



Paola Marrati. *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. xiv + 258 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-3916-0; \$57.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3915-3.

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The Birth of Deconstruction out of the Spirit of Phenomenology: The Search

Much of the recent scholarship on Jacques Derrida has moved away from according his characteristic “deconstructive method” a narrow relevance primarily to literary criticism towards appreciating its merits as a critical philosophical project unto itself. This interpretive trend sees deconstruction as a *constructive* engagement with the critique of Western metaphysics in the twentieth century. One effort in this direction has been to recapture Derrida’s early reading of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. Paola Marrati’s work is an attempt to rethink this relation of influence. For Marrati, as early as his dissertation of 1953-54, the young Derrida produced a “singular interpretation” of Husserl’s work that was to lead the latter to formulate the questions that would concern him in his subsequent career.[1] Moreover, Husserl proves to be a more substantial and productive influence for Derrida than any other philosopher—even Martin Heidegger. The author explicitly concludes “Deconstruction ... is born in Derrida’s work on Husserl; more than this, however, it is born in the work that Derrida has done *with* Husserl, *thanks* to him and, ultimately, *against* him, something that cannot be said of any of the other authors with whom Derrida has concerned himself. Not even Heidegger” (p. 181).

Genesis and Trace was originally published in French in 1998, when the author worked at the Marc Bloch University in Strasbourg.[2] There the book developed through her close collaboration with the philosophers Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. The original French edition appeared through Kluwer Academic

Publishers in the Netherlands in its series on Husserl.[3] Wolters Kluwer also publishes the journal *Husserl Studies*. Marrati’s book carries the traces of these elements of production and publication. The language and structure of the text will be relatively inaccessible for those unversed in the language of Husserl’s phenomenology or unfamiliar with the key terms of Derridian philosophy. This problem is complicated further by the fact that the author employs this Derridian language and style seamlessly, with no interest in translating it for a non-specialist audience. More importantly, for those unacquainted with the influence of Husserl’s phenomenology in French academic philosophy, which began in the early 1930s and continued into the postwar era, or with Derrida’s own admittedly outsider status in the *acadmie*, I fear the stakes of Marrati’s work may be a mystery. This situation is not helped by Marrati’s reluctance to state these concerns explicitly at the outset or to provide anything more than an internal exegesis of the philosophical texts. Although I certainly feel this book must be admired for its own merits, as a work of intense philosophical interpretation and certainly an important contribution to our understanding of Derrida’s development, I want to suggest that a broader consideration of the historical genesis—to use her key term—would both strengthen her argument and render it more accessible to a wider audience of philosophers and intellectual historians.

After exploring some of Marrati’s main points, I would like to raise the issue of what is implicit in the authors attempt to locate the birth of deconstruction in

Derrida's early philosophical thought. Her insistence on the "singularity" and independence of the origin of deconstruction can be viewed as an act of legitimation of Derrida's philosophical project, which leads her to elide the historical and intellectual context of this reception in favor of a purely internal reading. What is more, this narrow focus on the internal connections between philosophical texts would seem to belie the fundamental Derridian point about the ambivalence of any pure "birth" or origin.

