

DRAFT

Chapter Three

The Recovery of the Flesh in Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty

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In this essay I propose to bring Paul Ricœur and Maurice Merleau-Ponty into a conversation about the question of “flesh.” Such an exchange never took place during their lifetimes, but I will argue that, ultimately, neither thinker has the full story, and each supplements the other—Ricœur’s more “textual” approach and Merleau-Ponty’s more “carnal” perspective. My wager is that both can be crossed, retrospectively, to deepen and broaden what I would call a shared project of carnal hermeneutics.

The basic idea of carnal hermeneutics dates back to Aristotle, who maintains in the *De Anima* that flesh (*sarx*) is not an organ but a medium (*metaxu*).¹ In a dense and difficult passage that has been greatly neglected for two thousand years, Aristotle goes on to say that the primary sensation of flesh is touch, the most primordial of all the senses. Touch is the most philosophical sense, he insists, for it is always already interpreting—an assertion that, of course, flies straight in the face of Platonism. Right from the start, sensible differences—for example, between smooth and hard, hot and cold—are already a way of experiencing the world in terms of values and qualities, projects and possibilities. But just as the hermeneutics of touch constitutes our world, it is at the same time passively exposed to it. Touch works both ways—all touching is also a being touched. Tactile action is passion in a bilateral reversible process. The most philosophical person, concludes Aristotle, is precisely the one who is the most vulnerable, sensitive, discerning—because that person is most in touch with the world being touched.

My purpose here is not to rehearse the debate between the hapto-centric Aristotle and the opto-centric Plato;² rather, I will turn to the modern pheno-

menological retrieval of Aristotle's insight—though this retrieval was more implicit than explicit. For example, Husserl mentions Aristotle only once in *Ideas II*, when he famously discusses the phenomenon of “double sensation,”³ and Merleau-Ponty and Ricœur hardly mention him at all. In fact, Merleau-Ponty famously said, upon being told that practically everything he wrote in *The Visible and the Invisible* was anticipated by Aristotle, “*Je suis peu aristotélicien*” (“I am not much of an Aristotelian”). He simply had not read much Aristotle, in line with the post-Scholastic nature of most secular philosophy in French national universities after the Revolution.

In any case, my aim is to show how Merleau-Ponty and Ricœur develop a phenomenology and a hermeneutics of the flesh that argues that there is a mode of sensibility that is prior to cognitive intelligence. It is a mode of intelligence, but it is savvy, which precedes *savoir* and *sapientia*. There is a primordial basic savvy, or tact, to which even our colloquial language bears witness when we say that someone has tact or taste; to be in touch with things is to relate intelligently to the world and to people in the world. That is the ordinary-language level of the sort of insight I am trying to develop in carnal hermeneutics.

MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE FLESH

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty takes on what he views as a dualism, a residual Cartesianism, in Sartre. For Sartre, the body touching and the body touched belong to “two incommunicable levels,”⁴ whereas Merleau-Ponty insists that they are profoundly co-implicated in the flesh (*la chair*). Later, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he defines the flesh as a “chiasm” between me and the world, a reversible crossing that precedes all divisions between subject and object. Flesh is the common chain or bridge of both subject and object and of all reversible perceptions: seeing/being seen, touching/being touched, hearing/being heard, etc. Reexamining Husserl's “intertwining” (*Verflechtung*), Merleau-Ponty rediscovers flesh as a mutual interweaving between perceiving and perceived. To say that the body is a seer is to say that it is visible; to say that the body touches is to say that it is tangible. But moreover, it is also to say that the body is both visible and tangible. Whereas Husserl spoke only of reversibility within each sense, Merleau-Ponty extends reversibility across them all. The tangible crosses with the visible and vice versa, and this multilateral reversibility extends even to language itself: the I who speaks words is the I spoken in words. Sensation and language are isomorphic and also transmorphic. Radically, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a chiasmus of language and perception, referring to “the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech.”⁵

