



THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE: GENESIS AND STRUCTURE

10.62506/phs.v6i2.277

O Visível e o Invisível: Gênese e Estrutura

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Lo visible y lo invisible: génesis y estructura

Abstract: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published book, *The Visible and the Invisible*, is one of most cited of all his works. The book was edited by Claude Lefort in 1964. It is clear that Merleau-Ponty was engaged in an important new work that was cut short by his untimely death in 1961. The published text of *The Visible and the Invisible* is comprised of a few drafts of chapters and many pages of enigmatic working notes. Despite its incomplete status, it is often heralded as the culmination of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Some see it as the triumphant achievement of his lifelong phenomenological project, while others maintain view it as the inauguration of an important departure therefrom. Rather than endorsing any particular interpretation, here I want to call attention to the important role Lefort played in the presentation of Merleau-Ponty's posthumous work. If not for Lefort's effort in editing and publishing some of Merleau-Ponty's final reflections, contemporary readers would have had no access to Merleau-Ponty's exciting nascent project. However, based upon several years of archival research with Merleau-Ponty's unpublished notes and manuscripts, I argue that Lefort's presentation of Merleau-Ponty's final works is selective and tendentious.

Keywords: Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Claude Lefort; *The Visible and the Invisible*

Resumo: O livro publicado postumamente de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *O Visível e o Invisível*, é um dos mais citados de todos os seus trabalhos. O livro foi editado por Claude Lefort em 1964. É claro que Merleau-Ponty estava envolvido em um novo trabalho importante que foi interrompido por sua morte prematura em 1961. O texto publicado de *O Visível e o Invisível* é composto por alguns rascunhos de capítulos e muitas páginas de notas de trabalho enigmáticas. Apesar do seu estatuto incompleto, é frequentemente anunciado como o culminar do pensamento de Merleau-Ponty. Alguns vêem-no como a conquista triunfante do seu projecto fenomenológico ao longo da vida, enquanto outros continuam a vê-lo como a inauguração de um importante afastamento desse projecto. Em vez de endossar qualquer interpretação particular, quero aqui chamar a atenção para o importante papel que Lefort desempenhou na apresentação da obra póstuma de Merleau-Ponty. Se não fosse pelo esforço de Lefort na edição e publicação de algumas das reflexões finais de Merleau-Ponty, os leitores contemporâneos não teriam tido acesso ao emocionante projeto nascente de Merleau-Ponty. No entanto, com base em vários anos de pesquisa de arquivo com notas e manuscritos não publicados de Merleau-Ponty, defendo que a apresentação dos trabalhos finais de Merleau-Ponty por Lefort é seletiva e tendenciosa.

Palavras-chave: Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Cláudio Lefort; *O Visível e o Invisível*

Resumen: El libro publicado póstumamente de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Lo visible y lo invisible*, es uno de los más citados de todas sus obras. El libro fue editado por Claude Lefort en 1964. Está claro que Merleau-Ponty estaba inmerso en una nueva e importante obra que se vio truncada por su prematura muerte en 1961. El texto publicado de *Lo visible y lo invisible* se compone de unos pocos borradores, de capítulos y muchas páginas de enigmáticas notas de trabajo. A pesar de su estatus incompleto, a menudo se lo anuncia como la culminación del pensamiento de Merleau-Ponty. Algunos lo ven como el logro triunfal de su proyecto fenomenológico de toda la vida, mientras que otros mantienen que lo ve como la inauguración de un importante alejamiento del mismo. En lugar de respaldar ninguna interpretación particular, aquí quiero llamar la atención sobre el importante papel que jugó Lefort en la presentación de la obra póstuma de Merleau-Ponty. Si no fuera por el esfuerzo de Lefort al editar y publicar algunas de las reflexiones finales de Merleau-Ponty, los lectores contemporáneos no habrían tenido acceso al apasionante proyecto naciente de Merleau-Ponty. Sin embargo, basándome en varios años de investigación de archivos con notas y manuscritos inéditos de Merleau-Ponty, sostengo que la presentación que hace Lefort de las obras finales de Merleau-Ponty es selectiva y tendenciosa.

