

The Semiotic Lifeworld of John's Gospel A Phenomenological Reading

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Abstract. — *While the Synoptic Gospels emphasize the hiddenness of Jesus' identity, the Gospel of John proclaims it openly. A phenomenological reading of the Fourth Gospel is therefore difficult, for phenomenology deals well with hiddenness and absence but typically resists affirmations of presence. Among phenomenologists, Michel Henry is notable for his consideration of the Gospel of John. I will argue, however, that Henry ultimately fails to grasp the logic of presence in John because he assumes a dualistic relationship between presence (Life, interiority, invisibility) and representation (the World, exteriority, visibility). By analyzing signs (σημεῖα) and recognition (ἀναγνώρισις) in John, I will show that the Gospel negates a dualistic relationship between presence and representation in order to reveal the divine as decisively present within the world of representation. The Gospel of John ultimately calls for a new phenomenological approach to presence and visibility.*

The relationship between the visible and the invisible – between that which is manifest in the world and that which is not – is fundamentally important for phenomenology.¹ Indeed, phenomenology's most probing insights over the last century can be recast in terms of visibility and invisibility: Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink make visible the invisible processes of constituting and phenomenologizing; Emmanuel Levinas finds the trace of the invisible Other in the visible face; Michel Henry affirms the priority of invisible interior life over visible exterior representations; and Jean-Luc Marion investigates the interplay of invisibility and visibility in the saturated icon. Phenomenology's collective attachment to invisibility serves it well when it comes to scripture, which surely gestures apophatically toward the invisible (e.g., divine hiddenness). Yet the apophatic tendency of phenomenology is not without consequences.

1. As Jean-Luc Marion rightly observes, "From Husserl disengaging categorial intuition to Derrida establishing *différance*, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty manifesting the flesh of the world to Michel Henry assigning auto-affection, which phenomenology is not attached to the invisible, in order to bring it into full light?" Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 111.

It affects what phenomenologists choose to read; thus we gravitate toward passages, characters, and themes that resonate with (and potentially inform) the dialectic of visibility and invisibility. Moreover, phenomenology's focus on invisibility may ultimately blind it to the implications of scriptural *kataphasis*, by proscribing any purely positive affirmation of divine presence without some gesture toward invisible absence. The Gospel of John is a case in point. Phenomenologists do not often deal with John, and I suspect that is because discourses centered on invisibility do not easily map onto a text that affirms and depends narratively on a robust sense of divine presence. Michel Henry is a notable exception. I will argue, however, that Henry ultimately fails to grasp the logic of visibility in John because he assumes a dualistic relationship between presence (Life, interiority, invisibility) and representation (the World, exteriority, visibility). By analyzing signs (*σημεῖα*) and recognition (*ἀναγνώρισις*) in John, I will show that the Gospel negates a dualistic relationship between presence and representation in order to reveal the divine as present *within* the world of representation. The Gospel of John ultimately calls for a new phenomenological approach to presence and visibility.

I. Obstacles to a Phenomenological Reading of John

Before turning to Henry's reading of John, it will be necessary to make a few general observations about the Fourth Gospel in relation to the three Synoptic Gospels. Specifically, John's literary aim is fundamentally different from the Synoptics. While all the Gospels tell the story of a divine figure present in the world in human form, the Synoptics and John focus on different aspects of the identity and reception of Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, the plot is driven by questions about Jesus' identity: "What is this? A new teaching – with authority!" (1:27); "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (2:16); even after Peter, James, and John witness the transfiguration, during which a voice from heaven tells them who Jesus truly is, they "kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean" (9:10). No one close to Jesus understands who he truly is prior to the crucifixion; even then, the truest characterization of Jesus ("Truly this man was God's Son" – 15:39) is put in the mouth of a Roman centurion – hardly an authoritative narrative voice. The various questions about Jesus' character and mischaracterizations of his identity point to the central narrative issue in Mark's Gospel: "How does anyone know that this