In short, flesh is the cradle of both perception and the word. Thus, without naming Aristotle, Merleau-Ponty rehabilitates the ancient Aristotelian insights that the flesh is a medium, not merely an organ, and that all senses involve touch. And whereas the *De Anima* was still largely psychological, Merleau-Ponty brings these insights to an ontological level, arguing that flesh is both what makes the world appear (as touching-speaking) and what belongs to the world (as touched-spoken). I do not start as an isolated body opposed to another consciousness (*à la* Descartes or Sartre); on the contrary, I exist in my body precisely because I am already operating within and from the flesh of the world. I speak because I am spoken to and through; I touch because I am in touch with the world. Flesh is the twofold ontological texture—feeling and felt—that provides the underlying unity between, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the becoming-body of my senses and the becoming-world of my body. As such, the chiasm of flesh cannot be reduced to any of the dichotomies beloved of metaphysics—form and matter, soul and substance, consciousness and object—for it is rather to be understood as an ontological “element” in which we always already find ourselves. When one swims and breathes, one is not sure where one’s body ends and the water or air begins; in the same way, the ontological relation of one’s body to the world is a reversible elemental co-participation.

This analysis also enables Merleau-Ponty to resolve the transcendental problem of intersubjectivity, which troubled philosophers from Descartes to Sartre, for “it is not I who sees, nor the other who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us.”⁶ Here he brings a new ontological dimension to Husserl’s insight into the implications of double sensation for “empathy,” further developed by Edith Stein and Max Scheler. Contra Derrida, who charges Merleau-Ponty with “haptocentric closure,”⁷ in which reversibility becomes a sort of fusion and sameness, I maintain that Merleau-Ponty is fully aware that the chiasmic relation between the self and the other always has a gap (*écart*). Indeed, the chiasm is a sensation and a sensibility through gaps, through differences, and in this Merleau-Ponty has far more in common with Derrida than Derrida admits.

An Ontology of Desire

Let us now return to *Phenomenology of Perception* to consider the chapter “The Body in Its Sexual Being,” in which Merleau-Ponty specifically addresses the concept of desire and affirms that incarnation, as eros, must be understood not just biologically but ontologically. Thereby he provides phenomenological substance to Freud’s distinction, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, between the basic drives, eros and thanatos. Merleau-Ponty discusses an “erotic perception” that has a specific “significance,” not as a *cogito* aiming at a *cogitatum*, but as an existential body aiming at another body in

the world.⁸ Citing the example of Schneider, a patient deficient in touch and vision and incapable of living in the world in a sexual or emotional way, Merleau-Ponty explains that Schneider's inability to read life through touch coincides with his sexual indifference. His sexual impairment is also an impairment of action and cognition. Schneider is suffering from an existential sickness. Psychoanalysis has already shown that libido is not a mere instinct and that all erotic acts, even the most basic, have meaning. Sexuality is not just genital but is an intentional, pre-conscious way of experiencing the world. Eros, according to Merleau-Ponty, is directed toward the subject's whole life. He thus expands the notion of sexuality, revealing it to be both physiological and ontological. Sexuality must be thought accordingly as a distinct sign and symptom of our full existence, much as Gestalt psychology has shown that "the smallest sensory datum is never presented in any other way than integrated into a configuration and already *patterned*."⁹ At the level of the senses nothing exists in isolation, but only in differential relation to the other in parts and wholes. There is no dualism: biological existence and human existence are synchronized all the way down. To live the body (*leben*) is already to live this or that particular kind of world (*erleben*). Eating, breathing, loving are already forms of ontological expression that mark out each living person's singular style of existence.

