

The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics

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Part One: Making Sense of Sense

What is the sense of sense? How do we read between the lines of skin and flesh? How do we interpret the world with our bodily senses, and especially those long neglected in Western philosophy—taste and touch? How, in other words, do we discern the world *as* this or that, *as* hospitable or hostile, *as* attractive or repulsive, *as* tasty or tasteless, *as* living or dying? These are key questions of carnal hermeneutics.

A Matter of Taste and Touch

From the moment we are born we live in the flesh. Infant skin responds to the touch of the mother, hands and feet unfurling, mouth opening for first milk. Before words, we are flesh, flesh becoming words for the rest of our lives. Matter, no less than form, is about what matters—to us, to others and to the world in which we breathe and have our being. The old dichotomies between “empirical” and “transcendental,” “materialism” and “idealism,” are ultimately ruinous. Life is hermeneutic through and through. It goes all the way up and all the way down. From head to foot and back again.

Let me explain. I speak of sense in three senses. First, there is sense in the common connotation of physical *sensation*: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch (as in: I have a strong sensation that . . .). Second, there is sense in the equally habitual connotation of *meaning* (as in: I get the sense of

what you mean). And, third, we have sense in the original etymological connotation of *direction*—as in so many Romance languages, *sensus*, *sensio*, *sens*—referring to how we orient ourselves in space and time, how we move towards or away from, fore or aft, hither or thither (as in: *Je vais dans ce sens, à gauche plutôt qu'à droite*). These three connotations of sense—as (1) sensation, (2) meaning, and (3) orientation—signify how we make sense of our life in the flesh.

Central to the interpretation of embodied life is evaluation. The ancient term for wisdom, *sapientia*, comes from *sapere*, to taste. *Sapere-savourer-savoir*. This etymological line speaks legions, reminding us that our deepest knowing is tasting and touching. We first sound the world through the tips of our tongues. Discerning between hot and cold, savory and unsavory, course and smooth. Living well is a matter of “savvy,” as we say. Ordinary language knows this, and philosophical language is no more than an extrapolation of what we already know “deep down.” Wisdom, in the end, is tact. That is what we mean, isn't it, when we say that someone *sensible* is someone *sensitive*: they have “the touch,” as healer, teacher, artist, lover. Just as, by extension, they have the eye, the ear, the nose. They are attentive, tentative, in touch with things. They get it. To have the right touch is to touch and be touched wisely. Touching well is living well. Hermeneutics begins there: in the flesh. And it goes all the way down, from head to foot.

Between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

Contemporary continental philosophy has done much to address this question. But it has sometimes suffered from a tension between two related tendencies—phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology has done extraordinary work in rehabilitating the body. Think of Husserl's analysis of *Leib* as intentionality, as active and passive synthesis, as primal and secondary sensibility (*Ideas II*). Think of Sartre's brilliant descriptions of the body as caress, desire and possession in *Being and Nothingness*; of Merleau-Ponty's soundings of the body-subject in its sexual being in *The Phenomenology of Perception*; of Levinas's descriptions of eros, sensibility and enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity*; or of Irigaray's pioneering explorations of eros as birth, touch, and taste in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

These phenomenological inquiries opened new doors to a hermeneutics of flesh. And yet when the explicit “hermeneutic turn” occurred in the 1960s—with the publication of Ricoeur's *Conflict of Interpretations* and Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (inspired by Heidegger and Dilthey)—we witnessed an embrace of language at the expense of body. The journey from flesh to text often forgot a return ticket. And so we find the “lin-

guistic turn” of hermeneutics parting from the carnal as a site of meaning, replacing body with book, feeling with reading, sensing with writing. As if the two could be separated. Already in Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics, Dasein was stripped of its sexed, incarnate skin in the name of a quasi-transcendental discourse (*Rede*). Language as the “destiny of Being” came to overshadow the embodied life of singular beings (relegated to the status of “ontic” particulars). The temporality of understanding trumped the spatiality of flesh. And a subsequent veering from carnal experience was witnessed in the hermeneutic orientations of Gadamer and Ricoeur. A veering accentuated as hermeneutics increasingly engaged with structural linguistics and deconstruction. Textuality swallowed the body and turned it into *écriture*. But this did not mean that mainstream hermeneutics ceased to be phenomenological: Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur constantly reminded us that what they were doing was “hermeneutic phenomenology.” Granted. Yet there is no denying that the linguistic *turn to the text* was often construed as a *turning away from the flesh*—in practice if not in principle. And one of the main purposes of this volume is to suggest ways of undertaking a return journey. Ways which might help us recover the body as text and the text as body: to restore hermeneutics to phenomenology and vice versa, making explicit what was implicit all along. A step back to step forward.

What we are proposing therefore—at a moment when questions of matter, flesh, and body call out for new thinking—is to revisit the deep and inextricable relationship between *sensation* and *interpretation*. To show how both are, as Aristotle once noted, modes of hermeneutic “mediation” (*metaxu*). Our wager in this volume is that such a move may help us better understand how we are constantly *reading* flesh, *interpreting* senses, and *orienting* bodies in passion and place even as we symbolize and dream. This is the task of carnal hermeneutics.

Discerning among Strangers

So we are concerned with a hermeneutics that goes all the way down. A mode of understanding that helps us “diacritically” discern between diverse kinds of embodied beings. Reading between gaps. Discriminating and differentiating between selves and others—and others in ourselves. Such carnal hermeneutics has a crucial bearing, to cite an example we explored elsewhere, on how we “sense” subtle distinctions between strangers who surprise us (the same term, *hostis* can mean guest or enemy).¹ The first act of civilization is wagering on whether to open the hand or reach for a weapon. Hostility or hospitality is at stake from the outset. What do we

make of strangers that arrive out of the blue, walk in from the desert, and knock at our door in the middle of the night? And in this regard, carnal hermeneutics may be said to have two patron saints—the god Hermes and the dog Argos. For if Hermes, messenger of the gods, discloses hermetic cyphers from above, Argos brings animal savvy from below. The former, masked as a migrant, revealed himself to Baucis and Philomena as, arriving from nowhere, he “tasted” their gift of food. The latter, Argos, deployed canine flair in recognizing his master, Odysseus, when he returned to Ithaca disguised as a beggar.² In both cases we witness fundamental forms of “tact” in the discerning of strangers; and find a reminder that we often need animal or divine messengers to get us back in touch with ourselves.

What is true of Greek wisdom is equally true of biblical and other cultures. The inaugural act of Abrahamic discernment is, let us not forget, a scene of “tasting” where Abraham and Sarah greet strangers from the desert at Mamre who—in sharing food—reveal themselves as divine and announce an impossible child, Isaac. The subsequent revelation of the name of Israel is through a mutual “touching” of limbs between Yawveh and Jacob (the famous wrestling with the angel). And as John Panteleimon Manoussakis notes in this volume, Jesus came to earth to do two things: to taste and to touch. Both acts of carnal hermeneutics take place at the Last Supper and Emmaus; but they are already in evidence in multiple healings and epiphanies throughout the Gospels (the pasting of mud and saliva on the eyes of the blind man, the bleeding woman touching Jesus’s hem, Thomas touching Jesus’s wound, the washing of feet at the last supper).³ And this tradition of transformation through touch and taste—epitomized in hospitality of food and wine—continues down through western literature and art, inspiring such classic scenes as Monseigneur Myriel sharing his best cuisine with Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* and the miraculous metamorphosis of bodies and minds in Karen Blixen’s *Babette’s Feast*.

Nor should we forget the rich testimony of non-Western traditions in this regard. Let us recall, for example, how one of the most revered forms of address for Brahman, in the Vedantin tradition, was *Anna* (food). And how the Buddha, when challenged by Mara to reveal by what authority he spoke of suffering, simply touched the ground. His finger touched earth and he felt the sensation of breath. Enlightenment followed.⁴

In short, carnal hermeneutics covers a wide spectrum of sense, both sacred and profane, as it ranges up and down—in ascending and descending spirals—from the most elevated cyphers of the divine to the lowest probings of tooth and claw. From Gods to dogs and back again. While hands reach up, feet reach down. But the point is that no matter how high or low experience goes, it still *makes sense*. Flesh sounds, filters, scents. Between

the extremes of hyper rationalism at one end, and blind irrationalism at the other, we find the all too human path of carnal hermeneutics. A middle way. A road less traveled philosophically to be sure. But one that needs to be taken again and again.

It is a journey for which, fortunately, we have wise guides—as we hope to show in what follows in this essay, and in the other essays of this volume.

The First Breakthrough: Aristotle on Flesh as Medium

The philosophical discovery of carnal hermeneutics did not have to wait for the twentieth century. There were significant early intimations, starting with Aristotle. In the second book of the *De Anima*, Aristotle already acknowledged the enigmatic role of touch in his analysis of the five senses. It is a notoriously difficult and dense passage, but its implications are revolutionary—if largely overlooked for two thousand years. I offer some preliminary reflections on this text here before going on in “Enigmas of Flesh” (in the following section) to chart a summary hermeneutics of flesh from Husserl to Ricoeur. My aim throughout is to show how carnal phenomenology is intimately and ultimately carnal hermeneutics.

In the concluding sections of *De Anima*, Book II, Aristotle makes the bold claim that touch is a discriminating sense.⁵ Against the common view that touch and taste are the lowest sensations—because unmediated—he responds that these traditionally underestimated senses have their own indispensable form of “mediation.” With respect to touch, flesh (*sarx*) is the medium (*metaxu*) which gives us space to discern between different kinds of experience—hot and cold, soft and hard, attractive and unattractive.⁶ Or as Aristotle puts it, “touch has many differences.”⁷ In touch, we are both touching and touched at the same time, but we do not dissolve into sensuous sameness. Proximity is not immediacy. Difference is preserved. “*Flesh is a medium, not an organ.*”⁸ And this breakthrough insight means that flesh always harbors a certain distance or interval through which touch navigates. Touch is not fusion but mediation through flesh.

Unlike Plato, who denigrated touch and taste as unmediated senses, helpless before the flux of things, and contrary to materialists who claimed touch brings us into immediate contact with material stuff, Aristotle insists on the mediating character of tactility. To be tactile is to be exposed to otherness across gaps, to negotiate sensitively *between* other embodied beings, to respond to solicitations, to orient oneself. From the beginning, contact always involves an element of tact.

Aristotle places human perfection in the perfection of touch. Why? Because without touch there is no life. All living beings possess touch; which

is why it is the most *universal* of the senses.⁹ And precisely as the most basic and encompassing of sensations, it expresses the general "sensitivity" of flesh. But the most basic here does not mean the most transparent. In fact, touch turns out to be the most complex and elusive sense (which is perhaps why Aristotle places it at the end of his analysis of the senses in *De Anima*, Book II rather than at the beginning where one might expect to find it). Touch covers up its own medium and it is nigh impossible, admits Aristotle, to actually locate the organ of touch. Touch is "present throughout the flesh without any immediately assignable organ."¹⁰

But if touch is enigmatic, it is also keenly intelligent. For it is the sense which makes us most "sensitive" to the world and to others, bringing us into contact with things greater than ourselves and thus putting us in question. To learn to touch well is to learn to live well, that is, *tactfully*. "The being to whom logos has been given as his share is a tactile being, endowed with the finest tact."¹¹ And this is not just in the realm of the tangible, but potentially in all matters of seeing, hearing, tasting, and smelling. For touch crosses all the senses. Its universal presence throughout our entire corporeal experience is what keeps us perpetually in touch with things refusing to allow any sensation to withdraw into itself or close itself off from others. Touch keeps us open to the world—even in sleep (where bodies still breathe and respond to noise or temperature)! Like Hermes it is forever moving and messaging between inside and outside, self and other, human and more than human. Tactility is a medium of transition and transmission. It is always "on."

