

CHAPTER 1

World, Flesh, Vision

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One cannot deny that the philosophical problem that oriented Merleau-Ponty's entire approach is, in a sense, the "classical" problem of the relations of the soul and the body. Merleau-Ponty did not encounter this, however, as a "regional" problem, to which he would have devoted the full force of his reflection; rather, he encountered this problem because one of the most general philosophical problems guided his investigations from the start: the relation of consciousness to the world. Already in *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty set himself the task of finding an intermediate position between intellectualism and empiricism, that is, between an insular subject and a pure nature. The world and consciousness, the outside and the inside, are not distinct beings that the full force of philosophical thought must contrive to reunite; rather, they are interdependent, and it is precisely this interdependence that becomes legible in the phenomenon of incarnation. If the "frontal" opposition of consciousness and the world is renounced, then what has to be clarified first is the body, that is, what the philosophical tradition has always left unthought. Several times, Merleau-Ponty defines the Western way of thinking as "surveying thought," which, as such, can only produce a "naive ontology" (VI 240/187), because, wresting the object from the flesh from which it is born (VI 302/248), turns it into the Great Object. It becomes that Sublimated Being whose subjective correlate is, then, nothing other than the Kosmotheoros, that look that comes from *nowhere* and that consequently presents itself as a look dominating and embracing everything. Where does the look come from? How does the for-itself arise? What is subjectivity? These are the questions to which Merleau-Ponty always returns, even though he was led to recognize that the consciousness-object distinction can no longer be considered a valid starting point (VI 253/200). Because the question of the subject cannot be set aside so easily (cf. VI 244/190–91 and 247/193–94), Merleau-Ponty tirelessly interrogates Husserl's texts and particularly those texts where the intentionality of consciousness can no longer simply be

understood as “activity.” In a certain way, Husserl is the first Western thinker who undertook to dismiss the ideal of the Kosmotheoros by stressing the engagement of consciousness in the world—this is the case, even if, in the end, he does it in order to restore this ideal at the transcendental level through the “project to gain intellectual possession of the world,” which is what *constitution* always is (S 227/180). Reading *The Visible and the Invisible* carefully, one notices that the philosophical adversary, the representative of a philosophy of the subject for Merleau-Ponty, is Sartre and his massive opposition of the for-itself and the in-itself, and not Husserl, whose last writings more and more take account of the unconstitutable. It is Sartre, and not Husserl, who identifies subjectivity and activity, and already in *Sense and Non-Sense* Merleau-Ponty notes that what he expected from the author of *Being and Nothingness* was a theory of passivity (SNS 133/77). It is again Sartre who, considering the model of the in-itself (VI 269/216), determines the for-itself according to the same “sacrificial” structure that is already found in Hegelian absolute subjectivity (VI 127/93). Certainly there is no passage to absolute subjectivity in *Being and Nothingness*, and the for-itself’s passion remains futile.¹ But, precisely because Being slips away, “the For-Itself is charged with the task of *making it*” (VI 269/216). The “activism” of consciousness cannot be pushed any farther. On the contrary, the “later” Husserl—the Husserl that Merleau-Ponty had read and contemplated since his visit to Louvain in 1939, the Husserl of *Ideas II*, the *Crisis*, and the unpublished manuscripts, who placed himself “at the limits of phenomenology” (RC 159/181)—is also the one who gave a greater and greater role to intentionality *without acts*, to *fungierende Intentionalität*, which in an anonymous and hidden manner “produces the natural and prepredicative unity of the world and of our life” (PP xiii/xviii).

THE WORLD AND REFLECTION

As can be ascertained by consulting the detailed chronicle that Karl Schuhmann prepared of Husserl’s manuscripts,² or by reading Gerd Brand’s book which synthesizes part of Husserl’s unpublished manuscripts,³ the problem of the world is at the center of the later Husserl’s concerns. Husserl is increasingly sensitive to the “fundamental difference of the manner of being of an object in the world and that of the world itself,”⁴ and he speaks of the uniqueness of the world in terms that leave no doubt about the irreducibility of the world to the thing.⁵ Is it an accident if certain of those who accompanied his philosophical development during the Freiburg period saw in the privilege granted to the world the indication of a new starting point and the necessity of a surpassing of intentional analysis? Since 1923⁶ Heidegger had developed the theme of “being-in-the-world,” of that which is no longer consciousness or

subject but “Dasein,” that is, a being radically different from other beings precisely in that it is “constitutive” of the world. And in 1929, the date that marks the beginning of the *philosophical* break between the two thinkers, in a text dedicated to Edmund Husserl⁷ which deals essentially with the being of the world, Heidegger wants to establish that “intentionality is possible only on the foundation of transcendence;”⁸ for the original surpassing is not brought about by the subject toward objects, but by Dasein toward the world. Eugen Fink, whom Merleau-Ponty met at Louvain in 1939, and who Husserl said in 1931 was “the only disciple to have remained faithful to him,”⁹ during the same period, however, denounced the narrowness of the concept of horizon in Husserl, which cannot take into account the being of the totality.¹⁰ Fink consequently developed what can be termed a “cosmological phenomenology” essentially centered on the “cosmological difference” between the world and intramundane being.¹¹ However, the unpublished manuscripts, on which Gerd Brand comments, show that Husserl endeavored to think as one “*das Welthabende Ich und das In-der-Welt-seiende Ich*,” the ego who has the world and the ego who is in the world.¹² The world is not only the kingdom of the “*Ich kann*,” the totality of the potentialities of the ego; it is also *bodengebend*, that which gives to consciousness its very first ground. This is why there can be neither a demonstration nor an induction of the world.¹³ The world is not the presumptive synthesis of horizons—it truly seems that Husserl breaks here with the world as an Idea in the Kantian sense—but it is *Totalhorizont*, that is, the originary dimension from which all limited experience is possible.¹⁴ It is in this sense that Husserl speaks of the “transcendence of the world.”¹⁵ And Heidegger, when he also invokes the “*Transzendenz der Welt*,”¹⁶ that is, when he invokes the *fact* of a revelation of the world always already achieved before the encounter of intramundane being becomes possible, does not contradict Husserl’s idea of a world as *universaler Boden*. Nevertheless, as Fink notes very precisely in one of his conversations with Dorian Cairns, Husserl in *Ideas I*, starting from psychology, directed his attention too unilaterally onto the noetic constitution of the *Weltvorstellung* (the world as *representation*) while neglecting the essential noematic moment of the *Weltkonstitution* (the constituted *world*).¹⁷ In other words, while Husserl accentuates the ego’s *Welthabe* without attaining sufficient clarification of the ego insofar as it is in the world, Heidegger’s central problem in *Being and Time* is precisely to determine the mode of being of this “exemplary”¹⁸ being in which the world constitutes itself. For Heidegger, there is no transcendental ego whose operation remains “hidden” from the empirical ego and that “anonymously” unfolds the horizon of the world “behind the back” of the real ego, which directly devotes itself to its objects; rather, there is a unique “Dasein,” which in its very “facticity,” is always already a relation to the world and to beings *at the same time* that it is a self-relation. If the constitution of the world and of the alter ego by the transcendental subject remains

a constantly interrogated enigma for Husserl, it is precisely because the ego is thought at the same time as transcendental and as mundane. In the final analysis for Husserl, the issue is always to make the world in its totality, as well as other subjects, who are also constitutors of the world, emerge from one thing *belonging to* the world. The only way that one can do this is by “the abstraction of the pure ego” being given as the world’s origin; in contrast, for Heidegger, the “place” of the transcendental is not outside but within this privileged being, which *is* in a way entirely different from things.

