

Chapter One

Flesh

Toward the History of a Misunderstanding

Merleau-Ponty: Nature as Flesh

The notion of “flesh” appears simultaneously as most ancient and recent in the history of Western thought. In the twentieth century, such a notion mainly seems to occur in order to spell the possibility of a communication between our body and Nature, and to rescue both from the objectivity to which Cartesianism had tried to reduce them. More precisely, we might say that in the twentieth century the notion of “flesh” coincides with a preeminent attempt to name the possibility of a communication between the Husserlian conception of the body as *Leib*—that is, an experienced unity of perception and motion¹—and Nature, conceived in terms of “an enigmatic object, an object that is not an object at all,” as Merleau-Ponty explains echoing Husserl. In fact, as Merleau-Ponty highlights, Nature “is not really in front of us. It is our soil [*sol*]—not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us.”² In the effective and concise terms of his last working note attached to the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes this as follows: “Nature as the other side of man (as flesh— nowise as ‘matter’).”³

As is well known, Merleau-Ponty was the first one who, in the twentieth century, explicitly claimed a philosophical value for the notion of “flesh,” using it in order to illustrate a type of being, which “has no name in philosophy,”⁴ since it is neither matter nor mind nor substance.⁵ Rather, it is the *unitary texture in which each body and each thing manifests itself only as difference from other bodies and other things*. Indeed, to him the

notion of “flesh” designates the common horizon where all beings belong. In that sense, such a notion may even appear older than its specifically Christian acceptance. In fact, Merleau-Ponty defines it by resorting to the pre-Socratic term “element,”⁶ as well as to another pre-Socratic expression, which in fact Aristotle attributes to Anaxagoras: namely, ὁμοῦ ἦν πάντα.⁷ Although such an expression literally means “all things were together,” Merleau-Ponty significantly does not relate it to an *origin*, but to something “originating,” which, he warns, “is not all behind us,”⁸ but rather in perennial explosion.⁹ To come across the phenomenon of reversibility calling for an “ontological rehabilitation of the sensible”¹⁰—“a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact”¹¹—Merleau-Ponty suggests simply turning back to the experience of the touched hand becoming touching, which Husserl describes in §36 of *Ideen II*. Indeed, by being sentient and sensible at once, our body is *fleshly akin* to the sensible world. A world to which the very same ontological status that is attributed to the body shall thus be acknowledged.

Husserl, the Earth, and the Flesh

It was a 1934 Husserlian manuscript that particularly urged Merleau-Ponty to acknowledge one of the most decisive consequences of such a rehabilitation of the sensible. Merleau-Ponty came across this manuscript already in 1939, when visiting the Husserl Archives in Louvain as a foreign scholar—the first one ever. The manuscript in question is usually recalled under the title “Umsturz des kopernikanischen Lehre,” and has been translated in English as “Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature.”¹²

In the summary of one of his last courses at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty comments as follows about this manuscript: “Through mediation we must again learn of a mode of being whose conception we have lost, the being of the ‘soil’ [*Boden*], and that of the earth first of all.”¹³ This is the very “mode of being” through which we heard Merleau-Ponty characterizing Nature precisely as “our soil.”

Thanks to this “mode of being,” as Merleau-Ponty’s commentary highlights, we shall learn that “there is a kinship between the being of the earth and that of my body [*Leib*] which it would not be exact for me to speak of as moving since my body is always at the same distance from me. This kinship extends to others, who appear to me as ‘other bodies,’ to animals whom I understand as variants of my embodiment, and finally

even to terrestrial bodies since I introduce them into the society of living bodies when saying, for example, that a stone ‘flies.’”¹⁴

On this basis Merleau-Ponty affirms the *cobelonging* of the sentient and the sensible to the same “flesh” that interweaves our body, the other’s body, and the things of the world, and that envelopes them in a horizon of “brute” or “wild Being” in which the subject and the object are not yet constituted. In this horizon perception takes place, on the one hand, in the indistinction of perceiving and being perceived and, on the other hand, in its intertwining with the imaginary, namely, our capability to perceive the *presence* of the absent. Such a capability is witnessed by the *ubiquity* of our seeing: “I am in Petersburg in my bed, in Paris, my eyes see the sun.”¹⁵

