Merleau-Ponty. From Dialectic to Hyperdialectic¹

JACQUES TAMINIAUX

Université de Louvain-la-Neuve

In the book left unfinished at his death, Merleau-Ponty wrote; “The bad dialectic begins almost with the dialectic, and there is no dialectic but that which criticizes itself and surpasses itself as a separate statement; the only good dialectic is the hyperdialectic.”²

What about this good dialectic which his last writing sought to practice? Rather than address this question directly, I would like to prepare for it instead by inquiring into the status of dialectic in Merleau-Ponty’s itinerary. Since the final work strives to demarcate good and bad dialectic from one another, I would like to ask about this demarcation and its possible avatars in the earlier works. Supposing that such a demarcation indeed figures there, in what sense can Merleau-Ponty lay claim to a ‘dialectical thinking,’ why does he see it as entitled to validity, and for what fault, if any, does he criticize it?

I. If we address such a question to the first two books, *The Structure of Behavior*³ and the *Phenomenology of Perception*,⁴ we quickly realize that it is premature. The question supposes, in effect, that in these books there is a genuine confrontation with dialectical thinking; an effort to partition what is essential to it from what is merely accidental, or from what denatures it. But such a confrontation does not take place. Both books struggle at length with Cartesianism, empiricism, realism, criticism, and reflexive thinking; the second of the two inaugurates a confrontation with the phenomenology of Husserl, while

neither explicitly confronts dialectical thinking. It would be wrong to conclude that dialectical thinking is nowhere to be encountered; on the contrary, it is greeted positively, though in an allusive manner, as a mode of intelligibility suited to the phenomenal field to which these works are trying to gain access.

Take, for instance, *The Structure of Behavior*. Recall the purpose of this work. It aims to understand afresh the relations between consciousness and nature by surpassing the two solutions applied to this problem by prevailing thought: the critical solution, which consists in stripping nature of all substantiality by making it into an ensemble of functional relationships constituted by consciousness; and the realist solution, which consists in making of nature a real substance, a *res* divisible into parts mutually bound by causal relationships, and in situating consciousness with respect to this *res*, whether by integrating it therein, or by juxtaposing it alongside as a specific *res*. Properly speaking, however, it is not a matter of a joint critique of the two solutions. The critique is first aimed at realist and causal thinking, showing that it does violence to the phenomena of which it treats; and only subsequently, after having withdrawn the phenomena from this violence, does the critique show the difficulty of a pure and simple return to the classical transcendental perspective of Kantian inspiration. In other words, although there is indeed an actual refutation of realism, there is only a correction of criticism. What on the one hand founds the refutations, and on the other summons the correction, is the direct elucidation of what Watson had called "behavior"; something he had rightly intuited as the confrontation between man or any organism and a world, but wrongly interpreted within the framework of realist and causal thought. Pursuing the fundamentally sound intuition of Watson, but denying the indigent philosophy within which he had inscribed it, Merleau-Ponty applies himself to procuring an adequate philosophical status for this new notion of behavior, and it is here that he welcomes dialectical thinking positively for the first time. In a long footnote appended to the Introduction of the book—drafted while it was already at the printers—Merleau-Ponty manifestly takes stock of the position he had won: "In our opinion (. . .), when Watson spoke of behavior he had in mind what others have called *existence*; but the new notion could receive its philosophical status only if causal or mechanical thinking were abandoned for dialectical thinking" (SB 226, n3). This sentence, one might say, sketches out the style and limits of Merleau-Ponty's initial relationship with dialectical thinking. On the one hand, it asserts that the meaning and mode of being of behavior, however rudimentarily examined, needs to be thought

dialectically—and that mechanical and causal thinking are utterly unsuited to this task. On the other hand and reciprocally, it supposes that Merleau-Ponty uses dialectical thinking only in order to think the meaning of behavior. In other words, behavior understood as confrontation with the world is the norm and measure of Merleau-Ponty's recourse to dialectical thinking. This becomes even more evident when we refer to those analyses in the body of the text which introduce the epithet 'dialectical' or the syntagme 'dialectical thinking.' These terms are introduced at the end of a long critique, first of the notion of reflex behavior, then of realist explanations of so-called 'higher forms of behavior.' Against the classical definition of reflex, Merleau-Ponty invokes several physiological and psychological works whose contribution, in his eyes, seems to consist in the substitution of the notion of 'structure' or 'form' in place of the classical notion of the 'elemental unit.' The notion of form implies not only the predominance of ensembles over atomic units, but also a causal relation between the organism and its milieu that is not linear but 'circular.' This circularity is furthermore indissociable from a 'signification'; that is, it submits to the exigencies of maintaining an optimal equilibrium between the organism and its milieu, as well as of maintaining its own internal equilibrium.