Let us try to unpack some of these inaugural claims. While I may seem to be immediately present to what I touch and to be immediately touched by what I touch—unlike sight, where I am not necessarily seen by what I see, or hearing, where I am not necessarily heard by what I hear, etc.—there is always something mediate in the ostensibly immediate, something "far" in the "near." In other words, there is *sensing* in sense, a *making* sense and *receiving* sense from someone or something other than myself. Flesh mediates this otherness, crossing back and forth between self and strangeness. And this is where hermeneutics begins. What Heidegger calls the "hermeneutic as-structure" is already operative in our most basic sensations. For since all the senses, as noted, involve touch, and since touch involves mediation, all our sensations involve *interpretation* (albeit in the primal sense of orientation prior to theoretical understanding).¹² This is so even when such omnipresent tactile hermeneutics hides itself, functioning as a carnal medium we see through (*diaphanein*) but do not see. Flesh mediates unbeknownst to us, remaining for Aristotle an enigma describable only in images—e.g., watery membrane, air envelope, slim veil, or

second skin. When we try to grasp the medium of touch we find only metaphors in our hands. Flesh is figural from first to last. Literal is figurative. In touching the world we are constantly prefiguring, refiguring, and configuring our experience.

But if touch is something we do to the world, it is also something the world does to us. It works both ways. Touch is what first *affects* us, and does so in the most concrete, singular ways. From the beginning, flesh is charged with issues of attraction and retraction. When the child moves to the touch of its mother or opens its mouth to feed from the breast it is already orienting and interpreting. It is not merely reacting to a stimulus but responding to a call. In the natal contact of flesh on flesh, there are already tiny seizures and exposures of joy and fear, desire and anxiety. With the separation of birth, the mouth ceases to be a buccal cavity and becomes an oral medium.¹³ The first cry is a call responding to a call. Or summoning a response. A reaching across distance, a leap over a gap or caesura between self and other. So the first touch is not neutral but already a reading between the lines—of skin and bone, of soft and hard, of hot and cold, of far and near. Or to anticipate the terms of modern phenomenology, we might say that flesh is not a thing—qua object or organ—but a no-thing (like Heidegger's *Dasein* or Sartre's *for-itself*) which makes sense of things. It involves a highly sensitive carnal *Befindlichkeit* which evaluates and discriminates in the most concrete of situations. Babies are moody little beings, their babblings and strokings already a play of probing and sounding, testing and tasting.¹⁴ Before we ever actually say the words "here" and "there," "fort" and "da," our fingers and tongues are figuring things out in terms of this and that. "Touching never does away with the interval between us, but turns the interval into an approach."¹⁵ Touch, like its variation, taste, doesn't simply record sensible properties: "it grasps and immediately feels their noxious or useful character, their relevance to the preservation of our being."¹⁶ If we don't know what a thing is, our first impulse is to touch it. That is why Aristotle says touch is "always true."¹⁷

If touch was often called a "primitive" sense it was not because it was base or crude but because it was primal for life. For tactility is the ability to moderate and modulate the passion of existence, understood etymologically as *pathos/paschein*—suffering, undergoing, receiving, exposure to others who come to us *as* this or that. (This is what Edmund Husserl terms "passive syntheses" and what Christian Wiman calls "passion of pure attention, nerves, readiness.") To touch and be touched simultaneously is to be *connected* with others in a way that enfolds us. Flesh is open-hearted; it is where we experience our greatest vulnerability. The site where we are most keenly attentive to wounds and scars, to preconscious memories and

traumas, as even our navel reminds us (see Anne O'Byrne in this volume). With this goes a deep sense of fragility and insecurity. "Without insecurity no sensation" and vice versa.¹⁸ Through flesh—naked and tactile—we are subject to touch, day and night, even in sleep. Exposed on all sides to great risk and great adventure. Keenly sensitive. We can take nothing for granted. We develop savvy. Flesh is a surface that is always deep. And precisely because it mediates between a self carnally located "here" and an other located "there," it is, at bottom, what allows for empathy. Suffering with, *sym-pathein*, *Ein-fühlung*. The capacity to feel with others in and through distance. As such, touching finds its social beginnings in the handshake: open hand to open hand—the origin of human community.¹⁹ War and peace are skin deep in the profoundest sense.

This question of pathos is crucial for our consideration of carnal hermeneutics. As the "medium" which enables us to feel with others, flesh filters what is strange and alien. As Diderot reminds us in his *Letter to Alembert*, we do not feel what is the *same* as us but only what is *different*: in the case of temperature, for example, we sense what is hotter or colder than our own flesh. While the organ of smell is odorless and the organ of sound soundless, the medium of touch is always tactile. Unlike sight and sound, touch is touched by what it touches, and can even touch itself touching (as Husserl and the phenomenologists explore in great detail). This reversibility means that I can expose myself to "feel what wretches feel," risk being bare-skinned, feeling the other who is making me feel—from outside, from what is not me. And it is this very sensitivity to differences, opposites, alterities which makes up our original hermeneutic sensibility. Namely, the ability to discern and discriminate (*krinein/diakrinein*) through flesh. "Every sense discerns" (*hekaste ge krinei peri touton*), as Aristotle reminds us. "Touch has many differences" (*he d'aphe pleious echei diaphora*).²⁰ Which means, at its simplest, that it is through the medium of flesh that (1) we have "contact" with external sensibles and (2) we transmit these with "tact" to our inner understanding. But even to speak in terms of inner and outer is already derivative, for flesh is the membrane that both connects and separates. It is what mediates between internal and external, sensing and sensed. Just as it discriminates tactfully, at the level of value, between eros and thanatos, between what brings life and what brings death.

Here we return to the question of *risk*, the hermeneutic wagering of flesh. For without the sensitivity of touch (exposed, naked, fragile), there would be no resourcefulness of taste or tact. Sensitivity *is* sensibility because it provides the basic intelligence of attention, delicacy, vigilance, finesse. That is why, in most wisdom literatures, the smooth-skinned are deemed

intelligent while the coarse-skinned are not. Think of Odysseus and the Cyclops, Jacob and Esau, Jesus (who weeps) and Barabbas (who does not). "Man's flesh is the softest of all," notes Aristotle in *De partibus animalium*. And precisely as the most sensitive of animals, man is the "most sensitive to differences"; and therefore presumed to be of superior intelligence to other animals, whose skins are thick, hairy, hard. "Those whose flesh is tender are more gifted intellectually."²¹ Perfection of intelligence comes down, in the end, to perfection of touch. What transpires at the tips of fingers and tongues. Hermeneutics is in the first and last instance carnal. Sensibility of taste and touch.

All this is not without aporias and enigmas, however. Recall Aristotle's claim, for instance, that touch is *one* of the five senses and at the same time the condition sine qua non of *all* the senses. It brings us into intimate contact with particular concrete things while remaining a universal sense which traverses the other four. It expresses body and soul at once. The point is simple and profound, and bears repeating: one cannot live without sensing, one cannot exist as soul without flesh, and every sense requires the ability to be touched—whatever the distance—by what one senses (through eye, ear, nose, or tongue). Touch is the heart and soul of the senses, the intersensorial link and milieu which makes all sensible mediation between the outer and inner world possible in the first place. "Since we touch with our whole body, our soul *is* the act of touch, and only as such can it be a hearing soul, a seeing soul and so on."²² Touch fosters a synesthetic community of sensing. Or as Octavio Paz put it, "I touch you with my eyes/I watch you with my hands/I see with my fingertips what my eyes touch."

There are also, let it be said, ethical evaluations at stake. And further hermeneutic wagers. A refined sensibility of touch makes for a refined sense of goodness. And this is why in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle speaks of the importance of distinguishing between (1) good touch which differentiates between various kinds of sense, and (2) bad touch which degenerates into coarse undifferentiated behavior (gluttony, loutishness, perversion). Immorality of the senses comes from *contact deprived of tact*: grasping without feeling, consuming without caressing, swallowing without tasting, gorging without gustation. "Self-indulgent people make no use of taste. The role of taste is to discriminate between flavors (*he krisis tou khumon*), which is precisely what wine-tasters do, as well as those that season dishes."²³ Here lies the difference between the gourmand who ingests and the gourmet who relishes. Between the mouth as cavity (*bucca*) and as palate (*os*). It is all a matter of waiting, withholding, savoring, taking in

the fullness of the thing sensed with the fullness of the sensing body. Good taste is delicate, discriminating, integral, free. Bad taste is partial, reductive, unmediated, driven.

This is why touch—as the most holistic of senses—is logically the primal mode of sensibility in both life and judgment. A tall order for the body, which is tactile through and through (with the exception of nails and hair). And it is because touch thus belongs to flesh *as a whole* that it is, we repeat, the *sensus universalis*, capable of touching all things through all the senses. While we can close our eyes, ears, nostrils and lips, we are always touching and being touched. To live fully is to be constantly exposed to the elements, to being, to life, to others; it is to be forever attentive and attuned, from head to foot, to pain and pleasure, to happiness and grief, to good and ill. Touch is a “membrane” sensitive to everything that comes and goes. It feels by feeling what is not itself. It is a portal opening onto a world that can never be shut. The first *topos* of our consent to being, our welcome to the other. And it is also, for these very reasons, the first place of pain and pathos. Being in touch with flesh means being at risk. And without risk no life is worth living.

The Greek Legacy of Touch

In making such startling claims, Aristotle was, as mentioned, combating a number of prevailing prejudices. First he was challenging the fallacy of “sensory immediacy” held by the materialists.²⁴ In explaining how the senses related to things sensed, influential thinkers like Empedocles and Democritus had promoted a mechanist account of matter directly touching the organs. Empedocles spoke of effluvia, Democritus of atomic pellicles. But both of them agreed, and the “physiologists” with them, that there was immediate contact between sense organs and sense objects. They denied the existence of mediation. The Platonic position was a little more nuanced but still denied the role of medium (*metaxu*) to the more carnal senses. In the *Philebus*, for instance, Plato had distinguished between the “noble” mediated senses of sight, hearing, smell, which perceive things at a distance, and the “animal” immediate senses of touch and taste, which do not. The latter sensations, exposed to pressure from the material world, fell victim to the sway of need and necessity. Plato accordingly privileged intellect (*nous*) and understanding (*dianoia*) over the senses and passions; but of all the senses, sight was deemed the most theoretical in that it allowed for the most distance and detachment. Whence arose what Derida calls the opto-centrism of western metaphysics, presided over by the “soul’s eyes.”

Aristotle had to overcome such multiple prejudices, in addition to the common view that touch made us prone to licentiousness and bestiality. For, the old argument went, there could be debauchery of touch but not of sight. (You could not be overwhelmed by what you “see” for eyes keep things at a discriminating distance: if you bring an object right up against the eye it blinds it.) After his careful explorations of animals and plants in *De paribus animalium* and of the senses in *De Anima*, Aristotle repudiated this opinion, advancing a new theory of sensibility beyond both the mechanistic accounts of the materialists and the idealist account of Plato and the Academy. He boldly challenged the opinion that divided the senses into those of immediate contact (*haptomenon*), on the one hand, and of mediated distance (*apothēn*), on the other, declaring instead that in *all* the senses, including the so-called lowest ones of taste and touch, there is already a *metaxu* at work. Just as light is the medium of sight and air of smell and sound, in taste we have the medium of saliva—if the mouth is too dry or too wet there is no proper gustatory sensation—and in touch we have flesh. In each of the senses, as we noted, “the reality of an intermediary is necessary.”²⁵ And the intermediary always implies an interval or gap—a spacing which mediates between organ and object. In touch it is flesh which allows for both contact and tact, both a sensing from itself and “through another” (*di’ heterou*). Flesh is transmission not fusion. The gap makes all the difference, inviting us to differentiate and discriminate. And so Aristotle replaces the common notion of *sensing through distance*—which denigrated the fleshy senses of touch and taste—with *sensing through mediation*.

