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## The Art of Word

In the aesthetics of “a word” Merleau-Ponty located art within the sphere of linguistic *dépassement*, linking this linguistic *dépassement* with the power to express new things, the power that belongs to the authentic speech. Thus *art de conter* is an operation of expression and the philosopher identified it with the activity and function of the body. It is not an imitation or replication (*fabrication*) fulfilling the creator’s dreams, an expression of good taste or giving vent to his instincts. The art of word (literature, a novel), as a phenomenon manifesting itself in the human world, is a specific “commentary” to a chosen aspect of our experiential world. To be more precise, it reveals the possibilities that exist on the horizon but are not yet realized. And as the domain of the art is composed of the meanings brought to light by means of expression, in Merleau-Ponty’s formulation the art was not limited by any caesuras or divisions into species and kinds<sup>1</sup>; it embraced both the “visible” (“painter’s”) sphere and the linguistic creation. It invariably indicates beyond itself, directing us towards “an object”. However, Merleau-Ponty was far from understanding this “object” (the group of phenomena, truths and ideas) in terms of factors that determine and limit art’s range. Art is so inventing – just like speech that is being postulated<sup>2</sup>.

A lot of commentators (but doing research into Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics of a word additionally) rightly notice that the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Martinet, “Structure and Language”, *Yale French Studies*, 36–37, 1966, October, p. 10–18, 19–22.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *L’homme et l’adversité*, p. 284–286.

philosopher “made” art participate in “the miracle of an expression” which reveals systems of equivalence, interrelationship that the artist believes to be not yet discovered or, when he refers to the expression of those already existing, he treats them as if “demanding” the transcendence. What an artist created (not in one but in many works) is a kind of an establishment of the style characteristic of him. The philosopher called it the index of a coherent deformation. It was used for concentrating the diffused (i.e. existing before the act of expression) meanings. The philosopher formulated this – strictly connected with the index – system of equivalence as the chosen form of art in which the style characteristic of a given work style manifests itself. In a work, on the other hand, the triple intentionality of expression can be separated. Firstly, as a form (shape) of the expression, a work expresses its object. Secondly, every element included in a work expresses the style or the system of equivalence, but always in relation to the whole. This relation is always different from the method in which a work expresses its object. Thirdly, intentionality is treated as an expression of an artist, so at the same time of his existence in the world. These three aspects of intentionality of art irrefutably indicate the evident similarities to the phenomenon of speech and, also, perception. The perceptive directions towards the world and gestures or verbal signs are created by concrete movements (*motoricité*), bodily gestures that also indicate triple intentionality. The elements mentioned here always have to refer to something beyond them, to articulate “an object”. Thus all the linguistic elements reveal some system of equivalence that Merleau-Ponty wanted to see both in a work and in the linguistic system. We should remember that it can never be a complete system, the differences existing in it and reciprocal references create the possibility of infinite, inexhaustible combinations and changes, but always made in relation to the whole. Therefore only after the act of expression can one speak about something complete and finished.

A linguistic creation (a literary expression) always sends to some areflective moment; however, when this is considered on grounds of literary expression, one can immediately see that a creative act is not preceded by some idea, it does not become a realisation of a ready thought or project. The instrument – language – is not for expressing thoughts. Just like in the act of reading, in the

act of reception<sup>3</sup>, we have to discover “intentions that unite”, recognise the meaning of words. And although – Merleau-Ponty emphasised – we carry in us some ready-made alphabet, some grammar, the revealing of intentions situated in a work by the creator does not mean their total “fulfillment”. *Lecture* is rather like “seizing”, “uniting meanings” and transforming them according to a style obtained. Here a paradox can be observed, connected with the phenomenon of prose. A literary act, referring to everyday language, presents its possible, imaginary use. A writer can speak just like me, but due to this paradoxical imaginability, his language is not limited to a concrete, practical *milieu*, but it creates for the reader some potential meanings<sup>4</sup>. This potentiality brings about both positive and negative possibilities. If a reader sees only fixed meanings, settled in a given system, he will stay on the level of *la langue* – he will answer to the constant and predictable code of communication. However, if he makes transcendence “prompted” by the writer, then he will dive in the force of speech, in the acts of *langage*. The language of prose is therefore a possible, potential method of using the primordial and existential *parole* in the background of everyday language, fixed and sedimented. Merleau-Ponty openly spoke about a specific processing of the denoting instrument – language – what was identified with “manipulation and variation” according to the new syntax. It is a quality that characterises creative and innovatory writing. This writing, contrary to the “ordinary” one which only moves along the meanings accepted in a given culture, “seizes” them as not yet objectified, introducing at the same time the knowledge about new meanings, but it is the knowledge accessible only to those who speak the same language. When a writer is not able to establish “new commonness”, in brief – to take risks – his expression loses strength and burns out. Let us try to reconstruct Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics of a literary text, the aesthetics formulated in relation to speaking subjects, this communicating “we”. Let us also remember that the philosopher did not set up impassable barriers between the subject – creator and the subject – receiver, and he did not treat a literary

