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# A Vulnerable Glance: Seeing Dance Through Phenomenology

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### III. A Vulnerable Glimpse: Seeing Dance through Phenomenology

Sondra Fraleigh

When phenomenology is true to its intent, it never knows where it is going (1). This is because it is present-centered in its descriptive aims, accounts for temporal change, and does not have appropriate and inappropriate topics. It might move from Zen to dance to baseball to washing dishes, and even isolate a purity of attention that under certain circumstances connects them all. Phenomenology develops unpredictably, according to the contents of consciousness. This is its first level of method. Its second level develops philosophical perspectives from the seed of consciousness. It holds that “philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being” (2). Here I will discuss phenomenology as a way of describing and defining dance, shifting between the experience of the dancer and that of the audience.

#### Experiential Truth

Phenomenology depends on immediate experience, but includes more. It hopes to arrive at meaning, perspectives on the phenomena of experience (dance in this case) which can be communicated. It is not devoid of past and future, since both are lived as part of the present. Present time takes its meaning in part from past and future. Heidegger described time as belonging to the totality of being, as “the horizon of being.” He chose the vulnerable image of *falling* to describe the lived dimension of present time. Falling is both a movement and a symbol of our existential mode of being-in-the-world (3).

Existence is not static. It moves always just beyond our grasp. It has no specific shape, no texture, no taste (because it is nowhere). Yet we assume it is something. We can't see it (because it is everywhere), and we feel its perpetual “dance” inside us. It is of the essence of vulnerability. It surfaces to attention through reflection in literature, history, and philosophy, with the urgency of word and gesture, formulations of concrete materials, the actions and passions of drama, and the infinite combinations of sound and bodily motion in the various arts. Here psychic life, visible form, and experiential truth merge; thought and feeling converge, and meaning arises.

Art is an attempt to give substance to existence, that we may gain insight through distilling life's ongoing nature, repeating selected gestures, motions, and sounds, molding and maintaining certain shapes. Art in its various forms holds these before our senses. It allows us to absorb the textures, meanings, and motions of a perishable bodily existence. Art and existence are both within the context or “horizon” of time. Both are subject to the ways in which time is lived—compressed, elongated, endless, a long time, a short time, barely enough time, etc. Lived time does not refer to clock time, but to how time feels.

Falling in love may take “an instant,” for example, and some chores may “never” get done.

Heidegger also describes the “ecstasy of time”—those times when past and future are realized in the present—as “the moment of vision” (4). We say we “lose track of time” when we become fully involved in an experience; then consciousness is not divided, and an act or thought emerges from a present-centeredness. Insight, or moments of vision, as we take “sight” as the basis for “insight,” depends on our experiencing the fullness of present time. Lived dualisms (tugs, pulls, and scatterings of attention) disappear, and the unity of our being is experienced.

When I use the term phenomenology I mean existential phenomenology, the development of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy by later twentieth century existentialist philosophers: Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Paul Ricoeur, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gabriel Marcel. The common concern of these philosophers was to describe existence from the “horizon” (Husserl's term for the “context” in which experiences arise) of being-in-the-world. Existential philosophy originated primarily in the thinking of men—with the exception of feminist Simone de Beauvoir. As a revolt against traditional western philosophy, it developed several concerns consistent with feminists (see Addendum on Phenomenology and Feminism). Of particular interest is that the body (mythically associated with woman and the mystery of birth) has been ignored and denied by traditional philosophy, but is important in phenomenology, and is a central theme in existential phenomenology.

Existential phenomenology is vulnerable because it rests on experiential descriptions of the lived world; more precisely, human experiences arising always in particular contexts of being-in-the-world. While much of male dominated philosophy has striven for invulnerability through logic and reason, phenomenology took up the risky position of experiential description. It is clear, however, that particular concerns have helped to shape phenomenological description, making it less relative than it would be without guiding principles or method.