Aristotle concludes accordingly that “flesh is the medium of touch” (or in Suarez’s rendition: *caro non est organum sed medium*).²⁶ Flesh is not reducible to either the object or organ of tangibility but remains a highly elusive milieu in which the organ of touch and the object touched are proximate but never in direct contact. The carnal medium veils itself as it enables form to pass through matter and both to mingle and commune. *Metaxu*, in other words, serves as a transmitter between (*dia*) sense organs and material objects, allowing the forms to travel to the soul, thereby bringing perceiver and perceived into community (*koinonia*). This, as Emmanuel Alloa aptly reminds us, is the first great discovery of “difference in co-appartenance”: the birth of a dia-phenomenology which acknowledges that meaning goes all the way down, to the very lowest of our senses.²⁷ As such, the carnal *metaxu* is both potency (*dunamis*) and act (*energeia*): a potency which can take on the form of anything *other* than itself without being it; and an act which establishes a continuity (*suneches*) across distance and difference.

Metaxu, in sum, is the spacing of the interval which produces community through the differentiation of the milieu. It both unites and separates at once. It does not preexist the operation of mediation—it *is* mediation. It does not exist in a localizable space—it is the operation of spacing itself. As the very power of transiting between same and other, it makes the sensing of differences possible. Flesh, as medium, is both one and many.

In all of this, Hermes hovers. What these initial probings, dating back to the beginning of philosophy, disclose is the existence of meaning and orientation at the most basic level of our carnal being. The work of Hermes is everywhere—from the inner capillaries of our heart to the nerve endings of our fingers—sounding and coding, ciphering and signifying through skin and flesh. Sometimes this work of mediating conceals itself diaphanously, as Aristotle notes, in which case Hermes proves hermetic. Other times, it serves to transmit between deep and surface messages, translating between inner wounds and outer scars, between secrets and signs, in which case Hermes assumes his hermeneutic task and enlists us in the art of deciphering flesh.

In the second part of our analysis, which follows, I propose to chart a summary trajectory of a contemporary hermeneutics of flesh as it develops from Husserl's distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* to the diacritical and diagnostic accounts of the lived body (*le corps propre*) in Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur.

Part Two: Enigmas of the Flesh: From Husserl to Ricoeur

Husserl's Recovery of the Lived Body (Leib)

In spite of Aristotle's momentous insight into the hermeneutic potential of sensation, it was largely ignored for most of the subsequent philosophical tradition. The split between intellect and the senses, pronounced by Plato, prevailed. With some notable exceptions in medieval mystics and romantics,²⁸ the dominant metaphysical mind-view continued to deem reason the prime agency of interpretation, while the flesh was relegated to an inferior realm to be governed and supervised. In the process, touch was de-mediatized and demoted. To be sensible was to be reasonable rather than sensitive, to be rational rather than savvy. And when it came to adjudicating the role of the senses this meant confirming the Platonic priority of sight and hearing over so-called "immediate" sensations. Already Augustine had noted this hegemony of sight in the *Confessions*.²⁹ And Kant in the *Anthropology* would copper-fasten this dominion of "knowing" sight over the lower carnal senses of taste and touch. "Sight is what best approximates

to intuition," he argued; for it is what is most noble, active and critical in contrast to touch which is passive and subservient to the immediacy of external perception. Moreover, this epistemological depreciation of the "lower" senses had a moral corollary. In sum, the rationalist dualism of reason versus flesh prevailed in the Western metaphysical tradition from Plato to Kant until it was radically challenged when Husserl restored the primacy of the "flesh" (*Leib*) as a living body constitutive of psychic reality.

Let us take a close look at this critical moment in the story of carnal hermeneutics. It was in section two, chapter 3 of *Ideas II*, that Husserl made his phenomenological breakthrough concerning the flesh. Taking the famous example of one's left hand touching one's right, he remarked on the curious phenomenon of "double sensation." "The sensation is *doubled* in the two parts of the Body, since each is then precisely for the other an external thing that is touching and acting upon it, and each is at the same time body."³⁰ In this bilateral gesture, one is no longer an isolated subject experiencing the body as mere object: one is flesh experiencing flesh, both active and passive, constitutive and receptive, spirit and matter—or to use Husserl's terms, *Empfindung* and *Emfindnis*. When one touches in this double way, announced Husserl, "*one becomes body, one senses*."³¹ In this manner, Husserl reversed the privilege of the visual over the tactile, affording primacy to the latter. "In the case of an object constituted purely visually we have nothing comparable . . . an eye does not appear to its own vision. . . . I do not see myself the way I touch myself. What I call the seen body (*Körper*) is not something seeing which is seen the way my Body as touched Body (*Leib*) is something touched which is touched."³² Only in the case of touch, Husserl claims, does one have a total sense of flesh as a Janus-body turning both ways at once.

Husserl then makes a second, more complicated, claim. Because flesh is this two-way transmission between inner and outer, it is the place where I enjoy my most primordial experience of the other. My perception of others accompanies my perception of self.³³ Husserl does not develop the implications of this revolutionary insight, alas, but later interpreters of his phenomenology—in particular Paul Ricoeur—will do so in a radical fashion. Ricoeur will push Husserl's insight beyond Husserl to argue that at the heart of an egology of consciousness we find a heterology of flesh: the body curled in the womb of psyche. There is no auto-affection without hetero-affection. For it is my flesh which first opens me to a radical passivity and passion—naked exposition to the other than me, receptive to whoever and whatever exceeds and gives itself to me. As both Ricoeur and Chrétien would insist, my flesh is my wound, my natal pact, my umbilical memory, my vulnerability.³⁴ For while sight offers me dominion over

external persons and things, it is my flesh which inserts me—body and soul—into the flesh of the world. It reveals my radical interdependency as a being who feels both ways—as an embodied consciousness projecting meaning onto others at the same time as receiving meaning from them. Once again, we rediscover Aristotle's insight into flesh as mediation, hyphen, and crossing.

But let us return to Husserl. "The body as such," he says, "can be constituted originally only in tactuality and in everything that is localized with the sensations of touch."³⁵ While everything we see is touchable and so always in concrete relation to the body, the same cannot be said for visibility. "A subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could not at all have an appearing Body."³⁶ This is a radical departure from tradition and Husserl presses his claim. The body can, of course be "seen" like any other thing in the world—as a mere thing among things, as pure external object (*Körper*) determined by mechanical causes—but it only truly becomes a living incarnate Body (*Leib*), by "incorporating tactile sensations,"³⁷ that is, by touching and being touched. Incorporated as flesh, the Body serves as a precondition for the existence of all other sensations—visual, acoustic, olfactory, gustatory—which participate in it.³⁸ Husserl is very clear on this basic phenomenological point. It is thanks to touch that the Body—with its various senses—is *here* in relation to someone or something that is *there*.³⁹

It is in this double gesture of action-passion that flesh provides the ground for carnal hermeneutics. I do not exist in a vacuum, *ex nihilo*, neutrally. My simplest sensations are already shot through with all kinds of values and desires, withholdings and yieldings. This is what Husserl means when he claims that "all sensings pertain to my soul";⁴⁰ or one might add, to the body-soul as "flesh." For here, he insists, belong "groups of sensations which play a role as matter for acts of *valuing*." These are, he explains, the sensations which form the "material substrate for the life of desire and will, sensations of energetic tension and relaxation, of inner restraint, paralysis, liberation etc."⁴¹ So, where Kant and the rationalists gave primacy to reason as transcendental unity of apperception, Husserl talks here of the "Body as a new sort of unity of apprehension."⁴² Aesthesiology grounds gnoseology. We are not, in the first instance, cerebral sovereign egos but sensing incarnate Bodies. "The material Body is intertwined with the soul"; it serves as "an underlying basis of consciousness and undergoes its realizing apprehension *in unity with* this consciousness as soul and psyche."⁴³

This unity persists even if the psyche remains for the most part unaware of its natal debt to primordial embodiment. And here Husserl confirms

one of Freud's late dictums (much commented on by Derrida and Nancy) that "Psyche is extended and knows nothing about it."⁴⁴ And he also confirms Aristotle's observation that carnal mediation remains diaphanous and unknown to us—a fluid second skin which we see through (*dia*) but do not see. Husserl does not quote Aristotle directly, any more than he does Freud, but he is quite explicit: "The 'turning point' which lies in the Body, the point of the transformation from causal to conditional processes, is *hidden from me*."⁴⁵

In paragraphs 43–47 of *Ideas II*, Husserl explores a further dimension of extension and transformation—namely, how the "corporeal body" operates in the "mutual relations and communications between man and man," as well as in questions of identity and other deep "connections" (*Zusammenhang*) between humans and animals. Moving thus into the domain of the intercorporeal, he makes a crucial distinction between (1) the "primal presence" of our own bodies as lived internally by each person, and (2) the indirect "appresence" of other's bodies. The experience of other's bodies is lived both as an objective external object out "there" (*Körper*) and as a living body like mine "here" (*Leib*)—a double experience of empathy-in-distance mediated by a process of transfer by analogy. Suffice it to say that, for Husserl, our lived flesh "senses" not only bodies as given (presented) but also as non-given (appresented)—or, more accurately, as given in nongiveness. Hence the carnal enigma of presentation-in-appresentation.⁴⁶ (We shall return to this important point in our discussion of Ricoeur below).

In this same passage Husserl implies that our embodied relations with others already involve signifying connections before we ever get to explicit verbal language as such. For our intercorporeal relations always entail a primal reading of *signs* which prefigure full language. Even the most basic form of empathy implies a process of pre-linguistic embodied signification.⁴⁷ Before we are conscious of ourselves as speaking beings, we are in meaningful corporeal relations with others.

Husserl himself did not, alas, develop the radical implications of this carnal hermeneutics. But he made some crucial observations for others to follow. Subsequent interpreters of his work—from Merleau-Ponty to Ricoeur—would explore how flesh is the source of both our empathy and enmity with others. Edith Stein and Max Scheler would analyze how sympathy exposes us "to feel what wretches feel," while Sartre and De Beauvoir would disclose how flesh is a part of our power relations with others: desire, hate, masochism, and sadism. Flesh, as we shall see, is where the struggle of hearts first takes place—where basic wagers between hostility and hospitality unfold.

Sartre. Sartre learned from Husserl (and his Paris contemporary Gabriel Marcel) that we do not merely *have* bodies, we *are* bodies. This phenomenological fact of incarnation, which is decisive in Sartre's analysis of relations between self and other, forms the third part of *Being and Nothingness*, entitled "Being for Others." To be my body—or to *exist* my body as Sartre puts it—is at the same time to be exposed to others. And this, for Sartre, means that from the beginning human consciousness is an awareness of what is opposed to it in space and time. Sartre writes: "The body—our body—has for its characteristic the fact that it is essentially that which is known by the Other. What I know is the body of another, and the essential facts which I know concerning my own body refer me to the existence of . . . being-for-others."⁴⁸ Simply put, my embodied being is inextricably tied to my being-for-others.

Sartre picks up where Husserl leaves off. He both agrees and disagrees with his mentor. He concurs that while sight offers me an objectively perceived body it cannot allow the body to appear as a subjective body (for me). The eyes are never a seeing-seen as flesh is a touching-touched. Sight does not allow for carnal reversibility. But unlike Husserl, Sartre does not take the next step from sight to touch—from one-way vision to two-way touch. He flatly rejects the phenomenon of "double sensation," refusing the corollary of empathic reciprocity between bodies.⁴⁹ For Sartre I cannot "be" my body as both subjective (for-itself) and objective (in-itself) at once. I cannot experience my own body in a reversible lived way, since it is only "by means of the *Other's* concepts that I know my body."⁵⁰ Thus, for Sartre, my carnal experience of myself is *alienated* by its dependence on another's objectivizing grasp of me as external body. I can only know my body in "instrumental concepts which come to me from the other." And thus considered the incarnation of my for-itself is totally dependent on strangers set off against me who seek to determine me with their *regard*. When I experience shame or embarrassment at my own body it is actually my body as it exists *for others* which embarrasses me.⁵¹

Sartre proceeds, accordingly, to see my relationship with others as one of rivalry and conflict. To be exposed is to be opposed. Lifting the transcendental brackets of Husserl's reduction, Sartre reintroduces the embodied self into the perilous world of power and struggle. His account is dramatic and uncompromising. In so far as the other fixes and constitutes my body in its "look," it affirms its freedom to my detriment. The other sees my body as an instrumental "thing." And I see the other in equally reifying terms without being able to connect with the other's freedom and tran-

scendence. That is why Sartre concludes that "the existence of the Other is my original *fall*."⁵² The other is a no-thingness which I can only experience as an embodied—which for Sartre means estranged—"thing" and which can only experience me in turn as a "thing." I cannot, in short, sense my body except through the expropriating look of the other. "We resign ourselves to seeing ourselves through the Other's eyes."⁵³ My experience of my body is never truly lived by me but only as "extended outside in a dimension which escapes me."⁵⁴ And this means passing from the flesh (as mine) to language (as my alienated being with and for others).⁵⁵ Flesh and word are opposed.

