

BOOK REVIEWS

Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg (eds), *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010). 390 pp. ISBN: 9783039114092.

Kevin Hart notes in his preface to *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* that '[f]ew artists in the modernist age were finely attuned to phenomenology in a technical sense' (xii). However, it does not follow that modernists were uninterested in phenomenology's insights, nor does it preclude the—conscious or unconscious—presence of phenomenological ideas in modernist works. As this collection demonstrates, it is often valuable to consider the modernism and phenomenology relationship in terms of parallel ideas, rather than influence. Ariane Mildenberg, co-editor of the volume, stresses that her own essay, like others in the collection, 'does not examine the direct influence of phenomenology on the modernist aesthetic project but calls attention to their kinship of method and concern' (26). By drawing attention to phenomenologically resonant elements and ideas in texts, images, buildings, and pieces of music, this essay collection verifies the existence of a phenomenological vein in modernism.

As far as I am aware, this is the first essay collection dedicated to the exploration of the relationship between modernism and phenomenology. Recently, however, modernist scholars have shown a keen interest in the topic, which makes this new contribution timely and significant. Notable modernism and phenomenology studies from the last five years include AnnKatrin Jonsson's 2006 work, *Relations*, which considers ethical themes in modernist literature (Joyce, Woolf, and Barnes) through the phenomenology of Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur; Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei's 2007 study, *The Ecstatic Quotidian*, which considers phenomenology's and modernism's shared preoccupation with everyday experience; the 2009 essay collection, *Beckett and Phenomenology*, edited by Ulrika

Modernist Cultures 6.2 (2011): 338–350

© Edinburgh University Press

www.eupjournals.com/mod

Book Reviews

Maude and Matthew Feldman, which includes a wide range of essays on various phenomenological themes in Beckett's work; and Cheryl Herr's outstanding research on Joyce and phenomenology (mainly Heidegger), including 'Walking in Dublin' (2006), and 'Being in Joyce's World' (2009).

What most obviously distinguishes *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* from previous modernism and phenomenology studies is its breadth and pluri-disciplinarity. The collection is the product of an international, bilingual, and multi-disciplinary conference held at the Maison Française d'Oxford in 2006. The 'modernism' of the book's title includes several varieties of modernists: literary modernists from Britain (including Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Gerard Manley Hopkins), America (Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stephens), Europe (Marcel Proust), and the Caribbean (Claude McKay); modern artists (including Cézanne, Picasso, Kandinsky, Malevich, and Klee); modern composers (Saint-Saëns, Reynaldo Hahn, and Vinteuil – Proust's fictional composer); and modernist architects (including Hendrik Berlage, Rudolph Schindler, and Theo van Doesburg).

The 'beyond' refers to a selection of late twentieth-century texts which are 'not so much postmodernist as modernist in spirit' (29), including the work of French *nouveau roman* writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, the American poet George Oppen, and three French poets/ thinkers: Maurice Blanchot, Michel Deguy, and Yves Bonnefoy. According to the editors, these post-war texts are 'transmodernist' rather than 'postmodernist'; they 'resist the postmodern nihilistic ethos' and, instead of merely deconstructing traditional metaphysics (including ideas on knowledge, truth, and notions of the self), they provide constructive alternatives to these ideas (19 and 21). Phenomenology shares this 'transmodernist' desire to find constitutive essences in the rubble of deconstructed metaphysics. Thus, '[m]aybe, the most fruitful way to assess the true contribution of phenomenology is to see it as an antidote to the exacerbation of modernism, a resistance to its excesses and to its degeneration into postmodernism' (21).

Pleasingly, none of the essays in this collection treats phenomenology reductively or abusively. The editors and contributors provide shrewd and meticulous analyses of modernist and transmodernist works, of particular phenomenological ideas, and of the intricate relationship between these works and ideas. As Hart notes in the preface, 'we can begin to read literary works with more subtlety than had been possible for an earlier generation for whom phenomenology was no more than "criticism of consciousness"' (xii). The critiques and

analyses in *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* are certainly subtle and comprehensive.

'Part 1: The Reduction' comprises two essays on the Husserlian procedure of reduction. Ariane Mildenberg's essay looks at Husserl's practice of *epoché* (or 'bracketing'), which forms a key part of reduction and is designed to 'put out of play preconceived objectivity, uncover the world's essential structure and provide an exact description of things as these [are] met with in immediate experience' (42). Mildenberg argues that the aesthetic goals of Woolf, Stein, and Stevens are similar to Husserl's phenomenological goals; broadly speaking, they all aim to present life directly, to depict a world untainted by preconceptions. H. W. Fawcner's essay highlights the similarities between Husserl's ideas on 'self-givenness' (a key element in phenomenological reduction), and Reformed Christianity's notion of 'self-evidencing'. Fawcner then demonstrates that these anti-subjectivist ideas are also present in the affective aesthetics of modernist art (specifically in the work of Kazimir Malevich and Paul Klee) and literature (especially Wallace Stevens's poetry).

