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Afterword

PHENOMOPHOBIA, OR WHO'S AFRAID OF MERLEAU-PONTY?

Bruce R. Smith

“Literary Criticism for the Twenty-first Century”: that special topic took up thirty-six double-columned pages of the October 2010 issue of *PMLA*. According to Jonathan Culler’s introduction to the issue, the section had its origins in an MLA session organized by the Division on Literary Criticism. In addition to papers read at the session, there were more than fifty open submissions, but only one was accepted by the editorial board of *PMLA*.¹ What does that say about the state of criticism in the early twenty-first century? Confusion? No clear sense of direction? Banality? In the event, nine papers were published, some of them general submissions that were redirected to this special issue. Not one of the nine contributors uses the term “phenomenology.” Not one. Why should that be so?

A possible reason may be Culler’s identifying “the motif of the return” as the defining characteristic of twenty-first-century criticism, a return to previous concerns and methodologies, albeit with a difference in each case. Returns are the explicit subjects of three of the essays: a return to the political, to a purer Marxism (Jean-Jacques Lecercle); a return to deconstruction, but without the political edge, in effect a purer deconstruction (Richard Klein); and a return to poetics (Simon Jarvis). Supposedly new directions are mapped out in six other essays: cognitive science (Monika Fludernik), trauma theory (Shelly Rambo), aesthetics (Sianne Ngai), performance theory (Peggy Phelan), media studies (Meredith McGill and Andrew Parker), and literature and film (Ian Balfour). Or are these essays likewise variations on the motif of the return? If so, the absence of phenomenology is all the more striking, since the phenomenologies practiced in this issue of *Criticism* represent a return to, and an updating, of early- to mid-twentieth-century concerns and methodologies in the work of Husserl (1859–1938), Heidegger (1889–1976), and Merleau-Ponty (1908–61). Something else must be at work in the neglect of phenomenology.

Implicitly, but not explicitly, phenomenology informs at least three of the essays in *PMLA*'s "Literary Criticism for the Twenty-first Century": Ngai on three aesthetic categories (the zany, the cute, and the interesting), Jarvis on poetics, and Phelan on performance theory. One reason aesthetic categories are neglected, Ngai notes, is the subjective element: "Like literary affects or tones, aesthetic categories such as cute and zany are thus unusually vulnerable to accusations of subjectivism and impressionism."² Jarvis's argument for an "historical poetics" calls for attention to the repertory of "expressive practices" available in a given time and place. The available techniques work like melodic and rhythmic phrases in music and brush technique in painting, practices that Jarvis reads as "gestures": "The devices of verse have no fixed effects, but readers are seduced into conjecturing effects with them as they notice poets sinking the most powerful thoughts and feelings into even the most abject little phonetic and printed bits and pieces."³ Phelan stresses the affects that attend enactment as opposed to words. In all three cases, the focus is placed not on texts but on relationships, not on words but on the interpreters of those words and on the circumstances of interpretation. But phenomenology goes unnamed.

Why this avoidance? Why this unspoken phenomophobia? Why this reluctance to name phenomenology and embrace it as a critical method? After all, MS Word 2010 has finally recognized "phenomenological" as a word that doesn't call for a dotted red underline. Why, then, should attention to the physical, psychological, and social circumstances of interpretation produce so much anxiety? Let me suggest five possible reasons:

1. The *Gertrude Stein effect*. Some critics fear that there is no "there" there. Despite thirty-five years of deconstruction, many critics need a text as the object of analysis—something *right there* in front of them, something just as present as a well-wrought urn was in New Criticism, something that can be gestured toward even as it is being rejected. Phenomenology does not concern itself with objects of this sort; it is concerned with relationships, between subject and object, among objects, among subjects.
2. The *Narcissus effect*. Ngai in his contribution to *PMLA* recognizes that aesthetics can be dismissed as mere self-referentiality. What ground of authority does an individual's experience have? The resolute first-personhood of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty raises the

- same fears. The social subject of New Historicism and cultural materialism seems much more objective.
3. The *Oscar Wilde effect*. Phenomenology is regarded by many critics as an exercise in political bad faith. Concern with aesthetics and individual subjective experience is seen as a diversionary tactic, a mistaking of the superstructure for the base—and an abrogation of political responsibility.
 4. The *Euclid effect*. In the last chapter of *Phenomenal Shakespeare*, I attempt to expose the closed-circuitry of much contemporary criticism. The critic begins with certain axioms and proceeds to demonstrate those axioms at work in a particular text or texts that function as the equivalent of a geometrical figure. Once the axioms that are assumed to be correct in the first place are in fact demonstrated to be correct, the problem solver can write “Q.E.D.” at the end: *quid erat demonstrandum*, “which was to be demonstrated.”⁴ Phenomenology would seem to lack criteria for verification of the argument, to lack reproducibility of the interpretative experiment. The ad hoc way in which phenomenological critics cite Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty is generally looser than the way in which deconstructionist critics cite Derrida or psychoanalytical critics cite Freud and Lacan or materialist critics cite Marx or Raymond Williams. First principles in phenomenology are not so well established.
 5. The *Miss Emily Grierson effect*. If New Historicism began with Stephen Greenblatt’s desire to speak with the dead, phenomenology might be said to begin with a desire to *feel* with the dead, a form of necrophilia of the sort witnessed in Faulkner’s story “A Rose for Emily.” Many critics would reject the very possibility of reconstructing what subjectivity was like in the past. The result, they say, is only an *illusion* of presence.

