L'absente de tous bouquets

Linguistic Negativity in Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Berndt Sellheim

B.A. Comm. (Hons 1st Class, UTS), Dip. App. Sci. (Nuc. Med., Sydney).

Macquarie University, Department of Philosophy,
Division of Society, Culture, Media and Philosophy, April 2008.
This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

1

Contents

L'absente de tous bouquets

Linguistic Negativity in Martin Heidegger

and Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Synopsis

What is our opening upon the world? What is the relationship between this opening—its tactility, depth and reach—and the language with which we seek to express it? Poetry and philosophy are frequently considered in opposition, but here, pushing up against the limits and possibilities of expression, in the face of 'raw' perception, they speak of a common opening upon experience. Both disciplines begin in a sense of wonder that we find ourselves in a meaningful world, and each takes the exploration of that 'meaning' to be the first question of existence. Their divergence, and the manifold paths that proliferate within each individual discipline, arrives in how this question is unfolded and engaged.

Although the opposition between the disciplines is an ancient one, one that continues to this day, some theorists do attempt to merge these genres, and in fact see the possibilities of exploring this phenomenological opening as existing only within the coupling of the two. This thesis will look at how such a coupling is theorised in Jena Romanticism, and examine the way in which it is formulated and executed in two of the 20th Century's most original and important thinkers, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The central question is why, in the responses offered by both these philosophers, modes of 'indirect' expression are frequently privileged over more 'direct' logico-discursive language. The inquiry will be engaged thematically and in the linguistic form of the work itself.

Abbreviations for Frequently Cited Texts

Martin Heidegger

BDT. 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking.' Martin Heidegger *Poetry, Language, Thought.* Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York, Perennial Classics, 2001.

BT. *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1962.

CCP. 'Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking' in *Discourse on Thinking* trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freud. New York, Harper Perennial, 1966.

CTP. *Contributions to Philosophy: (From Enowning)* trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999.

DL. 'A Dialogue on Language' in *On The Way to Language.* San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1971.

EoP. 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking' in *Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell. London, Routledge, 1993.

I. *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996.

LH. 'The Letter on Humanism' in *Basic Writings* ed. David Farrell Krell. London, Routledge, 2002.

LP. 'Language in the Poem' in *On The Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz. San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1971.

OWA. 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in *Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell. London, Routledge, 1993.

NL. 'The Nature of Language' in *On The Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz. San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1971.

RP. 'Remembrance of the Poet' trans. Douglas Scott in *Existence and Being*. Chicago, Gateway, 1968.

PR. *The Principle of Reason.* Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996.

QCT. 'The Question Concerning Technology' in *Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell. London, Routledge, 1993.

WCT. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking,* trans. J. Glenn Gray. New York, Harper Collins/Perennial, 2004.

WM. What is Metaphysics' in *Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell. London, Routledge, 1993.

WPF. 'What are Poets For' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstandter. New York, Perennial Classics, 2001.

WTL. 'The Way to Language' in *On The Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz. San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1971.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

EM. 'Eye and Mind' in Galen A. Johnson ed. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting,* trans. ed. Michael B. Smith. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1993.

N. *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France,* trans. Robert Vallier. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2003.

PhP. *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith. London, Routledge, 2002.
viii.

PS. 'The Philosopher and His Shadow' in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. Mcleary. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964.

SB. *The Structure of Behaviour*, trans. Alden L. Fisher. London, Methuen, 1965.

UP. 'An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work' trans. Arleen B. Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964.

NH. Miguel de Beistegui, *The New Heidegger.* London, Continuum, New York, 2005.

CJ. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H.Bernard. Mineola. Dover Publications, 2005.

LA. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism,* trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988.

HLP. Julian Young, *Heidegger's Later Philosophy.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

HPA. —— *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

There are all kinds of emptiness and fullness

that sing and do not sing.

