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Stephen A. Noble, *Silence et langage: Genèse de la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty au seuil de l'ontologie*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. 285 pp. Editor's foreword, notes, bibliography, index, acknowledgments. \$163.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-90-04-26651-3.

Review by Glen A. Mazis, Penn State Harrisburg.

Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) is well-known as the French philosopher who redirected the traditional European philosophical and cultural tradition of identifying the self with a disembodied mind or "inner spirit," instead locating the center of identity and knowing the world in human embodiment. Further, of great current intellectual interest is his later articulation of the ontology of "the flesh of the world," in which all beings are interconnected and interdependent in a way that resembles a "field" paradigm in physics. Stephen Noble's book uncovers a key path of Merleau-Ponty's thought in tracing the continuity of his earliest analyses of the structure of perception within behavior to his arriving at his late "indirect ontology." The central role that silence plays in Merleau-Ponty's being able to move from his analysis of perception, to the bringing forth of its deeper meaning in expression, to transforming philosophy from a grasp of a determinate world in concepts to an expression of the interwoven dimensions of meaning in the depths of the sensible, and its correlative ontology, has not been adequately appreciated by Merleau-Ponty's readers. Noble correctly argues that until the role of silence in expression is traced back to its origins in perception and seen in its ramifications for altering the course of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty's ontology will not be fully understood.

Noble starts the book by pointing to Merleau-Ponty's ongoing effort to make us aware that the ordinary use of language masks its authentic function, to express our "inherence in things" (p. 3), or in other words, to express the way our sense of ourselves emerges from our intertwining with the world. Yet, to be able to express the "primordial contact" in perception with the world that was the focus of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, silence must be brought into language. This approach contrasts with philosophy's traditional attempt to render how the world appears by employing "second order" concepts gained through reflection about this experience. Expressive language recognizes "a silence of consciousness that envelops the speaking world and where the words first receive their configuration and sense" ("*un silence de la conscience qui enveloppe le monde parlant et où les mots d'abord reçoivent configuration et sens*") (p. 4). Here, once again, Merleau-Ponty is at odds with much of the philosophical tradition in the way he understands silence. The decisive point, says Noble—quite correctly—is to see that the question of silence is not about an "auditory nothing," but on the contrary concerns a modality of the world's being and that of sonorous being (p. 4). Silence, for Merleau-Ponty, is not the opposite of sound or of language, but is a quality of sense inaugurated by the nature of prereflective perceptual contact and runs throughout language in its expressive fabric.

Noble rightly asserts that the role of silence grows after the 1945 publication of the *Phenomenology of Perception* and becomes even more central in Merleau-Ponty's last writings when he is formulating his "indirect ontology." Tracing out the role of this silence is essential for phenomenology in order to fulfill its avowed task, as first articulated by Edmund Husserl, of "returning to the things themselves," since silence leads us back to the originary experience of the things of the world through perception. The use of the word "originary" is deliberate, since phenomenology does not seek to grasp an impossible origin--

impossible, since existence is relentless becoming—but rather sees each moment of expression as an endlessly ongoing origin of new sense, at least in language’s expressive use. It is the progression of this theme of the role of silence in Merleau-Ponty’s work that is the focus of Noble’s book, tracing out the shifts in locution, emphasis, terminology, influence from other philosophers and Merleau-Ponty’s historical context.

In the first chapter, Noble examines Merleau-Ponty’s first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, which was originally his minor doctoral thesis, and claims that “his whole oeuvre is rooted there” (p. 7). Noble traces how in this work Merleau-Ponty redefines interiority as gained through interchange with exteriority (pp. 11, 32); manages to find a middle course between determinism and finalism (p. 14); makes a dynamic sense of the gestalt central to his descriptions of perception; and reconfigures form as not an inherent given quality (pp. 16-24), but as an emergent phenomenon of expression of organisms (p. 29). If interiority is a co-emergence in and through the world, it is marked by contingency in a way ignored by traditional philosophy (p. 35). In this chapter, Noble asserts that Merleau-Ponty’s ideas were influenced by Kant’s treatment of purposiveness in the third *Critique* (pp. 12-14) and his description of productive imagination (p. 24); Kurt Goldstein’s work, not solely by his idea of the gestalt, but also by his sketch of the relationship of organism to environment (pp. 17, 27); and, Edmund Husserl’s sense of the opacity of the perceptual (p. 44). For Noble, *The Structure of Behavior* culminates in a sense that language is not conceptual, but rather perceptually driven in its development and expression.