This alienating fall is particularly obvious in Sartre's landmark analysis of the "caress." Here we reach a point of intimate intersensorial contact where reciprocity between my body and another's would seem to be most possible. But where Husserl saw carnal touch as a reversible mediation of intersubjective human relations, Sartre sees it as the opposite. Why? Writing of carnal desire, Sartre speaks of how it "compromises," "invades," and "clogs" my freedom. In passion we become passive. Carnal eros "takes hold of you, overwhelms you, paralyzes you."⁵⁶ Erotic flesh is described by Sartre thus as a contingency which one experiences as "vertigo." "I *feel* my skin and my muscles and my breaths . . . as a living and inert datum . . . a *passion* by which I am engaged in the world and in danger in the world."⁵⁷ The mention of danger here is telling, for the ultimate state of sexual desire is a "swooning" where I am swallowed up in the body. There is no trace here of Aristotle's hermeneutic "mediation" or Husserl's "intertwining." "Flesh is a pure contingency of presence";⁵⁸ it finds itself at risk of being frozen and fixed in the medusa glance of the other. And if I do allow my consciousness to descend into flesh, it is in order to seduce the other to do likewise, so that I can take hold of her. "In desire I make myself flesh in the presence of the Other in order to appropriate the Other's flesh."⁵⁹ In this process I discover my body as the facticity of flesh and either submit (masochism) or use this incarnation as a passing ploy to capture the other in its "contingency of presence."⁶⁰ Writing of the movement from sight (*le regard*) to touch (*la caresse*), Sartre offers this vivid description:

Desire is an attempt to strip the body of its movements as of its clothing and to make it exist as pure flesh; it is an attempt to incarnate the Other's body. It is in this sense that the caress is an appropriation of the Other's body. It is evident that if caresses were only a stroking or brushing of the surface there could be no relation between them and the powerful desire which they claim to fulfill; they would remain on the surface like looks and could not appropriate the Other for me . . .

the caress is not a simple stroking; it is a *shaping*. In the caressing of the other I cause her flesh to be born beneath my caress, under my fingers.⁶¹

The caress, in short, is not some innocent gesture; it is a teleological ploy which seeks to cut the other's body off from its projects and possibilities, uncovering the "web of inertia beneath the action"; and thereby reducing it to passive "being there," a mere thing-amongst-things. The caress is intentional and strategic. But as I incarnate myself as flesh in order to coax the incarnation of the other, I realize it is a strategy doomed to fail. In my efforts to catch the other by making myself flesh, I end up being caught by the other. My only options are then to accept this (masochism), or to coercively reduce the other to her flesh without solicitation or seduction (sadism). Both are self-defeating. For in exchanging the caress for the blow, the stroking palm for the striking fist, one is equally doomed to failure. In seeking to "ensnare" the other's consciousness in embodiment—where I may take my pleasure or exert my power—I end up not with the other in its freedom (which is what I desire) but merely as a corpse-like shell. Sartre describes this no-win dilemma with customary flair: "Everything happens as if I wished to get hold of a man who runs away and leaves only his coat in my hands. It is the coat, it is the outer shell which I possess. I shall never get hold of more than a body, a psychic object in the midst of the world."⁶² No matter how much power I exert over my neighbor, lover, partner, enemy, I can never actually possess their living freedom and transcendence. "I can make the Other beg for mercy or ask for pardon, but I shall always be ignorant of what this submission means for and in the Other's freedom."⁶³

Either way, the possibility of reciprocal relation being achieved through a mutual caressing of bodies is annulled. The dream of "double reciprocal incarnation" ends, absurdly, in a form of death.⁶⁴

To put this in terms of carnal hermeneutics, we could say that the ploy of incarnation to reduce others to something "immediately sensible" is forever frustrated by the fact that flesh is always a medium. The carnal contact between self and other remains a mediation attesting to a certain ineliminable gap by means of which the other flees from me and preserves his/her meaning intact. In the nearest touch of the near something still remains far. One cannot possess *la chair* (*Leib*) in immediacy, only *la chose* (*Körper*)—and that is *not* what we seek. *La chair*, as living body, never ceases to operate as a two-way transmission between self and other. It resists reification.

So here is the rub. By resorting to a Cartesian dualism of subject versus object, freedom versus extension, consciousness versus body, Sartre ultimately reduces the story of flesh to a tragedy of fall and failure. In resisting double sensation Sartre refuses the possibility of double incarnation as meaningful human communion. The only options for reciprocal relations remaining are masochism or indifference. A dialectical seesaw of power and paralysis. Hence Sartre's logical conclusion that "man is a useless passion."

In ultimately denying the transformative potential of flesh—as medium of hermeneutic crossing and dialogue—Sartre reduces the body to a thing of nothing. His phenomenology of *la chair* becomes a nihilism of *la chose*. He misses the hermeneutic turn.

Levinas. In Emmanuel Levinas, another early interpreter of Husserl in France, we find a very different phenomenology of the caress. This time flesh is not so much a clogging of consciousness qua thing as a lure of the future. The key passage is located in the final section of *Totality and Infinity*, titled "Phenomenology of Eros."⁶⁵ Levinas states here: "The caress, like contact, is sensibility. But the caress transcends the sensible."⁶⁶

From the outset Levinas establishes a paradox whereby the caress is a "non-signifying" touching of flesh on flesh. It is what he calls an "intentionality of search" which goes towards the invisible—and so negates any intentionality of vision. It forages for what is not yet, seizing upon nothing, soliciting what escapes its form toward a "future never future enough."⁶⁷ So saying, Levinas admits that the caress "expresses" eros "in a certain sense," but "suffers from an inability to tell it." It is an ineffable expression; a pre-linguistic sensing. It searches, but searches what? The feminine, responds Levinas, the inviolate, the virginal.

In a clear departure from Sartre, Levinas declares that the carnal caress is not about trying to capture another in its freedom, in some master-slave dialectic of power and possession. "It is not that the caress would seek to dominate a hostile freedom, to make of it its object or extort from it a consent."⁶⁸ No. The caress rather constitutes a "profanation." It brings us to a place of voluptuousity which opens onto an experience of "absence"—absence which is not an abstract nothing but absolute futurity. What the caress touches when it touches the flesh of the naked other is not another person or thing that *exists* out there. What it touches is the "untouchable in the very contact of voluptuousity, future in the present."⁶⁹ Thus moving beyond both Husserl and Sartre, Levinas claims that the caress brings us into nonexistence so that something new may be born.

The carnal, the tender par excellence correlative of the caress, the beloved, is to be identified neither with the body-thing of the physiologist, nor with the lived body of the "I can," nor with the body-expression, or face. In the caress, a relation yet, in one aspect, sensible, the body already denudes itself of its very form, offering itself as nudity. In the carnal given to tenderness, the body quits the status of the existent.⁷⁰

What this cryptic phenomenology signals is the caress's entry into the nonbeing of the not-yet. This is the night of the erotic, the mysterious, the clandestine. It dissipates into an anonymous passivity, a passion that is infantile, animal, vertiginous, elemental.⁷¹ Here the flesh of the Beloved is exposed as nakedly vulnerable and mortal, operating in a no-man's-land between being and non-being. As such, the caress is without will or goal. It does not act but swoons, an intention without meaning, an amorphous not-yet-being which overwhelms the "I" of the subject, sweeping it into an absolute future through the suffering of its own evanescence. As Levinas says: "It dies with this death and suffers with this suffering."⁷² A suffering transformed, paradoxically, into the happiness of voluptuousity. The caress makes us sick with the joy of love.

But what exactly is the voluptuous? It is impossible to say. We get no hermeneutic hints from Levinas. As we embrace the night of eros, there is no Hermes to guide us. No signs or signals. Only a maze of equivocations. As erotic nudity of flesh, voluptuousity is what "says the inexpressible."⁷³ But it is a saying which silences and dissimulates—an expression which expresses the impossibility to express. It is not an intentionality which *sees* or sheds light; it does not reveal a face or disclose an object; it is not an I relating to a Thou, nor a consciousness (however embodied) passing into a concept or idea, nor, finally, a touch of reciprocal desire. In revealing the hidden as hidden, the voluptuousity of the caress inverts the orders of signification into blind rallery.⁷⁴ Eros inveigles us into the "non-signifyingness of the wanton (*lascif*)."⁷⁵

More simply put: while the face signifies, the flesh does not. The face is about exteriority, society, language, ethics. The caress, contrariwise, is about unspeakable secrecy. The face—which commands as eminent voice of the teacher—comes divinely from above. Voluptuousity murmurs ravishingly from below. "In the face the Other expresses his eminence, the dimension of height and divinity from which he descends."⁷⁶ By contrast, the erotic, identified by Levinas with the feminine, is described as a shading of the ethical visage, defying language as it lures us into the "shadow of non-sense."⁷⁷ Or again: "The face, all straightforwardness and

frankness, in its feminine epiphany dissimulates allusions, innuendos."⁷⁸ As such, femininity inverts the face, inaugurating an "asocial relation of eros"—the ambivalence of a silent animality without responsibility. In this impersonal and inexpressive anonymity of night, concludes Levinas, "the relations with the Other are enacted in play; one plays with the Other as with a young animal."⁷⁹ As consequence, lovers in erotic nudity cease to exist as individual speaking persons, as moral agents with responsibilities, and embrace, at least momentarily, a closed *egoisme-à-deux*. "The common action of the sentient and the sensed which voluptuousity accomplishes closes, encloses, seals the society of the couple."⁸⁰

Here Levinas discloses what for him is the ultimate paradox of flesh. In the lovers' den of darkness, stripped of society and language, intimacy triggers something ungraspable: the not-yet future of the child. In the obscure "non-sociality of the society of lovers" comes the less-than-nothing, the collapse of the I and thou into a pre-personal play of flesh, a blind interplay of eros with eros, a voluptuousity of voluptuousity, which allows ultimately for the engendering of the child.⁸¹

Beyond the Caress? So what does all this mean for our thesis on carnal hermeneutics? At first blush, it seems Levinas may be acknowledging the hermeneutic power of the physical caress to open up the future. As such flesh—caressing and caressed—might be construed as a mediation between self and other, leading to the third, the child. But this apparent promise of carnal mediation, as a reciprocal gift, is quickly foreclosed. The ethical separation of face and flesh—and attendant separation between language and sensation, transcendence and profanation—means Levinas neglects the possibility of flesh as reversible signification between myself and another. In Levinas, no less than in Sartre, the mystery of "double sensation" is denied. And by so starkly opposing face (as teaching from above) and flesh (as caress from below), Levinas also misses the hermeneutic turn. He fails to see that a phenomenology of eros and tenderness, of touch and taste, *already* signifies and interprets, already reads the other. In short, he fails to appreciate that face *is* flesh. And vice versa. So when Levinas claims that the face of the other has eyes without color or skin without scars, he is resorting, I submit, to the old metaphysical dichotomy of transcendental versus empirical. His transcendental phenomenology actually ends up, for all its attention to the caress, in excarnating the other, removing her/him from the historical context of concrete spatial embodiment. In a quasi-Platonic move, Levinas thus ultimately identifies ethical (divine) otherness as a category of transcendence *beyond carnal singularity*. And by so denying the possibility of "double incarnation" he equally denies the option of

complementarity in sex, love, and friendship. There is no such thing as a carnal I-Thou. (Levinas was no friend of Buber). There is no possibility of hermeneutic "dialogue." Instead, the caress signals a collapse of distinct selves, without recourse to meaningful mediation.

