

# The Event – between Phenomenology and History

*Marlène Zarader*

Paradoxically, I have chosen to examine the event not from a phenomenological perspective, but, at least partly, from the outside – precisely in order to be able to relate this perspective to a wider field of relevance evoked by the event.

This demands an explanation, primarily by way of a brief historical reminder. If we were to invoke a conceptual history, in the style of Gadamer, it would here be possible for us to reconstruct a *history of the event as a phenomenological concept*: this history commences in the '20s, with Heidegger (though it might be said to have its “prehistory” in Husserl), continues, though somewhat quietly, with Merleau-Ponty, leaving traces also in the works of Gadamer – only to re-emerge in full force from the '80s and onward, in the form of a phenomenology of the event, viz, a phenomenology that in the event discovers or rediscovers its own central theme. I am thinking here of Jean-Luc Marion, Françoise Dastur, Jocelyn Benoist, Claude Romano – and would obviously also have to include Henri Maldiney, even if he reconsiders the event in terms of the double perspective of art and madness.

And neither can we afford entirely to lose sight of the fact that the event became a key concept in non-phenomenological ways of thinking as well in the '60s, for Deleuze and Foucault (whose main inspiration in this respect was less Heidegger than it was Nietzsche); and that it is today a key concept outside philosophy in the social sciences, most notably for the historians. And this is so to such extent that one could, beside the *history of the event as a phenomenological concept*, reconstruct with equal legitimacy a *history of the event as a historiographical concept*, where the latter is, moreover, more turbulent than the former. The milestones in this latter history are: the concept of

an event became important starting at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but in a positivist sense, as a reaction against historical theories of a Hegelian bent; then, from the '30s and onward, it was criticized from two sides: on the one hand, from those who questioned its stature as the exclusive object for the science of history (Lucien Febvre and the *l'école des Annales*), on the other hand, from those who rejected its character of simple gathering of facts, and who tried to reveal how the concept itself had been constructed (Raymond Aron, who in this way came to add to the insights of the *Historischschule* and also introduce them in France). And finally, in a manner practically concomitant with its massive irruption on the phenomenological scene (which, as I already indicated, occurred in the beginning of the '80s), we witness within the science of history a “return to the event” (the title of Pierre Nora’s famous article from 1974) – an event that could only “return” to the scene from which it had once been expelled after it had been redefined, radicalized and transformed into a “new” historical event (viz, the object for the so-called “new science of history”), whose possible links to the way in which the event (although in a different academic environment) has been re-invoked by the phenomenologists remain to be investigated.

At any rate, it is clear that we have today reached the summit of – and also the point of intersection between – these two genealogies of the event (and no doubt a number of others too), which has managed to make of the event *an epochal term* – the term of intersection in which movements of thought converge (without necessarily meeting), even scientific disciplines, whose motivations to use the concept may differ drastically.<sup>1</sup>

What I have decided to examine is precisely this convergence. Due to my own philosophical orientation, I will not be able to do this without a phenomenological bias. What I want to do, however, is to *situate* phenomenology – in relation to itself (while the term ‘phenomenology of the event’ may cover a whole set of different connotations), and also in relation to other contemporary ways of thinking. Because what I find most blatantly absent in the present flood of discourses on the

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<sup>1</sup> Though an epochal term does not obtain the same firmness as a concept, we should nevertheless refrain from viewing it as something simple or trend-related. When an epoch is in this way centered in a word through which it understands itself, this should generally be seen as indicating *a question* demanding its attention (and which is going to be confronted in a host of different ways: incantations, passionate standpoints, theoretical elaborations, etc.). It is this question that I find especially interesting to identify.

event is precisely a *relating* of tendencies to each other, that is, dialogue.

One might retort that the social scientists of today, who mainly speak of the event *in historical terms*, do not use the term “event” in the same sense as the phenomenologists – or, more radical still, that they really speak of two entirely different things. This may very well be the case. But the only way to decide this is to aim for a confrontation. Because even under the assumption that they are speaking completely past each other, we will still have to localize the chasms, measure the differences, and to endow them with a minimum of conceptual clarity. Why does the historian of today again focus upon the event, and what sense does he give to it? Is this movement related (and, if so, in what way) to the re-emergence of the event as a phenomenological theme? And, conversely, does the phenomenological thought of the event lead us to a certain kind (and, in that case, what kind) of historical thinking?

All these questions seem to me worthy of being posed, because they obviously remain open (i.e. unsolved). And I will have an opportunity to pose them as I structure my own views about the following two aspects of the event (there are others, naturally): its phenomenological aspect and its historical aspect. The first two parts of my text will be devoted to this.

## I. The event within phenomenology

A preliminary, programmatic remark: it will not be my business here to advance new theoretical propositions, but only to clarify, i.e. to classify, what already exists. My one fundamental ambition is to bring order to my own interpretations. Why this necessity of *arranging*? Because phenomenology treats the event in two distinctly different senses and according to two levels of depth – levels that, moreover, correspond to two distinct strata within phenomenological research. I will thus first try to distinguish these two ways of relating to the event.

### (a) Distinction of levels

The *primary level*. Here, we proceed from *events* in their almost infinite variety: intimate events (the death of someone dear, a meeting, an

illness) or collective, historical events (the assassination of Jaurès, September 11<sup>th</sup>). What we encounter at this level is of an *ontic* order, taking place within a worldly or intra-worldly manifold. The participants in these events take a natural attitude to what happens: they experience an illness or September 11<sup>th</sup> as a reality to which they are subjected.

To clarify such concrete events without betraying them, i.e. to do it while respecting their proper mode of development, I can accomplish the reduction by considering the phenomenon as a phenomenon, in order to extract its proper phenomenality. To accomplish the reduction here means necessarily both of the following things: (1) No longer to search for, for example, what an illness would be in and of itself, but to describe the way in which those who are stricken with it experience it. (2) To search for that which is invariable, i.e. to question the events of someone's death, an illness or September 11<sup>th</sup> with an eye towards trying to find out what it is that makes them events – rather than just things, simple facts, etc. This will lead us to extract a number of characteristic traits (singularity, excess, etc.) that will be explained in reference to the consciousness that constitutes them, which is what characterizes a phenomenological explanation of the category of phenomena we call events.

Such is the primary level. But today's phenomenologists of the event only develop this primary level in close connection to a secondary one.

What, then, is this *secondary level*? Before we thematize it by itself, let us look at two examples, two analyses performed, respectively, by Jean-Luc Marion and Claude Romano. Marion's analysis<sup>2</sup> is one where the thought of the event as an eminently paradoxical phenomenon frequently recurs. The event is paradoxical because of its special modes of givenness: rather than being inscribed into the world, it interrupts it, rather than being outlined against an horizon, it shatters it, rather than being constituted by a subjective consciousness, it comes suddenly upon it, i.e. dismisses it, etc. The event is thus defined by its radical excess, its ability to overload.

In what context is this analysis brought forth? Within a redefinition of the phenomenon as such. Certainly, not all phenomena are events (Marion here maintains a distinction which will be effaced by Jocelyn

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<sup>2</sup> J.-L. Marion, *Etant donné*, Paris, PUF, 1997, notably pp. 225-250.

