

**'Saving' 'Nature' since Earth Day 1970:
Management, Holism, Postmodernism, and Merleau-Ponty**

By

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**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of**

Master of Arts

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Abstract

'Saving' 'Nature' since Earth Day 1970: Management, Holism, Postmodernism and Merleau-Ponty, is concerned with the debate over 'saving nature' that has arisen in the past thirty years. Rather than a rally to unified action, the call to 'save nature' has led to the proliferation of conflicting discourses, each with its own concept of 'nature' and corresponding 'salvation'. Since the 1970s, the primary contestants amongst these 'solutions' have been the managerial discourse of 'shallow ecology', which calls for 'crisis management', and the holistic discourse of 'deep' ecology, which calls for a shift to holist paradigm.

Since the 1980s, however, a third major discourse has been developing; that of postmodern environmentalism. Postmodernism, by focusing on the discursive level of this debate rather than on its 'objects', takes a necessary step back from the tug-of-war over 'nature'. While 'shallow' and 'deep' ecologists act as if their debate is taking place beneath the realm of language, as if they have direct access to the physical and/or moral order of 'nature itself', postmodernists argue that while nature is ontologically distinct from our language about it, all nature claims are discursive. The world, then, exceeds language, and we are left with an ambiguous (rather than dualist or holist) relation between the foundational binaries of modernity such as nature/culture, antagonism/harmony, either/or, etc.

Merleau-Ponty, often called the philosopher of ambiguity, offers a position critical of both dualistic and holistic philosophies, and presents an ontology and philosophy of language with important implications for environmental thought. Taken up by a number of postmodern environmental philosophers as offering clues to a way forward from the traditional managerial and holist positions, Merleau-Ponty's work sets the stage for a renewed dialogue with a nature that 'speaks' to us

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'Saving' 'Nature' since Earth Day 1970:

Management, Holism, Postmodernism, and Merleau-Ponty

What is in jeopardy raises its voice. That which had always been the most elementary of the givens, taken for granted as the background of all acting and never requiring action itself--that there are men, that there is life, that there is a world for both--this suddenly stands forth, as if lit up by lightening, in its stark peril through human deed. (Hans Jonas 139)

"Nature is, of its nature, an uncontainable topic ..."
(Kate Soper viii).

Introduction

How can we save nature? Twenty-eight years after the celebration of the first Earth Day, a rally intended to unite humanity in the common cause of 'saving' the Earth from 'environmental crisis', the most striking characteristic of environmental literature has become the disagreement from one text to the next as to the true cause and cure of our planet's woes. Despite the shrinking number of people who would argue that such talk of 'crisis' is simply a scaremongering, even misanthropic, attack on capitalism, it seems that the general agreement that there *is* a crisis has not lead to any consensus on a straightforward plan of action, or substantial progress in changing our overall destructive impact on the Earth. Alongside reports of progress, we have traded compact cars for

minivans, NAFTA superhighways are being planned, China is entering the auto age, and 'environmentalism' has become a valuable marketing tool: we have 'Mother Nature's Gas Station', and nuclear power as a 'clean alternative'. Were it only an argument over whether government regulation is *more or less* effective than voluntary pollution reduction programs, or whether cultural factors are *more or less* responsible for our destructive behaviour than biological ones, we might at least agree on what it means to 'make every day Earth Day'. What is so baffling about many of the current debates is that they are not simply disagreements over who has pinpointed correctly *the* cause or cure, but that one side's devi is the other's devil. Just as we are being urged that time is of the essence in saving the Earth, that we should quickly rally together in united action as 'citizens' to 'commons', 'children' to 'Mother', 'passengers' to 'spaceship', 'stewards' or 'wise users' to 'resources', or suffer a common fate, we find that each relation implies very different kinds of behaviour, that these rhetorics of unity are not themselves united. The proliferation of positions on 'nature' and on the relation of 'nature' to 'culture' ensures that we remain as unsure of our footing as ever--the path through 'nature' discourse is no less full of brambles, barbs, sinkholes, cliffs, overgrowth and mudslides than 'nature itself'.

How can we 'save' nature? While policy makers call for crisis management, others blame this very management approach for the crisis (see McWhorter, Heidegger and the Earth). Some feel that 'green' consumer choices will lead the way, forcing manufacturers to become 'green' themselves (see The Pollution Probe Foundation), while others believe that this move from corporations to individuals shifts responsibility away from those who have the real power (see Timothy Luke, Ecocritique). Many believe that we are doomed without

a spiritual environmentalism, a fundamental change from within (see Rudolph Bahro, Theodore Roszak). Others, particularly anarchists, believe that it is just this 'spiritualism' that hides the true causes of environmental destruction--hierarchy and destructive modes of production (see Biehl and Standenmaier). Deep ecologists see wider identification with all life as imperative for developing compassion and respect toward all beings (see Naess, Fox, Sessions, Devall), whereas ecofeminists tend to see wider identification as the movement of an expansionist patriarchal ego, the true cause of planetary destruction. Within ecofeminism, such theorists as Susan Griffin, Carol Christ and Charlene Spretnak celebrate women's 'natural' link to 'Mother Earth', while others, such as Carolyn Merchant, see 'nature' as socially constructed such that the meaning of 'Mother Earth' will be determined by what 'mother' and 'nature' mean within a particular culture (see Carol J. Adams, ed., Ecofeminism and the Sacred and Carolyn Merchant The Death of Nature). Poststructuralist writers are considered irrelevant by many for denying us access to the extra-linguistic. Environmentalists often see this as distancing us from the very environment that is being endangered and with which they hope to renew contact (Aaron Gare, a Green Marxist, sees poststructuralism as leaving people powerless and without a position from which to protect nature). Poststructuralists, in turn, argue that it is the linguistic naïveté of believing that we have unmediated access to an extra-linguistic nature that causes us to continue the destructive mistakes of the past.

The seemingly straightforward question, 'How can we save nature?', is complicated by the many 'saving' projects, a complication further compounded by the prior questions: 'What is 'nature'?' and 'How can we know it?'. Today, more than ever, the nature of

'nature' is politically contested. The growing agreement that nature is indeed facing a crisis has led to a greater number and variety of people working on the problem, adding their voices to 'nature' discourse.

As Jane Bennet and Richard Chaloupka observe,

[t]here has grown up in the United States in the late twentieth century a profuse and polyglot discourse about "nature." Profuse because the category "nature" encompasses so much--the geological, biological, and meteorological "environment"; animals and plants; human bodies; and the inherent character or moral essence we seek to discern in all of the above. Polyglot for the same reason. (Intro.7)

Kate Soper, writing from England, agrees:

'Nature', as Raymond Williams has remarked, is one of the most complex words in the language. Yet, as with many other problematic terms, its complexity is concealed by the ease and regularity with which we put it to use in a wide variety of contexts. It is at once both very familiar and extremely elusive: an idea we employ with such ease and regularity that it seems as if we ourselves are privileged with some 'natural' access to its intelligibility; but also an idea which most of us know, in some sense, to be so various and comprehensive in its use as to defy our powers of definition. (1)

In the 1970s, the nature debate was largely held between the followers of what Arne Naess has labelled 'deep ecology' and 'shallow ecology'. Today, as we head toward the thirtieth anniversary of Earth Day, we find that the nature debate, even at the level of 'environmental discourse' (i.e. ethical), has splintered into many discourses, each producing a distinct 'nature' and a corresponding 'salvation'. According to the broad categories identified by Heidegger scholar and environmental philosopher Michael Zimmerman, ecologists today can be 'reform' (or 'shallow'), 'deep', 'radical', 'ecofeminist', 'critical', or

'new paradigm'. And though both he and Kate Soper discuss poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida and Foucault primarily as foils to be taken into account by those involved in environmental discourse, there are now growing numbers of such theorists calling themselves 'environmentalists'.¹ To this list can be added most theoretical or political positions currently in play by joining them with an eco-friendly prefix or suffix in order to designate their having branched off from traditions such as Marxism (Green Marxism), Socialism (Social Ecology) and Anarchism (Green Anarchy), Consumer Capitalism (Green Consumerism), Utilitarianism (Wise Use), etc.

It would be impossible in this context to provide more than a brief sketch of each of these broadly defined discourses. For the sake of finding some footing in this dense growth, I will begin in Section One by following an outline that finds many of these groups clustered around two major poles: 'management', which is characterised by the radical dichotomisation of humans and nature, and 'holism/deep ecology', characterised by the identification and attunement of humans with nature. We will see that where management/shallow ecology, securely positioned within the modern paradigm, sees nature as 'silent', as neutral matter for human use, holism/deep ecology seeks a paradigm shift through which we would come to see nature as it 'really' is; as having intrinsic value, meaning and voice, and as speaking to us if we 'attune' ourselves to its 'message'/'harmonies'. Given the latitude within these two 'clusterings' some positions, and/or some voices within these positions, may unintentionally become caricatured. Nevertheless, I believe that the broad outline holds true and serves well for the purpose of orientation in this otherwise uncontainable field.

Next, trying to make some headway past the stalemate between shallow and deep ecology, between managerial and holist 'solutions', I will turn to a currently developing third 'cluster', that of 'postmodernism', a 'position' loosely held together by a common emphasis on language. Postmodern environmentalist Shane Phelan observes that when faced with these often mutually exclusive and seemingly interminable arguments about nature, rather than surrendering nature as a foundational category, "contradictory projects and perspectives seek to use the same icon in their service...continually challeng[ing] one another's uses of it" (46-7).² Rather than being able to get on with the business of united environmental action, it seems that environmentalists are frequently caught expending their effort in debate with one another, arguing over the true nature of nature and the proper method for discovering it. Observing the multiplicity of voices working polemically with 'nature', postmodern environmentalists such as Neil Evernden believe that in order to find a way through this murky impasse we must direct our attention not simply to the 'objects' of nature, but to the contested 'icon', as Phelan calls it, the category of nature that mediates our access to these 'objects'.

Postmodernism, I believe, in stepping back from this debate, leads away from some of the obscuring brush that we find ourselves caught in, and on to a more effective path. Postmodernists show that management and holism hold in common a clear, dualistic distinction between nature and culture (despite holism's attempts to overcome this), and a dualistic theory of language (representationalism) that claims access to 'nature itself'--a dualism that tends to lead to environmentally destructive behaviour. The holist/management stalemate is caused, primarily, by the fact that both are yet grounded in modernity.

Postmodernist theorists do not attempt to go beyond the “exhausted terrain” upon which the management/holism, shallow ecology/deep ecology debate is played out by synthesising these two poles. Rather, they blur the relation between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, claiming that nature exists in a dynamic relationship between an ‘objective’ nature and our ‘subjective’ conceptualisations of it, that nature and culture, humans and other beings, dwell together in tension. In place of the modernist clarity of an ‘eco-logos’, for example, postmodern theorist Romand Coles calls for the more flexible ambiguity and tension of an ‘eco-tonus’.

Many postmodernists see opportunity in this blurring for pushing beyond the management/holism binaries of ‘dichotomy versus identity’ and ‘antagonism versus harmony’ and for opening more complex relations with nature. We will see how, in this space, paradoxical notions of our relations to nature have been developed: Shane Phelan’s ‘intimate distance’, Romand Coles’ ‘agonism’, Neil Evernden’s ‘natural alien’, Max Oelschlaeger’s ‘natural artificiality’, and Kate Soper’s ‘immanent transcendence’ all characterise the postmodern move to ambiguity, to the realisation that ‘nature’ is always more than we can know.

Following on the shift from the clarity of modernity to the ambiguity of postmodernity, Section Two is concerned with the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), often called the ‘philosopher of ambiguity’. In particular, his ‘indirect’ ontology and corresponding theory of ‘indirect’ language will be studied as offering a postmodern-leaning counter to the modern ontology and theory of language still in use by most environmentalists. A committed humanist early in his career, Merleau-Ponty was, at the time of his death, moving toward (and into) the development of a postmodern

philosophy in which humans are neither adversaries separate from the world, nor ‘at home’ or ‘at one’ with it. According to Merleau-Ponty, our relation to the world is one of simultaneous immanence and transcendence. Language, the main characteristic used to distinguish humans from the rest of nature, is decentred from the human brain to a world that appears in perception as ‘animate’ and ‘expressive’, but whose voice is ‘mute’. It is here, rather than in the ‘vague intuitions’ of holism, that a philosophical basis for a dialogue with a speaking nature is found.

In the conclusion, I will discuss some of the ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s work can be taken up for explicitly environmental purposes. Theorists such as Neil Evernden, David Abram, and Romand Coles, for example, find in Merleau-Ponty ways to reopen a dialogue with a speaking nature, but a nature that does not speak to us in any simple way. I will examine, through these writers and through my reading of Merleau-Ponty, how Merleau-Ponty’s work helps to move us beyond the modern either/or binaries of dualistic/holistic and antagonistic/harmonious relations with ‘nature’ toward more complex relations which do greater justice to nature’s fragility, resistance, uncontainability and otherness.

Section One: Environmentalism since Earth Day--The Traditional Positions

Chapter One: Management and Holism

Management’s Dualist Ontology

The debate between a managerial ecology (often characterized as ‘shallow’ or ‘reform’), and a holist (or ‘deep’) ecology, is generally seen as taking place between the

defenders of modernity and those who would 'overcome' it. While holists believe that only a paradigm shift to a non-dualistic human/nature relation will suffice to end destructive behaviour toward nature, to a paradigm in which we realise all selves to be part of a larger Self, an organic wholeness in which nature too has intrinsic value, managerial 'reformers' hope to continue the current path of development and 'modernisation', believing that we can solve the problem of environmental destruction within the current paradigm. As Bennet and Chaloupka characterise them, reformers hold "that some rational plan, combined with new technical devices, will enable us to continue an aggressive, high-consumption course" (x).

The management pole, which includes the environmental policy establishment, holds to the dualistic understanding of human/nature relations in modern philosophy and science, that of subjects and objects. Humans, as agents with intrinsic value, are radically divided from a nature that is external to them, a realm of morally neutral objects upon which human agency is played out, objects whose value is determined by their usefulness in fulfilling human ends. The concern for a larger whole, then, for 'saving' nature, arises for the instrumental reason of the survival of the human self.

Managerial Oxymorons: 'Wilderness Preservation' and 'Sustainable Development'

Two of the more popular and influential managerial approaches to 'saving' nature are 'wilderness preservation', such as advocated by The Nature Conservancy, and 'sustainable development', globally promoted by The Worldwatch Institute. According to

Timothy Luke, who studies both of these groups in *Ecocritique*, The Nature Conservancy, which “preserves” 7.5 million acres of ‘natural’ land in the Western hemisphere, accepts the political economy of advanced capitalist societies “as background conditions, and then tries to do something positive within the constraints imposed by these limitations” (57). To ‘save’ nature, the wilderness preservationists of The Nature Conservancy first transform it into real estate in order to divide ‘natural’ lands (those with minimal social presence) from ‘artificial’ ones (such as cities, towns and agricultural land). This land then becomes a commodity to be bought, sold, and traded for based on its ‘value’. In this schema, and true to modernity’s human/nature dualism, the value of ‘natural’ lands is determined by their utility to those who live in the ‘artificial’ areas. As Luke writes, “[s]cenery provides legitimation, land creates a containment area, and rare ecosystems constitute storage sites for precious biogenetic information” (73). Once its utility, or potential utility, value is established, ‘nature’ is stored safely until science and technology can bring its full potential to flower--as cures for cancer, building materials, or genetic information with which to cultivate better crops. As theorist Eric Katz comments:

The idea that nature ought to be used (and improved, if necessary) for human benefit is the fundamental assumption of “resource environmentalism”--arguably the mainstream of the American conservation movement. Under this doctrine, environmental policies are designed to maximise human satisfaction or minimise human harms With all environmental problems, the effects on humanity are the primary concern. (Oel. 165)

Confronted with this schema, we are forced to ask ourselves how effective this move will prove to be in the long run. As Neil Evernden warns, by justifying nature’s

existence solely on its utility to humans those parts of nature that are not 'economical', that are not 'for' something, are already tacitly surrendered to the bulldozer.

The natural environment remains vulnerable whenever there are short-term benefits to be had by sacrificing environmental protection. The basic attitude towards the non-human has not even been challenged in the rush to embrace utilitarian conservation. By basing all arguments on enlightened self-interest the environmentalists have ensured their own failure whenever self-interest can be perceived as lying elsewhere. (Nat.Alien 10)

Not only is the utilitarian basis of wilderness preservation highly problematic, but dividing land into 'artificial' and 'natural' zones, as The Nature Conservancy does, has lost its effectiveness as a preservation tool. Timothy Luke points out that "[a]t some point in the 1960s and 1970s, these discursive frames became obsolete" (66). The ability to physically separate nature from culture in any clear way became impossible.

