

Meaning, Experience, and the Modern Self: The Phenomenology of Spontaneous Sense in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway**

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ABSTRACT. By portraying meaning as a phenomenon that eludes complete expression and arises spontaneously in our everyday embodied interactions with others and objects in the world, as well as in our own unconscious registering of those interactions, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is uniquely insightful concerning both the presence of meaning in modern life and the modern conception of the self – phenomena marked by a certain ineradicable tension between that which is constituted by us and that which is given from outside us. This paper examines this tension through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, with special attention to the leitmotif of the «spontaneity of sense». Woolf and Merleau-Ponty both help to illustrate an important modern insight: that among the most meaningful experiences are those that are not only unexpected and unexplained, but in some sense foreign and unexplainable – mysterious events and yet everyday occurrences that explode the supposed privacy of our thoughts, and exceed our capacity for expression.

KEYWORDS. Sense-Making; Expression; Unconscious; Modernity; Identity.

* I would like to thank Lisa Chinn and Richard White for helpful comments on this paper, and participants at the 2015 conference of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences for thoughtful discussion of an earlier version. My thinking on these issues was also influenced by discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway* with students and faculty colleagues in the course sequence *Modernity and Its Discontents* at Boston University Kilachand Honors College, 2015 and 2017.

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The final scene of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place at a party, the major event at the culmination of the otherwise rather ordinary June day in which the entirety of the novel occurs. At her party, Clarissa Dalloway learns of the suicide of a war veteran, Septimus Smith, unknown to her in the novel, though known to the reader, and steps away into a separate room, where the news prompts an internal monologue – a depiction of inner life in which identity, social expectation and history interweave to create meaning in the fragile fabric of semi-self-transparency characteristic of the modern self:

They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop everyday in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them [...].¹

At the apex of the novel, in a room alone, Clarissa remembers the lost days of her youth at a country estate, Bourton, and mourns the trappings of social class and «chatter» of modern life, mechanisms that both made it impossible to reach the center, the mattering of things, and that made it possible to cope with modern life in spite of such a lack. She finds the ultimate triumph over the scattering of modern life in the death of someone she has never met, whose intersection with her own life (a central motif in the novel) is the result of nothing more than chance and circumstance.

What arises at the end of the novel, amidst the special atmosphere of Clarissa's party, is that what matters most is tied to that which we often think matters least; the meanings that make life meaningful are those that seem, from the outside, the most common, pedestrian, and

1 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 184, my emphasis.

everyday. And the self for whom those meanings matter – for a central character who we learn, at the beginning of the novel, «would not say of herself, I am this, I am that» – is revealed to exist only in a tension, somewhere between self-conception and a history and identity drawn from others and the world, a tension in which, Clarissa recognizes, Septimus too must have lived and died. «Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived».²

The lyrical, expressive language of high modernism employed in the novel should not be confused for a mismatch with the seemingly pedestrian themes portrayed. The stakes in the novel are indeed high: spurred by the psychological complexities of a post-war society unable to fully come to terms with the history and crisis it has just lived, and without the vocabulary to process or fully acknowledge the trauma that has occurred, Clarissa reflects at the outset of the narrative that «the late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, men and women, a well of tears».³ As David Trotter notes, *Mrs. Dalloway* is characteristic of modernist novels of the interwar period in its turn to more experimental forms of writing due to a dissatisfaction with the received meanings of the age: «In a time of crisis, the fabric of meaning wears thin in places, and meaninglessness sows through: the stories we tell about experience, the symbols which offer themselves from within it, no longer suffice».⁴ And yet the «mattering» Clarissa experiences in the passage is portrayed as a sort of common if underlying and not-often-discussed feature of our everyday lives, a sort of meaningfulness that arises in the «ebb and flow of things», in the interstices of modern life. As Mark Hussey puts it, Woolf's work evinces a certain «tension», «a world characterized by a lack, by a

2 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 8-9.

3 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 9.

4 TROTTER 1999, 77.

sense of an abstract 'gap' in being that cannot be directly referred to in language, but which is certainly a potential of human experience».⁵

This paper seeks to examine this gap, this tension, with special attention to the phenomenon of meaning and its relationship to expression, to the nature of our lived experience of a meaningful world, and to the modern complications of identity and selfhood that arise therefrom. The observation at the heart of my claims can be put thus: *We often recognize things as mattering to us before we have a clear and distinct conception of what exactly it is that matters, or even why. The complexities of human experience somehow make that experience meaningful, in ways that we always fall somewhere short of fully expressing or explaining, even to ourselves.* Woolf's novel helps to show us that among the most meaningful experiences in our lives are those that are not only unexpected and unexplained, but in some sense foreign and unexplainable – mysterious events and yet everyday occurrences that explode the supposed privacy of our thoughts and that seem to exceed our capacity for expression. Rather than taking this phenomenon to lie somewhere at the periphery of human experience, I claim instead that it stands near its core, at the intersection of experience and meaning. By examining *Mrs. Dalloway* through a phenomenological lens, primarily using the work of Merleau-Ponty and following the *leitmotif* of the «spontaneity of sense», I consider a set of related insights about meaning and the self important to the development of the phenomenological tradition and reflected, I argue, in Woolf's text. By portraying meaning as a phenomenon that eludes complete expression and arises spontaneously in our everyday embodied interactions with others and objects in the world, as well as in our own unconscious registering of those interactions, *Mrs. Dalloway* is uniquely insightful concerning both the presence of meaning in modern life and the modern conception of the self – both phenomena marked by a certain ineradicable tension between that which is produced or constituted by us and that which is given from outside us.

Since *Mrs. Dalloway* was published in 1925, well before some of the

5 HUSSEY 1986, xx.

developments of mid-twentieth-century phenomenology discussed in this essay, my claim is not that phenomenological work on these topics directly influenced Woolf in writing the book, nor that this novel in particular influenced later phenomenological thinkers,⁶ but rather that they exhibit important insights about meaning and the mattering of experience that are mutually illuminating, and that seem to have been particularly prevalent in period shared by literary modernism and phenomenology. Section One introduces the problematic of expression and the notion of spontaneous sense in Merleau-Ponty through a genealogy of the phenomenological concepts of meaning, motivation, and embodiment, with reference to examples in Woolf's text. Section Two focuses on the ways in which perspectivalism situates meaning outside the subject in world of shared experiences and things. Section Three focuses on the ways in which this situated meaning is manifested passively in the subject herself, below the threshold of conscious awareness and expression. Section Four uses Merleau-Ponty's conception of institution to show how, despite the historical "sedimentation" of meaning, the spontaneity of sense marks a certain spontaneity and unpredictability in modern life that Woolf intentionally integrates into her experimental prose style. Finally, Section Five applies these insights concerning meaning to the modern problematic of self and identity, as evidenced in Woolf's portrayal of Clarissa Dalloway herself.

