

The Metaphor of the Horizon¹

Dussert, Jean-Baptiste (Université de Paris-Sud XI)

The word Horizon is most often used by Husserl in a rigorous way. However, if we trace the use of this term, it is clear that he expanded its meaning. As he admits himself², this word is absent from *Logische Untersuchungen*, and occurs for the first time in *Ideen*. There, to explain the world in its natural attitude, he describes in the first person the usual surroundings of his desk and house, and observes that physical objects and animate beings are here, even if we do not heed them. This means that the field of intuition is not confined to the field of perception. These objects, that are not within reach, but are here nevertheless, he qualifies as *mitgegenwärtig*, which means “co-present”. His field being so broadened, it expands, and he observes: “What is now perceived and what is more or less clearly co-present and determinate (or at least somewhat determinate), are penetrated and surrounded by an obscurely intended horizon of indeterminate actuality³.” Two words in this passage are particularly significant. The first is “penetrated”, because we can visualize the horizon as a background that is blurred (Husserl calls it “misty”) and because we are focusing on other things. But can we conceive that a horizon is “penetrated” (*durchsetzt*)? The second word is “actuality”. This seems to be a rather surprising translation for *Wirklichkeit* that Paul Ricœur⁴ renders by “réalité” (reality). But such a divergence in the English and French translations can be found elsewhere. For example, “*wirkliches Sein*” is translated by “actual being” in English and “être réel” in French⁵. This choice is not without consequence. These details reveal that the Husserlian horizon is not static as we might initially think, and that it is not only changing as we approach it, but that it is continuously changing on its own in Aristotle’s sense of *energeia*. This explains why the foreground is penetrated by the horizon. This characteristic justifies the use of an image, if we refer to this definition of metaphor used by Aristotle: “I mean that things are set before the eyes by words that signify actuality⁶.”

To better understand the metaphor of the horizon, let us explain what Husserl means when he defines it, in *Cartesische Meditationen*, as “‘predelineated’ potentialities” (*vorgezeichnete Potentialitäten*). In fact, horizons have always been here and contain something implicit. They imply that the actual *cogito* never has had access to the entirety of the objective sense (*gegenständlichen Sinn*) of the horizon, which is “*cogitatum qua cogitatum*”. The meaning of reality becomes clearer when the horizons are revealed. The main benefit of this metaphor is thus to stress the temporal dimension of this process. But anyone could argue that this image is inappropriate, less effective, for example, than that of the “flowing consciousness” (*strömenden Bewußtsein*)⁷ or of the “flux of intentional

¹ I would like to thank Professor William Hanley (McMaster University, Ontario, Canada) who read over this article.

² See Edmund Husserl, *Logique formelle et logique transcendantale* (Paris, P.U.F., 1957), p. 269.

³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), I, § 27, p. 52.

⁴ See Edmund Husserl, *Idées directrices pour une phénoménologie et une philosophie phénoménologique pures* (Paris, Gallimard, 1950), *passim*.

⁵ See p. 5 and p. 14.

⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III, 11, 2, 1411b24-5 : “λεγω δὴ προ ομμάτων ταυτα ποιειν οσα ενεργουντα σημαίνει” (quoted by P. Ricœur).

⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), § 18, p. 42.

synthesis" (Fluß intentionaler Synthesis)⁸, which have been a trope ever since Heraclitus said: "You cannot step twice into the same river". Thus, to grasp the pertinence of the metaphor of the horizon, we must agree on certain fundamental particularities. (1) We always imagine the horizon as a skyline, a pure limit, beyond which there is nothing. It is like a glassy sea without any ships, like the Pampas, a line made with vanishing points. (2) No one can survey the horizon or take it in completely, as one does a panorama or with a wide-angle lens. (3) As we have already said, it often forms a background (Hintergrund), that is the subject directs his attention to an object in the foreground, and everything else becomes a blur; and yet, phenomenologists are especially interested in the content of this blur, something that other philosophers neglect. (4) We can never go beyond the horizon, as we move forward, we never come closer to it, and it always slips away. (5) The subject watching cannot be static, for it is not a metaphor for the point of view (Standpunkt), but the horizon is changeable, owing to the fact that he moves in its "middle". (6) We cannot reach the horizon, because it is moving at the same time as we are moving (which we are forced to do, for no one can be static forever). Thus, the horizon is nowhere and is literally a utopia. (7) Lastly, we cannot walk around the horizon, which means it surrounds us. To sum up, this metaphor offers the advantage of giving us an object that is always at a distance, and thus remains vague. But, most importantly, it appears to be almost invariable and immutable, with the result that it mixes spatiality and temporality. The horizon has finally the effect of putting beings in the same order, whether in spatial presence or in temporal sequence⁹.

It is therefore an arching concept to which Husserl returns in *Formale und Transzendente Logik*. Taking stock of the discovery and the use of the "intentionality of the horizon" (Horizon-intentionalität), he linked it to "occasional judgments" (okkasionellen Urteile), defining in a more general manner the "horizon of the situation" (Situationshorizont)¹⁰. Indeed, the word Situation refers not only to the location (situ), but to the circumstances, the two dimensions remaining merged. But, relating the metaphor of the horizon to the decisions that we make in everyday life, when similar circumstances prevail, it seems to me that he makes it hackneyed, that he blurs the skyline. Precisely, we can observe a desinhibited use of the metaphor of the horizon, debasing it into a verbal tic, as if the extension of the concept of the horizon to describe several frames of mind had caused him to use the word in any context. Here are some examples taken from Husserl: "the horizon of our thinking" (Ideen, 3), the "temporal horizon" (49), the "arithmetical horizon" (51), the "horizon of approximations" (Cartesian, 12), the "presumptive horizon" (23), the "horizon of undetermined determinability" (30), the "horizon of reference" (44), the "horizons of openness" (45), "the horizon of potentiality" (60), "the horizon of [...] historicity" (Krisis, 11), "the horizon of [...] rationalism" (66). What I have undertaken—and this paper is the initial of my investigations—is a metaphorology of the horizon in Husserl and his disciples, following the method of Blumenberg. I would like to conclude this paper by suggesting an axis of thought.

One might conclude that my description of the horizon, or rather of its connotations (in seven points), has been superfluous in a presentation such as this. But I wanted to insist on the fact that when we use the word horizon, it denotes as in scientific discourse a precise,

⁸ Ibid., § 20, p. 49.

⁹ See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas...*, I, § 27, p. 52.

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Logique...*, p. 269.

single and transcendent object, that is the skyline. So, why did Husserl need to use such a metaphor? Why did he need to employ this term in a context in which it retains its connotations, but loses its usual referent? Why did he introduce this literary process in a philosophical text with a positivist design? For me, he did not do so in order to adorn his discourse with a stylistic device, but to fill a “lexical gap”, to remedy the absence of a literal expression. Husserl had no word to denote what is not really an object, but a process, that of uncovering or displaying potentialities; the catachresis has thus also the useful property of indicating the multiple stages of the process, in conjuring them up in a single word.

To conclude, the primary interest of such a metaphor in a philosophical text is not to create an image, that plays a part in the rhetorical process of persuading, but to redescribe reality and, in so doing, to fulfil an heuristic function. Thus, I have a double task at present: from an hermeneutical point of view, to specify in which way a literary figure produces an objective and not a subjective truth, and from a phenomenological perspective, to grasp how this metaphor reinforces the description and exploration of the field of transcendently pure consciousness.