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. R. L. Laningan, *Speaking and Semiology*, Mouton, The Hague–Paris 1972, p.179.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sur la phénoménologie du langage*, in: *Problèmes actuels de la phénoménologie*. Bruxelles: Van Breda, 1962; cf. also J. O’Neill, *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology*. London: Routledge, 1976.

work as an entity closed in itself, but as an invariably open – interpreted and reinterpreted – form of expression.

Merleau-Ponty “understands” a work of art (the expression) in terms of an individual entity, situated in some field. The case of a literary work is not different. A literary expression always manifests itself against the background of some wider references, the background of this *inter-monde*, identified by the philosopher with the world of culture and literary world belonging to it. Therefore, in the range of expression, works have to be defined as some entities, separated from “the stream of speech”. References to the *Gestalt* conception can be clearly seen here: figure – the work was situated against the background of the whole language (*resp.* literary language). This language of a novel was for Merleau-Ponty “the speech of a second degree, in which one speaks about things or people to move somebody else”<sup>5</sup>. It probably should be understood that – although the philosopher did not say it precisely – the second degree is a language that only seems to be everyday one. It is taken away from the flow of life through the imaginability, i.e. it is being transferred into the new fields of meaning. Thus the literary art, as the expressive speech, was for the philosopher something constant, continued through the references to our existence (human reality), tradition and history. Hence on the level of the substance or matter (the first layer of the literary work), the speech makes use of canonical forms: existing language, its syntax and morphology, that have been in this way established and settled in the resources of “knowledge” of *le corps propre*. In this way Merleau-Ponty tries to solve the issue of ready and existing linguistic knowledge that stays at disposal of creator’s and receiver’s embodied consciousness<sup>6</sup>. On the basis of what is “established”, the transcendence that completes the existing language (and is inseparable from it) or exists in a parallel manner (like the primordial silence) is possible.

While describing the acts of creating and recreating, it should be definitely emphasised that speech is not an act fully realised and the structure of its elements and rules does not constitute the domain of consciousness. Having mastered the language, we use it

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J.H. Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*. London: Humanities Press, 1991, especially the chapter: *Circles of Meaning*, p. 17 and other.

unconsciously, we experience its ambiguity, we want to “outdistance” its meanings but, analogically to perception, we encounter many limitations that make our access to the linguistic world difficult. A creator (a writer), acting spontaneously, led by the premonition of a new language (that he is about to create), experiences one more threat while deciding to break the silence. It is the uncertainty accompanying the creative process from the beginning, having sometimes the shape of the illusion that it is possible to “defeat” a language, omit its essence. This project manifests itself with a strong desire to base the act of linguistic creation not on this inherent speech of ambiguity and so many “interstices”, breaks, inuendoes and gaps, but on the system of correspondence between the denoting and the denoted, which could make the linguistic expression straightforward and simple. Then it would not involve anything redundant and unnecessary, and the language itself would allow transcendence of our metaphysical condition. In other words, this desired sphere of straightforwardness and isomorphism of the denoting and the denoted would become something possible to achieve.

Merleau-Ponty called this project “the phantom of the pure language”. It meant replacing the lived speech with “the divine ideal” – in which simple and clear meanings “would create one world, one family with the signs”<sup>7</sup>. This project, however, is nothing more than – the philosopher stated – a rebellion against speech, departure from its nature. Finally, this phantom is a blind belief in the pre-existence of the one, proper word that as – it were – waits for an artist in “the other world”. Due to this temptation Mallarmé, desiring to express everything in the most precise, the most ideal way possible, was afraid to say anything. So the fear of the “primary” silence, experienced by a creator, joins the fear of using an inadequate word. An authentic speaker has to as – it were – go through the characteristic of the speaker’s *corps propre* tension existing between the primary silence and desire to its breaking, he has to experience the confrontation of the existing language with the attempt to express new acts of speech undertaken by the created work. Thus in his desire to express, an artist in the first place has to defeat the strong temptation of an algorithm – an ideal of a pure language, “in which the sign would stick to the thing”, and

