
FROM RESPIRATION TO
FLESHPIRATION:
A MERLEAU-PONTIAN
JOURNEY INTO RESPIRATORY
PHILOSOPHY AND
RESPIRATORY RELIGION
WITH JESUS, ST. PAUL,
CLAUDEL, AND
MERLEAU-PONTY

P e t r i B e r n d t s o n

Introduction: What Does One Wish to Say
when Speaking of God?

In this article, I will introduce a new word, a neologism. The discovery of this neologism takes place in dialogue with Jesus, Saint Paul, Paul Claudel and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This new word or new name is “*fleshpiration*.” It is a word in which I intertwine in a paradoxical manner, for example, what St. Paul calls *life according to the flesh* and *life according to the Spirit*. The text will invite the reader into a wondrous adventure from life according to the spirit to respiration and from respiration to *fleshpiration*. The most important figure in this dialogue is Merleau-Ponty as the methodological context that this dialogue takes place in is primarily inspired by him.

In this article, I will weave the tissue of *fleshpiration* using the following six key text excerpts from Jesus, St. Paul, Claudel and Merleau-Ponty.

1. “God is Spirit and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).¹
2. “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires” (*Romans* 8:5).
3. “[...] we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).
4. “[...] the spirit is respiration”² (Paul Claudel, *Commentaires et exégèses*).
5. “Being [...] is the flesh”³ (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*).
6. “What is called ‘inspiration’ should be taken literally: there is really and truly inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being”⁴ (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Spirit”).

My philosophical exploration of these excerpts will take place in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological philosophy. In Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy “God,” “spirit,” “flesh,” “respiration,” and “Being” are all themes that appear and intertwine with each other. As the notion of God plays such a crucial role in my article, I want to immediately address the methodologico-interpretative attitude of how I will approach the question of God. I take my main inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, who speaks of how to encounter, as a philosopher, the question of God and the relations between the human and God.

¹ The biblical references throughout this article are from *Holy Bible: New International Version* (NIV) (Palmer Lake: Biblica, 2011). If I have made alterations to the translation of NIV, I have always done them in dialogue with *The Greek New Testament: Produced at Tyndale House Cambridge* (THGNT) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

² Paul Claudel, *Commentaires et exégèses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 72.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 270.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’Œil et l’Esprit* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 31–32. In French, this quotation runs as follows: “*Ce qu’on appelle inspiration devrait être pris à la lettre: il y a vraiment inspiration et expiration de l’Être, respiration dans l’Être.*” See also the English translation: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. and trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 358. See my detailed interpretation of this respiratory phrase in Petri Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing: The Respiratory Primacy of Being* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 76–98.

[T]he question for a philosopher is not so much to know *if* God exists or does not exist, if the proposition *God exists* is correct or incorrect, as to know what one understands by God, what one wishes to say in speaking of God.⁵

Following Merleau-Ponty's guidance, my task is not to argue for or against the existence of God. Instead of this kind of argumentative attitude, my task is to try "to know what [Jesus, St. Paul, Paul Claudel and Maurice Merleau-Ponty himself] understand by God" and "what [they] wish to say in speaking of God." My reading of these thinkers is radically different compared with what we are used to within Christian culture, academic scholarship or even within contemporary philosophy, which, notwithstanding, has shown new interest as of late, for example, in St. Paul outside of theological contexts.

To better understand what Merleau-Ponty means with his philosophical interrogation of God, it is helpful to listen to the following brief conference⁶ exchange between Ernst von Schenck, the Chair of the session Jeanne Hersch, and Merleau-Ponty.

Von Schenck: Is it possible to deal with the problems within a philosophy without bringing in the term "God"?

Merleau-Ponty: If there is a philosophy, it would be just that.

Chair (Jeanne Hersch): Then it is possible to do it with others without bringing in the term "God." Is it possible to discuss other problems with other men, believers or not?

Merleau-Ponty: For me, philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God.⁷

Only if the philosopher understands what the author or speaker means by God, is the philosopher able to try to give "another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God." In his magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty defines the philosopher as "a perpetual beginner," which means that "he accepts

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, eds. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1992), 66.

⁶ The conference where this exchange took place was "Knowledge of Man in the Twentieth Century," *Rencontres Internationales* of Geneva, September 8–14, 1951.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. and trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 239–240.

nothing as established from what men or scientists believe they know.”⁸ “Philosophy is bored with [these] established”⁹ views about the world. In the case of interpreting the meaning of God and religion, the various ready-made interpretative traditions, for example, theistic (Catholic, Protestant, etc.), atheistic and academic ways of thinking are all part of what Merleau-Ponty, as a perpetual beginner, chooses not to accept because none of these traditions begin from the beginning and all of them narrow the philosopher’s free vision. Merleau-Ponty would agree with Edmund Husserl: “A true beginning, [is] achieved by means of a radical liberation from all scientific and prescientific traditions.”¹⁰

The philosopher’s way of being as a perpetual beginner is Socratic: “he knows that he knows nothing.”¹¹ The Socratic art of philosophy is the philosophical attitude of “not-knowing,”¹² that is, the lived experience of “wonder before the world.”¹³ This also means, according to Merleau-Ponty, that “philosophy is an ever-renewed experience/experiment of its own beginning” and “that it consists entirely in describing this beginning.”¹⁴ From a religious perspective, the beginning has been God and Merleau-Ponty’s words “philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God” need to be understood in this sense. It means that philosophy as a perpetual return to the beginning is constantly seeking new names with which to describe this beginning. The beginning for the beginner is a perpetual return to this experience of wonder before the world. The world as a perceptual world is, for Merleau-Ponty, the beginning, that is, “the foundation that is always presupposed by all rationality, all value and

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), lxxviii.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la philosophie et autres essais* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1953 and 1960), 59.

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 199.

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. John Wild and James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 3.

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la philosophie*, 13.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxviii.

all existence.”¹⁵ This means that all phenomena have their beginning or foundation within the experience of the “perceived world.” In relation to the theme of this article, the following question quite naturally arises: how would the phenomenon of God, religion and all forms of religious ways of life and values have their beginning or foundation within the experience of the perceived world?

When Merleau-Ponty says that “philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God,” he means, in my interpretation, that we could find the meaning of God within our experience of the perceptual world. He does not want to destroy God or religion; he “only tries to bring [these notions] down to earth,”¹⁶ that is, to the level of our lived human experience. This means that “religion [is] returned to its sources and to its truth,”¹⁷ to its beginning in which it is “not separated from experience.”¹⁸ The experiential sources and truth of religion are to be found in “the concrete relationships of men with each other and with nature.”¹⁹ The philosopher, as a perpetual beginner who explores the questions of God and religion, wishes to return continuously to wonder at the experiential beginnings and sources of religious life. In his text “Faith and Good Faith,” Merleau-Ponty gives perhaps one possible example of what could it mean if religion is brought “down to earth” in this experiential manner.

The meaning of the Pentecost is that the religion of both the Father and the Son are to be fulfilled in the religion of the Spirit, that God is no longer in Heaven but in human society and communication, wherever men come together in His name. Christ’s stay on earth was only the beginning of his presence in the world [*le commencement de sa présence dans le monde*], which is continued by the Church.²⁰

If Merleau-Ponty, as a perpetual beginner, is seeking to give another name to what has been traditionally named as God, then in this quota-

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 90.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 90.

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 127.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 103.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 127.

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 177.

tion, he is not yet sufficiently radical as he still speaks here within the context of religion and God. What could this task of “giving another name” mean? I suggest that we can begin to understand what this could mean in relation to St. Augustine. In his text “True Religion,” St. Augustine says that the true religion means “directing ourselves with their [i.e., the holy angels’] help towards the one God, and [...] binding (*religantes*) ourselves tightly to him alone (which is what religion is said to get its name from).”²¹ Where does the word “religion,” according to St. Augustine, “get its name from”? The word “religion,” that is, the Latin *religio*, gets its name from the verb *religare*, which means “to re-bind tight or re-fasten.” With this etymology, St. Augustine writes: “So let our religion, then, bind us tight to the one almighty God [*religet ergo nos religio uni omnipotenti Deo*].”²²

Merleau-Ponty returns to the same source as St. Augustine, that is, to the source where religion “gets its name from,” but he gives it “another name,” that is, a name that is not in any explicit way part of some traditional ready-made religious or theological vocabulary. For Merleau-Ponty, in relation to these words of St. Augustine, the fundamental question would be “what [St. Augustine] wishes to say in speaking of God” and of religion. In my interpretation, the answer would be the experience of “binding ourselves tightly” to something immensely larger than us, to something that we essentially belong to. “[P]hilosophy consists in giving another name” to St. Augustine’s words. For Merleau-Ponty, it is not, in the first place, fundamentally religion that is concerned with the question of binding, but philosophy itself. Merleau-Ponty *names* this question of “binding” as the *fundamental theme* of philosophy. Merleau-Ponty, for example, says that the fundamental “theme [of philosophy is] the umbilical bond that binds it always to Being”²³ or that “[t]here is a unique theme of philosophy, the *nexus* [bond/link], the *vinculum* [the connecting band of tissue] ‘Nature’–

²¹ Saint Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine: On Christian Belief*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2005), 103 and 17.

²² Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, 104.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 107.

Man'–'God.'"²⁴ This is to say, in other words, that "[p]hilosophy is already there in a recognition of [...] 'omou en panta' [all things are together] [...]. It is this philosophy of the interconnection of everything that we attempt to create."²⁵

When I said earlier that, according to Merleau-Ponty, the beginning or the source for the philosopher as a perpetual beginner is the experience of the perceptual world, it is important to understand that it is this "umbilical [perceptual] bond that binds" all things together and that creates the "interconnection of everything." Of this binding, Merleau-Ponty writes: the philosopher "must seek in the world itself the secret of our perceptual bond with it."²⁶ Merleau-Ponty calls our binding to the world "the mystery of the world."²⁷ "[T]o philosophise is to seek,"²⁸ that is, to be in a perpetual state of not-knowing or wonder before this "secret" perceptual "umbilical bond that binds" us with Being. In his late phenomenological ontology, Merleau-Ponty names this secret or mysterious binding as the fundamental theme of philosophy most famously with the name of "flesh" as a "tissue"²⁹ or "connective tissue"³⁰ that makes it possible that "*omou en panta*" (all things are together). In relation to "flesh," as the new name, Merleau-Ponty says: "What we are calling flesh [...] has no name in any philosophy."³¹

In the following exploration, I will show how this fundamental theme of philosophy as the binding or interconnectedness of everything, that is, as the mystery of the flesh, is intertwined with the fundamental phenomenon of respiration and renamed with my neologism "*fleshpiration*." I will also show how we enter into the atmosphere of

²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Valier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 204.

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Possibility of Philosophy: Course Notes from the Collège de France, 1959–1961*, trans. Keith Whitmoyer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2022), 37–38.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 38.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxxv.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 41.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 132.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 130n1.

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147 and 139.

fleshpiration through a respiratory interpretation of Jesus's, St. Paul's, Claudel's and Merleau-Ponty's concepts of God.

The Respiratory Journey's Interpretative Starting Point:
Claudel's "Spirit is Respiration"

My interpretative starting point in my journey toward the discovery of the new name of *fleshpiration* is Claudel's idea that "the spirit is respiration."³² If one takes this idea that "the spirit is respiration" seriously, it radically transforms how one reads and interprets the *Bible*. The interpretative atmosphere of "the spirit is respiration" is "a mutation"³³ of the Judeo-Christian culture as it can lead us, in my opinion, to a new "culture of respiration."³⁴ In his *oeuvre*, Claudel offers us many new interpretative paths that can lead our understanding of religious or spiritual life to something that we could possibly begin to call a respiratory mutation in biblical exegesis, as well as a respiratory binding to God. In my article, I wish to know what Jesus and St. Paul are possibly trying to say when they speak of God by

³² Claudel, *Commentaires et exégèses*, 72. Claudel is not alone with his idea that "the spirit is respiration" as, for example, Denis Edwards and Donald Gelpi understand "the Spirit as the *Breath of God*" and as "the Breath of Life." Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 2–3. Edwards also writes: "In the Scriptures, the Spirit first appears as the breath of life, God's breath." Denis Edwards, *Human Experience of God* (New York and Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 52. According to Gelpi, in the *Bible*, the Hebrew "ruah" and the Greek "pneuma," which are traditionally translated as "spirit," should be translated as "breath." In his book *The Divine Mother*, Gelpi says that he has "chosen to call ['ruah' and 'pneuma'] the Holy Breath rather than the Holy Spirit." Donald Gelpi, *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 11.

³³ I am not using this word in a scientific sense of genetics, but as Merleau-Ponty uses it in its etymological sense as "change" or "alteration." Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 368; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology: Including Texts by Edmund Husserl*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 53.

³⁴ I have borrowed this expression from Luce Irigaray, *Why Different? A Culture of Two Subjects: Interviews with Luce Irigaray*, trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 179. In Irigaray's words: "The forgetting of breathing in our [Western] tradition is almost universal." Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, trans. Stephen Pluháček (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 77. One of the deepest dimensions of this forgetting of breathing in our tradition is that we have almost universally forgotten in our religious life and tradition that "the spirit is respiration."

reading, especially Jesus's phrase "God is Spirit..." (John 4:24) and St. Paul's sentence concerning the life "according to the flesh" and the life "according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:5). I read these phrases within the Claudelian atmosphere of "the spirit is respiration," as well as within Merleau-Ponty's philosophical atmosphere of wonder at and not-knowing the meaning of God. The first Claudelian respiratory step is that these sentences of Jesus and St. Paul will be mutated into respiratory sentences. In the case of Jesus, this means that I initially transform the traditional wording of John 4:24 "God is Spirit and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" into the following form: "God is Respiration and his worshipers must worship in the Respiration and in truth." As one can observe, the only thing that I have done to the words of Jesus is to change the word "spirit" into "respiration" as Claudel says: "the spirit is respiration." With this same Claudelian respiratory interpretative logic, I can also transform Paul's sentence (Romans 8:5) to state: "Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live according to the Respiration have their minds set on what the Respiration desires."

Now one can easily ask whether I am just blindly or randomly following this suggestion of Claudel and creating something nonsensical or whether I am just following a certain kind of interpretative tradition and immediately discard the philosophical attitude of a perpetual beginner. Have I immediately lost the philosophical principles that I laid out in the beginning of this article by following Claudel dogmatically? I am not blindly, randomly or dogmatically following Claudel. I am indeed following his guidance, but only because it makes sense etymologically for the philosopher as a perpetual beginner who tries to understand what Jesus and St. Paul "wish to say in speaking of God" and tries to discover "another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God." Let me explain why following Claudel makes sense.

A Respiratory-Etymological Journey with *Spiritus*,
Pneuma and *Ruach* and the Respiratory Creation of Humanity

Claudel's "the spirit is respiration" ("*l'esprit, c'est la respiration*") is a discovery of a perpetual beginner. The English word "spirit" and the French word "*esprit*" both come from the Latin *spiritus*, which originally means "breathing, breath." It is a derivative of the verb *spirare* meaning "to breathe, to blow." In the original Greek *Gospel of John*, Jesus's words "God is Spirit" are "*pneuma o theos*" and Paul's original Greek wording of "according to the Spirit" in Romans is "*kata pneuma*." The Greek word *pneuma* originally means "breath, movement of air, wind, and finally air,"³⁵ and it derives from the verb *pnein* "to blow, to breathe." In the *Vulgate*, the Greek *pneuma* is translated as "spiritus." After Claudel in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Jacques Derrida writes of *pneuma* and *spiritus* that there is "the immense semantics of breathing, of inspiration or respiration, imprinted in Greek [*pneuma*] or Latin [*spiritus*]."³⁶

There are many examples³⁷ showing that the respiratory and aerial meanings of the word *pneuma* are essential dimensions of its semantic

³⁵ F. E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 160–161. See also Clint Tibbs, *Religious Experience of Pneuma: Communication with the Spirit World in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012), 307.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 99. Even if it is true that there is "the immense semantics of breathing [...] imprinted in Greek and in Latin," it is also true that many writers do not seem to take this seriously in their studies concerning our *spiritual* dimension of being. Even if these writers notice these respiratory origins of the spirit, they often see them as "less originary" (Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 99) compared to other features of our spiritual being. A perfect example of this is Martin Heidegger. Luce Irigaray investigates Heidegger's forgetting of air and breathing in her book Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

³⁷ To have a brief insight into "the immense semantics of breathing [...] imprinted in" *pneuma*, it is good to know, for example, that the root word of *pneumon*, a Greek word meaning "lungs," is *pneuma*, and from *pneumon* derives the word "pneumonia" as "inflammation of the lungs." In addition to this, *pneuma* is also, for example, the root of the word *pneumatikos*, meaning "of wind, of air," from which comes the English word "pneumatic," meaning "of the wind, belonging to the air, relating to the spirit." The word "pneumatic" is used, for example, in connection to tyres. A "pneumatic tyre" is a tyre inflated with air. See Petri Berndtson, "Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing: The Phenomenologico-Ontological Interpretation

field, and that these root meanings have not been lost, even in contemporary English discourse. This can make one wonder why it is that all the biblical traditions translate *pneuma* either as “Spirit” or as “Ghost,” and never with any of the possible respiratory or aerial notions.³⁸ These etymological considerations would mean that we could interpret Jesus’s words “*pneuma o théos*,” which are traditionally translated as “God is Spirit,” either as “God is respiration,” “God is breath,” “God is wind” or “God is air.” Even if this would be an improvement on the previous translations, it is important to say that these translations are still within the traditional scheme as their structure is “God is ...” Contrary to all of these translations, in his 2013 translation of the *Gospel of John* into French, Jean-Yves Leloup pointed out that the translation of “*pneuma o théos*” is not literally “God is breath/Spirit/respiration,” but in French “*Souffle, le Dieu*,”³⁹ which would translate into English as “Breath, the God.” It is not only Leloup who interprets these words of the *Gospel of John* in this manner as the Vulgate already translated “*pneuma o théos*” as “*Spiritus est Deus*” – that is, as “Spirit/Breath/Respiration is God.” But this is a rarity as all the major translations of John 4:24, for example, in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian, fall under the structure “God is ...” in their translations. All the major translations say: “God is Spirit” (English), “*Dieu est Esprit*” (French), “*Gott ist Geist*” (German), “*Dios es Espiritu*” (Spanish), and “*Dio è Spirito*” (Italian). To interpret Jesus’s “*pneuma o théos*” in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty, Claudel and Leloup either as “Breath, the God” or as “Respiration, the God” is a step toward the experience of *fleshpiration*. It is important to understand that in the same breath, we can also interpret “*pneuma o théos*” to say “Wind, the God,” “Air, the God,” and “Spirit, the God.”

