35

MERLEAU-PONTY AND JAMES AGEE: GUIDES TO THE NOVICE PHENOMENOLOGIST

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ABSTRACT: French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and American novelist and journalist James Agee are credited with inspiring a novice in phenomenological research inquiry to see the lifeworld freshly. Insights derived from their works were particularly relevant to nursing studies of ill persons whose bodies had become obstacles rather than enablers and whose worlds had shrunk to windowless hospital rooms. Both Merleau-Ponty and Agee provided guidance regarding genuine dialogue with other persons, discovering deeper meaning in the words and phrases spoken by interviewees, and the vibrant writing that "opens a new field or a new dimension" to the reader of the research report.

Introduction

Nearly two decades ago, I came to an impasse in my scholarly work. It was clear to me that the methodology of "objective" positivistic science, in which I had been trained, could not reveal the deeper meanings of the emotional phenomena which I was studying, phenomena that were highly salient to the discipline of nursing and to my specialty of psychiatric nursing (e.g., emotions of anger, stress, and depression). I became convinced of the merits of a phenomenological approach to studying these

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phenomena.[1] Numeric scales could not fathom the depth of women's anger about violations of their values, their rights, and their trust—violations occurring within their most significant interpersonal relationships. My study participants needed to tell me stories about the anger that metaphorically "simmered" on the "back burner" until it "boiled over" in response to egregious violations of relational reciprocity. I needed to invite them to share richly contextualized narratives that painted pictures of the situation, the provocateurs, and the anguish inherent in relational rupture.[2] How could their anger be measured by a questionnaire if the phenomenon of anger is shared between two people? Noted Russon, "Emotions...participate in intersubjective space, and cannot have their meaning determined except through being taken up by others."[3] To wit, Merleau-Ponty observed that the emotion of anger is "in this room: It is in the space between him and me that it unfolds."[4]

Only within existential phenomenology has emotion been given its rightful prominence.[5,6] Emotion cannot be reduced to the physiological alterations or motor behaviors commonly measured by researchers in laboratory experiments. Within classic philosophy, emotion had been viewed as inferior to reason. In particular, anger was viewed pejoratively, as a kind of temporary insanity. There was no acknowledgment that anger could have protective functions, such as defending oneself from injustice, or strategic objectives, such as those identified by Sartre. From the perspective of existential phenomenology, the myriad ways that humans are emotional are ways of being-in-the-world[7] that deserve serious investigation by scholars.[8]

Thus began my transformation from using quantitative research methodologies to learning a phenomenological method of inquiry developed by psychologist Howard Pollio and colleagues at the University of Tennessee,[9] which entails one-on-one in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest. This approach is based in large part

on the existential phenomenology of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[10] My new aim in research was not to establish correlations among variables but to produce faithful descriptions of human experience, unfettered by theoretical formulations and presuppositions. To accomplish this, I had to set aside much of what I had learned about the scientific enterprise (e.g., random sampling, hypothesis testing, statistical significance). I had to confront my own subjectivity as a psychiatric nurse researcher and the life experiences that shaped my preunderstandings of the phenomena that drew my interest, i.e., "the inseparability of researcher and self" described by Drew.[11] "Phenomenologists raise self-awareness to a prominent level of functioning in their work."[12] Thus, in mid-career, I had to undertake a journey toward a new "manner or style of thinking."[13] In this paper, I credit the works that have helped this non-philosopher learn to perceive, and to write, as a phenomenologist. I write with the hope that these remarks from a nurse will be of some interest to a multidisciplinary audience. I draw from selected writings of two men that provided inspiration on my journey: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and American novelist and journalist James Agee. I have chosen the word "inspiration" rather than "instruction," because neither Agee nor Merleau-Ponty left me any "tidy answer," instead a "legacy of questions."[14] First, I briefly describe my two sources of inspiration, who thought and wrote during the same turbulent sociohistorical period.

I. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and James Agee: Mavericks among their Peers

Merleau-Ponty was a maverick among philosophers, rejecting both historical determinism and absolute freedom, rejecting both realism and idealism, and rejecting both dogmatism and relativism. He explicitly rejected the mind-body dualism of Descartes. He was not shy about revealing his differences with

colleagues (e.g., Sartre, with whom he had a difference of opinion about the philosopher's proper level of engagement in the politics and social issues of the day).[15] Nevertheless, he retained a respectful tone regarding his philosophical forebears and colleagues, eschewing the "hypercompetitive adversarial style of much ... philosophical discourse."[16] Merleau-Ponty was criticized within philosophical circles because his work did not conform to academic philosophy's traditional emphasis on abstract concepts such as Truth and Beauty, but sought instead to understand the primordial phenomena that precede concept names and, in fact, cannot be easily articulated. One critic alleged that "Merleau-Ponty changes and inverts the ordinary sense of what we call philosophy."[17] Speaking directly to Merleau-Ponty in a seminar, his former thesis advisor Emile Brehier admonished, "I see your ideas as being better expressed in literature and in painting than in philosophy."[18] Ironically, in the same seminar, M-P was accused of not being radical *enough.*[19]