Against the realist, causal, and atomistic pursuit of 'higher behaviors,' or behaviors which testify to an aptitude for acquiring new reactions, Merleau-Ponty advances numerous observations along similar lines which call upon us to envision learning as a process of structuration which establishes an internal relation between the means and the end, as well as a signifying relation between the situation and the response of the living organism. This priority of structure bids us to surpass the classical distinction between elementary and complex conducts in favor of a hierarchy of behaviors according to the type of structure they embody—syncretic, amovable, or symbolic—and above all to surpass the alternative of *res* and *cogitatio*. To acknowledge that behavior is a form or structure is to acknowledge that it is not a *res*, since it does not disperse *partes extra partes*; also that it is not a *cogitatio*, since what it expresses does not betray "a being whose whole essence is to know," but only "a certain manner of treating the world" (SB 125). Such is precisely the mode of being Merleau-Ponty qualifies as 'dialectical.' He invokes this term to designate while also to embrace the diverse aspects of the notion of Gestalt or structure.

The first of these aspects is 'circularity.' The relations between the individual organism and his milieu are said to be 'dialectical' because "the organism itself measures the action of things upon it and itself

delimits its milieu by a circular process” (SB 148).

The second is ‘signifying totalization.’ Because the particularities of an organism and its mode of action symbolize each other, and because its unity is a unity of signification, the organism is said to exhibit a ‘vital dialectic’ (SB 156). In this context Merleau-Ponty invokes a quote from Hegel’s *Jena Logic*: “The mind of nature is a hidden mind . . . it is mind in itself, but not for itself” (SB 161), and he goes to the point of suggesting that to philosophize according to the Gestalt is—contrary to the attempts of Gestalt Theory to obliterate the meaning of its discoveries by drawing philosophical conclusions which only restore the realism of causal thinking—to acknowledge that the true Gestalt is close to the Gestalt in the Hegelian sense; namely, he says, the “concept before it has become consciousness of self” (SB 210). Hegel is again invoked in the discussion of the philosophical status of properly human—or ‘symbolic’—structures. The relation of man to his world is not reducible to the relation ‘vital situation-instinctive reaction.’ Instead it exhibits a specific dialectic owing its originality to another binary relation, ‘perceived situation-work,’ this last term understood in the Hegelian sense as designating “the ensemble of activities by which man transforms physical and living nature” (SB 162). The Hegelian negativity and mediation are certainly implicit here, since Merleau-Ponty later adds that “the meaning of human work” is “the taking possession of an indefinite space and time,” and that it reveals not only “the capacity of orienting oneself in relation to the possible, to the mediate,” but also “the capacity of rejecting the given milieu and of searching for equilibrium beyond any milieu” (SB 175-6, 245 n97).

There remains another properly dialectical aspect of the notion of Gestalt. The mind of nature, wrote Hegel, “is only mind for the mind which knows it.” In reality then, Merleau-Ponty adds while commenting on the stages of his own description, “we have already introduced consciousness and what we have designated under the name of life was already consciousness of life” (SB 161-2). That life is already consciousness of life means here that, since life offers itself in all respects as a structure or a form, and since form ultimately belongs to the perceptive order, *there is no form except for a perceptive consciousness*. The human order of consciousness is thus the universal condition of possibility and the ultimate presupposition, and the movement of Merleau-Ponty’s thought here is well within the sphere of transcendental thinking inaugurated by Kant. With one major corrective, however. Precisely because the consciousness everywhere presupposed is perceptive, it can no longer be envisioned as an ‘I

think' which accompanies all of my representations, or as an epistemological subject whose objective correlate is a pure signification. If the Gestalt must be envisioned as "the concept before it has become consciousness of self," what is profound here is not the idea of signification, but that of 'structure,' or "the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state" (SB 206-7). Correlatively, the perceiving consciousness presupposed by the structures itself has a mode of existence both contingent and laden with a structure. And here a final properly dialectical implication of the notion of Gestalt appears. Just as there is a circularity between the organism and its milieu, so there is also a circularity between existence and consciousness. Citing Hegel anew, Merleau-Ponty writes; "For life, as for the mind, there is no past which is absolutely past; 'the moments which the mind seems to have behind it are also borne in its present depths' " (SB 207). This signifies that the supposed purity of the epistemological subject is bound to conditions of existence which indeed are "indiscernible in the whole with which they collaborate," but are such that "the essence of the whole cannot be concretely conceptualized without them and without its constitutive history." In other words, the emergence of the epistemological subject is to be understood as "the institution of a new dialectic . . . the establishment of a new constitutive layer which eliminates the preceding one as isolated moment, but conserves and integrates it" (SB 208).

