

# The Art of Interpreting Landscapes: Nature Teaching Itself through Its Own Expression

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## Introduction

This paper responds to a set of interpretive problems in the philosophy of nature concerning our immanence to nature through developing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of "philosophy of the sensible as literature" from his unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>1</sup> I argue that rather than speak *about* the world, we speak *with* the world, as seen in Merleau-Ponty's account of expression throughout his corpus. In *Part One* of this paper, I consider how we might express the experience of the reversibility of flesh in language, as seen in Merleau-Ponty's later work, while considering challenges of giving a linguistic account. In *Part Two*, I argue that a hermeneutic approach can help us resolve the difficulties encountered when giving a linguistic account of our experience of nature. I argue that hermeneutics provides resources for phenomenological accounts so that we might respect the transcendence of nature while still being *of* nature. This paper seeks to respond to the challenges in developing a philosophy of nature as beings immanent to nature through the resources of hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology highlights the *prejudices* and *biases* involved in our understanding of nature, and when paired with hermeneutics, allows us to remain open to the alterity of nature and its transcendence to us. As the title

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 252.

suggests, I will argue that interpreting landscapes through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach allows for nature to teach itself through its own expression, answering a question I pose: How can a natural being understand nature naturally?

### Part One: Philosophy of Nature and Interpretive Problems

There are interpretive problems in philosophy of nature that Ted Toadvine succinctly sums up with the questions: “what does it mean to understand human beings as a part of nature and how can we think nature starting from our situation within it? How does our situation as immanent to nature compromise—or give us access to—the being of nature? . . . how can our understanding of nature respect its transcendence? In other words, is there a means of thinking nature that can take into account its excess over our projections and cultural stereotypes concerning it?”<sup>2</sup> These problems regard our immanence to nature, whether as a limitation or as our means to know it. They also regard our “particular cultural and historical situation that fits us with particular lenses for viewing the world,” acknowledging that there is not a “position from which to evaluate the mediating influences of history, culture, [or] language.”<sup>3</sup>

Given these problems about how we know nature through a particular vantage point, Toadvine points to phenomenology as a resource. Phenomenology “in its effort to describe and understand the *nature of experience*. . . is inevitably led to investigate the *experience of nature* and, in general, the relation between experience and nature.”<sup>4</sup> Phenomenological description and accounts of experiences of nature reveal the taken-for-granted relationships between ourselves and the more-than-human world surrounding us. These accounts can reveal cultural and historic habits of perception, unearth our assumptions about nature, and make us more aware of mediating influences. Toadvine especially relies on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature because Merleau-Ponty tries to “disclos[e] nature *on its own terms* [which] requires taking it up in an expressive gesture.”<sup>5</sup> *Expression* in Merleau-Ponty is more than just a human endeavor, it takes place “at the confluence of the body and the world.”<sup>6</sup> The perceiving

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<sup>2</sup> Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 7, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 19.

body for Merleau-Ponty is co-natural with the world. As Toadvine writes, “At a prereflective level, the body and the world are said to be ‘connatural’ (PP251/252); they engage in a ‘coition,’ a ‘symbiosis,’ or a ‘dialogue’ (PP 370/373).”<sup>7</sup> In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty articulates perception as a kind of communication, a dialogue, which occurs when we acclimate, or attune, our senses to our environment. He writes, “sensing is this living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life.”<sup>8</sup> Perception as communication or as a dialogue is further developed in Merleau-Ponty as he writes, “the whole of nature is the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue.”<sup>9</sup> The world is more than the setting for our lives; the world is in communication with us as we are with it.

