

# “A book which is no longer discussed today”: Tran Duc Thao, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty

*Tim Herrick*

---

This article argues that while Jacques Derrida’s autobiographical locations of himself within a philosophical tradition, and particularly his public thesis defense at the Sorbonne in 1980, form a helpful reminder of his intellectual background, they cannot be taken entirely at face value.<sup>1</sup> In the defense of a selection of his work submitted to the Sorbonne, Derrida acknowledges the importance of Husserlian phenomenology both for his philosophically formative years of the 1950s and for the time of writing. He calls Husserlian phenomenology “a discipline of incomparable rigour,” although he carefully qualifies the discipline he has in mind:

Not—especially not—in the versions proposed by Sartre or by Merleau-Ponty which were then dominant, but rather in opposition to them, or without them, in particular in those areas which a certain type of French phenomenology appeared at times to avoid, whether in history, in science, in the historicity of science, the history of ideal objects and of truth, and hence in politics as well, and even in ethics. I should like to recall here, as one indication among others, a book which is no longer discussed today, a book whose merits can be very diversely evaluated, but which for a certain number of us pointed to a task, a difficulty and no doubt an impasse. This is Tran Duc Thao’s *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to David Shepherd, Craig Brandist, and the two anonymous readers from the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations,” tr. Kathleen McLaughlin, *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. A. Montefiore (Cambridge, 1983), 34-50, 38.

Tran Duc Thao was a Vietnamese philosopher who studied in France and worked with Merleau-Ponty; his most significant work, translated as *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*,<sup>3</sup> is indeed “no longer discussed today” but at the time presented an attractive synthesis of Husserlian phenomenology with Hegelian Marxism. Derrida summarizes:

After a commentary which retraced the movement of transcendental phenomenology and in particular the transition from static constitution to genetic constitution, the book attempted, with less obvious success, to open the way for a dialectical materialism that would admit some of the rigorous demands of transcendental phenomenology. One can imagine what the stakes of such an attempt might have been and its outcome was of less importance than the stakes involved.<sup>4</sup>

Derrida politely suggests that Thao’s work was a failure, although the significance of the questions that it raised should not be doubted. Thao, though “one indication among others,”<sup>5</sup> is significant here first as a general reminder of the diversity of responses to Husserl’s phenomenology in France during the 1950s, second, as an example of the cross-cultural appropriation of Western philosophy, and third, for his importance to Derrida in several distinct ways. This article will outline the fundamental arguments of Thao’s text and go on to affirm its similarity with the early Derrida’s revision of Husserl, which relies on specific points of Thao’s interpretation and expresses a comparable interest in the material conditions of consciousness. Yet whereas Thao’s project is to reconcile Marxism and phenomenology by underscoring their mutual access to an incontestable level of absolute reality, Derrida’s work even in its earliest phases is designed to question such confidence in an absolute. Indeed, through this skepticism Derrida proves himself much closer to Merleau-Ponty<sup>6</sup> than Thao, even if in his thesis defense and elsewhere he appears to reject any influence.<sup>7</sup> Nor is Thao’s work necessarily produced “in opposition to” or “without” the

<sup>3</sup> Trần Duc Thao, *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*, tr. Daniel J. Herman and Donald V. Morano (Dordrecht, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, “Time of a Thesis,” 38.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida only names one other example, the philosopher of mathematics Jean Cavailles, on whom see Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Bloomington, Ind., 2002), 57-63.

<sup>6</sup> For Sartre, see Marian Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (London and New York, 1998), and Christina Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Flynn, “Textuality and the Flesh: Derrida and Merleau-Ponty,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 15 (1984), 164-79, 164. See also Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 22-57, esp. 30-35; M. C. Dillon, “Temporality: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida,” *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism*, ed. T. W. Busch and S. Gallagher (Albany, N.Y., 1992), 189-212; Mark Yount, “Two Reversibilities: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida,” in Busch and Gallagher, 213-26.

dominant versions of phenomenology. It represents one, admittedly extreme, solution to a set of problems common to Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists of that generation, a range of shared concerns about relations between politics and philosophy, the social influence on perception, and the development of history, all issues which are bequeathed in their generality to Derrida.

In this article, the following questions are therefore addressed: why does Derrida so strongly oppose two versions of phenomenology?; why does he align himself in this context with Thao?; and why, here and elsewhere, does he refute the influence of Merleau-Ponty? All three answers, I suggest, have to do with Derrida's conscious presentation of himself as a critical outsider to philosophy in order to reinforce his arguments about the complexity of linear intellectual histories. Questions of intellectual proximity aside, Thao's personal story makes him a useful figure for Derrida to foreground: in the immediate context of defending his work at the Sorbonne, a neglected philosopher from a defiantly ex-French colony is privileged over a canonical French intellectual. In Derrida's later work his project of identity construction is developed at length and always with a concern to undermine such simplistic narratives as a national intellectual lineage. This article explores this subversion with reference to both "The Time of a Thesis" and later quasi-autobiographical texts, with the key-note always being the refusal of essentialism we see in the Sorbonne defense. At the moment in which Derrida is accepted by the institution he questions its bounds and its remit, mimicking the operation of his work as a whole that persistently points out what philosophy excludes.