1. Meaning, Embodied Experience, and the Limits of Expression: From Husserl to Merleau-Ponty

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty asserts that to express oneself is «to create a path between my life and the lives of others» in the

6 Though it is certainly no stretch to say that modernist literature *in general* affected subsequent phenomenologists, as is clear, e.g., in the case of Merleau-Ponty's (1973 [1969]) *Prose of the World*. For an extended phenomenological treatment of themes in *Mrs. Dalloway* outside my scope here, see RICŒUR 1990 [1983-5], Vol. II, 101-12.

course of lived experience, where «lines between one life and another are not traced in advance».⁷ This serves as an apt description of a central motif in Woolf's novel: the mirroring of the lives of Clarissa and Septimus. While they never directly meet in the novel, we learn in the final pages that Clarissa «felt somehow very like him», and Woolf links the two characters by means of parallel thoughts and experiences, similar reactions to the confrontations of the modern world, and common references to a romanticized past in the works of Shakespeare. These connections, especially those via intertextuality – the appeal within one medium of expression (a novel) to another (a Shakespearean play) – illustrate the complex role expression plays in mediating relationships and identities. As Merleau-Ponty notes, it is in large part through cultural products of expression such as literature and painting that

I come to abide in lives that are not mine. I confront them, I reveal them to one another, I make them share equally in an order of truth. Responsible for all of them, I awaken a universal life – just as in one fell swoop I assume my place in space through the live and dense presence of my body. Like the operation of my body, the function of words or paintings remains obscure to me. The words, the lines, and the colors which express me come from me as my gestures and are torn from me by what I want to do. In this sense, there is in all expression – even in linguistic expression – a spontaneity that will not tolerate commands, even those I would like to give to myself. In the art of prose, words carry the speaker and the listener into a common universe by drawing both toward a new signification through their power to designate in excess of their accepted definition or the usual signification that is deposited in them from the life they have had together in us.⁸

The passage's appeal to the complex relationship between experience,

7 MERLEAU-PONTY 1973 [1969], 86-7.

8 MERLEAU-PONTY 1973 [1969], 86-7.

the self, expression, and language points to an important set of insights into meaning developed in the phenomenological tradition. These insights can help us to explain the great enigma of the mirroring of the lives of Septimus and Clarissa in the novel, and the great mystery of «mattering» that so preoccupies Clarissa in the book's closing scene. At the core of these ideas in Merleau-Ponty are the phenomenological concepts of *motivation*, the *spontaneity of meaning*, the *lived body as a source of meaning*, and the *tension between the spontaneity of sense and meaning as expression*. It will be useful to begin by sketching the historical background of these closely connected notions.

The phenomenological theory of meaning as first developed by Husserl was an attempt to address a fundamental enigma that lies at the very heart of meaningful experience: the process by which experience is given its sense, the process which Husserl's contemporary, the logician Gottlob Frege once called «perhaps the most mysterious of all».⁹ In his earlier phenomenology, Husserl insisted that all meaning can, at least in principle, be traced back to intentionally directed synthesizing acts of a «constituting» consciousness or transcendental ego (a term Husserl adopts – in modified form – in the sense of Descartes' *ego cogito ergo sum*¹⁰): the constitution of meaning is always a *Sinngebung*, an accomplishment of my consciousness arising from my lived experience of the world toward which my consciousness is directed. Meaning is a phenomenon encountered in that lived experience but revelatory of a priori essences or ideal meanings – including *but not limited to* linguistic or expressed meanings [*Bedeutungen*].¹¹ And while meaning is not simply equivalent to expression, all meaning is, in principle, *express-able*.¹²

In his mature phenomenology, as Husserl became increasingly

9 Frege, qtd. in MOHANTY 1976, 37.

10 See HUSSERL 1960 [1931], Meditation One.

11 Husserl's *Sinn/Bedeutung* distinction differs from Frege's in important ways. For a brief discussion and references, see RUMP 2018.

12 HUSSERL 2014 [1913], 259ff.

interested in “genetic” questions concerning not just the “static” phenomena of meaning in everyday experience but also how such meanings first arise historically and in social and intersubjective context, the transparency for consciousness of the meanings constituted for it began to be questioned, and the account of the “active” synthesis of meaning was supplemented by an account of “passive” synthesis.¹³ Alongside this, Husserl began to think that his descriptive phenomenological account needed to more fully separate a broader notion of meaning as sense (*Sinn*) from its exclusive «interweaving» with expressed meaning (*Bedeutung*):

[I]t is almost unavoidable and at the same time an important step in knowledge to expand and suitably modify the meaning of these words, through which it finds application in a certain way [...] to all acts, regardless of whether they are interwoven or not with acts of expressing. So, too, for all intentional experiences, we always spoke of “sense” [*Sinn*] – a word that is generally used in a way equivalent to «meaning». For the sake of clarity, however, we prefer the word meaning [*Bedeutung*] for the old concept and, in particular [...] meaning that “expresses” something. We use the word sense [*Sinn*] as before with the more encompassing scope in mind.¹⁴

In his later work, Husserl argued that when we examine the meaningfulness of our experience from genetic, social and historical perspectives, we come to see that it does not simply arise from a previously indeterminate perceptual mass: the objects of experience

13 By the «mature» Husserl I mean the explicitly «transcendental» position he developed in works beginning with HUSSERL 2014 [1913]. Although this theory shares important similarities with Husserl’s earlier theory of meaning as developed in HUSSERL 2001 [1900/01], it is the later transcendental version of his views that has had the greater influence on the development of subsequent work on meaning in Merleau-Ponty. The exact dating of Husserl’s transcendental turn and its relationship to his genetic turn and to the development of the account of passive synthesis are a matter of some scholarly dispute, but a position on these questions is not necessary for my argument here.

14 HUSSERL 2014 [1913], 245.

appear in the context of a history of previous, largely intersubjectively constituted meaning, organized in a nexus of «motivational» structures or implications which tend to direct our intentional awareness toward some aspects of the perceptual field and not others.

Even before Husserl's *Sinn/Bedeutung* distinction, the notion of motivation already features in Husserl's early work, in the guise of *indication*, which he contrasts with *expression*. Whereas expressions are meaningful signs on the model of «verbal signs» or speech (whether or not they are actually uttered by a speaker)¹⁵, indications may function even in cases where there is nothing explicitly «standing for» something else. In this «live functioning» of indication relations, «certain objects or states of affairs of whose reality someone has actual knowledge indicate to him the reality of certain other objects or states of affairs, in the sense that his belief in the reality of the one is experienced (though not at all evidently) as motivating a belief or surmise in the reality of another».¹⁶ In Husserl's later work, with the turn to passive as well as active levels of intentional experience, the active connotations of the «actual knowledge» requisite for indication are revised, and the motivational directing of intentional experience occurs not only via objects and states of affairs of explicit, linguistically mediated perceptions, but also via affective and kinaesthetic experiences undergone by the lived body. And with Husserl's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* in this later work, such experiences, even in the absence of direct conscious awareness, conceptual schematization, or linguistic expression, are taken to be in their own way, *meaningful*.¹⁷ To

15 HUSSERL 2001 [1900-01], *Investigation I*, §5. This is, of course, the claim that Derrida seizes upon in his *Voice and Phenomena*. For discussion of Derrida's critique issue in relation to the lived body and Husserl's *Sinn/Bedeutung* distinction, see RUMP 2018.