This communication, this dialogue we have with “the whole of nature”<sup>10</sup> is *expression*, or the confluence of one’s perceiving body and the world around them. Toadvine writes, “the ‘dialogue’ between the body and nature is the event of their correlation, their entanglement in an ongoing process of expression.”<sup>11</sup> Perception of nature, although mediated, does not prevent contact with nature, but is “instead, the condition for anything whatsoever to appear, to be disclosed.”<sup>12</sup> Nature then “discloses itself *through* our expressive acts,” which for Merleau-Ponty is this confluence of perception and the world, or nature.<sup>13</sup>

Merleau-Ponty at times calls this confluence *style*, or, “nature’s own self-expression through embodied life.”<sup>14</sup> This allows us a way to read Merleau-Ponty’s interest in Paul Cézanne, as he writes, “the landscape thinks itself in me.”<sup>15</sup> We can see nature’s self-expression through perception in other moments of Merleau-Ponty’s work, one being the description of “our contemplation of the sky as the sky’s own self-contemplation within us.”<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes, “As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against* it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me,’ I am the

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<sup>7</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 373.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 373.

<sup>11</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 60.

sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself.”<sup>17</sup> This exemplifies expression as the confluence between nature and perceiving beings, and nature as expressing itself through embodied life. This could seem anthropocentric, but it demonstrates the opposite: that the human being is but one being participating in nature. That is, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, instead of imposing our powers of expression or perception onto the world, “the body’s powers of expression are derivative from those of nature” so that rather than nature as “constituted by the expressive powers of the body, we find that the [perceiver] is a node within... nature’s own system of expression.”<sup>18</sup> As such, in Merleau-Ponty’s later work, nature is not constituted by the perceiver, but the perceiver is a being participating in nature expressing itself.

Merleau-Ponty’s idea of flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible* creates another space in which we can see nature’s expression through embodied life. The perceiver mutually participates in the sensible, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “If it touches them and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of things as the world is universal flesh.”<sup>19</sup> The human being is composed of the same flesh as the (natural) world around them. In flesh, perception is reversible, so that it is impossible to distinguish that which sees from that which is seen. Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that this distinction between the subject and object is ambiguous enough so as to make it impossible to differentiate; he writes, “the vision he 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. . . the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.”<sup>20</sup> The subject, as visible, is an object seen. This reversibility of flesh is what all beings participate in; it destabilizes the distinction between subject and object, and subject and world.

In sum, phenomenological descriptions of nature provide two things. First, the description of the *experience* of nature—the description of the confluence of perceiver and nature—reveals nature as expressive and the human being as a part of nature’s larger expression. Second, phenomenological accounts can highlight our traditions of perception and the very things mediating our relationship with nature, i.e., perception, history, culture, language, etc. Through these mediating influences we

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<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 248-49.

<sup>18</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

connect with our world. In our confluence with nature and in nature's self-expression through us, we see that our perception of nature, although mediated, is access to nature itself. Toadvine answers his questions through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of expression, especially nature as expressing itself through embodied life.

I will suggest that there is still a hermeneutic problem of giving an account of this experience. What is this nature that we experience expressing itself through our own perception? When I contemplate the sky or rather, when the sky contemplates itself through me, how do we come to understand this experience? How do we share this experience with others? When I feel looked at by visible things, that is, when trees look at me as I look at them, once I speak about it, I am not experiencing it anymore. There is the problem of putting this into language, into a description of experience, as Merleau-Ponty writes, "The visible things about us rest in themselves, and their natural being is so full that it seems to envelop their perceived being, as if our perception of them were formed within them. But if I express this experience by saying that the things are in their place and that we fuse with them, I immediately make the experience itself impossible: for in the measure that the thing is approached, I cease to be; in the measure that I am, there is no thing, but only a double of it in my 'camera obscura.'"<sup>21</sup> When I fuse myself with things I lose myself. But, when I keep hold of myself to express the experience, then I am not fusing with the things. Merleau-Ponty gives us a couple of clues as to how we might avoid this circularity. He writes in his working notes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, "the philosophy of the sensible as literature."<sup>22</sup> Phenomenology is a return to the sensible rather than intelligible world, and the sensible as literature is perhaps *how* this is done. Merleau-Ponty alludes to the necessity of writing, of giving accounts, in another section of *The Visible and the Invisible*:

Whereas the sensible is, like life, a treasury ever full of things to say for him who is a philosopher (that is, a writer). And just as each finds to be true and rediscovers in himself what the writer says of life and of the sentiments, so also the phenomenologists are understood and made use of by those who say that phenomenology is impossible. The root of the matter is that the sensible indeed offers nothing one could state if one is not a philosopher or a writer, but that this is not because it would be an ineffable in Itself, but because of the fact that one does not know how to speak.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252.