Benoist<sup>3</sup>), but on the basis of the phenomena that represent the structure of the event, we may have to reconsider phenomenality altogether, its relation to the subjective consciousness, the world, the idea of objectivity, etc. Marion's analysis thus tries to make possible a redefinition of the phenomenon in general, which is henceforth to be understood as that which forces itself upon us and exceeds us, which thereby relativizes the faculties of the subject, and, at the same time, reveals the limits of all constitution. Once the phenomenon gets defined in these terms, it calls for a question concerning its pure givenness, understood as its original givenness.

Claude Romano<sup>4</sup> elaborates and develops this perspective, but in a context of explicit resistance to the Heideggerian existential analytic. What interests Romano is the redefinition of temporality that the Heideggerian approach makes possible. His analysis, which is far more elaborated than Marion's, thus strives toward a well-defined goal – which is less to redefine the phenomenon on the basis of the event, than to redefine *Dasein* and its specific temporality on the basis of the event. But this ultimately leads him, just like it did Marion, to the question of original givenness – to answer this question becomes the explicit objective in his last book<sup>5</sup>, where he confirms that he is speaking of “the beginning of appearance,” or, more accurately: “the emergence of appearance.”

In this way, we encounter in both analyses two different levels. On the one hand we have a set of phenomenological descriptions pertaining to certain phenomena, those that “upset our entire existence,” and that are called precisely events; on the other hand we have the reappraisals of the phenomenon as such (Marion) or of existence as such (Romano) according to the aspects according to which they are simultaneously both determined within a structure of “eventicity” (*structure d'événementialité*) and rendered possible by an original event. In the phenomenologies of the event, the secondary level thus no longer consists in revealing the *essences* of phenomena, but in asking for the event (understood as a particular phenomenon) in the direction of a *coming-into-being* [fr. *avènement*] (understood as the coming-into-being of the phenomenality of all phenomena).

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<sup>3</sup> J. Benoist, “Qu'est-ce qui est donné? La pensée et l'événement,” in *Archives de philosophie*, 59, 1996, pp. 645-650.

<sup>4</sup> C. Romano, *L'événement et le monde*, Paris, PUF, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> C. Romano, *Il y a*, Paris, PUF, 2003.

These levels are both derived from phenomenology. Maybe they are inseparable. But inseparable or not, they must not be confounded, because the respective reasoning about the event that attends each is not at all identical – nor are the results obtained the same. I will thus try to maintain the distinction between their respective intentions, which I can do only by referring to their *provenance*.

In the first case, we try to think the *essence* of the event, by using the phenomenological method as it was left to us by Husserl. In the other case, we use the concept of the event to elucidate the *origin* of all appearance, in a phenomenology inspired by Heidegger. Why does Heidegger have to be mentioned here? Because the orientation toward the inaugural “it is” is only conceivable within the framework of a problematic that he bequeathed us. As soon as we orient ourselves toward eventicity in terms of original givenness, we may call it what we like – the event of appearance, the event of the phenomenon – it will still be the event of *being* that we are concerned with. For to ask for the appearance or the phenomenon in the direction of the act that inaugurates them – by the pure surfacing that enables their becoming – is to ask for the appearance or the phenomenon in the direction of their being, in the literal sense of that word.

When we move within the secondary level, we have thus reached the degree of originality or radicality at which phenomenology and ontology meet – which, by the way, is Heidegger’s very own contribution. Ontology, he claimed, is only possible as phenomenology. His heirs, whether rebelling against him or not, today tend to reverse this formula: for them, phenomenology can be fully realized only as ontology, i.e. in its Heideggerian version. Consequently, the concern that guides their understanding of phenomena is less the demonstration of their constitution within and by consciousness, than a reaching back to their conditions of being. And it is because their concern is of this kind that they can pass with natural ease from the event understood as a specific phenomenon whose essence we have to describe – to the event as the structure, or even the origin, of phenomenality as such.

But this “natural ease” calls for an explanation. Once the two levels have been distinguished, it thus seems suitable that we confront the problem of articulating them within the phenomenologies of the event. And this is the second point I will make here.

## (b) Articulation of levels

The analyses just referred to expand the structure of eventicity (as indicated by certain phenomena) to make it cover phenomenality in general. This expansion is not without justification. But *if we want to think the event*, a second, indispensable task remains: to stop such an expansion from becoming, quite simply, a generalization (of the kind: all phenomena are events), we will have to go back from eventicity (understood as the structure and origin of all phenomena) to the particular phenomenon of the event, by clarifying the distinguishing features according to which it is classified *as* event. This second task is *not* realized by any of the different phenomenologies of the event. It should be, and it could be, in phenomenologically rigorous terms, but in fact it is not. And this has led certain critics<sup>6</sup> to assume that the phenomenologists *use* the event (in service of their own problematic, viz the origin of all appearance), but that they do not *think* it, do not contribute to its elucidation. This criticism is not unfounded. In fact, if we rise toward the origin of all phenomenality without specifying the conceptual means of returning down to the phenomena themselves (returning, we might hope, a little bit richer than we were on the way up), we have only accomplished part of what we aimed for.

What I am doing here is to move along the perspective of the phenomenologies of the event (as their faithful secretary), to find out what their response to this question would be, purporting to make explicit something that remains implicit in them.

The point of departure is thus the following: we have passed from the event as a particular phenomenon to eventicity as the structure and origin of all phenomena. This movement I called an expansion. On the basis of this expansion, a whole series of questions arises, or should arise:

*The first question: who experiences* this generalized eventicity (by which term we should understand not only *the* original event, but also the event qua that which accompanies *each and every* phenomena)? Who lives this structure of perpetual novelty, of worlds being born, of continual virginity?

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<sup>6</sup> The best example I come to think of is a lecture delivered by François Zourabichvili during a conference under the title “*L’événement contre l’histoire*,” Paris, 2002.

Obviously not the consciousness that perceives things according to the natural attitude<sup>7</sup>. Another way of saying this: the eventicity of phenomena – this eventicity that we postulate at the origin of all phenomena – is not discernible among them. Instead, we are facing something that is the opposite, something that even the phenomenologist as well admits: the eventicity is that intra-phenomenality which is *kept away* from our view. What is given or becomes manifest – what is experienced by consciousness – is not things in the miracle of their surfacing, but things in their already given presence (in their *Vorhandenheit*).

Therefore: when we reach to the expansion, when we start speaking of the eventicity of all phenomena, who is it that speaks, and about what? The one who speaks here is the philosopher, in this case the phenomenologist, and what he speaks of is the origin of all appearance, not the appearing things themselves. On the contrary, on the level of appearance, on the level of phenomena as they present themselves before consciousness, he sees very few events (even though there persists a small number of them, as we will soon discover).

*The second question: why are there so few events? Or, generally stated: why doesn't the structure of the eventicity of all phenomena become manifest?* It is in Heidegger's work that we find the conceptual means for answering this question. The answer has two elements:

The phenomenon in general (which does not become manifest as a phenomenon) is characterized by the concealedness of its being (i.e. the concealedness of the event of its becoming manifest). As it is given and received in the natural attitude, the ever-recurring miracle of its surfacing is occluded. It is occluded because it is per definition the same as that which (within any appearance) has already retreated out of sight.