16 HUSSERL 2001 [1900-01], *Investigation I*, §2.

17 For a more detailed interpretation of Husserl's later work along these lines, see Rump 2017. With regard to contemporary debates in epistemology and the philosophy of mind, one of the most important issues raised by Husserl's views concerning passive structures such as those of affectivity is the degree to which they can be understood to fit within the framework of conceptualism and representationalism in the theory of perception. My own view (which cannot be defended here, but which follows from the claims above about a non-linguistic level of meaning *qua* sense in Husserl's mature works) is that Husserl's position should be understood to be non-conceptualist but not necessarily non-

say that one experience motivates another is not to say that it *causes* it, nor that the first instigates an *explicit reasoning* in which we somehow *infer* the second, but only that our intentional directedness shifts from one to the other in that the second is somehow felt to follow from and meaningfully belong with the first.

We can illustrate these ideas with an example from Woolf in a passage involving the first of several shifts in narrative perspective in the novel, in which we transition via intermediary characters from the thoughts of Clarissa to those of Septimus: if, like Clarissa, while in a flower shop, I hear a sound like a pistol shot, I will tend to go to the window, turning my attention to the street outside from which the sound seems to have come, and I will automatically seek out perceptual objects through which to *make sense* of the sound. I will cease paying attention to what is now merely background, and for all intents and purposes, “non-sense,” (e.g., the color and scents of flower arrangements, or the innocent passers-by on the street), and will look instead for something like a pistol or, as it may turn out, for a motor car that has backfired. Despite others nearby being involved in their own quite different thoughts, projects, and preoccupations of the moment, if they are within earshot, there is no rational choice here; they cannot help but each experience a similar intentional shift: «Every one looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated».¹⁸

But if this common shift in attention is not a matter of rational choice for those who experience it, nor is it a strictly *causal* phenomenon. Whereas the sound of the shot might *cause* an immediate embodied reaction in the form of a startle response, and while, upon reflection, I might reason that the sound is more likely to have come from a car backfiring than from a pistol, the immediate shift in attention and

representational, given a suitably broad notion of «representation». If this is right, it is actually possible to account for the insights into «spontaneous sense» discussed in this paper on more orthodox Husserlian grounds, and without the need for the revisions to Husserl’s account proffered by later phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty. I do not, however, pursue that line of thought here.

18 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 15.

meaning in the midst of which I already find myself homing in on the source of the disturbance – prior to or independent of any explicit reasoning – is, in phenomenological terms, motivational. While we might be tempted, in an everyday sense, to explain such situations in terms of causes, we are then no longer using the concept of causation in any strict, mechanistic, scientific, third-personal sense. When Woolf explains, from the standpoint of Septimus, that «the sun became extraordinarily hot because the motor car had stopped», the car certainly did not physically cause a change in the temperature of the sunlit air. But, in this sense, nor did Septimus' perception of the car *cause* the shift in his attention or *cause* him to perceive the sun as hotter. Nor was this the result of reasoning. The shift in attention is *motivational* – a shift of *sense*.

Furthermore, as the example of Septimus shows, motivation in this technical, phenomenological sense is in each case deeply personal and tied to one's own thoughts, circumstances and roles. Whereas for Septimus, particularly susceptible to sudden loud noises as a result of his PTSD, «the world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames», Miss Pym, the florist helping Clarissa to choose the flowers for her party, returns from the window «smiling apologetically with her hands full of sweet peas, as if those motor cars, those tyres of motor cars, were all her fault».¹⁹

Woolf's description of the reactions of different characters to the motor car (which mirrors the depiction of reactions to the cloudwriter, discussed below) thus displays at once a common structure of motivated attentional attunement and the unique and personal nexuses of meaning in which the motivated shifts in thought are situated. This reflects an important tension²⁰ between the constitution and the givenness or spontaneity of sense: while meaning is something that each of us – in some sense, though not always actively – makes, we cannot simply «construct» meaning in the world any way

19 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 13-4.

20 See the discussion of the «inner tension» between sense-constitution and sense-donation in the editors' introduction to GONDEK, KLASS, & TENGELYI 2011, 11.

that we want: meaning-making is a motivated intentional phenomenon that is in some sense shared, and while necessarily related to consciousness in what Husserl calls a structure of «correlation», it is also beyond or outside it.²¹

One of the most important strands of post-Husserlian thinking about these issues concerning meaning is found in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.²² Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl in emphasizing the phenomenological significance of motivation as a form of meaningful relation not assimilable to causality or to reason, and he uses this notion extensively to develop his account of «operative intentionality».²³ In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he addresses these themes by examining structural features of the lived body, emphasizing the sense – present in Husserl’s thought but not readily apparent in his texts publicly available at the time – in which the constitution of meaning occurs not only via linguistic expression but also via embodied sense, at a level of «passivity» below active, thematic conscious awareness. This focus on the direct role of the lived body in meaning constitution calls into question the constitutive priority of a conscious, self-reflective ego: «it is certainly true that there are no obstacles in themselves, but the ‘myself’ that qualifies them as obstacles is not an acosmic subject; this subject anticipates himself among the things in order to give them the shape of things. There is an autochthonous sense of the world that is constituted in the exchange between the world and our embodied existence and that forms the ground of every deliberate *Sinngebung*».²⁴ Merleau-Ponty

21 HUSSERL 2014 [1913], §116. On the notion of constitution vs. construction, see COBB-STEVENS 1974, 119ff.

22 This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of meaning is the only such account post-Husserl: there are similarities to the Merleau-Pontyan notion of the spontaneity of sense to be found, e.g., in Heidegger’s account of *Ereignis*. Along with ideas of Merleau-Ponty of the sort discussed here, this notion is central for the development of the account spontaneous sense as «meaning events» in more recent French phenomenology – a closely related topic but beyond my scope here (see TENGELYI 2010 for an overview).

23 For an overview of the notion of motivation in Merleau-Ponty, see WRATHALL 2005.

24 MERLEAU-PONTY 2013 [1945], 466.

rethinks the subject as an embodied site of interaction with the world, insisting upon our situatedness in concrete lived experiences, «among things» that affect consciousness and thereby help to motivate meaning from without. The center of experience is thus no longer the transcendental consciousness of Husserl's project (or even the self-reflective hermeneutics of Heidegger's *Dasein*); it is instead an embodied being in the world that can «give shape to things» only because it exists as a thing among them. Embodied aspects of lived experience outside the conscious, representational, constituting system of sense-perception help to present the meaningful world to us as something to some degree simply «given», *already there* for me in a nexus of motivational relations.

While the terminological trappings of phenomenology present all of this in a technical register, they are attempting to describe elements of a fairly regular occurrence in lived experience: often our bodies react to things before our minds “come to terms” with them and recognize their meaningfulness explicitly. Take another example from Woolf's novel, in which, at her party, amidst the multifarious distractions of greeting guests and making small talk, Clarissa first hears of the suicide of Septimus:

He had killed himself – but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it?²⁵

Clarissa undergoes an empathic reaction to the news of Septimus' death and how it occurred, but she does so in the first instance not via conscious reflection on the news, but «suddenly», by means of the reaction of her body. We see here another example of motivation, as in

25 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 184.

the case of the car backfiring, but here the motivation is tied even more explicitly to the lived body: first the news motivates an embodied response – it is her body which first “makes sense” of the event – and only then does she «see it» with the mind’s eye and attempt, reflectively and cognitively, to come to terms with and give expression to what has occurred. And we relate to this depiction not in the first instance through an intersubjectively shared language, but due to the recognition of a similar operative intentionality at work in our own bodies that constitutes its own level of intersubjectivity.

