

Introduction

Principally Unprincipled; or, Speaking of “Beginnings”

At the latest since Aristotle’s *Peri hermeneias*, there has been talk of the pathos of language: “There are, then, things in vocal-sound that are symbols [σύμβολα] of the affections [παθημάτων] in the soul,” Aristotle writes, and while voicings may vary, he asserts that the “affections” or “passions” of which they are the “signs [σημεῖα]” are the same for all, as are those things of which the passions are the “similitudes [ὁμοιώματα].”¹ Before there can be any articulate thought, that is to say, something must have been suffered in a way that marks the mind, which Boethius reiterates when he translates Aristotle’s σύμβολα with *notae*, suggesting that the voice must itself undergo an inscription in order to render what the soul has undergone.² Thomas Aquinas interprets the passivity at the core of language and thought as a sign for the “deficiency” of the human intellect, which, unlike divine intellect, needs sense impressions and phantasms in order to act and understand.³ And before these commentators, Augustine—who will confess to studying Aristotle’s *Categories*, if not *Peri hermeneias*⁴—recalls learning language as his first memory in terms that repeat and elaborate upon Aristotle’s formulation perhaps more than they comment upon any experience of his own: “What [the adults] wanted was clear, for they used bodily gestures, the natural words of all peoples [*verbis naturalibus omnium gentium*], such as facial expressions or glances of the eyes or movements of other parts of the body, or a tone of voice, indicating *the affection of the soul* [*affectionem animi*] concerning those things that they sought, wished to hold on to, rejected or shunned altogether.”⁵

The notion that there could be neither discourse nor thought without affection would be reprised in even the most rigorous modern investiga-

tions of transcendental subjectivity, from the role that receptivity (*Empfindung*) plays in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the passive syntheses of hyletic data that Edmund Husserl situates at the foundation of conscious apprehension in and beyond his lectures on passive synthesis from the 1920s. Yet something strange happens in Husserl: just as he seeks to articulate a phenomenological understanding of passivity that would be pure of the metaphysical, scientific, and sensualistic prejudices that he finds in his predecessors,⁶ Husserl describes the passive operations of consciousness as responses to the appeals—and the protests—that issue from the material givens. As he will concisely put it in one exemplary passage: “That which is experienced each time has the character of one who is calling [*den Charakter des Anrufenden*]”; and in another passage, he will speak of the “protests” that certain associative formations may give against the tendency of other associative formations to assimilate them.⁷ These turns of phrase are most likely meant to emphasize the subjective character of even the most inchoate “stuff [*Stoff*]” that enters consciousness⁸ and thus to indicate Husserl's distance from anything like the suggestion that sensory data may be “proper material substances”: “Sense-data, sense-complexes,” as he would insist elsewhere, “are only thinkable as perceived, as conscious in a subject.”⁹ Even the foreign matter of “I-less [*ichlosen*]” formations is only thinkable, in other words, when it is understood to speak to, and therefore like, “me.”¹⁰ By casting the subject matter in this way, however, Husserl does not so much offer a rigorously phenomenological formulation “that does nothing further than lend expression to such givens through [. . .] exactly commensurate meanings,”¹¹ as he returns to the trope or fiction that had already figured in Augustine's *Confessions*, where, beside the voice of reason, the mind was said to be solicited by both the “messengers [*nuntios*]” of the senses,¹² as well as the unsolicited memories that call attention to themselves, “saying, as it were, ‘are we not [what you are seeking]?’”¹³ That is to say, the imaginary calls Husserl cites may themselves be fictive citations and citations of fiction, without any foundation in the “givens” of intuition. But this is also not to say that Husserl's or Augustine's “personifications” are mere figures of speech. To the contrary, they are themselves traces of an affection or passion, which shows both writers to be drawn by the appeal of appeals whose occurrence could be neither intuitively founded nor otherwise substantiated. And in this respect, the voices that Husserl invokes also bear associations with those of Augustine's oeuvre, rendering their respective voices passive in yet another way that none could claim to experience:

for insofar as each writer echoes the other, their voices undergo a mutual inscription independently of their knowledge. Hence, the unverifiable yet repeated appeals of sensory and memory impressions may always resonate further, through to the passage from Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* that Emmanuel Levinas will recite in order to exemplify the structure of the trace—"Someone rang, and there is no one at the door: did anyone ring?"¹⁴—or the still more enigmatic, because fragmentary, phrase that appears isolated in italics in Maurice Blanchot's *The Step Not Beyond*: "As if there would have reverberated, in a muffled way, a call"¹⁵; or the call of the castle official, Klamm, who is said in Franz Kafka's *The Castle* to have summoned a woman named Frieda but whose speech also may not have been intended to address anyone at all, rendering his summons, at the limit, a call that can barely still be called "calling": "And the fact that he sometimes called Frieda need not at all have the meaning that one may wish to ascribe it; he simply called the name Frieda—who knows his intentions?—while the fact that Frieda naturally rushed to come was her issue [. . .] but one cannot exactly maintain that he exactly called her."¹⁶

The foreign instances of speech that are called to mind in Husserl's and Augustine's oeuvres, among others, suggest that the pathos grounding first-person discourse and experience is not merely a matter of those corporeal affections that the *cogito* might eventually grasp in conscious acts. Rather, they indicate that affections are already structured like a language and that language would therefore need to be suffered before any thought, recollection, or meaning could be recognized or voiced by "me." The linguistic pathos that is registered within texts such as Augustine's *Confessions* and Husserl's manuscripts thus calls for different readings of passion and passivity than recent theories of affect have tended to offer.¹⁷ For it is not merely a matter of describing what the affective contingencies of memory, cognition, and signification may mean for rethinking the supposed agency of the intellect or the embodied nature of experience. It is a question of how language affects the experience, sense, signification, and expression of the subject of speech, before any *logos* or *autos* of cognition; and in the last analysis, it is a question of how language could respond to these questions of language.

