

WILLIAM D. MELANEY

MERLEAU-PONTY AND EXPRESSIVE LIFE:  
A HERMENEUTICAL STUDY

This paper is concerned with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's contribution to the hermeneutical theory of expressive meaning that has been developed on the basis of an ongoing dialogue with traditional phenomenology. The early portion of the paper examines the unstable boundaries between expression and indication as a key to a new approach to expressive meaning. Edmund Husserl's articulation of this opposition in logical terms will be reexamined in a new philosophical context. The paper then takes up Merleau-Ponty's understanding of expressive life as it emerges in *Phenomenology of Perception*, his first attempt to discuss perception, aesthetics, and temporality in comprehensive terms. My discussion of this key text centers around the hermeneutical implications of its major claims. The third part of the paper examines Merleau-Ponty's return to the paintings of Paul Cézanne, which not only clarifies his earlier position but also deepens the philosophical meaning of his reflections on language. My final comments are concerned with how phenomenology can be broadened in a way that can become responsive to the hermeneutical theory of expressive meaning.

I

Husserl's exploration of expression in *Logical Investigations* provides a useful starting point for assessing a subjective theory of personal meaning. The relationship between expression and meaning is basic to phenomenology during its 'classical' phase. The elevation of expression (*Ausdruck*) over indication (*Anzeichen*) cannot occur unless meaning itself is grounded in subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> For Husserl, nonetheless, expression is primarily a *verbal* phenomenon, rather than the mere corollary of an impersonal intention, and the subordination of indication to expression does not entail the elimination of non-expressive meanings. However, expression acquires logical priority over indication if the indicative sign can be reduced according to strict procedures. Phenomenology identifies those procedures with a rigorous definition of the expressive sign. At the same time, every meaningful expression marks the cleavage between two kinds of signs, instead of simply constituting meaning according to a single

theory of the sign. This site of cleavage is an origin that does not allow us to expel indication (whether in the form of trace, grapheme, or material remainder) from the threshold of expressive meaning.<sup>2</sup>

By reading Husserl in this manner, however, we not only depart from standard interpretations of his early work but also provide another mode of access to many of the crucial oppositions that frame the limits of traditional phenomenology. The opposition between worldliness and the transcendental, which the phenomenological reduction was designed to radicalize, is only the most obvious in a series of oppositions that testify to the presence of an opening that cannot be eliminated from the phenomenological procedure. In terms of the opening within which these oppositions find their origin, therefore, phenomenology becomes less of an eidetic science than a special discipline that maintains a constant relationship to what precedes the ascendancy of natural consciousness over subjective life. If it is no longer possible to purify expression of indication, for example, this should not be taken to mean that phenomenology is incapable of maintaining a rigorous hold on mental contents. The compromised nature of expression offers instead an analogue to what emerges in the signs of indicative meaning. Hence the material residues that render indications phenomenologically suspect might provide essential clues for interpreting our being-in-the-world, which would be difficult to affirm in a strongly epistemological framework.

Moreover, the indeterminate boundaries between expression and indication enable us to challenge the way that expression is sometimes assigned a purely verbal meaning. While early phenomenology unfolds in the tension between two semiotic codes, Husserl himself places subjective meaning on the side of verbal accomplishments. The constitutive power of the speaking subject is organized in terms of the fulfillment of expressive meanings. At the same time, each constituting act brings the subject in contact with indications that exceed the scope of what is immediately constituted. Nonetheless, the space *between* indication and expression opens up a gap that cannot be eliminated whenever the subject encounters undisclosed meanings. It is as if early phenomenology already contained the possibility of a being-in-the-world that underlies its assertion of rigor. The space within which the subject constitutes meanings is also the space within which meaning is constituted. For this reason, the subject is limited with respect to its control over the contents of every mental act. This decisive limitation of the human subject is nowhere more apparent than in the realm of language. The subject who speaks is never equal to what exceeds the horizon of constitution.