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252.

This suggests that the writer, the philosopher, finds the world full of things to express because they know how to speak about things. There is a kind of art to speaking about things that would open the sensible world as literature. This world is one of narrative, of stories, of language in a rich sense.

I will add that if one is a participant within the sensible world, one must also be spoken about, as one would appear in the very world that is so potent with language, with stories. Further, I will argue that one speaks *with* the nature around them. The dialogue with the whole of nature as seen in *Phenomenology of Perception* alludes toward speaking *with* rather than speaking about. We can see speaking *with* in nature's expressing itself through embodied life, in which, as beings *of* nature, nature is speaking *through* us. Merleau-Ponty goes on to say, connecting with the idea of the sensible world as literature, that,

the whole landscape is overrun with words as with an invasion, it is henceforth but a variant of speech before our eyes, and to speak of its "style" is in our view to form a metaphor. In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests. And what we have to understand is that there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth.<sup>24</sup>

There is not a dialectical relationship leading to a synthesis between the landscape as a variant of speech and our own ability to express our experiences, to make meanings. There is not a synthesis between the things in the world having voices and our own voices—rather, this approach to nature—"philosophy of the sensible as literature"—respects the transcendence of nature while still acknowledging that we are *of* nature.<sup>25</sup> The world speaks to us, tells us things, creates meanings; and we too speak, we too tell others about things, we too create meanings. This is exemplary of the reversibility of flesh conveyed in a different way than when Merleau-Ponty describes perception as reversible; this is now language as reversible. If we combine this with perception as a dialogue from his earlier work, we can see how we are always in communication and

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<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 155.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252.

in dialogue with the world around us.<sup>26</sup> Nature has as much of a voice as we do, and if we consider that nature expresses itself through us as we are *of* it, this dialogue is between different expressions of nature belonging to the same, shared, fleshy nature.

## Part Two: Resolving Interpretive Problems with Hermeneutic Resources

So, how do we learn the art of how to speak about things—or, as I have argued, *with* things? How do we read nature like literature, like a book? If writers and philosophers see nature as expressive and know *how* to see the sensible world as literature, then how do we communicate this richness considering the circular problem we encounter; that is: when I fuse myself with things I lose myself, but, when I keep hold of myself, then I am not fusing with the things. The first problem exists in part because the dialogue we have with nature is pre-reflective. The perceptual communication we have occurs prior to reflection, prior to our ability to give an account of it. The second problem is a hermeneutical one regarding how we interpret our dialogue *with* nature. How do we interpret the landscape as an invasion of words, the voice of the waves, the voice of the forests? There are resources in hermeneutics to think through these problems, in a spirit inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s “graft[ing] the hermeneutic problem onto the phenomenological method.”<sup>27</sup> We can see a parallel between the questions this paper unearths and Ricoeur’s discussion of problems of historicity. Ricoeur writes, “how can a historical being understand history historically?”<sup>28</sup> Our question, stated in this parallel, is: how can a natural being understand nature naturally? Although our problems of understanding nature emerged in phenomenology, we may find that resources in hermeneutics can help us in our attempts to solve them.

While Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly present a hermeneutic theory, “the starting point for his analysis is the hermeneutical fact that through perception we always find ourselves already immersed in meaning.”<sup>29</sup> The kind of hermeneutics that we see in Merleau-Ponty’s work is implicit rather than explicit and emerges in part because embodied perception is always already situated in a particular cultural and

<sup>26</sup> This reading of Merleau-Ponty is inspired by and deeply influenced by David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” 5.