#### Tran Duc Thao

Tran Duc Thao (1917-93) was born in Vietnam as a French subject and traveled to France in 1936 to continue his education, receiving his *agrégation* in 1943 with a thesis on Husserl.<sup>8</sup> He was a student of Merleau-Ponty's and a contributor to *Les Temps modernes*, indeed leading the anti-colonial wing of that journal, in which *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* was developed and trailed. During his time in France he befriended Jean-François Lyotard, a friendship confirmed by favorable references in Lyotard's 1954 work on phenomenology that can serve as an indication of the impact Thao made on contemporary philosophy. Lyotard "cannot recommend this remarkable little book [*Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*] too strongly to the reader," praises its potential opening of an ideology-critique within phenomenology, and notes its emphasis on problems with matter in Husserl's philosophy that

<sup>8</sup> See Shawn McHale, "Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946-1993," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 61 (2002), 7-31.

unfold in other adaptations of his work.<sup>9</sup> *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* was published in 1951, the same year in which Thao returned to Vietnam to help build an independent Communist nation, a project to which he was so committed that he voluntarily underwent a “rectification” course to free him of Western misconceptions developed during his time abroad. In 1956 he was made Dean of History in Vietnam’s first national university, suggesting good relations with the ruling Workers’ Party—an accord, however, which was not to last. Because of the paucity and political bias of records of the time there is no definite answer to why Thao fell dramatically out of favor with the Party during the second half of the 1950s, but in 1958 he published a scathing piece of self-criticism, resigned his university post, and disappeared into the provinces. It has been suggested that he took part in the wave of criticism of the Party during the period and was punished for this liberality of thought.<sup>10</sup> He languished in rural obscurity for the next thirty years, translating classics of European philosophy into Vietnamese, and working on his own *Investigations into the Origin of Language and Consciousness*.<sup>11</sup> A political thaw in the late 1980s allowed him to seek medical treatment in France, where he met old friends from the 1940s and ’50s, who seemed as impressed by his knowledge of the phenomenology of that period as they were disturbed by his regurgitation of Party-line politics. He died in France in 1993.

Thao’s politics and philosophy are intimately connected. Marxism provides the materialist counter-blast to the late Husserl’s transcendental idealism and a way of resolving the problems of history, both individual and cultural, which phenomenology inevitably presents. The variety of Marxism propounded by Thao also emphasizes the thought about social transformation which had hovered at the fringes of phenomenology since its inception: if perception is culturally and psychologically determined, the argument runs, then there must be ways to change it in order to improve human understanding. Thao’s political thought was centered on Vietnam and marks the application of a European philosophy to a specific south-east Asian context, or to phrase this more sharply, a variety of French philosophy is being used to hasten the end of French colonialist rule. Thao based his argument for an independent, communist, self-determined nation on a conviction that the people should be allowed to realize their complete human potential free from the repressive negativity of a colonial power. Similarly, his critique of the Workers’ Party (according to his refutation) was based on a classical Marxism, emphasizing the need for more individual autonomy, less bureaucracy, and greater freedom for the lower levels of

<sup>9</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, tr. Brian Beakley (Albany, N.Y., 1991), 51,n.2, 128-29, 125.

<sup>10</sup> McHale, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Trần Duc Thao, *Investigations into the Origin of Language and Consciousness*, tr. Daniel J. Herman and Robert L. Armstrong (Dordrecht, 1984).

society.<sup>12</sup> Each individual and each social group should work towards its own solution to its own problems, a motif explored in detail by *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*.

Thao's text is a curious hybrid, shifting between three dominant positions: Husserlian phenomenology, Marxism, and experimental science, especially biology and child psychology. The first section of the book is a detailed outline and critique of Husserl, with a very heavy emphasis on materialism: "*Transcendental ideality*," Thao writes, "should not correspond simply to empirical reality but also to *absolute reality*."<sup>13</sup> Because of this emphasis on absolute reality it seems logical to turn from phenomenology to the natural sciences, among other things, a history of the fish and the first land-dwelling reptiles in an attempt to provide a physiological history of man's developing perception. This leads to the final movement of the book, a history of social institutions and the money economy and of how individual perception can be affected by such social conditions. The capitalist division of labor is what stands between an experience of authentic reality and us, and it is the responsibility of a Marxist phenomenology to alter the mode of production and hence, in several senses, the ways we create our world.