Taken as a whole, the investigation conducted by Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure of Behavior* qualifies itself as a dialectical one for two major reasons. First, because of its phenomenal content. The mode of manifestation of behavior envisioned from the lowest level upwards and, as Merleau-Ponty says, from the point of view of the 'outside spectator' exhibits dialectical traits: 'circularity' between the living organism and its milieu; 'signifying totalization' in the sense of a reciprocal symbolization of being and action, of partial activities and global conduct; and finally 'negativity' in the specifically human symbolic comportments. As these three characteristics are those of Gestalten, one might say that the very phenomenality of Gestalt is dialectical. But besides the descriptive content of the Gestalt the investigation also concerns the transcendental conditions of possibility of the Gestalt. Just as life, according to Hegel, refers back to consciousness of life, so the Gestalt refers back to consciousness of Gestalt. At this juncture the investigation qualifies itself as dialectical for a second reason, pertaining to this transcendental aspect. The

Gestalt presupposes a perceiving consciousness as its transcendental condition. But perceiving consciousness, in turn, is a structure. This means that it is itself affected by all the traits of what it renders possible; that the negativity permeating it, as well as its proper mode of signification, never permit it to detach itself from a circular confrontation with a world; and that the *Aufhebung* that it effects remains affected by what is surpassed.

The cogency of the Introduction footnote is now clear: behavior or Gestalt as confrontation with the world is indeed, and in every respect, the norm of Merleau-Ponty's recourse to dialectical thinking.

II. But this same note asserts that behavior thus understood is what others have called 'existence.' We are therefore led to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, since this second book deems itself entirely existential philosophy. Here an attentive study of the text will show that it is this time existence which is taken as the norm of the recourse to dialectical thinking. In this perspective, for instance, the Idea in the Hegelian sense will be said to be that formula "which sums up some unique manner of behavior towards others, towards Nature, time, and death: a certain way of patterning the world" (PP xviii), or which constitutes a unique core of existential signification at the intersection of a plurality of perspectives. But inversely, as any core of existential signification is inseparable from a plurality of perspectives, immeshing my past into my present, the other into myself, and myself into him, Merleau-Ponty will say that meaning can in no event "be set in a realm apart, transposed into absolute spirit" (PP xix-xx). Although allusions to dialectical thinking are overall less numerous in the *Phenomenology of Perception* than in *The Structure of Behavior*, these two works taken together sketch out the characteristic style of Merleau-Ponty's first encounter with dialectical thinking. Dialectical thinking is not thematized as such, but hailed in passing insofar as Merleau-Ponty believes an existential tenor can be recognized in it, and cast aside insofar as it is unfaithful to the condition of Being-in-the-world.

This is also the style which predominates in those writings of the same period in which, on the basis of his first two books, Merleau-Ponty explicitly considers the writings of Hegel and Marx. It is striking to verify just how little these writings bother to translate themselves into the text of Hegel or Marx, and how zealously, instead, they scurry to translate these texts into the terms of *The Structure of Behavior* or the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Consider the article in *Sense and Non-Sense*¹ entitled, "Hegel's Ex-

istentialism.” Here Merleau-Ponty treats the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. “But if the Hegel of 1827 may be criticized for his idealism,” he writes, “the same cannot be said of the Hegel of 1807,” adding that it is “certain” that “the *Phenomenology of Spirit* does not try to fit all history into a framework of pre-established logic” (SN 64). It would be vain, I think, to try to justify this proposition advanced by Merleau-Ponty by appealing to Hegel himself, for three reasons. First of all, any allegation of a supposed opposition between the Hegel of 1807 and of 1827 disregards the fact that the architectonic and the conceptual apparatus of the so-called mature system were both established at the time of the Jena writings. Furthermore, this thesis silently overlooks Hegel’s stated project of this period: the realization of an absolute idealism. Finally, it conflicts with the most recent results of the *Hegelforschung*, which tend to show that a preestablished logic does indeed found the articulation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. But if Merleau-Ponty’s proposition cannot be justified by appealing to Hegel’s writings, it may be justified—in effect—by appealing to those of Merleau-Ponty. When Merleau-Ponty writes, “Hegel’s thought is existentialist in that it views man not as being from the start a consciousness in full possession of its own clear thoughts, but as a life which is its own responsibility and which tries to understand itself,” and when he adds that the Hegelian oeuvre describes “man’s efforts to reappropriate himself” (SN 65), these remarks only make sense when they are understood, not in terms of the Hegelian relation between natural consciousness and absolute knowledge, but against the background of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the relation between the unreflective and reflection. Furthermore, the first relation must be merged into the second and displaced onto the humanist terrain of the existential project, thereby cutting it off at the same stroke from the Hegelian wellspring; namely, the presuppositions of the Absolute which, from the outset, “is and wants to be alongside us.” The same could be said of the other themes which Merleau-Ponty culls from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Anxiety, consciousness of death, and the struggle between consciousnesses are not introduced for the purpose of learning what they signify in Hegel, but as pretexts to reaffirm that consciousness is not a *res*, and that the mode of being human is an ambiguous one because life and death, solitude and communication never cease to intermingle in it.