Cognitive approaches to expressive phenomena seem to offer an alternative to the uncertainty inherent in this infinite regress. Everyday discourse often uses the term *expression* as a synonym for effective communication. For example, we might say that a warning expresses an imminent danger. In other cases, we speak of gestures that express sadness or joy. Works of art are particularly useful for the purpose of bringing the second use of the term into clearer focus. The communicative use of expression denotes something external to it, whereas the figurative use exemplifies a property that it borrows from some other thing.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as an example of the figurative use, if I say that a painting is somber, the property of sobriety has been selected as adequate to describing the painting as exemplifying a specific quality.<sup>4</sup> This second use enables us to consider the importance of what otherwise might be dismissed as a mere indication. Expression in this sense also demonstrates the nature of a transfer, since it calls attention to a quality that pertains to the thing itself but did not at first seem to be present.

From the phenomenological standpoint, strictly cognitive approaches to expressive meaning reveal the active nature of the human mind as it attempts to extract objective meanings from existing things. But cognitive approaches also suggest that indeterminacy cannot be eliminated from what is qualitatively exemplary. Exemplification invites us to imagine the work of art in the guise of a transcendental object. In responding to this invitation, we adopt a hermeneutical stance that carries us beyond a mere lack of certainty. Indeterminacy as a peculiarity of expressive meaning acquires hermeneutical importance when it can be shown to acknowledge the leap that occurs in cognitive insight. Cognitive indeterminacy demonstrates that expressive meaning cannot be equated with simple denotation. Hermeneutical indeterminacy, in contrast, is ontologically concerned with how expressive meaning exceeds subjective closure. Hermeneutics remains phenomenological when it accounts for the role of *experience* in holding together the ontologically laden qualities that give expressive meaning a more than formal significance. Hence, in moving beyond early phenomenology, we do not turn away from the theme of experience that is more fully developed in Husserl's late work and that offers a bridge between hermeneutical theory and application. At the same time, we recognize that the modern tradition has tended to 'subjectivize' expression in a manner that must be overcome if experience is to be approached in phenomenological terms.

Hans-Georg Gadamer has provided suggestive comments in *Truth and Method* on our need to rethink the meaning of expression according to

non-subjective criteria.<sup>5</sup> The legacies of Romanticism and the early twentieth-century avant-garde make it difficult for us to disentangle expression from subjectivity. While it is no doubt true that expression cannot be thought apart from subjectivity, Gadamer attempts to retrieve the earlier rhetorical meaning in opposition to the modern tendency to relate it to something interior, which would constitute a purely inner experience (*Erlebnis*). The experience that expression more properly implies would be one that has the capacity to frame a subject matter in terms of the unity of form and content. Gadamer contends, therefore, that not only Aristotle but also Spinoza and Hegel interpreted expression ontologically, unlike their nineteenth-century successors, whose tendency toward psychologism completely distorted the meaning of expression as an evocative mode of presence.

Gadamer's comments on expression can be related to his partial rehabilitation of Kant's aesthetic theory, which tends toward subjectivism but nonetheless sustains a symbolic interpretation of language use.<sup>6</sup> Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is important hermeneutically because it draws a strict contrast between symbolic and schematic forms of representation. The symbolic in Kant does not present the concept in a direct manner as in the transcendental schematism, but only indirectly when expression becomes an occasion for aesthetic reflection. Hence symbolic representation does not mediate conceptually but functions metaphorically in the mode of a language. Gadamer also remarks that Kant's analogy between the aesthetically beautiful and the morally good eases the transition between two distinct realms, instead of enforcing discontinuity.

The hermeneutical approach to expression is eminently compatible with a critique of intellectualism as a metaphysical stance. Gadamer's interest in developing an understanding of expression that is irreducible to modern subjectivity can be interpreted as a corrective to the limitations of early phenomenology. Nonetheless, we might argue that Husserl opens up a hermeneutics of expression in distinguishing expression and indication as related sources of understanding that are aspects of ordinary verbal experience. This opening would still be phenomenological in placing conceptual subordination under the sign of the natural attitude. From this standpoint, Kant's subjectivism at least provides a basis for freeing the mind from the strictly cognitive claims of intellectual knowledge. The source of spontaneity in this case would be the aesthetic subject, which might be linked to phenomenology since its use of reflective judgment unsettles a strict relationship between rules and percepts. The hermeneuti-

cal significance of the aesthetic subject would be grounded in its capacity to both inform and limit cognition.