These are the questions that are addressed in *Passive Voices (On the Subject of Phenomenology and Other Figures of Speech)*, beginning with those linguistic interventions that are not only said to affect the transcendental subject in Husserl's descriptions of passive synthesis but that also enter into his rhetorical performance through the citations, echoes, and

protests that traverse his writing and resist assimilation to its epistemological aims. Other voices will play critical roles in this study, including those of Augustine, as well as literary writers from the twentieth century, whose fictive experiments echo the thinking of Husserl and Augustine, while exceeding the more restrictive fictions of phenomenological “science.” *Passive Voices* addresses, that is to say, an affective corpus of philosophical and literary writings whose repetitions and variations testify to the manifold ways in which speech occurs in the passive voice, affecting even the most reduced claims to experience. Already those echoes that let Aristotle speak with Augustine and Augustine with Husserl, expose each of their voices to be passively disposed toward others whom none could have intended or precluded—and thus to speak otherwise than anyone may have pretended to do himself. Yet unlike the phenomenological exercise of imaginative variation, where individual givens are imagined otherwise so as to disclose invariant structures, the passive experiences of language surpass the limits of possible experience from the outset, soliciting further examination through literary fictions, which are beholden to no ontological or epistemological premises but permitted to “say anything, accept anything, receive anything, suffer anything, and simulate everything.”¹⁸ The passive dimensions of both philosophical literature and literary fiction call not for a phenomenological investigation but for a “philological labor [. . .] which necessarily complements the philosophical one and indicates its limits.”¹⁹

It is phenomenology, however, that marks an exemplary point of departure for approaching linguistic pathos because and not despite of the fact that it was never intended to do so. Because, in other words, Husserl most insistently calls for the radical reduction of all sensible and speakable experience to subjective consciousness, the passive relationship between subject and language that his texts nevertheless register gives one of the most radical testimonies to the irreducible alterity and priority of language to subjectivity and knowledge. In an age where notions of agency, power, and truth are in a crisis at least as troubling as the one which Husserl had confronted when he wrote *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, a reduction to the contingent and passive foundations of “experience” in language may be more crucial than the reduction of the modern sciences to life that Husserl more expressly retraces in that work—not in order to know the world we will have made but to advocate for the others whom we speak with, unbeknownst to ourselves. It is for this other reduction that phenomenological writing also speaks, when diverse voices and fictions cross Husserl’s lines against his better knowledge, and it is for the sake

of such speaking that this philological study draws out those traces of passion in the voice, which testify to modes of experience and community that would rest upon no common ground and no ego-subjects, but would rather hold open indefinitely for others.

Long before Husserl's lectures on passive synthesis, the project of phenomenology is marked by this passive "experience" beyond experience, from the "beginning." For the epistemological "principle" that Husserl states toward the outset of his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology* is not simply "intuitive." The often-cited "principle of all principles" reads: "that every originally giving intuition is a legitimizing source of knowledge."²⁰ To be sure, this statement would at first seem to affirm the unconditional priority and validity of intuitive givenness, as an authentic occurrence that "affects" consciousness from within its immanent stream and therefore as an originary presence beyond a shadow of a doubt.²¹ And even for many subsequent thinkers who would shift the emphasis of phenomenological discourse to other traits of experience than those which Husserl underscores in his explications of subjective constitution, the implications of his statement on principle would appear to remain decisive. It was by reinterpreting Husserl's "idea of an 'originary' and 'intuitive' grasp and explication of phenomena" that Martin Heidegger would understand phenomenality as the disclosure of "beings [. . .] themselves [. . .] in the way of access that genuinely belongs to them"—and would thereby begin to approach the question of being that opens through a return "to the things themselves."²² It was in taking up the primacy of "giving intuition" that Jean-Luc Marion would elaborate givenness as the condition of possibility for all appearance that precedes even "intuition and intention."²³ And it was with attentiveness to the "pathos" implied in "givenness" that Bernhard Waldenfels would insist upon the alterity that conditions the origin of subjective experience, where "we are struck [*betroffen*] by something," in advance of all (self-) awareness, which can neither be "founded on the previous 'what,'" nor "sublated into a subsequently accomplished 'for what.'"²⁴

But Husserl's statement of principle is followed nearly as soon as it is offered with a remark on language that doubles it, troubling its claim to priority—and thereby introduces a duplicity or discrepancy from the "beginning": "Every statement [*Aussage*]," Husserl adds, "that does nothing further than lend expression to such givens through mere explication and exactly commensurate meanings, is therefore really [. . .] an absolute beginning, called upon [*berufen*] to lay the ground, a principium in

the genuine sense of the word.”²⁵ Thus it would seem that intuitive evidence could not “really” mark the beginning of knowledge, nor could “givens” fully be granted at first since the “absolute beginning” is said to arrive only when given intuitions are lent words. Husserl’s articulation of “beginnings” thus anticipates both Tilottama Rajan’s observation that “the linguistic is already embedded in phenomenology,”²⁶ as well as Michael Marder’s more recent arguments that “Husserlian ‘original experience’ presages the deconstruction of pure origins that are inconsistent with phenomenology.”²⁷ But beside these general insights into the linguistic and historical character of phenomenological knowledge, Husserl’s particular formulations also indicate that the lending of words takes place as an operation which principal statements are themselves “called” (“berufen”) to perform, recalling or anticipating the “calls” that Husserl would invoke in his descriptions of passive synthesis. Although the source for this call does not seem to lie in the appeals of hyletic data, moreover, Husserl’s usage of the (grammatical) passive voice suggests that it issues from an experience that does not belong primarily to “me,” which is made still more pronounced by the fact that the authority of said experience is, according to Husserl, itself an anonymous “assertion [*Behauptung*] drawn immediately from general insight.”²⁸ The givens of intuition thus call for corresponding linguistic expressions in a manner that is already an “assertion” of sorts, rendering all further speech provoked in advance by this prior yet unspoken claim. An ambivalent, citational character thereby comes to mark every “beginning”—whether it be called an “originary” intuition or the “expression” that intuition will have originally called for—and this ambivalence is registered still more emphatically, when Husserl places “beginnings” in quotation marks in another iteration of this thought. Only those “findings,” he asserts, “which are carried out” in such a way where what is “directly given in intuition” is brought “to faithful expression,” are “real ‘beginnings’ [*wirkliche Anfänge*].”²⁹ On these terms, too, it is hardly evident where the “beginning” of phenomenological thinking begins. And even if it should be objected that intuition should remain prior to expression—it is intuition, after all, that each “expression” should faithfully translate and repeat—or if it should be objected that Husserl’s word of “beginnings” has less to do with phenomenological insight per se than with its intersubjective, mundane appearance,³⁰ there remain fundamental differences among intuitive givens, their solicitations for expression, and the expressions that are given to them, whose descriptions provide no

