

## **Phenomenology: From Philosophy to Literary Criticism**

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### **Abstract:**

This study traces the trajectory of phenomenology, a philosophical movement first systematized and established by Edmund Husserl, and later taken up by Martin Heidegger, who enriched and expanded it within an ontological horizon that links it directly to the question of Being. Phenomenology subsequently extended into the field of hermeneutics through the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who laid its interpretive foundations and broadened its scope. Under his guidance, phenomenology underwent a qualitative transformation, opening the way for the critical interrogation and understanding of the text within both historical and linguistic horizons. This intellectual context illuminates the movement of phenomenology from a primary concern with consciousness and intentionality to a sustained inquiry into Being itself, allowing for its critical application in literary discourse analysis. The study focuses particularly on concepts such as intentionality, time, and history, while also tracing the impact of these philosophical shifts on the development of modern critical approaches, notably hermeneutics and reception theory, and extending to their deconstructive elaborations in the work of Jacques Derrida. Within this framework, meaning emerges not as a fixed property of the text, but as the product of a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between text and reader.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Existentialism, Hermeneutics, Philosophy, Intentionality, Being

### **Introduction:**

Literary and critical studies have long benefited from phenomenology, as an inspiring philosophy in terms of its intellectual propositions and active in its ideological vision, aiming from an academic philosophical perspective to understand existence and what lies beyond it, in order to grasp the relationship between consciousness and the world around it, and thus comprehend the essence of things and being with a penetrating awareness. This is as envisioned by Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological approach, who established a set of concepts that became scientific principles and a philosophical orientation, progressing from initial formulation and foundation to maturity and expansion along a scholarly trajectory. This ideological project underwent a transformation in its propositions and a shift in understanding: understanding being after it was methodically studied by Husserl's disciples, especially Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, who rigorously sought to extend phenomenology from Husserl's focus on correlating phenomena with abstract mental processes to a broader conception of being and design, linking it to human existence in order to refine its propositions

and mature its ideas. The subsequent phenomenological framework represented both a scientific and philosophical extension grounded in Husserl's work, prompting later phenomenologists to establish a philosophical charter addressing the neglect of being—or rather understanding phenomena through being, which remained obscure and enigmatic during Husserl's era, when he focused on studying phenomena in relation to the self without considering existence.

Existence became the focus of Heidegger, Husserl's disciple, ensuring that phenomenology remained anchored in the study of being. This gave rise to hybrid phenomenological propositions that could accommodate classical ideas, which had remained limited in some aspects according to earlier thinkers. Consequently, phenomenology in Heidegger's era and beyond became a scientific blend capable of integrating both Husserl's proposals and post-Husserlian developments, forming a scholarly foundation for historical phenomenology.

Historically, phenomenology emerged in a context of intellectual and scientific tension, marked by divergent philosophical opinions and ideological conflicts, particularly between idealist philosophy—which favored reason over matter, especially in its Kantian and Hegelian forms—and materialist philosophy, which prioritized matter over consciousness, as seen in Marxist interpretations. Phenomenology positioned itself in the middle, avoiding these ideological disputes, seeking to reconcile both perspectives to study phenomena as they appear in consciousness. This approach merges self and matter within the domain of consciousness, benefiting from the tension between materialist and idealist philosophies, either by agreement or opposition, exploiting their insights.

Phenomenology navigated these philosophical debates by creating a unique trajectory that sought to understand the world more balancedly and rationally, avoiding the extremes of philosophical partisanship. Successive phenomenologists aimed to carve a philosophical space extending from theorization to ideological understanding, and finally to criticism, leveraging phenomenology's outputs to move from philosophy to literary, ideological, and cultural criticism. This initially appeared in the hermeneutics of Heidegger, who early on grasped the scientific debates surrounding him, moving phenomenology beyond Husserl's limited focus on consciousness toward a broader understanding of being. Although Heidegger did not dedicate his philosophy exclusively to textual analysis as Gadamer later did, his work laid an interpretive foundation, particularly in *Being and Time*, which philosophical propositions later took up in literary and critical applications through Gadamer's hermeneutics, establishing interpretive rules from the philosophical to the critical.

