

The Trouble with Phenomenology

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Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But, he adds: in bodies.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Joyce probes the limits of perception as Stephen Dedalus walks Sandymount Strand. Dedalus crushes seashells under his shoes, examining his ability to perceive what is outside himself. If there is nothing certain about external reality, he ponders, there is at least the sensation of perception, the sense that there are objects previous to consciousness, and that, even given the fallibility of our senses, there is some constancy—an “ineluctable modality”—if not to what we believe we see, then to how we believe we see it. This profound uncertainty is characteristic of the modern *episteme*, which Foucault designates as witnessing the separation of language from “things,” a reformulation of life science into systems and organicities, and the advent of the category of “man.” The questioning of the certainty of human knowledge opened up by Kant and Hegel infiltrated Joyce’s novels and was taken up directly by Joyce’s contemporary Edmund Husserl under the banner of phenomenology. Through a deliberate and rationally guided navigation of consciousness, Husserl would argue, one can describe the world that is available to perception in a way that is meaningful, dependable, and verifiable—in other words, one can undertake to mine consciousness in a particular way so as to gain a knowledge of the world that is everything but absolute. Husserl founded a “new eidetics,” rather than claiming to describe the indwelling essences of the world’s constituent objects, he sought to accumulate knowledge of the essences of objects of consciousness—to know the world from the inside-out.¹

Bert O. States first applied Husserlian phenomenology in his critique of the semiotics of performance in the mid-1980s. Since then, phenomenology has become a familiar part of the performance studies vocabulary. Much of this derivation of

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Husserl's thought is specifically a derivation of the "phenomenological reduction," also known as "bracketing," "parenthesizing," or "suspending" the "natural attitude" so as to isolate the essential qualities of the perception of a particular object. Yet these applications of the "phenomenological reduction" to theatre scholarship tend to do so with little regard for the welter of critique that has accumulated to Husserlian phenomenology since its founding, little attention to the problems of applying a highly normative and positivistic idea of consciousness, and little concern for the failure of phenomenology to produce a mode of performance scholarship essentially different from that which ignores phenomenology completely. To examine these issues is to find the current mode of performance phenomenology inadequate to its task and in need of modification.

The following is intended to reflect upon the practice of phenomenological criticism of theatre by critiquing the belief structure of that practice at several nodes. After a brief characterization of the application of phenomenology to theatre scholarship, and in particular an accounting for the primacy of the phenomenological reduction within that scholarship, Husserl will be examined as a thinker of his time, as distinctively modern in the sense that he is secular (in a decidedly post-Christian way), positivistic (in the sense of an explorer charting an undiscovered country), and normative in his characterizations of consciousness. In service of my proposal for a modified sense of phenomenological criticism, Derrida's broad-ranging critique of Husserl will be brought to bear on the phenomenology of theatre at two locales: those of genesis and language. It will be shown that, far from obliterating phenomenology, Derrida interrogates it to the point of putting an endless uncertainty at its center. The notion of *différance*, a product of Derrida's meditations on Husserl, re-opens the question of presence that Husserl would close off, offering a play of meaning to those who embrace it. In my final formulation, a deconstructed phenomenology benefits from this sense of play as well as from the Derridean hospitality² to the other, a welcoming that may address other interpretive constructions suited to the aims of theatre phenomenology.

Parameters: The Scope of the Argument

There is not one single phenomenology, nor one static and internally consistent version of the thought of Husserl.³ The present study is intended to address Husserlian phenomenology as it is applied to the study of theatre and, therefore, takes up Husserl in ways germane to the application of his thought to theatre studies. The impact of the argument will extend only so far as scholars of theatre claim recourse to the phenomenological reduction to support their descriptions of performance. Phenomenological criticism is a discursive practice that is not identical to Husserlian phenomenology, but neither is the former uninvolved with the latter. Therefore, this essay will be concerned with critiques of Husserl insofar

as they have ramifications for the peculiar ways in which he has been put to work in our field.

The Phenomenological “Epoch” in Theatre Scholarship

Since 1985, phenomenology has propagated through theatre scholarship, culminating in the inclusion of a “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics” section in Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach’s influential 1992 anthology, *Critical Theory and Performance*. This inclusion cemented phenomenology within the theoretical repertoire of theatre and performance studies for more than a decade and into the present. Phenomenology is indispensable to any survey of performance theory, and it is conjured to use in a great variety of critical projects.⁴

Any attempt to characterize this discursive practice must first encounter Bert O. States, whose *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* makes an eloquent and persuasive case for an alternative mindset with which to interpret theatre. States was by no means the first to treat the experience of theatre and performance with phenomenology,⁵ but his advocacy of an extra-semiotic criticism was taken up with vigor in the nineties, and his shepherding of Edmund Husserl’s work—the bedrock of phenomenology—into theatre scholarship was emulated by those for whom the interpretive register of “culture,” as approached through the project of semiotics, lacked the means to convey the *weight* of the subjective experience of performance. States deploys his phenomenology within a larger critique of semiotics and new criticism:

... the danger of a linguistic approach to theater is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects. This site is the point at which art is no longer only a language. When the critic posits a division in the art image, he may be saying something about language, but he is no longer talking about art, or at least about the affective power of art.⁶

The Burkeian deflection here is one from the semiotic/linguistic to the sensory/affective.⁷ Phenomenology for States produces knowledge of the corporeal, the sensory, and the emotional: it produces knowledge of the physiological dimension of performance experience as understood separately from a system of signs and referents. Though States will repeatedly position his phenomenological perspective as complementary to semiotic interpretation, the phenomenological side of the complement requires that referential associations be “reduced,” or “bracketed,” to isolate the aspects of object-apprehension that phenomenology holds at a premium.

