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Inquiry > Writing

Phenomenological inquiry is practised as phenomenological writing.

Writing is the way that phenomenology is practised. Phenomenologists like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Levinas, Bachelard were not only scholars but also and especially they were gifted authors. Phenomenological research does not merely involve writing: research is the work of writing–writing is at the very heart of the process. For scholars such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty the activities of researching and reflecting on the one hand, and reading and writing on the other hand, are indeed quite indistinguishable. When one visits the Husserl archives at the University of Louvain this close connection between research and writing becomes evident in the symbolic value of Husserl's desk which occupies a prominent place in the archival room. It is at this desk where phenomenology received its fundamental impetus. And, yet, interestingly, Husserl himself has had little to say about written language and the actual process of phenomenological writing.

What is involved in phenomenological writing? Strangely perhaps, the practice of phenomenological writing is quite difficult to articulate. Writing is not the practice of some clever technique; neither is writing restricted to the moment where one sets pen to paper, or the fingers to the keyboard. Writing has already begun, so to speak, when one has managed to enter the space of the text, the textorium. The space of the text is what we create in writing but it is also in some sense already there.

It is easier to say what phenomenological writing is not. Writing is not just externalizing internal knowledge, it is not simply writing up one's conclusions, it is not composing the final research report, it is not something that comes at the end of phenomenological inquiry, as if it were a mere stage in the complex set of procedures of the research process. Of course, phenomenological writing involves a painstaking application of the various methods that inhere in the reduction and the vocative. But we can say more.

Something does happens in the act of phenomenological writing: Phenomenlogical writing is the very act of making contact with the things of our world. It is in this sense that we can say that to do research is to write and that the insights achieved depend on the right words and phrases, on styles and traditions, on metaphor and figures of speech, on argument and poetic image. And even then, writing can mean both insight or illusion. And these are values that cannot be decided, fixed or settled since the one always implies, hints at, or complicates the other.

It is also helpful to be reminded that phenomenological inquiry-writing is based on the idea that no text is ever perfect, no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight is beyond challenge. It behooves us to remain as attentive as possible to the ways that all of us experience the world and to the infinite variety of possible human experiences and possible explications of those experiences. Having said all this, it is now possible to make several experiential distinctions that present themselves as moments in the act of writing: I describe these as moments of seeking, entering, traversing, gazing, drawing, and touching.

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Drawing: The words draw us in.

In some sense the phenomenologist is like an artist and an author. Just as a painter draws the world so the phenomenologist tries to use words to evoke some aspect of human existence in a linguistic image. Perhaps it is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty compared the task of the phenomenologist to the work of authors and artists such as Balzak, Proust, Valry or C zanne. All are animated by the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will and desire to seize the meaning of the world.

But how do words seize the meaning of the world? When I mention someone+s name-this friend-then the word magically makes this person disappear and then reappear in words. Just as artistic images, words become the replacements for the things they name. A word is not a thing. But it lets nothing (experience/meaning) appear as something. Thereby, even the word becomes a thing. More precisely, the word makes present the absence that it names, and thus it denies the concreteness and singularity of existence. But at the same time the word restores this absence through the constitution of meaning. Thus the immediacy of lived experience is first lost but then fleetingly restored by the indirectness of meaning that is made possible by language. The experience of writing shows us reflexively that the immediacy of the lived world can never be recaptured in its original form.

Furthermore, written words differ from ordinary discursive words in that these words lose their transparancy and their ordinary currency. Almost every word we write may place a question mark over the meaning of the thing it expresses. In the experience of writing, words tend to become more dense and ambiguous. Rather than facilitating the conversational nature of human life, they acquire a quality of transparancy in a different sense. They open a different realm, a different vista on human existence. The words draw us in. And as words draw us, they seem to open up a space: a temporal dwelling space. We step out of one world, the ordinary

world of daylight, and enter another, the world of the text. In writing one develops a special relation to language which disturbs its taken-for-grantedness. Perhaps one finds it impossible to write. And yet one must write. One writes. One has become "one" who writes.

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Entering: To write is to enter the space of the text.

