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PROUST'S ARTISTIC ONTOLOGY :
A Comparison of Merleau-Ponty's and Deleuze's Readings
of Proust's *Recherche*

In this paper I will examine how Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze read Proust. I will look at which passages they refer to and how they interpret them.

Introduction

Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past* (*A la recherche du temps perdu*, also translated as *In Search of Lost Times*) has been a constant source of inspiration for philosophers. Although the discussion with Proust was most extensive in post second World War French philosophy – one can think of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Ricoeur and Roland Barthes – Proust was also a point of reference in the work of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin and the Irish philosophical writer Samuel Beckett.

In my paper I will examine how Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze read Proust. I will look at which passages they refer to and how they interpret them. My choice for these philosophers is build upon, first, the remarkable fact that they comment on exactly the same passages of the *Recherche* : the passage on the little phrase of Vinteuil, on the actress Berma, on the paintings of Elstir and the descriptions of Marcel hovering between sleeping and awaking. Second, and even more remarkable seen the different schools of thought under which Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze are usually subsumed, both philosophers deduce a similar 'artistic ontology' from these passages. This is the ontology as revealed by the arts and constructed around the central characteristic of an intrinsic relation between the artistic expression and what it wants to express.

In sum, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze do not only refer to the same passages of the *Recherche*, they also interpret them in a similar way, namely as indicating the immanent (Vinteuil and Berma), deformative (Elstir) and temporal (half-sleep) aspects of the relation between art and what it expresses.[1]

1. The little phrase of Vinteuil

Let us start with the first common reference to the *Recherche* found in Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze : the passage on the little phrase of Vinteuil. The little phrase of Vinteuil is a sonata by the fictive composer Vinteuil, which Swann gets to know at the time he is madly in love with his future wife, Odette, and which, for him, will always remain inextricably wound up with this love. For Swann, the sonata expresses the essence of his love for Odette. In the following passage, Swann tries to determine what constitutes the singularity of the sonata :

> When, after that first evening at the Verdurins', he [Swann] had had the little phrase played over to him again, and had sought to disentangle from his confused impressions how it was that, like a perfume or a caress, it swept over and enveloped him, he had observed that it was to the closeness of the intervals between the five notes which composed it and to the constant repetition of two of them that was due that impression of a frigid, a contracted sweetness; but in reality he knew that he was basing this conclusion not upon the phrase itself, but merely upon certain equivalents, substituted (for his mind's convenience) for the mysterious entity of which he had become aware, before ever he knew the Verdurins, at that earlier party, when for the first time he had heard the sonata played. (Proust, 2006, 334)

According to Merleau-Ponty, the passage indicates that the singularity of the sonata cannot be reduced to the musical characteristics of the sonata, although the sonata cannot be said to exist without them. In a way, the physical components of the sonata (the notes, the tonal distance between the notes, the tempo, etc.) do constitute the sense of the sonata because it is impossible for the listener to guess the sense of the sonata before he has actually heard the sonata, and once he has heard it, it is impossible for him to detach the sense from this actual expression. Once the sonata is heard, it seems impossible to express exactly the same sense in a different sonata. In another way, however, the sonata seems to be more than the sum of its physical components : it incarnates the essence of love and it is this essence that accords the sonata its unity and singularity. It thus seems that the sense of the sonata constitutes or determines physical characteristics (such as the notes, etc.), while, at the same time, the physical characteristics constitute the sense of the sonata.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty uses the Husserlian term of *Fundierung* to describe this relation of reciprocal determination (PP, 394), whereas in his later work (the courses *The Problem of Speech* and *The 'institution' in personal and public history*, and the books *Notes de cours 1959-1961* and *The Visible and the Invisible*) he prefers the notion of institution. The notion of *Fundierung* is predominantly used to characterize the relation between speech and sense, whereas 'institution' concerns the level of being itself. The reciprocal determination thus no longer concerns only our relation to being, but being itself. For example, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty presents the little phrase as an example of a sensible or musical idea (VI, 149, NC, 191-195). What is a sensible idea? A sensible idea is like light (NC 1960-1961, 196) : just as one cannot see light in itself, but can only see it by the things it illuminates, a sensible idea is inseparable from its concrete manifestations. Being inseparable from it, however, does not imply 'coinciding with'. Just as light is something different from the things it illuminates, the sensible idea does not coincide with the sensible that expresses it. The sensible idea refers to something other than that which can be seen : it is invisible. This invisible, however, is not situated beyond the visible, but in the visible itself. It is not an absolute or transcendent invisibility, but the invisible of this visible world. Hence, for the later Merleau-Ponty, the little phrase illustrates the intertwinement of the essence and its concrete incarnations or expressions, the intertwinement characteristic of being itself.

