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Writing Qualitatively, or the Demands of Writing

Max van Manen

Have you ever said this or heard someone say this: "I have done all of my data analysis—I just have to write it down." Or, "I just have to write it up"? I will suggest that within the context of phenomenological inquiry, it is not necessarily helpful to try to assist researchers learning "how to write down" their reflections or "how to write up" their results. What should be more helpful is learning "how to write." Qualitative writing may be seen as an active struggle for understanding and recognition of the lived meanings of the lifeworld, and this writing also possesses passive and receptive rhetoric dimensions. It requires that we be attentive to other voices, to subtle significations in the way that things and others speak to us. In part, this is achieved through contact with the words of others. These words need to touch us, guide us, stir us.

Keywords: *space of writing; phenomenological method; phenomenological reflection; gaze of Orpheus; desire; hypomnesis; anamnesis; primal impressional consciousness*

The role, meaning, and significance of writing are rarely problematized in the literature of qualitative human science methods. One seldom asks, How does writing enter the process of research? Where does writing begin? What is the relation between writing and method of inquiry? How do phenomena of everyday life belong to the space of the text? How is this textual space (the textorium) of writing experienced? What is the phenomenology of writing, or how can this writing be written?

The assumption that needs to be examined is that qualitative (phenomenological) inquiry cannot really be separated from the practice of writing. The more committed we are to a seriously qualitative (and thus less technical) form of

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inquiry, the more we should resist the temptation to surrender to a view of method that hollows out our understandings and cuts us off from the deeper sources of meaning. In the following pages, the meaning and place of writing in qualitative and phenomenological research are considered.

WRITING AND MEANING: BETWEEN LOGIC AND RHETORIC

The one scholar who is generally identified as being concerned with writing in virtually all his work, is Derrida. In his *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), Derrida posed questions fundamental to the work of Husserl that have important consequences for phenomenology and the problem of writing. These questions are still and actively debated in the publications of Husserl scholars such as Zahavi (2003).

Derrida's study of Husserl's foundational text *Logical Investigations* is not easy reading for nonphilosophers, but it nevertheless had a major impact on the Husserlian project of phenomenology. In his preface to the English translation of *Speech and Phenomena*, Garver suggested that the best way to understand Derrida's critique of phenomenology (i.e., Husserlian phenomenology) is in terms of the radical turn in philosophy from a logic- to a rhetoric-based approach to language and meaning. Garver used the old medieval triad of grammar, logic, and rhetoric to explain this shift in the tradition of philosophy and the wider human sciences. Although it might be an exaggeration to say that Derrida reversed the role of logic and rhetoric, it is nevertheless obvious that he loosened the boundaries between philosophy, literature, ethics, and critical approaches in the arts.

Within this frame, Derrida's deconstructionist reading of Husserl's phenomenology is very much in keeping with what had been happening in the works of other scholars such as Heidegger (1971, 1982), the later Wittgenstein (1997), and Ricoeur (1976). In their writings, there is a shift away from understanding meaning in terms of the relation between name and reference, perceived objects and mental objects, and a move toward the changing contexts of meaning in which human beings find themselves, and to the complexity and instability of textual meaning, the language games and narrative practices that give expression and interpretation to human experience.

Garver's (1973) analysis seems particularly pointed when we consider the present scene of philosophy and phenomenology. Furthermore, these considerations are critical for thinking about the work done in the human sciences, where inquiries are placed in the service of professional practices such as nursing and pedagogy, in fields of the health sciences, education, clinical psychology, and so forth.

We now see in the work of scholars such as Nussbaum (1990), Lingis (2001), and many others a decisive turn toward rhetorical practices that are still disconcerting in the eyes of some philosophers. Why? Because they imply different ways of thinking about meaning and language, literature and philosophy, narrative and scientific discourses, ontics and ethics, and therefore about the very project of inquiry and writing itself.

A provocative example can be gleaned from the text *A Taste for the Secret* that contains conversations between Derrida and the Italian philosopher Ferraris (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001). These are largely discussions about the role and significance of writing. Ferraris complains that so much philosophy seems to have taken a narrative turn, and he poses the question to Derrida: "How does writing enter

philosophy?" (p. 7). Ferraris questions the generally accepted version of this entrance, which holds that after the end of metaphysics, philosophers are no longer dealing with truth but are serving something like "a sort of social welfare service based on conversation" (p. 7). Ferraris is troubled by the new tolerance for letting philosophers do whatever they wish, with the exception of their proper work, which is, in his words, "the search for truth" (p. 8). This tolerance is actually repressive, he said, as it leads to the historical circumstance in which philosophy has become just another form of "literature."