This miracle is likewise occluded by the specific structure that governs everyday phenomenality and works against eventicity: habit, repetition, handiness. We say accordingly that (the majority of) phenomena are not given as events because they are captured in structures that conceal their fundamental eventicity (though without effacing it).

*It is only when the structures lose their grip and falter that something like an event can become manifest. It is then that it is lived.* But it is lived as an exception.

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<sup>7</sup> By "natural attitude" I don't mean here a *naturalist* attitude, but that of consciousness in general, plunged into what the later Husserl called *Lebenswelt*.



We are here faced with two kinds of phenomena: first we have phenomena that are events “by general right” (as Marion puts it), though their structure of eventicity remains *concealed*; and then we have *events*, meaning the very specific set of phenomena that themselves *make manifest* their structure of eventicity.

*The third question:* once this distinction is established, in what way does it serve us here, in what way is it relevant to our over-all question? Well, it seems to allow us, firstly, to narrow down the essence of the event, and then, secondly, to understand its privileged position within phenomenology.

Firstly, its *essence*. What is it that characterizes, uniquely, the phenomena we usually call events? Well, what characterizes them (if we stay within the logic established so far) is that the original structure of eventicity, which is usually concealed, and toward which the gaze of the phenomenologist must *again be lifted* – that this structure, in the case of the event, is given and received within the natural attitude itself: it intrudes directly upon that which appears, thereby qualifying it as an event. Which is the same as saying that the only means to define the event in its differences and relations to other phenomena, i.e. to phenomenality in its entirety, is to distinguish between *concealed eventicity* and *manifest eventicity*.

On the basis of this very definition, the event can get to be assigned an extremely precise and also precious *function* within the phenomenological framework, where an event would then be the particular phenomenon that reveals the (usually concealed) structure of all phenomenality. Representing what can hardly be recognized as anxiety, its function would thus be one of phenomenological reduction (in its Heideggerian version, viz the reduction understood as the reduction from beings to being). In “What is Metaphysics?”<sup>8</sup>, anxiety was the emergence, in the heart of beings, of being (i.e. of something other than beings). But here, the event is the emergence, in the natural world itself, of a usually concealed eventicity. And this is actually what enables the phenomenologist to use the event in order to reascend toward eventicity, i.e. to accomplish the movement of expansion that served as our starting point. But he cannot carry this movement through legitimately if he does not support it with the adequate conceptual distinctions.

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<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?, Wegmarken*, Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1967.

*The fourth question:* Is the phenomenologist the only one that could reveal, under the phenomena, their hidden eventicity? Certainly not. At this point, he encounters the artist. Not the artist in general, but in any event the painter, or rather precisely the painter as he has begun to understand himself from impressionism onwards, and as he found expression in the voice of Cézanne. For the painter as for the phenomenologist, the smallest thing is large in the world that it discloses, the most insignificant of all phenomena, in the miracle of its appearance, is the birth of this whole world. All this happens as if the artist adjusted his perception to the origin: this is the famous “gaze of innocence” of which Monet spoke. But the gaze of innocence is a discipline. Far from being innocent, the natural gaze is by nature encumbered with impressions: we have to *purify* it to be able to distinguish, in the seemingly motionless things, the trembling of their becoming and the miracle of their reaching the surface – i.e. their disclosing themselves to be seen or their “ascent into the visible.” To be able to discover what was hidden, the painter uses a method, just as the phenomenologist does.

If we were to state plainly just that “all phenomena are events,” or that “all consciousness can be assimilated to that of the painter,” we render invisible the differences that necessarily apply to the methods used to underline, i.e. to construct.

Which leads me to my *fifth question*. If we do not establish the distinctions just made, to what dangers are we then exposed? Well, to a whole set of disastrous consequences. The first, evidently, is that it all gets confused, so that nobody knows what they are talking about. The second – this one is highly embarrassing for a phenomenologist – is that we substitute, for the actual givenness of beings, the way in which they would give themselves had they not been concealed. And this amounts to rendering abstract the fact that concealedness is in itself a kind of givenness, and, as a consequence of this, to no longer respect phenomenality at all – regulating its laws, as one then does, solely in terms of how it *should* be. The third consequence, finally, which is the most serious of them all, is that the object we wished to think disappears. In fact: if all phenomena are events, then the event in itself ceases to exist. And this is no return to a coarse common sense, but to an irrevocable, phenomenological demand. The event is given in the modes of excess, rupture and discontinuity, i.e. *as an exception*. Such is its proper phenomenality. But if we universalize this rule of exception, we will no longer have any means of distinguishing the specific

phenomenon of the event from other phenomena. We believe that we are multiplying the event *ad infinitum*, but in reality we are annulling it, by effacing the very place where it could have existed.

Having passed here through a specific number of divisions, I would like to insert a sort of summary before I close this part of the text.

### (c) Summary

What I have strived for so far is to establish *two* distinctions – two distinctions which, moreover, are connected to each other. These I will now briefly recapitulate:

*The first distinction.* It is important to maintain the difference between the following two levels: on one hand, we have the level of eventicity *presumed by the phenomenologist* to exist at the very origin of all phenomena, but which – and this he is unconditionally bound to admit – *is not given or experienced in the natural attitude*; on the other hand, we have the events that are themselves *given* in the natural attitude, and that the phenomenologist will then have to *describe* – describe precisely in their difference from other phenomena – otherwise their specific nature is forfeited.

*The second distinction.* It is important to maintain the difference between two versions of, or tendencies within, phenomenology: one that aims to *describe the phenomenon/event*, the other that *makes the event the origin of all phenomena*. The former, of course, does not restrict itself to pure descriptions; it, too, takes upon itself to reach back to the origin of phenomenality. In its Husserlian version, however, it traces this origin to the transcendental consciousness, *which is itself not an event*. Only the Heideggerian version of phenomenology can make the event the origin of all phenomena, because it localizes this origin within the “evential” character of being. Naturally, it might be said against this second version (the event as origin of all phenomena) that it doesn’t free us from the task of the first version (the elucidation of the phenomenon/event). And if we wish to accomplish both these tasks – i.e. simultaneously elaborate the event eidetically as well as by a kind of event-centered ontology – it will remain absolutely necessary for us to show in what way the two tasks diverge (which was the objective of my first distinction). If we confound them, we are left with nothing: neither one of them – only an inconsistent hybrid.

When the event is in this way distinguished from general eventicity, what happens then to its relation to history? This is a question seldom posed by the phenomenologists outside of the perspective of a history of being, where the event itself is asked for only in relation to its origin. The question I pose here is much more trivial. The world, by which term I also include the spiritual world, is peopled not only by phenomenologists, and we should at times take it to be necessary to speak to others about common concerns – concerns such as the event, which precisely has become such a concern today. In so far as the event, within other kinds of discourse, is not related to the origin of all appearance but to history, what have *we* to say of it? In what relation does our event – the event thought of in the phenomenological sense, and even conceived of today as the very core of phenomenology – stand to the events of the world, especially its historical events? And, likewise: in what relation does it stand to *the* event (whatever we may think of it) such as it has become the interest of historians and social scientists? How does *our* event get inscribed into *their* history? And since their history is also ours (the one in which we are all firmly stuck), we will also have to ask: how does what *we* call event get inscribed in history?

