“VASTS APART”:
Phenomenology and *Worstward Ho*

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Through an attention to the vestiges of concepts resonant of phenomenology, and an analysis of the ways in which the verbs “to see” and “to say”, inter alia, mingle, swap places, fold, and combat each other, this article seeks to show (to borrow the words of Deleuze on Foucault) that in *Worstward Ho* “[phenomenological] intentionality gives way to [...] an endless interplay between the visible and the utterable. Each breaks open the other” (Deleuze 1995, 108).

Phenomenology should be thought of less as a doctrine than as a method, defined by Martin Heidegger as “the process of letting things manifest themselves” (Heidegger in Richardson 1963, xiv).¹ That being granted, however, the plenitude surveyed by the Husserlian transcendental ego is replaced by a somewhat more bereft landscape in Heidegger, who took many opportunities explicitly to distance himself from phenomenology as embodied in the thought of his former teacher (xiv).² For the Heidegger of “What is Metaphysics?” human beings hover in a state of anxiety confronted by a situation within which beings – *qua* beings – slide from themselves, thus remarking the loss of their very ‘being-ness’. It is not, however, Heidegger writes,

as though “you” or “I” feel ill at ease; rather, it is this way for some “one”. In the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold onto, pure *Da-sein* is all that is still there.

(Heidegger 1993, 101)

The occurrence of anxiety, and its coextensive relation with the nothing, have the consequence for Heidegger that, in lifting the human
being out of the confines of its facticity we “complete the transformation of man into his Da-sein” (102).

In its emphasis on the appearance of the phenomenon, phenomenology is in the opinion of Derrida essentially a treatise on light, abetted by the inevitable domination of the concept of form upon which such a “photology” is founded (Derrida 2001, 31). Hence, for Merleau-Ponty language is subject to a universal anonymous visibility. Speech is, in the words of the unfinished book Le Visible et l’invisible, a “gaze of the mind” (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 154, italics added), while “the whole landscape ... is [...] but a variant of speech before our eyes” (155). As Derrida shows, phenomenology entails “a submission of sense to sight, of sense to the sense-of-vision, since sense in general is in the very concept of every phenomenological field” (Derrida 1982, 158).

Despite his deep indebtedness to the philosophy of Heidegger, Blanchot’s thought has to be understood partly in terms of its critique of a cornerstone of phenomenology (hermeneutic and otherwise), a critique which can be encapsulated in one phrase, appended to an essay in L’Entretein infini (1969): “Parler ce n’est pas voir.” There, against the grain of phenomenology, Blanchot sets up “speech” as the defiant locus of a resistance towards the privileging of light in the specific context of the Western tradition. To grant pre-eminence to speaking at least serves to reverse the prejudice in question:

Speaking [in Blanchot’s words] frees thought from the optical imperative that in the Western tradition, for thousands of years, has subjugated our approach to things, and induced us to think under the guaranty of light or under the threat of its absence. [In the tradition] one must think according to the measure of the eye.

(Blanchot 1993, 27)

Although Blanchot’s distinction remains contentious in its presumption of receptive passivity on the part of seeing, whereas speaking is figured as active, the fundamental assertion that “to speak is not to see” has been a rich resource for both Deleuze and Foucault.