<sup>29</sup> Shaun Gallagher, “Introduction: The Hermeneutics of Ambiguity,” in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 3.

historic milieu. Further, following Merleau-Ponty, I argue that because the most important lesson of the phenomenological method is that it is necessarily incomplete, there is space left open for hermeneutic interpretation; that is, we cannot completely “rupture our familiarity with [the world.]”<sup>30</sup> We are thoroughly “related to the world” and cannot achieve a pure or complete phenomenology, which is one way that Merleau-Ponty is a thinker of ambiguity whose work contains an implicit hermeneutics.<sup>31</sup>

The impossibility of a complete reduction and our immanent relationship with nature is where my analysis complicates Toadvine’s claim of “disclosing nature *on its own terms*.”<sup>32</sup> If we follow Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of perception as always already situated and his claim that the phenomenological reduction is bound to be incomplete, we find we are limited in our attempt to truly, *purely*, disclose “nature *on its own terms*.”<sup>33</sup> We are thoroughly related to nature as natural beings participating in the flesh of the world; we are not separable from nature nor is nature separable from us. However, rather than our immanence to nature as natural beings preventing us from attempting to disclose nature naturally, I argue that this attempt is vital and that we must be even more attentive to the unavoidable prejudices and biases in order to respect nature’s transcendence to us. Even though we cannot *purely* disclose nature on its own, by further acknowledging our immanence and thorough relatedness *with* it, I will argue that we can learn the art of interpreting landscapes through nature teaching itself through its own expression. In order to do so, I will articulate a hermeneutic phenomenology by engaging with Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible* in conversation with his other works. One of the consequences of admitting this limitation—that we cannot purify our perception of mediating influences, including our immanence to nature—is that this ambiguity actually allows for the mystery and wonder of the natural world to emerge. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “The world and reason are not problems; and though we might call them mysterious, this mystery is essential to them, there can be no question of dissolving it through some ‘solution,’ it is beneath the level of solutions.”<sup>34</sup> Remaining open to the ambiguity and mysteriousness of nature rather than having a purified “nature *on its own terms*” admits the embodied, situated position from which we engage in this attempt.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

<sup>32</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxxv.

<sup>35</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.



Rather than this mysteriousness or the impossibility of purity preventing us from our attempts to understand nature naturally as natural beings, I will argue that hermeneutic phenomenology shows us that time spent with a landscape—learning from a landscape through long ongoing conversations—allows us to assimilate to the style of a particular landscape. As such, this paper will engage with hermeneutics, primarily through Hans-Georg Gadamer, who presents an explicit hermeneutics to draw out Merleau-Ponty’s implicit hermeneutics. Importantly, the kind of hermeneutics in Merleau-Ponty’s work differs from much of the hermeneutic tradition because it centers embodiment.<sup>36</sup> Regarding the hermeneutics that appears in Merleau-Ponty’s work, Shaun Gallagher writes that “the human body acts as both an interpretational constraint and an enabling condition.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, this paper will consider resources in Gadamer’s hermeneutics and then return to Merleau-Ponty’s framework of thought that centers embodiment to make explicit the implicit hermeneutics therein.

One hermeneutic resource that can help us approach the question, “how can a natural being understand nature naturally?” appears in Gadamer’s essay “On the Circle of Understanding,” in which he writes:

[In] learning foreign languages[, w]e learn that we can only try to understand the parts of a sentence in their linguistic meaning when we have parsed or construed the sentence. But the process of parsing is itself guided by an expectation of meaning arising from the preceding context. Of course this expectation must be corrected as the text requires. This means then that the expectation is transposed and that the text is consolidated into a unified meaning under another expectation. Thus the movement of understanding always runs from whole to part and back to whole. The task is to expand in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning.<sup>38</sup>