In the biblical tradition, both *pneuma* and *spiritus* are translations of the Hebrew *ruach*⁴⁰ of the *Old Testament*. Yet again the Hebrew *ru-*

of the Barbaric Conviction of We Breathe Air and a New Philosophical Principle of Silence of Breath, Abyss of Air” (PhD. diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2018), 226–228.

³⁸ Berndtson, “Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing,” 227.

³⁹ Jean-Yves Leloup, trans., *L’Évangile de Jean* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2013), 268.

⁴⁰ Gelpi writes of *ruach* that it is “a Hebrew word for breathing, for air in motion; its English equivalent in this text [Gelpi’s book *The Divine Mother*] is Breath.” Gelpi, *The Divine Mother*, 244. Traditionally the word *ruach* is translated almost universally as “spirit” and not as “breath” or “air in motion.”

*ach*⁴¹ means “breath” and “wind” as well as “spirit.” It is important to notice, as Adriana Cavarero has pointed out: “The term *ruach* indicates above all breath.”⁴² In the very beginning of the *Old Testament*, “the Spirit/Breath/Wind (*ruach*) of God” is mentioned as “the Breath/Wind/Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). This means that from the very beginning of the *Bible*, God is essentially connected with *ruach* (breath, wind, and spirit). In addition to this, the creation of the human being as the starting point of humanity in Genesis is essentially a respiratory creation as it says: “the LORD God who formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [*ruach*], and the man became a living being/soul [*nephesh*” (Genesis 2:7). And in the reverse manner, according to *The Book of Job*, “if [...] [God] withdrew his spirit and breath [*ruach*], all humanity would perish together and mankind would return to the dust” (Job 34:14–15).

In addition to the Hebrew word *ruach*, the word *nephesh* has a deep respiratory meaning in Genesis 2:7. According to linguist and rabbi Ernest Klein, the primary etymological meaning of *nephesh* is “breath, breath of life.” The other meanings of this word are “soul,” “person, human being” and “self.” Etymologically, the term *nephesh* is derived from the term *naphash*, meaning “to blow, to breathe.” In relation to Klein’s etymological study of the term *nephesh*, Róbert Bohát writes: “etymology and lexicography agree that [*nephesh*] is ‘a living, breathing being’, ‘a breather’ in short.”⁴³ In his book *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, theologian Hans Walter Wolff ponders the meaning of the word *nephesh* in Genesis 2:7. In his view, *nephesh* in this verse of the *Old Testament* should “[c]ertainly not [be translated as] soul.” Instead of “soul,” Wolff emphasises “breath” as he writes: “*Nephesh* is designed

⁴¹ Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 100.

⁴² Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 20. See also John R. Levison, *The Spirit in First-Century Judaism* (Boston and Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 63–64.

⁴³ Róbert Bohát, “‘My Soul Knoweth Right Well’: the Biblical Definition of Soul (heb. ‘*nefes*,’ Gr. ‘*psyche*’) and the Epistemology of Embodied Cognition – an Ancient Source of a Modern Concept?,” in *The Soul in the Axiosphere from an Intercultural Perspective*, vol. 1, ed. Joanna Jurewicz, Ewa Masłowska, and Dorota Pazio-Włazłowska (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 167.

to be seen together with the whole form of man, and especially with his breath; moreover man does not have *nephesh*, he is *nephesh*, he lives as *nephesh*.”⁴⁴ In addition to this, Etan Levine relates Genesis 2:7 explicitly to air as he writes: “human life derived from the air when God ‘blew into his nostrils the breath of life.’”⁴⁵

With the help of these etymological investigations, I can now give one possible interpretation of Genesis 2:7 as the beginning of humanity provided that one also understands that the Hebrew word *adam* (“man”) originated from *adamah* (“ground” or “earth”). This interpretation runs as follows: “God formed man (*adam*) as an earthling of the dust of the ground/earth (*adamah*), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life that is His breath/air/wind/spirit (*ruach*); and man (*adam*) as an earthling became a living, breathing being, that is, a breather (*nephesh*).”

As Wolff said, “man does not have *nephesh*, he is *nephesh*, he lives as *nephesh*,” and this would mean, in my interpretation, that according to Genesis 2:7, the human being does not have a breath, but is at the most primordial level a breathing being and lives as a breather, as one who breathes. This respiratory way of being, which derived from “the common air”⁴⁶ (*ruach*) when God “blew into his nostrils the breath of life,” is the fundamental root experience of human existence. This train of thought goes together well with Claudel who thought that if we take seriously what the *Bible* says about creation as the beginning of human beings, then it means that “[t]he whole character of man is within respiration.”⁴⁷ Thus, all questions of humanity without exception need to be understood within the atmosphere of respiration and within a human being’s respiratory binding to God. All other dimensions of the human being exist within the atmosphere or realm of respiration. In Genesis 2:7, the breath is the beginning, the root

⁴⁴ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 10.

⁴⁵ Etan Levine, *Heaven and Earth, Law and Love* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 12.

⁴⁶ William Glen Moncrief, *Soul: Or the Hebrew Word Nephesh and the Greek Word Psuchen* (Edinburgh: William Laing, 1864), 3.

⁴⁷ Paul Claudel quoted in Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, “La ‘Co-naissance’: Merleau-Ponty et Claudel,” in *Merleau-Ponty aux frontières de l’invisible*, eds. Marie Cariou, Renaud Barbaras, and Etienne Bimbenet (Milan: Associazione Culturale Mimesis, 2003), 271n118.

and the atmosphere of human existence and it connects or binds us to God as “respiring God” or “God who breathes”⁴⁸ in a most intimate and elemental manner.⁴⁹

The Intertwining of *Pneuma* and God: Jesus and St. Paul

Pneuma and the God of Jesus

If Jesus’s words “*pneuma o théos*” are translated literally as “Breath, the God” (“Breath [is] the God”) within the guidance of Leloup, Claudel and etymological evidence, then what could it be that Jesus wishes to say when speaking of God? I suggest that Jesus wishes to express that breathing or respiration is the most fundamental reality that we are connected with, and thus it is also the most important thing in one’s life and the life of the community, as well as the most fundamental way of being. For this reason, it could be that Jesus says in the synoptic Gospels, as well as in the *Gospel of Thomas*, that there is only one sin that will never be forgiven: this “eternal sin” is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit/Respiration (*pneuma*) (see Mark 3:28-29; Matthew 12:31-32; Luke 12:10; Thomas 44). What is the opposite lifestyle to blasphemy against the Holy Respiration? Jesus gives his answer to this in John 4:24 after the words “Respiration [is] the God.” His answer is that the “worshippers [of God] must worship in the Breath [*en pneumatí*] and in truth.” According to Jesus, to know what God is, is to know what Respiration is – and to know what Respiration is, is to worship in Breathing. But what does it mean to worship in the Breath? What kind of practice does Jesus have in mind?⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Paul Claudel quoted in Saint Aubert, “La ‘Co-naissance,’” 271n118.

⁴⁹ David Abram writes of this as follows: “breath [...] is the most intimate and elemental bond linking human to the divine; it is that which flows most directly between God and man.” David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 239.

⁵⁰ One can wonder whether Jesus’s respiratory practices of worship could be something similar, for example, to the Eastern Christian practice of *hesychasm*, the Sufi practice of *dhikr* or the respiratory practices of Yoga (*pranayama*) and Buddhism (*anapanasati*). Perhaps somewhat similarly to John 4:24, for some Sufi groups’ spiritual practice, i.e., “worship is observance of

First of all, I suggest that when Jesus defines Breath as the God, one needs to understand it in the context of Genesis 2:7. Jesus's "*pneuma o théos*" could be a radicalisation of the phrase "God who breathes" or "respiring God" (Genesis 2:7), who gave us the breath of life and who keeps us perpetually alive with each and every breath. So what could it mean to "worship in the Breath/Respiration"? I suggest that this respiratory worship is essentially related to Jesus's teaching of "the first and greatest commandment": "Love LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27). These words are originally from Deuteronomy 6:5. The word "soul" in the *New Testament* Gospels is *psyche* and in Deuteronomy 6:5, the Hebrew *nephesh*. The word *psyche* is normally translated as "soul or psyche," but the word originally "means breathing, breath"⁵¹ and it derives from the verb *psycho* "to breathe."⁵² If "Breath is the God," then Jesus teaches people to *love Breath as the God with all one's heart and with all one's soul/breath (psyche, nephesh) and with all one's mind*. But it is important to remember that in Genesis 2:7, one becomes a living being or a living soul (*nephesh*) when God breathes the breath of life (*ruach, pneuma*) into a human being. What we learned earlier is that, in the first place, according to Wolff, "man does not have *nephesh*, he is *nephesh*, he lives as *nephesh*" and this word should "[c]ertainly not [be translated as] soul." As *nephesh*, I am neither "a living being" nor "a living soul," but "a breathing being," that is, "a breather." In connection to this respiratory creation of a human being as a breathing being or as a breather, Claudel said that "the whole character of man is within respiration."