## II

The critique of intellectualism that informs Gadamer's hermeneutical approach to expression assumes a more specifically phenomenological form in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, which also explores the problem of subjectivity in new ways. The paradoxes of rationalism are taken up in *Phenomenology of Perception*, a work which discusses the limitations as well as the potential of Cartesian thought.<sup>7</sup> Hence, instead of subordinating perception to analytical reflection, Merleau-Ponty revisits the 'truth' of natural judgment as a synthetic activity. The piece of wax that Descartes attempts to constitute as a mere result is actually reconstituted, that is to say, it cannot perfectly coincide with mental progress toward a preordained future. Reflection, therefore, is always part of a particular situation, and the analysis of perception cannot abolish the specificity of the percept and the involvement of consciousness in time and place. Thought in this sense is always given in an experience, which both conceals what it reveals and provides the origin of knowledge.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception is inseparable from his view of the human body as an essentially expressive complex in relation to which existence acquires meaning. The body incarnates existence to the extent that it expresses something that neither lies behind it nor subsists beneath it. Bodily existence from this standpoint can be interpreted in semiotic terms: "If we therefore say that the body expresses existence at every moment, this is in the sense in which a word expresses thought."<sup>8</sup> Bodily expression does not stand at a remove from a prior meaning in the way that a translation is sometimes said to stand at a remove from an original text. In other words, bodily expression does not merely derive from a pre-existing body as a secondary and less dependable phenomenon. On the contrary, because body and existence presuppose one another, the body in its expressive being is related to the life that incarnates what cannot be fully embodied: it is at this point and within this framework that human sexuality comes to possess 'metaphysical' significance. Indeed, rather than restrict its meaning to otherworldly concerns, Merleau-Ponty suggests how metaphysics "begins with the opening out upon 'another,'" and therefore cannot be detached from encounters between sentient beings who are both free and independent.<sup>9</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's remarks on body and existence can be related to his interpretation of aesthetic expression as an experience that creates a quasi-material presence or opens up a sphere in which empirical life is suddenly transcended. Literary expression is not something that simply relates reader and writer to a previous moment in time, but "it brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text," and, in this way, enlarges and deepens common experience.<sup>10</sup> Hence the place of aesthetic experience in a dramatic performance should not be confused with the feelings of a dramatist or the personality of the performer. It is Phaedra, rather than Berma, who appears before us in the work of Racine, which enables the actress to surpass what exists externally and to convey this movement to spectators:

Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, installs it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all, or conversely plucks the signs themselves – the person of the actor, or the colours and canvas of the painter – from their empirical existence and bears them off into another world.<sup>11</sup>

Aesthetic expression in this account is not an attempt to copy what lies beyond it, but instead gives birth to another world through the vehicle of material signs. Whether these signs are interpreted as presences in their own right, or as clues to some larger whole that exceeds the surface of their appearance, is determined according to different criteria. In either case, however, the production or reception of expressive meaning involves more than an abstract relationship to the thing expressed.

