

Review of Ellen Miller, Releasing Philosophy, Thinking Art: A Phenomenological Study of Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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Although the author does not say so directly, this book is not intended to be a contribution to literary criticism, but rather to phenomenology. It is written in a language full of elemental terms taken from Heidegger's later work, such as "shining", "gathering", "holding", "releasement" and others, whose meaning is not entirely clear to readers without a training in phenomenology. As a phenomenological study of Plath's poetry, the book is rich in potential for opening up new insights into Plath's work, which is more than usually overlaid with the kind of pre-interpretive discourse that phenomenology strips away. Nevertheless, because of its almost complete lack of concession to the norms of literary criticism, this potential is fulfilled only to a limited degree.

The book is "an application of the phenomenological principles held by Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger" to four of Plath's poems, "Mystic", "Ariel", "The Moon and the Yew Tree" and "The Arrival of the Bee Box" (x). As Miller points out in the epilogue, these poems are chosen because all of them raise spiritual questions (all refer to "God," for example) which allow her to develop an exposition of Plath's feminist spirituality. Her goal, throughout the book, is "to open up ways of understanding spiritual and poetic language that impact our social and ethical dealings with one another, the environment and the divine" (xii).

Miller describes her method as "hermeneutic phenomenology," distinguishing it from "literary theories inspired by Husserlian phenomenology" such as those of E.D. Hirsch, whose object was the intentions or consciousness of the author (xiii). Her method aims at "recovering a more primary understanding of textual meaning." She does this in two ways. Firstly, she tells us that she wrote "phenomenological descriptions" of her



experience of reading (and re-reading) the poems; that is, she attended to that experience alone, bracketing from consideration all everyday and scientific discourse which would pre-interpret her understanding of it (xv). These descriptions would be very interesting in themselves, but Miller does not make them directly available to the reader. Rather, the text of the book constitutes a re-interpretation of her experience in the light of the thought of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray.

Miller brings to Plath's poems a feminist phenomenology of the body. She attends fully to the bodily experience of reading these poems, and to the gendered nature of that experience. This is the source of most of the book's insights. Perhaps the things I found most informative were Miller's accounts of the ways in which reading "Mystic" and "Ariel" affect the reader's breathing and heart rhythms. Her accounts of the white space on the page, within which one reads the black words, and of the physical experience (as well as the history) of the paper one touches as one does so are also of interest. Her most successful use of Heidegger's work, in my view, was in raising the question of Plath's environmentalism. She argues, for example, that "The Arrival of the Bee Box" "directs us towards an environmental issue about the way in which humans have been (quite literally) unable to let things be" (132). She makes an especially interesting point about the concealment and unconcealment of femininity at work in the poem (140).

If the book is to be judged as a work of literary criticism, however, it is a poor one. Miller surely intends it to be judged as a work of phenomenology. The difficulty with this, however, is that she frequently engages directly with trends in Plath criticism, and with individual works of criticism. For example: "Critics often cite ['Ariel'] as a declaration of Plath's resignation towards life" (47); "I disagree with [Renée Curry's] argument that Plath only considers her whiteness insofar as it affects her personal goals" (146). As soon as this kind of engagement with the work of literary critics occurs, the book becomes a contribution to literary criticism.

It has three major weaknesses as such. First, it is very unclear. In Heidegger's later essays on art and poetry, on which Miller draws, he defines each new term he develops, and he also periodically responds to the kind of objection to these terms that an ordinary language speaker might be expected to raise. Miller does neither of these things, presumably because her intended audience can take the meaning of her language for

granted. This makes reading her work, for a literary critic unfamiliar with this language, very difficult. Second, very few of her claims are supported, in the ordinary way in which literary critics recognize claims to be supportable, by detailed citations from texts. Hence, one is left with the impression of an interesting poem, or experience of reading that poem, but it is not clear that it is truly Plath's poem (or the experience of reading it) that has been described. Finally, the studies of Plath with which Miller engages, and cites in the bibliography, are mostly drawn from the 1980s. The most recent monographs on Plath she cites are from 1994, which means that the last fifteen years of Plath criticism are almost entirely excluded from consideration. As a result, Miller gives the impression that there is a consensus among critics that Plath's work is largely to be interpreted in the light of her biography and that the most significant events of that biography are her depression and suicide. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. If anything, there is a consensus that this is the way *not* to interpret Plath's work. Furthermore, the relationships between Miller's book and the major studies of Plath done in the last fifteen years are unexplained. For example, we do not know how her phenomenological analysis of Plath's letting be of the non-human other relates to Tracy Brain's work on Plath's environmentalism. Nor do we hear how her meditations on Plath in the light of Irigaray's thought relate to those of other critics on Plath, like Christina Britzolakis or Nephie Christodoulides, in the light of Kristeva's thought.

Miller has raised some excellent questions in this book. It is clear that feminist phenomenology of the body and feminist spirituality have a great deal to tell us about Sylvia Plath. I simply regret that her answers to the questions she asks are not expressed in terms that are as accessible to literary criticism as they are to phenomenology.