

Trauma and Event in Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Mythical Time

EVAN EDWARDS

At least beginning with the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty was critical of the prevailing phenomenological understandings of time. In the chapter “Temporality,” Merleau-Ponty critiques Husserl, who sees time as a series of *Abschattungen* that overlap each other.¹ This theory is not satisfactory for Merleau-Ponty because although it takes into account the subject’s positioning of one moment in time onto another, it does not sufficiently do away with the idea that an event is a thing that can be objectively studied. As Raphaël Gély points out in his essay, “La Question de L’Événement dans la Phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty,” “what interests Merleau-Ponty is the institution of the event and not first and fundamentally the institution of the subject in the event” (355). In other words, the problem of the event for Merleau-Ponty is properly situated around an investigation of how the event comes to structure our human world. Generally speaking, this paper will investigate how the event figures into the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, particularly in his later thought.

The first section is an introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of time. Focusing primarily on his later thought, I will begin by introducing the problems of traditional phenomenological theories of time, drawing out the significance of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the objective mode of inquiry

¹ *Abschattungen* is notoriously difficult to translate. Husserl uses the term to describe the multitude of nuanced “shades” of a phenomenon.

Evan Edwards is a senior specializing in philosophy and gender studies at the University of North Carolina–Asheville. His interests include contemporary French philosophy, philosophy of space, metaphysics, and radical politics.

that he sees in his predecessors. I will continue by looking to Mauro Carbone's work on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of "mythical time" that emerges in his last few writings. This work gives a particularly lucid account of the differences between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of time and that of Husserl and Bergson. Finally, in this section, I will begin to try to determine the place of events in our overall understanding of time. These background considerations will be important to understanding the bulk of this paper's argument.

In the second section, I will show some of the similarities that Merleau-Ponty's situation of the event in time bears to the idea of trauma in the later psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud. Looking to Freud's analysis of the Wolfman and Slavoj Žižek's reading of this interpretation, I will argue that the structure of mythical time calls for the same kind of retroactive signification that one finds in the traumatic event. Finally, in this section, I will draw out the complications that this analogy entails for Merleau-Ponty's thinking of the event.

In the final section, I will look to Gély's paper to situate our reading of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the event with more contemporary theories. In this comparison, it will become clear where Merleau-Ponty's thinking of the event coincides with and where it deviates from these contemporary theories. Though my conclusions will be fundamentally opposed to Gély's thesis, I will use his paper to demonstrate more clearly the possibility for a reconsideration of Merleau-Ponty's work through a Badiouan lens.

Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Reflective Theories of Time

As early as the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty looked to Marcel Proust as a guidepost on the way to a coherent theory of the relation of the sensible and the intelligible. In the first chapter of Mauro Carbone's book of essays, *The Thinking of the Sensible*, he argues that toward the end of his career, Merleau-Ponty moved even further away from Husserl and Bergson than he had in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Carbone suggests that in his earlier critiques of Bergson's and Husserl's theories of time, what Merleau-Ponty develops is more of a clarification and refinement of their theories—a critique—than an innovative philosophy. It is as Merleau-Ponty's thought matures that we see a more properly Merleau-Pontian theory of time emerge (Carbone 3). This theory, as Carbone explains, posits "mythical time" as a serious alternative to the serial theory that Merleau-Ponty still saw in Husserl and Bergson.

Mythical time, the "time of half-sleep," is "properly Merleau-Pontian" because it refers to a thinking of time as neither continuous nor discontinuous, but existing as an "existential eternity" (Carbone 12). This eternity is

always already there and is always “at the first day” because there is, strictly speaking, no line of “nows” that can be traced back to what would be “previous days” (Carbone 12). The quasi-discontinuous narrative that mythical time presents is a synthesis of events both distant and present. This confusion of distance and presence, of past and present, as when one is still in a “state of half-sleep,” problematizes the serial account of time that Merleau-Ponty saw his predecessors clinging to.

This synthesis of events, however, is not active; one cannot refer back to a point in the past where one says, “I will create a memory and a reference point in this ‘now’ which I will refer back to sometime in the future.” Rather, there is a “passive synthesis” of time, a seeming contradiction in terms that Merleau-Ponty explains by reference to a contact with “wild Being” prior to subject and object. In the next part of this section, I will attempt to show what Merleau-Ponty and Carbone mean by this wild Being by quoting Proust as well as Merleau-Ponty.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty quotes a passage from Proust in which the author describes, at great length, the process of “waking up.” Proust writes, “when I awoke like this, and my mind struggled in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything revolved around me through the darkness: things, places, years” (PP 211). This description, according to Merleau-Ponty, is an ontologically significant and beautiful piece of prose. The passage goes on to describe the ways which the author is unsure whether he is the mind constituting the room or it is in fact the other way around. Before an intentional consciousness foists structure on this wild Being, there is no distinct subject or object, no distinct past or present, etc. As Carbone describes it, the past and present are simultaneous (8).

