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The Phenomenology of it All

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The Phenomenology of it All

Books are nothing more than paper and ink that has been bound together, they are mere objects. They line bookshelves as morbid trophies of our supposed conquests of knowledge. They lie in wait for someone to come and set them free from their materiality; their static state. Their fate depends on finding a reader to save them from being treated as nothing more than objects. Do they know that so much of the transformation of their existence is predicated on the acts of man? They appear to know this tie between their potential and man as they scream out read us from long since forgotten dusty library corners. No, books are more than just objects they are living breathing immortal entities with thoughts and feelings that transcend both time and space.

The feeling that a book gives its reader is an entirely unique exchange between the two. How is this possible? The words on the pages are in the exact same order for everyone. The syntax does not change from reader to reader. The pages of the book itself are universally the same. What does change from reader to reader is the meaning contained within those words as well as the knowledge that one takes from a given text. “The result of Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive ferment, as I would put it, is to activate from the text an unlimited number of readings, to announce the impossibility of restraining the signification of a poem or a story or a philosophical meditation.” (Natanson 3). This idea that there is an unlimited number of readings for any given text is what makes literature both fascinating and frustrating. Each individual’s interaction with a text is so unique that when a text is inevitably discussed, there is always going to be conflicting interpretations from reader to reader. This conflict is not about who read a given

text “right” or who read it “wrong” instead it is about the multitude of ways that a text engages in an exchange of knowledge with the reader.

This unique exchange of knowledge and ideas between reader and texts is the phenomenology of reading. To narrow down the definition of the phenomenology of reading is a dangerous task. Every interaction with a text yields different results. Therefore, delineating what it is or isn't dismisses the uniqueness of the phenomenon of reading for it is an everchanging experience with innumerable results. The phenomenology of reading aims to extend beyond the realm of humanity to include the unhuman. That is to say that the phenomenology of reading is not only concerned with the experiences and consciousness of humans but the experiences and consciousness of the unhuman as well. “I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard-of licence, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels.” (Poulet 54). This statement about the knowledge exchange that occurs within the phenomenology of reading is a perfect example of how the unhuman and the human interact with one and other. During the act of reading the reader is given unprecedented access to the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of the unhuman text in exchange for the use of human consciousness as a means of conveyance for the physical consciousness that the unhuman lacks due to its purely

object state. This exchange while mutually beneficial is skewed in favor of the unhuman.

In this interaction between the human and the *unhuman*, the unhuman text takes on a role as a God like lover to whom we ecstatically submit to during the act of reading. This unquestioning submission to the text is the price of our admission into the cult of literature. The reader must be willing to give up everything during their interaction with a text. They must drop all pretenses of knowledge and worship at the altar of bibliophilia. The text demands every ounce of our consciousness. This sort of idol worship that a text is in need of is not because it is full of its importance. Instead, it is because complete and utter subservience to the text is what is needed for the reader to engage in a meaningful conversation with the text in the hopes that they will gain any insight from the text.

While the reader does gain new insight and knowledge from their interaction with a given text what they give up is far more significant. For the briefest of moments, they give up their autonomy in order to engage in a conversation with the text itself. While the reader does eventually regain their autonomy by either outright rejecting what a text has to say or by accepting what the text has to say and incorporating it into their own thoughts and beliefs, while they are engaged with the text, they are indeed a person divided. The conversation within the self between the self and the other is an intentional act by the text. It seeks to pass the physical barrier that typically distinguishes the self from the alien in order to make its thoughts and feeling feel familiar to the host. This familiarity that a text

perpetrates on its host during the exchange of knowledge is akin to the uncanny.

The uncanny is the sensation of something as familiar. That is to say the uncanny as it relates to the phenomenology of reading is an attempt by an alien object such as a text to bypass all barriers within its host in an attempt to supplant its existing knowledge with that of the foreign object to make it feel as if the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of the alien have originated from within the host.

