Introduction

This work originated, or at least received its impetus, in my encounter with certain texts of Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, and Jacques Derrida.

The encounter was traumatic, so my pleasure in reading philosophy is now never free of a certain imposed discomfort. I had numerous startling surprises. First, it seemed that these texts were, at least in significant part, literary texts—which certainly does not mean that this accounts for their "essence" or that they should therefore be denied the status of philosophical texts—or, on the other hand, that we should argue in favor of a *confusion* between the philosophic and the literary. It simply means, in the first place, that the philosophical necessity for the unveiling of what *is*, *as* it is, is not in these texts separable from the work of language—language considered as something that must be "worked"—or from any specific style.

Additionally (and this is an indication of their traumatic power), one of the significant stylistic traits shared by these texts is *violence*, a violence done to the *logos* itself in its apophantic exigency as manifested, for example, in its persistent practice of paradox, metaphor, oxymoron, and parataxis.[1] And the reader is the first to be exposed to this violence, if reading a text entails re-creating for oneself the acts of thought it suggests.

These works clearly produce meaning, but do they not also dangerously deviate from the standards of evidence and the transparency of language characterizing the Husserlian idea of phenomenology as, precisely, a

"rigorous science"? These are necessary questions, since they relate to phenomenology, and in each case this relationship concerns its very essence. My attempt here will be to demonstrate that the opposite is also true: that phenomenology is concerned, in *its* very essence, with its relationship to itself and to these questions. It must be understood, however—and this is vitally important—that none of the texts examined here is inscribed exactly on the "axis" of the phenomenology preceding them: all claim in one way or another to exceed it.

In any case, if it is true that for Adjukiewicz philosophy belongs to the evolution of logical positivism, and Husserlian *Wesensschau* was already an example of metaphoric usage and was simply suggestive of language in its conflict with direct, literal, univocal expression (a conflict necessary to the explicit argumentation required for a true scientific philosophy), then we can easily glimpse the kind of judgment to which we could submit Levinas's, Henry's, and Derrida's works on the basis of such criteria.

I am certainly not holding to these criteria: to do so would simply render the specific readings of the authors I am interested in here impossible. The fact remains, however, that they do put to the crudest of tests any requirement of clarity and explicit argumentation that apparently needs to be maintained in order for philosophy to be philosophy. Yet an essential aspect of this requirement is the courage to venture into regions in which it tests the *limit* of its own power: the texts we will examine will bring us to this limit—one of the essential aspects of their traumatic nature.

The issue of this limit can be made clearer if we concentrate on the related question of the practice of phenomenological method. In fact, it seems that these texts' stylistic violence can be more precisely described as the fact of an "excessive" style. This in turn means that inseparable from any writing style a mode of phenomenological description is also brought into question.

But do these authors not, paradoxically enough, test out the idea that adhering to radicality can be pushed too far? That the discourse of radicality can be inverted into merely excessive discourse doing violence to the constraints of its own proper coherence and pertinence? Thus, it is in fact the fundamental operation of the phenomenological reduction itself that is in play: the phenomenological reduction as renewal [*reconduction*] of the phenomenological gaze, as what appears to the how? and the where?

of what appears; that is, to pure appearance? And is the phenomenological reduction not itself susceptible to being betrayed in the very act of wanting to be *too* radical?

Could there be a reading of Michel Henry, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida that does *not* confront their excessive application of the phenomenological method? Indeed, a phenomenology *of* excess necessarily understanding the genitive as objective as well as subjective; a phenomenological practice having lost all sense of proportion and of critical stresses, as it moves toward a description of excess itself; a phenomenology that is the victim of immoderation, since its focus on the originary would lead ineluctably and in perverse ways to its being moved ever closer toward that which *exceeds* the field of appearance; a phenomenology characterized by what might be called an *escalation of the originary*. In conventional terms we might connect a charge of phenomenology's "poetization" to that of its "theologization"; in the following I will try to demonstrate that if the latter actually means posing a quite necessary question to phenomenological practice, it still obscures the complexity and richness of that practice: by *identifying* phenomenology as a simple repetition of the theological project, do we not risk sidestepping—or even seeking to evade—this specific test? Is not every excessive practice naturally theological? We must ask this last question, however, taking care not to expand another one: has not *all* excessive practice, even when not identifying itself as "theologizing," always had to confront this risk, this temptation?

We must not allow the question of the "theological turn" to be our investigation's foundation,[2] yet we must equally attempt not to evade its problematic charge, or even to achieve its resolution, by addressing the question underlying this entire reading: what is it that we can expect, in phenomenology, from a practice of excess?