evidence that the expression of any given intuition could not, in principle, fail its initial calling or fall from faithfulness.

The “beginnings” of phenomenological insight are thus not only already a recital of but also subjected to the epochal suspension that “quotation marks [*Anführungszeichen*]” will signify in Husserl’s thought,³¹ and this suspension is not so much enacted by the transcendental subject of phenomenology, as it occurs as an effect of the language of “principle.” How could any commensuration between an expression and an intuition be asserted, if not in “quotation marks,” when intuition is already understood to speak for itself, on the one hand, and when this silent speech nonetheless calls for expression, on the other, with the consequence that there could be no common measure between intuition and expression—or between unspoken “assertion” and verbal “expression”—that would not repeat their irreducible difference? How could any but a “suspended” position be taken toward statements that pretend to do “nothing further than lend expression” to the givens, when the latter require repetition in order to “begin,”³² to say nothing of the fact that any terms that may lend themselves to expressing intuitions will have themselves already come before “I” could have a say?³³ It is in “response” to such questions that Marder calls for ongoing “critiques of *logos* by phenomena and of phenomena by *logos*,”³⁴ yet the logic of Husserl’s critical remarks on intuition and expression suggests that “we are not” even “sufficiently sure of what terms like reason, reasonable, rational, intuition, faith, truth signify in order to commence by way of them,” as Brice Parain would write in his *Recherches sur la nature et les fonctions du langage*, which may also be read as an answer to the phenomenological investigations of Husserl.³⁵

This passive *epoché* is not, however, the only trait of Husserl’s formulations that testifies to an experience of language that eludes and affects what will be called “subjective experience.” Husserl’s “principle” remarks are themselves reiterations of a dilemma that will have long since marked the thought of intuition in texts such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” where “symbolic” knowledge is synonymous with “blind” cognition and where “signs” are said to be used “in the place [*loco*] of things” that they do not replace, so much as they allow us to operate upon the fiction or belief that we know what we are talking about, at a remove from any question of reference or referent. It was already within this tradition that Husserl’s understanding of “signitive” meanings had inscribed itself,³⁶ despite the purely descriptive method that

Husserl announces,³⁷ when he observes in his *Logical Investigations* that understanding is a “descriptive trait in the experience of the intuitionless, yet understood sign.”³⁸ Nor would Leibniz fail to characterize what Husserl will call the “act-experience [*Akterlebnis*]” of signitive understanding through a first-person performance of his own:³⁹ “Either knowing or believing [myself] to have” the explication of signs “in [my] power, I remember that I know the signification of the words [*memini me significationem istorum vocabulorum habere*].”⁴⁰ Since, however, remembering oneself to have explanatory knowledge does not necessarily mean that one still has it or that one has ever had it, Leibniz’s formulation also implies that any “memory” marked in this way could always be a sort of screen memory or fiction of knowledge effected by memorized signs.⁴¹ He nearly says so explicitly, when he claims that what is initially recalled in using signs is not any grasp of their meaning but the belief that no “interpretation” or “explication” of them “is necessary for the present judgment [*nunc iudicio necessariam non esse*].”⁴² It was with an eye to this structural trait of language that G. W. F. Hegel would posit the mechanical memorization of signs as the critical juncture between reproductive imagination and discursive thought in the evolution of subjective spirit,⁴³ and that Husserl would later call for the thorough investigation of historically “sedimented” meanings on the grounds that any “judgments” that take place on their basis cannot but rest upon blind and unthought “prejudice,” so long as they have not been traced back to their intuitive origins.⁴⁴ But insofar as each reduction to an intuitive ground would have to be iterable in order to offer any verifiable insight, and insofar as its verification could not be affirmed without recourse to signs, each reduction necessarily remains blind on at least two counts, as Jacques Derrida has argued at length: as an iterable ideal, it necessarily exceeds immediate intuition in order to be what it is—and is therefore always already “(no-) more-sight [*plus-de-vue*]”⁴⁵—and as a linguistic formulation, it opens the phenomenon in question to “an infinite discursiveness” from the “beginning.”⁴⁶ All of these intersecting voices, fictive constructions, and unresolved problems contaminate Husserl’s appeals to pure intuition in his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, whose formulations cannot but run the risk of repeating the very sort of prejudice they seem meant to speak against, of erring on the side of speaking otherwise than intended and thus of speaking in the passive voice, which would here signify the incapacity of speech to exclude such repeated risks.