The latent solution here is the task of expansion of one’s understanding, which is done through *time*. There are at least two ways in which time can be a solution. Outlining *temporal distance* from the material as vital for understanding, Gadamer writes, “Time is not primarily an abyss to be bridged because it divides and holds apart, it is rather in

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<sup>36</sup> Important outliers regarding this tendency in the tradition of hermeneutics to not consider embodiment in interpretation can be found in Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, ed., *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Gallagher, “Introduction,” 4.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” in *Hermeneutics vs. Science? Three German Views*, ed. John M. Connolly and Thomas Keutner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 68–78.

truth the supporting ground of the event in which present understanding has its roots. Thus temporal distance is not something to be overcome. . . . It is in truth a matter of recognizing the distance of time as a positive and productive possibility for understanding.”<sup>39</sup> Temporal distance from the material allows for the material to speak in a way in which “the true meaning of th[e] work” is revealed.<sup>40</sup> But there is another way in which time is vital to understanding, that is, time spent *with* that which one is trying to understand. Time spent *with* nature will be essential to the art of reading the landscape, of seeing the sensible world as literature, of hearing the voices of the forests and waves. Reading nature as literature is *earned* through time spent *with* nature.

This leads us to a response to the question, “how can a natural being understand nature naturally?”: *learning* through spending time with nature. With these hermeneutic resources in mind, we will return to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language to uncover his account of learning and consider the implicit hermeneutics in his work. First, thought is accomplished through speech and is unthinkable without speech. Merleau-Ponty explains, “the thinking subject remains in a sort of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself.”<sup>41</sup> Before expressing thoughts in speech or writing, the thought is ungraspable by the thinker. It is only through writing or speaking that they will learn what they think.<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes that, “for the speaking subject, to express is to become aware of; he does not express just for others, but also to know himself what he intends.”<sup>43</sup> As such, “speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes thought.”<sup>44</sup> Language births thought, brings it into being, as “a thought, content to exist for itself outside the constraints of speech and communication, would fall into the unconscious the moment it appears, which amounts to saying it would not even exist for itself.”<sup>45</sup>

Regarding the sensible world as literature and our perceptual dialogue with nature, it is only through perceptual dialogue that we are aware of our expression. Nature expresses itself through our own embodiment and this expression necessitates the confluence of embodied being and nature. That is, one cannot become aware of

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<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” 76.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” 76.

<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 196.

<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes, “my spoken words surprise me myself and teach me my thought” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964], 88). One does not know exactly what one thinks before expressing it.

<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 90.

<sup>44</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 183.

<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 183.

nature as an interlocutor without perceiving nature, without spending time in nature.<sup>46</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, this happens naturally, as we are all participating in the reversible flesh through our embodiment. We can also think about this in regards to a particular landscape. If we do not deep-sea dive, we will not have actualized the conversation with the deep sea as expressing itself through us.

Further, meaning is not in the individual pieces of speech, “meaning is in the total movement of speech. . . our thought moves through language as a gesture that goes beyond the individual points of its passage.”<sup>47</sup> As such, Merleau-Ponty writes, “The meaning of language, like that of gestures, does not lie in the elements composing it. The meaning is their common intention, and the spoken phrase is understood only if the hearer, following the ‘verbal chain,’ goes beyond each of its links in the direction that they all designate together.”<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty specifies that the meaning of a written work is not in its ideas but is given through an “unexpected variation of the modes of language, of narrative, or of existing literary forms.”<sup>49</sup> *Meaning* is understood through style, through how something is expressed. Merleau-Ponty writes, “I begin to understand a philosophy by slipping into this thought’s particular manner of existing, by reproducing the tone or the accent of the philosopher in question.”<sup>50</sup> The meaning in a philosopher’s writing is revealed through the form, accent, and tone. The particularity of speech, is, for Merleau-Ponty, “assimilated little by little by the reader.”<sup>51</sup>

The meaning of language is in its particularity, thus what one landscape communicates with us will mean something quite different from another landscape. If we assimilate to the style of the language of a high desert, this will be quite a different conversation than one we might have with a tropical rainforest. Thus, in the implicit Merleau-Pontian hermeneutics, understanding is found in attuning to or assimilating to the style and particularity of expression.