Meaning, for Levinas, only arises at the level of language when the face finally replaces flesh and ethics trumps erotics. And in this passage from carnal eros to the language of transcendence the virile I takes his departure from the feminine—like Aeneas from Dido (a move justly critiqued by Luce Irigaray and other feminists).⁸² If carnal erotics has a role for Levinas—and it does—it is in suspending our personal sense of ourselves so that in a profane play of indistinction something new is engendered—beyond all signification or intentionality—namely, the child. Destroying every sense of historical past and present, the caress, in a swooning evanescence of blind love, ejaculates the not-yet of the future. And in this suspension of vision and light, in this dissolution of hermeneutic meaning into the "less than nothing" of lust, the invisible whispers a way out—opens an escape hatch to the exteriority of transcendence. In this sense, we may conclude that Levinas's phenomenology of the face is the impossibility of a hermeneutics of the flesh.

This last point is crucial, so let me be more exact. Levinas equates language with the face. The face, he insists, signifies in so far as it presents itself in person. "The symbolism of the sign already presupposes the signification of expression, the face."⁸³ Thus, even though Levinas concedes at one point that "the whole body—a hand or a curve of the shoulder—can express as the face,"⁸⁴ the body in this exceptional sense is, I would argue, "transcendentalised" rather than touched. It is not body as flesh but a mere pretext for ethical hallowing. The hand or shoulder in question is, in such instances, no more than a surrogate face—a trace of an other who transcends the flesh towards the invisible, the vertical, the infinite, merely leaving its mark, like an evacuation notice, on the finite body. Levinas writes: "In voluptuousity the other is me and separated from me. The *separation* of the other in the midst of this community of feeling constitutes the acuity of voluptuousity."⁸⁵

The operative word here is "separation"—not "alteration" or "differentiation." The rupture between self and other, for Levinas, is absolutely asymmetrical, denying any possibility of reciprocal communion—or, by extension, of hermeneutic dialogue (so central to the thought of Ricoeur and Gadamer). Levinas's ethics of separation tends to equate any notion of symmetry with un-ethical "possession"—a variation on the Hegelian-Sartrean dialectics of power. And that is why, in Levinas, eros never seeks to possess or objectify the other, as in Sartre. "Nothing is further from

Eros than possession. In the possession of the Other I possess the Other in as much as he possesses me: I am both slave and master. Voluptuousity would be extinguished in possession." But, by contrast, the impersonality of voluptuousity "prevents us from taking the relation between lovers to be a complementarity. Voluptuousity hence aims not at the other but at his voluptuousity; it is voluptuousity of voluptuousity, love of the love of the other."⁸⁶ Thus, unlike friendship, which goes forth to the other, love for erotic flesh, femininity, nudity, seeks not another existent person but rather "the infinitely future, what is to be engendered."⁸⁷ In flesh the same and the other are not reconciled (in some project or meaning) but "engender the child"—the child heralding from that "nothingness of the future buried in the secrecy of the less than nothing."⁸⁸ A nothingness, let it be noted, which has nothing to do with anxiety, as in Heidegger and Sartre.

Let me add finally that while the terms "eros," "love," and "desire" are often used synonymously by Levinas, he occasionally uses "eros" as a generic term which can cover both "love" as an enclosing *egoisme-à-deux* (fusion) and "desire" as a metaphysical search for the invisible—as desire of desire, voluptuousity of voluptuousity, infinitely seeking out, beyond totality, a future never future enough. This slippage between terms is, in my view, yet a further symptom of Levinas's inability to fully embrace a hermeneutics of flesh, a lack of proper discrimination and discernment. As is the fact that the greatest of these three terms, for Levinas, is ultimately "desire," understood as a metaphysical yearning for an impossible other beyond the double incarnation of *Leib*.

Double Sensation in Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty restores the phenomenology of touch as double-sensation and takes it to a new level. He boldly challenges Sartre's dualism between an "objective body" (qua other) and a "phenomenal body" (qua mine).⁸⁹ Whereas Sartre had declared that the body touching and the body touched belonged to two "incommunicable levels,"⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty redescribes them as deeply co-implicated in the notion of "flesh" (*la chair*). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he defines flesh accordingly as a "chiasm" between me and the world—a reversible crossing which precedes all analytic and transcendental divisions between subject and object, consciousness and thing. Flesh is not simply how I as a subject see nor how I as an object am seen; it is the common vinculum of both—and indeed of all other reversible perceptions—tactual, gustatory, olfactory and synesthetic.

Revisiting Husserl's notion of "intertwining" (*Verflechtung*), Merleau-Ponty reinterprets flesh as a mutual interweaving between perceiving and

perceived. To say that the body is a seer is, he says, to say that it is visible.⁹¹ Just as to say that it touches is to say that it is tangible. But it is also to say more: that the body is *both* visible *and* tangible. There is not just a reversibility within each specific sense (as with Husserl)—touching and being touched, seeing and being seen—but across different senses. One finds a crossing of the tangible with the visible and the visible with the tangible.⁹² And this reversibility is extended not only to all the senses but to language itself. The I which speaks words is the I spoken in words. Sensation and language are isomorphic. But they are also transomorphic. In a radical gesture that brings Merleau-Ponty to the threshold of what we are calling carnal hermeneutics, he speaks about a chiasmus of linguistic and perceptual sense: “the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech . . . manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as by a sublimation of the flesh.”⁹³

Flesh is the cradle of both perception and the word. The phenomenon of multi-reversibility extends from touch and sight to language itself, revealing flesh as a shared membrane between body and world. Here Merleau-Ponty rehabilitates Aristotle’s ancient insight (without naming him) that all senses involve touch, and brings it to an ontological level. He claims that flesh is both what makes the world appear (as touching-speaking) and what belongs to the world (as touched-spoken). I do not begin with an isolated body opposed to another consciousness; I exist my body because I am already operating in and from the flesh of the world. I touch because I am in touch with the world. I speak because I am spoken to and spoken through. In short, flesh is the pre-existing, pre-reflective chiasm which allows for the mutual insertion of the world between the folds of my body and my body between the folds of the world.⁹⁴ It is a twofold ontological texture—feeling and felt—which provides the underlying unity between the becoming-body of my senses and the becoming-world of my body—or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, between nature and human being. As such, the chiasm of flesh is not reducible to the metaphysical dichotomies of matter and form, soul and substance, consciousness and object, but is to be understood instead as an ontological “element” in which we already find ourselves—sensing and sensed, speaking and spoken at once.

Here the old transcendental problem of intersubjectivity—which bedeviled modern philosophy from Descartes to Sartre—is resolved to the extent that “it is not I who sees, nor the other who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us.”⁹⁵ Husserl’s original insight into the implications of double sensation for “empathy”—developed by both Edith Stein and Max Scheler—is here afforded a new ontological depth. Though

it has to be said that Merleau-Ponty resists the dialectical temptation—signaled by Derrida in *On Touching*⁹⁶—to lapse into premature synthesis. He avoids, I believe, the lure of “totality” by recognizing that there is always an element of the invisible and the untouchable in the other’s life. The reversibility of touching-touched is imminent but never fully realized.⁹⁷ There remains a gap. And the gap makes all the difference, preventing fusion and keeping open the task of transit and translation between self and other. The flesh, as chiasmic tissue and texture, allows “ownness” and “otherness” to interweave in multiple carnal reversibilities and doublings; but it never reduces them to the *same*. Were it to do so, we would be deprived of the diacritical role of *reading across difference*, and submit to what Derrida calls “hapto-centric closure.”⁹⁸ Had he construed flesh in such self-enclosing fashion, Merleau-Ponty would have foreclosed the possibility of carnal hermeneutics. He would have simply replaced Platonic optocentrism with philosophical haptocentrism. Contrary to Derrida’s suspicion, we do not believe he did so.

Embodiment and Eros. An initial insight into the potential of carnal hermeneutics can be found, I believe, in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the caress in the fifth chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled, “The Body in Its Sexual Being.” Here he claims that the best way to understand how things signify in general is to begin by exploring the significance of our “affective life” at its most basic level of “desire and love.”⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty affirms that incarnation, as eros, must be understood not just biologically but ontologically. If Freud provided a distinction between the basic drives—eros and thanatos—in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Merleau-Ponty gives phenomenological substance to this claim. He speaks of an “erotic perception” which has a specific “significance,” not as a *cogitatum*, but as an existential body aiming at another in the world.¹⁰⁰ Citing the example of Schneider, a patient deficient in touch and vision and incapable of living in the world in a sexual or emotional way, Merleau-Ponty notes how his inability to read life through touch coincides with the fact that he cannot respond to the world sexually. He cannot make distinctions between one kind of sexual being and another. The impairment of action, cognition, and sex are structurally interconnected.¹⁰¹

Psychoanalysis had already shown that libido is not a mere instinct and that even the most basic erotic act has a “meaning.” The sexual is not just genital but a general intentional (albeit pre-conscious) way of being-towards-the-world. Eros, Merleau-Ponty observes, is geared toward the whole life of the subject, relating to existential wagers of flight or conquest, desire or recoil, adherence or rejection, seduction or shame, fear or

fascination. As such, phenomenology "expands" the notion of sexuality to show how it is both physical and metaphysical, both physiological and ontological. Sexuality must be construed, accordingly, as a distinct sign and symptom of our full existence, in much the way as Gestalt psychology shows that "no layer of sensory data can be identified as immediately dependent on sensory organs: the smallest sensory datum is never presented in any other way than integrated into a configuration and already *patterned*."¹⁰² At the level of the senses (as in the brain or psyche which they embody) nothing exists in isolation, but only in differential relation to other parts and wholes. Biological existence is synchronized with human existence through and through. To live the body (*leben*) is, therefore, already to live this or that particular kind of world (*erleben*). Eating, breathing, loving are always forms of ontological expression, marking out a singular "style" for each living person. "The life of the flesh and the life of the psyche," as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "are involved in a relationship of reciprocal *expression*."¹⁰³ Which is not to say that body is the integument of spirit (spiritualism), nor that mind is caused by body (naturalism). The body does not indicate an inner mind as a house number might indicate a home. The body signifies meaning because it *is* that meaning. If I lose my voice (aphasia), it is not because I am withholding speech but because I cannot speak. "The girl does not *cease* to speak, she 'loses' her voice as one loses a memory."¹⁰⁴ Or to take another example, to lose a book given by a friend when one falls out with that friend signifies a general relationship of loss (including both book and friend); just as finding it again when one is reconciled with that friend is a sign of general reconciliation. The one is linked to the other in a single existential sensibility (of losing and regaining, forgetting and remembering). In this sense, we may say that carnal signs are full signs—both signifier and signified at once.

Relating this to other cases of mental illness such as anorexia or frigidity, Merleau-Ponty shows how bodily symptoms are neither simply determined biochemically, nor strategically manipulated by conscious volition, but express a carnal manner of being in the world which is often healed more by the touch of a hand than a disclosure of knowledge. Citing Binswanger's famous version of the "bedside manner," Merleau-Ponty argues that cures often come more from the senses than from will or consciousness.

In treating (these conditions), psychological medicine does not act on the patient by making him *know* the origin of his illness: sometimes a *touch of the hand* puts a stop to the spasms and restores to the patient his speech . . . the patient would not accept the meaning of

his disturbances as revealed to him without the personal relationship formed with the doctor, or without the confidence and friendship felt towards him, and the change of existence resulting from this friendship. Neither symptom nor cure is worked out at the level of objective or positing consciousness, but *below* that level.¹⁰⁵

Therapeutic hermeneutics is, at bottom, a carnal hermeneutics that goes all the way down.