Palabras clave: Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Claude Lefort; *Lo visible y lo invisible*

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“Writing shares a strange feature with painting.
The offspring stand there as if they were alive,
but if anyone asks them anything,
they remain most solemnly silent.
The same is true of written words.” [Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d]

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published book, *The Visible and the Invisible*, is one of most cited of all his works, especially in recent scholarship. The book was edited by Merleau-Ponty's student, ally, and friend, Claude Lefort in 1964. It is clear that Merleau-Ponty was engaged in an important new work that was cut short by his untimely death in 1961. The published text of *The Visible and the Invisible* consists of a few drafts of chapters and many pages of enigmatic working notes. Despite its incomplete status, it is often heralded as the culmination of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Some see it as the triumphant achievement of his lifelong phenomenological project, while others view it as the inauguration of an important departure therefrom. Rather than endorsing any particular interpretation, I want to address the context of the *appearance* of the text in question and to call attention to the important and too often unacknowledged role Lefort played in the presentation of Merleau-Ponty's posthumous work. If not for Lefort's tireless and thankless effort in editing and publishing some of Merleau-Ponty's final reflections, contemporary readers would have had no access to Merleau-Ponty's exciting nascent project. However, based upon several years of archival research with Merleau-Ponty's unpublished notes and manuscripts, Lefort's presentation of Merleau-Ponty's final works is selective and tendentious. Far from offering a corrective or some purportedly definitive account of Merleau-Ponty's later work, I want to reveal that urge to provide such an account as the source of the problem in Lefort's editorial agenda.

Reading Merleau-Ponty's notes and manuscripts is a challenging endeavor. His usual way of developing an idea was to construct an outline and write around it on the page—sometimes sideways, marking out whole passages, and these pages are especially difficult. There are usually many such outline pages as the project takes shape. But once he began writing out prose, after a few pages, there are often relatively few corrections. The words emerge on the autograph pages slightly slanted once he finds his flow. Merleau-Ponty would then edit his first draft, often with a different color pen or a pencil. Sometimes he would go through the draft several times before re-writing it. He continued this process, usually through at least two drafts, and produce a typed version, which he again edited before submitting it for publication.

While Merleau-Ponty was engaged in this process as he was working on *The Visible and the Invisible*, obviously, he was unable to complete it. So, we must look carefully at the context from which this text emerged, keeping in mind that whatever Merleau-Ponty might have produced or might have wanted to produce, he certainly was not aiming to write a posthumous publication. All of this to say that we must not overdetermine these provisional writings (posthumously published or unpublished). It is easy to make this mistake as we hold in our hands *The Visible and the Invisible*: it certainly *looks* like a book, and it lists Merleau-Ponty as the author. It is important that we give credit where credit is due and recognize Claude Lefort for the very difficult and highly speculative editorial work that he accomplished in the realization of this work. This was not Merleau-Ponty's “final word” on the subject (except in the most morbid sense). Nonetheless, it provides some valuable resources for speculation and interpretation which we must keep in mind when trying to understand Merleau-Ponty's later work.¹

The Visible and the Invisible is often referred to as a “published work” dating from this period; but the distinguishing feature for our purposes is that Merleau-Ponty did not complete it, let alone finish editing it. So, we should classify it among the *inédits*.

¹ For our purposes today, let's follow Lefort's organization of the unpublished notes on reserve at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* and designate 1958 – 1961 as the period of the “later works”.



Lefort organized all of the notes and papers on reserve at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*.² The sorting of the pages into these volumes was done by Lefort rather than by Merleau-Ponty. When these volumes are organized this way, the establishment of the text of *Le visible et l'invisible* appears to be a *fait accompli*, separate and apart from all the other enormous number of notes, outlines, drafts, etc. Yet it is clear upon examination of these notes that the project Merleau-Ponty was embarking upon in the neglected 632 pages that the material Lefort selected for *Le visible et l'invisible* emerges from within the same project.