One objection may be that we are stretching the metaphor of dialogue, that Merleau-Ponty does not intend this dialogue literally. However, Toadvine writes that we should take this dialogue literally: “While it may seem easiest to interpret this notion

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<sup>46</sup> As Gallagher writes, “Merleau-Ponty proposed a hermeneutical theory that identifies the embodied subject as the seat of interpretation”; thus, the kind of hermeneutics that is present in Merleau-Ponty’s work “detour[s] from the hermeneutical tradition by showing that the human body acts as both an interpretational constraint and an enabling condition” (“Introduction,” 3–4).

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 39.

<sup>49</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 135.

<sup>51</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, 39.

of ‘dialogue’ metaphorically, Merleau-Ponty indicates that this description is intended literally [especially seen when he writes]: ‘It can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them.’<sup>52</sup> In our literal conversation with nature over time, we assimilate to particular styles of speech, we attune ourselves little by little, suggesting that the more time we spend assimilating and adjusting to the style of speech the more we can understand the meaning of what is said. This brings us back to the hermeneutic circle and the expansion of our understanding through learning and spending time *with* what we are trying to understand. The more time we spend with one landscape, the more accurately we can assimilate to its style of expression, and the more clearly we can understand the meaning of our conversation.

In Merleau-Ponty’s work, we learn from other people’s language use by taking up the particularities, assimilating to the styles of speech, and looking towards the common intentions therein. He writes, “through speech, then, there is a taking up of the other person’s thought, a reflection in others, a power of thinking according to others, which enriches our own thoughts.”<sup>53</sup> Upon following the intention or direction of the speech, we find the sense of the linguistic gesture, which can be completely new. Rather than possessing all possibilities of expression beforehand in order to translate meaning into words in an unambiguous manner, we are expressive beings, and as such, diverse attempts of expression reveal different styles of being, or, “particular manner[s] of existing” that we otherwise would not be able to perform.<sup>54</sup> Successful expression “installs [its] signification in the writer or reader like a new sense organ, and it opens a new field or a new dimension to our experience.”<sup>55</sup> Language, when successfully understood, opens a new way of being-in-the-world. It teaches us; we can use language to communicate, and further, to re-establish our way of being after new dimensions are revealed to us. That is, we transform. When we successfully understand a landscape, through stylistic assimilation to the particularities of its expression, and through following the holistic movement and direction of the expression, we can learn. We can enrich our own thoughts through learning from expression around us, from the dialogue of which we are a part, and develop new dimensions to our experience. Particular landscapes, with their different styles of expression, open us up to learn

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<sup>52</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 51. Toadvine is citing Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 369, 371.

<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 184. Donald A. Landes writes of the genuine ability to learn from others: “we do not translate a speaker’s words into a language of ideas we already possess in our own minds, rather, when we understand and genuinely communicate, we grasp the sense of their speech” (Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression [New York: Bloomsbury, 2013], 8).

<sup>54</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 185.

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 188.

novel ways of being-in-the-world. Attuning to the style of a temperate rainforest opens a dimension of experience, a way of being-in-the-temperate-rainforest that is different from the style of wetlands, which in turn, when attuned to, would open a different dimension of experience, a way of being-in-the-wetlands.

Looking closely at Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature through drawing out his implicit hermeneutics provides a method to resolve our interpretive obstacles, i.e., learning through time spent in conversation. Our first problem is losing our self when we fuse with nature and not fusing with nature when we try to express this experience. Through time spent with a landscape, one can slowly assimilate to the style of the landscape and can understand the sense of what a landscape is saying through following its gesture. Time solves the problem of losing oneself through fusing, because one can regain oneself having learned something. Further, through losing oneself to fusion with nature repeatedly, one might be able to clearly understand what it is telling you; after a long period of time, one may be able to express this experience in such a way that this experience is not lost. Learning through time spent in conversation with a particular landscape, a particular place in nature, can be the solution to the first problem.

