

# Chronicle

Henri Maldiney, *Le vouloir-dire de Francis Ponge, encre marine*, Fougères, 1993; *L'art, l'éclair de l'être: traversées*, Comp'Act, Paris, 1993; *Regard, parole, espace*, revised edition, L'Âge de l'homme, Lausanne, 1994; *Aux déserts que l'histoire accable – L'Art de Tal-Coat*, Deyrolle, Paris, 1996; *Avènement de l'oeuvre*, Théâtète, Sainte-Maximin, 1997.

Henri Maldiney was born at Mersault (Côte d'Or) in 1912. A student at the École Normale Supérieure and qualified in philosophy, he was called up and, in June 1940, experienced those terrible days when, as he puts it, 'a landless army buried itself' (see *In Media Vita*, published by Comp'Act). Then came a long spell in captivity for him. When the war was over, he taught first at Ghent then at the University of Lyons, where he succeeded to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Henri Maldiney has been a master for many of us, whether we were his students or not. Yet nevertheless, if I happen to state in the course of a casual conversation that, on this topic or that, Henri Maldiney is the only one to . . . or, again, that of all French philosophers alive today he is undoubtedly one of those whose thought is first rate, it is not unusual for an interrogatory note to appear: 'Who's that?' Forced to admit that they do not even know the name, the interlocutors have difficulty in hiding their confusion. Thinking about it, in the end I found this 'ignorance' understandable, when all is said and done. Although for some poets (Francis Ponge, André du Bouchet), artists (Tal Coat, Bazaine), psychiatrists (Ludwig Binswanger, Gisela Pankow and Roland Kuhn) or even philosophers *au fait* with phenomenological thought, the work of Henri Maldiney was (if, like Ponge, Tal Coat, Binswanger and Pankow, they are dead), or is, an indispensable reference point, and the encounter with it one of the powerful moments in their lives, the name of the philosopher still remains largely unknown. A demanding thinker, resistant to all forms of compromise, thus a 'fact-denying' thinker, in the Nietzschean sense, it is not surprising that Henri Maldiney has remained marginal, as it were, in relation to 'the intellectual life' of Paris. But make no mistake about it: the reputation and regard associated with Maldiney's name are more widespread than one might think. And, without any fanfare, they go well beyond the borders of France today. From Belgium, where he goes frequently, to Brazil, where he has been invited on several occasions in recent years, via Italy, where his work is read and studied, and most especially in psychiatric circles, Henri Maldiney is seen as a great philosophical pioneer.

In all his writings, consistently and in different forms, he turns the same question over and over again: that of being. In this sense, Henri Maldiney is indebted to Martin Heidegger. It was his reading of *Being and Time* that set him on the road of his own thought. But this road has become so much his own that it cannot be confused with any other. In what respect is it distinctively his own? In that, while depending at the outset on Heidegger's release from the ontological structure of existence – that of a being which, open to all others and to the oneness which they constitute, has, by means of this very openness, to determine itself – Henri Maldiney has pushed his search in the direction of

what has always been a major challenge for philosophy: understanding the singular. What he has not ceased to question and he strives to comprehend by finding the words to express it is existence in the act, there where it takes place: in other words, in the singularity of each existence in its inimitable *style*.

This attention to the singular has led Henri Maldiney to turn aside from all the comprehensive interpretations of history or of the history of western philosophy – including Heidegger's interpretation. Interpretations which often exact a heavy price: a refusal to acknowledge singular paths, the exceptional nature of great works, their excess in relation to the interpretative snares in which general views enclose them. In sum, Henri Maldiney has shown great scorn for every hermeneutic totalizing structure. Whence his refusal to sacrifice what such thinkers as Plato, Plotinus and some of the modern philosophers offer as food for thought to the allocation, for each of them, of a place at the heart of the history of metaphysics itself conceived as the history of the obscuring of being. It would, moreover, have been at the very least paradoxical that thought focused on understanding the singular should be able to take to its heart an interpretative scheme which, whatever the qualifications, implies an overbearing or an overhanging attitude, a gesture of closure.

It is therefore in the light of Henri Maldiney's endeavours to contemplate the singularity of what exists that we should consider the two spheres, often intersecting, to which his attention has most readily been drawn: art and psychiatry. One of his most important books – *Penser l'homme et la folie, à la lumière de l'analyse existentielle et de l'analyse du destin* (Jerôme Millon, 1991) – as well as numerous studies in his other works, such as *Art et Existence* (Klincksieck, 1985), bear witness to his engagement with psychiatry and psychiatrists. Some of them regularly appeal to him. Thanks to the acuity of the gaze that he is able to turn upon the productions of a sick person – drawings, models, gestures, postures, linguistic stances – they expect Maldiney to help them to understand that person's 'being in the world', that is to say, his wounded, indeed broken, existential structure.

It is precisely this acuity of vision and this capacity for tracing forms to their genesis, to their form in formation (*Gestaltung*) – as, following Paul Klee, he likes to repeat – which makes the words of Henri Maldiney on works of art – pictorial, plastic or poetic – a kind of event. An occurrence of this kind he has called *Avènement de l'oeuvre*. This is in fact the title of his latest book (1997), which follows a work, *Aux déserts que l'histoire accable* (1996), which gathers together his writings on 'The Art of Tal-Coat'.