No one familiar with phenomenological criticism will be unacquainted with the phenomenological reduction: the willful suspension of our everyday belief in

the factually existent world as such, the suspension of the automatic interpretation we do of our surroundings. In the tradition of Husserl, this reduction is said to provisionally invalidate the hazy assumptions that mediate between the incomplete perceptual data received at every present moment about a given object and the artificially complete version of that object presented in the mind. What is leftover once this is done, according to States, is the “thing itself,” free of interpretations, connotations, and denotations, free of assumptions, memories, biases, and spin. The remainder of consciousness in the phenomenological attitude is evaluated as a freshly estranged experience of an otherwise familiar object. It is a type of awareness akin to Victor Shklovsky’s “defamiliarization.”⁸ States advocates the phenomenological attitude toward the production of a new kind of knowledge of objects in performance, a knowledge specifically attuned to the facts of presence that make performance itself unique to representational arts.

A great deal of phenomenological writing is writing about the phenomenological method. But what may be said of the knowledge of performance that is produced by its rigorous application? A survey of phenomenological writing on theatre shows that it is manifested in a poetic language and is concerned with presence. States gives examples of the writing generated by a phenomenologically altered perception. In *Great Reckonings*, he recounts a moment of altered perception of a familiar object: “I am walking to the bus terminal to get my ride home. Suddenly, as I approach, the bus parked in the lot strikes me as being outrageously large and rectangular. It is heavy with material and texture; it is not a bus, it is a queer, unforeseen shape.”⁹ The poetic, defamiliarizing mode of language applied to the bus is reinstated in States’s essay in *Critical Theory and Performance*. Here States invokes Barthes’s “punctum,” the arresting use of words that makes the text come alive in surprising ways. Barthes’s comparison of Greta Garbo’s face in her film *Queen Christina* to the “flour-white complexion of Charlie Chaplin, the dark vegetation of his eyes,” is for States “the creation of a new phenomenon, something without a history of signification.”¹⁰ The measure of phenomenological writing, as well as the proof of its worth, are found in writing that disrupts expectations, writing in a poetic mode. Despite the factual non-presence of Greta Garbo’s face, to Barthes, States, and the reader of States in this example, phenomenology is concerned with presence, the immediacy of the object to the phenomenological critic. States describes his relapse into the “natural attitude,” the default, non-phenomenological mode of consciousness. Once he boards the bus described in his example, he starts to think over what he will do when he arrives home: “All of these anticipations are softened, however, because on the bus I read a newspaper, which is another way of not being where I am.” Phenomenology for States is being where one is, being present to objects just as they are present to him.

It is necessary to pause here in order to fend off a vulgarized reading of States’s phenomenological attitude. While this essay will go on to point out the

ideologies and internal contradictions that inhere to Husserlian phenomenology, this baggage is not wholly imported to the phenomenology of *Great Reckonings*. States disclaims that this book is not a rigorous phenomenology and goes so far as to say that “it does not have an argument, or set out to prove a thesis.”¹¹ States’s *Great Reckonings* is not a crusade to reduce performance to an array of static essences; it is not a field guide to the pure experience of theatre. States, in fact, wants to keep a sense of playfulness in our responses to theatre, rather than giving them over to a totalizing system of codes. This study does not cross-apply criticisms of Husserl directly to States and other phenomenologists of theatre. Such critics marshal phenomenology toward an articulation of the limits of semiotics and culture, but do so with particular attunement to the sensory and affective, with a vocabulary of immediacy, vitality, and essence, and with attention directed at some objects of performance more than others.

It is common to hear phenomenology applied to certain things on stage: animals, open flames, the bodies of actors—objects of particular interest. Wanda Strukus employs phenomenology toward an understanding of masks and puppets, while Carrie Sandahl applies phenomenology to an accounting for the role of disability in performance space. It is curious that the discourse of phenomenological theatre criticism finds some objects to be more “phenomenological” than others, yet in the context of phenomenology’s application within the field as an alternative to strictly linguistic analysis, it is not surprising to find a pattern in the way that phenomenology is applied. The phenomenology of theatre addresses itself to objects that, for varying purposes, are not to be read as signs for something else. It is employed as a theoretical framework for the articulation of the affective and purely sensory, as well as the situational in performance studies. Phenomenologists emphasize what is felt and lived, rather than read. Phenomenology allows theater scholars to bracket, among other things, the semiotic reading of an object in the way that States initially explained. It also introduces a discourse of “essences,” which is not the least interesting aspect of this practice.