What about the essays relating to the thought of Marx? Here the text itself seems to have been taken into consideration—which was scarcely true in the case of Hegel. Still, Marx’s tests meet a similar encroachment as that which governed the reading of Hegel. The princi-

ple of this reading is announced by Merleau-Ponty himself: "Concrete thinking, which Marx calls 'critique' to distinguish it from speculative philosophy, is what others propound under the name 'existential philosophy' " (SN 133). If the Marxist critique—namely, that critico-praxis which Marx, during the years 1843-4, opposed simultaneously to a praxis without philosophical horizon and to a critique which never left the ground of self-consciousness—if this critique is indeed what others propound under the name 'existential philosophy,' then it cannot be Merleau-Ponty's intention to interrogate its Hegelian filiation, nor even to inquire into the ontological principles which unify the traits of this filiation in the text of Marx, still less to search for what is unthought in it, but rather to transpose this critique into the terms and foundations of existential philosophy. Some examples will suffice to make this transposition manifest. When Marx writes in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* "You cannot overcome philosophy without realizing it," in context this signifies that the absolute identity of subject and object is going to find the means of 'becoming world' in the proletariat. Merleau-Ponty translates this as follows: "The *cogito* is false only in that it removes itself and shatters our inherence in the world. The only way to overcome it is to realize it, that is, to show that it is eminently contained in interpersonal relations" (SN 133). As he makes explicit further on, this means that "the human subject thinks in terms of his situation," that he finds himself "in the midst of other consciousnesses which likewise have a situation;" in short, that subjectivity is intersubjectivity (SN 133-4).

Similarly, when Marx writes in the *Manuscripts of 1844* that "naturalism or realized humanism differ from idealism as much as from materialism and is at the same time the truth uniting both," Merleau-Ponty hastens to decipher it, without troubling to inquire into the Feuerbachian soil from which such formulae grow, in the light of his own project of a conjoint surpassing of realism and intellectualism, to such an extent that it signifies for him that man is neither pure consciousness nor inert thing, but relation to a world; that is, an engagement which has "an exterior aspect, an outside . . . which is 'objective' at the same time as 'subjective' " (SN 130).

Finally, when Marx writes that "for man the root is man himself," or that "he produces himself" and is himself his own origin, everything happens as if Merleau-Ponty found in these sentences an equivalent of the Heideggerian distinction between *Vorhandenheit* and *Da-Sein*, since he takes them as signifying that man "not only is, but exists," without so much as suspecting that at virtually the same

time Heidegger was situating the Marxist self-production at the antipodes of the ek-static mode of being of Dasein. One may argue that these writings on Marx are topical, indissociable from the political atmosphere in which the French intelligentsia basked during the early post-war period, and that after all the intent of these texts is pedagogical—to point out to those who reject existential philosophy in the name of Marx what in his writings could be said to sanction it. Such indeed seems to be the aim of these texts; it is centripetal and without being arbitrary one may transpose to the relationship which Merleau-Ponty's texts form with Marx what he told us of Marx's relationship with phenomenology: "A purely philological examination of the texts in question would yield nothing; we find in texts only what we put into them, and if ever any kind of history has suggested the interpretations which should be put on it, it is the history of philosophy. We shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology" (PP viii). Just as there is what he calls "a phenomenology for ourselves," which recognizes what it had been waiting for, so there is also a "Marxism for ourselves."

But what is this "Marxism for ourselves"? And, in jeopardy of having to admit that Merleau-Ponty's relation to the history of thought is a pure projection, what are the properly philosophical principles, common to both Marx and Merleau-Ponty, which found this retrieve or reappropriation? We shall doubtless have the best chance of finding the elements of a response to this question by turning to his most elaborate essay on Marxism, *Humanism and Terror*. This effort requires, in my opinion, that we go beyond the topical character of the essay to try to disengage the properly philosophical theses. The pretext for the book was Arthur Koestler's romantic interpretation of the Moscow trials in *Darkness at Noon*. This interpretation, Merleau-Ponty asserts, demonstrates that Koestler is not a Marxist. This does not prevent it from posing an acute problem, however; that of effective communism. I shall not broach this second problem, but only the first: that of Marxist thinking.

Merleau-Ponty finds the proof that Koestler is not a Marxist in the alternatives governing his manner of thinking; efficacy and morality, historical determinism and Kantian imperative, Commissar and Yogi, in short subjective and objective. But it is the privilege of Marxism to have surpassed these alternatives. Koestler's novel describes characters who "believe it is necessary to choose between the interior and the exterior," who decide that consciousness is nothing, who submit themselves to a scientific and mechanistic view of the political state that will ultimately crush them, and who adhere to a 'technical

logic' which transforms everything into inert objects. Marx, according to Merleau-Ponty, recognizes in history, however, a "living logic . . . which expresses itself indivisibly by objective necessities and by the spontaneous movement of the masses" (HT 15), with the result that, instead of absolutizing history as a grand machinery whose truth yields itself to the impersonal inquiry of science, he makes it rest upon the blending of human perspectives. For Marx, writes Merleau-Ponty, "interhuman praxis is the absolute" (HT 18).