<div align="right">Robert Hass</div>

Foreword

The thesis began in a particular 'sense of world' that arises when we engage with the natural environment, and a curiosity with how it might be articulated. What it has become is a sustained and in some respects open inquiry into the nature of language and its 'fit' with that world. The way this question is framed is via the relationship between poetic language and philosophy, and the directionality of the question will most frequently be from the philosophical into the poetic.

Some practical matters need to be clarified at the outset. The first is what I mean by the poem, or poetry, or the poetic, a notion that will be used frequently. Besides a few provisos, I don't find any contradiction in saying that my definition here is essentially a circular one: most of us have experiences of poetry, of reading poems or having them read to us, and have subsequently developed a 'sense of the poetic.' This definition is not much help in any absolute sense, but for the majority of readers it will function well enough.[1] Significant differences appear within changing poetic history, 'school' and genre, but it is arguable that even between the sonnet and free verse, between Homer and Robert Perelman, a certain relationship arises between the poetic object and language which asks similar questions of sound, meaning, and form, which enquires about the link between sense, music and word. The poem is an aesthetic *enaction* of these questions.

From Page 11. Robert Hass, *Sun Under Wood*. Hopewell, The Ecco Press, 1996. 21.
Wherever translations are my own, I have included the original text in the notes.
[1] Derrida in fact suggests is that there is no theory of aesthetics the foundation of which is not in some way embedded within its own aesthetic objects, adding "Circles of circles, circle in the encircled circle."
Jacques Derrida, 'Parergon' in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987. 24.

This said, when I talk of 'poetry,' it is especially in the direction of modern poetry that I am gesturing. Modern poetry (for the sake of convenience) is anything beginning with Mallarmé. At the same time as recognising the arbitrary nature of this definition, the significance of Mallarmé's break from poetic history, and his emphasis on a very precise and profound negativity, make him hard to ignore as a point of epochal commencement. Still, a discussion which focuses on the American tradition might well draw the line at Walt Whitman, which is to say, really, that such distinctions *are* arbitrary, but remain somewhat useful and not altogether meaningless. In particular I choose Mallarmé because the central theme of this thesis is linguistic negativity, and Mallarmé was both the mother and midwife of a certain form of negativity that is now commonplace within poetic expression.

The idea that certain linguistic structures are not reducible to a logico-discursive language, yet remain meaningful, is central to the following discussion, and it is this particularly that is understood by the term 'linguistic negativity.' Such negativity may take the form of unresolved or polysemous language within a poem, or a philosophical text which trades on an apparent 'imprecision.' Negative meaning indicates that which cannot be understood in a positive sense: a word (or a phrase or an entire text) that exhibits a problematic reference to its usual object or action, where 'direct' lines of signification are severed, where literal meanings perhaps do not function at all, do not, as such, 'make sense.'

Frequently, such 'negative' relationships *counter-determine* the usual modes of understanding. In this breakdown of sense, alternative possibilities of meaning arise, yet within this space of destabilised signification, such meanings evade determinate translation, representation, or reduction into a more 'rigorous' language. They remain negative, and yet they continue to signify. Such expressive negativity might be

14

understood in terms of an 'indirect disclosure': what meaning it *does* present, it offers indirectly. The idea which necessitates such indirection is that some phenomena defy direct representation, yet at the same time might still be revealed through obscure or oblique references, partial sketches of their overall form. Such a model is central to German Romanticism and I will consider its emergence and development in the first two chapters.

In chapters 3 and 4, I will examine what I term 'existential negativity' in relation to Martin Heidegger: this describes the way in which the experience of existence is permeated by forms of absence. A further sense in which negativity is understood is as an indication of an underlying ontological absence, which marks the two-fold play of revelation and concealment by which Heidegger conceives of Being revealing itself. I will term this 'ontological negativity.' These two chapters will explore the relation between these 'Heideggerian negativities' and the issue of 'negative' expression.