Prior to the creation of a cohesive *Gestalt*, the scene in Proust disorients the author and the reader because it is unclear whether the seer is constituting the room or the room is constituting the seer. This disorientation of seer and seen, of subject and object, mirrors the description of wild Being that Merleau-Ponty gives at the beginning of the chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* called “The Intertwining—The Chiasm.” Applied to experience as a whole, we might say that for Merleau-Ponty, embodied time is a time of half-sleep where experience is passively synthesized. The “passivity” of this “activity” (synthesis) is problematic for the transcendental subject. Indeed, it displaces phenomenal consciousness as the constituting force in the world. The mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being is found in this disintegration of the transcendental subject, as well as in Merleau-Ponty’s critique of serial time. Experience without reflection, or as Merleau-Ponty says, a “life without *Erlebnisse*, without interiority,” is precisely what seems to have been germinating in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy at least since the *Phenomenology of Perception* (VI 243).

When we understand Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy of time, we can begin to extricate from it a theory of the event. If, as Merleau-Ponty entreats us, we are to abandon the serial understanding of time in favor of a "mythical" understanding, how are we to understand the existence of recollections and histories which chronicle when and where certain happenings occurred? It seems doubtful that Merleau-Ponty would be so bold as to suggest that the French Revolution did not happen just over 200 years ago or that prior to this event there wasn't a period when France was a monarchy. To admit such a claim would be to collapse into a revisionist relativism that would be so radical that it would border on being incomprehensible. So how can we situate the existence of the event of the revolution in relation to ourselves while continuing to reject the serial understanding of time?

In order to begin answering this question, let us venture the following proposition: what Merleau-Ponty rejects in the reflective theories of time is the possibility of understanding, once and for all, the chain of causality that led from one event to another. We find an analogue of this proposition in Merleau-Ponty's own statement about the relation of reflection and perceptual faith. He writes that "a philosophy of reflection, as methodic doubt and as a reduction of the openness upon the world to 'spiritual acts', to intrinsic relations between the idea and its ideate, is thrice untrue to what it means to elucidate: untrue to the visible world, to him who sees it, and to his relations with the other 'visionaries'" (VI 39). In this passage, Merleau-Ponty shows that limiting the phenomenon to a reflective explanation of causality and description fails to capture the essentially open nature of the phenomenon itself. In the same way, by precisely describing the relations between events, the serial theorist claim to absolute knowledge of historical processes.

What we must understand, then, is that there is inevitably something irreducible in the event and that this irreducibility is a restriction not only on the determination of the significance of an event, but also on the determination of its place in the historical montage. In other words, the event must be understood as indefinite, unable to be said entirely, and open (perhaps infinitely) in its relation to the world.

In this section, I have given a summary of Merleau-Ponty's later thinking of time. This philosophy of time, as we have seen, explicitly rejects serial understandings of temporality in favor of an understanding of temporality as a "time of half-sleep" (Carbone 1). This theory interrupts the serial understanding by positing the indeterminacy of eventual causation and significance in order to encourage us to understand the event not as a mark on a time line or as a point on a field, which even Husserl may have admitted. Rather, the event is more accurately described as "horizontal" than as "horizontal." Rather than moving in one direction—horizontally—the

event emerges as a horizon of meaning. In the next section, I will argue that we can give an even more accurate description of Merleau-Ponty's reading of the event by considering its similarity to what Slavoj Žižek identifies as Freud's second theory of trauma.

Trauma and the Event

According to Žižek, a major shift occurs in how Freud thinks of trauma between *The Ego and the Id* and *Three Case Histories*. Before this time, Freud thought of the traumatic event as an outside disturbance, something that came into the patient's psychical life as an alien intruder. As Freud's thinking progressed, he realized that the relationship between event and ordinary life is precisely the opposite. Žižek looks to Freud's analysis of the Wolfman to make his point:

His analysis of [Wolfman], his famous Russian patient, isolated as the early traumatic event that marked his life the fact that, as a child of one and a half, he witnessed the parental *coitus a tergo*. However, originally, when this scene took place, there was nothing traumatic in it: far from shattering the child, he just inscribed it into his memory as an event the sense of which was not clear at all to him. Only years later, when the child became obsessed with the question "where do children come from" and started to develop infantile sexual theories, did he draw out this memory in order to use it as a traumatic scene embodying the mystery of sexuality. (Žižek)

