

2018

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## Recommended Citation

Hodge, James J. (2018) "Suffering the Modernist Legacy of Husserlian Phenomenology," *Criticism*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol59/iss1/9>

# SUFFERING THE MODERNIST LEGACY OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

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*Testing the Limit: Derrida, Levinas, Henry, and the Phenomenological Tradition* by François-David Sebbah. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012. Pp. 336. \$90.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Phenomenology has received a curiously spotty reception in the wake of the influx of Continental philosophy in language departments in North America beginning in the 1960s. Of the three major philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, Martin Heidegger remains the most widely read, yet he is also regularly discussed as though somehow beyond the context of phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961 deprived him of the opportunity to engage the emerging Anglo-American appetite for French theory in person and in "the flesh." More significantly, it denied him the chance of responding to the casual statements levied against phenomenology in the works of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and other stars of the '68 generation. And although his voluminous and antiseptic prose has undoubtedly turned off many potential readers, Edmund Husserl's legacy has suffered from the errant impression that Jacques Derrida's most famous works from 1967—including *Of Grammatology* and especially *Voice and Phenomenon*—constitute something of a summary rejection of Husserl's project insofar as it represents the grand villain of the "metaphysics of presence." Husserl's reputation—again, within language departments and not necessarily philosophy departments—has suffered in inverse correlation with Derrida's status

as perhaps the most influential and famous avatar of so-called “French theory.” This situation has always been quite unfair to Husserl and phenomenology more generally.

With the rise of interest in the body, embodiment, and affect in the last two decades or so, the situation has started to change. Phenomenology has begun to achieve more critical currency. Merleau-Ponty’s work has proven particularly important for the work of several influential scholars in the fields of film studies and new media studies. Beyond the work of Vivian Sobchack and Mark B. N. Hansen, however, the word *phenomenology* has largely become disconnected from its philosophical origins.<sup>1</sup> Use of the word *phenomenological* as a synonym for embodied experience constitutes merely the most egregious symptom of this condition. Discussion of Husserl’s work, it almost goes without saying, remains marginal at best, and the very meaning of phenomenology remains unproductively elusive.

Although it is not aimed at correcting these problems of North American literary and media studies, Stephen Barker’s translation of François-David Sebbah’s 2001 monograph *Testing the Limit* offers a potent resource for those interested in not only phenomenology but in understanding its legacy for several important continental philosophers. The specific achievement of Sebbah’s text lies with his

careful and revealing readings of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, and Jean-Luc Marion among a group of French philosophers whose concern with issues of givenness, time, and subjectivity all ultimately derive from Husserl and thus share a certain family resemblance. Sebbah refers to these philosophers as phenomenologists, a key decision no doubt meant to provoke. It is no surprise to discuss Henry or Marion as phenomenologists, but eyebrows might be raised with respect to Derrida and Levinas. Even though Levinas studied with both Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg, and Derrida spent the first decade of his career writing about Husserl, both thinkers are generally thought of as breaking with phenomenology in order to establish their own philosophical projects. Carefully avoiding the politics of labeling philosophers as phenomenologists with a capital P, Sebbah admirably explores their work as operating within the longer tradition of phenomenology in a refreshingly nonpartisan and nongenerationalist manner.

Sebbah synthesizes the work of these often very different philosophers by devoting himself to specifying how each operates at the extreme limits of Husserlian phenomenology. To pursue this project, Sebbah explicitly suspends consideration of phenomenology’s more recent theological turn (and

silently suspends analysis of similarly contemporary efforts to naturalize phenomenology in concert with research in cognitive science and neuroscience).<sup>2</sup> At least in the North American context, the impact of this decision registers beyond the already significant but ultimately highly specialized payoff associated with the astute reconsideration of the rich work of individual philosophers. More broadly, Sebbah's work productively opens up the question of the phenomenological tradition as part of a larger question of historicizing phenomenology and its heirs within a modernist tradition.

Phenomenology properly emerges with Husserl in the early twentieth century. As Husserl and many other practitioners observe, phenomenology is not so much a school of philosophy as a method for the investigation into phenomena and their fundamentally partial appearance to consciousness or, as Husserl puts it, perception by adumbration. The suspension or bracketing of empirical reality—what is generally known as the universal *epoché*—constitutes the distinctive methodological operation of Husserlian phenomenology. The meaning, extent, and dubious success of the *epoché*, then, represent one of the most significant themes in the phenomenological tradition. Many writers might be content to cast judgment on Husserl's philosophical project accordingly. To his

great credit, Sebbah reads Derrida, Levinas, and Henry as not breaking with Husserlian phenomenology on the basis of its success or failure, but continually dwelling at the extreme limits of the phenomenological enterprise in the aporia of phenomenality and nongiveness as the “very matrix of all aporia” composing phenomenology as “less a field of problems than a field of *aporias*” that also includes time and subjectivity (245, 244). It is this shared sense of a common *modus operandi* among Derrida, Levinas, and Henry that inspires the richly suggestive title of Sebbah's study: *L'épreuve de la limite*. Translated into English as *Testing the Limit*, Sebbah's use of the term *épreuve* taps into its polyvalence as meaning a test, an experience, and suffering. Each meaning of the term suggests a slightly different dimension of Sebbah's project. On the one hand, he indicates that Derrida, Levinas, and Henry all put the limits of phenomenology to the test, so to speak. But further, their writings also constitute a continual working-through of the fundamentally irresolvable aporias that preoccupy phenomenological investigation—especially the aforementioned issues of givenness, time, and subjectivity. These writers experience the limit in their own writing and we with them. Finally, as Sebbah reflects, the experience of reading Derrida, Levinas, and Henry—as many readers may agree with a knowing wink—can

be somewhat traumatic. The frequently opaque, nonlogical—which is not to say illogical—and literary quality of their writings expresses the ordeal of testing the limits of phenomenology. And it is this observation, perhaps more than any other sustained analysis in the book, that opens up Sebbah's project to wider stakes.