In contrast to the general tendency of modern aesthetics to subjectivize meaning, therefore, Merleau-Ponty shows us how the existence of the thing enters into the constitution of the text itself. This existence is not only what bears meaning, but it also interrupts a transparent relationship to an external world. When understood in this way, literary expression offers us a paradigm for understanding how existence can be introduced into the text as if from the outside, since meaning modifies self-reflection and establishes a new mode of presence. Existence in literature, however, always refers back to a common linguistic horizon or world that contains the possibilities of future meanings.<sup>12</sup> Literature rests upon itself and therefore suggests the idea that words are fully transparent to thought. Perfect transparency is, nonetheless, an illusion. The life of literature is based on the link between speech and reiterable meaning. Speech functions in terms of sedimentation, but it also remains inseparable from the emergence of thought in verbal experience.<sup>13</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's conception of reiterable meaning can be related to his understanding of perception as a bodily phenomenon. The impersonal nature of eidetic insight was often emphasized by Husserl himself. Perceptions possess an evanescent quality that coincides with the need for perpetual renewal. The hold that the object exerts on me occurs in a segment of time, and the synthetic effort to embrace a plurality of moments in order to achieve constancy is potentially limitless. Perception becomes a recurrent failure to the degree that it must remain anonymous. However, in recognizing that subjectivity is limited through perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty offers a phenomenological account of how the self transpires in time.

The person who, in sensory exploration, gives a past to the present and directs it towards a future, is not myself as an autonomous subject, but myself insofar as I have a body and am able to 'look'. Rather than being a genuine history, perception ratifies and renews in us a 'prehistory'.<sup>14</sup>

The bodily movement that animates human life joins later experiences to earlier ones, and then proceeds in time, but at no point can the self achieve absolute identity. The future is continually thrown back on the past, and the project of the self is forever thwarted in the stasis of an empty present.

Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty helps demonstrate that bodily existence compares to a work of art in its particularity as well as in its capacity to unite expression with the thing expressed. A theoretical overview of Cézanne's paintings provides us with various options that are equally plausible, but a concrete perception of a single painting establishes the identity of his work once and for all.<sup>15</sup> This lesson, which suggests by analogy that the body is composed of lived meanings, returns us once again to the phenomenology of expressive meaning and offers an alternative to modern subjectivism. Bodily existence cannot be posited in the abstract. The relationship between existence and expression places the issue of identity in a hermeneutical setting.

Hence, while he is less concerned in this early context with aesthetics than with life in general, Merleau-Ponty nonetheless looks forward to a hermeneutical approach to the work of art. What is being said about the body through the example of the work of art can be formulated in aesthetic terms. This two-sided discourse demonstrates the limitations of both empiricism and rationalism in contrast to a phenomenological assessment of the work of art. The work of art is never the mere embodiment of an abstract idea. For this reason, the empiricist insistence on the

material aspects of art acquires some legitimacy. However, we do not come to terms with any *single* work unless we can move beyond an additive approach to the works that summarize a life. Empiricism rightly criticizes the divorce of form and content that vitiates modern rationalism, but it fails to grasp the concrete unity of the work itself. Modern rationalism as well fails to provide a concrete understanding of the *particular* work of art when it suppresses perceptual disparity in order to achieve aesthetic abstraction.<sup>16</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's conception of the work of art surpasses the perspectives of rationalism and empiricism in emphasizing how expression always bears a relation to the shared nature of interpretation. The work of art can be said to express qualities that are irreducible to the attitudes of an aesthetic subject. However, the expressive qualities that inhere in the work of art become shared meanings whenever they are perceived to be exemplary. However, the work of art is not only constituted in a way that ceases to be purely subjective, but it opens up a dimension of intersubjectivity that presupposes shared experience. The relationship between expression and existence is thus related to the connections between living persons who relate to one another on the basis of common interpretations that both inform existence and presuppose it. Hence, while expression and existence do not coincide, they can be conceived as different aspects of a coherent process that allows life itself to embrace the possibility of productive change.