Žižek likens this shift to the one made by Einstein between the special and general theory of relativity. Whereas in the special theory, the curvature of space is caused by the intrusion of matter, in the general theory, the curvature is primary and matter serves only to herald its presence (Žižek). In the same way, for the earlier Freud, the traumatic event is the thing that reorganizes the space of the patient's life. By the 1920s, however, Freud had come to see the traumatic event as the sign of the curvature of the space of the subject. In other words, rather than the Wolfman being shaped by the event of witnessing his parents in coitus, Freud sees that the significance of the traumatic event lies in its signaling of the theories of sexuality that Wolfman had developed in order to answer his youthful wondering. The event, then, has retroactive significance.

We see in Merleau-Ponty's theories of mythical time an analogue of this later idea of Freud. Frank Chouraqui's paper, "Thickness and the Vertical Unfolding of Time in the Notes of May 1959," cues us into this insight. Chouraqui sees Merleau-Ponty's theory of the event as the invisible

sediment of significance. I take this to mean that events are the stuff lying beneath what we find significant. He looks to the note called *The Visible and the Invisible* from May 1959 to make this point. In the note, Merleau-Ponty writes that “this reduction to the myth presupposes a ground of non-mythical positivity which is another myth” and that rather, “one has to understand that *myth, mystification, alienation* etc. are second-order concepts” (VI 188). These are second-order concepts in the sense that there is a real of the event which is not clear to us (in the note mentioned above, the real that Merleau-Ponty refers to is Madame de La Fayette’s novel *La Princesse de Clèves*) but which nonetheless contributes to our understanding of social life. Merleau-Ponty assigns to this significance, this *invisible* significance, the name “myth” precisely because it is not immanent to us. Chouraqui writes that “a myth is a myth because it is not about sedimented facts, but about Being itself: mythologization is an exemplification of Being as sedimentative process” (15). It is only when an event has settled into the sediment of history that its real significance can be determined.

In terms of our discussion of trauma above, we can say that by looking at the literal, serial event of *La Princesse de Clèves*, we are simply looking at the event as insignificant. It is much like the Wolfman looking at the event of seeing his parents in their nighttime act. We see the value of the literal novel as symptomatic of the curvature of the social sphere that came after it. There are, then, two senses of *La Princesse de Clèves* as event. First, there is the sense in which it is a visible novel written in the 17th century. This sense, however, is one that is exactly situated in serial time, a concept which we have seen is unsatisfactory for Merleau-Ponty. It is in the second sense, then, that we find the truer meaning of the event. In this second sense *La Princesse de Clèves* is a myth whose value is determined retroactively and ambiguously. This determination, as we said above, is invisible. Just as the curvature of space in Einstein’s general theory is the invisible heralded by the visible matter, the truest sense of the event for Merleau-Ponty is given in the invisible sediment that *La Princesse* has left in the sedimentative process of Being. This means, as Chouraqui suggests in his paper, that the event itself is *absolutely invisible* to us.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty gestures toward a theory in which the event is left entirely open. We see evidence for this in his letter to Sartre in which he accuses Sartre of denying history its “right of rectification” (Davis 42).² Much of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of history rests on the problem he introduces of the distinction between past and present, between past events and present events. Who, he suggests, is to say that we have said all there is to say about the French Revolution, or even the

² Special thanks to Dr. Duane Davis for directing me to this passage.

October Revolution? Although this critique of Sartre may be unfair, it is clear that for Merleau-Ponty, the distance that Sartre seems to put between us and historical events is too great, and the event is in fact more immanent than we ordinarily assume.

We see, then, the problem inherent in Merleau-Ponty's thinking of the event. On one hand, it is entirely invisible to us, and so it is separated from us as an object of inquiry. We cannot rightly look at Madame de La Fayette's novel and say that we can find its meaning in the text itself. On the other hand, the event is entirely immanent to us. It is always open to our interpretation and has the "right of rectification" which Merleau-Ponty called for in his letter to Sartre.

In my correspondence with Chouraqui about his paper, he has suggested that the way to reconcile these positions is through a kind of psychoanalysis. By psychoanalyzing the significance of the event, one brings to consciousness the invisible ground of sedimentation as a way of determining its meaning. While the event may be "entirely invisible" because it is, as Gilles Deleuze would say, "a past which never was present," it is always possible to bring that very fact to consciousness in order to critically investigate what is otherwise taken as given in the curvature of our social space (104). Rather than simply investigating the text itself, we ought to look at the text as the event to which we have retroactively assigned value.

