

What is Carnal Hermeneutics?

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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 senses 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.

From the moment we are born, we live in the flesh. Vitality is a matter of taste and tact. Infant skin responds to the touch of the mother, hands and feet unfurling, mouth opening for its 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: what matters to oneself, to others and to the world in which we breathe and have our being. The rigid dichotomy between “transcendental” and “empirical” is 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, 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 say). And, third, we have sense in the original etymological connotation of *direction*—as in so many Romance languages, *sensus*, *senso*, *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 i) sensation, ii) meaning, iii) orientation—signify how we make sense of our lives 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 savory and unsavory. 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 about taste and tact. That’s what we mean, isn’t it, when we say that someone *sensible* is someone *sensitive*: they have “the touch,” as healer, teacher, artist, lover. They are attentive, careful, tentative. 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.

Contemporary continental philosophy has done much to address this question. But it has also 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 (in *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 *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 *The Conflict of Interpretations* and Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (inspired by Heidegger and Dilthey)—we witness an embrace of language at the expense of body. The journey from flesh to text all too often lacked a return ticket. And so we find the “linguistic turn” of hermeneutics tending to veer away 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, which were then 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. This does not mean, of course, that hermeneutics ceased to be phenomenological: Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur constantly remind us that what they are doing is “hermeneutic phenomenology.” Granted. But still the linguistic turn to the text was often construed as a turning away from the body—in practice if not in principle. One of the main purposes of this essay is to suggest ways of undertaking a return journey—ways that might help us recover the body as text and the text as body in order to

restore hermeneutics to phenomenology and vice versa, making explicit what was implicit all along.

What I am proposing, therefore, is nothing particularly new. Simply a reminder—at a moment when questions of matter, flesh, and body call out for new thinking—to revisit the deep and inextricable relationship between *sensation* and *interpretation*. To show how both are, as Aristotle once noted, modes of hermeneutic “mediation.” Such a move may help us better understand how we are constantly *reading* the flesh, *making sense* of sensibility, and *discerning* bodies in lived passion and place even as we symbolize and dream.

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; a method for reading between gaps and discriminating, distinguishing, and differentiating between selves and others—and others in ourselves. Such carnal hermeneutics has a crucial bearing on how we “sense” subtle distinctions between strangers who surprise us (the same term, *hostis*, can refer to guest or enemy).² The first act of civilization is wagering on whether to open the hand to the other or to reach for a weapon. Hostility or hospitality is at stake from the outset. What to make of strangers who arrive out of the blue, walk in from the desert, 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 discloses hermetic cyphers from above, Argos brings animal savvy from below. The former, masked as a migrant, revealed himself to Baucis and Philemon 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.³ In both cases we witness fundamental forms of “tact” in the discernment of strangers. We also find a reminder that we often need animal and divine messengers to bring 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,” wherein 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 occurs through a mutual “touching” of limbs between Yaweh and Jacob (the famous wrestling with the angel). Moreover, as John Manoussakis notes, Jesus came to earth to do two things: to taste and to touch.⁴ Both acts of carnal hermeneutics take place at the Last Supper and Emmaus; but they are already in evidence at the wedding feast at Cana and in numerous acts of healing: the pasting of mud and

saliva on the eyes of the blind man, the bleeding woman touching Jesus's hem, or the Phoenician woman's reminder that even "dogs eat crumbs from the table." If Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to hold onto him (*noli me tangere*), it is only because there are deeper, richer, more exquisite forms of touch to come. And it is surely telling that Andrei Rublev's canonical icon of the Trinity portrays the Three Persons partaking of a meal, reprising Abraham's welcoming of the strangers at Mamre.⁵

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 Vedantin tradition, is *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 taught the great lesson of sense breathing. Enlightenment followed.⁶

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 top, and blind irrationalism, at bottom, we find the all too human path of carnal hermeneutics: a middle way, a road less travelled philosophically, to be sure. But one that needs to be taken again and again.

The First Breakthrough—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.