For this very reason, Husserl’s language exposes itself to further and other associations, including associations with those writers of confession,

theory, and fiction who would rearticulate intuition and evidence, phenomenality and light, through a discourse of blindness. Georges Bataille, for example, would characterize “experience” in *Guilty* (*Le Coupable*) as an ecstatic movement that escapes the one who lives it, which he illustrates by invoking “a blind man’s motions, eyes wide open, arms stretching out, staring at the sun, and inside he’s turning to light himself.”⁴⁷ The phenomenological tropes of vision and immanence, as well as the ideal of adequation, are all evoked in this passage where outer and inner luminosity coincide, but they are also all displaced. Far from offering any promise of an “originarily giving intuition,” the moment that Bataille describes would remain beyond the scope of the one who lives through it as well as his witness, who could not approach an illumination like the one that he relates without becoming blind to it himself. In Bataille’s scenario, blindness and evidence can *either* be lived through *or* “known” and “spoken,” and by exposing the insuperable disjunction that renders vision inaccessible to cognition, and vice versa, the text thus draws *the* operative metaphor of phenomenology “to the edges of the blind spot that constitutes it,” as Rodolphe Gasché has brilliantly shown Bataille’s writing to do in other contexts.⁴⁸ Yet what also renders the passage from *Guilty* a most powerful indication of the blindness that would affect all signs of “intuition” are the ways in which Bataille’s words on blind motion become themselves impossible to fix, locate, or trace. For although one could object that the above-cited passage could be contrasted with others, more favorable to the notion of evidence, or that Bataille may not have intended his text to be a critical response to phenomenological insight, the testimony to blindness that it gives is not dependent upon authorized intentions but emerges through echoes that expose not only Husserl’s but also Bataille’s vocabulary, among others, to unforeseeable associations. Within the context of Bataille’s corpus alone, his lines repeat the portrayal that he had provided of his blind and syphilitic father in the postscript to the *Story of the Eye* (*Histoire de l’œil*),⁴⁹ whether or not they were meant to evoke or overwrite the paternal figure from his novel. At the same time, moreover, they resonate with the evocation of a benighted eye that takes place toward the opening of Maurice Blanchot’s *Thomas the Obscure*: “His eye, useless for seeing, took on extraordinary proportions, developed beyond measure, and, extending over the horizon, let the night penetrate into its center to create an iris.”⁵⁰ Yet even beyond these nearly contemporaneous passages, Bataille’s words also distantly recall the illustration that Augustine offers for the simultaneous presence of God

to man and absence of man to God, which is similar to “the way that a blind man is posed in the sun, and the sun is present to him, but he is absent to the sun [*quomodo homo positus in sole caecus, praesens est illi sol, sed ipse soli absens est*]”;⁵¹ as well as the fragment on truth that Franz Kafka would draft during a period of convalescence in Zürich: “Our art is a being-blinded-by-the-truth [*ein von der Wahrheit Geblindet-Sein*]: The light upon the grimacing visage that draws back is true, nothing else.”⁵² And finally, all of these passages take another turn with the helio-tropism of Husserl’s *cogito*, whose acts are said to radiate like the sun, but whose luminosity is itself left unclarified and obscure: “In every actual cogito a radiating ‘look’ [*ausstrahlender ‘Blick’*] is directed from the pure Ego to the ‘object.’”⁵³ Each of these writers will be explicitly cited elsewhere in Bataille’s oeuvre,⁵⁴ but because there is no clear evidence that Bataille had any of them in mind when he recorded the motions of a blind man in *Le Coupable*, there is also no way to decide the extent to which his lines may be borrowed, spliced together, or severed from those others in this indefinitely culpable (*coupable*) and cuttable (*coup-able*) text. In lieu of any unequivocally original or citational formulation, a vacancy thus opens through Bataille’s words—which he pronounces “void” himself: “so many empty words [*autant de mots devenus vides*]”⁵⁵—and it is this linguistic vacancy, like the eyes of Bataille’s blind man, which blindly admits all possible associations and “interferences.”⁵⁶ It is a blind and passive movement of language that is traced through Bataille’s words of light and sight, which leaves room for other articulations of those phenomena and lets various voices resonate with—and without—one another.⁵⁷

It was precisely under the sign of such blind and passive movements that Jacques Derrida would write in his *Memoirs of the Blind* (*Mémoires d’aveugle*): “Language is spoken / speaks to itself [*Le langage se parle*], that is to say, *from / of blindness* [*de l’aveuglement*]. It always speaks to us *from / of the blindness* that constitutes it.”⁵⁸ Drawing together both Husserl’s signature notion of “constitution” and Heidegger’s famous dictum, “language speaks [*die Sprache spricht*]”,⁵⁹ Derrida rearticulates these phrases along the lines of the destitution “from” and “of” which language speaks, and he does so without compensating for the lack of vision or intuition that “his” language makes pronounced. His citational “language” on language emphasizes instead the difference between language and intuition, which entails, on the one hand, that no speech could make up for its intuitive deficit but could only repeat a variation upon its constitutive blindness; while on the other hand, it entails that language could never speak “itself,”

either, without withdrawing from evidence and remaining blind to its senses. As it echoes and alters the phenomenological vocabulary of Husserl and Heidegger, however, Derrida's passage also shows words to be excessive beyond measure: "tropes [*tropes*] of [. . .] rhetorical supplementarity" that "always lead us [. . .] too far [*trop loin*]." ⁶⁰

