Graham – Let’s start with your title, *The End of Phenomenology*. This will no doubt annoy many phenomenologists, though you are certainly much closer to phenomenology than to those who wish for its end: Deleuzeans, Derrideans, neurophilosophers, and so forth. Why do you proclaim the end of phenomenology, despite your deep sympathy for this now rather old movement?

Tom – With a title like this, one must assume that it was certainly chosen to provoke reader interest. Indeed. But it is also a title loaded with ambiguity and several implications, each of which is explored in the book. The title is much less an announcement than it is a query into the current state of phenomenology, which has been pronounced “moribund,” even dead, a number of times in the last several decades. I don’t go so far as to echo these pronouncements, but I do wonder a good bit about where phenomenology is headed in the years to come. For now, it simply seems undead to me. There is certainly a lot of promise left in phenomenology, but I’m not exactly sure where that promise lies and, even more, what it takes to actualize that promise. While I myself harbor a lot of sympathy for the critics of phenomenology you identify, I also think that they set up a false dichotomy in which one is encouraged to choose sides. Either you’re a phenomenologist or a Deleuzean, a neurophilosopher or a Husserlian. The camps are not so neatly divided, however. There’s a lot of overlap. But I think the problem runs both ways. Whereas many of phenomenology’s critics wish to break free from the phenomenological moment in philosophy as quickly as possible, often too hastily and armed with a facile reduction of the complexity of phenomenology, the phenomenologists are equally as guilty of wanting to quarantine themselves from other
philosophical currents under the pretense of doing something completely original or, as it were, immune to classical philosophy – metaphysics, especially. My book advances the thesis that phenomenology’s immunity to metaphysics is not what it seems and, at the end of the day, if phenomenology is going to have a future, then that future might be on a horizon illuminated by German Idealism. Those phenomenologists who have been running from idealism since Husserl’s later work may see this horizon as effectively announcing the end of phenomenology, but, on the contrary, I see it as the promise of a new beginning. The end of the phenomenology signaled in my title, then, is only the end of a certain practice and a certain self-understanding of phenomenology, not its absolute demise.

Graham – Now let’s turn to your subtitle: *Metaphysics and the New Realism*. Here we have another string of words that is bound to annoy most continental philosophers, who tend to see both metaphysics and realism as archaic fossils from a hoary, oppressive yesteryear. How do you propose to defend metaphysics against the various postmodern critiques directed against it?

Tom – Whether they like it or not, continental philosophers have to come to terms with the fact that metaphysics has made a comeback. It’s on the program at SPEP and there are plenty of book, articles, and events covering the new developments. At this point, however, I’m not sure that I (or anyone else) needs to spend too much energy defending metaphysics or realism against the postmodern critiques. Postmodernism, for all of its influence and scandal, doesn’t seem to have put the past to rest or gotten us beyond metaphysics. There’s a story to be told about the overcoming of metaphysics, but I think it remains just a story. If postmodernism entails leaving metaphysics behind, being able to think without making metaphysical commitments, then we have never been postmodern. My sense is that there are plenty of old-guard continentals who will double down on the “end of metaphysics” rhetoric of the last few decades, but there will always be something reactionary about this, and it’s rather withering under the light. I think what folks are realizing is that metaphysics never came to an end, that it’s never been possible to escape metaphysics or do metaphysics-free philosophy. Even apart from the work
done in the niches of speculative realism or object-oriented philosophy, the allure of philosophers like Deleuze, Badiou, and Latour testifies to the fact that we are still drawn to metaphysical puzzles, that we take them seriously, and have kept open the avenues of research that will help us work them out. There is more than one person out there working on the “realism” in Derrida’s work, so I think realism is ascendant even in neighborhoods where it was believed to be banished for good. In short, this is an extremely exciting time to be writing continental philosophy because it’s no longer unfashionable to talk about things other than language, writing, and différance. People are hungry to get back to the things themselves, but they want to find alternatives for doing so instead of falling back on phenomenology all the time. There are other routes out there; there are new paths to be cut.

