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Merle A. Williams

Excerpt

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Introduction: Jamesian thinking and philosophy as story-telling

I

In the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives a concise and persuasive account of what he believes to be the major strengths of the phenomenological approach to philosophical problems. He contends that it is legitimate for phenomenology to ‘*be practised and identified as a manner or style of thinking*’ since it, in fact, ‘*existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy*’.¹ This sense of phenomenology, not as a narrow or doctrinaire theoretical school, but as a flexible and creative intellectual approach, is confirmed by Merleau-Ponty’s concluding remarks, in which he argues that it

is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne – by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being. In this way it merges into the general effort of modern thought. (p. xxi)

While these loosely connected, general statements give a helpful picture of the projected method of phenomenological investigation, of the adaptability of the philosopher’s conceptual tools and of his resistance to the rigid categorization of various kinds of exploratory scheme, it is important to identify the concrete content of characteristically phenomenological undertakings. Phenomenology marks a unique moment in recent philosophical effort, one in which an entire tradition of scholarly enquiry is first set aside, and then reinstated on modified – and, if the project is unsuccessful, more rigorous – terms. Such procedures are not unlike the often quoted

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. viii.

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experience of religious conversion; the world is renounced, only to be reclaimed and rediscovered from a strikingly fresh and illuminating perspective. The demanding techniques of the phenomenological reduction challenge accepted conceptual patterns, while ensuring that, in the thorough investigation which develops, the possible is carefully founded upon the real (see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xvii). Henry James, too, frequently proves himself a skilled discoverer and remaker of worlds, a shaper of brief factual anecdotes into the most surprising array of fictional possibilities. The phenomenological impulse guides his thinking, and leads him in search of the testing limiting conditions for perception, moral appraisal, or even coherent interpretation. The phenomenological approach, therefore, has strong affinities with James's style of narrative; it is this identification of a system of close correspondences between the later novels and a particular type of philosophizing which forms the *raison d'être* for the carefully detailed commentary that follows.

To offer a compressed and simplified preliminary outline, phenomenology is deeply concerned with the exploration of man's immediate experience; through reflection and careful description, it aims to arrive at a deeper understanding of the fundamental patterns of human existence. The phenomenologist seeks initially to grasp the special qualities of pre-reflective experience; he accepts the challenge of finding a mode of expression and examination which will make what was formerly unarticulated fully available for open-minded, yet meticulous, study. This commitment to considering the phenomena, as they present themselves, is extended to, and exercised at, every level of analysis, from the scrutiny of the relatively simple functioning of sense-perception to the interpretation of the subtlest manifestations of cultural and historical endeavour. The ultimate objective of the phenomenologist must be to cover and to comprehend the widest possible range of human action and interest. This introductory account would suggest that the phenomenological thinker and the novelist or poet share extensive common ground. As the ensuing chapter by chapter analysis will show, the philosopher commands an impressive array of incisive technical tools, whereas the literary writer's resources include drama, irony, extended linguistic play and far-reaching ambiguity. Yet the phenomenological preoccupation with the richness and diversity of human experience promotes fruitful ambiguities, while innovative works of fiction (such as James's)

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challenge accepted theories concerning the interaction between consciousness and its objects. For all its methodological refinements, phenomenology is not a discipline of narrowly end-stopped statements; its imaginative flexibility suits it subtly to a variety of literary purposes. Perhaps the most logical outcome of a phenomenological interrogation should, in fact, assume the lineaments of an adventurous and comprehensive fictional exposition.

At the same time this brief and very generalized sketch of the principal preoccupations of phenomenology points to more specific parallels with the work of Henry James. James, like Merleau-Ponty, is an ardent observer of the range and diversity of human experience. He runs the whole gamut of possibilities, from a child's first encounters with the mysterious phenomena of the nursery environment in *What Maisie Knew* to the dazzling display of sophisticated social manners in *The Wings of the Dove*. He is adept at minute descriptions, while spinning out elaborate processes of reflection is a hallmark of his later fiction. Of course, phenomenological tendencies can be ascribed to a fair cross-section of literary texts, if one relies solely on the broad discriminations of my preliminary outline; a key function of this study is, therefore, to bring about a productive dialogue between the detail of James's narratives and the characteristic techniques employed in phenomenological enquiry. In addition, James's novels of the 1890s and 1900s strikingly exhibit the 'attentiveness and wonder', the 'demand for awareness', and the 'will to seize the meaning of the world... as that meaning comes into being' which Merleau-Ponty considers to be representative of phenomenological thinking. As the following chapters set out to demonstrate, these novels also go much further; the rigour and comprehensiveness of their design embodies a series of searching investigations into problems of subjectivity, truth and social intercourse. In this regard, James proves himself to be a fully-fledged, philosophical novelist, who presses the phenomenological 'style' of thought into the service of his complex process of argument. His narratives themselves become a form of philosophical path-finding and concept-building.