Faithful to this counter-intuitive language, the narrative performance that Derrida goes on to sketch in his *Memoirs* offers an indirect yet critical commentary on the conscious and lucid ego of phenomenology—upon the premises Derrida sketches, there could be no other way⁶¹—by drawing the tropes of vision and first-person figures of speech that mark phenomenological investigation into a thoroughly citational portrait of "personal" experience. This "portrait," in turn, exposes the radical alterity of the scripts for vision and self alike. Early in his *Memoirs*, for example, Derrida will confess to "insinuating an oblique or distracted reading" of Bataille's *Story of the Eye* into the "story of the eye"⁶² that he will call his own, which intersection of readings and writings, of proper titles (*Story of the Eye*) and common names (*story of the eye*), would alone cross through the "proper" claims to experience that found Husserl's theory of the "I." Derrida's passing remark on Bataille's *Story of the Eye* also bears out further, however, as Derrida develops his "self-portrait of a blind man."⁶³ For just as Bataille's story will be traced back to "Réminiscences" that are not initially remembered by himself⁶⁴ but first recalled by photographs from "an American magazine,"⁶⁵ even the most personal confessions of Derrida's *Memoirs* turn out to be entangled with other narrative scripts and contingent encounters. From the first, the partially recorded dream that Derrida relates of two elderly dueling blind men will prompt the recollection of a plethora of elderly blind men from Greco-Roman and biblical antiquity: Oedipus, Tiresias, Homer, Isaac, and Tobit, among others.⁶⁶ Associations prescribed by an archive, rather than any sensed or remembered data, are what form the composite images that make up his mind and do not portray thought as a "free-floating [. . .] play of self-destructive signs,"⁶⁷ as critics such as William Spanos have asserted of Derrida's writing, but rather expose the passive constitution of subjectivity through language, without which there could be no coming to terms with "ourselves." The fact, moreover, that Derrida, like Bataille, introduces his oneiric text not as one that he recalls directly but one that he only remembers recording in the dark—that is, without a glimmer of knowledge as to its contents—not only inscribes his dream *ab initio* into a tradition of manuscripts and copies but also shows this tradition to be the only chance for getting a

grip: “And so on the night of July 16th of last year, without turning on the light, barely awake, still passive but careful not to chase away an interrupted dream, I felt around with a groping hand beside my bed for a pencil, then a notebook.”⁶⁸

What Derrida “remembers” writing in the dark figures in no process of lending words to an “originarily giving intuition”: there is no “absolute beginning,”⁶⁹ but an abyssal gap that absolves both scribe and inscription from every memory on the record, thus letting speech take (their) place in the passive voice. Hence, when Derrida goes on to write, “Upon awakening, I deciphered this [*ceci*], among other things,” he characterizes the dream-text that will have only later become apparent to him as though it were originally drafted in a foreign hand. Beyond the propositional content of this confession, moreover, the very word for “this” (“*ceci*”) literally points to the “blindness” (*cécité*) of both its writing and written protagonists. In these ways and more, Derrida thereby disowns the ocular subject of his (and Bataille’s) “story of the eye,”⁷⁰ while his emphasis upon the eye shifts the sight, vision, regard, aims, and acts of the (phenomenological) subject out of focus. Yet it is also in these ways that the dream-text produced by groping in the dark exposes the passive history of an experience that could never be appropriated but remains open to the vicissitudes of whatever is written of it, thus marking out a space where the “heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible can haunt the visible as its very possibility.”⁷¹

Derrida’s writing offers some of the most far-reaching commentaries on the blindness and passivity that will have marked the language of subjectivity, experience, truth, and knowledge, not only in the study of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* that he would set under the sign of *Speech and Phenomena* or in his introduction to Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry” but also in the confessional rhetoric and literary fictions that are explored in, among others, *Memoirs of the Blind*, *Circonfessions*, and *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot*. In these works, first-person speech figures not in the form of the knowing *cogito* but in the performative modus of testimony, which “always goes hand in hand with at least the *possibility* of fiction, perjury, and lie”—with “the *possibility*,” in a word, “of literature.”⁷² In its “own” way, of course, phenomenological writing, whose eidetic descriptions depart from the exemplary evidence of what is given to “me,” also presents itself as a sort of testimony.⁷³ But the “literary” effects that may at all times dispose the phenomenologist to speak in a manner that is shaped by archives, tropes, coincidences, and contingencies that surpass his capacity to know or to tell—that is, to speak in the passive voice—tend to be understated,

if not left out of the picture. Thus, if Derrida offers articulations of experience that exceed the scope of phenomenology—articulations “where,” as John D. Caputo has written, “experience does not mean phenomenological seeing but running up against the unforeseeable”⁷⁴—then his polyvocal first-person performances draw the furthest consequences of his readings in Husserl. As Derrida had written in his earlier study of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, “The primordially repetitive structure” that Husserl assigns to “signs in general” means that the sign is—like testimony—“*originally wrought by fiction* [travaillé par la fiction],”⁷⁵ and that no sign could enable one to tell between “reality and representation, between the veridical and the imaginary, and between simple presence and repetition,”⁷⁶ even when “I tell myself ‘I am.’”⁷⁷ This inability to tell is a consequence of the passivity to which all acts of speaking and writing are exposed; and it is what structurally allows each voice and trace to recall others, permitting passive associations that belong to no subject of experience but to the experience of language. The lineage that readers such as Rajan have drawn from phenomenology to deconstruction and literature may thus be traced back to the passive character of (linguistic) experience.⁷⁸ Language is, in a word, “a matter of the passivity of passion before or beyond the opposition between passivity and activity,” as Derrida would write, echoing similar remarks by Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot but also Husserl, whose writings on the so-called appeals and protests of passive synthesis will have said much the same.⁷⁹ But language is also, for the same reason, a matter of the affect that precedes the distinction between fact and fiction and that is therefore exposed most emphatically not in Derrida’s commentaries on fiction, citation, and passivity but in the more citational and fictional traits of his written performance.⁸⁰ Hence, it is the less evidently phenomenological texts of Derrida that set the example for this book, where the “same” quotations and motifs will be read through various confessional, fictive, and philosophical contexts, so as to draw out those resonances that render their passive character pronounced and to unfold their implications for the thought of self-knowledge, testimony, and community, among others.