There really were no lands without any traces of some large social presence [H]uman beings have profoundly disturbed what had been regarded as unalterable sovereign Nature with industrial pollution, greenhouse gases, chemical contamination, and radioactive wastes. Hence, to pretend to be conserving "the untouched and undisturbed expanses of Nature" in simple actions of land ownership made very little sense. (Luke 66)

Like The Nature Conservancy, The Worldwatch Institute accepts the current paradigm, but rather than preserve nature by setting it aside, it believes it can preserve it by advocating "sustainable development," in which "Nature" and the global economy, rather than being at odds, are reconciled through the instrumental rationality of resource managerialism (Luke 78).

Whereas the categories of wilderness preservation have become obsolete as nature is

no longer simply 'natural', the sustainable development program of The Worldwatch Institute has further encouraged this obsolescence. While The Nature Conservancy turns 'nature' into real estate, The Worldwatch Institute turns 'nature' into the 'global environment' and integrates its systematic patterns into the world economy, thus creating a single system. As Luke argues, "[t]hey represent the world as a closed totality through 'ecoknowledges' that will disclose its logics, interrelations, and operations as 'geopower' seen by correctly informed analysts" (92). Luke, following the analysis of Foucault, sees that

[t]he work of the Worldwatch Institute acknowledges how "the historical" then begins to envelope, circumscribe, or surround "the biological," creating interlocking disciplinary expanses for "the environmental" to be watched, managed and controlled. (91)

Defining nature as "economically rationalised environment" begs for "human managerial oversight, administrative intervention, and organisational containment" (Luke 90). Through the gaze of Worldwatching, nature, once seen as raw and untamed, is caged and forced to open up before science, handing over its secrets for the benefit of human use. Nature comes to be what it is said to be, nothing more, and nothing less--its threatening mystery has been mastered—"everything is environment now; nothing is Nature ..." (Luke72). "Underneath the enchanting green patina," writes Luke, under the terminological guise of developing a sustainable ecology, "sustainable development is about sustaining development as economically rationalised environment ..." (85). Profit margins, not nature, are the concern, and to this end 'inefficiencies' are rationalised. According to writers such as Max Oelschlaeger and Vandana Shiva, sustainable development "is primarily an apologetic for

the continued wholesale exploitation of the earth and Third World peoples by multinational corporations and developed nations (Shiva 1989; Kennedy 1993)” (Oel.7). It is profit margins, not nature, that are the concern, and to this end ‘inefficiencies’ are rationalised’. The exploitation of nature can continue as long as ‘wasteful’ practices are minimised.

‘Wilderness Prisons’ and ‘Sustained Development’

Managerial forms of ‘saving’, writes Thomas Birch, whether ‘wilderness preservation’, ‘sustainable development’, ‘wise use’, ‘stewardship’, or ‘resource environmentalism’, are the only kind that our paradigm allows. Seeing nature as an external object that environs us, an object to be known by science and mastered by technology determines in advance what counts as ‘knowledge’ of nature and how we use that knowledge.

By remaining within the dominant paradigm, which places the satisfaction of the human self and its civilisation at the centre and nature at the margins, our reforms serve to legitimate the paradigm as a provider of solutions rather than calling it into question. The ‘central presupposition’ being reinforced, writes Birch, is “Hobbes: that we exist fundamentally in a state of war with any and all others” (140). Opposition is defined in advance as “fundamentally conflictive” and adversarial (Birch 140). Otherness, as opposite, is thus by definition enemy to the ‘imperium’, the globalising power of the urban centres of the West, which enforce this paradigm while masking their power behind the language of a ‘global community’ (Birch 137). In its globalising march, this ‘imperium’ sees itself as

bringing civilisation and domestication, “light and order to wild darkness and savagery,” establishing ‘Meaning’ where previously reigned the unintelligible and irrational (Birch 139).

The imperium establishes ‘Meaning’ by defining and fixing identities, such that it can internalise nature “into its own system of domination—domination through objectification” (Birch 143). It thus accomplishes the historical’s total control over the biological, the triumph of the productive forces of human life over the mysterious darkness and waste of death, the ultimate biological limit.

The dominant hegemony, therefore, while setting aside ‘natural’ areas, does not, indeed cannot, allow these areas to survive as “voids in the fabric of domination where ‘anarchy’ is permitted, where nature is actually liberated” (Birch 143). We cannot “grant genuine self-determination to nature, and let its wildness be wild, without dis-inheriting our story of power and domination, even in its most generous liberal form ...” (Birch 139).

Rather than banishing nature to an ‘outside’ where its wildness might flourish, it is incorporated into the system in a prison or asylum, i.e. the wilderness reserve (Birch.143). In confining nature to official reserves, it is made to function, in the words of Luke, as resources that we do not yet know how to fully utilise or appreciate (in both the manufacturing and financial sense). Ultimately, these resources are being put aside, or ‘saved’, for the day when we do. Nothing is to be ‘wasted’. In setting nature aside for protection, Evernden writes, we act as ‘wise stewards’, treating animals and wilderness as domesticates. “They are objects to be planned for, matter to be arranged to maximise its ‘success’ and ensure that it is used ‘efficiently’” (Soc. Cr.120).

Wasting nothing, and confirming its control and centrality, the imperium places nature on the margins where we are safe from its subversive effects, from its otherness and opposition to the system. “Wilderness, like religion and morality, is fine for weekends and holidays, but during the working week it may in no way inform business as usual” (Birch 155). The message of incarceration, according to Birch, is that it is all right to follow John Muir to the temples of wilderness areas, in fact, room is made for such ‘sacred space’, thereby showing tolerance and generosity, but to actually live in a nature which is not solely passive, object, utility, etc., is anathema and incompatible with the imperium (Birch 155).

The creation of legally protected wilderness areas, while reforming the legal system, leaves intact the central presuppositions of the dominant paradigm. According to Birch, this

is precisely the same sort of reform as the incarceration of Native Americans (paradigm “others”) on reservations, even with the putatively well-intentioned aim of making them over into “productive citizens,” in place of the former practice of slaughtering them. Mere reform that is bound by the terms of the prevailing story not only fails to liberate us from the story, but also tends to consolidate its tyranny over us. (Birch 141)

The Science of Nature: Ecology as Modern Science and Holist Oracle

The science of ecology plays a pivotal role in environmental debate. Both ‘shallow’ environmentalists who would save nature through managerial approaches and ‘deep’ ecologists/holists who would save it by ‘letting it be’, letting its wildness flourish, call upon ecology as justification for their agendas. We will see that ecology, while able to provide us

with a sense of the limits imposed upon us by nature, is unable to unify environmental discourse around a single model of nature.

In describing the rise of ecology to public consciousness, Neil Evernden writes in The Natural Alien, that after the first Earth Day (1970),

[e]veryone began to pay lip service to the environmental movement, and the American president of the day declared the 1970s to be the 'decade of the environment'. Inevitably this public expression of interest engendered, in bureaucratic circles, a craving for experts. Now that a problem had been identified, there was a need for people who had the ability to find solutions. It was to the universities, citadels of expertise and scientific management, that the bureaucrats turned. And there, as if waiting for discovery, was an obscure biological specialty called 'ecology', which was to become a household word. (4-5)

Indeed, it is ironic that solutions were to be derived not from some novel way of thinking, but from the very industrial-scientific community that had fuelled projects like the development of the H-bomb, DDT and Agent Orange. Scientific, rational, pragmatic and objective, these experts embodied just the kind of clear thinking that is typically called for in times of crisis. They would apply the investigative method of science to the problem, gather data, conduct tests and provide 'reasonable' solutions.

Through environmental impact assessments, wildlife management strategies and land reclamation projects, 'ecology' was to give us the ability to continue on our current path of 'development' with 'acceptable' or 'sustainable' amounts of environmental backlash. It would help us to reassert our power and control over an unruly nature that was beginning to turn on us. As administrators of modernity, the bureaucratic aim was to return nature to its place as the silent, neutral backdrop to human activity in order for business to

continue as usual.

In such a 'scientific', 'rational' society, Evernden writes, anyone calling themselves an environmentalist before the rise of ecology had generally been lumped into the category of 'nature lovers': emotional, impractical, sentimental and 'merely' subjective. Nature lovers, of course, made few gains by arguing for the preservation of nature on the basis of their lived experience of it; tales of nature hikes, Thoreau-inspired retreats and intuitive flashes of their oneness with all things natural. Ecology, on the other hand, seemed to offer environmentalists just the kind of irrefutable facts that they were under such pressure to produce. Environmentalism now had its own science.³ But where environmentalists hoped that once they traded up from 'warm fuzzy feelings' to 'cold hard facts' everyone would see the data of destruction and become concerned environmentalists, the 'facts', though more generally respected, have proven less helpful than hoped for.

As Theodore Roszak notes, attempts to scare or shame people into action through scientific data have not worked. Every doomsday prophecy that does not actualise serves to further strengthen the common feeling that nature is not in trouble after all. Not surprisingly, facts and data alone fail to motivate people into action--science is not enough. More importantly, argues Evernden, environmentalists, by turning to ecology as the basis of their position, have undermined themselves. In relying on the tools of science, management and technological fixes, not only do they cease to confront society's values, but, in effect, are forced to adopt them, and adapt to them, thus giving them further legitimation and strength.

In The Social Creation of Nature, Evernden further problematises the use of the

science of ecology, noting how it has not only been adopted by management and holist environmentalists to protect nature, but also by developers and industrialists who seek to diminish environmental concerns. Thus, we have what Evernden describes as “the frequent spectacle of competing experts” (4). Environmentalists have concluded from the empirical facts generated by ecology that the Earth is warming, that the hole in the ozone layer is expanding, that concentrations of pollutants in the rain from car exhaust and industry are destroying lakes and forests, and that existing practices must be altered, if not halted. Developers, on the other hand, have interpreted the same ‘facts’ as supporting the continuance of existing practices. The reason for this apparent impasse, Evernden explains, is that “pollution involves questions not only of concentrations but also of consequences ...” (Soc.Cr. 4). The debate is not so much a disagreement over the ‘hard data’ of pollution, says Evernden, but over what the future consequences of these concentrations will be, over what the data ‘means’. For environmentalists, ecology ‘endorses’ the view that industrialist actions lead to a wasted planet. For industrialists, ecology ‘endorses’ the view that environmentalist alternatives are too harsh. We can ‘sustain’ nature at higher levels of development than environmentalists believe, and greater losses of nature are both justified and manageable for the sake of preventing ‘unnecessary’ loss of jobs, lifestyles and freedoms, and a regression to a ‘less civilised’ world. “The debate,” as Evernden sees it, “is actually about *what constitutes a good life*” (Soc.Cr. 5). Ultimately, this is not a debate that can be settled within the science of ecology.

Unlike past societies that were more likely to share an accepted story or foundation, modern society has multiple, competing stories about the good life. As Alasdair MacIntyre

shows convincingly in After Virtue, moral debate in modern society is interminable. While MacIntyre awaits a new St. Benedict to guide us through these “new dark ages” (263), many environmentalists believe we already have the “new oracle” in our midst. Rather than giving up their conceptual use of ‘nature’ in the seemingly endless debate, it is no wonder that those who see nature as at the brink of annihilation bring in nature as an authority in order to end debate and begin action before it is too late. Ecology, the reigning authority on the workings of nature since the 1970s, fulfils the role of revealer of “natural harmonies” which will allow us to live in peace with nature and, by extension, with each other as natural beings, in an ‘unforced’, ‘organic’, ‘healthy’ community.

In spite of the confidence placed in ecology’s reliability by both management and holism, the history of ecology paints a more problematic picture. The holist use of nature as a source of value, truth and authority is no more justified by ecology than that of the developers and managers who see in nature a neutral resource which ecology gives us power over (whether we use this power to exploit or ‘sustain’).

According to historian Donald Worster, when the idea of ecology was formed in the 18th century, it was intended to provide

a more comprehensive way of looking at the earth's fabric of life: a point of view that sought to describe all of the living organisms of the earth as an interacting whole, often referred to as the ‘economy of nature’. (x)

Such a unified view is often still ascribed to ecology. But while many rely on ecology’s picture of nature as a ground for ethics, even a cursory review of the literature turns up a plurality of ‘ecologies’. As Worster points out:

On close examination ... the common point of view

suggested by an 'economy of nature' fragments into many views, sometimes leading in thoroughly incompatible directions. 'Nature's economy' has been defined by different people for different reasons in different ways (x)

Thus, it is not only the developers and environmentalists who argue over 'ecology', but also ecologists, for there exists within the science of ecology frequent debate over differing models of nature. Environmentalist literature which upholds terms such as 'balance, integrity, order, health, stability, and diversity' is contradicted by literature which sees in nature 'competition, exclusion, exploitation, and survival'. Some believe that ecosystems are 'healthy' when 'stable' and 'balanced', while others argue that nature is primarily chaotic, stabilising only temporarily. This prompts the question of *which* norm of 'health' we should model society on, of what kind of behaviour is 'natural'. We see that, like 'nature', the 'natural' and 'healthy', are politically contested terms.

Without rejecting ecology, it is necessary to recognise that it is not an 'oracle', capable of providing us with a foundation upon which to build a new society or ethic, nor does it present us with a model of the good, or 'ecological', life. Despite its use to imply a holistic worldview, ecology is a science and as such shares the limitations of science. Ecology has a history, and thus cannot provide us with universal and atemporal harmonies—and its history shows that the science of ecology is not itself universal. We can only return to ecology to help determine the 'how', or means, once we decide on the 'why', or goal.

"Nature in the realist sense," as Kate Soper clarifies, is

essentially a theoretical-explanatory concept, which can tell us about the causes and problems in certain relations to nature and the conceptual coherence of envisioned alternatives, but does not tell us what is desirable in the way of comportment towards it. It is true that nature in the realist

sense sets certain limits on what we can do, or even try to do, and we must observe these on pain either of looking very foolish (as did Canute) or else perishing in the effort to transcend them. But since the elasticity of these limits is very much in dispute even among ecologists themselves, their existence does not guide in any but the broadest sense the policies we should adopt to the natural world. Indeed, since nature conceived as deep level structure has been a condition of all practices hitherto adopted, including those most condemned by green politics, we must conclude that none of the normative questions raised by the latter are to be settled simply by reference to the limits imposed by nature in the realist sense. In other words, there is a vast range of options open to human beings in this respect, all of them having divergent consequences on the planetary eco-system. (159)

Soper's theoretical claims echo Evernden's thesis that the debate is not simply about the hard data or concentrations of pollutants, but also about the consequences of these concentrations, about 'what constitutes a good life' and what the data means to this life. Ecology as a science, "does not address the question of ends--why are we doing all this in the first place?" but "can help us pursue the goals that we have already set for ourselves" (Soc.Cr. 22). We must still decide--nature does not dictate: what kind of consequences are we willing to accept (and risk)? What do we hold as unacceptable? Science, for its part, can help us to imagine what these consequences might be. ⁴

The Silence of Nature

Perhaps the most devastating result of modernity's radical dualism between nature and the human is the overwhelming silence of nature in our culture. This silence results from the modern way of knowing, most powerfully refined in modern science. In The Natural Alien, Neil Evernden, himself an ecologist, shows how the process of becoming an

ecologist involves “the transformation of the world into a material object subservient to the laws of classical physics. In effect, [the ecologist] must deny life in order to study it” (17). In the first stage of education, he writes, students learn to mentally cut up bodies using labels and categorisation. In the last stage, the actual cutting begins and the students change from animal lovers to biologists, “from beings with an interest in mysteries and animate nature to beings with an interest in a mechanical order” (14). Ecology replaces our experience of animals with abstractions, theories and neutral matter (Nat.Alien 14), and gives us nature, as Soper noted, as a ‘theoretical-explanatory concept’.

From an animistic world in which humans shared characteristics such as life and free will with non-humans, we have come full swing to an objectivist world view in which all previously shared characteristics are appropriated by ‘Man’; nature is dead, silent, an object bound by the laws of necessity (Soc.Cr. 56).

The rite of passage into the scientific way of being centres on the ability to apply the knife to the vocal cords, not just of the dog on the table, but of life itself. Inwardly, [the ecologist] must be able to sever the cords of his own consciousness [that remind us that animals are sentient and feeling]. Outwardly, the effect must be the destruction of the larynx of the biosphere. (Nat.Alien 17)

As Christopher Manes writes, “Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (43). Our paradigm, defining nature in advance as ‘object’, confines subjectivity and language to humans. As a result of “compress[ing] the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of ontology,” we are surrounded by a “vast eerie silence” (Manes 43; 44). Even those who

recognise the presence of subjects in nature tend to see them as subjects in the same sense as women, children, minorities, prisoners and the insane—‘others’ whose discourse has traditionally been treated as “‘meaningless’ and often silenced” (Manes 43). The silence of nature, Manes concludes, ensures that it is given no moral consideration, only utilitarian consideration.