Merleau-Ponty's shrewd synopsis of the major concerns of phenomenology, as he practises it, has further significant implications for James's approach to the writing of fiction. In the highly informative Preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, for instance, Merleau-Ponty urges that man is a 'subject destined to the world', and, explicitly

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rejecting the basic tenets of idealist philosophy, he insists that ‘the world is not what I think, but what I live through’ (pp. xi, xvi-xvii). The individual is an embodied consciousness, located within a given spatial context and discovering his very subjectivity as temporality. The potentialities open to each person are defined, not only by the inventiveness of his powers of reasoning, but also by the capabilities of his body, as well as the intricacies of a network of spatio-temporal relations. Under these circumstances, truth is not some predetermined logos which is brought to light, and then expounded in abstruse philosophical doctrines; truth is forged by people in their commerce with the world as the ‘closely woven fabric’ of the ‘real’, which incorporates the most surprising phenomena, while excluding the most appealing fantasies and daydreams. Moreover, truths are developed through the steady unfolding of human endeavour. Implicit in this view of the truth, not as absolute, but as creatively founded and constantly evolving, is Merleau-Ponty’s conviction that rationality itself may be mysterious and endlessly fascinating, but that it is not essentially problematic. It exists precisely in the fine spiderweb of relationships which binds consciousness to the world, and the world to consciousness.

This order of philosophical claim may readily find itself translated into the medium of a fictional exploration. Lambert Strether, for example, thinks intensely, yet he is ruefully reminded that he cannot conjure his enticing speculations into satisfying being. He lives, instead, through Paris and Woollett, struggling with the ‘closely woven fabric’ of his bewildering experiences and framing his decisions after a protracted sequence of experiments and compensatory realignments. Against this background, there is a Jamesian ring to Merleau-Ponty’s statement that ‘because we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*’ (p. xix). If for Merleau-Ponty the world is a finely-spun tissue of human projects, these remain by their very nature incomplete and inexhaustible in their rich variety. As James, too, frequently demonstrates in his fiction, perception is inherently perspectival, so that any object or situation must be presented from a particular point of view – and this, inevitably, leaves other aspects of the phenomenon unexplored. The individual, who is involved in this pattern of criss-crossing relationships, faces a constant challenge to interpretation and qualificatory reinterpretation. For Merleau-Ponty, in fact, the world *demand*s interpretation as the price paid by the embodied subject for his sustained interaction with it. A similar

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rationality soon becomes apparent in the universe of James's later fiction. Characters and the reader alike are drawn into following the intertwined threads of a series of compelling, yet elusive, significations. In *The Golden Bowl*, this drama of proposing, negating and restructuring meanings reaches its climax, as the four central characters vie for control in their constricting situation of interdependence. But the notion of 'meaning' acquires an added connotation in the later works. Like the phenomenologist, James attempts to identify the universal structures of experience through the detailed and disciplined scrutiny of the individual case. So his texts frequently test and elucidate 'what it means to': what it means to judge in *The Ambassadors*, and what it means to adopt a social rôle in *The Wings of the Dove*. The delimiting principles are grasped most vividly and most accurately through the imagination of a particular set of relevant circumstances.

Merleau-Ponty's essay, 'The Philosopher and his Shadow', again considers the genesis of meaning, this time within the precise framework of the history of philosophy. He opens his case by endorsing the opinion that 'establishing a tradition means forgetting its origins, as the aging Husserl used to say'. However, he immediately clarifies this potentially irresponsible proposition by suggesting that there 'must be a middle-ground' between a strictly objective approach to the history of philosophy, in which the critic conscientiously records the exact details of the appropriate theories, without the slightest addition or modification, and the form of meditation, 'disguised as dialogue', in which the writer both asks the questions and supplies the answers. Merleau-Ponty hopes, instead, to realize a sort of co-presence between the attempt of the philosopher pursuing the discussion, and the contribution of the philosopher whose work is being studied, so that the two styles of assessment interpenetrate and reinforce each other. In addition, he points to Martin Heidegger's belief that the richness of a philosophical work depends upon the 'unthought-of element' which it contains, upon the impetus which it gives later readers or scholars towards following up these hints and thus fulfilling the unexpressed vision of the original author.² Merleau-Ponty regards himself as treating in just this way the production of Edmund Husserl, the father-figure of the Phenomenological Movement; he is anxious to tease out the

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosopher and his Shadow', in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 159–60.

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‘unthought-of’ strands in his predecessor’s texts, and to co-operate with him in achieving the full promise of his phenomenological procedures. He sees loyalty to the tradition as residing not in uncritical acceptance or sterile reformulation, but in a commitment and participation which both deepen and extend the range of available knowledge.