What remains unclarified in Husserl, therefore, is the relation of the ego and the world, and this is why he is led to repeat the movement proper to all reflective philosophy. Through this movement, reflective philosophy “metamorphoses with one stroke the actual world into a transcendental field” (VI 68/44), with the result that, for it, “there is no brute world, there is only a developed world; there is no in-the-world, there is only a signification ‘world’ ” (VI 73/48). For transcendental phenomenology as well, what we are finally as *naturata* (the empirical mundane ego), we are at first *actively* as *naturans* (the transcendental ego), and “the world is our birthplace only because first we as minds are the cradle of the world” (VI 54/33). It is true that Merleau-Ponty wants to reserve a particular fate for phenomenological reflection” (VI 74 n. 2/49 n) not only because the *Urerlebnis* to which phenomenological reflection leads back can no longer be defined as an activity of consciousness, but also because Husserl is willing to consider as a problem what “the reflective attitude ordinarily avoids—the discordance between its starting situation and its ends” (VI 71/46). In effect, what characterizes phenomenological reflection is precisely the illusion of a reflection *without remainder*, for which the trajectory going from the ego to the world and the trajectory returning from the world to the ego would be one and the same. By saying that every transcendental reduction is also an eidetic reduction, Husserl brings to light the principal “delay” of every reflection on the already-there of the world and shows that to reflect is not to coincide with the flux of intentional life. On the contrary, to reflect is to free kernels of meaning, intelligible articulations, and then to reconstruct the flux “*après coup*.” When, in order to surmount the naïveté of the reflective operation that transforms the world into a noema and the subject into pure thought, Merleau-Ponty calls for a hyper-reflection (VI 61/38, 70/46f.), it is certainly not in order to “surpass” or push aside reflection—and with it, philosophy—in favor of the immediate or the lived (cf. VI 57/35, 235/182). Rather, it is a question of a reflection on reflection itself, which thereby stops being unaware of itself as a retrospective reconstruction and that can no longer set itself up as absolute reflection. But what comes into question then is the very starting point of the reflective conversion: doesn’t all reflection come from *the hypothetical nonexistence* of the fact that the world such as it is given in actual sensing and seeing exists? The problem here lies in the reflective rupture between the ego and the world, and,

ultimately, in the phenomenological reduction itself. A working note from February 1959 recalls that the phenomenological reduction is “wrongly presented—in particular in the [*Cartesian Meditations*]—as a suspending of the *existence of the world*” (VI 225/171). Husserl himself falls back into the Cartesian defect that he had denounced, the defect of a world negation that “has as an immediate consequence that one misses the transcendental.” In this way, one is ineluctably led to confuse the transcendental ego with the *mens sive anima* as the only thing in the world resistant to doubt. But Merleau-Ponty also casts doubt on the Husserlian sense of the epochê, conceived as the neutralization of the belief in the existence of the world and no longer as mere negation. Neutrality can be exercised only in regard to the *in-itself* of the world, but not in regard to the “‘wild’ or ‘vertical’ world” (VI 230–31/177), from which one can never withdraw to a position outside. An “adequate” reduction would not be able to enclose us within the immanence of a false subjectivity, but on the contrary leads to the disclosure of spirit as *Weltlichkeit* (VI 226/172). Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty pose the *same* question to Husserl concerning the *right* of the phenomenological reduction to be completed and the *status* of the “subjectivity” with which it leaves us. *In fact* philosophy cannot definitively tear itself out of perceptual faith and enclose itself in the kingdom of pure significations. There is a structural incompleteness to the reduction (VI 232/178) that defines the philosophical endeavor in its permanent inchoativity. One must not then confound a “complete” reduction, which is the transcendental illusion of all reflective philosophy, and a “radical reflection, which amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life that is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all” (PP ix/xiv). It is such a radical reflection that Merleau-Ponty would like to see at work in *Sein und Zeit* (PP ix/xiv), for what hyper-reflection discovers is the problem of the *double* genesis of the world *and* reflection, of being *and* thought—and not solely the problem of the correlation of thought and the existing object. The problem of the double genesis is not “a superior or more profound degree of philosophy” (VI 71/46), nor is it a residual problem that would be confronted only once the reflective method is put in place; it alone is the philosophical problem *par excellence*.

The field that is opened by what might be called Husserlian reflective honesty is that of subjectivity’s *facticity*, insofar as this facticity is not entirely absorbed back into the eidetic invariants through which philosophy describes it (VI 70/45–46f.). This unthought of Husserl, “which is wholly his and yet opens out on something else” (S 202/160), namely, on brute or wild being, on the facticity of the subject, on the “there is” of the world, on “the meaning of first sight, is perhaps only the presentiment—constitutive of the phenomenological process penetrating into what it possesses with a more profound character—of an impossible recuperation of being into meaning, of an irreducible divergence between the silence of experience and philosophical speech.

What must be brought to light, then, is not the *Welthabe* of a wholly active subject, but the *Vorhabe* of an incarnate consciousness, “the prepossession of a totality which is there before one knows how and why” (VI 65/42). Such a prepossession shows that existence is not originally the *thought* of existing (VI 246/192). If philosophy is willing to recognize the divergence, which institutes philosophy as speech, and if it commits itself to accounting for its own genesis, then it owes itself to be “the study of the *Vorhabe* of Being” (VI 257/204). Without this *Vorhabe*, nothing is thinkable; nothing is sayable. The term *Vorhabe*, which appears several times in the working notes (VI 246/192, 255/201, 257/204), is borrowed from Husserl. Nevertheless, one can legitimately compare it to the fore-structure (*Vorstruktur*) that Heidegger discovered at the level of the *understanding*. The understanding is a fundamental *existentiale* of Dasein since it determines Dasein as potentiality-for-being and as project, that is, as existing in a way that distinguishes it radically from the thing of the world. To understand is always to interpret the being *as* this or that; it is *to see* as, but from a prepredicative “sight” that “articulates” the signifiability of the world outside language. The *Vorstruktur* contains three moments: fore-having (*Vorhabe*), fore-sight (*Vorsicht*), and fore-conception (*Vorgriff*). These three bear witness to the fact that there is never an apprehension of immediate givens without presuppositions or prejudices¹⁹—that, between the ego and the thing, there is no “frontal” relation, no pure and simple “face-to-face.” What Heidegger denounces in paragraph 32 of *Sein und Zeit* is precisely the Husserlian idea of a pure perception as an original mode of access to the being, which would give itself “in person,” “in flesh and blood,” “in the original,” and that would not already be an articulation of the world. Now, what Merleau-Ponty always understood by the term “perception” cannot be identified with a *pure* seeing or with an original *knowledge*, which would have a world of pure things for its correlate. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he even proposes to exclude the term *perception* in favor of perceptual faith, because the one who says “perception” “already implies a cutting up of what is lived into discontinuous acts, or a reference to ‘things’ whose status is not specified” (VI 209/158). It is true that perception, not in the sense of a sensorial function but as “archetype of the originating encounter,” remains at the most basic level of the investigation. But it is possible that this encounter with what is not-us is not the experience of an absence, any more than of an original presence (VI 210/159). Also for Merleau-Ponty, “perception” is a kind of articulation, “*articulation* before the letter, the appearance of something where there was nothing or something else” (VI 168/126). To perceive is always to sketch a figure against the background of the world, to organize an area of the visible, to open oneself to a “Gestalt,” that is, to “the contingent arrangement by which the materials begin to have a meaning in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state” (SC 223/206–7). This is why we can speak about perception in the same way as we do about

a language: “I describe perception as a diacritical, relative, oppositional system” (VI 267/213), applying to it the terminology that Saussure had reserved for language. There is certainly a “relative positivity of perceiving,” a sensible *world of things*, but this is not an objective being, substantial, completed; the sensible is never itself given except in an elusive manner, and it is strictly “ungraspable” (VI 267/214). This is why we can say about perception, and about language, that it surrenders to us only “differences” or “divergences.” The thing is made quasi-observable only by the precipitation of *Abschattungen* (VI 245/191), only by the work of the senses, these “apparatus to form concretions of the inexhaustible, to form existent significations” (VI 245/192). But this crystallization of *visibilia* remains illusory, ephemeral, always subject to metamorphoses; “the only thing finally that is seen in the full sense is the totality wherein the sensibles are cut out” (VI 268/214). Thus, the being of the world is “inflated with non-being or with the possible” (VI 234/181), and this is why Merleau-Ponty often uses the expressions “being at a distance” or “transcendence” to define it. The world is essentially understood on the basis of the notion of field and configuration, on the basis of *Gestalt*—not as a closed set but as an open environment, where the “something” (and no longer *die Sache selbst*) is “a principle of distribution, a system of equivalences” (VI 258/205).