Phenomenology does not rely primarily on the uniqueness of experience. Overall, it is propelled by a universalizing impulse, since it hopes to arrive at shared meaning, recognizing that this world is indeed “our world,” that our being-in-the-world is conditioned by the existence of others. Self and other are terms that take on meaning in relation to each other. Individual subjectivity is therefore understood in view of its intersection with a surrounding world, constituted by other objects, natural phenomena, and other human beings. Intersubjectivity is a given. It is the basis of both alienation and

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communion, all possible shades of relation and solitude, for to be alone is to be (in fact, or feeling) without others.

If there is a single guiding principle behind phenomenology, it derives from Husserl's repeated assertion that "consciousness is always consciousness of something." He first formulated his phenomenological method according to this concern in *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (5). Here he analyzed the basic structures of what he called "transcendental consciousness." Consciousness, he held, was the necessary condition for experience, or experience is presupposed by consciousness. Experience has both immanent and transcendent levels. Immanence is that which is held within consciousness, a memory in a stream of experience, for instance. Transcendence is not a mystical term here, nor does it necessarily mean an ecstatic level of consciousness. Transcendent consciousness is active since it unifies impressions, grasping phenomena in their entirety. (A phenomenon is anything that appears to consciousness.) Consciousness is transcendent because it refers beyond itself, attesting to a world of objects and the reality of others. It is the ground or possibility of our recognition of a world outside ourselves.

Central to phenomenology is the understanding that we never perceive a phenomenon in static unchanging perspectives, but rather as existing through time. Time and motion are ever present conditions influencing attention and perspective. Nevertheless, consciousness can unify experience. For example, when one considers a particular phenomenon such as a dance, one not only has changing sense impressions of the dance as it flows through time, but also insight into the essence of the dance. By essence here I mean that something is discerned which characterizes or typifies the dance, so that it is recognized as itself and not some other dance. The dance then becomes more than sense impressions of motion. The essence of the dance is not identical with its motion. It arises in consciousness as the motion reveals the intent of the whole and its parts. Consciousness transcends separate acts of perception to unify our experience of phenomena.

### **Essence: Identity**

When I look at a dance I perceive something of the work's identity, its individuality. Not only do I perceive it—I consciously construct it. That is, I imbue the work with the meaning I find there as a viewer (or critic). This requires both my perceptual grasp and conscious integration of the work.

For example, it is obvious that Cunningham's work *Eleven* takes its title from the eleven performers in the dance. It is also strongly identified with the mantra-like word/sound score. In the following description, part of the work's identity emerges for me:

The text is sparse, with sound and silence coming at intervals and chanted in monotone, returning over and over, lending to the meditative quality of the whole. Duets, solos, trios, and other groups collect and disperse without emotional impetus, like a hand plays easily with an intricate design when the design begins to lead the hand unconsciously into the next figure. However, the exact movement, its energies and space/time configuration, is unique to *Eleven*. At one point, there is a long stalking sequence with body leans and leg extensions. It finally develops into a reaching walk with the body twisting and turning on one foot, ending

with the torso bending over the leg, and an arm dangling, the hand tracing a circle, actually outlining it on the floor.

This sequence contributes to the individuality of *Eleven* for me. Others may pay attention in a different manner, thus consciously constructing aspects I don't see. When I reflect back and relate this work to other Cunningham dances, I understand that their lack of overt expressiveness focuses my attention on intricate tangles of sound, movement, color, lines of energy, shape, and design. Thus, I see them as abstract and formal, or form become content. I further notice that my attention becomes cleared and concentrated toward the end of his dances, like the concentrated attention of the dancers.

The phenomenologist approaches the task of defining or describing a phenomenon (a dance or a dance experience, for instance) as though seeing it fresh for the first time. Of course this is not possible since we do have conceptions, attitudes, and assumptions which color understanding. Phenomenology is at best an effort to remove bias and preconception from consciousness. It aims to describe through some direct route, not to analyze and theorize (at least not in the beginning), but first to describe the immediate contents of consciousness.