Not unexpectedly, Ferraris is provocatively contradicted by Derrida, who counters, "Writing did not 'enter' philosophy, it was already there" (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001, p. 8). Derrida continues, "This is what we have to think about—about how it went unrecognized, and the attempts to repudiate it" (p. 8). However, in passing, Derrida agrees with Ferraris that truth is not outmoded. "Truth is not a value one can renounce," he says (p. 8). Derrida points out that writing is essential to all philosophic reflection and that it is worthwhile to think about the relation between phenomenology or philosophy in general and writing in general.

It is in the act of reading and writing that insights emerge. The writing of work involves textual material that possesses hermeneutic and interpretive significance. It is precisely in the process of writing that the data of the research are gained as well as interpreted and that the fundamental nature of the research questions is perceived. In a phenomenological sense, the research produces knowledge in the form of texts that not only describe and analyze phenomena of the lifeworld but also evoke understandings that otherwise lie beyond their reach.

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

To understand the role of writing in phenomenological inquiry, we need to go back to Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), in which he examines the problem of signs in Husserl's phenomenology. Derrida questioned some of the key assumptions that make possible approaches to phenomenological inquiry that are supported by Husserlian notions of the relation between worldly objects and intentional objects. He also questioned the meaning of the prereflective nature of primal impressionable consciousness, with its retentive and protentive aspects, and whether there is anything like simple and pure experience that can serve as the source or foundation for the meaning of signs, or acts of consciousness that can provide access to the intentional object.

It is, of course, naïve to say that the qualitative researcher aims to describe "what appears in consciousness," "lived experience," "the intentional object," or "the things themselves." All these notions begin to disintegrate when we ask what is really meant in them. For example, Husserl's famous motto "back to the things themselves" is usually interpreted as an opposition to constructions and premature conceptualizations and systematizations, and a return to the immediate data as given to us in consciousness. However, the problem is, of course, that the data are not unambiguously immediately given at all, and certainly not in a form that would permit the unequivocal descriptions of the so-called intentional objects, as suggested in so much contemporary human science.

In fact, what is so compelling in Husserl's (1991) accounts of that irreducible sphere of primal impressionable consciousness is that it somehow constitutes an

awareness of self as a function of internal time consciousness, as well as an access to the elusive nature of the moment of the now that is always somehow at the very center of all phenomenological reflection.

How can primal impressional consciousness be the source of meaning of that which is given in experience if primal impressional consciousness is never experienced as such? Lévinas (1978) had already suggested that what presents itself in consciousness is always haunted by the alterity of what withdraws itself as absence and so always presupposes an "othering." Therefore, in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida (1973) insisted that the presence of what is given in consciousness is always preceded by, and thus profoundly compromised by, the absence of the retentional trace that gives us the experience of the now and of our awareness of self as existing now.

The upshot of all this is that writing is much less a writing down of the results of a phenomenological analysis of the data given in consciousness or experience. Why? Because the data are not unequivocally "given" as such at all. What seems given or what seems to present itself in the primal or prereflective immediacy of every moment of the now is always haunted by the not now in which we are forever caught, and by the absence or void that always echoes in everything that we seem to locate in the so-called things to which we turn: the act of consciousness, or the primacy of lived experience.

Moreover, the so-called essences or eidetic structures of intentional objects are ultimately those of language. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) said in his much-quoted "Preface" to *Phenomenology of Perception*, "It is the office of language to cause essences to exist in a state of separation which is in fact merely apparent, since through language they still rest upon the ante-predicative life of consciousness" (p. xvii). The experience of phenomenological reflection is largely (though not exclusively) an experience of language, and so phenomenological reflection on prereflective life would be much better described in terms of an experience of writing, as explicated in the provocative works of Blanchot (1981).

THE ORPHEAN GAZE AND THE SPACE OF WRITING

Blanchot (1981) used the allegory of Orpheus to allude to what happens in the act of writing. The story of Orpheus, son of Apollo and the muse Calliope, is well known. It happened that shortly after their marriage, Orpheus's wife, Eurydice, dies from the poison of a snakebite. The grieving Orpheus descends into the dark caverns of the Underworld to implore the gods with his songs to reunite him with Eurydice and allow him to take her back to the daylight world of the living. This is a classic story about the power of art and the artist. His songs are so moving and so stirring of the soul that, finally, Hades and Persephone grant his wish to take Eurydice with him from the realm of the dead but on one condition: that he will not turn around to look at her until they have reached the upper air of daylight.

