

The ecstatic-poetic phenomenology of Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei

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Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei studied at Columbia University, where she obtained a Master of Fine Arts in poetry; at Villanova University, where she gained a PhD and MA in Philosophy; and at Oxford University, where she was granted a Doctor of Philosophy in German Literature and a Master of Studies in European Literature. Her extensive and varied background is evident in the wide range of sources she cites and discusses from philosophy, phenomenology, the fine arts, and languages. She translated (with Matthias Fritsch) Heidegger's *Phenomenology of Religious Life* (2004). She published a selection of her own poetry, *After the Palace Burns* (2003), for which she won the Paris Review Prize in poetry. Gosetti-Ferencei has a special interest in the phenomenology and philosophy of literature and aesthetics. Her several books include *Heidegger, Hölderlin and the Subject of Poetic Language* (2004); *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (2007); and *Exotic Spaces in German Modernism* (2011).

Gosetti-Ferencei is especially relevant for human science in that she explores the crossings between phenomenology and the media of poetry and painting. In particular, she explores the creative significance of poetic language and the vocative for phenomenological understanding. In *The Ecstatic Quotidian* Gosetti-Ferencei proposes that phenomenology is like art in that it tends to be interested in the ordinary and in everydayness; the quotidian. And, of course, the whole point of phenomenology is to help us grasp the meaning of the world as we live it in everyday experience. The quotidian everydayness of the world and its taken-for-grantedness makes phenomenology not only desirable but also possible. But Gosetti-Ferencei shows how, in both phenomenology and the arts, the attentive and aesthetic gaze at the ordinary inevitably causes the ordinary to shift towards the extraordinary, which she terms 'the ecstatic.'

Now, this shift from the ordinary (the quotidian), to what lies outside the ordinary (the ecstatic quotidian) is suggestive of the moment of phenomenological seeing. What happens when we "see" an ordinary phenomenon phenomenologically? We need to acknowledge that this phenomenological seeing is a reflective seeing through the refractive lens of the phenomenological method of stepping outside of oneself: the epoché (bracketing) and the reduction (returning or leading back to experience as lived). This "stepping outside of oneself" of Ekstasis is experienced as a deranged astonishment or distracted wonder: re-seeing the world ecstatically through the (re)turning and refocusing of the phenomenological glance to the world as lived. In describing this moment of wonder, Heidegger suggests that what we now see is not really the extraordinariness of the ordinary but, rather, it is the very ordinariness of the ordinary that is yielded in this ecstatic experience. Accordingly, Gosetti-Ferencei's phrase "The

Ecstatic Quotidian” could really be understood as a poetic tautology.

In a manner, Gosetti-Ferencei advances methodological and ontological discussions that had already begun, for example, by some of the proponents of the phenomenologies of ordinary life at the University of Utrecht. Langeveld spoke of the “home-garden-kitchen” interest of phenomenology. Langeveld and his colleagues employed an artful and literary approach in their sensitive explications of everyday phenomena such as the conversation, the smile, at homeness, the hotel room, the secret place, things, etc. This focus on the ordinary or the quotidian was fused with literary and poetic styles that made descriptions of everyday life phenomena recognizable. Indeed, Buytendijk spoke of the “phenomenological nod” that occurs when recognizing the subtle and nuanced experiential meanings that only a phenomenological description can evoke through descriptive and evocative means. And that is why he proposes that a phenomenological association with literature and the arts can provide insights into the psychology, the everyday motivations and deep dramas of human life—insights that the discipline of psychology itself is incapable of producing. Buytendijk explicates this reflection on the value of literary and poetic text in his 1962 book *De Psychologie van de Roman (The Psychology of the Novel)*—a phenomenological study of the novel’s power and potential for understanding human phenomena through Dostoevski’s *Brothers Karamazov*.

So Gosetti-Ferencei’s project is not new but she pushes the envelope, so to speak, by contrasting purely poetic with purely (Husserlian) phenomenological texts. In *The Ecstatic Quotidian*, Gosetti-Ferencei provocatively plays on this tension between poetic seeing and phenomenological seeing. Both seem to spin round the pivot of recognition of Husserlian essence in the singular. But, while Husserlian phenomenology aims at direct description in the act of intuitive seeing, literary description makes use of indirection. Gosetti-Ferencei examines Husserl’s phenomenological seeing of the essence of something side-by-side Rilke’s poetic seeing, and she notes that the indirect poetic phenomenology of Rilke results in an immediate or pathic grasping of meaning.

But what Rilke’s poetry achieves is a noncognitive grasp that works the registers of intuition and feeling so that the specificity of that which speaks to the poetic gaze can be preserved there. Rilke’s grasp at essences occurs only through the performance of language, which for Husserl would have to be restricted to a function of expressing the phenomenologist’s findings. Rilke’s poem does not represent, it enacts the capacities of poetic recognition. (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2007, p. 113)

And, she writes,

What the phenomenologist accomplishes in reflective study of the structure of phenomena, the poet accomplishes only through an indirect approach. We may speak of the common aim of grasping essences, but this means something different to the Husserlian phenomenologist than it does to the speaker of Rilke’s poem. (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2007, p. 115)

Thus, Gosetti-Ferencei proposes or implies that there are two kinds of phenomenologies: the eidetic Husserlian approach that aims to capture the essence of a phenomenon and the

literary poetic approach that is able to capture a more subtle and non-cognitive essence that only poetry is able to express.