Michel Foucault has amply demonstrated that social power operates through a regime of privileged speakers, having historical embodiments as priests and kings, authors, intellectuals, and celebrities. The words of these speakers are taken seriously.... For human societies of all kinds, *moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another*. We can, thus, safely agree with Hans Peter Duerr when he says that “people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them.” Regrettably, our culture has gone a long way to demonstrate that the converse of this statement is also true. (43-44, italics mine)

The rhetoric of ‘Man’, of the masculine, rational subject that holds hegemony in the modern paradigm, is concerned with maintaining sufficient space between humans and nature for ‘Man’s’ dignity to be securely established. To increase the space between the ‘civilised’ rational subject and ‘wild’ irrational nature is the very definition of becoming ‘civilised’ in modernity, it is a taming and domesticating, the human will overcoming that which resists it. By hoarding all subjectivity within the human and objectifying nature into silence under our surveying gaze, we establish our separateness and difference from the animal. We are thus both able to deny our animality, our mortality and the limits of our flesh, and to use nature unimpaired to aid us in this project of freeing ourselves from necessity. But despite our best efforts at total freedom from nature, as with the animals, we too die, decay, become food; we too are not wholly free. It is for this reason that we are

comforted by nature's silence--we are repulsed by, and desire mastery over, that which nature represents, but without fooling ourselves, are unable to gain this. It is no wonder then, as Bennet and Chaloupka observe, that "[o]ur threshold of repugnance at the animal-like has advanced—the body, like the physical environment, is to be subdued through science and technology, reshaped according to a conscious, rational design" (ix). Thus, trapped in this adversarial relation, to speak of human dignity, of our freedom, worth and purpose, is, by definition, to eclipse, depreciate and objectify the nonhuman world (Manes 51).

But as we are finding, nature does have limits, however 'elastic' they may be. As Manes suggests, we

need to dismantle a particular historical use of reason, a use that has produced a certain kind of human subject that only speaks soliloquies in a world of irrational silences. Unmasking the universalist claims of "Man" must be the starting point in our attempt to re-establish communication with nature, not out of some nostalgia for an animistic past, but because the human subject that pervades institutional knowledge since the Renaissance already embodies a relationship with nature that precludes a speaking world. As scholars, bureaucrats, citizens, and writers, we participate in a grid of institutional knowledge that constitutes "Man" and his speaking into the void left by the retreat of animism. Therefore, we have to ask not only how to communicate with nature...but *who* should be doing the communicating. "Man," the prime fiction of the Renaissance, will not do. (52)

The Voice of Nature: Holism

The 'holist' position, most clearly associated with 'deep ecology', believes that the current paradigm's radical dichotomisation of humans and nature leads to our alienation

from, and antagonistic opposition to, nature. It believes that only a paradigm shift to a holistic worldview, one that overcomes human/nature separation and opposition, will be sufficient to escaping this situation. As all is seen to be one, holists believe that we can intuit, and attune to, the 'voice(s)' of nature, and thus speak on its behalf. Reversing the management binary that silences nature, they find nature to not only have a voice, but one that speaks clearly to us.

For both management and holism, 'nature' provides the opposition to the conditional, transient, 'made' world of culture. The nature seen as 'given' for the management pole is neutral matter structured according to physical laws. Science, by discovering through these laws the way in which nature works, provides us with knowledge and power for mastery over the objects and processes of nature. For holism, nature is 'given' as a meaningful moral order. Through our intuitive attunement to it, we discover nature's structure to be both morally significant, providing a model of the 'good life', and existentially significant, offering a path to authenticity. Attunement to a nature beneath the distorted facade of culture is believed to lead to the overcoming of our antagonistic drive for mastery over nature, and to model for us a socio-political order based on the 'natural' order of nature—harmony, co-operation and balance. As deep ecologist Arne Naess writes: "If reality is experienced by the ecological Self our behaviour naturally and beautifully follows strict environmental ethics" (TLM 29).

Holists see the modern paradigm as promoting a self which is detached from the world, a subject over and against objects, incapable by definition of the kind of unity with nature required to overcome modern aggression. Rejecting this ideology, they call for a shift

to an 'ecological self', According to Arne Naess, "[t]he ecological self of a person is that with which the person identifies. This key sentence (rather than definition) about the self, shifts the burden of clarification from the term *self* to that of *identification* or more accurately, the process of identification" (TLM 22). Naess approvingly quotes Gandhi's belief in "the oneness of all life" (TLM 25), an ideology which supports Naess' assertion that the widest possible identification is the truest. Our 'true identity', our 'true', 'ecological self', as Theodore Roszak elaborates, is the 'all in one' experience of the mystic and the infant's experience of ego as all (44). As Naess describes this experience, "[w]ith a sufficiently wide and deep sense of self, ego and alter as opposites are eliminated stage by stage as the distinctions are transcended" (TLM 28).

In noting the shift from a modern self to an ecological self, deep ecologist John Seed writes: "What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature" (TLM 36), "the nature of Gaia ..." (TLM.3). Joanna Macy supports this worldview, insisting that "[t]here is also a great yearning and great need to own that story [of our evolutionary journey]—to break out of our isolation as persons and as a species and recover through that story our larger identity" (TLM 57).

From a subject that is bound within its body and radically dissociated from the world and others, which does not identify with them and therefore feels unrestrained in its actions toward them, we are to develop a sense of ourselves as part of a larger Self to which everything belongs.

As Roszak quotes from a 1990 conference, "... if the self is expanded to include the natural world, behaviour leading to destruction of this world will be experienced as self-

destructive” (12). Learning to experience the defence of nature as self-defence, holists have developed the ultimate 'reason' to act in defence of nature, and the ultimate 'authority' to justify their actions. As Macy and Fleming write,

[w]hen in defense of living species we stand up and speak to corporations, government officials or the military, we don't do it out of personal whim or passing fancy—but with all the authority of our four-and-a-half billion years! (TLM 108)

This belief is further illustrated in “The Council of All Beings,” a ceremony in which deep ecologists practice giving voice to nature.

We ease out of our solely human identification; we settle into the life-forms that have come to us and that seek expression ... One by one around the circle, speaking through our masks, we identify ourselves: “I am wolf and I speak for the wolf people.” “I am wild goose and I speak for all migratory birds.” “I am wheat and I speak for all cultivated grains” (TLM 84).

“It is as if we are one organism” (TLM 89). Holists, by looking back to an original innocence which we have lost, a prereflective and 'instinctive' realm in which all beings participate, seek to overcome the cognitive distance between humans and nature, and “return to nature and with it a simpler, less problematic time” (Kohák 7). This harmonious relation to nature is seen as both our salvation (authentic being), and nature's (non-destructive).

Chapter Two: Postmodernism

Despite the role of management and holism as opposites in current environmental debate, postmodern environmentalists argue that the fundamental opposition between them

is only apparent. Whereas management accepts the externality of nature as a 'given', many holists/deep ecologists, while calling for an end to the alienation of humans from nature, and a revision of modernist ontology, are inadvertently caught within a position that hinges upon nature's externality as well. As Neil Smith argues, rather than reversing management's separation of humans and nature, holism revisits it:

Together with parallel pronouncements of the 'death of nature' or the 'end of nature', the ambition to 'save nature' is utterly self-defeating insofar as it reaffirms the externality (otherness) of a nature with and within which human societies are inextricably intermeshed. (39)

For Evernden, holism shares with management the assumption "that there is a thing called nature that needs our help" (Soc.Cr. 99). Despite holism's assertion that we are truly one with nature, in its calls for 'us' to save 'nature' it separates 'us' from 'it'. Both positions, then, are intrinsically dualistic, relying on a clear distinction between 'nature' and 'culture', and disagreeing only as to where the line between 'it' and 'us' should be drawn.

The separation of humans/culture and nature in the holist position is not simply an oversight or linguistic slip. Holism cannot escape the need for a separate nature, for it derives nature's authority from this very externality—it is nature's 'givenness' apart from and prior to the interference of culture that allows it to be a source of authority rather than just another transient creation of culture. In order to identify with and 'attune' to the nature side of the binary, there must be a prior distinction between nature and culture.

Smith notes that there is a "slippage" within the holist position by which nature plays both the role of 'external' authority *and* its opposite, 'universal' nature. Once nature's 'given' laws, norms, order are discovered, then "a *universal* nature that incorporates human

and nonhuman worlds in endless union” is brought into play (Smith 39), and nature’s norms become social norms ascribed to ‘human nature’.

The identification of holists with nature, rather than the mark of a radical paradigm shift, is no less a characteristically modern move than management’s dichotomisation of humans and nature. Both essentialise, fixing nature’s meaning in order to create the distinct categories that they need in order to fulfil their identification with one pole or the other.

As Cheney writes,

... identification is an essentializing move motivated by attempts to deal with ambivalence. As Shepard notes [in Nature and Madness], the lovers of the earth and the destroyers of the earth have one thing in common: the attempt to handle ambivalence without resolving it, using the defective tools of identification and dichotomization respectively. (35)

Uncomfortable with ambiguity and seeing it as a failure of clear thinking, modernity is characterized by either/or dichotomies. While management claims that we are more like nature (object), holism claims that nature is more like us (self). Management collapses self into nature: the gaze of the absolute spectator turns everything into objects, lifeless matter void of subjects. Holism, on the other hand, collapses nature into self, effacing human/nature dualism by making all animals honorary humans. As a result, all becomes self, and we “populate our landscape with the pets and puppets that these pseudo-humans inevitably become” (Soc.Cr. 108). In either case, notes Evernden, “the centrality of the perceiving human is apparent” (Soc.Cr. 108).

Michael Zimmerman is critical of the holist position, characterising its ‘yearning’ for an age in which social antagonism and human/nature dualism will be overcome as a

yearning for a relation with nature which we have never had, and which is not desirable (8). Both extremes, the management position which sees the process of becoming 'civilised' as that of increasing the distance between the self and nature, of radically dissociating the two, and the holist position, which attempts to erase this gap, can be forms of psychosis—complete alienation from the world, or even from one's own body on the one hand, and loss of identity or complete diffusion of one's sense of self on the other. Our dissociative attitude toward nature, argues Zimmerman, "is one way in which the ego seeks to protect itself from 'regressing' into a more primitive level of awareness" (Bless. 264). Holism, on the other hand, attempts to unearth this primitive consciousness in a communal 'return to nature'. Zimmerman also notes that these forms of relationship with nature, dualism/ domination and a kind of regression to a preindividualistic unity, respectively represent self-assertion and self-effacement, two of the most popular ways of denying death (Rad. 55). This denial of the limits of embodied life has led to behaviour destructive to our finite planet..

According to Soper, we need to recognise both our yearning for and dependence on nature, and our rejection of and independence from it. For example, deep ecology's notion of 'wider identity' has been seen by many, and most powerfully by feminists, to represent the self-expansion of the modern, masculine ego, seeking to erase difference in favour of a problematic unity (Rad. 10). Rather, we need to recognise not only our interdependence with the other, but to combine this with the recognition of the other's difference, such that we do not overcome the other and make it same. Where management calls us to continue the process of 'civilisation' and holism seeks merger with the wild other, Zimmerman calls for a new idea of civilisation, one in which we accept both the 'civilised' and 'wild'

dimensions of ourselves. It is the wildness in ourselves, the otherness, that we must come to terms with in order to ease our fear and abhorrence of it in nature.

Postmodernism and the Critique of Modernity's Dualistic Theory of Language

Along with their ontological dualism, management and holism maintain a correspondingly dualist theory of language, that of representationalism. In Postmodern Environmental Ethics, Max Oelschlaeger explains how representationalism dominates our speaking of nature in modernity:

... a designative theory of language (also called representationalism) now dominates the modern mind (Taylor 1985). Scientific language is conceptualized not as constitutive but representative of an object to be objectively known and technologically appropriated. Accordingly, true statements are understood as the mirror of nature, conceived as veridical accounts (in the case of true knowledge) of reality as represented through scientific law and description (objective knowledge). (3)

In this model of language, "'Truth' ... consist[s] of propositions that correctly 'mirror' or 'represent' an independent, preexisting reality" (Rad. 93).

As we have seen, both the management and holist poles believe that they have privileged, direct access to 'nature itself'—to nature's laws and intelligibility (whether physical or moral/spiritual)—and thus to nature's authority. As we will explore here, in maintaining this position each tends to act as if the debate (at least their side of it) is taking place *beneath* the realm of language. Nature is understood as prediscursive and preconceptual, existing prior to, below, or beyond the 'merely' cultural. Simultaneously,

nature is assumed to be accessible to thought. Thus, politically motivated toward correcting the abuse of nature, deep ecologists “direct us to the ‘nature’ that we are destroying, wasting and polluting,” sometimes as if this were as straightforward as the kick with which Johnson responded to Berkeleyan idealism (Soper 3). Postmodern environmental theorists, on the other hand, identify rhetoric as the first political question. Denying the modern theory of referentialism, that language simply refers to or mirrors something outside of it, they focus on the role of language in ‘capturing and constructing’ events. All nature claims, according to this position, are discursive.

While we may still hold that ‘nature’ *exists* independently of discourse, that there is an ontological distinction between an independent nature and our constructs of it, there is “no reference to that which is independent of discourse except in discourse ...” (Soper 8).

As Zimmerman notes, deep ecologists tend to

take for granted that their assertions about humankind, animals, plants, the biosphere, wider identification, and Atman correctly correspond to or correctly disclose these phenomena. Because of a lack of critical reflexivity about the role played by language in shaping of cultural experiences and definition of “nature,” the writings of some deep ecologists seem philosophically naive in comparison with the hypersophistication of postmodern theory. (Rad. 99)

Postmodern environmentalists, then, divert our attention from the ‘saving’ of ‘nature itself’, for they deny that we have access to such a ‘thing’. They are concerned, rather, with “the semiotics of nature ... recall[ing] us to the role of the concept in mediating access to the ‘reality’ it names ...” (Soper 3). Since there is “no reference to that which is independent of discourse except in discourse” (Soper 8), nature has always been a cultural artefact. As Bennet and Chaloupka argue, “even preindustrial nature took shape by virtue of its location

in a cultural project, in, for example, the myth of the Garden” (xi).

But we should not conclude from this that ‘nature’ is a cultural project, that there is no ontological distinction between our constructs of ‘nature’ and an independent nature that is their referent.

Soper points out that we must recognise the limitations of the postmodern argument when we seek to define the concept of ‘nature’:

Just as a simplistic endorsement of nature can seem insensitive to the emancipatory concerns motivating its rejection, so an exclusive emphasis on discourse and signification can very readily appear evasive of ecological realities and irrelevant to the task of addressing them. (8)

Far worse than remaining “evasive” or “irrelevant,” theorist Shane Phelan argues that the removal of the inverted commas, the making of nature into a purely social construct, leads us to the ultimate managerial end.

The elimination of nature can only further the solipsism of modern Western civilization, in which the earth becomes “standing-reserve” for appropriation by humans who have themselves become nothing but resources in a global economy. (Phelan 59)

Verena Conley, in her analysis of postmodern theory, concludes that:

[r]ather than saying that “there is no real,” ... [p]roponents of discourse theory ... never say that the real is inexistent, especially in the sense of nature, but that no truth, *no human truth*, can prevail and that ... the world is not “out there” waiting for human symbols to make sense of it (31)

Thus, postmodern environmentalists, while emphasising discourse and signification, tend to do so to correct those who overlook it in presuming that they have a pipeline to truth uncontaminated by human conceptuality.

Evernden notes that postmodernism challenges the “time-honoured technique of invoking the authority of nature [that] has been essential to the presentation of a persuasive argument,” and makes it “vulnerable to charges of fraud” (Soc.Cr. 26). In surrendering environmentalism’s most powerful rhetorical weapon, the authority of nature, in favour of a rhetorical humility, postmodernism opens space for contestations about the ‘order of things’. As Soper notes, the idea of nature has been used “to legitimate social and sexual hierarchies and cultural norms” (3), to “eternize” what are, in fact, complex cultural creations.