Some phenomenologists of theatre take care to play down the sense of overdetermination linked to “essence” in the post-structuralist academy. In *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, Stanton Garner invokes a phenomenology concerned with “modes of given-ness intrinsic to experience, and seek[ing] to uncover the invariable structure of these modes.”¹² Indeed, Husserlian phenomenology is concerned with the structure of experience and the essences of *mental processes*. Husserl does not make qualitative statements about objects outside of himself previous to perception, warning, “One must not let oneself be deceived by speaking of the physical thing as transcending consciousness or as ‘existing in itself.’”¹³ Objects for Husserl are always objects of consciousness; these are believed to “correlate” with the actual world, yet there is a gulf: “a veritable abyss yawns between consciousness and reality.”¹⁴

The phenomenology of theatre, however, claims access to the essences of objects themselves. In Joseph Roach's words, "the intuitive apprehension and penetrating description of such first-order phenomena constitute the agenda of phenomenologists," and "phenomenology . . . relies upon 'essences,' a set of necessary and sufficient considerations for the existence of an entity, the fundamental supposition of essentialism."¹⁵ I will assert that the discourse of phenomenology in theatre classrooms does not distinguish between the essences of conscious objects and the indwelling essences of objects in the world. This "penetrating description" is conceived in the phenomenology of performance as the gleaning of knowledge from the object out in the world that is new, pure, and affectively weighted in a way that is inaccessible to the observer uninitiated in the ways of the phenomenological reduction.

Husserl in the Modern Episteme

Michel Foucault famously unpacks the fault line between the classical mode of thought—wherein the world was encountered in a pre-arranged order of resemblances and similitudes—and the modern mode—wherein the classical tabular organization of living things, transparency of language, and study of economic value fell prey to sciences focused on the mystery of life, the opaque density of languages that were now separated from their referents, and the study of labor. In the modern *episteme*, Foucault claims, there emerged a curious new category to be known, which was at once sovereign and subjected: the "empirico-transcendental doublet," man. This momentous shift in how man thought himself in relation to his world bore consequences for the philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; Foucault asserts that:

The question is no longer: How can experience of nature give rise to necessary judgments? But rather: How can man think what he does not think, inhabit as though by mute occupation something that eludes him, animate with a kind of frozen movement that takes the form of a stubborn exteriority?¹⁶

"To think the unthought" is for Foucault the unspoken mandate of philosophy in the condition of modernity. The unthought is the site of an endless excavation that promises to bring humanity, by an accumulation of empirical knowledge, closer to transcendence of his newly finite condition. Foucault finds Husserl's phenomenology in the service of this mandate: "If phenomenology has any allegiance it is to . . . interrogation concerning man's mode of being and his relation to the unthought."¹⁷ This characterization obtains in Husserl's introduction to the 1931 edition of *Ideas I*, where he portrays his forays into the realm of pure consciousness:

(He) who for decades instead of speculating concerning a New Atlantis has really wandered in the trackless wilds of a new continent and undertaken bits of virgin cultivation, will not allow himself to be diverted by the refusals of geographers who judge the reports in the light of their own experiences and habits of thought . . .¹⁸

Phenomenology is a philosophy formed within a specific historical moment, and it bears the marks of a special kind of positivism, a post-Christian orientation toward knowledge and the unknown, and a normative concept of consciousness. The first of these three observations may take the quote above as its point of departure. Husserl's metaphor of the explorer is not rendered capriciously. For him, the phenomenological reduction is a method whose rigorous application gives access to the realm of pure, transcendental consciousness, to the *eidetic* sphere (sphere of essences), which has the galvanizing virginity of an undiscovered country. Also, Husserl "exclude(s) all sciences relating to this natural world" in order to effect his phenomenological reduction, but this is simply a temporary bracketing that serves to establish phenomenology as "a science of a novel kind."¹⁹ To the extent that 1) the project of phenomenology is to mine this territory for knowledge, and 2) phenomenology is deployed as a new kind of science, phenomenology is a positivist project in the sense that it claims to gather up information toward the advancement of human understanding. It participates in the grand *telos* of Western metaphysics and sciences to discover the principles at the foundation of knowledge and the being of man through the "pure" thinking of the unthought.

Husserl conceives of his phenomenology as the point of access to the realm of pure consciousness, and in this sense Husserl takes on the role of the prophet, and phenomenology a secular prophesy. Husserl writes that he "sees the infinite open country of the true philosophy, the 'promised land' on which he himself will never set foot."²⁰ Here one sees extended the positivist quality of phenomenology by its distinctly colonialist logic, and also begins to read phenomenology as indebted to Christianity for its tropology.²¹ Phenomenology resonates with the belief structure of Christianity in that it requires initiation through the rigorous voluntary application of its tenets (at the guidance of Husserl the prophet). Once applied in its several steps and with some difficulty, the initiate is freed from the trappings of the natural attitude, temporarily escapes the factually existent world and gains access to a realm of purity and transcendence. In fact, the familiar terms that have been translated to describe the phenomenological reduction (bracketing, reducing, parenthesizing) can also be translated as "abstaining."²² The phenomenological initiate refrains from positing the existence of the natural world in the same way a Christian convert may abstain from sex, bad language, or strong drink. These tropes of purification and visual access to a transcendent realm mark phenomenology as the recipient

of an ancient and habitual orientation toward knowledge and experience. For the phenomenologist, as for the Christian, knowledge of one's situation is not all equal, but is to be ranked according to its proximity to the transcendent.