Departing more often from Blanchot and Levinas than from Husserl, scholars over the past several decades such as Steven Shapiro, Ann Smock, and Thomas C. Wall have sought to elaborate what could be called the transcendental passivity of language.⁸¹ Yet the elucidating commentaries that they offer through readings of not only Blanchot and Levinas but also Georges Bataille, Samuel Beckett, and Herman Melville solicit further

and other readings, not least because the implications of linguistic passivity, as opposed to those of an eidetic structure, cannot be formalized. Rather, they emerge each time anew through singular contingencies and associations across texts that escape intentionality and cannot themselves be fixed once and for all. In particular, *Passive Voices (On the Subject of Phenomenology and Other Figures of Speech)* retraces how the subjects of phenomenology—in the first instance, “I”—are figures of speech and thus disposed to be affected at every turn by aleatory signifying effects, “citational” associations, and asignificant echoes. The first chapter takes up where the *Cartesian Meditations* leave off, namely, with an exceptional string of citations that begins with the Delphic oracle, “Know thyself,” and that ends by lending Augustine the last word of Husserl’s book. Following this indication that Augustine introduces the motifs that would prove decisive for phenomenology, the chapter pursues a reading of Augustine’s articulations of self, truth, knowledge, and language, along the lines of his “own” recitations and exegeses of the Delphic inscription, “Know thyself.” To the extent that Augustine appears as the last speaker of Husserl’s text, the *Cartesian Meditations* calls for this preliminary detour through Augustine’s oeuvre, whose relevance to phenomenological thought has, to be sure, been underscored by other phenomenological thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and James K. A. Smith.⁸² Yet whereas numerous readings of Augustine and Husserl will have centered upon the significance of confession, memory, and prayer for the thought of the self, the permutations throughout Augustine’s oeuvre of the particular syntagm that Husserl cites—namely, “Know thyself”—solicit further elaboration of the consequences of originally receiving word of a “self” from another, as a linguistic event that occurs to “me” before “I” know myself to be at all. Thus, although Augustine calls himself into question in his *Confessions*—“I have been made a question for myself [*mihi quaestio factus sum*]”⁸³—he also suggests that self-knowledge could not even begin to be questionable without the language of another, rendering the question of alterity all the more urgent than any concerning “myself.” These observations prepare for an analysis of Augustine’s descriptions of language acquisition and infancy in the *Confessions* and *De trinitate*, which show that the experience of alterity and the alterity of language do not cease to affect the voice, and in ways that are not quieted or settled with the responses that Christian doctrine may have been seen to provide to the question of the self.

Reading backward from the *Cartesian Meditations* to Augustine may seem initially to lead away from Husserl, yet it is a similarly unsettling experience of language that takes shape through Husserl's analyses of passive synthesis, where voices of alterity are said to be what first calls the *cogito* to life. The second chapter thus furthers the discussions of Augustine by registering the ways in which Husserl's writings on passive synthesis and intersubjectivity testify to appeals and associations that precede intentional acts and expressions of consciousness. In other words, consciousness is affected by the language of others before anyone can know it, let alone know (of) a self. Yet as the readings of Husserl in this chapter also show, the language of alterity does not merely affect whatever may come to be known as "I" but also provokes decisive alterations to the language of phenomenology: for Husserl finds himself compelled to resort to fictions that are unfounded in intuition in order to describe it, while at the same time, his "descriptions" themselves assume the shape of convoluted rhetorical figurations that do not allow for distinctions to be fixed between self and other, *comparatum* and *comparandum*. Especially in drawing out these latter traits of Husserl's analyses of passive synthesis, the chapter complements those elucidating studies that largely underscore embodiment and gesture, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and, more recently, Natalie Depraz's *Transcendance et incarnation: Le statut de l'intersubjectivité comme altérité à soi chez Husserl*—as well as those interventions that decenter the *cogito* by turning to the question of being (Martin Heidegger), the transcendence of the Other (Emmanuel Levinas), the revelation of givenness (Jean-Luc Marion), the pathos of auto-affection (Michel Henry), and the desire that troubles every sign of cognition (Jean-François Lyotard). Taking Husserl's rhetoric for passivity as the subject of inquiry, in particular, allows for critical implications to be unfolded from both Husserl's less-studied manuscripts and more well-known texts, such as the *Cartesian Meditations*, where, for example, the overlapping that is said to take place whenever similar data "recall" or "remind" of one another is characterized as a "living, reciprocal [*wechselseitiges*] awakening-of-one-another; a reciprocal, overlapping [*überschiebendes*] overlaying-upon-one-another [*Sich-Überdecken*] according to their objectival sense [*gegenständlichen Sinn*]."⁸⁴ In this passage, the changing (*Wechsel*) of sides (*Seiten*) that the very word for "reciprocal [*wechselseitig*]" indicates is at once amplified and crossed through with a hyperbolic "overlapping" that is itself "overlapping," yielding an "over"-perplexing dynamic

of communication that can originate from no single, recognizable “side,” because each is already “over” with the other to begin with.

If this strange language should render the foundational conditions for not only the associative developments of “objectival sense,” but also intersubjectivity and verbal intercourse, as Husserl will imply that it does, then it also “says” that the phenomena of association, intersubjectivity, and verbal communication would be originally unsettled by a passive and arational mode of relating that is carried out among the givens themselves. Since this relationship is characterized as their “awakening” to one another, moreover, their (and, indirectly, “my”) first experience of language is thereby also marked off as one that would undo categorial formations before they can be formed: for this awakening is also an initial provocation whose approximation in Husserl’s text pushes the categories of syntax—to say nothing of the categorial intuitions upon which they are supposed to be based—to the breaking point. In passages such as this one, Husserl’s writings not only found the logos of the subject but also bring it to the founder in advance, deconstructing the structures they appear designed to support, as Jean-François Lyotard would also insist in his critique of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s approach to passivity.⁸⁵ And ultimately, those writings may therefore be found to reduce “I” to an unstable figure of speech, among others, whose truth would lie not in the correspondence between intentions and intuitions but in the variable and figural associations that will have exposed every one and every other to a language that none could truly own but only ever share in the passive voice. Before any word can be given of an intersubjective community, the presubjective, anonymous work of language will have brought “us” in touch and entangled “us” with other others than we could know for all our more and less wakeful lives. The rhetorical reading of Husserl that is performed in this chapter thus describes how passive synthesis opens phenomenological study to “the poetic value of passivity” that Derrida had evoked in the contrastive comparison he once drew between Husserl and Joyce.⁸⁶ It also opens the question, however, as to how testimonies, conversations, and common speech would need to be read and heard otherwise, from out of their abyssal, passive grounds.