'Part 2: The Invisible and the Unsayable' considers the ways in which modernism and phenomenology traverse and dissipate such binaries as visible/invisible, sayable/unsayable, and subject/object. In his essay on Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Raymond Monelle employs the philosophical theories of both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze. He argues that the novel's recurring 'little musical phrase' defies binary thinking; it is neither purely mental, nor straightforwardly bodily. Hanna Meretoja's essay focuses on Robbe-Grillet's 1959 work *Dans le labyrinthe*; she argues against both 'objectivist' and 'subjectivist' interpretations of the novel. Instead of imposing traditional Husserlian theory onto his work (as earlier critics have done), Meretoja suggests that the ideas in Robbe-Grillet's novels are closer to Sartre's truly modernist notions of empty consciousness and the unstable 'I'.

'Part 3: Paths of Appearance in Early and Late Modernist Poetry' examines the relationship between words and things. Eoghan Walls's essay demonstrates how the parallel notions of transcendent essences in Husserl's phenomenology and the poetical aesthetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins followed in the footsteps of the philosopher-theologian Duns Scotus. He also examines Husserl's and Hopkins's attempts to formulate and articulate their transcendent essences: Husserl borrows the metaphors and style of abstract mathematics, while Hopkins emulates the highly descriptive style and rigorous observational methods of meteorology and botany. Matt Ffytche's essay

analyses the close relationship between phenomenology and George Oppen's 1960s poetry. Oppen himself acknowledges that Heidegger's *Essays on Metaphysics* was "of such importance as to alter the subjective conditions of my life" (189). According to Ffytche, both Oppen and the phenomenologists – Heidegger, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty – struggle with a key 'modernist' paradox: the 'desire to heal the rift between words and things', between the articulation of and apprehension of 'a primary "this-ness"' (201).

The three essays in 'Part 4: Space and Place' consider spatial experience, exile, and landscape. Filip Mattens, an architect-turned-philosopher, analyses 'lived space' in the work of three modernist architects: Hendrik Berlage, Rudolph Schindler, and Theo van Doesburg. According to Mattens, like Husserl (and, to a certain extent, like Heidegger), 'modernist architects [...] sought to turn everyday life categories of space into a liberating [...] living space, [...] completely alien to scientific abstraction' (244). It is the *lack* of a stable living space which is the focus of Minna Niemi's and Justin Parks's joint essay. The authors use Franz Fanon's critique of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in their comparative analysis of exile and homelessness in the lives and works of James Joyce and the Afro-Caribbean literary modernist Claude McKay. Niemi and Parks argue that 'both authors can be said to participate in the collective project of articulating a modernist phenomenology of home as both a provisional [...] "here" in which the body acts [...] and an idealization, a metaphysical "there", a lost origin to which the body can no longer return' (251). The third essay in this section analyses the landscape paintings of Turner, Monet, Kandinsky, and Cézanne, as well as contemporary Aboriginal 'dreaming' maps, using Edward Casey's recent phenomenologically-informed philosophy of space and place. Martin Leer suggests that '[l]andscape does not disappear or dissolve in modernist art; it undergoes a *transcendental reduction*' which dissolves the inside/outside and mind/matter binaries (278).

The essays in the final section, 'Part 5: New Lyricism: Beyond Phenomenology', focus on late twentieth-century French poetry. Jean-Jacques Wünenburger draws on Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Bachelard, and Mikel Dufrenne in his analysis of 'the image' in the literary works of Blanchot and Bonnefoy. He argues that, for the literary writers and the philosophers, 'image is rich because it stands between representation and presence, revelation and disappearance' (316). The other two essays, by Michel Collot and Carole Bourne-Taylor, examine the ways in which French 'new lyricist' poems 'rearticulate the outside and the inside, the subjective and the

objective, the possible and the impossible, presence and absence, desire and loss, celebration and deploration' (32). Using Husserl's and Ricoeur's work on 'horizons', Collot argues against formalist literary theories which see the text as a closed object. According to Collot, the phenomenological notion of horizon 'enables us to understand that writing can both reveal and re-invent our experience' (332). Bourne-Taylor considers the poetry and philosophy of the 'poet-moralist' Deguy. For Deguy (like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur), meaning originates in the other, in alterity. Through his 'intertwining of poetry and ethics', Deguy 'urges us to rediscover the merits of perplexity and recognise the burden of our responsibility towards the world' (361).

Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond is a multifarious, scholarly, and rigorous essay collection. However, sometimes its philosophical rigour is a little alienating, which may be off-putting for readers who are unfamiliar with phenomenology. The editors do a fantastic job of explaining key phenomenological concepts in their introduction, but there is only so much that can be covered in a thirty-four page preamble. Even if readers do find some of the passages a bit hard-going, there is much to be gained from the contributors' erudite analyses of modernist literature, art, music, and architecture. I hope that, rather than intimidating modernist scholars, *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* will encourage researchers to learn more about phenomenology and the valuable insights that it offers. As Bourne-Taylor and Mildenberg assert, phenomenology provides a useful and liberating approach to interpretation: 'confronted by such open-endedness we are inclined to respond imaginatively'; '[t]he reader of the modernist text, then, is a practical phenomenologist, a "perpetual beginner"' (22).

Cleo Hanaway

New College, University of Oxford

DOI: 10.3366/mod.2011.0019

Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). 563 pp. ISBN: 9780199579761.

Autobiography is a slippery genre. Its parameters shift, giving it, as Max Saunders says, a 'radical ambiguity' (4). Autobiographical fiction is even more slippery. Saunders is concerned with genre. Can autobiography be, or become, a genre proper, with clearly defined