In the concluding sections of *De Anima*, Book II, Aristotle makes the bold claim that touch is a discriminating sense.⁷ Against the common view that touch and taste are the lowest, because unmediated, sensations, he responds that these traditionally underestimated senses have their own indispensable form of "mediation." With respect to touch, flesh (*sarx*) is the medium (*metaxu*) that gives us space to discern between different kinds of experience—hot and cold, soft and hard, attractive and unattractive (*DA* 2:421). Or, as Aristotle puts it, "touch has many

differences" (*DA* 2:418). In touch, we are both touching and touched at the same time, but we do not for all that collapse into sameness. Difference is preserved. "Flesh is a medium, not an organ" (*DA* 2:428), insists Aristotle, which means that flesh observes a certain distance, a gap, a call to which touch responds. Touch is not immediacy, but rather mediation through flesh. Unlike Plato, who denigrated touch and taste as unmediated senses, helpless before the flux of things, and contrary to materialists like Democritus and Empedocles who claimed touch brings us into immediate contact with material stuff (effluvia and pellicles), Aristotle insists on the mediating character of tactility. To be tactile is to be exposed to otherness across gaps, to navigate and negotiate sensitively between other embodied beings. From the beginning, contact always involves an element of *tact*.

Aristotle locates 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.⁸ As the most basic and encompassing of sensations, it expresses the general "sensitivity" of flesh. But the most basic does not mean the most transparent. In fact, touch turns out to be the most complex and elusive sensation (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."⁹

But if touch is enigmatic, it is also deeply philosophical. For it is the sense that makes us most "sensitive" to the world and others, bringing us into touch with things greater than ourselves and thus putting ourselves in question. To learn to touch well is to learn to live well—that is, *tactfully*. Jean-Louis Chrétien writes, "The being to whom logos has been given as his share is a tactile being, endowed with the finest tact" (BT 85). And this is not just in the realm of the tangible, but potentially in all matters of seeing, hearing, tasting, and smelling also. 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 sense to withdraw into itself or to close itself off from others. Touch keeps us open to the world—even in sleep! Like Hermes, it is forever mediating and messaging between inside and outside, self and other, human and more-than-human. Tangible flesh is constantly a medium of transition and transmission. It is always on.

Let us try to unpack some of these inaugural claims. I may seem to be immediately present to what I touch and 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. However, there is nonetheless always something mediate in the ostensibly immediate, something “far” in the “near.” 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 arises. This is where what Heidegger calls the “hermeneutical as-structure” operates in our most basic sensations. For since all the senses, as noted, involve touch, and since touch involves mediation, all our sensations involve *interpretation* (BT 98), even when this omnipresent tactile hermeneutics hides itself, operating as a carnal medium we see through (*diaphanein*) but do not see. Flesh mediates unbeknownst to us, remaining an enigma describable only in images—e.g., watery membrane, air envelope, veil, or second skin. When we try to grasp the medium of touch, it leaves only metaphors in our hands. Flesh is figural from first to last. 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 always something the world does to us. It works both ways. Touch is what first *affects* us, and this in the most concrete, singular ways. From the beginning, flesh is charged with issues of attraction and retraction, eros and thanatos. When the child moves to the touch of its mother or opens its mouth to feed from the breast, it is already 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.¹⁰ The first cry is a call responding to a call: a reaching across distance, a leap over a gap or a 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) that makes sense of things. A highly sensitive carnal *Befindlichkeit* that evaluates, discriminates, and orientates in the most concrete of situations. Babies are moody little beings, their babblings and strokings already a play of probing and sounding, testing and trying.¹¹ Before we ever actually say the words “here” and “there,” “*fort*” and “*da*,” our fingers and tongues are already 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.”¹² 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” (BT 98).

If touch was, therefore, considered a “primitive” sense, then it was not because it was base or crude but rather because it was primal for life. For tactility is the ability to experience and negotiate the passion of existence, understood etymologically as *pathos/paschein*—suffering, receiving, or undergoing exposure to others who come to us *as* this or that. (This is what Husserl terms “passive syntheses.”) To touch and be touched simultaneously is to be *connected* with others in a way that opens us up. Flesh is open-hearted; it is where we experience our greatest vulnerability. It is the site where we are most keenly attentive to wounds and scars, to preconscious memories and traumas, as even our navel reminds us. With this comes a deep sense of fragility and insecurity. “Without insecurity no sensation,” and vice versa (BT 98). Through flesh—naked and tactile—we are subject to touch, day and night, even in sleep. We are exposed on all sides to great risk and great adventure and therefore, Aristotle suggests, most keenly intelligent. We can take nothing for granted. We must develop savvy. Flesh is a medium that is always deep, skin deep. And precisely because flesh mediates between a self who is carnally located “here” and an other “there,” it is, at bottom, what allows for empathy. *Sym-pathein. Einfühlung*. 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 civilization.¹³ War and peace are skin deep in the profoundest sense.

