MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE PARADOXES OF EXPRESSION

Donald A. Landes

PACT

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Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression

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to Kathleen, for so many reasons

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Abbreviations

Given the focus of this book, I have provided the completion or publication dates for Merleau-Ponty's works in brackets following the titles below. An extensive resource for this information can be found in the front materials of the books by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, listed below as *ESA1* and *ESA2*.

AD Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955), trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

BH1 Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existential Diary*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976).

BH2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Being and Having" (1936), trans. Michael B. Smith, in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry, Jr., 101–7 (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992).

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

CAL Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* (1949–1950), trans. Hugh J. Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

CD Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945), trans. Michael B. Smith, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, 59–75 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

CR Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Christianity and *ressentiment*" (1935), trans. Gerald Wening, in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry, Jr., 85–100 (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992).

EBEC Donald A. Landes, "Expressive Body, Exscriptive Corpus: The Tracing of the Body from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Jean-Luc Nancy," *Chiasmi International* IX (2009): 249–72.

EM Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" (1960), trans. Michael B. Smith, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, 121–49 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

ESA1 Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être: Merleau-Ponty au tournant des années 1945–1951* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2004).

ESA2 Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, *Le scénario cartésien: Recherches sur la formation et la cohérence de l'intention philosophique de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2005).

EX Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosophy of Existence" (1959), trans. Allen S. Weiss, in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry, Jr., 129–39 (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992).

EXR Jenny Slatman, *L'expression au-delà de la représentation: Sur l'aisthêsis et l'esthétique chez Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Peeters, 2003).

FEP Kerry H. Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

HLP Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* (1959–1960), ed. Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo, trans. John O'Neill and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002).

HT Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror* (1947), trans. John O'Neill (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

IL Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (1952), trans. Michael B. Smith, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, 76–120 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

ILFI Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (Grenoble: Jérome Millon, 2005).

IMP Galen A. Johnson, "Introductions to Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Painting," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, 3–55 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

Inédit Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *A Prospectus of His Work*" (1951/1952), in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Arleen B. Dallery, 3–11 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

IPP *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. James M. Edie and John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

JM Gabriel Marcel, *Journal métaphysique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927).

MO Renaud Barbaras, "Métaphore et ontologie," in *Le tournant de l'expérience: Recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*, 267–87 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1998).

MP Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

MPIL Hugh J. Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language," in *Inscriptions: After Phenomenology and Structuralism*, 2nd edn, 152–71 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

MPLV Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

MPM Barry Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism: From Terror to Reform* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979).

MPO M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2nd edn (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

NH Étienne Bimbenet, *Nature et Humanité: Le problème anthropologique dans l'oeuvre de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2004).

Note Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli" (1949), in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, 211–23 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

OPL Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "On the Phenomenology of Language" (1951), in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, 84–97 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

PEx Bernard Waldenfels, "The Paradox of Expression," trans. Chris Nagel, in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh,* ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, 89–102 (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

PH Sonia Kruks, "Philosophy of History," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds, 70–81 (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008).

PhEx Remy C. Kwant, *The Phenomenology of Expression*, trans. Henry J. Koren (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

PhP Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012).

PLB J. Messaut, *La philosophie de Léon Brunschvicg* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1938).

Pol Diana Coole, "Politics and the Political," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds, 82–94 (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008).

Préface Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Introduction" (1960), in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, 3–35 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

PSh Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosopher and His Shadow" (1958), in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, 159–81 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

PW Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World* (1951), trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

R Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1994).

RM Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (New York: Routledge, 1977).

RRMP Hugh J. Silverman, "Re-reading Merleau-Ponty," in *Inscriptions: After Phenomenology and Structuralism*, 2nd edn, 123–51 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

SB Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (1938), trans. Alden L. Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963).

SEG Jean-Hugues Barthélémy, *Simondon ou l'encyclopédisme génétique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

SNS Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (1948), trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia A. Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

TP Claude Lefort, "Thinking Politics," trans. Taylor Carman and Mark B. Hansen, with Alexander Hickox, in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. Hansen, 352–80 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

TT Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Titres et travaux: Projet d'enseignement" (1951), in *Parcours deux: 1951–1961*, 9–35 (Paris: Verdier, 2000).

UEP Lydia Goehr, "Understanding the Engaged Philosopher: On Politics, Philosophy, and Art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. Hansen, 318–51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Union Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul* (1947–1948), trans. Paul B. Milan (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001).