In discussing literary criticism from this perspective, one addresses a philosophical and ideological orientation rooted in rigorous scientific and scholarly concerns, which helped shape analytical and interpretive approaches. Accordingly, this study addresses key questions, including:

- What are the boundaries between philosophy and literary criticism within phenomenology?
- How does the concept of consciousness affect understanding of literary texts, and how does the relationship between artistic production and consciousness manifest in reshaping reality within these works?

- To what extent does phenomenological criticism remain faithful to its philosophical roots?
- Does meaning arise from the text itself, or from the interaction between the reader's consciousness and the text?

**Phenomenology: From Understanding the Self to Grasping the World**

It is necessary to note the crisis in philosophical and psychological sciences, which Husserl highlighted, describing them as “playing a central role in producing unsolvable ambiguities and enigmas in modern sciences, including mathematics... linked closely to the enigma of subjectivity and the theme of psychology and its method.” It is important to trace phenomenology's roots, examining the scientific environment and intellectual context in which it emerged, which reveals its foundations and ideological principles. The phenomenological approach arose from the ruins of idealist and materialist philosophy, benefiting from their philosophical tensions while avoiding their extremes. It involved questioning existence and the essence of things, engaging with philosophical narratives and scientific theories that could bridge the intellectual and scientific divides in Western thought. Husserl sought to reconcile thought and matter, positioning consciousness as a mediator—what he termed intentionality—through which awareness engages with objects purposefully, integrating thought and existence without excluding either. Consciousness shapes perception as it passes through the senses, differing according to how each individual experiences phenomena: “Each of us has a perspective from which we perceive existing things, producing diverse appearances of things, and the domain of actual perceptions and memories differs for each person, even if the conscious objects are shared.”

Intentionality in the phenomenological sense became the pivot of this framework, integrating subject and object while focusing on how things appear in individual consciousness. Phenomenology, defined as a critique of theoretical reason, encompasses two aspects: one scientific, gathering various fields into a coherent system, and the other philosophical, establishing a specific viewpoint and structural approach. These aspects are inseparable.

Thus, intentionality acted as the bridge through which phenomenology transitioned from pure philosophy to literary criticism, treating reading as an intentional process producing meaning within the reader's consciousness. This concept emphasizes that all consciousness is consciousness of something, forming a new model of reading and aesthetic experience as an intentional act mediating between reader and text, generating dynamic meanings through continuous interaction between awareness and object. Intentionality became embedded in criticism, notably in Gadamer's hermeneutics, shaping literary analysis.

**Time and Interpretation**

Husserl emphasized the role of time within consciousness, treating it as an active structure influencing perception. Time is an intuitive, perceptual datum, shaping meaning in consciousness independently of physical measurement. He presented time as the moment of awareness in which the self engages with past, present, and future—a continuous temporal flow within consciousness, distinct from physical notions of hours and minutes. Phenomenology unites time and consciousness in a single experiential flow, encompassing past, present, and

future: “It is real as a conscious phenomenon generating temporal subjects and meanings... every temporal existence appears as a continuous flow of change.”

Time became central to interpretive techniques, influencing reception and hermeneutic theories. Intentionality is crucial in hermeneutics, but time allows critical engagement with texts both synchronically (immediate reading) and diachronically (over time), enabling multiple readings from a text’s formation to its reception. Time thus guides interpreters in tracing a text’s meaning through historical and temporal dimensions, linking phenomenological awareness with interpretive practice. This enriched reception theory, transforming reading from a single, isolated event to a temporally extended process in which meaning emerges through interaction with past and anticipation of future contexts.

In this framework, aesthetic meaning is shaped by the reader’s reception, compared with prior experiences, and develops across generations of reception, establishing historical significance and aesthetic value. Time thus becomes a tool for critics, enabling theoretical and practical analysis, as exemplified in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and in the reception aesthetics of Iser, Jauss, Roman Ingarden, and Paul Ricoeur, among others. Past, present, and future merge in consciousness, forming an “inner temporal flow,” allowing open engagement with objects and enabling a deeper interpretive understanding.