Lefort selected 103 working notes comprising 109 pages in the French edition of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Obviously, the task of selecting what material to include was a very difficult one, and one that Lefort took very seriously, as he explains in his very brief *Avertissement*.³ Lefort explains that the prose manuscript bears the title *The Visible and the Invisible*, and that it appears to be part of a project that Merleau-Ponty had begun two years prior to his death (1959). He notes that the folder containing the worked-over manuscript was dated from March to June 1959. He also notes that Merleau-Ponty had indicated several possible titles in his working notes. (He does not indicate that some of these notes were from well before 1959.) The titles included “Being and Meaning,” “Genealogy of the True,” and “The Origin of Truth.” Curiously, Lefort omits many other provisional titles, including the title Merleau-Ponty used most often, “Being and World.” Lefort says that “outlines for the work are few and do not agree with one another.” The latter claim is true; but the former is true only if one attends to selected notes. Lefort presents a few representative outlines, although he omits many stricken-through passages and other notes scrawled between lines in the outlines he provides. There are dozens of such outlines dating from 1958—unsurprising, since that was the way Merleau-Ponty often worked.⁴

During 1958–1960, Merleau-Ponty made many working notes and plans that were related to his book project often bearing the titles, *La nature, ou la monde du silence* and *Être et monde*. It is clear that these are early versions of what would later be published as *The Visible and the Invisible*.⁵ He considers various titles of sections that offer insight as descriptions of the direction of his thought: “Être et sens”; “La Généalogie du vrai”; “Le Labyrinthe de l’ontologie”; “La nature ou le monde du silence”; “Le complexe ontologique cartésien”; “L’Ontologie interrogative”; “Problématique d’Être”; “L’Origine de la vérité”; etc. In a working note most likely from 1958, he gives one of many such provisional outlines of the overall work.

- I. *pour l’ontologie à articuler cet mot: la Nature* [For ontology to articulate this word: Nature]
- II. *Les Physiques et l’être brut* [Physics and wild being]
- III *La vie et l’être brut* [Life and wild being]
- IV. *Le corps humain et l’être brut* [The human body and wild being]
- V. *Physis et logos*⁶

Lefort claims that Merleau-Ponty had abandoned the provisional title *Being and World*—even for a section title. Yet even as late as May 1960 he presented the overall title of the project to be “*Être et monde*.”⁷ The materials in these unpublished notes are a series of plans under development, all of which Merleau-Ponty seemed to regard as merely introductory. One can see this even in some of the more developed and worked-over extended passages.⁸

Lefort does not address why he chose to exclude all of the material from Volume VI and Volume VIII. Again, it is abundantly clear that these notes are directly related to the project. Lefort did address why he did not elect to publish all of the working notes from Vol VII. “It was neither possible nor desirable to publish all of them. Their mass would have overshadowed the text, and moreover a good number of them could not be usefully retained either because they were too elliptical or because they had no direct bearing on the subject of the research.”⁹

2 Vol. IV *Préface de Signes* (including drafts and notes), 67 pp.; Vol. V *L’Œil et l’Esprit* (including drafts and notes) 174 pp.; Vol. VI, *Projets de livre 1958–1960*, 264 pp.; Vol. VII, *Le visible et l’Invisible*, 204 pp. (including dozens of notes Lefort did not include); Vol. VIII *Livre en Projet*, 1958–1960 II, *Notes de Travail*, 368pp. There are also volumes devoted to Merleau-Ponty’s courses at the Collège de France from this period. Merleau-Ponty wrote out voluminous notes in preparation for his lectures. Apparently, these were only for preparation, since witnesses confirm that he usually went to the podium with a single sheet of notes. These detailed course notes have been transcribed and published in two books: *La Nature: courses from 1956–1960* (published 1995); and *Notes de cours: courses from 1959–1961* (published 1996). These courses often overlap with the notes in the other volumes. For reasons of brevity, we will not be considering these course notes here.