To a non-philosopher, navigating Merleau-Ponty's writings proved to be challenging; even philosophers have considered his language difficult.[20, 21] He employed a dialectical writing style that makes the reader wonder which stance he actually espouses. To complicate matters further, for a novice seeking to grasp his thought, there are notable differences between the ideas he put forth in "early" and "later" treatises. However, Carman[22] has traced the evolution of Merleau-Ponty's thought and identifies logical continuities throughout his work. For my purposes in this paper, it is not necessary that I digress into parsing the discrepancies between "early" and "later" Merleau-Ponty.

Now a brief word about James Agee. Because Agee may be less familiar to a reading audience of phenomenological philosophers, let me defend my selection of him as a guide. Indeed, James Agee was not a philosopher, but his work was sometimes more abstract than philosophy,[23] and like a phenomenological philosopher, Agee's primary research instrument was his "indi-

vidual human consciousness."[24] Agee actually lived with tenant farmers in the rural American South for 8 weeks in 1936 while researching their lives as "working and ill-used people of the world," an immersion experience that he characterized as "a peculiarly good opportunity to try to see ... unanswerable questions of human and earthly and universal destiny, human art, human life."[25] Agee's goal was to "tell everything possible as accurately as possible: and to invent nothing."[26] He hoped to produce a written text of the same stunning clarity as the accompanying photographs of the farmers' faces and their dilapidated shacks that were being taken by his collaborator (Walker Evans). The resultant book, with its Biblical title *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is "an intense and complex examination of not only its putative subject matter but also the act of perceiving itself."[27] Agee seemed to possess "the same kind of attentiveness and wonder [and] the same will to seize the meaning of the world" as the phenomenological philosophers.[28] I contend that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a phenomenological investigation in the truest sense of the term, and I will refer to it throughout this paper.

Like Merleau-Ponty, the maverick among philosophers, Agee was a maverick among journalists: "He was always out of step, and he had very little respect for the Zeitgeist."[29] His pieces for magazines were often seen as "quirky" and rejected—or heavily modified—by his editors.[30] Agee was a bohemian, a "hippie" before there were hippies, who felt that educational and religious institutions had "deadening and muffling power over what was pure and immediate in perception, in thought, and in art."[31] His interest in impoverished farmers was puzzling to publishing houses and literary critics, and his book about them received acclaim as a masterpiece only decades after its 1941 publication.

How did I become interested in James Agee? Perhaps because it is part of my family lore—my mother was an Agee—that we are distant relatives of the famous writer. Upon investigation, I learned that all Agees in the United States are descended from a

common Huguenot ancestor, who fled France during religious persecution. It pleased me to claim a biological connection to the writer, however distant it may be. I am also connected to him because of place. I live in Knoxville, Tennessee, where Agee spent his early childhood, and I teach at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, a site of lively scholarship about Agee and a repository of his papers.

Most importantly, however, I name Agee as a guide because his writing illuminates the human condition. Literature does not engage in "*explicit* philosophical reflection [but] presents us with the material on which we can reflect."[32] "The true reader of Agee is compelled, as in an act of communion, to an expansion of consciousness."[33] Moreover, his writing serves as a consummate exemplar of the vivid description toward which a phenomenologist must strive.

II. Similarities between Merleau-Ponty and James Agee as Thinkers and Writers

Although I have never seen comparisons of Merleau-Ponty and Agee in published papers, I began to discover rather amazing commonalities as I became better acquainted with the lives and works of the two men. As they were inducted into their preunderstandings of the world in very different cultures, separated by the Atlantic Ocean, the commonalities seem uncanny. Both men were concerned with consciousness, perception, language, the meaning of existence, the horrors of World War Two. Agee distrusted modernity's glorification of science, just as Merleau-Ponty did. Describing Agee, Lofaro and Davis[34] said he had a "sensitive, unsettled, and wide-ranging mind." Acknowledging the restlessness of his thoughts, Agee wrote that "I fail to carry one idea through; before I realize it, I am whirled along the rim of another—and so on—ad nauseam. Yet, from time to time, I am aware of a definite form and rhythm and melody of existence."[35]

Madden noted that "Agee was always keenly, often crippingly, aware of the opposite possible truth to whatever he was passionately analyzing and advocating at the moment. Knowing the nature of things as they are, he looked at both sides."[36] Unsettledness is also a cardinal characteristic of Merleau-Ponty, who referred to himself as the "philosopher who does not know"; to Merleau-Ponty, meaning was always ambiguous, mixed up with nonmeaning.[37] His student, Claude Lefort, called him "a thinker who had a gift for breaking certainties, introducing complications where one sought simplification."[38]