The whole question of pathos is crucial for our consideration of carnal hermeneutics. As that which enables us to feel with others, flesh mediates what is strange and alien. As Diderot reminds us in his *Letter to d’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 will make plain in great detail). This reversibility means that I can, in King Lear’s words, “expose myself to feel what beggars 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, and alterities that makes up our original hermeneutic sensibility: namely, our 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*) (DA 2:418). For Aristotle this means, at its simplest, that it is through the medium of flesh that i) we have “contact” with external sensibles, and ii) we transmit these with “tact” to our inner understanding. But even to

speak in terms of inner and outer is 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.

All this is not without aporias and enigmas. 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 that traverses the other four senses. It expresses body and soul at once. His point is simple and profound, and it bears repeating: one cannot live without sensing, one cannot exist as soul without flesh, and every sense requires the ability to be touched—at 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 the common milieu that makes all sensible mediation between the outer and inner worlds 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 also be a hearing soul, a seeing soul and so on," Chrétien writes (BT 108). 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."¹⁴

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 i) good touch, which differentiates between various kinds of sense, and ii) 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 *gouter*. Chrétien writes, "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" (BT 110–13). Herein lies the difference between the gourmand who ingests and the gourmet who relishes, or between the mouth as cavity (*bucca*) and palate (*os*), as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it (C 15). It is all a matter of waiting, withholding, savoring, and 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, devouring.

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, a medium of transmission and transit between self and other. 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 consent to being, of response to the call, of yes to the other, of welcome to the world. And it is also, for these very reasons, the first place of pain, suffering, and pathos. Being in touch with flesh means being at risk. And without risk there is no life worth living.

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.¹⁵ 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 bit 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, and smell, which perceive things at a distance, and the “animal” immediate senses of touch and taste, which do not. The latter sensations, when 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.

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 partibus 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 intellectualist 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 always already a *metaxu* at work. Even here there is always some interval, gap, or spacing that mediates between organ and object. And it is this medium called “flesh” (*sarx*) that allows for both contact and tact, a sensing both from itself and “through another” (*di’ heterou*). The gap makes all the difference: it is that which enables 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*: “Flesh is the medium of touch” (*DA* 2:422).¹⁶ Or, in Suárez’s famous translation: *caro non est organum sed medium*.¹⁷ Flesh is reducible to neither the object nor the organ of touch (Aristotle, as noted, is very vague about where such an organ exists). Flesh is a highly elusive milieu, a diaphanous spacing in which the organ of touch and the object being touched are never in direct contact, but are always mediated. The carnal *metaxu* generally veils itself as it enables form to pass through matter and to both mingle and commune. The means is omnipresent even if it goes unnoticed. For example, this applies to the medium of saliva in the transmission of taste: it is not enough to place food directly on the tongue to taste it, for if the mouth is either too dry or too wet, then no proper gustatory sensation is possible. And one finds a similar role played by the medium of light in sensations of sight and air in sensations of smell. In all the senses, concludes Aristotle, “the reality of an intermediary is necessary” (*DA* 2:419). *Metaxu*, in brief, serves as a transmitter between (*dia*) sense organs and material objects, allowing these forms to travel to the soul. It is what brings perceiver and perceived into community (*koinonia*).

Metaxu is thus the spacing of the interval that 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 interpretation 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 every touch of 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 inner wounds to outer scars, secrets to signs. In these cases, Hermes assumes his hermeneutic task and calls us to join him in the art of deciphering the meanings of flesh.

