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Introduction

Carnal Hermeneutics from Head to Foot

RICHARD KEARNEY
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The essays collected in this volume all address, in one way or another, the theme of carnal hermeneutics—that is to say, the surplus of meaning arising from our carnal embodiment, its role in our experience and understanding, and its engagement with the wider world. The voices represented here are diverse, each contributing to the view that the work of Hermes goes all the way down, from the event horizon of consciousness to the most sensible embodied experiences of our world.

Why Carnal Hermeneutics?

In the first section, Why Carnal Hermeneutics?, we show why our project of carnal hermeneutics is central to hermeneutics more broadly conceived, and to explain in some detail why this focus is necessary, productive, and timely.

Carnal hermeneutics, as the opening essay indicates, offers a philosophical approach to the body as interpretation. How do we make sense of bodies with our bodies? How do we read between the lines of flesh and skin? Building on previous hermeneutic models—the "as-structure" of existential understanding in Heidegger, the dialogical play of questioning in Gadamer, the semantic surplus of meaning in Ricoeur—we try to show how the new "carnal" turn in hermeneutics ranges across a wide spectrum of interpretation, from head to toe, from sky to earth, from the most sacred and sublime to the most tactile and terrestrial. What we pro-
pose to develop from previous hermeneutic projects are the following basic principles: (1) human existence requires an art of understanding as well as a science of explanation, (2) our understanding involves a finite, spatio-temporal being-in-the-world, (3) our finite experience calls for a phenomenological appreciation of meaning as a projection of possibility and reception of reality, (4) this meaning involves "sense" mediations in a wide arc of signifying ranging from the proto-linguistic domain of corporeal sensation and orientation to the most advanced forms of linguistic articulation, (5) this extended hermeneutic arc transcends the traditional dualism between rational understanding and embodied sensibility, and reverses the prejudicial hierarchy of the senses where sight and hearing trump taste and touch, (6) this reversal—or more accurately redistribution—of our bodily senses enables us to see how the most carnal of our sensations are already interpretations: a question of tact and tang (from the same root, tængere-tactum); and, finally, (7) this equiprimordial redistribution of the senses invites hermeneutics to go "all the way down," abandoning residual tendencies to oppose language to sensibility, word to flesh, text to body.

Once we follow the hermeneutic ladder all the way from head to foot we find that text is body and body is text. If there is nothing outside of the text it is because there is nothing outside of the flesh. Word is flesh. This is the basic lesson of carnal hermeneutics: all experience, from birth to death, is mediated by our embodiment and only makes sense of sense accordingly.

By way of illustrating and substantiating these core principles of carnal hermeneutics,1 the opening essay charts a hermeneutic genealogy of touch, from Aristotle's discovery of flesh (skeu) as "medium" (metate) to the revolutionary analyses of embodiment in the more contemporary works of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. One of its main aims is to show how savvy is as much about savour as savoir (from sapere, to taste), which means amplifying and deepening hermeneutics to embrace sensory orientation as much as intellectual understanding.

In the second essay, "Mind the Gap: The Challenge of Matter," we suggest that hermeneutics must undertake a Ricoeurian "detour" through carnality in a wide variety of applications, including new philosophical realisms and materialisms and the work of the "hard" sciences from which they often hail. Such a detour is especially important when taking up issues like the environment, neuroscience, health, and more general questions of matter. This means that hermeneutics must be willing to engage modes of thinking that see carnal embodiment as hard, material reality in addition to those that see it as cipher or symbol. Fat from attempting to "objectivize" hermeneutics or "subjectivize" science, the essay argues we should take seriously the possibilities inherent in Ricoeur's dictum that "to explain more is to understand better." To this end, we engage with some contemporary approaches in which this might occur, including Michel Serres' recent reflections on the "hard" and the "soft" of reality. We propose that preliminary gestures in this direction can be found in carnal hermeneutics understood in the broad sense of a reengagement with both our human senses (the medium of lived flesh) and the "flesh of the world" (which calls for a new environmental hermeneutics based on eco-phenomenology and extending to nonhuman forms of life).