Sesquipedalian words and ponderous, lengthy paragraphs were typical of both writers. Agee was accused of being arty and pretentious[39] and Merleau-Ponty of hyperbole.[40] Critics have pointed out that Merleau-Ponty's arguments were not systematically organized; his writing, "in its cadence and its incomplete state, is the very form of a thought in emergence, in process."[41,42] Likewise, critics bemoaned the "maddening complexity" of Agee's work.[43]Agee himself admitted that he was "much more interested in complexity and contradictions than in conclusions."[44] I believe that this statement fits Merleau-Ponty as well. To counter the criticisms of their writing, I remind readers that both men struggled with ambiguity and paradox. Should we expect "tidy answers" to profound existential questions?[45]

III. Biographical Similarities between Merleau-Ponty and Agee

Biographical similarities between the two men are abundant. Born within a year of one another, albeit on different continents, both Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Agee (1909-1955) lost their fathers at an early age. Raised in the Christian faith as children, both became alienated from institutional religion in adulthood. Despite being privileged with regard to superior intellect and education at the best schools in their respective nations, both men became exquisitely attuned to the plight of the ordinary

person, often finding poetry in the minute details of mundane daily existence. Undeniably, the similarity between the views of Agee and Merleau-Ponty is attributable, in part, to their lived experience during a unique historical era: the first half of the twentieth century, "with its projects, disappointments, wars, revolutions, audacities, inventions, and failures."[46] As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, writers cannot choose to live in a certain historical landscape, and their work "is always a *response* to life's very particular events."[47] Writings of Agee often depict a "harsh and unloving world...whose institutions had become tarnished."[48] Agee referred to industrial air pollution as "the breath of a collective beast, the breath of our time: foul, sterile, baneful to the things we cherish"[49] and to television as "ghastly gelatinous nirvana."[50] Merleau-Ponty spoke of the post-war "*abyss* of modern society" with its problems of urbanism, traffic, and "the new peasantry": "Our problems call into question contemporary mental, political, and economic systems."[51] Yet, despite the negativity of the aforementioned observations, Merleau-Ponty envisioned a humane social world in which dialogue would take priority over violence,[52] and Agee was "always full of innocent ... hope."[53]

Both men were drawn to Communism for a time, in the aftermath of the war, but subsequently became disillusioned by it. Both of them sought answers in psychoanalysis; we know that both read Freud, and Merleau-Ponty also read Melanie Klein. Agee underwent Jungian analysis. Both displayed intense interest in music and the visual arts that are relevatory of being (Merleau-Ponty mainly in paintings, such as those of Cezanne and Klee, Agee more so in films and photographs, such as those of Evans and Levitt). Finally, both died young, of coronary thrombosis, arguably before their full promise was realized—receiving renewed attention from scholars now.[54]

IV. Drawing Insights and Inspiration from Agee and Merleau-Ponty

What have I gleaned about being a phenomenologist from my foray into the works of Agee and Merleau-Ponty? In the following paragraphs, I share my insights—perhaps an audacious endeavor, given that I am applying their work to a research method that neither man could have imagined. Furthermore, my understanding of phenomenological philosophy is incomplete and I lack training in literary criticism. I am neither philosopher nor journalist. The philosopher conducts his or her investigations in solitude, reading and reflecting and then sharing insights with other philosophers. The journalist collects facts and stories, then writes for public audiences, such as the readers of magazines. I do research and write because of a different mandate: The findings from my phenomenological investigations must be relevant to the clinical practice of nursing. Like a heliograph—a device that sends messages by flashing the sun's rays from a mirror—I must send messages from my study participants with chronic pain and emotional distress to practicing nurses, to enlighten nurses about the first-person perspectives of these patients.[55] Brief excerpts from some of my studies are included in this paper to illustrate the application of phenomenological philosophy in nursing research.

Despite our disparate endeavors, I feel a common bond with Merleau-Ponty and Agee: a dedication to understanding human life in the world. In this quest, we are seeking the "absolute and true" described by Agee in the following passage:

> It was good to be doing the work we had come to do and to be seeing the things we cared most to see, and to be among the people we cared most to know, and to know these things not as a book looked into, a desk sat down to, a good show caught, but as a fact as large as the air; something absolute and true we were a part of and drew with every breath, and added to with every glance of the eye… We lay thinking of the unprecedented

> and unrecorded beauty, and sorrow and honor in the existence of, a child who lay sleeping in the room not far from us, and of the family up the road, and of the other family that lived near them … and all the things seen and known and wondered over in those hours.[56]