The paradoxes of language are discussed in the second chapter, and there especially Noble details what he sees as Merleau-Ponty’s debt to the late writings of Husserl and to the work of Eugen Fink, who carried on Husserl’s explorations. Merleau-Ponty’s trip in 1939 to the Husserl archives at Louvain certainly had an impact upon the young philosopher (p. 59). Noble speculates that Fink’s search for a language that could adequately articulate phenomenological insights (p. 62) inspired Merleau-Ponty, as well as Fink’s call for a different logic (p. 65) and an interplay of natural language with transcendental language (p. 74). Noble sums up the achievement of the *Phenomenology of Perception* as the articulation of the connection between language and the sense of truth gained through perception, whereas in his later writing he will explore the connection of language with the truth of the flesh (p. 80).

The third chapter explores Merleau-Ponty’s developing ideas about the expressiveness of language after his the 1945 publication of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Although first written in 1938, but not published until 1942, the essay “Metaphysics and the Novel” is, Noble feels, of exceptional importance (pp. 92-93). This importance stems both from its being the first statement by Merleau-Ponty that ties together the task of a revised metaphysics of “everyday life” or philosophy in general with the practice of literature, and from the content of its analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s novel, *She Came to Stay*. Like Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, Noble asserts that the friendship and the writings of de Beauvoir shifted Merleau-Ponty towards seeing philosophy as a shared articulation with literature, and ultimately requiring the use of literary language (p. 105).<sup>[1]</sup> It is helpful that Noble cites the 1959 interviews with Charbonnier, during which Merleau-Ponty discusses this shift (p. 113). Noble discusses other influences, such as Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* (p. 95), Bréhier’s questioning Merleau-Ponty for further explication of how to put the primacy of perception into language (p. 116), and the 1946 phenomenological conference in which this question of expression comes to the fore. As a result of this period of research, Noble feels that Merleau-Ponty had become focused on the deeper question, “What is the *being* of language?” This question leads to ontology and to fathoming the role of silence in both perception and expression (p. 124).

Noble begins the third chapter by emphasizing a theme that runs throughout the book: that there is a strict continuity in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy from its earliest works to its last (p. 130). This has not often been asserted, as some are puzzled by the connection between the early works and the last writings, but I think that Noble is correct.<sup>[2]</sup> His citing of many of the unpublished writings helps to prove this case, as Merleau-Ponty often wrote about insights using terms that would only come to light

in his published work later. The chapter focuses on Merleau-Ponty's 1949-50 course on "The Child and the Acquisition of Language," his 1951-52 writing on the manuscript, *The Prose of the World*, which remained unfinished and was published posthumously, and his revision of part of the book, published in 1952 in *Les temps modernes*—his co-edited journal with Jean-Paul Sartre—as an essay, "Indirect language and the Voices of Silence." Merleau-Ponty describes the child's unique way of being-in-the world (p. 132), the child's primal contact with being (p. 133), the way the child moves from silence to language as representative of the problem of all language use (p. 136), and how literature is tied to the coming into expression (p. 143).

The writings in *The Prose of the World* manuscript pursue the articulation of the way silence enters language through poetry and the creative use of language. Noble contrasts these passages with those in the *Phenomenology of Perception* concerning the "tacit cogito" and silence. He feels the influence of Saussure has opened Merleau-Ponty to a more intersubjective sense of the how language emerges from perceptual experience, as a shared expression (p. 180). Noble notes how Merleau-Ponty navigates between Malraux's emphasis on the subjectivizing of literary and artistic expression and Saussure's overly impersonal emphasis on language's development and function (p. 183). Malraux has pointed to a silence that the individual faces in the impenetrability of perception (p. 187) and Saussure to the way there is a silencing of the personal creativity in language's totalizing of sense (p. 183-4), yet Merleau-Ponty will come to show that on an ontological level the meaning expressed by language can only emerge from a silence of the way the world envelops itself in perception (p. 190). In other words, Merleau-Ponty renders silence ontological.

