

Phenomenological psychiatry and literature: guardians of the “lifeworld”

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Fenomenološka psihijatrija i književnost: čuvari „životnog sveta“

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Abstract

This paper explores the deep parallels between phenomenological psychiatry and the modern novel, arguing that both disciplines act as “guardians” of the lived world (*Lebenswelt*) against the reductive tendencies of modern scientism. Drawing from phenomenological psychiatry – particularly the work of Jaspers, Minkowski, Binswanger, Fuchs, Sass, and Parnas – and literary modernism as articulated by Kundera and others, I show how both psychiatry and literature illuminate the subtle textures of subjective experience, including temporality, embodiment, and intersubjectivity. Literary modernism, exemplified in the works of Kafka, Woolf, Proust, and Kundera, not only anticipates but extends the phenomenological exploration of disturbances in these experiential structures, such as those seen in depression, schizophrenia, and trauma. By juxtaposing phenomenological psychiatry’s clinical accounts with literary portrayals, the paper reveals how the novel’s narrative imagination offers “eidetic” insights into lived experiences that exceed positivist, objectifying models of mind. The analysis extends to Serbian and Yugoslav literature, showing how authors such as Petrović, Kiš, Pavić, Pekić, and Živković have crafted intricate narratives that align with phenomenological psychiatry’s emphasis on the relational and historical embedding of subjectivity. Ultimately, this comparative analysis argues that both literature and phenomenological psychiatry fulfil an indispensable role: to safeguard and deepen our understanding of the lived world in an era dominated by abstraction and reductionism.

Keywords: phenomenology; literature; novel; psychopathology; phenomenological psychiatry

Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje povezanosti između fenomenološke psihijatrije i savremenog romana, tvrdeći da obe discipline deluju kao „čuvari“ životnog sveta (*Lebenswelt*) naspram reduktivnih tendencija savremenog scijentizma. Polazeći od fenomenološke psihijatrije – posebno radova Jaspersa, Minkovskog, Binsvanger, Fuhsa, Sasa i Parnasa – i moderne književnosti, prema tumačenju Kundere i drugih, pokazujem kako i psihijatrija i književnost osvetljuju tananu teksturu subjektivnog iskustva, poput temporalnosti, utelovljenosti i intersubjektivnosti. Moderna književnost, oličena u delima Kafke, Vulfave, Prusta i Kundere, obogaćuje fenomenološka istraživanja psihijatrijskih poremećaja, poput depresije, shizofrenije i posttraumatskog stresnog poremećaja. Upoređivanjem kliničkih opisa fenomenološke psihijatrije sa književnim prikazima, ovaj rad ukazuje da narativna imaginacija romana nudi eidetske uvide u proživljena iskustva koja prevazilaze pozitivističke, objektivizirajuće modele uma. Analiza uključuje i srpsku i jugoslovensku književnost, ukazujući kako su autori poput Petrovića, Kiša, Crnjanskog, Pavića, Pekića i Živkovića u svojim romanima stvorili i oblikovali složene narative koji se podudaraju sa pojmovima koji su istraživani u fenomenološkoj filozofskoj tradiciji, poput relacijske i istorijske ukorenjenosti subjekta. Komparativna analiza fenomenološke psihijatrije i savremenog romana ukazuje da književnost i fenomenološka psihijatrija dele sledeću ulogu: čuvanje i produbljivanje životnog sveta subjekta u vremenu dominacije redukcionizma.

Ključne reči: fenomenologija; književnost; roman; psihopatologija; fenomenološka psihijatrija

INTRODUCTION: CONVERGING ON TO THE LEFWORLD (*LEBENSWELT*)

Psychiatry and literature share a deep, multifaceted relationship^[1]. Since the late nineteenth century, the modern novel and clinical psychiatry have converged on parallel themes. Both sought to illuminate the inner structures of subjective experience, although by different means: the novelist through narrative imagination, the psychiatrist through phenomenological description^[2]. In their respective domains, each confronted what Husserl^[3] termed the *Lebenswelt* – the pre-theoretical lifeworld that anchors meaning prior to scientific abstraction.

Phenomenological psychiatry, from Jaspers' *General Psychopathology*^[4] through contemporary work by Fuchs^[5], Sass & Parnas^[6], among many others, conceptualizes mental disorders as disruptions in fundamental experiential structures such as temporality, embodiment and intersubjectivity. Concurrently, the European novel – particularly in the lineage from Cervantes to Proust, as outlined by Milan Kundera – has functioned as an artistic laboratory in which those same experiential structures become palpable.