By indicating how language suspends and disrupts the very orders of experience that it otherwise seems to express, Augustine’s and Husserl’s meditations approach a limit that may be further probed through an examination of writings that register religious and phenomenological thought, while calling the operative notions of those discourses into ques-

tion through written performances whose infra- and intertextual echoes exceed every single persona and authority. Precisely because an attentive reading of Husserl's rhetoric discloses its eccentricities not to be external to its central themes and claims but to affect it at its (Augustinian) foundations, his writing also speaks to oeuvres other than those he names: for example, writers such as Georges Bataille, Franz Kafka, and Maurice Blanchot, whose prose responds to the problems of phenomenology in the improper, passive, and fictive modes of speaking that will have always more or less implicitly marked it. Along similar lines, Leslie Hill describes Bataille's, Pierre Klossowski's, and Blanchot's writing as interventions "in the discourse of philosophy from a place that hitherto has been relegated outside philosophy,"⁸⁷ taking inspiration from a 1978 interview in which Michel Foucault had spoken of the ways in which these writers "shattered" the "founding self-evidence of the subject."⁸⁸ Yet before this interview, Foucault would name a slightly different triad of writers toward the end of *The Order of Things*, where he addresses the unthought dimensions of thinking and language that phenomenology and psychoanalysis will have broached:

And as if this experiencing of the forms of finitude in language were insupportable, or inadequate [. . .] it is within madness that it manifested itself—the figure of finitude offering itself [*se donnant*] in language [. . .] but also before it, preceding it, as that formless, mute, unsignifying region where language can liberate itself. And it is indeed in this space thus disclosed that literature, first with surrealism [. . .] then, more and more purely, with Kafka, with Bataille, with Blanchot, offered itself [*s'est donné*] as experience: as experience of death (and in the element of death), of unthinkable thought (and in its inaccessible presence), of repetition (of original innocence, always there at the nearest and yet always the most distant term of language); as experience of finitude (captured in the opening and the constraint of that finitude).⁸⁹

The emphasis that Foucault places upon "offering" or "giving" (*se donner*) repeats the critical term of phenomenological description; yet here, what is said to offer or give itself as finitude and experience is received by no subject but registered in language. "Experience" could therefore no longer signify anything of the order of conscious knowledge or intuition; rather,

it would indicate what occurs through language and to language, whose role as a nonagent and nonpatient in any usual sense of the words also means that its element is death, that its thought is not thought by it, and that its finitude or closure remains indefinitely open.⁹⁰ Hence, it is not even Kafka, Bataille, or Blanchot themselves but “with Kafka, with Bataille, with Blanchot” that literature is said to give itself (as) an experience in Foucault and to let this experience alter the way in which (literary) language speaks. Such modes of givenness, experience, alteration, and alterity imply in yet another way that language speaks not only blindly, as Derrida had said, but also and initially in the passive voice, where speech undergoes its (self-) alteration. What Foucault’s rhetorical gestures indicate still more pronouncedly than his arguments, however, is that the passivity and alterity of speech also could not be adequately characterized or conceptualized in general but only expressed and “experienced” through singular written performances. The following three chapters of this book therefore seek to address the implications of passive voices for experience, both singular and shared, through the language of selected fictions penned by each of the writers whom Foucault names, drawing the consequences of not only Foucault’s, but also Husserl’s, Augustine’s, and Derrida’s writings on the subject. At the same time, the readings that are offered of Bataille’s *L’Abbé C.*, Kafka’s *The Castle*, and Blanchot’s *Aminadab*—and especially, the readings that are offered of their reciprocal overlapping—accentuate the passive voices of these texts in new ways for readers of literature.

The first of these chapters retraces the ways in which Bataille’s notion of scissiparity modifies Husserl’s notion of intersubjective “pairing,” when it comes to articulating the structures of identity and alterity. Unlike the presupposition of a primordial proper sphere from which Husserl departs when it comes to “my” engagement with another “I,” Bataille borrows the foreign term for unicellular reproduction, showing through both his terminology and argumentation how the identity of each living being would have to be cut through with difference. This difference is necessarily suffered in a way that could never be assimilated into conscious experience, since it cannot “itself” be identified for thought: no traditional logic can accommodate the notion that one being may double by being split, or that replication both eliminates the original and leaves two of the “same” in its place. In formal terms, scissiparity would translate to the impossible equation: $a = a' + a'' = -a + -a$. If scissiparity could hardly be thinkable, however, it can nonetheless be imparted in writing, as Bataille’s literary prose indicates perhaps more precisely than his theoretical essays, and

especially the fiction of autobiographical testimony that plays out in his novel about two identical and self-divided twins, *L'Abbé C.* The chapter concludes with a reading of the divisions that mark not only the embedded and discordant first-person narratives that make up the text but also the narrating voices themselves, which repeatedly suffer breaches and allow others to cut in.