In later work, Merleau-Ponty would further expand these insights concerning our immediate embodied lived experience into his conception of «the flesh» and the related notion of «wild sense», structures of experience which he saw as closely intertwined with – but always finally separate from and never simply reducible to – expression.²⁶ On Laszlo Tengelyi’s interpretation, for Merleau-Ponty,

Although the wild sense of an experience can, in principle, always be transmuted by a sufficiently creative expression into a freshly instituted meaning, the inevitably ensuing process of conceptual sedimentation never fails to regenerate the tension which has thus been eliminated. It may be inferred from this observation that not just a harmless difference but rather an *irremediable* – because *inappropriate* – *alterity* keeps distinct experience and expression from each other. We may claim that it is the experience of this alterity which gives rise to the very notion of reality.²⁷

I have argued in this section that the recognition of this structural tension led Merleau-Ponty – expanding on Husserlian insights that begin from the structure of motivation – to argue that the

26 For a detailed account of the continuity between these such themes in the later work and Merleau-Ponty’s earlier writings, including not only *Phenomenology of Perception* but also *The Structure of Behavior*, see MULLER 2018.

27 TENGELYI 2004 [1998], 39. For a parallel discussion and critique of this notion, see the discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s «new sense argument» in INKPIN 2016, 102-11.

meaningfulness of our lived experience, though it may necessitate expression, in a certain sense *precedes* it. The formation of sense can be traced, at least in part, to a non-conscious, non-thematic, bodily form of intentionality that can be distinguished from the ego or thematic consciousness *qua* exclusive constitutional nexus. These aspects of lived experience exhibit what Merleau-Ponty in the quote at the beginning of this section called a «spontaneity that will not tolerate commands» – a sort of meaning whose givenness is not captured by more traditional conceptions that see meaning exclusively in terms of expression and constitution by the conscious subject. The gap or tension that this spontaneity opens up is the same one that pervades the portrayal of meaning and the self in Woolf's novel.

2. Perspectivalism and Meaning in the World

One important way in which the spontaneity of sense is portrayed in *Mrs. Dalloway* is via the novel's perspectival structure. The portrayal of the inner lives and thoughts of characters moves from the perspective of one to another by means of shared perceptual objects appearing in a common lived time and lived space (a motor car, as discussed above; an airplane; a running child; a woman singing; a passenger bus; an ambulance).²⁸ This device of Woolf's experimental prose is well treated in the literature, and has been discussed above. In this section I wish to emphasize the effect of Woolf's perspectivalism in linking the spontaneity of sense formation to the novel's implicit insistence on the meaningfulness of everyday occurrences and objects and to intersubjectivity below the level of expression in embodied lived experience. Take the following transition from the thoughts of Elizabeth, Clarissa Dalloway's teenage daughter, who has stolen away to spend an afternoon on her own in London, to those of Septimus, by means of their common perceptual experience of the sky and of a city bus. We begin amidst the thoughts of Elizabeth, looking at the clouds

28 Cf. BAZIN 1993, 115.

above:

Fixed though they seemed at their posts, at rest in perfect unanimity, nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow-white or gold-kindled surface; to change, to go, to dismantle the solemn assemblage was immediately possible; and in spite of the grave fixity, the accumulated robustness and solidity, now they struck light to the earth, now darkness.

Calmly and competently, Elizabeth Dalloway mounted the Westminster omnibus.

Going and coming, beckoning, signaling, so the light and shadow which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the Strand grey, now made the omnibuses bright yellow, seemed to Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting-room; watching the watery gold glow and fade [...] Every power poured its treasures on his head [...] At every moment nature signified by some laughing hint like that gold spot which went round the wall – there, there, there – her determination to show, by brandishing her plumes, shaking her tresses, flinging her mantle this way and that, beautifully, always beautifully, and standing close up to breathe through her hollowed hands Shakespeare's words, her meaning.²⁹

To whom does the experience of the passing clouds and the omnibus belong? To Elizabeth, boarding the bus? To Septimus, watching it from his sitting-room window? There is no neutral, omniscient narrator in the passage (and very rarely elsewhere in the novel), no overarching perspective or divine mind to which we could assign the Berkleyian role of fixing shared objects of perception. We are given *only* perspectives; we move *directly* from one consciousness to the other.

²⁹ WOOLF 1990 [1925], 139-40.

But, as with the examples discussed above, the transition is neither causal nor rational: the shifting clouds and the bus do not function in the passage as mere external things. They matter, they are *meaningful* to the perceivers: Elizabeth and Septimus share not only a fleeting glimpse at a yellow bus, but – like the hearers of the backfiring motor car – parallel structures of motivation for intentional consciousness. Each experiences a simultaneous fixity and fluidity, indication relations which lead to a recognition of patterns of color and of light and dark, and in turn to the perceptual encounter with the clouds and bus themselves. What the two subjects have in common is thus not merely objects in space, but a horizon of connected sense-relations whose significance in determining their experience we seem to falsify if we label it as a merely coincidentally parallel constitution in the minds of two enclosed and independent egos, each of whom owns and constitutes the experience of the bus separately. Here the meaning is not simply made in and for each inner life independently; it is also simultaneously given, spontaneously, for both. Nature itself «signifies» and «shows» its meaning, and that meaning is not the exclusive possession or creation of a consciousness but out there in the everyday world.

To be sure, there are separate consciousnesses in play; there is a story to be told here, along Husserlian lines, about sense constitution in the separate consciousnesses of Elizabeth and Septimus. But at the same time, the spontaneity and givenness of sense works against the exclusively individualizing story, exceeding the bounds of any individual ego-consciousness while amounting to more than a shared perception of brute external objects. For Woolf's characters, meaning itself appears as an event in the world. It is neither exclusively their accomplishment nor merely their possession, and that world is neither purely external, consisting of meaningless, mind-independent objects and facts, nor purely internal, made up exclusively of representations contained in individual consciousnesses. Woolf's perspectivalism and use of everyday objects as fulcrums for transitions between perspectives illustrates the way in which meaning arises in the tension

between the core of our innermost thoughts (for Septimus, for example, nature seems to speak in Shakespeare's words) and that everyday world outside of us which exists «in perfect unanimity» but is constantly «changing» and «dismantling», infusing experience with meanings that are not fully our own and that seem to be «poured» onto our heads from without.³⁰

3. Meaning, Passivity, and the Unconscious

But this tension also reveals influences that, while outside the purview of consciousness, are not outside ourselves. This is another way in which the spontaneity of sense is portrayed in the novel. It is no accident that the outside element in Septimus' case, the «gold spot» that he follows around the room, is an image of the sun that recalls the words of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*³¹ – which is appealed to throughout the work and functions not only as a point of connection between Clarissa and Septimus, but also as a sign of Septimus' triumph over the meaninglessness of modern life, his preservation of «a thing that mattered» in his death. Throughout the novel, sun, sky, and clouds represent both a source of meaning outside the purview of human power and understanding, and a place of ambiguity suggestive of the unconscious, at once strange and familiar, in which meanings occasionally rise to the surface that already pervade our lives from others and our environment in ways we were not previously aware of and still cannot fully comprehend.