Another example that Merleau-Ponty himself draws on, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, comes from another work by Proust, *Swann's Way*. In the novel, refined socialite Charles Swann is deeply moved by hearing a particular violin phrase in a sonata by the composer Vinteuil. In fact, "le petite phrase," as it is called, becomes an important part of Swann's life and comes to symbolize his half-willing love for Odette de Crécy, a former courtesan. For Swann, Vinteuil's "little phrase" conjures up a "past which never was present," that is, the non-real moment which passed between Swann and Odette when he realized the love he had for her (VI 286). In our terminology, for Merleau-Ponty, the retroactive assignment of value to this non-existent event is a symptom of the curvature of Swann's life. Proust describes, however, the way that Vinteuil's little phrase is retroactively assigned the value that, in the case of *La Princesse*, was assigned to the novel itself. The tumultuous relationship between the two inevitably goes sour when Swann realizes Odette's unpleasant nature. According to certain readers of Proust, the author does not resolve the conflict between Swann and Odette. Rather, the story trails off, never achieving a *détente* or direction. This example, obviously, is quite different from any that we have given thus far. If, as we have argued, the event in "mythical time" is in some way positive, how are we to understand this example? In the case of *La Princesse*, the event was a new understanding of sociality that can

be seen in the world and that proceeded from the relatively insignificant publication of a short novel in the 17th century. In Swann's love for Odette, the amorous event is entirely self-reflexive, drawing on itself in order to sustain Swann and Odette's ridiculous affair. Nowhere are we told that there is a single point, a declaration or otherwise, which is given retroactive significance. In the case of *La Princesse*, we can refer back to the novel itself and its popularity in the court in 17th century France as the transcendent object to which we have retroactively assigned value. For Swann, his love for Odette does not have the same sort of referent, relying entirely on the "past that never was present."

In this section, drawing on Chouraqui's paper, I have established the similarities between the theory of trauma that Žižek finds in the later psychoanalytic theory of Freud with the thinking of the event that we discovered in the later philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. I was then able to give a more robust description of what constitutes the event in this later thinking, expanding on the definition given in the first section of this paper. By looking at the case of Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, I was able to give a description of how this definition fits into an actual case of a real event. Finally, in this section, I introduced what might be seen as a snag in this definition of the event. In the next section, I will look at Raphaël Gély's article to understand how we might reconcile this problem and draw on a contemporary thinker to help clarify our understanding of the event.

Subject and Event

In Raphaël Gély's article, "La Question de L'Événement dans la Phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty," he argues that the significance of the event for Merleau-Ponty is the "institution of a cohesion of impossibles" (365). The event, according to Gély, is something that happens to subjects that causes a crisis or rupture in their own bodily understanding of the world. That is to say that in the wake of an event, a subject brings together elements of the world that were previously seen as incommensurable. As I said in the introduction to this paper, according to Gély, Merleau-Ponty's main concern with the event is how it becomes instituted and not how it constitutes a subject. Gély here has as his target contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou. For Badiou, following the Althusserian critique of phenomenological subjectivity, the subject comes to be constituted only in the wake of an event.

Gély begins by arguing against Badiou's theory of the event, saying that Merleau-Ponty's theory is superior because it "stops presupposing that

the event is something which institutes or magically reveals a subject” (355). Rather, he says, the event comes into the life of a subject unpredictably and incalculably, and it is the subject that organizes this impossible event alongside that which is already given, instituting, as I said above, a “cohesion of impossibles.”

How does this mesh with my account of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the event so far? I have argued that for Merleau-Ponty, the event is the invisible and open curvature of a significant moment that retroactively values a given happening. If there is a subject involved with this event, I have not established its place so far.

At the end of the previous section, I noted the difficulty of Swann and Odette’s relationship in *Swann’s Way*. Whenever Swann finds a clue to Odette’s infidelity and doubts his love for her, he is reminded of Vinteuil’s little phrase and is once again emboldened to pursue their affair. We might see this as a refutation of Gély’s understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking of the relationship between event and subject. The institution of the amorous event, Swann and Odette’s love, is what causes Swann to become subject to the love. Then again, we may agree with Gély and argue that it is Swann’s own subjectivity that institutes the amorous event. If this is the case, then we might also find an explanation for the faulty continuation of this event, which is doing nothing but harm to both Swann and Odette. That is, if what is at stake is the cohesion of the impossible elements of Swann’s life and his love for Odette, we can easily understand that the problems inherent in their relationship are grounded in Swann’s inability to create a proper cohesion.