Marrati makes the basic claim that the persisting questions of Derrida's deconstruction arise out of his criticism of Husserl's phenomenology. The most important of these questions is what Derrida calls the "contamination" of the empirical and the transcendental. For Marrati, Derrida arrives at this question through his thinking "with and against" the problem of genesis in Husserl's task of transcendently grounding philosophical reflection. Contamination designates the continuing presence of the finite in the infinite, of the temporal in the eternal, and the insurmountable paradox of worldly genesis as both origin and becoming. The discovery of this contamination leads Derrida to challenge the tenability of the phenomenological reduction. Husserl maintained that the practiced phenomenologist could "bracket out" or "place in abeyance" (epoché) the "natural attitude" or "prepredicative" way in which we attend to objects in the intersubjective world of experience (*Lebenswelt*), thereby throwing into relief the transcendental acts of consciousness or of a transcendental subject. Of course, the practice of phenomenological reduction was always the result of an attempt to ground phenomenology's own reflection: it was not only a method but also the result of its practice and the proof of the possibility of phenomenology as theoretic reflection.[4] Similarly, Marrati suggests that Derrida discovers in investigating the problem of genesis the unavoidable paradox in the reduction as method and result of phenomenological reflection. Despite the phenomenologists' effort to isolate the pure activity of consciousness, these acts always refer back to or "intend" an ontology that is already in place, a genesis that is "always already" constituted by a passive temporal synthesis (p. 15). Husserl holds onto the supposition that the separation of the phenomenological from the natural attitude as well as the separation of transcendent and empirical life is possible in phenomenological reflection. Derrida introduces "contamination" as the inability to dissociate the world in its historical becoming from the becoming of the world in transcendental consciousness. We can see incipient in this analysis a critique of

"metaphysical presence" that was to be the mainstay of Derrida's deconstruction. In Husserl's phenomenological reduction, Derrida discovers the impossibility of a "pure presence" of thoughts for consciousness precisely by recovering the "trace" of its worldly genesis.

Derrida develops this point further through criticism of the linguistic implications of the phenomenological way of thinking. Language serves as "the fundamental condition of possibility of phenomenological difference" (p. 52). If transcendental reduction is the means to arriving at the theoretical attitude in acts of consciousness, then the possibility for thematizing this content requires a phenomenological language. But, for Derrida, the possibility of such a language rests on the split that is made in the sign between its pure expression and its indicative value. Phenomenology, in other words, requires "a purely expressive language" (p. 64). This state is achieved by viewing language as pure ideality, as in the example of imagination or fantasy. In Derrida's view, this activity amounts to the positing of a "solitary mental life" of interiority over against an "other" exterior world—the intersubjectively constituted world—to which it need not refer, but which will always remain as a "trace" or contamination of its worldly origin. This is in part the problem and paradox of the phenomenological reduction being both productive of theoretical knowledge and the result of its own practice: any supposedly pure theoretical presence must retain its "non-present" origin in time. As Marrati writes, "The possibility of a purely phenomenological language, of a language that can submit the world to *epoché*, is the very possibility of distinguishing body from soul *within* language itself. There is no absolute life, no absolute living life unless the soul does not need the body" (p. 62). On this basis, Derrida claims that Husserl fails to free transcendental reflection from the traditional oppositions of metaphysics and the privileging of interiority (p. 52). We must recognize, for Derrida, the "différance" or limitation of a purely expressive language in a solitary mental discourse that would maintain an ideality of signs and a complete "othering" of an exterior world of intentional meaning significations. By speaking in terms of asymmetrical oppositions, by privileging the consciousness-side of experience, Husserl ultimately falls prey to logocentrism.[5]

The second part of Marrati's work focuses on Derrida's confrontation with Heidegger's thinking of an "originary temporality" under which the two related projects of *Being and Time* are placed: the existential analytic of *Dasein* and the destruction (*Destruktion*) of the history of ontology (pp. 114-116). The notion of con-

tamination with which Derrida confronts Husserl's transcendental reflections can be mapped onto Heidegger's point of departure for the existential analytic of *Dasein*. Heidegger denies Husserl's focus on transcendental consciousness and the "bracketing" of the world it requires; for Heidegger, self and world are contained in *Dasein*. This state of affairs means that what can be discovered in phenomenological interpretation "already belongs to *Dasein*" even if it has the tendency in its everyday mode of being to "cover up" these ontological issues. Marrati reveals how Derrida concludes that Heidegger's existential analytic requires the "epoch of all metaphysical interpretation" and the naming of *Dasein* (p. 146). On this basis, Derrida claims that Heidegger ultimately fails to throw off the traditional oppositions and ordering of metaphysics.