In this paper, I argue that both phenomenological psychiatry and the art of the novel operate as parallel, mutually illuminating “guardians” of the lifeworld (in the Husserlian sense). Where psychiatry seeks to restore experiential coherence to patients whose sense of time, body or self seems fractured, the novel preserves and thematises these experiences, offering readers an eidetic access to forms of life that exceed positivist description. By placing these two discourses in dialogue, I aim to demonstrate (1) how literary narrative can enrich clinical understanding of psychopathological phenomena, and (2) how phenomenological concepts can furnish literary criticism with a rigorous vocabulary for analysing experiential structures discovered and elaborated by psychiatry.

CRISIS OF MODERNITY: FRAGMENTATION OF THE LIFEWORLD (*LEBENSWELT*)

In *The Crisis of European Sciences*^[3], Edmund Husserl has portrayed modern science as a “mathematisation of nature” that occludes the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) – the pre-theoretical horizon from which meanings first arise. For Husserl, the adjective “European” denoted a spiritual vocation, not a geography: beginning with Greek philosophy, Europe conceived the world *as a question* pursued for its own sake. Yet, at the threshold of the seventeenth century, Galileo and Descartes paved the way for a new intellectual style that narrowed that question to what could be measured, predicted, and technically mastered. Progress in the specialised sciences therefore issued in paradox: the more humanity advanced in knowledge, the more it “lost sight of the whole”^[4].

According to Kundera, whereas philosophy and science risk abstracting from lived reality, the European novel, beginning with Cervantes, undertakes an exacting inquiry into that reality. Each great novelist, Kundera argues, seizes a new aspect of Being neglected by formal thought: Cervantes explores the logic of adventure; Richardson, interior feeling; Balzac, historical embeddedness; Flaubert, everydayness; Tolstoy, the irruption of the irrational; Proust and Joyce, the phenomenality of time; Mann, the secret sway of myth. In this sense the novel becomes “the great European art that is nothing other than the investigation of forgotten being”^[4].

Phenomenological psychiatry inherits similar sentiments towards today’s reductionistic paradigms of mind and brain. Jaspers, Minkowski, Binswanger and their successors argue that mental disorders manifest as fractures within the structures that make up the self and its relationship to the world, such as temporality, embodiment, and intersubjectivity^[5–9]. Thus, the psychiatric clinic may become the place where the richness of subjective lifeworld is reclaimed

and explored beyond the confines of the medical, third-person, objectivity. To attend to a patient's disrupted lifeworld is, therefore, to counter the reductive drift that Husserl warned against: the tendency to overlook the textures of lived experience in favour of abstracted, objectifying models of mind and illness.

The trajectories from Husserl's crisis, through Kundera's poetics, and finally to phenomenological psychiatry's clinical praxis all converge on a single imperative: the safeguarding of the lifeworld against the reductive tendencies of modern scientism. In the following section I examine how specific novelistic treatments of temporality and embodiment can inform, and be informed by, contemporary phenomenological models of depression, trauma and schizophrenia.

THE NOVEL AS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL MIRROR

As previously stated, phenomenological psychiatry approaches mental disorder as a disturbance in fundamental structures of experience – such as temporality, embodiment, spatiality, and intersubjectivity – rather than as the mere malfunction of neuro-biological substrates^[5,10–12]. These structures correspond to what Husserl called the *Lebenswelt*: the pre-reflective ground on which any act of knowing or valuing becomes possible. Because the phenomenological method is based on the first-person description, that is, the intimate experience of an individual, it finds an unexpected ally in literary narrative, whose very medium is individual experience. As Moran observes, fiction furnishes “proto-phenomenological” data – rich, eidetic variations of consciousness that can refine clinical concepts such as self-disturbance, affective colouring, or corporeal alienation^[13].

Literary modernism anticipated many insights of phenomenological psychiatry. Louis A. Sass's seminal work *Madness and Modernism*^[2], draws striking parallels between the “enigmatic signs and symptoms of schizophrenia” and the modernist art and literature of the

early 20th century. Sass compares schizophrenia traits – hyper-reflexive self-awareness, temporal distortion, alienation – with the avant-garde writing of Kafka, Becket, and others, noting “illuminating parallels between anomalous experiences in schizophrenia and key aspects of modernism”^[2]. Mildenberg’s discussion of Kafka as “epiphanic modernism” – moments of sudden openness that reveal existential truths^[14] – resonates with Sass’s view that modernist texts enact a kind of psychopathology of form, illuminating the phenomenological structures that also preoccupy clinical psychiatry.

In this respect, literary experiments with phenomenological concepts such as temporality and embodiment not only anticipate but also extend the insights of phenomenological psychopathology. Thus, the novel becomes a “mirror” in which psychiatry may discern the subtleties of subjective experience with a clarity unavailable to methods coming from medical approaches alone.