These two opening essays, which constitute the first section of the book, are intended to serve as overall genealogies and topologies of our two guiding terms—carnal and hermeneutics—and set out some common coordinates for the essays that follow.

Rethinking the Flesh

The next section of the book showcases some major contemporary voices in our conversation: Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-Louis Chretien, Julia Kristeva, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, and Paul Ricoeur. Jean-Luc Nancy opens this section with an intriguing reflection on what he calls "essential skin." Nancy addresses issues of touch in relation to life and death, taboo and zone. He shows how skin is where inside and outside are related and distinguished. It is where the in-itself finds itself outside of itself in order to be a self. Nancy explores how different languages signify the enigma of skin, exposing the roots of flesh in multiple etymologies besides his native French—Greek and Hebrew, Latin and English—yielding everyday poetics of flowering and fruition, sounding and stitching. In a particularly evocative passage on the caresses (echoing several other essays in the volume), Nancy shows how in such moments of intimacy, the body moves beyond functionality, perception, and action—and in so doing, scatters seeds of carnal signification: "Sign, signal, omen, or promise, the skin assures us it will never stop stretching out, being offered, and deepening. It promises that the body is entirely there within it, that it is the body itself and consequently that it is its soul."

In a companion piece on bodily movement, Nancy goes on to offer a detailed investigation of the intimate liaison between carnal motion and emotion, exploring the rich semantic play between the terms rhabren, herabren, and Aufbruch. Touching, he says, sets something in motion—displacement, action, and reaction. It begins "when two bodies move apart and distinguish themselves," as in birth. Touch is the first rhabren, but only comes to fullness with separation/birth—only a separated body is capable of touching. Leaving the un- (or under-) differentiated environment of

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the fetal-body-in-the-womb, the separation of birth opens us to touch, to contact, to the world, to relationship. This separation is a prerequisite for passion, the essence of which is to touch, contact from the outside. On this reading we are not “in contact”; we are contact itself. My entire being touches and is touched. Thus, being is not separate from relationship and what we currently call the “soul” is not different from arousal and receptiveness to motion and emotion. The soul is the body that is touched.”

Jean-Louis Chrétien’s “From the Limbs of the Heart to the Soul’s Organs,” provides a hermeneutic retrieval of the carnal language of the Song of Songs—a language that gives us a voice to probe regions of experience that would be voiceless without it. Following some of the great classical and medieval commentaries of the Song—Origen, St. Augustine, Gregory the Great, and others—Chrétien maps the homonymous isomorphism of the “inner and outer man” by describing the various accounts of eyes, ears, hands, neck, and other bodily “parts” of the heart. As translator Anne Davenport notes, the “body is the word-bearer through which meaning reaches us and in which every possible call is answered”, but we can lose sight of this eloquence when we isolate the body and fail to appreciate it as incarnation of the word.2 Chrétien’s analysis of the encounter with ultimate love in the Song of Songs suggests new hermeneutic possibilities for thinking embodiment and spirituality. Julia Kristeva takes the hermeneutics of the body in a distinctly humanist direction in “A Tragedy and a Dream: Disability Revisited.” Here she argues that disability, despite its obvious tragic dimensions, has the power to move us toward a “new humanism,” offering itself as a challenge and a complement to the Greco-Christian “ontology of privatization” or “poverty”—a standard ontology which can give rise to acts of charity, but which risks turning disabled persons into objects of care. Kristeva argues that insofar as disability (physical or mental) reveals the incommensurable singularity (heterotopia) of each person—both those with and those without disability—it harbors the possibility of restructuring the social bond. Disability is the “difference” that most radically confronts us with mortality and the finite limitations of all incarnate life, and that challenges us with a new “Socratic ethics” of the singular.