This question, then, at least up to a certain point, is manifestly of the Kantian type: with regard to the practice of the phenomenological method we can sense the risk of what Kant calls the dialectic of the "logic of appearance" of knowledge in general: the movement of that which is conveyed toward what exceeds the domain of the given. We know that for Kant this movement is illegitimate and the producer of illusions; it is the ineluctable perversion of a human characteristic that is nonetheless essential and even "positive" within the mind: our desire for the absolute

and for totality (a desire replayed in phenomenology as the desire for originarity).

To be interested in the practice of excess is thus, precisely, to be interested in the practice of the *limit*, the limit through whose transgression alone excess can be what it is. In fact, in the case of phenomenology, the legitimate limit—the limit as legitimizing norm—is the limit of the domain of what appears *as* it appears, the limit of the *given*. Our interrogation here, then, continues to be inspired by Kant, but it will become clear that our interpretation of this limit's signification—and of the use we intend to make of it—is not Kantian.

The first part of this study attempts to deepen, to clarify, and to support this problematic. Its particular orientation, however, will be laid out as follows: if an excessive practice of the phenomenological method tends to destroy the constraints proper to it, then the question becomes one of knowing if such a violence can be converted into something fruitful. Such an eventual fecundity can only be instigated immediately, from the very start, since it is and must be a matter of *initial* violence. But what would be, in general, a *good usage* for the limit, and for excess, in and of phenomenology? Do the texts we will address present a useful manner of utilizing excess within phenomenology? Or are they rather entirely excessive texts whose eventual fruitfulness depends from the outset, perhaps exclusively, on the use the reader makes of them?

The present interrogation is formulated according to two irreducibly intertwined dimensional questions: Is there an inherent fecundity of these phenomenological practices within a description of appearance as such? Is the traumatism inflicted by these texts' excesses, paradoxically, capable of engendering its addressee, or at least its receiver, as a philosophizing subject?

It should be understood that the impression of the reading being laid out here—this traumatism in encountering these texts—is not simply the most immediate access to the problem, and certainly not the most superficial. If these works pose the question of the correct usage or the correct regulating of this excess, then this questioning (which might be called an ethics) is indissociable from an aesthetics of reception: as the reader of these texts, I must accept the responsibility for their usage in the very gesture by which I nonetheless expose myself integrally to their traumatic

power, and this is just as much a matter of their phenomenological fecundity as of my emergence as a philosophizing subject.

My effort will be to show that this practice of the limit, of excess, is exemplarily brought into play in the confrontation with temporality (Part 2).

I will then work to characterize more clearly the test (*as* a test) from which the Self emerges, or more precisely that experiences it as always already there (Part 3). In fact, if excess is always the threat of destruction, could it be brought to life in any way other than through a test? And is it not through such a test that I am *myself*, in the sense in which I "prove" myself *to be* myself? And further, is the test of the limit not always already in the same gesture the test of the Self *by* itself—that is, of the Self emerging from the test *of* the Self?

The idea of "the test of subjectivity" is explicitly thematized by Michel Henry. I will attempt in what follows to show that the Levinasian notion of "traumatism" from which the Self emerges and the Derridean notion of the "endurance" of the limit at which one encounters oneself also allow for the formulation, in a clear and precise manner, of the expression "test of subjectivity." For these three thinkers, this process is a matter of indicating an experience *that is not one*, since it is not constituted by a subject, and that consequently precedes both all activity of the subject and all objectivizing knowledge. But it thus also presupposes a connection to a self from which the Self arises, in the obscurity and passivity of auto-affection: this is precisely the question of "self-testing [*s'éprouver*]."

It is therefore a powerful characteristic of the works we will examine to make subjectivity, in its differing configurations, originary in its own manner, even though they will have stripped it of the prerogatives and privileges that have accrued to it in the modern world and relegated it to a radical passivity, to the pure self-immanence of a subjectivity "driven back on itself" in an expression as Levinasian as it is Henrian. And this is accomplished in the same gesture through which they have shown that this subjectivity is engendered by an injunction older than itself. I will try to describe, without becoming absurd, how subjectivity can *simultaneously* be in some sense originary to itself, caught in advance in the immanence of the test of its auto-affection, so to speak, *and* arise despite the risks of being "older than itself."

In other words, I want to suggest that in their practice—their test-ing—of phenomenology, these three writers have all exceeded intentional-ity (the Husserlian term for the milieu of everything that appears insofar as it appears and, more radically, of the power to give itself everything that is given) in the direction (a direction no doubt not exclusive for all, but always decisive) of a Self, a Self older than the knowledge of intentionality. And it is, moreover, an idea common to all three that they have made their texts just as much a witness to this test as its thematic description.