VArt Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Vestige of Art," in *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, 81–100 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

VGM Simonne Plourde et al., *Vocabulaire philosophique de Gabriel Marcel* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985).

VI Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1959–1960), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

VPT Théodore F. Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendantale: La genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu'à la* Phénoménologie de la perception (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

WMM Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 245–64 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

WTP Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The War Has Taken Place" (1945), in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, 139–52 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

Introduction: The Paradoxical Logic of Expression

Our analyses of thought give us the impression that before it finds the words which express it, it is already a sort of ideal text that our sentences attempt to translate. But the author himself has no text to which he can compare his writing, and no language prior to language.[1]

Throughout his work, Maurice Merleau-Ponty characterizes phenomenological reflection as a type of "wonder" in the face of the paradoxical structures haunting our most familiar experiences. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he describes reflection as the act of stepping back from the world, not to discover "consciousness as the foundation of the world," but rather to "see transcendences spring forth" and to "loosen the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear." Phenomenological reflection "alone is conscious of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical."[2] In his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he characterizes the beginning of phenomenological reflection upon our familiar experiences of the world through an allusion to Saint Augustine's famous assertion about time: time is "perfectly familiar to each, but [. . .] none of us can explain it to the others."[3] Time, at first glance, appears wholly unproblematic; my present is a limit between a past that is *no longer* and future that is *to come*. The world of unreflective experience seems to be merely an ensemble of medium-sized dry objects that I sense or represent as *outside* of myself. Time and the world sustain our actions and respond to our expectations seamlessly. Yet when we press upon these phenomena and attempt to express their meanings or to identify their deep structures, their initial clarity slips through our fingers. We are left astounded at just how unknown and fleeting such familiar or intimate aspects of our experience could suddenly appear. This wonder is both the motivation for and the engine of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy.

The case is no different for Merleau-Ponty's consistent return to the phenomenon of expression. Thought, it would seem, takes place in mental

space, and expression is simply the *making public* of this inner experience. It appears that thought exists as an ideal text that our spoken or written words "translate" (*IL*, 80). Indeed, what could be more obvious than the act of expressing our thoughts? "If you *have* something to say, say it!" And surely we have all uttered the words: "No, that's not quite what I meant. I meant to say . . ." Such experiences seem to reveal a breakdown in the technical translation between thought and its expression. But what justifies this metaphor of *having* something to say, and where exactly does this inner world or treasure chest of ideas exist?

As Merleau-Ponty repeatedly demonstrates, phenomenological disruptions leave us standing in wonder before the paradoxes of expression. For instance, in philosophical reflections on language or aesthetics, cracks begin to appear in the definition of expression as a simple "making public" of inner thoughts, giving rise to paradoxical formulations—*aporias* of creation, confusions over the endurance or location of the artwork, problems of constituting or communicating a new sense, or of communicating at all, and debates about the nature or existence of ideal meanings or objectivities. Such paradoxical formulations haunt any aesthetic theory that does not posit a transcendental subject behind or before artistic activity or that fails to question the theory of communication that rests upon a mind coding and decoding signs from the safety of (what I will call in this book) an interpretive distance.

Just as Saint Augustine's rethinking of time leads him to an urgent questioning of the presuppositions of the philosophical tradition, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of *expression* suggests a reconceptualization of subjectivity, the philosophy of language, and, eventually, of ontology itself. Merleau-Ponty's approach to philosophical questions *via* the paradoxical "logic" of expression is, I will argue, his fundamental style, and it shapes his investigation into regions as diverse as the structures of behavior, perception, language, politics, aesthetics, and ontology. Although he never makes this generalization of the logic of expression thematic, his conviction is clear in the following passage:

> All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*. Not that derivative labor which substitutes for what is expressed signs which are given elsewhere with their meaning and rule of usage, but the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs, makes that which is expressed dwell in them through the eloquence of their arrangement and configuration alone, implants a meaning in that which did not have one, and thus—far from exhausting itself in the instant at which it occurs—inaugurates an order and founds an institution or a tradition. (*IL*, 104)