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, *op.cit.*

“communication would not hide any mysteries”<sup>8</sup>, would make neither “shortages” nor “surpluses” of the senses. The philosopher emphasised the fact that choosing pure signs invariably “destined for the pure meanings” carries the risk of not realising or even making an act of literary expression impossible. Probably, “to neutralise” this impurity and incompleteness inseparable from speech, is a latent dream of many creators. Thus Merleau-Ponty identified a literary creation both with resignation from those unrealisable dreams and with making the decision about breaking the silence, i.e. “to undertake the attempt to arrange and configure the words flowing” after having finally defeated the fear<sup>9</sup>. This may lead a creator to expressing the proper equivalent of a thought, a thought that he does not know yet and knows nothing about it. In this desire to realise an act of speech, an algorithm or a universal language would only be a problem. While “deciding to break the silence”, a creator places himself, almost automatically, in this ambiguity that characterises both the reality that he celebrates and the language that he uses. Merleau-Ponty linked this call to get rid of the primordial fear of emptiness (there are no ideas that anticipate the writing act), as well as the fear of the background of the speech – silence – with the important, on grounds of genetic phenomenology, idea of a dialogue. An act of expression is an intentional act, it directs itself towards something and is always about something. Therefore a creator has to be aware of the fact that he does not speak to himself and that he cannot speak about nothing. In a sense – although Merleau-Ponty did not develop this motive, only mentioning “the ethics” of the act of expression – a creator is responsible for what he expresses. In the excellent fragment of *La prose du monde* the philosopher made a valuable differentiation of the literature as an act of expression “that tells something new” and a message (“news”) that uses seemingly the same words. Stendhal’s *Fabrice*, transferred into our reality, “skims” a luminous newspaper. All the signals sliding through the motionless but sparkling bulbs, flashing letters, make an impression (or rather create an illusion) that they offer the possibility to see – plunged far away – a human thought. As Merleau-Ponty stated, it is only an illusive mirage. Those sparks and flashes are a great metaphor of a universal, algorithmic sign, 20<sup>th</sup> century version of

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

God's all-embracing thought: the sign that always has to correspond to the established meaning. Fabrice does not get to know really anything new from this luminous newspaper. Or, to be even more precise, he does not get to know anything he has not known before and what so alluringly the newspaper tries to "transmit" to him. "Even the news about a death or a misfortune that the telegram brings is absolutely not something new. I receive it only because I have already known about the existence of the dead people and misfortunes"<sup>10</sup>. So it is not a method of literary communication. Thus while deciding to undertake the creative act, a writer has to as – it were – areflectively refer to the yet inactive "sphere-I-do-not-know-yet".

Merleau-Ponty definitely refuted all that is closed or established in linguistic forms, forms in which the expression would be something secondary, "and the style totally mastered". Just like in the sphere of philosophy, in the sphere of the aesthetics of word reconstructed by us, the philosopher proposed the use of a specific *epoche*, on condition that in the sphere of language one can preliminarily use the reference to its one special feature. Merleau-Ponty turned here towards the possibility being "in possession" of speech – "to withdraw", so towards the moment when speech alone makes itself absent, forgets about itself, "as it turns away from its meanings". It may do it, because speech differentiates itself, but when it wants to introduce new gestures, new arrangements and meanings, "it has to choose some carelessness"<sup>11</sup>. In this way Merleau-Ponty probably wanted to emphasise this spontaneous aspect of what is preconscious in the creative process, making us realize that an act of using speech is strictly correlated with the act of existence, our *modi* of being in the world (*être du monde*)<sup>12</sup>. And this fact cannot be hidden, and more importantly, it is the authentic use, agreeable with the nature of speech that can create consciousness<sup>13</sup>. Here the philosopher gave as an example the

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, "On the other hand, the writer has always referred to the experiences of our existence in the world, although concrete situations can definitely be different from each other".

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Roche, *op.cit.*, p. 19–34; cf. also M. Merleau-Ponty, "Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression", *L'Annuaire du Collège de France*, 1953 p. 145–157.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A. Hesnard, *op cit.*; cf. also *L'Art du Comprendre – de l'Inconscient Phénoménologique* (Paris) 1999, no 8 (Février) especially: J. Desanti, *Phénoménologie*