We see this ambiguity and occasionality of meaning perhaps most pointedly in the skywriting scene, in which an airplane – one of the devices Woolf uses to accomplish the narrative shifts in perspective discussed above – writes an advertisement in the clouds which seems to spell something different for each onlooker, and in which each

30 For a more recent account of this phenomenon in terms of «Meaning Events», see the editors' introduction to GONDEK, KLASS, and TENGELYI 2011.

31 SHAKESPEARE, *Cymbeline*, 4.2.2657-62.

interpretation is informed by a different popularly advertised commercial brand in circulation at the moment.³² The airplane, we learn, is «a symbol [...] of man's soul [...] to get outside his body, beyond his house»,³³ and the letters it spells are in a constant state of flux that seems to repeat itself and yet precludes a clear fixation on their meaning: «only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing».³⁴ This depiction of an almost constant movement, only temporarily lying still enough to be grasped before disappearing again into a space of the unknown, is itself suggestive of Woolf's portrayal of the interplay of consciousness and the unconscious in the novel.

Woolf's modernist fascination the meaningfulness of the everyday, her perspectivalism and her portrayal of embodied motivational structures thus have as a close cousin a notion of the unconscious. What is at stake in such depictions is a source of meaning at once beyond the active constitution of the conscious subject and also thereby not entirely self-transparent, complexly intertwined with our passivity and our past. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, when we recognize the role played by such «existentials» of meaning left over as «sediment» from previous experiences, most of which are no longer available to us as conscious memories, we can no more treat the unconscious as a mere underlayer to conscious thought than we can ascribe it exclusively to the perspectives of another:

One always talks of the problem of «the other», of “intersubjectivity”, etc [...] In fact what has to be understood is, beyond the “persons”, the existentials according to which we comprehend them, and which are the sedimented meaning of all our voluntary and involuntary experiences. This

32 For a brief interpretation of the skywriting scene with reference to the history of technology and advertising, both so important for meaning in modernity, including the historical significance of specific brands mentioned in the novel, see YOUNG 2000.

33 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 28.

34 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 20.

unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our “consciousness”, but in front of us, as articulations of our field. It is “unconscious” by the fact that it is not an object, but it is that through which objects are possible, it is the constellation wherein our future is read [...].³⁵

To say that the unconscious is not behind the back of consciousness but «in front of us» is to admit that it affects the meaningfulness of our experience not only in fringe situations or rare cases, but always and constantly, functioning in the gaps between our conscious representations in ways we can never fully predetermine or control.

As James Phillips has noted, while the notion of «the invisible» is perhaps the most closely associated with the unconscious in Merleau-Ponty’s late work, since it is used to convey this sense of «between» and of an «unexpressed structure that holds the visible world together», this notion is itself further explained with reference to the «existentials» of the passage above.³⁶ For Merleau-Ponty these existentials both «make up the (substitutable) *meaning* of what we say and what we understand» and account for the ultimate «ambiguity of the motivations [that] must be understood by rediscovering our quasi-perceptual relationship with the human world».³⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, the Freudian version of the unconscious – especially in the explicitly linguistic and representational form it took in his contemporary Lacan – risks overdetermining the relationship between the unconscious and the conscious as if expression were merely the translation of predetermined thoughts. Merleau-Ponty specifically rejects such a picture of the relationship of expression and experience: «if we rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text, we shall see that the idea of *complete* expression is nonsensical... The relation of meaning to the spoken word can no longer be a point

35 MERLEAU-PONTY 1968 [1964], 180.

36 PHILLIPS 2017, 88.

37 MERLEAU-PONTY, qtd. in PHILLIPS 2017, 88.

for point correspondence that we always have clearly in mind».³⁸

It is for this reason characteristic of Merleau-Ponty's taking up of the Husserlian focus on sedimentation and genetic phenomenology that structures of passivity in experience, especially those characteristic of the unconscious, be understood not in terms of a *Sinngebung*, but rather as a «happening» to and for the subject. As he writes in his «Reading notes on Freud»,

Passivity can be understood only on the basis of *event-based thought*. What is constitutive of it is that the signification is here, not by *Sinngebung* (neither by the analyst, nor above all by the patient), but welcoming to an event in a situation and event themselves not *known*, but grasped through commitment, perceptually, as configuration, proof of reality, relief on [...] i.e., by existentialia and not categories. The fundamental fact is that there are certain structures, in themselves *not analyzed*, with the help of which we «understand» all the rest. This is because perception can make sense without its elements being composed in an adequate thought [...] The fundamental fact is that clarity, sense, and truth are in front of us, not within. We can direct ourselves in an experience according to styles, sure relations, yet without the organizational signification being possessed. And this is ultimately the case because the life of consciousness is not *Sinngebung* in the constituting sense, but the fact that something *happens* to someone.³⁹

For Merleau-Ponty, of course, as noted above, this «happening» ultimately occurs at the level of the lived body. And the «grasping» that characterizes our engagement with sense at this level is grounded not in conscious representations and memories or the fixed meaning of «categories», but, as in the previous passage, in unanalyzed

38 MERLEAU-PONTY 1964 [1960], 43.

39 Merleau-Ponty, «Reading Notes on Freud», in MERLEAU-PONTY 2010 [2002], 217.

«existentials», at the level of body memory.⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty frames the unconscious in terms of a non-representational «sedimented practical schema» of the lived body, a set of bodily habitualities that, in contradistinction to explicit memories and judgments at the level of conscious awareness, function to record and manifest our individual lived histories even insofar as those histories remain opaque to consciousness.⁴¹ The phenomenological level here is thus not egoic act-intentionality but the body-subject with its motivational nexus and operative intentionality, and the meanings that arise in accord with this operative intentionality demonstrate an implicit, prereflective relationship to our lived and embodied history,⁴² something «grasped», and a pre-condition for anything at all to be «known». Merleau-Ponty links the notion of the unconscious to the embodied encounter with spontaneous sense, even if we always betray this spontaneity in bringing sense to consciousness and expression and thereby fixing it (e.g., in language).⁴³

This reading supports Ricœur's claim that the phenomenological notion of the unconscious – such as we see in Merleau-Ponty⁴⁴ and even in some of Husserl's unpublished later manuscripts – is in fact more properly associated with the psychoanalytic notion of the preconscious, since in the case of phenomenology there is no in-principle barrier (such as repression) which prevents that which is not conscious from rising to consciousness in the case that it is, e.g., expressed.⁴⁵ Similarly, motivations, in the phenomenological sense, while they are passive and in this sense «unconscious», are embodied motivations that can become known to us – they are not sealed off

40 For a detailed account of the notion of body memory in Merleau-Ponty, see KOZYREVA 2018.

41 MERLEAU-PONTY 2010 [2002], 191. For detailed discussions of the non-representational nature of the unconscious in Merleau-Ponty, see KOZYREVA 2018, Phillips 2017.