(Or, at least: if it does *not* get inscribed at all, how is this exception possible? Even though we must remember here as well that it wouldn't evaporate just by being excepted). Thus: to what kind of historical thinking – or non-thinking – does the phenomenology of the event lead us?

This problem does not get solved by any of today's phenomenologists of the event, but for very different reasons. Partly because it is not posed as a problem, due to a restriction to individual events – death, encounter, separation –, which means the putting aside of all collective or political dimensions (this applies to Romano and Dastur), partly because the problem is posed but in terms inadequate to it (in my opinion this is the case with Jocelyn Benoist<sup>9</sup>). Nobody has solved these problems, nor has anyone contributed to their elaboration.

It seems to me that if we wish to do more than simply speak as phenomenologists to other phenomenologists, we will have to raise these

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<sup>9</sup> J. Benoist: "La fin de l'histoire comme forme ultime du paradigme historiciste," in J. Benoist and F. Merlini (ed.), *Après la fin de l'histoire. Temps, monde, historicité*, Paris, Vrin, 1998.

questions – and this is what I will try to do now, in the second part of the text.

## II. The event within history

Again, we must proceed by way of some preparatory remarks. Hence, I begin by posing three questions that will be indispensable for my whole analysis: (1) What is it that historians call an event?; (2) What is it that they call history – i.e. what is it that they *today* designate thus?; (3) What relation do they establish between these two concepts?

### (a) What is it that historians call an event?

The notion of an event does not have the same connotations today as it did earlier, when an event was to be understood as a given, historical fact (while it is judged naïve today to believe that historical facts actually *are* given, and also argued that they have mainly been so constructed by the earlier historians themselves). Rather, we see today an entirely new concept, that the historian uses partly to be able to think the contemporary history as such (Pierre Nora<sup>10</sup>), partly to be able to rethink history as a whole.

How, then, is this concept *defined* by the historians? Well, the determinations given it may vary in certain details, but they all agree on the essence of the event, which one will encounter in whoever of them one chooses to read. The principal traits of this essence are: the *singularity* (as soon as the event is upon us, it presents itself as something incomparable: it is unlike everything else); the *cessation*, i.e. the faculty of separation (because of the event, a hitherto significant totality disintegrates and makes way for a new configuration); and, finally: the *distortion or rupture of the intelligible* (where all sense is as if suspended). From a descriptive point of view, then, the notion of the event thus involves the same essential characteristics whether it is described by the phenomenologist or by the historian – even if they do it within different conceptual frameworks and with different theoretical goals in mind. But there is no speaking past each other here: phenomenologists and historians alike are really concerned with the same “thing,” and

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<sup>10</sup> “Le retour de l’événement,” in J. Le Goff and P. Nora (ed.), *Faire de l’histoire*, pp. 285-307.

precisely because they are faithful to this thing, they describe it in analogous terms.

And it is not only the definition of the event that they have in common: they share also the recognition of the event as a *critical faculty* in regard to the discipline that invokes it. The science of history has today become preoccupied with the event (in the stronger sense of the word, the one that I just defined), even though it no longer defines it as “event-ual.” But far from being contradictory, these two changes are directly linked to each other. For today’s historical science, the event is no longer its natural building material (which it was as long as it was understood in the weaker sense) – rather, it has become its *problem*: it is understood by this science itself as that which radically *upsets* it. And, in fact, how could it do otherwise when its essence as defined by today’s historian (through and beyond its determinations as singularity, cessation, etc.) is *the fundamental discontinuity itself*? It thus seems that historical science can reject, in terms of this discontinuity, the (still metaphysical) categories of unity and totality – but can it really reject continuity? Or, to speak at an even more basic level, can it reject *processuality in general*? Isn’t processuality its very own object? How will it be able to preserve its object if it lets itself be touched (read: attacked) by the event?

One last remark in passing: the historian’s interpretation of this critical faculty of the event corresponds exactly to the phenomenologist’s interpretation of it. In both cases, the event is welcomed into the centre of a discipline *as that which* is about to shake the ground on which the discipline stands, the frameworks it has constructed, etc. – viz *as that which* forces the discipline to redefine itself.<sup>11</sup>

To understand how history is to meet the challenge of the event, we have to proceed to our second question.

## (b) What is history?

What is it that historians – and our contemporaries in general – *today* designate by the term “history”? This is where the philosophers (at least some of them) have sometimes had difficulties in “adjusting,”

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<sup>11</sup> This property has doubtlessly part in what may explain the primarily “epochal” character of the event: being an epoch *in crisis* – which is its own definition of itself – it is bound to privilege such *critical* concepts as may serve it in its fundamental project – which is to constantly question its own foundations and to identify its own limits.

which has also had some obvious impact on the results of their analyses.

A certain definition of history dominated for more than a century (roughly speaking from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>), one with which we are especially familiar since it was the one proposed by the philosophies of history (the Hegelian philosophy foremost among them). These philosophies conceived of the historical process as a unity (a conception that, moreover, found its semantic support in the rise of *Geschichte* as a collective, singular term, which has been demonstrated by Koselleck in his reconstruction of its conceptual history<sup>12</sup>), a unity whose form was that of a (beginning and ending) totality, and which was governed by a unique, motivating force (progress or, inversely, decline – which of them matters little.) This is what was for a long time called “History” (with the above determinations explaining its capital H). The model for this way of conceiving history was in fact very much older, as Hegel showed, but it was not enough to enable us to think History as such. It was only from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and onward that the model in question was used in order to think an object that up till then had been understood as lacking internal substance: History.

This definition – that for a long time was considered as one corresponding adequately to its object, and actually even to the historical future – lost its authority after almost 150 years: it begun to be questioned somewhere in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. And thus, if we want to try to think *today* the relation between event and history, this will not be accomplished if we stick to the old definition. We cannot elaborate a new concept of the event with which to challenge an old concept of history<sup>13</sup> and claim that we are thereby contributing to the present, i.e. preparing for what is to come.

I thus repeat my initial question: what is it that is today called history, how is it that the contemporary historiographer understands this term? Which boils down to the question: how does the historian define his object?

If he understands it in another way than he has ever done before, it is because he understands it in the light of some new concepts – *of*

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<sup>12</sup> R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Which it seems to me that Benoist does, notably in “La fin de l’histoire comme forme ultime du paradigme historiciste,” pp. 7-15.

*which the event is one.* For the historian, certainly, there is *not only* the event. There is also, for example, the structure. And up till about the '70s, the general tendency was still one of emphasizing the structural element – the long-lived braudelian heritage, the description rather than the narration. But what really characterizes today's historiography – and what reveals the immense difficulty of its task – is that it no longer admits of alternatives<sup>14</sup>. Surely, for today's historian, there are structures as well as events. It is known today that the demand to take structure into account obliged history to cease to be “event-ual” in the old sense of the term. But to what will history be obliged, inversely, when it is demanded of it to account for the event? The event will oblige history, on the one hand, not to limit itself only to structures, but to let *the singularities manifested by the event* intervene; and it will oblige it, on the other hand, not to limit itself to the unrolling of a thread of continuity, but to let *the discontinuity indicated by the event* intervene.