This would mean that all the dimensions of a human being are respiratory in the sense that one is *nephesh* (a breathing being, a breather) or *psyche* (a breathing being). This means that whatever is meant by

the breaths." See J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 195.

⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit*. 1. *Der Anfang des abendländischen Denkens*. 2. *Logik*. *Heraklits Lehre vom Logos* (Gesamtausgabe 55), ed. Manfred S. Frings (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 1979), 281.

⁵² Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 32. See also Edward S. Casey, *The World on Edge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 97.

the words “*with all one’s heart and with all one’s soul and with all one’s mind,*” the essential factor is that they are all within respiration, that is, within a breathing being. They are thus, in the first place, respiratory in nature, that is, one’s heart is a respiratory heart, one’s soul is a respiratory soul, and one’s mind is a respiratory mind. Jesus’s first and greatest commandment can now be understood as the commandment to love Breath as the God with the whole of one’s respiratory being, that is, with all the dimensions of one’s being, which are all, to use Claudel’s expression, within the “milieu of the divine respiration.”⁵³ If the first and greatest commandment is interpreted in this kind of respiratory manner, it might just mean exactly the same as what Jesus says in the *Gospel of John*, that we need to worship Breath as God in the Breath and in truth (John 4:24).

St. Paul’s Life According to *Pneuma*⁵⁴

Now let us move to St. Paul’s phrases: “[t]hose who live according to the flesh [*kata sarka*] have their minds set on what the flesh [*sarkos*] desires; but those who live according to the Breath/Spirit [*kata pneuma*] have their minds set on what the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneumatos*] desires” (Romans 8:5), and “we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). I will interpret these within the atmosphere of Genesis 2:7, Claudel’s “the spirit is respiration” and *pneuma* as breath. To “live according to the flesh” and to “live [...] by sight” are synonymous expressions. Also, to “live according to the Breath/Respiration/Spirit” and to “live by faith” are synonyms. In order to understand what St. Paul is saying with these two sentences, let us begin with Romans 1:25 in which he states the human condition and situation in simple terms: there is “the truth about God” and the “lie” about God. This “lie” is equal to “sin.” In Paul’s view, the fundamental question of life is: do we

⁵³ Paul Claudel quoted in Bernard Hue, *Rêve et réalité dans Le Soulier de satin* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005), 142n94.

⁵⁴ I have investigated St. Paul within the respiratory and aerial atmosphere in a subsequent article, Petri Berndtson, “The Temple of the Holy Breath as the Place of Conspiracy Between the Respiratory Body and the Space of Open Air,” in *Art and Common Space*, eds. Anne-Karin Furunes, Simon Harvey, and Maaretta Jaukkuri (Trondheim: NTNU, 2013).

live in the realm of God's truth or not? If we do not live in that divine realm, our life is sinful. To exchange "the truth about God for a lie" means that in one's life, one worships and serves the "created things rather than the Creator [God] – who is forever praised" (Romans 1:25).

According to Paul, we always worship and serve something in our lives. It is impossible not to direct one's focus toward something. The question is where do we direct our desires and interests? That is, what do we "worship and serve"? For Paul, the only two possibilities are either to direct our desires toward the created things in the world or the Creator/God.⁵⁵ In other words, this choice between the created things and the Creator is what Paul elsewhere calls the choice between life according to the flesh and life according to the Spirit/Respiration. In life according to the flesh, we worship and serve the created things, that is, the earthly (*adamah*) realm. Instead of this, in life according to the Respiration/Breath/Spirit, we worship and serve the Creator as the respiring God. We live *pneumatically* or spiritually in the respiratory manner of the word. In Romans 8, Paul says the following about this choice:

Those who live according to the flesh [*kata sarka*] have their minds set on what the flesh [*sarkos*] desires; but those who live according to the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*kata pneuma*] have their minds set on what the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneumatōs*] desires. The mind governed by the flesh [*sarkos*] is death, but the mind governed by the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneumatōs*] is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh [*sarkos*] is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh [*sarki*] cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh [*sarki*] but are in the realm of the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneumati*], if indeed the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneuma*] of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneuma*] of Christ, they do not belong to Christ (Romans 8:5–9).

⁵⁵ This choice to serve either the created things or God is already part of Jesus's teaching as he says: "No one can serve two masters. [...] You cannot serve both God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13). And if, for Jesus, Breath is the God, then one cannot serve both Breath as God and mammon. We noticed earlier that in John 4:24, Jesus speaks of worshipping in the Breath/Spirit.

Similarly in Galatians 5, Paul says:

For through the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneumati*] we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. [...] So I say, walk by the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneumati*], and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Breath/Respiration/Spirit [*pneumatōs*], and the Breath/Spirit [*pneuma*] what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other (Galatians 5:5, 16–17).

So according to Paul, there are two radically different lifestyles or atmospheres of living that are contrary to each other. They are opposite ways of being. We can either worship and serve the created material things or the Creator/God – that is, “live according to the flesh” or “live according to the Breath/Respiration/Spirit.” These are the only two atmospheres of living. Life according to the Breath/Respiration/Spirit is essentially connected to faith as Paul says “through the Breath/Respiration/Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.” Faith is connected to what is invisible as in Hebrews, Paul says, “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). For Paul, the other way to express the proper way of existing between “according to the Breath/Respiration/Spirit” and “according to the flesh” is to say: “we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). So we live by faith or according to the Breath in contact with “what we do not see,” that is, with the invisible. Didier Franck describes in an insightful manner Paul’s idea of life “according to the flesh” in which “we live [...] by sight” as a way in which our eyes serve and worship the created visible earthly things in the world as follows:

The flesh is [...] coextensive with natural visibility [...]. Paul’s phenomenology makes the flesh into the very being of the visible. However, the flesh not only characterizes the body such as it sees itself, but also as in the midst of what it sees. The wisdom of the *logos*, the wisdom of the world sought by the Greeks, is a wisdom “according to the flesh,” opposed to the grace of God. The flesh is thus the body inasmuch as it refers to itself and to the world; in short, to the extent that it turns away from God.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Didier Franck, *Nietzsche and the Shadow of God*, trans. Bettina Bergo and Philippe Farah (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 44.

As the opposite way of being, life “according to the Breath/Respiration/Spirit” in which “we live by faith” is connected to “what we do not see” and this is not intertwined with the Greek “wisdom of the *logos*, the wisdom of the world,” that is, the wisdom of the eyes, but rather with what Paul calls in the Corinthians “God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden” (1 Corinthians 2:7). As it is hidden, it is “what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard.” What is hidden, according to Paul, is what “God has revealed to us by his Breath/Respiration/Spirit. The Breath/Respiration/Spirit investigates everything and the depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:7–10). Colossians 1:15 speaks of God as “the invisible God.” In connection to this Pauline tradition of the divine hidden wisdom and mystery of “the depths of God” and “the invisible God,” it is important to mention that outside of this Pauline tradition, there is the Johannine tradition, which also emphasises that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12).