Marrati follows this claim in an interesting discussion of the Heideggerian notion of "being towards death" as that which discloses to *Dasein* its "ownmost" possibility. Many will be familiar with Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death developed in division 2 of *Being and Time*. This is the notion that only when confronted with the potentiality of death does *Dasein* find disclosed its "utmost possibility" of authentically taking a stand in existence. Death is a perfect point of entry for a Derridian deconstruction because it is, like writing, at once the site of a possibility and impossibility for being. Death is a universal experience. Yet my death cannot be experienced by anyone else; that is to say, I cannot experience it as "one" (*das Man*) does. Moreover, *Dasein* cannot properly experience death as a temporal being because it is not characterized by a succession in time. Death is final and thus defies the temporal structure of experience in which *Dasein* is, as Heidegger puts it, "always ahead of itself" in its projects. It is only through "being with" the death of others that we recognize this possibility. It is here that Derrida finds the inevitable fall-back position whereby Heidegger attempts to support the opposition of inauthentic, undifferentiated being and authentic "being-towards-death." The distinction between the empirical death of man (*verenden*) and "authentic dying" (*eigentlich sterben*) of *Dasein*, and of the "ontic" and "ontological" levels in general, is something achieved only through language. As Marrati puts it, "this distinction is only possible because *Dasein* is presupposed" as that which "can itself testify to its being *Dasein*, that is, to its potential being for death" (p. 163). Death, at once *Dasein*'s "ownmost possibility," is also an impossibility in the sense that *Dasein* cannot die, nor truly experience the death of others. There is again an issue of the "trace"

as a contamination of the empirical and the transcendental, which was first constructively taken from a dialogue with Husserl, and now deployed against the Heideggerian hierarchy of asymmetrical oppositions between authentic/inauthentic or ontic/ontological.

This interpretation is a very specialized study of Derrida's reading of Husserl that seeks to show how the unique questions that emerge initially from this reading predate Derrida's reception of Heidegger, and thus distinguish deconstruction from Heidegger's philosophical project. If we do not view the Husserl reception in this sense as the originary moment of Derrida's philosophical apprenticeship, Marrati emphasizes that we run "the risk of turning deconstruction into a formal and empty structure, a method that one might indifferently apply to all sorts of texts in order to investigate their undecidability" (p. 181). This is as close as Marrati comes to explicitly revealing what is at stake in her reading of Derrida. Deconstruction is not first "applied" but properly *born* in Derrida's thinking of the problem of contamination in Husserl's thought. Derrida would continue to repeat this thought of contamination, always altering it to be sure, but never reducing this "profound lineage, as the never abandoned categories of ideality and the contamination of the empirical and the transcendental suggest" (p. 183).

In my view, the question remains why there is a need for the author to defend deconstruction in this way, or at the very least to provide for it an alternative, more "profound" lineage. Marrati never claims that this is an introduction to Derrida's thought or a history of the reception of German philosophy in postwar France. However, she does tell us in a perfunctory footnote that in explanations of the role of phenomenology in French philosophical debates, she finds that "the opposition between 'historical' and 'internal' reasons—in other words, between *structure* and *genesis*—is ultimately insufficient for reading a work that, from *The Problem of Genesis* on, constitutes an attempt to reconsider all such categories" (p. 199 n2). While I certainly accept this point of *différance*, I find it surprising that she proceeds to fall back on a purely internal reading of Derrida's work. This decision generates the suspicion that the concern for the status of deconstruction as "a theoretical thinking: a philosophy" has its own historical grounds in the author's implicit agenda (p. xiii).