This much in summary. Now let us explore in detail how Thao reconciles the apparent contradictions of a psychologically-focused phenomenology and a socially-focused Marxism.<sup>14</sup> From the beginning Thao is quick to emphasize how this encounter is born of necessity, not chance: "it is not a question in any sense of a mere juxtaposition of two contradictory points of view: Marxism appears to us as the only conceivable solution to problems raised by phenomenology itself."<sup>15</sup> The main device it seems phenomenology lacks is the dialectic, which in one sense avoids the Husserlian attempt to separate the material object from the significations around it. For Thao

*materiality (Dinglichkeit)* is not a simple substrate indifferent to the significations which it bears. It defines the originative resting place from which the movement engenders more elevated modes of being in the specificity of their meanings, the real *infrastructure* which founds the ideal *superstructures* in their historical emergence and in their truth value.<sup>16</sup>

It is only by means of the dialectic that a stronger concept of materiality can be developed and so phenomenology can move towards a meaningful engage-

<sup>12</sup> McHale, 15, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Thao, *Phenomenology*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Lyotard, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Thao, *Phenomenology*, xxi.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

ment with the real world. Thao suggests that the failure of phenomenology to recognize this route to concreteness is due to its class origins and that the transcendentalism Husserl opposed to a more naturalistic attitude “does nothing but express the *natural* repugnance of the ruling classes to recognizing in that labor that they exploit the true source of meanings to which they lay claim.”<sup>17</sup> Marxism can move phenomenology beyond this bourgeois prejudice and open the possibility of changing or naturalizing the world, which the third part of the text deals with most explicitly. The capitalist division of labor disguises not just the similarities between different instantiations of the means of production, but also the unity of human perception and a full phenomenological appreciation of lived experience. Individual ownership encourages individual perception and an idealization of the object that relies on closure, possession, and a denial of real exteriority.<sup>18</sup> In forgetting the essential materiality of ourselves and our world, we lose not only justice but pleasure and a recognition of the richness of experience. All of this builds to a rather messianic conclusion and one perhaps based more on the early Marx than the hard-nosed materialist relied upon in the introduction:

In the construction of socialism and the passage to communism is realized, finally, that *universal reconciliation* which was the dream of bourgeois thought in the idealistic dialectic of the forms of exploitation and which the proletariat places on its true ground by means of the organization of social labor, where every class structure and every pretext of exclusivity is suppressed. As the realization of the human form of humanity, Marxism achieves the ideal aspirations of the past. But this itself is not asserted in terms of an idea: it is the actual movement of the social totality where the traditional formations are absorbed in the proletariat by the *materiality* of their real life.<sup>19</sup>

The balance between the different elements of the title of Thao’s work can be seen to shift as it unfolds from an attempt to correct the errors of phenomenology through dialectical materialism to a Marxism tinged with the idealism of other philosophical projects.

The influence of Husserl on Thao’s work is not to be underestimated, nor is the persistence of his thought within a Husserlian paradigm. Indeed the main ambition of his text is to fulfill the dream of phenomenology as a “first philosophy,” a point of material origin and reality from which all other human and natural sciences can proceed. This original truth is not a fixed object for either Husserl or Thao but a process: “truth is not presented as a thing which is recog-

<sup>17</sup> Thao, *Phenomenology*, xxvi.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 175, 177.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

nized by a sign but as a *movement* which takes its value only in its actualization.”<sup>20</sup> Phenomenology erred not in its intention but in its failure to push its conclusions far enough: in the Hegelian reading of Husserl which closes Part One of the text Thao suggests that “*Lived experience* is but an abstract moment of *real life*,” and he concedes that nothing has proved more successful in examining lived experience than phenomenology.<sup>21</sup> What it needs to do and what Thao believes he has done is to outline this next movement towards a material reality.

The other significant work by Thao, *Investigations into the Origin of Language and Consciousness*, was not published until 1973 and is not mentioned by Derrida at any point. However, the effort of a brief examination will be repaid in the details it provides for connections between the two thinkers. Thao’s second text is no less troubled than his first, frequently losing itself in pedantic distinctions and obscure arguments whose fundamental premises are never firmly established. It again falls into three sections: a history of the development of human society and its tools, an explanation of the child’s acquisition of language with reference to this more general history of human development, and a relating of both of these to psychoanalysis and the Oedipal crisis. The basic theme is familiar from the *Phenomenology*: the development of one individual’s perception is identical to human development as a whole and therefore with a Hegelian Marxist narrative of social progress.

One of the early connections that Thao makes between language and consciousness is the origin of self-consciousness, namely, that speech permits the individual to recognize differences within oneself and possess some sort of framework for resolving them.<sup>22</sup> This is akin to Derrida’s reading of Husserl, which draws out how “The subject cannot speak without giving himself a representation of his speaking,” although the emphasis falls less on the individual resolving internal differences and more (in a psychoanalytical sense) on allowing them to be clearly expressed.<sup>23</sup> Thao’s own reading of psychoanalysis attempts to cut away the “ideological parasites of [Freud’s] time: psychological biologism and Durkheimian sociologism,” and replace them with “historical materialism,” capable of “developing the theory of the socio-historical forms of individuality.”<sup>24</sup> Clearly the very terms of this movement are antithetical to Derrida’s work, yet it is worth recalling that one of his strategies for questioning Husserl’s apparently naïve understanding of self-presence and the movements of protention and retention invokes Freud and the temporally distorting effects of the unconscious.<sup>25</sup> As with his *Phenomenology*, Thao’s *Investiga-*

<sup>20</sup> Thao, *Phenomenology*, 82; cf. Lyotard, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Thao, *Phenomenology*, 129-30.