How can the historian let the event intervene? Not by denouncing processuality (which he surely cannot avoid), but by no longer identifying history as a *simple* process. And this will lead him to render his scientific discipline more complex, to admit of equally valid, coexisting histories (in the plural), and to define his field of research by its internal plurality: it will be constituted by a manifold of series open to alternative interpretations (as opposed to a unique series constituted by progress), and it will entail heterogeneous levels of reality and discourse that will be for the historian to articulate.

The meaning of all this is that the new concept of the event flows back into history to let it be defined as just described – and to such an extent that it might finally be redefined, from an epistemological perspective, as having *the intervening spaces* for its *only* objects (which is Michel de Certeau's paradoxical yet stimulating suggestion<sup>15</sup>).

My analysis has so far been restricted to definitions, i.e. definitions of what the historians of today mean by the terms “event” and “history.” Before passing on to my third and principal question – what relation do they establish between these two concepts? – I'd like to linger for a moment on the *provenance* of these definitions. Has the

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<sup>14</sup> I here wish to refer to Koselleck, see the illuminating chapter entitled “Representation, event and structure,” pp. 133-144, in *Vergangene Zukunft*

<sup>15</sup> M. de Certeau, “L'opération historique,” in Le Goff/Nora (ed.), *Faire de l'histoire*, pp. 19-68.



historian thought his object (history) and that which has upset it (the event) exclusively within his own field of research, or has he tried to gain support from other conceptual models (and which ones, in that case)? This leads me to the third point of my argument.

### (c) Note about the provenance of some concepts

From where do they come, then, the concepts of the event and of history that today's historian uses? Even if he has revised them, it was from philosophy that he first got them. Not primarily from phenomenology, but rather from philosophies that remained concerned about articulating their thinking in relation to the social and political world, i.e. primarily to praxis. And the philosophies to which the historians thus owe their concepts are those of Deleuze (for the event) and Foucault (for history).

Let us cast a quick glance back on Foucault's theory (such as it is presented, e.g., in the article *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire*<sup>16</sup>). He too proceeds from the event as an irreducible singularity outside of every process. But he sees it neither as the end of all history and world (as a certain post-modernism does), nor as the intact origin that keeps reemerging throughout history and the world (as a certain phenomenology does); instead, he perceives it as a sign of the *heterogeneity* of worlds, spaces, perspectives. And it is this that leads him – on the basis of the event – to rethink history, which he will do by replacing the (up till then unquestioned) category of continuity with another category, that of “systematic dissociation.” It is this other history, henceforth fragmentary and devoid of centre, that he will call *genealogy*. And it is in the spirit, thus, of Foucauldian genealogy, among other inspirations, that the new historians have reconstructed their object – i.e. that they have reconstructed it into its fundamental, *plural* form.

As far as Deleuze<sup>17</sup> is concerned, he has provided historians with two important ideas: the first is that the event is nothing but an (incorporeal) divide at which history and future float apart; the second is that the paradoxical sense of this divide – constituted as it is by the singularity of the event – will be to still render series possible. In connection

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<sup>16</sup> This article was first published in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, Paris, PUF, 1971, and then reprinted in *Dits et écrits*, part 1, Paris, Gallimard 1994. Later, it was again reprinted (in a reedited version), *Quarto*, 2001, pp. 1004-1024.

<sup>17</sup> G. Deleuze, *Logique du Sens*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1976.

with this, historians have also taken up the tasks of constructing *relevant* series (Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin<sup>18</sup>) or *operational* series (Michel de Certeau<sup>19</sup>), i.e. series by which the event is retroactively endowed with a sense, or even with a certain “inexhaustibility” of sense. It is on the basis of the event as such cessation that the historian may define series that close or series that disclose, and it is at the same time on the basis of these series that he may qualify the event.

The perspectives of Deleuze and Foucault have thus enabled the historian to answer some of the questions he is facing. But not all of them, and perhaps not the one that is principal among them. We have witnessed hitherto how the event, in its flowing back into history, has been able to redefine and to pluralize it. But we have not seen, as of yet, how history, even thus redefined, would be able to integrate the event without betraying it. In other words, the new historian *wants to* respect the event. But the event cannot be *totally* respected by the historian, and this he knows very well. The events need to be *reduced* in some way to assume their place within history, or within *a* history, if only as that which upsets that history itself. How can today’s historian succeed in formulating this respect and this reduction? How can he, while still respecting the event, nevertheless re-inscribe it into the structure of history, be it into its fragmentary and manifold version?

This leads me to my last question:

#### (d) What kind of relation between event and history does the historian establish?

To resolve this terrible paradox, the historian leans on a distinction which is seemingly quite simple.<sup>20</sup> He distinguishes between *historical agents*, for whom there are events (this is also called “the indigenous perspective”!), and *historians*, who must certainly take the perspective of historical agents into account, but who must also articulate the event’s levels of interpretability after it has taken place.

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<sup>18</sup> A. Bensa and E. Fassin, “Les sciences sociales face à l’événement,” in *Terrain*, Editions du Patrimoine, nr. 38, mars 2002, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> M. de Certeau, “L’opération historique.”

<sup>20</sup> I here let the historian stand in the singular, because most historians use this distinction. If I were to be more specific, I’d point to the remarkable thematization of the distinction that occurs in the article, already quoted, by Bensa and Fassin. See also A. Farge: “Penser et définir l’événement en histoire. Approche des situations et des acteurs sociaux,” in *Terrain*, pp. 69-78, notably p. 71.

This will amount to the establishing of a distinction between the event as it is *lived* (this is the perspective of agents), and the event as it is simultaneously *described* and *interpreted* by the historian. We note in passing that the true originality of the new historian lies in his affirming that the event can only be correctly interpreted if it is first of all described, and described as it is lived.

In proposing this apparently simple distinction, the historian orders into a certain hierarchy – perhaps without clearly knowing it – three different ways of relating to the event. If it was permitted for me to render this hierarchy in another language, I would express these three different ways as: (1) the natural attitude; (2) the phenomenological gaze; (3) the hermeneutical activity. Let us again clarify these three levels.

*The natural attitude* is that of the historical agents, the attitude of the consciousness that lives the event and that, surprised by its faculty of dislocation, experiences its presence within the event as though benumbed. There occurs something that shatters what I thought was the world, and during the span of time that I inhabit this fracture, I believe it to be *real* (viz to be the sum of what *is*).

*The phenomenological attitude* (at least as I understand it) is the attitude of describing the event in terms of how it unfolds, and then as a *phenomenon*, without any preconceived notions about its being. The phenomenologist, thus, has no part in the belief of the historical agent – rather than saying: “the world is shattered, time is suspended,” he would say: “for the consciousness that lives through it, the event consists of experiencing the world as being shattered and time as being suspended.”

By saying this, the phenomenologist does not wish to imply that this is the ultimate truth of the event (an assumption to which he would have no right whatsoever), but that *there has been* (fr. il y a eu) an event, and he shows what the singular form of “there is” (fr. il y a) means in connection with the event.