Graham – Merleau-Ponty plays an important role in your philosophy, but not in the usual way. Generally he’s one of those philosophers assumed to have a “futuristic” air about him. Namely, Merleau-Ponty is generally depicted as if he were always already more avant-garde than the present – as if none of us had yet caught up with his cutting-edge twenty-second century intuitions. Schelling is another of these futuristic philosophers, and there is now a permanent subculture that views him as a more advanced figure than Kant or Hegel, one who summons us to a still-distant future. During my student years Maurice Blanchot briefly filled the same niche, as in Derrida’s rather melodramatic book blurb: “Blanchot still waits for us to come,” or words to that effect. I suspect that François Laruelle is now being groomed to fill this role of the inscrutable Ghost of Christmas Future. But to get back to the point, I sense that your reaction to Merleau-Ponty is closer to my own: that he’s a fabulous writer in spurts, with uncanny intuition in specific cases, but philosophically more conservative than people realize. Am I going too far in ascribing this view to you? And in any case, why are you not entirely on board with Merleau-Ponty despite your great respect and admiration for him?

Tom – Usually I don’t like to discuss Christmas when it’s not the holiday season, but I’ll take the bait! I have a deep admiration for Merleau-Ponty,
no question. He also provokes in me an acute frustration because he seems to be someone who can be contorted into any shape one wishes him to take on. Now, this is not to say that there is a proper Merleau-Ponty that is often distorted, but that it is his well-known ambiguity that keeps him always on the cutting edge, if not beyond it. This is also the case with Schelling, I think, and most likely with Blanchot as well. The ambiguity that permeates so much of their work enables them to always be adaptable, amenable to current trends and concerns. Merleau-Ponty, then, will never go out of fashion and there will always be someone who claims that he has already anticipated whatever trend comes along. Anyone who tries to read Merleau-Ponty as conservative in any way, then, will always meet with the objection that she or he is not seeing the deeply radical nature of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking.

As a phenomenologist, however, there must be some limit to what Merleau-Ponty’s work is capable of achieving or defending. This is a claim I try to defend in the book, arguing that if phenomenology is in any sense a method of philosophy, then it must place some kind of limit on what one is authorized to claim about existence, for surely not everything can be grasped phenomenologically. For example, even in his later work, The Visible and the Invisible, he seems to retain a phenomenological sensibility and its accompanying subject-centered perspective. While he’s certainly engaged in an ontological project in that book, he seems bound to see the world through human eyes and, therefore, cut the world down to human size. If we’re going to get at the things themselves, as themselves, then another ontological approach is necessary. Speculative realism offers such an approach, one that is hyper-sensitive to the danger of reducing the things themselves to their appearances to human consciousness. This is why I recommend it as an alternative to Merleau-Ponty, even though I would not go so far as to say that one must be either a speculative realist or a Merleau-Pontyan. There are certain methodological incompatibilities between these approaches, but together they offer a more complete picture of things.

At any rate, few things are more irritating in academia than being told that one has not appreciated the radicality of Thinker X when that radicality is always proving to be even more radical than once thought! I am not trying to say that Merleau-Ponty was not ahead of his time, and in a sense is still our contemporary, but I think it’s important to draw a
distinction between the ambiguity, or ambivalence, of his writing and the foresight of his thinking. As a stylist and commentator on the world of perception, however, he has yet to be beaten.

Graham – Levinas is another figure you treat rather differently from most commentators. Sometimes he’s appreciated, but only if processed in suitably Derrideanized form. At other times he’s condemned as a pious and moralistic busybody who actually has the gall to lecture people about how to live their lives. Obviously, neither of these describes your attitude. What are people missing in Levinas when they approach him along these usual paths?