The Phenomenological Turn

In spite of Aristotle's breakthrough 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, announced by Plato, prevailed. With some notable exceptions in medieval scholastics and mystics,¹⁸ the dominant metaphysical mindset continued to deem reason the prime agency of interpretation, while the flesh was relegated to an inferior realm to be governed and supervised. Touch was demediatized and demoted. To be sensible was to be reasonable rather than sensitive, 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 the so-called "immediate" senses. Already Augustine had noted this, in the *Confessions*, when he spoke of the domination of sight over the other senses.¹⁹ And Kant in the *Anthropology* would copperfasten 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 was considered passive and subservient to the immediacy of external perception.²⁰ For Kant, this epistemological depreciation of the "lower" senses also 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, I believe, when Husserl restored the primacy of the "flesh" (*Leib*) as a living body that constitutes psychic reality.

It was in section two, chapter three 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."²¹ 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, *Empfindung* and *Emfindnis*. When one touches in this way, announced Husserl, “*it becomes body, it senses*” (I 152).²² In such a 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 one’s own vision. . . . I do not see myself, my Body, the way I touch myself. What I call the seen Body is not something seeing which is seen, the way my Body as touched Body is something touched which is touched” (I 155). Only in the case of touch, Husserl claims, does one have a total sense of flesh as a Janus-faced 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 have my most primordial experience of the other. My perception of others accompanies my perception of self (I 175–78). Husserl does not develop the implications of this revolutionary insight, alas, but subsequent interpreters of his phenomenology—in particular Paul Ricoeur—will, as we shall see, do so in the most 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 that first opens me to a radical passivity and passion—naked exposition to the other-than-me, receptive to whomever and whatever exceeds and calls and gives itself to me. As both Ricoeur and Chrétien will insist, my flesh is my wound, my natal pact, my umbilical memory, my vulnerability.²³ For while sight offers me dominion over external persons and things, it is my flesh that 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 while simultaneously receiving meaning from them. Once again, we rediscover Aristotle’s insight into flesh as mediation, hyphen, crossing.

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 givings. This is what Husserl means when he claims that “all sensings pertain to my soul” (I 157); or, one might add, to the body-soul as “flesh.” Here, he insists, belong “groups of sensations, which, *for the acts of valuing* . . . *play a role as matter.*” These are the sensations that form the “material substrate for the life of desire and will, sensations of energetic tension and relaxation, of inner restraint, paralysis, liberation etc.,” (I 160). So, where Kant and the rationalists gave primacy to reason as the transcendental unity of apperception, here Husserl speaks of the “body . . . as a new sort of

unity of apprehension" (*I* 163). Aesthesiology grounds gnoseology. We are not, in the first instance, cerebral sovereign egos but perceiving incarnate bodies. "The material Body is intertwined with the soul" (*I* 164) and serves as "an underlying basis of consciousness and undergoes its realizing apprehension *in unity with* this consciousness as soul and psyche" (*I* 164–65, italics mine).²⁴

Husserl, then, did not develop the radical implications of this work for carnal hermeneutics. But he made some crucial observations for others to follow. Merleau-Ponty, for example will take the phenomenology of touch as double-sensation to a new level. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he defines flesh accordingly as a "chiasm" between me and the world—a reversible crossing that precedes all analytic and transcendental divisions between subject and object, consciousness and thing.²⁵ 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 (*VI* 273), just as to say that the body 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 touch (as with Husserl)—touching and being touched, seeing and being seen—but also a reversibility across different senses. One finds a crossed reversibility of the tangible in the visible and the visible in the tangible (*VI* 134, 146). And this chiasmic function is extended not only to all the senses but to language itself. The I that speaks words is the I spoken in words. Sensation and language are not only isomorphic; they are also transmorphic. In a radical gesture that brings Merleau-Ponty to the threshold of hermeneutics, he speaks about a reversibility of linguistic sense 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" (*VI* 155).

Flesh is the cradle of *both* perception and the word. The phenomenon of multiple 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 Merleau-Ponty also takes it to a new 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 my body, isolated opposed to another consciousness; instead 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 preexisting, prereflective chiasm that allows for the mutual insertion of the world between the folds of my body and my body between the folds of the world (VI 264). It is a twofold ontological texture—feeling and felt—that provides the underlying unity between the becoming-body of my senses and the becoming-world of my body—or, as Merleau-Ponty simply 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 rather 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—of ego and alter ego, that bedeviled modern philosophy from Descartes to Sartre—is resolved to the extent that “it is not I who sees, not he who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us” (VI 142). Husserl’s original insight into the implications of tactile double sensation for “empathy”—later developed by both Edith Stein and Max Scheler—is here given a new ontological depth. It has to be said, however, that Merleau-Ponty resists the great dialectical temptation—signaled by Derrida in *On Touching*²⁶—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 (VI 147). 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*.

