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CRITICISM OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES

Phenomenology (or criticism of consciousness) as “a method of philosophical inquiry which lays stress on the perceiver’s vital and central role in determining meaning” [The Penguin Dictionary 1999, p. 663] has come into the practice of literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century.

The development of this approach to literature is understandable because the made object (novel, play, epic), the various occurrences and realities of the fictive world, and the reader’s perception are all coexistent phenomena. The method demands a close inspection of mental and intellectual states and processes. The influence of phenomenology has been widespread since Husserl put forward his theories in 1900 and thereafter. Concepts of phenomenology were developed by Martin Heidegger in Germany and by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The Polish theorist Roman Ingarden developed Husserl’s ideas in the *The Literary Work of Art* (1931) and in *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1937). The influence of Ingarden is clear in the research of modern German scientists: Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory and Jauss’s reception theory.

J. Hillis Miller, Professor of English at the Johns Hopkins University, openly made an attempt to transfer the methods of the Geneva School to the study of English literature. He combined the formal with the existential approach in his textual criticism of consciousness. He is the author of three books of criticism: *Charles Dickens: the World of His Novels* (1959), which is dedicated to Georges Poulet; *The Disappearance of God* (1963); and *Poets of Reality* (1965). In all three books, Miller moves alternately from an examination of metaphysical qualities to an analysis of the formal qualities that embody them. He tends to reveal the central nature of each author on various interrelated levels. Such an approach, he believes, can hope for a comprehensive, varied and coordinate reading.

Because he writes for an audience trained in the English critical tradition, and is himself educated in this tradition, Miller wants to avoid a misunderstanding between phenomenological and formal readings.

He does not abandon his primary concern with literary experience, but he is careful to assert that this experience, if it is to be a valid subject of analysis, must first appear in words. “A poem or novel is indeed the world refashioned into conformity with the inner structure of the writer’s spirit, but at the same time it is

that spirit given, through words, a form and substance taken from the shared solidity of the exterior world. It is in this sense that the words of the work are themselves the primary datum, a self-sufficient reality beyond which the critic need not go." [Miller 1959, p. X]. Individual words, however, do not provide Miller's only data, and his interpretation goes farther than Poulet's early technique of extrapolation. His analysis is not limited to an author's direct personal expression, for he discusses sentences, paragraphs and even a character's imagining mind as contained within its own universe. "This study presupposes that each sentence or paragraph of a novel, whether it is presented from the point of view of the narrator or of some imagined character, defines a certain relationship between an imagining mind and its object... the definition of a certain relation between the mind and its world" [Miller 1959, p. IX]. His emphasis on style, as Miller himself recognizes, brings him closer than other Geneva critics to American "new criticism". Miller remains the most style-conscious of the Geneva critics, but his definition of style is consistently phenomenological. Style is a "way of living in the world given a verbal form" [Miller 1959, p. X].

Dickens, says Miller, uses his characters to project the experiences of his own personal development. He examines himself through his characters, and creates their lives as so many vicarious attempts to achieve ontological integrity. Their grotesquerie, struggles, successes, and rebuffs represent stages in a master plan of existential inquiry that is not resolved until the final books. The experiences of the characters, their various false conclusions and new beginnings are all a part of their author's personal drama.

The pattern of this drama emerges from the sequence of experiences in the novels. The ending of *Oliver Twist* is a resolution which is essentially based on self-deception and it finds a "radical criticism" in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. The "solution" of *David Copperfield* undergoes further examination in *Bleak House* and meets another "radical reevaluation" in *Great Expectations*. Throughout, the problem facing all characters is one of reaching an authentic self that is related to outer reality but not subjected to it.