3 VI, pp. p-14. Lefort’s preface appears in the English translation as an “editorial note,” pp. xxxiv – xxxix. One should note that the word *avertissement* literally means “warning.”

4 One important question to consider here is whether *The Visible and the Invisible* is a section from a much larger work provisionally titled *Being and World*, or vice-versa. In fact, there are multiple outlines indicating that Merleau-Ponty considered both plans. To the best of my knowledge, there is nothing to indicate that he had resolved the matter.

5 Indeed, there are many passages from these projects that appear word for word in the material published as *The Visible and the Invisible*.

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Vol. VI, *Projets de 1958–1960*, p.125.

7 Emmanuel de Saint Aubert has argued that Merleau-Ponty eventually separated the two projects, neither of which would be completed. Cf. his monumental works, *Être et chair: Du corps au désir l’habilitation ontologique de la chair*, Vrin, Paris, 2013; and *Être Et Chair II: L’épreuve Perceptive De L’être: Avancées Ultimes De La Phénoménologie De Merleau-ponty*, Vrin, Paris, 2021.

8 For example, there are two such indicative passages in the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*. “It is too soon now to clarify this surpassing-in-place [*ce dépassement sur place*].” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’invisible*, Gallimard, 1964, p.200. It seems consistent with other working notes from this period that he planned to produce this clarification at length in some later section of the project. Likewise, two pages later, he writes, “We shall have to follow more closely this passage from the mute world to the speaking world. For now, we can only indicate that one can speak neither of the destruction nor the conservation of silence...” (p.202).

9 VI p.13/p. xxxviii.



Please note that I am not implying that Claude Lefort was deliberately contriving to present Merleau-Ponty's work through his own hermeneutic framework. What I am saying is that he could not have avoided doing so; nor could anyone who would undertake such a selective and interpretive project. I had the honor of asking him about that many years ago. I asked him, "Professor Lefort, how did you come to select the working notes you included in *Le visible et l'invisible* from among the hundreds of others?" He responded, "I tried to select the notes which best indicated the direction of his emerging project." I paused and inquired, "Professor Lefort, how did you determine which notes best reflected the direction of his emerging project?" He replied, "I selected the notes that best showed the most important new concepts of his project." I paused, and, *on le sait*, I asked, "But Professor Lefort, how did you determine which were the most important new concepts of his project?" He paused. He asked me, "You have examined these notes?" I affirmed that I had. He said, "Then you know that some of them are very difficult to read." And here I have to report the French: I smiled and said, *Professeur Lefort, je pense que le vrai titre de ce livre est Le lisible et le illisible!* [Professor Lefort, I think that the real title of this book is *The Legible and the Illegible!*] He laughed and slapped me on the shoulder.

It was a charming moment shared with the great scholar; but it also reveals a serious hermeneutic difficulty with the project. It was already apparent in the passage quoted above from the preface where Lefort explained that many notes were not relevant to the research topic. We must keep in mind that the research topic was determined by Lefort. In short, Lefort's principle excluded most working notes from Volume VII, but also all the hundreds of pages of notes in Volumes VI and VIII.

One important manifestation of Lefort's strategy is the foregrounding of the notions of flesh [*chair*] and reversibility [*réversibilité*] and the downplaying of the notion of divergence [*écart*]. Certainly, the notions of flesh and reversibility loom large in the fourth chapter, *The Intertwining—The Chiasm*. That chapter proclaims flesh to be "an ultimate [*dernière*] notion" and concludes by proclaiming reversibility to be "the ultimate truth."¹⁰ Such proclamations encouraged Lefort to select almost every working note that included these terms—in accord with selecting the notes that featured the concepts germane to what he determined to be "the new direction of Merleau-Ponty's thought." However, the notion of *écart* figured into the project from the beginning. Throughout the working notes in all three volumes, Merleau-Ponty marks his newest radicalization of phenomenology through his use of *écart* to feature difference within intentionality. Whereas reversibility and flesh appear late in the process, *écart* is the central unifying concept of the entirety of the *inédits*.