Much effort has been spent by postmodernists on deconstructing 'nature' for social justice purposes rather than for environmental concerns. Without unmediated access to an external, pre-discursive world, without the ability to call upon nature’s authority and truth as incontestable, what kind of ‘environmental ethic’ could postmodernism possibly develop? Bennet and Chaloupka pose the problem for postmodernism as follows:

What happens to environmentalist concerns when the object of those concerns, the thing for the sake of which one speaks—nature, wild lands, animals—begins to lose its status as an object, a given, already set thing to which we can refer as if we were not involved in its construction? (xvi)

In postmodern environmental texts such as Bennet and Chaloupka, Conley, Evernden, etc., it is in the space opened between the signifier and the signified, in the ‘otherness’ of nature to what we can know and say about it, that room is found for environmental ethics. Since we cannot grasp nature without remainder, since nature and our claims about it do not fit neatly into one another, there is always the “inevitability of the resistance posed by ‘the world’ to human projects and projections” (B&C xii). Even in that

“most human of creations, language,” by which we try to grasp the world, there is “the recalcitrant remainder of ‘wildness’” (B&C xii). Language is ‘wild’, is ‘other’, in the sense that our access to language is through language. We are already caught up in language before our reflective powers are developed, and are thus unable to stand outside of it in order to see it as an object. Language is our ‘world within the world’ and therefore we cannot fully tame or domesticate the world, but must consider its alterity—nature as other, in fact, as other than we can ever know (B&C xii). While postmodernism is useful in uncovering the various constructs which inform our notion of ‘nature’, postmodern environmental theorists realise that this is only the first step toward addressing the problem of a postmodern environmental ethic. As Kate Soper reminds us, “it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the ‘real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier” (151). Ultimately, we must agree with Soper who argues that we need both to be sensitive to the critique of representationalism, and to develop more ‘green science’ to oppose polluters (151).

We need not abandon nature because of postmodernism's theoretical position but we can instead attempt to understand the issue from what Shane Phelan calls an “intimate distance (55). As ‘intimate’, nature is never fully ‘absent’; we are intertwined with it. As ‘distance’, nature is never directly accessible, never immediate. It is never a fullness that leaves nothing undisclosed, for distance is never eliminated, it is “the not-quite-thought,” the “not-quite-manifest” (55).

What is needed is a reconceptualization that heightens respect and care without a return to medieval piety. Recognition of nature as intimate distance reminds us simultaneously that nature is us and our lives, but that those

lives are the greatest, most mundane mystery we will ever face. (Phelan 59)

Thus, in the space between presence and absence, between a holistic 're'-turn to nature and management's total dissociation from the natural world, room is opened for ambivalence and complex relations between nature and culture/humans.

Section Two: Merleau-Ponty

Introduction

In this chapter I will be examining the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose theory of language and ontology have much to add to our contemporary environmental debate. Indeed, his work, which most closely belongs to our third category of discourse, postmodernism, is critical of both ‘rationalist/management/scientific discourse’ and ‘intuitionist/holistic discourse’. As Galen Johnson writes, “Merleau-Ponty’s entire philosophical effort from The Phenomenology of Perception forward had been to overcome dichotomies such as these [mind and body, subject and world, etc.] and the philosophical impasses they had created in modern thought” (23).

Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty rejected ‘ethics’ as a system or formula, and thus he did not develop an ‘ethics’. But, as many writers attest to, his writing does contain a latent ethic.⁵ Any reading of Merleau-Ponty’s ethic, then, must also be a writing of it. Thus, after presenting Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language and ontology in chapter one, we will conclude by attempting to write a Merleau-Pontian environmental ethic with the help of the recent efforts of Neil Evernden (1985 and 1992), David Abram (1988 and 1996), and Romand Coles (1993).

The primary focus of this section will be the philosophy of language and ontology of Merleau-Ponty’s last period, cut short by his death in 1961. During this period, Merleau-Ponty was in the process of returning, unsatisfied, to the conclusions of his earlier and more humanist theoretical work, i.e. The Structure of Behavior (19) and The Phenomenology of

Perception (19), conclusions which he had applied in Sense and Non-Sense (1948, trans. 1964), Humanism and Terror (19), and The Ventures of Dialectic Thought (19). Taking up these conclusions as starting points for further reflection, and finding them yet too dualistic, Merleau-Ponty was developing his earlier philosophy of language and ontology into a philosophy of 'indirect language' and 'indirect ontology'.

In The Prose of the World, says editor Claude Lefort, Merleau-Ponty "will discover, in the meditation on 'indirect language', the first signs of the 'indirect ontology' which sustains The Visible and the Invisible" (Pref., PW xix). Following the movement of this 'discovery', we will begin with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, and then work toward his ontology. Merleau-Ponty focuses on language most closely in "On the Phenomenology of Language" (Signs 1960, trans. 1964) and the unfinished and posthumously published The Prose of the World (1969, trans. 1973), later developing part of this 'work set aside' into "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (Signs).

Merleau-Ponty's theory of language, as we will see, rejects both the representationalist belief in the ability to capture the world in language, and the holist notion that beneath language and conceptualisation are 'thoughts' or a level of intelligibility that we can attune ourselves to.

In The Eye and the Mind (1964, trans.), Signs, and the incomplete and posthumously published The Visible and the Invisible (1964, trans. 1968), significant material for a post-Cartesian ontology is presented. In "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty rethinks the relation of humans and nature, characterized in modernity as a subject/object dualism, and begins to speak of 'our flesh' and 'the flesh of the world',

seeing the modern categories of subject and object as abstractions from, and reciprocal aspects of, the same reality—‘the Flesh’. In the same text, he moves from the traditional opposition of a sensible world and a world of ideas, and begins to speak of thought as embodied, of the ‘invisible’ not as the ‘non-visible’, but as the lining and depth of the ‘visible’, of an invisible that is latent ‘in-the-visible’, and of the subject (sujet) as embodied, as a body-subject (sujet-corps). These new relations in which ideas, thought, language and subjectivity are inseparable from the material, are further explored in The Eye and the Mind and The Visible and the Invisible. Here, Merleau-Ponty decentres language from the human brain, finding its basis in an ‘animate’ and ‘expressive’ perceptual landscape, a move that has dramatic implications for environmental thought.

Unlike the modern subject that relates to the world as if separate from its body, seeing from above or outside it, body-subjects (sujet-corps), are situated in and intertwined with the world (‘flesh’ to ‘the flesh of the world’). Paradoxically, being situated means that we have both an ‘openness’ to the world, and that the world exceeds our perspectives, is always at a distance (horizon). Thus, ‘presence’ for Merleau-Ponty, rather than a coincidence of mind and object, is both absolute proximity and irremediable distance.

Our intimate intertwining with the world stands in the way of the externalising gaze of science and management; our distance from the world prevents an easy holism that sees us as “at one” with the earth. Unable to say exactly where we stand, Merleau-Ponty's ontology is not a clear statement of our place in nature, but an expression of the unresolvable ambiguity between humans and nature. To be left with ambiguity is a failure only in the terms of modernity, in which the goal is a passage from ‘confusion’ to the clarity

of complete expression. In Merleau-Ponty's 'postmodern' terms, the ambiguity between subject and object, self and world, signifier and signified, is a 'good ambiguity', allowing room for a different kind of ethic. It is not a case of choosing between the universal and rational laws of modernity, or an irrational and particular spontaneity, but an intertwining of the two: in the opening that allows us to experience the world anew, context and novelty call for judgement, while the existence of a common world that sustains our individual perceptions allows our perspectives to blend with and confirm those of others, allowing for a 'new reason' and a generalisation in morality.

Chapter One: Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Language: Language is a World

“We all secretly venerate the ideal of a language which in the last analysis would deliver us from language by delivering us to the things”
(The Prose of the World 4).

“The perfection of language lies in its capacity to pass unnoticed” (PW 10).

In Section One, we saw how postmodernists take rhetoric as their first question, claiming that language mediates our access to the world. Here, we will explore in greater detail how Merleau-Ponty comes to see I-world relations as 'situated' within conceptual structures that both mediate and direct our understanding of nature, and how management and holism came to forget language.

In accord with postmodernism's linguistic turn, and following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty moves the problem of language into a central position. Throughout Western

philosophy, and most fervently so in modern thought, notes Merleau-Ponty editor Claude Lefort, language has managed to escape from “first philosophy,” has been deemed “the scandal of philosophy” (Preface, PW xxix). Before this move it was held that philosophy, in order to be ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’, required a language as ‘rigorous’ as science’s—a ‘mathematical’, ahistorical, unchanging, universal language not subject to the confusions and contingencies of common speech (Preface, PW xxix). Equipped with such a clear and concise language, philosophy could finally fulfil the promise of Plato’s philosopher-king, offering certain guidance for the socio-political world. As Lefort continues: “This Cartesian dream of a universal language is at the same time ... a prescription for social order, since clarity of mind eliminates the vexatiousness of theological and political controversy—not to mention the vanity of poets” (Preface, PW xxix). This one true universal language would bring all peoples within a single socio-political order. Once the sign system was set, meaning established once and for all, and things were what they were said to be, consensus would be predetermined and there would be no cause for conflict, no need for debate. And yet, somehow, from a system that was to end in universal agreement, environmentalists find themselves caught in interminable debate.

The question we must ask ourselves is how we came to believe in a language that could be based on the ‘given’, pre-cultural authority of nature and could thus deliver up to us the ‘things themselves’? The ‘problem’, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, is that language ‘works’, that is, that it “efface[s] itself to the extent that its expression comes across” (PW 9). Rather than wilfully having been ignored, he writes, language has within itself the “capacity to pass unnoticed,” to “hide itself” (PW 10). When language ‘works’,

communication seems unproblematic, words efface themselves as if all along communication was taking place as “some operation of pure spirit” (PW 117). We see then, that through the complicity of both our “secret veneration” of a language that delivers us to things themselves and language’s capacity to pass unnoticed, we come to believe that we are dealing in the realm of spirit, meaning, thought and mind. We are able to ‘use’ language ‘successfully’ without paying attention to, and, in fact, by diverting our attention from the corporeal/material realm of language, signs, and words—the realm of arm and hand, of pen, ink and paper, of gesture, throat, tongue and lips, and of history and place.

In The Prose of the World, Merleau-Ponty explains that the self-effacement of words, while leading us to ‘forget,’ is also language’s ‘perfection’ and its ‘virtue.’

When someone—an author or a friend—succeeds in expressing himself the signs are immediately forgotten; all that remains is the meaning. The perfection of language lies in its capacity to pass unnoticed.

But therein lies the virtue of language: it is language which propels us toward the things it signifies. In the way it works, language hides itself from us. Its triumph is to efface itself and take us beyond the words to the author’s very thoughts, so that we *imagine* we are engaged with him in a wordless meeting of minds. (PW 10, italics mine)

The key word here is “imagine,” for we are ‘tricked’ by language into letting it pass unnoticed, into believing, as representationalism does, that it is simply a humble container for transporting thoughts (and a world turned into thought), such that, its function served, we are left standing face to face with the author’s thoughts or ‘the world itself.’ Only when expression and communication fail do we feel that we are dealing only with words. It is through this model of language as a neutral tool that management and holism believe nature can be delivered up through language and yet remain ‘nature itself’.

Despite its seeming self-effacement, Merleau-Ponty argues, there is no signification without signs: “no language ever ... wastes away to make the things themselves appear ...” (Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence 78). We have no access to a world beneath language, he argues, a position from which we could set the relations between signs according to ‘reality’, and thus we cannot “define [language] to match the divine mind, return to the very origin of the history of speech ...” (PW 5), or “recover the muted language in which being murmurs to us” (PW 6). For language to waste away and leave us in a silent coincidence of mind pressed against thing, it would, impossibly, have to be an identical mirroring of things. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, “[w]ords do not look like the things they designate ...” (Cézanne’s Doubt 68).

Supporting the postmodern position that words do not function as representations requiring us only to mentally polish away the flaws in their reflective surface, Merleau-Ponty argues that “every attempt to close our hand on the thought which dwells in the spoken word leav[es] only a bit of verbal material in our finger” (On the Phenomenology of Language 89). Drawing from his reading of Saussure, Merleau-Ponty argues that meaning is the result of “the way in which ... signs behave toward one another and are distinguished from one another ...” (ILVS 42). Saussure has shown “that each act of expression becomes significant only as a modulation of a general system of expression and only insofar as it is differentiated from other linguistic gestures” (ILVS 81). Each sign, then, gains its meaning from all the others, and together they allude to a signification that lies beyond them. Taken singly, without other signs to relate to, words would be only meaningless sound and scribble, the ‘thought’ or ‘signification’ “always in abeyance” (OPL 88). The relation

between signs creates meaning different from the sum of their parts, each word does not refer directly to a corresponding meaning, but together they form a 'halo' of meaning. Our 'truth', therefore, rather than an ahistorical and universal truth to end all debate, accessible to us through the reflective polishing of the mirror of language, is the result of the relations between signs, of sign structures, of symbolic contexts from which it cannot be separated, and which stamp our knowledge with a date and place.

For Merleau-Ponty, sign structures are not screens which hide pure thoughts and meaning, or containers that transport them from mind to mind, but the context in which meaning arises. Sign structures *embody* meaning and thoughts such that there is no meaning or thought outside these material/historical contexts, no "inner lexicon" freed from signs, "no language prior to language" (ILVS 42).

Embodied in material sign structures, 'thought,' in Merleau-Ponty's terminology, is language, an 'internal monologue' and a 'personal vibration'. A primary 'thought' does not then lead us to 'speak', nor do 'words' arouse in us a 'thought', but "[i]t is words that words arouse and, to the degree that we 'think' more fully, words so precisely fill our minds they leave no empty corner for pure thoughts or for significations that are not the work of language" (PW 115). Thought, then, is not "a sort of ideal text that our sentences attempt to translate" (ILVS 41-42), as in modernity where thought, using language as a tool in a second order operation, "joins the linguistic meaning of speech with the signification it intends" by choosing words to match "as one goes to look for a hammer in order to drive a nail or for a claw to pull it out" (ILVS 46). Speech is, rather, as Don Ihde finds, "the performance of thought"; it does not translate a prior thought, but "accomplishes it"

(Singing 69). In this way, as Kohák writes, there can be no ‘return’ to an “alleged depth of our collective unconscious, of our ancestral memories, of our prereflective myths or perhaps our primitive emotions,” a depth in which we tap into a kind of collective unconscious of all beings through which the world speaks to us (9). Rather, language always folds back upon itself to create more language. “Speech always comes to play against a background of speech; it is always only a fold in the immense fabric of language” (ILVS 43), “a reflection back upon a preconstituted language which we are born into” (OPL 84).

Merleau-Ponty argues that when we ‘fold back’ upon language we are “taking possession or acquisition of significations which otherwise are present to us only in a muffled way” (OPL 90). Rather than seeking an ‘ideal text’, ‘pure thought’ or ‘golden age of clarity’ that will guide language, we return to a ‘new beginning’ of language in which expressive speech “is precisely in the process of writing the text” (ILVS 46). Thus, it is not a return to *the* beginning of language, but to a preconstituted language from which we can draw new meanings. Unlike a ‘mathematical language’, our clarity of thought/language comes at the end of this process. We do not know our own mind until we speak it (even if only internally), and even then, since the consequences of this process always exceed its premises (OPL 91), we often surprise ourselves.

Even so, the thematisation of the signified does not lead to complete expression at the end either. In rejecting language as the translation of an original text, and that meaning and word exist in a 1:1 relation, Merleau-Ponty is led to the conclusion that “the idea of *complete* expression is nonsensical ...” (ILVS 43). As language is not an object of thought laid out before a constituting consciousness, but is ‘pre’-constituted, any attempt to

thematise, grasp and clarify language must do so through the language in which it is already caught up, and thus will always leave us with a remainder, with language as an enigma. Since, rather than predictably following morphological, syntactical and lexical rules, we are always in the process of creating language, linguistic rules can only approximate the lived usage of language, governing past expression. Thus, “we can only ‘think of [language] obliquely’, ‘mime’, or ‘reveal its mystery’” (PW 116). We cannot go through language to ‘the world itself’, as modernity claimed, but always remain within language—language is a ‘world’ which we can approach only indirectly.

As we see then, language contains a dimension of the ‘wild’, of excess, of more than we can know: even our own speech escapes and exceeds our intentions in a way that will never end, always remaining ‘other’ to us. This is what Merleau-Ponty speaks of when, in referring to his own craft, he writes: “The philosopher must bear his shadow, which is not simply the factual absence of future light” (PS 178). “Philosophy is not the passage from a confused world to a universe of closed significations” (PW 17).

Merleau-Ponty overturns the model of language prevalent since Aristotle which allows language to escape from first philosophy, a model in which the management/holism debate is caught due to a lack of critical reflexivity about language. In this model, the curtain of language, as a representation or “flawed copy” of speech which is, in turn, a flawed representation of thought, falls away and mind unites with world through the process of ‘philosophising’ (Davis 34). Thought cannot escape language, language cannot capture itself, and thus the world escapes our attempts to fit it into our categories, definitions and identities. There is always excess of the signified over the signifier. Within and beyond

what is said, there is always a remainder, the not-said, the wild. Silence. As Romand Coles writes, “the earth and its beings only really ‘speak’ ... to us through our efforts to articulate them” (238), and our articulations are, as Merleau-Ponty shows us, always also silence.

