

"To Be Alive When Something Happens": Retrieving Dilthey's Erlebnis

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Erlebnis is a common German word which has the normal connotation of event, occurrence, adventure, experience; something memorable which happens to someone. It became a term of art for Wilhelm Dilthey and others in the nineteenth century who were turning away from the modeling of the human sciences on the objectivism of the physical sciences. At its zenith *Erlebnis* was an extraordinarily rich and powerful idea that founded thought in the inexhaustible meaning of experience. But as a vestige of romantic hermeneutics, and on account of the disavowal of Dilthey's own heirs, the term in its conceptual promise has not taken hold outside of the German-speaking world. My purpose in this paper is very simple -- to retrieve the German concept of *Erlebnis* as a useful middle term between literature and philosophy. In order to do this I will have to work my way back from Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose exposition of *Erlebnis* in *Truth and Method* brings it to renewed prominence, at the same time that his critique of it is nearly devastating. With Gadamer, *Erlebnis* is regarded as an early conceptualization of an anti-methodological principle, flawed by its association with romanticism, a step on the way to a more mature form of communal experience. And yet even in Gadamer's hands its extraordinary power as an idea shines out. And, ironically, he extracts the dimension of the idea which most recommends it for retrieval.

Gadamer and Erlebnis

Gadamer has the habit of taking issue with the very concepts to which he is most indebted. He does this, for instance, with the romantic conception of genius, and the German ideal of *Bildung*. Although such dissonances appear to arise in the normal course of his philological and conceptual investigations, Gadamer, as a general rule, has really absorbed the dialectic of contradictory impulses that have animated European, particularly German culture since Luther and Enlightenment. He attempts to accommodate these tensions with an historical and contextual perspective, but often enough he keeps these contradictory impulses alive within himself. Such an instance is his supple and inflected treatment of the counter-Enlightenment and romantic theme of *Erlebnis*.

Now one of Gadamer's great projects is to distance himself from modern subjectivism, that emerges partly out of the romantic preoccupation with the soul thrust back upon itself. In its stead he wishes to propose a communal ontology in which understanding is always achieved through dialogue. One of the difficulties in understanding this

doctrine is that Gadamer often seems to be gravitating back into the orbit of the inner life. It is as if, in aiming toward the balance of eighteenth century German classicism, or fifth century Athens, he picks up a great deal of the nineteenth century along the way: "I have become aware...how deeply rooted I am in the romantic tradition of the humanities and its humanistic heritage."

One of the most wonderfully suggestive passages in *Truth and Method* is the philological history of a term to which he seems indebted and eager to set aside. On the one hand, *Erlebnis* identifies the quality that is so crucial to his own abiding sense of the whole in the part: "Because it is itself within the whole of life, the whole of life is present in it too." An *Erlebnis*, like a piece of art or a symbol, is "something whose meaning cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination" (TM, 67). In Gadamer's hands the concept and its history appears so fertile that it is hard to reconcile as the target of his polemic.

Ultimately Gadamer argues for the displacement of *Erlebnis* (a personal life experience) by *Erfahrung* (the experience of social interaction), as the basis for hermeneutic understanding, substituting for romantic subjectivism a historical-communal ontology. In his exposition of the term, however, he repeatedly frustrates the expectation for a clean opposition to the idea of *Erlebnis*. Instead of laying out a clear progression from *Erlebnis* to *Erfahrung*, he describes a subsumption of an ideal which continues to survive in another form, without saying exactly what it is in the earlier incarnation that remains. Alan How's description of Gadamer's method is especially apt here: ". . . One cannot list the formal properties of his ideas and hope that this will meet the bill, as it is the suggestiveness and mutually informing nature of relationships between his ideas that gives them their meaning." Gadamer's method reminds us that he is under the shadow of dialectical idealism, especially in the way that *Erlebnis* never fully succumbs to his polemical intention, but is never entirely disavowed. As Windelband explains it, "Fichte set the principle, that in each higher stage the reason apprehends in purer form what it has accomplished in the lower stage." When *Erlebnis* seems to have been dealt the decisive blow, its remnants rise again with some unexpected bit of life, and finally only modulate into another history. Its positive and negative consequences insinuate themselves into Gadamer's larger project in a way that complicates his objection. For after all, *Erlebnis* was used by the nineteenth century German philosophers precisely to oppose modern technocracy, a goal that is at the heart of Gadamer's purposes (TM, 63).