As Husserl endeavored to clarify how experience is unified in consciousness, he eventually extended his phenomenology to what he called a "science of essences." This remains the most controversial aspect of his philosophy. Existentialism never embraced phenomenology as a science, rather it developed the original method initiated by Husserl of "bracketing" the natural attitude—that is, suspending all common assumptions (presuppositions) about phenomena and removing theoretical or analytical biases. This narrowing of attention to essential elements is called phenomenological reduction.

Phenomenology strives to capture pre-reflective experience, the immediacy of being-in-the-world. I think of this initial impulse of phenomenology (the basis of phenomenological reduction) as poetic and subliminal, containing moments of insight into an experience when the details of "being there" are vivid in feeling, but have not had time to focus in thought. The subsequent descriptive process may also be similar to the poetic; both are grounded in experience and require reflection, or a looking back on the experience to bring it to language. It is further significant that both poetry and phenomenological reduction seek the essence of experience, a re-creation in words of the living of the experience, as the most salient features arise in consciousness and others drop away. In this, the phenomenologist knows that finally she cannot strip away her own consciousness, nor would she want to, however much she may rid herself of baggage in terms of previous knowledge or attitudes. Consciousness and moreover her particular consciousness, will be a part of the experience and its description. (This could be compared to Sklar's point on ethnography and self-reflexivity in the second article in this series. See also Addendum on Phenomenology and Ethnography).

### **Meaning**

Let's take an example again from Cunningham: I notice in general that his dances use the geometrically clean lines of ballet, even though they are overlaid with radical departures from typical ballet geometry, and that the performer is cool and detached (as others have also noticed). The male dancer is not

simply a prop for the female as in ballet stereotypes since much of their dancing together develops unison and equality, but the partnering per se continues the classical/romantic dependence of the female as she leans on or is held and lifted (however dispassionately) by the male. With comparisons to ballet, I am of course bringing to consciousness my background in dance, and I move from the purely descriptive to the comparative and analytical. This comes about naturally as a result of first recognizing attenuated lines and geometric forms. However, I would miss what seems a major point of Cunningham's works if I let them rest with balletic influence. In *Doubles*, for instance, dancers are seen in problem solving modes, and the balletic movement serves more as a background for this to occur, as my attempt to describe a part of the dance indicates:

One movement motif develops out of a small leap stubbornly turned to the back at the landing, then stopped in a balanced position on one leg. Small leaps eventually turn to giant steps with voluminous pauses. An incomplete stop-action fall is the most memorable of the work's challenges to the dancer's skill and the choreographer's inventiveness. The dancer falls sideways without warning or preparation in a sudden drop to his hands. He recovers from the fall but not completely, getting up only half-way, reaching that difficult to control mid-zone between standing and falling, only to fall again and again from an incomplete recovery. The dance's repetition of this series draws upon my body's memory, touching those murky moments in experience where something is about to happen, but never quite breaks through.

The foregoing is an example of my consciousness of one aspect of *Doubles*. It is true for me, it contains both descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative elements. One of the major purposes of phenomenological description is to build toward meaning. Then others may be able to see what you see, or at least understand what you see. The truths of dance are not scientific or irrefutable. They are of another order, created by the choreographer, the dancer, the audience, and the critic. Good critics do phenomenology naturally, describing without pre-judging, and then drawing forth the meaning they find. They exercise their consciousness of the dance in writing about it, finally delineating its values (and disvalues) for them. Critics, like phenomenologists, try to speak the truth of their own experience clearly, so that others may find meaning in it.

The admission of the primacy of consciousness is central to existential phenomenology, distinguishing it from scientific phenomenology, claims to distill (reduce) phenomena to pure essences of ideas (eidos) through "eidetic reduction." A phenomenology which takes for granted our being-in-the-world owes more to insight than to an objective scientific stance. Existential phenomenology is vulnerable because it admits this level of subjectivity. It allows for irrationality and accident as human concerns. It is also paradoxical. While it seeks to describe the essence of things, it acknowledges the impossibility of knowing things purely as objects, since objects are relative to our perception of them. It celebrates subjectivity without surrendering to a view of a privatized or narcissistic world where individual consciousness is isolated, understanding and community an impossibility. It is the desire to reach beyond the boundaries of one's own consciousness to

understand how consciousness is human which in fact motivates existential phenomenology.