They proceed in total silence, he leading and she following, through passages dark and steep, until they nearly reach the cheerful and bright upper world. Just then, it is said, in a moment of forgetfulness, as if to assure himself that she is still following him, Orpheus casts a glance behind. At that very instant, she is borne away. Eurydice is snatched from him so fast that their hands, stretched out for a last embrace, fail to reach each other. Orpheus grasps only the air, and her last words of

farewell recede with such speed that they barely reach his ears. He has lost her for a second time, and now this loss is forever.

All that Orpheus is left with is the image of that fleeting gaze that he saw of Eurydice. This is the way the story is usually told: "When in fear he might again lose her, and anxious for another look at her, he turned his eyes so he could gaze upon her" (Ovid, 1955, lines 95-98). However, Blanchot (1981) has suggested a different interpretation: Orpheus was not forgetful at all; he was motivated by a different gaze—the gaze of desire.

According to Blanchot (1981), the ambiguous gaze of Orpheus was not really an accident. The gaze was motivated by desire, said Blanchot, but it was not the simple desire for the person, Eurydice, in her visible flesh and blood appearance. No, said Blanchot, the force that drove Orpheus

does not demand Eurydice in her diurnal truth and her everyday charm, but in her nocturnal darkness, in her distance, her body closed, her face sealed, which wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the strangeness which excludes all intimacy. (p. 100)

Thus, what Orpheus came to seek in the darkness of the Underworld was not a lost love but the meaning of love itself. That alone is what Orpheus came to seek in the Underworld. He came "to look in the night at what night is concealing" (p. 100). It is about a mortal gaining a vision of what is essentially invisible, the perfection of Eurydice—before she resumed her mortal state as they approached the light of day.

We all know how writing makes something or someone disappear and then reappear in words. Love had driven Orpheus into the dark, the darkness of the text. His consuming desire was to see love's essence and to feel its form, but such a glance is not permitted to mortals. What lies on the other side belongs to the great silence, to a "night" that is not human. So the gaze of Orpheus expresses a desire that can never be completely fulfilled: to see the true being of something. Yet, it is this veil of the dark that every writer tries to penetrate. This is the very nature of writing: "The act of writing begins with Orpheus's gaze" (Blanchot, 1981, p. 104), and one writes only if one has entered that space under the influence of the gaze, or perhaps it is the gaze that opens the space of writing. "When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power by which night opens" (p. 99). Thus, we can read the whole myth as an event of writing. Orpheus the poet tries to capture the love that has ensnared him to Eurydice.

The writer uses words to uncover a truth that seems almost within reach. Indeed, at first it seems that Orpheus's words (his poetic songs) bring his love into presence. His words and songs have made her visible, so to speak. He dimly discerns the image of his love in the dark of the Underworld, but this is not enough. He desires to see more clearly. He must bring her back from the dark of night to the light of day. Orpheus is not satisfied with the image evoked by his words. He wants the immediacy of a presence—a presence that is not mediated by words or other means. This description is uncannily close to the ambition of any phenomenologist motivated by the desire to bring to nearness that which constantly eludes our grasp—a human truth. To grasp the naked now and rescue it from the just now (see van Manen, 1997, 2002).

WRITING CREATES A SPACE THAT BELONGS TO THE UNSAYABLE

It is not surprising, therefore, that Blanchot's (1981, 1982) provocative portrayals of phenomenological writing have resonated loudly in the works of contemporary French philosophers such as Derrida (1978) and Cixous (1997). What the writer tries to see is the nakedness of the now. In the words of Cixous, "What is most true is poetic. What is most true is naked life. I apply myself to 'seeing' the world nude" (p. 3). However, to see the nakedness of the now directly requires that one move into that space at the edge of existence, in the twilight between the Underworld and the world of daylight. The now is the moment that is constantly past, no longer now when we try to apprehend it, and that is why Orpheus must turn around in this space where human understanding evaporates into nothingness (no-thingness), where knowing is dying. It is here, on the other side of everyday reality, that "things" exist without real existence, before they have gotten names attached to them, before they can hide themselves behind words, as if they were more real than real.

Orpheus turns around and gazes at Eurydice. What does he see? In this wondrously wondering gaze, one may see existence in its naked appearance, peer past the veneer of human constructs. How is this possible? Does such realm exist? The writer can find the answer to this question in the experience of writing itself, in the virtuality of the text, where one can run up against the human wall of language or where one might be permitted a momentary gaze through its crevices.