The difficulty of this book may be in part the result of bringing a work intended for a French audience unchanged into an English edition.[6] The French reader may better ascertain the value of an attempt to locate

the root of Derrida's thought in a philosophical questioning derived from the criticism of Husserl. For it was Husserl who imparted to his French audience in 1929 the following insight: "Jeder, der ernstlich Philosoph werden will, mu sich einmal im Leben auf sich selbst zurckziehen und in sich den Umsturz aller vorgegebenen Wissenschaften und ihren Neubau versuchen. Philosophie ist eine ganz persnliche Angelegenheit des Philosophierenden." [7] Derrida had not been born when these words were uttered; however, the conception of phenomenology as the most rigorous philosophical thinking of real existence would dominate the academic world in which the young Derrida was educated. I do not mean to reduce Derrida's thoughtful engagement with Husserl to the question of his academic pedigree and cultivation in the premiere institutions of French secondary education (the Louis-le-Grand to cole Normale Suprieure trajectory, etc.). However, to find the origin of deconstruction here, as Marrati does, is to place Derrida's thought in a philosophical tradition unimpeachable for its seriousness and rigor.

The issues at stake are the French reception of Derrida himself and the related concern of his reliance on Heidegger. Derrida's influence in academic philosophy and the humanities in France was much less significant in comparison to his influence in the United States. The *enfant perdu* held a marginal position in the French academic field as *matre-assistant* at the cole normale (1964-84) and thereafter as director of the Collge International de Philosophie. His works after the Husserl studies were not as well received by the academic establishment. He was considered by many to be more of a literary critic than a serious philosopher. Marrati wants to turn our focus to the work on Husserl in part to recuperate Derrida as a "serious" philosopher. While this shift in focus may be helpful and justified for our understanding of Derrida, I also believe that this strategy must be made explicit. Likewise, if we are to accept the independence of Derrida's questioning of traditional metaphysical dichotomies from Heidegger's "ontotheology," then it would have been worthwhile for the author to link this localized concern with what intellectual historians of postwar France have come to regard as a general tendency to overestimate the Heideggerian influences in French philosophy. [8]

Finally, one could argue that the author's focus on the "internal" reasons for Derrida's work with/against Husserl and the "confrontation" with Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein* takes for granted a "Derrida" and his "reading-of" as unproblematic origins or as pure

presences. Marrati's internal reading of "structure" in this sense could be problematized by the "contamination" inherent in its own "worldly genesis." Who is this "Derrida"? A Derrida whose *absence* we now "mourn" and whose insights in life would seem to have defied the oppositions of reader/writer, philosopher/literary critic implicit in Marrati's representation.

Notes

[1]. First published in French as Jacques Derrida, *Problme de la gense dans la philosophie de Husserl* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990) and very recently in English as *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, trans. by Marian Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[2]. Paola Marrati-Gunoun, *La gense et la trace. Derrida lecteur de Husserl et Heidegger* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998).

[3]. The Netherlands and Belgium have a rich tradition of Husserl reception, due in part to the location of the main Husserl archive at the Katholieke Universiteit in the Flemish town of Leuven.

[4]. This observation, that "the reduction is its own presupposition," was famously made by Husserl's apprentice, Eugen Fink. For the best introduction to this problem and to Husserl's ideas in general see Maurice Natanson, *Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 75-77.

[5]. Here Marrati might have compared Derrida's reflections with those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, where the latter introduces an influential criticism of Husserl's ego-logical perspective. In general, I find the absence of any reference to Merleau-Ponty in Marrati's text troubling, given that philosopher's enormous influence on the reception of Husserl in postwar French academic philosophy.

[6]. Yet this has nothing to do with the actual work of translation, which is extremely faithful to the French original.

[7]. Edmund Husserl, "Die Cartesianischen Meditationen und ihre kritische Umbildung zur meditierenden Erschlieung des transzendentalen ego," lecture given on February 23, 1929 at the Institut d'tudes germaniques and the Socit franaise in Paris.

[8]. This is one of the main conclusions of Alan D.

Schrift's excellent essay "Is There Such a Thing as 'French Philosophy' Or Why Do We Read the French So Badly?" *on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).
in Julian Bourg, ed., *After the Deluge: New Perspectives*

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