*The hermeneutical attitude* does something else and goes further than the phenomenological one. And it is because he takes responsibility also for this latter attitude that the historian thinks today that he has *more* to say about the event than both the historical agent and the phenomenologist. What the historian wants to do is actually to qualify the event on the basis of but also beyond the recognition of its phenomenological aspect, as he takes upon himself to define, not only what the

event “is,” but also what it opens up, what terminates with it, etc. This he cannot do without transcending the phenomenological attitude in the directions of *before and after*. Transcending it in this way, his real activity starts, which is that of weaving and unweaving the structure of sense.

And this he does today with elegance, because he assumes the third attitude only in taking into account the other two: even though the perspective of the historical agent (the first level) has been accounted for and described in terms of how it is experienced (the second level), it will ultimately be reinstated at its original place, though now it is no longer (and can no longer be), something absolute (this is the third level). The historian thus believes himself to have *done justice* by the phenomenon of the event, in the same process whereby he has come to *understand* it (i.e. by subjecting it to contextualization). But is it really possible to contextualize a phenomenon of this kind? Does there not remain within such a phenomenon (within *precisely* such a phenomenon) some power of resistance?

Hence the third step of my argument. After having tried (in vain, no doubt) to act the “faithful secretary” of the phenomenologists and the historians, I would like to state what I prefer to retain from their respective beliefs, and to explain why I feel in no way tempted to *choose* between them. It in fact seems to me that they both announce a truth, that they both “are right” – even though the reasons for their beliefs are perfectly irreconcilable.

### III. Phenomenology or history?

#### (a) The event as phenomenon

Let us first return to the phenomenon of the event in order to specify some basic traits.

(1) It is the phenomenon that becomes the object to describe (at least at a certain stage within their procedures) for all the thinkers that are concerned with the event. This goes for the phenomenologists, naturally, but also for Deleuze, the historians, etc. If they all – almost in the detail – describe the same “thing,” it is precisely because they are all referring to the *phenomenon*. They may very well feel disinclined to regard themselves as phenomenologists, or even define their views in direct opposition to phenomenology, yet the only *legitimacy*

they can claim in describing the event the way they do will still be that of relating to the event as to a phenomenon – i.e. to the event as it is presented to the consciousness that experiences it. And so when Deleuze, for example, defines the time of the event as a time of split or disjunction, he evidently refers to the event as to something *lived*. If he understood the event differently, his talk of an interruption of time wouldn't make any sense at all (there is no interruption of objective time). And then, when he goes on to assign such and such a function within the structure of his problematics to the event, he surely transcends the phenomenon, but his arguments will still be based upon it. And this applies to all those who write about the event.

(2) The phenomenon (of the event) is unanimously described as having certain basic traits, of which the principal ones are singularity, exteriority, excess, discontinuity, etc. I have not deemed it necessary to develop any of these traits further, because they are today repeated almost to the point of being worn out. But I want to stop for a moment to ponder over one of them, precisely because it deviates from the unanimity. This exception concerns the relation between the event and its *sense*. It seems to me, namely, that if we proceed from the event in order to describe it as it is given, i.e. within the limits of its givenness, we are bound to admit that by the event *all* sense, including the very sense of the event, is suspended. The event is not accompanied by its own sense – what happens is actually the opposite: the event is the instant where sense begins to float, i.e. to dissolve. It is only retrospectively that the event can be reinvested with sense on one hand, and understood radically as a source of sense on the other.

But Claude Romano seems, for his own part, ready to affirm the event as inseparable from its own sense<sup>21</sup> (F. Dastur, as we have seen, follows him in this). And in order to be able to do this, he re-inscribes the retrospective mechanism of revision *into* the event itself, whose domain he thereby expands. One may certainly expand this domain (as the limits of domains are fleeting), on the condition that one then makes clear that the domain thus expanded is no longer that of the *phenomenon* (as the limits of the phenomenon are by no means ambiguous, being the exact limits of what is *lived*). The revision is the event repeated in a configuration of sense, a repetition in which it has already ceased to be what it was as lived. To describe the phenomenon of the event is thus to describe something unfinished – which we may

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<sup>21</sup> C. Romano, *Il y a*, pp. 106-107, and above all pp. 286-289.

actually define as a *waiting for sense*. But if we start, already here, to present the sense to come and the world that will rise with it, we will lose contact with the event as *phenomenon*, and from this point and on we will also have abandoned the *phenomenological way of looking at the event*, which means describing it the way it is given in the moment in which it is given, i.e. within the proper limits of its givenness. Another way of saying this is that we must not confound or assimilate a *phenomenology of the event* with a *hermeneutic of the event*.

(3) Beside this primary, essential characteristic of the event, we should add a second one which is closely connected to it. Confronted with the (disastrous or enchanting) event, I am not only unable to incorporate it, but I live it as *un-incorporable*. And that is what may explain its sharpness.

If it can be lived in this way, it is because of its specific temporality, which has often been described in the following fashion: the event comes upon us as if from outside of chronological time, it opens us up toward an elsewhere, interpretable as a “non-time” or as another time, and in both these interpretations we will have to recognize that the event is foreign to the natural succession of time (past-present-future). But this means that the suspended time of the event is *a present with no other horizon than itself*. The event is lived in a temporality which knows of no future (we could imagine a future only by reentering into chronological time). The development commonly associated with time is here replaced by the contraction of its three dimensions into a present *without end*, i.e. a present lived as *endless*.<sup>22</sup> And this is the actual reason why the event, as given in and by itself, is already beyond all consolation.

To the different modes mentioned above – singularity, rupture, excess – we must thus add another one: *resistance*. The event is obstinate: actively contesting all that is structural, refusing to let itself be re-inscribed into any structure, it comes forth as *the irreducible*. The author who has captured and described this in the most precise manner is

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<sup>22</sup> To avoid any of the confusions that may arise here: first, there is the time of the event as the span of time during which the experience of it is lived by the consciousness precisely as *an event* – after that, it will be lived in other ways because it will then be re-contextualized. This time is measurable and occurs within chronological time: it may last for a couple of minutes or for several years. But then we have the way in which *time as such* is lived or experienced during the time of the event. Here, we specified that it is lived as an interruption, i.e. as out of contact with any imaginable future.

Maurice Blanchot: what he calls the *other* night<sup>23</sup> is not only the night as the abyss into which we fall in the fracture of a process, but the night that gives itself as impossible to processualize – as the refusal to accept any “relief of the watch.”

If resistance is really one of the essential traits of the event, the question of its relation to history will appear in a different light. It will no longer be sufficient to say that the event interrupts history. Rather, the event rises *against* history, as a contestation of its basic principle, while it is given precisely as an exception *from* history. Actually, it is an exception from everything: language, world, time ... . Its givenness is inseparable from a certain claim: the claim of being something absolute. The claim is in itself unreasonable, but this is still how the event unfolds, and how it is lived.

Let us summarize. What our epoch is given as an object – and as a problem – in the name of the “event,” is the event as phenomenon. Once it has been exposed in its essence, the event entails, as we have seen, a dimension of *irreducibility* (it belongs to its proper mode of givenness neither to let itself be reduced to something else, nor to let itself be re-inscribed into a process). Which must inevitably lead us to ask: is what presents itself as irreducible here *really* irreducible? Or in other words: is what consciousness lives as something absolute *really* absolute?