In Deleuze's eyes, the fact that the sonata cannot be reduced to the notes that constitute it, illustrates the immateriality of the artistic sign (PS, 26). For Deleuze, the little phrase is thus an illustration of the radical difference between the sense and the sensible, and not, as Merleau-Ponty had it, of their intertwinement. Further examination, however, brings both interpretations closer to one another. To begin with, the materiality Merleau-Ponty attributes to the sensible is not so material : "It is as though the visibility that animates the sensible world were to emigrate, not outside of every body, but into another less heavy, more transparent body, as though it were to change flesh, […]"(VI, 153). Second, one could say that, just like Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze advocates the impossibility to situate the sensible idea or sense outside of the sensible. For art's advantage over classical, rationalist philosophy with regard to the production of sense, is exactly due to the fact that art is not this incestuous activity, originating in an autonomous subject and resulting in something that was already put forward beforehand. On the contrary, according to Deleuze, art is always taking place in the realm of the outside, of the non-transparent, of the a-logical, in short, of the material. In sum, Merleau-

Ponty's and Deleuze's interpretations of the little phrase are united by the anti-positivistic materiality they ascribe to the sonata in particular and to the artistic signs in general : artistic signs do not have the materiality of objects, which are what they are, which do not possess any ambiguity or negativity, which are governed by necessary laws, etc. On the contrary, with respect to these characteristics, they would rather have to be called ideal, were it not for their real and sensible characteristics. The following reference to Proust will help us to better situate the artistic signs and essences.

2. Berma

'The second passage taken up by Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze is Proust's description of Berma's performance in the role of Phèdre in Racine's eponymous play (Proust, 2006, 411-28). Deleuze invokes this passage in order to illustrate how the sense of a sign can neither be found in the object that is the carrier of the sign, nor in the subject who makes associations on the basis of the sign. For, when the narrator is trying to define the talent of Berma, he first turns to the sensible or objective qualities of her performance, for example, her perfect intonation. He has to admit that, actually, they are "only the fruit of intelligence and work" (PS, 24) and thus do not allow to distinguish between Berma's performance and inferior performances of other, equally intelligent and hard-working actresses. He then asks himself if the power of the performance is situated in the associations it allows the spectator to make, for example, the archaic statues Berma's movements remind us of. This proposition is refuted by the fact that, in principle, there is no limit to the nature and number of possible associations. Every association is allowed. Finally, Deleuze concludes that

> neither Berma nor Phèdre are designable characters, nor are they elements of association. Phèdre is a *role,* and Berma unites herself with this role – not in the sense in which the role would still be an object or something subjective – on the contrary, it is a world, a spiritual milieu populated by essences. Berma, bearer of signs, renders them so immaterial that they grant access to these essences and are filled by them. (PS, 25)

Hence, Berma's performance constitutes a series of signs that express the essence of Phèdre, and neither the signs nor the essence can be reduced to the objective and the subjective. This does not mean, however, that sign and essence are to be situated beyond the sensible. They are not transcendent but immanent. Although the sign cannot be reduced to the object – the object in itself tells nothing – it does have a sensibility or materiality because it has an

undeniable presence or actuality. The essences, on the other hand, are, as Deleuze says with Proust, "real without being present, ideal without being abstract" (PS, 38). They are virtual. They are sensible through the signs. What is the nature of this relation between the signs and the essence? According to Deleuze, the fundamental categories of the *Recherche* are implication and explication or envelopment and development (PS, 57). This means that the sense or essence of a sign is always already implied or wrapped within the sign, which implies that the explication of the sign will influence the sense, and at the same time, the sign "develops, uncoils at the same time that it is interpreted" (PS, 58), which means that the interpretation of the sign, the creation of sense, will also influence the nature of the sign.

Merleau-Ponty makes a similar remark with respect to the performance of Berma. The Berma passage illustrates, according to him, the intertwinement or circularity between the (artistic) expression on the one hand and what it expresses on the other hand. They do not exist independently of one another but envelop one another (PP, 179-81) and co-determine one another (*se constituent simultanément*) (PP, 183). The expression does not merely translate a pre-existing sense but realizes this sense (PP, 183). Thus, both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze read the Berma passage as an illustration of the intrinsic relation between the artistic expression and what it expresses. The passage shows that it is impossible to situate the artistic essence beyond the expression and thus that it is necessary to conceive of the essence as being immanent to the expression. Moreover, just like Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty refers to Berma's capacity to disappear in her role, to become one with Phèdre : "[…] Phaedra has so completely taken possession of Berma that her passion as Phaedra appears the apotheosis of ease and naturalness" (PP, 183). In other words, the intrinsic relation almost cancels out the independent existence of the expression, which is why – again, just like Deleuze – Merleau-Ponty does not situate the signs and what they express in the empirical world : "Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, […] plucks the signs themselves – the person of the actor, or the colours and canvas of the painter – from their empirical existence and bears them off into another world" (PP, 183). Finally, both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty recognize the desubjectivating implications of this intertwinement of the expression and the expressed. Deleuze writes that, although "[…] the world so expressed does not exist outside the subject expressing it […]" (PS, 28), it cannot be reduced to subjective expression. On the contrary, strictly speaking, it is not even the subject that expresses the essence, "rather it is essence that implicates, envelops, wraps itself up in the subject" (PS, 28). Merleau-Ponty, on his turn,