### **Heidegger and the Phenomenological Transformation**

The Martin Heidegger era of phenomenology involved its reformulation on ontological foundations, as he moved it from the level of intentional consciousness to the horizon of being, and from focusing on meaning to questioning existence itself, representing a qualitative shift from epistemology to ontology. He rejected Husserl’s confinement of the phenomenon within the framework of transcendental consciousness and instead proposed an understanding of the phenomenon as the disclosure of being in the world. “The position developed by Heidegger must be determined from two entirely different sides: one concerning his role in twentieth-century academic philosophy (especially within the German scene), and the other concerning his influence on the general consciousness of our era and his significance within this era. His position is fundamentally determined by the fact that these two sides, in Heidegger’s case, cannot be separated as they can be for major classical thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, or Nietzsche.” Accordingly, he inclined toward analyzing human existence as the only being capable of questioning its own existence. From this emerged the concept of Dasein, as he called it, marking an important turning point in phenomenological and critical study in a post-phase, as will be shown later.

Therefore, this study takes an ontological rather than an epistemological direction, aiming to uncover the meaning of being as it manifests through human existence in the world. “Thus, the question of being does not aim merely to provide the a priori condition for the sciences that examine an entity as this or that being, which thereby always operate within some understanding of being, but it aims at the a priori condition for ontologies themselves, which exist prior to the particular sciences and constitute them.” It is a transition from “I think” to “I exist,” and from “intentional consciousness” to “being-in-the-world.” New directions appeared alongside this ontological dimension, such as phenomenological existentialism in Sartre, philosophical hermeneutics in Gadamer, and deconstructive ontology in Derrida.

Thus, criticism experienced fundamental transformations with Heidegger, who had the merit of advancing literary criticism from the confrontation of form and content to the ontological questioning of literary work, opening new horizons for analyzing literary texts as manifestations of existential patterns, including the human relationship with the world, language, and time, and consequently interpreting human experience from within, through anxiety and fall, challenge and fragmentation, life and death, history and historicity. It is a move from anthropological-cultural examination of identity to philosophical questioning of “Who are we?” as a phenomenological marker of an ontological question that contemporary philosophers approached only after gradually freeing themselves from the dominance of the Cartesian subject paradigm. By “who?” in general, we now refer, after Heidegger and Ricoeur, to the notion of identity as *ipseité* or *selbstheit*.

Following these developments, existential literary criticism—if we may term it as such—was influenced, particularly by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Blanchot, where the literary text became a space for revealing the contradictions of human existence. This includes the application by several critics of Heidegger’s modified concepts of Husserlian phenomenology, especially regarding time, treated by Heidegger as an internal experience lived through anticipation and recollection. This influenced the analysis of temporal structures in novels, as seen in works by Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Proust, as well as the attention to poetry from an ontological space perspective, or in Heidegger’s terms, “language is the house of being.” “There is no meaning in speaking of a universal cognition of being in the philosophical sense if its universal essence is disrupted... because this universality requires unity of intellectual vision, purity of philosophical discourse, and the collectivity of existential truth.”

In light of these orientations, the influence of Martin Heidegger’s propositions is evident in Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, regardless of their points of agreement or difference. Despite the critical distance Derrida established toward Heidegger’s approach, the question of being and time remains a foundational pillar in Derrida’s trajectory, who openly acknowledged Heidegger’s profound influence, particularly in dismantling the metaphysical structure of the West and revisiting the concepts of being, presence, and meaning. Deconstruction thus leans toward these propositions in the sense Heidegger criticized Western philosophy for making presence the only moment in which meaning is available, neglecting the possibilities of absence, deferral, and temporality, introducing the term “deconstruction” to undermine the historical structure of metaphysics and analyze it by de-centering its core concepts, such as “essence,” “stability,” and “presence.” This technique engages in analytical practice aimed at uncovering internal contradictions in texts and discourses, demonstrating the fragility of their centrality. While Heidegger focused on the ontology of presence, Derrida redirected deconstruction toward dismantling the metaphysics of presence in language and thought, where meaning becomes unstable, deferred, and multiple.