If I ask this question, *it is by no means because I want to answer it*. I only want to draw attention to it. And that is for three reasons: (1) As soon as we would answer it, we would no longer relate to the event as to a *phenomenon*, but settle only for its *being*. (2) *Everybody* already does answer it, the phenomenologists as well as the historians. (3) It seems to me that even though they do answer it, they do it without having clearly formulated – or even identified – the question. Analyzing the event, they all refer to it as to a phenomenon. If their views diverge, it is exclusively in terms of the ontological status they are willing to ascribe to the event. Clearly stated: the conflicting attitudes assumed in regard to the event are derived directly from the diverging responses to this unique question, even though it remains implicit within most texts on the subject. It is this question, thus, that we must unconditionally elucidate if we want to understand anything of the

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. e.g. *L'espace littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955. And I also permit myself to refer to this point as it is being made in my own study: *L'être et le neutre. A partir de Maurice Blanchot*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2001, notably pp. 47-86.

present debate concerning the event, i.e. if we want to identify its (real, even if implicit) *object*. And this leads me to the second part of this section.

## (b) About the being of the phenomenon and some philosophical conflicts concerning it

Let us imagine them together, for one last time, the phenomenologist and the historian.

In the case of the question just asked, there can be no doubt as to the response of *the historian*: “the indigenous perspective” means living in a stupefaction which the hermeneutical activity will have to reinvest, precisely, with interpretational possibilities (if possible in the plural). Or even, as Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin have expressed it: to be an historical agent means to live “in the epiphany of the moment,” i.e. in a present which it will be for them, in their turn, to “historize.”<sup>24</sup> In this historization, the agent’s perspective is not overruled, but set into a certain position (that of the lived) where it cannot and will not have the last word.

Then, how does the *phenomenologist* answer the question? Well, he doesn’t *have to* respond at all, as I will try to show you in an instant. But if he does respond (which is the prevailing attitude today), he tends to assert that what gives itself as irreducible *really is* irreducible, for the simple reason that phenomenality is for him the only measure of being real. What *really is* or what *is* in reality, well, that’s precisely the event in its pure singularity, making all the rest (by which he in this context particularly means *the process*) appear as a mere construction, viz as nothing but a convenient fiction. Earlier, historians believed in history as a unique and directed totality; today, they believe in history as a process – but this, too, is still too much for the incandescent truth of the event.

These two answers are perfectly antagonistic, and the reason for this is that they both lay a claim to defining being. Here, the historian and the phenomenologist have already transcended the phenomenon, one of them because he considers it to be distinct from being, the other precisely because he identifies it with being. And so we stand today before an irreducible philosophical conflict – provided, of course, that

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<sup>24</sup> Bensa and Fassin; “Les sciences sociales face à l’événement,” p. 15.



we don't take a stand: either for history against the event (meaning we reject the *prerogative* of the event), or for the event against history (meaning we reject the prerogative of history).

Which leads me to the last part of my text.

#### IV. Return to the prerogative of the phenomenon

Personally, I don't feel that this opposition engages me. I do not subscribe to any of its two claims concerning being, as none of them feels more *constraining* than the other. The only distinction I regard as substantial is the one that differentiates between what is lived and what is not. It seems to me that we here rather have to do with two levels, each of them legitimate, even though irreconcilable. I do not feel at all tempted to choose between them. Quite the contrary – as either choice would only *mask* the difference in levels. I thus restrain myself to the inaugural act such as Husserl conceived it: I accomplish the reduction, I suspend all claims about the world, I consider the phenomenon as it is constituted by consciousness. I want to remain faithful to him, and my fidelity means taking in earnest his own kind of radicalism: pure interstice, dislocation, indetermination of sense. This indetermination is not a mere subjective or psychological appearance possible to overcome, but the very content of the phenomenon. What I retain from the phenomenological approach, thus, is its descriptive uprightness, which has the merit of doing justice by the lived, to recognize its prerogative, to accept its demands.

And so we see that the limit of this approach is the lived itself. But the lived is neither the only possible level in which to situate the event, nor the only possible perspective from which to regard it. Coming upon me from nearby, death as event is unincorporable already when it is happening to me, and given in modes important to describe without distortion – but it is *also* the most natural thing in the world. It is inscribed into the world without troubling its course, and this aspect must *also* be accounted for. In other words: it will still be necessary for us to think a continuity, one that continues to maintain its prerogative, someplace else, on another level.

I think of the passage in Dostoevsky, in *The Possessed*, where Shatov is present at that bewildering event, a child being born under the supervision of a feminist midwife – she is even a bit of a nihilist – who

bursts out laughing as she observes his ridiculous state of emotion. That which for him is an absolute experience is for her only a habit – or, worse still: it is a decimal in the statistics. What I ask myself (knowing full well that the question is naive) is this: why should the childbirth, such as it is lived by the mother or by Shatov in the role of empathic spectator, why should that childbirth, in terms of being or truth, have priority over the same childbirth regarded in a statistic way, i.e. repeated in a series which is here only numerical, but which might as well have been temporal?

As we bring this priority into renewed questioning, we realize that the different phenomenologies of the event ought to be called *philosophies* (in a thetic sense) of the event, in the same way that we speak of philosophies of history. And certainly, they are strictly opposed to one another. But there will be no winner in this combat. To the proponent of history, we may legitimately oppose the event. To the proponent of the event, we may as legitimately oppose history. *The reason for this is that each of them affirms his object as something absolute*, and the only difference between them relates to the way in which they conceive of the object: to their absolute totalizations (in the image of a circle), we oppose an absolute profundity (in the image of a point of concentrated infinity). What I want to do is to fully respect the point without thereby negating the circle. And the condition for the accomplishment of this aim is to regard none of them as *being* itself. Consequently, it seems to me perfectly legitimate and productive to rethink man, the world and time on the basis of the event, as long as we remain within the structure of a certain perspective: that of the lived, i.e. that of phenomena – and, more precisely still, that of *specified and limited* phenomena. And then also on the condition that this specified domain is not transformed into a unique domain of truth.

Speaking in this way, I fully realize that I retreat into an acceptance of a phenomenology which is neither the most radical, nor the most original, and which actually, on the deepest level, is quite ontologically poor (or neutral). But it is the only phenomenology I truly understand, and it is the only one that seems binding to me. It don't feel tempted, in order to welcome the *phenomenon* of the event, to adhere to a *philosophy* of the event, be it of the phenomenological kind. And to tell you the truth: in choosing between the philosophy that emphasizes history and the philosophy that emphasizes the event, I think the latter is even more problematical. I continue to believe, with Hegel, that thinking is

mediation, and that it has thus always already transcended the innocent otherness of the event. And yet, with Blanchot<sup>25</sup> against Hegel, I would like to do justice to the lived and to its special claim to the absolute. I have found no other means to accomplish this than to use the phenomenological *method*.