This is not spiritualism or naturalism. The body does not indicate an inner mind as a house number might indicate a home. The body signifies meaning because it is that meaning. If I lose my voice (aphasia), it is not because I am withholding speech but because I cannot speak. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "The girl does not *cease* to speak, she 'loses' her voice as one loses a memory."¹⁰ Or losing a gift from a friend after falling out with that friend signifies a general relationship of loss, of falling out, and finding it again upon reconciling with the friend signifies a general reconciliation, a re-finding. Both are part of one's general ontological way or style of being. They are linked together in a single existential sensibility of losing and forgetting; carnal signs are both signifier and signified.

Relating this to other cases of mental illness, such as anorexia or pithiatism, Merleau-Ponty illustrates how bodily symptoms are not simply a matter of biochemistry or of conscious manipulation but are rather an expression of carnal being. Cures are often a matter of the senses, not of the will or of consciousness. As he explains,

[P]sychological medicine does not act on the patient by making him *know* the origin of his illness: sometimes a *touch of the hand* puts a stop to the spasms and restores to the patient his speech [. . .] the patient would not accept the meaning of his disturbances as revealed to him without the personal relationship formed with the doctor, or without the confidence and friendship felt towards him, and the change of existence resulting from this friendship. Nei-

ther symptom nor cure is worked out at the level of objective or positing consciousness, but *below* that level.¹¹

Therapy thus involves a “conversion” through the body-subject in tactful contact with other body-subjects. This is the Asclepian approach to healing rather than the Hippocratic approach to curing—not that the two have to be rigidly separated. The doctor who has the healing touch is someone who is tactful in his or her relation to the suffering body of the patient. Because it is our flesh that exposes us to others, even its closure in itself is never a given; just as in sleep we are never completely asleep, nor are we ever completely sick in illness. Flesh is the possibility of a coexistence with other human beings. Merleau-Ponty therefore defines healing as a reopening of self to others through the body, a turning from thanatos (the death drive of closure) to eros (the life drive of communion). One could speak here of a *connais-sance* (knowledge) that is knowledge precisely insofar as it is a *co-naissance* (co-birth) with the other.

Our bodily existence, because it inaugurates our primary “consonance with the world,” always remains our first line of both resistance and openness to others. In the body, existence finds its originary sense. Expression does not exist apart from the body, and the body does not exist apart from expression. What Merleau-Ponty calls the “incarnate significance” of the flesh is the “central phenomenon” of which the two poles of the traditional body/mind dichotomy are mere abstract derivatives. Flesh and existence presuppose each other—indeed, *are* each other, flesh as “solidified existence” and existence as “perpetual incarnation.”¹² Together they constitute what Merleau-Ponty names the “woven fabric” of “inter-communication.”¹³

Returning to his guiding theme of eros, Merleau-Ponty concludes that “desire and love” are neither “bundles of instincts” governed by natural law nor strategies of some willful, Cartesian mind but rather are carnal interplays where the self “opens out upon another” in an exposure to alterity that is the beginning of our existence, both physical and metaphysical. Indeed, he goes so far as to assert 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 through which we see the world. This point calls to mind Aristotle’s notion of the flesh as a means or medium (*metaxu*) of which we are not aware: as with the blind spot of the eye, we do not see it but see because of it. Eros hides itself—which is perhaps one reason Freud says is unconscious. Eros and thanatos are not biological: you will never find them in a blood test, yet the blood flows according to the two drives; they are not, as it were, parachuted in ex cathedra. Located in flesh, eros spreads forth like a transpersonal “color” or “sound” between self and other. Merleau-Ponty coins the term “interfusion” to describe this mutual mediation where “existence permeates sexuality and vice versa.”¹⁴ No explanation for eros can

reduce it to anything other than itself because it is already other than itself: it is a perpetual crossing over between inner and outer, nature and freedom, sameness and difference.