<sup>22</sup> Thao, *Investigations*, 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, tr. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill., 1973), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Thao, *Investigations*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Derrida, *Speech*, 63

tions have generally been dismissed by history as not simply factually inaccurate but methodologically wrong-headed. Derrida's judgment on the *Phenomenology*, that the argument of the text "was of less importance than the stakes involved" seems fair, and Thao's oeuvre is perhaps more valuable for the questions it asks than for the answers it proposes.

#### Thao–Merleau-Ponty–Derrida

These are questions that Derrida has acknowledged pertain to his work. First, one can look at the direct overlap between their arguments. In Derrida's untranslated 1954 *Mémoire* (master's thesis) he calls Thao's note on how the Husserlian understanding of time abstracts the real world "remarkable," and he suggests that Thao expresses a new concept of the living present "very brilliantly."<sup>26</sup> In Derrida's translation of Husserl's *Origin of Geometry* he chooses "production" as the best equivalent of *Leistung*, a term which Husserl employs to describe how truth is an achievement or performance. In preferring "production," Derrida appears to rely on Thao's argument about the conditionality of this truth and its origin in fallible subjective perception.<sup>27</sup> More broadly, a central tenet of Derrida's early critique of Husserl is an interrogation of the possibilities of determining original material conditions, most noticeably in relation to the issue of language. Derrida brings to the fore Husserl's worries over to what extent language should be recognized as an ideal system of meaning and how its material existence could affect that judgment. For instance:

Insofar as the unity of the word—what lets it be recognized as a word, *the same* word, the unity of a sound-pattern and a sense—is not to be confused with the multiple sensible events of its employment or taken to depend on them, the *sameness* of the word is ideal; it is the ideal possibility of repetition, and it loses nothing by the reduction of *any* empirical event marked by its appearance, nor all of them.<sup>28</sup>

Derrida is interested in how language perpetually slips away from this "ideal possibility of repetition," while Thao develops this argument so that the ideal "sameness of the word" is grounded in society, in a common recognition of an object. The mutually understood indication of a "this here" rather than the perception of an essence therefore becomes the fundamental engine for language.<sup>29</sup> In both cases Husserl's reliance on a division of real and ideal content in lan-

<sup>26</sup> Lawlor, 247,n.24.

<sup>27</sup> See Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, tr. John P. Leavey (Stony Brook, N.Y., 1978), 40,n.27; the relevant section of Thao is *Phenomenology*, 71-72.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Speech*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Thao, *Investigations*, 15.

guage is displaced in favor of more critically materialistic models, which naturally open questions of ontology and being. “What gives a theory of knowledge the authority to determine the essence and origin of language?” asks Derrida.<sup>30</sup> In his Heideggerian reading of Husserl there is an attempt to call an epistemology into question through, at the risk of prolixity, an analysis of the possible conditions for an ontology. This can also be seen in Thao, whose first *Investigation* examines

how the indicative sign, which appears at the very origin of consciousness, effects the fundamental mediation between social practice and lived knowledge, a mediation which assures the correspondence between knowledge and things. It is the meaning of this sign which is the basis of the concept of *matter*, as an essential concept of the theory of knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

In *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* this desire for concreteness is phrased even more strongly, as “There has to be a return to the actual lived in order to explicate the meaning which constitutes its very being. In the *experience* of authentic knowledge is revealed the very thing which constitutes its truth value.”<sup>32</sup> Derrida remains a great deal more suspicious than Thao as to the possibilities of understanding experience, let alone finding the “truth value” of “authentic knowledge.”<sup>33</sup> His analysis of Husserl taps into problems about how an object can ever be said to be present, and more specifically, how the perceiving self can be certain of their own presence. This line of thought leads him to remark that “phenomenology seems to us tormented, if not contested from within, by its own descriptions of the movement of temporalization and of the constitution of intersubjectivity.”<sup>34</sup> In order for objects to be constituted they must exist within a temporal development, which is also a movement away from the individual towards intersubjective awareness, and therefore towards ideality. Yet this argument can also be connected to Thao’s reading of Husserl, and the heavy emphasis he lays on Husserl’s recognition that “omni-temporality is but a mode of temporality,” or that transcendental thought is reliant upon subjectivity.<sup>35</sup> This phrase of Husserl’s is repeatedly recalled in Derrida’s early works and with a similar intent to question Husserl’s idealism.<sup>36</sup> While Thao uses dialectical materialism to reconfigure the question of history, Derrida goes beyond dialectics and argues for the regrounding of phenomenology in

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, *Speech*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Thao, *Investigations*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Thao, *Phenomenology*, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Speech*, 58.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Speech*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Thao, *Phenomenology*, 115.

<sup>36</sup> See *Speech*, 83; and *Introduction*, 148.

*différance*, the interrogation of the possibility of presence rather than its simple denial or acceptance.<sup>37</sup> This refusal of dialectical materialism does not constitute a refusal of politics, but it does suggest seeing questions about political commitment as more fundamentally philosophical than Thao argues. Indeed, this can be neatly supported by one of Derrida's 1967 papers where he mentions the situation in Vietnam and popular dissatisfaction with the French government's policy as indications of the stakes when discussing the concept of man.<sup>38</sup> Derrida cannot accept the grand narratives of an author like Thao and regards the political and philosophical certainty that Thao claims to have found with the deepest suspicion.