human figure is a divine being if he looks, talks, and acts like a human being? How does his identity become known?"² Mark uses constructions like the "messianic secret" to nudge the implied reader (rather than characters within the narrative) to perform a sort of phenomenological reduction by locating the ultimate meaning and validity of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in the context of the invisible Kingdom of God (βασιλεία), which is manifest decisively in the cross and resurrection, rather than the visible world (κόσμος). Mark uses parables, in particular, which make little sense at the literal level, to nudge readers toward the Kingdom (βασιλεία) and an accompanying understanding of Jesus' identity and role in salvation-history.³

Alternately, in the Gospel of John, Jesus' identity is never in question:

In John ... Jesus tells everyone who he is. From the very first chapter both he and others use the church's lofty titles to describe his identity. There is no question about how people discover who Jesus is – he tells them, and tells them repeatedly. Now the question becomes, How do people respond to his claim to be the Son of God? Why do some people believe him and others not?⁴

In fact, the rhetorical force of the Fourth Gospel depends on Jesus' identity *not* being hidden. Those who fail to fully recognize Jesus (as the incarnate *Logos*) do so not because they fail to see a *hidden* or *invisible* reality, but because they fail to see what confronts them directly. Failed recognition is the result of obvious errors in perception and/or interpretation. Consider Nicodemus's reaction when Jesus tells him, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above [ἄνωθεν]" (John 3:3). Taking the word "ἄνωθεν" to mean "again," Nicodemus asks, "How can one be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Nicodemus' mistaken interpretation is comically bad, even if his confusion is completely understandable! He has not missed subtle clues discoverable only through a reduction; rather, his mistake is due to an obvious lack of vision/ understanding. It is no accident that the narrative has Nicodemus come to Jesus "by night" when vision is more difficult. So Jesus reproaches him: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of *what we know* and testify to *what we have seen*; yet you do not receive our testimony" (3:10-11, emphasis mine).

2. R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 15.

3. See Kevin Hart's phenomenological reading of parables in *Kingdoms of God* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

4. *Ibid.*, 15.

Nicodemus' "blindness" provides important clues for situating the Gospel phenomenologically. First, John does not employ (and is perhaps opposed to) the type of reduction used in the Synoptics: there is no special phenomenological maneuver needed to grasp "the truth"; rather, "the truth," as *Logos*, is always already there, present from the primordial "beginning" (1:1). The central question of the Gospel is: why do some people, like Nicodemus, fail to recognize truth when it is so intuitively obvious? John thus functions not as a proto-phenomenological meditation on reduction, but as a theological treatment of the phenomenality of truth, exploring both *how* truth is manifest and *why* some people are blind to it.

II. Michel Henry's Reading of John

John's focus on the manifestation of the *Logos* undoubtedly piqued Michel Henry's interest. Henry quite rightly sees "manifestation" and "phenomenality" (rather than husserlian "reduction") as the most natural phenomenological points of contact with the Gospel of John. The central interpretive issue for Henry is the Johannine concept of truth, which he defines over-and-against the "truth of the world."

Henry notes that the word "truth," as we commonly use it, is ambiguous. It can refer to truths that are contingent on certain perspectives or states of affairs. So, for example, the statement, "It is cold today," may well be "true" in my location and given my particular physiology, while it may be truly hot where you are. "Truth" may also refer to necessary or ideal truths: "In Euclidean space, the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180°."⁵ Yet what is it about these two statements that makes them both "true?" Coldness has nothing to do with the geometry of a triangle, so their "truth" cannot be explained by similarity in content. What makes both these statements true, for Henry, is the fact that something "shows itself." For it to be true that it is cold today, something has to appear in a particular way. "Coldness" has to be somehow apparent. For it to be true that the angles of a triangle add up to 180°, an ideal triangle must be somehow manifest, even if only in the imagination. Since "coldness" or any other particular appearance cannot determine a general concept of truth – e.g., the appearance of coldness cannot determine the truth of claims about triangles – it must be the "appearing"