On the surface, this idea of text being a teenager from Mars who seeks to inseminate our minds in the middle of wet dreams seems wholeheartedly ludicrous. However, as Trigg points out “A bodily subject (in phenomenological terms) is not necessarily a human subject. Another body needs to be accounted for in phenomenology. A creature that invades and encroaches upon the humanity of this thing we term ‘the body’ while at the same time retaining the centrality of the human body as its native host.” (8). The text itself must be looked at for what it is. It is an ideological predator who lies dormant waiting for its next victim to pick it up and offer themselves up to it willingly. This concept of text as an invasive species that aims to take over the body while maintaining the body is what makes literature an effective medium for the transmission of thoughts and ideas. This invasive otherness that literature has is also what makes it a horrifying concept to those who want to keep things as they are. As soon as the reader begins to engage with any text, they become the prey of language. That is to say that they offer up their consciousness as a sort of sacrifice to the invasive species that is a text in the hopes that through the ensuing conversation that occurs internally, they will gain

something from the text as a reward for their sacrifice. Where a text must be careful though is it must not alienate the reader from its ideas if it does it runs the risk of losing all power.

The idea of the alienation of one's self while interacting with something that is itself alien makes most readers uncomfortable especially when the alien has no physical manifestation, but rather it is a set of ideas that are just out in the ether with no tangible forms. In this case "the alien is not encountered directly; its physical form, as well as its ontological and metaphysical features, is never disclosed, and the alien is perceptible only by its effects, its traces" (Fisher 110). This idea of the alien only being perceptible by its effects and traces is something that a text wants to avoid at all cost. If a text and its ideas are perceived as alien, it runs the risk of being rejected by the host's consciousness in the same way that a transplanted organ risks rejection by the body. For text to have truly succeeded in its mission of transmitting its thoughts and ideas to the reader, it must be as if it never existed at all. This nonexistence within the consciousness of its victim after contact is vital for the text because if it is as if it never existed outside the mind of the reader than the consciousness of the text has been successfully integrated into the new consciousness of the reader.

This dependence on the consciousness of the host for sentience is a tremendous advantage for the text. The lack of consciousness inherent in the material state of a text allows it an almost immortal status that permits it to defy both time and space. Like the white whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick* "the unearthly

conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time.” (146) texts do have a ubiquitous nature that allows them to be in multiple places conversing with multiple people on multiple subjects at the same time. The eternal nature that every text has is its greatest strength. It allows texts to discard the constraints of time and space that hold mortals back from conquering the world. The use of the consciousness of another by a text creates a oneness between the host and the alien entity. That is to say, the interior universe that is created by the alien within its host is attuned to the mind of the host. This attunement is used by the text to create synchronization between its thoughts and those of the host thereby blurring the lines between the two consciousnesses that are conversing within the host. Thus, the most significant advantage of literature is its ability to persuade its host. They no longer view the consciousness of themselves and the consciousness of the text as two different entities. Instead, they are the same.

The powerful and unionizing effect that the phenomenology of reading has on the reader is not just a parlor trick that allows writers to sell millions of copies and the reader to get lost in a fantasy world. It is a tool that all good writers will use to their advantage. How they choose to use it varies depending on the motivations of the author. In the case of Dark Reformist writers like Herman Melville and George Lippard, their motivations were to engage society in a conversation about how to change for the better on a large scale. Both Melville and Lippard belong to a group of reformist writers that Reynolds coined “The *immoral* or *dark reformers*” (55).

These Dark Reformist writers' goals were to rid society of various behavioral sins such as chattel and wage slavery, licentiousness, and urban poverty. These reformists described the vices that plagued American society in such a violent way that they were often branded as dangers to society. While Melville may not be considered by most scholars to be a Dark Reformist writer the literary ambiguity that he traded in was "so characteristic of their time that they aroused critical controversies very similar to those provoked by popular immoral reformers." (56). That is to say that while he may not have turned up the sex, drugs, and rock n' roll to eleven in his novels like Lippard and other writers of the time he was not afraid to talk about the things that a polite society did not want to talk about. The most significant difference between Melville and Lippard is not in their respective writing styles or their stance as writers. It is in their respective popularities during the mid-nineteenth century. At the time of his death in 1854, George Lippard was perhaps one of the best-known writers in America, while Melville was wasting away in relative obscurity with the commercial failure of his last three books including the American classic *Moby-Dick* in 1851.