The final chapter explores the last works of Merleau-Ponty that culminate in his articulation of the ontology of the flesh, including the essay "Eye and Mind," and the notes and writings of the unfinished projects such as *Being and World* (*Être et Monde*) or the incomplete manuscript and working notes that were published posthumously as *The Visible and the Invisible*. Noble contrasts Sartre's privileging of prose writing, as considered to be signifying, unlike poetry, which like painting, music or sculpture is not (p. 210). For Sartre, the writer of prose uses language to change the world and to engage in meaningful acts (p. 217). Silence, for him, is the non-being of the subject and the world which predates speech and is transcended by language (p. 212). For Merleau-Ponty, poetry and the poetic language are at the heart of language's expressive capacity and its ability to open intersubjectivity (p. 219), whereas for Sartre, poetic passages within prose introduce zones of obscurity (p. 221). Throughout the book, Noble has remarked that he finds an ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty's use of the terms "world" and "nature," and he feels it persists even in these late writings, although he notes that term "*Umwelt*" is a term that moves between the two (pp. 232, 238). The chapter ends by explaining that for Merleau-Ponty the literary and creative use of language must dovetail with the philosophic use of language such that the sensible is made to manifest the invisible sense that is at its depths. Language can be used creatively to configure the visible in such a way that the invisible becomes manifest as dimensions of sense.

This book is beautifully researched and is a treasure trove of biographical information, references to the unpublished writings archived in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and speculations concerning possible influences on Merleau-Ponty's thinking. It traces out carefully the evolution of the line of thinking, from the silence of perception to the way language expresses perception to the way that expression emerges from the thick interconnectedness of beings within the flesh such that only the indirect, allusive language of poetic language can express ontology. Along the way, Noble's assertion of the influences on Merleau-Ponty's thought like that of the late Husserl or Goldstein seems undeniable, while others such as that about Kant or Fink seem less certain.

What is lacking from the book, however, is an exploration and description of the nature of silence, the expressive aspects of poetic and literary language, or even the nature of the ontology of the flesh in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. The major concepts—silence, perception, expressive language, art, and the

flesh—and all the concepts to which they are intimately related, such as the latency of perception, the phenomenology of silence in the “gestures of the (perceived) world,” the gestural aspect of language, metaphor, the imaginary, the reversibility of the perceiver and the perceived, “lateral” relations, and the differing idea of truth in regard to Merleau-Ponty’s indirect ontology are not explicated at all or instantiated (a practice always followed by Merleau-Ponty). These stated terms and ideas are left as if they are self-evident, although Merleau-Ponty has given them unique senses that call for explicit description. The terms that are left out as well as the emphasis on the earliest works of Merleau-Ponty, especially *The Structure of Behavior*, point to a missing dimension of this book that needs to be supplemented by a fuller explanation of the topic. This lack is evident in the figures that Noble chooses to discuss as influencing Merleau-Ponty, such as Kant, Husserl, Goldstein, Fink and Malraux, instead of explaining the many references to and influence of Proust, Cézanne, Claudel, Valéry, Klee, Bergson, Bachelard and others who would have added another dimension to the book’s understanding of silence and expressiveness. These sources would necessitate an examination of depth, of the expressiveness of silent gestures, of the role of the imagination in bringing out the latencies of perception, the non-rational logic of lateral relations, and in general a less rationalized framework of interpretation.

The way that perception is obscure, for Merleau-Ponty, is not about the kind of impenetrable opacity that Noble discusses as allied with one type of silence. Rather, the obscurity of perception is as much about the inexhaustibility of its sense, which led Merleau-Ponty to privilege depth as the “dimension of dimensions,” since on a prereflective level there is always more sense to be manifest.[3] The way the world gestures to us and we respond to its beckonings as first discussed in the phenomenology of silence in the “tacit cogito” passages of the *Phenomenology of Perception* gives another sense to how silence envelops language as a latent depth of perceived sense that can become manifest [4]. Merleau-Ponty gradually articulates another type of imagination at odds with fantasy that instead works with perception to deepen the original sense of the perceived by making manifest latent meanings. Poetic language, if described in detail, and metaphor bring together that which seems to be impossible, which is Merleau-Ponty’s definition of depth. Silence can be allowed to enter language more fully to bring these depths to expression.

## NOTES

[1] Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2004), pp. 61-104.

[2] Again, Emmanuel de Saint Aubert is in complete agreement with this assertion, and he was the custodian of Merleau-Ponty’s unpublished writings after Claude Lefort and has studied them in great detail.

[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'oeil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 79.

[4] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 462.

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