For Merleau-Ponty, all human action is expression (understood in a particular way), and thus understanding the paradoxical logic of expression is an essential task in approaching his varied contribution.[4] Moving definitively beyond the realm of language, the paradoxical logic of expression is the thread that unites Merleau-Ponty's diverse investigations as the very style of his questioning and, true to this paradoxical logic itself, his understanding of expression evolves in dialogue with the very investigations through which it is revealed. This book attempts to capture, through Merleau-Ponty's engagement with the *paradoxes of expression*, a form of reflection capable of sustaining this wonder and of raising these paradoxes to speech without thereby locking them down with final eidetic clarity or thereby freezing the open and *metastable* trajectory to which they belong.[5]

In the paradoxes of time or the familiar world—that they are "perfectly familiar to each, but that none of us can explain it to the others" (*VI*, 3)—a priority to the question of expression appears. Experience overflows what is said about it, and the paradox of expression is sparked in the irrepressible space between what we live and what we say, a *metastable* silence that makes possible both its organization in speech and the simultaneous undoing of that organization. For a subject who can speak, the silence of thought is not a treasure chest of ideas complete in themselves and waiting merely to be transposed into arbitrary signs. Rather, there is a silence that haunts us as a metastable structure of tensions and possibilities, and this silence guides the creative act that, paradoxically, gives it voice and sustains it *as* silence. The philosopher speaks, and Merleau-Ponty admits "this is a weakness in him," at least insofar as he or she would assume his/her work to be finished when philosophy *coincides* with experience, as if it were possible to collapse the irrepressible space by which things appear. "[The philosopher's] entire 'work' is this absurd effort. He wrote in order to state his contact with Being; he did not state it, and could not state it, since it is silence. Then he recommences . . ." (*VI*, 125). The paradoxical logic of expression names the endless movement of philosophy itself, a *hyper-dialectic* that never comes to rest, the constant and forever abortive attempt to close the gap between what we live and what we say. For Merleau-Ponty, the responsible philosopher is the one who takes up this inescapable task without wishing to bring it to an end, and hence philosophy in the end will be, properly speaking, a trajectory of ongoing *interrogation* in the mode of *expression*.

Some readers have emphasized key breaks or "turns" that mark Merleau-Ponty's philosophical trajectory.[6] He seems to have abandoned his earliest investigations of behavior and Gestalt psychology in favor of a predominantly Husserlian phenomenological approach. His studies of child psychology and Saussurean structuralism moved him decidedly away

from transcendental phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty himself famously affirms a break when, in his final shift to a mode of reflection he called "hyper-reflection" or "interrogation," he suggests that his earlier works remained mired in a "philosophy of consciousness" that they had nonetheless attempted to escape. Even his political thought undergoes fundamental revision, moving from Marxism to a new liberalism. And yet, throughout all of these developments, Merleau-Ponty consistently returns to the opening questions of his philosophical reflection: how is it that humans are both subject and object, first person and third person, spontaneous and yet wholly determined?[7] As I will argue, his evolving answers reflect less a series of breaks or rejections than an open *trajectory* of deepening engagements with the paradoxical logic of expression.

As such, I will demonstrate in this book how Merleau-Ponty's philosophical practice itself is deeply marked by the paradoxical logic of expression and how, in a sense, his *explicit* work on expression is just a moment in an *implicit* trajectory of his ongoing philosophical interrogation into this logic. He draws from a diverse set of thinkers or methodologies and immediately puts them to work toward his own questioning, but what remains constant is his *style* of questioning. In this book, I aim to establish that the paradoxical logic of expression is not the "secret" of Merleau-Ponty's texts, but rather the *style* of his every philosophical gesture and is thus illustrated across his corpus. As Hugh J. Silverman writes, "[s]tyle is the paradox of expression taken to its limits" (*MPIL*, 171). This book, then, requires not a collection and evaluation of Merleau-Ponty's explicit statements *about* expression, but a return to the movement of his thought along its entire open trajectory, a thought, as he once said of Husserl, that was only turned into a "work" by an "interruption which is always premature."[8] From his initial understanding of the paradox of expression as action between pure repetition and pure creation, to his deepening of this structure to the ontological register by which expressive gestures create and sustain structures that paradoxically transcend them and solicit them, this book offers *a reading* of Merleau-Ponty in the style of Merleau-Ponty—through a contact with the texts themselves in an attempt to take them up and carry them forward along the *unthought* trajectory of their metastable sense. It is a reading of the style of his expressive traces insofar as they contain (as potential) not only what he thought, but also *how* he thought it and *where* it might have taken him.

