4. “AN EVENT IN SOUND”

Considerations on the Ethical-Aesthetic Traits of the Hermeneutic Phenomenological Text

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we endeavor to describe some of the linguistic textures of hermeneutic-phenomenological writing and, in so doing, point to the close connection between lived experience and the ethical-aesthetic traits in interpreting and writing the experience.

Our starting point for considering phenomenological writing to be an ethical-aesthetic responsibility of the researcher is Heidegger’s (2001) understanding of existence as a poetic dwelling and Wivel’s (1953) postulate that the ethical outlook comes from within, from the poetic outlook. Awareness of the ethical-aesthetic dimension is, of course, of importance to all phenomenological research. However, it becomes even more imperative for researchers who follow the scholars of the Utrecht School and van Manen’s orientation to hermeneutic phenomenology, which use an expressive/aesthetic language to turn informants’ lived experiences into anecdotes. The dilemma here is how and why we can trust aesthetic language to be ethical.

Our primary interest in phenomenology is methodological, methodical and pragmatic, not philosophical. In this sense, we follow Ricoeur’s (1998) declaration that he does not “adhere to the letter of Heidegger’s philosophy but shall develop it for my own purposes” (p. 109). Our purpose here is not to tarry in philosophical discourse but to focus on the methodological significance of writing the experience rather than writing about the experience. In so doing, we focus on language and its potential to give expression to the meaning of recollected lived experiences.

This chapter begins by focusing specifically on the phenomenology of the Utrecht School, particularly as it has been developed as a “research orientation” by Max van Manen (1997b). The scholars who share this orientation (e.g. Buytendijk, Langeveld, and Linschoten) are typically known for at least three things: their choice of everyday, common and situational subjects; their use of experiential material in their texts; and their unconventional writing style. One key notion in the methodology developed by van Manen (van Manen 1989, 1997b) is the anecdote: an experiential description that is carefully crafted by the researcher and that is based on informants’ accounts of lived experience. We employ the notion of the anecdote when we explore the linguistic features of writing the experience. When we move from writing the experience to the raw material provided by informants, we employ the term lived-experience description (van Manen, 1997b) interchangeably with experiential accounts.
I am not alone in this desire to understand those moments of life that are invisible even and precisely in practice. In their text Becoming Aware (Depraz et al., 2002) the authors (a phenomenological philosopher, a neuroscientist–Buddhist practitioner–phenomenologist, and a psychologist) confront in/visibility head on.

A “FINE” HUMAN SCIENCE

The scholars of the Utrecht School gained reputations for their evocative and insightful texts on a variety of common human experiences, such as “On Falling Asleep” (Linschoten), “The Meaning of Being Ill” (van den Berg), and “The Psychology of Driving a Car” (van Lennep). What united the original group of like-minded academics was an inclination to integrate the diverse social disciplines and their experiential practices; they were all “sailing under the flag of the personal responsibility and social engagement of the individual human being” (Levering & van Manen, 2001, p. 278, emphasis in original). However, the methodological underpinnings of their work were kept hidden or in petto. Thus, the profound existential orientation of the Utrecht School has since been misunderstood as an arcane, impressionistic, and exclusive form of phenomenology. As phenomenological writers, they appear to have simply practiced phenomenology with earnestness and sensitivity, rather than overtly teaching or explicating its substance. The lack of methodological self-awareness of the Utrecht School phenomenology might belong to what Merleau-Ponty (2002) interprets as a characteristic of European phenomenology in general. According to him, phenomenology is a practiced and acknowledged movement that involves a style of thinking and writing before reaching philosophical and methodological self-awareness. Despite the criticism of the Utrecht School, by becoming familiar with their reflective and often beautiful texts, the power of their methodology is almost self-evident. But how did they write like this? Can the skill of beautiful and perceptive writing be acquired through a persevering and sympathetically insightful practice? Our endeavor to understand begins in the world of aesthetics.

Things speak of the beautiful

The concept of “the beautiful” was once a universal metaphysical concept that had a function in the universal doctrine of being. Even today, the concept of “the beautiful” has significance for contemporary methodology of the human sciences. The original Greek word kalon translates to fine, as in “the fine arts.” The adjective fine distinguishes these arts from natural sciences and human sciences. “In fine art the art itself is not beautiful, but is called so because it produces the beautiful,” Heidegger claims (2001, p. 35). How does fine art produce what is beautiful? Heidegger demonstrates to us that a piece of art can bring into nearness the nature of a thing – a pair of shoes, for example (van Gogh, 1885). By unveiling the shoe-ness of the shoes, the painting, in its beauty, sets to work the truth about shoes. Under Heidegger’s and van Gogh’s guidance, we perceive a pair of worn-out shoes, shabby and dirty from daily toil and the worker’s contact with water, soil