

SYNOPSIS

TEXTURES OF LIGHT

Vision and Embodiment in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty

Theorists of vision, those which include Luce Irigaray refer to her as an anti-visual theorist. Such commentaries concentrate on Irigaray's analysis of metaphysical vision as a form of phalliccentrism. By way of contrast, this thesis draws a line between the critical project of *Speculum*, in which Irigaray addresses the phallic concern, and a more provocative alliance which Irigaray makes with certain philosophers, including Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. These philosophers consider vision and embodiment as a nexus of signification, rather than in relation to abstract illumination, metaphysical light, or a disembodied eye. However, despite Irigaray's critique of perception as a natural coincidence, Levinas's break with the self as a thematizable totality, both philosophers adhere to preconceived notions about the feminine.

Cathryn Vallas Vasseleu

**A thesis submitted in fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Doctor of Philosophy

Rather than devalorizing vision, Irigaray's challenge to Merleau-Ponty and Levinas is directed to their myopic sense of vision, which perpetuates feminine invisibility. In particular she identifies their lapses into familiar ways in their accounts of tactility, which for Merleau-Ponty is implicated in visibility and for Levinas is radically separate from visibility. Despite their differences, Irigaray argues that in both accounts, tactility is ultimately subordinated within an ocularcentric visual regime. What is most significant about Irigaray's engagement with Merleau-Ponty and Levinas is the determination with which she extends and develops their ethico-syncretic work to an ethics of a way which gestures towards a new genealogy of light.

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May 1994

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Acknowledgements

Among recent commentaries on Western twentieth century theorists of vision, those which include Luce Irigaray refer to her as an anti-visual theorist. Such commentaries concentrate on Irigaray's analysis of metaphysical vision as a form of phallogentrism. By way of contrast, this thesis draws a line between the critical project of *Speculum*, in which Irigaray addresses the photology which is philosophy's concern, and a more provocative alliance which Irigaray makes with certain philosophers, including Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. These philosophers consider vision and embodiment as a nexus of signification, rather than in relation to abstract illumination, metaphysical light, or a disembodied eye. However, despite Merleau-Ponty's break with the concept of perception as a natural coincidence of consciousness and things, and Levinas's break with the self as a thematizable totality, both philosophers adhere to preconceived notions about the invisibility of the feminine.

Rather than devalorizing vision, Irigaray's challenge to Merleau-Ponty and Levinas is directed to their myopic sense of vision, which perpetuates feminine invisibility. In particular she identifies their lapses into familiar ways in their accounts of tactility, which for Merleau-Ponty is implicated in visibility and for Levinas is radically separate from visibility. Despite their differences, Irigaray argues that in both accounts, tactility is ultimately subordinated within an ocularcentric visual regime. What is most significant about Irigaray's engagement with Merleau-Ponty and Levinas is the determination with which she extends and develops their idiosyncratic and unique concepts of vision and embodiment, relating their work to an ethics of sexual difference in a way which gestures towards a new genealogy of light.

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Abbreviations

PART I

Selected Works of Merleau-Ponty

- PhP *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).
- VI *The Visible and The Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).
- PP *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James E. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

Selected Works of Levinas

- TI *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- EE *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978).
- OBBE *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

Selected Works of Irigaray

- SF *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- SE *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- SG *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

METAPHYSICAL LIGHT

Noble, then, is the bond which together sight and visibility, and greatness and light, have no small difference of nature, for light is their bond...¹

METAPHYSICAL LIGHT

(Introduction)

Introductory Comments

This thesis considers Irigaray's work on vision after *Speculum of The Other Woman*,² the text in which she undertakes a study of the history of Western metaphysics. Recent commentary on Irigaray's theorization of vision has been largely confined to this earlier period of her work. As will be discussed, Irigaray's equation of ocularcentrism with phallogocentrism in *Speculum* and the essays collected together under the title of *This Sex Which is Not One*³ is related to an analysis of the metaphoric relation between vision and light in Western philosophy. In the section of *Speculum* titled "Plato's *Allegory*," Irigaray's commentary is in substantial agreement with Derrida, who has characterized the metaphor of darkness and light, or self-concealment and self-revelation, as the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics: "...not only because it is a photological one - and in this respect the entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history of, or treatise on, light - but because it is a metaphor."⁴ However, there is a significant shift in Irigaray's attitude towards vision in her subsequent work, which is related to a more politically directed figuration of feminine visibility in the symbolic order. As Margaret Whitford describes the transition:

...she has moved from the stress on unbinding, or undoing (eg. undoing patriarchal structures) to a stress on binding (eg.

1 Plato, *The Republic*, Book VI: 508, trans. B. Jowett, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 206.

2 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985). Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (SF).

3 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

4 Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 27.

METAPHYSICAL LIGHT

Noble, then, is the bond which links together sight and visibility, and great beyond other bonds by no small difference of nature; for light is their bond...¹

Introductory Comments

This thesis considers Irigaray's work on vision after *Speculum of the Other Woman*,² the text in which she undertakes a study of the history of Western metaphysics. Recent commentary on Irigaray's theorization of vision has been largely confined to this earlier period of her work. As will be discussed, Irigaray's equation of ocularcentrism with phallogocentrism in *Speculum* and the essays collected together under the title of *This Sex Which is Not One*³ is related to an analysis of the metaphoric relation between vision and light in Western philosophy. In the section of *Speculum* titled "Plato's *Hystera*," Irigaray's commentary is in substantial agreement with Derrida, who has characterized the metaphor of darkness and light, or self-concealment and self-revelation, as the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics: "...not only because it is a photological one – and in this respect the entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history of, or treatise on, light – but because it is a metaphor."⁴ However, there is a significant shift in Irigaray's attitude towards vision in her subsequent work, which is related to a more politically directed figuration of feminine visibility in the symbolic order. As Margaret Whitford describes the transition:

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4 Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 27.

constructing new forms of sociality). What has been described as the 'philosophical terrorism' of *Speculum* has given way to an apparently more law-abiding concern with citizenship and rights, in which the central political concept is love between the sexes."⁵

It is more appropriate to consider Irigaray's work as an engagement in what might be called the texture of light rather than in relation to light as a metaphor for truth, or as either an ideal or physical medium. A "texture" is a disposition or characteristic of anything which is woven into a fabric, and comprises a combination of parts or qualities which is neither simply unveiled or made up. Texture is at once the cloth, threads, knots, weave, detailed surface, material, matrix and frame. Light is not simply the ideal medium which links sight and visibility, but also the matter which spills over and passes through the interstices, depending on the openness of the structure. It is not appropriate to think of light as a texture either perspectively as a thing, or as a medium which is separable from its source. As a texture, light cannot be divorced from its historical and embodied circumstances. It is both the language and material of visual practices, the invisible interweaving of differences which form the fabric of the visible.

A feature of Irigaray's project is her concentration on the implication of touch in vision, without which she argues, seeing would not be possible. Tactility is another aspect of the texture of light, where "texture" also refers not only to the feeling of a fabric to the touch, or the grasping of its qualities, but also to the hinges or points of contact which constitute the interweaving of the horizontal and vertical strands of sexuate subjectivity. This fabrication of subjectivity is articulated in Irigaray's later work, most notably in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.⁶ Irigaray's theorization of the relation between vision and touch stands as a challenge to the representation of sight as a sense which guarantees the subject of vision an independence, in which the seer is distanced from an object. Irigaray's interpretation of touch in vision has a significance which

5 Margaret Whitford, "Irigaray, Utopia and the Death Drive," *Engaging With Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, eds Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), forthcoming. I quote here from a prepublication manuscript which Margaret Whitford kindly made available.

6 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993). Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (SE).

is not entertained in the work of theorists such as Hans Jonas, whose discussion of the valorization of sight in "The Nobility of Sight" is based on the extent to which vision gives a sense of an immaterial and thus infinite object.⁷ Jonas compares the perpetuation of vision to a transitory sense of being affected, as is the case with the other senses. By way of contrast, Irigaray has a concept of vision which is indivisible from the affection of touch, or an indefinable difference in contact. The difference is best described in her analysis of the role of touch in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, two philosophers who critically engage with the transcendental assumptions of metaphysical and phenomenological accounts of subjectivity.

The work which follows is structured around two of Irigaray's essays, which along with an introductory essay, "Love of the Other," form the final section of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. The first essay is "The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm,'" (SE, 151-184) and the second is "The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 'Phenomenology of Eros.'" (SE, 185-217)⁸ In each of these essays Irigaray takes up and extends the projects of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas in a way which neither philosopher is prepared nor able to imagine, despite their intention to break with the dualist conceptualization of the visible and the invisible in the history of Western philosophy.