V. Phenomenological Investigation of the Lifeworld

We begin life as "a fragile mass of living jelly… and we all reach the world, and the same world, and it belongs wholly to each of us."[57] The world is already there before we begin to reflect upon it. The world invades us, as Merleau-Ponty noted: "In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me."[58] Concurrently, persons respond to the world: painters through their art, writers through the vehicle of words. Whereas both Merleau-Ponty and Agee exhibited childlike awe of the lifeworld and its profound mysteries, their investigations often focused on the concreteness of "things" in our immediate awareness. We can imagine Merleau-Ponty saying—in response to Husserl's famous directive to return to the "things themselves"—"The things speak quite loudly for themselves when we stay in the world."[59] In fact, Merleau-Ponty urged us to "return to that world which precedes knowledge" because "true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world"[60]

The struggle to see the world freshly, not as science, society, and religious dogma have trained us to see it, preoccupied Agee as well as his French counterpart. Agee scholar Victor Kramer asserted that Agee "saw and loved the world in its immediacy, and he was angered when others (with words, or improper use of camera) failed to see it."[61] Hear these words of Agee:

> For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him (sic) who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so

> that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.[62]

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy proved to be an apt lens through which nurse researchers could examine the lifeworld of ill persons, i.e., the hospitals and clinics to which they present their bodies for the ministrations of healers. There is scant attention in the literature to patients' perceptions of these facilities. Therefore, members of my research team embarked on phenomenological studies of the World of the Patient, first investigating patients' perceptions of the environment in hospitals. We found that patients cared little about the walls, furniture, or flooring—rendering irrelevant the previous research about "customer-pleasing" hospital design and décor.[63] In a subsequent study of the outpatient clinic environment, *coldness* was thematic, not only the room temperature and the equipment, but also the emotional climate, in which patients felt like "a bunch of cattle" or "objects on a factory assembly line."[64] In both studies of health care facilities, time dragged as patients waited for a few rushed minutes of attention from doctors and nurses. In both, patients yearned for their caregivers to see them in their wholeness, to listen to them, to "enter into" their suffering, in the sense described by Shotter and Katz: "To be fully 'moved' by another's suffering, we have ... to take the trouble to 'enter into' it."[65]

VI. Phenomenological Investigation of the Body

Of paramount importance to nurse researchers is Merleau-Ponty's elucidation of embodiment, which was unique within philosophy, a radical departure from the concept of body as a mere machine that transported the mind around. To Merleau-Ponty, the body is the fundamental category of human existence.[66] It is the body that first grasps the world and moves with

intention in it;[67] it is the locus of intentionality.[68] The body is the focal point of living meanings, the carrier of our mortality, and the origin of all spatial relationships and perceptions of objects: "There is no 'weight' without lifting, no 'smoothness' without a caress, no 'circle' without a curving glance, no 'depth' without reach, and no 'distance' without gait."[69] "Bodily perspective grounds and informs culture, language, art, literature, history, science, and politics."[70]

Nurses engage in the most intimate interactions with the human body: we bathe the body, irrigate it, bandage it, soothe it after painful procedures, and finally, prepare it for its journey to the morgue when all the wizardry and technology of medicine have failed to preserve its life force. Merleau-Ponty made a crucial distinction between the "body object," the body that endures the indignities inflicted by the medical profession, and the "body subject," the body of one's subjective personal experience.[71] Before I became a phenomenologist, I confess that I probably perceived my patient's body as an object, checking an arm to see if intravenous fluid had infiltrated the tissues beyond the vein, or checking a heel to see if a pressure sore had begun to form. A bed bath was mainly a task to be accomplished, among many other tasks, in a cramped time frame. I had not thought about the patient's first-person perspective of the bath. This account from a cardiac patient reveals that the lowly bath can actually have a healing effect:

> The bath was a thoroughly visceral experience and the relation to the nurse, too, had that quality of utter physicality. Somehow she seemed to sense the threshold of my body's tolerance for pain and touch…[After the bath] I simply felt so much better, physically better in a way that was indeed experienced as healing… "physical healing." The nurse touching me had a peculiar effect: I was allowed to be myself and to feel my own body again.[72]

To use Merleau-Ponty's words, "Bodily events [were] the events of the day"[73] when patients described their lived experience

of chronic pain in a study I conducted in 2000.[74] The patients were perpetually aware of their bodies because every movement produced twinges, aches, spasms, or sharp reminders of damage and disability. The body was altered, recalcitrant, an obstacle rather than an enabler. Distinctions were made among levels of pain, as exemplified in the words of a study participant who contrasted the ever-present flu-like feeling of "achy all over, just yucky all over" with the more episodic "excruciating pain [in a] particular place like my shoulder or back."[74] Simple activities such as brushing teeth or walking to the mailbox were carefully planned in advance. Despite such pre-planning, pain often intervened; one woman reported being "stunned with the pain" as she was halfway across the lawn walking to the mailbox to retrieve her mail, depriving her from completing a simple act performed daily, so thoughtlessly, by most of us.