The second problem of how to interpret our dialogue with nature, how to interpret the landscape as overrun with words, how to interpret the voice of the waves and forests, can be addressed through this *learning* through dialogue with nature as well. Hermeneutics paired with phenomenology is necessary again because of the problem of prejudice in our attempts to understand. As previously discussed, the problem of an immanent account of nature is that there is no way in which to give an account of nature unmediated by our historical, cultural, or social, influences. Perception is thoroughly historical in Merleau-Ponty's thought.<sup>56</sup> Embodiment situates subjects in a particular milieu, in a context. This union with a milieu prevents the subject from being outside of history. However, as Gadamer's work shows, *prejudice or bias* is not necessarily problematic if they are thoroughly acknowledged and considered. Gadamer thinks that Martin Heidegger's "disclos[ure of] the fore-structure of understanding. . .

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<sup>56</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein" (84). As he continues, the human being is "thus not foreign to history and somehow beyond the reach of history" (90.) Rather, "my life is made up of rhythms that do not have their reason in what I have chosen to be, but rather have their condition in the banal milieu that surrounds me" (86). Human lives are conditioned by a milieu not of our choosing. It is in this way that the subject "has an historical thickness, he takes up a perceptual tradition, and he is confronted with a present" (248).

was a completely correct phenomenological description.”<sup>57</sup> When we encounter a text, we project biases about our expectations, that which we have learned before, the historical/cultural influences we live in, etc. Gadamer thinks that this is how understanding works, and that it is not a problem so long as “we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it.”<sup>58</sup> Importantly, this remaining open is not achieved through a purification of all of our prejudices and biases, because that would be impossible.<sup>59</sup> As Gadamer explains, “a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.”<sup>60</sup> If we are aware of our biases, the text can more forcefully present itself to us in its alterity; we are open to the text in a way that our mediation does not prevent access to its meaning. If we explicitly acknowledge our prejudices in our encounters with nature, nature can more forcefully present itself to us; we can be more open to what it might be saying, and we might understand its meaning, even if this is a seemingly infinite task. This seemingly infinite task is suggested by Merleau-Ponty himself as he suggests that philosophers are perpetual beginners.<sup>61</sup>

Importantly, although we fuse with nature, it is still an alterity, as Toadvine explains, “Perception is the discovery of a sense that is not of my making, the response to a demand placed on my body from the outside, a manner of being invaded by an alterity, which is why the figure of dialogue is appropriate.”<sup>62</sup> Because our expression is derivative of nature’s expression, because perception is a sense that we do not author, and because the dialogue happens pre-reflectively, nature is still an Other. Sometimes, dialogue with nature is difficult, or we cannot see nature as literature, we cannot hear the voices of things. Toadvine explains, “[nature’s] expressive capacity always exceeds the resonating powers of my body. While nature turns toward the body

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<sup>57</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995), 272.

<sup>58</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271.

<sup>59</sup> As Gadamer writes, “The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust” (*Truth and Method*, 272).

<sup>60</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272.

<sup>61</sup> In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes that “The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoate style in which it proceeds are not the sign of failure; they were inevitable because phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world” (lxxxv).

<sup>62</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 59.

a ‘familiar face,’ the sensible configuration to which our body may become attuned, it simultaneously withdraws or holds in reserve a depth that the human perceiver can never plumb.”<sup>63</sup>

Thus, we must acknowledge our prejudices and biases in our readings of nature and understand its transcendence to us. We can look at accounts of nature that enact two things. First, accounts that go through an (incomplete) hermeneutic phenomenological bracketing, in order to reveal our cultural and historic habits of perception; unearth our assumptions, biases, and prejudices about nature; and help us acknowledge mediating influences. Enacting a hermeneutic phenomenology reveals these biases and is sensitive to the alterity and transcendence of nature, allowing us to acknowledge the biases of one’s own mediating influences. This approach squares with Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction” and as such, if we start from a place of acknowledging this incompleteness we can take our prejudices seriously.<sup>64</sup> The second enactment would be keeping our attunement to the style of the landscape around us if that style has proven to be a way in which to understand the meaning of a particular landscape. This is earned through time spent with a landscape, and ongoing long conversations with a particular place; we are expressive beings and we give accounts of nature’s own self-expression through our embodiment.