An initial insight into the potential of carnal hermeneutics is to 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.”²⁷ Merleau-Ponty affirms that incarnation, as eros, must be understood not just biologically but also 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” that has a specific “significance,” not as a *cogito* aiming at a *cogitatum*, but as an existential body aiming at another in the world (*PP*

156–57). Citing the example of Schneider, a patient deficient in touch and vision and incapable of living the world in a sexual or emotional way, Merleau-Ponty notes how Schneider's inability to read the world through touch coincides with the fact that he cannot respond to the world sexually. Schneider cannot make distinctions between one kind of sexual being and another. And for Merleau-Ponty the impairment of action, cognition, and sex are all structurally interconnected (*PP* 157).

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 also a general intentional (albeit pre-conscious) way of being-toward-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, life or death. 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 an important symptom of our full existence, in much the same 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'" (*PP* 159). 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 synchronised 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, and 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*" (*PP* 160).

This 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 rather because I cannot speak: "The girl does not *cease* to speak, she 'loses' her voice as one loses a memory" (*PP* 161). 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.

Because our bodily existence inaugurates our primary “consonance with the world,” it remains our first line of resistance and exposure 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.” Together they constitute a “woven fabric” of “inter-communication” (PP 166).

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 that 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” that 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 “inter-fusion” to describe this mutual mediation, where “existence permeates sexuality and vice versa” (PP 169). That is why there is no explanation of eros that 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 or its or ours” (PP 171).

Diacritical Sensation

This element of “difference” at the heart of sensation was developed by Merleau-Ponty in his Collège de France lectures in the fifties, delivered while 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.”²⁸ This is a new mode of expressive sensibility deriving from the crossing of sensation and language. Borrowing liberally from Saussure’s notion that words only signify by virtue of their differences from 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, 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” (MS 203–4).

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” (MS 211).

This logic of diacritical perception is alien to the classical presumption that difference presupposes identity. On the contrary, writes Merleau-Ponty, the identity of these terms emerges in the tension of their differences, their contours arising from the encroachment (*empiètement*) of things on things. And here he coins the term “infra-thing,” in contradistinction to the older 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 derived correspondence arises only in retrospect and 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 insofar as they are structured like the phonetic differentia-

tions 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” (MS 204). Our body schemas, in other words, operate like phonetic systems that 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, gaps (*écarts*). Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in Gestalt language: “Consciousness of the figure is consciousness without knowledge of the ground (*fond*)” (MS 204).

We may say accordingly that diacritical perception (or more broadly, sensation) witnesses the birth of expression, against an unformed background, as a meaning that begins and re-begins, an awakening that 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 dia-critical” (MS 206). And Merleau-Ponty adds, significantly, “This is Valéry’s idea,” thereby indicating that his attempts to describe the hidden “diacritical” function is as indebted to literary poetics as it is to structural linguistics. (Once again we note how great phenomenologists have resorted to poetics when it comes to naming or expressing the enigma of signifying flesh: Aristotle invokes tropes of membrane and water, while Merleau-Ponty draws on figures of modulation and chiasmus). Either way, this sensory birth of meaning occurs not in the manner of a foundational cause (as in the old 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 (MS 204–5). 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.

It is important to remind ourselves here that the diacritical model of carnal interpretation is not a matter of voluntarist invention (à la Sar-

tre). 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, laterally, 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 Paul Valéry to make his point: “A man is nothing so long as nothing draws from him effects and productions which surprise him” (*MS* 205). 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*. From sexual expression to the act of eating itself, every carnal act and organ inscribes its own *imaginaire*. 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.