And yet in Gadamer's concern to oppose the supremacy of methodology as the standard of truth he does not wish to rehearse the sterile appeal to feeling that was exhausted with the romantic experiment. The patent awareness of the bankruptcy of this kind of subjectivism as a standard calls out for an alternative to scientific methodologism. So his hermeneutics will be formed out of a disagreement with

Erlebnis, but, one senses, as a quarrel with a loved one. It is after all in opposition to the cold rationalist tendency of Enlightenment that a doctrine of life-experience was engendered, a development for which Gadamer can only sympathize. But he prefers to see a transcendence of the presiding opposition of reason and feeling in a dialectical encounter with truth. This dialectic is the historical manifestation of an ongoing question, the question of truth's criterion. The approach to the question Gadamer now wishes to promote is precisely that the *communal* and *historical* movement of thought in wrestling with the question of being is itself an ongoing approach to the answer.

In pursuit of this alternative approach Gadamer attacks the subjectivism of Erlebnis, and promotes a social-historical concept of experience, Erfahrung. Both German terms translate as 'experience' in English, but in contradistinction to experiences of the individual subject (Erlebnis), Erfahrung connotes the manifestation of the traditional experience of a community. This communal experience is founded not in the inner recesses of the individual mind but in the institutions of tradition and the life of the polis, an eminently civic experience. By this route, the struggle to oppose the dominance of scientific methodologism also attempts to topple the preeminence of the subject in the ontological character of understanding. Gadamer's communalism flows from this ontological distinction.

Thus it is strange how rich and inflected is Gadamer's elaboration of the theme of Erlebnis. Ironically, he never quite surpasses the brilliance of his exposition of this ideal, and it remains as a tantalizing artifact of an archeological dig. In the end, the fact that he brings it to such prominence as a philosophical concept turns out to be more important than his disavowal.

Truth and Method, Part I, Section 2B

Gadamer's history of Erlebnis is at the same time a recognition of its vitality as an idea, and I can only briefly outline this rich philological exercise. The various dispersed elements that were to make up Erlebnis coalesced for a period of time and only eventually came together as a kind of cultural leitmotif. Kant gave an early impetus to the idea by developing the idea of *Lebensgefühl*, the "heightening of the feeling of life." Rousseau, who portrayed the uniqueness of his inmost self as the best evidence of Nature, was also a seminal influence. It was Rousseau's opposition of the world of inner experience to Enlightenment rationalism that inspired Dilthey to coin the term. Its roots in biographical literature explain a great deal about its character, particularly in the way that an experience carries with it and is attached to the whole of a life: "Every act, as an element of life, remains connected with the infinity of life that manifests itself in it" (Gadamer, TM, 64). Dilthey speaks of this in the relation between biography and history: "Everything that I experience or could experience constitutes (a nexus or system). Life is a process which is connected into a whole

through a structural system which begins and ends in time." Gadamer will lay claim to this crucial appropriation of the doctrine of part and whole. His treatment of *Erlebnis* begins as a linguistic history, catching at the double meaning at the root of the concept to explain its extraordinary power. The verb "erleben" in the first instance means "to be alive when something happens," and thus speaks to the immediacy of the moment of experience. The form "das Erlebte" refers to the permanent result of what is experienced, relating the transience of undistinguished life to the achievement of permanence in certain experiences. The fruitfulness of this dual derivation is that the word is able to refer simultaneously to the two aspects of experience as a conceptual matrix: "Something becomes an 'experience' not only insofar as it is experienced, but insofar as its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance" (TM, 61). The entanglement of these two aspects of the same experience has an ontological consequence, because it lays claim to the relationship of every act to the whole of experience that surrounds it.