Merleau-Ponty attempts to move his ‘shadow’ into centre stage—not, finally, to dissolve it in the full light of knowledge, but to serve as a constant reminder of its presence, that all attempts to know the world and express it carry within them the ‘not-said’. He seeks to take responsibility for the fact that language does not resemble or approximate the world as a mirror might, but, as we will see, covers over as it ‘reveals’ and ‘discloses’. Rather than the pure light of the complete expression of an intelligible world, we have access only to “radiant nebulae separated by expanses of darkness” (CD 3-4).

This darkness, or ‘silence’, “which is not simply the factual absence of future light” (PS 178), which “does not cease to surround [speech]” (ILVS 46), is yet not a negative phenomenon for Merleau-Ponty. ‘Silence’ is, in fact, the tacit ground of speech that makes communication possible. We will see in Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between ‘spoken’ language (le langage parlé) and ‘speaking’ language (le langage parlant), that he uses the term ‘silence’ to distinguish allusive, ‘indirect’ language from the empirical use of language (ILVS 44). For Merleau-Ponty, “all language is indirect or allusive—that is, if you wish, silence” (ILVS 43). In order to express the world, we do not speak *in* words as if each word were a container for meaning, but *through* them; words carry us beyond themselves. Despite this, we tend to use language as if signs reveal the ‘thing itself’, confirming the adequacy of past expressions to this task each time we repeat them.

Le Langage Parlé, Le Langage Parlant

“... [W]e are bewitched, by language and its power of reification, to make prose of the world at the expense of poetry” (Claude Lefort, preface to The Prose of the World).

In arguing that expression is never complete, that philosophy does not lead from confusion to closed signification, but is a process of creation rather than replication, Merleau-Ponty offers the possibility of changing our world-view. Our destructive paradigm, though made to seem 'natural' and inevitable by the 'successful' functioning of language, is not the final word. The notion of 'silence', of the 'not-said', opens space for future possibilities different from the present, for a new language that implicates a new ethics.

In The Prose of the World, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between two kinds of language: 'le langage parlé' (spoken language) and 'le langage parlant' (speaking language). Le langage parlé is our culture's fund of already established expressions in which the relations between signs and significations are already habitual and familiar—it is 'sedimented' language, 'after the fact', 'already spoken', the language studied and formalised by linguists. In le langage parlé, “there is a direct meaning which corresponds point by point to the established phrases, forms, and words” (PW 46). Thus, to convey meaning, le langage parlé has only to remind us of significations already present in us.

But speaking or writing that relies solely on repeating this language supports the status quo. It is an institution or, as Merleau-Ponty says, hinting of the past, a “monument,”

for it “limits itself to using, through accepted signs, the meanings already accepted in a given culture” (“An Unpublished Text,” PW 8-9). “The tendency of sedimented language (le langage parlé),” as Hugh Silverman writes, “is to consolidate, to formalise, and to regulate established meaning ...” (Silverman 189). It is language that has forgotten that its speaking is also a silence.

Merleau-Ponty writes of culture as a second hand speaking that provides an “already constituted reason” and a familiar and solid world (CD 19). Surrounded by our cultural world and artefacts, we gain confidence in our power to understand the world and a sense that these understandings have permanence. “We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and inshakeably” (CD 16). We see the world through the eyes of our culture, through which it has already been seen, spoken, and explained, and are thus quick to conceptualise, name and geometrise it according to these established categories. Our experience is not ‘original’ but second hand, Merleau-Ponty claims, and thus we are not *truly* ‘seeing’.

Once meaning is institutionalised in these habitual expressions, they come to stand for the world, the world is bound within them, and “the gaps and element of silence are obliterated” (PW 46). Forgotten and buried beneath this “monumental” achievement is the fact that the world transcends language, that our expressions are only partial. But this need not be our fate, Merleau-Ponty argues. There is also ‘authentic’ and ‘productive’ expression that frees the world from this cage, if only for a time.

For ‘authentic’ expression, we need both le langage parlé, a fund of already established expressions, and a new form to take from this fund and “detach itself and remain new enough to arouse attention” (PW 35). Merleau-Ponty finds this new form in le langage parlant. Rather than a repetition of past meaning in which words simply efface themselves, le langage parlant creates itself in expressive acts, and “sweeps [us] on from the signs toward meaning ...” (PW 10).

As we saw earlier, language folds back upon itself. But Merleau-Ponty shows here that we need not simply follow it blindly, using language ‘empirically’ only, retracing the same path each time. While we cannot create a new language ex nihilo or match it to a true guide beneath the cultural realm (in nature or a heaven of ideas), we can “de-form” past expression and “re-create” language. “All great prose,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “is also a re-creation of the signifying instrument, henceforth manipulated according to a new syntax” (“An Unfinished Text,” PW 8-9). To make language signify what is intended requires a creative arranging of already signifying instruments, a “coherent deformation” in which we “throw them off center and recenter them” (OPL 91). As Merleau-Ponty writes:

As long as language is functioning authentically [i.e. creatively rather than repetitively], it is not a simple invitation to the listener or reader to discover in himself significations that were already there. It is rather the trick whereby the writer or orator, touching on these significations already present to us, makes them yield strange sounds. At first these sounds seem false or dissonant. However, because the writer is so successful in converting us to his system of harmony, we adopt it henceforth as our own. (PW 13)

While ‘Truth’, as we have seen, is partial, an historical, temporary event, Merleau-Ponty yet reserves ‘truth’ a special place.

To say there is a truth is to say that when my renewal [of language] meets the old or alien project, and successful expression frees what has always been held captive in

being, an inner communication is established in the density of personal and interpersonal time through which our present becomes the *truth* of all the other knowing events. It is like a wedge we drive into the present, a milestone bearing witness that in this moment something has taken place which being was always waiting for or “intending to say” [*voulait dire*], and which will never stop if not being true at least signifying and stimulating our thinking apparatus, if need be by drawing from it truths more comprehensive than the present one. At this moment something has been founded in signification; an experience has been transformed into meaning, has become truth. (OPL 96)

As a result of this creative event, past expression breaks out of the bounds of established relations, of the “controlled, limiting circumstances” of the established relations between words and their meanings (Silverman 189). Rather than a ‘sheer rebellion’, something *new* is being “founded” and “established”: “another form of expressivity, another type of communication, an indirect language that has *not yet* become codified and solidified ...” (Silverman 189, italics mine).

Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to retrieve the world from sedimented language is not a search for a final acquisition, formula, or dialectical synthesis, for all expression is only partial. But rather than rejecting dialectic altogether, he reformulates it to allow for a creative movement of language which never ceases. Even our ‘new’ speaking which frees possible meanings captive in being covers over and, through its successful use, in time becomes familiar and forgets that it is not complete expression. It falls for the ‘ruse’ of language, that is, that it is “capable in principle of winning ... any being which might present itself” (OPL 95), and thus we are called to ever renew language.

Merleau-Ponty differentiates between two kinds of dialectic, which he calls ‘bad dialectic’ and ‘good dialectic’. The ‘bad dialectic’ “thinks it recomposes being by a thetic thought, by an assemblage of statements, by thesis, antithesis, and synthesis” (VI 94). It is

this kind of dialectic that is practiced by a modernity uncomfortable with ambiguity, with incomplete identification, which claims to represent in language all there is. The ‘good dialectic’, on the other hand, which he calls ‘hyperdialectic’, “is conscious of the fact that every *thesis* is an idealization, that Being is not made up of idealizations or things said, as the old logic believed, but of bound wholes where signification never is except in tendency ...” (VI 94). Hyperdialectic, thus, is dialectic without synthesis. There is still a “surpassing that reassembles,” but it is not the reassembly of a ‘solution’, it is a trembling unity exposed to contingency, “concrete, partial, encumbered with survivals, saddled with deficits ...” (VI 94-5). Language cannot hand over to us “the secret of the being of the world,” for, as we saw earlier, “language is itself a world, itself a being ...” (VI 96). But it is “a world and a being to the second power, since it does not speak in a vacuum, since it speaks *in* and *of* the world and therefore redoubles their enigma instead of dissipating it” (VI 96). In modern philosophy, reflection upon the world is said to pass beyond language and provide us with ‘the world itself’, but we will see that just as language folds back upon a preconstituted language, so too reflection folds back over a preconstituted world, and over our body’s perceptual experience of this world upon which it then reflects. It is in the parallel of language and world as preconstituted, and thus ‘prereflective’, that Merleau-Ponty joins language and ontology as ‘indirect’. Neither language nor the world give themselves over as ‘objects’—both can only be alluded to, approached indirectly. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology finds in the body’s prereflective, perceptual experience a more immediate access to the world. He thus attempts to ‘return’ to this experience and to articulate it. We will see here that we are not ‘trapped’ in language, circling in a cultural world of our

making in which our 'speaking anew' is no more than a game of language. We are not simply 'freeing' the world by releasing it from one 'trap' to another.

Chapter Two: Merleau-Ponty's 'Indirect' Ontology: Writing the World from Within

In order to reflect, there must be a prior experience of the world to reflect upon, an experience prior to any thesis. It is this experience that is the 'object' of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the naive position of our everyday lives in which we believe that our senses open upon a common world given to experience before reflection and from which reflection proceeds. He calls this position a 'perceptual faith'.

Just as the instituted opinions of le langage parlé create for us a common world, so too when dealing with the visible world, divergent positions are unified without great difficulty and our naive belief that we share a common world is maintained. However, as soon as we reflect on the evidence of our perceptions, as soon as we reach the 'invisible', "it seems rather that each man inhabits his own islet ..." (VI 14). Thus, says Merleau-Ponty: "What St. Augustine said of time—that it is perfectly familiar to each, but that none of us can explain it to the others—must be said of the world" (VI 3). When we attempt to clearly articulate what we mean by 'we', 'seeing', 'thing', 'world', we find ourselves caught in "a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions ..." (VI 3). Our faith succumbs to doubt, and we find ourselves in 'crisis'. In the process of reflecting and articulating upon our experience of the world as "absolute proximity, it also becomes, inexplicably, irremediable distance" (VI 8).

The philosophy of reflection attempts to resolve this 'crisis' by grounding philosophy in the interiority of the mind, turning the world into an 'idea' such that world and cogitatum coincide. In this reflective 'theoretical attitude', the 'I' "makes itself 'indifferent', a pure 'knower', in order to grasp all things without remainder--to spread all things out before itself and to 'objectify' and gain intellectual possession of them" (PS 162). It seeks "things simply as things" (blosse Sachen), rendering them "of every action-predicate and every value-predicate" (PS 162).

While Merleau-Ponty claims that this theoretical attitude toward things is not false, it is not the only attitude we can have toward the world. Merleau-Ponty is not interested in re-exploring the world through traditional philosophies of reflection, for "[w]e do not live naturally in the universe of blosse Sachen" (PS 162-3). "Prior to all reflection, in conversation and the practices of life ... things are not nature in itself for us but 'our surroundings'" (PS 163). Here, the so-called 'confusion' and 'opinion' of our diverse, situated perspectives is an "Urdoxa", the fundamental unveiling of the world in experience (PS 164).

The activities of theoretical consciousness—positing, constructing, affirming, negating and judging are not necessary here, for the world of perceptual faith is given to experience prior to these, and is thus "beyond proofs" (VI 128). In it "we know far more about [things] ... than the theoretical attitude can tell us—and above all we know it in a different way" (PS 163). While 'our surroundings' are not given in the sense of clear and distinct knowledge, the world of perceptual faith is yet not wholly irrational or mysterious, but has a 'clarity' of its own. It is an experience

of inhabiting the world by our body, of inhabiting the truth by our whole selves, without there being need to choose nor even to distinguish between the assurance of seeing and the assurance of seeing the true, because in principle they are one and the same thing—faith, therefore, and not knowledge, since the world is here not separated from our hold on it, since, rather than affirmed, it is taken for granted, rather than disclosed, it is non-dissimulated, non-refuted. (VI 28)

Coming after, reflection must make use of our body's prior opening to the world, and thus cannot account for it. Reflection does not 'go beyond' it in a passage from 'opinion' to 'knowledge', and any effort to replace its ambiguity with a new formula or picture is not a resolution but an effacing, a forgetting. For Merleau-Ponty, our primary relation to the world *is* one of ambiguity. Since reflection cannot return back 'before' or 'outside' this realm in order to clarify it, a philosophy of this sensuous, prereflective realm must be "the perceptual faith questioning itself about itself" (VI 103).

Cézanne's Painting and Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

“[P]ainting, being language, must also be expression, and therefore a creative process. ‘Words do not look like the things they designate; and a picture is not a trompe l’oeil’ (CD 68)” (de Waelhens 175).

Merleau-Ponty appeals to painting throughout his career as a paradigm case of indirect language and its power to renew the world through “returning to the source of silent and solitary experience” of the world, to a world that is unfamiliar and strange. [footnote: “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1948), “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” (1960) and “Eye and Mind” (1964)]. In Cézanne’s painting, Merleau-Ponty finds “a paradigm for

prescientific perceptual experience of the natural world ...” (Johnson 7), the kind of direct and primitive contact with the world that phenomenology seeks. Rather than repeating the fund of already spoken speech, or already painted painting, the artist attempts, through a process of ‘forgetting’ the cultural perspective, its sciences and systems, projects and meanings, to ‘know’ this ambiguous realm and express the world anew, creating a “rebirth of existence” (CD 18). “Cézanne’s painting suspends these [institutionalised] habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself” (CD 16). We see here the attempt to ‘bracket’ the habitual, the realm that covers over silence in order to allow something else to appear.

Where Cézanne attempts to stay in, and paint from, the sensuous immediacy of the lived world, from our ‘living perceptual field’ prior to any reflection upon it, Merleau-Ponty attempts to return to this universe of brute being in order to bring it to expression and endow it with philosophical status (Sallis 29).⁶ In both Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Cézanne’s painting, writes Smith, we find the attempt to return us to regions of experience so close and familiar, in the background of our consciousness, that they escape attention (21).

It seems here that holism and a kind of romantic phenomenology embrace each other. But it is only through an uncritical reading of Merleau-Ponty that his work could be brought to support a romantic approach of this sort. The holist longing for a return to beginnings, to a lost ‘natural’ innocence or a golden age of harmony with nature, is not endorsed here. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reduction is not Husserl’s; his ‘return’ does not give us the origin of the world, it “discloses the dimension of the beginnings not by

its success but by its inevitable failure ...” (Sallis 21). In its ‘failure’ to return us to an origin ‘before’ language, world, reflection and experience, we discover that we cannot pass back behind our historical, situated bodily experience of the world. Every attempt to ‘return’ finds not a placeless cogito, but a body that is physically and inescapable situated—a body whose perceiving is always inseparably thought/language plus material opening onto the world. A thought embodied in symbolic contexts, a body situated in a culture/place/language that informs ‘seeing’.

Rather than an immaterial ‘origin’, we discover that what is ‘original’ is “the dimension of our already established, indissoluble inscription in the world ...” (Sallis 22). We can not coincide with the world or successfully ‘return’ to immediate experience. Thus, by The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty speaks of our ‘revealing’ of the world as a revealing of a ‘world-at-a-distance’, always further on. As Merleau-Ponty writes, the world is given to us through our body’s “openness upon the world which does not exclude a possible occultation ...” (VI 28). The perception of our body is simultaneously a revealing *and* a concealing from view; an occultation, not an esoteric secret that would open to a mystical knowledge which can go beneath it. Where holism presupposes an innocence of prereflective consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty “there is an informing of perception by culture which enables us to say that culture is perceived” (VI 212). There is not, on the one hand, a cultural explanation of things, and on the other an innocent purely biological perceiving of them. Sensory perception and symbolic contexts are interrelated, such that no seeing is a ‘seeing of’, but always a ‘seeing as’ and a ‘seeing from’—a pairing of perception and expression.

According to Don Ihde, “the world is already primitively given as meaningful in some sense. There is not pure datum, no raw qualia or pure sense from which to begin; rather, man begins immersed in a world already significant, already both ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’, and the phenomena of immersion are the first to be interrogated” (Singing 62). As Sueellen Campbell confirms in “The Land and the Language of Desire,” “all readings are ‘situated’. We *always* read [and see] from within a system of social, political, economic, cultural, and personal circumstances—and thus a set of conceptual structures—that direct us to a *particular* reading” (129). These symbolic structures act as a vast network of “texts” and, as Campbell adds, “surely one of the most important of these forces is the rest of the natural world” (134). ‘Biological’ seeing, which Don Ihde refers to as ‘microperception’, is open to many interpretations or ‘macroperceptions’—the world, open to multiple possibilities, both sustains numerous descriptions and exceeds them all (Tech. 45). The same sky, for example, seen from within different cultures, may be perceived as a dome, or as openness—each culture tends to accept one interpretation of things and block out or ‘forget’ others. Though all perception includes the ‘naked’ observations we make, no perception is ‘bare’ or ‘innocent’. There is no direct perception in the sense of a relation in which the world is present to the perceiver. All I-world relations are I-language/culture-world relations; our perceptions always include the symbolic contexts from which we cannot escape. Even were we to imagine an innocent ‘seeing of’, our biological perception, as we will see, is never of the ‘world itself’ but of pieces torn out from the whole; we may imagine the world as a whole in conception, but the observations which are used to ‘prove’ these conceptions are always local and partial.