My own discussion of Irigaray is divided into four parts. In *Part I*, a summary of Irigaray's account of ocularcentrism is preceded by a brief remark on the positioning of Irigaray in some contemporary commentaries on Western vision. *Parts II* and *III* each comprise three chapters, the first two of which are devoted to Merleau-Ponty and Levinas respectively. These chapters give an outline of the two philosophers' disruption of foundationalist concepts of vision and embodiment based on the assumption of a transcendental perspective or a disembodied eye. In Merleau-Ponty's "philosophy of ambiguity" it is a case of recasting the body as an ontological question within the language of perception. In

7 Hans Jonas, "The Nobility of Sight," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.14 No. 4 (1954), pp. 507-519; reprinted in Stuart Spicker, ed., *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times, 1970), pp. 312-333.

8 There are currently two published English translations of the essay on Levinas. One is translated by Alphonso Lingis, *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York, 1986), pp. 231-256. The other, from which all quotes which appear here are taken, is in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp. 185-317.

Levinas's "philosophy of anarchy" it is the demonstration that otherness exceeds the totality of visual perception and cannot be defined in terms of self-identity. The third chapters of *Parts II* and *III* are devoted to Irigaray's engagement with each philosopher on the subject of their continued adherence to the invisibility of the feminine. In particular she identifies their lapses into familiar ways in their accounts of tactility, which for Merleau-Ponty is implicated in visibility and for Levinas is radically separate from visibility. Despite their differences, Irigaray argues that in both accounts, tactility is ultimately subordinated within an ocularcentric visual regime. The central concern of the third chapters in *Parts II* and *III* is an exegesis of Irigaray's extension of Merleau-Ponty's and Levinas's accounts of the relation between touch and vision in the two essays which I have mentioned. Finally, *Part IV* brings together Irigaray's thoughts on the equivocation of vision, as discussed in *Parts II* and *III*, and relates them to more general questions of the visibility of relations between femininity, maternity, women and eroticism in the context of a new genealogy of light.

ge of the World Picture is something in which we remain very much immersed. I do not wish to take up the framing of these works as a general issue, but only note the nature of their concerns. My own interest in both books, for the purposes of this discussion, is that they include commentaries on Irigaray's account of the ocularcentrism of Western philosophy. My intention with respect to these commentaries is certainly implicated in the issue of framing, but it is directed to a specific questioning of the contextualization of Irigaray as an anti-visual theorist in analyses of modernity and vision.

Irigaray and Derrida are grouped together in Martin Jay's chapter on deconstruction and vision, for which he proposes the tongue-twisting if not tongue-in-cheek neologism, "Phallogocularcentrism."¹¹ The problem of ocularcentrism as Jay presents it, is cast in terms of the relationship between feminism and deconstruction. Rather than conceiving this

9 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Desigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Paul Robinson uses these words, no doubt provocatively, in his endorsement on the back cover. Martin Jay himself describes his project more cautiously, as an "opening overview" (p. 542), referring to his willingness to risk the loss of the look which he perceives is what ultimately empowers the intellectual historian (p. 20).

10 David Michael Levin, *Modernity and the Legacies of Plato* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Both works have been published by the same publisher in the same year, and not only does an essay by Jay appear in Levin's collection, but other cross-references also abound.

11 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 494.

Positioning Irigaray as a Theorist of Western Vision

The hierarchization of vision is the common theme of a couple of books which have been published in America recently on various theorists of Western vision in the twentieth century. At the same time that Martin Jay's monumental study, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* has been endorsed for its global mastery,⁹ David Michael Levin has collected together essays which consider many of the same theorists, under the title *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*.¹⁰ Although these books appear to be arguing opposite positions on vision and modernity, the difference can itself be regarded as an effect of a dichotomous hierarchization of vision. Also, while the hegemony and the denigration of vision appear simultaneously as the means of framing the concerns of the theorists dealt with in common in both texts, the determination to provide such an overview (an Icarian overview, as Martin Jay suggests) reminds us, ironically, that the Age of the World Picture is something in which we remain very much immersed. I do not wish to take up the framing of these works as a general issue, but only note the nature of their concerns. My own interest in both books, for the purposes of this discussion, is that they include commentaries on Irigaray's account of the ocularcentrism of Western philosophy. My intention with respect to these commentaries is certainly implicated in the issue of framing, but it is directed to a specific questioning of the contextualization of Irigaray as an anti-visual theorist in analyses of modernity and vision.

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11 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 494.

relationship in terms of a feminist debt to deconstruction¹² or the reverse, as Lyotard suggests when he acknowledges feminism's undermining of the symbolic as a metadiscourse,¹³ Jay considers the two philosophers' analysis of vision in the context of their readings of ocularcentrism. Derrida's work is not interpreted as a denigration of vision, but as a deconstructive position: "It would be imprecise to call the suspicious approach Derrida does take to the primacy of vision in Western culture a straightforward "critique" of ocularcentrism."¹⁴ On the other hand, Jay offers his interpretation of Margaret Whitford's comments about deconstruction as a guide to the context in which a reading of Irigaray's position might begin. He writes: "No feminism interested in undoing the effects of patriarchal oppression, it might be thought, could be inspired by so Sisyphean a scenario. No theory so blatantly lacking in a redemptive, utopian impulse could fuel the feminist quest for radical change."¹⁵

Jay indicates that the general trajectory of his discussion of Irigaray will be the revelation of her "radicalization of the antivisual components in deconstruction," rather than the deconstruction of vision. Jay goes so far as to propose that the difference between the two philosophers with respect to their writing about vision is that Irigaray is a less rigorous deconstructionist than Derrida: "Moving beyond Derrida's characteristic ambivalence, Irigaray produces a less insistent double reading of the pernicious effects produced by the hypertrophy of the visual."¹⁶

Although Jay labels Margaret Whitford's discussion of Irigaray's interest in identity and the violence of metaphysics as reproachful of Derrida, her (albeit severe) analysis of Irigaray's differences with deconstruction is not actually broached by Jay. The omission is relevant to my own disagreement with Jay, which rests with his intention to show

12 Jay is referring here principally to Alice A. Jardine's criticism of the adherence of feminism to deconstruction, which she addresses in *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985). Of the many other works also addressing this issue, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's three essays, "French Feminism in the International Frame," *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 134-153; "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman," *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 169-195; and "Feminism and deconstruction, again: negotiating with unacknowledged masculinism," *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 206-223, comprise the most complex and shifting interrogation of this issue.

13 Jean-François Lyotard, "One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles," trans. D. J. Clark, W. Woodhill and J. Mowitt, *Sub-Stance* Vol. 20 (1978), pp. 9-17.

14 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 496.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 497.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 498.

that Irigaray's writing on vision can be described as a radicalization of the antivisual components in deconstruction. Whitford's discussion of Irigaray's departure from deconstruction, feminist or otherwise, does not hinge on the dismissal of deconstruction as politically ineffective, but rather on inconsistencies in Derrida's own statements about feminism and deconstruction. In particular, Whitford argues that Derrida ultimately insists on the fixation of woman as writing. Derrida "masters" the identity of "woman" as nothing but a trope for the undecidability of meaning. To that extent, Whitford's reproach of Derrida is the reverse of Jay's comparison of Irigaray and Derrida. If anything, Whitford accuses Derrida of being a less rigorous deconstructionist than Irigaray.

Irigaray's own statement of her position in relation to deconstruction is more of a double reading than Jay gives her credit. Rather than radicalizing certain themes in deconstruction, Irigaray is attempting both a deconstruction and a feminist position which is irreducible to the terms of deconstruction. In response to a question addressed to her on the implication of a woman deconstructing the "theory of woman," Irigaray replies:

It is not correct to say that I have "entered into" the "theory of woman," or even simply into its deconstruction. For, in that particular marketplace, I have nothing to say. I am only supposed to keep commerce going by being an object of consumption or exchange. What seems difficult or even impossible to imagine is that there could be some other mode of exchange(s) that might not obey the same logic.¹⁷

While Irigaray is interested in securing a place for the feminine within sexual difference, the last thing she is trying to do is to secure that place by resorting to the inverse of a masculine paradigm and embracing the absence of light, invisibility, and a distaste for looking as essentially feminine. Irigaray's efforts are not lost on Derrida, who comes closer to becoming open to such a position in his challenging of Levinas's ethics of alterity for its attempt to master sexual difference. Derrida portrays Levinas's mastery in terms of a textual sleight of hand which secures the origin of woman by substituting his own words in the place of hers.¹⁸