Merleau-Ponty’s “Inspiration and Expiration of Being,
Respiration within Being”

My intention is to read Merleau-Ponty’s “Eye and Spirit” in a similar manner as I have previously read Jesus’s and Paul’s words within the atmosphere of Claudel’s “the spirit is respiration.” This means that I will read “Eye and Spirit” essentially as a text concerning “Eye and Respiration.” Within this Claudelian atmosphere, Merleau-Ponty’s text interrogates the Pauline themes of life according to the eye and life according to the Spirit/Respiration even if Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis is definitely on the former way of life. In relation to these themes, it is important to emphasise the obvious fact about Merleau-Ponty’s text that it is named “Eye *and* Spirit” and not “Eye *or* Spirit.” The meaning of the conjunction “and” is that Merleau-Ponty does not make a clear distinction between life according to the flesh and life according to the Respiration/Spirit in the way St. Paul does. It also means that one does not have to make a decision on which one chooses – either life according to the eye as flesh or life according to the spirit as respiration. It is not only that I will read “Eye and Spirit” in dialogue with Claudel, but, in my opinion, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is deeply inspired by Claudel’s thinking and

this Claudelian influence is profoundly felt in “Eye and Spirit.” Within the interpretative context of “the spirit is respiration,” the most important sentence of “Eye and Spirit” as *eye and respiration* airs:

What is called “inspiration” should be taken literally: there is really and truly inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that one no longer knows who/what sees and who/what is seen, who/what paints and who/what is painted.⁵⁷

Let us begin by wondering about the possible meaning of the opening words of this sentence: “what is called ‘inspiration’ should be taken literally: there is really and truly inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being.” What would it mean to take the word “inspiration” literally? Traditionally, this word has not been taken literally, but mostly in a metaphoric sense as “artistic inspiration,” “creative inspiration,” “divine inspiration” or “biblical inspiration.” The meaning of artistic inspiration or creative inspiration is a sudden moment of creativity in artistic production when a new innovation, idea or vision strikes the mind of the artist, poet or designer. Biblical inspiration or divine inspiration means that the human writers of the *Bible* were guided by God as the *New Testament’s 2nd Epistle to Timothy* states: “All scripture is inspired by God [*theopneustos*]” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Earlier, in connection with Claudel’s “the spirit is respiration” (*l’esprit, c’est la respiration*), it was already mentioned that the English word “spirit” and the French word “*esprit*” both come from the Latin *spiritus*. The word *spiritus* is a derivative of the verb *spirare* meaning “to breathe, to blow.” The word “inspiration” similarly comes from *spiritus*. In “inspiration,” the word “spiration” is conjoined with the prefix “in-”. The word “spiration” is obsolete nowadays, but it was used around the 16th century meaning the “action of drawing the breath.” Also, the Middle English verb “spire” is obsolete itself even if the word is still in use with the same prefix “in-” as “inspire.” The word “spire” meant “to breathe.” Both of these words, “spiration” and “spire,” came etymologically from the Latin *spirare*. This means that the literal meaning of “inspiration” is “the action of drawing the breath in” and “inspire” is

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *L’Œil et l’Esprit*, 31–32. See also the English translation: Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 358.

“to breathe in.” Now as there is no inspiration without expiration, this would mean that the word “expiration” should also be taken literally in this Merleau-Ponty’s quotation. The prefix “ex-” means “out” and thus the literal meaning of “expiration” is “the action of drawing the breath out” and literally the verb “expire” means “to breathe out.”

In addition to this, Merleau-Ponty speaks of “respiration within Being.” I suggest that the word “respiration” also needs to be taken literally. And as the prefix “re-” means “again, anew, once more, back,” then “respiration” could possibly mean in the same breath, all at once “the action of drawing the breath again,” “the action of drawing the breath anew,” “the action of drawing the breath once more,” and “the action of drawing the breath back.” If respiration means “the action of drawing the breath back,” then where is it drawn back to? In his *Nature* lectures, Merleau-Ponty very briefly says that respiration is “always recommenced (*toujours recommencée*).”⁵⁸ Thus, I would say that respiration is perhaps the action of drawing the breath back to the space and time where it recommences itself, where it begins again and again and again. This also means that the meaning of the verb “respire” is “to breathe again,” “to breathe anew,” or “to breathe back” in space and time.

What about the word “Being” in this phrase concerning “inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being”? The ultimate ontological questions are: what is Being? What is the meaning of Being? What does it mean “to be”? When Merleau-Ponty speaks of “Being” in his late ontological thinking, I suggest that he could be interpreted as speaking in a paradoxical manner in the same breath about the flesh and God. Could it really and truly be that the word “Being” names both “flesh” and “God” as I earlier quoted Merleau-Ponty’s words “philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God”? Let us first speak of the relationship between Being and the flesh. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes in a surprising and cryptic manner: “Being [...] is the flesh.”⁵⁹ But what does this mean? Does it mean that the flesh and Be-

⁵⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature: Notes Cours du Collège de France* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995), 61.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 270.

ing are synonyms? Esteemed Merleau-Ponty scholars Renaud Barbaras and Gary Brent Madison speak of the intertwining of Being and the flesh in the following ways. In the words of Barbaras: for Merleau-Ponty, “Being makes sense only as flesh.”⁶⁰ Madison says: “the flesh is [...] a ‘prototype of Being,’ [...] it is in fact Being itself [...] The flesh is Being qua Opening. Under the concept of flesh [...] Merleau-Ponty is thinking Being.”⁶¹ If “Being makes sense only as flesh,” then it would mean that, for Merleau-Ponty, “inspiration and expiration of Being” and “respiration within Being” “make sense only as flesh.” Could we then say as Being is the flesh that there is really and truly inspiration and expiration of the flesh, respiration within the flesh?

If one tries to interpret the meaning of “inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being” within the ontological atmosphere where Being is the flesh, then one needs to interrogate what respiratory expressions like *inspiration and expiration of the flesh* and *respiration within the flesh* could mean. What could it mean to say, following Barbaras, that “inspiration and expiration of Being” makes sense only as flesh and that “respiration within Being” makes sense only as flesh? If we take inspiration, expiration and respiration literally within the ontological atmosphere of flesh, then we could say that these words of Merleau-Ponty state that there is really and truly an action of drawing the breath in (breathing-in) and of drawing the breath out (breathing-out) of the flesh, as well as the action of drawing the breath again within the flesh or the action of drawing the breath back within the flesh.

But what is this ontological flesh that Merleau-Ponty speaks of? In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty says that the flesh is the “ultimate notion.”⁶² He also says that “reversibility [...] defines the flesh.”⁶³ The flesh as the phenomenon of reversibility is actually “the fundamental phenomenon” and the “ultimate truth.”⁶⁴ Let us remember Merleau-

⁶⁰ Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 319.

⁶¹ Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1981), 177.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 140.

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 144.

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 155.

Ponty's words: "For me, philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystalised under the name of God." The flesh truly sounds like that new name, as Merleau-Ponty says: "What we are calling flesh [...] has no name in any philosophy."⁶⁵ The flesh sounds like a "God [who] is no longer in Heaven" as He has been brought "down to earth" and thus He is "not separated from experience." Like God, the flesh is the "ultimate notion," "fundamental phenomenon" and "ultimate truth." As "God [...] is everywhere"⁶⁶ and as "[t]he Spirit is everywhere,"⁶⁷ similarly "the flesh [...] radiat[es] everywhere."⁶⁸ As "God" is "eternal"⁶⁹ and "forever,"⁷⁰ so is "the flesh [...] here and now [...] forever."⁷¹ Within "the religion of the Spirit," God comes down to earth and is "in human society and communication, wherever men come together in His name." Similarly in the *name* of "the flesh," we may recognise the "domain" that is "between" all human beings as "their means of communication."⁷² In the name of the flesh, this communication takes place as the fundamental phenomenon of reversibility.

What does Merleau-Ponty mean by the fundamental phenomenon of reversibility? According to him, "[t]he [...] reversibility is the idea that every perception is doubled with a counter-perception, [...] is an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens. [There is] speaking-listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived circularity – *Activity = passivity*."⁷³ In relation to these words, one can observe that the respiratory phrase of "Eye and Spirit" spoke of the flesh as reversibility: "there is really and truly inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that one no longer knows who/what sees and who/what is seen, who/what paints and who/what is painted." We can describe this

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147; and see also 139.

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 266; Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 363.

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 177.

⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 142.

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 116–117.

⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 375.

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 142.

⁷² Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 135.

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 264–265.

fleshy reality of reversibility as a “strange system of exchanges”⁷⁴ or a “hidden,” “unlimited,” and “strange domain.”⁷⁵ It is a latent depth dimension in which the typical or normal “roles between [the subject and the object, between the perceiver and the perceived, between the painter and the painted, etc.] switch”⁷⁶ in a way that creates a totally different way of being compared to what we are used to. We no longer know what is what as our normal dualities like subject-object, inner-outer, profound-superficial, active-passive, visible-invisible, etc. are unhinged and thus the strange domain of the flesh as reversibility leads us into the philosophical state of not-knowing and wonder. The question is, how is it possible that there can be such a strange system of exchanges between the seer and the seen or the painter and the painted? Earlier, we mentioned that the flesh is the means of communication between the seer and the visible. Let us next interrogate how the flesh makes this communication possible and how Merleau-Ponty’s life according to the eyes relates to St. Paul’s ideas about living by sight.

Merleau-Ponty’s Life According to Flesh and the Wisdom of the Eye

Now that we have discovered that “Being [...] is the flesh” as the “unlimited” “strange domain” called reversibility, which is a “strange system of exchanges,” and that Being or “universal dimensionality” is a new name for God, we must continue our interrogation of what it could mean when Merleau-Ponty says that “one no longer knows who/what sees and who/what is seen.”⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a phenomenological interrogation of perception. It is very rare for Merleau-Ponty to speak of the phenomenon of breathing in his philosophical examinations.⁷⁸ Most of the time, he forgets breathing as a

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 355.

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 140.

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 358.

⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *L’Œil et l’Esprit*, 31–32. See also the English translation: Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 358.