Here it becomes helpful to recall Martin Jay's astute placement of phenomenology in the wider historical field of modernism. Modernism, of course, is and has been many things, yet one particularly dominant characterization of its spirit concerns what Jay, citing Renato Poggioli, calls its "mystique of purity."<sup>3</sup> Instanced by the incessant theoretical and practical concern of many artists and critics alike to determine the unique characteristics of art forms such as painting, cinema, and literature—for example, Wassily Kandinsky, Hans Richter, and Gertrude Stein and Clement Greenberg, André Bazin, and the New Critics—this drive similarly informs phenomenology as, first and foremost, a discourse founded against what philosophers of the day termed *psychologism*, or the tendency to reduce the mind to the psyche in such a way that obscures the apodictic nature of logic and mathematics in a shroud of crude relativism. While it is impossible to rehearse the problem of psychologism here, it suffices to say that the Husserlian *epoché*

constitutes a classically modernist methodological attempt to suspend every contaminating influence from the outside world that might obfuscate knowledge of the things themselves. The modernist drive to isolate, suspend, and purify lies behind both the power and the limits of Husserlian phenomenology. And it is precisely these limits to which Sebbah attends both in his method and his critical readings. It is perhaps instructive to remember this larger context of modernism in reading Sebbah's claim about his own methodology. He writes that it is not his goal to "ask questions *of* a text, but rather to think *within* a text, to take it as a *medium* allowing for the possibility of a thought that no other has ever made or will ever make possible" (11). One finds here some of the core ideas of the modernist drive so briefly sketched earlier, including a certain hermeticism poised against the possibility of mixing or comparing, as well as something of a background notion of medium specificity. No doubt Sebbah does not intend to invoke Clement Greenberg, yet viewed alongside modernism one detects the remarkable notion of Husserlian phenomenology as a philosophical medium always straining to stave off the influence of the mixed media of empirical reality.

Sebbah's lucid, always probing analyses of his subjects likewise reveal further connection with

phenomenology's heritage in the writings of mid- and late-twenty-first-century French philosophers. It is difficult to miss the influence of modernism at certain moments, as when Sebbah cites Levinas's idea that to listen to music is to resist dance (as though confronting one artistic genre necessitates the suspension of another). At other moments, the generative confluence of phenomenology, modernism, and literary analysis reveals a deeper affinity. Sebbah's analyses of Levinas and Derrida on literary works by Edgar Allan Poe and James Joyce here prove remarkable. As Sebbah writes, Levinas's discussion of the fear of being interred alive in Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" (1846) starkly illustrates the broader themes of alterity at the root of givenness and subjectivity, or the "horror of being" (144). This citation vividly aligns Levinas's philosophical project and an early master of modern American literature with Sebbah's own stated methodological injunction to dwell *within* the medium of a text to its limit. Sebbah's emphasis of Derrida's reading of the circulation of breath in *Ulysses* (1922) similarly aligns modernist literature with the investigation of core problems of subjectivity. More broadly, the payoff, for Sebbah, of reading Derrida as a phenomenologist lies at least in part with the way such a view reorients our understanding of deconstruction as

expressing both "the impossibility of the phenomenological reduction and the impossibility of not *desiring* the reduction" (56). The wider payoff may be to historicize deconstruction in terms of the longer phenomenological and modernist inheritance of its singular preference for articulating the aporias of language—that is, of the very limits of language.

Sebbah's affinity for the aporias of thought finally, and productively, ends on the issue of rhythm. Dwelling with the medium of phenomenological thought provides its own ongoing reward, rhetorically invoked with the frequent mentions of *mise en abyme* and the flicker of givenness and nongiveness. "Rhythm," Sebbah writes, "ceaselessly awakens phenomenality" (200). Such rhythm can be scrutinized only within the limits of phenomenological investigation. If phenomenology constitutes a kind of modernist formalism, then it is also of an unusually restless variety that resists schematic thinking—indeed, that resists ending, solidity, or firm labels for concepts that will always require testing and retesting. And, as Sebbah's insightful book demonstrates, perhaps the only way to gain insight into such a restless rhythm is to participate within it oneself, to join one's thought to an ongoing test of a method that seeks to block everything out but the thing itself. Some have scoffed at the supposedly idealist

fruitlessness of such an endeavor, but, as Sebbah's book attests, so much can be gained by exploring its limits, as well as the modernist drive that informs its practice.

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#### NOTES

1. See Vivia Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
2. On the confluence of phenomenology and neuroscience, see Jean Petitot et al., eds., *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, Writing Science (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
3. Martin Jay, "Modernism and the Specter of Psychologism," in *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880–1940*, ed. Mark S. Micale, Cultural Sitings (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 352–65.