What I have tried to demonstrate above is that the problematical character of the event is precisely what has made our entire epoch so obsessed with it (without always admitting it and even, sometimes, while denying it). In fact, we would only have to adopt a position transcending it, and it would again become something accidental, something that would no longer “call us.”<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the phenomenolo-

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<sup>25</sup> And also with the female protagonist of Patrice Chéreau’s *Intimité*, as I have recently tried to demonstrate in “The Event of Desire,” in *Etudes phénoménologiques*, 36, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Which could lead us to ask a new question: why have we become so reluctant to assume this transcending position? And this question is of vast consequence, because it manages to ask, in a profound manner, what determines the surfacing of a whole epoch within thinking. In the case of the event, the primary answer would seem to be: the reason for our reluctance is partly that certain of the events of our century (symbolized most obviously by *Auschwitz*) are irreducible to the point of *resisting* all our previous efforts of integration (they bring to a halt the tendency to re-inscribe them into the structure of history), partly that thinking no longer strived for integration and thus wanted to regard these events as irreducible. I am not certain that the problem of Auschwitz is even correctly posed. I feel inclined to think that even Auschwitz cannot escape the hermeneutical activity to which all human events will eventually get subjected. Our epoch, just as any other, has turned around – true, it did it with a certain delay, but then again that’s always the case – to study the events that seemed unintelligible to it. Among these, it has picked out a singular event as the Unintelligible. This is to say that Auschwitz was integrated into history, and by history, only as its very limit: as that which it could never repeat or contextualize. The activity of re-imagining has functioned well, but its specific manner of being realized has been to pronounce itself un-realizable. Just as a trauma is a failed hermeneutic, one could say that our relation to Auschwitz is a rejected hermeneutic. And hence the importance of the theme of *remembrance* in relation to the destructive workings of *history*. Remembrance is the indispensable correlate of the event: it is remembrance that wants to maintain within it the event exactly as it came about, preserve the memory of its unique character, welcome it without turning it into a process. In the last analysis, we may actually have to interpret Auschwitz as something of a model for the paradigm of the event such as we deal with it today. But this paradigm is not only historical, it is also, perhaps most of all, hermeneutic. Another way of saying this: it is not because history is “really” interrupted that we have begun to fail to think of it as a continuity. My hypothesis would rather be the following: while history was for a long time *thought of* as a continuity, it has certainly always been *lived* as interruption. Our epoch will begin when thinking can no longer, will no longer, treat the lived as a negligible quantity: when it lets itself be concerned – to the point of vertigo – by the radical nature of the phenomenon understood as a specific mode of givenness.

gist's claim that his discipline is the one most likely to think the event, that the event is *his* object par excellence, is perfectly well-founded. Because in fact, the event can have no other legitimacy than that of *phenomenality*. It can become the battleground for thinking only if we take seriously its becoming *as becoming*, i.e. according to the *how* of its becoming. This means that there is no event at all unless it is related to a consciousness (or to a manifold of consciousnesses) that lives it as such, that can only live it by having constituted it, i.e. by having constituted it already here and now and as the limit of its own faculty of constitution. Or, to say the same thing in another vocabulary: there is no event at all unless it discloses a paradoxical temporality, a mode of time which we must unconditionally understand as *lived time*, but then, also, as time lived by a consciousness (or many) that has become unable, precisely, to accomplish the synthesis of time. All thinkers, whoever they may be, who today focus upon the event (if only to criticize the exaggerated enthusiasm it has provoked) relate to it as to a phenomenon in that sense; if they would relate to the event otherwise, they would immediately fall to the side of the object of which they try to speak. Under these conditions, I think the total denial of the importance of the phenomenological approach would be a high-risk project indeed.

But as we have seen, all that happens is that the phenomenologist, who is the one best equipped to describe the interstice and fracture indissociable from the event, assumes the position of the interstice only in endowing it with ontological substance. And from that moment on, he will almost inevitably feel an urge to *render unreal* all immediate existence (i.e. the natural perspective) and to consider as *derived* all chronological time<sup>27</sup>, thereby becoming unable to consider historical and collective life in any kind of positive fashion (this applies e.g. to Heidegger, for whom all such things belonged to the level of an inauthenticity which he recognized as necessary, but in relation to which his theory nevertheless represents a structure of flight). What I have tried to show here is that if phenomenology finally loses contact with history, it is not – as one would be tempted to believe – because it has

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<sup>27</sup> A tendency which even Deleuze seems unable to escape. Cf. F. Zourabichvili's note on "Aion" in *The Vocabulary of Deleuze*, Paris, Ellipses, 2003: "Deleuze is not content with a dualism time/event, but searches for a more internal connection between time and what is outside of it. What he tries to show is that all chronology is *derived from* the event, that the event is the original instance that gives rise to chronology as a whole."

welcomed the event: it is because it has *delegated it to being*. Similarly, but inversely, the historian is only doomed to loose contact with the event if he *renders history absolute*. What I feel becomes questionable in today's endless discussions about the event is thus not at all the event in itself (which is really given too much attention), but rather the status accorded to its *phenomenality* – perhaps even, in more general terms, the status accorded to phenomenality as such. As a consequence of this, I really do not think that those who today “side with” history in order to “save it” from the event have any adversaries<sup>28</sup> – due to the lack of sufficiently discriminating reflections on the part of the phenomenologists.

When it comes to the other phenomenology – the one that, having accomplished the expansion, then concentrates upon the inaugural event understood as the coming-to-being itself – it clearly and explicitly speaks of *something quite different* from the events of the world. And this marks its justification as well as its limitation. Its justification, because this is its own way of doing what philosophy always does, which is to go back to what is most principal (if only to deny it this latter determination); its limitation, because it becomes doubtful if it may develop any further on the basis of this one, fundamental move. Husserl considered phenomenology as an infinite task, but if we have gone back to the very first word, we will also have pronounced the very last, and there will be nothing more to say – other than in the mode of tautologies (this is of course also possible to assume).

## Conclusion

Because I let myself go in the last section (in a very incautious manner, certainly) and admitted myself to present some personal thoughts about all this, I will conclude this text by saying something even more personal.

What initially attracted me to phenomenology was the return to the things themselves, the concretion, the rich differentiation of the modes of givenness, the fidelity towards the given (towards the lived as it is lived), the rejection of fantastic, formal categories afterwards stamped

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<sup>28</sup> I think this is the case e.g. in two articles, by the way highly stimulating, by B. Binoche: “Histoire, croyance, légitimation,” in *Etudes théologiques et religieuses*, 75, 200/4; and “Après l’histoire, l’événement?,” in *Actuel Marx*, 32, PUF, 2002.

upon the phenomena. The fundamental reason for my attraction, the one that sums it all up, was that phenomenology admits of phenomenality in its irreducible variety.

I admit to feeling less at home in a phenomenology that has become oriented so exclusively towards the origin that it no longer goes back to – in order to elucidate it – the genesis of a *specific* givenness, but only to the *undifferentiated* origin of *all* givenness. I believe that this exclusive orientation towards the event of being (towards the inaugural “there is”), this orientation whose fertility stems from its ever nourishing and renewing our faculty of enchantment, also poses a risk: that it may turn us away from the rich manifold of phenomena, just as the stubborn obsession with the origin *in general* may end in turning us away from the complexities of history.

*Translated from French by Johannes Flinck*