In order to offer an introduction to this reading, I will begin with a sketch of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the phenomenological necessity of a new theory of meaning and communication, one in which thinking is in fact *accomplished* by speaking. Following this, I will establish the importance of

Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the *experience* of expression, which leads to a formulation of his particular form of phenomenological reflection, while introducing concepts such as "exscription" and "vestige" from Jean-Luc Nancy.[9] This form of thought involves not an eidetic analysis of the phenomenon of expression, but instead an attempt to gear into the metastable structures of experience themselves through an open style of phenomenological description. Drawing upon the work of Gilbert Simondon, I will introduce some concepts, such as metastable equilibriums and transductive logic, which help to structure my reading in the chapters to follow. This makes it possible to offer a Merleau-Pontian theory of metaphor as a new theory of meaning understood as the performance of the sense of the vestiges of expression. I will conclude the introduction by drawing out Merleau-Ponty's own theory of *reading*, setting the stage for the chapters of this book that attempt to gear into Merleau-Ponty's expressive vestiges through a Merleau-Pontian-styled reading of Merleau-Ponty.

* * *

Meaning, communication, and phenomenological disruptions

> [L]anguage is not meaning's servant, and yet it does not govern meaning. [. . .] Here no one commands and no one obeys. What we *mean* is not before us, outside all speech, as sheer signification. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said. (*IL*, 120)

In commencing a study of expression, one finds the seemingly clear concepts of "meaning" and "communication." Language is surely a system of signs related to meanings, and through language we have access to a meaningful world and to a community of fellow speakers with whom we can and do communicate our thoughts. As the animal possessing language, we "have" meanings held in some reserve storehouse of memory like ammunition for a potential battle. In communicating, we deploy this arsenal to achieve a particular "end" that itself can be defined outside of the essentially interchangeable "means" by which it is accomplished. Communication is, then, a question of logistics, efficiency, or technique. And yet, this common sense description already points toward Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the "classical" or "technical" theory of meaning. In short, a classical theory will be one that understands speech as *translation* and communication as *interpretation*. A patient study of classical theories is neither the task of this introduction, nor a task that Merleau-Ponty adopted

as his own. Rather, he begins by identifying the broad strokes of classical theories and the phenomenological evidence that disrupts their foundational premises in order to situate his own phenomenological position. Thus, the question here is not to evaluate the accuracy of his reading, but to introduce how phenomenological insights into lived experience shape both his critique and his positive theory of expression.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that, despite their differences, classical "empiricist" and "intellectualist" accounts of language share the common presupposition that, as a phenomenal reality, a "word *has* no signification" (*PhP*, 182). In the case of empiricist or mechanistic approaches, a word is understood as a mere sign or stimulus that has the peculiar property of triggering some association of sounds, behaviors, or verbal images that give an external observer the impression of some mental activity happening in some physical body. Conceived as a moment in a causal chain, a word cannot be said to "have" meaning. In the case of intellectualist accounts, the word itself can have no meaning because meaning is reserved for thought. "Thought," writes Merleau-Ponty, "has a sense and the word remains an empty envelope. The word is merely an articulatory, sonorous phenomenon, but in any case, language is only an external accompaniment of thought" (*PhP*, 182). By subordinating the word to thought, "one ends up [. . .] devaluating language."[10]

Yet Merleau-Ponty is clear—the stakes are higher than simply debunking a misguided theory of speech, since any theory of language has important consequences for, or reveals important presuppositions in, one's implicit understanding of subjectivity or human being. The study of expression offers nothing less than the opportunity "to leave behind, once and for all, the classical subject–object dichotomy" (*PhP*, 179). On the empiricist view, there are pure objects, but "there is no one who speaks," since language is a mechanical process of recording and reacting to stimuli. On the intellectualist account, there is a pure subject, but this subject is a thinking subject, not a speaking one (*PhP*, 182). The ideas or thoughts of this subject are considered pure, whereas the accidents and particularities of empirical languages are merely inconvenient obstacles to efficient expression and communication. In neither case is there room for the phenomenological subject, and communication is "an exclusively technical problem." The act of speaking is a simple event in a causal chain or "a piece of clothing for consciousness, an accoutrement of thought" (*CAL*, 9–10).