### Definition

Merleau-Ponty held that phenomenology united the poles of subjectivism and objectivism in its philosophical approach (6). We know that it was also an attempt, in its formulation of the existential concept of "the lived body," to mend the subject/object (mind/body) split in Western attitudes toward the body (7). When I turn to phenomenology, I am aware of a nondualistic way of using language, and seek modes of expression that will most closely appropriate the experience I wish to describe. Out of the descriptive process, I understand that I will be defining dance while drawing my readers into the process with me. In its own way, a description is a definition.

My process of phenomenological writing develops definitional anchors and experiential description toward an overview. Otherwise, I would lose my reader in a stream of consciousness which, however meaningful to me, may seem pointless and rambling to the reader. My philosophical obligation is to extract the meaningful essentials, to communicate to the reader well founded points of reference. These often come through questioning, even through questioning the questions.

For instance, instead of asking the typical question *What is dance*, I might get a fresh approach to my subject by asking another definitional question, such as *When is dance happening*, as I have in a recent paper. If I can answer the second question, I will be answering the first, and from a perspective that will not allow me to revert to assumed definitions. I examine this question descriptively from the dancer's experiential perspective:

When I dance, I am subtly attuned to my body and my motion in a totally different way than I ordinarily am in my everyday actions. That is, I seldom take notice of my ordinary comings and goings. I'm either in a rush, just getting things done, or maybe couch potatoing, trying to get going. The point is I'm not really paying much attention to my movement. I'm just doing it (or not, as the case may be). But, when I dance, I am acutely aware of my movement. I study it, try out new moves, study and perfect them, until I eventually turn my attention to their subtleties of feeling, and meaning. Finally, I feel free in them. In other words, I embody the motion. When I make any movement truly mine, I embody it. And in this, I experience what I would like to call "pure presence," a radiant power of feeling completely present to myself and connected to the world. This could also be described in other ways, but I think dancing moments can be named. These are those moments when our intentions toward the dance are realized. (8)

Further questions crop up immediately. What kinds of intentions are these? Is my intentionality in dance different from my intentionality in other kinds of movement? The subject of "the aesthetic" as it applies to performance would then become important, since one apparent distinction between dance movement and everyday actions is that dance is "performed" with qualitative attention toward the movement (even when it is not performed for others). Or we could say the

movement is intentionally designed and performed, not merely habitual and functional nor purely accidental. My description obligates me to look into these aesthetic distinctions and whether they might hold for all forms and cultures. It is also apparent from the description that the movement is not only intentionally performed, but it is also performed for itself, for the experience of moving this way. And there may be purposes beyond this intrinsic one that appear in dance according to cultural contexts. Most of our movement accomplishes some objective; it gets us some place or accomplishes a task. Generally dance movement does not, especially theatre dance. Rather its values are not utilitarian or practical; they are affective or aesthetic. In terms of human movement, aesthetic intent implicates intrinsic values which inhere in actions, be they appreciated for their beauty or for some other affective quality. (My brief description included affective aspects of freedom.)

### **Imagination**

Still another aspect of aesthetic intent is involved. The dancer deals not just with movement, but with the motivational source, idea, or metaphor behind the movement, that which the movement will bring to mind. Even if the dance is stylistically abstract, it will draw our attention to its unique unfolding of movement patterns in space-time. Movement patterns are also images, and they impress the imagination, as the word "image" implies.

The imaginative, or meaningful, level of the dance may be the focus of phenomenological description. Clearly there would be many ways into this, and the description would be influenced by the full intent of the dance—theatrical, ritual, social, etc. In the following description based on phrases of original choreography, I carry through my consciousness of freedom as a compelling experience in dance and discover that dance is less ephemeral than I have supposed:

My dance contains an original structure all its own, however related or unrelated to the world from whence it springs. As I move up, down, or spin around, I feel the purity of these directions. As movements, they take on specific identity. My own identity merges with the movement I experience. And I can repeat it. To a great extent, my dance is repeatable; it has permanence, but my life moves always into the future. I cannot relive it, nor any part of it, as I can my dance.