Michel Henry’s contribution, “Incarnation and the Problem of Touch,” directs us to the “phenomenological foundation” of incarnation—the condition of possessing flesh. Phenomenologically, the body can appear in the mode of the world, as an object external to us. But in the mode of “life” phenomenalization is different; here the old opposition between appearing and what allows it to appear breaks down in terms of what Henry calls “revelation.” There is no longer separation, no “outside of oneself”;

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“the revelation of life and what it reveals are one and the same.” Flesh is the proper name for this unity and its auto-revelation. Arguing that the traditional phenomenology of the body always presupposes a second transcendental and constituting body—leading to impossible aporias—Henry proposes that we reverse this tradition so that the “original” body is not the mundane body in the world but rather the flesh and its “auto-impressionalism.” The “arrival in flesh” is the truer and more radical meaning of incarnation that illuminates our human condition and the archipassibility of life itself. Though Henry himself does not explicitly argue the rich hermeneutic implications of his reading of life (e.g., as a hermeneutic retrieval of the Christian revelation of flesh), they are strongly present. And a similar point applies to Jean-Luc Marion’s subtle reading of incarnation and suffering in the wake of Henry’s work—offered here as “On the Phenomena of Suffering”—an interpretation which he explores in his more developed analyses of “flesh” in Being Given and The Erotic Phenomenon.

In the last essay of the second section, “Memory, History, Oblivion,” (published here in English for the first time), Paul Ricoeur picks up the question of lived suffering in relation to history, memory, and history-writing. Although he does not address the question of carnal hermeneutics per se, this late text points toward one of the reasons why such a “carnal turn” is necessary: namely, to address the persistence of what Ricoeur calls “the wounds left by history” and the consequent “call to justice owed to the victims of history.” It is interesting to note that Ricoeur wrote this text to highlight the particularity of suffering touched on in his last major work, History, Memory, Forgetting. Under a variation of this title, Ricoeur stresses here the moral imperative to reconnect hermeneutic remembering to the concrete “acting and suffering” of living beings. In preparing this paper, he reviewed numerous Holocaust testimonies (including films like Schindler’s List and Shoah). This essay may be read, accordingly, as a call for a new hermeneutics of the suffering body, in continuation with his hermeneutic retrieval of flesh as “other” in study 10 of Oneself as Another (discussed in our opening essay). We might also note here that “the wound of history” is an example of a broader concern with suffering bodies shared by other hermeneutic reflections in this volume—we are thinking not only of Julia Kristeva’s essay on disability but also of Shelly Rabkin’s analysis of the scars of trauma, Ed Casey’s mediation on the pain of incarcerated bodies, and Anne O’Byrne’s essay on the umbilicus. These recurring references to wounding represent an important bridge between standard hermeneutic concerns with writing and reading (texts, narratives, testimonies) and the more carnal significations of the lived body (marked with traces, trauma, scar).
Matters of Touch

The third part of our volume comprises essays by leading contemporary continental philosophers—from both Europe and America—who explore a hermeneutics of body and touch in pioneering and original ways.

In "Skin Deep: Bodies Edging into Place," Ed Casey offers an engaging account of the complex liaisons between body and place. Beginning with a harrowing account of the body in solitary confinement, he proceeds to discuss the notion of "edge" and "skin" in terms of intervals and boundaries. Ranging through a compelling list of descriptions—from prison cells and MRI tubes to living rooms, porches, yards, and landscapes—Casey shows how the "lived body" is both "absolutely here" and yet always edging into place between oneself and another. Drawing from phenomenologists such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Sarre (with the Bachelard of the Poetics of Space never far off), Casey proposes an original hermeneutics of skin as the ultimate edge between body and place. "We take in the world as a series of places felt in and through the skin." For skin is the most intimate medium (metazon) which both separates and connects each one of us with the world.

In "Touched by Touching," David Wood reflects on a variety of "quite ordinary" experiences in the course of plumbing "the creative prativoc- 

ity of meaning murmuring within the concepts that most fascinate us." Touch, he thinks, is an exemplary case. Wood considers: the stroking, nuzzling, and licking of feral cats turned semi-domestic mousers; the confusing complexities of eroticism; visual and tactile intimacies in the case of romantic partners; the indirect sexuality of flowers via the work of pollina- 
sors; literary accounts by Neruda and Hopkins; and, finally, the unwanted "vampire touch" of leeches. Reflecting on these diverse cases, which extend the carnal to include the non-human worlds of animal and plant, Wood suggests that a very fertile site for carnal hermeneutics is the question of boundaries that is disclosed and traversed—willingly or unwillingly—with joy or anxiety—by touch.