Often writing is best done in special places that we seek out. The physical environment has to be conducive to writing. The business office may not be the best place. Too many interruptions. Look at your present space. Is this where you work best? This is where you write. So is this then the space of writing? Yes and no. When we are actually typing on the keyboard or staring out of the window, then I seem to be somewhere else. Where are we then? One might answer: inside our thoughts. The writer dwells in an inner space, inside the self. Indeed this is a popular way of spatially envisioning the self: an inner self and an outer self. But phenomenologically it is probably just as plausible to say that the writer dwells in the space that the words open up. Again, in this sense writing is not unlike reading a story. First we have to find a space that is good for reading this book. It must be a space that is comfortable for the body, but not too comfortable. It does not need to be quiet as long as the sounds or people do not draw attention to themselves. Once we have found this physical space conducive to reading, we are ready, so to speak, to enter that other space, the space of the words that transports us away from our everyday reality to the reality of the text. When I have entered this world of the text then we are somewhere else. So there is a doubling of space experience here. The physical space of reading or writing allows us to pass through it into the world opened up by the words, the space of the text.

But is this not a misleading way of speaking? after all, the space opened up by the text is not a "real" physical dimensional space. Is the idea of textual space not just a metaphor and therefore a gloss for how we actually experience the process of reading and writing? This seems to be true. We are using a spatial/temporal phenomenology. But the term space itself possesses rich semantic meanings. Etymologically it does not just refer to physical extension and perspective. The term space possesses the meaning of lapse or duration in time. It refers both to the time and the distance between two points. So space carries the meaning of temporal and physical expanse as well as the time spent in an experience. When we enter the perspectival space of the text we enjoy a temporal experience in the world evoked by the words of the text. Language and experience

seem to coincide in this lived meaning of space. And for the writer this is where insights occur, where words may acquire a depth of meaning, where the author may experience human understanding. But this is also the place where writing shows its difficulties, where we find out what language really is, where writing may become impossible, where language ironically seems to rob us of the ability to say anything worth saying or saying what we seek to say.

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Gazing: Phenomenological inquiry aims to reach the perspective of the gaze.

The researcher/writer is someone who studies and practices writing in the hope to make something clear. Of course, a reluctant writer may need encouragement. And pedagogical encouragement by a teacher sometimes has to make false promises. Promises of a clear view, a sharp hearing. Indeed, there is a strange contradiction at work in helping others write. Every now and then he or she may find an updraft and suddenly soar, reaching the perspective of the gaze. Phenomenologically this could be described as really "seeing" something. Really being in touch with something. One experiences a sensation of something intuited. Further encouragement is no longer needed. In fact, external encouragement may now be brushed off, dismissed. Something strange now animates the writing: desire.

To write is to be driven by desire. So, perhaps, in a moment of desire one has become a writer, propelled to traverse the space of the text in search for another updraft-the perspective of the gaze. But it is then, and only then, that the true nature of writing may reveal itself: this is not a perspective at all. There is no-thing to see. What happens is that one realizes that there was no soaring height to reach from which things could be seen in Heideggerian brightness. One aimed for the light of insight, but one ends up facing the darkness of the night. The intimation of the gaze only yielded something unintimatable, ineffable. Perhaps, in a sensation of being surrounded by transcendence one was caught confusedly in a downward movement plunging into the Orphean depths of desire. So the original motivation to write was based on a false promise. But it was a promise that needed to be believed in, for the sake of being brought to the edge, where one may take off, on an unfulfillable (perhaps) but fine flight to finally write. One becomes a true seeker of meaning.

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Seeking: A phenomenologist is a seeker of meaning.

The phenomenologist seeks to be a writer, and as writer he or she seeks to enter the space of the text where one tries to gain a view of or to touch the subject one is trying to describe. Seeking to be a writer. But what does that mean? What does phenomenology ask of the person who wants to practice it? I do not mean to speak of the technology of writing. The act of writing is difficult and fraught with frustrations. In fact, no writer becomes successful in seeking to be a writer. What makes writing successful is to search for the meaning that motivates one to be a writer/researcher in the first place.

Writing is a solitary activity. While it is commonly assumed that writing is usually performed as a communicative act and therefore social in its intent, the experiential fact is that at the moment of writing I am here by myself at this writing desk or in this writing space. Many authors have commented on this intensely solitary, even lonely dimension of writing.

When an author manages to set a questioning mood, then the text may infect the reader with a sudden realization of the unsuspected enigmatic nature of ordinary reality. This infectious evocation of perplexity and wonder is perhaps what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xiii) had in mind when he spoke of phenomenological method as a peculiar attitude and attentiveness to the things of the world. Or when he referred more directly to Eugen Finke+s declaration that at the heart of the famous phenomenological reduction lies the orientation of wonder, wonder in the face of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Wonder is that moment of being when one is overcome by awe or perplexity-such as when something familiar has turned profoundly unfamiliar, when our gaze has been captured by the gaze of something staring back at us.

