Foreword

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THE USUAL TASK of a foreword is to give a context for the work that follows, to tie that work to what is familiar, and to provide a set of illustrative examples as points of entry into the work at hand. But I am struck by the impossibility of fulfilling such a task in relation to Maurice Natanson's *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature*. Natanson's text does not presume that the reader has been engaged in the exegesis of phenomenology for several decades, but begins with examples, anecdotes, passages, and other fragments from the everyday. In that way, it would make no sense to add anecdote to anecdote in the effort to make this theory familiar. But more important, the familiar is precisely what is put into question by this text. Natanson's text refuses to offer the context for its own reading precisely because *The Erotic Bird* asks its reader to suspend belief in ordinary contexts. In order to understand what is written here the reader may well have to suspend beliefs about what literature is, what phenomenology is, and where the encounter between philosophy and literature takes place.

Phenomenology has been dismissed by some as a philosophy of "consciousness," where the presumption reigns that "consciousness" is a speculative and psychologistic notion, unnecessary or a diversion in relation to literary reading. Such arguments, however, presume that they know what they mean by consciousness: that it is an interior and ideal "stream" of perceptions, the property of a subjectivity cut off ontologically from a relationship to the world. Such notions, however, have little to do with the notion of consciousness offered here.

Following Husserl's theory of intentionality, Natanson argues that consciousness consists rather in a series of acts, repeated through time and temporalized in their very structure. Such acts posit objects within the horizons of the life-world, which is not to say that those objects or the life-world are produced by the mind as its sole effects. The world is irreversibly there, populated with objects for consciousness, but it is only "there" in the manner of being meant or intended. To be "intended" within phenomenological terms is not to be the object of a conscious wish: it is to be constituted, built up, through a series of acts. The thereness of objectness is made plain to a consciousness that intends or constitutes those objects, but it would be wrong to assume that consciousness manufactures those objects. It performs a paradoxical exercise, building up what is already there, at once layering what is disclosed,

constituting the given. In this sense, the givenness of objects is made plain only for a consciousness that is structured as a corollary to the world itself. Intentionality thus characterizes a certain isomorphism between consciousness and its world, one that cannot be spatially grasped. This was the meaning of intentionality that entranced William James as well, and which he traces to the scholastic tradition. It is also the relationship that Merleau-Ponty once described as an “embrace of the world.”

The notion that consciousness belongs solely to the domain of subjectivity thus misses the phenomenological point that subjectivity always belongs to the world: consciousness is always consciousness *of* its object, it is nothing without its preposition, and its preposition marks its kinship with the world that it interrogates. Consciousness is, thus, in its very structure, in an implicit relation to the world it seeks to know, and seeks to know that world precisely to the extent that it is “of” it in some way. What this means is that the terms of subjectivity that we often imagine to be residing in a psychic interiority, such as consciousness, memory, and imagination are to be found precisely in a constitutive and binding relation to the world, intentional relations that posit a world they do not make, that build up a world of objects whose thereness is disclosed as irrefutable.

If one is to look for this intentional structure of consciousness, one would have to consult the relations established by the preposition that follows it; in other words, one would have to ask, what is consciousness “of”? Thus, the turn to the object is the turn to consciousness, but not in any ordinary sense. The turn to the object is one that effectively sets the object into relief from its ordinary context, de-naturalizing the object, as it were, in order to gain access to its essential structure. Setting the object into relief, suspending one’s everyday understanding of what the object is, becomes the route by which consciousness takes stock of itself as constituting the object at hand. What is constituted about the object only becomes clear on the condition of such a de-realization of its status, a suspension of the web of beliefs within which it is ordinarily held.

Here it seems important to note that this method is also what guides Natanson’s approach to “phenomenology.” We may think we know what phenomenology means and what it looks like, but it may be that phenomenology itself appears here in unfamiliar form. Indeed, it may be that phenomenology itself must be set into relief, cut off from what has become its naturalized status within ordinary intellectual contexts, for phenomenology to be known again or, equivalently, for the first time. Husserl’s claim that a phenomenologist is a perpetual beginner finds confirmation in Natanson’s work. One of the most established scholars

of the phenomenological enterprise, Natanson here takes the risk of beginning again. What is phenomenology? Where is it to be found? What is its relation to irreality, and irreality to fiction?