Therapy, in this wise, involves a "conversion" through the body-subject in *tactful* contact with other body-subjects. Because our flesh is what constantly exposes us to others—human, animal, vegetal—even its closure in itself (refusing words, food, sex) is never a given. Just as in sleep we are never completely asleep, in sickness we are never completely sick. Qua flesh, the human being is never either a pure "nothingness in the mind" nor a mere "thing" amidst things—it is the possibility of co-existence with other human beings. Healing is thus defined by Merleau-Ponty as a re-opening of self to others *through the body*, a turning from thanatos (death drive of closure) to eros (life drive of communion). I quote again:

Precisely because my body can shut itself off from the world, it is also what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation there. The momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, towards the world can be restored as a river unfreezes. The girl will recover her voice, not by an intellectual effort or by an abstract decree of will, but through a conversion in which the whole of her body makes a concentrated effort in the form of a genuine gesture, as we seek and recover a name forgotten not "in our mind" . . . but "on the tip of our tongue." The memory or the voice is recovered when the body once more opens itself to others or to the past, when it opens the way to *co-existence* and once more acquires significance beyond itself.¹⁰⁶

Because our bodily existence inaugurates our primary "consonance with the world," it remains our first line of resistance and openness to others. Existence comes into its own in the body and finds there its originary sense. Expression does not exist apart from the body and the body does not exist apart from expression. What Merleau-Ponty terms the "*incarnate significance*" of flesh is the "central phenomenon" of which the traditionally opposed poles of body and mind are abstract derivatives. Flesh and existence presuppose each other, they *are* each other—flesh as "solidified existence" and existence as "perpetual incarnation."¹⁰⁷ Together they constitute a "woven fabric" of "inter-communication."¹⁰⁸

Returning to his guiding theme of eros, Merleau-Ponty concludes that "desire and love" are not "bundles of instincts" governed by natural laws nor strategies of some willful mind, but carnal interplays where the self "opens out upon another"—an exposure to alterity which is the beginning of both our physical and metaphysical existence. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to declare that "sexuality is co-extensive with life," comparing it to a particular "atmosphere" or "haze" which hides itself even as it provides the secret means (*metaxu*) through which we see the world. Located in flesh, eros spreads forth like a transpersonal "color" or "sound" between self and other. Merleau-Ponty coins the term "interfusion" to describe this mutual mediation where "existence permeates sexuality and vice versa."¹⁰⁹ That is why there is no explanation of eros which can reduce it to anything other than itself, for it is already something other than itself—a perpetual crossing between inner and outer, nature and freedom, sameness and difference, such that "we never know whether the forces which bear us on are its or ours."¹¹⁰

Diacritical Perception. This role of "difference" at the heart of sensation was developed by Merleau-Ponty in his Collège de France lectures in the 1950s, delivered at the time he was sketching his notes on the carnal chiasm for *The Visible and the Invisible*. In one particular lecture series of 1953, entitled *Le Monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, he offers a fascinating account of what he calls "diacritical perception."¹¹¹ This is a new mode of expressive sensibility involving the crossing of sensation and language. Borrowing liberally from Saussure's notion that words only signify by virtue of their differences with other words, Merleau-Ponty argues that meanings are never given as isolated terms or objects but always as parts of a mobile interaction of signs involving intervals, absences, folds and gaps (*écarts*). This is not just a function of language, however, but the very structure of perception itself. Going well beyond Saussure and the structuralists, then, Merleau-Ponty makes the radical claim that because perception is structured like language in its nascent state it is *diacritical*. Here is how Merleau-Ponty puts it in an important note from his 1953 lectures:

Diacritical notion of the perceptual sign. This is the idea that we can perceive differences without terms, gaps with regard to a level (of meaning) which is not itself an object—the only way to give perception a consciousness worthy of itself and which does not alter the perceived into an object, into the signification of an isolating or reflexive attitude.¹¹²

In a subsequent note entitled "Diacritical perception," Merleau-Ponty adds this intriguing example. To see another's visage is to interpret it carnally as this or that form of expression:

To perceive a physiognomy, an expression, is always to deploy diacritical signs, in the same manner as one realizes an expressive gesticulation with one's body. Here each (perceptual) sign has the unique virtue of differentiating from others, and these differences which appear for the onlooker or are used by the speaking subject are not defined by the terms between which they occur, but rather define these in the first place.¹¹³

This logic of diacritical perception is alien to the classical presumption that difference presupposes identity. On the contrary, writes Merleau-Ponty, the identity of terms emerges in the tension of their differences, their contours arising from the encroachment (*empiètement*) of things on things. And here he deploys the term "infra-thing" in contradistinction to the old notion of discrete objective substances.

With this move, Merleau-Ponty departs from the classic habit of defining something new in terms of a preexisting genre or foundation. Diacritical perception through gaps reveals the inadequate character of the traditional one-to-one correlation between consciousness and object—showing that such correspondence arises only in retrospect—which ignores the fact that there never was an object in the first place, but only several different infra-things, and at the very minimum a reversible interplay between figure and ground (*fond*). This plurality of infra-things is irreducible to the dualist framework of an isolated mind faced with an isolated object. Diacritical perception is, Merleau-Ponty insists, the sensing of meaning as it expresses itself in the intervals between such infra-things of our experience. It involves our sense of identity through differentiation rather than differentiation through identity.

Our most basic carnal sensations may thus be said to be structured diacritically in so far as they are structured like the phonetic differentiations of language. "To have a body capable of expressive articulation or action and to have a phonetic system capable of constructing signs, is the same thing."¹¹⁴ Our body schemas, in other words, operate like phonetic systems which function according to principles of which they are not conscious (e.g., *parole* is not conscious of *langue*, just as touch, as Aristotle noted, is not conscious of its *metaxy*). But to compare carnal sensation to linguistic structure in this way is not to reduce the latter to the former (naturalism), nor to reduce the former to the latter (structuralism). Nature does not

make the body any more than it makes phonetic systems. And it would be a mistake to construe the perceptual capacity to play with principles of which it is not immediately aware as some kind of "unconscious." Perception of figure is not simultaneously perception of ground—but rather "imperception": the sensing of the invisible in and through the visible, a "*sentir en profondeur*," by negations, absences, *écarts*. Or as Merleau-Ponty puts it in Gestalt language: "consciousness of the figure is consciousness without knowledge of the ground (*fond*)."¹¹⁵

We may say accordingly that diacritical perception (or more broadly, sensation) witnesses the birth of expression, against an unformed background, as a meaning which begins and re-begins, an awakening which takes the form of a figure that is prefigured and refigured again and again, now fore, now aft, now here, now there. Hence the importance of Merleau-Ponty's metaphor of modulation: "Consider sensation itself, the act of sensing (*le sentir*), as the intervening of a figure on a *fond*. Modulation. As a sound modulates silence. As a color modulates an open space by varying it. Every sign is diacritical."¹¹⁶ And Merleau-Ponty adds significantly, "This is Valéry's idea," thereby indicating that his attempts to describe the hidden "diacritical" function are as indebted to literary poetics as they are to structural linguistics. (Once again we note the recourse to poetics when it comes to naming or expressing the enigma of signifying flesh—Aristotle's recourse to tropes of membrane and water, Merleau-Ponty's to figures of modulation and chiasmus.) Either way, this sensory birth of meaning occurs not in the manner of a foundational cause (as in standard metaphysics) but as a diacritical play of visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, an embodied vigilance capable of signaling and resuscitating "full being" (*l'être total*) on the basis of a fragment.¹¹⁷ This diacritical interplay between *figure et fond* represents an endless reversibility—for what is one perceiver's *figure* is another's *fond* and vice versa. The diacritical art of sensing ultimately amounts, in Merleau-Ponty's view, to the displacement of natural cause by cultural expression.

In the same 1953 lecture course, Merleau-Ponty offers one further noteworthy illustration of the diacritical isomorphism of perception and language. He compares the perception of movement to the comprehension of a sentence. We only understand the beginning of a sentence from its end, he says, just as we only perceive movement in light of its goal. Perception does not follow something as it displaces itself from one fixed place to another, as if one solid object succeeded another; it proceeds rather as a wave which stretches back and forth across distances in the same manner as a sentence circulates through a whole linguistic field.

Carnal sensation is, therefore, best depicted as a fold (*pli*) in the moving flesh of the world; there is no world without it and it cannot be without a world. "Like signs in language," writes Merleau-Ponty, "the points traversed in movement have only a diacritical value; they do not function in themselves as places but rather as passages in the same way as words of a sentence are traces of an intention which (invisibly) transpierces them."¹¹⁸ Or to put it another way, perception operates like language in that it does not confront an object head on, but senses things which speak to it laterally, on the side, provoking one's "complicity" in the manner of an "obsession." Less objective than obsessional, then, the thing perceived "solicits" us (Valéry). Like an epiphany that calls for remembrance (Proust); or a naming which invites co-naissance (Claudel); or a pregnancy that yearns for birth and rebirth (Bachelard); or a frosted branch whose every crystal signals a whole order of emergent meanings (Stendhal). With all these literary analogies, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that each carnal perception of the world constructs itself on the basis of an emerging part which solicits our co-creation of this world; just as language constructs itself in terms of a circular movement between a present part and absent whole. (Merleau-Ponty also uses here the analogy of a film montage where each frame functions in the movement between gaps across an invisible background.)

But it is important to remind ourselves here that the diacritical model of carnal interpretation is not a matter of voluntarist invention (*à la Sartre*). It is not a question of reading *into* something but of reading *from* (*à partir*) something. We are solicited by the flesh of the world before we read ourselves back into it. Carnal attention is as much reception as creation. It precedes and exceeds transcendental idealism. And this is why I think Merleau-Ponty insists that the solicitation of our body schema functions symbolically, obliquely, indirectly, like a sexual or ontological *surprise*. Diacritical sensation, across distances and intervals, comes not just from us but from another person or thing that meets us "like a stranger in the dark." Merleau-Ponty again cites Valéry to make his point. "A man is nothing so long as nothing draws from him effects and productions which surprise him."¹¹⁹ But to be surprised one must be ready to receive, open to solicitation and seduction, prepared to partake of the thing sensed and symbolized. Every sense, as Merleau-Ponty concludes, has its own *symbolique*. Every carnal act and organ inscribes its own *imaginaire*. From sexual expression to the act of eating itself. Nature is already culture as soon as we sense it *as this or that* (however mute or self-concealing this hermeneutic-as may be). Sensation is expression and expression sensation. Flesh is word

and word flesh. Hence the significance of Merleau-Ponty's description of sensation in terms of a diacritical Eucharistic communion:

Just as the sacrament not only symbolizes, in sensible species, an operation of Grace, but is also the real presence of God, which it causes to occupy a fragment of space and communicates to those who eat of the consecrated bread, provided that they are inwardly prepared, in the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body, provided that it is capable of doing so, so that sensation is literally a form of communion.¹²⁰

Here we find yet another, deeper meaning to double sensation and double incarnation. We are far from conceiving the flesh according to the logic of "possession" (Sartre) or of "separation" (Levinas). Merleau-Ponty resorts to an Aristotelian logic of "analogy"—more precisely, of proper proportionality: A is to B what C is to D. Namely, the sacrament of transubstantiation is to the responsive communicant what the sensible is to the attentive sensor. He delineates this quasi-Eucharistic power of the sensible as follows:

I am brought into relation with an external being, whether it be in order to open myself to it or to shut myself off from it. If the qualities radiate around them a certain mode of existence, if they have the power to cast a spell and what we called just now a sacramental value, this is because the sentient subject does not posit them as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them, makes them his own and finds in them his momentary law.¹²¹

In other words, each sensory encounter with the strangeness of the world is an invitation to a "natal pact" where, through a form of "diacritical sympathy," the human self and the strange world give birth to one another. Sacramental sensation is a reversible rapport between myself and others, wherein the sensible gives birth to itself through me.

What a fine example of carnal hermeneutics. Everyday sensation as exquisite empathy.