The structural plurivocity of Bataille's novel would, as such, have to extend beyond the nominal personae who figure within it, which trait becomes perhaps most pronounced in a remarkable passage toward the end of *L'Abbé C.*, where one of the twin protagonists entertains and then rejects the thought of burning the scattered papers that his deceased twin had left behind. The initial thought occurs to the surviving brother as if from out of nowhere, marking Bataille's fiction with an especially pronounced trace of foreignness that invites associations with other texts, such as Max Brod's afterword to Kafka's *The Trial*, where Brod pleads his case for not burning Kafka's manuscripts, despite documents testifying to Kafka's wish that he destroy them. This split from within *L'Abbé C.* is the point of departure for the next chapter, where the bifurcation that opens Bataille's oeuvre to Brod's and Kafka's writings is explored as a more radical instance of "scissiparous" language than those that more obviously appear to affect Bataille's fictive personae. Its radicality emerges from and not despite the fact that the resemblance between the words of Bataille's narrator and Brod's afterword is neither authorized nor precluded by Bataille's language but merely admitted at the limit of his narrative logic. Beyond any dichotomy between the archival preservation of papers and their annihilation, the traces of Kafka and Brod in Bataille's novel thus occur in a way that can neither be confirmed nor denied on the basis of evidence—not unlike the constitutive blindness of testimony, as Derrida would describe it.

But Bataille's literary fiction does not merely offer exemplary instances of the split and passive character of narrating voices; for it also echoes what he would elsewhere say of Kafka's novels: "They are books for the fire [*pour le feu*], objects for which the truth of being on fire is lacking; they are there, but they are there in order to disappear [*pour disparaître*], as though they have already been annihilated."⁹¹ This succinct commentary prepares a way to approach Kafka's fictional writing along the lines of its vanishing traces, its withdrawal from evidence, its effacement of subjective authority, and its indefinite splitting of voices. These issues already emerge through the diary entries and aphorisms where Kafka—at times

in the first person—broaches the notion of “inner” experience that had been developed by the major figures in proto-phenomenological empirical psychology whom he had studied during and beyond his university years. Subjective interiority figures in Kafka’s notes as the unsteady, if not fictive, effect of external resonances and inscriptions, whose repercussions will be multiplied perhaps most dramatically when these quasi-personal records give way to the novelistic fiction of *The Castle*, where the initial “I” is crossed through and replaced with the signature “K.” From the outset, namely, the first-person subject appears placed under erasure, just as “I” or “K.” is about to cross a bridge into the realm of the eponymous “castle”; but this effacement of the subject is precisely what allows the text to give testimony to another experience of language, where no single instance of speech or narration could be decisive. Hence, as many perceptive readers such as Charles Bernheimer, Stanley Corngold, Malte Kleinwort, Henry Sussman, and Joseph Vogl have recognized, K.’s trajectory bifurcates into “a” story of multiple circulating legends, none of which is or could be privileged upon the basis of experience or evidence.⁹² Yet what is less often explored are the consequences of the fact that the equally plausible and mutually incompatible variants of “K.’s” story are not only told *of* K. but are also told *to* K., yielding paradoxical situations that expose what it would mean for a “subject” to be constituted—and deconstituted—through encounters that cast him as a variable figure of speech.

The plurality of voices that intersect and interfere with one another in Kafka’s various fictions of the subject provokes the question of the truth that may nevertheless lie in a collection of passive voices: the truth that Aristotle presupposes when he asserts that the passions of the soul are the same for all and that Kafka more tentatively approaches with an aphoristic remark on confession: “Confession and lie are alike. In order to be able to confess, one lies. One cannot express that which one is, for one is just that: one can only impart that which one is not, that is, a lie. A certain truth may lie only in a chorus.”⁹³ Once the possibility of knowing, confessing, or expressing oneself is excluded in this way, however, choral truth could be predicated upon neither subjective certitude nor a certain intersubjective basis. Its chances would instead rest solely in the cumulative utterance of that which no one could utter alone or even know oneself to have said in part. The rumors and stories of K. that circulate throughout *The Castle* already expose the fragility of this chance for shared truth, but it is Maurice Blanchot’s early novel from 1942, *Ami-nadab*, which still more vocally places choral truth at stake in ways that

are analyzed in the last chapter. Both in its broader strokes and specific lines, *Aminadab* has been read as a further permutation of the language, logic, and situations that play out in Kafka's *Castle*, whether their more or less pronounced similarities are interpreted as an effect of imitation, as Jean-Paul Sartre suggested in his review of *Aminadab*,⁹⁴ or whether they are taken for indications of what Paul Davies has characterized as Kafka's and Blanchot's "apprenticeship" in the indefinite "movement" of writing.⁹⁵ But among those traits which Blanchot's and Kafka's novels share, the most marked one may be the openness of their writing to echoes, which Blanchot amplifies by setting his novel in a boarding house described as an "immense sonorous cage."⁹⁶ This sonorous enclosure opens to any number of voices, but unlike the house of language that Heidegger would famously address, it unsettles everyone and everything that may seem to speak or be: instead, each utterance rebounds with repercussions that yield a situation where there is no first-, second-, or third-person speech that is not passively disposed toward echoes and distortions from the outset. Hence, it is not only that no one could answer but also that no one could ask the question, "Who are you?" that reverberates through *Aminadab* like a parody of the proverbial imperative "Know thyself," or the less proverbial aphorism, "Confession and lie are alike." Yet it is because and not despite of the fact that echoes proliferate in lieu of personal questions and claims that *Aminadab* opens a literary space for exploring the chances for choral truth that Kafka had invoked.

The movements of language that are traced, imparted, echoed, and parsed through Blanchot's writing expose what the texts of Augustine, Husserl, Bataille, and Kafka will have indicated for their part as well: namely, that language abandons its speakers to occurrences of pairing and parting that cross the limits of subjective experience and intersubjective communication and that thus come to pass with every instance and figure of speech as a passion that no subject could know to suffer. But as the unprincipled contingencies of language dispossess speakers of the very words that escape them, they also hold speech open for alterity, for speaking otherwise, and for impossible encounters that may put them in touch beyond all appearance and to no one's knowledge. Drawn together, the writings of Augustine, Husserl, Bataille, Kafka, and Blanchot thus trace an exemplary history of those encounters that can only take place in the passive voice.