17 Irigaray, "Questions," *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 158.

18 See Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 11-48.

There is no denying that much of Irigaray's criticism is directed towards the privileging of the visual in Western culture, which she argues is tied to the perpetuation of a monological masculine subjectivity. For this she has been criticized for making generalizations based on her own globalizing reach, or her assumption of a prevailing phallogentric signifying economy.¹⁹ There is a danger of interpreting comments by Irigaray, including one on pornography and eroticism which Jay cites, as unvarying pronouncements of women's relationship to vision:

Investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men. More than any other sense, the eye objectifies and it masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations.²⁰

However, there is more to Irigaray's theorization of the visual than a consideration of the privileging of the gaze in a phallogentric economy will allow. As will be discussed in the next section of *Part I*, Irigaray pursues the trail of an invisible materiality which is systematically eliminated in the adoption of a metaphysics of presence. Irigaray extends this assessment of the workings of heliocentrism to Derrida's naming of woman as writing or *différance*. Just as the sun is metaphorically incorporated into philosophy, woman as trope of *différance* incorporates femininity while excluding any claim to a feminine identity by women: "...ever more hemmed in, cathected by tropes, how could she articulate any sound from beneath this cheap chivalric finery?" (SF, 143) The trope of woman is an endless deferral of identity, independent of any material referent. As Jay quotes Irigaray, in the idealist rationality of heliocentrism, woman cannot refer to any women in particular. Woman is "never anything but the still undifferentiated opaqueness of sensible matter, the

19 For example, in relation to Irigaray's theorizing of gender asymmetry in general as a consequence of a monological discourse, Judith Butler asks: "Is it possible to identify a monolithic as well as a monologic masculinist economy that traverses the array of cultural and historical contexts in which sexual difference takes place?" See *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 13.

20 Luce Irigaray, interview in *Les femmes, la pornographie et l'erotisme*, eds, Marie Françoise Hans and Gilles Lapouge (Paris, 1978), p. 50; quoted in Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 493.

store (of) substance for the sublation of self, or being as what is, or what he [sic] is (or was), here and now."²¹

Irigaray is more ambivalent about vision, and Derrida is more in sympathy with Irigaray's refusal to embrace the Other of metaphysics than is allowed in Jay's comparison of the two philosophers, set up as it is in terms of Derrida's ambivalence towards vision and Irigaray's anti-visual stance. Jay discusses Rodolphe Gasché's Derridean foregrounding of the materiality of signifying practices, and the proposition that perfect specularity can never be entertained.²² Jay concludes that while Derrida is hostile to any traditional privileging of the eye, he is equally hostile to any hierarchizing of the senses or a radical rejection of ocularcentrism. On the other hand, Jay limits his consideration of Irigaray's rewriting of the assumption of undifferentiated matter to its negative implications for vision. Furthermore, Irigaray's preference for touch, which she claims is the sense in which women's sexuality is best expressed within a scopic economy, is presented as evidence of her reconstruction of a binary opposition between (masculine) vision and (feminine) touch.

The nuances of Irigaray's differentiation of touch and vision are more apparent in her recent work than in her earlier deconstruction of the complicity between ocularcentrism and phallogentrism. As will be argued in the course of this thesis, Irigaray's analysis of the implication of touch in vision in her study of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas is grounded in her criticisms of the extent to which both philosophers fail to consider the indeterminacy of touch, except within the sensible/intelligible binarism of heliocentrism. Irigaray's preference for touch is not a preference in opposition to vision, but an attempt to re-eroticize all the senses, including vision.

Having criticized Jay's positioning of Irigaray, I should also qualify my remarks. In terms of his intention to provide an overview, Jay's description of Irigaray as an anti-visual theorist is more than justifiable. His analysis reiterates in detail a prevailing assumption that she is exactly that. However, for the purposes of contextualizing my own work, I would add that his analysis also reflects the absence of any significant differences of interpretation of Irigaray's stance in relation to vision. An irony of Jay's inclusion of Irigaray as one of the anti-visual theorists against whom he argues for an ineradicable passion for the freedom of vision is that no

21 Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 224, quoted in Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 536.

22 Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1986).

opening remains for considering the extent to which Irigaray addresses illumination as an ineradicable passion. Although Jay has written this chapter of his book in the past tense, Irigaray has not yet finished with visual economies. It is my intention to argue in this thesis that her recent concern regarding vision is the constitution of a visibility of the feminine through a re-eroticising of light.

Irigaray is aligned with anti-visual thought in a different way in Andrea Nye's essay, "Assisting at the Birth and Death of Philosophic Vision."²³ This commentary, which is devoted to Irigaray's critique of speculative metaphysics, is included in the collection, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, which is edited by David Michael Levin. Here, Irigaray is positioned as an anti-visual theorist because of her philosophical alliances. She is caught, it is proposed, within the negativity of the metaphysics which she attempts to abandon. Nye's opinion of Irigaray's *Speculum* is characterized by Levin in the book's introduction as a "blind passageway." Her essay is followed by Mieke Bal's concluding essay, "His Master's Eye," which according to Levin's introductory comments, manages to free the gazes of women (in paintings by Manet and Rembrandt), "from the long history of critical interpretations that obscured their truths."²⁴ Levin's commentary suggests a progression from the closure of metaphysical vision in Irigaray's blind turn, to the opening of a pluralism of vision. Levin ends his introduction with the comment: "Bal's essay will thus leave us, at the end of this book, with an unsettling question: Whose eye is ultimately master?"²⁵

Not only am I unsettled by Levin's question, I am left doubting whether it would be the one which Bal would want asked at the conclusion of her paper, arguing as it does against the institution of a gaze as an ultimate or master view. I am also left wondering how Irigaray's work is meant to be positioned within the scope of the eye which Levin's question rips from the subject of the book and holds over it like a gory panopticon or forbidden trophy. The question comes as a strange conclusion to a collection on modernity and vision in which technologies of ocular privileging are thoroughly addressed. A second reading of the question, in terms of who would want to claim that their mastery rests ultimately in an eye; or a third, that they are mastered by an eye; or a

23 Andrea Nye, "Assisting at the Birth and Death of Philosophic Vision," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 361-378.

24 Mieke Bal, "His Master's Eye," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 379-404.

25 Levin, "Introduction," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 26-27.

might have used to dispell the Platonic myth. Nye's essay represents Irigaray as a midwife, who with a singularity of vision, assists a philosophical system with its self-birth metaphors. However, what Nye has to offer in place of Irigaray's approach is an equally synchronic strategy. What if, she suggests, Irigaray had considered the everyday social interactions of those Greeks, who would not have lived their lives with their eyes focussed on eternity, yet alone with such monocular and insecure vision?

To argue that Irigaray should attend to the real and not the metaphoric vision of the Greeks is not only to adhere to the logic of resemblance, but to return there for its (re)origin. To suggest that one can move inside and outside of metaphysics is to repeat the very division it sets up. Irigaray's strategy, which Nye does not address, although she quotes the postscript of *Speculum*, in which Irigaray puts it succinctly, is to insist on the two positions simultaneously.²⁷ Nye suggests that this postscript is an indication of the position assigned to women in Irigaray's work. I read this postscript as a key to Irigaray's methodological strategy of confounding an unavoidable systematicity by a double reading:

Because in relation to the working of theory, the/a woman fulfills a twofold function – as the mute outside that sustains all systematicity; as a maternal and still silent ground that nourishes all foundations – she does not have to conform to the codes theory has set up for itself. In this way, she confounds, once again, the imaginary of the "subject" – in its masculine connotations – and something that will or might be the imaginary of the female. (SF, 365)

My difference with Nye lies with her interpretation of Irigaray's approach in *Speculum*. Nye maintains that in aligning herself with speculative metaphysics, Irigaray leaves women in a paralysed state. I will pursue a different theme in relation to vision in the essays from *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Irigaray herself makes a distinction between her earlier cultural analyses, where what is most apparent is that alliances are a necessary part of discourse, and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, whose style of alliances cannot be approached through an exhaustive decoding.²⁸ A

27 Ibid., p. 369.

28 Luce Irigaray, "The Three Genders," *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 177. Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (SG).

consistent theme of Irigaray's work is the development of a corporeally based notion of interiority whose morphology cannot be subsumed within the logic of an isomorphic imaginary. Far from perpetuating a legacy of sterile vision, in her studies of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, Irigaray addresses vision in the context of her notion of lived interiority. Her reconceptualization of vision in terms of interiority is discussed in *Parts II and III* of this thesis.