There are certain dance phrases I like to do again and again. They strike my imagination. In one there is an upward reach that seems to pull down the stars. I can depend on this happening. It is there when I do it. It fills me with wonder, and I feel free in it. In another more complex phrase, I also feel free, but it is more precarious. The phrase begins with a triangle of steps. First a glide forward on the right foot is mirrored with the left hand. As the glide gives in to a step to the left and rocks back to hold a step on the right, the hand polishes and smooths out the air over the triangle, then suspends in a momentary reach as the last step is held and the eyes look across the passing movement into the distance. Out of this, the left foot takes a soft lunge forward and grounds only enough to permit a slow smooth turn to the right, while the reaching arm folds

at the elbow and the hand brushes the heart, then extends again. The head bows down as I return to the soft lunge beginning, completing the turn. This phrase always invokes feelings of tenderness and devotion in me. It holds the fullness of some special gratitude, the more because the slow turn is risky. I could fall short or overturn. When I do it well, I feel peaceful, serene, and free.

Since phenomenology seeks to get at the core of things (phenomena), it aims for simplicity in the initial descriptive process. For me it often comes to rest on a single word, such as "freedom," as has come up thematically in the foregoing descriptions, but much depends on where I begin, the point of entry into my own consciousness of a particular dance experience, and whether I am conscious of my own dancing or paying attention to the dances of others. I am also aware that what I already know experientially and theoretically eventually enters the picture, but it is questioned, expanded, reinforced, or discarded in the process of extracting core values. Contrary to what might be expected, it is not easy to see (and give word to) the most basic constitutive elements of phenomena without the support of common assumptions and dualistic habits of thought which favor the objective status of phenomena apart from their manifestations in subjective life.

As a philosophical school, existential phenomenology returns to the traditional tasks of philosophy (9). Plato stated that "philosophy begins in wonder," and indeed this is the point of beginning for the phenomenologist. As I step back from my own processes to better understand them, I confess to giving myself up to a quest and questioning with a kind of blind faith that something in me already knows the answers, if I can somehow get out of my own way (remove my conditioning) long enough to glance them.

### **Addendum on Phenomenology and Feminism**

While I don't identify existential phenomenology directly with feminism, I am aware that the anti-philosophers at the foundation of existentialism, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and the later twentieth-century philosophers who extend that foundation with phenomenology, are in revolt against the traditions—especially the logic, essentialism, and idealism—of Western philosophy. They admit concerns into philosophy which are also important to feminists: the importance of individual consciousness, freedom, and choice. They are against determinism, and against the Western body/mind dualism propagating the body as inferior that also concerns feminists. Indeterminacy, expressed by Sartre's familiar "existence precedes essence," is at the root of existential self-responsibility and the existentially feminist assertion that biology is not destiny, as first taken up in the existentialist movement by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Existential phenomenologists, like feminists, are deconstructing a Western hierarchy.

Self and other are major existentialist themes, receiving their first extensive treatment as aspects of consciousness in existential phenomenology. Ann Daly's article in this series states that "woman has always been the other," and that women are consumed and debased in the objectifying "male gaze," suggesting a gender division according to intentions embodied in the act of looking at others. Sartre interpreted the "gaze of the other" as an objectifying and alienating gaze in *Being and*

*Nothingness*. He (a man) felt chill and usury in becoming the “object” of another’s look, as he describes at length. One of his most popularized expressions became known as “the gaze of the other,” fueling subsequent examinations in phenomenology and other areas of thought about what intentions gazes may contain and communicate.

While Sartre gave the first phenomenological account of the affective power of the objectifying gaze, Gabriel Marcel described the other as a source of “communion.” I take up both of their perspectives in examining dance performance as “body for other” in *Dance and the Lived Body*, developing a view that dance (though many of its practices may objectify the body) is in essence (or by definition) a human activity that seeks a bodily lived communion with others.