Here the first philosophical principle founding Merleau-Ponty's retrieve of the teaching of Marx reveals itself; the 'absoluteness of praxis.' He expresses it in these terms: "The only history of which we may speak is that whose image and future we construct, by means of interpretations which are simultaneously methodical and creative" (HT 20). This history is dialectical inasmuch as it returns against itself, and this, "in the final analysis, because men enter into collision with structures which alienate them, because the economic subject is a human subject" (HT 23). To the extent that it accomplishes an interchange of subjective and objective, Marx's conception of history escapes the alternative of scientism and nominalism, since it surpasses the former by integrating the lived, and the latter by practically realizing the abstract imperatives of the ethics of pure intentions. A second principle is derived from the absoluteness of praxis; the 'radical contingency of the liberal pact' which proclaims the universality of the rights of man. This pact does not express the properties of human nature. It is but a historical product, and the universality it appeals to is but a class reason, while the spontaneous practice of the proletariat, given the universality of the concrete situation of oppression that it sustains, is always in the process of realizing a no longer merely formal but effective universality. Moreover, this contingency of liberalism implies an unacknowledged violence which, because it is deliberately overlooked, can only perpetuate itself. Revolutionary violence, on the other hand, admits itself as such, being the willful negation of the established violence, thus the negation of the negation.

But a third principle, of 'historical responsibility,' is also derived from the absoluteness of praxis and surpasses, like the second principle, the classical doublets intention and act, and subjective and objective, adhered to by liberal thinking. Honesty of intention does not prohibit the historical act from being guilty if it happens that its objective consequences entail a weakening of the chances of the concrete realization of the universal. It is precisely because history is not inscribed in things, but is relatively unforeseeable and thus created and decided in risk, that its course in the wake of a decision first brings this

decision into the tribunal's jurisdiction only *a posteriori*. This contingency condemns the political man to being an 'unhappy consciousness,' and condemns the revolutionary to being a 'tragic hero,' since in the name of the revolution the ruling power imputes to him as a crime an opposing position which he had believed favorable to the revolution, while at the same time it is impossible for him to associate himself fully with the forces crushing him, since insofar as the revolution is unachieved it is still undecided who has the better deciphered history, the ruling power or himself. Merleau-Ponty found in these principles the secret of Bukharin's confession during the Moscow trials, and also rested upon them the idea that there is no absolute difference between Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, for all three acknowledge contingency and the open exercise of terror as a violence that is not gratuitous but oriented towards a human future.

III. The question here is not to discover whether this interpretation of the immediate historical situation stands up to scrutiny, but to pursue further the investigation of the philosophical principles which articulate Merleau-Ponty's 'Marxism for ourselves.' When he says that praxis is the absolute, this signifies on the one hand that, just as there is no nature in itself, so there is no history in itself, and on the other that the pure for-itself is an abstraction, an unreality. In no longer negative but positive terms, this means that consciousness exists only as incarnated and situated, or, as he says, that consciousnesses "intermingle with the situation assumed by themselves, and could not complain if one confused them with it and if one neglected the so-called incorruptible innocence of conscience" (HT 109). This thesis is dialectical in the sense that it assumes the Hegelian critique of the 'beautiful soul' and the general tenor of Kantian morality; also in the sense that in its implications it rejoins the Hegelian analyses of the struggle of self-consciousnesses and of the 'unhappy consciousness.' They rejoin the Hegelian analysis of self-consciousness, for to say that consciousness intermingles with the situation it assumes is also to say that it enters necessarily into a struggle with others, that it cannot abstract itself from the perspective which others have on it, and that consciousness never ceases to make use of them and to be what it does unto them—and is therefore originally inscribed in violence.

The implications of the absoluteness of praxis also rejoin the Hegelian analysis of the 'unhappy consciousness.' By virtue of its situation and of the violence of intersubjectivity, consciousness feels the lack of coincidence between what it is and what it thinks, between what it wills and what it does, as a permanent drama.

But Merleau-Ponty's position in *Humanism and Terror* is yet

dialectical for another reason. For Hegel the figures of the struggle and of the 'unhappy consciousness' are joined by virtue of being moments in the perspective of an identity between being and thought. Strangely enough, we do not find it otherwise for Merleau-Ponty. Just as tragedy as Hegel understood it—the collision of a knowing and a non-knowing—far from being irremediable, is only the promise of a higher synthesis, likewise the tragedy of the revolutionary condition, as described by Merleau-Ponty, is inscribed within the perspective of its abolition. A careful reading of the text will show that, however carefully he tries to repair the paradoxes of acting, embodied intersubjectivity, an interrogation of the revolutionary *telos* as such never materializes. This is clearly evident in those analyses where he subscribes to the Marxist theory of the proletariat. "The theory of the proletariat is not an annex nor an appendix in Marxism," he writes. "It is truly the center of the doctrine, for it is in proletarian existence that abstract conceptions become life and that life makes itself consciousness . . . The theory of the proletariat absolutely distinguishes a Marxist politics from all other authoritarian politics, and makes the formal analogies which are often pointed out between them utterly superficial" (HT 113). What are the distinctive features of the Marxist concept of the proletariat? Marx thinks of the proletariat as a *de facto* universal, Merleau-Ponty claims; a universal which is not merely conceived but lived. Its condition—thus, its socio-economic condition—is such that in it the reign of particularities is transcended: "It is the universality which it thinks," and it thinks the universality which it is. It is the sole authentic intersubjectivity because in its alone "the separation and the union of individuals are simultaneously lived" and because "it alone is in a universal situation" (HT 116). The violence or terror assumed but not created by Marxism is transcended through the proletariat. The alternatives of real and ideal, Machiavelli and Kant, means and ends, fact and value, power and ethics, are also transcended therein. That he assumes this synthetic concept of the proletariat—"the identity of the subjective and the objective" (HT 137)—is demonstrated by his translation of it into the language of intersubjectivity, and especially by the application he makes of one of his dearest notions, the Gestalt, to the Marxist concept of history as the happening of the universal in the proletariat.