But the transcendence of the *Gestalt*, its nonpositivity, does not refer to the prevalence of anything other than the sensible; it does not refer to the invariance of the eidos, because there is a *Gestalt*, a configuration, a field and world only for a perceiving body inside spatiotemporality. This modulation of time and space gives birth to *pregnant* forms, that is, to concretions of the “there is,” to *Wesen* in the verbal sense (VI 256/203, 260/206–7, 262/208), *existing* significations. But the internal cohesion of this modulation refers to a primary explosive and productive power, of which the existing significations are only the crystallization or the cipher.²⁰ Prior to philosophical speech, there is therefore a logos of the sensible, a logos *endiathetos* of the world, that, even if it calls forth the logos *porphorikos* of philosophy or literature, is still no less the silent origin, the influx of meaning by which the latter is nourished. Now, “we can have an idea [of this meaning] only through our carnal participation,” and it is this originary carnal relation with the world which the uttered logos “sublimates” (VI 261/208). The sublimation of the flesh is, in a sense, the whole advent of “culture,” this “descent of the invisible into the visible” that can lead to the complete obliteration of the “wild” perception beneath cultural perception (VI 267/213, 266/212), and that has as a consequence that the phenomenal order is denied all autonomy in order to turn it into a simple province of the objective order (VI 263/209). If “culture is perceived,” if perception itself is cultural, one sees how hard it is to return to the “immediate” and to the phenomenal. The most striking example of this informing of perception by culture is that of the perception of space and the

privilege that falls to Euclidean space and to the pregnancy of geometric forms. Where does the privilege of one perspectival world, of one homogeneous, isotropic, three-dimensional space, of lines, points, and planes (none of which are real) come from? Merleau-Ponty recognizes a “profound suitability” of the idea of Euclidean space to “the classical ontology of the *Ens realissimum*, of the infinite being” (VI 264/210), that is, the divine Kosmotheoros that sees in their juxtaposition and their identity the things that humans know in their encroachment and their reciprocal latency. In “Eye and Mind,” he shows that Renaissance perspective is a cultural fact, a moment of painting that makes the mistake of setting itself up as an infallible technique and a fundamental law (OE 48 f./134 f.). Beneath the Euclidean mask, on the contrary, one finds a space of encroachment and envelopment, a topological space including relations of proximity, vectors and centers of forces, space “constitutive of life” that founds “the *wild* principle of the Logos” (VI 264/211). It is a space essentially determined by depth; one can even say in a sense that all of Merleau-Ponty’s work is articulated around depth, the dimension of encroachment and latency. Depth is the *spatiotemporal* dimension of distance (PP 306/264–65), since to have something at a distance is to have it in the past or in the future as well as in space. It is therefore the dimension of *simultaneity* or coexistence, and “[w]ithout it, there would not be a world or Being. . . . It is hence because of depth that the things have a flesh: that is, oppose to my inspection obstacles, a resistance which is precisely their reality, their ‘opening,’ their *totum simul*” (VI 272–73/219).

Once recognized, the privilege that falls to Euclidean space, the illusion of a sensible positivity, and the carving of the world into solid things by thought demand to be explained in themselves, because the issue with these is not that of simple historical contingency. In the same way, Heidegger has to explain why the phenomenon of worldhood has been lost from view since the beginning of the ontological tradition and why intra-worldly being has always been understood as being present-at-hand (*Vorhandensein*) and not as being ready-to-hand (*Zuhandensein*). For the dissimulation of *Zuhandenheit* is due neither to an omission nor to a negligence that could be remedied. On the contrary, the dissimulation results from an essential way of being of *Dasein*, from a constitutive “inauthenticity” by which *proximally* and *for the most part* it remains closed to what it properly is, namely, the revelation of the world. *Dasein* does not see that the world is part of its being; this is why it understands the world and itself on the model of the being of things, as *Vorhandensein*. Fink very precisely defines inauthentic existence as “a clenching onto *ontic* truth and a blindness with regard to the ontological truth, an abstention, a suspension of the ‘transcendence’ of human *Dasein*.”²¹ Merleau-Ponty gives a rather similar response to the question of why the *Lebenswelt* remains concealed and why the reflective tradition has always ignored perceptual faith; he also speaks of “a repression of transcendence” and a ten-

dency of “the universe of immanence” to “make itself autonomous:” “*The key is in this idea that perception qua wild perception is of itself ignorance of itself, imperception, tends of itself to see itself as an act and to forget itself as latent intentionality, as being at—*” (VI 266–67/213). The key phrase is “of itself”: it is a question of a natural and inevitable movement, of a constitutive ignorance of perception. All vision assumes this *punctum caecum* of the eye that renders it possible; all consciousness assumes this blindness with regard to itself by which it becomes the consciousness of an object: “It is inevitable that the consciousness be mystified, inverted, indirect, in principle it sees the things *through the other end*, in principle it disregards Being that prefers the object to it.” (VI 302/248). Perception gives itself an author and understands itself as an activity of consciousness, even though it is merely the emergence of a *percipere at the center of the percipi*, even though perception is born only out of that attachment to Being which makes it possible. A reflection, which wants to be radical, therefore, should not ignore the blind spot of the mind (VI 55/33). But, for Merleau-Ponty, acknowledging its existence cannot mean fusion and coincidence with the origin of vision. That by which everything begins, “nature” or “the originary,” is not *behind* us in a past into which one would have to go in order to rejoin the origin; rather it lies in the *écart* of the present from this past, in the *écart* that is the space of our whole experience (VI 165/124. Cf. also 320/267). It is *today*, in the depth of the lived and in the presence of the flesh of the world that “the originating breaks up, and philosophy must accompany this break-up, this non-coincidence, this differentiation” (VI 165/124). Being is not a plenitude into which one would have to sink and dissolve oneself. On the contrary, it is “*what requires creation of us for us to experience it*” (VI 251/197). Being is not a great Object on which thought should tirelessly work in order to make itself adequate, but that “universal dimensionality” (VI 319/265, 280/227) on which all the dimensions are set apart in advance without any one ever expressing it completely (OE 48/134). Being is that “pregnancy of possibles” (VI 304/250) and that “polymorphism” (VI 306–7/252–53) that would not be exhausted by our representations of it, although they are as much experiences of it. Between the *Lebenswelt* as universal Being and philosophical *creation*, there is no antinomy (VI 224/170) “not only because the philosopher *alone* can disclose the *Lebenswelt*, as Fink already showed in his famous *Kantstudien* article”²² but also because the natural attitude and transcendental attitude are not two sets of acts with opposite meanings. The originary relation that we maintain with the world is not an “attitude,” that is, not a set of acts, but rather a primordial faith, an *Urdoxa*, as Husserl moreover recognizes as well. And it is for this reason that Fink already proposed in 1931 to replace the term *natürliche Einstellung* with *Weltbefangenheit*—thereby designating in a single term both the world’s authority over the “subject,” which finds itself included therein and the perplexity of the latter with regard to its own being.

Originary experience is that of an *exchange* between the world and the ego, that of a *delay* of *percipere* on the *percipi* (VI 164/123), and this delay of perceiving on the perceived is what Husserl thematized by emphasizing the importance of operative intentionality in relation to act intentionality. For even before an object is constituted in front of consciousness, there is the first opening of consciousness to its outside by which it institutes horizons and a world. But the development of operative intentionality requires a reversal of the agencies of the perceived and the perceiving, a reciprocity of the intentionality of ego to the world and of the world to the ego, which “phenomenology,” as an ontology of the object and of the act, cannot integrate (VI 298/244). To think *all* of consciousness as operative intentionality is to reject the privilege that Husserl granted to “objectivating acts” over affective or practical, nonobjectivating intentionalities; it is to stop defining consciousness primarily as knowledge and to put Reason back in the world, to anchor it in the body and in the flesh (VI 292/238–39). Transcendental phenomenology is certainly not ready for such a “reform of ‘consciousness,’” which strongly resembles the destruction of the classical subject. However, transcendental phenomenology has opened the way for it at least, a way that leads, *on this side* of the subject-object, activity-passivity opposition, to the “generality of the flesh” (VI 173 n/131 n).