Phenomenology also sets out a model of consciousness that is unabashedly normative. For Husserl, his is the model of all consciousness, a fact he knows by access to the expressed thoughts of others, who can be found to agree with him. His model of the natural attitude speaks for himself, but in tone and by the logic of his project, for us all:

We begin our considerations as human beings who are living naturally, objectivating, judging, feeling, willing in the natural attitude. What that signifies we shall make clear in simple meditations which can best be carried out in the first person singular.

I am conscious of a world endlessly spread out in space . . .²³

This rhetorical turn from the "we" to the "I" is justified within phenomenology because Husserl cannot in fact live any interior life but his own. Thus the normative formulation is one that 1) locates the lived experience of Edmund Husserl at the center and extends the model of his consciousness outward onto all others, and 2) discounts those others whose lived experience is not analogous with that of Edmund Husserl. This observation doesn't destroy the validity of phenomenology; in fact, the commonality of experience across subjectivities is precisely the stakes of the game for Husserl. It does, however, leave to the side considerations of the peculiarities of consciousness within and across cultural and gender lines, at different stages in development from birth to maturity, and the radical alterations of consciousness described in states of trance or meditation and those observed under the influence of narcotics and environmental factors.

Phenomenology, according to Husserl, despite its current applications to theatre and performance, is a product of a specific intellectual/historical moment and has been considerably weakened by developments in philosophy and critical theory that have followed it. Its conditions of possibility as thought did not include the critiques of patriarchy, structuralism, and language that came after it. Husserl could not have foreseen these developments; indeed Husserl's thought itself was constituent of the conditions of possibility of the later critiques. Nowhere is this aspect of the genealogical involvement of phenomenology with today's critical theory more evident than in Husserl's reworking by and incorporation into deconstruction.

The Problems of Genesis and Language in the Phenomenological Reduction

The specter of deconstruction or Derridean analysis is born from a characterization of that analysis as irreverent and destructive. It is derided as a

reflexive aversion to essentialism so forceful that it acts like a powerful solvent, razing structures of meaning to dust, or dissolving them into primordial soup. Deconstruction intimately understood is not destructive but productive. It introduces playfulness into our interpretations by showing how metaphysical principles rest upon a foundation that trembles with uncertainty. By exposing the internal contradictions papered over by philosophy, deconstruction points out problems of meaning that were already there, but rather than obliterating otherwise sturdy meaning, Derrida re-opens the possibility of an abundance of meaning. In this sense, deconstruction operates like a phenomenology of philosophy, immobilizing assumptions and questioning familiarity.

This is to be expected considering Derrida's intimate knowledge of Husserl's phenomenology, which occupied the early phase of his career. In *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy, An Introduction to the Origin of Geometry, Speech and Phenomena*, as well as in essays in *Writing and Difference* and *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida canvases Husserl's phenomenological project, not to destroy it, but to productively expose its contradictions toward the creation of the method of deconstruction. As John D. Caputo interprets, the work of Derrida is "not an attack upon Husserl but a liberation of Husserl's deepest tendencies."²⁴ Similarly, Leonard Lawlor characterizes Derrida's criticism as a "super-phenomenological critique" and accredits the Derridean concept of *différance* to the paradox of intentionality and *noema* in Husserl.²⁵ Derrida's critique of phenomenology is concerned with 1) its satisfaction with a metaphysics of presence that closes off the problem of accounting for genesis without the necessary evidence to do so, and 2) the deferral by Husserl of the problem of language, which puts in doubt the possibility of a phenomenological reduction in the first place.

The issue of genesis is taken up by Derrida first in his student thesis, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* and then condensed and revised in "'Genesis and Structure' and Phenomenology," published in *Writing and Difference*. In both texts Derrida observes Husserl inaugurating the phenomenological reduction to satisfy the structural demand (that for a "comprehensive description of a totality, of a form or function organized according to an internal legality . . .") in priority over and at the expense of the genetic demand ("the search for the origin and foundation of the structure").²⁶ Consequently, the description of the phenomenological reduction found in *Ideas I* and its resulting access to the realm of pure consciousness tends to avoid issues of genesis and temporality. In other words, it describes essences in stasis, without a sense of where these have come from or of how objects originally "become" to consciousness. These priorities are not new to Husserl at this stage in his thought. They were crucial to his early work on the origin of mathematical unities. According to Derrida, the fact that Husserl sought to "maintain simultaneously the normative autonomy of logical or mathematical ideality as concerns all factual consciousness, and its original

dependence in relation to a subjectivity in general; in general, but concretely,” paved the way for the phenomenological reduction.²⁷ In other words, the idea that mathematical entities are at once uniform and yet never found prior to their iteration in consciousness provided a concept of structure and genesis that led Husserl to try to similarly isolate the structure and genesis of other objects of consciousness.