The status of the phenomenologist as a perpetual beginner can be understood through recourse to Aristotle's view that philosophy begins in wonder. The epoché restores wonder to the object, and in a quite specific sense. It is not this or that quality, but rather the thatness of the thing—not what it is, its specific actuality in the world at this place and time, but that it is possible at all.

What is, then, the object that the phenomenologist seeks to know? It is not a list of its features or the variety of its forms, but what persists as an ideal unity in the course of imaginary variations, something which is called its "essence." Here again we ought not to rush too quickly to the conclusion that we know what an essence is, assuming that it hovers behind appearances, elusive and eternal. Consider Natanson's provisional definition: the intuition of an essence seeks the quiddity of an imagined object. "Essence" he writes "is the gnosis of perception." Eidetic intuition, the intuition of essence, is possible to the extent that such intuition is intentional—that is, correlated with the object it seeks to know prior to any possible act of knowledge.

The persistence of the object through various imaginary efforts to vary its form and features is not its actuality, but its ideality. Exceeding any given appearance of the object, ideality also makes that appearance possible: an excess in the object that establishes its irreducibility to any actuality.

Natanson does not offer in these pages, as he has elsewhere, a systematic exegesis of Husserl's views or the development of those views into a phenomenological theory of the social in the work of Alfred Schutz.¹ Instead, he proceeds by offering anecdotes from ordinary life, readings from literary texts, imaginary exercises that approximate what Husserl meant by "imaginary variation." He seizes on the brief passage as a way of exemplifying consciousness as it flashes up to illuminate its world. And the proliferation of such moments attests to the impossibility of a full or final exemplification of this process. The example that illuminates intentionality is necessarily oblique to the consciousness it seeks to show.

¹ For a comprehensive bibliography of Maurice Natanson's work, see the excellent bibliography compiled by David Royal in *The Prism of the Self: Philosophical Essays in Honor of Maurice Natanson* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), pp. 335–44. For a full discussion of Husserl's work by Maurice Natanson, see *Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). For his writings on the work of Alfred Schutz, see *Anonymity: A Study in the Philosophy of Alfred Schutz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) as well as his edited volume, *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Honor of Alfred Schutz* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970).

Natanson sets out to interrogate the convergence of the intentionality of consciousness and the fictive dimension of literary works. What Natanson writes here is not a phenomenology *of* literature, but an evocation of the phenomenological in literature. He does not ask how best to apply phenomenological doctrine to the reading of the literary text, but whether the “art of fiction may tell us the truth about the fictions natural to the mind.” Such a formulation is immediately misleading, for what is “natural” to the mind is precisely what makes any analysis of the mind irreducible to naturalism. The positing action of the mind intends or means an ideality in the object, an ideality that from the point of view of ordinary life can appear only as unreal. Thus, in Natanson’s work, the power of the example is precisely the illumination of the unreal within the ordinary; the visual equivalent would surely be the opaque doorways and obscured tunnels in Edward Hopper’s paintings. [Consciousness haunts its objects as their own proper unreality.] Thus, Natanson can refer to the fictive universe of intentional consciousness, an ideality of the object that can only appear within the real as the unreal.