In her "Umblilicus: Toward a Hermeneutics of Generational Difference," Anne O'Byrne proposes a hermeneutic circle marked by the umbilical scar, the scar that marks us belonging to another, as vulnerable, and as generated and generational. The navel as the "circum cleft of skin at the center of us . . . the place where the hermeneutic circle makes a Mobius twist and interpretation turns inside out." Philosophical and theological traditions touch on the umbilical scar—from Christian monks at Mount Athos to Aristotle's circular people, and from Greek religion to psychoanalysis—but none plumbs the depths of understanding necessary to account for the umbilical relationship. Why does the maternal body nurture and grow the fetal body rather than attack it as foreign? How does the fetus survive inside an immunologically hostile maternal body? Biology tends to get by as if it were "positing epicycles" and turning a blind eye, but some research suggests a new model of immunology in which the notion of a war between the self and all intruders (nonself) is replaced by a model of permeable communities that permit immigrants unless and until they present a danger. The fetus does not cause an immune response be- 
cause it causes no immunological damage. O'Byrne's umbilical hermeneu- 
tics directs us to questions of generational and sexual difference, and asks us to consider sense rather than meaning as the goal of hermeneutics. Such extended consideration has, needless to say, evident political and social im- 
lications for our contemporary world. Which reminds us here, as in other essays, that carnal hermeneutics often calls for an applied hermeneutics of lived suffering and action.

In "Getting in Touch: Aristotelian Diagnostics," Emmanuel Alloa brings us back to the beginning of hermeneutics. He argues that while hermeneu- 
tics as an art of textual interpretation was born in late antiquity in Alex- 
andria, there is a pre- or even non-textual art of distinguishing which has to do with sensible diagnostics. Alloa provides a rich, scholarly overview of this non-textual tradition of diagnostico within the Greek world, especially in the medical tradition, and underlines the importance attributed to the different sense organs. In tune with our opening essay and other contribu-
tions to this volume, Alloa's account confirms that touch has a peculiar position among the senses, being considered the "lowest" and at the same time the most universal: all senses "touch" their objects. With this thesis in mind, Alloa offers a close reading of Aristotle's De anima, showing how it provides both a rehabilitation of touch as a crucial sense for orientation in the world and a strong rebuttal of reductionist readings of touch as imme- 
diate. Demonstrating how flesh is not the organ of touch but ts medium, Aristotle inaugurated a whole new theory of sensorial diagnostics.

In "Between Vision and Touch: From Husserl to Merleau-Ponty," Dermot Moran explains how Merleau-Ponty reinterprets and transforms the account of "double sensation" (Doppelsempfindung) discussed by Husserl (and other contributors to this volume). Husserl claims that double sensation is characteristic only of touch, and that this indicates a certain priori- 
ty of touch over the other senses in the composition of the living organic body (Leib). However, Merleau-Ponty argues that the reversibility of sensa- 
tion is characteristic of all five senses, and that it prefigures and founds the reflexivity of thought. Moreover, this interwoven—which goes by various terms in Merleau-Ponty's work: the chiasm, interlacing, or inversion of the
flesh—has ontological import. It expresses "the ambiguous character of human embodied being-in-the-world," which is the subject of his late work on la chair. Moran carefully charts this key development in the philosophy of sensation, showing how Melelau-Ponty's account of interweaving grows from and significantly develops Husserl's own account.