Tom – Yes, for my part I’d rather see Levinas read alongside someone like Deleuze, as I begin to do in Levinas Unhinged and parts of Plastic Bodies, since both of them are serious thinkers of the materiality of sensation and what sensation means for the theory of the subject. His attention to sensibility is in a lot of ways unparalleled in the twentieth century. He refers to part of his project as a “phenomenology of sensation,” but I think this is a misnomer. My view is that no such phenomenology is possible; sensation is not the kind of thing that can be disclosed phenomenologically. In my view there’s a lot of work to be done with Levinas, and many ways to bring him into dialogue with other thinkers. Part of the obstacle to this sort of work, I think, is a certain image of him that resembles the one you invoke here. With any luck that stereotype can be overcome and people will begin rediscovering Levinas, looking at him with fresh eyes and without prejudice. To my mind, he’s one of the most efficacious critics of phenomenology, rather than one of its most accomplished practitioners, and looking at that criticism – of Husserl and Heidegger, for instance – is a great place to begin reading him. Levinas better than anyone else shows us the limits of phenomenology, and he does so from within the establishment itself.

Graham – Closer to home, you’ve done work on Alphonso Lingis, who in many ways continues the mission of Merleau-Ponty and
Levinas: the sensualization and de-jargonization of phenomenology. What are some of the main ideas you’ve taken from Lingis?

**Tom** – My first published article was on Lingis, as you know. What I tried to articulate there was a sense of the pliability of subjectivity in Lingis’s philosophy. But I wanted to also emphasize the respect that Lingis has for the passivity of the subject in the face of what he calls, as you well know, the imperatives of the environment. In some ways this attention to passivity is inherited directly from Levinas, but in another way Lingis is wont to break from the fixation with transcendence that one finds in Levinas. Imperatives issue from all corners of existence for Lingis, not just the wholly other, God, or human sapience. Imperatives, in short, are corporeal as much as they are rational. Of course, Merleau-Ponty also recognized this sort of thing, but I think for Lingis there is just a little too much control accorded to the subject by Merleau-Ponty. Lingis performs a great balancing act between Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, and it was this performance that inspired me to write a dissertation that featured all three of these thinkers, along with some others, like Deleuze, Foucault, James, Dewey, Spinoza, and Malabou. Lingis, too, pays perhaps more attention to sensation than any other thinker in the twentieth century. Once again, I think he takes his cue from Levinas, but in Lingis there are profound explorations of the ways in which sensation grips us in our everyday encounters and, ultimately, transforms who we are. This concern for the reality of sensation and its importance as a philosophical concept, which infuses not only Lingis’s theoretical work but indeed all of this travel writing, is what really caught my attention. There’s no one else like him, and in many ways I owe the idea for my dissertation, which is now the book *Plastic Bodies*, to him.

**Graham** – In *The End of Phenomenology* you deal at some length with Speculative Realism, rather appreciatively I would say. But if there is one thing missing from this new current of philosophy that leaves you unsatisfied, what would it be?
Tom – Speculative realism as I understand it is a name for a loose confederation of roughly “continental” thinkers working in the realist tradition, each with a certain affinity for speculative metaphysics. These folks don’t share a common methodology per se, but what unites them is a basic commitment to the reality of the mind-independent world and a faith in the efficacy of speculative philosophy. I wouldn’t say that I’ve been unsatisfied with the works I’ve encountered, but what I do think needs to happen as speculative realism progresses is a demarcation of the bounds of speculative realism vis-à-vis other forms of realism. Speculative realism has people looking for realism all over the place now, for various reasons and motives, but what makes a realism properly speculative? A sort of taxonomy of realisms should be drawn up, I think. And not so much so that we can police the boundaries of SR, but so that the methodologies of the various extant (and future) realisms can be made clearer.

Graham – Though your authorial career has really just gotten underway, you have already written three rather daring books. I’d be curious to hear if you’ve chosen your next book topic yet. This might give us some sense of where you are going in the near future.

Tom – If it’s the case, I humbly accept the label of daring, to be sure. In some ways I would much rather write a daring failure than an academic success. Hopefully I have found some balance between the two possibilities. I can’t imagine anything more depressing than writing an academic failure, however. Spending all that time playing it safe and writing by the book, only to have it all fall apart.