Phenomenology has explored a wide spectrum of intentionally regarding the self in relation to others, holding that the other always arises in context and imbued with the complications of individual selves related to particular others. For phenomenologists there has been no one gender specific way of gazing, but nothing to preclude an examination of gender as influencing intention in any action.

Questions concerning a possible “male gaze” and its implications for dance arise immediately for me. As a phenomenologist, I would need to examine the term without its rhetorical baggage to try to understand what men see, what they see when they look at women and when they look at women dancing (would reviews of male dance critics be useful?). If there is a pattern or way of looking so prevalent that it could be attributed to all or even most men, I would want to explore what intentions color or influence the pattern. I would need to set aside any assumptions I might have about what men see when they look at women, or I wouldn’t be doing phenomenology. I would inevitably need to admit my own consciousness and to examine what I may be aware of when men look at me, or at my dancing.

If I used the term “male gaze” as it originated in the film-feminism of Laura Mulvey and is adopted by Ann Daly, I would not be doing phenomenology. I would just be general-

izing to make a point, and conflating objectifying gazes with maleness in men (and woman?).

If, as a writer with feminist concerns and a phenomenological disposition, I took up a critique of “the male gaze” in the context of dehumanizing intentions attributed to it, I would have still other questions: what is the distinction between a possessive or consuming glance and one of erotic pleasure? Would an erotic magnetic attraction to the body of “the other” also be an aspect of the male gaze? If the female is “always the other,” as Daly states, wouldn’t this be the case? How then can we account for erotic pleasure in the way that women look at (perceive) the world and the bodies of others? Would we deny women erotic vision (seeing, looking, gazing)? Phenomenologically speaking (and as a woman), I know that I see, and I am also seen. On the other hand, I am also aware that as a woman, I have often been objectified in the gazes of men. However, it would not be so easy for me to generalize this perception, creating a lens through which I color the world and interpret the female as seen in dance (all dance).

#### **Addendum on Phenomenology and Ethnography**

Culture develops as people relate to each other and build common understandings and traditions. The phenomenologist’s admission of the subjective level of awareness is not clearly focused on the accumulated cultural knowledge that interests the ethnographer. Phenomenology aims first to describe immediately perceived features of anything, admitting the subjective character of perception. Cultural context inevitably arises in phenomenology in terms of “the other,” or the ever present understanding that subjectivity is conditioned by our relation to others—intersubjectivity. The very notion of a self depends on the notion of an other (or others) separate and distinct from the self. The concept of culture further assumes that distinct individuals can build relationships and share meaning. A general task of phenomenology would be to expose these notions and the constructs of culture as elements of human consciousness—or perspectives that we take on life as we literally “make meaning” out of it.

#### NOTES

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. xxi.

2. Ibid.

3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 164.

4. Ibid., p. 239

5. *Ideen zu einer reinen Phanomenologie und phanomenologischen Philosophie. Erster Buch. Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phanomenologie*, ed. Walter Beimen (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950). *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York:

Humanities Press, 1931: paperback ed., Collier, 1962). For a comprehensive survey of phenomenology including origins of the phenomenological method, its subsequent development, and its contemporary manifestations see Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*. 2 vols., 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

6. Merleau-Ponty, p. xix.

7. I dealt with this in terms of dance in the first chapter of *Dance and the Lived Body*, and Richard Zaner takes it up extensively in *The Problem of Embodiment*. Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), pp. 8-15. Richard Zaner, *The Problem of Embodiment*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), pp. 239-40. Arturo Fallico believed that the joining of the phenomenological method with existential concerns connected

philosophical efforts with ontological, religious, and aesthetic interests. For existentialism, it meant a transition from unsystematic literary expression to technical writing. For phenomenology, it signaled a change in application from pure idea to concrete problems of human life. Arturo B. Fallico, *Art and Existentialism* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 7

8. Sondra Fraleigh, "Good Intentions and Dancing Moments:

Agency, Freedom and Self Knowledge in Dance," Emory Cognition Project with the Mellon Foundation, Colloquium on the Self, Emory University, Atlanta Georgia, May 5, 1989.

9. David Stewart and Algis Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1974), pp. 5-6.