As well as Irigaray, many theorists who have been actively engaged in the issue of feminism in France, including Le Doeuff, Cixous, Wittig, Montrelay, Duras, Clement and Kristeva and Rose, have drawn associations between ocularcentrism and phallogentrism. In their essay, "The Mind's Eye,"²⁹ Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski place Irigaray's work in the context of the anti-visual sentiments which emerged against what was perceived as a traditional privileging of vision in the Western hierarchization of the senses.³⁰ The essay by Keller and Grontkowski addresses this tendency to accuse the visual of being responsible for the logic of Western thought. As well as challenging the presumption of a hegemonic privileging of vision in the history of Western ideas, the essay also questions the radicality of championing touch as a sense preferred by women, given that this distinction has a long tradition, in which vision is generally accorded a higher status and touch a lower one.

Fox Keller and Grontkowski argue that those theorists who consider that there is some inherent logic of the visual are ignoring that any such logic is the effect of an elision of vision and truth. Any correspondence between the visual and the intelligible is an operation of metaphoric (dis)association, between a mind's eye and the body's eye, between the sun and the purity of divine light, between the perception of sensible things and knowledge of abstract truths. Fox Keller and Grontkowski interpret the association of the visual with objectifiability and knowability in terms of this dualism, rather than in terms of the visual. Descartes' radical division of mind and body is the ultimate expression of the logic of metaphoric (dis)association, with the intelligible activities of a knowing

29 Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski, "The Mind's Eye," *Discovering Reality*, eds Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 207-224.

30 Psychoanalysis itself was condemned on the grounds of its visual emphasis. Hélène Cixous, for example, calls it "a voyeur's theory." See "Sorties," *New French Feminisms*, eds Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), p. 95.

subject entirely separated from the passive mechanisms of a physical body. In objectivity the world is severed from the observer; in knowability communion is re-established through the mediation of light.

Fox Keller and Grontkowski's analysis of the associations between scientific vision and philosophical truth also makes some preliminary suggestions about the de-eroticization of vision in the act of metaphorization. According to their analysis, the emphasis on the so-called "objectifying" function of vision is achieved at the relegation of the communicative, or erotic function (*parousia*) to the realm of disembodied thought. They conjecture, by way of an alternative, that a conception of knowledge based on the metaphor of touch "cannot aspire to either the incorporeality of the Platonic Forms, or the 'objectivity' of the modern scientific venture; at the very least it would have necessitated a more mediate ontology."³¹ This association of touch with a more mediate ontology, rather than in opposition to the predominance of vision, is closer to Irigaray's position on the relationship between feminine sexuality and touch than is the criticism that she reconstitutes a dichotomy between touch and vision.

The following passage from "This Sex Which is Not One" is frequently cited³² to demonstrate Irigaray's assertion that feminine desire is unrepresentable within the specular logic of Western thought:

Within this logic, the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individuation of form, is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into the dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the "subject," her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*.³³

It is arguable that if Irigaray is asserting that touch is the unique preserve of female eroticism then her comment would be as prescriptive as the

31 Keller and Grontkowski, *Discovering Reality*, p. 221.

32 For instance, it is quoted by Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 535, and Gary Shapiro, "In the Shadow of Philosophy: Nietzsche and the Question of Vision," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 134.

33 Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, pp. 25-26.

economy she wishes to subvert. However, Irigaray is offering no such prescription. To interpret this passage as representative of Irigaray's thoughts about female eroticism is to ignore the context in which she makes these remarks. Within this economy which is *dominated* by the scopic, eroticism is consigned to the logic of an isomorphic imaginary. Woman is not excluded by the representation of this imaginary, her participation in eroticism is. Her body thus eroticized, woman embodies an unrepresentable desire.

It is in this context that Irigaray's assertion – that woman takes more pleasure from touching than from looking – is made. The fact that woman must/cannot choose between the two is as much the issue which Irigaray is raising as her argument that the predominance of the visual supports an isomorphic imaginary. Rather than privileging touch over vision, Irigaray demonstrates in her discussions of both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, that despite their appreciation of its necessity to vision, touch persists as a source of mediation of a scopic economy. By way of contrast, Irigaray explores touch as a sense which defies reduction to the ontologically based discriminations of vision. Irigaray is not an anti-visual theorist. She has a regard for the indeterminacy of touch which invites a reconsideration of the constitution of vision.

34 Vasco Ronchi, Chapter 1, *Optics: The Science of Vision*, trans. Edward Ross (New York: New York University Press, 1957), pp. 3-23, gives an outline of the fate of these ancient terms in the history of optics. See also Vasco Ronchi, *The Nature of Light: an Historical Survey*, trans. V. Barocas (London: Heinemann, 1970) for an historical study of light conceived of as having physical, physiological and psychological phases.

35 Ronchi, *Optics: The Science of Vision*, pp. 17-18. For an historical mapping of the complexities of the lux/hunch dualism, see Martin Jay, "The Noblest of the Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes," *Downward Eyes*, pp. 21-52.

36 Martin Jay, "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," *Three Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (Routledge: New York and London, 1993), pp. 105-106.

37 For historical accounts of this tradition see for example Martin Jay, "The Noblest of the Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes," *Downward Eyes*, pp. 21-52; Hans Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 30-62; and David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

There is a dualist conception of light which permeates the history of Western thought, and is formulated in the opposition between "lux" and "lumen."³⁴ In general, "lumen" refers to the physical movement of invisible rays of light, whose perfect linearity is the essence of illumination and requires no organ of sight. The passage of lumen is transparent and imperceptible. "Lux" refers to the phenomenon of light, or light as it is experienced in sight, composed of colour, shadow and visible qualities. Broadly speaking, lux is the subjective experience of light. This ancient and ambiguous dichotomy, used in the optics of the Greeks, has been reconstituted hierarchically in many different ways by theologians, philosophers, artists and scientists alike. The terms lux and lumen, which became a source of unresolvable confusion, were eventually replaced, at the same time as modern languages replaced Latin as the language of science, by the single term *luce* (Italian), *light* (English), *lumière* (French), *luz* (Spanish) and *Licht* (German).³⁵

The long tradition of complicity between philosophical truth and vision is based on the distinction between invisible and visible light. Martin Jay observes that until such modifications as Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic formulation of light, one of the most powerful sources of ocularcentrism in the West has been the certainty provided by the opposite term whenever the superiority of either has been discredited.³⁶ Broadly defined, invisible light is the light of ideas, speculation, revelation and divine illumination, while visible light is the light of facticity, observation, empirical evidence and knowledge.³⁷ The most significant

34 Vasco Ronchi, Chapter 1, *Optics: The Science of Vision*, trans. Edward Rosen (New York: New York University Press, 1957), pp. 3-23, gives an outline of the fate of these ancient terms in the history of optics. See also Vasco Ronchi, *The Nature of Light: an Historical Survey*, trans. V. Barocas (London: Heinmann, 1970) for an historical study of light conceived of as having physical, physiological and psychological phases.

35 Ronchi, *Optics: The Science of Vision*, pp. 17-18. For an historical mapping of the complexities of the lux/lumen dualism, see Martin Jay, "The Noblest of the Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes," *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 21-82.

36 Martin Jay, "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (Routledge: New York and London, 1993), pp. 105-106.

37 For historical accounts of this tradition see for example Martin Jay, "The Noblest of the Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes," *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 21-82, Hans Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 30-62, and David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

modern reassertion of the ancient dualism which grounds the Platonic distinction between eternal forms and their resemblances in human perceptions is Descartes' theory of "lumen naturale," or natural light.³⁸ Natural light has its source in God, and possesses a perfect symmetry with the mind: "For I have certainly no cause to complain that God has not given me an intelligence which is more powerful, or a natural light which is stronger than that which I have received from Him..."³⁹ As Derrida comments, for Descartes, while the existence of God is put into doubt, natural light is never subjected to radical doubt, but rather, is the medium in which doubt unfolds.⁴⁰ With the notion of "lumen naturale," Descartes hopes to bypass the vagaries of the senses in his study of dioptrics, which is based on the claim that a lux of non-sensory origin is the cause of movements of the lumen, or the light of the mind.⁴¹ Before Descartes' reformulation, lux and lumen constitute the terms of a metaphoric relationship between light and truth. Hans Blumenberg explains that this relationship is proposed by Plato, who uses metaphors of light to describe the difference between being and non-being, truth and non-truth, and light and darkness in non-oppositional terms (the dependence of Being, truth and light on the negation of their opposites had already been refuted by Parmenides).⁴² Instead of implying any distinction, Plato argues that any splitting-in-two implies the *naturalness*, or essential nature of the connection between Being and truth. Rather than relying on an opposite existence, Plato's doctrine of anamnesis is a way of conceiving of the self-presentation of beings. The "naturalness" of light consists in its "dawning" with the visibility of things, which means that light itself differs from the things which it brings to light. Hence, Being and truth are joined by a light which has both a visible and invisible dimension; the union of the soul with the forms constitutes knowledge, just as the union of the light entering the eye with

38 Stephen H. Daniel outlines the features of lumen naturale in "The Nature of Light in Descartes' Physics," *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. 7 (1976), pp. 323-344.