For example, in an excluded working note from June 1959 titled "Transcendence and Cogito," Merleau-Ponty wrote, that to think oneself is *écart*: "any adhesion of the 'ego' is a divergence from the 'ego' by rapport with the 'ego', and 'knows the ego' as outside of it, preconstituted."¹¹ He describes the cogito as "autocritique" and writes of the cogito revealing the ego as "an invariant term for an inductive *residue*."¹² Earlier in two notes from 1958 Merleau-Ponty clearly connects *écart* with his new ontological account of wild being and its transformation of negation and of nothingness. He writes, "Wild knowledge is not annihilation, but divergence [*écart*]." In this same note, he also describes his project as "intra-ontological" here owing to *écart*.¹³ Likewise, a few pages later, he writes, "nothingness=not nothing, but *écart*."¹⁴

The unrepresentative over-emphasis of reversibility and flesh without due diligence for *écart* results in framing Merleau-Ponty's project as flirting with monism. For all the discussion of reversibility as an ontological parity or a kinship, Merleau-Ponty constantly emphasizes that there is no reversibility without *écart*. This is manifest in his choice of terms that emphasize the differentiation, fission, divergence, dissonance, encroachment, dehiscence, and detachment among things. Merleau-Ponty speaks of reversibility as something of a transcendence, as a "propagation" of exchanges among bodies, but he explicitly describes this in terms of differentiation: "and this by virtue of the fundamental fission or segregation of the sentient and the sensible..."¹⁵ But such passages can be overshadowed by Lefort's editorial strategies.

There are many passages in *The Visible and the Invisible* which foreground *écart*, but Lefort's selection of the working notes and his organization of the volumes give an unrepresentative emphasis on reversibility and flesh. I am only claiming that Merleau-Ponty is less consistent in these matters when we consider the larger context of the later work. To put the matter forcefully, Lefort's editorial strategies presuppose a unified *sens* of the project of the later works that downplays the vast majority of the working notes and foists that *sens* upon the text.

Lefort's postface is reverential and brilliant throughout. It dwells poignantly on Merleau-Ponty's death and the ordeal of trying to make sense of the incomplete text in his absence. Lefort describes the manuscript as a *phenomenon* and as a *gift*. I would like to dwell upon these beautiful metaphors as we consider not only Lefort's predicament, but the hermeneutic problems we encounter regarding the text today in spite of Lefort's best efforts.

¹⁰ VI, pp. 185 & 204 / pp.140 & 155.

¹¹ Vol. VI, p.209.

¹² Vol. VI, pp. 209 & 209 bis.

¹³ Vol. VI, p.149.

¹⁴ Vol VI, p.154.

¹⁵ VI, p.188 / p.143.



Lefort situates his account of making sense of the *The Visible and the Invisible* as a *phenomenon* in terms of Merleau-Ponty's account of writing and reading. The text *appears*. As with any phenomenon, no complete reduction is possible as we try to determine its meaning. Lefort says that this incomplete text brutally confronts us with the essential ambiguity of any text.¹⁶ He repeatedly marks the sad occasion of Merleau-Ponty's death as a hermeneutic turning point. Now that the author is absent, we lack his authority. Now we must read the text without recourse to Merleau-Ponty's responses. Now we must read Merleau-Ponty's works as classics—alongside any other philosophical *oeuvre*. We can't ignore the void at the center of the surviving text.¹⁷ It's not only that the manuscript is incomplete; it calls us to inscribe as we read this work.¹⁸ These pages and the enigmatic working notes call us to complete their thoughts the way we do with intimate friends as a *Vorhabe*—but now in the most intimate absence.