5. See Michel Henry, *I am the Truth*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12-13.

itself that somehow accounts for truth. Thus, as Henry states, “The fact of self-showing, considered in itself and as such – that is the essence of truth [Any] truth concerning things ... any ontic truth, refers back to a pure phenomenological truth that it presupposes, refers back to the pure act of self-showing, considered in itself and as such.”⁶ Henry’s insight here is somewhat straightforward: it cannot be true that “It is cold today” unless coldness is manifest; an analysis of truth will therefore depend upon an analysis of manifestation itself.

In normal experience, phenomena appear in the horizon of the world. In fact, phenomena only function *as phenomena* when they become *objects* in the world. “World” here is not equivalent to “the planet earth” or any other observable cosmic entity; phenomenologically speaking, the world is, “that horizon on whose screen everything shows itself to us.”⁷ In other words, the world is not a phenomenon; it is the transcendental horizon that makes a phenomenon – any phenomenon – manifest, like a screen on which observable phenomena appear. Moreover, the mode of appearing in the world has certain identifiable characteristics, chief among them spatio-temporality. As Henry puts it, “Time and the world are identical.”⁸ This identity has profound implications. Consider a worldly phenomenon – a saltshaker, for instance. The saltshaker exists in space-time as an object for my consciousness, but as such, it can never be fully present. When I look at it, I perceive only one side of it. In order for the saltshaker to achieve phenomenal fullness, to become an object, my experience of it is always already augmented by memories of what its various sides look like and my intentions for its future use. That is to say, phenomenal presence is suffused with past and future, with absence: “In time there is no present, there never has been one, and there never will be one.”⁹ Thus the mode of appearing in the world is not a “making present” but a “making absent” – a de-presencing, if you will. A thing appearing in the world is, in some sense, emptied of Being. It exists “outside-itself,” as a representation without any self-presence, for phenomenological presence (as the presence of a thing-in-the-world), “destroys the reality of that thing in the very process of its presentation, making of it a present-image homogeneous with the image of the future as well as with the image of the past.”¹⁰ Manifestation in the world is ultimately a form of annihilation or destruction; the truth

6. Ibid., 14.

7. Ibid., 15.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 19.

10. Ibid.

of the world is death. The greatest lie in the world is, therefore, the promise of eternal life.

Henry argues that the Gospel of John presents an alternate vision of manifestation – one that is, in fact, phenomenologically prior to worldly manifestation. Let us return to the notion of truth discussed above: I claimed (on Henry's behalf) that "It is cold today" is true only if "coldness" is somehow manifest; manifestation is therefore the source of truth. This implies that *what* is true – in this instance, the claim "It is cold today" – is distinct from truth or manifestation itself. Henry argues, however, that this distinction is not an intrinsic feature of truth; rather, it is a feature of manifestation in the world. Phenomena appear in the world only in the mode of representation, as phenomenal *objects* projected onto the spatio-temporal horizon of the world. The world itself is not an object, but the horizon within which objects appear. The externalizing function, which projects things *as objects for consciousness*, is a fundamental feature of the world-horizon, though it may not be a fundamental feature of truth (manifestation) itself. Indeed, the very existence of the world-horizon proves this point: if worldly manifestation is restricted to the appearance of objects, then it cannot suffice to explain the world itself, which is not an object. Consequently, the manifestation of the world-horizon must be logically prior to the manifestation of objects in the world. Moreover, this logically prior form of manifestation must be non-externalizing, for externalization is a secondary mode of manifestation only appropriate to objects *within* the world. What this means, for Henry, is that the most basic form of manifestation is not *ek-static* but *en-static*: it does not create externalized phenomena (objects for consciousness), and consequently does not separate *what* is true (content) from truth itself (manifestation). Thus, what is manifest (the content) is manifestation itself.