### **Conclusion: Nature Teaching Itself through Its Own Expression**

This paper responds to a set of interpretive problems in the philosophy of nature concerning our immanence to nature through developing Merleau-Ponty’s account of “philosophy of the sensible as literature” from his unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>65</sup> This paper seeks to respond to the challenges in developing a philosophy of nature as beings immanent to nature through the resources of hermeneutic phenomenology. Because we are embodied beings without a vantage point outside of our social, historical, cultural, linguistic milieu—we perceive through our mediated lenses. Rather than mediation being a preventative obstacle disallowing us to know nature, mediation is the enabling condition to knowing nature. Enacting a phenomenology allows us to reveal the taken-for-granted relationships between ourselves and the more-than-human world surrounding us, to be aware of our cultural

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<sup>63</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 59.

<sup>64</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

<sup>65</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252.

and historic habits of perception, to unearth our assumptions about nature, and to make us more aware of mediating influences. As such, phenomenology highlights the *prejudices* and *biases* involved in our understanding of nature, and when paired with hermeneutics, allows us to remain open to the alterity of nature and acknowledge its transcendence to us. Hermeneutics shows us that prejudices or biases are unavoidable but are not problematic if they are thoroughly acknowledged and considered.

I have argued that hermeneutic phenomenology shows us that time spent with a landscape, learning from a landscape through long ongoing conversations, allows us to assimilate to the style of a particular landscape. As such, this assimilation becomes a way in which to understand the meaning of a particular landscape—that is, the art of interpreting landscapes becomes nature teaching itself through its own expression. Thus, I have argued that interpreting landscapes through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s later work, allows for nature to teach itself through its own expression, answering the hermeneutic question I posed: “How can a natural being understand nature naturally?”

Importantly, understanding nature naturally is a vital endeavor in part because hegemonic cultural stereotypes concerning nature have significant political impacts, contribute to shaping our life-worlds, and influence our habits of perception. One of Toadvine’s questions, related to giving accounts of nature from our immanent positionality, concerns whether “there [is] a means of thinking nature that can take into account its excess over our projections and cultural stereotypes concerning it.”<sup>66</sup> Hegemonic cultural stereotypes concerning nature in the context of the North American continent include varied projections that nature is the sublime, the frontier,<sup>67</sup> the wilderness (in dualistic opposition to culture),<sup>68</sup> a wasteland, and/or full of resources for extraction.<sup>69</sup> There is also a cultural and historical context of feminizing and racializing nature.<sup>70</sup> As such, these are several of the prejudices and biases that we have to acknowledge as we attempt to interpret nature, as they contribute to our habits of perception. A hermeneutic phenomenology will deeply consider these prejudices and biases; phenomenology can reveal these naturalized assumptions and

<sup>66</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7–28.

<sup>68</sup> Val Plumwood, “Wilderness Skepticism and Dualism,” in *The Great New Wilderness Debate: An Expansive Collection of Writings Defining Wilderness, from John Muir to Gary Snyder*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 652–90.

<sup>69</sup> Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).



hermeneutics gives us resources to respect the transcendence and alterity of nature. Thus, the account of the “philosophy of the sensible as literature” that appears in Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* provides a resource to enact a hermeneutic phenomenology of nature, a way to learn the art of interpreting landscapes, and a means of thinking *with* nature that responds to concerns regarding the development of a philosophy of nature given our immanence to nature.