BEING AND THE FLESH

Merleau-Ponty does not, however, intend to *complete* the philosophy of consciousness by adding some things to it, namely, the phenomenon of the body on the side of the subject and the world as field and as horizontal structure on the side of the object. What is at issue is not the need to take account of the contingent fact of a perception that might just as easily have not taken place, nor is what is at issue the unmotivated sudden appearance of a for-itself that the in-itself does not need in order to be. It is not even a question of fabricating the architectonic of the world with elements borrowed from the world. One will never make this lacuna and absence, which is subjectivity, emerge from the positivity of a world that has begun by being given (VI 285/231). Also, rather than start from abstractions such as being and nothingness and attempt to “construct” their union, it would be better to remain at the level of structure and transcendence, of the nascent intelligibility and the segregation of the outside and the inside, and to find one’s “starting point where Sartre ends, in the Being taken up by the for Itself” (VI 290/237). By placing negativity *outside* of being, Sartre does not succeed in accounting for the sudden appearance of consciousness and history; he remains at an ontology of the “as if”: “*everything takes place as if* the in-itself in a project to found itself gave itself the modification of the for-itself.”²³ This is the impasse that

every humanization of nothingness, that every philosophy that places negativity exclusively in humanity runs into, since such a placement amounts to making a worldly being the agent of the world's revelation. There is truly no exchange or reciprocity between the for-itself and the in-itself, and the passage from a negation of being *through* humanity to being's *self*-negation *in* humanity remains something that Sartre cannot realize. Sartre rejects every compromise with a "continuism" that would distinguish intermediary levels of being between the being of a thing and the being of consciousness; he considers what Merleau-Ponty wants to insert between humans and things nonexistent: the "interworld" called "history, symbolism, truth to be made" (AD 269/184)²⁴ But is it any surprise that Merleau-Ponty adopts the task, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, of elaborating an "ontology of the inside" (VI 290/237) or an "intra-ontology" (VI 279–80/226–67), which no longer raises itself out of that causal thought or surveying thought that always opposes the pure negative to the pure positive (VI 99/69–70, 280/227), but that instead maintains itself in the inherence to the sensible world and within a "being in dehiscence"? Must we consider the return to ontology and the use of the word 'being' as philosophy's own temptation, the temptation to which Merleau-Ponty would have finally succumbed?²⁵ To neglect, however, the "ontological" references that run through *The Visible and the Invisible* is to make the "text" unintelligible. Merleau-Ponty does not "fall back" into ontology from the height of an existential problematic or a philosophy of expression, but he opens onto this being without which our volubility signifies nothing (and consequently can not even signify itself) and from which spirit learns that it does not exist without bonds (VI 275/222). There is certainly a "cult" of presence that always ends up reestablishing being in a frontal relation and under the species of the in-itself (even though being envelopes and traverses us); but, inversely, there is also a pathos of absence that often only disguises the most unbridled subjectivism. By calling "being" the "dehiscence of the flesh," Merleau-Ponty frees us from both of these.

The expressions "flesh of the world," "flesh of things," indeed "flesh of being" (VI 121/88), produce at first sight a certain perplexity; one is tempted to see only metaphors in them, an effect of style or a play on language, unless one sees in the notion of the flesh a new name for the being of every being, a new determination of the common essence of things. Through this term, however, Merleau-Ponty is really trying to conceive the openness of being, this coiling of being on itself or this "specular phenomenon" internal to being by which the reign of visibility is opened. The problematic of the flesh does not simply take over for that of the lived body by a sort of extension of the experience of the reversibility of sensed and sentient to everything sensible—an experience discovered by Husserl at the level of the phenomenal body, as constitutive of *Leiblichkeit*. Merleau-Ponty's work does not arise from a hylozoism that consists of "conceptualizing" as animated what is at first

posited as *blosse Sache* and imparting the corporeity proper to a subject to the entirety of materiality (VI 304/250). The flesh of the world is not “identical” to the flesh of the body (VI 213/261); in particular, “[the world’s flesh] is sensible and not sentient” (VI 304/250). But if Merleau-Ponty calls it flesh nonetheless, it is because the world’s flesh does not arise entirely from the objective order. And, as the “pregnancy of possibles, *Weltmöglichkeit*,” it is not self-identical, but being that contains its negation in itself, a being in dehiscence, which is *eminently percipi* and “big” with its *percipere* (VI 304/250). It is necessary, therefore, to reverse the “natural” order of explanation: “it is through the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body” (VI 304/250). Likewise, the solution to the “regional” problem of the relations of the soul and the body is not to be found in a new definition of their union but in “the unicity of the visible world and, by encroachment, the invisible world” (VI 286/233). It is not by a generalizing induction and by a projection that one passes from the being of the subject to the being of the world. On the contrary, it is rather the being of the subject that appears as a variant of the being of the world. Merleau-Ponty responds as clearly as one could wish to the objection that would see in the flesh only an anthropological notion unduly projected on a world whose true being would remain unclarified: “Rather, we mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, *but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible*” (VI 179/136, our emphasis). The body as sensible sentient only concentrates the mystery of visibility in general and does not explain it. The paradox of a being that is at once one and double, objective and phenomenal body at the same time, is not a human paradox but the paradox of Being itself, insofar as it is the double “dehiscence of the seeing into the visible and of the visible into the seeing” (VI 201/153). What Merleau-Ponty understands by flesh, therefore, does not refer to a “referent” that philosophy would have already identified under other appellations; rather, it “has no name in any philosophy” (VI 193/147; cf. 183/139). The flesh does not arise from a determinate region of being; it is no more substance than matter or spirit. The domain that it inaugurates is that of unlimited visibility (VI 185/140). This is why it is necessary, instead, to conceive it as a “general thing,” an “element” that does not have a proper place and is nevertheless everywhere (VI 184/139–40), “the formative medium of the object and the subject” (VI 193/147). But if a stable referent cannot be assigned to the flesh, if, *stricto sensu*, there is no “concept” of the flesh, that nevertheless does not mean that we are concerned with a simple *flatus vocis*, nor does it mean that by its generality it proves resistant to all experience. One does not pass from the experience of the lived body to the experience of the world’s flesh by analogy, precisely because the experience of the lived body is already in itself

the experience of a *general* reversibility. Rather than folding the subject back onto its private world, this reversibility opens the lived body on the contrary to an “intercorporeity” (VI 185/141), to “a Sentient in general before a Sensible in general” (VI 187/142), and to that “anonymous visibility” that inhabits all seers. The flesh, then, is really that “final notion” that one succeeds in reaching after having traversed every region of being, which is “conceivable by itself”; one does this without supporting oneself on other elements in order to construct the flesh, and also without ever identifying it with an object of thought conceivable by means of something other than itself (VI 185/140–41). The experience of the flesh, therefore, is able to take place only on the terrain of perceptual faith, which is also that of vision in action, the place where perceiving and perceived are still undivided and where things are experienced as annexes or extensions of ourselves. Now, the experience of vision is the place of a strange reversal of the relations of *percipi* and *percipere* for which act intentionality and *Sinngebung* can no longer give an account: “It is through the world first that I am seen or thought” (VI 328/274). The perceiving subject is inhabited by that anonymous visibility, that reflection of the visible that constitutes the perceiving subject by seeing; and this is why the perceiving subject can be, as *ghost* of the thing and *écart* in relation to the thing, only the impersonal subject of the *fungierende Intentionalität*, “the anonymous one buried in the world, and that has not yet traced its path” (VI 254/201). The anonymity and the generality of the perceptual self, which is in reality “no one,” does not refer back to the negativity of the Sartrean for-itself, to that *hole* (VI 249/196) that introduces an irreducible heterogeneity into the fabric of being; rather, it refers to “a ‘lake of non-being,’ a certain nothingness sunken into a local and temporal *openness*” that must be understood as that hollow internal to being from which vision springs (VI 254/201, 193/147). The place where we find vision, and certainly feel it, is an experience of dispossession with which we see ourselves confronted: “the things have us and it is not we who have the things. . . . [L]anguage has us and it is not we who have language. . . . [I]t is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being” (VI 247/194). One can no longer, then, begin again with the consciousness of being and with the constituting power of the subject; but neither can one reject consciousness without, in the same blow, canceling visibility into the night of the in-itself. To surmount this dilemma, the task remains to conceive consciousness otherwise than as knowledge and as taking possession of things—to conceive it as *Offenheit* (VI 252/198–99), as the *simple* openness that develops from the interior of being and not from the interiority of an ego toward the nonego (VI 268/214–15, 135/99). But if, on the one hand, the experience of vision is the test of the exhaustion of the transcendental subject, it is, on the other hand, the revelation of the universal complicity of beings. Complicity, exchange, encroachment, coupling—these are the terms Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the relation of the ego to things