We must understand that it is essential that these philosophies have for their common theme a problematic of originary subjectivity in its con-nection with an address older than itself, and, at the same time, that it consists in a sense entirely of *one* address: they appear to their addressee through a traumatism under the ambivalent sign both of destruction and of the engendering of a philosophizing subjectivity.

The fourth part of my inquiry will shed light on what might provi-sionally and somewhat awkwardly be understood as the *mise en abyme* of these works' thematic form.

Before plunging into the heart of the matter, it is necessary to point out some supplementary aspects of the nature of the project at hand and its methodology.

Our focus here will not be the presentation of a *panorama* of con-temporary French phenomenology, for several related reasons.

First, many eminent representatives of contemporary French phe-nomenology are not evoked here, not even allusively or indirectly. My project is a more modest one, interested only in a particular *family* of contemporary French phenomenology. What do I mean by this? A fam-ily is characterized by a "family likeness"; that is, by a resemblance. And a "resemblance" is a characteristic that can never be completely clarified and formalized, even though it gives the impression of being meaning-ful. It can never be formalized because by definition it is not an *exact* resemblance: if it were, it would be an *identity*. All resemblance contains a difference, and, conversely, in it difference is present as such only on the basis of a commonality. Wittgenstein thematizes the idea of a "fam-ily" as being freed from a purely formal characteristic of language,[3] and he does this in the following way: for him it is a question of marking the fact that there can be a complicated network of linked significant

and irreducible resemblances uniting differing elements; a network never integrally formalizable yet that can nonetheless permit the inscription of these different elements in a single and unique "family," even while they do not share a group of commonly articulable properties. These elements share a "family resemblance." Just as there is thus no "essential" common denominator for the different elements composing a "family," the *borders* of a family are not clean ones: they are susceptible to modification from other adopted perspectives. The intrinsic haziness of the "family" frontier means that this frontier can be refigured relative to the specific stakes of one or another moment of reflection.

I want to demonstrate here a particular kind of relation that is comparable to Wittgenstein's "family resemblance." I will thus try to show that if no common denominator essential to each can be found in the works addressed—such a reading would be simply reductive—these works still remain in not always explicit relationships that can determine and open out a specifically thinkable field.

It would be unnecessary to acknowledge the need for an interest in "family resemblance" if we did not want to renounce our ordinary understanding of the richness of meaning overflowing the domain of exactitude. Since the "border" of a family is by definition unclear, it will always be important to indicate the resemblance of this or that thinker to the family being explored even when it is not apparent at first glance. Such a resemblance emerges from a specific viewpoint. Rendering the resultant frontier even more complex will in no case alter the power of analysis and determination; on the contrary, it is precisely in the varying of the angles of attack, in the play of resemblances and differences, that a family resemblance can be incrementally affirmed. The progress of this exploration will thus proceed less by linear accumulation than by variations in those angles of attack on the problematic at hand. We must, however, guard against a possible default. There must be no question of throwing oneself into an endless quest for resemblances and differences; a great deal of insipidity and coarseness would inevitably result from any attempt to demonstrate that in some sense Levinas, Henry, and Derrida are saying the same thing; immense naïveté would be required to make such a claim despite their many differences. My task is thus the following: while laying out a "family resemblance," to open out a field of thought

in its own properly problematic configuration, to assist in bringing it to light. And also, doubtless, to see that the link uniting the different works in this family is all the stronger in that they do *not* conjoin integrally—do not melt together—their discrete differences into a singularity, as Wittgenstein says, in the same way that a cable's separate strands conjoin to augment the cable's strength.

In one sense, this work can be read as an attempt at the rigorous description of this kind of family within contemporary French phenomenology. A too-great dissimilarity within this or that trait constitutive of the given family would mean that a particular work, or even a particular writer's oeuvre, could not properly be a focus of our concerns, though we might refer to it in order to mark a particular affinity or, contrarily, a counterpoint.

Thus, we will not focus on the work of Paul Ricoeur, since I have retained the violent and excessive nature of the gesture of thought as a constitutive trait of the family resemblance I am exploring; as is well known, Ricoeur locates his philosophical practice under the sign of a respectful hermeneutic whose generosity makes a powerful case precisely *against* a concentration on the violence in these texts.

