MODERNISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY: LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY, ART BY ARIANE MILDENBERG

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Ariane Mildenberg's *Modernism and Phenomenology: Literature, Philosophy, Art* (2017) depicts a complex web of interrelation between phenomenological, artistic and literary texts in the modernist period. Mildenberg conceives of modernity, quoting Gertrude Stein, as 'a time when everything cracks' (17): habitual modes of thought and expression are disrupted, and those more 'primitive', 'pre-reflective' modes of experience that precede such habits are suddenly visible through these cracks. Phenomenology represents one response to this challenge: in 'bracketing' the conventions that govern our thought (including, significantly for Mildenberg, the distinction between subject and object), we might find the wondrous hiding in the everyday. Mildenberg outlines how a variety of modernist artworks operate with comparable impulses.

Mildenberg's book is made up of five chapters, with the three central chapters offering original close readings of works by Paul Cézanne, Gertrude Stein, Franz Kafka, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wallace Stevens, Paul Klee, and Virginia Woolf. This book follows a number of other volumes which similarly survey the open interplay of phenomenology and modernist art and literature: for example Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei's *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (2007), and another volume which Mildenberg co-edited with Carole Bourne-Taylor: *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* (2010). The originality of *Modernism and Phenomenology: Literature, Philosophy, Art* lies to a large extent in the particular case studies it brings to light.

Mildenberg grounds her comparisons on the premise that 'phenomenology is not a theory, it is a practice' (3); as such she is 'less interested in using phenomenology as a theoretical tool for analysing selected texts or artworks than in bringing into dialogue modernism and phenomenology' (2). This makes for a fruitful comparative approach. The network of relations between texts built here is one without absolute limits, and the book offers a model for a truly interdisciplinary approach to different sorts of texts. Mildenberg's open approach to her texts is an appropriate strategy given her subject: phenomenology has as its delineating limits receding 'horizons' as opposed to clear lines, as the reality and experience it describes resists attempts at thorough systematisation. Similarly, the modernist artworks considered exhibit 'less one particular style than a search for a style' (19). Mildenberg's own book maintains the same open, un-fixed and unfinished character; she '[concludes] by starting again' (139), avoiding absolute pronouncements on the nature of the connections she makes. However this approach paradoxically displays another kind of systematising impulse: in an enthusiasm to make clear the relevance of the different kinds of writing (and other artistic output) to one another, Mildenberg does not incorporate into her

schema a framework by which to consider *difference*: between the writers, or between different kinds of writing, arising out of different historical cultural/academic traditions.

Mildenberg's introduction, 'Phenomenology, Modernism and the Crisis of Modernity', is breathless, as she jumps between sources and layers connections upon connections between thinkers, writers and artists in a manner that at times requires some effort to follow (there are almost 200 endnotes which reference a sizeable corpus in a 26 page introduction, and this density does not let up much throughout the book). Nonetheless it makes a strong case for the relatedness of the fields and fruitfulness of comparative study of phenomenological and modernist artistic and literary texts. Mildenberg shows this kind of comparative-critical approach to be a generative, active one: following Merleau-Ponty's conception of the function of philosophy, Mildenberg demonstrates that her critical approach 'actualises' connections between texts, rather than merely reflecting pre-existing connections.

Chapter 2, 'On Apples, Broken Frames and Fallenness: Phenomenology and the Unfamiliar Gaze in Cézanne, Stein and Kafka', offers a persuasive account of how certain modernist artworks engage with a loss of faith in the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, and the new grounds of the relations between objects that this involves. The 'apples' of the chapter's title become a point of focus in the discussion of works by Paul Cézanne, Gertrude Stein and Franz Kafka. The apples act as a thread, providing a kind of thematic unity to the comparative thinking on these artworks that allows Mildenberg to avoid relying on a systematic framing; this is important as this 'lack of a frame' is precisely the subject of the chapter. A highlight is Mildenberg's close reading of Stein's 'Apples' (50–52), which carefully traces the relations between the words of this text.

Chapter 3, 'Earthly Angels and Winged Messengers: Experience and Expression in Hopkins, Stevens and Klee', uses common angel imagery in order to draw out a shared emphasis on 'a shift in perspective' in the texts considered that reflects phenomenological procedure. Though often convincing, the comparisons between these primary texts are not always given sufficient space to unfold, with too many references to material beyond the texts in question. There are moments at which it might have been beneficial to slow down: such as with this chapter's only very brief treatment of religion. Mildenberg takes for granted the 'sacred secularity of the two poets' work'; the lack of specificity regarding the sacred and the secular appears unsatisfactory especially in the case of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Chapter 4, 'Virginia Woolf's Interworld: *Folds*, *Waves*, *Gazes*', makes a convincing case that Virginia Woolf ought to be considered a 'literary phenomenologist' (106). Mildenberg reclaims Woolf's *The Waves*, sometimes seen as an 'aesthetic failure', arguing that its interplay of voices makes it Woolf's 'strongest aesthetic statement', and that it is 'the most phenomenological of Woolf's longer works' (109). An analysis of Woolf's use of brackets is related to Husserlian bracketing; and both are well defended from accusations of introspection. This chapter is particularly strong in its examination of issues of *articulation* in Woolf's work, revealed in close-reading: the modernist literature examined here operates, like phenomenology, between the articulate and the inarticulate, the reflective and the pre-reflective.

The book's final chapter, 'Hyperdialectic: A Modernist Adventure', reflects on the texts examined throughout as well as some new ones (including Nederlands Dans Theater's

2003 dance production ‘Shutters Shut’, inspired by Gertrude Stein’s ‘If I Told Him’), explicitly without acting as conclusion. Mildenberg emphasises the ‘polyphony and polysemy of reality’ (149) identified in the texts she considers, and how these texts are characterised by their form of embodied practice, not by any conclusive results. The ‘continual questioning’ at issue here is said to ‘[surpass] dichotomies’ rather than resolve them (143). The trouble with this is that certain dichotomies or sources of difference hinted at in the text, between the religious and the secular, or between theoretical and non-theoretical traditions of writing, are not always satisfactorily surpassed or dissolved.

Nonetheless, this book makes a compelling contribution to a growing body of work on the connections between modernism and phenomenology, particularly in its effective close readings of modernist texts. The grounds of its comparisons, whereby both artistic production and phenomenological procedure are conceived of as practices, and responses to a modernity in which the relatedness of objects appears fluid, remain well-established, if not fixed. Indeed it is precisely the openness or unfixed nature of these comparisons, in keeping with the strategies of the texts examined, which ensures that they are productive.