In this skepticism Derrida appears closer to Thao's mentor and primary influence, Merleau-Ponty, than to Thao himself. Let us first investigate the relationship between Thao and Merleau-Ponty, thus questioning Derrida's division of "the versions [of Husserlian phenomenology] proposed by Sartre or by Merleau-Ponty which were then dominant" and more materialist developments, and then turn to the common ground between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. To begin with, Merleau-Ponty, like Thao, places a heavy emphasis on the dialectic, although with a more open philosophical objective:

the dialectic is unstable (in the sense that the chemists give to the word), it is even essentially and by definition unstable, so that it has never been able to formulate itself into theses without denaturing itself, and because if one wishes to maintain its spirit it is perhaps necessary to not even name it.... One of the tasks of the dialectic, as a situational thought, a thought in contact with being, is to shake off the false evidences, to denounce the significations cut off from the experience of being, emptied—and to criticize itself in the measure that it itself becomes one of them.<sup>39</sup>

The dialectic is philosophically indispensable but must be constantly reinvigorated from within, subject to its own rhythms of cancellation and development.<sup>40</sup> This shades into a greater political openness, so that Merleau-Ponty regards Marxism as "the idea that another history is possible," "the resolute try for that future which no one in the world or out of the world can know will come or, if

<sup>37</sup> See *Speech*, 104; *Introduction*, 153; also *Glas*, tr. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln, Neb., 1986), 107a; *Positions*, tr. Alan Bass (London, 1981), 41; *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (London, 1994), 54, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Brighton, 1982), 113-14.

<sup>39</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill., 1968), 92.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Margins*, 14.

it comes, what it will be.”<sup>41</sup> The acknowledgment here of non-knowledge, separating Merleau-Ponty from Thao, is also seen in his more hesitant linkage of social formations with individual perception. “Solipsism as a philosophical doctrine is not the result of a system of private property,” he argues; “nevertheless into economic institutions as into conceptions of the world is projected the same existential prejudice in favour of isolation and mistrust.”<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty was a committed and gifted political writer, and in contrast to Thao, his conception of politics and philosophy maintained a distinction between these two spheres.<sup>43</sup> A similar pattern can be found in both thinkers’ conceptions of history. Thao’s narrative of the development of social formations is narrowed by the limited meaning he ascribes to materialism, a move which Merleau-Ponty’s work is careful to avoid:

“Historical materialism,” in the works inspired by it, is often nothing but a concrete conception of history which brings under consideration, besides its obvious content (the official relations between “citizens” in a democracy, for instance) its latent content, or the relations between human persons as they are actually established in concrete living.... [“Historical materialism” investigates] in more general terms the living subject, man as creativity, as a person trying to endow his life with form, loving, hating, creating or not creating works of art, having or not having children. Historical materialism is not a causality exclusive to economics. One is tempted to say that it does not base history and ways of thinking on production and ways of working, but more generally on ways of existing and co-existing, on human relationships.<sup>44</sup>

This quotation should also make clear that while Thao posits an external spirit of history working its way out in the “human form of humanity,”<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty begins very much from the individual. Merleau-Ponty does not abandon a strong teleological orientation to history but rather grounds it in plurality and a resistance to universal concepts, arguing that it is neither devoid of economic meaning nor exhausted by it.<sup>46</sup> This skepticism towards historical materialism is something that Thao downplays in his adaptation of Merleau-Ponty’s work, just as the reduction and the dialectic become more Husserlian routes to cer-

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, tr. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Ill., 1964), 119.

<sup>42</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London, 1962), 171n1; cf. Thao, *Phenomenology*, 175-77.

<sup>43</sup> See *Signs*, tr. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill., 1964), 3-38.

<sup>44</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Perception*, 171n1.

<sup>45</sup> Thao, *Phenomenology*, 218.

<sup>46</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Perception*, 171-73, n.1.

tainty than critical tools of reflection. Yet the commonality of their concerns points to a shared tradition of French phenomenology which impacts on Derrida's earliest works and resurfaces throughout his career.

A case for comparing Derrida and Merleau-Ponty has often been made, although never, to my knowledge, with reference to Derrida's privileging of Thao in "The Time of a Thesis." To begin with, some terminological similarities crop up between the two men: *écart*, *dehiscence*, *inscription*, and *invagination* are all common terms,<sup>47</sup> as well as the concept of *monstration*. Merleau-Ponty employs this to explain language's capacity to explain itself by means of itself and so remain open to all,<sup>48</sup> while Derrida draws from it a whole series of puns about watching, guarding, and dividing to help clarify Heidegger's use of *Geschlecht* (broadly, "race").<sup>49</sup> In both cases the word's etymology—as something that shows and so constitutes itself—is exploited and this provides a useful introduction to the two thinkers' work on the philosophy of reflection. Both men see that traditional philosophy of reflection and in this sense a naïve phenomenology does not go far enough: to bracket off the outside world is certainly a helpful start, but in the famous watch-word of Merleau-Ponty "The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction."<sup>50</sup> Phenomenology must incorporate not only a capacity to understand transcendent influences on the act of perception but also an ability to compensate for the blind spots of reflection, the areas of external influence which are not, cannot be, known. One reason for this vigilance is to avoid dogma, a reification of philosophy into a set of doctrines, disciplines, and certainties; instead, philosophy should be a necessarily critical and popularly accessible set of intellectual tools. Merleau-Ponty's *In Praise of Philosophy* makes this point lucidly:

In order to understand the total function of the philosopher, we must remember that even the philosophical writers whom we read and who we are have never ceased to recognize as their patron a man who never wrote, who never taught, at least in any official chair, who talked with anyone he met on the street, and who had certain difficulties with public opinion and with the public powers. We must remember Socrates.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> David Farrell Krell, *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Mourning, Art, and Affirmation in the Thought of Jacques Derrida* (University Park, Penn., 2000), 100.

<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 43.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand," tr. John P. Leavey, *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. J. Sallis (Chicago, 1987), 161-96, 166.

<sup>50</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Perception*, xiv.

<sup>51</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, tr. John Wild, James Edie and John O'Neill (Evanston, Ill., 1988), 34.

Philosophy must enjoy a living relationship with the common experiential world in order to have meaning, a relationship symbolized by Socrates and his “true” irony.<sup>52</sup>

Now, it is perhaps curious to present some of most difficult philosophical writing of the last fifty years as a popular philosophical project, but while on the one hand Derrida’s work is obscure and hard to read, on the other hand it strives as hard as possible to avoid forming a closed and formalized system, and by so doing engages with a more radical version of reason than the one bound in the textbooks. This is very much the Derrida recognized by Christopher Norris, who has presented his philosophy as a continuation of the Enlightenment investigation of reason;<sup>53</sup> it is also a vision that heavily emphasizes Derrida’s statements about questioning “the reason of reason.”<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Derrida relies on a certain ideal of Socrates as the one who distinguished the power of irony and internal critique, leading others to recognize their own errors rather than introducing external pressure,<sup>55</sup> and deconstruction has repeatedly been described as something the text brings to itself, not an operation from outside.<sup>56</sup> This suspicion towards transcendentalism can be followed in both Derrida’s and Merleau-Ponty’s ethical writings. In opposition to Sartre’s concepts of good and bad faith and the associated Heideggerian baggage of more or less authentic existence, Merleau-Ponty relies on the individual moving through a variety of equally authentic and relevant worlds guided by time.<sup>57</sup> In one essay he writes, “There is no absolute innocence and—for the same reason—no absolute guilt. All action is a response to a factual situation which we have not completely chosen and for which, in this sense, we are not completely responsible.”<sup>58</sup> Morality becomes a series of individual time-bound choices, in which the subject unquestionably has a range of responsibilities and connections to others but which cannot be reduced to a binary of responsible/irresponsible, or good/bad. It takes very little effort to connect this decentralized version of ethics with Derrida,<sup>59</sup> who in later years explicated his thought about the aporias of ethical responsibility. For instance, in a work on the Christian philosophy of Jan Patočka, Derrida argues, “I can respond only to the one (or to

<sup>52</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 39.

<sup>53</sup> For instance, Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London, 1991); *Deconstruction and the “Unfinished Project of Modernity”* (London, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” tr. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics*, 13 (1983), 3-20, 9.

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, tr. Barbara Johnson (London, 1982), 119.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires for Paul De Man*, tr. Catherine Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1989), 123; *Dissemination*, 4-5.

<sup>57</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Perception*, 427.

<sup>58</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 37.

<sup>59</sup> See Michael Yeo, “Perceiving/Reading the Other: Ethical Dimensions,” in Busch and Gallagher, 37-52.

the One), that is, to the other, by sacrificing the other to that one. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality.”<sup>60</sup> Responsibility is limitless, yet we always must act within limits. We are not absolved of our duties by acknowledging that they are ultimately impossible; and no one specific political formulation can satisfy all obligations to the *polis*.<sup>61</sup>

The philosophy of language provides another area in which Derrida’s relations with mainstream French phenomenology become a little clearer. Merleau-Ponty’s linguistic philosophy is a good example of how he expands the Husserlian transcendental focus on the individual to a more socialized understanding: we all move in language (broadened here to include any form of communication), and in some senses it affects our interaction with others and with history. For both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty there is no immediately accessible space beyond language; the latter argues,

Speech always comes into play against a background of speech; it is always only a fold in the immense fabric of language. To understand it, we do not have to consult some inner lexicon which gives us the pure thoughts covered up by the words or forms we are perceiving; we only have to lend ourselves to its life, to its movement of differentiation and articulation, and to its eloquent gestures. There is thus an opaqueness of language. Nowhere does it stop and leave a place for pure meaning; it is always limited only by more language, and meaning appears within it only set in a context of words.<sup>62</sup>

Merleau-Ponty reaches an optimistic conclusion in this essay, that the endless superficiality of language is acceptable as we can always talk about language and describe the movements we cannot contain. This is perhaps a different attitude to that of the early Derrida, who casts his argument in more dramatic terms. He expands on his famous, if frequently misunderstood, proclamation, *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*:

What we have tried to show by following the guiding line of the “dangerous supplement,” is that in what one calls the real life of these existences “of flesh and bone,” beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, tr. David Wills (Chicago, 1995), 70. For other instances, cf. this text; or *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, tr. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London, 2001).