How is it that one experience is set apart from others, and does not simply fall into the endless stream of conscious life? What is it that gives it a lasting meaning that achieves its own integrity? A certain experience separates itself out from the rest of a life both because it calls for this distinction in the moment of its conception and derives it by the place it takes in the rest of the life in the processes of memory and reflection. Gadamer introduces the terms episode and adventure as antitheses to clarify this phenomenon. Episodes succeed each other without calling forth any relation; an adventure "interrupts the customary course of events, but is positively and significantly related to the context which it interrupts" (TM, 69). An adventure emerges from and relates back to the context it interrupts, feeding it and absorbing from it meaning and significance. Something like this is meant with the saying "the future in the instant," or, "a defining moment"; in essence, the intuition that something special that has happened is consequent on the whole of a life:

It is not simply that an experience remains vital only as long as it has not been fully integrated into the context of one's life consciousness, but the very way it is "preserved and dissolved" (*aufgehoben*) by being worked into the whole of life consciousness goes far beyond any "significance" it might be thought to have. Because it is itself within the whole of life, the whole of life is present in it too. (TM, 69)

This notion of incommensurability tied to the surplus of life that draws upon and feeds the experience makes the doctrine of *Erlebnis* a challenge to scientific truth: "What we call an *Erlebnis* in this emphatic sense thus means something unforgettable and irreplaceable, something whose meaning cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination" (TM, 67). Because of the indelible relation of the experience to all experience, its significance reaches out in infinite directions through the roots and

branches of an entire life, shifting and changing as the life changes to which it is attached, defeating any methodological approach to harness it: "The mode of being of experience is precisely to be so determinative that one is never finished with it" (TM, 67). Irreducible to concept, its uniqueness and complexity remains the sole property of the person who experiences it: "Everything that is experienced is experienced by oneself, and part of its meaning is that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an unmistakable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life" (TM, 67). Gadamer stops short of naming the narrative context which would most make sense of this capacity of experience to fold back and fertilize the understanding of a life (Ricoeur will take this step), but he does place *Erlebnis* in a temporal context which hints at this elaboration: "It knows that, as an adventure, it is exceptional and thus remains related to the return of the everyday, into which the adventure cannot be taken" (TM, 69).

The doctrine of *Erlebnis* thus holds within itself potential in a number of different directions. It suggests a strategy against the reductive methodology of science, it hovers on the brink of narrative theory, and it paves the way for a theory of the symbol as an uncontainable site of meanings. Its orientation in the unique and personal experience of a life offers support to Gadamer's move from the inductive nature of scientific reasoning towards an understanding that seeks in a phenomenon "its unique and historical concreteness" (TM, 5).

Erlebnis-cult suffered from the aestheticism of the *fin de siècle*, but only after it had been transformed from a doctrine of experience to an aesthetic. For Gadamer, it is this deviation in the history of the concept that renders it ineffectual as a life-philosophy: "Originally *Erlebniskunst* obviously meant that art comes *from* experience and is an expression of experience. But in a derived sense the concept of *Erlebniskunst* is then used for art that is intended *to be* aesthetically experienced" (TM, 70). In this way, Gadamer is justified in moving away from *Erlebnis*, although in the end he does not move very far. His *Erfahrung*, as consciously communal as it intends itself to be, remains peculiarly personal. In a way that is not professed or developed, Gadamer is very close to the adventure, the irreplaceable experience, the romantic perception of the future in the instant. His pivotal emphasis on the Heideggerean idea of anticipation, the presence of the infinite in the finite, can have the potency that it has only as it emerges out of the rich understanding of *das Erlebte*.

This brief survey of Gadamer's relationship to *Erlebnis* shows a more complex picture than his avowed preference for *Erfahrung* suggests. Gadamer openly admits the pull of his romantic heritage, and this should not be obscured by his renunciation of its excesses. Perhaps the best way to understand Gadamer's critique of *Erlebnis* is as a classic demonstration of hermeneutic understanding:

We accept that the matter at hand presents itself historically in different ways at different times or when approached from a different standpoint. We accept that those ways are not simply cancelled (aufheben) in the continuity of progressive research, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that persist by themselves and are only united in us. Our historical consciousness is always filled with a multiplicity of voices that echo the past. (TM, 252)

Are there, nevertheless, instances in a hermeneutic understanding in which the multiplicity of voices creates a dissonance which cannot be sustained? I believe that when Erlebnis takes a communal turn in Gadamer (towards Erfahrung), it works against its own proper identity, and the inherent tension in this move explains in no small measure the fascination of Gadamer's exposition. One senses here a manifestation of the discord of the German intellectual confrontation with its own inwardness that became so significant in modern history. To follow Gadamer's explicit indications in regard to Erlebnis would mean to abandon it; his own treatment of the subject, however, is so suggestive, rich, and inviting that it surpasses his own expectation for it. He appears less to have exhausted its potential than promoted it. Even more important, by bringing out its ontological structure in relation to a speculative philosophy, he reinvigorates its claim to a central place in the human studies. Its seed is ready to take in more receptive soil.