As another example, though we will refer to the work of Jean-Toussaint Desanti on certain vital points, we can still not fully integrate him into the family: Desanti might be suspected of wanting to exceed the field of appearance; his phenomenology, far from making subjectivity originary, tends in a structuralist gesture toward reading it out of a system of *formal* configurations. Although he can be quite instructive, I will refer to him in order to bring out and to amplify a resemblance between Desantian and Derridean descriptions of temporality.

As a final example, I will frequently characterize the family on which I focus by contrasting it with another family—one that will, however, be approached only at an angle, not through its own problematics. The principal members of this other family are, chronologically, Henri Maldiney, Jacques Garelli, and Marc Richir. This family shares the constitutive trait of drawing its inspiration from Merleau-Pontian phenomenology; it thus also tends to concentrate on what exceeds and what is prior to intentionality, but this gesture, far from leading it toward an originary subjectivity, in fact leads it toward an originary anonymity. The importance of this

Merleau-Pontian influence means that Marc Richir's work cannot be integrated into the family on which I will be focusing here even though Richir has thematized a phenomenology of excess that is in some respects close to Levinas's.

Concentrating, thus, on a certain restricted family of contemporary French phenomenology will mean that the "family portrait" I construct here will necessarily be limited, incomplete.

One further possible misunderstanding must be prevented: in what follows I will absolutely not be constructing a map: the work at hand is not that of mapping, in any strict sense, the home territory of contemporary French phenomenology—or even of one of its constituent families. My aim is more modest, and not simply because it is not exhaustive: it consists simply in relating the development that has occurred within a particular area of contemporary French phenomenology, all the more since we have approached it as a landscape and not as a space, to recall Maldiney's distinction reading Erwin Straus. The changing, always unfinished, nature of this field constrains me to adopt the only position possible relative to works of thought: immersion in an *Umwelt* rather than taking the position of a spectator before what would then be merely an object. To think *within* works is to be a stroller in a particular countryside, not a spectator before a map representing a space of thought.

This characterization is not without implications: such a countryside is what it is because it is focused by a consciousness situated within it, which then becomes the absolute focus of that consciousness, disconnected from any integration into a larger space of which it might be part: "We are immersed in it: our 'here' refers only to itself. Wherever we step, our horizon moves with us. We are always at the origin. We are lost," as Maldiney writes,[4] which means that the landscape and the singular consciousness moving through it are dedicated to each other, and that it is this co-originary relationship that gives each its identity just as much as it relates them to each other. It would thus be a gross error to conclude that though one is strolling through this landscape but does not entirely traverse it, therefore this landscape has no other value than the entirely relative and arbitrary one of painting private impressions lacking all objectivity. If it is true that without a strolling figure there is no countryside, no

landscape, the still-inchoate countryside nonetheless limits the perspective that gives birth to it, orienting the work of the very gestures that manifest it.[5] In order to recall the nature of phenomenological practice, we should quickly recall a comparison made by Desanti: like the carpenter, the phenomenologist must in certain respects "work"—"open up"—his material; he must separate it from its surface in order to *make it appear*—but this action is by then already guided by the limitations and constraints of the thing itself, such as the wood's grain and knots.

The glance I want to cast "into" the countryside rather than "onto" it constitutes the composting soil in which it is rooted and that conceals the position of the overview that produces the object. The phenomenologist attempts to connect to this model in life just as in texts, even while the latter operate as frames for the former. According to Maldiney, we can learn only through rigorous paradoxes, *orienting* ourselves within a landscape of thought as though in a landscape as such; we must know how to "lose ourselves"; that is, precisely, to "throw ourselves out the window" *into* it, letting ourselves be traversed by it, seized in its always-prior *rhythm*, constantly renewing it.[6]

In this sense, *description* of the field is indissociable from *intervention* in the field. The description proposed here intends to be neither arbitrary nor "objective." This strategy is of interest to philosophy in that as it constructs itself, by definition it cannot be the determination of an object, since objectification implies distancing as well as rupture from the object and thus its successful completion. If "history" consists of a practice of, so to speak, separating oneself from the dead in order to certify and even to perfect the dead in one's act of distancing them through objectification,[7] then our work here arises in no sense from the genre of the history of philosophy.[8]

It would be equally erroneous, however, to deduce from this that we will not be concerned with filiation. Rather, we will be preoccupied with it in one specific sense: the familial texts being read here could be considered to be an attempt at receiving, and witnessing, a transmission. This can occur only on the condition that we take these texts into consideration as living things (whether their authors are still living or long dead), that is, as capable of engendering and being engendered, at the potential cost, no doubt, of always-new displacements, since the life of thought, like life in general, never repeats itself.[9]