In a lot of ways my three authored books all grow out of an article I published back in 2008, which was then expanded into a dissertation. The article looked at Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Lingis and read those figures largely through the lens of SR and object-oriented philosophy. Your book, Guerrilla Metaphysics, really helped me conceive that article. What I couldn’t do in the dissertation (now Plastic Bodies) was deal with a lot of the methodological issues I stumbled upon while reading loads of phenomenology. These issues became the impetus and one of the chief concerns of The End of Phenomenology. Additionally, I began seriously to engage Catherine Malabou’s work in my dissertation, specifically her
concept of plasticity, but I did so mostly uncritically. Which is to say, I put her concept to work for me, but did not critique her work in its entirety and on its own terms. That’s really what I’d like to do next, what I’m working on now. Malabou provides a unique approach to subjectivity, one that weds continental philosophy to psychoanalysis and neuroscience. In the continental tradition she seems to be one of the few people trying to foreground neuroscience in her theory of the subject and personal identity. There is a lot at stake here. A book on these themes, along with the broader philosophical history of the concept of plasticity, is what I’d like to write now. I’m also eager to draft my own treatise on objects, to contribute to the object-oriented ontology discussion, but that might have to wait a bit. I have some ideas working there.

Graham – Who are some of the authors from outside philosophy who have shaped your intellectual trajectory the most?

Tom – It’s difficult for me to trace any direct impact on my work from outside of philosophy, now that you ask. It makes me a little sad to realize this, and to say it out loud. But I can say that I’ve found a lot of useful ideas in Yukio Mishima’s memoir, Sun and Steel, which I first learned about in Lingis’s book Foreign Bodies. Mishima tells of the intimate relation between his body and the elements, particular the rays of the sun and the steel of the weights he used to sculpt himself into a bodybuilder. He also says quite remarkable things about a writer’s body, things that often terrify me and send me out of the house and into the park for exercise! And actually, the memoir of Haruki Murakami, What I Talk About When I Talk About Running, also had a deep influence when I was writing my dissertation. Neither of these books masculinist or reductive, as one might believe at first. Murakami’s reflections on running marathons and ultramarathons, how the body under such duress can become a foreign agent, a stranger to oneself, really helped me conceive the relation – I won’t say difference for fear of being labeled a dualist – between body and self. Now that I’m thinking about influence I can also say that some of the phenomenology-friendly architecture theorists, like Peter Zumthor, Michael Benedikt, and Juhani Pallasmaa, helped me think through one of my central concerns – the relationship between body and environment. I also have an idea for a book that would explore this relationship as it has
been theorized in continental philosophy generally. That book would recast the idea of corporeal animation as an ecological, not a spiritual or vital or mechanical, event.

Graham – One of your other first three books is called (like your blog) Plastic Bodies. The Foreword to that book was written by none other than Catherine Malabou, obviously a very prominent thinker of plasticity in present-day continental philosophy. What are some of the most important ideas you’ve picked up from Malabou?

Tom – As I began saying earlier, it is really the concept of plasticity that I’ve found most useful in her work so far. For my part, I’m curious to see just how expansive this concept is, and where else it pops up in the history of philosophy and psychology. I personally first encountered it reading William James’s Principles of Psychology and John Dewey’s Human Nature and Conduct, before I even touched a page of Malabou. Their concepts are very similar, however, and I’m keen to trace whatever differences might exist between them. The other thing that caught my attention in Malabou is the way she uses the concept of plasticity to theorize change, contingency, and ultimately identity. I can’t say too much at this point since I’m only beginning my research in this area, but I believe that a fully fleshed out idea of personal identity, one that centers on the plasticity of the psyche, brain, and body, could be one of the most enduring contributions that Malabou has to offer us.

Graham – As a final question, let me ask your advice for graduate students who might be reading this interview. You were in their shoes not so long ago. But unlike many graduate students, you found both a personal voice and an efficient work rhythm rather quickly. How were you able to pull this off at a much younger age than many of us did, as we procrastinated our way through the dissertation-writing darkness?