While this prereflective dimension, being primary, is the ‘object’ of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, given the secondary nature of any reflection upon it, the method that characterises his indirect ontology in The Visible and the Invisible is that of a reflection aware of its secondary nature, that attempts to take into account reflection’s effect on the reflected—a ‘hyperreflection’ (surréflexion). As Galen Johnson writes,

[t]o reflect in thought cannot mean to coincide with the object precisely because thought is reflection, re-turn, re-conquest, or re-recovery (VI 45; VI 69). Reflection is retrospective, therefore a temporal beat behind the genesis of its object; reflection is the activity of a self-in-genesis in relation to an object, therefore a temporal beat behind the genesis of itself. The source of the world and the source of the self slip away from reflective view. Hyperreflection is the effort to take seriously these spaces of genesis, meaning that ontology is possible only indirectly, in an interrogative mood that remains sensitive to the silence of what cannot be said. (45-46)

While Merleau-Ponty seeks to bring to expression the universe of brute being from the depths of its silence, this realm where “the portals of culture are yet not closed” (Waldenfels 5), its expression must be through ‘indirect’ language. This world-at-a-distance to which we are open

by principle does not admit the procedure of objectifying or reflective *approximation*, since it is at a distance, by way of horizon, latent or dissimulated. It is that universe that philosophy aims at, that is, as we say, *the object* of philosophy—but here never will the lacuna be filled in, the unknown transformed into the known; the “object” of philosophy will never come to fill in the philosophical question, since this obturation would take from it the depth and the distance that are essential to it. (VI 101)

The theoretical attitude can only idealise this primary realm, give “an approximation of the total situation, which includes, beyond what we say, the mute experience from which we draw what we say” (VI 88). Unable to grasp this realm in language, Merleau-Ponty incorporates an allusive, ‘indirect’ language that has more in common with literary

language than with the clear, concise, almost mathematical language of modern philosophy.

The Intertwining—The Chiasm: The Body, the Other

In “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” Merleau-Ponty attempts to think what Husserl hints at, but leaves unthought, in regards to the relationship between “the haecceity of Nature” and “the vortex of absolute consciousness” (165). Merleau-Ponty rejects both the unsituated objectivist position in which all subjects see as if with the same eye, and Husserl’s immanent transcendental subject in favour of a situated body-subject, both immanent and transcendent. He sees the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’, the general categories by which modern philosophy understands the relation of humans and mind to nature, “as two orders hastily constructed within a total experience, whose context must be restored in all clarity” (VI 17). To confine the world to these limited categories is to reduce the rich depth of the world. These bifurcations, he argues, arise only in reflective thought, for in lived perception we inhabit the world through our body. Merleau-Ponty blurs the opposition of subject and object, mind and nature, in what he calls “an ontological rehabilitation of the sensible” (PS 167), for these dichotomies have invariably privileged the ‘invisible’ over the ‘visible’. This ‘rehabilitation’ does not reverse the privilege, nor is it “a concession of mind to matter”: “This renewal of the world is also mind’s renewal, a rediscovery of that brute mind which, untamed by any culture, is asked to create culture anew” (PS 181).

As body-subject, the subject is no longer seen as pure consciousness, nor the body as pure object. Subject and body, sentient and sensible, are intertwined and blurred together

such that we do not see from above, detached from our body, but from our body's position in the world—our body bonds us to the world and gives us a place in it. For Merleau-Ponty, a pensée de survol, an unsituated view of the world as if from on high [objectivist], is not an experience open to a subject with a body. Thus, not only will an ontology fail to fully reveal the world, but it must also be an 'ontology from within', written from the position of a situated body-subject. In such an ontology, the formulation of 'subject with a body' is still not radical enough, for this would still be to see it from the position of the reflective gaze. Our immediate experience of ourselves is not that of two things side by side, one in the other, or glued together mysteriously like the Cartesian cogito and body. The body, for M-P, as experienced in the prereflective 'natural attitude', is two dimensional, at once sentient and sensible. It has a "double belongingness": as sensible mass it belongs to the order of the 'object', and as a seer open to the mass of the sensible, to the order of the 'subject' ..." (VI 137).

Merleau-Ponty finds in the body, rather than in reflective consciousness, the basis on which our reflection upon the realm of perceptual faith can proceed. The body is able to "accomplish[] 'a sort of reflection'" in which it is ambiguously both the subject and object of its own perception (PS 166).

Merleau-Ponty explains it thus:

There is a relation of my body to itself which makes it the *vinculum* of the self and things. When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a 'physical thing.' But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right, es wird Leib, es empfindet. The physical thing becomes animate. Or, more precisely, it remains what it was (the event does not enrich it), but an exploratory power comes to rest upon or dwell in it. I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes "a sort of reflection." In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what

he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body—that the body is a “perceiving thing,” a “subject-object.” (PS 166)

Strictly speaking, in its reflection upon itself, the body neither perceives—“it is as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it” (VI 9)—nor is it perceived—“this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand” (VI 9). In this reflection, we do not coincide with ourselves in the way modern subjects are supposed to. Subject and object do not pass into each other, my left hand cannot have my right hand's experiences.

Just as we do not coincide with ourselves in our body's reflection upon itself, neither can we coincide with others in our perception of them. These ‘*animalia*’ are ‘absent’ for us as our body serves to separate us from other bodies. At the same time, Merleau-Ponty argues, the experience of an ‘other’ is only possible because we are embodied; it is available to us “beneath the order of thought,” it is “offered to a body” (PS 170). As a transcendental consciousness, detachable from its body, we would either know others as we know our own body, or dominate them with a pure vision that “transforms them into puppets which move only by springs” (VI 77). In both cases, they cease to be other. Merleau-Ponty posits a ‘bodily transcendence’ in which the body, immanent in, and intertwined with, the world, goes beyond itself through perception. The body opens us to others *as* other. Through the body, we experience others as both “absent” and “absolutely present” (PS 172).

Just as the reflection of the body upon itself is not that of modernity, in which an active subject perceives a passive object, but the reversibility of an intertwined body-

subject, so too is our perception of other bodies reversible such that we are intertwined with other body-subjects in an intercorporeality—what appeared as ‘puppets’ in modern vision, as physical things, are re-animated—their ek-stasis, their bodily transcendence, is compossible with our own (PS 170).

Where the gaze of modernity sees a flat world from on high, bodily perception sees from within the world, up close, and here the world is a world in depth. Rather than falling upon other human and animal bodies and objectifying them, we are able to distinguish between ‘man’ and ‘mannequin’. We come across a form that resembles us, but which is in depth, which presents itself as “a certain absence that is hollowed out and tactfully dealt with behind that body by its behavior” (PS 172). Though we do not have access to another’s thoughts, we yet perceive a gesturing and behaving body that “arouses and convokes the possibilities of my own body ...” (OPL 94).

Here too, Merleau-Ponty finds an extension of the mirror model of two hands touching. Just as when my right hand touches my left hand, my left hand ‘springs to life’ and touches my right, so too “the other’s body becomes animate before me when I shake another man’s hand or just look at him” (PS 168). In the handshake we touch the other’s hand, which we experience as also touching us, our gesture is mirrored, asymmetrically, by the other. The other’s hand is substituted for our left hand and we suddenly find ourselves an object for another’s perception. We come up against a visible that gestures, speaks, and has a style suggesting a latent, ‘invisible’ depth.

As embodied by the ‘visible’, these ‘invisibles’ are intertwined with it in such a way that, for example, the clenching fist, red face, raised blood pressure *are* anger. We can know

that we see not the movements of a marionette, but the expression of an other ourself, for bodily gestures do not require any further interior reflection or translation into language but “speak[] directly to our own body” (Abram 74). As Merleau-Ponty writes: “Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another’s consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist *on* this face or *in* these gestures, not hidden behind them” (“The Film and The New Psychology” 52). Our body has the capacity to resonate with other bodies. Even speech, Merleau-Ponty argues, is only one way of gesturing—as carnal, it is a ‘vocal gesture’ in which meaning and sound, rhythm, timing, intonation, etc. are inseparable. Though speech is a paradigm case, there is a continuum with other bodily gestures: the gestures of another reverse our relation to ‘objects’, they serve as a kind of “magic machine for transporting the ‘I’ into the other person’s perspective” (PW 19). But while “I can construct, behind this mannequin, a presence to self modelled on my own,” I can know *that* he thinks and sees, *that* we perceive the same world despite our different perspectives on it, “it is still my self that I put in it ...” (PS 169). I cannot know exactly *what* he thinks and sees, this intercorporeity of body-subjects that opens us to “other Narcissus,” is never an identity. The other’s life is always being lived elsewhere.

We cannot think others’ thoughts or see with their eyes, but we are not isolated, each living in our own solipsist world. When I know that the things my body perceives are also visible to and seen by others, they are no longer “solipsist” and become being itself. The ‘synergy’ between the senses within an organism through which our hands touch the same world that our eyes see, also exists between organisms (VI 142), as in a handshake or

when our eyes fix upon the same object as another's. When the glance of another comes to meet the very things that we see, when another's gaze takes over our things, we are forced to "bring a vision that is not our own into account" (VI 143).

Without a coincidence of subjects, there cannot be one, true perspective. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "each of us have a private world: these private worlds are 'worlds' only for their titulars; they are not the world. The sole world, that is, the unique world, would be a KOIVOS KOSMOS, and our perceptions do not open upon it" (VI 10). But our many perspectives are not isolated and unrelated, our 'private worlds' "communicate ... each of them is given to its incumbent as a variant of one common world" (VI 11). While we do not open to this common world through a single eye, our separate eyes all see the same world from different points, our divergent perspectives often "blending," "confirming," and "resonating" with each other. This, Merleau-Ponty writes, is the kind of rationality that we can have. Being is not 'pure being', but a system of perspectives. Reality is an 'inter-corporality', lying "at the intersection of my view with those of the others, at the intersection of my acts with those of the others" (VI 84). Both the sensible world and the historical world, then, are "intermundane spaces" (VI 84). Because thought cannot soar *over* the body and its horizon to the clarity of pure being, but must 'use' the body as its intermediary *through* which it can see and feel,

our life has, in the astronomical sense of the word, an atmosphere: it is constantly enshrouded in those mists we call the sensible world or history, the *one* of the corporeal life and the *one* of the human life, the present and the past, as a pell-mell ensemble of bodies and minds, promiscuity of visages, words, actions, with, between them all, that adhesion which cannot be denied them since they are all differences, extreme divergencies of one same something. (VI 85)

It is the same world that sustains our divergent worldviews.

Since our experience of the 'life world' is relative to our situation within it, philosophy and ontology must remain indeterminate and ambiguous. Nevertheless, we need not surrender to irrationalism. Meaning emerges, Merleau-Ponty writes, where "the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears" (PhP xix-xx, qtd. in Lefort, Pref. PW xxviii-ix). As the relation of individual words creates a 'halo' of significance, so our individual perspectives combine to form a 'halo' that is 'our surroundings'.

The World as Animate and Expressive

As we saw in Section One, moral consideration is given to a group of privileged speakers in conversation with each other. In Western philosophy, language is conceded to 'Man' alone, thus cutting off our access to the voices of 'wild' otherness and "compress[ing] the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of ontology" (Manes 43). As silent, nature has no moral standing and is exploitable. Merleau-Ponty's work, on the other hand, while not claiming a direct access to the voice of nature or the mute language of being, nonetheless breaks the closed circle of privileged speakers and expands it.

In his progressive analysis of the body's relation to itself, to other beings, and to things, Merleau-Ponty leads us from a circle of humans as sole proprietors of language, speaking only *about* the world, to humans in conversation with a world that they both speak

to and which speaks to them through the body. In the sensible/ sentient 'flesh' there is a reciprocity of perception that finds us already in dialogue with nature, caught up in a mute conversation from which we cannot excuse ourselves, which constantly serve to remind us of our embodiment.

Merleau-Ponty's "animation" of what in modernity are held to be inert objects does not stop with the human body. The "mirror phenomenon" of reversibility, in which the distinction between subject and object is blurred in the body and in our relation to other bodies, is extended to our relation with the 'flesh', the sensible/sensing world which is the pole of our bodies' exploration (VI 253). Where we can, through the reversibility of perception, encounter other humans as alter egos, reversibility gives to things a certain degree of animateness, changing them from passive objects to active players in the unfolding of our perception. In perception, perceiver and perceived reflect each other, creating an indefinite series of images more real than any one image alone. In this 'coupling', we can no longer say which is active and which passive, which subject and which object, which seeing and which seen. Here, 'inner' and 'outer' are linked such that, as David Abram characterises, "we begin to turn inside-out," leaking subjectivity back into the non-human world (262). But Merleau-Ponty does not return us to an animism that finds spirits in the rivers, rocks and trees, but neither are these 'things' inanimate. In perception we are 'coupled' with these 'dynamic presences' in a process greater than body-subject or rock or tree alone, and the once rigid boundary between us loses its clarity. Rock, river, tree; all become 'animated'. David Abram argues that "[t]o describe the animate life of particular things is simply the most precise and parsimonious way to articulate the things as we

spontaneously experience them, prior to all our conceptualizations and definitions” (56). In fact, all things that we perceive, including the paper before us that we place at a certain distance due to the size and darkness of the print on it and the strength of our vision, the writing upon it that ‘speaks’ to us, the pen we reach for to mark the text in response to its questioning without having to tell our body how to do so—all these ‘things’ involve us in relationships larger than ourselves.

As with the perception of other humans, there is no coincidence of self with thing such that we can see ourselves from the outside, but our visibility, our embodiment and place in the world, is reflected back to us. The visible places us within the landscape we see, and forces us, every time we see or touch, to recognise that we are visible and touchable. As Merleau-Ponty writes,

the vision [the seer] exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity ... [I am] seen by the outside ... exist within it ... emigrate into it, I am seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen (VI 139).

As we saw earlier, language is no longer the flawed translation of a constituting consciousness’ ideal thought. Merleau-Ponty decentres language from the human intellect to the material realm of historical and temporal sign structures, and to the bodily realm of vocal cords, throat, tongue, lips, intonation and timing, hand and arm. But is not only in the body that language is grounded, for Merleau-Ponty further decentres language to the silent, prereflective world of immediate experience. Language is not founded *in us*, but *out in front* of us. Merleau-Ponty dissolves the dichotomy between language and earth, creating a philosophical basis for dialogue with a “speaking landscape.”

Merleau-Ponty blurs Aristotle's categories by finding the basis of thought/language not in the "rational soul" of intellect and reason, but in the "animal soul" of perception and movement. The world we perceive, observes Abram, is "relational and weblike", it "ramifies and elaborates" itself and its "wild, participatory logic" in language (84). Language owes its "organic, interconnected structure" to "the deeply interconnected matrix of sensorial reality itself" (Abram 84).

Rather than immaterial minds speaking an ideal language, we are each embedded in a landscape which is our 'field of perception' and thus of discourse. The mind is "instilled and provoked by the sensorial field itself, induced by the tensions and participations between the human body and the animate earth" (Abram 262). Language developed, Merleau-Ponty argues, from bodies who perceived a sensible world that they shared and who were already in communication with one another through common forms of behaviour (OPL 125).

In lived perception, we experience a reciprocal and animate world with which our body has an ongoing exchange. It is here that Merleau-Ponty finds the root of our ability to speak to nature. Rather than the perception of a passive, silent world, he finds in perception "a 'mute' operational language" (PW 124), a preverbal communication, a silent conversation of mute solicitations between body and world. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is 'interrogative', a "question and response" between perceiver and perceived (VI 131). As Abram writes,

[p]erception, in Merleau-Ponty's work, is precisely this reciprocity, the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness—and often, even, *independent* of my verbal awareness,

as when my hand readily navigates the space between these scribed pages and the coffee cup across the table without my having to think about it (50)

In its grasping of the world from no point of view, but from everywhere at once, Merleau-Ponty shows that modernity has been conceiving the world, but not perceiving it. He calls us, then, to “recommence description from closer up” (VI 87). In lived experience, he observes, perceived things coexist as rivals in our field of vision, each disputing for monopoly of our glance. “[A]nchored in one of them, I felt in it the solicitation of the others which made it coexist with the first—the demands of a horizon and its claim to exist” (ILVS 49-50). Each thing, “seeking individually to monopolize [our glance]” (ILVS 50), to “call the whole of vision to itself” (ILVS 49), calls upon us to answer its ‘vague beckoning’ by focusing upon it.