To be Marxist is to think that the economic questions and the cultural or human questions are a single question, and that the proletariat such as history has made it contains the solution to this unique problem. To speak a modern

language, it is to think that history is a *Gestalt*, in the sense that German authors give this word, a total process of movement towards a state of equilibrium, the classless society, which could not be attained without effort and without human action, but which indicates itself in the present crises as a resolution of these crises, as the power of man over nature and reconciliation of man with man (HT 130).

It might be objected that Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the immediate historical situation questions this concept. But upon closer examination it is not this concept which Merleau-Ponty criticizes, but only certain concrete forms in which it has been realized—Stalinist authoritarianism and a general recession of internationalism and of the initiative of the masses, for instance. In other words, the actual tenor of the concept of the proletariat in the Marxist sense is not interrogated as such. After checking off all those factors contradicting the realization of those things augured and willed by Marxism, Merleau-Ponty asks himself the following question: "But why grant a respite to this philosophy? It has not succeeded in becoming reality; it is a utopia." To which he replies: "Considered closely, Marxism is not just any hypothesis which can be replaced tomorrow by some other. It is the simple statement of those conditions without which there would neither be any humanism, in the sense of a reciprocal relation between men, nor any rationality in history; it is *the* philosophy of history, and to give it up completely would be to strike out historical reason" (HT 156). The proletarian *Gestalt* is not one form among others; it is *the* 'good form' of history, without which history would be merely a collection of insignificant facts.

It is evident that a sizeable equivocation in Merleau-Ponty's texts is generated by this unquestioned retrieve of the synthetic concept of the proletariat as the realizing agent of authentic intersubjectivity and of the meaning of history; an equivocation affecting, most immediately, the internal economy of his thought. It is one thing to say that intersubjectivity is paradoxical and ambiguous, that there is a drama of Being-with-others, that the moment there is another's perspective on me and of me on him there is violence, that embodiment is simultaneously the condition and limit of liberty, that the sense which it inaugurates is always accompanied by a non-sense—and quite another to say that authentic intersubjectivity is the concrete realization of a universal which transcends all particularity, which identifies the subjective and the objective, and which inaugurates an equilibrium such that only then and through it does history finally become reason.

This equivocation concerns the very concept of dialectic itself, and affects the very manner in which it is understood by Merleau-Ponty. In the first instance the dialectic is not synthesis but persistent interchange of contraries—hence ambiguity—while in the second it is truly identity—hence effacement of ambiguity. But if this equivocation is to be possible; if the same concepts, for instance that of intersubjectivity, could be understood on some occasions as ambiguous and on others as synthetic, then we must ask whether it is not generalized, whether this equivocation does not affect each and every one of these concepts. We have seen that when Merleau-Ponty established his initial relation to dialectical thinking, it was behavior as confrontation with a world, or again as existence, which functioned as the norm and privileged domain of dialectic. We also encountered this same norm and privileged domain in those writings on Marx and Hegel contemporary with the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and once again in *Humanism and Terror*. Let us recall the famous sentence from the Conclusion to this latter book: “There is as much existentialism in the ‘Stenographic Transcript’ of the Moscow trials as in all the works of Heidegger” (HT 187). This sentence is, as it were, the symptomatic distillation of an entire way of thinking which appears strange and even shallow to us today, consisting of a generalized practice of rapprochement and encroachment, to which the following phrases, selected almost at random, testify: “the whole of *Sein und Zeit* springs from an indication by Husserl” (PP vii); “the introduction of the notion of the *human object*, which phenomenology has taken up and developed, was reserved for Marx” (SN 131); and finally, “the ‘metaphysical’ content of Marxism, in the Heideggerian sense, consists of men in the process of taking nature (to which they were at first subordinate) upon themselves, of rupturing the given structures of society, and of acceding through praxis to the ‘reign of liberty,’ or, as Hegel said, to ‘absolute history’ ” (SN 127-8). The unsuitability of this practice is that it is only possible by detaching those themes allowing the rapprochements effected from the principles grounding them in the original text—for instance, from Hegel’s “will of the *Absolute* to be from the start alongside us,” or from Heidegger’s *Seinsfrage*. But my aim is less to discover the unsuitability of this practice than to discover what, in the final analysis, founds these rapprochements and encroachments. More precisely, since our concern is dialectic and since Marx played a dominant role in Merleau-Ponty’s retrieve of dialectical thinking, to discover what founds the superimposition of Merleau-Ponty’s text on that of Marx. We have seen that it is ultimately behavior as Being-in-the-world, or again as existence, that