Henry sees an analog to the phenomenologically deeper level of manifestation in the Gospel of John: "What reveals itself is revelation itself; it is a revelation of revelation, a self-revelation in its immediate effulgence. With this idea of pure Revelation ... we are in the presence of the essence that Christianity posits as the principle of everything. *God is that pure Revelation that reveals nothing other than itself. God reveals Himself.*"¹¹ God's self-revelation is characterized decisively in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." For Henry, the "and" (καί) in John 14:6 functions as a strong conjunction, expressing fundamental equality: Jesus (as God's self-manifestation) = the way = the truth = the life.

11. *Ibid.*, 25.

The incarnation of the Son is God's presence in a world-horizon characterized by representation, annihilation, absence, and death. The pure manifestation of the incarnation, as opposed to the death inherent in the world-horizon, is Life and truth. (This sort of reading makes Pilate's question in John 18:38 – "What is truth?" – all the more ironic: Jesus is Truth. Pilate is standing in the very presence of Truth!) The revelation of Christianity essentially reveals manifestation itself, life, as the original creative force underlying the existence of the world-horizon and everything in it. As Henry defines it, "Life designates a pure manifestation, always irreducible to that of the world, an original revelation that is not the revelation of an other thing and does not depend on anything other, but is rather a revelation of self, the absolute self-revelation that is Life itself."¹² Moreover, inasmuch as manifestation *is* truth, Life *is* truth (and truth *is* Life).

The upshot of all this, for Henry, is that Christianity reminds us of our origin in Life – not our biological birth, but our genesis in divine love:

It is because God (as absolute Life) is love that he commands Love. He commands it of all the living by giving them life, by generating them in himself as his Sons, *those who, feeling themselves in infinite Life's experience of self and its eternal love, love themselves with an infinite and eternal love, loving themselves inasmuch as they are Sons and feeling themselves to be such* – in the same way that they love others, inasmuch as they are themselves Sons...¹³

Truth is manifestation, which is, in the Johannine register, the love of God manifest in the world among God's sons and daughters. This is not, of course, a truth that can be verified in traditional ways, for by nature it does not exist as an object in the world.

III. A Critique of Henry's Interpretation of John

Henry's reading of the Gospel of John has much to recommend it: 1) It makes sense of Jesus' curious claim to *be* truth. 2) It fits John's anthropology, where "life" (ζωή) is not an inherent possession of human beings (ἄνθρωποι); only Jesus, the incarnate manifestation of God, can give it.¹⁴ 3) It fits the dualist conceptions of life/world, spirit/flesh, God/

12. Ibid., 34.

13. Ibid., 186.

14. Jaime Clark-Soles, *Death and Afterlife in the New Testament* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 124.

man commonly attributed to John. Yet Henry's dualism is problematic. Henry's critics have often claimed that his reading of John is essentially gnostic.¹⁵ Of course, the charge of gnosticism is not particularly effective as a critique of Henry's work because he never claims to defend Christian orthodoxy. Additionally, the Gospel of John does in fact employ various neo-platonic and Stoic themes that appealed to ancient gnostics. So the charge of gnosticism cannot disqualify Henry's reading on either philosophical or historical-critical grounds. More to the point, though, this sort of critique rests on a superficial understanding of Henry. As Gschwandtner rightly points out, "Henry advocates a material phenomenology, a phenomenology of utter immanence. What is most real is what is most immediate, namely our experiencing ourselves within our own feelings and affections, in our flesh directly. This is not a philosophy of transcendence or other-worldliness."¹⁶

While Henry's work is certainly not gnostic, a problematic dualism persists. The very concept of Life rests upon a dualistic relationship between representation and presence, or *ek-stasis* and *en-stasis*. For Henry, the truth of life is present in the world in the manifestation of Christ, but present in the mode of hiddenness, for pure presence can never appear in the world because it cannot be externalized as a phenomenal object. So, Henry: "Radically foreign to the world, life nevertheless constitutes its real content. Here below, too, life extends its reign. Its concrete modalities are the atemporal substance of our days. Any visible appearance is paired with an invisible reality. With each mouthful of the visible, as Kafka says, an invisible mouthful is given to us: on earth as in heaven."¹⁷ Life, it seems, is present in the world, but present *as invisible*.