Writing creates a space that belongs to the unsayable. It is in this writerly space where there reigns the ultimate incomprehensibility of things, the unfathomable infiniteness of their being, the uncanny rumble of existence itself, but in this fleeting gaze, we also sense the fragility of our own existence, of our own death, that belongs to us more essentially than anything, said Derrida (1995). To see Eurydice in her invisibility, and to make her visible in her infinite immortality, Orpheus has entered the dark, and so it happens that in this fleeting glance, Orpheus sees and does not see, touches and does not touch, hears and does not hear his beloved, whereas she still belongs to the uncanniness of the night.

The problem of writing is that one must bring into presence this phenomenon that can be represented only in words—and yet escapes all representation. The writer who aims to bring the object of his or her gaze into presence is always involved in a tensional relation between presentation (immediate "seeing" and understanding) and representation (understanding mediated by words). This writing is a first reading "from now on understood as the vision of a presence immediately visible, that is to say intelligible," said Blanchot (1993, p. 422). Language substitutes itself for the phenomenon that it tries to describe. In this sense, language re-presents what is already absent, and yet, absence is a sign of presence, a non-absent absence. The contradiction is that to bring something into presence, one would have to write without recourse to language and concepts and without the help of discourses of representation—but compelled by the gaze of Orpheus, one has to write.

Orpheus is the writer, and Eurydice is the secret meaning (the feminine?) that the writer's work seeks or desires. Thus, the gaze of Orpheus and the image he sees of Eurydice belong to the essential act of writing. The writer is the solitary figure

who leaves the everyday reality of ordinary daylight and whose gaze creates the space of the text, and then enters, dwells in this space of the text to bring back what cannot be brought back: the object of desire. The writer's problem is that the Orphean gaze unwittingly destroys what it tries to rescue. In this sense, every word kills and becomes the death of the object it tries to represent. The word becomes the substitution of the object.

Even the most subtle poem destroys what it names. For this reason, Blanchot (1982) said that the perfect book would have no words. The perfect book would be "blank," as it tries to preserve what it can only destroy if it tried to represent it in language (see Nordholt, 1997). Perhaps this is why writing can be so difficult. The author becomes tacitly aware that language annihilates or "kills" whatever it touches. The result is the terrible realization that one has nothing to say. There is nothing to say, or, rather, it is impossible to truly "say" something. The writer desires to capture meaning in words, but the words constantly substitute themselves, destroy the things that they are meant to evoke. There are no "things"—only evocations, nothings.

At the level of raw existence, there are no "things," only the darkness of the night from which human insight and meaning arise. In the space of the text, we witness this birth of meaning and death of meaning—or perhaps meaning becomes indistinguishable from the dark. This dark can be experienced as the frightful allure of Existence itself that fascinates the writer but that cannot be written: the "there is" or the *il-y-a*. Lévinas (1996) described the *il-y-a* as something that resembles what one hears when holding an empty seashell against one's ear, as if the emptiness is full, as if the silence is a murmuring, as if one hears the silent whispering of the Real.

This Orpheic image of the difficulty of writing—of writing in the dark—might seem overly trite for the philosopher, who already knows this intellectually, or it might seem totally absurd for the nonphilosopher, who regards this as unacceptably intellectual. But is this not what a writer experiences? Furthermore, as phenomenologists, should we not draw from it practical conclusions? Whether one ponders the meaning of the most consequential or the most trivial of human concerns, the act of phenomenological writing, if done with utmost seriousness, confronts the writer with the dark, with the enigma of phenomenality.

This is what it means to dwell in the space of the text, where the desire for meaningfulness leads. "The act of writing begins with Orpheus's gaze," said Blanchot (1981, p. 104), but to write, one must already be possessed by the desire to descend into the darkness of the night: "One can only write if one arrives at the instant towards which one can only move through space opened up by the movement of writing" (Blanchot 1981, p. 104). Like Orpheus, the writer must enter the dark, the space of the text, in the hope of seeing what cannot really be seen, hearing what cannot really be heard, touching what cannot really be touched. Darkness is the method.

THE HAUNTING OF GOOD BY BAD WRITING

Although method (in the usual sense of following directions, procedures, or orientations) can, indeed, give guidance, one cannot rely on it. Therefore, Derrida (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001) argued, it is important to distinguish between bad writing (*hypomnesis*, low or inferior thinking) and good writing (*anamnesis*, upward or

mindful thinking). "Good writing is thus always hanté [haunted] by bad writing," said Derrida (p. 8). The distinction between good writing and bad hinges on a reliance on method, not on method as such but on method conceived as prescriptions, strategies, procedures, and techniques. Derrida pointed out that in Heidegger we can already find the distinction between bad writing and good writing, hypomnesis and anamnesis, between mere philosophic technique, on the one side, and poetic thinking as a kind of writing, on the other.