and to others. Their meeting does not open the space of a face-to-face encounter, because they make their entrance *laterally*, from the same side where the ego finds itself. Others, in particular, never present themselves frontally, in the universe of things, but are introduced into the universe of seeing by breaking in, as the radical calling into question of a private spectacle (VI 109/78; cf. PM 185 f./133 f.). The other springs from the very “substance” of the ego by parturition or subdivision (VI 86/59), as a diffusion or propagation of the sensible sentient that I am. This is why Merleau-Ponty cannot be satisfied with the Sartrean approach to others, which remains at the level of rivalry and never opens onto a genuine coexistence (VI 268/215, 322/269). If there is a relation of being between the ego and others, as Sartre nevertheless would like, and not solely a reciprocal relation of objectification, it does not suffice to juxtapose the multiplicity of for-itself as so many parallels or equivalent universes. Rather, the for-itself have to form a “system”; they have to be open to one another as so many partial perspectives confirmed in the *same* common world (VI 113/81). This “miraculous multiplication of perceptible being” (S 23/16), by which the *same* things have the force to be things for more than one and that makes the *duel* of consciousnesses futile, comes from the world. And to translate a plurality into a duality is still a simplification of reflexive thought: “Perhaps it even would be necessary to reverse the customary order of the philosophies of the negative, and say that the problem of *the* other is a particular case of the problem of others” (VI 113 n/81 n). Between the ego and the other, there are always those who count as “thirds,” a bit like the fact that behind the intentionality of the object, there is the multiplicity of operative intentional productions, of which act intentionality is only the simplification. These multiple faces of others are so many variants of one life which is never my private property but rather a moment of a syntax or a general system of symbols (VI 114–15/82–83). Certainly, the fact of seeing in the other less a rival than a twin or a double does not mean that there is total reciprocity between the ego and others: to reduce what is non-transferable in my own experience and what is inalienable in the experience of others would mark “the triumph of a disguised solipsism” (VI 110/78–79). The life of others, just as they live it, remains for me “a forbidden experience.” But the *Nichtpräsentierbarkeit* of others—the fact that they are given to me originarily as absence, the transcendence and the *écart* that they constitute in relation to myself—is of the same order as that of everything sensible, which is to them also the *Urpräsentation* of what is not *Urpräsentierbar*, “Being’s unique way of manifesting itself without becoming positivity, without ceasing to be ambiguous and transcendent” (VI 267/214, 234/180).²⁶ Far from shutting them and me into parallel private worlds, the mystery of others only refers me back to the mystery that I am for myself insofar as I am perceptive life (PM 188/135). This is why the problem of the relations of the ego with others and the problem of the relations of the ego with things are the same. With things also, there is a lateral relation and *Einfühlung*: “Like

madmen or animals they are *quasi-companions*” (VI 234/180).²⁶ As others are “the flesh of my flesh,” things are “the extension of my body,” which, as Bergson said, extends unto the stars (VI 83 n. 2/57n. 10). Now, if there is an “intropathy” (*Einfühlung*) from the perceiving to the perceived, this is not a hylozoism of the Leibnizian type that would recognize a dormant or dull consciousness in everything, a pure horizontal consciousness that would not yet reflect on itself in the form of an ego. Husserl takes his chances with Leibniz’s monadology when he defines consciousness as the unity of a flux in which the dullness of the ego can interrupt the alertness of consciousness at different times, for “nothing prevents us from thinking that what is familiar to us as an interruption of alert consciousness would be extended to infinity.”²⁷ But, for Merleau-Ponty, intropathy is not the way of access to what, in nature, is not susceptible to being given in the original, to the *psyche*, which can only be presentified and not presented originally as is the body. It is not an imperfect modality of evidence,²⁸ but is intermingled with perception itself insofar as the latter is always also “imperception” (RC 12/72). What is *Urpräsenz* for Husserl, namely, spatiotemporal material nature,²⁹ is never for Merleau-Ponty anything but the extraction that brings about a vision reduced to a pure thought, the extraction from the seeing of the flesh of the sensible—which, as Merleau-Ponty repeatedly takes care to specify (VI 183/139, 191/146), is not identical with matter. From the ego to the things, there is indeed *intropathy* since I feel their unity *from within*. Moreover, on the inside “they exist only at the end of those rays of spatiality and of temporality emitted in the secrecy of my flesh” (VI 153/114). *Einfühlung* is the *originary* mode of access both to the being *within* which we are (VI 302/248), and to the being that we are also for ourselves—not as the pure intimacy of a self-consciousness but as the self-presence of that which has a world and a body and that can be self-present only in self-absence (VI 303/249), as “an original of the *elsewhere*, a *Selbst* that is an Other, a Hollow” (VI 308/254).

As the principle of differentiation—double dehiscence of seeing into the visible and the visible into seeing, work of the negative that opens in its medium the sensible mass to visibility (VI 193/147)—the flesh is a name for Being. But it is also generality, element, fabric common to all beings and the principle of indivision, and, as such, it is the name of being as a whole. This ambiguity of the notion of flesh testifies to the “regional” character of Merleau-Ponty’s work in relation to Heidegger’s investigation of a “direct expression of what is fundamental” (RC 156/179–80). Merleau-Ponty in effect conceives of ontology only indirectly (VI 233/179) and can apprehend the “verticality” of Being only by traversing the horizons of the sensible and in contrast to the natural region and the level of objective being (S 29/20; also VI 325/271–72). And if, in other respects, it is true that the notion of flesh has no equivalent in Heidegger’s philosophy,³⁰ this is perhaps less the effect of a lacuna—the filling of which a “phenomenology of perception” would have had as its goal—than the effect of a more radical thought of *Weltoffenheit*. Heidegger’s

thought of *Weltoffenheit* would be one that does not see in sensible experience an originary mode of access to being and that does not conceive an affect as “presence to the world through the body and to the body through the world,” that is, as *flesh* (VI 292/239). Rather, Heidegger sees an effect as a consequence of dependence in relation to the world that is also the revelation of the world (*eine erschliessende Angewiesenheit auf Welt*),³¹ a dependence relation that characterizes existence more originally than the phenomenon of incarnation. Moreover, an ontology of Dasein, which no longer conceives openness on the basis of consciousness—“consciousness as *Offenheit*” (VI 252/198)—does not have to reevaluate the psychological in terms of the ontological (VI 230/176) and can perhaps, with good reason, be parsimonious with respect to an ontology of the flesh. In contrast, an ontology of the flesh responds to the paradox of phenomenology, which, as philosophy of evidence and presence, is still led to recognize the undeniable horizontal structure of all intentionality. It is not sufficient to conceive, as Husserl still does, the interior horizon and the exterior horizon of things as a “system of potentialities of consciousness,” which remains under the control of a classical infinitism (VI 195/148–49). Instead, one has to recognize more decisively than Husserl himself that the horizontal structure “has meaning only in the *Umwelt* of a carnal subject” (VI 238/185) that is not cut off from a *positive* infinite because of the *fact* of its finitude; but rather, *as flesh* and *by an operative finitude*, it is open to a Being that is for it only *negatively* inexhaustible and infinite. This Being is such because it participates in the carnal subject and is thereby near to the subject and far away at the same time (VI 305/251, 223/169). Heidegger recalls, in a 1928 lecture course,³² that the word “horizon,” from the Greek *horizein*, “is by no means related primarily to looking and seeing but simply means in itself that which encloses within limits, that which closes in, *closure*.” To have a horizon therefore means less the capacity for the gaze to overcome what is actually given than “to capture” it from being, “to encompass it” within the openness of the visible (VI 195/149). Merleau-Ponty, who thought of horizons only as those of the flesh and who saw the verticality of existence erupt from the relation of embracing that takes place between the body and the world (VI 324/271), is with this conception nearer to Heidegger—who defines horizon as the limit toward which the temporal ecstasies tend,³³ that is, as a structure of a being essentially outside of itself³⁴—than to Husserl, for whom the horizon remains the index of a potential infinity at the center of an actual given whose objective status is not called back into question.