It is precisely such “flesh of the sensible,” to which we all belong and in which we belong to each other, which makes each of our experiences *communicable* and sharable. Husserl suggested that the Earth, meant as our soil, is properly neither in motion nor at rest, but remains on this side of either, being the condition of possibility of both.¹⁶ Similarly, the flesh appears as the condition of possibility of the communication of all experiences. In this sense, it remains on this side of any effective communication or lack of communication. This is why the “flesh of the sensible” widens as flesh of history, language, and even ideality. Indeed, ideality itself turns out to be inseparable from its *carnal* appearance, inseparable from the *flesh of the images of the world* by which it arose. In fact, ideality is constituted by those images as their excess, and it is precisely *through* their appearance that it manifests itself. In the same way, as Merleau-Ponty writes in *Eye and Mind*, “when through the water’s thickness I see the tiling at the bottom of a pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections there; I see it through them and because of them.”¹⁷ This is how a programmatic intention was reasserted by phenomenology. Namely, that of conveying attention onto *appearing* (and therefore onto *becoming*) in order to reinstate them into *Being*, by complying with their paradoxical characteristic, as Husserl had exemplarily been able to do in his “Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature.”

Merleau-Ponty comes to the notion of “flesh” by thinking of our relationship with the world in the direction showed by what he calls the “shadow” of Husserl’s thought, that is, the “unthought” that such reflection projects all around itself. However, at the same time, Merleau-Ponty is inclined to flag that the danger of *merely reversing* the relations between what lies on this side of an edge that keeps remaining metaphysical and what lies beyond it, can also be hidden in an idea advocated by Husserl. Such an idea is that of a *stratification* of experience whose truth would be

directly proportional to its depth. Merleau-Ponty thus criticizes Husserl's intention of "'unravelling,' 'disentangling' what is entangled," which is the flesh itself. He also highlights that "the relation between the circularities (my body-the sensible) does not present the difficulties that the relation between 'layers' or linear orders presents."¹⁸ In my opinion, it is to follow these circularities that the later Merleau-Ponty conceives the flesh starting from the body as well as the body starting from the flesh. This is particularly evident where he characterizes the flesh as visibility.

Franck, Nancy, Derrida: Body and Flesh

In the 1980s, proceeding in the speculative direction opened by Merleau-Ponty, Didier Franck proposed to generalize the translation of the German *Leib* by using the French term *chair*, that is, "flesh." In doing so, he first referred to Husserl's phenomenology,¹⁹ and later came to connect "the problem of flesh and the end of metaphysics."²⁰

In the first text I just evoked, Franck undertakes to think of the notion of *Leib* in terms of "flesh [*chair*]," rather than according to the expression "*corps propre*" which is the standard French translation of the *Leib* notion in the phenomenological jargon.²¹

In the light of such developments, it is therefore peculiar that, in his writing titled *Corpus*, Jean-Luc Nancy quotes as an example of a "philosophy of the 'body proper'"²² precisely the passage in which Merleau-Ponty points out that "what we are calling flesh [. . .] has no name in any philosophy."²³ That is, a passage whose radical intentions rather allude to the *insufficiency* of a "philosophy of the 'body proper.'" On the other hand, this peculiar matching did not go unnoticed to Jacques Derrida in his *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*.²⁴ Here he declares that, in the way Nancy mentions it, Merleau-Ponty's sentence is kept "at arm's length"²⁵ rather than being actually quoted. However, immediately afterward, Derrida interprets Nancy's gesture as an implicit "denunciation"²⁶ of that very sentence's content.

In any case, through Nancy's, Derrida's, and—as we shall see further on—Michel Henry's reflections, the notion of "flesh" now appears to have come back forcefully in the core of the philosophical debate, beyond the limits of the Merleau-Pontian, French, and phenomenological intellectual environment.

Here I would like to question some of this debate's issues and move toward some of its political as well as aesthetic implications, in order

to make them explicit and to discuss them. Such implications will only appear in the second place. This, however, shall not be misinterpreted by deducting that we are here sharing the traditional metaphysical reasoning according to which to a certain philosophy respond *its own* politics and *its own* aesthetics, as if the former legitimated the latter, as if they were its consequences. Moving toward such implications of a philosophical proposition rather means moving toward the very core of this proposition as well as moving toward philosophy as such. Namely, the very core that is one and the same with the ontology manifesting itself as “practice, and experience, of the being-in-common,”²⁷ which we are urged to question precisely *because of this*.