Between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics: Ricoeur's Wager

Paul Ricoeur, the final figure I consider here, also developed a phenomenology of flesh inspired by Husserl in the 1950s. But while this early phenomenology was developing strongly in the direction of a diagnostics of carnal signification—in tandem with Merleau-Ponty—once Ricoeur

took the so-called "linguistic turn" in the 1960s he departed from this seminal phenomenology in order to concentrate more exclusively on a hermeneutics of the text. There are, however, some fascinating reflections in Ricoeur's final writings which attempt to reanimate a dialogue between his initial phenomenology of the flesh and later hermeneutics of language. I will take a look at these by way of suggesting new directions for a carnal hermeneutics—directions which might bring together the rich insights of a philosophy of embodiment (developed with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) and a philosophy of interpretation (deriving from Heidegger and Gadamer).

Before looking at these later reflections, however, let me say a few words about Ricoeur's early "diagnostics" of bodily expression. As I have written on this elsewhere, I will confine my remarks here to a few summary points.

Diagnostics of the Body. Ricoeur's main contribution here comes in the form of three important sections of his first major work in phenomenology, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, published in 1950, five years after *The Phenomenology of Perception*. The sections in question are entitled, "Motivation and the Corporeal Involuntary," "Bodily Spontaneity," and "Life: Structure, Genesis, Birth."

Ricoeur sets out in this work to explore the life of the "incarnate cogito," drawing on the phenomenological notion of the *corps propre* (announced by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty), Gabriel Marcel's notion of incarnation, and Maine de Biran's analysis of the embodied *cogito* (as touch, effort, and resistance). From the outset Ricoeur proposes an account of the body as a dialectical rapport between the voluntary and the involuntary in direct opposition to naturalism. Starting with the phenomenon of "affectivity," he notes that "*sentir est encore penser*," understanding *sentir* no longer as a representation of objectivity but as a revelation of existence.¹²² Carnal affectivity is thus seen as a mediating bridge between (1) our flesh and blood existence and (2) the "thinking" order of interpretation, evaluation and understanding. But if "incarnation" is the first anchor of existence, it is also the temptation of betrayal—for the affective body lends itself to reductive objectifying accounts.

Ricoeur takes up the challenge, beginning with "need" as something to be phenomenologically experienced not as a natural event from without, but as a lived experience from within. It is here, right away, that Ricoeur proclaims his diagnostics of the lived body: "the diagnostic relation which conjoins objective knowledge with Cogito's apperception brings about a truly Copernican Revolution. No longer is consciousness a symptom of

the object-body, but rather the object-body is an indication of a personal body (*corps propre*) in which the Cogito shares as its very existence."¹²³ Affectivity and thought are thus connected from the outset by a tie of mutual inherence and adherence. The two bodies (inner and outer) are not separate realities but two ways of "reading" the same flesh—externally (as nature) and internally (as incarnation).

Ricoeur then goes on to show how need relates to pleasure in terms of various "motivating values and tendencies"—evaluative discriminations that are not imposed by consciousness or reason but are already operative in our most basic affective relations. Nor is need to be reduced, naturalistically, to a mere reflex sensation translating an organic defect in the form of a motor reaction. It is not a "re-action but a pre-action"—an "action towards. . . ." ¹²⁴ Otherwise put, need reveals me not as a mechanism of stimulus-response but as a "life gaping as appetite for the other."¹²⁵ To have needs does not mean being *determined* by them; we are continually *discerning* between needs and pre-reflectively evaluating when best to realize or suspend them. "It is because the impetus of need is *not* an automatic reflex that it can become a *motive* which inclines without compelling and that there are men who prefer to die of hunger than betray their friends."¹²⁶ As Gandhi's hunger strikes or the sacrifice of countless heroes and saints attest, "man is capable of choosing between his hunger and something else."¹²⁷

Need is thus revealed as a primordial spontaneity of the body where will mixes with a "first rank of values" which I have not engendered but which mobilize my feelings. The existing body as living flesh is the original source of carnal hermeneutics; it is what makes our first *savoir a savoir-faire*, a savvy of life. "Through need, values *emerge* without my having posited them in my act-generating role: bread is good, wine is good. Before I will it, a value already appeals to me solely because I exist in flesh; it is already a reality in the world, a reality which reveals itself to me through the lack. . . . The first non-deductible is the body as existing, life as value. The mark of all existents, it is what first reveals values."¹²⁸ It is at this crucial point that Ricoeur addresses the role of carnal imagination at the crossroads of need and willing. He explores how we imagine a missing person or thing (which we need or desire) and the ways towards reaching it. But the corporeal imagination is not just about projecting possibilities from within; it is equally a means of reading the "affective signs" of real sensible qualities out there in the world. The carnal imagination—witnessed in need, pleasure and desire—is already a diagnostics in which primal judgments become both affective and effective. Imagining the world in the flesh is a matter of feeling, valuing, and doing. "We must not lose sight of

the *sense* quality of imagination," insists Ricoeur, "for it is in our imagination mobilizing our desires and discerning between good and bad ways of realizing them that our life can be *evaluated*."¹²⁹ Values mean nothing unless they *touch* me. Contrary to Kant and the idealists, ethics requires the mediation of flesh. Ricoeur concludes his reading of the body as primal field of evaluation with this manifesto:

The body is not only a value among others, but is in some way involved in the apprehension of all motives and through them of all values. It is the affective *medium* of all value: a value can reach me only as dignifying a motive, and no motive can incline me if it does not *impress my sensibility*. I reach values through the vibration of an affect. To broaden out the spread of values means at the same time to deploy affectivity to its broadest span.¹³⁰

Ricoeur spends the rest of his phenomenological analysis exploring this claim for affective sensibility as "medium" of evaluation. Suffice it for now to note that his initial sketch of corporal diagnostics offers what we might call a proto-hermeneutics of the flesh.

The Textual Turn. In spite of this promising early diagnostics of the body, however, Ricoeur was soon to abandon this trajectory. After the "textual turn" in the 1960s, we witness a surprising (and I believe regrettable) rift between a hermeneutics of texts, on one hand, and a phenomenology of affectivity, on the other. He now looks back on the whole emphasis on sensible experience as susceptible to the lure of "immediacy, effusiveness, intuitionism," contrasting this with the more authentic "mediation of language."¹³¹ And he even commends the later Merleau-Ponty—in an obituary homage—for moving beyond his initial phenomenology of "incarnation" towards a "second philosophy" of language as a privileged medium of "distance" and "reflection."¹³² A commendation which, one suspects, is curiously applicable to himself.

This tension between flesh and text is nowhere more evident than in the 1964 essay, "Wonder, Eroticism, Enigma." Here Ricoeur speaks of sexuality as contrary to language. He starkly opposes what he calls (1) the "immediacy" of the "flesh to flesh" relationship and (2) the "mediations" of language and interpretation. Simply put: "Sexuality de-mediatizes language; it is eros not logos."¹³³

Eros in our contemporary culture, Ricoeur argues, has lost its old cosmic force in sacred mythology and assumed the form of a "restless desire." It becomes a "demonism" that resists both the logos of understanding and the logic of instrumental rationality. "The enigma of sexuality," he claims,

"is that it remains irreducible to the trilogy which composes human existence: language, tool, institution."¹³⁴ And if at times it articulates itself, it is "an infra-, para-, superlinguistic expression." Eros "mobilizes language," admits Ricoeur, but only in so far as "it crosses it, jostles it, sublimates it, stupefies it, pulverizes it into a murmur."¹³⁵ Utterly de-mediatized in this manner, eros cannot be reabsorbed either in an "ethic" (like marriage) or a "technique" (like pornography); it can only be "symbolically represented by means of whatever mythical elements remain."¹³⁶ Left to itself, in short, the "flesh to flesh" relationship defies the order of logos: "Ultimately, when two beings embrace, they don't know what they are doing, they don't know what they want, they don't know what they are looking for, they don't know what they are finding. What is the *meaning* of this desire which drives them towards each other?"¹³⁷ Sexual desire does not, claims Ricoeur, contain its own meaning but gives the impression that it participates in a network of powers whose cosmic connections are forgotten but not totally abandoned. Eros shows us that there is *more* to life than life—"that life is unique, universal, everything in everyone, and that sexual joy makes us participate in this mystery; that man does not become a person . . . unless he plunges again into the river of Life—such is the truth of sexuality."¹³⁸ But this River of Life has, Ricoeur notes, become obscure and opaque for us today. Like a lost Atlantis sunk within us long ago, it has left sexuality as its "flotsam" (*épave*). Hence the enigma of eros. The meaning of this submerged, dislocated universe is no longer accessible to us in terms of immediate participation, but only indirectly "to the learned exegesis of ancient myths." There is no straight route to eros—only hermeneutic detours.

So Ricoeur concludes that the best means to interpret the enigma of sexuality is a hermeneutics of ancient texts which record and represent this forgotten world of cosmic eros. The opposition between flesh and text could not be more explicit: "It lives again only thanks to hermeneutics—an art of interpreting writings which today are mute. And a new hiatus separates the flotsam of meaning which this *hermeneutics of language* restores to us and that other flotsam of meaning which sexuality discovers *without language*, organically."¹³⁹ On the one hand, *textual reading*, on the other *organic feeling*. Two forms of flotsam at the limits of reason. A dualism of logos and eros.

Between Flesh and Face. But this was not to be Ricoeur's last word on the matter. Fortunately, he returns to other options for a hermeneutics of flesh in one of his last major works, *Oneself as Another* (1990). In a section of the final chapter, entitled, "One's own body, or the Flesh," Ricoeur defines flesh as "the mediator between the self and a world which is taken in

accordance with its various degrees of foreignness."¹⁴⁰ As such, it reveals a certain "lived passivity" where the body, in the deepest intimacy of flesh, is exposed to otherness. How to "mediate" between this intimacy and this otherness, between the immanence of Husserl's *Leib* and the transcendence of Levinas's *Visage*, becomes a key concern.

This dialectic of passivity-otherness signals the enigma of one's own body. Or to put it in phenomenological terms: how can we fully experience the human body if it is not at once "a body among others" (*Körper*) and "my own" (*Leib*)? We need both, suggests Ricoeur. We require the experience of our lived flesh to provide us with a sense of our individual *belonging*. This is what gives a corporeal constancy and anchoring to the self.¹⁴¹ Flesh is the place where we *exist* in the world as both suffering and acting, pathos and praxis, resistance and effort. Combining the pioneering work of Maine de Biran with the phenomenologies of the *corps propre* in Husserl and Michel Henry, Ricoeur shows how it is through active "touch, in which our effort is extended, that external things attest to their existence as much as our own." It is the "same sense that gives the greatest certainty of one's own existence and the greatest certainty of external existence."¹⁴² In the pathos of passivity and passion, "one's own body is revealed to be the mediator between the intimacy of the self and the externality of the world."¹⁴³

Here Ricoeur makes the interesting point that it is not, as we might expect, in Heidegger—who ostensibly existentialized the phenomenological subject—that we discover the greatest ontology of the flesh.¹⁴⁴ It is rather Husserl, in retrospect, who offers the "most promising sketch of the flesh that would mark the inscription of hermeneutical phenomenology in an ontology of otherness."¹⁴⁵ Ricoeur's hermeneutic retrieval of Husserl runs as follows. In the *Cartesian Meditations*—written ten years after *Ideas II*—the founder of phenomenology had argued that in order to constitute a "foreign" subjectivity, one must formulate the idea of "ownness"—namely, flesh in its difference with respect to the external body (of others seen by me or of me seen by others). Flesh opens up a realm of *Leibhaftigkeit* (immediate embodied givenness), excluding all objective properties. It is the pole of reference of all bodies belonging to this immanent nature of *ownness*. And it is by pairing one flesh with another that we derive the notion of an alter ego. But here we return to the deeper paradox: flesh as a paradigm of *otherness*. Flesh is what is both most mine and most other. Closest to me and furthest from me at the same time. This enigma of far/near is revealed most concretely, once again, as *touch*. As center of pathos, our flesh's "aptitude for feeling is revealed most characteristically in the sense of touch."¹⁴⁶ It precedes and grounds both the "I can" and the "I

want." Indeed, it even precedes the very distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary. "I, as this man," explains Ricoeur, "is the foremost otherness of the flesh with respect to all initiative."¹⁴⁷ Or to put it in more technical language, "flesh is the place of all the passive syntheses on which the active syntheses are constructed, the latter alone deserving to be called works (*Leistungen*); the flesh is the matter (*hülle*) in resonance with all that can be said to be *hülle* in every object perceived, apprehended. In short, it is the origin of all *alteration of ownness*."¹⁴⁸