Alternately, in John, God's self-revelation is in no way hidden. The underlying problem that the Gospel confronts is, "Why do some people reject Jesus, when his identity as God is *so clear, so visible*?" For the Johannine community, Jesus is fully present, as life and truth, in the visible world. John 12:45 suggests that God can be *seen* in the incarnate Son: "And whoever sees [θεωρῶν] me sees [θεωρεῖ] him who sent me." Similarly, Jesus confirms God's visibility in a conversation with Philip in John 14:8-12: "Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied'. Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time,

15. Cristina Gschwandtner, "The Truth of Christianity? Michel Henry's Words of Christ," *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 13, no. 1. (2014), accessed November 10, 2014, <http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/vol-13-no-1-june-2014-phenomenology-and-scripture/the-truth-of-christianity-michel-henrys-words-of-christ/>.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Henry, *I am the Truth*, 258.

Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen [ἑώρακώς] me has seen [ἑώρακεν] the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ... Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves." Even when the Gospel of John references God's hiddenness, it seems to do so in order to demonstrate Jesus' authority to make God known. John 1:18, for example, states, "No one has ever seen [ἑώρακεν] God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Similarly, in John 6:46, Jesus states, "Not that anyone has seen [ἑώρακεν] the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen [ἑώρακεν] the Father."

Proof texts cannot, of course, settle the philosophical issue. It is, after all, possible that "seeing" is meant metaphorically in all of the above passages. The deeper problem is that Henry's dualistic conception of representation and presence neglects the Gospel's nuanced treatment of the relationship between signs and divine presence. Henry unwittingly commits the very error made by Philip in John 14 (cited above): Philip asks for a sign, a visible representation of God. If representation and presence existed only as an oppositional duality, then Philip is asking the impossible – namely, a sign or representation of that which cannot be represented. One almost expects Jesus to quote Exodus 33:20 ("no one shall see [God] and live"). Yet he does not rebuff Philip's request with appeals to divine invisibility and ineffability, nor does he rely on abstraction. Rather, Jesus gives Philip exactly what he seeks, though Philip does not recognize it *yet*. Jesus' response is deceptively simple: "Whoever has seen me has seen the father." In one sense, this reply assumes the incarnation: Philip can see the father because Jesus is God incarnate. In another sense, though, Jesus' response negates the dualistic relationship between representation and presence altogether.

The context of this passage makes clear that the disciples do not quite "see" what Jesus was saying, and for good reason: true vision is only possible after Easter. John repeatedly indicates that a true understanding of Jesus' "signs" can occur only after the resurrection. So, in John 2:22, for example, the narrator reveals the Gospel's "post-Easter" perspective: "After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." Contrary to Henry's interpretation, there is a third element involved in John's hermeneutic of truth. Manifestation in the Gospel of John is not based on a dualistic relationship between presence (*en-stasis*) and representation (*ek-stasis*), but a triadic relationship between divine presence, signs (or representation), and Easter. In other words, the "truth

of the world,” which is characterized by representation, annihilation, death, is not opposed to the “truth of life.” The two are ultimately unified in Easter, which makes God decisively present in the world of representation.

IV. Representation and Presence in John

If Henry’s interpretive error consists in seeing a rigorous duality between the “truth of life” (presence) and “truth of the world” (representation), he is certainly not alone. Dualism is an oft-cited feature of the Johannine text. Yet recent narrative criticism of the Gospel has revealed that John’s dualism is hardly fixed.¹⁸ The Gospel repeatedly asserts duality (e.g., spirit vs. matter, light vs. dark) only to undermine it: “The aim of God’s redemptive activity [in John] is to overcome oppositional dualities – darkness versus light, below versus above, falsehood versus truth – so as to leave room in creation only for reconciled differences.”¹⁹ The instability of Johannine dualism demands that we, as readers, play close attention to the way that dualities vary throughout the narrative. As will be shown below, the shifting relationship between signs (σημεῖα) and recognition (ἀναγνώρισις) ultimately undermines the oppositional dualism of “presence” and “representation,” which is fundamental to Henry’s distinction between life and world.