⁷⁸ My study Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing: The Respiratory Primacy of Being* is devoted to exploring Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of breathing. I investigate

phenomenological theme. In those rare moments when he remembers breathing, he says highly interesting and important things about it. But what he never forgets is the phenomenon of seeing as throughout his phenomenology of perception, this is the most emphasised dimension of perception. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty defines philosophy as the process of “relearning to see the world.” Some fifteen years later, the opening words of *The Visible and the Invisible* emphasise the phenomenon of seeing: “We see the things themselves, the world is what we see: formulas of this kind express a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher – the moment he opens his eyes; they refer to a deep-seated set of mute ‘opinions’ implicated in our lives.”⁷⁹ The dominant theme of “Eye and Spirit” is the interrogation of the wisdom of the eye. The painters are the masters of this wisdom. For Merleau-Ponty, the wisdom of the eye as a philosophy of vision “is what animates the painter [...] in that instant when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cézanne’s words, he ‘thinks in painting.’”⁸⁰ In “Eye and Spirit,”

[t]he painter’s world is a visible world, nothing but visible: a world almost mad, because it is complete though only partial. Painting awakens and carries to its highest power a delirium which is vision itself, since to see is *to have at a distance*; painting extends this strange possession to all aspects of Being, aspects which must somehow be made visible in order to enter into painting.⁸¹

Now if we read Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy within St. Paul’s perspective, we can say that it is a sinful project in which he exchanges “the truth about God for a lie.” Merleau-Ponty “lives by sight” as he celebrates the painters as the masters of the eye. As “the painter’s world” is nothing but “devotion to the visible world,”⁸² the painters, and Merleau-Ponty along with them, worship and serve the “created things rather than the Creator [God]” (Romans 1:25). As such, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy

Merleau-Ponty’s remarks about breathing that are scattered around throughout his *oeuvre*. He never elaborated on these respiratory remarks and the community of Merleau-Ponty scholars has almost universally forgotten them.

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 3.

⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 367–368.

⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 357.

⁸² Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 70.

is almost entirely a project of what Paul means by life according to the flesh. It is in a certain sense true that Merleau-Ponty's flesh for the most part goes hand in hand with how Franck described Paul's notion of the flesh: "The flesh is [...] coextensive with natural visibility [...]. Paul's phenomenology makes the flesh into the very being of the visible. [...] the flesh not only characterizes the body such as it sees itself, but also as in the midst of what it sees." Merleau-Ponty also describes the flesh with the notion of visibility as he calls the flesh "one Visibility"⁸³ or "one universal visibility."⁸⁴ He writes, for example, "it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because one anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, one vision in general."⁸⁵ What is here named as "one Visibility" or "one vision in general" is a "primordial property that belongs to the flesh."⁸⁶

In Merleau-Ponty's case, things are never as clear and distinct or black and white as the Pauline perspective makes them out to be. One can already see this in the titles of his last texts. The titles are not "Eye or Spirit" nor *The Visible* or *the Invisible*, but "Eye and Spirit" and *The Visible* and *the Invisible*. This is truly important. In the Merleau-Pontian context, one does not have to make a choice between life according to the eye and life according to the spirit or between worshipping the visible world and worshipping the invisible God. We have already indicated this as we have discovered that in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, "Being," "the world," "the flesh," and "God" are deeply intertwined and so are also "eye" and "spirit," as well as "the visible" and "the invisible." In a sense, we could say that they are intertwined in a reversible manner. A very revealing example of this intertwining is how Merleau-Ponty describes his notion of the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that doubles them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but the possibility, the latency, and the *flesh* of things [*chair des choses*]. If we turn now back to the seer, we will find that this is no analogy or vague

⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

⁸⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 145.

⁸⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 185. I have altered the translation of Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 142.

⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 142.

comparison and must be taken literally. The gaze, we said, envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things.⁸⁷

If we read these words carefully, we can notice that Merleau-Ponty's flesh refers to a different sphere than Paul's flesh. For Paul, according to Franck, all visible things (my body as a visible thing and things in the world) are the flesh. But surprisingly, for Merleau-Ponty, the flesh is not any kind of visible thing. It is the latent, hidden or secret "tissue" that sustains and nourishes the visible things. It is that which makes visible things possible as visible things. The flesh is "between" all colourful and visible things. Merleau-Ponty calls visible things "alleged [...] visibles" as they do not have existence in our experience without the flesh. Perhaps it could be said that what Merleau-Ponty means by flesh is what makes possible that which Paul means by flesh.

Phenomenologically speaking, the visible things are not independent of the flesh. In the above quotation, Merleau-Ponty writes: "The gaze, we said, envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things." Here, the words "we said" refer to something that Merleau-Ponty said a few pages earlier. In these earlier words, he writes: "we could not dream of seeing [things] 'all naked' because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh."⁸⁸ Visible things are "alleged" things as we can never see them "all naked," that is, independently, on their own and without the latent, secret or hidden flesh as the strange and unlimited domain that constantly envelops and clothes them and thus makes them visible. Later, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty says the following about this: "the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication."⁸⁹ So the flesh between the seer and the thing constitutes the visibility of the thing. In order for the thing to become a visible thing, it needs to be clothed by and within the tissue of the flesh, which "is [...] the] means of communication" between the seer and the thing. In "Eye and Spirit," Merleau-Ponty almost repeats this quotation of *The Visible and the In-*

⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 132–133.

⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 131.

⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 135.

visible with the difference that this time he speaks of “the thickness of water” instead of “the thickness of flesh.”

When through the thickness of water I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if I saw without this flesh, the geometry of the tiles, then I would stop seeing the tiled bottom as it is.⁹⁰

In this example, it is “the fleshy water,”⁹¹ “water as flesh,”⁹² or “the flesh of water”⁹³ as “the *flesh* of things” that makes one see the things. In this example, the thing is “the tiled bottom of the pool.” When the thickness of flesh is the element of water, it means that *to see according to the flesh is to see according to the element of water*.⁹⁴ In relation to this, Miika Luoto insightfully says the following about Merleau-Ponty’s structure of perception: “before opening us to *what* we perceive, perception in fact opens us to that *with which* or *according to which* we perceive.”⁹⁵ The “*what*” is the thing and “*with which* or *according to which*” is the elemental flesh or the elemental tissue.

As the latent “*flesh* of things” is the “perception of *elements* (water, air ...)”⁹⁶ – that is, life according to which we perceive things – then, in my view, we must say that in our everyday life, it is not “the flesh of

⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 371.

⁹¹ This expression is from Leonard Lawlor, *Early Twentieth-Century Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 166 and 167. See also in connection to “the flesh of the water” in “Eye and Mind” Lawlor’s other book *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 82.

⁹² This expression is from Galen A. Johnson, *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 35.

⁹³ This expression is from Johnson, *The Retrieval of the Beautiful*, 33.

⁹⁴ Merleau-Ponty says: “Rather than seeing it I see according to it, or with it.” Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 355.

⁹⁵ Miika Luoto, “Approaching the Untouchable: From Husserl to Merleau-Ponty,” in *Figures of Touch: Sense, Technics, Body*, eds. Mika Elo and Miika Luoto (Tallinna: Academy of Fine Art, 2018), 116.

⁹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 218. Of this elementality of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty writes: “we must think [the flesh ...] as an element” “in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire [...]. The flesh is [...] an ‘element’ of Being.” Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147 and 139.

water” or “water as flesh,” but the “aerial tissue”⁹⁷ (Gaston Bachelard’s notion) as the flesh of air, the thickness of air or *air as flesh* that is most commonly between the seer and the visible thing as “their means of communication.”⁹⁸ Most of the time in our everyday existence, the visible things that we see are clothed in the “hidden or latent”⁹⁹ aerial “connective tissue,” which is invisible. The aerial tissue or elemental air as flesh is the universal dimensionality, milieu or atmosphere of our life that connects and binds us and all things together. In that sense, we could say that the flesh is one single whole in which, to use a Pre-

⁹⁷ This notion of “aerial tissue” (*tissu aérien*) is from Gaston Bachelard, *L’Air et les Songes: Essai sur l’imagination du mouvement* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1943), 298. In this book on the element of air, Bachelard rethinks and reimagines the world within the elemental context of air and through this process, he transforms everything into “aerial phenomena.” In addition to “aerial tissue,” he speaks, for example, of “aerial world,” “aerial imagination,” “aerial travel,” “aerial psychology,” “aerial freedom,” “aerial poetry,” “aerial joy,” and “aerial ethics.” About the Bachelardian use of the notion of aerial, see, for example, my articles Petri Berndtson, “Cultivating a Respiratory and Aerial Culture of Hospitality,” in *Borders and Debordering: Topologies, Praxes, Hospitableness*, eds. Tomaž Grušovnik, Eduardo Mendieta, and Lenart Škof (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 165–180; Petri Berndtson, “Aerial and Respiratory Atmospheres of Avicenna’s Flying Person,” *Poligrafi* 26, no. 103/104 (2021): 131–151, <https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2021.292>.