The essays collected in this issue of *Criticism* put the quietus to these five objections. The *Gertrude Stein effect* disappears if it is recognized that phenomenology does have a “there”: it exists not in objects but in relationships. Kevin Curran provides a paradigmatic example in his treatment of criminality as “a dynamic relationship between ideas, objects, and bodies.” Macbeth’s crime is a matter of thoughts as well as deeds, of

daggers imagined and real. Ken Jackson questions the supposed objectivity of language-based criticism, exposing its fascination with the other, with that-which-cannot-be-named. By the same token, affect-based criticism, with its focus on objects that occasion emotions, can be regarded as materialism in a new guise. The space between “the linguistic turn” and “the affective turn” is occupied, Jackson argues, by “the religious turn.” Religion supplies the other that is sought for in linguistic criticism and denied in materialist criticism. All in all, the “there” in phenomenology is more elusive than it is—or often seems to be—in deconstruction and cultural materialism.

Several essays in this special issue—most of them, in fact—absolutely deny the *Narcissus effect*. Jennifer Bates, Julia Lupton, Jennifer Waldron, and Michael Witmore are all concerned with group experience of live performance. In Witmore’s formulation, Shakespeare’s theater involves a “mobile capacity for feeling and, in effect, energizes it by distributing it across a group.” The locus of experience may ultimately be an “I,” just as it is in Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, but that “I” is immersed in a social and cultural environment that fundamentally shapes its identity. Phenomenology in its present guise, as practiced by the contributors to this issue of *Criticism*, is thoroughly informed by New Historicism and cultural materialism.

Any suspicion that phenomenology cannot be politically engaged—the *Oscar Wilde effect*—is answered by the ethical concerns of Paul Kottman’s essay on *Romeo and Juliet*, James Kearney’s use of Levinas to explore the possibility or impossibility of an ethical relation to “the stranger,” and Julia Lupton’s provocative suggestion that live theater enacts rituals of hospitality. All of these writers demonstrate that Shakespeare’s scripts are doing political work, but in terms far more complicated than the dominance/resistance model that has informed political criticism in the past fifty years.

Potent challenges to the *Euclid effect* are offered by Jennifer Bates, Ken Jackson, James Knapp, and Jennifer Waldron. In the analyses carried out by these critics, phenomenology opens up experiences that lie beyond language and hence beyond the confines of verbal syllogisms. For Bates, juxtaposing Roman and Egyptian ways of thinking in *Antony and Cleopatra*, that open space is full of contradiction, a central fact of life as it is a central feature of theater. Ken Jackson and James Knapp both seize on Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of the “saturated phenomenon” to investigate experiences that overwhelm comprehension. For Jackson, religion is just such a phenomenon; for Knapp, there is always something in Shakespeare’s images that exceeds cognitive labeling. Synesthesia, “sensing-with,” is the

essence of theater in Waldron's analysis, not only because theater is a multisensory affair (all the perceiver's senses are engaged) but also because it is a communal affair (all the perceivers are engaged at once).

Finally, *Miss Emily Grierson* is laid to rest in the attempts here to offer a specifically historical phenomenology. Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty may have started with an "I" solidly situated in the present and proceeded from there to hazard universalizing generalizations about perception, but all of the contributors to "Shakespeare and Phenomenology" carry out archival reconstruction. Waldron and Witmore trace (via Heller-Roazen) the origins of the concept of synesthesia to Aristotle and note the particular importance of the concept in Shakespeare's time. "The common sense" in Aristotelian psychology still dominated the story people told themselves in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries about what they were perceiving, and how. Lupton takes pains to fill the scene of hospitality with objects specific to Shakespeare's time and place. Curran demonstrates that criminality in early modern terms embraced both deed and state of mind.

Fear not Merleau-Ponty.

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NOTES

1. Jonathan Culler, "Introduction: Critical Paradigms," *PMLA* 125, no. 4 (2010): 905–13, esp. 908.
2. Sianne Ngai, "Our Aesthetic Categories," *PMLA* 125, no. 4 (2010): 948–58, quotation on 953.
3. Simon Jarvis, "For a Poetics of Verse," *PMLA* 125, no. 4 (2010): 931–35, quotation on 934.
4. Bruce R. Smith, "Epilogue: What Shakespeare Proves," in *Phenomenal Shakespeare*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 177–86.