For Heidegger (1982), genuine phenomenological method consists in creating one's path, not in following a path: "When a method is genuine and provides access to the objects, it is precisely then that the progress made by following it . . . will cause the very method that was used to become necessarily obsolete" (p. 328). After all, when we try to reflect on the originary dimensions of meaning of some phenomenon, we would abandon the single-mindedness of reflection for reflection relying on some preconceived method. Moreover, suggested Heidegger, it is difficult to commit oneself to certain phenomenological research methods, as even within the tradition of philosophy, "there is no such thing as one phenomenology, and if there could be such a thing it would never become anything like a philosophical technique" (p. 328).

Thus, qualitative method is often difficult, as it requires sensitive interpretive skills and creative talents from the researcher. Phenomenological method, in particular, is challenging, because it can be argued that its method of inquiry constantly has to be invented anew and cannot be reduced to a general set of strategies or research techniques. Methodologically speaking, every notion has to be examined in terms of its assumptions, even the idea of method itself.

One might dismiss this cautionary tale about method by proposing that the literature of the great philosophers is contradictory: Heidegger (1982) warned us against a reliance on method, yet he and others described phenomenology in terms of method. Phenomenology "is accessible only through a phenomenological method . . . each person trying to appropriate phenomenology for themselves," said Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. viii). How do we reconcile these claims? It appears that Heidegger was warning against reducing phenomenology to a set of philosophical strategies and techniques, and Merleau-Ponty referred to method not as techniques but as something like an attitude: "*Phenomenology can be practised and identified as a manner and a style of thinking*" (p. viii, italics in original text).

Indeed, it is apt to think of the basic method of phenomenology as the taking up of a certain attitude and practicing a certain attentive awareness to the things of the world as we live them rather than as we conceptualize or theorize them. "Doing phenomenology," as a reflective method, is the practice of the bracketing, or "reduction" of what prevents us from making primitive contact with the concreteness of lived reality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Although, according to Derrida (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001), all reflection of a general philosophic nature can be seen as a form of writing (p. 9), Derrida was not speaking of the act of writing in only a metaphorical manner. What is critical about the Ferraris-Derrida discussion of the entrance and place of writing in phenomenological thinking is not only that writing has a place in phenomenology but that phenomenological reflection is, first of all, an experience of writing.

Writing does not need to be understood here as writing to or for someone. Derrida admitted, "My own experience of writing leads me to think that one does not always write with a desire to be understood—there is a paradoxical desire not to be understood" (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001, p. 30). One does not write primarily for being understood; one writes for having understood being.

THE LURE OF WRITING

Now, some might feel that phenomenological research and writing, writing that truly addresses the meaning of something, is an entitled endeavor that can be claimed only by a talented author and scholar. If the goal of writing is to touch something meaningful in order to be touched by it, however, then this is no privileged pursuit.

I am a student of phenomenological writing myself, and I always will be. I have become reconciled with the difficulties of writing—but no, that is not quite right. Writing is not something with which we make peace. Rather, one learns to obey its demand with the hope of an uncertain promise: to satisfy the desire really to "write" something, to see what we try to write in its nakedness. Of course, we know that the promise of writing is impossible. There is no naked truth, no understanding of naked reality, but, not unlike Orpheus, we desire the impossible promise: to really write something.

Of course, in the beginning a reluctant student writer might need encouragement, and pedagogical encouragement sometimes has to make false promises: promises of a clear view (van Manen, 2002). Indeed, there is a strange contradiction at work in helping students write. The student writer is someone who studies and practices writing in the hope of making something clear. Every now and then, he or she might find an updraft and suddenly soar, reaching the perspective of the gaze. Phenomenologically, this could be described as really "seeing" something. One experiences a sensation of something perceived. Often, further encouragement is no longer needed. In fact, external encouragement might now be brushed off, dismissed. Something strange animates the writing from now on: We can call this desire. I have seen this over and over in my students.

No encouragement is needed, because real courage has been ignited. To write is to be driven by desire. So, perhaps, in a moment like this, one has become a real writer, propelled to cross the space of the text in search of another updraft—the perspective of the gaze. It is then, and only then, that the true nature of writing can reveal itself: This is not a perspective at all. There is nothing to see. What happens is that one realizes that there was no soaring height to reach from which things could be grasped 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 yielded only something inimitable, 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. It was, however, 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.

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