Diacritical Perception

Before moving on to Ricoeur, let us consider Merleau-Ponty's 1953 Collège de France lecture course, *Le Monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, in which he provides a fascinating account of what he terms "diacritical perception," a new mode of expressive sensibility involving the crossing of sensation and language. Borrowing from Saussure's notion that words only signify by virtue of their differences from other words, Merleau-Ponty contends that meanings are never given as isolated terms but always as parts of a mobile interaction of signs involving intervals and absences, folds and gaps. And going well beyond Saussure and the structuralists, Merleau-Ponty makes the radical claim that this is not simply a function of language but is the very structure of perception itself: in its nascent state, perception is *diacritical* (a term that comes from the phrase "diacritical signs"), and so it is structured like language. In the beginning is hermeneutics, which means logic not as logos but as savvy, sensation, sensibility. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in a crucial note, "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."¹⁵ In a subsequent note (entitled "diacritical perception"), he takes the example of reading another's face: "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."¹⁶ This logic of diacritical perception is wholly alien to the classical assertion that difference presupposes sameness. On the contrary, for Merleau-Ponty, the identity of terms emerges only in the tension of their differences. Diacritical reading is a reading across gaps, before things are separated into identity. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a realm of "pre-identity" and deploys the term "infra-thing" in contradistinction to the old notion of discrete objective substances. Infra-things are quasi-things that exist in this realm of savvy, of tact, prior to the division into subjective and objective things. And it is in the primary diacritical realm that we discriminate prereflectively between parts and wholes across difference.

Our most basic carnal sensations may, therefore, be said to be structured diacritically insofar as they are structured like the phonetic differentiations of language. They are not language but are prior to language; if anything, language is derived from this primordial realm. 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. Perception of figure is not simultaneously perception of ground but rather is “imperception”: the sensing of the invisible in and through the visible. Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in the language of Gestalt psychology, it is “consciousness of the figure without knowledge of the ground (*fond*).”¹⁷

Thus we may say that diacritical perception 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. Hence the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s metaphor of modulation: “Consider sensation itself, the act of sensing [*le sentir*], as the intervening of a figure on a *fond*. Modulation. As a sound modulates silence. As a color modulates an open space by varying it. Every sign is diacritical.”¹⁸ And he adds, “This is Valéry’s idea.”¹⁹ Like Husserl describing time-consciousness or Aristotle describing flesh, Merleau-Ponty resorts to poetics. Certainly he turns to psychology, but also he takes the notion of modulation from Valéry, of *co-naissance* from Claudel, of involuntary memory from Proust, of natality from Bachelard. Just as Freud and Plato looked to myth when trying to figure out eros, Merleau-Ponty turns to poets and painters (Cézanne is an important figure for him as well).

It important to remember here that diacritical conscious interpretation is not a matter of voluntarist intervention, as Sartre would maintain. It is not a question of reading *into* something but of reading *from* 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 it is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty insists that the solicitation of our body schema functions symbolically, obliquely, indirectly, like a sexual or ontological *surprise*. Diacritical sensation, across distances, comes not just from us but from another person or thing. Merleau-Ponty again cites Valéry: “A man is nothing so long as nothing draws from him effects and productions which surprise him.”²⁰ But to be surprised one must be ready to receive, open to solicitation and seduction from the world. For Merleau-Ponty, every sense has its own *symbolique*, every organ its own *imaginaire*, from sexual expression even to the act of eating. Fantasy, imagination, and symbolizing are going on from the moment of the child’s first cry. Already, from the start, there is hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of Argos, not of Hermes—but perhaps the two are not really so far apart. Hermes comes from above with ineffable messages; Argos comes from below, the

dog who with his hermeneutic flair recognizes Odysseus when he returns. Sensation is expression, and expression is sensation. Flesh is word, and word is flesh.

RICŒUR'S HERMENEUTICS OF FLESH AND TEXT

Let us now turn to Ricœur, who in the 1950s also developed a phenomenology of flesh inspired by Husserl. But although this early phenomenology was developing in the direction of a diagnostics carnal signification—in tandem with Merleau-Ponty, whom Ricœur does not, however, cite—Ricœur took the “linguistic turn” in the 1960s and departed from this seminal phenomenology of embodiment to concentrate more exclusively on a hermeneutics of the text. There are, nonetheless, some fascinating reflections in Ricœur’s later works, notably *Oneself as Another* (1990), that attempt to restart a dialogue between his initial phenomenology of the flesh and his later hermeneutics of language.