The project I am describing here promulgates a way of reading that allows us to take precautions against the risk of being dissipated among various works and themes. This is precisely why I am certainly not proposing any synthesis of the philosophical content of Derrida, Henry, and Levinas as accompanied by a "glimpse" at some other works: such an effort is hardly philosophical. Nor will I engage here, in the manner of a historian of philosophy, in a genetic and structural study of these works in a step-by-step constitution of their problematics: such an effort exceeds my competence as much as the proportions of my intent; in any case, it presupposes a constituted object that, as I have already insisted, is not relevant here. Let me simply say from the outset that the specificity of this connection with the corpus addressed here is clearly marked by the contamination at work between my discourse and its own, even while I will make operational such notions as "diachrony" and "double bind," borrowed from Levinas and Derrida, respectively. This undoubtedly poses some methodological problems, the price to be paid for approaching philosophical texts in the only appropriate manner: not to summarize doctrinal content, not to analyze a particular argument or system, not to locate principal concepts, not even 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. That is, it is a matter of becoming permeable not to contents, and not even to questions, but to a "gesture of thought," to a certain way of posing questions in order to revitalize them, which implies simultaneously letting them take possession of us, since properly seen, they are a field of forces, and to dislodge them from any particular teleology, just as a navigator is simultaneously carried along by water and wind and is oriented there.

Our two chief instructors here, though they might initially seem to be antithetical to each other, are Bergson and Derrida, Bergson because he engages in raising himself beyond the extension of doctrine toward the intensity of intuition as a living force deployed in it, but that is also diluted and masked there.[10] That is, he invites us to seize what we might freely call a writer's "diacritical posture," as inscribed in the field of philosophy through the production of (a) difference. Bergson also invites us less to locate constituted notions than the matrix of their constitution, the style—in Leo Spitzer's sense—of a thought.

But from another perspective, must we not be on guard against—or at least question—what might be the full presence to itself of an intuition, and henceforth to return to text(s) less as faithful guardian(s) of well-argued thought than as marginal, perhaps even originarily, distancing us from the senses and eroding presence? This working hypothesis is clearly Derridean, and the addressing of texts to which we will invite Derrida does not consist of following a well-mastered argumentation but rather of suspending it, forcing it toward the nonmasterful—deconstructing it. Faced with adopting such a method, one must have an obvious reticence: paradoxically, does not forcing textual mastery on oneself present itself as an effect of mastery? And does deconstructing mastery not manifest itself as an attitude of overarching with regard to a text? It is certainly not a question of foreclosing it but of opening it out—but immediately the spectre of mastery reappears, insofar as even if the figure of the master is no longer there to question everything, its ironic spectre questions from "nowhere." To make such a claim would be to do justice to Derridean deconstruction. We must never forget that it is not a matter of taking the text unaware but, in a motivation more originary, to let it take itself by surprise. Deconstruction is not a gesture of negation; to deconstruct is to say "yes," as Derrida says, to invent: to allow "a field of forces" to take possession of us, which can occur only through taking maximal risk, consisting of having the strength to renounce all calculation and all predetermined meaning. Clearly, regarding deconstruction and the force of intuition, even if they are opposites, they are not contradictory. Deconstruction liberates the force of a thought, its "unthought" being itself not an instance of mastery but the very thing that defeats all mastery, including (before all else, if one plays its game) that of the deconstructive gesture itself.

Such a manner of being inserted into texts and of being mobile in them implies certain things, certain insistences, or, on the contrary, certain attenuations. Thus, for example, nearly nothing will appear here on the question of "the face of the other" in Levinas, though that is, so to speak, a "star" issue for him. On the contrary, I will propose an analysis of Derrida's notion of subjectivity, although the notion appears very seldom in his work other than in some critical confrontations, and, once again, I will approach it without stopping preferentially at the part of the Derridean corpus in which it seems to be imposed "naturally," the texts

interrogating the proper name and the signature. I hope to be given credit for the fact that this is neither a matter of ignorance nor of excessive frivolity, nor some arbitrary, "subjective" choice; these perspectives have been dictated, as it were, by the global configuration of the phenomenological family under consideration. Describing this configuration should imply undoing certain "false likenesses" of the family, certain superficial resemblances, or alternatively "forcing" certain traits and certain contrasts in order to uncover an affinity at first hardly manifest.

The work of reading I propose here, then, is a mode of reception and transmission attempting to test out constraints determining a family of contemporary French phenomenology in order to offer an account—a singular one—of the opening out of a field of thought—one that everyone can experience and experiment with.