Yet one wonders what has changed with the occasion of Merleau-Ponty's death with regard to the hermeneutic situation. Lefort wisely points out that Merleau-Ponty's accounts of language, writing, and reading preclude any final determination of the meaning of any text. There is an essential ambiguity of any *sens*. The best-founded interpretations do not exhaust the meaning of a text.¹⁹ The more knowledge we have of a text, the more it beckons thinking. Yet I fear that Lefort's hermeneutic modesty becomes hermeneutic license. Merleau-Ponty's death occasions a lack of authority that no author ever held, by Merleau-Ponty's account. Lefort says the meaning the text will have to “the reader,” assuming some univocity of meaning on future readers' parts. Lefort uses the complementary illusions of the sovereignty of author and reader to justify a hegemonic frame of meaning for the later works of Merleau-Ponty.

Similarly, Lefort portrays the text as a *gift*. One might think that a gift is only a gift if it is given freely. But, Lefort states, in this case, the gift of the text lacks the sovereignty of its author.²⁰ The text enigmatically calls us to make sense of it, lacking the *sens* provided by its author. Lefort unsurprisingly calls our attention to the death of the author, but not in the post-structuralist sense. Merleau-Ponty's death takes on a sacrificial tone in the postface. The grace provided by Merleau-Ponty's death allows us to recognize the essential meaning of his later works. That gift is the “ultimate truth,” reversibility. Reversibility “names the sense of Merleau-Ponty's enterprise.”²¹ Lefort states that reversibility is the ultimate truth not in the sense of a destination, but in the sense of an “ontological necessity” of interrogation. I fear that he uses this as hermeneutic license to assign an ultimate *sens* to *The Visible and the Invisible* and indeed to all of Merleau-Ponty's later work.

The hermeneutic situation is even worse in the English version of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Lefort's postface, placed in the original French edition to be read after the text, appears first as an “Editor's Introduction.” His *Avertissement*, or short preface, is included immediately after that as a section labeled “Editorial Note.” This is followed by a Translator's Introduction, by Alphonso Lingis. He follows Lefort's lead, by overdetermining the text, emphasizing the flesh over *écart*.²² Lingis shows his organizing principle, which echoes Lefort's principle of selecting the included working notes. “[But] one extraordinary constructive chapter—that entitled “The Intertwining, the Chiasm”—introduces *the new concepts...*”²³ And these concepts are the ones that explore “the metaphysical structure of our flesh.”²⁴ The reader is confronted with 45 pages showing how the text is to be read before a single word of Merleau-Ponty's appears.

In both French and English editions, the methodology and framing are hermeneutically suspect, manifest in an unrepresentative over emphasis of reversibility and flesh at the expense of *écart*.

I agree with Lefort's instance that we must not dismiss *The Visible and the Invisible* simply because it is incomplete. But we must not compound the error of dismissing a text because it is incomplete with the error of regarding its meaning as a *fait accompli*. Undoubtedly, there is a treasure trove of materials in *The Visible and the Invisible* that is of great value when working *à partir de* Merleau-Ponty. But if we have learned anything from Plato, it is that we do not need to know the right answer to recognize what is wrong. If we should demand an ultimate consistent meaning of the project it represents, *The Visible and the Invisible* must remain most solemnly silent before us.

16 VI, pp. 343-4.

17 VI, p. 350.

18 VI, p.344. This is an important anticipation of Derrida's claim that all reading is writing.

19 VI, p.341.

20 VI, p.343.

21 VI, p.357.

22 Indeed, Lingis never consulted Merleau-Ponty's notes and relied entirely upon Lefort's manuscript.

23 VI English, p.xl.

24 VI English, p.xl.



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Recebido em 26.11.2024 – Aceito em 13.04.2025