### III

In his later writings on art and language, Merleau-Ponty more fully examines the relationship between life and work, the self and its productions, as a 'space' that remains forever indeterminate. From this standpoint, the significance of Cézanne's work is not limited to a hermeneutics of painting. The work of art that achieves 'visibility' is the expression of a mode of existence to which the work remains irreducible. The work is not a mere example of the visible but helps us understand the nature of existence as a projection. In "Cézanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty alludes to the need for a more fluid approach to the experience of causation as an alternative to explanatory hypotheses:

The truth is that this work to be done called for this life. From the very start, the only equilibrium in Cézanne's life came from the support of his future work. This work to come is hinted at, but it would be wrong to take these hints for causes, although they do make a simple adventure of his life and work.<sup>17</sup>



The argument describes an incomplete circle. The work of art is not a mere representation of external reality, nor does it refer to the life as the cause of a simple or even complex expression. The work of art refers to a larger structure that anticipates the life to come, or frames an existence as its inseparable projection. The life of the artist cannot explain the work of art that supports a future life. The life of the artist has its origin in art and in the work of art as an expression that cannot be detached from the life of art. The work of art in this sense *is* the work to come. We must refer to it in our search for the origin of creativity.<sup>18</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's reflections on Cézanne are important for many reasons. The distinction between the artist's life and work can be explored in terms of various hermeneutical issues that are not restricted to aesthetic interpretation. By making this distinction, Merleau-Ponty begs the question of whether the life or the work has fundamental priority. If the life has priority over the work, art itself becomes a mere sign of something more primary. This renders art less essential than what it attempts to express. On the other hand, if the work is completely autonomous, art no longer sustains a significant relationship to existence in general. Life as a consequence would lose its artistic potential. Merleau-Ponty confronts this dilemma in linking art to life but also in establishing a framework within which art and life could be viewed separately. It would be possible, for example, to interpret the work of art on its own as a *relatively* autonomous accomplishment, which becomes a source of meaning that could be approached in a thematic sense. However, the framework that allows the work to be thematised in this way does not presuppose a radical break between art and existence. Although the artist's work cannot be explained in terms of a specific biography, we should not falsely conclude that it is produced in a vacuum or that it can be understood apart from the life that formed it.

The distinction between the artist's work and life can be articulated hermeneutically in terms of textual understanding. A literary text can be read as a delimited accomplishment, but it can also be assigned to a larger context that potentially modifies our initial reading of it. Of course, our reading of the text could be restricted to an analysis of internal features that provide it with a certain unity and perhaps complicate our reception of it as a literary object. The structural features of the text compare to what gives the work of art its material integrity. However, the literary work is also part of a diachronic movement that it inscribes as a record of culturally mediated experiences. Apart from the act of mediation that turns the writer's life into a source of art, the literary work

would not assume the form of a compelling triumph of language over the viscissitudes of lived experience. Nonetheless, the literary work continues to bear testimony to the life of a singular individual and to the historical moment to which it belongs. The life does not provide a perfect explanation for the text as an object of knowledge. However, the text cannot be read in complete isolation if the reader wishes to grasp its actual meaning, not only as an expression of the writer's life and period, but also as a projected meaning that draws upon the entire history of literature in terms of the writer's personal contribution to an ongoing tradition.

Merleau-Ponty employs the example of Cézanne in discussing how the work of art frames an existence that cannot be conceived apart from art itself. The painter's work presupposes a relationship to art, which enables the artist to transcend the mere fact of his empirical existence. These same reflections can be expanded upon hermeneutically to illuminate the writer's engagement with literary tradition. Literature is not simply an activity, but it is also an institution that pre-exists the writer and extends beyond the horizons of the present. However, just as language and speech can be contrasted in terms of the difference between sedimentation and verbal expression, we might develop Merleau-Ponty's insight concerning how new significations can be altered in the creation of new meanings. A painter may return to the same landscape again and again in order to establish a new relationship to the tradition of painting. By the same token, the novelist or poet who borrows indirectly from the work of predecessors is inscribing a new meaning in a recognized achievement. Hence, while art and literature are guided along traditional paths, they also provide the creative spirit with fresh possibilities that are unexpected and couched in unlimited meanings.