Accordingly, the concept of deconstruction aligns with Heidegger’s initial notion of “destruction,” which called for liberating philosophical thought from residues that had drifted away from the original meaning of being, returning to the primary experience of existence as understood in life before philosophical systems and concepts covered it. Deconstruction thus functions as a critical process accompanying analysis to clarify how philosophy diverged from

the question of being, measured by its capacity for conscious analysis, free from ready-made judgments and outdated rules governed by Western metaphysics.

Heidegger paid particular attention to deconstruction, approaching it philosophically and engaging in serious interpretative practice, seeking to question the traditional structures of discourse established by classical narrative patterns. “It traced philosophical psychology, anthropology, ethics, politics, poetry, biography, history writing, the behaviors and capacities of Dasein, each in varying ways and degrees, yet the question remains whether these interpretations were achieved originally in an emotional manner, as they were existentially.” This implies questioning history in a way that frees thought from the metaphysical conceptions shaped by philosophy from Plato, through Aristotle, to Hegel. “Do not the boundaries you speak of coincide, as sometimes suggested, with a kind of phenomenology in Heidegger?”

The discussion of deconstruction is inseparable from Derrida’s notions of deferral and *différance*, which are closely connected to his profound influence from Heidegger, opening to mechanisms of deferral and difference in harmony with Heideggerian efforts to rethink metaphysics. “Since this point has been addressed, I allow myself to reintroduce the issue of the confrontation between your thinking and Heidegger’s philosophy in the previously mentioned text: difference. You speak of Heideggerian mediation as an unavoidable necessity. What distinguishes this mediation, which indeed manifests in the era we live in, to appear to you so inescapable?”

Thus, “deferral” in Derrida is a radical development of the concept of “temporal difference,” extending it to a comprehensive critique of the linguistic and epistemological structure of Western discourse, opening the door to a decentered thought revealing meaning shifts and identity fragmentation. Within this deliberate distinction, deconstruction utilizes the ontological dimension to surpass the traditional view of language, allowing for a critique of Western metaphysics, overturning hierarchies such as privileging speech over writing to prioritizing writing over speech, moving from logic of dependency to logic of precedence, revising fundamentally the hierarchy between speech and writing as the latter becomes the foundational structure of meaning rather than a derivative. Especially after Heidegger shifted from privileging speech in his early works to focusing on writing and its symbolic and existential depth, hinting at a transformation of this precedence without explicit declaration. Indeed, his thought shattered academic norms as he sought a new language to pursue art and interpretation, and this unannounced shift was what Derrida captured to establish his deconstructive project.

Thus, the deconstructive project cannot be understood without considering the horizon opened by Heideggerian phenomenology, especially regarding language and its capacities for expressing being, whether in the study of speech at an earlier stage or the later focus on language and its analysis. If our focus in this section centers on Heidegger’s extensions into deconstruction, these extensions do not stop here but are also evident in Gadamer’s studies and interpretative efforts, which added greater depth to hermeneutics.

### **Gadamer and the Hermeneutics of Interpretation:**

The study of interpretation in Hans-Georg Gadamer cannot be undertaken without returning to the precursors that formed the core of hermeneutics for this interpreter, who advanced it to

highly developed stages, bridging the gap between the epistemic orientation of Husserlian phenomenology and the ontological orientation that later became central to his interpretive project. He advocated combining historical understanding with dialogical interpretation. Instead of suspending prejudices, Gadamer viewed these prejudices, or “prejudgments,” as conditions for the possibility of understanding itself, since human consciousness is always immersed in historicity, asserting that understanding is not purely a mental activity but an event shaped in the horizon of language and history, thus moving phenomenology from abstract theorization to practical application.

Based on this epistemological transition, Gadamer approached understanding from a historical-anthropological standpoint, emphasizing openness to historical dimensions and denying the existence of pure or objective consciousness, as we are always implicated in our history and traditions, through continuous dialogue among self, text, and world. This marked a qualitative shift in interpretation, taking phenomenology beyond its confinement in the knowing self. “The individual ego is like a single point in the world of phenomena, yet in its expressions, primarily in language and all forms of self-expression, this ego is no longer solitary. It belongs to a world that can be comprehended and understood, and understanding history is no different from understanding language.”