Merleau-Ponty also emphasized the intertwining of bodies with the worlds they inhabit: "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism; it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive; it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system."[75] Merleau-Ponty brought the figure/ground concept from German Gestalt psychology into his work, which helped to convey the seamlessness of body and world. Although phenomena are always perceived as wholes, and described that way by participants in our research interviews, perceived things always have a certain figure or form against a background or environmental context.[76]

The interviewee's narrative reveals what is *figural* (predominant) in his perception, such as searing pain, as well as what is *contextual* in his environment, such as the windowless hospital room in which he feels confined and afraid or the mechanistic assembly line of the outpatient clinic in which he feels like an object. A phenomenological researcher is obligated to discuss both figure and contextual ground in his or her descriptions of phenomena because the figure that stands out is never independent of its ground.

VII. Insights from Agee and Merleau-Ponty regarding Dialogue with other People

Connections with other people allow humans to transcend their existential aloneness. From the first gaze of a newborn at his mother's face, humans spend their lives in "knots" or networks of interpersonal relationships. Within our interpersonal milieu are "all those we have loved, detested, known or simply glimpsed."[77] In contrast to Sartre, who emphasized the potential for conflict with the Other, "epitomized in the sweaty ... boxing match,"[78] Merleau-Ponty saw the potential for recognition and affirmation from "my double" or "my twin." In contrast to Heidegger, who warned that other people distract from the pursuit of authentic being, M-P saw Others as fellow travelers in life's journey.[79] He wrote about the intersections of his path, and the paths of other people: "My own and other people's [paths] intersect and engage each other like gears."[80] Yet, the mere intersection of our paths does not guarantee that we actually come to *know* them. Merleau-Ponty himself wondered how one could access the private world of another person: "How could I conceive, precisely as *his*, *his* colors, *his* pain, *his* world, except as in accordance with the colors I see, the pains I have had, the world wherein I live?" [81] At the same time he expressed confidence in the vehicle of dialogue: "In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric... We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behavior in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world."[82] He extolled the benefits of "genuine" conversations, in which new possibilities of meaning could be generated: "Sometimes I feel myself followed in a route unknown to myself, which my words, cast back by the other, are in the process of tracing out for me."[83]

By all accounts from friends and biographers, James Agee delighted in conversation. He was known to be garrulous, and a riveting speaker at social gatherings, yet he was also a careful listener who was genuinely interested in other people and the details of their lives. This passage is illustrative: "When, in talk with a friend, you tell him, or you hear from him details of childhood, those details ... are real and exciting to both of you in a way no form of art can be." [84] His friend Robert Fitzgerald bore testimony that Agee's "power of attention to another human soul was endless. He had the power to empathize with and to understand folks." [85]

The depth of empathic resonance that Agee achieved with the Alabama farmers was connoted in the words of one of the women. Saddened when Agee and Walker Evans were leaving, she said, "Every one of us cried; they were so good to us, you know. They told us not to cry... It kind of hurt Jim [Agee], you know, that crying."[86]

Dialogue is the collaborative method of inquiry chosen by the Applied Phenomenology Colloquy at the University of Tennessee. Pollio has called attention to the original meaning of the word *method* which consists of *hodos* (path) and *meta* (across).[87] As I engage in face-to-face, unstructured, dialogue with the Other, a path is created across that space between myself and the Other, enabling movement toward understanding his or her experience. Through language, the Other articulates his or her perceptions, and the phenomenological researcher listens with a scrupulous diligence and empathy that differs from the listening that occurs in everyday conversations. This way of listening requires enormous self-discipline. It is a skill that must be developed by practice and by critical analysis of the typed texts of the audiotaped interviews. During a phenomenological interview, one must silence natural impulses to satisfy one's own curiosity, to offer personal opinions, or to convey approval/disapproval of the interviewee's report of his perceptions and actions. Imagine

listening to a batterer who vividly describes beating his wife (and justifies this atrocious behavior) or to a snake-handler who engages in the seemingly bizarre practice of taking up serpents to achieve a state of religious ecstasy; phenomenological researchers at our university have listened, with utmost respect, to accounts such as these. We are listening in the same respectful way that Harvard-educated Agee listened to the unsophisticated grammar of the Alabama tenant farmers. Although we have not promised any benefit to our interviewees, they routinely thank us for listening to them. In daily life, seldom are most people listened to by another person who is so intensely interested in their experience. Some interviewees profess to have received therapeutic benefit after sharing their stories.[88]