This study of the philosophical orientation of Henry James’s later fiction aims, in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty, to establish a sort of co-presence between the novels themselves and the phenomenological investigations which illuminate them. In this manner, it becomes possible to explore the implicitly phenomenological contours which uniquely define James’s highly-wrought texts (rather than a more vaguely delineated ‘unthought-of element’ which they hold in reserve). And the phenomenological tradition is unmistakably enhanced by its interchange with James’s vividly dramatic fleshing out of several perplexing epistemological, moral and interpretative problems. Merleau-Ponty’s subtle and flexible model of phenomenological practice is clearly most appropriate to interdisciplinary research of this nature. Yet his thought is firmly rooted in Husserl’s persistent efforts towards founding phenomenology as a rigorous science. At the same time, Merleau-Ponty’s methodology and interests have strong links with the existential-phenomenological enterprises of writers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre.³ Søren Kierkegaard, who is often counted as an existentialist philosopher, has shown unique and rewarding insights into the vexed questions of subjectivity and truth; these prove valuable in complementing and refining a predominantly phenomenological line of argument. Finally, a couple of phenomenological theories of the reading process helpfully appraise the kind of responsive and creative activity which James’s texts elicit from their readers. If Merleau-Ponty’s version of the phenomenological project lies at the heart of these spreading rings of theoretical enquiry, then it not only functions as a stabilizing reference point, but also gains pertinence and sharpness of definition from its supporting setting. A wide range of philosophical techniques can, therefore, be brought to bear upon the tight nexus of complex relationships which constitute the Jamesian

³ As a useful rule of thumb, phenomenology and existentialism can be distinguished by identifying their guiding themes: the former emphasizes the concept of essence, the latter that of existence (see John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 21–6).

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world. By the same token, Jamesian relations, by their very conception, force outward the frontiers of philosophical debate.

II

Although the phenomenological approach offers a revealing mode of grasping and comprehending James's preoccupation with issues which are broadly termed 'philosophical', his highly complex work naturally exhibits alternative dimensions as well. Nor is this at odds with Merleau-Ponty's recognition that phenomena display a multiplicity of aspects, all requiring thorough exploration, so that the abstract ideal of a single, final and exhaustive description becomes seriously misleading. At the same time, it seems prudent to test the applicability of phenomenological models to a selection of James's novels by placing them under a certain degree of controlled pressure. The incorporation of a number of Jacques Derrida's deconstructive strategies into the framework of this discussion at once exposes some of the limitations of phenomenological procedures, while extending the theoretical scope of the detailed commentary. After all, one of Derrida's earliest theoretical undertakings took the form of a sustained appraisal of some key phenomenological concepts. Nonetheless, Derrida may appear a perverse choice of companion thinker for the phenomenologists, because he is uncompromising in his rejection of Husserl's idea of presence. In *Speech and Phenomena*, his critique of the treatment of signs in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, he sets out to prove that the notion of an expressive sign, or a sign simply "charged with meaning", is fallacious.⁴ The attempt at restricting a particular type of sign to the immediacy of the subject's inner life effectively makes nonsense of the concept of a sign. The self, in the intimacy of its pure self-communion, can manifest nothing to itself and learn nothing about itself. Derrida contends that all signs, including those strictly confined to the processes of mental life, would actually have to belong to Husserl's other category of the indicative: such signs '[move] something such as a "thinking being" to *pass* by thought from something to something else'. Natural signs, such as the canals of Mars, *indicate* that intelligent beings may exist on the planet, while artificial signs (such as chalk marks) operate as 'the instruments

⁴ See Jacques Derrida, 'Speech and Phenomena', in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 32.

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of conventional designation' (*Speech and Phenomena*, pp. 27–8). This account, after all, approaches more closely the familiar understanding of a sign as both representative and integrated within an articulated system. Equally damaging for Husserl's position is Derrida's convincing demonstration that the immediate present is not primordial, but derived, because it is defined in terms of its relation to a series of retentions and protentions, or backward and forward references. Nor, according to Derrida, is auto-affection originary; it, too, is derived by an unavoidable differentiation of the self from itself in order to establish a 'subject'. This also threatens the contention that the voice, which emanates from within, guarantees unimpeded contact with the springs of identity.⁵

'Speech and Phenomena' seems to strike at the very foundations of Husserlian phenomenology with its striving to acquire apodeictic (or indubitably certain) evidence in the immediacy of self-consciousness. Even Merleau-Ponty, while refuting the idealism of the early Husserl, retains his confidence in an adapted concept of 'presence'; and 'The Philosopher and his Shadow' advocates the 'co-presence' of two separate intellectual undertakings as a means of achieving a creative intellectual – or interdisciplinary – cross-fertilization. Derrida, however, reaches the conclusion that every presence is shot through with absence, so that it figures as a species of 'non-presence'; this explains why a paradoxical 'primordial supplementation' comes into play. The search for the clearly identifiable origin of phenomena has become futile. Objects give way to signs, which are replaced by further signs, in an endless chain of steady substitutions. There is no longer a solid and trustworthy bedrock of being. Yet the impression of absences and deferments is by no means an alien experience for the reader of Henry James's later novels. The young Maisie's eager yearning for reliable knowledge is repeatedly deflected into a sequence of uneasy substitutions. In *The Spoils of Poynton*, the novelist keeps recasting the form of Fleda's anxious judgements, as she gropes her way towards a sharper evaluation of her predicament. And in *The Golden Bowl*, Charlotte's energetic drive for fulfilment in her liaison with the Prince frequently lapses into a sense of emptiness and