functions as the privileged location of the dialectic. Despite Merleau-Ponty's cavalier assertion to the effect that we only find in the history of philosophy what we await there, something in the text of Marx has to solicit such superimposition, or else we have to admit that this retrieve is a purely arbitrary projection. This something Merleau-Ponty himself puts into relief in the exergue to his article on "Marxism and Philosophy," a quotation from the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man, the root is man himself." For Marx this means that man as self-productivity has the status of the ultimate ontological principle, and that Merleau-Ponty recognizes himself in it signifies that he indeed has understood self-production as Being-in-the-world.

Here we reach the essential moment of the inquiry. It seems to me beyond doubt that the Marxist self-production is decidedly inscribed within the modern heritage of Cartesian subjectivity, absolutized by Hegel. The Marxist project can be conceived as the realization of the Hegelian speculative equation: absolute certitude of Self or the Same in its Other, or of Substance in the Subject. Themes such as the identity of accomplished humanism and accomplished naturalism spoken of in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, history as man's production by man, and praxis as the path of man's self-recognition in nature and of man in other men, are all decipherable as realizations of Hegelian speculation, as offspring of the Cartesian *cogito*. Merleau-Ponty began by superimposing the existentialist theme of the project over the Marxist theme of praxis. This implies, if not the resolute adoption, at least the unquestioned retrieve of that first principle of modern thought, subjectivity. And if Merleau-Ponty objects to the Cartesian *res* from the start, it is *de facto* not for the purpose of objecting to the *cogito* as such, but rather of correcting it. Perception corrects but by no means abolishes the primacy of subjectivity. Let us recall that famous text where Merleau-Ponty objects to the Cartesian *realitas*, and erects the mode of being of perception upon the Ego: "I am the absolute source . . . for I alone bring into being for myself (and therefore into being in the only sense that the word can have for me) the tradition which I elect to carry on, or the horizon whose distance from me would be abolished . . . if I were not there to scan it with my gaze" (PP ix). In its ontological import Being as Being-for-me is the very definition of the *cogito*, of *Bewusstsein*. To be in-the-world does not mean for Merleau-Ponty to be ek-statically open to Being which withdraws and conceals itself; it means to be as an Ego for a Being which is essentially for me. This is precisely the dialectical formula of

the Hegelian speculative circle, of which existentialism is but one version. Perhaps this reveals the incentive for the tenacity with which Merleau-Ponty everywhere sets himself to refuting objectivist thinking and conditioning by external causation. If I produce myself, my outside is nothing other than myself.

IV. And yet Merleau-Ponty did not stop there. He set out to recognize and lucidly to interrogate this equivocation, which, as I have tried to show, gives rise to a gliding back and forth between ambiguity and synthesis at the heart of his understanding of dialectic.

This recognition and interrogation will engage the new project, not by way of a pure and simple repudiation of what he had hitherto thought, but by way of a retrieve of the same texts and elected themes in another light. "We must begin everything anew," he wrote in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and this sentence expresses very well the style of his second project. But of its implimentation we have, alas, only scattered fragments. In them one frequently notices the signs of a certain mutation involving, one might say, a displacement of phenomenology towards ontology, of the description of consciousness towards the interrogation of Being, of the humanist and existential *lumen naturale* towards the latency of *aletheia*. Where does dialectic stand in this new context? At the beginning of this paper I suggested that in his final drafts Merleau-Ponty did not repudiate dialectic, but was in search of what he called the 'good dialectic.' If there is a mutation, it does not consist of a thematic replacement, but of a new exploration of the same theme. It is not my intention to follow out this new exploration of the dialectic. I shall restrict myself to indicating those aspects by which it seems to differ from the unquestioning appropriation which we saw at work in the early writings. Most immediately, it is indeed a question this time of an attempt at *confrontation*, and no longer of a practice of encroachment which seeks to expropriate from Hegel and Marx, by hasty analogies, theories in which existentialism may be recognized. There is a genuine effort to interrogate these two thinkers on their own terrain, according to what they said and from the principles which found their discourse. Thus he writes in one of his last texts, the Preface to *Signs*; "To remain faithful to what one was; to begin everything again from the beginning—each of these two tasks is immense . . . one would have to redefine the relationships of the young Marx to Marx, of both to Hegel, of that whole tradition to Lenin, of Lenin to Stalin and even to Khrushchev, and finally, the relationships of Hegelo-Marxism to what had gone before and followed it."⁷ It is doubtless within this perspec-

tive that he had conceived reading texts of Hegel and Marx as his last course.