Accordingly, the self becomes a being shaped in the process of dialogue. Interpretation gains dynamism, occurring within a shared horizon between interpreter and text. It is an experience unfolding in time and arising from inherited traditions and meanings. Interpretation involves linking literary production with historical context and their interaction at the moment of reception, engaging both aspects in a successful and active reading process, considering that all understanding begins from a preliminary knowledge base or assumptions that cannot be eliminated. Prejudgments are thus existential, dialectical, and critical components of understanding. Gadamer relies on these prejudgments, which are explanatory and subject to critique themselves, giving the interpreter space to avoid misinterpretation. Prejudgments do not necessarily entail irreducible bias; they can themselves be built upon other judgments.

We live in language as part of our existence, as the space in which meaning is formed, where understanding becomes a comprehensive human experience, surpassing a mere mental process. Language symbols and meanings intermingle with our being to the extent that we live through them; they possess us more than we possess them, expressing us as we express through them. All interpretive experience is therefore tied to the language we inhabit; understanding is dialogue, and dialogue is language reshaping the relationship between reader and text, self and other. Things, images, and behaviors may indicate, abundantly even, yet they cannot do so independently, as every semiotic system is intertwined with language. Gadamer worked diligently to demonstrate that understanding is conditioned by our belonging to prior linguistic and historical traditions; we do not think outside language, nor interpret outside interpretation. “It concerns temporal distance and its significance for understanding... time is not a gap to be surpassed to access the past; it is, in fact, the ground that carries the future and from which the present derives... the temporal issue constitutes the foundation for a positive and productive possibility of understanding.”

Thus, temporal distance was freed from Husserlian phenomenological inheritance, especially Husserl's conception of time as an intentional structure of consciousness, and redirected in a purely hermeneutic context.

It should be noted that reception theory drew its methods and principles from Gadamer's interpretive efforts, especially Jauss, who derived the horizon of expectations in his study "Toward an Aesthetic of Reception," focusing on audience reception of literary texts, and his colleague Iser, who studied the reader's role in meaning production in *The Act of Reading*. Reception theory, particularly through Jauss and Iser, relied heavily on Gadamer's work, as his efforts synthesized prior phenomenological studies, benefiting both theory and application. Gadamer brought phenomenology closer to interpretation with universality and comprehensiveness, while Iser and Jauss brought interpretation closer to the literary text. Those studying reception theory will find substantial resemblance between it and Gadamer's views on history, a key principle forming the backbone of reception theory.

**Conclusion:**

Hermeneutics represents a persistent interrogation of early phenomenology, opening it to transformations, extensions, and the questions it raises about being and existence. It reached a significant stage as critics linked beginnings with extensions, bringing phenomenology closer to the text. Ultimately, it achieved its goals, warmly received by critical schools, especially reception theory with Iser and Jauss, and deconstruction with Derrida.

While Gadamer's hermeneutics benefited from Heideggerian existentialism, Gadamer's definitions and reasoning remain closely linked with Heidegger's insights. In this context, one cannot ignore Husserl's transcendental ego, which Heidegger critiqued and Gadamer utilized, as Gadamer, like Heidegger, does not start from a neutral self-regarding understanding but from a self-immersed in history and language. Claiming transcendence becomes its opposite; the self must not deny its roots in the world, particularly as the philosophical transcendental concept consistently revealed its insufficiency in relation to Heidegger's internal concerns, leading him to its negation. This philosophical harmony between Gadamer and Heidegger, which evolved into hermeneutic work, demonstrates their shared effort to revise inherited concepts of reason, truth, and knowledge, arising from an authentic desire to free philosophy from objectification, grounding it in living human experience, where understanding surpasses mere representation to become an ontological act integrating humans within a renewed historical and linguistic horizon, defining their relationship with the world and themselves.

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