39 Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. 1, trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), p. 177.

40 Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 207-271.

41 See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 73-79, for discussion of the extent to which Descartes failed, as he admitted himself, adequately to describe this relationship between lux and lumen.

42 Hans Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 32-33.

light emanating from the eye constitutes seeing. Darkness on the other hand, is unable to bring about any distinguishable identity.

Blumenberg argues that although a metaphysics of light is already implicit in Plato's metaphoric usage, it is Descartes' insertion of a window metaphor, and with it, the implication of a light which displaces the darkness of the Platonic cave, that heralds the epoch of an explicitly metaphysical usage. The double movement which characterizes this transition is the transcendence of light and its internalization.⁴³ Both movements are linked by the idea that light is associated with loss of self and projection of self. The history of "man" becomes a history of "light," which is no longer a drama of emerging from the dark to the light, but a loss of light to the dark and return to itself. Light becomes an object(ive), either as that which must be accomplished, or as a thing at the disposal of the subject. Truth becomes something which no longer reveals itself, but must be revealed, or brought to light. According to Blumenberg, in their ideas of "method," Descartes and Bacon envisage light as something at the subject's disposal, by which phenomena can be subjected to examination, distanced and placed in perspective. As a challenge to the metaphors of light, the metaphysics of light is ultimately a figure of technological invasion: "light turns into an encompassing medium of the focused and measured rays of 'direct lighting.'"⁴⁴ Heidegger also identifies this technologized relation between vision and light in terms of "enframing," as opposed to a former openness of light which he evokes by way of the analogy of a forest "clearing."⁴⁵

The concern which Blumenberg expresses about the development of "lighting" is related to what is perceived as a loss of the freedom to gaze for oneself into the abstract world of metaphoric light. According to Blumenberg, within the technologized lighting of nocturnal spaces, "an "optics of prefabrication" is being developed, which eliminates the freedom to look around within a general medium of visibility, and

43 It is precisely the metaphoric omission of the passage which allows such movement that Irigaray protests. For a discussion of twentieth century architectural figurations of windows as a passage which "gives light," see Thomas Keenan, "Windows: of vulnerability," *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 121-141.

44 Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 53.

45 See, for example, Martin Heidegger's discussion of these concepts generally in "The Origin of the Work of Art," "Letter on Humanism," "The Question Concerning Technology," and "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," all in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977).

confronts modern man with ever more situations of coerced vision."⁴⁶ Blumenberg's distinction between the freedom of metaphoric light and the manipulable selectivity of technologized lighting is itself an investment which comes under the scrutiny of recent theorists of technologies of light such as Derrida and Foucault. Although Blumenberg's concerns for subjective autonomy are very different from these theorists, his comments serve to demonstrate that the humanist subject's powers of transcendence are implicated in the differentiation between a metaphysical and metaphoric relation of vision to light. This issue is given further complexity in Foucault's study of the literal rather than metaphorical use of light in the construction of madness in the age of Reason; an age where Descartes could see the truth in light by closing his eyes, while the madman who used his eyes was dazzled and saw nothing but night.⁴⁷

While Foucault describes a language of subjectivity dominated by the figure of light, Derrida foregrounds the reliance of metaphysics on metaphors of light, or heliotropes.⁴⁸ When Derrida describes the history of philosophy as a photology, his emphasis is on its metaphoric use of light. The very condition of possibility of philosophy is metaphor, or more precisely the movement of metaphorization. This movement is indistinguishable from the movement of idealization, or signification. Derrida describes the movement as a double effacement, involving both the displacement of sensible origin and a forgetting of the metaphor. Metaphysics is conceived within the space of possibility, or ungraspability of no/more metaphor.⁴⁹

While philosophy is based on metaphor, the concept of metaphor is itself dependent on metaphysics: "Metaphor...is included by metaphysics as that which must be carried off to a horizon or proper ground, and which must finish by rediscovering its truth."⁵⁰ Derrida describes philosophy as a complex interplay of concept-metaphors, which far from being disposable or replaced by something more exact, are instruments inextricable from the field of philosophy which they constitute.⁵¹ For Derrida, light is the concept-metaphor by means of which truth can be

46 Blumenberg, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 54.

47 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

48 Derrida, "White Mythology," *Margins of Philosophy*.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 211-229.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 268.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 228.

made to appear, or become present to consciousness. This light is conceived of in terms of the sun:

The very opposition of appearing and disappearing, the entire lexicon of the *phainesthai*, of *alētheia*, etc., of day and night, of the visible and the invisible, of the present and the absent – all this is possible only under the sun. Insofar as it structures the metaphorical space of philosophy, the sun represents what is natural in philosophical language.⁵²

The structure of the metaphoric space inscribed by the sun is a specular circle, or heliotrope. The movement of a heliotrope is simultaneously a movement turned toward the sun and the turning movement of the sun.⁵³ In turning, the heliotrope returns to itself, is interiorized without loss of meaning or expenditure. The heliotrope describes the law of metaphysics, which operates by re-appropriating the conditions of its possibility.

Derrida extends the significance of this economy of metaphor into the philosopheme of heliocentrism, which as he argues, characterizes the entire history of Western thought:

The sensory sun, which rises in the East, becomes interiorized in the evening of its journey, in the eye and the heart of the Westerner. He summarizes, assumes and achieves the essence of man, "illuminated by the true light..."⁵⁴

Metaphysics is cast as the "white mythology," which erases within itself the very conditions of its production, or its *logos*. In so doing, metaphysics not only reflects the culture of the "West," but rises to its own mythological form, which is the universality of Reason.⁵⁵ Light is associated with white man, for whom the indeterminate darkness must be overcome and brought to a common (sun)light.

The sun is the exemplarily natural object, entirely sensible or perceivable. Paradoxically however, the sunlight of heliocentrism is also always partially artificial. On the one hand, the heliotrope is the paradigmatic metaphor, or sensory model of the sensory sun. Being

52 Ibid., p. 251.

53 Ibid., p. 251.

54 Ibid., p. 268.

55 Ibid., p. 213.

sensory, the sun is something whose presence cannot be mastered and is always improperly known. On the other hand, the sun is also always metaphorical, being the representative for all that is most natural in philosophical language. The sun is an artificial construction, which is not a bad metaphor, but a mere and infinitely substitutable metaphor of natural light: "what is most natural in nature bears within itself the means to emerge from itself; it accommodates itself to 'artificial' light..."⁵⁶ As Derrida describes the relationship, by metaphor we make things sensible, that is, both accessible to the senses, and sensible in an abstract sense.⁵⁷

The visible/invisible economy of heliocentrism is drawn by Derrida in terms of a filial relation. The visible sun is the analogue or son of the intelligible paternal sun, which as Derrida describes, is the hidden illuminating source of *logos*. The law of *logos* is capable of both blinding and protecting those who look within its scope.⁵⁸ Heidegger also identifies this double illumination in the Platonic redefinition of *eidos*, or idea. First, rather than the outward, visible aspect of things, "Plato exacts of this word...something utterly extraordinary: that it names what precisely is not and never will be perceivable with physical eyes." Second, as well as naming the non-sensuous aspect of the physically visible, it "names and is, also, that which constitutes the essence in the audible, the tasteable, the tactile, in everything that is in any way accessible."⁵⁹

Derrida argues that light is not just one metaphor used in philosophy, but the metaphor which founds the entire system of metaphoric truth. The definitive aspects of metaphor, which are a movement towards idealization, and an appropriation of that movement, are simultaneously those of Plato's formulation of *eidos* in terms of metaphors of light. By means of the catachresis of heliotropism, the graspability of sensible things is extended to that which cannot be rendered visible except through the laws of intellect. Susan Handelman makes a connection between the metaphoric separation of truth and language, and the subordination of the Jewish Rabbinic tradition. The original unity of discourse and truth in Hebrew thinking was the very thing which the

56 Ibid., p. 251.

57 Ibid., p. 209.

58 See "Plato's Pharmacy," *Disseminations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 75-84.

59 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), p. 20.