For Merleau-Ponty, a return to the *experience* of expression reveals human action as between pure exteriority and pure interiority, between the "pure repetition" of mechanical processes and the "pure creation" of constituting consciousness.[11] A sensitivity to the phenomenological subject, however, is

no guarantee against the illusions that lead these "classical" approaches astray. According to Merleau-Ponty, even Husserl's *Logical Investigations* offers an "eidetic of language and a universal grammar" that reduces empirical language to a mere accompaniment of the activity of transcendental consciousness.[12] Such a "pure" language presumes a system of available significations devoid of all ambiguity. The desire for a language without ambiguity—a language that would allow for thought to express itself without remainder—is a natural effect of the fact that language is always pointing away from itself and toward the things that are spoken of. Given its adoption of the mistaken presupposition that language is a mere external *accompaniment* of thought, such a project for a "universal language" is, writes Merleau-Ponty, a "revolt against language in its existing state" and an attempt to "tear speech out of history."[13] Only a phenomenology of expression that begins and remains *within* lived experience can avoid the pitfalls of classical approaches that offer nothing but a "bad ambiguity," nothing but the "mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority."[14]

A return to the phenomenon of expression shows that language, spoken or written, *has* a meaning, that words *accomplish* thought. The conversion of the question of language into a technical, structural, or even *eidetic* question is a refusal to reflect upon the phenomenal reality of speech. If thought existed as complete and self-sufficient prior to its expression, then it seems impossible to explain, as Merleau-Ponty writes:

> why thought tends toward expression as if toward its completion, why the most familiar object appears indeterminate so long as we have not remembered its name, and why the thinking subject himself is in a sort of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken or written them. (*PhP*, 182–3)

In other words, the *experience* of thought, which is assumed to proceed without the contingencies and obstacles of empirical language, in fact reveals that thought is *accomplished* in language. "Meaning" can be neither reserved for thought, nor reduced to a third person system of associations. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on expression entails nothing less than a shift in the theory of meaning toward what we might call a theory of sense (*sens*).[15]

Moreover, if communication were the coding and decoding of meanings through the medium of written or spoken "messages," then communication would involve simply overcoming the technical difficulties of accurate interpretation. And yet genuine learning takes place in conversation. If thought were complete and pure in itself, then it would possess in advance everything we would ever think (either alone or in dialogue). But we surely

"have the power to understand beyond what we could have spontaneously thought." "Through speech," writes Merleau-Ponty, "there is a taking up of the other person's thought, a reflection in others, a power of thinking *according to others*, which enriches our own thoughts" (*PhP*, 184). We do not translate a speaker's words into a language of ideas we already possess in our own minds; rather, when we understand and genuinely communicate, we grasp the *sense* of their speech. Just as learning a gesture or acquiring a habit involves learning not merely some mechanical set of muscle contractions and physical movements, but rather the *sense* that will allow this gesture to modulate in new and different settings, learning a "meaning" is also more than simply memorizing an association between a word and an idea. Grasping the *sense* of the word allows me to play it forward into new situations that may bear little resemblance to its original occurrence. To learn a word is to grasp its *style* as one of the possibilities of my body and to enter into a phenomenal field in which this word is tacitly present and may (or may not) be solicited. Listening or reading are not purely passive; they are expressive insofar as they leave no room in our minds for a pure thought separate from this expressive act; they involve lending our ears or eyes to the thought that is coming into the world as the *sense* of these sonorous phenomena or material traces. Moreover, the structure of communication reaches to the essence of expression in general, for even in my own acts of speaking "my spoken words surprise me myself and teach me my own thought" (*OPL*, 88). The phenomenon of expression is always already one of *inter*-subjectivity, a spacing that divides and connects, the spacing between me and myself that allows the world to appear as the meaningful background of all that I might do, though this background remains the silent support of every spoken word.

Speaking, then, must be related to a certain silence, but this silence is not the unspoken and preexisting language of thought. Since we grasp a *sense* rather than possess a meaning, the silence that permeates our experience of speaking must be the felt presence of so many possibilities that are never made explicit. The silence to which speech responds, then, is not a pure nothingness. For Merleau-Ponty, thought cannot exist outside of its expression, and yet speech is surely a response to *something*, to the silence that calls to be spoken through the taking up of already spoken or constituted language in a paradoxical response to what *will have been* said. This is not to fall back into empiricism, where the sedimented language is triggered through some third person process in the impersonal system of acquired meanings. Speech is a creative taking up, a response to the *weight* of the past and to the urgencies of the present in an act that at once attempts to say what cannot be said and that simultaneously falls into language as spoken, bringing with it all of its latent ambiguity as the surplus of what is said. In