It is well known, at this point, that John employs Aristotelian recognition (ἀναγνώρισις) as a type-scene – a sort of “micro-genre” – wherein various characters progress from ignorance to knowledge of Jesus’ true identity.²⁰ Kasper Bro Larsen identifies five “moves” in a typical recognition scene:

- 1) *The meeting* – the recognition opens with the arrangement of a meeting between the observer and the observed.

18. See, for example: Stephen Moore, “Are There Impurities in the Living Water That the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism, and the Samaritan Woman,” *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993): 207-227.

19. Miroslav Volf, “Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism,” *Modern Theology* 21 (2005): 192.

20. On recognition, see Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 72-86. Also, Kasper Bro Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2008). My reading of John is indebted to Culpepper and Larsen’s detailed analyses of recognition scenes. Both scholars find rhetorical significance in Johannine deviations from typical forms of recognition. My own interpretation examines the philosophical implications of those deviations.

- 2) *The move of cognitive resistance* – after the observer and observed have gathered, the observer typically resists recognition, displaying his or her ignorance (*agnoia*) or doubt.
- 3) *The move of displaying the token* – the observed presents a token (*σημείον*, for Aristotle) meant to spur recognition. The display of the token constitutes a turning point toward either recognition or further resistance on the part of the observer.
- 4) *The moment of recognition* – the observer properly identifies some true characteristic (proper name, social or thematic role, etc.) of the observed.
- 5) *Attendant reactions and physical reunion* – The observer somehow communicates the awe and amazement that they find themselves thrown into.²¹

The third move (displaying a token) is particularly interesting because it suggests a connection between signs and the recognition motif in John. Following Larsen and others, we may identify eight signs in the Gospel of John:

- 1) The wedding at Cana (2:1-11)
- 2) The healing of the official's son (4:46-54)
- 3) The healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18)
- 4) The feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15)
- 5) Jesus walking on water (6:16-21)
- 6) The healing of the blind man (9:1-12)
- 7) The raising of Lazarus (11:28-44)
- 8) The miraculous catch of fish (21:1-14)²²

While the correct number of signs is arguable, and while a full treatment of each sign is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note the shifting relationship between signs and recognition over the course of the narrative. The first sign, where Jesus turns water to wine (2:1-11), ends with a summary statement about the role of signs in the process of recognition: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory (*δόξα*); and his disciples believed in him." This suggests that the signs serve as "tokens" meant to reveal Jesus' glory.²³ In this case, the "token" confirms what the reader knows from the prologue (1:1-18): Jesus is the divine *Logos*, active in the event of creation, and therefore has

21. Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger*, 63-69.

22. See *ibid.*, 113.

23. R. Alan Culpepper, "Cognition in John: The Johannine Signs as Recognition Scenes," *Perspectives in Religious Studies: Journal of the NABPR* 35:3 (2008): 253.

authority (ἐξουσία) over the elements of creation – water, in this instance. It also leads to recognition on the part of the disciples, though the reader is not told what the disciples recognize about Jesus. More broadly, the “sign” functions here as we might expect; it “stands in” for a reality that is disguised or unapparent (invisible!) in the context of this scene – namely, Jesus’ identity as it is defined in the prologue.