Husserl copes with the problem of genesis by closing it into a metaphysical principle, his “principle of principles” (the self-evidence of that which is given to consciousness). For Husserl, the phenomenological reduction gives access to objects that are at once taken up actively by the intentionality of consciousness (the need for consciousness to be always a consciousness “of something”) and received passively by virtue of their presence. The critical and ultimately unresolved question for Derrida is how these objects in their essence can be constituted as meaning in a way that is both foreign and native to consciousness:

Noema, which is the objectivity of the object, the meaning and the “as such” of the thing for consciousness, is neither the determined thing itself in its untamed existence (whose appearing the noema precisely is) nor is it a properly subjective moment, a “really” subjective moment, since it is indubitably given as an object for consciousness. It is neither of the world nor of consciousness, but it is the world or something of the world for consciousness.²⁸

By elaborating the essences of consciousness in a non-temporal structure, Husserl avoids the problem of the genesis of the empirical. Derrida notes that, “In fact—and this is the primary cause of all the difficulties in *Ideas I*—the world is not considered in its ‘reality’ during these analyses, but in its noematic value. Husserl never envisages in *Ideas* the relation of real substrate with its noematic sense which will define the problem of a genesis of sense.”²⁹ The resulting paradox is elaborated concisely in Derrida’s later work “Form and Meaning.” Drawing from Husserl’s early work on math and logic, he places language at the center of the noematic formation, since Husserl has said that even numbers must be “expressed” from their foundations in a sense attainable by consciousness. Therefore, this lower, prior stratum must impress itself onto “sense” so that it can express itself to consciousness. The expression simultaneously takes up and gives off a constituted meaning:

Thus, the preexpressive noema, the prelinguistic sense, must be imprinted in the expressive noema, must find its conceptual mark in the content of the meaning. Expression, in order to limit itself to transporting a constituted sense to the exterior, and by the same token to bring this sense to conceptual generality without altering it, in order to express what is already thought

(one almost would have to say written), and in order to redouble faithfully—expression then must permit itself to be imprinted by sense at the same time as it expresses sense.³⁰

This inscrutable relation between the pre-expressive layer of meaning and the linguistic substance in which it is given to consciousness bears consequences for the problem of writing, but no less so for the first-order perception of phenomenology. Whatever experience of the object is produced by the phenomenological reduction, it only presents itself (it can only present itself) in particularities of sense—these can be thought of, for example, as the pre-linguistic correlates of Bert States's memorable experience with the bus. Yet an interrogation of the source of these constituted sense particulars can lead only to another constituted sense of indeterminate origin, the beginning of an interminable series of sloughings-off of concrete shells from an object that interminably recedes from view. Moreover, the fact that the direction of this recession lies into, impossibly, both the transcendent (external) world and the immanent (mental) world amounts to a permanent contradiction for Derrida. "The constituting origin of lived experience is in the lived experience and outside the lived experience, in time and outside time, and so on, and one cannot exclusively determine absolute originary in one sense or the other."³¹

It is easy to see the problem that language itself would pose to a phenomenology of theatre even if one could account for the constitution of perceived objectivities. How could an experience of an object properly isolated by the phenomenological reduction be transmitted to someone else? This paradox was pointed out by Eugen Fink in his early work on Husserl. If the phenomenologist has surpassed the natural attitude, he or she may not rightfully be said to communicate to those who remain in that state. Husserl leaves the problem of language to the side in *Ideas I*, preferring to group it in with the natural attitude so that its intricacies can be simply "put out of action." Yet the impossibility of demonstrating the fealty of speech or writing to whatever pre-expressive impulses shape them makes language into a problem for the phenomenologist. Bert States noted the problem of meaning's relation to language when he wrote, "language itself contains an even more virulent form of frontality."³² That is, the arbitrary relation of the symbols of language to their referents and the indeterminacy of those linkages amount to a condition wherein the impulse that motivates any speech act cannot be said to fill its linguistic receptacle without risk of filtration, distortion, or spillover. Derrida dissects Husserl's attempts to assert a transparency of language. Of the Husserlian metaphor of a weaving into language of a pre-linguistic meaning, he observes, "What is woven as language is that the discursive warp cannot be construed as warp and takes the place of a woof that has not truly preceded it. This texture is all the more inextricable in that it is highly significant: *the nonexpressive threads are not without signification.*"³³ But

for Derrida the consequences of this inextricability, should the phenomenologist fail to meticulously unweave it, are profound:

If the description does not bring light to an absolutely and simply founding ground of signification, if an intuitive and perceptive ground, a pedestal of silence, does not found discourse in the originally given presence of the thing itself, if the texture of the text, in a word, is irreducible, not only will the phenomenological description have failed, but the descriptive “principle” itself will have been put back into question. The stakes of this disentanglement are therefore the phenomenological motif itself.³⁴