TEMPORALITY: FROM LITERARY TEMPORALITY TO AFFECTIVE TIME

Minkowski’s classic thesis that schizophrenia entails a loss of *vital contact with reality* illustrates a disruption of the experience of time: the patient no longer co-moves with the rhythm of the world, but drifts in a kind of private temporality^[7,15]. Contemporary phenomenological research deepens this idea. For example, depression may be described as an empty “temporal vacuum”, mania as an over-accelerated *now*, and PTSD as a collapse of past into present through intrusive flashbacks^[16,17].

The European novel has long dramatised such temporal pathologies. Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*^[18] replaces linear succession with associative recurrence, challenging the conception of time and memory. The famous madeleine episode subsumes decades of Marcel’s life into a single sensory pulse, foreshadowing today’s interest in the non-linear temporality of traumatic memory.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*^[19] compresses a single day in London, yet dilates it through multiple internal time-streams; Septimus Smith's war-trauma exemplifies a phenomenological "double time" – clock time versus subjective duration – that echoes clinical accounts of dissociation in PTSD.

Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*^[20] illustrates the subjectivity in which the irreversibility of personal choice is juxtaposed with Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, illustrating the existential weightlessness often reported in chronic depression, where future projects appear devoid of gravity. Even Kafka's interminable waiting in *The Trial*,^[21] or search for the authority in *The Castle*^[22] enacts a phenomenology of stalled futurity akin to the hopeless temporality of melancholia.

These literary depictions of temporality can sharpen psychiatrists diagnostic-phenomenological sensibility: clinicians attuned to Proustian involuntary memory may better recognise the experiential structure of flashbacks; those mindful of Woolf's flux may hear the lived elasticity of time in bipolar cycling. Conversely, phenomenological psychiatry offers to the literature a rigorous philosophical-psychiatric lexicon, such as: *retentional-protensional collapse* which may be of use for analysing the modern novel^[23].

EMBODIMENT: FROM LIVED BODY TO CORPOREAL ALIENATION

Merleau-Ponty's distinction between the *Leib* (lived body) and the *Körper* (object body) has become axiomatic for phenomenological psychiatry^[24]. Depression "corporealises" the body – making every gesture heavy and opaque – whereas schizophrenia often "disembodies", generating feelings of puppet-like control or somatic intrusion^[25].

Novelists externalise these conditions with visceral precision. Kafka's *Metamorphosis*^[26] can be read as an allegory of radical disembodiment: Gregor awakens estranged from his shell of an insect, a situation that literalises the schizophrenic's complaint

of a body “no longer mine.” In Woolf, sensory hyper-attunement signals psychic fracture: Septimus hears birds speaking Greek, anticipating contemporary descriptions of hallucinatory synaesthesia in PTSD^[19]. Dostoevsky transforms epileptic aura into ecstatic illumination – Prince Myshkin’s pre-seizure rapture – demonstrating how neurological events colour selfhood^[27]. Proust’s asthmatic narrator shows how bodily fragility modulates memory and mood, aligning with phenomenological claims that our corporeal state frames the horizon of meaning^[18].

By comparing these portrayals to clinical vignettes – e.g., the depressed patient who describes her limbs as “poured concrete”, or the traumatised veteran who experiences the body as a site of alien alarm – psychiatrists can refine phenomenological constructs such as *corporealisation*, *hyper-embodiment*, and *intercorporeality*. At the same time, literary critics armed with those constructs can explain why Gregor’s plight elicits both horror and recognition: the text stages a disruption of the tacit body schema that is universally intelligible via empathy.

THE LEIFEWORLD IN SERBIAN AND YUGOSLAV LITERATURE

The safeguarding of the *Lebenswelt* has also been undertaken by writers in the Serbian and broader Yugoslav literary tradition, whose works attend to the secret folds of subjective life, often amid turbulent social circumstances. In these works, we find narratives that illuminate the texture of existence – the interplay of temporality, embodiment, and intersubjectivity – while also thematizing how historical forces fracture these very structures of experience.

Goran Petrović, for example, in his novel *Atlas opisan nebom* (eng. Atlas Described by the Sky)^[28], offers a kaleidoscopic vision of reality in which multiple temporalities and subjective perspectives intertwine. His prose suggests that lived time is not a straight line but a layered, polyphonic tapestry – a view consonant with the phenomenological idea of retentional-protensional temporal flow^[29]. The act of reading itself becomes a metaphor for the clinical act

of attending to the patient's narrative in all its complexity, resisting any reduction to linear causality or static typologies.