The Proximity of Erlebnis to Ricoeur's Narrative Project

A more comfortable connection for Dilthey's grounding of the human sciences in Erlebnis is found in Paul Ricoeur, who stands within the reflective tradition, and does not fight so hard against the subjective implications of this grounding. Indeed, in at least two ways Ricoeur's project seems to be a natural extension of Dilthey's grounding of the human sciences in Erlebnis.

First, Dilthey's model for historical interpretation is precisely the personal understanding that comes about from privileged moments, and the personal history that evolves in relation to such moments. The part-whole relation works itself out in a life by means of memory, which retains only what is significant from the past, and the special place such memory confers creates the nodal points for what Ricoeur will call a narrative identity:

We grasp the meaning of a moment of the past. It is significant for the individual because, in it, an action or outer event committed him for the future or a plan for the conduct of his life was made or carried forward to realization. . . The single moment derives its meaning from its connection with the whole, from the relation between future and past.

The web of history is spun from these points in time which gather meaning around them, and a person weaves together a life on the strength of their significance. There is here at least an incipient theory of narrative based upon the reflective grasping of the meaningful contours of a life. The human inclination to find coherence and meaning is very close to Ricoeur's narrative prefiguration:

The person who seeks the connecting threads in the history of his life has already, from different points of view, created a coherence in that life which he is now putting into words. He has created it by experiencing values and realizing purposes in his life, making plans for it, seeing his past in terms of development and his future as the shaping of his life and of whatever he values most. (PM, 86)

It is Dilthey's living, vibrant idea of experience that survives through all of the methodological and conceptual journeys of Husserl and his followers, blossoming once again not only in Ricoeur's narrative theory, but in Ricoeur's later reflections on subjectivity, ethics, and politics. So, for example, the idea of self bears an obvious debt to Dilthey's *Zusammenhang*: "To be sure, despite the affirmation of life's interiority in relation to itself, the self is essentially an opening onto the world, and its relation to the world is indeed, as Brague says, a relation of total concern: *everything* concerns me."

This similarity between Dilthey's historical and Ricoeur's narrative theory is not without its problems. The idea of connectedness is at the heart of Dilthey's thought, and the fluid, interlocking relationship of identity in the movement of biography and history is what allows Dilthey to remain confident in his intention to build a science. Throughout his writings he has recourse to a family of terms - *- Beziehung* (connection), *Verhältnis* (relation), *Verwandschaft* (relationship), *Zusammenhang* (connectedness), *Wirkungszusammenhang* (to bring about a connection) -- which name his sense of the interlocking nature of the relation of part (individual) to whole (society, history, institutions): "I am involved in the interactions of society because its various systems intersect in my life. . ." (PM, 66). For Dilthey this interconnectedness remains unproblematic. He sets about the clear and untroubled goal of centering a social, cultural, historical science in the biography of individual human lives. Dilthey achieves a communal ontology too easily by extending personal identity progressively ever outward: "Understanding is the rediscovery of the I in the Thou; the mind rediscovers itself at ever higher levels of connectedness" (67). The relation between social and private history is as straightforward as the relation between recto and verso, and through the medium of culture and history, through "states, churches, institutions, customs, books and works of art" (69), the two sides relate. Dilthey's assumption of an unproblematic continuum between individual and institution has to be reworked by Ricoeur, who is conscious of all of the aporias of subjectivity, intention, consciousness, fault and rupture. Ricoeur's preoccupation with

the brokenness of human understanding is at the crux of his work, and here he shows *his* distance from the romantic inheritance.

A second point of likeness is Dilthey's foreshadowing of Ricoeur's major objection to phenomenology; in essence, that it is preoccupied with the direct, immediate perceptual phenomena and not with the indirect evidence of signs: "If we consider mankind only in terms of perception and knowledge it would be merely a physical fact for us and, as such could only be explained in terms of the natural sciences" (71). In a remarkable anticipation of Ricoeur, Dilthey concludes that the human being "comes to know himself only by the circuitous route" (71) of a hermeneutic. Because an *Erlebnis* is always a moment in relation to the rest, standing as a part of the architectonic of a life or a history, it is tied up with all of the machinery of memory, including all forms of expression, communication, and preservation. And thus we are led into the domain of philosophical hermeneutics. For Dilthey, expression is the vestige of experience, and understanding is the unpacking of expression: "Mankind becomes the subject matter of the human studies only because the relation between experience, expression and understanding exists" (71). Here is the great triad of romantic hermeneutics; experience, expression, and understanding. Ricoeur will invest so much of his discernment in complicating the subjective and objective interplay between these elements, and in this great effort he departs not only from Dilthey, but also from Gadamer.