This analysis separates the language produced by a subject from the meaning stratum that is supposed to formulate it and, thereby, calls into question the status of phenomenological writing. But Derrida’s critique of phenomenology on the level of language has a more radical dimension. As Caputo notes, Husserl brackets language to gain access to the realm of essences in a transaction that is ultimately monological and mute, “a realm of pure linguistic expression, free from mundane interference and opacity.”³⁵ Husserl dissociates the apprehension of transcendent, actual objects from mental processes, which are given immanently, absolutely and without frontality. Yet Derrida doesn’t rein language in at the border of Fink’s paradox of outward expression. Extending Husserl’s analysis of the linguistic generation of mathematical entities, Derrida radicalizes the issue of language by linking it to the problem of genesis. Lawlor explains:

For Derrida, the Finkian question of a “transcendental language” will be deepened in *The Origin of Geometry*, where Husserl will make language, indeed writing, fundamental in the constitution of ideal objects. That writing is necessary in the constitution (or institution) of ideal objects means that language precedes all the distinctions that Husserl makes on the basis of the reduction.³⁶

This is true both in the sense that phenomenology itself, as the *guide* to the “undiscovered country” of transcendental idealities, is entirely figured in language, as well as in the sense that linguistic categories are prior to and found in the symbolic distinctions that open the realm up to the phenomenologist in the first place. Language is a problem for the phenomenologist, therefore, not only in the composition and transmission of phenomenological texts, but also at the crucial first moment of phenomenology, when the natural attitude is suspended and the “object itself” apprehended by virtue of its presence. This problem in Husserl has

been noted by his many interlocutors, including Wolfgang Walter Fuchs.³⁷ Husserl aims to make language a secondary problem whose intricacies one could abstain from in a moment of transcendental consciousness, but Derrida shows how the presence of the object itself depends on a movement and separation at the heart of language.³⁸

The realm of the transcendental in Husserl is, for Derrida, shadowed off from its mundane counterpart in a trope of parallelism that is the gateway to *différance*. The figuring of the transcendental ego takes the place of an alter-ego for the phenomenological traveler and thus instates a relation to “my” self that is paradoxically situated, like the noema with relation to consciousness, as both foreign and native. For Derrida, this parallelism, which spans nothing, sparks a new kind of difference: “Husserl specifies, for example, that my transcendental ego is radically different from my natural and human ego; and yet it is distinguished by nothing.”³⁹ Whereas Husserl is inclined to ignore this nothing, this gulf between the mundane and the transcendent, as the very absent place of that which is excluded in the reduction, Derrida will read it as a productive *aporia*, the site to which “we must ceaselessly direct our questions.”⁴⁰ The fact that language must be the material out of which this gulf is stretched in spite of itself—that it makes possible an articulation of the movement, the casting off, which makes language itself possible—casts light on a paradox in Husserl at the site of genesis that is the seed ground of deconstruction:

It is at the price of this war of language against itself that the sense and question of its origin will be thinkable. This war is obviously not one war among others. A polemic for the possibility of sense and world, it takes place in this *différance*, which, we have seen, cannot reside in the world but only in language, in the transcendental disquietude of language. Indeed, far from only living in language, this war is also the origin and residence of language. Language preserves the difference that preserves language.⁴¹

Where Husserl designates a realm of essences and transcendencies that amount to the foundation of experience in presence, Derrida inscribes an irreduced oscillation between self and other prior to and engendering of language itself. The formation of language immanent to consciousness is always a sending off, a departure and a deferral, as well as a differing (a *différance*) from consciousness, and as such it necessitates repetition for survival, an eternal return. This oscillation or “wobble,” as put by Caputo, alerts us to the radical alterity that faces us in the world where we would otherwise dam it up with metaphysical principles. This is what Derrida means when he claims that the debate between issues of genesis and structure in

Husserl “gives to the description its ‘animation,’ and whose incompleteness, which leaves every major stage of phenomenology unbalanced, makes new reductions and explications indefinitely necessary.”⁴² The impossibility of phenomenology to definitively articulate the sphere of essences to its own or anyone’s satisfaction propels phenomenology into endless self-definition and condemns its practice to naïve assertions of access to essences that are always shifting, always shedding their skin.

The Prospects for Phenomenology within Performance Studies

The phenomenological reduction as appropriated by scholars of theatre and performance is an outline of Edmund Husserl’s elaborate and rigorous “science” of phenomenology. It has come to stand for a “defamiliarizing,” or an isolation of essences, or a corporeal turn that emphasizes the life of bodies in performance. In some ways, the phenomenology of theatre has little to do with Husserl’s project. Phenomenology has provided a vocabulary for certain crucial aspects of the experience of witnessing performance that are not adequately translated into or understood as cultural matter. But Husserl’s name should not be invoked in ignorance of the historical moment that made his theory possible, the contradictions that trouble it, or of Derrida’s veritable dismantling of it under the banner of deconstruction. If scholars of performance go on invoking Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, they should at least be aware of these problems and be prepared to answer for them. If theatre scholarship elects to ignore Derrida’s critique of Husserl, it should at least know why it is choosing to do so. The Derridian critique, again, does not cause an obliteration of phenomenology but rather an opening up of the question of genesis and essence where phenomenology had closed the issues in the metaphysics of presence. Thus, an integration of deconstruction offers up a fundamentally altered practice of performance phenomenology, not a pile of ruins. What follows are three broad implications of the preceding argument for this new practice.