In my interpretation, Bachelard’s elements (air, water, earth and fire) had a major influence on Merleau-Ponty’s “ultimate notion” of the flesh. With this view, I follow, for example, Edward S. Casey, Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, Glen Mazis, Eileen Rizo-Patron and Richard Kearney. See Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 461n73; Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l’être: Merleau-Ponty au tournant des années 1945–1951* (France: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2004), 267; Glen Mazis, *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination, and Poetic Ontology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 255–270; Eileen Rizo-Patron, “Introduction: Bachelard’s Living Philosophical Legacy,” in *Adventures in Phenomenology: Gaston Bachelard*, eds. Eileen Rizo-Patron with Edward S. Casey and Jason M. Wirth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 4; Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 207n12.

⁹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre briefly mentions that “the warmth of air” and “the breath of the wind” can be understood experientially in terms of flesh as he writes: “In my desiring perception I discover something like a *flesh* of objects. My shirt rubs against my skin, and I feel it. What is ordinarily for me an object most remote becomes the immediately sensible; the warmth of air, the breath of the wind, the rays of sunshine, etc., all are present to me in a certain way, as posited upon me without distance and revealing my flesh by means of their flesh.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 509.

⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 249.

Socratic expression, “all things are together” (*omou en panta*).¹⁰⁰ In this aerial whole as the flesh, “we are made” of “common tissue”¹⁰¹ that is a latent or secret aerial tissue. This means that “perception is not first a perception of *things*, but a perception of [...] [invisible elemental] air”¹⁰² as the fleshy air that makes it possible to have perceptual access to visible things. This invisible and secret aerial tissue as a perception of air is the “fundamental experience”¹⁰³ *according to which* we perceive visible things.

With our newly discovered interpretation of Being as the flesh of air (the latent or secret aerial tissue, the “aerial world”¹⁰⁴), let us interpret anew Merleau-Ponty’s respiratory phrase “there is really and truly inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that one no longer knows who/what sees and who/what is seen, who/what paints and who/what is painted.” In this interpretation, we can initially say that there is “really and truly”¹⁰⁵ a reversibility of inspiration (the action of drawing the breath in) and expiration (the action of drawing the breath out) of the hidden flesh of air, latent aerial tissue or the invisible aerial world. If “action and passion [are] so slightly discernible that one no longer knows who sees and who is seen,” this also means that the action of drawing the breath in cannot easily be differentiated from the passion of drawing the breath in and similarly the action of drawing the breath out cannot easily, if at all, be separated from the passion of drawing the breath out. This means that one no longer knows who or what breathes in and who or what is breathed out, nor who or what breathes out and who or what is breathed in.

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 217. See also, for example, Rajiv Kaushik, *Art and Institution: Aesthetics in the Late Works of Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 68–69; and William S. Hamrick and Jan Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty’s Fundamental Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 73. The Pre-Socratic *omou en panta* is the principle of Anaxagoras. Both Plato and Aristotle refer to this Anaxagorean principle, see also Plato, *Phaedo* 72c and Aristotle, *Physics* 187a30.

¹⁰¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 203.

¹⁰² Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 218.

¹⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 110.

¹⁰⁴ Bachelard, *L’Air et les Songes*, 195.

¹⁰⁵ Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing*, 82 and 96n1.

Earlier I referred to Merleau-Ponty's remark: "*Activity = passivity.*" In this remark, Merleau-Ponty goes as far as to equate activity and passivity within the fundamental phenomenon of reversibility. In relation to this theme of "activity = passivity," Merleau-Ponty writes: "Philosophy has never spoken – I do not say of *passivity*: we are not effects – but I would say of the passivity of our activity [...] it is not I who makes myself think any more than it is I who makes my heart beat."¹⁰⁶ Similarly, it is not I who makes myself breathe. It was never my choice to take a first breath as a newborn. Even now, with each and every breath that I take, the question of who actually breathes is highly complex. There are moments when I breathe consciously and voluntarily in such a way that I can control the rhythm and depth of my breathing. This is only possible if I truly concentrate my awareness on my breath.

Most of the time, my consciousness is focused elsewhere than my breathing, which means that my respiratory activity is deeply passive, i.e., autonomic at least from the perspective of my active will and consciousness. Even during the conscious action of breathing, there are plenty of passive aspects of this activity that Merleau-Ponty calls "the passivity of our activity." I did not choose my breathing body, for example – that is, that I have nostrils and a mouth with which I am able to draw air in and release it out. I did not choose what kind of respiratory organs I have. Neither did I choose the constant structure of breathing as a dual movement of inspiration and expiration, nor did I choose that we breathe the elemental atmosphere of air and that there is this invisible immensity of air perpetually surrounding us with each and every inhalation and exhalation. As we are engulfed by this aerial immensity, we do not need to look for air to breathe as we do for other goods and services like food, clothing, shelter, etc. One of the major differences, for example, compared to eating and drinking is that we can be without them for quite long periods, but we can only remain alive for a very brief period of time without breathing. In addition to these dimensions, breathing is not a private affair as we breathe together with one another. We constantly share the common air that we breathe.

¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 221.

Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Themes within
Milieu of *Fleshpiration*: Paradox of Being
and Binding Together

I have repeated quite a few times during this article Merleau-Ponty's words: "philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God." This other name, for the late Merleau-Ponty, is the flesh of which he said that "there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it."¹⁰⁷ It is a name that binds all things together. The fundamental "theme" of philosophy, according to Merleau-Ponty, is this theme of "binding" or "*vinculum*." It is in his respiratory phrase concerning "inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being" that, in my opinion, Merleau-Ponty gives us a seed that radicalises the name "flesh" into what I call "*fleshpiration*." The name "*fleshpiration*" names a radicalised beginning of philosophy. In a somewhat similar manner as in the words inspiration, expiration and respiration, where the prefixes in-, ex-, and re- are combined with the word "spiration," the words "flesh" and "spiration" are combined in this neologism. It is a name in which I intertwine in a paradoxical manner the life according to the flesh and the life according to the Spirit. For St. Paul, these two lifestyles fundamentally oppose each other as the one worships the created visible things and the other the invisible Creator/God. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is not based on either-or oppositions or dichotomies. His "philosophy of interconnection of everything" is the interrogation of the "initial paradox[es]"¹⁰⁸ of life. The word "paradox" means that which is "contrary to the common opinion, belief or expectation." In relation to this, a paradox can be understood as a statement that seems absurd but is still true. In comparison to Paul who understands the flesh and the Spirit as Respiration, the sight and the faith, or the visible and the invisible as mutually exclusive opposites, Merleau-Ponty understands all of them in a paradoxical manner as intertwined and mutually inclusive. For example, Merleau-Ponty says the following about the relation between the visible and the invisible: "the

¹⁰⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

¹⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 354.

invisible is not the contradictory of the visible [...] the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it.”¹⁰⁹ If we interpret the invisible as the aerial tissue or the fleshy air and the visible as visible things, then we can say that the invisible flesh of air is the secret counterpart of the visible things. As the secret counterpart of the visible, the aerial tissue is the flesh of things that clothes all things in its aeriality. This aerial clothing that embraces all things, Merleau-Ponty also calls “upholstering”¹¹⁰ around and between the visible. If in St. Paul, the flesh is related to the visible and the Spirit to the invisible, then within the Merleau-Pontian context, the Spirit as Respiration is related to the in-visible flesh of air or aerial tissue that surrounds each and every breathing being and visible thing. Life according to the eyes/sight connects us with the visible things by means of the fleshy air. Life according to the Spirit as Respiration as *fleshpiration* gives us immediate (without mediation) respiratory access to the flesh of air. Merleau-Ponty’s “inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being” refers to perpetual reversibility as a strange exchange between fleshy air and various modalities of breathing.

Fleshpiration expresses the fundamental experience of the reversibility of respiration and Being as the flesh of air, which Merleau-Ponty expresses when he says: “there is really and truly [...] respiration within Being.” In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty states the fundamental ontological truth: “we are within Being.”¹¹¹ If one intertwines “we are within Being” and “respiration within Being,” the wonderful sentence arises “we are respiration within Being,” which expresses the respiratory ontological truth. As Being is the flesh, then this same fundamental truth could be expressed by saying “we are *fleshpiration*.” As I suggested earlier, my neologism “*fleshpiration*” names a new beginning of philosophy for the perpetual beginner who always wishes to “recommence everything.”¹¹² I suggest that the ontological truth “we are respiration within Being” that the word “*fleshpiration*” names is the new beginning that challenges and radicalises Merleau-Ponty’s previous

¹⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 215.

¹¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 272.

¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 128.

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 130.

beginning of the perceived world as life according to sight. The respiratory world or “we are respiration within Being” would be the new “foundation that is always presupposed by all rationality, all value and all existence.”