The Early Phenomenology and the Textual Turn

I will briefly address his early phenomenology of the body in *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950) and will then concentrate on his last study of flesh in *Oneself as Another*, published shortly before his death. The three particularly relevant sections of *Freedom and Nature* are “Motivation and the Corporeal Involuntary,” “Bodily Spontaneity,” and “Life: Structure, Genesis, Birth.” What interests him in this work is the “incarnate cogito.” Like all French phenomenologists, he is battling with Descartes. What, he asks, is the *corps propre* (proper body), announced by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty? Starting with the phenomenon of “affectivity,” he notes that “[t]o feel is still to think” [*sentir est encore penser*].²¹ Carnal affectivity is thus a mediating sensation between our flesh-and-blood existence on the one hand and the thinking order of interpretation, evaluation, and understanding on the other. So he is already starting from a Cartesian model and asking how the two sides come together, but when he goes on to do the phenomenology, he discovers that what he calls the flesh is already thinking in the sense of discerning, evaluating.

His diagnostics of the lived body begins with an analysis of need. Need, of course, is often thought of (in Levinas, for instance) as an object, as something that can be satisfied, as biological or natural, in contrast to desire, which is on the ontological level. Ricœur replies that in fact there is already a hermeneutics, an interpretation, at work in need. He explains, “No longer is consciousness a symptom of the object-body, but rather the object-body is an indication of a personal body [*corps propre*] in which the Cogito shares as its very existence.”²² Affectivity and thought are thus connected from the outset

by a tie of mutual inherence and adherence. The two bodies (inner and outer, *Leib* and *Körper*) are not separate relations but are two ways of “reading” the same flesh—externally (as nature) and internally (as incarnation). Need thus cannot simply be placed on the side of nature, or the external, and reduced, naturalistically, to a mere reflex sensation transmitting an organic defect in the form of a motor reaction. Need expresses itself in terms of pleasure with motivating values and tendencies that are not imposed by consciousness or reason but are already present in the most basic relations. As he puts it, “it is [. . .] an action towards. . . .”—“not a re-action but a pre-action [. . .].”²³ In other words, need reveals me not as mechanism of stimulus-response but as “a life gaping as appetite for the other.”²⁴ To have needs is not to be determined by them; we are continually discerning between needs and pre-reflectively evaluating when best to realize or suspend them: “It is because the impetus of need is *not* an automatic reflex that it can become a *motive* which inclines without compelling and that there are men who prefer to die of hunger than betray their friends.”²⁵ Human beings have the ability to choose between hunger and something else. Think, for example, of Gandhi choosing his hunger strike over food. That we have this freedom means that our sensations and appetites are already a savvy of life, a *savoir-faire*. As Ricœur states, “Through need, values *emerge* without my having posited them in my act-generating role: bread is good, wine is good. Before I will it, a value already appeals to me solely because I exist in flesh; it is already a reality in the world, a reality which reveals itself to me through the lack [. . .].”²⁶ In short, evaluation is already going on at the most basic level. Values are meaningless unless they *touch* me; thus ethics itself requires the mediation of flesh. In this way, though he does not yet use the word “hermeneutics,” the early Ricœur’s corporeal diagnostics already offers a sort of proto-hermeneutics of flesh to which he will not return for sixty years.