Greek Enlightenment disrupted. The Rabbinic aurally-based attentiveness to the word is not concerned with the truth of representation, but with the interpretation of the true word.⁶⁰

Like Derrida, Irigaray regards light as the founding metaphor of metaphysics. In "Plato's *Hystera*," (SF, 243-364) which is devoted to a discussion of the first part of Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*, Irigaray considers Plato's organization of light and space in terms of the photo-logic of heliotropes. However, rather than emphasizing the dependence of metaphysics on metaphors of light, Irigaray's attention is directed to the gender of philosophy, which as Derrida proposes, sees itself in terms of metaphors of light. Irigaray argues that the drama of concealment and unconcealment which is played out in philosophy's metaphoric labyrinth is an elaborate concealment of a maternal, or unrepresentable irretrievable origin. According to Irigaray, the fantasy which heliocentrism upholds is a masculine re-origination, or the appearance of giving birth to oneself – grasped self-reflexively through the mediation of light. By this means, philosophy generates a self-image while excluding any sense of its corporeality. Irigaray calls the light of heliotropes the phallic light of the Same, meaning that difference is ultimately recuperated in the return of light from an intermediary point which is never present in language. Difference, which can only be figured as absence or invisibility, is ultimately reducible to an indiscriminate and overpowering light in which everything appears identical.

Irigaray sets out in "Plato's *Hystera*" to make apparent the isomorphic imaginary body which philosophy constructs for itself, while it relegates the maternal-feminine to the role of securing that body's material conditions. While Irigaray argues that this imaginary is of a male body, she is not claiming a causal relation between a biological or essential male body and philosophy. When Irigaray speaks of the body she is referring to its morphology – as a discursive reality which is irreducible to either material or cultural determination. Morphology is the form of a body as it is lived and represented, as it is interpreted culturally. What Irigaray is proposing is that there is a complicity between the discourse of metaphysics and the imaginary (phallogentric) male body.⁶¹ In the course

60 Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 4.

61 The imaginary body and its politico-cultural implications is outlined in greater detail by Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 115-118.

of this complicitous production, any form of feminine identity is effaced. Devoid of its own imaginary, the maternal-feminine is reduced to formless, mute, indeterminate, bodiless matter which yields passively to the instruments of Man.

Irigaray regards it to be of secondary interest that Plato's metaphysics operates within a mythological cave which is analogous to a womb. In fact various morphological features of a female body, including "hymen" and "vagina" as well as "womb," are essential features of Plato's myth. Of primary importance to Irigaray is the significance of matter and its exclusion in metaphysics. Although the Platonic drama appears to require no material support, such support is provided, or more precisely swindled under the guise of metaphors, from the body of woman. As perennial matter, woman's corporeality counts for nothing in Plato's dialectic of Sensible and Intelligible worlds. To the contrary, Irigaray demonstrates that although forgotten by Plato, the ideality of the Intelligible sphere has an indeterminacy which is of maternal origin.

Irigaray's analysis takes up an aspect of metaphor stressed by Derrida, which is that metaphor is both a means of passage to and inevitable detour in the arrival at a proper meaning:

Metaphor, therefore, is determined by philosophy as a provisional loss of meaning, an economy of the proper without irreparable damage, a certainly inevitable detour, but also a history with its sights set on, and within the horizon of, the circular reappropriation of literal, proper meaning.⁶²

Irigaray places a different emphasis on the detour/passage of metaphor, relating it to the passage between the Platonic cave's artificially lit interior and the purity of the outside light. Irigaray calls this avenue of transport the "forgotten vagina," or the "passage that is missing, left on the shelf, between the outside and the inside, between the plus and the minus." (SF, 347) The "in between" has no name in philosophy, which considers only absence or presence of the Same. Plato is unable to speak of shadows inside the cave except as the loss of light in elaborate deflections and photoplays. The perfect clarity of intelligible light is achieved as a progressive recovery from the displacement of light, which in the sensible realm is ambiguously differentiated from unrepresentable material

62 Derrida, "White Mythology," *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 270.

obstacles, like the tain of a mirror, the bodies which cast shadows, the water's reflective surface, the cloth divider, the walls of the cave.

For Irigaray, the indeterminacy of matter in metaphoric passage is disguised by the attention focussed on the reproduction of likeness by means of *logos*:

...whatever assures the functioning of difference in this way is always already foreign to the multiple action of difference, or rather differences, because it will always already have been wrapped away in verisimilitude, once the neck, the corridor, the passage has been forgotten. (SF, 247)

It is within this very process of limitation that the metaphor of *hystera* comes into play, with no representation of the passage itself. Metaphor displaces the fact that it obliterates the neck or transition, and the displacement is covered over in a matrix of resemblance. The displacement of the materiality of the passage is the condition of possibility of circulation of family likeness between sun and son.

In the course of mapping all differences within a system of equivalence, the dependence of the sun's offspring/filaments/images/rays on any material support becomes gradually more invisible. Eventually the materiality of light is lost sight of altogether in the transparent light of day. Light, the metaphor of resemblance is displacement itself. The cavity of the cavern disappears after formerly being an eye socket with walls that conditioned the scope of the gaze. Vision enters a realm which no longer requires the human eye. Once penetrated by daylight, the soul, which was formerly a mirror, loses its glass and its tain.⁶³

The metaphoric eradication of matter can be extended to light itself. Zoe Sofoulis draws attention to the corporeal basis of the metaphor of illumination, invoking a play on "lumen" as further explication of the "forgotten" vagina of which Irigaray speaks. As Sofoulis explains, in physics a "lumen" is a unit of light flux, which for me, reinvokes the sense of light as a material interlude. In anatomy, Sofoulis observes, the term is used to describe bodily cavities and spaces, such as those of blood vessels, glandular orifices or the cytoplasm within cell walls. Here light is extended to mean both light-space and cavity or hole. Within this double sense, or play of similitude between space and lumen, light can be thought

64 Zoe Sofoulis, *Through the Lumen: Frobenius and the Optics of Re-origination*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Santa Cruz, June 1988, pp. 299-300.

63 Margaret Whitford traces this progression, "The same, the semblance, and the other," *Philosophy in the Feminine* (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 108-9.

of as space, and space as light.⁶⁴ Displacing the material means by which it achieves its metaphoric basis, light takes on the feminine aspect of a vacant matrix. In this light, which is of heliotropic origin, man ultimately finds a unique dwelling, or space which is his own.

As well as expanding upon Irigaray's reading of heliocentrism, Sofoulis regards Irigaray's omission of the association between "lumen" and the "forgotten vagina" as a missed opportunity. She argues that Irigaray's preoccupations with the idea of the cave as hystera (womb) and with the logic of light (photology) could be directed to an explication of "lumen" which would further identify the corporeal basis of heliocentrism in its various historical forms.⁶⁵ Sofoulis herself extends this theme to the light of a luminary body in the solar system – the moon. Any equation of reason with sunlight is made by way of this intermediary lunar term, meaning, Sofoulis argues that photology requires more than one body. The moon is the paradigm of tropism or half-light. Standing closer to the sun, and deflecting its blinding rays: "The moon would be an exemplar of an intermediary between the "primitive proper sense" of the sensible sun and its re-originated 'figurative sense' of the light of reason."⁶⁶

As Sofoulis argues, Irigaray does not direct her attention to an explication of the corporeality of light in her discussion of Plato's *Hystera*. In Irigaray's defence, I comment that to do so would be to risk associating corporeality with a notion of fixed bodies of a solar system. However, as will be discussed at length in this thesis, Irigaray makes much of the issue in her reading of Merleau-Ponty's account of the chiasmic spacing of light. Within/between the ambiguous determination of the chiasm, Irigaray addresses Merleau-Ponty's theorizing of light as the medium of incorporation into an isomorphic space. Irigaray also makes much of Levinas's critique of the ontological priority of light while still insisting on the singularity of its imaginary. More broadly still, Irigaray's notion of an erotically constituted interiority forms the basis of a sophisticated re-reading of the exclusion of a feminine dwelling in the light.

In Irigaray's naming of Western philosophy as photology, the weight of her argument does not fall on the elaboration of light as the founding metaphor of metaphysics. Her argument is directed towards the

64 Zoe Sofoulis, *Through the Lumen: Frankenstein and the Optics of Re-origination*, PhD dissertation (University of California at Santa Cruz, June 1988), pp. 299-300.