Interviewing has been criticized within the social sciences because research participants (allegedly) cannot accurately remember all the particulars of their past experiences and cannot accurately describe their internal representations in linguistic form.[89] I must take a moment to counter this criticism. In my experience as a researcher, some participants have recalled past events—particularly traumatic ones—in amazing, graphic detail, such as the exact time of the first intimation of impending doom signaling a heart attack. Even if the unfolding narrative is not based on such "flashbulb memory," and time has blurred some aspects of the person's experience, I take comfort in these words of Agee: "The 'truest' thing about the experience is now neither that is was from hour to hour thus and so; nor is it my fairly accurate 'memory' of how it was from hour to hour in chronological progression; but is rather as it turns up in recall, in no such order, casting its lights and associations forward and backward upon the then past and the then future, across that expanse of experience."[90] Merleau-Ponty (correctly) noted that "Description is not the return to immediate experience; one never returns to immediate experience."[91] Furthermore, Pollio has asserted that "the description of an experience as it emerges in a particular context *is* the experience. To

proceed otherwise, such as by seeking to capture a more 'truthful' version, is to look past the concrete phenomenon at hand in search of an abstract ideal."[92]

VIII. Insights regarding Plumbing the Data for Meaning

The phenomenological researcher follows a rigorous step-by-step analytic process from (1) initial identification of meaningful words, phrases, and metaphors in the typed interview text to (2) provisional identification of larger themes to (3) development of the final thematic structure comprising the essence of the phenomenon.[93] Although this process is unlike that of a philosopher, I believe that it is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's description of his own process: "I always go from particular things to more essential things." [94] Agee, too, began with "a careful rendition of the particular" which led to "appreciation of the universal."[95]

The very first step in my process is to examine *words*. I had to cultivate a keen sensitivity to the nuances of my study participants' choice of words. In phenomenology, every word is important. In our interpretative group at the University of Tennessee, interview transcripts are read aloud. First, we simply let the words wash over us. Then someone will ask the group members to dwell longer with a specific word. We reflect on the participant's choice of that specific word. Each of us around the table, bringing our own experiential backgrounds and sedimented understandings of that word, offer our thoughts about it. Sometimes a dictionary is consulted to shed light on the word's etymology and its meanings as they have evolved across time. Consider the meaning of the word "received." Presumably, when a psychiatric patient speaks of being "received" at the hospital, the patient might merely be describing the admission process (a nurse asking questions, a clerk filling out forms). But in our study, we realized there was a much deeper meaning of

the word "received."[96] Discovering meaning is always a process of relating part to whole (i.e., the word in question, in relation to the whole of the text). From the surrounding text, we learned what being hospitalized meant to psychiatric patients. The hospital was a blessed refuge from the unbearable chaos of the external world and from their own self-destructive impulses. Admission to the hospital meant being "received" by a caring surrogate family, analogous to being wrapped in a "receiving blanket" and allowed to regress to infancy again, at least for awhile. This process of listening, and re-listening to participants' words, to ascertain deeper meanings, was beautifully described by Merleau-Ponty:

> To understand a phrase is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being ... *to hear what it says*...The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of "psychic reality" spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said ... it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear.[97]

IX. Discovering the Essence of the Phenomenon

"Phenomenology is the study of essences," said Merleau-Ponty.[98] After scrutinizing hundreds of words and aggregating key words into themes, the phenomenological researcher must undertake a task that resembles clarifying butter to derive the essence of the phenomenon. Although some investigators[99] argue that it is necessary to transform the language of the study participants into the abstract conceptual language of the researcher's discipline, our view is more compatible with that of Husserl, who advised that phenomena can be characterized in language "derived from common speech."[100] We have found that the specific words of the participant are powerful enough to capture the essence of the phenomenon. For example, a psychologist might use the label "regression" to describe the behavior of a

hospitalized psychiatric patient. But the words of the patient himself convey more meaning, as he speaks of the hospital mercifully allowing him to "cool his head and mind." For this reason, we prefer to describe the structure of meanings in the simple personal language of study participants whenever possible.[101]

Sometimes a metaphor best captures the essence of the phenomenon. For example, in my study of chronic pain, interviewees used the metaphor of a tormenting monster, which was sharply discrepant with extant language in the biomedical literature on "pain management:" Obviously, a monster cannot be "managed," and these study participants bore witness to that fallacy.[102] The grim, ongoing struggle with the monster dominated their existence, so that they felt distant from the world and from other people, even family members. The poignant words of one participant: "Now it's me and the pain" express the grim struggle and the sense of utter isolation.

X. Seeking Validation of the Interpretation of the Phenomenon

Unlike the philosopher, who can ascertain validation of his interpretations only from other philosophers, in our phenomenological research procedures there is a step involving validation from the study participants themselves. Who else is the expert on his or her own subjective experience? Thus, from a stance of humility, the researcher returns to some (or all) of the interviewees, to engage in dialogue about the tentative thematic structure. What is sought is a fusion of horizons, the "phenomenological nod" described by van Manen.[103] I can attest to the exhilaration a researcher feels when a study participant exclaims, "Yes, that's it!" Would that Agee could have heard the affirming words of one of the tenant farmers portrayed in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: "My daughter got one of 'em [copy of the book] ... and told me she had it, and she wanted me to look at it and give it to me. And I took it home and read it plumb through. And when