With his “textual turn” of the 1960s, Ricœur turns from a diagnostics of the body to a hermeneutics of the text. But there is one very interesting essay that he published in 1964, “Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma,” in which the question of eros comes back. Strikingly, in this particular essay he opposes eros to language. He criticizes what he calls the “immediacy” of the “flesh to flesh” relationship, contrasting it with the “mediations” of language and interpretation. Stated simply: “Sexuality de-mediatizes language; it is eros not logos.”²⁷ To come back to Derrida’s critique of Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur suspects eros of haptic closure. For him, eros is something that “mobilizes language” only insofar as “it crosses it, jostles it, sublimates it, stupefies it, pulverizes it into a murmur.”²⁸ In a way, flesh to flesh relationships, erotic relationships, are mad. Eros does not conform to either an ethic of marriage or a technique of sexual behavior. It is mythical. Of course, Ricœur is for eros, not against it, but he does not now enter into a hermeneutics of it. Ultimately, two beings in eros have no idea what they are doing, what they

want, what they are looking for, what they are finding. If you ask what the meaning of the drive even is, you will not find an answer. Eros participates in a network of powers whose cosmic connections we have forgotten. The closest we can get to the “truth of sexuality” is through indirect reading of ancient texts and myths. Like a lost Atlantis sunk within us long ago, it has left sexuality as its “flotsam.”²⁹ Hence the enigma of eros. The meaning of this submerged, dislocated universe is no longer available to us in terms of immediate participation, and the hermeneutics of texts can take us to eros only indirectly, via mediation—which is not going to help anyone when embracing another. In this essay, there is for Ricœur a near-apartheid between the hermeneutics of the text and the lived experience of eros.

The Return to the Flesh

This particular dualism of logos and eros is, I argue, overcome in *Oneself as Another* (1990), which is essentially a return to the phenomenology of the body of the 1950s, but now in terms of hermeneutics. In the final chapter, he defines flesh as “the mediator between self and a world which is taken in accordance with its various degrees of foreignness.”³⁰ As such, it reveals a certain lived passivity where the body, in the deepest intimacy of flesh, is exposed to otherness. Husserl and Levinas are his two main interlocutors in this text, and Ricœur is, in sum, proposing that the flesh can mediate between the immanence of Husserl’s *Leib* and the transcendence of Levinas’ face.

The dialectic of passivity-otherness that he identifies in the experience of the flesh signals the enigma of one’s own body. To say it phenomenologically (as Ricœur does), how can we fully experience the human body if it is not at once “a body among others” (*Körper*) and “my own” lived body (*Leib*)? We need both, according to Ricœur. We need to understand how we can experience the intimacy of the body from within, as *Leib*, and also to understand it in terms of the externality of the world, as *Körper*.

Here Ricœur makes the striking point that it is not, as we might expect, in Heidegger, with his existential phenomenology, that we discover the greatest ontology of the flesh.³¹ Heidegger’s Dasein has no body, no sexuality. It is rather Husserl who offers the “most promising sketch of the flesh that would mark the inscription of hermeneutical phenomenology in an ontology of otherness.”³² In the *Cartesian Meditations*—written ten years after *Ideas II*—Husserl 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 myself seen by others). Flesh opens up a realm of *Leibhaft* (immediately 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 radically mine and most radically other, what is closest to me and furthest from me at the same time. This enigma of far/near is revealed most concretely, once again, as touch. Commenting on Husserl, Ricœur explains that as the center of pathos, our flesh's "aptitude for feeling is revealed most characteristically in the sense of touch."³³ In this Husserl and Ricœur are (at least implicitly) going back to Aristotle. Flesh precedes and grounds both the "I can" and the "I want"; it precedes even the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary. As Ricœur explains, "flesh is the place of all the passive syntheses on which the active syntheses are constructed, the latter alone deserving to be called works (*Leistungen*); the flesh is the matter (*hule*) in resonance with all that can be said to be *hule* in every object perceived, apprehended. In short, it is the origin of all 'alteration of ownness.'"³⁴