Ricoeur’s Wager

Ricoeur 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 1960s, he departed from this seminal phenomenology in order to concentrate more exclusively on a hermeneutics of the text. After this turn, he signals a surprising (and I believe regrettable) division between a hermeneutics of texts, on the 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.”²⁹ And he even commends the later Merleau-Ponty for moving beyond his initial phenomenology of “incarnation” towards a “second philosophy” of language as privileged medium of “distance” and “reflection.”³⁰ A commendation which, one suspects, is curiously applicable to himself.

There are, however, some fascinating reflections in Ricoeur’s final writings that attempt to reanimate a dialogue between his initial phenomenology of the flesh and his later hermeneutics of language. He returns to other possibilities of a hermeneutics of flesh in one of his last

major works, *Oneself as Another* (1990). In a section of the final chapter, entitled "Selfhood and Otherness," Ricoeur defines flesh as "the mediator between the self and a world which is itself taken in accordance with its variable degrees of of practicability and so of foreignness."³¹ As such, flesh reveals a certain "lived passivity" where the body, in the deepest intimacy of its 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. First, we need the experience of our own lived flesh to provide us with a sense of our individual *belonging*. It is what gives a corporeal constancy and anchoring to the self.³² 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 things attest to their existence as indubitably 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" (OAA 322). 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" (OAA 322).

Here Ricoeur makes the interesting point that it is not, as we might expect, in Heidegger—who ostensibly existentialised the phenomenological subject—that we discover the greatest ontology of the flesh, but in Husserl.³³ It is Husserl who offers the "most promising sketch of the flesh that would mark the inscription of hermeneutical phenomenology in an ontology of otherness" (OAA 332). 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 *Leibhaft* (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" (OAA 324). 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: this is the foremost otherness of the flesh with respect to all initiative" (OAA 324).

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 (OAA 324). 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. He states, "Among the bodies . . . included in my peculiar ownness, I then 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 (*chair*, 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'" (CM97). It is only on the basis of this primordial spatial materiality of immanent flesh—as a "pre-linguistic relation" to the world of the I can—that we could construct a genuine semantics and hermeneutics of action. But it is here that phenomenology also reaches its limit. In seeking to derive the objective world from the "non-objectifying primordial experience" of flesh, Husserl goes too far. He ignores that flesh is not just mine but equally a body among other bodies, both *Leib* and *Körper* at the same time. 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, as Husserl says, out of the network of intersubjectivity—*itself*, unlike Husserl's conception, founding selfhood in its own way" (OAA 326).

So Ricoeur concludes that while Husserl recognized the primordially of subjective flesh and the necessity of intersubjective language, he could not reconcile the two. Ricoeur writes, "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" (OAA 326). 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, I believe, can provide a full account of the ontological relationship between flesh and world.

Let us recap. In order for my flesh to engage in the work of "transfer by analogy," whereby I can enter 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" (OAA 333). 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 technical 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" (OAA 333). An interval 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" (OAA 334). 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 very program of phenomenology, in transgressing the experience of one's own flesh" (OAA 335).

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 “he/she says in his/her heart: I think” (OAA 335); 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.” I am called by the other, who comes to me in a way that I cannot assimilate to my own immanence. I can only respond by “reading” the other’s transcendence in immanence, across distance and difference. Ricoeur actually speaks of a hermeneutic interpreting of the body by the body that precedes the work of inference through formal signs. He refers to it as a primal “relation of *indication* in which the interpretation is made immediately, much as the reading of symptoms” (OAA 334). And the “style” of confirmation to which this reading of indications belongs involves, says Ricoeur, “neither primordial intuition nor discursive inference” (OAA 334). It entails a special grammar of carnal hermeneutics across distance, gaps, and differences: carnal hermeneutics as diacritical hermeneutics.³⁴

* * *

By way of conclusion, I would like to note four important future directions for the project of carnal hermeneutics. First, there is the *deconstructive hermeneutics of touch*, sketched out by Derrida in *On Touching* and developed by Nancy in a number of powerful recent works from *Noli me Tangere* to *Corpus I* and *II*. Second, there is the *feminist hermeneutics of the body* inaugurated by thinkers like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, drawing from both psychoanalysis and phenomenology, and also represented by a new generation of feminist thinkers like Shelly Rambo, Anne O’Byrne, and Karmen MacKendrick. Third, there is the *theological hermeneutics of incarnation* inspired by the phenomenological retrieval of Christian mysticism and exegesis on the part of Michel Henry, Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Falque, and John Manoussakis. Fourth and finally, there is a *diacritical hermeneutics of flesh*, represented by the ecophenomenology of David Wood and Ed Casey, the diaphenomenology of Emmanuel Alloa, the biodiacritics of Ted Toadvine, and the environmental hermeneutics of Brian Treanor, in creative dialogue with the new realist and materialist movements.