“full” literary expression that introduced – by changes and transformations – new configurations of meanings. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty does not avoid thesis, brought up so often, that a writer as a speaking subject has to exist in some linguistic community. But, as he stated, we can speak many languages, but we live and create only in one. Our linguistic acts go always from some basis and – just like in the field of perception – crossing in the fields of expression they place themselves on different acts. Merleau-Ponty strongly emphasised that if creators had stopped at the ordinary, prosaic method of using the language, its use would have brought instinct behaviours to mind. And as was with the case of Fabricio, the act of communication would have taken the shape of something general, universal. In other words, we would have got a look or an intuition of the world given to us only in categories of generality, universality. Thus the Other given – though spread throughout my field of perception and language – because of those linguistic acts, would have shown himself to me only “as an individuality of a species, more as a conception”<sup>14</sup>, thus something settled in the sphere of cognition for good, i.e. sedimented and specified behaviours. And – it was Merleau-Ponty’s innovative proposition – acts of literary expression as the ones closest to the nature of speech and language are to give to me not the ideas or conceptions but they are to present (*présentifier*), “give” only the presence<sup>15</sup>. Thus the philosopher turned towards the literary expression from which – as he claimed – one can learn a lot. We already know that it cannot be something isolated, it cannot exist and function without references to previous acts. However, going from what is common, functioning in the established literary world, a literary expression pulls away from what already exist in different layers of the human world. “The writer is not satisfied with using *the existing language* but he anticipates – added Merleau-Ponty – something new”<sup>16</sup> in this way creating so far unheard of construction’s of a given figure, pointing at the unknown and absent meaning. The movement of both the creator’s intentions and linguistic elements is important. The new meaning has to ap-

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*et inconscient*, p. 66–73.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity*, Routledge, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.*

pear from the background, but after a change “that overshadows its own premises”. Merleau-Ponty did not relate this fact to some kind of destruction. Literary *dépassement* is not a destructive or negating but a constituting and establishing act and “the writer does not desire to replace the language with his own” but aims at the creative disturbance of some order. He just wants to introduce “the stability of some weirdness” and suggest it to the Other, as this literary act takes place in the sphere (*inter-monde*) of “our” world. That is why I can, as a reader (a speaking subject), seize those changes and in the act of receiving I can experience, moreover – open myself to the linguistic transcendence proposed by the writer. But as well as he, I should – stated Merleau-Ponty – “start from some familiarity, the moment of accustoming to the language”<sup>17</sup>. While beginning to read, I approach the concrete expression through the language that – as is supposed – I know perfectly. In other words, as a receiver, I was given certain structures, vocabulary, linguistic syntax, and more importantly – some ideas existing (or rather born) in the previous linguistic acts. With such equipment (having at my disposal “signs” existing in a given cultural field) I go towards the work offered by the creator.

Merleau-Ponty presented the phenomenological description of approaching the specific entity – a novel. Once again he mentioned the analogy with perception. The moment of opening the book was compared to perceiving gestures, behaviours of other people which in relation to literary expression corresponds to some articulations of the expressed fragment of the world. The philosopher probably wanted to emphasise the extraordinariness of such a “meeting” connected with the increasing sensation of a gradual opening to the act of communication, to the dialogue with the writer. When I “lazily start to read (...) I mobilise only a part of my thoughts”<sup>18</sup>. However, this moment of opening oneself is at the same time the moment of beginning of a new reciprocity, because “I give and get with the same gesture”. So Merleau-Ponty presented the idea of reception of a literary work in terms of interchanging and dialogue. “I have given the knowledge of the language, of what I know about the sense of those words, forms and syntax”<sup>19</sup>. However, one should give a very important thing at a

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

writer's disposal – the experience that we possess in relation to the existence, this significant and undeniable fact of being in the world. It means that in the constitution alone (*resp.* in the reception) of a literary work there will appear and there will always be present such events, questions and ideas that stress the metaphysical condition common to us. Together with the writer we have been thrown into one world, we experience a common *en situation* and we have to begin a specific cooperation and interaction from this. This takes place within a common sphere (Merleau-Ponty totally ignored the fact of differences between the epochs and historical placement) of linguistic “activities”<sup>20</sup>. In other words, the philosopher tried to make the primacy of speech visible, stress that it is able to show both the present world and the world that is not here any more but which can “once again” exist. So this communion of the two speaking subjects – a writer and a reader – “becomes the joust of the untouchable and full of glory bodies”<sup>21</sup>. Both the world (or rather its fragment presented by a work) and speech functioning in reality (in a shape of a literary expression) constitute the level of this meeting, on the condition that the literary speech must be something authentic, existential, so causing tension between “existing” and “opening’ (to be more precise: opening me) in the act of reading of that which a writer has to reveal. Only in this way in the act of reading I can grasp the intentions included in the work. “Speech sends us above our thoughts to the meaningful intention, pulsating from someone else”<sup>22</sup>. But this power of transcendence, of exceeding, with the presence of an act of communication and a literary expression, is invariably connected with the fact of our existence in the world, the fact that I am a speaking subject and, more importantly, normally functioning embodied consciousness. So while reading, I have to use this bodily mechanism, linguistic apparatus of the body functioning in the world.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, also p. 63–64.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. J.P. Hudzik, *Estetyka egzystencji – szkice z pogranicza nowoczesnej etyki i estetyki*, Lublin: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1998, p. 78; cf. also M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, *op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, *op.cit.*