SEEING AND TOUCHING

If the ontological rehabilitation of the body and the flesh, as the unthought of the Western tradition,³⁵ is also the ruin of classical infinitism, it is nevertheless

the case that Merleau-Ponty still found the idea of chiasm in Husserl. In effect, in *Ideas II*, the text that Merleau-Ponty analyzes carefully in “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” Husserl shows that the level of *Leiblichkeit* is also the plane where one finds the distinction between subject and object “blurred,” since the living body (*Leib*) is the object of a *double* constitution, as physical thing and matter on the one hand, and bearer of localized sensations on the other.³⁶ Now, Husserl’s entire analysis in paragraphs 36 and 37 relies on the privilege granted to touching in the constitution of the living body. If Husserl starts from the particular case where the living body itself is the object of perceptual experience—that is, the object of the experience of the double contact of two hands that touch each other—it is to bring to light, in contrast to visual sensation, the remarkable *double* function of *all* tactile sensation as such. It is the *same* sensation that is apprehended once as perception of an external body and that—“according to another direction of attention,” which turns toward the “inside” of the body—furnishes a localized sensation of the lived body. The experience of double contact between two hands that are touching one another is characterized more particularly in that, here, we are dealing with two sensations that are *each* apprehendable in two different ways: the touched becoming the touching and the touching becoming the touched.³⁷ What reveals this remarkable property of the sense of touch is that, concerning the double constitution of the lived body and of nature, “everything can come into play in the extra-visual sphere.”³⁸ There is, therefore, a “striking” difference between the visible sphere and the tangible sphere, because the eye does not appear visually, nor can the visual sensation of color appear as the localized sensation of the lived body. If there is indeed therefore at least an experience of double contact, a touching-touched, there is not in contrast a similar “reflexivity” of vision nor a seeing-seen. This is why one cannot assimilate seeing and touching by speaking “metaphorically” of a look that would “palpate” things. If the eye is the object of localized sensation, that can only be in relation to the sense of touch, because like all the other organs it originally belongs to touched objects and not to seen objects. The experience of the mirror cannot be invoked as a counter-example, because it is not the eye as *seeing* that is perceived in the mirror: “I see something, of which I judge indirectly, by way of ‘*Einführung*,’ that it is to be identical with my eye as a thing (the one constituted by touch, for example) in the same way that I see the eye of an other.”³⁹ The body constitutes itself therefore as lived body, not through the intermediary of the sense of sight, but uniquely through that of touch. And inversely, visible things can refer back to an immediate relation with the lived body only if they can be touched and not by virtue of their visibility. A purely ocular subject could not have a phenomenal body at all, because it would *see* its own body solely as a material thing.⁴⁰ What is announced in these paragraphs of *Ideas II* is the collapse of any parallelism between vision and touch as a sense involving an *immediate* relation with the

object. Here Husserl refuses to consider vision as a touching at a distance, in contrast to Saint Bonaventure, for example.⁴¹ Vision is not a quasi touching because the reversibility between internal and external is strictly found only in touching, which is thereby the origin of their difference, the difference on the basis of which alone vision can be established. Touching therefore is given an astonishing ontological privilege, especially if we connect it not only to the theme of *Wesenschau* but also to the general importance that falls to sight in Husserlian phenomenology. At least concerning the lived body, the principle of all principles finds itself placed in check: there is no originary giving intuition of the flesh. Indeed, only on the basis of the flesh is there even any “originary” giving intuition—that is, the presentation of the thing “so to speak, in its ‘corporeal’ reality”⁴²—since Husserl shows in *Ideas II* that *carнал* intersubjectivity is the foundation of every apprehension of an objective being.⁴³ And it is still in relation to knowledge founded on seeing that *Leiblichkeit* appears as the limit-experience of constitution. Because one cannot *see* one’s body entirely—neither one’s back nor one’s head—Husserl says that the lived body “is a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing.”⁴⁴

Heidegger showed, as early as 1927 in *Being and Time*, that the entire Western tradition from Parmenides to Husserl had privileged sight as the unique mode of access to beings *and to being*,⁴⁵ and that the privilege given to pure intuition on the noetic plane corresponds to that given to subsistent being on the ontological plane.⁴⁶ Heidegger specifies, moreover, in explicit reference to Husserlian phenomenology, that “the thesis that all cognition has ‘intuition’ as its goal, has the temporal meaning that all cognizing is making present,”⁴⁷ defining thereby the meaning of being as *presentation* for these philosophers of *consciousness*, Kant and Husserl. Merleau-Ponty, with regard to the exorbitant privilege that is granted to vision, hardly seems to have distanced himself in relation to this long tradition, which seems on the contrary to find its culmination in the unique question that the author of *Eye and Mind* continues to ask from his first to his last book: what is vision?⁴⁸ Is it not possible, nevertheless, while remaining the inheritor of the tradition, to put into question *from within* the nonexplicit presuppositions on which the tradition is founded? By interrogating the enigma of vision, Merleau-Ponty wanted to differentiate what the philosophical tradition has always identified: to differentiate “the thought of seeing,” that is, a sublimated vision, one extracted from seeing and from its body, one identified with the inspection of the mind, from “active vision,” that vision that genuinely takes place, “squeezed into a body—its own body,” and “of which we can have no idea except in the exercise of it” (OE 54/136). This vision in fact can no longer be assimilated to the “reading of signs” of which the Cartesian *intuitus mentis* consists, nor to the “vision in general”⁴⁹ of which Husserlian intentionality consists. What we discover in active vision is no longer the intentional coincidence of the object and the subject, but rather the reversibility of the flesh, if to look is not

originally the act of a consciousness but “the opening of our flesh immediately filled by the universal flesh of the world” (S 23/16). Vision’s enigma lies in the fact that vision happens in the *midst* of things, “in that place where something visible undertakes to see” (OE 19/124); it is initiation to “a world in which all is simultaneous, *homon hèn panta*” (S 226/179; cf. VI 270/217): vision alone “makes us learn that beings that are different, ‘exterior,’ foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together*” (OE 84/146). What the Cartesian analysis of vision does not see is that “vision is tele-vision, transcendence, crystallization of the impossible” (VI 327/273): tele-vision in the sense that it “makes us simultaneously with others and the world in the most private aspects of our life” (S 24/16); transcendence because it discharges consciousness from its immanence; crystallization of the impossible since every visible is the union of impossible aspects and the concretion of something ungraspable. Vision, then, is no longer a form of *self-presence* or a form of thought, and seeing is less a *presentation* of the in-itself to consciousness than “the means given me for being absent from myself, for taking part in the fission of Being from the inside” (OE 81/145). Because the enigma of vision is really the enigma of *presence*, but of a “splintered” presence that can no longer be referred to the unity of an agency of presentation, this enigma is the mystery of *simultaneity* (OE 84/146)—the mystery of a coexistence of everything in and through distance, of “this deflagration of being” (OE 65/140) that Cézanne attempted to paint.

Such a conception of vision leads Merleau-Ponty to restore the parallelism between seeing and touching that Husserl contested, and to discover in them the same reversibility: “we could not possibly touch or see without being capable of touching or seeing *ourselves*” (S 23–24/16, our emphasis). There is not only a “vague comparison” between seeing and touching, but also a literal, essential identity between flesh and visibility (VI 173 n/131 n): the look “*envelopes, palpates, espouses* the visible things;” the look is with the visible things as in a relation of preestablished harmony and according to a proximity similar to that felt in the tactile palpation “*of which, after all, the palpation of the eye is a remarkable variant*” (VI 175/133, our emphasis). Just as the crisscrossing of touching and tangible in my hand opens onto a tangible being of which my hand is a part, one can say that the body is seeing (VI 176/133–34); that is, one can say that the body is visible and incorporated into the whole of the visible (VI 327/273–74), because vision, like touching, happens in the *midst* of the world and *within* being. This does not mean that Merleau-Ponty is not conscious of the difference between the visual and tactile spheres; there are certainly parts of my body that I cannot see—the eye in particular is not seen—while touch is spread throughout the whole body. If, however, it is “that same thick reflection that makes me touch myself touching” and makes “the *same* in me be seen and seer,” it is because “*by encroachment* I complete my visible body” (VI 256/202), because it is visible