Merleau-Ponty's late reflections on language provide a basis for interpreting excess in relation to verbal meaning. One of the words that is used to name this excess is silence. Once again, we might return to his comments on Cézanne in placing these linguistic concerns within an artistic context. The painter dwells in silence, and yet his relationship to creation does not derive from an abstract conception of a future work. The sedimented meanings of a living tradition are important to whatever becomes visible in the painting itself. Creativity is not a matter of finding the exact equivalent for something known but of allowing meanings to emerge in terms of what cannot be stated. This implies that language should not be conceived as the translation of an original text, but as an

indirect and allusive accomplishment, in short, as an expression of silence.<sup>19</sup>

The relationship between language and silence is central to Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of key linguistic insights in his final writings. The spaces *between* words, rather than the words themselves, evoke the most telling difference with respect to the nature of language. This implies that difference overtakes the sign as a self-identical unit of meaning. Hence Merleau-Ponty assimilates the structuralist view of semiotic difference to a critical understanding of linguistic expression. From this standpoint, the gaps between words constitute a source of meaning that no longer conforms to the customary distinction between silence and speech. Words are steeped in silence because the spaces between them guarantee whatever meaning they possess. The painter moves beyond a silent tradition in returning to a living present that perpetually seeps away. Merleau-Ponty relates the instability of language to the interweaving of visible and invisible that painting suggests but cannot fully bring to light. Language unfolds in this silent space and almost disappears in the vibrancy of speech, which situates the self in an ontological setting.

In once again returning to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Cézanne as a crucial point of reference, we immediately recognize how the phenomenon of expression has been carried beyond the oppositional terms of an analytic discourse. The silence of the painter now becomes the condition for the possibility of a future work. The work of art that frames the artist's existence is not merely the conscious projection of a deliberate life. The artist originates in the work of art, which bears a relationship to art as an institution. Hence we would be wrong to attribute a strongly volitional character to the artist's existence. The artist's relationship to the work of art is temporally determined in a manner that concerns the *being* of the artist, rather than simply the artist's place in time. Cézanne's life is supported by his future work even before it acquired the 'signature' that allows us to identify it. The artist's being does not exist outside the work to come, nor does it perfectly coincide with a series of future accomplishments. The artist produces works that hint at this work to come, but the visible signs of future intentions are only part of the temporal life that shelters and sustains particular tasks. The self that carries out specific intentions is less the product of positional consciousness than a temporal being whose relationship to the future is continually suspended between undisclosed possibilities and expressive concerns.

## IV

Our examination of Merleau-Ponty's early work has enabled us to explore the problem of expression in terms of two types of inquiry. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty's immersion in phenomenological themes is evident in his concern for perception, bodily experience, and aesthetic truth. However, while revealing that expression and existence are irreducible, phenomenological investigation also opened up the possibility of shared understanding. Hence Merleau-Ponty's reflections on expression and existence have the hermeneutical value of demonstrating that meaning is an interpretive issue. The hermeneutical implications of his work suggest, for instance, how the thing itself can be brought into the heart of the literary text. From the standpoint of a philosophy of expression, this basic phenomenon revealed how literature opposes various tendencies toward extreme subjectivity that typify modern thought.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on Cézanne's art were shown to demonstrate how the life of the artist is inseparable from the work to come. Individual paintings were identified with hints of some future work, which was in turn conceived as a prerequisite for the painter's accomplishments. Just as the literary work bears the imprints of the thing itself, we might say that graphic art offers indicative material for the understanding of the work to come. Moreover, the artist's relationship to the work to come provides the basis for surpassing an empirical existence that otherwise would restrict the artist to lived experience. Finally, this same relationship not only allows the work of art to be appreciated cognitively as an expression that is irreducible to subjective experience, but it also provides the artist with a subject matter that constitutes a basis for self-understanding.

The possibility of self-understanding that is inscribed in the work to come suggests that the distinction between expression and indication does not have to assume the form of a binding opposition. The painter achieves self-understanding in terms of a temporal project that includes particular works of art in an on-going series of interpretations. Self-understanding is never complete, but it enables the indicative sign to be intuitively transformed into an occasion for expressive meaning. However, the self that understands its own work in terms of the future is not a disembodied consciousness that surveys the world as an external witness. The difference between inside and outside may form the 'classical' opposition that constitutes traditional metaphysics.<sup>20</sup> And yet, this same opposition cannot be said to constitute phenomenology, which ultimately seeks to demonstrate

the temporality of mental acts and the radical nature of conscious experience.