In addition to these projects, I would add the importance of diacritical hermeneutics in engaging with the carnal “signs” of our times, as evinced by the increasing digitalization of the body and the virtualisation of our means of communication and communion. Here “medium” takes on new connotations unknown and unknowable for Aristotle when he

first wrote about *metaxu* two thousand years ago, and scarcely imaginable even for the major contemporary phenomenologists discussed in this essay. This semiotic task will be a major challenge in our coming age of exarnation.

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NOTES

- 1 This essay is drawn from the forthcoming book *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2015) (hereafter cited as *CH*).
- 2 See the hermeneutic analysis of the other as stranger, foreigner, and alien in the introduction to *Phenomenologies of the Stranger*, ed. Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2011) and *Hosting the Stranger*, ed. Kearney and James Taylor (New York: Continuum Press, 2011).
- 3 See Kearney, "What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?" in *The Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 1, no. 1 (2011), ed. Nancy Moules, University of Calgary (especially notes 5 and 6).
- 4 John Manoussakis, "On the Flesh of the Word," in *CH* (no pagination yet available).
- 5 Genesis 17: 6–8. See chapter 1, "In the Moment: The Uninvited Guest," in Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010).
- 6 I am grateful to my brother, Michael Kearney, for bringing this to my attention.
- 7 Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J. A. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931), 2:423 (hereafter cited as *DA*).
- 8 See Jean-Louis Chrétien's illuminating commentary on Aristotle's claim that touch is the most universal of all the senses in an essay entitled "Body and Touch" in *The Call and the Response* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2004), 92–94 (hereafter cited as *BT*). I am deeply indebted to Chrétien's brilliant hermeneutic retrieval of Aristotle's reading of the senses in *De Anima* Book II, and also to the recent innovative retrievals of this same work by Emmanuel Alloa and Manoussakis.
- 9 See commentary by Chrétien, "Body and Touch," 95–96, and the fascinating analysis by Manoussakis of these same passages in the *De Anima* in "Touching," part 3 of *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2007).
- 10 See the very insightful distinction between the infant mouth as *os* or as *bucca* in its first gestures of touching and tasting in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2008), 2–122 (hereafter cited as *C*). Nancy's phenomenological description of the body's radical exposure to the other from birth is captured in his wonderful neologism "expeausition"—the exposition of skin to skin (*C* 14).
- 11 I am grateful to Alloa for these references. Alloa, "Getting in Touch," in *CH* (no pagination yet available).
- 12 See Nancy, "On Skin," in *CH* (no pagination yet available).
- 13 On the importance of the handshake for the primal turning of hostility into hospitality, see Kearney, "Welcoming the Stranger," in *All Changed? Culture and Identity in Contemporary Ireland*, ed. Pádraig Ó Duibhir, Rory Mc Daid, and Andrew O'Shea (Dublin: Duras, 2011). Think of the first wager of open hand in the encounter between the rivals Diomedes and Glaucus in Homer's *Iliad* or in Abraham's greeting of the strangers at Mamre.
- 14 Octavio Paz, "Árbol Adentro" (A Tree Within). Cited by Chrétien (*BT* 109).
- 15 For Aristotle's critique of the materialist notion of immediate perception, see Alloa, "Metaxu. Figures de la médialité chez Aristote," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 2, no. 62 (2009): 252–53.

16 As *metaxu*, flesh has the potentiality to discern hermeneutically between opposites, differences, variations. “What is ‘in the middle’ is fitted to discern; relative to either extreme it can put itself in the place of the other” (*DA II*: 424a, 529).

17 Alloa cites Suarez’s translation in *CH* (no pagination yet available).

18 See Chrétien’s highly instructive analysis of medieval philosophical commentaries on Aristotle’s theory of touch—especially Suárez, Bonaventure, and Aquinas (BT 103–5).