The third sign, the healing at the pool of Bethesda, represents an interesting development in the relationship between signs and recognition. The “token” in this scene is clearly the “healing,” but it does not spur recognition. The narrator reports that the man does not know who it was that healed him (5:13). (It is noteworthy that the man’s non-recognition serves a purpose in the narrative by heightening tension with the Jews – 5:16-18.)²⁴ Here we see the beginnings of a division between signs, as evidentiary tokens of an invisible reality, and recognition, as the acknowledgement of divine presence. The seventh sign, the raising of Lazarus (11:28-44), makes that division clearer, though the result *is* an instance of true recognition. The “token” (Lazarus’ resurrection) plays an insignificant role in the recognition scene, which is effectively resolved before Lazarus is raised (11:17-27). Martha, who originally misunderstands resurrection as a future event (11:24), is challenged by Jesus: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (11:25-26). Martha’s response is an authentic (and exemplary!) recognition of Jesus’ identity: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (11:27). Like the sheep in Chapter 10, Martha heard the voice of the “good shepherd” and responded accordingly. No “sign” was necessary for Martha to see God’s presence.²⁵

If the first seven signs constitute a narrative trajectory that calls into question the necessity of signs (representation) in the process of recognizing divine presence, the final sign redefines presence and representation altogether, effectively collapsing the distinction. John 21:1-7 has all the structural elements of a classic recognition scene. Jesus appears to a

24. Culpepper, “Cognition in John,” 255.

25. Culpepper argues that Martha’s recognition scene serves to emphasize Jesus’ “I am” claim over the sign: “The issue of faith shifts from the sign to the claim ... the claim is made first and the sign follows” (ibid., 258). The upshot of this “shift” is that future believers, who may not have witnessed signs, “are not disadvantaged because they still have the words of Jesus, which are more effective than signs in eliciting faith” (ibid., 259). I would argue that Culpepper’s reading places too much emphasis on propositional statements as a foundation for belief – a possibility that is effectively proscribed by the Gospel’s emphasis on the relational nature of faith. After all, the sheep do not follow Jesus because they assent to his truth claims; rather, they follow because they know his voice!

group of disciples fishing in the Sea of Tiberias (the meeting). The narrator confirms their ignorance (cognitive resistance): "Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus." Jesus gives a sign (displaying the token) by arranging the miraculous catch of fish, which inspires the Beloved Disciple, and then Peter, to recognize Jesus (the moment of recognition). Finally, Peter leaps overboard, swimming to Jesus ahead of the others (attendant reaction and physical reunion).²⁶ Yet the scene does not stop there. The remaining disciples do not recognize Jesus until a new token is given: "Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast'" (21:12). This in turn inspires the Gospel's ultimate moment of recognition: "Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord" (21:12). This second moment of recognition is not explained in the narrative; rather, the climax of the scene is the communal meal, which is a clear reference to the Eucharist: "Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish" (21:13).²⁷ As Culpepper puts it,

The recognition of Jesus by the Beloved Disciple and the other disciples (21:7, 12) no longer stands as the climax of the scene. Instead the climactic act is the invitation to the meal and the giving of bread and fish, which has both Christological and Eucharistic significance. The final move of the signs as recognition scenes in John, therefore ... is to pose for the reader the challenge of recognizing Jesus in the Eucharistic meal.²⁸

Here presence does not triumph over representation (as it does for Henry) nor does representation triumph over presence (as it does for Fink, Derida, and other thinkers in apophatic traditions), but presence and representation are collapsed and unified in the Eucharist; Christ is present in the most decisive way precisely in the world of representation, in the Eucharistic meal and in the community that shares it, for the Eucharist is both a sign (standing in for the particular historical events of Christ's death and resurrection) and true divine presence.²⁹ In sum, the Gospel of John does not undermine the role of signs (representation) in encountering divine presence; rather, John calls into question the dualistic relationship between representation and presence that Henry, and many others in the phenomenological tradition, take to be fundamental.

26. Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger*, 212.

27. 21:13 is clearly reminiscent of 6:11, where the Eucharistic connection is made clear by the use of the participle "εὐχαριστήσας."