repeatedly quotes Proust's idea that it is not the subject who gives expression to the sonata, but rather the sonata expressing itself through the subject (PP, 145). Furthermore, Proust's account of a life 'without <u>Erlebnisse</u>, without interiority' (VI, 243) will inspire Merleau-Ponty's conception of the subject, not as an autonomous, self-constituting agent, but as temporality (PP, 425-7).

3. Elstir

The two previous passages illustrate the immanence of the artistic essence to its expression. The following indicates how the expression is not a copy of the world or of being, but implies a deformation or difference.

Both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze show a particular interest in Proust's descriptions of the paintings of the fictive artist Elstir. Deleuze mentions Elstir's picture of a city adjacent to the sea – showing a city "designated only by 'marine terms' and the water by 'urban terms'" (PS, 31) – in the context of the idea that art does not represent the world. Deleuze claims that art is not about offering a true image of the world. On the contrary, in order to reveal the essence of this world, art needs to create a new image of the world. It needs to present the world as we have not seen it yet. According to Deleuze, this is also what Proust's description of the madeleine cookie shows : the actual savoring of the cookie does not bring back Combray as it has been experienced in the past, but it reveals Combray as it has never been present (PS, 38-9). In other words : the cookie is not a sign that reveals an identity, something common between the actual and the past experience of Combray, but something that is different from any possible remembrance and any actual representation of it. Or, to put it normatively : in order to reveal the essence of Combray, Combray has to be liberated from the harness of the actual of which the remembered is just a derivative; a deformation needs to be executed. This deformation is a function of the transversals or the elements that keep the differences together without uniting them into a whole and without allowing a direct communication between them. Transversals take something that is present in one sign (for example, the actual taste of the cookie) and transport it to another (for example, the non-existent Combray) by changing it along the way.

At first sight, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Elstir's paintings seems to be quite different than Deleuze's as he presents the paintings as an artistic exploration of our experience of the world, prior to the distinction between subjects and objects and prior to the denomination of these delineated entities (vol XII, 104-105). The paintings thus reveal the encroachment (*empiètement*) and envelopment (*enveloppement*) characteristic of what he calls 'the flesh'.

They show the world in its equivocity, in its nascent state. In order for the artist to do this, however, Merleau-Ponty states that the artist needs to liberate himself from how things present themselves to his thetic consciousness : "*the expressive operation will consist of* liberating *this presentation*".[2] The painter has to enforce a metamorphosis (vol XII, 105) or, as Deleuze calls it, a deformation : "If one would not be able to retrace the thing through these deformations, if it would not be imminent to them, the painting would be a failure".[3]

4. The time of half-sleep

The last passage in Proust to which both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze refer, is what Mauro Carbone calls Proust's descriptions of half-sleep (Carbone, 2004, 1):

> […] when I awoke like this, and my mind struggled in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything would be moving round me through the darkness : things, places, years. My body, still too heavy with sleep to move, would make an effort to construe the form which its tiredness took as an orientation of its various limbs, so as to deduce from that where the wall lay and the furniture stood, to piece together and to give a name to the house in which it must be living. Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, knees, and shoulder-blades offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept; while the unseen walls kept changing, adapting themselves to the shape of each successive room that it remembered, whirling madly through the darkness […] [M]y body, the side upon which I was lying, loyally preserving from the past an impression which my mind should never have forgotten, brought back before my eyes the glimmering flame of the night-light in its bowl of Bohemian glass, shaped like an urn and hung by chains from the ceiling, and the chimney-piece of Siena marble in my bedroom at Combray, in my grandaunt's house, in those far distant days which, at the moment of waking, seemed present without being clearly defined, but would become plainer in a little while when I was properly awake. (Proust, 2006, 27-8)

The context in which both philosophers mention this passage seems different, although it is not. According to Merleau-Ponty, the passage indicates that the communication with the lived time and past is ensured by the phenomenological body (PP, 181, VI, 267). Deleuze quotes the passage in the context of the relation between the expressed and its expressions, mentioned earlier (PS, 30, 82-3). The passage shows how the expressions explicate the expressed and how the expressed is implied in the expressions. In other words : it illustrates the complicated nature of the essence. Deleuze uses this notion of complication in a Neo-Platonic sense : complication designates the way in which the many is enveloped in the One, the way in which the One is a unity of the multiple or of differences (PS, 30). For Deleuze, the complicated

essence *par excellence* is aeon or the virtual time of the pure event. Aeon conditions the chronological, actualized time or the time in which things happen because it is the happening of events itself.