<sup>61</sup> “[N]ot to mention the animals that are even more other than my fellows,” *Gift*, 69.

<sup>62</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 42.

writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the “real” supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc.<sup>63</sup>

Because of this slipperiness of language, which Derrida would class as polysemy,<sup>64</sup> the individual is not entirely in control of his own meanings and thus is reliant on certain obligations and expectations from others in order to make sense; the similarities with the ethical argument outlined above should be obvious. Where Derrida and Merleau-Ponty differ is in their belief as to what underpins this movement of meaning. Given Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the physical mechanisms of perception which create a common bond between individuals, it will be no surprise that he suggests a corporeal grounding to linguistic interaction:<sup>65</sup>

the spoken word (the one I utter or the one I hear) is pregnant with a meaning which can be read in the very texture of the linguistic gesture (to the point that a hesitation, an alteration of the voice, or the choice of a certain syntax suffices to modify it), and yet is never contained in that gesture, every expression always appearing to me as a *trace* [Fr. *une trace*], no idea being given to me except through transparency, and every attempt to close our hand on the thought which dwells in the spoken word leaving only a bit of verbal material on our fingers.<sup>66</sup>

The terminological similarity of “trace” makes the point most neatly here: Derrida employs the same term to name the minimal marker of difference which sets language in motion, of which it should be recalled that “The trace [*la trace*] is *nothing*, it is not an entity, it exceeds the question What is? and contingently makes it possible.”<sup>67</sup> Merleau-Ponty is ultimately keen to explain communication by means of physical presence, while Derrida complicates this model through his emphasis on writing and the distance between the author and their words. Yet in both cases there is an interest less in language use and more in the necessary conditions for language: what needs to be in place for language to be possible? This question inherently turns both men’s work away from the

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1974), 158-59.

<sup>64</sup> See Jacques Derrida and Raoul Mortley, “Jacques Derrida,” *French Philosophers in Conversation*, ed. Raoul Mortley (London, 1991), 93-108, 97-98.

<sup>65</sup> Compare with Thao’s *Phenomenology*, 165-66.

<sup>66</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 89, emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 75.

“Diogenes in a barrel” model of Husserl’s philosophy of language and towards different, more transcendental, problems.<sup>68</sup> For Merleau-Ponty the matter is the social and communal aspects to understanding, which only in his very late works turns more towards an ontological schema, the figure of self and other intertwined in the flesh of the world.<sup>69</sup> Derrida traced a path in almost the opposite direction, as his earlier works emphasize the role for ontology, while his later texts developed in a much more sociological direction than could have been predicted.<sup>70</sup> The 1980 defense of his works at the Sorbonne, as Derrida admits, stands at one critical juncture of this progression.

Derrida, in his fiftieth year, explains to the thesis panel and the wider audience his current feelings of hiatus and dislocation:

Between youth and old age, one and the other, neither one nor the other, an indecisiveness of age, it is like a discomfiture at the moment of installation, an instability, I will not go so far as to say a disturbance of stability, of posture, of station, of the thesis or of the pose, but rather of a pause in the more or less well-regulated life of a university teacher, an end and a beginning which do not coincide and in which there is involved once again no doubt a certain gap of an alternative between the delight of pleasure and fecundity.<sup>71</sup>

1980 can indeed be seen as a significant stage in Derrida’s development. Following the early works on Husserl which formed the starting-point for this narrative, he wrote on the other influences which feature most heavily in these texts and indeed in the French intellectual scene of the 1950s and 60s—Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud.<sup>72</sup> Heidegger exerted a subterranean influence on all of these commentaries, but was not treated in the detail that the following decade offers.<sup>73</sup> What follows this thesis year are the growth of Derrida’s political work (for instance, the Jan Hus Association and his activity against apartheid),<sup>74</sup> the

<sup>68</sup> Karl Bühler, cited by Craig Brandist, “On the Philosophical Sources of the Bakhtinian Theory of Dialogue and the Utterance,” *Bakhtin and His Intellectual Ambience*, ed. B. Żyłko (Gdańsk, 2002), 177.

<sup>69</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 113-14.

<sup>70</sup> For instance, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, tr. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, 1998); *Of Hospitality*, tr. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif., 2000).

<sup>71</sup> Derrida, “Time of a Thesis,” 34-35.

<sup>72</sup> See *Glas*, published in French in 1974; *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, tr. Barbara Harlow (Chicago, 1979), originally 1978; and *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1987), first published in 1980.

<sup>73</sup> See the series of *Geschlecht* articles, and *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago, 1989).