19 See Martin Heidegger on Augustine: “The remarkable priority of ‘seeing’ was noticed particularly by Augustine, in connection with his interpretation of concupiscentia: ‘Seeing belongs properly to the eyes.’ But we even use this word ‘seeing’ for the other senses when we devote them to cognizing. For we do not say, ‘Hear how it glows,’ or ‘smell how it glistens,’ or ‘Taste how it shines,’ or ‘feel how it flashes’; but we say of each ‘see’ . . . ‘see how it sounds,’ ‘see how it smells,’ ‘see how it tastes,’ etc. . . . Therefore the experience of the senses in general is designated as the ‘lust of the eyes’; for when the issue is one of knowing something, the other senses, by a certain resemblance, take to themselves the function of seeing—a function in which the eyes have priority.” Heidegger is quoting from Augustine’s *Confessions*. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 215–16.

20 Alloa quotes from Kant’s *Anthropology* in *CH* (no pagination yet available).

21 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Book II, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 153 (hereafter cited as *I*).

22 Husserl makes the distinction between two different ways of experiencing the same sensation, or more accurately, the two simultaneous sides of the same act of touching: *Empfindung* as the experience of the touched object (as cold, hard, etc.) and *Empfindnis* as the localized sensing in my touching fingers.

23 See Paul Ricoeur’s reading of flesh as umbilical “scar” and pre-natal memory in *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1966), 439–43 (hereafter cited as *FN*). Jean-Luc Marion has contributed rigorous phenomenological analyses of the role of flesh as exposure to alterity and saturation in such works as *Being Given* and *The Erotic Phenomenon*. One might also mention here the theological phenomenologies of *la chair* developed by Michel Henry and Emmanuel Falque.

24 See also: “A Body . . . a material thing . . . as localization field for sensations and for stirrings of feelings . . . as phenomenal partner and counter-part of all perceptions of things . . . makes up a fundamental component of the real givenness of the soul” (*I* 165).

25 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Linguis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1979), 273 (hereafter cited as *VI*).

26 See Jacques Derrida’s critical reading of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of touch as a haptocentric intuitionism. Derrida, “Tangents III,” in *On Touching*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005), 190.

27 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 154 (hereafter cited as *PP*).

28 Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l’expression*, ed. Emmanuel de Saint Aubert (Geneva: Metispresses, 2011) (hereafter cited as *MS*).

29 Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), 139.

30 Ricoeur, “Hommage à Merleau-Ponty,” in *Lectures 2: La contrée des philosophes* (1961; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 163–64.

31 Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 318 (hereafter cited as *OAA*).

32 See Ricoeur’s brilliant critique of Derek Parfit’s “puzzling cases” of consciousness without bodies, as well as his critique of technological fictions of disincarnate human

identities (OAA 150–51). Ricoeur’s main literary example is Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*, but one could also add more recent sci-fi movies like *Simone* or *Her*, where a virtual OS (computer operating system) is divorced from physical touch and taste, with dramatic existential consequences. Ricoeur’s basic point is that if one deprives the human of its terrestrial-corporeal anchoring, then one deprives the self of any perduring lived identity as constancy-in-change (idem-ipse). Ricoeur argues that literary fictions, unlike technological fictions, remain imaginative variations on “an invariant, our corporeal condition experienced as the existential mediation between the self and the world” (OAA 150). This invariant anchoring of lived corporeality testifies to the ontological condition of carnal selfhood in “persons as acting and suffering” (OAA 151).

33 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), 97 (hereafter cited as *CM*).

34 See the current development of diacritical hermeneutics by Alloa, Ted Toadvine, and Treanor (all featured in *Diacritical Hermeneutics*, ed. Kearney and Treanor), as well as my own recent publications: Kearney, “What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?”; “Eros, Diacritical Hermeneutics and the Maybe,” *Philosophical Thresholds: Crossings of Life and World (Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy)*, vol. 36, Special *SPEP* supplement, *Philosophy Today*, vol. 55, ed. Cynthia Willett and Leonard Lawlor, 2011; and “Diacritical Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutic Rationality/La rationalité herméneutique*, ed. Andrew Wiercinski et al. (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2011).