Martin Chuzzlewit embodies a stage in which Dickens investigates the possibility of a human contact "which would guarantee the uniqueness of each person... enhancing rather than absorbing and destroying his intrinsic identity" [Miller 1959, p. 97]. Finally, Dickens comes to a vision of self-creation which satisfies his needs." To take responsibility for arranging the world is to take responsibility for making the self and to escape at last from the grim alternatives of guilty action, passivity or isolation which are initially the sole possibilities in the imaginative universe of Dickens." [Miller 1959, p. 334]. This passage describes a personal "authenticity" stemming from the choice and assertion of characterizing the vision of such authenticity culminates Dickens' search, throughout his novels, for ontological integrity.

Miller's next two books place several analyses in the framework of a larger historical context. They can be called chapters for Poulet's "history of the human consciousness". Each author has a separate "structure of consciousness", and reveals an "organizing form which presides over the elaboration" of his works. These structures form mental landscapes or "inscapes" (Miller adopts Hopkins' term) that can be compared and the comparison of inscapes among authors is the first step in framing a literary history of the human consciousness.

Miller's history, like Poulet's, is related to a religious perspective. This perspective is part of the typical Geneva creative theory, but also reflects Miller's particular touchstone for analyzing literary experience. In *The Disappearance of God* Miller chooses to emphasize theological experience because it "is most important and determines everything else" [Miller 1963, p. VIII] for the writers involved. The procedure is the same in *Poets of Reality*, although the latter writers have various initial experiences and reach more advanced conclusions. Miller uses the Genevan methodological approach with its ideal of a coherent pattern of existence, to reject an age-old philosophy of causation and logical sequence. He dislikes this philosophy because it has fragmented existence into terms of subject, object and being.

In *The Disappearance of God* Miller discusses five writers who try to overcome their inability to experience God. The first of these is Thomas De Quincey, the nineteenth century English author best known for his *Confessions of an Opium Eater*. Throughout his life, De Quincey yearns to recover the paradisaical happiness of his childhood. On the death of his sister, he feels shut out from affection and security; he becomes a wanderer in a strange world. Through opium he glimpses a Godlike perspective which, if re-created in literature, would give him the coherent universe for which he longs. Miller maintains that De Quincey's literary ideals of musical balance and continuity, his "literature of power" are no more than technical attempts to occupy mental space with a self-sustaining architecture. De Quincey fails because he uncovers only "an infinite abyss which can never be crossed or filled" [Miller 1963, p. 58]; he finds himself condemned to relive again and again his experience of loss. At the very end he accepts this tragic repetition as the way to God and discovers that man's sense of separation is "his way of holding communion with God" [Miller 1963, p. 78].

Robert Browning's experience is more concrete than De Quincey's: he attempts to identify himself with God by creating a many-faceted world out of chaos. The attempt to experience God through various perspectives on reality fails; the poet is left in a "precarious equilibrium" between two extremes. This equilibrium functions in an intermediate "realm of imperfection and change" [Miller 1963, p. 140], where the poet is as close as possible to God and yet eternally removed. Browning's language, "thick and substantial" with sounds, images and rhythms,

helps to authenticate various poetic expressions of reality. When speaking of the poet's language, Miller moves from the broad phenomenological reading to a smaller, more technical circle of formal analysis and so relates formal methods to phenomenological ends. Miller's analytical training focuses attention on the way in which formal effects suggest qualities that are not formal but physical or emotional. He moves from a larger to a smaller "circle" of reading but consistently directs his observations to the larger goal of phenomenological analysis.

Miller's *Poets of Reality* completes the spiritual history of literature begun in *The Disappearance of God*. He describes those stages of ontological insight that bring the 20th century past the 19th. He approaches literature through the "particular worlds" of his writers but he examines through these worlds the hypothesis that "a new kind of poetry has appeared in our day, a poetry which has grown out of romanticism but goes beyond it." [Miller 1965, p. 1]. In the 20th century God does not exist. Such is the starting point for the modern "poets of reality" who have to create a sense of coherent existence beyond the nihilism of subjective consciousness.