Merleau-Ponty explicitly denies that the difference between inner and outer is the starting-point for his phenomenological position. Hence it is no accident that his late reflections on art and the meaning of language challenge the modern version of this traditional difference. The basis for this challenge, however, can be found in the critique of intellectualism that emerges in his early work. In exploring the status of perception in Cartesian rationalism, this critique results in a new way of understanding the reflective *cogito*. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty is able to appreciate the phenomenological truth inherent in early modern philosophies of consciousness: "Cartesianism, like Kantianism, would seem to have seen quite clearly that the problem with perception resides in its being an originating knowledge."<sup>21</sup> Rather than interpret the Cartesian tradition from a purely reflective standpoint, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reading moves beyond the oppositional framework within which rationalism is generally interpreted.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Descartes is not simply a reinterpretation but a *reversal* of metaphysical rationalism. Rather than argue that the 'I think' contains the 'I am' as a derivative phenomenon, he insists that consciousness is integrated into existence whenever the *cogito* is assigned its true meaning.<sup>22</sup> This reversal of a widely accepted reading enables him to introduce a new concept of self in place of the metaphysical subject that occupies modern philosophies of consciousness. Hence it is not a question of understanding the self either empirically as a succession of psychic acts or rationally as the ground of synthetic unity. The self is a single cohesive experience that engages in the temporal confirmation of itself with every passing moment. Merleau-Ponty refers to this coming into being as an advent or transcendental event that the *cogito* brings into actuality. This would mean that the *cogito* not only belongs to itself but that it also belongs to the world. As a result of resituating consciousness in this new setting, phenomenology is able to break with the metaphysical tradition that would conceptualize the self in terms of the difference between inner and outer reality. The self can be understood hermeneutically as a being-in-relation because it is linked to the world and it is also the rift that brings the world into being at the site of experience. Merleau-Ponty draws a significant conclusion from his phenomenological analysis of the connection between self and world: "Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself."<sup>23</sup>

The hermeneutics of expression is eminently compatible with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of self and world. The human being who achieves a degree of self-understanding does not leave behind a finite existence that provides momentary insights into an on-going project. Furthermore, the actually existing self never possesses the future in a manner that would allow the present to assume the meaning of an entire life. From the standpoint of a perpetually unfinished existence, the merely articulate meanings that trace the present with silence are indications of an underlying condition of being that involves the self in deferral and expectancy. However, rather than interpret this condition in a purely negative manner, the hermeneutics of expression is capable of ascertaining this work of silence as a pause in the movement toward some future accomplishment that remains forever out of reach. The positive value of this change in tempo pertains to the way that it allows the future work to retain an indeterminate meaning.

Hence, in remaining open to indicative signs that complicate the task of self-understanding, the hermeneutics of expression can be related to a phenomenological conception of the self in time. Unlike traditional empiricism, this approach to experience permits us to assess heteronomic data in terms of temporal schemes of interpretation. Unlike transcendental idealism, it prevents us from placing the self beyond the temporal occasions that qualify the unity of the project whose outline appears in the light of the present. The hermeneutics of expression reintroduces the theme of temporality at the very moment when the issue of self-understanding becomes an urgent concern. This is hardly an accident, since the temporality of the 'living present' was a concern of phenomenology from its very beginnings.