42 KOZYREVA 2018.

43 See INKPIN 2016, 107-11.

44 For another, more nuanced treatment of the notion of the unconscious in Merleau-Ponty (beyond my scope here), see LEGRAND 2017.

45 RICŒUR 1977 [1965], 392. For the notion of the preconscious in Freud, see FREUD 1965 [1900], 579.

from consciousness except as specially revealed on the analyst's couch but rather principles of acting that we may become aware of through reflection and description, though they function before and outside of that description. To put the point differently, for phenomenology, the meaning of that which remains passive or unconscious is not *separated* from consciousness, even as, in its spontaneity, it is not limited to it. As Ricœur notes, «phenomenology shows that the lived meaning of a behavior extends beyond its representation in conscious awareness»,⁴⁶ and it is able to do so, I have suggested, by accounting for this lower level of meaning in terms not of linguistic expression but of unconscious (preconscious) embodied sense.

A conception of the unconscious structuring of meaning similar to the phenomenological account as much or more so than the Freudian is reflected in Woolf's prose style. And just as the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl seeks to show «how it is possible that consciousness can bring to present appearance something unconscious, that is, something foreign or absent from consciousness, without thereby incorporating it or subordinating it to the conscious present»,⁴⁷ so does Woolf's prose seek to probe between and beyond the surfaces of expression – Trotter's «fabric of meaning worn thin» in modernity – without assuming or desiring the complete expressibility of the unexpressible. While it is common to characterize Woolf's fiction as a form of stream-of-consciousness writing that lays open for the reader a character's inner life, most of *Mrs. Dalloway* is in fact not written in the stream-of-consciousness style in the typical sense, but rather in a form of free indirect discourse.⁴⁸ The reader is confronted not with the direct and exclusive reporting of the internal train of thought of a single character by that character, but with a description of that train of thought indirectly, by means of a narrative voice that is

46 RICŒUR 1977 [1965], 397.

47 BERNET 2002. Bernet's treatment of these issues is especially instructive concerning Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and the temporal and representational aspects of the problematic of the unconsciousness, topics unfortunately somewhat beyond my scope here.

48 LODGE 2002, 65ff. See also DOWLING 1991, 45ff.

privity to but imperfectly aligned with the subject's consciousness. Take the following passage from the novel, portraying the thoughts of Peter Walsh, which quite remarkably manifests in its style the very claims it expresses in language: «For this is the truth about our soul, he thought, our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities threading her way between the boles of giant weeds, over sun-flickered spaces and on and on into gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable; suddenly she shoots to the surface and sports on the wind-wrinkled waves; that is, has a positive need to brush, scrape, kindle herself, gossiping».⁴⁹ This is not direct self-reporting, as we would expect from stream-of-consciousness writing – a fact that can be seen from the words «he thought» in the passage, which in direct stream-of-consciousness writing would either be rendered «I thought», or not be present at all. Despite the fact that the rest of the passage clearly reveals the internal thoughts of the speaker, our perspective on those thoughts is not quite fully or constantly in his head.⁵⁰ As for the skywriter passing through the clouds, here too there is no simple, constant self-presence of consciousness: while the soul at times «shoots to the surface», at other times it remains «cold, deep, inscrutable».

Like Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, then, Woolf's free-indirect style is no more a simple celebration of the transparency of consciousness than an insistence on its insurmountable opacity; there is an implicit recognition here of an outside, a source of meaning partially within consciousness but remaining partially without, at a level of passivity beyond language and not present to consciousness, but, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, «in front of» it – in the sensations, affects, emotions and unconscious motivations that drive our lives in ways we not only cannot recognize and control, but that remain

49 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 161.

50 A point further emphasized by the contrast between the feminine pronouns used for the soul masculine pronouns used for speaker. The use of gendered pronouns is another important aspect of Woolf's depiction of consciousness in the novel, but is outside my scope here.

partially mysterious, unforeseeable, and unnamable.⁵¹ On this phenomenologically more robust view of the relationship between experience, consciousness, and meaning, the happenings and intersubjectivities that imbue our lives with meaning do so not only in predictable ways on the surface level of expression and conscious thought, but also, less straightforwardly and less predicably «in front of us», in the spontaneity of our non-reflective everyday embodied interactions in the world. As a final step in our analysis of the spontaneity of sense, we need to account for this spontaneity in its tension with the seeming predetermination of previous experience and history.

4. Constitution, Institution, and the Spontaneity of Life

In the classic essay «Modern Fiction», Woolf speaks to this issue in her critique of what she calls the «materialist» writers prominent in her day, who «write of unimportant things [...] they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring».⁵² The materialist writer is «constrained» by «an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour».⁵³ In the «materialist» novels of Edwardians such as H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett, Woolf suggests, a superficial focus on the description of tangible, physical objects and the public lives of characters, and a lack of concern for depicting psychological depth or inner life leads to a style of fiction which is formulaic and without novelty: nothing is unexpected, everything happens exactly as it is

51 In Barbara Hardy's words, «Woolf uses the free indirect style to register the pressure and growth of feeling. She tears her characters out of their affective privacy, showing how passion is checked and qualified, as it gathers momentum and material from external sensations and events» (qtd. in DOWLING 1991, 47).

52 WOOLF 1925, 152-3.

53 WOOLF 1925, 153-4.

supposed to happen, perfectly in accord with the probabilities determined by the styles and sentiments of the moment, and every detail and loose end of plot and character is neatly tied up in the course of «two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds».⁵⁴

Despite these novelist's best efforts to show the contrary, however – despite the most careful attention to detail – Woolf insists that the reality of modern life is neither so perfect nor so predictable. While her writing does not shy away from the close description of everyday objects or of characters as seen from the standpoint of others, her emphasis could not be more different. For Woolf, it is precisely that which arises between and despite what is expected that matters most:

life escapes, and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while [...] for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide.⁵⁵

Life – *real life*; that which *matters* – can no more be buttoned up in the garb of a fully predictable, expected set of meanings than it can be captured within the confines of an isolated and self-transparent subject.

Woolf's remark here recalls a similar sentiment in a well-known passage from Husserl's late work *The Crisis*, where the fully mathematized and measured depiction of the world offered to us by natural science is – while perfectly legitimate in its own limited domain – problematic when it is taken as the model for understanding the full complexity of our lived experience: «in the open infinity of possible experiences, we measure the lifeworld – the world constantly

54 WOOLF 1925, 153.

55 WOOLF 1925, 153.

given to us as actual in our concrete world-life – for a well-fitting *garb of ideas*». Through this garb, Husserl claims, the mathematician and the natural scientist, like Woolf's materialist writer, «represents the lifeworld, dresses it up as 'objectively actual and true' nature». But such a picture of our lived experience is too precise, too predictable: it leads us to «take for *true being* what is actually a *method* – a method which is designed for the purpose of progressively improving, *in infinitum*, through 'scientific' predictions, those rough predictions which are the only ones originally possible within the sphere of what is actually experienced and experienceable in the life-world». ⁵⁶

Husserl's critiques of scientism along these lines in his later work were of central importance for Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, in a 1954-55 lecture course, he seems to take Husserl's claims about the merely rough predictability of the lifeworld even further, refiguring the Husserlian notion of *constitution* and the associated conception of partially predetermined meaning «horizons» ⁵⁷ (what in the passage above is termed the «open infinity of possible experience») into his own conception of *institution*:

[I]nstitution [means] establishment in an experience (or in a constructed apparatus) of dimensions (in the general, Cartesian sense: system of references) in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and will make a *sequel* [*suite*], a history [/story] [*histoire*]. The sense is deposited (it is no longer merely in me as consciousness, it is not re-created or constituted at the time of recovery). But not as an object left behind, as a simple remainder or as something that survives, as a residue. [It is deposited] as something to continue to complete without it being the case that this sequel is determined. The instituted will change but this very change

56 HUSSERL 1970 [1936], 51-2.

57 For a recent account of this Husserlian notion, see YOSHIMI 2016, 53-58 (Yoshimi's account, however, is an attempt to formalize the notion of horizons, which would seem to be an example of the sort of pre-determination account of horizons that I am suggesting Merleau-Ponty rejects).

is called for by its *Stiftung*.⁵⁸

The notion of institution, which Merleau-Ponty contrasts with constitution, is meant to capture the fact that even the sedimentation of sense does not completely determine or predict the course of events that will follow from it. Sedimentation functions rather as point of beginning – of institution – for a «sequel», a new story that is at the same time part of a history (*histoire*) – part of a continuing story (*histoire*).

Husserl himself is sometimes read as equating the notion of historical sedimentation more-or-less directly to a process of fixation of meaning in shared linguistic expression, and there are passages in his later work that suggest such a reading.⁵⁹ In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty's focus on the body prevents him from making such a straightforward equivocation between sedimentation and language, and he already implicitly recognizes the insight at the core of what will become his account of institution. Nonetheless, in that work, he places more emphasis on the fixity and situatedness of sedimentation:

We must recognize a sort of sedimentation of our life: when an attitude toward the world has been confirmed often enough, it becomes privileged for us. If freedom does not tolerate being confronted by any motive, then my habitual being in the world is equally fragile at each moment [...] The rationalist alternative – either the free act is possible or not, either the event originates in me or is imposed from outside – does not fit with our relations with the world *and with our past*. Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but *gears into it*: so long as we are alive, our situation is open, which implies both that it calls forth privileged modes of resolution and that it, by

58 MERLEAU-PONTY 2010 [2002], 8-9, my interpolation/ MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 38.

59 See, e.g., DERRIDA 1978 [1962]. For an alternative account that still emphasizes the intersubjective aspects of sedimentation, see CARR 1974, 103-9.

itself, lacks the power to procure any of them.⁶⁰

With his later, explicit treatment of institution, by contrast, the emphasis has shifted from fixity to spontaneity. Institution is still intimately tied to the moment of expression, the moment in which instituted horizons of possibility are recognized, though in retrospect. But whereas, on the earlier taking up of Husserlian sedimentation, we might have been tempted to ascribe events and happenings to nothing more than the unfolding of possibilities already inscribed through egoic *Sinngebung*, Merleau-Ponty's account of institution can be read as taking a stronger stance against this misunderstanding of the function of sedimentation by correcting against a failure to recognize the role of the unconscious and the involuntary in the arising of meaning – a function which for him cannot be attributed straightforwardly to the problematic of constitution.⁶¹ Though expression and institution are intimately tied, they cannot be collapsed together: there will always remain two levels of meaning at play, that of expressed meaning but also that of prior embodied sense: as for Woolf, for Merleau-Ponty there is always a sense in which «life escapes» our attempts to express it. The spontaneity of sense reflects the spontaneity of life.

In her own theoretical reflections in «Modern Fiction» (ideas clearly put into practice in the text of *Mrs. Dalloway*), Woolf similarly advocates for the vagaries and inconsistencies of our actual lived

60 MERLEAU-PONTY 2013, 466-7. For a defense of this view in contrast to a Heideggerian-inspired *Ereignis*-view of meaning in history, see RUMP 2014.

61 See Claude Lefort's Introduction to the lecture course (MERLEAU-PONTY 2010 [2002], x), for discussion of this point with regard to the «Kantian sense» of constitution. The relationship between institution and constitution in the Husserlian sense is more complicated, though in the lecture course Merleau-Ponty does seem to be making a contrast with Husserl despite the latter's careful qualifications of the term: «In the concept of institution we are seeking a solution to the difficulties found in the philosophy of consciousness. Over and against consciousness, there are only the objects constituted by consciousness. Even if we grant that certain of the objects are 'never completely' constituted (Husserl), they are at each moment the exact reflection of the acts and powers of consciousness. There is nothing in these constituted objects that is able to throw consciousness back into other perspectives». (MERLEAU-PONTY 2010 [2002], 76). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point.

experience, at turns unexpected, boring, pleasant, wandering or fixed (though never fully) in expression. In perhaps the most well-known passage of the essay, after the critique of «materialist writers» discussed above, Woolf provides an account of the sort of deeper reflections she seeks, never entirely successfully, to capture:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as *they shape themselves* into the life of a Monday or a Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old [...] Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged, but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.⁶²

Faced with the «evanescence» and semi-opacity of the spontaneity of sense, of meanings «shaping themselves» in ways never fully predictable, never fully in our conscious grasp or control, we strive to make sense of life in general and of our own lives by expressing the meanings we find already, if imprecisely and unpredictably, in it.

62 WOOLF 1925, 154, my emphasis.

5. Makings of the Modern Self: Meaning, Identity, and Life-history

Having given an account of the complex and multi-layered portrayal of meaning in Woolf's novel, with emphasis on the ways in which the spontaneity of sense exceeds expression, and having shown how this spontaneity of sense arises from the spontaneity of life, we need to turn now to the other distinctly modern notion – complex and multi-layered in its own right – that informs Woolf's portrayal of «things that matter» in that final party scene of the novel: the problematic of identity and self.

Philosophers influenced by and working in the phenomenological tradition have approached *active* forms sense-making in terms of narrative – an idea already suggested in Merleau-Ponty's play on the double meaning of *histoire* in the passage cited above.⁶³ This conception of narrative applies not only to works of literature such as Woolf's, but to the structuring of our lives and our conceptions of selfhood. As David Carr notes, «human beings live their lives by formulating and acting out stories that they implicitly tell both to themselves and others. Indeed, in this realm time itself is human, narratively shaped by beings who live their lives not from moment to moment, but by remembering what was and projecting what will be».⁶⁴ But it should be clear from our discussion above that such active, voluntary sense-making, on the model of linguistic expression, can never fully assimilate the lived and embodied spontaneous formation of sense to which it responds.

If spontaneous sense cannot be reduced to expressed meaning, but remains in constant productive tension with it, it follows that we cannot be merely who we take ourselves to be according to the stories we tell, any more than we can fully predict or understand the histories

63 See, e.g., RICŒUR 1990 [1983-5]; CARR 1986, 2014. Outside the phenomenological tradition, a similar and highly influential account of the self in terms of narrative is developed in MACINTYRE 1981.