This would mean that all phenomena have their beginning or foundation within the experience of “we are respiration within Being” or, as Claudel said based on the biblical respiratory creation of humanity, that “the whole character of man is within respiration.” We can interpret Claudel’s “respiration” in his sentence as synonymous with what he elsewhere calls the “milieu of the divine respiration.” The word “milieu” literally means “middle place.” Claudel’s respiratory definition of humanity could be stated as follows: *the whole character of man is within the milieu of the divine respiration*. In connection to the Hebrew tradition, it was earlier stated that *ruach*, as the breath of God, could be understood as the common air. The milieu as the middle place or the middle of the divine respiration or the common air in Merleau-Pontian terms of the flesh could be interpreted, for example, as the fleshy air (the thickness of the flesh, the thickness of the air) between the seer and the seen. In relation to these respiratory and aerial trains of thought, the new beginning could be also taken from Jesus’s “*pneuma o théos*” as “Breath [is] the God” or “Air [is] the God,” and thus it could be combined with Merleau-Ponty’s words: “philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God.” Here, it is important to remember that Jesus does not say that “God is Breath” (John 4:24) as he is saying something different, which means that, in my opinion, he is already “giving another name” to that which has traditionally been named as God. His new name is “Pneuma” (Breath, Wind, Air, Spirit). I suggest that this new name or word is placed in the famous context of the *Gospel of John*, which says: “The Word became flesh and made his/its dwelling among us” (John 1:14). If this Word or Name is the Name that Jesus gave, that is, “*pneuma o théos*,” then we could say that the Word or the Name as “Breath/Respiration” and/or “Air” became flesh, which would mean in my Merleau-Pontian context that “Breath/Respiration” and/or “Air” became, in a reversible manner, *fleshpiration*.

In the early part of this article, I quoted these words of Merleau-Ponty:

The meaning of the Pentecost is that the religion of both the Father and the Son are to be fulfilled in the religion of the Spirit, that God is no longer in Heaven but in human society and communication, wherever men come together in His name. Christ's stay on earth was only the beginning of his presence in the world [*le commencement de sa présence dans le monde*], which is continued by the Church.

Merleau-Ponty is expressing the idea of religious life, which has been brought "down to earth" and that is no longer "separated from experience." Now if one reads these words within the Claudelian context of "the spirit is respiration," as I have cultivated throughout this article, Merleau-Ponty would be speaking of *the religion of the Respiration*. *The meaning of the religion of the Respiration would be that "respiring God" or Breath as God would no longer be in Heaven but in human society and communication, wherever people come together in His name.* In relation to this, it is worth remembering that the etymological meaning of religion, according to St. Augustine, was "to bind or fasten" and thus "religion [...] bind[s] us tight to the one almighty God." If this etymology is taken seriously, then the religion of the Respiration transforms into a *binding* or *fastening of the Respiration* and this goes together with Merleau-Ponty's fundamental theme of the philosophy of *nexus* or *vinculum* as "a philosophy of the interconnection of everything" that binds everything to "inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being," that is, to *fleshpiration*.

Merleau-Ponty's New Hidden Respiratory God?

For Merleau-Ponty, "philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystallised under the name of God." Within the atmosphere of these words, I want to say that very few readers of Merleau-Ponty know that *Phenomenology of Perception* contains some surprising clues or seeds connected to what could be called the beginning of a new religion of respiration (respiratory religion) or a new philosophy of respiration (respiratory philosophy). In this new respiratory religion or new respiratory philosophy, we are all bound tightly to one

respiring God as “the hidden god”¹¹³ or one respiring Being. We are, according to Merleau-Ponty, all *calling with our breath this respiring God or respiring Being* before we wish to fall asleep and sleep only becomes possible if we are able to establish communication with it in a deep and reversible manner. Merleau-Ponty gives a new name to this God or Being: “some immense exterior lung.”¹¹⁴ We gain access to this communicative reversibility through “some immense exterior lung” by breathing in a certain way as a call of breath. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty’s *respiratory call* has similarities to Jesus’s idea that the “worshippers must worship in Respiration” as “Respiration [is] the God” and to St. Paul’s idea that “Breath/Respiration” reveals the mysterious “depths of God” as “the invisible God.”¹¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty’s respiratory call is a form of worship and service in Respiration. He writes about this respiratory call and “some immense exterior lung” as follows:

I lie down in my bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes, *breathe slowly*, and distance myself from my projects. But this is where the power of my will or consciousness ends. Just as the faithful in Dionysian mysteries invoke the god by imitating the scenes of his life, I too *call forth the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper*. [...] Sleep “arrives” at a particular moment, it settles upon this imitation of itself that I offered it, and I succeed in becoming what I pretended to be: that unseeing and nearly unthinking mass.¹¹⁶

[S]leep arrives when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from the outside the very confirmation that it was expecting. *I was breathing slowly and deeply to call forth sleep, and suddenly, one might say, my mouth communicates with some immense exterior lung that calls my breath forth and forces it back, a certain respiratory rhythm* desired by me just a moment ago, *becomes my very being*, and sleep intended until then as a signification, suddenly turns into a situation.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 211.

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 219.

¹¹⁵ Karl Rahner speaks of sleep in religious terms. According to Rahner, there is “such a thing as a theology of sleeping,” which includes, for example, “welcoming sleep in a prayerful way.” Karl Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 183.

¹¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 166. My emphasis.

¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 219. My emphasis.

Nobody in the academic community, except myself, has tried to investigate what this “immense exterior lung” and respiratory call could be about and whether it could have a connection with Merleau-Ponty’s other respiratory phrasing of “inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being.”¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty himself never elaborated on what these notions could be about and the potential further implications of this immense lung as the respiratory God or respiratory Being. As we can observe, these quotations have quite a few religious references as Merleau-Ponty speaks of “faithful,” “Dionysian mysteries,” “invoking the god,” and “confirmation.” In addition to these references, just before or after these quotations Merleau-Ponty also refers to “the sacrament,” “an operation of Grace,” “the real presence of God,” and “the communion.”¹¹⁹ The process of falling asleep in the communicative guidance of “some immense exterior lung” can be interpreted as “an operation of Grace”¹²⁰ and respiratory communication or communion with this immense lung could be interpreted as “the real presence of God.”

Merleau-Ponty’s brief descriptions of falling asleep are great examples of what respiratory reversibility as *fleshpiration* could be as a phenomenon between the one who imitates “the breathing [...] of the sleeper” and “some immense exterior lung,” because in this betweenness, one no longer knows who or what breathes in, who what is breathed in, who or what breathes out and who or what is breathed out. And as *one no longer knows*, one has entered the milieu of mystery and philosophy, the milieu of recommencement as the art of not-knowing and wonder. As it is this immense exterior lung that takes over my life in this process of falling asleep, we could say within the Pauline context that falling

¹¹⁸ In the following two chapters, “Merleau-Ponty’s Return to ‘Some Immense Exterior Lung’ and the Possibility of the Primacy of Breathing” and “The New Ontologico-Respiratory Principle ‘There is Really and Truly Inspiration and Expiration of Being,’” I investigate Merleau-Ponty’s thinking concerning the relations between the respiratory call, “some immense exterior lung” and “inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration within Being.” Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing*, 46–65 and 76–98.

¹¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 166–167 and 219.

¹²⁰ See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*, trans. Leonard Lawloe and Heath Massey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 142.

asleep could be interpreted as a form of life according to the Spirit, that is, *kata pneuma* or *pneumon* (lung) (perhaps during sleep, we find life according to this immense lung). We could say roughly that our circadian rhythm makes all of us righteous in the Pauline perspective during the night when we close our eyes and fall asleep, giving us access to life according to the Respiration/*pneumon*/immense lung, and makes us sinful during the day as we open our eyes and live according to the sight focusing on and worshipping the visible created things.

What kind of new religion could be a religion (etymologically binding as a bond, *nexus* and *vinculum*) of Respiration/Spirit in which the hidden and invisible god, or perhaps better expressed as “some immense exterior lung,” is “no longer in Heaven but in human society and communication”? It is a religion or philosophy as binding in which we perpetually communicate in a respiratory manner with some immense exterior lung that is interpreted as the aerial tissue (air as the elemental flesh) and in this respiratory binding, it is this communication with this invisible and secret immense lung between all of us as the “means of communication” (flesh) and as the shared common air that makes possible our human community, society and culture without any hierarchies as each and every one of us has immediate access to it. Merleau-Ponty relates this immediate communicative access to the immense exterior lung to “an operation of Grace” and “the real presence of God” as “the hidden god.” This strange system of respiratory and aerial communication or communion, in its ceaseless reversibility between respiration and fleshy air, is what my new word or name “*fleshpiration*” defines as it weaves its invisible tissues around and through visible things. At least during each night, as well as during the day if I am lucky enough to realise *pneuma* as the God, I am *born again* as a *pneumatic self* in respiratory, or dare I say *fleshpiratory*, communication or communion as Merleau-Ponty says: “a certain respiratory rhythm [organised by some immense exterior lung ...] becomes my very being.” I suggest that as, according to Merleau-Ponty, the fundamental theme of philosophy is the interconnection or binding of everything as the common flesh/tissue of which we are all made, it would be the experiential *life according to some immense exterior lung* (*kata pneuma, pneumon*) as *fleshpiration* that we would take as the new point of departure to create

this philosophy in a totally and radically new manner. One of the first tasks of this new respiratory enterprise would be to explore the relation between the respiring God of Genesis 2:7 and the immense exterior lung in the name of *fleshpiration*.

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