In the framework of this confrontation we see a questioning of the synthetic ambition of dialectic at work. This is the negative side of this confrontation. It is directed first of all against the synthetic concept of history as the happening of reason, which Marx had invested in the proletariat in his realization-destruction of Hegel, and which Merleau-Ponty had himself earlier retrieved while neither questioning it as such nor interrogating its Hegelian root, since he had envisaged as the primary task of our time the retrieve of an enlarged reason “which goes so far as to integrate the irrational.” It is an ‘illusion,’ he writes in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, “to precipitate into a historical fact—the proletariat’s birth and growth—history’s total meaning, to believe that history itself organized its own recovery, that the proletariat’s power would be its own suppression, the negation of the negation” (AD 205). He does not conclude that dialectic is an illusion, but rather that pretension to terminate it in an identity which, precisely because it is pure coincidence without difference or outside, could think itself equally well the culmination of objectivism and the culmination of subjectivism. This is to postulate, he says, the miracle of a directing class gifted with complete coincidence with what it directs, whose movement is without the slightest inertia, and which institutes itself without sedimenting itself; in short, a class which functions in history as “a substantial and given principle which would drive ambiguity from it, sum it up, totalize it, and close it” (AD 221).

Despite this repudiation of the synthetic ambition of dialectic, it is difficult to discover from the book entitled *Adventures of the Dialectic* just what justifies the idea affirmed therein that “the dialectical idea is always valid.” Dialectic, as many commentators have remarked, is treated only *ex professo* in several pages of the epilogue. They speak of a dialectic whose site is “the junction of a subject, of being, and of other subjects,” or “their communal residence, the place of their interchange and of their reciprocal interpretation,” or “the global and primordial cohesion of a field of experience wherein each element opens onto the others;” “dialectic which is not a surpassing centered upon a finality but a “perpetual genesis” to “a plurality of levels or orders” (AD 204).

These remarks are too allusive for one to be able to extract the conclusive indices of a fundamental difference with respect to the concept of dialectic which he had hitherto assumed. Although the confrontation with the world is described as a perpetual, polycentric genesis, this does not fundamentally alter the physiognomy of what had func-

tioned as the privileged domain of the dialectic ever since *The Structure of Behavior*, since here as before it is a question of the reciprocity of Being and the subject, and of the reciprocity of subjects.

But this is no longer true when one turns to *The Visible and the Invisible*. To be sure, there are certain respects in which the text exhibits remnants of the philosophy of subjectivity and of the affiliated conception of truth as adequation between subject and object. The working notes, however, seem to escape the old language of adequation. "We have to pass from the thing (spatial or temporal) as identity, to the thing (spatial or temporal) as difference, i.e. as transcendence, i.e. as always 'behind,' beyond, far-off" reads one of them, and later continues, "Understand perception as differentiation . . . understand that the 'to be conscious' = to have a figure on a ground" (VI 195, 197). Another note makes this more precise: "The for-itself . . . is the culmination of the separation (*écart*) in *differentiation*" (VI 191). The thing as *differentiation*, the for-itself as presence to this differentiation and the locus where it manifests itself—this does indeed seem distant from the classical conception of truth. If dialectic then consists, as several texts suggest, of accompanying and being open to this process of differentiation, it could well be that it had changed meaning along the way. Initially dialectic was supposed to be adjusted to the mode of manifestation of the Gestalt or of the structure of behavior, consisting of circularity between an organism and its milieu, signifying totalization, and negativity. These properties refer, in the final analysis, to consciousness itself as the project of a world, as totalization, as a wrenching from the given. The superimposition of Marxist self-production onto Husserlian intentionality confirmed that the Gestalt was thought within the unquestioned horizon of the modern correlation of subject and object. In the perceived considered as milieu of Gestalten I produce myself and the Gestalt is the objective fact of my project.

But from the moment when the Gestalt, as the final working notes suggest, is less identity than showing-forth, less entity than "operation of *ester*," it situates us "entirely outside of the philosophy of subject and object." Not because it invites us to transcend both in some unity of identity and non-identity, but rather because it bids us welcome the unsurpassable differentiation which it constitutes. Asking himself what is accurate in what he calls the "being for itself of the Gestalt experience," Merleau-Ponty responds, "It is being for X, not a pure agile nothingness, but an inscription in an open register, in a lake of non being, in an *Eröffnung*, in an *offene*" (VI 206-7). If this renovated approach to the Gestalt is indeed at the heart of his last ef-

forts in the direction of a 'good dialectic,' then perhaps the sought-for 'hyperdialectic' rejoins the most ancient sense of *dialegein*: to welcome the difference.

Translated by Robert Crease

NOTES

¹"'Merleau-Ponty. De la dialectique à l'hyperdialectique'" appeared in the *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 40:1 (March 1978): 34-55.

²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 94. Subsequent references are identified immediately following quote. Certain of these and other translations have been slightly altered.

³Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, tr. Alden Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). Subsequent references are identified immediately following quote.

⁴Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1962). Subsequent references are identified immediately following quote.

⁵Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, tr. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Subsequent references are identified immediately following quote.

⁶Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, tr. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

⁷Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, tr. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 7.

⁸Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, tr. Joseph Bien (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).