⁵ Raymond Tallis provides an excellent summary of Derrida's case against Husserl in *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 189–202. In a commonsensical and often persuasive fashion he counters Derrida's attack on 'logocentrism' with his own construct of 'legocentrism' (pp. 202–33). Tallis's irreverent remarks are usually astute and stimulating, but his analysis is severely weakened by a tendency to oversimplify complex philosophical disputes.

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absence. Against this background Derrida's insistence on the restless movement of *differance*, as a complex economy of 'differing' and 'deferring', becomes highly pertinent to the patterning of James's fiction. A new angle of vision opens upon problems of indirection, delay and loss.

While the critique of Husserl definitely constitutes a crucial phase of Derrida's career, he is equally bound to the phenomenological tradition by a number of vital links. Rather than casting him as the *enfant terrible* of the literary and philosophical establishment, Rodolphe Gasché presents a searching and scholarly appraisal of Derrida's thought, which lays bare the magnitude of his debt to phenomenological practice.⁶ In this guise, Derrida is taking up the challenge initially confronted by Heidegger while seeking to transcend the methodological barriers which he believes his predecessor to have encountered. One might even see Derrida as drawing out the 'unthought-of element' in Heidegger's work, to revert to Merleau-Ponty's formulation. Derrida, too, is keen to break the vicious circle which he regards as circumscribing the history of philosophy: the imitative return by several predetermined routes to the fundamental questions of philosophical investigation. Instead, he tries to come to grips with the limiting conditions of philosophical enquiry – or even to go beyond conventional philosophy altogether. This is perhaps why Richard Rorty, arguing somewhat disingenuously from his own pragmatistic vantage point, claims that Derrida's production has a 'constructive' side which offsets its deconstructive extravagance. In his eagerness to tackle the entire problematic of language, without rehearsing yet again the stale dance of the impoverished sign, Derrida brings himself dangerously close to offering up a fresh philosophy of language.⁷ Rorty's deduction is deliberately contentious, but it effectively narrows one of the gaps between Derrida's approach and phenomenological theory. If Derrida places himself at the circumference of institutionalized philosophical endeavour, wrestling tirelessly with the shifty and shifting dynamics of signification, then Husserl is also determined in his own way to lay down a gridwork of limiting conditions. His specially tailored method of the phenomenological reduction is designed scrupulously to filter out all

⁶ See *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁷ Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida', in *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–80)* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 99–103.

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prejudices and preconceptions and to deliver up the essence of perception, judgement or imaginative projection. He is concerned with 'how it is possible to' perceive, and with 'what it *means* to' judge. Moreover, this fascination with limiting conditions expresses itself in James's later novels. The idiosyncrasies of Maisie's upbringing at once compel and set her free to discover the parameters of her perceiving relationship with her environment. And the tightening intellectual, social and moral pressures in *The Ambassadors* lead Strether to examine 'what it *means*' to frame complex judgements.

Any consideration of Derrida's disruptively innovative activities on the borderlines of linguistic philosophy and literary criticism would prove unjustifiably superficial if it failed to engage with some of his remarks about texts. 'Plato's Pharmacy' begins with a paragraph of provocative and shrewdly qualified assertions:

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception.⁸

Derrida's line of reasoning clearly draws upon his attack on the familiar metaphysical concept of presence, as well as his rejection of any presumption of straightforward self-contained meaning. For him, textual work is not genteel, superficial embroidery, but 'entering into the game' of elaboration and risking 'getting a few fingers caught' in a dissimulating woven texture (p. 63). This passage suggests why Derrida favours his strategically plotted practice of deconstruction, with its flair for revealing internal contradictions and its energetic subversion of textual structures from within those structures themselves. At the same time, the opening of 'Plato's Pharmacy' might serve as an apt description of the tantalizing complexity and elusiveness of a late Jamesian text. James's silences, evasions and suppressions have their affinities with the play of Derridean deconstruction, and his textual explorations cannot invariably be fitted into the mould of distinctive phenomenological attitudes. Derrida's interrogation of a cluster of key metaphysical assumptions must place him at odds with Merleau-Ponty's faith that the individual is a creative body-subject, securely situated in a world

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), p. 63.