65 Ibid., p. 300.

66 Ibid., p. 280.

figuration of a complicity between photology and phallogentrism. She argues that the complicity with phallogentrism is equally apparent in phonocentrism. Insofar as philosophy speaks of itself as a "love" of a wisdom which is equated with light, it reduces eroticism to a love which photology is singularly able to reveal. Irigaray's consistent argument is that such a love is both inadequate to the representation of women's desire and to any sexual intercourse/conjunction. Irigaray's analysis of photology is of a metaphoricity which ensures that any engendering of maternal origin is never to come to light:

No proper sense, proper noun, proper signifier expresses the *matrix* of any discourse, or any text, even the legal text. The necessity of its (re)production is absent from what it lays out. Eclipse of the mother, of the place (of) becoming, whose non-representation or even disavowal upholds the absolute being attributed to the father. He no longer has any foundation, he is beyond all beginnings. Between these two abysses – nothing/being – language makes its way, morphology takes shape, once the mother has been emptied out. (SF, 307)

In Irigaray's words, photology stands as an unsexed "heliogamy," or a system of ex-static relationships which is "disastrous for the still organic membrane of the eye: living tissue, unfit to receive the glare of such a fiery star." (SF, 305) There is nothing erotic yet alone materially conceived about the eye which takes pleasure from this fixture of the sun. While Irigaray's project in *Speculum* is to re-trace the movement by which a maternal genealogy is lost in the dissemination of light, she has an ongoing interest in re-defining a love of light which is dependent on its embodied, material conditions, and above all, its sexual beginnings.

PART II

CARNAL LIGHT

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CARNAL LIGHT

(Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray)

light.¹

Introductory Comments

Merleau-Ponty's writing on vision is part of his general concern to break with the philosophical project of self-reflection. While committed to extending Husserl's phenomenological understanding of the body as subject, Merleau-Ponty is critical of the transcendental intentions of Husserl's self-present embodied consciousness.² Unlike philosophers with aspirations to transcendental vision, Merleau-Ponty regards the specular as an essentially incarnate activity, bound to and produced within a corporeal and social context. Merleau-Ponty's account of vision is anti-Platonic. It inhabits a space which is tactile as well as visual, and is resistant to a unified, self-reflexive, or panoptic viewpoint. Transcendental philosophers and objective scientists alike have traded, without acknowledgement, on the essential carnality of this sense. In his commitment to making a radical break with metaphysical thinking, Merleau-Ponty does not subordinate vision to other senses. Instead, he includes it in a general account of perception whose structuration defies reduction to disembodied or objective modes of consciousness. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty's work, with its insistence on the primacy of perception, and in later work, its questioning of the relationship between perception and language, offers itself as a unique response to philosophy's ocularcentrism.



¹ Ingmar Bergman, referring to his collaborator cinematographer Sven Nykvist, *The Magic Lantern*, trans. Joan Tate (London: Harvilld (Hamilton), 1986), p. 229.

² For a general discussion of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in relation to Hegel, Heidegger and Lacan, as well as Husserl, see Mark Taylor, "Carnality: Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *Alterity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 61-81.

CARNAL LIGHT

...we are both utterly captivated by the problems of light, the gentle, dangerous, dreamlike, living, dead, clear, misty, hot, violent, bare, sudden, dark, springlike, falling, straight, slanting, sensual, subdued, limited, poisonous, calming, pale light.¹

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The premise which I am making in this study is that Merleau-Ponty is confronted by the need to develop two schemas in the course of articulating his revision of phenomenology. These are first, an alternative to a systematic disembodiment of light within the photology of metaphysics, and second, an account of an originary intersubjective, rather than reflective nature of vision. These are two tasks at which Merleau-Ponty laboured his entire philosophical life, and which are most specifically and originally addressed in his last, and perhaps appropriately, unfinished collection of work, published posthumously as *The Visible and the Invisible*.³ Merleau-Ponty makes a radical shift in his account of a phenomenological project in general and the corporeal basis of knowledge in particular in an outstanding paper of that collection, titled "The Intertwining – The Chiasm." This is also the text through which Irigaray engages with Merleau-Ponty, and as such it will be the focus of the chapters which follow these introductory remarks.

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not simply an object, but a locus of intentionality which is essential to all conscious experience. In terms of Lyotard's definition of phenomenology as "that which appears to consciousness, that which is given,"⁴ Merleau-Ponty denies consciousness an intentionality which can be divorced from its embodiment in the world: "My body is to the greatest extent what everything is: a *dimensional this*. It is the universal thing..." (VI, 260). This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty attributes to the body a transcendental privilege that he denies to consciousness. His approach involves more than choosing between the two terms, which would be simply to preserve the dichotomous structure which is fundamental to Western philosophical thought since Plato.⁵ Merleau-Ponty's challenge to metaphysics begins with the development of the concept of the "entre-deux," or the "in-between two," which brings the excluded ground of oppositional terms into play. In his earlier works, this approach takes the form of demonstrating the fundamental undecidability of dichotomous terms. For example, in *The Structure of Behaviour* the

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (VI).

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, trans. Brian Beakley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 32.

⁵ Bernard Charles Flynn, "Textuality and the Flesh: Derrida and Merleau-Ponty," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 15 No. 2 (May 1984), pp. 164-179, characterizes Merleau-Ponty's non-oppositional approach to consciousness as a departure from the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible (the visible and the invisible) which Derrida diagnoses as one of the founding gestures of metaphysics.

concept of gestalt is shown to defy simply either an objective status in physiology, or subjective existence in psychology.⁶ Instead of opposing consciousness and the world as dichotomous terms, Merleau-Ponty attempts a tenuous and indeterminate synthesis between them. He describes the interweaving of subjective and objective relations in positive terms, as a philosophy of ambiguity.

In his later work, the concept of *entre-deux* is refigured as the concept of "flesh." As flesh, the interwovenness of language and materiality in perception is embraced as a complexity whose irreducibility is necessary for identity: "...flesh is not a contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself." (VI, 146) According to Merleau-Ponty, the problems which he identifies as phenomenology's project in *The Phenomenology of Perception* are insoluble because his starting point in that work is the distinction between consciousness and its object (VI, 200). This distinction presupposes the perceiving subject and perceivable object rather than considering them as originating in a perceptual field. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the need to place the terms of his phenomenology under the scrutiny of a phenomenology which would challenge its own transcendental view.

In the working notes for *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty restates his project as the elaboration of an ontology whose notions would replace those of transcendental subjectivity; notions such as subject, object and meaning (VI, 167). The account of ontology as flesh is a profoundly ambitious recasting of the relationship between self and world, and self and other in terms of a language of perception. Not only would the terms of embodiment and experience change, but this language would also recast the way that philosophy could claim to perceive itself:

It is already the flesh of things that speaks to us of our own flesh, and that speaks to us of the flesh of the other -- My "look" is one of those givens of the "sensible," of the brute and primordial world, that defies the analysis into being and nothingness, into existence as consciousness and existence as a thing, and requires a complete reconstruction of philosophy. (VI, 193)

While other philosophers have challenged the adequacy of empirical schemas of perception, Merleau-Ponty attempts to define perception in

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

terms of a language of its own. Whereas Sartre's criticism of any empirical schema of vision was that it "could be as empirically adequate as I please, but it could never account for the fundamental fact that I see,"⁷ Merleau-Ponty takes up the fundamentality of this fact as the starting point for his non-dualist ontology.⁸

In *The Structure of Behaviour* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*⁹ Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the simultaneous participation of multiple factors in the processes of perception. In *The Visible and The Invisible* his emphasis shifts to the articulation of a pre-discursive experience, or what he refers to as a "deep-seated set of mute 'opinions' implicated in our lives." (VI, 3) The aim is to elaborate within the terms of sensibility the conditions of perception itself. That aim should not be understood as an attempt to rediscover a raw data of perception, or the richness and immediacy of the perceivable world. As Irigaray and Lacan do, Merleau-Ponty theorizes the prediscursive as the imaginary, or unrealizable presumption of something's existence, never as the raw material of language.

Levinas contrasts Merleau-Ponty's approach to perception with a tradition of philosophies from Platonism to positivism which have attempted to make up for, or illuminate what is considered to be lacking in the pure receptivity of perception.¹⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, perception is a creative receptivity rather than a passive capacity to receive impressions. This creativity is an activity which is inseparable from its corporeality, as likewise, incarnation in the world is inseparable from its capacity for such activity. Far from regarding its relevance as indefinable, Merleau-Ponty is determined to rediscover in perception what he refers to as the "Lebenswelt logos," or language of the perceivable world:

It is a question of that $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ that pronounces itself silently in each sensible thing...which we can have an idea of only through our carnal participation in its sense, only by espousing by our body its manner of "signifying"... (VI, 208).

⁷ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1958), pp. 403-404.

⁸ The opening paragraph of "Reflection and Interrogation," the first essay in *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 3, addresses seeing as a matter of perceptual faith.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962). Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (PhP).

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), pp. 75-80.