I read it plumb through I give it back to her and I said, "Well everything in there's true."[104]

XI. Insights from Agee and Merleau-Ponty regarding Phenomenological Writing

It has been said that a journalist has three responsibilities: to his human subjects, to his conscience, and to his readers."[105] As a phenomenological researcher, I share these responsibilities. When I am satisfied that I truly heard what my human subjects said—verified by their feedback—my task becomes transmitting the study findings to other scholars. I must convince readers that I have been faithful to the phenomenon by scrupulous attention to detail in the written report. Agee's writing exemplifies this attention to detail. In *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* he described a farm home "right down to the dust in the corner of the drawers...trying to say that it's all valid. It all needs attention."[106] His aim was "above all, to make what he had seen visible to other people."[107] To accomplish this aim, he even touched and smelled the clothes of the Alabama tenant farmers: the women's work dresses, made from flour and fertilizer sacks, and the men's worn and oft-patched overalls. Agee actually devoted four pages of text to overalls,[108] which is perhaps excessive attention to detail—and deplored by at least one critic for its alleged romanticizing of a garment that is iconic of rural poverty.[109]

In addition to devotion to detail, phenomenological writing must not emulate the prosaic, technical style of quantitative research reports; it must be vibrant, enticing the reader into the sounds and smells of the situation in which the phenomenon is experienced. The reader should be able to sense the anger crackling in the air or the chill in the hospital emergency room. Noted Agee, "Description is a word to suspect. Words cannot embody; they can only describe. But a certain kind of artist, whom we will distinguish from others ... continually brings words as

near as he can to an illusion of embodiment."[110] Merleau-Ponty spoke of the kind of writing that "brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience."[111]

To achieve this level of writing, numerous drafts are required. Agee's journals reveal his continual text revisions. According to biographer Bergreen, Agee worked over each sentence "as if he were a goldsmith fashioning a tiny, intricate bracelet. Every word had to shine and lend strength, or it was discarded"[112] He often read drafts of his work aloud to friends such as Robert Fitzgerald, who asserted that "'There isn't a word in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" that he—and I and others—did not ponder many times."[113]

Ouellette advised qualitative researchers to write about our findings like a painter: "The brush is our computer keyboard and the painted canvas is the written document that we produce."[114] It is daunting to face a blank canvas, committing to a representation of the phenomenon that I know will be imperfectly painted. The concept of *pentimento* is useful here. Sometimes in an old painting, the image of a tree or a boat may be seen, although the painter later covered it with a layer of fresh brush-strokes, having "repented" (changed his mind). Lillian Hellman pointed out that pentimento perhaps could be better described as the artist "seeing and then seeing again." As I paint my picture, I can correct incomplete understandings of the phenomenon and apply new brush-strokes as I see the phenomenon more clearly.

Once I have painted my picture, who is to say that I have been faithful in describing the phenomenon—or merely making a mess with my brushstrokes? When I experience self-doubt, I am comforted by the words of Merleau-Ponty and Agee. Despite their superior command of the writer's craft, Merleau-Ponty and

Agee had times of despair when they felt unable to communicate the fullness of their thought. Merleau-Ponty observed that "writers experience the excess of what is to be said beyond their ordinary capacities."[115] Thus, "as a professional of language, the writer is a professional of insecurity."[116] This insecurity is paralleled in Agee's critical evaluation of his work. Speaking of his efforts to convey the "human divinity" of the tenant farmers in his book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee called the book "the crudest and most fragmentary of beginnings ... a record of blindness as well as of perception."[117]

Thankfully, affirmation of validity arrives in unexpected ways. For example, as I was preparing this essay, I received an email message from a stranger who had suffered from severe chronic pain since 1996 after a car accident. Somehow a journal article about my research recently caught his eye. He told me, "I recognized every theme in your results—more like jolts of recognition." The writer's kindness in contacting me bolsters my intentions to keep expanding my knowledge of phenomenology and to further hone my skill in painting pictures about my findings. I have only begun to learn, feeling much like Agee when he wrote:

"To come devotedly into the depths of a subject, your respect for it increasing in every step and your whole heart weakening apart with shame upon yourself in your dealing with it: To know at length better and better and at length into the bottom of your soul your unworthiness of it: Let me hope in any case that it is something to have begun to learn." [118]

Endnotes

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17. Words of Emile Brehier, during the discussion of the French Philosophical Society following Merleau-Ponty's presentation of "The

Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences" in 1946, cited in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader,* Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, eds. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

18. Brehier, in Toadvine and Lawlor, 2007, *op. cit.*

19. Beaufort, in Toadvine and Lawlor, 2007, *op. cit.*

20. Taylor Carman, 2008, *op. cit.*

21. Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000).

