Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language

HUGH J. SILVERMAN
State University of New York at Stony Brook

To interrogate language is to raise the question of its place and meaning within the frame of human experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty never ceased to interrogate language; but in asking about language, he reformulated its character into four generally synchronic knowledge frameworks. Within what he called the primacy of perception, he wove a texture of problematics, including nature, thing, body, world, time, freedom, dialectic, art, history, and vision. Each problematic implicates and incorporates the others. Language is inscribed within the texture of problematics as the disclosure of their relationships but also according to the knowledge frame in which they operate.

Merleau-Ponty returned to the question of language again and again—from its initial formulation in Phenomenology of Perception (1945) to the version offered in his posthumous and unfinished The Visible and the Invisible (1964). Within each framework, he would retrace to a certain degree the terrain he had already traversed and each time he would reformulate his understanding of language. In each reiteration, the shape of language as a problematic itself had changed. Yet there are no radical epistemological breaks along his itinerary and there is no continuity of thought either. As he articulated his understanding of language, it underwent significant transformations in the almost two decades during which it played a role in his thinking and writing.
The framing of the four formulations includes (1) the language of the body [1945], (2) the philosophy and psychology of communication [1946-52], (3) indirect language [1952-57], and (4) the language of visibility [1958-61]. Because these frameworks incorporate texts resulting from formal lectures and uncompleted manuscripts as well as deliberate publications, a certain overlap in the dates of appearance mark the organization of texts.

I shall offer a three-fold reading of the four formulations. The first and most extensive reading establishes Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of language according to the four different frameworks or formulations. The second reading offers an interrogation of language based upon its appropriation within Merleau-Ponty’s own enterprise. The third reading takes the interrogation of the appropriative and appropriated language to its limits, to the place at which it no longer operates simply as a lived language of significations. This last reading moves to where its own paradoxes of expression locate a style which is not in any particular place but which joins, corners, and signs the inscription and interpretation of particular languages—of literature, of corporeity, of history, of sociality, etc.

For each of the four formulations, a distinctive, diacritical, and oppositional relation characterizes the appropriateness of language. The elaboration of the oppositional structure is already the interrogation of language. The elaboration does not simply announce the appropriateness of language, for it places itself in the between, at the locale in which language is questioned, where language is neither a philosophical construct nor a practical tool, where language becomes a system of significations with a style of its own. For language to have a style of its own is to take language too far, to take it to excess. For language to rely exclusively on a network of significations is to underestimate language. The limits of language occur at the juncture, at the intersection, at the cornering (accointance) where the ambiguity of significations meets the expression of a style. This placement of language at the limits of significations on the one side and the achievement of style on the other constitutes the parameters which Merleau-Ponty announces but cannot fulfill.

I. THE LANGUAGE OF THE BODY

In the Structure of Behavior (1942), Merleau-Ponty found little place for language. The critique of early behaviorism, the building of the human order onto the vital and physical orders, and even the relations between body and soul circumvented the question of language.