Tom – This is actually a question I got during a job interview this past year, and I wish that I had a complete and definitive answer, which I don’t.
Perhaps it would have landed me the job. But I do have some clues to what helped me shape my voice and my work ethic. First, it helped that I came from a working-class family, and one without an academic history. Throughout graduate school I always felt like I was playing catch-up with the students who had a stronger academic background than I have. This game of catch-up persists for me even today, and I feel it most acutely when competing against other job candidates with prestigious pedigrees. This kept me from procrastinating throughout graduate school, and in fact pushed me to do more than I had to for graduate courses, comprehensive exams, and so forth. One thing I did was commit to working on a paper that was completely unrelated to my coursework, and I committed myself to presenting it at conferences, getting feedback, and improving it until it was ready to send off to journals. Of course, everyone must find this one paper, the one they know can be successful. This took a lot of work, and the time for it had to be snatched up whenever I could. It meant working on it in the cracks, in between my other duties. This is how I still work today, where my own research and writing is concerned. I don’t have the luxury of teaching at a research institution, so I write when I can and I write when I must. I’m not convinced that you have to publish as a graduate student to get a job — I certainly know plenty of people getting jobs these days without publishing — but publishing as a graduate student is very useful for gaining confidence, or courage, about one’s endeavors. It also helps one find one’s own voice, which is arguably even more important that getting a line on the CV under “Publications.”

Another thing I’ve done is get used to rejection. The trick, however, is to not lose confidence when you know you’ve got something valuable. I had to figure out the difference between getting rejected because my work didn’t fit in somewhere, and getting rejected because my work wasn’t ready for publication. It’s much easier, of course, to be confident when your work has been accepted once or twice.

As for finding my own voice, I can say with some degree of confidence that I found my own voice when I deliberately tried to write simply and clearly, to just state my arguments, disagreements, frustrations, and criticisms plainly. The key here is to figure out what you think, then say it. Of course, you need a nice abstract of your argument, or an outline if you prefer it, but once you have that you know what you want to say and what it will take to say it. My dissertation director, Fred Evans, told me that
while I was writing the dissertation I should constantly return to my prospectus to make sure I was sticking to my plan. That has been some of the best advice I’ve gotten. Stick to the abstract, or the prospectus; it will keep you focused and ensure that you’re a productive, efficient writer. It also helped that my director allowed me to write my dissertation like a book, so that when I was finished it was easy to revise and publish. I’m aware that not all directors allow this, but if you can make it happen, I think it’s a huge advantage to write your dissertation like a book. Once you’re done with graduate school, you’ll already know what it’s like and what it takes to write a book.

One more thing about voice. Even once you’ve found your own voice, you will often find it impossible to write in that voice. This will seem like writer’s block, but it’s really just an inability to write as oneself in the moment. It’s important to distinguish these obstacles. Sometimes the voice will be that of someone else, and it will persistently interject as you trudge along, struggling to write. One night while I was working on the final chapter of my dissertation I found that I could only write in something approximating the voice of Edgardo Cozarinsky in *Urban Voodoo*. This would have been wonderful if I were writing something like fiction, but it was horrible for my present purposes. I had to give up. Sometimes, in the worst cases, it will find that you can only write in a nameless, general academic voice that is the embodiment of all the voices you encounter in your review of the literature on your chosen subject – an abstract, academic voice, devoid of all style and sincerity. Nothing good can come of writing in a voice other than your own, so when you find this impossible, stop writing and wait for your voice to return. For me, this is easiest at specific times of day, usually in the morning, rarely after dinner.

The last thing I’ll say about writing is this: It is imperative that you don’t mimic the philosophers and theorists you’re reading, unless you are reading someone who writes plainly and as clear as day. It was a huge achievement for me when I became able to write about Heidegger without sounding like Heidegger. For me, the best way to avoid writing like the philosophers you are reading is to write plainly. Once you get in the habit of writing plainly, it becomes easier to paraphrase others’ writing, and to write efficiently.