64 CARR 2014, 208. For a critical review of this work focusing on topics similar to those discussed here, see RUMP 2016.

in the midst of which we find ourselves. While the narrative conception of the self is certainly correct concerning the active, self-reflective sense-making of our lives, this element cannot exist without another that simultaneously constrains and contradicts it. As Tengelyi has argued, when we bring together narrative accounts of the self with the notion of spontaneous sense formation, we confront an unavoidable tension:

We attempt to articulate – and thereby to *fix* – this sense retrospectively or, better still, retroactively by telling rectified – reshaped, modified or entirely renewed – stories. Thus, we try to get hold of what is beyond our scope and control. Owing to this endeavor, we succeed in most cases in preserving the identity of ourselves, or at least we manage to recuperate it after the interlude of a crisis. But nothing warrants the success of our continual efforts to fix retroactively the spontaneously emerged senses in our lives. On the contrary, experience shows that the process of sense formation repeatedly escapes from our grasp, challenging over and over again even our rectified stories and breaking up, from time to time, the supposedly hard core of our identity.⁶⁵

In the case of narrative, we are limited to the vocabularies of ourselves and those around us: our retroactive sense fixation can only rely on fixed meanings (*Bedeutungen*). But these fixed meanings – predictable categories that «button up» life – never finally or fully contain that life. As Tengelyi notes, it follows from this that life-history and self-identity may be intimately connected and even inseparable concepts, but they nonetheless resist equivalency or interchangeability.⁶⁶ Life-history, as a history of instituted (not merely constituted) meanings, remains in tension with self-identity. And thus the tension at the heart of the self mirrors the tension at the heart of meaning, the «alterity of experience

65 TENGELYI 2004 [1998], xxvii

66 TENGELYI 2004 [1998], xxvii.

and expression».⁶⁷ The problematization of the phenomenological meaning-making subject discussed in the sections above is at the same time a problematization of the self as a stable source of identity.

This persistent cleft between self-identity and the broader life histories in which we find ourselves is a virtual constant in Woolf's novel, which, although its activity takes place in the course of a single day, consists largely in recollections in the minds of its characters, especially recollections of their youth. Indeed, the entire novel can be read as an attempt by the central characters to come to terms with the people whom – in comparison with the self-conceptions of their youth and behind the back of consciousness, as it were – they have become. This is the case especially for Clarissa, not only in the novel's final scene, when she returns from the room alone to confront again the life history in which she belongs, with Sally and Peter, but also in the various moments in the novel portraying, in Hussey's words, «a momentary resolution of scattered attributes that saves Clarissa from a moment of despair», a «constitution of identity» that «holds in tension a circumference of memories that pertain to that center».⁶⁸

At the forefront of the tensions between Clarissa's self-identity and her life history is her marriage to Richard Dalloway – a tension alluded to in the title of the novel itself. She reassures herself at several points in the novel that the right choice has been made – even if it is not exactly clear why or how it was made – in marrying Richard Dalloway, a rather dull if thoroughly dependable man, rather than the more adventurous and seemingly more like-minded Peter. And yet as

67 We can even say, in line with my account above, that both arise not only in expression but first and foremost at the level of the lived body itself – my own body, my experience of others as encountering similar embodied motivations, and their experience of my body. As Joonas Taipale notes with regard to Husserl (a point we can extend to Merleau-Ponty as well): «In Husserl's phenomenology, selfhood and the lived-body are not simply and unambiguously synonymous. On the one hand, the self *has* a perceivable exteriority in the sense that it is expressed in externally perceivable movements, but the self is neither exhausted by nor reducible to this exteriority. On the other hand, the self is what makes up the 'livedness' or subjectivity of the lived body. It *is* this interiority, and hence something that is expressed *in* the externally perceivable movements» (TAIPALE 2014, 223).

68 HUSSEY 1986, 26.

Richard's wife she is, as she notes at the outset of the novel, «not even Clarissa any more» but rather «this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway», a high-society woman no different from the others as she walks along Bond street to buy flowers for her party, «invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them».⁶⁹ Toward the end of the novel, the crisis of Clarissa's identity comes to a head as she welcomes guests to her party, playing the role of hostess and wife. She admits to «this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was, she thought, partly their clothes, partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background».⁷⁰ With this admission she has, it seems, finally lost the thread of her own identity among the personalities, roles and histories that have provided the «background» meanings that structure and define her life from without and that now seem to crowd it out in the midst of her party.

And yet, at the very end of the novel, directly after her experience of shock at the news of the death of Septimus, and her feeling and thinking that «somehow it was her disaster – her disgrace», we witness an assessment of self-identity in contrast to her assigned place in an external life-history:

It was due to Richard; *she had never been so happy*. Nothing could be slow enough; nothing last too long. No pleasure could equal [...] this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank. Many a time had she gone, at Bourton when they were all talking, to look at the sky; or seen it between people's shoulders at dinner; seen it in London when she could not sleep.⁷¹

When we recall the aforementioned importance of the sky as an image

69 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 11.

70 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 170-1. Cf. HUSSEY 1986, 27.

71 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 185, my emphasis.

of ambivalent meaning in the novel – location of the ambiguous message of the airplane skywriter; stand-in for the unconscious; place of the sun whose heat we learn, with Septimus' death, to fear no more – and when we read, in the subsequent paragraph, that the very sky so familiar in Clarissa's life is also, once she is confronted with the image of a much older woman at her window in the apartment opposite, «something new to her», we encounter, finally, Clarissa's joyful acceptance of the juxtaposition between personal identity and life history illustrated in the dichotomous feelings and thoughts of her inner life. In the context of the novel as a whole, this is none other than a recognition and embrace of the juxtaposition between the spontaneity of sense – embodied, unconscious, out there in the world – with expression.

6. Conclusion

Despite, and, indeed, in a certain way, *because of* this modernist dissolution of the self as source and locus of the meaning of one's life, the phenomenological ideas discussed here can help us to explicate that peculiar optimism that arises seemingly spontaneously at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*. At the party, upon hearing of Septimus' death, when Clarissa retreats to the «little room» of her own consciousness, thinking «[p]erhaps there was somebody there. But there was nobody»,⁷² she encounters, in spite of but indeed also because of that void, a thing that matters, outside of herself, but part of the making of her self, in the commonalities and mysteries of modern life. She throws away the stifling if comfortable notion of the self arising from a too simple conception of meaning for one assembled from the ordinary commonalities and spontaneous senses of life:

She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it

72 WOOLF 1990 [1925], 183.

away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room.⁷³

Woolf's novel exhibits a distinctly phenomenological recognition of the complexity of meaning, of its unpredictability and partial absence, and of the way that it is – at least sometimes – something that confronts us as an outside not simply belonging to or constituted by us. I have argued that this ambiguous, partially present character can be understood in light of a spontaneity of sense that gives our lives both mystery and meaning, complicating without negating our conception of ourselves. Despite their radically different modes of presentation, both modernists such as Woolf and phenomenologists such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty sought to interrogate the fundamental importance of this phenomenon of meaning. They recognized as an important challenge of modern life the need to uncover the complexities of human experience that make it meaningful – a thing that matters – without failing to account for the ways in which we always fall somewhere short in our explanations and expressions and find ourselves – lose ourselves – amidst the familiar novelty of the everyday. A weekday in June, for instance; a day as ordinary and mysteriously meaningful as any other.

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⁷³ WOOLF 1990 [1925], 186.

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