In the final essay of this section, "Biodiversity and the Diacritics of Life," Tod Toadvine takes up the meaning and value of the much-heralded notion of "biodiversity." Although this term is ubiquitous in both academic (scientific, economic, philosophical) and popular discourse, it is far from clear that it has real empirical or ethical value. Building on Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics, as well as on Melelau-Ponty and his readings of Saussure and Valéry, Toadvine suggests a form of "bioidacritics." He argues that the diacritical perspective captures an insight into the experience of life as difference while preserving our sense of life as unity, and he does so in a way that helps us to explore sense "beyond or beneath apparent sense." The pre-theoretical sense of life that precedes any biological investigation of living things is, Toadvine insists, diacritical: it mirrors the coexistence of unity and difference. On this view, the unity of the different nodes of life is in the intervals and gaps that constitute them; each one "implies the whole and therefore hangs together with the whole insofar as its own identity is the determinate negation of every other moment within the whole." While biodiversity measures a kind of difference, it misses the intervals, deferments, and gaps to which bioidacritics is attuned. Each form of life, each being, is a unique set of historical legacies. And, as Toadvine notes, "it is precisely insofar as life . . . institutes an evolving history or even a figured memory . . . that it commands our respect and hospitality." This essay—along with frequent other references in this volume to matter, earth, animals, sacred bodies, and the environment—suggests how important it is to keep carnal hermeneutics open to extra-human forms of life.

**Divine Bodies**

The final section, *Divine Bodies*, helps illustrate how carnal hermeneutics can extend to the fullest range of meaning while keeping sight of our inescapably carnal nature. Hermeneutics, including carnal hermeneutics, navigates both the sacred and the terrestrial, ranging up and down, translating messages from "above" and from "below."

In "The Passion According to Teresa of Avila," Julia Kristeva deploys a psychoanalytic hermeneutic to interpret the life of a great woman visionary. She enumerates three characteristics of Christian life highlighted by its mystics: the Ideal Father who, loved, is the foundation of the subject; the renewalization of this ideal by the mystic (pre-version); and the oral gratification of the Eucharist that reconciles the believer with the beaten Father. Teresa is offered as an archetypal example of such mystical hermeneutics. In her "incarnated fantasies" the ideal father who persecutes her is transformed into a loving father, "poussance and extreme pain, always the two together or alternating." These raptures are expressed in a unique narrative. Teresa loses her identity, becoming a "psyche-soma" below the threshold of consciousness. Her visions inhabit the entire body and mind, including the philosophically underappreciated senses of touch and taste. They are part of what Kristeva calls the "sensitive imaginary" in which water signifies the link between the soul and the divine. The body is earth, which becomes garden at the touch of water. And the divine is brought down from its supersensitive status to become an element that nourishes and touches. Touch—psychosomatic contact—is the mode in which Teresa appropriates the Other. Transcendence turns out to be immanent: the Lord is not above, but within.

In "Refiguring Wounds in the Afterlife (of trauma)," Shelly Rambo asks the reader to rethink the notion of the "invisible wound" in a manner that would draw on all the senses rather than privileging sight. The double wounding of trauma—the wounding event and its aftermath or scar—is said to result in a wound that does not close; and part of the task of trauma theory and psychoanalysis is to make visible what is invisible in the process of healing. Wounds, of course, are central to the Christian tradition, but Rambo focuses on the afterlife of wounds, the wounds of resurrection, and thinking these wounds in terms of the figure of the scar. Examining the case of the wound/scar associated with Macrina, sister of Gregory of Nyssa, Rambo notes the aporias associated with traditional visual readings of the scar, which she resolves via a multi-sensory, carnal reading. Macrina's story also complicates the gendered politics of trauma and recognition—insofar as Gregory is displaced by the mother-daughter-maidenservants relationships—in a way that reads scars not as a recification of wounding, but as a mark of the "complex textures of life." Finally, the story renews traditional accounts of resurrection by emphasizing the healing aspects of touch. Rambo thus performs a hermeneutic retelling of a story of wounds which is itself a retelling of the Christian story.

In "This Is My Body" Emmanuel Falque considers key elements of the Eucharist—Christ as the "lamb" on the altar, the Eucharist as the "body" of Christ, and what it means to "eat" that body. The "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharistic meal has always been controversial; and understanding it strains the limits of phenomenology: the phenomenological excess of "sense over non-sense"; the increase of "feath over body"; and the "weak-
ness in the forgetting of force." As translator Christina Gschwandtner notes, Falque's work criticizes the phenomenological distinction between "Leib" and "Körper," reiterating a body/soul dualism that downplays the "animality" of our flesh. "[Falque] seeks to recover the 'organicity' of the body (in its concrete 'flesh and bones') and to take full account of its animal nature (the chaos or 'abyss' of our passions, drives and impulses)." Here Falque reads the viaticum as joining in the union of bodies in Eucharistic communion, and concludes with an account of "abiding" in which the real presence is linked to desire. Neither fleeing from humanity, nor falling below its limits, Eucharistic enthusiasm animates the act of communion in the sense that the communicant is "fully incorporated into God" such that his or her animality, corporeality, and desire are made meaningful and converted.