28. Culpepper, "Cognition in John," 258.

29. See Ingolf Dalferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 85-93.

V. Conclusion: Johannine Semiosis as a Corrective for Phenomenology

Presence and representation are not opposed, but connected in John through a third event: Easter. The Fourth Gospel's tripartite view of presence suggests that Henry's dualistic framework is lacking a crucial category: if presence and representation are mutually opposed, as they are for Henry and much of the phenomenological tradition, then there is no way to make sense of the Gospel's idea of a divine presence manifest decisively *within* the world of representation. This is not just an issue of biblical interpretation, for the Gospel of John ultimately exposes a lacuna at the heart of phenomenology (and theology, for that matter): by presupposing a dualistic and agonistic relationship between presence and representation, phenomenology cannot properly understand those phenomena that cut across categories of presence and representation. This poses a real problem when it comes to religious phenomena – such as the sacraments, incarnation, or scripture – where presence and representation overlap. Yet this lacuna is not irresolvable. The Fourth Gospel offers a way forward.

Ultimately, any phenomenological engagement with the Gospel of John will require a third category that somehow mediates between presence and representation without reducing one to the other. Only by employing such a category can one make sense of a unity between presence and representation. There may be many ways of understanding this third category, but most plausible to my mind is Charles Peirce's notion of "Thirdness." While an extensive treatment of Peirce's philosophy is beyond the scope of this paper, his categories of Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness are useful in finding a way forward for phenomenology.

Peirce defines Firstness as, "the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else."³⁰ Firstness constitutes the pure intuitive qualities of any given perception or experience – the "redness" of a red car, for example.³¹ Firstness is a mode of unmediated presence; it is pure possibility, and cannot actually appear in the world except as incarnated in particular phenomena.³² It is also analogous to Henry's notion of Life (i.e., presence): "Life designates a pure manifestation, always irreducible to that of the world, an original revelation that is not the revelation of an other thing and does not depend on anything." Secondness is the category of actuality or incarnation: "it is the

30. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Vol. VIII (London: Thoemmes Press, 1998), 327.

31. Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 34.

32. Frederik Stjernfelt, *Diagrammatology: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Phenomenology, Ontology, and Semiotics* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 13.

insistency, then, with which the ... existent phenomenon appears.”³³ The continua of possibility (First) are limited by a Second, which allows particular instantiations of presence to enter into existence as representation – “redness” is phenomenalized as a red car. Peirce’s Secondness is very much analogous to Henry’s concept of representation wherein pure presence is stripped away so that a phenomenal object may appear in the world of representation.

Thirdness has no real analogue in Henry’s thought; it mediates between Firstness and Secondness, providing a set of general rules governing the process of phenomenalization. Peirce uses the example of an apple pie to explain Thirdness: the qualities of the experience of the pie (taste, smell, color, etc.) are Firsts. The act of baking an actual pie consists of Seconds. Thirdness is the pie recipe, which connects the pure presence of Firstness to the actual representation of the Secondness. Thirdness, like a recipe, is a general framework that applies in principle to any number of potential pies, controlling the “move” from pure possibility (presence, Firstness) to phenomenal instantiation (representation, Secondness).

Peirce’s terminology provides a convenient way to think about both the Johannine connection between signs and divine presence and the phenomenological tension between representation and presence. Easter operates in the Gospel of John as a “Third”; it is the general framework that facilitates the true understanding or meaning of individual phenomena, which are particular concrete inferences (Secondness) of the vague qualities of pure possibility (Firstness). When mediated through Easter, the signs of the Gospel become vehicles for the true presence of God. *Contra* Henry, divine presence cannot be reduced to interiority vs. exteriority (*en-stasis* vs. *ek-stasis*) because the two are inherently linked by Easter, which is encountered by church communities in the Eucharist. God’s activity in the world cannot, in the end, be broken down into presence and representation; rather, God is present in the cruciform life of the worldly church.

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33. *Ibid.*, 14.