This brings us to a point of real decision. To accept the pre-existence of the subject is to bring us to Gély’s position. To reject the pre-existence of the subject and argue for the institution of a subject in the wake of the event is to bring us to an entirely different position, one that is similar to Badiou’s. The example that Gély himself uses to make his case, that of the famous two hands touching, perhaps betrays his own argument. In the article, he writes that “in the merleau-pontian experience of touching-touched, the subject does not resolve the impossibility . . . except in a process of incarnation” (Gély 363). He believes that this shows that unless we are in bodily situation, we cannot hope to achieve the process of creating a cohesive world where the event is instituted alongside the rest of the world.

We may read this famous example of the touching-touched another way, however. At the beginning of “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty writes that philosophy must “recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition [have] provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished” (VI 130). The event of the touching-touched, similarly, forces us to consider

the reversibility of subject and object all “pell-mell” (VI 130). Gély’s argument relies on the assumption that there is a subject who experiences both the touching and the touched, the alien feeling of being at once subject and object. But how does this example work when considering the flesh of the world generally? If the touching-touched example is supposed to describe not only the subjective experience of one’s own body but also the condition for any visibility and contact with the world whatsoever, then must we also posit a subject whose flesh is the flesh of the world, a deity perhaps? Gély seems to consider only the localized encounter of the flesh, wherein we might be able to posit an already existing subject. The touching-touched example, against Gély, seems to suggest the possibility of a subject that realizes itself only in the wake of its understanding itself to possibly also be an object.

What we do learn from Gély, however, is what I noted earlier about the aftermath of the event as the cohesion of impossibles. In this last portion of this section, I noted that we are forced to decide between Gély’s positioning of the subject in this definition and a position closer to Badiou’s. Though I opted for the latter in light the insights from the touching-touched example, it is still to be determined whether Gély is correct in what he has to say about this cohesion. I have argued that the event functions much like trauma. The event is the invisible real which retroactively assigns value to some visible occurrence. But who is it that does the work of this retroactive assignment? Furthermore, who evaluates the significance of the invisible event? I argue that it is the subject who has come under the effect of this event who must do this work. I noted in the second section of this paper the possibility of a “psychoanalysis of the invisible” that would allow us to analyze the curvature of the event. For Badiou, finding the way that the event relates to the world through an exegesis of its depth is precisely the process of inquiry that constitutes the finite instance of the subject. Badiou relates the subject to the event through its invisibility and the infinite unfolding of its openness to the world.

But while Badiou’s theory of the event almost thoroughly necessitates a serial understanding of time, Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, rejects this position. For Badiou, the event is composed of two parts. First, the event is a collection of mundane facts. In his most famous example, Badiou talks about how, on one hand, we can talk about the French Revolution by referring to the storming of the Bastille, the marches on Versailles, the Terror, and so on (180). On the other hand, the French Revolution also signified an invisible cause that was incalculable. To say that the French Revolution was caused by inequity between the social classes in France would be to reduce the significance of the event itself. However, unlike the understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking of the event that we have given in this paper,

for Badiou, the event does in fact have an end. He argues that what can be found in the event itself is contained in the words and actions of those who were involved in it. This doesn't mean that we can't be contemporaries of a certain event, but there is definitely a point where the event itself is done. Rather than presuming to be a part of the event itself, we must be "faithful" to the event. We must, in other words, remain committed to the truth introduced by the event. The process of inquiring into the event is, for Badiou, staying true to the event, not participating in the event itself.

Merleau-Ponty would have trouble accepting this, I believe. As we noted above, this theory still relies on a serial understanding of time. Both Badiou and Merleau-Ponty want to avoid the reduction of the event to the result of a causal chain. Both want to retain the openness of the interpretation of and fidelity to the event. In the field of Merleau-Ponty studies, I believe that this understanding of the similarities between the two thinkers could prompt continuing research into the meaning of the event and alternative understandings of subjectivity in his philosophy. In the field of Badiou studies, I hope that this understanding will lead to a rethinking of the understanding of time, possibly non-serially. Because of the criticisms that have been leveled against Badiou about the "divine" nature of the event, emerging *ex nihilo* in a time line, considering time in different, non-serial ways might aid in explaining the relation of being, time, and event.

Conclusion

In this paper, I sought a theory of the event in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. By examining his theory of time in his last works and by looking to the work of Mauro Carbone, I came to a preliminary theory of the event which relied on a "mythical time." In the second section, I argued for the similarity between this philosophy of the event and Freud's later theory of trauma. Finally, by evaluating Raphaël Gély's argument about the fundamental difference between the event in Merleau-Ponty and Badiou, I chose to reject his thesis but use what he had to say to make my own connection between the two thinkers. In the end, I hope that this paper has suggested new directions for thinking the connections and disagreements between Merleau-Ponty and Badiou, a field that has been uncharted thus far.

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