Karmen MacKendrick's "Original Breath" challenges the traditional non-carnal readings of "speaking" in the Genesis creation account: creation ex nihilo, God beyond space and time, humans as absolutely distinct from animals, and so on. In MacKendrick's hermeneutic retrieval of this text, God's calling the world into existence takes place in the presence of a "there is" already in creation—formless matter that responds to God's call, the rech echlin (mighty wind, breath). Here "breath is given form by matter and matter its meaning by breath." The chapter follows the Genesis creation narrative, tracing the manner in which the breath of God breathes life into humans and animates animals, challenging us to think of meaning in matter. MacKendrick analyzes the naming of the animals by Adam, questioning the assumption that this task confers some form of absolute dominance, and suggesting that this call must await a response, not linguistic but carnally meaningful, from the creature named. Her account offers a richer option for human-animal interaction and relationship, one that, without conflating the human and animal, thinks in terms of a "divine animality" and a "continuous carnal creation."

Rounding out the collection, John Panarehios Manousakis's "On the Flesh of the Word: Incarnational Hermeneutics," reflects on the claim by which "Christianity stands or falls": the Word became Flesh. He suggests that a long history of misreading and misappropriation has caused us to think in terms of spiritualizing the flesh rather than incarnating the spirit. Hermeneutics has forgotten the command "take, eat, this is my body" in favor of a textual rumination that results in regurgitation rather than digestion and sustenance. This is reflected in the marginalization of the Eucharist. Manousakis offers a detailed and original reading of St. Augustine's Confessions as an exemplary text of carnal hermeneutics in which he finds a "conversion of the flesh" alongside the more familiar episodes of the "conversion of the mind" and "conversion of the heart." This third conversion is evident in Augustine's reversal of the traditional hierarchy of the senses by giving primacy to touch, in his use of the parable of the prodigal son to emphasize the flesh, and in his extended use of language associated with hunger, eating, and feasting.

The essays of this volume are not conclusions but rather openings to further dialogue and debate. They are signposts of things to come in the ongoing conversation of carnal hermeneutics. This conversation is, we suggest, marked by certain challenging characteristics. First, a radical commitment to interdisciplinary work, opening philosophical hermeneutics to fruitful exchanges with other human sciences such as linguistics, anthropology, theology, poetics, psychoanalysis, and politics. One of the greatest challenges for hermeneutics in the twenty-first century, as Riouval has said, is dialogue with the sciences. And for us today this also means expanding the hermeneutic circle—often texts talking to texts—to engage "harder" disciplines such as cognitive science, neuroscience, computer science, and other environmental and life sciences. It is at the limit of phenomenological hermeneutics that we shall find both the task and test of its future. This volume presents itself accordingly as a series of invitations to think "at the edge." And these, taken collectively, suggest a further challenge of carnal hermeneutics: namely, to rethink, in a new key, the enigma of flesh that has so baffled philosophers for centuries and, above all, to realize that flesh can no longer be confined to a phenomenological account of the human body but must also be recognized as a membrane or medium connecting us to "the flesh of the world." Flesh is precisely "the edge" where the human meets worlds that exceed and extend it—animal and environmental, sacred and profane. It is the site of endless transmissions between selves and strangers where "surplus meaning" comes to remind us that we can never be sufficient to ourselves. This surplus may be of the order of joy (viz. the reflections in this volume on eros, creation, life, and care) or of the order of suffering (viz. the essays on pain, trauma, tragedy, and violence); but both orders serve to instruct us that there is more to flesh than meets the eye—or even the tips of our fingers and tongues. Flesh raises more questions than answers. And that is why this volume is no more than a beginning—a promissory note of work to come.