As for his books, *Regard, parole, espace*, *L'Art, l'éclair de l'être* and *Le vouloir-dire de Francis Ponge*, they are to be numbered among the great works of the French phenomenological movement. Long out of print, but produced in a revised edition in 1994, *Regard, parole, espace*, was Henri Maldiney's first book (1974). In its very title he announced that sight and speech, as well as the space and time of existence, would be the work's focal-points, not scattered but experienced in their interlacing. Moreover, one of the concerns of Henri Maldiney's writing is not to betray his gaze and to this end to act in such a way that his speech remains speech, so that it can say what it is essential to say and is not transformed into *discourse on* any subject. In this, his affinity with Francis Ponge can be understood. He never ceased struggling to voice the dumbness of things: 'the uttered look'. But this book also contains one of the most authoritative writings there is on 'comprehension' and others on 'feeling'. Understanding and feeling are linked. How can we get near to the singularity of a human being, how understand it, if we are content to consider from the perspective of general ideas the notion one has of it or what it aims or seeks to express,

without paying attention to *how*, to its way of being and to the world which corresponds to that way of opening a world, of opening oneself to the world. Now, this 'how' manifests itself for each person *through* the structures of feeling and moving which are those of its appearance in the being – since this appearance is always that of an incarnate being.

What is said here of the human being applies equally to a work of art. A work of art *exists*. And it only exists through the way in which it makes meaning happen, a meaning which is not predetermined, even though the subject of the work may be. Thus it is with the 'nativities' painted countless times. Each one, by its form and inseparable from it, brings about a meaning which is proper to itself and is not that of any other work on the same theme. And it is in it, thanks to it, that there is art or, maybe, there is not truly art, if what one denotes by work of art partially usurps its name. Then we have no more than a generic appellation denoting a category of cultural objects to do with 'artistic' production.

Thus to understand philosophically what Henri Maldiney meant by the advent of the work (*Avènement de l'oeuvre*), one has to go beyond the habitual thought which considers the work as the expression of the artist who produced it. What precedes the work and the artist, who can only be described as such thanks to the work he produces, is this Nothing, this Void or this Silence with which the artist has to pit his strength and on which he has to rely to bring into being what he alone hears calling and which, through his work of creation, comes into the world. The contribution of oriental thought is critical for the thought of Henri Maldiney here, and in particular Taoist thought. It has provided him with a frame of reference as substantial as it is strange, in relation to the ways of western thought, better to understand that no great work fits into a causal network which would explain it in terms of such or such positive antecedents or their conjunction.

This can be experienced in the analyses in his essay 'Cézanne et Sainte-Victoire – Peinture et Verité' (in *L'Art, l'éclair de l'être*), analyses which testify quite as much to the reflective attention which Henri Maldiney brings to works in their singularity. We see there, in dazzling fashion, that his gaze has become capable not only of distinguishing differences of colour, tonality, viewpoint and spatialization among the various 'Sainte-Victoire' painted by Cézanne but also of auscultating the meaning which they assume in the advent of that 'lightning flash of being', which takes place in them, each time unique.

What is true for works of art, whether pictural or plastic, holds just as good for poetry. We have proof of this as much in his analyses of Hölderlin as in those of André du Bouchet or in the two works which Henri Maldiney has devoted to Francis Ponge, *Le legs des choses dans l'oeuvre de Francis Ponge* (L'Âge d'homme) and *Le Vouloir-dire de Francis Ponge*, respectively. What other work has recaptured so well what Francis Ponge wanted to do? The 'task of the impossible' of the author of *La Fabrique du Pré* was to *give voice to the mute world*. 'A doubly impossible task', says Maldiney, 'for the *mute* is also to be found in the language. Now it is this double mutism which the founding project takes as the bedrock of its work' (p. 39). For Francis Ponge 'the mute world is to be uttered'. But this utterance cannot be conceived as if things in their density did not challenge it, as if words were only pure transparency. This is what is expressed in the emblematic formula, 'the *bias of things* calls forth the *rage of expression*'.

To be uttered, the things which have struck him, which have moved him and whose call he hears, assign to the poet the task of remaking them in speech. Or, as Henri Maldiney writes: 'Pierced by these mute entreaties, the defiance hurled by things at speech masks an appeal' (p. 41). In fact, 'the place of their meeting (the meeting of words

and things) is an intermediate zone of experience which, like that explored by the English psychoanalyst D.M. Winnicott, belongs neither to the external world nor to the internal world' (p. 88). It is precisely to mark this intermediate zone where everything is in play that Francis Ponge has forged the expression *objeu*, which Henri Maldiney illuminates not only in linking the notion to that of potential play-space, as in Winnicott, but in showing how 'the *objeu* extends to everything. For it is it which everywhere preserves and articulates between words and things the only interval across which they can communicate' (p. 74).

Thus to recapture the movement, like that of the flight of the swallows in the poem of the same name (*Les hirondelles*), Francis Ponge also practises such changes in writing that the latter reconstitutes, by means of its style, the style and appearance of flight. To these reciprocal exchanges between the experience of the world which makes the poet and the appearance of his writing, 'between the play of experience and the play of words', Henri Maldiney devotes a meditation which is also a lesson in phenomenological scrutiny. Is the difficulty which the poet encounters not that of finding the speech to give voice to his gaze? Whence the question underlying the text, 'The Glass of Water', which Henri Maldiney puts clearly: 'How to produce – make discernible and create in words – the distinctive quality of water?' (p. 80).

In short, as he proceeded in his reading of Ponge's *vouloir-dire*, Henri Maldiney's lesson becomes clear. He makes us understand what utterance is, above all in the place where it reveals its innate power, that is in poetic speech.

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