As the previous reference hinted, in *Corpus*, Jean-Luc Nancy had criticized the notion of “body proper,” pointing out that it seems inevitably to refer to “Property itself, Being-to-itself [*l’Être à soi*] embodied. But,” countered Nancy, “instantly, always, the body on display is foreign, a monster that can’t be swallowed.”²⁸ Moreover, as Didier Franck had wondered even earlier: Is it really certain that the limits of my flesh are the ones of the body proper?²⁹ Shall we not push the flesh as far as “everything that we perceive, [extending it] unto the stars,”³⁰ to use a Bergsonian expression also quoted by Merleau-Ponty?

Precisely in the light of these questions, in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida tends to accept the proposal advanced by Didier Franck to “substitute ‘flesh’ for ‘body proper’ [. . .],” and to do so, as Derrida points out, “despite the risk of some unreadable connotations that ‘flesh’ may risk importing [. . .] where the question of the ‘Christian body’ keeps reopening.”³¹

Still, in the case of the term *leibhaftig*—often used by both Husserl and Heidegger to express a certain nonrepresentative and nonsubstitutive relationship to the relevant thing—Derrida tries to reject every attempt to burden the reference to the “flesh” with whatever meaning that goes beyond a “vaguely and conventionally metaphorical”³² use. For his part, Merleau-Ponty expressly wrote that “[w]hen we say that the perceived thing is grasped ‘in person’ or ‘in the flesh’ (*leibhaft*), this is to be taken literally: the flesh of what is perceived [. . .] reflect[s] my own incarnation and [is] its counterpart.”³³

Derrida’s perspective thus rejects the tendency of “bestowing a flesh upon ‘things,’ ‘essences,’ and modes of experience that are fleshless (without *Leib*) by essence, and without self-relation or self-contact.”³⁴ In other words, in his opinion, only self-affection is evidence of the *Leiblichkeit*. By taking up again the terms of Merleau-Ponty’s commentary on “Foundational

Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature,” we should then talk about a “kinship” that from the being of my body (*Leib*) “extends to others, who appear to me as ‘other bodies,’ to animals whom I understand as variants of my embodiment,”³⁵ *without*, however, going as far as the “terrestrial bodies,” whose example par excellence is the stone.

Henry, Flesh, and Mud

Several points of convergence can be found between the main background notions of Derrida’s writing and the premises of the work published by Michel Henry a few months later and titled *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*,³⁶ namely, an explicitly Christian-inspired “philosophy of the flesh.”

In fact, since the very first page of the “Introduction,” Henry announces his intention of excluding from his inquiry “all living beings other than men,” on account of the “methodological choice [. . .] of speaking of what we know rather than of what we don’t know.”³⁷ Nonetheless, in the following page he points out that self-affection is the distinctive feature of the “flesh”: “We shall fix from the very beginning, through an appropriate terminology, this difference between the two bodies we have just distinguished—that is, on the one hand, our body experiencing itself feeling what surrounds it, and, on the other hand, an inert body of the universe, be it a stone on the road or the physical microparticles it is supposedly made of. We will call *flesh* the first, reserving the use of the term *body* for the latter.”³⁸

Such a layout leads us to express the aforementioned formulation as an opposition: “being defined by everything a mere body lacks, the flesh would not be able to blend with it. In fact, we might say that the flesh is rather the exact contrary. Flesh and body are opposed as feeling and not feeling—i.e., on the one hand, what gets enjoyment from itself; on the other hand, the blind, opaque, inert matter.”³⁹