Now, Merleau-Ponty understands this lived time to which the phenomenological body gives access in a similar way : it is an a-chronological time that allows for the temporal determination of phenomena (PP, 181; VI, 267). Hence, both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty read Proust's description of half-sleep as revealing a time that does not consist of a succession of time dimensions (that, on their turn, consist of now-moments) but that implies a simultaneity of them.[4] In other words : they both read the *Recherche* as presenting a Bergsonian conception of time. In *Sense and non-sense*, for example, Merleau-Ponty writes that the philosophical idea in Proust's oeuvre is "the way the past is involved in the present and the presence of times gone by" (*l'enveloppement du passé dans le présent et la présence du temps perdu*) (SNS, 26. See also NC, 197). Deleuze claims that Proust's conception of time resembles Bergson's because, among other things, "[…] this past does not represent something that has been, but simply something that is […]" (PS, 38). Moreover, they both encounter in the *Recherche* Bergson's idea that one does not gain access to the past by recomposing present memories of that past, but by placing oneself directly in the past itself (PS, 38, PP, 393, VI, 243-4). It is not memory that guides one towards the past – thus, the *Recherche* is not a novel about memory – but one already has a direct connection to this past in the sense that the past is still present or real. The same goes for the future: the future is already implied in the present. Merleau-Ponty sees this illustrated in, for example, the love relationship between Swann and Odette (PP, 425). Proust does not describe it as if Swann's love for Odette brings with it a jealousy which then distorts his love. On the contrary, he shows how Swann's love is perverted from the beginning. His pleasure to observe Odette is a pleasure to be the only one to observe her and, at the same time, to be aware of the fact that he will never be able to possess her completely. Proust is a great writer, not because he can describe a course of events in a compelling way, but because his sketch of a person or an event already contains their future excrescences. He can catch the unity of time without denying its multiplicity and he can evoke the multiplicity of time without losing track of its unity.

Conclusion
How do we have to understand the artistic ontology that Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze were said to gather from the *Recherche*? How does the artistic expression relate to that which it wants to express, the so-called essence or

sense, and how do we have to conceive of them? The passages on the little phrase of Vinteuil and on the actress Berma showed that both the expression and the sense do not belong to the empirical world. They are no positive entities. This does neither mean that they have no reality, nor that they have the same reality. The expression has a reality or presence that allows us to access the non-present sense. This, on its turn, does not imply that they are two independent entities. On the contrary, they are intrinsically related in the sense that the development of the expression gives shape to the essence and vice versa. The essence is not transcendent but immanent to the expression. Because of this non-presence of the sense to which the art work gives expression, art cannot contend itself with representing the world as we know it. As the Elstir passage indicates, a deformation is required. What this deformation reveals then, is, as the half-sleep passage learns us, the dynamic or temporal nature of the essence. The essence does not so much indicate what things are, as well as what makes them happen, the movement from which they are a crystallization. This movement cannot be understood as succession. The essence is an a-chronological time which allows things to be situated in time.

Notes

1. I would like to express my gratitude to prof. Sjef Houppermans (Leiden University) and Annelies Monseré (Ghent University) for their valuable tips and remarks. An extended version of this article will be published in Wambacq, J. (2014), *Thinking Between Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty*. London/New York : Bloomsbury.

2. Transl. JW. Original quote : *'l'opération expressive va consister à* libérer *cette présentation'* (vol XII 106).

3. Transl. JW. Original quote : 'Car si on ne retrouvait pas la chose à travers ces déformations, si elle n'y était pas imminente, la peinture serait manqué' (Vol XII, 104-5). In order to illustrate this idea of deformation, Merleau-Ponty refers, just like Deleuze (CC, 33), to the following statement by Rimbaud : 'To attain the unknown by disorganizing *all the senses* … a long, boundless, and systematized disorganization [dérèglement] of *all the senses'* (NC, 186). Beside this literal correspondence with Deleuze, one can also refer to some more implicit elements in Merleau-Ponty's ontology (not related to his reading of Proust) that can be considered differential *avant la lettre* and thus bridging the gap between both philosophies. This, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

4. Merleau-Ponty's reference to Proust's idea of the true hawthorns being the hawthorns of the past (VI, 243) is not unreconcilable with Deleuze's idea of aeon as the virtual and essential time. For Merleau-Ponty's hawthorns of the past are not the hawthorns as we remember them, but the hawthorns that belong to a 'mythical time', 'a time before time' as Merleau-Ponty calls it (VI, 243), or a time that precedes the time of the three dimensions.

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