for others and “in principle” visible for myself: “it counts in the *Visible* of which *my* visible is a fragment” (VI 327/274). It is, consequently, the same reflexivity—“thick” because it does not enclose into immanence but because, on the contrary, it opens the space of the world—that Merleau-Ponty recognizes in seeing and in touching, and as well, moreover, in the understanding (VI 190/144–45, 310/256). The “senses” are not, according to a “crude delimitation” (VI 176/133), openings to different aspects of the world. Rather, beyond their fundamental incommunicability, they are structurally open to each other, and the parts of the world they reveal are each for themselves a “total part,” at once singular and universal, giving themselves “as a *certain* being and as a *dimension*, the expression of *every possible being*” (VI 271/218). There is a universal *Transponierbarkeit* between them, since they are the expressions of one *same* world, the dimensions set up on one same and universal dimensionality. Between the visible and the tangible, there is therefore *reciprocal* encroachment, like two total parts that are nevertheless not superimposable, since, if the visible is cut out in the tangible, the tangible is still however promised to visibility (VI 177/134). This reversibility, which Merleau-Ponty discovers equally in seeing and in touching, is nevertheless essentially incomplete, “always imminent and never realized in fact” (VI 194/147), for if touched and touching, seen and seeing, were exactly superimposable, seeing and touching would not open onto one world. It is the “shift” in the reflection of the body (VI 313/260, 194/148), “the overhanging that exists within each sense” (VI 309/256) that prevents the experience of reversibility from being that of a fusion and a total coincidence that would also be closed within the immanence of an *actual* identity. Because reversibility is always *unsuccessful*, because there is only an identity *in principle* between touching and touched, seeing and seen, it opens onto the “il y a” of the world (VI 313/260). The identity in question here is neither actual-real nor ideal, that is, posited by the mind or consciousness; rather it is a *structural* identity, that of a being that can have many dimensions precisely because it is nothing positive (VI 315/261). If, in order to touch or see the things of the world, it is necessary to be capable of touching *oneself* or seeing *oneself*—that is, it is necessary to be capable of incorporating the living body into the space of the tangible and the visible—then inversely to touch and to see something is always to touch and see “oneself,” in a “sort of reflection by Ecstasy” (VI 308/255); tangible and visible things are extensions of our body, which is visible and tangible like them. The “divergent” reversibility of touching and touched, of seeing and seen, which coincides neither in the body nor in consciousness, refers back to an untouchable and an invisible that are such *in principle* and not only in fact; it refers back to a *true* negative that is not solely an *absent* positive (VI 281/227–28, 305/251, 308/254), but that—in the same way as the *punctum caecum* of consciousness *makes* consciousness be consciousness—makes there be a visible and a tangible through the openness

of a corporeality onto the world and being. This openness is that of a corporeality that participates in the world and being and not that of a consciousness or a thought that would “survey” them. The untouchable and the invisible, that at which I cannot be present or that with which I cannot coincide, are this *movement* of perception that throws me out of myself toward the things and that makes me always late in relation to myself, which always makes me exist in a difference or an *écart* that is the world itself (cf. VI 284/231 and 308/254–55). This blind spot of reversibility, which is, however, “ultimate truth” (VI 204/155), is the in-principle latency of all flesh that makes the self, quite by being open to itself, nonetheless be unaware of itself. Moreover the self would not be able to coincide with a constituting source of perception (VI 303/249–50), since, for such a being, “self-presence *is* presence to a differentiated world” (VI 245/191), the for-itself never being anything but *derived* from transcendence. This is why one rediscovers this hiatus at the very level of the *Urerlebnis*, which Husserl mistakenly understood as coincidence or fusion of the self with the self in the “living” present of consciousness—even though all presence is merely partial coincidence of the self with the self in transcendence, “a Self-presence that is an *absence from oneself*, a contact with self *through* the divergence with regard to self” (VI 246/192), and even though every present is an opening of spatiotemporal horizons and not only the unity of an impressional and retentional consciousness (VI 246/192, 248/194–95). What marks the limits of intentional analysis, in relation to a philosophy of transcendence that thinks “a dimensional present or *Welt* or Being” (VI 297/244), is that it remains a psychological reflection, and that it continues to think the being of humanity in the Cartesian way—as “a flux of individual *Erlebnisse*,” whereas it is “a field of Being” (VI 293/240). Nevertheless, what Husserl correctly grasped in his psychological reflection is consciousness as absolute *retentional* flux, since with *retention* one is concerned with an adherence of the past to the present that is not *posited* by consciousness, which is therefore preintentional (VI 245–46/192, 297/243–44, 248/194–95). The past, then, is no longer a modification of the present of consciousness, as in memory. Rather, it is “simultaneous” with the present; the present is constantly prolonged in retention,⁵⁰ and retention gives to the present its “thickness.” A philosophy of consciousness cannot even give an account of this thickness of the present, this simultaneity of the past and the present, if it describes and thematizes the phenomenon of the temporal flow; what is primary is not consciousness and the flow themselves, but the *spatializing* and *temporalizing* “vortex” of the *flesh* of which the flux of the *Erlebnisse* is only the schematization (VI 298/244). It is not enough to recognize the field character of time. Even more, one must not identify *Präsenzfeld* with immanent consciousness. But one must see, on the contrary, that a “transcendent consciousness” (VI 227/173) is opened in the field of presence and in the spatial and temporal dimensions, if, as the *Phenomenology of*

Perception has said so precisely already, “subject and object are two abstract moments of a unique structure which is *presence*” (PP 492/430). If, therefore, we want to stop thinking of subjectivity as pure *actuality* and *instaneity*, if we want to understand it as flesh—for “then past and present are *Ineinander*, each enveloping-enveloped—and *that itself is the flesh*” (VI 321/268, our emphasis)” or inversely to understand time as chiasm, then it is necessary to substitute an instituting subject for the constituting subject (RC 60/108) and the order of *Stiftung* for that of *Erlebnisse* (VI 275/221). The notion of institution is not only “a solution to certain difficulties in the philosophy of consciousness,” which would allow “the development of phenomenology into a metaphysics of history” (RC 59/107, 65/113); it is also what gives a more decisive turn to the difficult problem of activity and passivity with which Husserlian phenomenology never stopped struggling.⁵¹ In the final analysis, the main point consists in leaving the opposition of active and passive behind in order to think a simultaneous *Urstiftung* of *time* and *space* that—far from enclosing us in a philosophy of history which is still too “personalistic,” because it is too tied to praxis and to individual interiority—leads on the contrary to “grasping the *nexus* of history and transcendental geology” (VI 312/259). That is, it leads to the nexus of human freedom and its *terrestrial* “implantation” in the frame of what is no longer a philosophy of the subject, but in the frame of the world as *Offenheit der Umwelt* (RC 170/191). To think the simultaneity of time and space, of past and future, of subject and object, of positive and negative (RC 62/109), is not only to stop opposing a pure interior light to the impenetrable order of the in-itself (VI 67/43), but is also, as Husserl was already bringing to light, to conceive the *passivity* of our *activity* or the *body* of our *mind* (VI 274/221). If no question truly *goes* to Being, but is really rather *returning* to it (VI 161/120), this means that “new as our initiatives may be, they come to birth at the heart of being,” since their field of *inscription* has already been opened, and since we are no more the author of this opening—which nevertheless happens through and with us—than the author of ourselves and of the beating of our hearts (VI 274–75/221). The profound sense of the rehabilitation of the figure of Narcissus and of the mirror experience in *The Visible and the Invisible* is to be found in the fact that our activity is equally passivity (VI 183/139). Only the Cartesian—and Husserl is still this Cartesian—does not see himself in the mirror and considers the specular image to be nothing *of* himself (OE 38–39/131); while, for the one who recognizes the metamorphosis of seeing and of the visible, the mirror only translates and doubles the very reflexivity of the sensible (OE 33–34/129–30) and the specularity of all flesh, because “the flesh is a *mirror phenomenon*” (VI 309/255). This fundamental narcissism of all vision and of all flesh does not, however, refer back to a solipsism, because this “coiling over of the visible upon the visible,” which is the flesh, opens for other Narcissus” the field of an “intercorporeity” (VI 185/140–41). Nor does it

refer back to a philosophy of fusion and identity, as there is transcendence between seeing and visible, that is, identity solely *within* difference (VI 279/225). It is nevertheless the case that the specularity of being is the last word of Merleau-Ponty, as it is the culmination of the metaphysics of vision in the Hegelian dialectic, given that it is “in the grasping of opposites in their unity or of the positive in the negative, that *speculative thought* consists.”⁵² Merleau-Ponty does not purely and simply align himself with the Hegelian dialectic, however, but on the contrary invokes a “hyperdialectic” that, insofar as it is a “thought of the situation,” would be familiar with only partial and local sublations. It is a dialectic without synthesis that would not posit the ambivalence of the negative and the positive, and that would rediscover the being prior to reflection and idealization in the reciprocal *encroachment* of myself and things, in the *thickness* of the present and the *spatiality* of the world (VI 125–30/91–95, 318/264).