Our glance can only fix on one thing at a time, and thus we experience a tension and incommensurability between an ‘inaccessible and vague background’ and an ‘aggressive foreground’. As one object comes into focus, others fade and recede.⁷ It is “the experience of a world of teeming, exclusive things which could be taken in only by means of a temporal cycle in which each gain was at the same time a loss” (ILVS 50). Rather than laid out before a ‘god’s eye view’ that dominates all things equally and simultaneously, a world given all at once in a coincidence of mind and things, here we perceive in time and through a moving, material eye. It is the conflict between these things, calling us now here, now there, that creates the depth of a horizon. As David Abram writes, depth “provides the slack or play in the immediately perceived world, the instability that already calls upon the freedom of the body to engage, to choose, to *focus* the world long before any verbal

reflection comes to thematize and appropriate that freedom as its own” (M-P 59).

Rather than a gathering up of the world in a single point where it is held still, the world exceeds our perceptions, each attempt to focus the world causes other parts to fall away from us, calling us to gather them up again. From an objectified and silenced world held in place such that each thing can be abstracted from the whole and isolated for investigation, in which we ask all the questions, are not answerable to the nonhuman, we arrive at an interrogative world and self questioning each other through the reciprocity of perception.

The visible world presents us with sensible qualities which “on the point of being felt set[] a kind of muddled problem for the body to solve” (PhP 214, qtd. in Abram 54). Things compete for our attention by offering up a visible surface, but this surface is lined with a latency and depth, and thus things ‘invite’ the further participation of our senses, calling us to engage the world from different perspectives, to see what lies latent behind the visible, in the depth of things. We ‘accept’ when we focus upon them, and they respond again by offering up further dimensions, other sides, shades, textures, etc. which then call for further exploration.

Things do not stop perception with a fullness that confronts head on and plugs up gaps, the visible is not offered all naked to perception, holding still to be dominated— “things are only half-opened before us, unveiled and hidden” (PS 167). We never overcome this distance, for the visible is lined with an “inexhaustible richness,” “the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it” (VI 136). The visible, then, is a promise that slips off into the future, a promise of “an indefinite series of experiences,

which are a concretion of possibles real here and now in the hidden sides of the thing, which are a lapse of duration given all at once” (PS 167). Thus, as a presence that is always at a distance, the sensible order is a realm “of which we are not titulars” (VI 142). While “... our body commands the visible for us ... it does not explain it, does not clarify it, it only concentrates the mystery of its scattered visibility” (VI, 136).

Through perception, the body and the world share a reversible passive/active relation. In its receptive openness to a questioning landscape, the body is ‘passive’ and the world ‘active’, but in its ‘response’, its creative improvisation in which it adjusts its relation to this world, it takes on the ‘active’ role. We do not simply sense the sensible, for, having an active role in perception, the sensible world, in Merleau-Ponty’s writing, is “animate”—it ‘invites’, ‘beckons’, ‘responds’, ‘catches me up’ and ‘questions’. The sensible world is animate in the sense that its things make an “active, dynamic contribution to perceptual experience” (Abram 56). They appear “as our interlocutor—as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation” (Abram, M-P 56).

When we pay attention to this realm, a realm beneath the cultural explanation of things that we are constantly turning over in our minds, we find this ‘mute’ conversation already underway. Unlike the world of modernity, which we dominate through perception, which we make *ours* through idealisation, identification and conceptualisation, perception catches us up in the flesh, we belong to *it*.

The fact that we are *in* the world, embodied, and thus that this gap exists between the self and things-in-depth is not a problem in Merleau-Ponty’s work, but our only access to things. Transcendental subjects, high above, see only a flat world, but significance does

not lie freely on the surface of things, the world is in depth, and thus requires a subject that is not foreign to it, who can respond to the call of perception. The subject, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, is 'two-dimensional', of the order of subject and object, and thus "[i]t is through the body that we can speak of the world, because the world in turn speaks to us through the body" (Lefort, PW xxxiii).

Other Species

Abram directs us to Merleau-Ponty's final working note, in which "Merleau-Ponty writes that his discoveries 'must be presented without any compromise with humanism, nor with naturalism, nor finally with theology'" (VI 271, qtd. in Abram, M-P 67). "In the same instruction to himself he writes: 'Precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures ...'" (VI 274, qtd. in Abram, M-P 67). While Merleau-Ponty wrote of the body's self-reflection, of our intercorporeity with other humans and our openness to 'animate' things, he passes over any mention of an encounter with nonhuman bodies in this movement. As a humanist working to overcome humanism, as his last notes show, Merleau-Ponty leaves us with only the promise of further reflection on this question. The evidence of Merleau-Ponty's final notes, the unfinished nature of The Visible and the Invisible due to Merleau-Ponty's early death, and the fact that "a new recognition of other animals follows directly from his thesis" leads Abram to argue that it was inevitable that Merleau-Ponty would eventually come to see other animals as part of the flesh, having their own senses (M-P 66). "As soon as we pay attention to other organisms," he notes, "we are forced to say that the flesh of the world is

both perceived *and perceiving*" (Abram, M-P 68).

In dissolving *both* the traditional human/nature dichotomies of subject versus object and of speaking versus silent, Merleau-Ponty ensures that nonhuman organisms are no longer simply 'silent objects', but also 'speaking subjects'. "[I]ndeed," Abram argues, "each species, by virtue of its own carnal structure has its own unique sentience or 'chiasm' with the flesh of the world" (M-P 66). All embodied organisms, having a perceptual openness to the world, hold their own conversation with the world around them, creatively adjusting and improvising their relation to the world and other beings.

Indeed, the immediate perceptual world, which we commonly forget in favour of the human culture it supports, is secretly made up of these others; of the staring eyes of cats, or the raucous cries of birds who fly in patterns we have yet to decipher, and the constant though secret presence of the insects we brush from the page or who buzz around our heads, *all of whom make it impossible for us to speak of the sensible world as an object*—the multitude of these nonhuman and therefore background speakings, gestures, glances, and traces which impel us to write of the transcendencies and the "invisibility" of the visible world, often without our being able to say just why. (Abram, M-P 68)

Conclusion: Merleau-Ponty in Environmental Ethics⁸

David Abram argues that the ecological crisis may be a result of a ... collective perceptual disorder" (Abram, M-P 57), a disorder in which we suppress our sensuous perception of the world and take the optional interpretation of perception that is classical perspective, as the one, true reality. Classical perspective, which accompanies modern thought, writes Neil Evernden, forces us to domesticate even as we look, and in so doing to deny the possibility of encounter with the other. Every question we ask, every solution we devise, bespeaks mastery, never mystery: they are incompatible" (Soc.Cr.123). The 'world

itself', modernity believes, is made present to thought, and therefore the 'optional' interpretation that modernity offers is taken as the 'truth' about the world.

Classical perspective holds still and dominates through objectification. The nonhuman no longer 'beckons' to us, no longer questions us—we are in command. It no longer reflects our embodiment, allowing us to ignore our situatedness and rootedness in the world. In order to correct our "myopia," says Abram, we need "a phenomenology that takes seriously the primacy of perception" (Abram, M-P 57). It is this kind of 'corrective' perspective that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy offers—a perspective that does not offer us the one, true way of seeing, but reawakens us to a larger capacity for seeing that accounts for, includes, and goes beyond modern seeing.

The 'object' of environmental ethics following Merleau-Ponty's analysis, is a world before the clarity of knowledge, a prereflective world upon which our body opens through perception but which our thought/language cannot capture in the logic of identity. Thus, environmental ethics can neither presuppose what our 'environment' is, nor what 'ethics' is, for the understanding of language as 'indirect', as incapable of capturing the world, and of perception caught up in culture and resisted by the world—of thought and perception as both revealing and concealing—creates a space for the contestation of these terms. This contest need not be adversarial, for we are no longer dealing with an either/or dichotomy; rather, many perspectives provide a richer sense of the world's depth. Prior to all our cultural explanations of 'nature', 'the environment' is 'otherness', 'wildness', 'wild Being'. It is 'wildness', then, that is at issue in environmental discourse, not 'wilderness', 'environment' or 'nature'—these terms by which we clarify ambiguity and dominate

otherness. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, concepts such as these are idealisations of a prereflective world that, through misplaced concreteness, come to be seen as 'objective reality'. We mistake nature for our complex social creation of it, thus making 'wildness', the irreducible otherness of nature, 'Natural', domesticating it within our construct. As Evernden writes, "we are not *in* an environmental crisis, but *are* the environmental crisis" (Nat.Alien 134). The environmental crisis "arose as a consequence of conceptual imprisonment" (Soc.Cr.130). "Once defined, the nonhuman other disappears into its new description: it is drawn into a symbolic system which orders and explains, interprets and assigns value. In short, the creature becomes ours as it is made 'real' by this assimilation" (Soc. Cr. 131).

In the modern West, as we have seen, the explanation of otherness is of an adversary and 'nature' is seen as an external object to be controlled and manipulated for solely human ends. In the prereflective realm of bodily perception, on the other hand, we encounter nature as 'otherness'. "An other," Birch argues, "cannot *essentially* be what it is objectified, defined, analyzed, legislated, or understood to be if it is to be and remain an other" (143). "Wildness is logically intractable to systematization. There can be no natural laws of wildness" nor any final definitions or identity (Birch 154). The maintenance of otherness requires the maintenance of a radical openness and a sort of unconditioned freedom that permits sheer spontaneity and continuous participation in the emergence of novelty (Birch 143). The perceived world is a world of radical heterogeneity that our systematisation idealises into a homogeneous order. We must recall that "not everything can be reduced to the status of a human product, project, or construct" (Zimm. Oel, 247).

Our concepts and practices are always partial and contingent, unable to do justice to the world's heterogeneity, and thus monological discourses of mastery must give way to dialogues that allow for mystery.

Rather than coming to the world each time with a preformed idea that we project before us, we must remain open to the world such that we continuously form and reform our thoughts, ideals and practices through the reciprocal dialogue of lived perception. By paying attention to the 'silent conversation' we hold with the world rather than taking for granted the 'givenness' of things, we leave open the possibility that something new might break through; not the thing itself, but perhaps another aspect of the world which we may not have been aware of.

"If we would save the world, we must set it free," writes Evernden (Soc.Cr. 130). We must respeak the world in a way that releases wild beings reduced or forgotten by domesticating speech. With Merleau-Ponty, Evernden argues that it is the task of the artist and writer to unsettle the camouflaging process of sedimented language. Our 'crisis' calls for "the re-creation of *the things themselves*" (Soc. Cr. 123). 'The things themselves', in Merleau-Ponty's thought, are not objective reality, but 'our surroundings', the sensuous world to which we are open through our body before reflection, and which we can articulate only indirectly and metaphorically. The call of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, then, is to change our metaphors. As Coles and Evernden argue, while some metaphors devour the world, others tread less heavily.

Although including nature in our circle of privileged speakers may give it moral standing, the 'harmony' between humans and nature so often held up as the goal of

environmentalists, is not possible. While nature is not 'wholly other' but speaks to us through our bodies, it is, at the same time, at-a-distance, its purposes, desires and intentions never fully revealed to us such that we could attune ourselves to them. Since we are embodied and situated in the midst of things rather than above, the world always exceeds our perspectives, is a horizon. As Merleau-Ponty says in The Visible and the Invisible, it seems as though between us and the visible there is "an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand" (VI 130), but this intimacy is always one of distance, for despite their closeness their relation is always a conversation of tension and ambiguity, never a passing of one into the other.

Even if we can become more sensitive to, and skilled at 'letting nature be', we cannot 'let nature be' in any simple way; in order to live, we cannot but encroach upon the world. There is no pre-established harmony to which we can conform, for perception never achieves 'reality-in-itself', nor can our spontaneous responsiveness to the world create such harmony through the give and take of our perceptual 'conversation' with things. Harmony is not possible because perception is a violent act that conceals the world with every attempt to reveal it. As we focus our perception, some things come forward, torn out from the whole, while others recede into the background, eclipsed. And as there is violence in our perceptual dialogue with the world, so too is there violence in the thought/language in which we grasp and articulate the world. Quoting Adorno, Coles writes: "the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify" (Coles 233). Echoing the movement in which the body 'focuses' the world around it, thought takes hold of the world by identifying, by tearing pieces out from the background through

conceptualisation. We are constantly attempting to ‘make sense’ of the sensuous, local world surrounding us by clarifying our ambiguous relation to it through an identification that does violence to the ‘not-said’, the ‘un-known’, that attempts to go beyond our body’s ability to focus local aspects of the world’s mystery, believing that it can focus the entire world at once.

As we saw in Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language, muffled significations are like a ‘vague fever’, arousing us to express them and know our own thoughts. So too, the world arouses us through its mute presence. For Merleau-Ponty, there is a longing of the flesh for vision and comprehension. Desire is ontological. “The desire or *conatus* of the Flesh is the demand for expression, the demand that the world be brought forth over and over again into visibility” (Johnson 51). Since we cannot intuit the ‘language’ of the mountains, of waterfalls, of crickets, “the earth and its beings only ‘speak’ ... to us through our efforts to articulate them” (Coles 238), and our expression is always incomplete. While being calls for comprehension and expression, our ability to ‘think’ the world comes in the form of identification, conceptualisation and the creation of order. But, as Evernden notes, “[t]he ordering that makes the world comprehensible also makes most of it inaccessible” (Soc. Cr. 119). Rather than the teeming conflict of an excessive world, we make the world ‘ours’ “by declaring what its form shall be and by asserting a system of necessity which henceforth shall be known as ‘Nature’” (Soc. Cr.120). As a result, we come to encounter only our cultural explanation of nature. While we cannot escape ‘identifying thought’, we can keep in mind the concern that our answer to the world is to identify, to attempt to solve once and for all a mystery that never ends. We must refine not only our sense of technological

limitation on a finite planet, but also the sense of our intellectual limitations.

Even were harmony with nature possible, it would require more than a ‘letting be’ on our part, for nature too encroaches upon us. As Coles writes, “human existence has always required an element of resistance ... an ability to question, avoid, and alter both social and natural conditions that are uncondusive to our flourishing, an ability to pry open that which lies beyond the immediately given in the present” (235).

As Kate Soper and Michael Zimmerman argued earlier, we need to accept both our yearning for/dependence upon nature, and rejection of/independence from it. As Phelan called for, we need a respect and care for nature that is not a piety; a concern for nature that yet allows for our rejection of it and its resistance to us. Erazim Kohák calls for “not a return to innocence, but a step forward to the responsibility for our freedom” (9). Any “sustainable mode of cohabitation” with nature will not come from a return to precritical innocence, but through conscious effort. “There can be new beginnings,” Kohák argues, “but no returns The cognitive distance that distinguishes humans from the rest of nature is not an accidental temporary deviation, but the inmost way of being human” (11). We are, as Evernden writes, ‘the natural alien’. But while reflection is not our alienation from the depth of our being, “in claiming our freedom, we have rejected natural restraints without accepting the responsibility for self-restraint” (Kohák 6). We cannot hand over the reigns to a nature that ‘knows best’, as deep ecologists might wish—nature does not dictate, as Soper argued, leaving us to decide how we are to live. “We are not doomed by historical necessity. We are challenged to accept the repsonsibility of our freedom” (10). Our cognitive distance, our ability to reason, to reflect, is both “[o]ur separation from the whole,

the individuation we experience as alienation,” and the ‘calling forth’ of humans “out of the continuum of nature into freedom” (Kohák 13). As Kohak continues, “it does not make us a ‘higher’ species, only one that bears a greater responsibility. The moment of the fall comes later, when we accept the freedom and fail to accept the responsibility *That* is the original sin. The ecological crisis is an accumulation of such responsibilities deferred” (13).

In modernity, our resistance to nature has become an end in itself to the point that we remain antagonistic toward nature even at the expense of our flourishing. Thus, neither able to sustain our antagonism toward nature for much longer, nor able to achieve harmony, we remain within the very oppositions that most ecologists attempt to overcome. But rather than an interminable either/or struggle, the irreducible ambiguity between subject/object, self/other, voice/silence, harmony/antagonism creates oppositions-in-tension. In the tension between our intertwining with the world and our separation from it, between harmony and antagonism, lies the positive potential of what Coles calls an ‘agonistic’ relation. This relation, Coles writes, “consists of interminglings, conversations, and negotiations that continually must be pursued between beings. These beings, in their radical otherness, are captured neither by the logic of identity nor that of contradiction, but rather require the difficult elaboration of overlappings, tensions, and paradoxes—all of which are too multiplicitous to be reduced” (228). Coles calls us to recognise “the ineliminable transgressions of life (e.g., we must identify to think, we consume other living things in large quantities, and so on),” but encourages us to seek “sustainable modes of encroaching being” (234). As we have seen, classical perspective and the totalising reflective thought of modernity are unsustainable, for they objectify the world, turning it into neutral matter that

invites not question and response, the openness to novelty, but the unrestrained manipulation and exploitation of nature. Seeking predictability, modernity in fact *requires* that the world be made up of inanimate objects. The harmonious ‘at-one-ness’ with nature of holism, on the other hand, is unattainable.