For Dilthey there is an integral interrelation described by this triad, the sweep of history and the biography of lives attached in an intricate linkage of responding parts, "constantly related and interacting" (79), not in some linear mechanical fashion but rather in a complex convergence of vector fields in multiple dimensions: "Every individual is, also, a point where systems intersect; systems which go through individuals, exist within them, but reach beyond their life and possess an independent existence and development of their own through the content, the values, the purpose, which is realized in them" (78). Dilthey has marked out the parameters of a hermeneutic phenomenology for the reflective tradition: the independent existence of life experience in expression, in language, in institutions. The exceptional aspect of his theory is the identification of *Erlebnis* as the matrix of the human sciences. This is an exceptional formulation that has been neglected, a hinge between two areas of the human studies that have grown apart, a point where the study of philosophy and literature usefully converge.

Erlebnis and the Moment

Dilthey's exposition of the innately narrative character of human experience shares many of the key themes not only of the later hermeneutic phenomenology, but of literary modernism as well. His description of life understanding bleeds imperceptibly

into a high modernist language concerned with memory, privileged moments, and their relation to life whole. This is no accident, as the development of the ideal of *Erlebnis* in Germany and literary epiphany in England and France were roughly parallel, springing from many of the same sources. In brief, their histories are coincident with romanticism, and before their famous coinages the underlying conception percolated throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Wordsworth spoke of spots of time, and Browning of the infinite moment, while Schleiermacher yearns "to be eternal in a moment." Coleridge, who claimed that "all truth is a species of revelation," drew deeply and fundamentally from German Idealism while collaborating with Wordsworth to develop the notion of the epiphanic imagination. Although it was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that the term *Erlebnis* achieved conceptual precision, the idea had been gestating powerfully since at least Goethe.

Our own quarrel with high modernism repeats some of the same criticisms we have seen here of the *Erlebnis*-cult. We draw away from its obsessive focus on the individual psychological experience, feeling the claims of the social pressing upon us. We feel an antipathy towards a too precious aestheticism of moods and sentiments. We wish to distance ourselves from the narcissism of a perspective built on the sensation of a moment, and we feel Pater and Wilde lurking behind the deepest expressions of its greatest works.

What I am suggesting is special about the *Erlebnis* concept is that at its heart is the idea of connection to a whole, and this saves it from the worst propensities of the aestheticism that it nurtured in its own time. Dilthey was after all primarily concerned with a historical science, and his effort was to connect the personal with the social. The moving chain that links moment to life also links life to society, society to history, history to world. Rather than discard *Erlebnis* in favor of *Erfahrung*, rather than sacrificing the exquisite revelations of personal experience to uncover the ideological, let us have all of it. *Erlebnis* provides a means to explore the links between the different aspects of experience without giving up either. *Erlebnis* gives us a way to see High Modernism as an experience of connection rather than isolation. And so instead of mercilessly poking fun at those delicate sensibilities with their precious epiphanies, we can appreciate better the links between our personal lives and the sweep of history:

But it is even more true that life is ceaselessly weaving other threads between human beings and events, that life crosses these threads with one another and doubles them to make the weft heavier, so that, between the tiniest point in our past life and all the other points, a rich network of memories leaves us only the choice of which road to take. (Proust, 381-2)

Under the care of poets and novelists, divorced from philosophical culture, the epiphany was circumscribed by a literary culture, reduced to a narrow and febrile aestheticism, and then, as a kind of precious artifact of exhausted sensibility, parodied into oblivion. *Erlebnis* was given a stronger footing, conceived at the center of sociology, history, and philosophy in an intellectual culture which respected less the artificial divisions of the human studies. Thus it is much easier for Gadamer to retrieve it in founding his philosophical hermeneutics, and when Ricoeur, following in the *German* tradition, speaks of "privileged experiences, precious moments," it is to find assurance of being "on the right path" toward the formation of a personality in a social and moral context.

