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

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

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

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