*The American University in Cairo*

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Husserl develops the basic distinction between expression and indication in terms of a phenomenology of signs that examines the status of both terms, particularly in view of the possibility of achieving ideally unified meaning on the basis of intentional acts. The phenomenological significance of this distinction, its complex bearing on the status of pronouns and demonstratives, and its role in overcoming a purely psychological conception of meaning are examined in Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, "Investigation I," chapters 1–4 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 269–333.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida has provided an important criticism of Husserl's approach to meaning in arguing that the distinction between expressive and indicative meaning remains indeterminate. In

upholding the indeterminate status of this distinction, Derrida can suggest that the exclusion of indication from expression is, in many cases, rather arbitrary, and that the trace of indicative meaning on the margins of expression foreshadows other phenomenological themes that are only suggested in this early context. See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Goodman is not working in the phenomenological tradition, and yet his cognitive approach to art contains a theory of expressive meaning that might be related to any rigorous attempt to move beyond aesthetic subjectivism. Moreover, his view of expression as exemplification evokes allegorical interpretations of artistic works, and, for this reason, suggests a social basis for considering cultural experience in nonsubjective terms. Cf. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 85–95.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Appendix VI (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 502–505.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), pp. 41–44.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that literary tradition presumes related influences that enable authors to build on past achievements and to establish a dialogue with the dead. Literary works are not autonomous in the sense of constituting discrete objects of discourse, or belonging to separate spheres of expression: “The worlds of Balzac and Stendhal are not like planets without communication with each other, for speed implants the idea of truth in us as the presumptive limit of its effort.” *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> The notion that language preforms thought, which is a basic theme in contemporary theories of language, is tacitly argued in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of what it means to take up a position: “What does language express, if it does not express thoughts? It presents or rather it is the subject’s taking up of a position in the world of his meanings.” *Ibid.*, 193. The notion of ‘world’ is identified with an intellectual or cultural life that would be inherently continuous with natural existence.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre argues that Leibniz, who assumed that many possible Adams are equivalent to the actual Adam who caused the fall, raises abstraction to the level of a formal principle “when he reduces the chronological order to being only a symbolic expression of the logical order.” Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 602. Leibniz therefore attempts to found freedom on the *essence* of Adam instead of interpreting the moment of choice from the standpoint of the future. For Merleau-Ponty, someone who tried to understand Cézanne’s work on the basis of many possible Cézannes might be compared to the Leibnizian rationalist, since he would miss the significance of the work as the temporal expression of a concrete life. *Ibid.*, pp. 150–151.

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger interprets the origin of both the artist and the work of art in terms of art. Heidegger argues that the significance of the work of art has been passed over by modern aesthetics, which is abstract and noncommittal, and that the artist cannot be understood apart from the structure of art in which he participates. The structure of art is also put in question through the example of the Greek temple, which is used to demonstrate how the work itself is riven with earth and world. Like Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger suggests that the work of art harbors materiality, and that the artist is less an origin than a bridge into an unknown future. For details, see Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 15–87.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> The opposition between inner and outer constitutes the threshold of metaphysics, particularly when conceived in terms of modern philosophies of consciousness. However, phenomenology is interested in the opening through which this opposition springs into being, as well as the various modalities in terms of which it becomes manifest. The importance of this opposition to early phenomenology as well as its partial overcoming through temporalization is discussed in Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, note 9, pp. 84–85.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 437.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Derrida, Jacques. 1973. *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Tr. David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1993. *Truth and Method*. Tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Crossroad Publishing.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1976. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row.
- . 1971. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Tr. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, pp. 15–87.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1982. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Tr. F. Kersten. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher.
- . 1970. *Logical Investigations, Books I/II*. Tr. J. N. Findlay. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Tr. Colin Smith. New York: Humanities Press.
- . 1964. "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," "Eye and Mind." *The Primacy of Perception*. Tr. Carleton Dallery. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 43–95, 159–190.
- . 1973. *The Prose of the World*. Ed. Claude Lefort, tr. John O'Neill. London: Heinemann.



- . 1964. "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," "On the Phenomenology of Language." *Signs*. Tr. Richard C. McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 39–83, 84–97.
- . 1974. "Cézanne's Doubt." *Sense and Non-Sense*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 9–25.
- . 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Ed. Claude Lefort, tr. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Risser, James. 1993. "Communication and the Prose of the World: The Question of Language in Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer." *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*. Ed. Patrick Burke and Jan van der Veken. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 131–144.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1966. *Being and Nothingness*. Tr. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.