The closest we can come to ‘letting be’ or ‘harmony’ with nature, argues Coles, is what Adorno calls “reconciliation,”

a nonantagonistic commingling of a ‘multiplicity of different things.’ However, reconciliation is not a completely achievable condition, but rather a dialectical process in which thought goes about ‘dismantling the coercive logical character of its own course’ by seeking to recognize both where it has eclipsed the world and dimensions of that which lies beyond the eclipse. (Coles 233)

We find a comparable movement in Merleau-Ponty’s hyperreflection, in which reflection attempts to take into account the effect of its own retrospective movement, which is to idealise, clarify and grasp a world that is prereflective, and thus opaque to it. Like Adorno’s, Merleau-Ponty’s dialectic is a “dialectic without synthesis” (VI 94). It is a thought that takes responsibility for the fact that there is always excess of the signified over the signifier, a resistance of the world to our concepts of it, by remaining an ‘interrogative thinking’—a questioning that prevails over any final state or order. As Waldenfels notes, questioning, for Merleau-Ponty, is not “only a transitional state” from “a state of belief without question” to a “state of knowledge being again without question” (5). In “On the Phenomenology of Language,” Merleau-Ponty states: “There is finality only in the sense in which Heidegger defined it when he said approximately that finality is the trembling of a unity exposed to contingency and tirelessly recreating itself” (97).

One of the reasons we do not find an explicit ‘ethics’ in Merleau-Ponty’s writing is this recognition that every thesis—every ‘solution’, ‘finality’, or ‘unity’—is an idealisation of the inherently ambiguous realm of ‘wild Being’, the recognition that this realm is “not of the order of laws” (ILVS 49). Neither ‘physical’, nor ‘moral’, nor ‘perceptual’ laws are simply given to us. We are born into and involved in the creation and maintenance of symbolic structures. Thus, as Christopher Manes writes, “environmental ethics must aspire to be more than just an explicit schema of values proclaimed as ‘true’, for ethics are implicated in the way we talk about the world, the way we perceive it” (24). Just as he loosens our grasp by infusing sedimented language with speech, and culture with creation, so too Merleau-Ponty loosens our grasp on ‘ethics’ as a static moral system by infusing it with a moral ‘art’. ‘Ethics’, as an institutionalised system, inevitably reduces ‘otherness’ and does violence by restricting and covering over novelty and claiming to take into its account the future possibilities of human knowing and action. Based on a ‘science’ or ‘system’ of being which itself threatens to cover over the unknown, presenting itself as adequate to the world, saying the not-said, eliminating the distance between things, ‘ethics’ becomes doubly questionable.

Coles observes that the ontologies of both management and holism, in typically modern fashion, “tend toward imperialistic orders of things that a priori reduce that which is ‘other’ to nothingness and error—all to be brought into Being through subjugation or conversion” (Coles 228). Where the gaze of management radically objectifies its surroundings, holists intuit a Truth that, believed to be ‘outside’ language, is

frequently conceived in terms of a totalizing system of Being in which all beings have a place they must occupy in perfect harmony with all others. This frequently

leads to dogmatic intolerance, an insistence upon consensus without regard to what this eclipses and, generally, little space to appreciate as fundamentally valuable contestations about the order of things. (Coles 227)

An 'ethics' based on such a system is not ethical, despite its best intentions. Merleau-Ponty, while presenting an 'ontology', allows room for contestation of the order of things and for the challenging of his claims from becoming eternized by decentering his authority as 'philosopher-author', by not presenting his position as a firm grasp on the world from the author's 'true' perspective which we should then centre ourselves around, but from the perspective of his historical and local situation in the world.

In "Cézanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty notes that "the rational arrangement of a system of morals or politics, or even of art, is valueless in the face of the fervor of the moment, the explosive brilliance of an individual life, the 'premeditation of the unknown'" (3). When we open ourselves to original experience, to the world and language as 'indirect', we loosen our control over what presents itself. In this space, novelty can arise, a novelty not predicted by the system/tradition. 'Outside' the static system of second hand seeing, the other has traditionally been seen as error and converted to sameness; by opening to lived perception, we can creatively and spontaneously adjust to allow room for the dynamic presence that arises. For Coles, living in this ambiguous tension between ourselves and nature, self and other, is an opportunity for encountering the depth of the shifting 'others' that we are caught up with rather than objects that we have already explained away. While modernity finds only opposition in otherness—wastefulness to be rationalized, nonsense to be made sense of, a frightening outside to be brought into the system or eliminated as error—otherness, as Birchard Coles argue, can also afford us "oppositional opportunities"

(Birch 140). These opportunities, which Coles finds in even the physical aspects of the landscape, when we encounter the world with the openness of a self-corrective ‘hyperdialectic’, can open us to dimensions of richness and depth.

While there is a dialogue between self and other, the body and the otherness of the world, the two do not coincide, but have an ambiguous relation, a relation of tension.

In Arctic Dreams, [Barry] Lopez writes of borders, “ecotones.” Ecotones are the edges where different ecosystems meet: where forest meets field, sea meets land, salt water meets fresh water. Natural ecologists know that ecotones—with their intermingling borders—are especially fertile, ‘special meeting grounds’ charged with evolutionary potential. When we combine this knowledge with the etymology of *ecotone*, *oikos* (dwelling), and *tonus* (tension), we evoke an image of the fertility and pregnancy of dwelling at the edge of the tension between different people, beings, landscapes. (Coles 243)

Ecotones

are, like all human knowledge, ‘a metaphorical representation of the exterior landscape’ Some metaphors devour the earth, others reveal the world less antagonistically, even as they contain dimensions of encroachment Our metaphors are tightly entwined with a process that has brought us to the brink of global destruction, and it is clearly time—if there is time—to consider a profound change. (Coles 245)

“In morality as in art,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “there is no solution for the man who will not make a move without knowing where he is going and who wants to be accurate and in control at every moment” (CD 4). To remain ‘ethical’, an ontology must be ‘indirect’, leaving room for otherness, novelty and contestation. As with language, culture and art, ‘ethics’ must ever be renewed.

While calling for a thought that is constantly renewing itself, Merleau-Ponty cautions against simply overturning reason, universality and law, or the “rational arrangement of a system.” To reverse the binaries in a “sheer rebellion is insincere” (Sense

3). The individual, creative, spontaneous life does not stand alone, a constant creation ex nihilo, but launches itself from the cultural, always folds back on tradition and the habitual to create itself anew, its 'creation' always "encumbered with survivals, saddled with a past." Rather than privileging one over the other, Merleau-Ponty blurs their terms such that they exist together in tension, side by side in a shifting relation. Rather than a rejection of reason, this ambiguity calls for yet another renewal: "we must form a new idea of reason" (Sense 3). Not the universal, ahistorical reason of a disembodied consciousness, but of embodied subjects situated in the world and open to it from different perspectives which, nonetheless, can blend and confirm each other.

Rather than a disembodied, universal reason that discovers the principles of 'reality-in-itself' in an ideal world, and then seeks a totalising consensus around this Truth, Merleau-Ponty posits an "intercorporeality," an "intersubjectivity." Here, as Abram notes, the "striving for objectivity is ... a striving to achieve greater consensus, greater agreement or consonance among a plurality of subjects, rather than an attempt to avoid subjectivity altogether" (38).

The Kantian emphasis on reason, universality and law is problematised by a more creative and spontaneous moral 'art' in which the binaries of reason and unreason, universal and particular, exist in tension and ambiguity, leaving context and novelty to play a major role, allowing room for different perceptions to co-exist without all but one being 'unreasonable'. As Abram argues, it is "not a matter of 'going back', but rather of coming full circle, uniting our capacity for cool reason with those more sensorial and mimetic ways of knowing ... " (Abram, *Spell* 270).

Without the authority of the full claims of modernity, and having access only to a world that is simultaneously “absolute proximity” and “irremediable distance,” revealed and concealed, our relation to nature remains ambiguous. In Merleau-Ponty’s thought, rather than a “loss,” this relationship is a “good ambiguity” (Watson xxxi). In the realm of wild Being we find a site of positive potential for an environmental ethic. Ethics moves from an establishing and following of models and formulae, from a solid structure built on a permanent foundation, to an ever renewed ‘trembling unity’ with an emphasis on judgement. As Shane Phelan notes, “seeing nature as intimate distance places judgment in the foreground. Intimate distance can be explored and evaluated contextually, within a particular time and place; it does not admit of regulations and checklists” (59). This is not “a judgment from on high on life, the world, history, as if the philosopher *was not a part of it*” (In Praise of Philosophy 30, qtd. in Sallis 28). The Cartesian dream of a universal reason, a mathematical language, and a “tête-à-tête of the philosopher with the true” (ibid.) is brought down to earth through the misty atmosphere of our divergent biological and historical horizons. As we see in Abram, there are no global solutions, but local solutions all over the globe:

at the scale of our sensing bodies the earth is astonishingly, irreducibly diverse. It discloses itself to our senses not as a uniform planet inviting global principles and generalizations, but as this forested realm embraced by water, or a windswept prairie, or a desert silence. We can know the needs of any particular region only by participating in its specificity—by becoming familiar with its cycle and styles, awake and attentive to its other inhabitants. (A 268)

Where a universal reason tends to a reduction of otherness, and a disenfranchising of nature and the material from the realm of ethics, this ‘new reason’ of embodied subjects

re-incorporates them. Merleau-Ponty argues that “[o]ur only resort,” when it comes to morality, “is the spontaneous movement which binds us to others for good or ill, out of selfishness or generosity” (CD 4). This spontaneous movement is that of first hand experience in which we experience ‘others’ whom we are bound up with in perception.

While our ‘agonistic’ relation with each other and the world is not bound by a system of laws or rules, the reversibility of perception both calls for, and allows, morality. There is yet an ethical obligation to the other based on our reversibility, our knowledge of “what it is to be on the other side.”

The flesh of the world as present to itself is not a coincidence, and thus both alterity and similarity reside in Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘reversibility’. As Davis observes, in alterity, the particularity and lack of identity, lies our *need* for ethics, and in universality and similarity, the *possibility* of ethics. In the past, universality and rationality have been overemphasised to the detriment of particularity and corporeality. Rather than reverse the privilege, Merleau-Ponty stays in the ‘agonistic’ tension between these terms. In tactile experience, for example, we have both an accessibility to caresses and a vulnerability to violation (Davis 37).

The force of the ‘ought’, which obtains in any human ethical situation, issues not from our potential as rational beings; to conform with ‘the universality of a law as such’, but from our potential to conform with another. The propriety of an act is visible in an action that is spoken of as befitting the situation. And the manner in which we ‘fit it’ with one another is not to be grounded on anything more, nor anything less, than the realm of human existence and praxis.

The force of the ought obtains because I can both bleed and draw blood; because the shedding of blood is a singular event that I share with the other; because whether I hold the blade or the handle of the knife, I know what it is to be on the “other side”. Indeed, I am that moment of shared divergence that I recognize as me only insofar as I am also a determination of, and am likewise determined by, what it is to be on the other side. Our “landscapes interweave,” our “actions and...passions

fit together exactly.” [VI, 142]. Ethical obligation is no longer merely a rational determination which, as Hume correctly observed, could never motivate me to action. [A Treatise of Human Nature]. Indeed, freedom and responsibility are not purely rational; nor are they purely universal. Likewise they cannot be purely irrational, nor can they be radically particular. As a vestige of the transcendence of reversible subjectivity, responsibility takes on a carnal dimension. (Davis 41)

Being-within the world, we experience ourselves as vulnerable: we have a psychological permeability, a lack of control, and a dependency. Because intertwined with the world, to “obliterate the wild nonidentical texture of our world” is to “simultaneously reduce the potential richness of our own beings ...” (Coles 231). Our freedom both “implies and affirms the freedom and flourishing of other beings” (Coles 232). Thus, embodied in the world, intertwined with it, not foreign to it, we come to experience a responsibility toward the Earth, for we experience reversibility not only with other human subjects, but with nonhuman others and an animate landscape.

As Evernden argues, “[i]f wild otherness is to be sustained, those who have encountered it must not forfeit their right of description to the conventions of domesticating speech” (Soc. Cr.132). But how do we describe without domesticating? Through Merleau-Ponty’s ‘indirect’ language. The kind of ‘answers’ that a philosophy like Merleau-Ponty’s seeks are in the region of ‘wild Being’, answers that do not fill up the gaps of our knowledge. With language seen as ‘indirect’, as capable only of alluding to, rather than capturing, the world, things are given a freedom not allowed in modern language and philosophy, the freedom to remain ambiguous—*both* what we say they are, *and* something other. Speech is understood as “the taking of a position,” as Ihde writes. “Focusing is taking a position within the field; it is a selection” (Singing 73).

In philosophy, the idea is frequently used as a conceptual container—it closes about things with a firm grip. In Merleau-Ponty's writing, there is "a more slipping grasp, argumentation by persuasion, by evocative suggestion ... use of the idea as a cursive, heuristic device ... [in order] to let vision speak" (Smith 211). If we are to succeed in the task of 'saving' 'nature', we cannot ignore the strangeness and ambiguity of the world, and therefore environmental philosophy must learn to speak indirectly and in half-silence.

Merleau-Ponty's writings tell us that philosophy, rather than a reflection of things as they are, "is a form of motivated creation, and that in this it is not unlike other art forms" (Smith 211). Thus, Merleau-Ponty writes his philosophy in language more closely associated with literature than with the clear, concise, almost mathematical language of modern philosophy. In 'art' lies the possibility for transcendence, for our expression of the world "to completely awaken and recall our sheer power of expressing beyond things already said or seen" (ILVS 52). As Merleau-Ponty says: "Each act of philosophical or literary expression contributes to fulfilling the vow to retrieve the world taken with the first appearance of language, that is, with the first appearance of a finite system of signs which claimed to be capable in principle of winning by a sort of ruse any being which might present itself" (OPL 95). While Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on allusive language, poetry and the artist may seem daunting to the average environmentally concerned citizen, the renewal of the world through language is not only the task of an elite or creative few. Merleau-Ponty saw the power for transcendence, for "expressing beyond things already said or seen" (ILVS 52) in everyday language as well. "This transcendence," he argues, "arises the moment I refuse to content myself with the established language, which in effect is a way of

silencing me, and as soon as I truly speak to someone” (PW 20). Because, strictly speaking, we do not ‘have’ or ‘use’ language, but *are* language, we change each time we speak. By not resting satisfied with the relation of the uncanny to something already familiar to us, by working with the kind of openness and generosity toward otherness that is found in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, we may come to experience the world with which we are intertwined as a vast depth that enriches us with its heterogeneity, as a textured realm that calls for humility and curiosity rather than a flat landscape over which we increasingly tighten our grip.

Notes

1. See, for example, the collection of such writers in Bennet and Chaloupka, *In the Nature of Things*, and V. A. Conley, who sees a strong “ecological resonance” in poststructural theory’s “resistance to unbridled economic globalism” (*The Environment in Poststructural Thought* 148).
2. For an examination of the interminability of debate in contemporary ethics, see Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.
3. A major breakthrough was made by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, a book that scientifically documents levels of chemical build-up.
4. For more on this, see Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, especially his heuristic of fear, in which science serves to imagine the future possibilities of our actions. In these possibilities, the prophecies of doom, of “well-grounded possibilities of disaster” are given priority over the prophecies of bliss, for the former prepares us for the ultimate, while the latter disarms us (31).
5. See David Abram, Dwayne Davis, Neil Evernden, Romand Coles, Galen Johnson, Bernard Waldenfels, Stephen Watson.
6. Cézanne, as Merleau-Ponty saw, could paint his new discovery, but articulate it only inadequately.
7. It is this tension, says Merleau-Ponty, that Cézanne made visible in his paintings and, in our reactions to his paintings, felt.
8. Important work has been done on Merleau-Ponty as ‘environmental philosopher’ by Neil Evernden, David Abram, and Romand Coles. See Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985; and *The Social Creation of Nature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1992; Abram, “Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth,” *Environmental Ethics*, Summer 1988 and *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon, 1996; Coles “Ecotones and Environmental Ethics: Adorno and Lopez,” *In the Nature of Things*. Eds. Janet Bennet and Richard Chaloupka. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

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