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, tr. Bennington (Chicago, 1993), 334.

dilation of his project beyond commentary on literary and philosophical texts,<sup>75</sup> and a more reflective style of writing which feeds into quasi-autobiographical pieces from the end of the 1980s onwards. It is at this point of uncertainty that he offers one of the first public accounts of his intellectual development and simultaneously explains his apparent acceptance by and of an academic institution. Part of the procedure for the defense has been to select certain of his works for presentation to the board, and he describes leaving out texts that he does not believe “to be simply presentable or acceptable to the university.”<sup>76</sup> More than anyone else, Derrida is conscious of the anti-institutional nature of his work, and so in his defense he justifies this reconciliation with one of the most prestigious institutions in France by reference to his “strategy without any finality.”<sup>77</sup>

[T]his strategy is a strategy without any finality; for this is what I hold and what in turn holds me in its grip, the aleatory strategy of someone who admits that he does not know where he is going. This, then, is not after all an undertaking of war or a discourse of belligerence. I should like it to be also like a headlong flight straight towards the end, a joyous self-contradiction, a disarmed desire, that is to say something very old and very cunning, but which also has just been born and which delights in being without defence.<sup>78</sup>

There is no ultimate plan to his work, no *telos* which shapes his ends, and hence nothing essential either about the writings he has presented for this occasion or the persona that could be built out of them.

The privileging of Thao in “The Time of a Thesis,” therefore, could be seen in Derrida’s terms as strategic: while Thao unquestionably marked certain aspects of Derrida’s reading of Husserl, that is less important than the rhetorical-autobiographical possibilities which he offers. In particular his status as a marginalized philosopher explicitly using continental philosophy to undermine colonialist politics appears attractive to Derrida’s anti-institutionalized moment of acceptance. This might become a little clearer by reference to probably the most well-known of the quasi-autobiographical texts, namely “Circumfession,” where Derrida recollects his childhood in Algeria as that of “a little black and very Arab Jew,” his “expulsion from school and from Frenchness,” and his gradual and incomplete incorporation within French academic institutions.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> See “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” tr. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics*, 13 (1983), 3-20; “Languages and Institutions of Philosophy,” *Semiotic Inquiry*, 4 (1984), 91-154.

<sup>76</sup> “Time of a Thesis,” 40; referring to *Glas*, *Spurs*, and *The Post Card*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>79</sup> “Circumfession,” in Bennington and Derrida, 58, 248.

While these moving passages can be and often are taken straight, Derrida carefully qualifies them with doubts about their veracity. The frame of “Circumfession” is a text by Geoffrey Bennington, supposedly summarizing and containing Derrida’s work and running across the top of the pages, which Derrida undermines by creating a new text from beyond the system in another strategic attempt to avoid finality. The title forms a Jewish reinscription of one of the primary intertexts, Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, which also presented another North African intellectual’s life as exemplary or instructive in some manner and which for these ends engaged literary, therefore unreliable, modes of expression.<sup>80</sup> Derrida is conscious not just of constructing an autobiography to fit his academic works in a certain way but also of the historical situatedness of this project, its continuity and differences from other similar tasks, including those used to justify very different ideas. This is perhaps why here, as in other texts, he identifies himself as being a “Marrano,” a Christianized Jew or Muslim in medieval Spain, the very emblem of a hybridized culture and a necessary refusal of any kind of essentialism:

I am one of those *marranes* who no longer say they are Jews even in the secret of their own hearts, not so as to be authenticated *marranes* on both sides of the public frontier, but because they doubt everything, never go to confession or give up enlightenment, whatever the cost, ready to have themselves burned, almost.<sup>81</sup>

Thao is a marker of this hybridized sense of identity, a committed skeptic and critical outsider to the traditions that gave him inspiration; and he provides a means for Derrida to express himself, including his relations as an Algerian to French institutions, without lapsing into naïve autobiography.

We return, then, to the three questions broached at the start of the article: why does Derrida so strongly oppose two versions of phenomenology?; why does he align himself in this context with Thao?; and why, here and elsewhere, does he refute the influence of Merleau-Ponty? All three can be answered within the terms of Derrida’s larger strategies of self-representation and indeed must be so once the detail of relations between the three is understood. Thao and Merleau-Ponty share a common set of concerns even if they draw radically different conclusions. While Derrida incorporates Thao into his early works, the bulk of his career bears greater similarity to Merleau-Ponty. Yet because of the anti-institutional nature of his project, Derrida cannot be seen to accept the

<sup>80</sup> “Circumfession,” 25-26.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 170; cf. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, tr. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, 1996), 69-70; “Faith and Knowledge,” tr. Samuel Weber, *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge, 1998), 1-78, 66.

legacy of such an authoritative figure. This technique of autobiography forms part of Derrida's larger investigations of values of canonicity and exclusion and indeed the overall critique of the referential capacity of language. By privileging "a book which is no longer discussed" and complicating the possibility of an intellectual history, Derrida enacts on a micro level the questioning of authority that the macro level of his work elaborates.

The University of Sheffield.