1. Phenomenological Criticism Does Not Need Phenomenology:

When Bert O. States introduced phenomenology to theatre studies, he did so to address the need for a complement to a strictly semiotic approach to performance. In order to limit semiotics’s “almost imperial confidence in its product,”⁴³ States marshaled Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Husserl toward the description of that which cannot be decoded in a moment of performance experience. The results of this move, as we have seen, manifest in writing that is markedly rich in affect, rhetorically loaded and poetic. But if the phenomenologist has given us these accounts of his or her journey into the realm of pure consciousness, the writing itself cannot convey the essence of its object. The phenomenological perspective would become “enworlded” at the point it tried to communicate itself to others in the natural attitude. The issue, then, is not whether we eradicate phenomenological

writing (one wants beautiful writing like that of States), but rather, if this writing is produced in the natural attitude, why does it need to invoke the technicalities of phenomenology in the first place? It is possible to reformulate the objectives of phenomenological criticism without the phenomenological reduction. These would include: a concentration on the sensory aspects of performance considered separately from their status as signifiers; writing on theatre that awakens new and surprising perspectives with affective weight and an attention to language; the description of the perceptual first moments of the performance object as experienced by the spectator. I will argue that these tenets, by jettisoning the rhetoric of essences and metaphysics, bring the phenomenology of theatre into the contemporary moment and avoid the pitfalls linked to a reductive, positivist, and essentialist discourse.

2. The Dangers of Essence:

Whatever qualifications phenomenology may make about the essences it claims to access, it cannot escape the rhetoric of purity and ideality that founded Husserl's project. Husserl concedes that a worldly object cannot be known in the same precision as a geometric axiom, yet his incitement to approach "the things themselves" has implications in the social sphere. The claim to reduce any object to its essence, to grasp it in its transcendence cannot but do some violence to the field of interpretations and experience that surround it. If, for example, we accept Roland Barthes's description of Greta Garbo's eyes (their similarity to Chaplin, their "dark vegetation") as a glimpse of the essence of that image and, if we further suspend our concerns about the compound filtrations and distortions perpetrated by language as the image is transferred from Barthes, to Barthes's essay, to States and so on, we will have conceded an elision of alternative readings and experiences of that image. The necessity of understanding the self-difference of an object, a human being, or a culture has political ramifications. As Derrida explains at the Villanova Roundtable, the effect of *différance* is far from nihilistic; it is driven by a democratic impulse:

The identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself; a culture is different from itself; language is different from itself; the person is different from itself. Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity. And this prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism and so on.⁴⁴

Deconstruction of the performance object, descended though it may be from the phenomenological reduction, works to reduce the reductiveness of that reduction. It

acknowledges a play of subject and object at the very origin of language. It guards against an unfounded metaphysics of the performance object. In the words of John Caputo, it preserves our “openness to the mystery.”

3. Beyond the Phenomenological Reduction

Husserl is widely regarded as the initiator of the phenomenological project as it is understood today, but the foundations of this project as laid out in Husserl's thought have been reworked and built upon by numerous interlocutors. Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricouer, among others, have undertaken phenomenological investigations directed at art, perception, narrative, and other subjects. It should be noted that phenomenological criticism of theatre and performance has adopted these thinkers as well, evading, in some cases, the problems of the Husserlian reduction or modifying the reduction to be less essentialist. Additionally, critics like Foucault and Judith Butler have made use of the Husserlian reduction on a more or less explicit level towards analyses of historical knowledge and performed social formations. In these projects, the reduction of consciousness towards a pure encounter with the object has gradually passed away. Structuralist theories have shown language to be far from a transparent medium through which transcendental objects could be revealed and described. The problems of language articulated by Derrida and others have troubled the Husserlian version of phenomenology.

Consequently, applications of Husserl to theatre and performance scholarship should acknowledge the limitations of the reduction as originally conceived. The paradoxes of language and genesis in Husserl's method burden claims about the essences of the experience of performance or of particular objects of performance. Phenomenology will continue to occupy an important place in the study of theatre and performance, especially as scholars come to recognize the relevance of cognitive neuroscience to the phenomenological project of articulating the contours and limitations of perception. The human neural machinery is understood by Merleau-Ponty as one term in the highly complex equation of human conscious experience, and recent developments in the neurosciences raise exciting prospects for detailed studies into the phenomenology of theatre and performance informed by an understanding of the brain and its collaboration with the senses and the body. There is a great potential for phenomenologically-minded investigations of consciousness of performance through formulations that do not naïvely import the Husserlian reduction in order to access the essence of some aspect of performance. As Husserl's project continues to be adapted and updated, fresh perspectives on the relation of consciousness to objects of performance will emerge.