Differently nuanced, negativity also refers to a fecund conception of silence: a birth of meaning within the world that, in Merleau-Ponty's thinking, continues to exist within expression. An exploration of Merleau-Pontian 'silence' will be the focus of chapters 5 and 6. In this case, I am describing a meaning structure that is prior to language, an innate expressivity of the world itself, with which language continues to speak. The link between such a silence and spoken or written expression is a question that I will push up against frequently.

By labelling these diverse phenomena instances of 'negativity,' I do not mean to collapse the differences between them, but to emphasise the way in which they intersect and share common points of origin; that one necessitates the other. What exactly Mallarmé, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and German Romanticism have in common is to be found here, within a theory of expression which sees the non-explicit aspects of language

15

as being in some respects equal to those which might be grounded within a logico-discursive communication, and in some respects capable of more.

It should be acknowledged that this usage of the term 'negativity' is itself contentious. Expression is, after all, a positive phenomenon: it is an act of transmission, of making something manifest or understood. One way that the word 'express' is defined is to "squeeze out (liquid or air)"[2] – one might 'express' ointment from a tube. There is a sense in which we think of language like this, as the act of 'squeezing' meaning from ourselves: how can such an extrusion be negative? One does not, so to speak, 'reverse-squeeze.' Describing an 'expressive negativity' erects an opposition that, within any absolute architecture of language (which however it is conceived, functions via a great many indirect significative relationships) is perhaps difficult to justify: however we think about the signifier/signified relationship, something *is* evoked by language, and by being an evocation is *necessarily* positive. Where I see the value and validity of the term lies in its technical understanding: as a means of differentiating essentially 'resolvable' language, which might be clarified in terms of meaning, from the kinds of open, paradoxical, irresolvable linguistic relationships that commonly, although not exclusively, occur in poetry. That such relationships continue to offer meaning *despite their irresolution* is both the fascinating thing about the phenomenon and the very aspect which calls such 'negativity' into question.

---

[2] *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, 2nd Edition.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995. 494.

16

Prelude

In the evenings walking the harbour's edge, the light falls in liquid colour across the hulls and masts. Having recently returned from some time in Europe, I realise that this is the vivid brightness particular to Australia, a vibrancy that exists only here. Each evening I come to watch the end of day, and each evening I find the same raft of boats, the same chiming stays, the same universe of melted colour buoying the curved white hulls. Each day the same and each utterly different: so little changes, yet everything does – its light, its music – and it is possible to become drawn into it, to give oneself to it completely.

Some days in heavy rain, if you walk dressed to withstand the weather, you can stay for what seems like hours at the furthest arch of land, looking out towards the heads and back to the Harbour Bridge, back towards the city. All around you, drops impact the arcane silver of the water, and the sound of meeting waters almost overcomes you, a complete immersion, which penetrates, it seems, to some other place, within you yet deeply concealed; as though you can hear within that sound the delicate ping of neurons, the firing of your synapses; as though there is an echo within your body of this marriage of ocean and rain.

What is the metaphysic of this opening, this sense-limited space? What is the resonance of expression that exists between body and world? Being, we might call it, perhaps following an eastern tangent, but this is also the place where ontology and the Buddha's *Sutras* might intersect. To this end we might describe it as a way of dwelling, in the Heideggerian sense, but that too feels somehow misleading, as if too ingrained with the history, weight and complexity that surrounds the German philosopher. No matter

how it is called, it is what it is, and this seems to be its message. Our task is to find names for things, to lay over them a blanket of symbols by which the mind might give them form.

Our violent ink, which seems so often to be everything we have, is not enough. What is enough in such moments is this liquid speech – a speech of things, upon which pale words prosper and bleed: a language of atoms that thoughtlessly know, of synapse and skin; a speech of rain that lands on the water like clicking tongues of the Kalahari San. What seems enough is this endless beginning, which takes you and pulls you into its deep.

≈