Ricœur 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.³⁵ The otherness of the other is preceded by otherness of my flesh. Otherness appears most strikingly precisely in its uncanny intimacy: it is so buried within us that it appears to us as foreign and scares us, even horrifies us—but it is actually our own otherness. We are strangers to ourselves. Ricœur therefore departs from Husserl when the latter seeks to derive the objective world from the primordial space of immediacy that he calls the flesh, for such an attempt ignores that flesh is not just mine but is equally a body among other bodies—both *Leib* and *Körper* at once. To make flesh part of the world (*mondanéiser*), one has to be not simply oneself but oneself as another—a self with others, a body with others. And it follows 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. Here one recalls Freud's notion that eros blindsides us by coming from within, from behind, and from outside us—the first trauma. In phenomenology too, it comes from the depths of our own uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*), our own inwardness, our own flesh—and yet also from the otherness of the other person, whom I will never know fully and who will never know me fully. The flesh can appear in the world as a body among bodies only to the degree that I am already an other among others, a self-with-another "in the apprehension of a common nature, woven out of the network of intersubjectivity—itsself founding selfhood in its own way."³⁶

Ricœur concludes this intricate analysis by observing that although Husserl recognized the primordially of subjective flesh and the necessity of intersubjective language, he could not reconcile the two. He remarks, "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.”³⁷ 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—and only the latter, Ricœur suggests, can provide a full account of the ontological relationship between flesh and world.

Ricœur criticizes Levinas for the error opposite Husserl’s: traversing flesh too quickly toward alterity. According to Levinas, the face of the other is a trace, not flesh, and, observes Ricœur, “[n]o middle ground, no between, is secured to lessen the utter dissymmetry between the Same and the Other.”³⁸ Flesh for Levinas is in the realm of the sensible, which for him is related to the feminine, the obscure, the pre-hermeneutic in every sense of the word, not to the face. Levinas, says Ricœur, needs Husserl in order to become more enfleshed. The face of the other needs language and touch. The face cannot be only the discarnate voice of the master that solicits and commands us; it must also come to us through sensibility. To be clear, Ricœur is not anti-Levinas; he is trying to bring Levinas and Husserl together and is grappling with the question of how to have *both* radical alterity *and* the flesh as givenness. He sees a half-open door in both Husserl and Levinas—and true to his chosen role as hermeneutic mediator, he tries to push the door open and find a middle way.

CONCLUSION: BRINGING RICŒUR AND MERLEAU-PONTY TOGETHER

What, then, does this analysis of Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty mean for the hermeneutic relationships between self and other? It means first that the other who is a stranger is also a counterpart who, like me, can say “I.” To quote *Oneself as Another* again, the transfer of sense shows how “she thinks” signifies “she says in her heart: I think,” and at the same time it reveals the inverse movement of “she thinks and feels in a way that I can never think or feel.”³⁹ I am called by the other who comes to me in a way that I cannot fully assimilate or reduce to my immanence. I can respond only by “reading” his or her transcendence in immanence, across distance and difference. Ricœur in fact speaks of a hermeneutic interpreting of the body by the body that precedes the work of “inference” through formal linguistic signs. This is where he seeks to go deeper than Husserl and Levinas. He refers to such inference as a primal “relation of *indication* in which the interpretation is made immediately, much as the reading of symptoms.” And the “style” of confirmation to which this reading of indication belongs involves “neither primordial intuition nor discursive inference.”⁴⁰ It entails rather a special

grammar of what I call carnal hermeneutics across distance, gaps, and differences. Carnal hermeneutics as diacritical hermeneutics. But if there is a language of the body, a language of sense and sensibility, of savvy and tact, what language are we talking about? One not only of words, writing, and texts but also of sensing and touching. One not only of intellectual understanding but also of tangible orientation. Thus does the simplest phenomenon of touch lead to the most complex of philosophies—for the simplest is the most complex and remains the most enigmatic. In posing such questions, Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty open doors where hermeneutics and phenomenology may cross at the swing door of the flesh.