The phenomenology of Husserl will also be important to theatre studies as an ideological complex with a special relationship to theatre in the Western tradition. Husserl's emphasis on presence and the special status of vision within his phenomenology, as well as the structure of his reduction itself, resonates with

the importance of presence to Western theatre, the development of a Western theatre architecture model that prioritizes vision over other senses, and the selecting/bracketing function of the proscenium arch. When Derrida, in *Speech and Phenomena*, comments that “*phenomenological reduction is a scene, a theater stage*,” he metaphorically relates the structure of a mode of consciousness that is contingent and bound to a specific historical moment to the conceptual/architectural form of the Western theatre. Both constructions depend on the direction of the conscious mind toward a strictly delimited object, both enforce the silence of that which surrounds that object of attention, and both make presence the casting criteria for the role of the object. Rather than treating Husserl’s phenomenology as a method whose application can negate the interference of mundane conscious life in order to reveal the transcendent qualities of the world, theatre scholars might analyze phenomenology as a mental object whose positive content amounts to instructions for a peculiar mode of consciousness, a mode whose structure uncannily resembles that of the Western theatrical event itself.

Notes

¹ Edmund Husserl. *Ideas I*. § 33. *The Essential Husserl*. ed. Donn Welton (Indianapolis: Indiana UP) 1999.

² This notion, like much of the present work, owes much to the ideas of John D. Caputo.

³ Husserl scholars tend to divide his work into early, middle, and late periods, tracking his early work on psychologism to his final renderings of transcendental phenomenology. See J. M. Mohanty, “The Development of Husserl’s Thought,” *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, eds. Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith (New York: Cambridge UP) 1995.

⁴ Recent applications of phenomenology include: Carrie Sandahl’s “Considering Disability: Disability Phenomenology’s Role in Revolutionizing Theatrical Space,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 16.2 (2002), and Wanda Strukus’s dissertation, *Unidentified Performing Objects: Perception, Phenomenology, and the Object as Actor*. Strukus is particularly concerned with the Husserlian formulation of intersubjectivity and its importance to performing objects. In her study, Husserl’s phenomenology of subjects outside oneself allows an enhanced understanding of the uncanny experience of animated objects. Sandahl, however, uses phenomenology (which she interprets as an alternative experience of altered perception) as part of a “strategic essentialism based on the subjective, phenomenological experience of physical impairment.” These approaches show the range of projects to which phenomenology has been recently applied.

⁵ Bruce Wilshire foreshadowed the phenomenology of performance in his 1982 volume, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*. Wilshire invokes Husserl’s phenomenological reduction as a means to “reveal the meaning of the actual,” in theatrical events. This is part of a larger project of showing the failure of the notion of metaphor to describe the relation of the theatrical to life. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982).

⁶ Bert O. States. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley

and Los Angeles: U of California P) 1985.

⁷ Kenneth Burke, to whom States dedicates *Great Reckonings*, has famously observed, “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality.” “Terministic Screens,” *Language as Symbolic Action*, repr. in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press) 1990.

⁸ Bert O. States, “The Phenomenological Attitude,” *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992). Also *Great Reckonings*. 11.

⁹ States, “Phenomenological Attitude” 376-77.

¹⁰ States, *Great Reckonings* 8-9.

¹¹ 1.

¹² Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 12

¹³ Husserl, *Ideas I* § 47, *Essential* 80.

¹⁴ § 49, *Essential* 83

¹⁵ Roach, *Critical Theory and Performance* 353.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1994) 323.

¹⁷ 325.

¹⁸ Edmund Husserl, Preface, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (New York: MacMillan, 1931) 22-23.

¹⁹ Husserl, *Ideas I* §§ 32-33, *Essential* 67, 69.

²⁰ Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* 29.

²¹ Husserl converted from Judaism to Christianity early in his life; some speculate that this was necessary for his career advancement.

²² Smith and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl* 11.

²³ Husserl, *Ideas I* § 27, *Essential* 60

²⁴ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987) 120.

²⁵ Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002) 3, 230-231.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 157.

²⁷ 158.

²⁸ 163.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) 79.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 164.

³¹ Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis* 84.

³² States, *Critical Theory and Performance* 371.

³³ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 160.

³⁴ 161.

³⁵ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* 136.

³⁶ Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl* 22.

³⁷ Wolfgang Walter Fuchs observes of Husserl's treatment of language that, "We examine the doctrine of language as presented in the *Logische Untersuchungen* and we see that nowhere does Husserl acknowledge the density of language, what aspect of the being of language whereby concepts and words operate in terms of each other, and not simply independently or clearly. For Husserl, however, consciousness becomes aware of self-constituted meanings. But to maintain this is to neglect the reality of language as a system which resists being reduced to a series of meanings constituted by consciousness." *Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Presence: An Essay in the Philosophy of Edmund Husserl* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976).

³⁸ For Derrida, the present is conditioned by a negative relation to that which is not present in much the same way that Saussure explained the meaning function of linguistic signs. In his 1968 lecture "*Différance*," he states that, "An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being . . ." This infusion of linguistic difference and temporal deferral into the category of presence constitutes the major thrust of Derrida's critique of the Western metaphysics of presence, of which phenomenology is a continuation. Jacques Derrida. "*Différance*," *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia UP, 1991).

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973) 11-12.

⁴⁰ 13.

⁴¹ 14.

⁴² Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 156-57.

⁴³ States, *Great Reckonings* 7.

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 13.

THE FIELD