According to Henry, an “abyss”⁴⁰ opens wide between the two terms. Concerning the first one, we would benefit from an “absolute and uninterrupted [although nonconceptual] knowledge.” “Concerning the second one, we would be in “complete ignorance.”⁴¹ Provided that this is Henry’s layout, it is my opinion that it should be brought back to his intention of inserting the “flesh elucidation”⁴² theme in that of “Incarnation in a Christian sense.”⁴³ Or, even better—as he specifies further—in St. John’s

sense.⁴⁴ In fact, Henry explains that in *De carne Christi* Tertullian links the flesh that Christ and mankind have in common to the mud that God, according to the Bible (Genesis 2:7), used to shape mankind itself.⁴⁵ Thus are outlined, in a clearly mythical form, the conditions of possibility of the “kinship” between our flesh, the earth’s being, and the being of other bodies.⁴⁶ However, Henry rejects that link between flesh and mud. As he writes, “*in the earth’s mud, there is no flesh, only bodies.*”⁴⁷ Henry rather turns to the link announced in the fourteenth verse of John’s Gospel’s “Prologue”: “And the Word was made flesh [καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο].” According to Henry, not from mud, but from the Word comes the flesh uniting mankind to the Christ. Therefore, as we have already noticed, the flesh proves in his opinion to be incomparable both with “inert bodies of material nature”⁴⁸ and with “living beings other than men.”

In order to compare the layouts examined so far and to clarify their relevant implications, we shall consider as particularly significant certain consequences that, for Henry, are produced by this connection between flesh and Word. Namely, the flesh coming from the Word can neither be divided nor torn, with the exception of “*experienced impressions, none of which has been found yet in searching the earth’s soil.*”⁴⁹ Such flesh, then, “*is always somebody’s flesh, mine for instance; so that it carries in itself an ‘ego.’*”⁵⁰ If the Gospel of John’s “Prologue” characterizes the Word as “the Word of Life,” then, according to Henry, Life cannot be identified with “the blind and impersonal modern thought—be it Schopenhauer’s will to live or Freud’s drive.”⁵¹ This is why, in his opinion, phenomenology should undergo a “reversal” of the presuppositions rooting it in that “Greek” way of thinking that remains incompatible with John’s announcement, and having shaped it so far as a “phenomenology of the world or of Being.” Then it could become the science of a revelation of Life in its absoluteness, of which the flesh and the Word are ways of expression.⁵² Henry’s book aims precisely at this project.

Nancy, Flesh, and Stone

Contrary to what Merleau-Ponty stated in his commentary to “Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature,” neither Derrida nor Henry maintain that the stone “flies.” Strictly considering the universe of authors so far taken into account, it can be useful to recall a remark Nancy makes in one of his writings explicitly

evoking *Corpus*. It is a remark on the famous Heideggerian affirmation according to which “the stone is worldless,”⁵³ since its “touching” the earth is in no way similar to that of the lizard touching the stone, and even less to that of our hand resting on another person’s head.⁵⁴ Nancy observes that “Heidegger’s ‘stone’ is still merely abstract,”⁵⁵ since concretely, by its touching earth, “[t]here is difference of places—that is to say, place—dis-location, without appropriation of the place by another. There is not ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ but, rather, there are sites and places, distances [*écarts*]: a possible world that is already a world.”⁵⁶ What Nancy specifies further seems precisely to answer the question concerning the limits of our *Leib*’s kinship (a question coinciding with that, otherwise formulated above, of the conditions of possibility of the experience communication). Indeed, Nancy writes as follows: “Am I in the process of suggesting that something of ‘comprehension’ can be attributed to the stone itself? One need not fear that I am proposing here an animism or a panpsychism. It is not a matter of endowing the stone with an interiority. But the very compactness of its impenetrable hardness (impenetrable to itself) can be defined (or can define itself, precisely) only through the distance [*écart*], the distinction of its being this here [. . .]. Thus, no animism—indeed, quite the contrary. Instead, a ‘quantum philosophy of nature’ [. . .] remains to be thought. *Corpus*: all bodies, each outside the others, make up the inorganic body of sense.”⁵⁷

Merleau-Ponty seems to move in a similar direction, when he states that the contact between my hands and that between my hand and a thing prove to be *akin* on account of a reversibility remaining—as I already recalled—“always imminent and never actually realized,” thus celebrating the differentiating (and as such signifying) power of the distance [*écart*]. Actually, I would like to at least hint at the fact that Merleau-Ponty claims the carnal rooting of science when questioning precisely the problem of “the philosophical significance of quantum mechanics.”⁵⁸

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty’s and Nancy’s thinking directions seem to converge in recognizing the participation of the stone in the same world to which we belong ourselves.⁵⁹ With clear critical reference to Merleau-Ponty’s later thought, Derrida, for his part, rejects—due to the previously argued reasons—the hypothesis of a “globalization [*mondialisation*] of flesh.”⁶⁰ Hence, his remarks urge us to question whether it is possible to maintain phenomenology’s programmatic intention to reinstate appearing into Being, isolating it at once from its unwanted implications (such as they are, at least, for Derrida).