There remains, of course, much work to be done, and neither Merleau-Ponty nor Ricœur has the final word. Ricœur took Levinas and Husserl as interlocutors to see what they were missing, and in this essay I have endeavored to do the same with Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty. The phenomenology of flesh sketched out by Ricœur in his early work *Freedom and Nature* is never more than that—a sketch, a promissory note which the rest of his hermeneutic work does not fully realize. One is required to flesh out, as it were, the embryonic bones of a phenomenology of carnality that one finds there, especially in the retrospective light of the final “Tenth Study” of *Oneself as Another*. Had Ricœur engaged in a more active dialogue with Merleau-Ponty, he would delivered on the promise of his early phenomenology of embodiment far sooner and far more adequately. Even in *Oneself as Another*, he offers only a proto-hermeneutics of the flesh, not a full hermeneutics. For all the potential, text still ultimately trumps flesh. Or as Ricœur himself humorously confessed: “*Je suis un obsédé textuel*” (“I am a text maniac”). His hermeneutics of the text always needs more flesh.

As for Merleau-Ponty, he might have been well advised to take a more hermeneutic turn by tempering his phenomenology of radical embodiment with greater layers of textual refinement and reference—stemming the temptation, on his part, to become an *obsédé charnel* (a carnal maniac)! In short, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of flesh needs more hermeneutics, more text. And here I am inclined to admit that Derrida has a point in *Le Toucher* when he suggests that the phenomenon of “double sensation”—where the hand touches the hand—runs the risk of a certain haptocentric circularity and closure. It is true that Merleau-Ponty speaks constantly of gaps (*écarts*)—but they are always gaps inscribed *within* the flesh of the world, invaginations rather than separations. There is, in the first and final analysis, a fundamental and undeconstructable immanence in Merleau-Ponty (even more than in Deleuze) that needs to be further opened to transcendence and otherness. On the other hand, I would suggest that Ricœur, who has a certain Protestant (and post-Hegelian) suspicion of immanence as fusion and immediacy, needs to delve deeper into the phenomenon of the flesh. If the flesh is a lost Atlantis to which we cannot return directly, as Ricœur insists in his “Wonder, Eroticism,

and Enigma,” we may find ourselves condemned to many long detours! Hermeneutic circles through infinitely receding texts, modern and ancient. To put it simply: if Ricœur needs to be more carnalized, Merleau-Ponty needs to be more textualized. Although they lived in the same city at the same time in history and read many of the same authors and books, they never really engaged each other’s work in their own lifetime. I have sought here to sketch out the possibility and desirability of such a dialogue.

NOTES

1. See Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J.A. Smith (London: Clarendon, 1931), 2, 428.
2. See Jacques Derrida’s treatment of the haptic versus optic debate in *On Touching*. Platonic optocentrism dominated the history of Western metaphysics up to Husserl and phenomenology, with few exceptions. See my “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics,” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 15–56.
3. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book, Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1989), 176.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 304.
5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1979), 155.
6. *Ibid.*, 142.
7. See “Tangents III” in Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 156–57.
9. *Ibid.*, 159.
10. *Ibid.*, 161.
11. *Ibid.*, 163.
12. *Ibid.*, 166.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 109.
15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Monde sensible et le monde de l’expression*, ed. Emmanuel de Saint-Aubert (Geneva: Métis Presses, 2011), 203–4.
16. *Ibid.*, 211.
17. *Ibid.*, 204.
18. *Ibid.*, 206.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 205.
21. Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 86.
22. *Ibid.*, 87–88.
23. *Ibid.*, 91.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 93.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Paul Ricœur, “Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, ed. James Nelson and Sandra Longfellow (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 141.
28. *Ibid.*, 141.
29. *Ibid.*

30. Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 318.
31. See *ibid.*, 327–28 and note 34.
32. *Ibid.*, 322.
33. *Ibid.*, 324.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, 326.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 338.
39. *Ibid.*, 355.
40. *Ibid.*, 336.

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