22. Carman, *op. cit.*

23. David Madden, "The Test of a First-Rate Intelligence: Agee and the Cruel Radiance of What Is," in Michael A. Lofaro, ed., 1992, *op. cit.*

24. Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis, eds. *James Agee Rediscovered* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005). Note: after the statement on page 145 that Agee's primary research instrument was his "individual human consciousness," the authors added that his "secondary instruments [were] the still camera and the printed word."

25. Age's journal, cited in Lofaro and Davis, 2005, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 148.

26. Agee's Guggenheim fellowship application, cited in David Madden, *op. cit.*

27. Michael Lofaro and Hugh Davis, 2005, *op. cit.*

28. Merleau-Ponty, 1962, *op. cit.*

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31. Robert Fitzgerald, "What Was Pure and Immediate: James Agee Memorial Library Dedication," in Madden and Folks, 1997, *op. cit.*

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37. Sandra P. Thomas, 2005, *op. cit.*

38. Bernard Flynn, "Lefort in the Wake of Merleau-Ponty," *Chiasmi International* 10, 2008: 251-262.

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41. Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

42. Franck Robert, in a paper presented at the Husserl Archives in Paris on May 5, 2007, cited in "Re-Reading Merleau-Ponty in the Light of the Unpublished Writings," in *Chiasmi International 9,* 2007: 493-497.

43. Lofaro and Davis, 2005, *op. cit.*

44. These words are from an unpublished manuscript by Agee, cited by his biographer Laurence Bergreen, page 352, *op. cit.*

45. Having emphasized similarities between the two men, I must acknowledge dissimilarities, particularly in personality. Merleau-Ponty has been described as "retiring" and "austere" by Dermot Moran, 2000, *op. cit.*, whereas Agee has been described as "hell-for-leather" by his colleague Dwight Macdonald, in Madden and Folks, 1997, *op. cit.*, and as "candle-burning-at-both-ends" by his daughter Deedee Agee in "Growing up with the Jimiagees," in Michael Lofaro, ed., 2007, *op. cit.*

46. Merleau-Ponty, "Merleau-Ponty in Person: An Interview with Madeleine Chapsal" on February 17, 1958, in Toadvine and Lawlor, 2007, *op. cit.*

47. Merleau-Ponty, "Man and Adversity," in Toadvine and Lawlor, 2007, *op. cit.*

48. Victor Kramer, *James Agee.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975.

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50. Agee, cited in Bergreen, 1984, *op. cit.*

51. Merleau-Ponty, in 1958 interview, in Toadvine and Lawlor, 2007, *op. cit.*

52. Gary B. Madison, "The Ethics and Politics of the Flesh," in D.H. Davis, 2001, *op. cit.*

53. Dwight Macdonald, in Madden & Folks, 1997, *op. cit.*

54. The renewed interest in Merleau-Ponty is evidenced by a plethora of new books, such as Carman (*op. cit.*) in 2008, as well as conferences and a trilingual journal, *Chiasmi International.* Carman claims that Merleau-Ponty's work is more topical and urgent than ever, influencing scholars such as Bourdieu, Taylor, and Dreyfus. With regard to Agee, recent books include a two-volume set of his work published by the Library of America, and Michael Lofaro's edited book, *Agee Agonistes* (op.cit.), including the papers from a 2005 conference in Knoxville, TN.

55. E. Porter, cited in Sandra P. Thomas, 2005, *op. cit.*

56. Agee, 1988, *op. cit.*

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61. Kramer, 1975, *op. cit.*

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67. V. Leonard, "A Heideggerian Phenomenologic Perspective on the Concept of the Person," in E.C. Polifroni and M. Welch, eds. *Perspectives on Philosophy of Science in Nursing* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1999).

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76. Moran, 2000, *op. cit.*

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79. Pollio et al., 1997, *op. cit.*

80. Merleau-Ponty, 1962, *op. cit.*

81. Merleau-Ponty, 1968, *op. cit.*

82. Merleau-Ponty, 1962, *op. cit.*

83. Merleau-Ponty, cited in Robert Switzer, "Together in the Flesh: Ethics and Attunement in Hume and Merleau-Ponty," in Duane Davis, ed., 2001, *op. cit.*

84. Agee, 1941, *op. cit.*

85. Robert Fitzgerald, cited in Madden, 2007, *op. cit.*

86. Hersey, 1988, *op. cit.*

87. Pollio et al., 1997, *op. cit.*

88. Thomas, 2000, *op. cit.*

89. Pollio et al., 1997, *op. cit.*

90. Agee, 1941, *op. cit.*

91. Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences," in Toadvine and Lawlor, 2007, *op. cit.*

92. Pollio et al., 1997, *op. cit.*

93. See Thomas and Pollio, 2002, (*op. cit.*) for description of other essential steps in our method: e.g., bracketing of presuppositions and implementing principles of the hermeneutic circle.

94. Merleau-Ponty, "Man and Adversity," in Toadvine and Lawlor, 2007, *op. cit.*

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