Merleau-Ponty, Freudianism, and Flesh

As an example, it makes sense to question the position of the precisely “ontological” interpretation of psychoanalysis proposed by Merleau-Ponty’s later thought. From his standpoint, such an interpretation redeems psychoanalysis at once from the scientist causalism whose presence Merleau-Ponty often notices in the Freudian language, as well as, on the one hand, from the “anthropological”⁶¹ limits assigned to psychoanalysis, and, on the other hand, from the idea of stratification,⁶² which we have seen Merleau-Ponty criticize with reference to Husserl.

The urge not to make “an existential psychoanalysis, but an *ontological* psychoanalysis”⁶³ is explicitly affirmed in a working note of the *Visible and the Invisible*, whose title significantly associates the conceptual “body and flesh” couple with the notion of “eros” in order to make the “Philosophy of Freudianism”⁶⁴ emerge from their connection.

This working note begins by reasserting Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of the causalistic interpretation of what Freud calls “the relationship between on the one hand children’s impressions [*Kindheitseindrücken*] and the artist’s destiny, and on the other his works as reactions to these stimuli.”⁶⁵ Here is the text of Merleau-Ponty’s passage: “Superficial interpretation of Freudianism: he is a sculptor because he is anal, because the feces are already clay, molding, etc. But the feces are not the *cause*: if they were, everybody would be sculptors. The feces give rise to a character (*Abscheu*) only if the subject lives them in such a way as to find in them a dimension of being.”⁶⁶

With regard to this last expression, which is typical of Merleau-Ponty’s later thought, it is worth recalling that the term *dimension* has to be understood as an *element* in the pre-Socratic sense I mentioned before, and in Bachelard’s sense, as Merleau-Ponty himself specifies.⁶⁷ Such an element will never cease to define the relationship of that “subject”⁶⁸ with Being, resignifying itself from time to time in concurrence with the developments of that very relationship.

Going back to the examined working note, it carries on as follows: “In other words, to be anal *explains* nothing: for, to be so, it is necessary to have the ontological capacity (capacity to take a being as representative of Being).”⁶⁹ What Merleau-Ponty calls “ontological capacity” consists all in all in the possibility to invest any being (in a further working note the example of the sea is introduced) “as ‘element,’ and not as individual thing,”⁷⁰ through which the “openness to Being”⁷¹ takes place.

It is clear, however, that such a capacity is denied whenever one advocates, as Derrida does, that our kinship with other bodies is confined to the ones for whom self-affection is possible. Still, the Eros that is appropriately summoned up in the title of Merleau-Ponty's working note, certainly can be invested in *things*, as testified by the phenomenon of fetishism, as well as in those ideals—namely, the essences, to which Derrida denies any carnal consistence, as much as he denied it to things—whose elaboration process is, according to Freud, similar to that of fetishes. Indeed, “[i]n this connection we can understand how it is that the objects to which men give most preference, their ideals, proceed from the same perceptions and experiences as the objects which they most abhor, and that they were originally only distinguished from one another through slight modifications. Indeed, as we found in tracing the origin of the fetish, it is possible for the original instinctual representative to be split in two, one part undergoing repression, while the remainder, precisely on the account of this intimate connection, undergoes idealization.”⁷²

Flesh, Stone, and Politics

However, does acknowledging a kinship between things and our *Leib* not imply (or, at least, risk to imply) an annihilation of their nature of *Körper*? A line of answer to that question may be found outlined once again in “Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature.” Here Husserl considers the hypothesis that “I and [. . .] we were able to fly and have two earths as soil-bodies, being able to arrive at the one from the other by flight. Precisely in this way the one would become body for the other, which would work as soil. But what do two earths mean? Two pieces of one earth with one humanity. Together, they would become one soil and, at the same time, each would be a body for the other.”⁷³ Hence, the inclusion of the *Körper* in the *Leib* horizon does not erase its *Körperlichkeit*. Rather, it inaugurates the reversibility—“always imminent and never actually realized”—between its being *Körper* and its being *Leib*.