From a philosophical perspective it is not at all surprising that wonder is the central methodological feature of phenomenological inquiry, since phenomenology is a philosophical project. Plato and aristotle had argued that all philosophical thought begins in wonder, but we may also turn it around and say that philosophical reflection is the product of wonder. In other words, wonder is both the condition and the primariry principle of phenomenological method (Verhoeven 1967, pp. 30-50). But how can wonder be a method? and how does the state of wonder relate to the process of inquiry and questioning that animates the phenomenological interest?

Phenomenology not only finds its starting point in wonder it must also induce wonder (van Manen 1990, pp. 44, 45). For a phenomenological text to "lead" the way to human understanding it must lead the reader to wonder. The text must induce a questioning wonder.

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Touching: The researcher-as-author is challenged to construct a phenomenological text that brings us in touch with the phenomenological gaze.

The phenomenologist is a researcher, a seeker of meaning, someone who learns to "really" write in order to gain the experience of being in touch with something. One does research and writes to make contact, to achieve phenomenological intimacy with an object of interest. But at the moment when the writer senses that contact, when close in-touchness has been achieved, something strange may happen: it appears that this contact came from the outside. Rather than touching something with words, the writer feels as if being touched, an invitation as it were.

The power of phenomenological texts lies in a certain resonance that words can effect in our understanding, including those reaches of understanding that are somehow prediscursive and precognitive and thus less accessible to conceptual and intellectual thought. The creative contingent positioning of words may give rise to evoked images that can move us: inform us by forming us and thus leave an effect on us. When this happens, says Gadamer (1996), then language touches us in the soul. Or as Bachelard puts it, the reverberations bring about a change of being, of our personhood (1964, p. xviii). He says,

> the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface [of our being or self]. And this is also true of a simple experience of reading. The image offered us by reading the poem now becomes really our own. It takes roots in us. It has been given us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it, that we should have created it. It becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being. (1964, p. xix)

A phenomenologist does not present the reader with a conclusive argument or with a determinate set of ideas, essences, or insights. Instead, the he or she aims to be allusive by orienting the reader reflectively to that region of lived experience where the phenomenon dwells in recognizable form. More strongly put, the reader must become possessed by the allusive power of text-taken, touched, overcome by the epiphanic effect of its reflective engagement with lived experience. In this sense, we must become a reader of our own texts too. As writers, we know that we have achieved epiphany when we have managed to stir our own self. Of course, there is always the danger that we are merely enchanted by the superficial haunt of shallow sentimentality or catchy formulations; that is why it is good practice to check again the effect of the text several days after writing it. George Steiner puts it well when he says that "the genuine writer is a self-reader" (1989, p. 126). To write is to stir the self as reader.

A text which is thoughtful reflects on life while reflecting life. In thoughtful phenomenological texts, the distinction between poetic and narrative is hard to draw. Therefore, the human science researcher is not just a writer, someone who writes up the research report. Rather, the researcher is an author who writes from the midst of life experience where meanings resonate and reverberate with reflective being. The researcher-as-author is challenged to construct a phenomenological text that brings us in touch with the phenomenological gaze.

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Traversing: To write is to traverse the writerly space of the text.

The phenomenologist-as-writer tries to bring things into presence through artistic evocation. But to see the being of things directly would require that one moves into that space where the invisibility of the real has not yet compromised itself into visible form. It is here, in traversing this realm of wild being that things exist and may be encountered before they have gotten names attached to them, before they can hide themselves behind words. It happens that in this wondering gaze one may suddenly "recognize" the fragility of human understanding, to see existence in its naked appearance, to peer past the veneer of human constructs. How is this possible? The writer may find the answer to this question in the experience of writing itself, in the virtuality of the text where one may run up against the limit of language or where one may be permitted a momentary gaze through its crevices. It is in traversing this writerly space where there reigns the ultimate incomprehensibility of things, that we may sense the unfathomable infiniteness of their being, that we may hear the uncanny rumble of existence itself.

In the moment of writing I am here by myself at this writing desk and in this writing space. Many authors have commented on the intensely solitary dimension of writing. Perhaps that is also the reason that this solitudinous sphere can bring one face to face with fundamental questions. But the self is affected in an even more profound way in writing. A peculiar change takes place in the person who starts to write: the self retreats or steps back as it were, without completely stepping out of his or her social, historical, biographic being. This is similar to what happens when we read a novel. One traverses a world that is not one+s own. Here everything is undetermined. Everything is possible. Just as one is no longer oneself when one loses oneself in a novel, so the writer who writes is no longer this or that personal self. In a certain sense, the writer becomes depersonalized, an "it" or neutral self-a self who produces scripture.

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