In the mid-nineteenth century literature in its various forms was the only way to engage an ever-growing and ever-increasingly literate population in conversation. Both Melville and Lippard were well aware of the fact that they had to reach as many people as possible if they wanted to engage the population in a large-scale conversation. From 1846 to 1857 Melville published seven books and fifteen short stories. While at his peak Lippard was believed to be writing a million

words a year for his various literary works. The feverous pace at which both these men put out their work was not just an accident. It was an intentional act to reach society en masse. Both of these writers were painfully aware of the effects that the phenomenology of reading has on a reader. Melville even references the idea that books bring about certain feelings from a reader in his novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* “if you change this man’s experiences or that man’s books, will wisdom go surety for his unchanged convictions? As particular food begets particular dreams, so particular experiences or books particular feelings or beliefs” (222). While he may not have been able to point it out explicitly and say this is what the phenomenology of reading is, the idea that Melville had about how changing something as simple as the books that a man is exposed to can change his very convictions is at its core what the phenomenology of reading is all about. Melville knew that if he could get his readers to engage with his texts in a wholeheartedly, he could change the culture of American society through the change he effected within them. As stated earlier in this paper the most effective way for a text to engage in a meaningful conversation with someone is for it to surpass the physical barriers that separate the self/reader from the other/text and have a dialogue that occurs between the self and the other within the self via the reader's consciousness. That is to say that if a text can penetrate the consciousness of its reader it has a better chance at being accepted and incorporated into the existing value system of the reader.

While there are no references in his writings that are as attuned to the phenomenology of reading as there are in Melville's works George Lippard was well aware of how literature was a useful tool for social change. While Lippard's writing lacked the philosophical ambiguity that would eventually lead to Melville's resurgence as one of America's most celebrated authors it did share in the idea that a text must be engaging in order for it to affect any meaningful change within its reader. Lippard went about engaging the reading public in a different way than Melville. While some of his more famous works were eventually collected and published in novel form like *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall* and *The Killers*. The majority of his work was published in his five-cent story paper that was advertised as "A POPULAR JOURNAL, devoted to such matters of Literature and news as will interest the great mass of readers." (Lippard). His paper was explicitly designed to reach as many readers as possible in the hopes that he could rally the working poor, women, and minorities to come together as one and eat the rich. Lippard aimed to engage those who were politically indifferent in a conversation about what was happening in Antebellum Philadelphia by luring them in to a conversation with promises of salacious and scandalous accounts of the elite and their excesses. To bring this idea back to the phenomenology of reading Lippard's aim was to disarm the reader with a text that seemed to be nothing more than sex and violence. However, on a covert level, he was engaging the consciousness of society in a conversation about the ills of capitalism and how it was only a matter of time before the reader themselves or someone they loved would fall prey to the

cannibalistic nature of capitalism. It was through this covert conversation that Lippard hoped to impart his thoughts, feelings, and ideas into the consciousness of the masses in the hopes that it would lead to a revolt where Americans would burn it all down and start over.

Even though the phenomenology of reading is something that has been studied and talked about regarding scholarship for the last century or so its power has been felt and known since man first drew on cave walls. This idea of a text's ability to transcend both space and time is what makes it a force to be reckoned with. Because of this immortality readers are able to converse with minds that are only seen once in a generation on a daily basis. Empires have risen and fallen on the back of words. In the last century, a war was fought not with bullets and bombs, but rather with sentences and semicolons. As any literature class will show the phenomenology of reading has the ability to transform a book that is nothing more than paper and ink into a God-like figure whose ideas can torment the souls of man for centuries after its initial creation. The unanswerable question that haunts this paper is who is left standing after the interaction between reader and text? Is it the reader with a newfound wealth of knowledge after having engaged with and consumed the text or is it the text who stands before us having found a new host to spread its gospel?

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