If one looks deeper, similar worries to those underpinning the question above have been recurrently raised as objections to the later thought of Merleau-Ponty. Sartre already complained that “Merleau-Ponty developed the habit of following each No until he saw it transformed into Yes, and each Yes until it changed it into No. He became so skillful at this *jeu de furet* that he virtually developed it into a method.”⁷⁴

Jean-François Lyotard later revived this perplexity, noticing Merleau-

Ponty's tendency to ignore "dissonances" in favor of "consonances."⁷⁵ The political implications of these remarks are evident. Sartre himself evoked them when writing that in Merleau-Ponty "contradictory truths never fight one another. There is no danger of their blocking movement or provoking an explosion. Moreover, are they, strictly speaking, contradictory?"⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty's later thought would thus dilute contradictions so as to make them unthinkable as such, and therefore would open up to basically consolatory outcomes.

From a different standpoint, the clearly political necessity of not ignoring "dissonances" in favor of "consonances" seems at work in the book where Jean-Luc Nancy reflects on his own experience of undergoing a heart transplant. In explaining the basic underpinning of the book, he claims as follows: "I was asked for an article on the theme 'the stranger's coming.' I did not quite know what to do. I had just one idea: *to insist on the extraneousness of the stranger (instead of reabsorbing everything in the proximity, brotherhood, etc.)*."⁷⁷

With regard to the problems analyzed so far, it is particularly meaningful that a text so explicitly prompted by such a necessity, comes to draw the conclusion that "the intruder is nothing but myself and man himself. None other than the same, never done with being altered, at once sharpened and exhausted, denuded and overequipped, an intruder in the world as well as in himself."⁷⁸

What does emerge between that necessity and those outcomes? In a nearly intermediate position, Nancy describes in his text his own experience as a cardiac patient, which casts light on the inside-outside relationships—and even: the *intimate-extraneous* relationships—in terms that, referring to Merleau-Ponty, we could call *chiasmic*. "My heart became my stranger: stranger precisely because it was inside. *The strangeness could only come from outside because it surged up first on the inside.*"⁷⁹

Precisely because of the emergence of this chiasm, Nancy's writing—prompted by the demand to emphasize the intruder's irremediable intrusiveness—seems to go as far as to announce that the intruder is *always already inside*, because "it is nobody else than me."

Could these outcomes be judged in their turn as consolatory? No, because although the stranger, being flesh of my own flesh, is as such my brother, my brother could indeed be Cain. *Actually, I may even be Cain myself*. As a condition of *all* these possibilities, as a condition of "a reversibility always imminent and never actually realized," the flesh founds *every* possible ethics and *every* possible politics. This means, on the one hand, that it does not found a particular ethic or a particular politic,

and, on the other hand, that it cannot be considered as a “pre-ethical” or “pre-political” dimension, but that it rather constitutes the very horizon of our “being-in-common.”⁸⁰

Transposed to the terms of the question concerning the risk of an annihilation of the *Körper* into the *Leib*, these conclusions would not only point out that the stone is indeed within the horizon of the flesh, but also that we should be careful, for within the horizon of the flesh we might come across the stone. To state the absolute distinction between the flesh and the stone, between the stranger and the familiar, between the friend and the intruder, as if someone having exterminated his or her own family were not part of it, this would definitely be consolatory. It would in fact be consolatory to think of a reversibility without gaps (*écarts*), that could *realize itself* as a pacified con-fusion between the elements it relates. It would be just as consolatory to think of the distance (*écart*) as a fracture that, instead of *conjointly* opening the different—and divergent—possibilities of such elements, would set their absolute distinction and therefore their reciprocal *extrusion*. Within this last tendency, the orientation of those stating the irreducible specificity of the man’s flesh as associated with incarnation (in the Christian sense of this term) is exposed to the risk of reproposing even for men the very position that founded, in the Western history, the modern strategies of both subjectivation and subjection.