Danilo Kiš similarly engages with the existential ruptures produced by social violence and historical trauma. In *Grobница za Borisa Davidoviča* (eng. A Tomb for Boris Davidovich)^[30], Kiš narrates lives caught in the machinery of ideological persecution, where personal identity becomes fragmented and the lifeworld is displaced by an alien, bureaucratic order. These themes of self-fragmentation and historical alienation resonate strongly with phenomenological psychiatry's accounts of alienation and depersonalization^[2], suggesting that literature and psychiatry are mutually illuminating in understanding how social forces shape subjective experience.

Milorad Pavić's *Hazarski rečnik* (eng. Dictionary of the Khazars)^[31] – an encyclopaedic, hypertextual novel offering multiple reading paths – makes form itself a locus of phenomenological enquiry. As one critic puts it, Pavić's work allows readers to “compose the text as they dream it”, invoking multiple truths through active co-creation^[32]. His narrative collapses distinctions between past and present, myth and history, reminding us that meaning and identity emerge through engagement and reflection: true figures of lived-world engagement. In psychiatric terms, Pavić's work reflects the open nature of subjectivity and the role of narrative in self-constitution.

Borislav Pekić's magnum opus, *Zlatno runo* (eng. The Golden Fleece)^[33], is deeply engaged with the subjective experience of time and the moral self caught in historical flux. In this novel, Pekić weaves a vast genealogical tapestry of the elite Serbian family Njegovan, using multiple narrative voices and ironic distancing to reveal how individual subjectivity is both shaped by and resistant to historical determinism. In it, subjective freedom emerges through ethical engagement rather than historical fatalism. Pekić's refusal to reduce characters to mere

“products” of their time parallels the psychiatrist’s challenge to see the suffering self not merely as a symptom of social forces, but as an active, creative agent. His playful, reflexive narratives serve as a literary model for understanding how lived experience is never fully contained within linear temporality or static diagnostic labels. In this sense, Pekić stands as a guardian of the subjective lifeworld, offering a distinctly Serbian articulation of ethical subjectivity in the face of historical alienation.

Zoran Živković’s fiction – especially works like *Biblioteka* (eng. The Library)^[34], and *Četiri smrti i jedno vaskrsenje Fjodora Mihajloviča* (eng. Four Deaths and One Resurrection of Fyodor Mikhailovich)^[35] – offers a subtle exploration of the lived world through labyrinthine narrative structures. His characters often confront uncanny spaces or anomalous objects – libraries that contain impossible memories, rooms that are at once familiar and alien – echoing the corporeal and spatial alienation that feature in depersonalization syndromes^[2]. These settings act like embodied thresholds, where perception and reality waver, revealing the porous boundaries of selfhood and world. Živković’s stories also thematize intersubjectivity in their treatment of communication as fundamentally enigmatic: dialogues in his works often require phenomenological openness to interpret meaning from fragmented cues – much as psychiatrists do when navigating the disrupted intersubjective bridges in psychosis^[36]. In this sense, his work stands as a literary analogue to the clinical task of safeguarding the subjectivity of the lifeworld of the patient.

PSYCHIATRY AND THE NOVEL AS GUARDIANS OF THE LIFE WORLD

In summary, a phenomenological psychiatry perspective reveals deep congruencies between the aims of psychiatry and the function of the contemporary novel. Both endeavour to understand and preserve the lifeworld of human experience in its full breadth – temporal flow, spatial and embodied context, relational life, and personal identity. The novel, termed here a

“guardian of the lifeworld”, complements psychiatry by offering rich, qualitative insights into subjective experience that no diagnostic manual or brain scan can provide. As Mishara observes, literature can record the dynamics of self and consciousness with a certain intimacy beyond the reach of neuroscience^[37]. Namely, novelists and insightful critics guard the lived world by capturing the texture of experience – the flow of time, the feel of a body, the reach toward others – in ways that abstract science cannot.

Conversely, psychiatric and phenomenological theories provide frameworks that can deepen our literary analysis – for instance, recognizing a character’s existential crisis as a disruption of life-world structures, or using concepts like hyper-reflexivity, lifeworld, or intercorporeality to name what a novel is showing us.

Writers like Dostoevsky, Kafka, Woolf, Proust, Kundera, Petrović, Pavić, Kiš, Pekić, Živković (among many others) have, in effect, conducted phenomenological investigations through storytelling. Their works keep alive certain truths of experience – the torment of conscience, the absurdity of bureaucracy, the stream of thought, the scent of memory, the comedy and tragedy of bodily existence – which enrich our collective understanding. This is one of the reasons their novels endure and remain objects of study across disciplines.

Ultimately, to call novels and phenomenological psychiatry “guardians of the lived world” is to assert that both of these disciplines have an indispensable role in safeguarding the subjective, aspects of life in an era often objectivized, quantitative or impersonal approaches.

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