Hermeneutics and Textuality:
Questions Concerning Phenomenology

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The most important contemporary French thinkers have all had to some degree a phenomenological education. This is obviously the case for J. Derrida whose first publications deal with Husserl. However, it is also true for J. Lacan and for M. Foucault and even to a certain extent for L. Althusser. Yet it is difficult to call these thinkers phenomenologists. Sometimes they are called by a rather problematic term—structuralists. The term is problematic, as all these thinkers reject structuralism as a characterization of their way of thinking. It is more correct to say that they are thinkers of discourse and discursivity, of text and textuality, of écriture and texture. It will later become evident that they are first of all readers or possibly listeners. They are concerned with the act of reading and writing, and of listening and talking. Consequently the style of their thinking and the thema of their work differ totally from those of phenomenology, in which perception and everything that it implies and presupposes is the central focal point. Merleau-Ponty published in the forties an important work entitled Phénoménologie de la perception. From the late fifties until the early seventies it would be difficult to find an important work or publication with the word perception or experience in the title, or even in the table of contents. However, words like 'lecture,' 'lire,' 'texte,' 'texture,'
'textualité,' 'intertextualité,' 'discours,' 'écriture,' 'signe,' 'signifiant,' 'signifié' (and 'metaphor' and 'metonymy') occur very often.

The leading contemporary French philosophers have certainly had phenomenological training, but they have, as Levinas explicitly says of his own thought, used phenomenology to think against phenomenology. Furthermore, they have formulated radical questions concerning the basic ideas and structure of the phenomenological way of thinking. These questions on the one hand arise out of a radical consideration of the most fundamental notions and starting-points of phenomenology itself. Therefore a basic knowledge of phenomenology is necessary to understand what occupies these French thinkers. On the other hand these questions emerge out of a confrontation with many other tendencies in twentieth-century European thought.

First of all, I want to show schematically the fundamental notions of E. Husserl's phenomenology, which will serve as a background for contemporary French thought and which become critically questioned. At the same time however I would also like to consider other tendencies in European thought which have made it possible to raise these questions. Secondly I would like to give a short analysis of Husserl's basic ideas; this analysis will be somewhat tendentious, as it already shows the problematic of these fundamental ideas. And thirdly I will endeavour to say something about what occupies French philosophers, through particular attention to the act of reading. This will be an opportunity, although limited, to enter into the problem of hermeneutics and textuality.

FUNDAMENTAL NOTIONS OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND OTHER TENDENCIES OF CONTINENTAL THOUGHT

Perception is central for Husserl, both sensory perception with the material object (Gegenstand) given to us, and non-sensory perception with its so-called ideal object (ideale Gegenstand) given to us. It is important in an analysis of perception to take into account that the word perception points to what is perceived (what is present) as well as the act of perception itself (the making present). Perception on the one hand necessarily refers to a perceiving subject for whom the object can be object and what is present can be present, a consciousness for whom the given is given, for whom the appearance appears (phenomenon). On the other hand, perception necessarily refers to the givenness of that which is given or the presence of the present. Phenomenology as logos