Globalization, the “Virtual Field,” and the Semantics of the Flesh

Roberto Esposito affirms something along the same lines as what I just outlined. In an original combination of Nancy and Merleau-Ponty,⁸¹ he writes: “Philosophy cannot be but philosophy of relation, in relation, for relation. It is the point of resonance of the flesh of the world.”⁸² This is of course an orientation opposed to that of Derrida, and to his rejection of a “globalization [*mondialisation*] of flesh.”

However, this expression does not only evoke the Merleau-Pontian theme claimed by Esposito. In fact, the French term *mondialisation* is indeed the one designating the current economic and cultural globalization process.

Which are the resonances produced by the combination of such a process and a thinking of the flesh? One, for instance, is that the conception of the flesh I defined above as *texture of differences* leads Merleau-Ponty, at the end of a working note significantly titled “Chiasm-Reversibility,” to

wonder: “What do I bring to the problem of the same and the other? This: that the same be the other than the other, and identify difference of difference.”⁸³ The identity defining me, then, consists in perceiving myself as different from the differences constituting others. For instance, this means that I would perceive myself as *Italian* coming across the difference of a *French* person; while facing that of an American, I would rather perceive myself as *European*, suddenly bestowing that same identity on the French person as well, which will make him or her appear as similar to me, rather than different. Still, it is evident that this dynamic is not specific to the time of globalization following the fall of the Berlin Wall and characterized by the event of electronic trade. Indeed, in the same way that, thirty-five years ago the son of a Southern immigrant based in Northern Italy would feel Southern only when hearing certain Northern judgments on his father’s fellow countrymen, and he would feel Northern, and utterly so, only when visiting his father’s family.

Such examples point out that, if considered in the terms suggested by this conception of flesh, identity is never established once and for all, but always defined anew by the *encounter* with the other’s difference. Identity consequently reveals itself to be the *virtual center* never ceasing to define itself through one’s always renewed differentiation movement with relation to the other’s differences. Thus, the vertiginous acceleration imposed on certain transformations by the *current forms* of globalization⁸⁴ emphasizes the way in which the flesh is constitutively “global [*mondiale*].”

This direction of thought is reintroduced and specified by Roberto Esposito within a “Dialogue on the Philosophy to Come” with Jean-Luc Nancy.⁸⁵ Despite what we read above concerning his critics against the notion of “body proper,” in this dialogue Nancy affirms his preference for a thinking of the body rather than of the flesh, which he qualifies as “a word of depth while body is a light word.”⁸⁶ Toward Nancy’s reasons, Esposito objects with some reflections that it would be useful to mention, at least in their main articulations:

Rather, it seems to me that the principle of alteration or contamination evokes instead the semantics of “flesh” understood exactly as the opening of the body, the body’s expropriation, its “common” being. [. . .] Flesh refers to the outside as body does to the inside: it is the point and the margin in which the body is no longer just a body but is also its reverse and its base sundered, as Merleau-Ponty had intuited. [. . .] I believe that the first task of a philosophy to come is above all that of

replacing terms like “earth,” “body,” and ‘immunity,’ with terms like “world,” “flesh,” and “community.”⁸⁷

In his turn, Pietro Montani followed up this line of thought—this semantics of “flesh”—by developing it in an original way within the field of aesthetics and pointing out that such a line of thought brings along “important repercussions as far as images are concerned.”⁸⁸ Such repercussions evidently also conjugate with the technological mutations at work in this field.

No wonder that, from such a perspective, the semantics of the Merleau-Pontian flesh inspires a volume “entitled *Aesthetics of the Virtual* because it deals with bodies that are images, with the interactions between our body—weighted down but at the same time lightened by inorganic prostheses—and those images.”⁸⁹ In fact, the volume’s author, Roberto Diodato, explains that, in his view, the notion of “flesh of the world” is “a good descriptor of the virtual field”⁹⁰ insofar as this very “virtual field, whose objects are modalities of relation, is itself a structure of the correlation or relational texture of bodies understood as events of reversibility.”⁹¹

Whether we are taking into account the digital revolution or globalization, what the semantics of the Merleau-Pontian flesh helps us to think and name is always such a texture of relations between differences. And indeed, it can also prevent us from separating aesthetics from politics.