Even though Dilthey, as philosopher, historian, and sociologist, was primarily engaged in the task of conceiving the human sciences in the broadest sense, he kept coming back, as to a homing beacon, to the individual experience. History is constructed in the same way that life narrativizes itself, "by the conceptions of experience in which present and past events are held together by a common meaning. Among these experiences are those which have a special dignity both in themselves and for the course of his life; they have been preserved by memory and lifted out of the endless stream of what has happened and been forgotten" (86). What Proust demonstrates in a work of fiction will be for Dilthey's heirs to conceptualize. The constructive power of narrative is what gives meaning to life, and how someone groups, connects, shapes, and follows the raw materials of existence determines a life's value. This shaping function is what creates identity, and when Dilthey explains how identity is formed out of these narrative decisions, Ricoeur cannot be far behind: "Because the sequence of a life is held together by the consciousness of identity, all the moments of that life have their foundation in the category of identity. . . The different states of this self and the influences at work on it have a meaning in their relation to the course of the life and to what is shaped within it" (PM, 87).

Understanding social and cultural history, then, is merely a repetition at the less immediately felt level of the processes of interpreting and constructing the history of a life. All of the tools for understanding history are present in the formation of identity at the personal level. Dilthey illustrates this relation in a rich existential description of the integration of experience into the narrative of a life history (PM, pp. 102-3). This surely is where Gadamer finds the exemplary case for *Erlebnis*, at the same time that it so obviously feeds the narrative theory of Ricoeur: "All this 'about' 'from' and 'towards' [sic] all these relations to what has been lived and remembered or still lies in the future carries me along backwards and forwards" (102). Identity, Dilthey concludes, is as much a reflective narrative construction as the phenomenal life: "The knowledge of the course of one's life is as real as experience itself" (103).

Ricoeur's commitment to the fixed characteristic of texts as observable vestiges of identity is in clear line of descent from Dilthey. "What is thus fixed," whether "in notes, letters, on a gramophone, or, originally, in a memory" is what we have of life that is available to inspection:

Neither in its temporal flow nor in the depth of its content is the self fully accessible to us in experience. For the small area of conscious life rises like an island from inaccessible depths. But expression lifts something from out of these depths; it is creative. And thus, in the process of understanding, life itself becomes accessible as a reproduction of creative activity. (PM, 116)

Dilthey's thought is also congenial to Ricoeur's effort to found a sociology on the normative character of these signs. The expressions of life are of various classes, and certain classes, concepts and judgments for instance, are distinguished by their portability, retaining "their identity, therefore, independently of the position in which they occur in the context of thought." (PM, 117). This very idea is developed by Ricoeur at great length in his attempt at a rapprochement between sociology and hermeneutics:

We could say that a meaningful action is an action the *importance* of which goes "beyond" its *relevance* to its initial situation. . . . An important action, we could say, develops meanings that can be actualized or fulfilled in situations other than the one in which this action occurred. To say the same thing in different words, the meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, transcends, the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts. (FTA, 155)

For Dilthey, common culture provides a syntax for communication between persons; the connection between experience and expression is rooted in social upbringing, tradition, and culture. Dilthey is sensitive to the complexity of this connection, dismissing any crude theory of relation by causal inference, since expression is related to experience "in a peculiar way" (PM, 120), emerging as it does from the world of experience before any conscious logic is applied: ". . . Understanding tends towards articulate mental content which becomes its goal" (120). Dilthey relates only as self-evident the kind of preunderstanding that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty go to such lengths describing: "How, for instance, both the gesture and the terror are not two separate things but a unity, is based on this fundamental relation of expression to mental content" (120). Like them, he sees the relation of communication to common culture. This explains the availability of common understandings, since a common culture is the air we breathe from the earliest moments: "Every square planted with trees, every room in which seats are arranged, is intelligible to us from our infancy because human planning, arranging and valuing--common to us all--have assigned its place to every square and every object in the room" (120). Thus expression holds

within it deeply embedded and numberless ties to common experience: "The expression of life which the individual grasps is, as a rule, not simply an isolated expression but filled with a knowledge of what is held in common and of a relation to the mental content" (121). This strong link virtually invites a hermeneutic sociology, and in retrospect it hangs like ripe fruit for Ricoeur to pluck:

The great outer reality of the mind always surrounds us. It is a manifestation of the mind in the world of the senses--from the fleeting expression to the century-long rule of a constitution or code of law. Every single expression of life represents a common feature in the realm of this objective mind. Every word, every sentence, every gesture or polite formula, every work of art and every historical deed is intelligible because the people who express themselves through them and those who understand them have something in common. . . (PM, 123)

This last statement betrays both Dilthey's strength and weakness. We dismiss thought of an "objective mind," the arcane vestiges of a speculative system, the impulse toward homogeneous explanations, and a historical sense that misses the deep circulation of power and desire. Still more jarring to the contemporary ear is the Husserlian preoccupation with presence, from which theory has worked so hard to distance itself: "Only in the present is there fullness of time and, therefore, fullness of life. The ship of our life is, as it were, carried along on an ever-flowing river and the present is always where we live. . ." (PM, 99). The simplicity of this statement is like a photographic negative from which we may discern, in its reversal, all the resources of contemporary thought.

And yet there is an important reminder in the outmoded idea that, beyond all our sophistications, "the present is always where we live." Should we try to dispense with this vestige of the nineteenth century, we would go only so far as we could hold our breath; any advance of thought will have to take it into account and fold it into itself. *Erlebnis*, a word that took on the full resonance of the romantic insight into the richness of personal experience, contains within itself the fructifying relation of eventfulness to being. This is a potency which Gadamer understood, and gave prominence in his philological history. He failed to extract and inject this potency into his ideal of *Erfahrung*, but it remains his achievement to have acknowledged the abiding power of the idea. In the reflective tradition, to take the example I have touched on, it is fully amenable to a theory of identity that relies on the reciprocal involvement of metaphorical imagination and narrative structure. As a bridge between conceptual and imaginative thought, it speaks the same language as the greatest literature of the twentieth century. And although *Erlebnis* does not do justice to everything we have learned on the other side of personal experience, do we therefore dispense with it altogether? "To be alive when something happens. . ." This is something worth keeping.

As for Dilthey and Erlebnis, it would be a great loss to discard too easily a perspective that so richly describes the links between personal and social meanings, that preserves in a vital and direct language the structuring role of eventful experience, and that thinks the world so broadly and generously. Dilthey's Erlebnis did not fall into the error of the literary epiphany, but simply passed along the Meseglise and Guermantes ways toward a formulation of sociology and history. Losing the ability to do this ourselves, we may well profit from someone who still could.

Notes

1. The term began to appear in Europe outside of Germany after Dilthey's essay gained notoriety. Wittgenstein, for instance, used the term prominently. See Linhe, 23.
2. This is just one way in which the lasting contributions of Dilthey are reemerging. See for instance Makkrel and Scanlon.
3. *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, 24.
4. *Truth and Method. 2nd Rev. Ed.*, 69; hereafter abbreviated *TM*.
5. Allan How, *Habermas-Gadamer Debate and the Nature of the Social*, 23-24.
6. Winderlband, 598.
7. See *Critique of Pure Reason*, chapter 29. See also John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*, chapter 15.
8. *Poetry and Experience*, 223; hereafter abbreviated *PE*.
9. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*.
10. Such a confrontation was occasioned momentarily by the political events of the first half of the twentieth century. See W.H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: 'Bildung' from Humboldt to Thomas Mann*, and Louis Dumont, *German Ideology: From France to Germany and Back*.
11. *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*. Ed. H.P. Rickman, 106; hereafter abbreviated *PM*.
12. *Oneself as Another*, 314.
13. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII.
14. See ed. H.P. Rickman in Dilthey (*PM*), 23-4.
15. "It is above all here that Merleau-Ponty the philosopher remained a prisoner of his fight against intellectualism and reflective philosophy, whence his concern to bring language down to its perceptual and bodily foundation rather than guide it towards its proper field of actualization." Paul Ricoeur, Foreword to Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, xvii.
16. See "The Conflict of Interpretations: Debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer" in *A Ricoeur Reader*, 216-241.
17. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 140.

18. The noun had become popular in the 1870's, was used often in Dilthey's essay on Goethe in 1877, but was only added to the famous title of this essay (*Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*) in a later revision.
19. *Fallible Man*, 104.
20. *From Text to Action*; hereafter abbreviated *FTA* .

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