The outlines of this history have been given in Poulet's work but Miller is not merely a disciple of the French critic. He combines Poulet's phenomenological approach with its apparent opposite, the formal perspective. As a critic educated in the English tradition and as one who wishes to adapt the phenomenological view for English literature, he tries to synthesize both approaches. He upholds a comprehensive, alternating reading which moves from level to level of interpretation from circle to concentric circle. Miller recognizes that there may be several interrelated manners of reading, and practices a wide synthetic analysis. He, more than Poulet, tends to venture into the formal circle and to emphasize the effect of a writer's life position on his poetic technique. Where Poulet collates phenomenological literary perceptions to write a history of consciousness in literature, Miller never abandons the study of style in various circles of interpretation.

It is this ability to balance both the formal and the phenomenological perspectives and to make some sense between them that makes Miller the most useful of the critics of consciousness in terms of traditional literary interpretation. By discussing grammar, images, rhythm, onomatopoeia, and other technical devices, he has given the uncommitted reader a chance to follow a "reading of consciousness" through techniques that are public and objective.

By attempting to suspend moral, ideological or psychological assumptions, a phenomenological interpretation of literature hopes to reach "the things themselves", the essential phenomena of being, space and time, as they are constituted by consciousness, in words. The book by David Halliburton *Edgar Allan Poe. A Phenomenological View* is the first general study of an American author from this particular point of view. The critic is concerned with the reading of texts, what that reading reveals or fails to reveal. The book begins with a

methodological chapter which sets out the assumptions and procedures of the approach. The author hopes that in this way the reader can become acquainted with an interpretative method that remains unfamiliar to many.

When Santayana observed that “each sort of net drawn through the same sea catches a different sort of fish” [Santayana 1968, p. 40], he was suggesting that every method of interpretation has its peculiar assumptions. One of the peculiar assumptions of current criticism is that the literary work is a discrete object, a kind of inert and neutral “thing”, which we can study exactly as we would study any other object in the world. The phenomenologist holds a different view. Without denying that the work has, in some sense, a life of its own, the phenomenologist believes that the work cannot be cut off from the intentionality that experiences it after it is made. The work arises from some act of consciousness and is interpreted by some act of consciousness. Writing might be described as an act “in which a subjectivity passes into an objectivity without surrendering its own identity” [Halliburton 1973, p. 22]. The final product of the creative act is, then, a fusion in which both elements, the subjective and the objective, merge. An interpreter who attempts to construe the meaning of a text without regard to its intentional aspects limits himself. In doing this he denies the subjective, intentional element in himself, surrendering his most natural means of access to the text. The phenomenologist acknowledges this means and uses it, believing as he does that he can best approach a work through the capacities that he shares with its creator.

The critic acknowledges the role of Russian formalism in studying literary texts. The phenomenologist tries, with the Russian Formalists, to meet the text, and to stick with it. This involves a willingness to put aside considerations of value, personal taste or ideology. The intentionality in the work differs from other kinds of intentionality. There is “pure” intentionality sought after by Husserl. There is the aggregate of intentional acts that occur during the course of composition. And finally there is the intentionality expressed in the work. The phenomenological interpreter draws extensively on the theoretical foundations provided by Husserl, but endeavors to go beyond them by showing, as Husserl never chose to do, the complex role of intentionality in literary art. The interpreter does not explore the second type of intentionality simply because it is nowhere to be found. During the writing process the creating consciousness intends many things that never reach the stage of final expression. The totality of surviving intentions is the literary work; and it is with this that the interpreter is primarily concerned.

Halliburton's chief concern is with the existential situation of the work – the way it stands against the horizon of interrelated phenomena that we call life. He is speaking of everyday things: of consciousness, identity, process, body, love, fear, struggle, the material world. All writing, all interpretation, all language is a naming. When an interpreter names, he offers a creation in response to a creation offered

him. It is only through critic's making that he can approach the making of another. The critic makes an attempt to present to American reader some unfamiliar ideas derived from modern European philosophy and show how they work in literary criticism. Interpretation is being, and like "all other types of being, it has its peculiar responsibilities and privileges – not the least of which is the right to speak in its own authentic voice" [Halliburton 1973, p. 37].

Literature

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