Husserl made clear that it was only through an imaginary experimentation that the essence of the object might be known. Such an experiment of imaginary variation not only takes time, enumerating the variety of perspectives by which an object might be constituted and known, but it also lays out the temporality of the object itself, the sedimentation of its features, the specific time of its unfolding. The object known through imaginary variation is never the same as the actual object, and yet that actual object is revealed as a possible permutation or adumbration of the object in the course of its imaginary travels. Thus, the point of such a phenomenological thought-experiment is not to fix the actuality of the object, but to render its actuality into a possibility: to show the contingency of *this* appearance within the temporal horizon of the object as a unity of its own possibilities. Rendering the actual possible is in many ways the reverse of deductive empiricism, the method that seeks to filter out the possibilities to know what is, finally, the actuality. Phenomenology seeks to tease the possible from the actual object, to display its ideality, not as an invisible perfection that lurks behind the phenomenal object, but precisely as the unreality of its givenness, the strangeness of quiddity, that it is rather than not. This insight into what makes the object possible means that one must turn to the horizon in which it appears; this is no easy task because a horizon is not the same as the objects that it makes possible. And yet, there are moments in which insight into the horizon are enabled. Max Scheler, a phenomenologist whose works focused on ethics and aesthetics, identifies the tragic as such a moment, for the recognition of the tragic, he argues, is not that such an event has happened but that one lives in a world in which such an event can happen—where it is possible at all. That oblique relation between the event

and the world that makes it possible is precisely the preoccupation of eiditic intuition. Thus, Natanson reminds us that essences are commonplace: “just as immediately as one can hear a sound, so one can intuit an ‘essence.’”

From the claim that intentional consciousness posits an ideality of the object emerges the central relation between phenomenology and the fictive domain. The irreality of the object appears only to a consciousness that can suspend what it ordinarily knows about that object in order to begin to ask, with Scheler, what is the world in which such an object can emerge as a possible object? If the object is possible, if there is an ideal condition for its emergence and existence, how is it that we come to understand the object itself as possibility? Importantly, the bracketing of the familiar world does not involve a loss of that world; it remains perceptually before the phenomenologist, but in a mode of irreality. Thus, the route to the ideal is precisely through the familiar, through the anecdotes and examples it delivers that cast doubt on the foundational status of actuality: this is the everyday operation of the *epoché*. The imaginary is thus a domain that includes the fictive and constitutes the *domain of possibility* as the essence of the actual. This domain is intended, which means that it is neither a feature of the object nor of consciousness, but precisely of that moment when consciousness discovers itself as what haunts the familiar boundaries of the world.

For Natanson, the literature that converges with phenomenology is precisely that which enters the familiar only to illuminate its constitutive reality. Literary works that compel us to suspend our belief in the familiar through examples drawn from familiarity enact an *epoché*, that phenomenological drama which exposes consciousness at the heart of its object. Natanson himself makes this clear in his own quasi-fictive tales drawn from everyday life—the sphere of the natural attitude, as phenomenologists claim—in which the past and future inhere in the moment of present experience, revealing the present moment as an adumbration or possible permutation of time, fragmented from the continuum that is also condensed within itself. The future and the past are precisely not “given” as phenomenal features of experience, but they form the horizon within which what is given appears.

It is no easy matter to attend to qualities that are not given, but which make the given possible, lace its emergence, hover at its boundaries. At such moments, language appears to be forced into figuration to come to grips with this non-given quality of things. Natanson himself turns to metaphors to describe this temporality that makes the given possible: “the pulse of the mundane” and the “current of existence.” In the work of Thomas Mann, Natanson traces the fugitive time of the leitmotif, the recurrent and variant emergence of form, not as a static or unyielding notion but as the essence of change.

No simple inspection of a literary work can illuminate this form that is the essence of change. The form cannot be excised from the time in which it occurs; indeed, it can be grasped only in time, by a consciousness whose apprehension is structured by an internal time-consciousness. The peculiar temporality of Mann's work, for instance, is not the same as chronology, nor is it otherworldly; it articulates the temporality within which ordinary time is experienced, a temporality that is its condition and its essential strangeness.

Natanson offers a view of existential phenomenology as a further elaboration of phenomenology in its transcendental and social forms. His view is not opposed to these other kinds of phenomenology, but its focus is perhaps different. When the object that phenomenology seeks to know is human reality, when the question, as it were, turns upon the questioner as its matter, then phenomenology also turns to finitude, understood not merely as what ends human time but as that which makes it possible and pulses throughout its everydayness. The literary works that Natanson chooses are ones that seek to approximate this pulse of finitude in the everyday.