An early theme in Gosetti-Ferencei's *The Ecstatic Quotidian* is her attempt to return to childhood reminiscence and childhood consciousness as a source for regaining an innocent view of the ordinariness of everydayness life. Gosetti-Ferencei aims to use childhood consciousness to access the quotidian dimension of phenomenological experience. She says, "It might turn out that the naïve attitude of childhood as reflected upon is more like phenomenological reflection than it resembles the natural attitude" (2007, p. 77). Here, too, she is not the first who turns to childhood in order to reset the default of one's original way of seeing the world. In a poem entitled "In the naming" Susan Goyette (1998 p. 17) suggests that the phenomenology of naming the world rests on a prior recapturing and renaming of our own childhood:

*In naming my childhood, I've given it a room
to rest in. So long it's wandered late at night looking
for me. I've caught glimpses of it rumpled and weary, stranded*

*on the side of my life; a hitchhiker
stilled by the headlights of memory. So I've housed it
in a brick room, safe from wolves and weather.*

*And I've planted a vine that slowly climbs
the bricks and covers them in a melancholy of fluttering
flowers. Wisteria. Myself as a child, still.*

Gosetti-Ferencei's theme of recovering one's sense of self and the world through reminiscing on our childhood is a pervasive theme in our culture and literature. She quotes extensively from the poets Rilke, Frost, and Wordsworth and the novelist Proust. The question is whether childhood consciousness can be regained and whether our remembrances of seeing the world as child have a recognizable structure. In "Quite Early One Morning," Dylan Thomas publishes two, slightly different versions of a brief text "Reminiscences of Childhood." His descriptions contain sensuous, vivid, and pungent reminiscences of his hometown and childhood world. Was it ever like this?

*The recollections of childhood have no order; of all those every-colored and
shifting scented shoals that move below the surface of the moment of recollection,
one, two, indiscriminately, suddenly, dart up out of their revolving waters into the
present air: immortal flying-fish. (1954, p. 6.)*

The second version of "Reminiscences of Childhood" is only slightly but tellingly revised. The last line of the text now reads:

The memories of childhood have no order and no end. (p. 14)

The memories of childhood have no order (reminiscing is fragmentary) and no end (one narrates and re-narrates one's childhood in order to make a home in it). It is, indeed, strange how our memories of childhood appear so arbitrary and contingent. Why can I

remember in such vivid and sensuous ways seemingly trivial incidents while more important moments seem to be erased from memory? As with remembering and forgetting names of people we meet, there seems no order to our remembrance and forgetfulness of things from childhood. Sometimes we unexpectedly catch glimpses of images that present themselves to us from a past. And in these glimpses we may recognize that what we see belongs deeply to us and defines whom we are—children still. Or, that is what we may hope: to recover something that we have lost. Is the attempt to see like a child a romanticist project? These are issues that should be addressed in Gosetti-Ferencei's work.

The most significant theme of Gosetti-Ferencei's work is probably her exploration of the power of literary phenomenology and of literature, poetics and the arts for phenomenological grasping of ordinary life phenomena. She says, "While Husserl maintained a scientific approach to lived experience, the technical determination of which may have put its real vitality out of reach, other phenomenologists have turned to art and literature to grasp the original quality of the world" (2007, p. 41). Nobody would disagree with Gosetti-Ferencei that traditional philosophical argument is a different genre from poetic expression, each working and playing on their own linguistic registers. And, as long as the comparison is maintained between Husserlian eidetic texts and literary-poetic textualities it seems appropriate to extend the reach of phenomenology beyond the limited eidetic analysis that Husserlian phenomenology permits. Gosetti-Ferencei strongly implies that Husserlian phenomenology needs to be more sensitive to the subtle nuances of the richness and depth of human experience. At the same time, she suggests provocatively that Rilke's poetry is a poetic phenomenology that needs to be placed and acknowledged side-by-side the classic Husserlian phenomenology. But it is not entirely clear why Gosetti-Ferencei does not acknowledge that a notable number of phenomenologists, since Husserl, have increasingly realized the expressive value of literary and poetic elements in their phenomenological reflections and writing.

Gosetti-Ferencei extensively discusses the beginning of this poetic theme in the texts of the later Heidegger and she frequently cites Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, and Blanchot who have all made the literary form thematic for their philosophical and phenomenological project and writings. And yet, she keeps falling back on Husserlian phenomenology when she is establishing a dialogue between the application of phenomenology and modern art.

The relationship between phenomenology and literature is a vital and complex one, and while literature assists in the imaginative variation of the phenomenologist, phenomenology often helps to explain the particular operations of modern literature as it transforms everyday perceptions into what writers hope to be truer, more intense forms of recognition (2007, p. 111).

Yet, in *The Ecstatic Quotidian* she does not mention phenomenological philosophers such as Alphonso Lingis, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Michel Henry, and Jean-Luc Marion, who all exemplify in different ways literary styles, attention to the image, and the use of paintings in their phenomenological writings. By insistently using Husserl's consciousness phenomenology as her exemplary template, Gosetti-Ferencei does not create the opportunity to acknowledge that post-Husserlian

phenomenology has evolved toward a rich philological fusing of phenomenological reflection with poetic and literary forms. So, strangely Gosetti-Ferencei's case seems somewhat overdrawn. Still, her detailed probing into the power of the literary and poetic forms is enlightening and seductive.

To reiterate, Gosetti-Ferencei is a most intriguing author who has already contributed in an original manner to the international scene of phenomenology. In her various publications, she displays an extensive familiarity and detailed fundamental knowledge of a great variety of artists, poets, literary authors, phenomenologists and their work. There is currently no other phenomenological philosopher who makes a stronger and more nuanced case for the methodological relevance of literature and the arts for phenomenological understanding. Gosetti-Ferencei's great contribution consists in part in her explorations into the intricacies of the relationship between phenomenology and visual art, literature, and poetics. She searches exhaustively for the commonalities and distinctiveness of visual seeing of the image in paintings and poetic seeing of the image in literary texts, and then she urgently relates poetic recognition of the image to phenomenological recognition of essences.

References

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