Ricoeur concludes accordingly that flesh is the support for selfhood's own "proper" otherness. For even if the otherness of the stranger could be derived from my sphere of ownness—as Husserl suggests—the otherness of the flesh would still precede it.¹⁴⁹ This paradox of flesh as ownness-otherness reaches dramatic proportions in a crucial passage from Husserl's "Fifth Meditation," where flesh is claimed to be a primordial space of immediacy prior to all linguistic or hermeneutic mediations:

Among the bodies . . . included in my peculiar ownness, I find my *animate organism* [*meinen Leib*], as *uniquely* singled out—namely as the only one of them that is not just a body but precisely an animate organism [flesh]: the sole Object within my world stratum to which, in accordance with experience, I ascribe *fields of sensation* (belonging to it, however, in different manners—a field of tactual sensations, a field of warmth and coldness, and so forth), the only Object "in which" I "*rule and govern*" *immediately*, governing particularly in each of its organs.¹⁵⁰

It is only on the basis of this primordial spatial materiality of immanent flesh—as a "pre-linguistic" world of I can—that we are able to construct a genuine semantics and hermeneutics of action. But it is here that phenomenology reaches its limit, and Ricoeur departs from Husserl. In seeking to derive the objective world from the "non-objectifying primordial experience" of flesh, Husserl went too far. He ignored that flesh is not just mine but equally a body among other bodies—both *Leib* and *Körper* at once. In order to make flesh part of the world (*mondanéiser*) one needs to be not just oneself but oneself as another—a self with others. And this means that the otherness of others as "foreign" relates not only to the otherness of my flesh (that I am) but also exists prior to any reduction to ownness. For the flesh can only appear in the world as a body among bodies to the degree that I am myself already an other among others—a self-with-another "in the apprehension of a common nature, woven out of the network of intersubjectivity—itsself founding selfhood in its own way."¹⁵¹

So Ricoeur concludes this highly intricate analysis by observing that while Husserl recognized the primordially of subjective flesh and the necessity of intersubjective language, he could not reconcile the two. "It is because Husserl thought of the other than me only as another me, and never of the self as another, that he has no answer to the paradox summed up in the question: how am I to understand that my flesh is also a body."¹⁵² In short, Husserl could not adequately account for both the flesh's intimacy to itself (in the absolute immediacy of immanence) and its opening onto the world (through the mediation of others). He had a carnal phenomenology but lacked a carnal hermeneutics. Only the latter could provide a full account of the ontological relationship between flesh and world.

One's Body and Another's. In correcting Husserl it is important, however, not to go to the other extreme. And this is, according to Ricoeur, where Levinas erred in traversing flesh too quickly towards alterity. Identifying the carnal caress with a play of feminine immanence, Levinas, as we saw, redirected the virile self in the direction of an ethics of vertical transcendence in which the face trumps flesh. In contrast to both Husserl and Levinas, we might say (with Ricoeur and Irigaray) that if flesh needs the other to save it from fragmentation and inner collapse, the other needs flesh to save it from Platonic moralism and paternalism.¹⁵³ And here we return, finally, to the realization that we need to combine sensibility (flesh) and language (face) in a new carnal hermeneutics. The ultimate question stands: how to make sense of sense by making flesh a body in the world.

Let us recap. In order for my flesh to engage upon an intersubjective world with others and empathize with them, I must have both an intimate body for me (*Leib*) and a physical natural body among other bodies (*Körper*). This involves a complex intertwining (*Verflechtung/entrelacs*) whereby I experience myself as someone in a shared world. Thus Ricoeur, challenging the Sartrean dichotomy of flesh versus body, asks: "To say that my flesh is also a body, does this not imply that it appears in just this way to the eyes of others? Only a flesh (for me) that is a body (for others) can play the role of first *analogon* in the analogical transfer from flesh to flesh."¹⁵⁴ And this reveals in turn that intentionalities that are aimed at the other—as strange and foreign to me—go beyond the sphere of my immanent ownness in which they are rooted and given. The other is revealed to my flesh as *both* inscribed in my embodied relation through flesh *and* as always already transcendent. Or to put it in more precise terms, the other is not reducible to the "immediate givenness of the flesh to itself" in originary presentation, but only in appresentation. The gap can thus

never be bridged between "the presentation of my experience and the appresentation of your experience."¹⁵⁵ And this interval is revealed in the fact that the pairing of your body over *there* as flesh with my body *here* as flesh always retains a certain distance. The analogizing grasp between two embodied selves is never complete or adequate. Total assimilation is impossible. "Never will pairing allow us to cross the barrier that separates appresentation from intuition (immediate presentation). The notion of appresentation, therefore, combines similarity and dissymmetry in a unique manner."¹⁵⁶ It is this double fidelity of flesh to both near and far that is captured in Ricoeur's felicitous formula, "oneself as another." And it is precisely because of the irreducible distance of alterity at the very heart of our flesh that hermeneutic mediation is always operative. This is where phenomenology reaches its limit and calls for more. Where the analogical transfer of flesh to flesh, through an intersubjectivity of bodies, "transgresses the program of phenomenology in transgressing the experience of one's own flesh."¹⁵⁷

So what does all this mean for the hermeneutic relationships between self and other? It means, first, that the other who is stranger is *also* my "semblable," a counterpart who, like me, can say "I." The transfer of sense shows how "she thinks" signifies "she says in her heart: I think"; and at the same time it reveals the inverse movement of "she thinks and feels in a way that I can never think or feel."¹⁵⁸ I am called by the other who comes to me in a way that I cannot assimilate to my immanence. I can only respond by "reading" their transcendence in immanence, across distance and difference. Ricoeur actually speaks of a hermeneutic interpreting of the body by the body which precedes the work of inference through formal linguistic signs. He refers to it as a primal "relation of *indication* in which the interpretation is made immediately, much as the reading of symptoms." And the "style" of confirmation to which this reading of indications belongs involves, says Ricoeur, "neither primordial intuition nor discursive inference."¹⁵⁹ It entails a special grammar of carnal hermeneutics across distance, gaps and differences. Carnal hermeneutics as diacritical hermeneutics.¹⁶⁰

With this final intuition, Ricoeur retrieves some of his most radical early insights into a diagnostics of affectivity. He charts a middle way between Husserl's phenomenology of carnal immanence and Levinas's ethics of radical transcendence. While the former addressed the movement of sense from me to the other (through analogy, transfer, pairing, appresentation), the latter addressed the movement of the other towards me. But in Levinas, as we saw, the other goes too far in instigating a rupture of separa-

tion: the face of the other is one of radical exteriority to the exclusion of all mediation. "The Other absolves itself from relation in the same movement by which the Infinite draws free from Totality."¹⁶¹ So if Husserlian phenomenology veers at times towards an excess of egology (the haptic circle of the hand touching its hand, critiqued by Derrida in *On Touching*), Levinas veers toward the opposite extreme of heterology. The ultimate "evincing" of the Levinasian face, as Ricoeur notes, lies apart from "the vision of forms and even the sensuous hearing of voices."¹⁶² To the extent that a call remains, it is the voice of the Master of justice who teaches but does not touch. For Levinas there is no primacy of *relation* between the terms of flesh and face. No communication or communion possible. No *metaxu*. "No middle ground, no between, is secured to lessen the utter dissymmetry between the Same and the Other."¹⁶³ Put in more affective terms, the Levinasian other persecutes, summons, obsesses, offends, but does not love. And it is against this paroxysm of absolute separation that a diacritical hermeneutics of dialogue proposes itself. "To mediate the opening of the Same onto the Other and the internalization of the voice of the other in the Same, must not language contribute its resources of communication, hence of reciprocity as is attested by the exchange of personal pronouns (I, you, he, she, us)?"¹⁶⁴ And must not this basic linguistic mediation call in turn for an even more radical hermeneutic exchange—"that of question and answer in which the roles are continually reversed?" In short, surmises Ricoeur, "is it not necessary that a dialogue superpose a relation on the supposedly absolute distance between the separate I and the teaching Other?"¹⁶⁵ And is it not precisely the task of carnal hermeneutics to do this by finding a just balance between the movement of same toward other and the other toward same? A balance which would not only bridge the divide between Husserl and Levinas, but also, by extension, between Merleau-Ponty's reversible *chair* and Derrida's irreversible *différance*?

The answer, I submit, is yes and raises further on-going interrogations. For what kind of language are we talking about? One not only of words and writing, surely, but also of sensing and touching. And what kind of dialogue? One not just between speakers but also between bodies. And what kind of sense and sensibility is at issue here? One not only of intellectual "understanding" but also of tangible "orientation." Thus does the simplest phenomenon of touch lead to the most complex of philosophies. Because the simplest *is* the most complex and remains the most enigmatic. In posing such questions, Ricoeur opens a door where phenomenology and hermeneutics may cross in the swing door of the flesh. He marks a new beginning. But much work remains to be done.

Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion I would like to note four further orientations for the continuing conversation of carnal hermeneutics.

First there is the *deconstructive hermeneutics of touch*, sketched out by Derrida in *On Touching* and developed by Jean-Luc Nancy in a number of powerful recent works from *Noli me Tangere* to *Corpus* I and II. The contributions of Anne O'Bryne, David Wood and Nancy himself in this volume show the rich potential of this itinerary.

Second, there is the *feminist hermeneutics of the body* inaugurated by thinkers like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, drawing from psychoanalysis, semiotics and phenomenology, and represented here by Kristeva herself and a new generation of feminist thinkers like Shelly Rambo, Anne O'Byrne, and Karmen MacKendrick. Recent work by Judith Butler, Susan Heinamaa, and Susan Bordo also moves in this direction.

Third, there is the *theological hermeneutics of incarnation* inspired by the phenomenological retrieval of Christian mysticism and exegesis and represented in this volume by some of its major proponents—Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Falque, and John Panteleimon Manoussakis. One might also mention here the recent writings of Virginia Burrus, Caroline Bynum, and Catherine Keller.

Fourth and finally, there is a *diacritical hermeneutics of flesh*, represented in this volume by the eco-phenomenology of David Wood and Ed Casey, the bio-diacritics of Ted Toadvine, and the dia-phenomenology of Emmanuel Alloa and Brian Treanor (the latter in dialogue with the new realist and materialist movements, the recent findings of cognitive science, and the growing challenge of environmental ethics).¹⁶⁶ In addition to these projects, I would add the importance of diacritical hermeneutics engaging more specifically with the carnal "signs" of our particular time, as evinced in the increasing digitalization of the body and the virtualization of our means of communication and community. Here "medium" takes on new connotations unknown and unknowable for Aristotle when he first wrote about *metaxu* two thousand years ago; and scarcely imaginable for the major phenomenologists discussed in this essay. This diagnostic task will be a major challenge in the coming age of exarnation.¹⁶⁷

Mind the Gap

The Challenge of Matter

BRIAN TREANOR

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake . . .

—Henry David Thoreau¹

Truth is not that which is demonstrable, but that which is ineluctable.

—Antoine de Saint Exupéry²

Why Carnal Hermeneutics?

Why "carnal" hermeneutics? Don't we already talk enough about the body? After all, the body has, since the dawn of philosophy, been a topic of concern in one form or another. Plato talks about embodiment in the *Republic* and *Philebus*. Aristotle takes up the subject in *De Anima*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *De Partibus Animalium*, and other works. Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, and others all write about the body; it has hardly been ignored. And don't we already have enough flavors of hermeneutics? The latter half of the twentieth century was dominated by hermeneutics: Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur; the radicalization of these thinkers by Derrida; the expansion of "postmodern" hermeneutics into religion, feminism, political philosophy, psychoanalysis, and myriad other fields. One might legitimately wonder about the usefulness of yet another subfield, another