All things considered, if Merleau-Ponty joins back up with the philosophies of absolute reflection, this occurs by working a displacement at once both infinitesimal and radical in relation to them.⁵³ The reflexivity that is at issue is a structure of the *flesh* and no longer of *spirit*. All reflection, here understood as spirit, is of the type that reveals the experience of double contact (VI 257/204). This is why our conception of spirit as *reflection* is borrowed from the specular structure of the relation of our body to the world (VI 325/271). And the mirror play at issue here is no longer that of spirit preying solely on itself, but is rather the play of the world and of its metamorphoses. Merleau-Ponty leads us in the direction of such a “cosmology of the visible” by challenging, as had Anaxagoras,⁵⁴ every question of origin, every evolutionary perspective, since there is no longer anything but “one sole explosion of Being which is forever” (VI 318/265), no longer anything but an “existential eternity” in the “vertical” presence to the world and in this “stabilized explosion” of the outside and the inside, which is the sensible and Nature (VI 321/267; S 30/21). Neither reflection nor presence have the same meaning any longer then, and philosophy sees itself forced to make room within itself for nonphilosophy, for indestructible nature and what Schelling called his “barbarous principle” (S 225/178). No more are there two separate worlds, the sensible and the intelligible, than there are two different attitudes, the natural one of surrender to the world and the other, the philosophical, of reflective return (VI 94/65). In contrast to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty truly abandoned the “dream” of philosophy as a rigorous science.⁵⁵ If philosophy is no longer the *overhanging* of life but rather “the simultaneous experience of the holding and the held in all orders” (VI 319/266), then it says nothing more than all literature which, like philosophy, is “the *inscription* of being” (VI

251/197) the inscription of a being that is a sort of ledger open to our creations only because we are inscribed in it; this “ledger,” nevertheless, appears as “a treasury ever full of things to say” only for “the one who is a philosopher (*that is, a writer*)” (VI 305/252, our emphasis). To recognize that there is no absolutely pure philosophical speech, and to see in the circularity of Proust’s *oeuvre* the model of every philosophical approach (VI 231/177), by no means leads to the abandonment of the philosophical *as such*, but indeed rather to *true* philosophy. That is, it leads precisely to a philosophy for which the world and being are neither just an ideate (VI 254–55/201), nor the “truth” independent of the relation of transcendence that we maintain with the world (VI 239/185):

The true philosophy-apprehend what makes the leaving of oneself be a retiring into oneself, and vice versa.

Grasp this chiasm, this reversal. That is spirit. (VI 252/199)

NOTES

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1. Cf. Jean Paul Sartre, *L'etre et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 708; *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 784. It is no doubt on this point that there is a “fundamental incompatibility” between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Cf. the interview with Sartre in 1975, “An Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre,” in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 16 (La Salle, Ill.: P.A. Schilpp, 1982), p. 43.

2. Karl Schuhmann, *Husserl-Chronik* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).

3. Gerd Brand, *Welt, Ich und Zeit* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955).

4. Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, *Husserliana*, vol. 6 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), p. 146; *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 143.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 146/143.

6. In Martin Neidegger, *Metaphysische Aufgangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1978); *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984). Also in *Sein und Zeit, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Neimayer Verlag, 1963);

Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962).

7. Martin Heidegger, *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1965); *The Essence of Reasons*, trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

8. Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, 16/28–29, 18–20/34–41, 47/112–13.

9. Cf. Dorian Cairns, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), p. 106.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

11. Cf. F. W. von Herrmann, *Bewusstsein, Zeit und Weltverständnis* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1971), p. 21 f.

12. Brand, *Welt, Ich und Zeit*, p. 17.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 14–15.

15. Brand, *Welt, Ich und Zeit*, p. 17.

16. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 364/415 f.

17. Cairns, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*, p. 66.

18. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 7/27.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 149/189–90 f.

20. Merleau-Ponty, VI 262/208–9. Merleau-Ponty recalls in this working note that pregnancy means, primarily, productivity, fecundity; second, it means the typical character of *la "bonne" forme*. It is the implicit being, the dynamic character of *la bonne forme* that gives to it its stability, which imposes it on the perceiving body.

21. Eugen Fink, *Nähe und Distanz: Phänomenologische Vorträge und Aufsätze*, ed. Franz-Anton Schwarz (Freiburg: Alber, 1976), p. 122: “*eine Versteifung auf die ontische Wahrheit und eine Blindheit gegen die ontologische, als ein Unterlassen, eine Stilllegung der ‘Transcendenz’ des menschlichen Daseins.*”

22. Cf. Eugen Fink, “*Die Phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der Gegenwärtigen Kritik*” in *Studien zur Phänomenologie* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1966), p. 110 f.; “The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism,” in *The Phenomenology of Husserl*, ed. and trans. R. O. Elveton (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 104 f.

23. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 715/789–90.

24. Sartre denies validity to the type of being invoked by Merleau-Ponty for which “he invokes Heidegger” (“An Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre,” p. 43). He refers to his 1961 article, “Merleau-Ponty Vivant,” where we find this phrase: “Reading him at times, it would seem that being invents man in order to make itself manifest through

him.” *Les Temps Modernes* 17 (1961): 36; “Merleau-Ponty Vivant,” in *Situations*, trans. Benita Eisler (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 313.

25. Cf. M. Blanchot, *Le “Discours philosophique,”* in *L’Arc* 46: no. 2.

26. On the problem of the significance of *Einfühlung* in Husserl, see Cairns, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*, 74: “In the end, I got no clear idea whether Husserl thinks of plants as limiting cases of *Einfühlung*, or not. Though he did say perhaps Leibniz was right in saying that the only conceivable being was spiritual being, and the ‘things’ of the world are really ‘sleeping’ monads.”

27. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen II, Husserliana*, vol. 4 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), p. 108; *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 (Boston: Kluwer, 1989), pp. 114–15.

28. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen I, Husserliana*, vol. 3 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), p. 291; *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book (General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology), trans. Fred Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), p. 336.

29. Husserl, *Ideas II*, p. 163/171.

30. Cf. Claude Lefort, *Sur une colonne absente* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 110.

31. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 137/177.

32. Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 26 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1978), p. 269.

33. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 365/416.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 329/377.

35. That is, the *Cartesian* tradition; Merleau-Ponty refers to Greek ontology only exceptionally, and essentially remains in dialogue with the philosophy of consciousness.

36. Husserl, *Ideas II*, p. 145/152–53.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 147/155.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 147/154.

39. *Ibid.*, 148 n. 1/155 n. 1.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 150/158.

41. Cf. E. Gilson, *La Philosophie de Saint-Bonaventure* (Paris: Vrin, 1924), p. 335 f.; *The Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure*, trans. Dom Illtyd Trethowan and Frank J. Sheed (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965), p. 319 f.

42. Husserl, *Ideas I*, p. 43/44.

43. Ibid., p. 82/87. This text is cited by Merleau-Ponty in a note in S 218/172.
44. Ibid., p. 159/167.
45. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 147/187, 171/215.
46. Ibid., 147/187.
47. Ibid., 363 n/498n xxiii.
48. Cf. C. Lefort, “*Qu’est-ce que voir?*” in *Sur une colonne absente* (op. cit.), pp. 140–54. First published in *Histoire de la Philosophie*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 692–705.
49. Husserl, *Ideas I*, p. 36/36.
50. Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893–1917)*, *Husserliana*, vol. 10, ed. Rudolph Boehm (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), p. 28; *Lectures on Internal Time-Consciousness*, ed. M. Heidegger, trans. J. S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 49.
51. See above all Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), sections 38 and 39 (111–14/77–81), and Edmund Husserl, *Urfahrung und Urteil: Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1972), section 23, 116–23; *Experience and Judgement*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 106–12.
52. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik, I, Werke 5* (Frankfurt, a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969), p. 52; *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969), p. 56. On the relation of dialectic and vision, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 171/215, and “*Hegel und die Griechen*” in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt a. M., Klostermann, 1967), p. 425.
53. These are the terms by which Derrida expresses his own relation to the Hegelian discourse. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Edit. de Minuit, 1972), p. 15; *Margins*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 14.
54. Anaxagoras, frag. 17. See Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 85.
55. Cf. Husserl, *Crisis*, p. 508/389. Cf. H. G. Gadamer, *Die Phänomenologische Bewegung*, in *Philosophische Rundschau* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1963), vol. 11, no. 1/2, p. 25 f.; “The Phenomenological Movement,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 158 f.