Although Natanson considers in these pages a novel, a short story, and a play, it is perhaps the philosophic poetry of Wallace Stevens that stages the encounter between philosophy and the fictive to which Natanson seeks to bear witness. Stevens writes in his poem, "The Motive for Metaphor," of "the obscure moon lighting an obscure world / Of things that would never be quite expressed."² In this poem, as in so many others, Stevens gestures toward this obscure yet fundamental horizon of finitude that is also the focus of Natanson's work. "The obscure moon lighting an obscure world" could be a formulation for intentionality itself: obscure because never quite expressed, and yet the occasion for expression all the same. What is grasped of phenomenology in literature is the essence of the finite world in the course of change. Stevens writes further that in the obscure world

you were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon
The ABC of being,

No simple exegesis in this domain, no "ABC" that might lead the way. In the place of any such linear expressions are the exhilarations of

² Wallace Stevens. "The Motive for Metaphor," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, edited by Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 240.

changes, a poetic notion that comes close to understanding the mobile form, the essence of temporality, that the existential phenomenologist seeks to illuminate, with whatever obscure light is at hand.

Natanson shows how the zone of the fictive emerges through the common experience of the word as a site of *possible* meaning. Indeed, metaphors enact the displacement of the familiar, and inaugurate the variations of possibility that begin to render the familiar unreal. Natanson puts the matter this way: "Metaphors are condensations of language in which words *become*, in which words escape their bounds and reverse our perception of what is real. 'To be strong in metaphors' . . . means . . . to track the normal for the sake of misleading it, discomforting it, and . . . to alienate it."

The suspension or disorientation of the familiar happens in Mann, Kafka, and Beckett in different ways, but with similar effects. *Waiting for Godot* effectively brackets the principles that govern everyday existence, forfeiting the world of reality for a perspective on what composes the world in surreptitious ways. Similarly, in Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, we see how what is remembered and anticipated converge at the present moment, a particularly dense event of immediacy. Thus, the "leitmotiv" in Mann functions as the temporal horizon in Husserl, the quality of what is not given, but which constitutes the given essentially. In Kafka, the unrealizing effects of the fictive are offered perhaps most dramatically when the workday is disrupted by a fatal transformation. And yet, the cockroach is not pure fancy, but a fleeting insight into the essence of the workday, a defamiliarization that nevertheless reveals the "underside" of what makes such a day possible.

Natanson believes not only that the intuition of essences takes place in sudden starts, in the immediacy of the moment, but that in presenting the world consciousness enacts the very intentionality it seeks to know. The reader of literature seizes upon such moments as they emerge in the course of a reading, and this means that the time of reading is invariably interrupted by the time of life. That constant interruption emerges in Natanson's work as the very presentative rhythm of consciousness as it finds itself in the landscape of its fictive universe. Bringing forth the past and charting the associations that reading unleashes, Natanson enacts the temporal horizon of the reader's consciousness, one who not only reads the world in literature but rediscovers the fictive as the essence of the world. This kind of traveling is not always linear or exegetical, but it returns, faithfully, to that moment of immediacy, dense with time past and future, in which the ordinary suddenly becomes strange, and that strangeness is exposed as the condition of possibility of the ordinary. Importantly, the fictive domain unrealizes the world, but it does not deny its reality; neither does it escape the world. Literary works

perform this irrealization of the world, and this is their peculiar intentionality: they provide the suspended occasion for considering any given configuration of the ordinary as something yielded by the world as one of its possibilities. Although no example can quite capture the strange and wondrous occasion of its own possibility, the moment in which the example nevertheless illuminates what it cannot capture is the moment of phenomenological insight.

Natanson's text abounds in such moments, insights culled from the everyday that consistently disorient us with respect to what we take for granted. The literary texts recall a life-world that exceeds them, and yet the life-world is rediscovered in the literary text inflected as unreal. Thus, Mann's words about his own work might well apply to Natanson's as well: "The book itself is the substance of that which it relates . . . its aim is always and consistently to *be* that of which it speaks."