Merleau-Ponty describes the primacy of perception in terms of "empirical pregnancy" (VI, 207), or a productive signifying system in its own right. Modelled on Merleau-Ponty's particular understanding of Saussure's diacritical account of language, this ontology displaces the mythological transparency of terms such as subject and object with an opaque differential logic of flesh. In contrast to his earlier work, in which the phenomenal body is the synergistic system or unifying source of the multiple aspects of perception, in *The Visible and the Invisible* the experience of body is itself schematized in the folds of flesh. This revision of phenomenological thought gives Merleau-Ponty a way of describing corporeality textually, as an engagement comprising multiple historico-cultural, ideal and libidinal dimensions rather than as something separate from or inadequate to them.

Although concerned explicitly with the body as subject, Merleau-Ponty's work has not generated as much interest amongst theorists of embodiment as might be expected. As will be discussed in the chapters which follow, there are several aspects of Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied experience which, while not entirely successful in breaking with an objective notion of embodiment, are radical in their conception. First, there is a challenging of the division between the interiority and exteriority of psychical and physical embodiment, and related to this, an intersubjective account of body image, which is neither internally nor externally derived, but an elision of both. Second there is a temporalization of embodiment in terms of the visible and other modes of perception. Third, Merleau-Ponty proposes an essentially intersubjective basis of perception, as opposed to a self-reflexive objective perception of things. Fourth, Merleau-Ponty introduces the idea of a fundamental historicity of meaning which challenges the nomination of any pregiven attribute, including sex, to a body. Fifth, embodiment is formulated as the effect of precarious syntheses, or "intertwinings."

Within the limits of some serious criticisms, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project has yielded original and provocative analyses of embodiment among those scholars who have seriously engaged with it.¹¹

¹¹ Michel Foucault's work in particular is deeply influenced by as well as critically opposed to Merleau-Ponty's notion of lived embodiment. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982) discuss the relationship between the two thinkers at length. Elizabeth Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh," *Thesis Eleven* No. 36 (1993), pp. 37-59, addresses Merleau-Ponty's ambiguous status in relation to a range of feminist theoretical concerns in a comprehensive paper which also outlines Irigaray's engagement with his notion of "flesh." English speaking

Most significantly, his notion of flesh has been identified as offering a more sophisticated analysis of experience than critiques of dualism provide.¹² Although he does not pursue the matter himself, Merleau-Ponty's revolt against disembodied consciousness has provided a starting point for theorizing corporeality as an irreducible nexus of language and materiality.

Flesh is Merleau-Ponty's term for the prototypical structure of all subject-object relations. In every instance of this relation, flesh defines a position which is both subject and object, and also simultaneously, a subjectivity which is internally divergent with itself. In other words, flesh expresses the inscription of difference within the same.¹³ Merleau-Ponty represents this structure in terms of one hand of a body touching the other hand - an example which encapsulates both the intertwining and divergence of flesh:

Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relation by principle, some kinship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate.

theorists who have developed productive theoretic positions partially through both critical and sympathetic interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's account of lived embodiment include Grosz herself, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, and Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994); Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); Jeffner Allen, "Through the Wild Region: An Essay in Phenomenological Feminism," *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* Vol. XVIII, Nos 1, 2 & 3 (1982-83); Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, eds Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

12 See Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh," *Thesis Eleven*.

A LANGUAGE OF FLESH

Flesh

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The factor which conditions this relation is the reversibility of subject and object. A hand that touches is, in contact with the other, simultaneously an object touched. The two hands represent the body's capacity to occupy the position of both perceiving subject and object of perception. This example of the reversibility of tactile perception is regarded as representative of sensibility in general. However, it is *not the body* which

¹³ For a description of flesh in these terms see Gary Brent Madison, "Flesh as Otherness," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, eds Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. 27-34.

is responsible for the double touching. The "double touching" is the language of perception. The body is a term within flesh – it participates insofar as it becomes perceivable *only through its structuration as perceiving/perceived*. The body never perceives itself independently of the language of perception, as a thing itself. It cannot exist independently of a thing perceived, but nor is it reducible to that thing:

...it is not entirely my body that perceives: I know only that it can prevent me from perceiving, that I cannot perceive without its permission; the moment perception comes my body effaces itself before it and never does my perception grasp the body in the act of perceiving. If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand. But this last-minute failure does not drain all truth from that presentiment I had of being able to touch myself touching: my body does not perceive, but it is as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it... (VI, 9)

By insisting that the body does not perceive, Merleau-Ponty takes issue with his own phenomenology of perception as well as transcendental theories of subjectivity which substitute the body for consciousness.¹⁴ Even more importantly, instead of posing the body as the origin of perception, he poses the origin of the body as an ontological question within the terms of perception.

For Merleau-Ponty, the body that offers itself to biology offers itself as an object. It does not offer itself as flesh. Biology treats "the body" as a thematizable object, pushing towards an already abstract meaning.¹⁵ Flesh in contrast, refers to the body as a living substance, or condition for the

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty's observation is aimed at refuting a notion of the body as subject as much as it is aimed at refuting a notion of a transcendental subject. M. C. Dillon, "Ecart: Reply to Lefort's 'Flesh as Otherness,'" *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, pp. 14-26, comments that in the secondary literature, critics commonly misrepresent Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body in his later work by equating it with Kant's transcendental unity of apperception. If anything, Merleau-Ponty is taking issue with Husserl's transcendentalism.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty," trans. Michael B. Smith, *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 56.

expression of a point of view. Neither subject nor object, but implicated in both, flesh is itself that which offers its body to biology as a thematizable object, or to art as an aesthesiological consciousness:

Is my body a thing, is it an idea? It is neither, being the measurant of the things. We will therefore have to recognize the ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depths, its dimensions. (VI, 152)

Flesh refers to a body which is definable neither empirically nor abstractly, but elementally, in terms of its own divergence and reversibility (terms which will be discussed in the following section). When Merleau-Ponty writes that flesh has no name in any philosophy, he means that it cannot be experienced as thought, or reduced to the theoretical (VI, 147). Its existence resides in the language of sensibility. The body that cannot be properly conceived is "flesh."

As the inauguration of our double installation as perceiving and perceived in the world, sensibility defies the Cartesian differential dimensionality of *res cogito* (disincarnate thought) and *res extensa* (extended substance). For example, as Levinas says of pleasure and pain, both are characterized as an ambiguously mental and physically localizable experience.¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty gives the example of painting as an instance in which the dimensionality of visibility emerges, not in terms of subject and object, but as the emergence of meaning as flesh.¹⁷ In painting, vision is not expressive of an object or idea; vision is expressive of itself – its flesh. In painting, the dimensions in which we see anything – "invisible" idealities or concepts such as colour, line, contour, illumination – become visible in their own right.¹⁸ A painting is meaningful as such only

16 Emmanuel Levinas, "Sensibility," trans. Michael B. Smith, *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 61.

17 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays* ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 159-190. Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (PP). See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 9-25. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979) speaks extensively of Merleau-Ponty's account of painting. For a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the dimensionality of the visible in painting see James Gordon Place, "The Painting and the Natural Thing in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty," *Cultural Hermeneutics* Vol. 4 (1976), pp. 75-91; and Edward S. Casey, "'The Element of Voluminousness': Depth and Place Re-examined," *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, ed. M.C. Dillon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 1-29.

18 Véronique M. Fóti, "The Dimension of Color," *International Studies in Philosophy* Vol. 22. No. 3 (1990), pp. 13-28, describes Merleau-Ponty's understanding of

because vision is not explicable in terms of a look that reduces the image to a painted surface. Rather, it is only by going into the visible, or inhabiting the painting through a dimensionality which is sustained by the visible, that the visibility of painting can be experienced. Furthermore, through his analysis of painting, Merleau-Ponty underscores the profound intertwining of the cultural and the carnal in flesh. As the expression of the inner in an outer, living flesh is life as culture.¹⁹ Painting actually destroys the illusion of disembodied spectatorship by basing visibility in its own carnality; by demonstrating that even as it is his or her own, the seer's vision is the flesh of the seen.

Living flesh is the modality of the body inscribed within sensibility. This body is not an internal or external projection, but a sensibility inextricable from its inhabiting of a world: "...things are the prolongation of my body and my body is the prolongation of the world, through it the world surrounds me..." (VI, 255) In other words Merleau-Ponty transforms the concepts of interiority and exteriority into a moebius strip. Alphonso Lingis describes this as an inner face, which by prolonging itself, becomes an outer face. Each aspect of the body has a variant outside itself.²⁰ In refusal of the the mind/body distinction, Merleau-Ponty defines the mind as "the *other side* of the body." (VI, 259) By virtue of its carnality, ideality becomes extension.²¹ and by virtue of its ideality, the sensible resides within the subject. Through sensibility (the double touching) my body inserts itself between the two leaves of the world, which itself is inserted between the leaves of my body (VI, 264). The body is therefore a hinge; an articulation of the world; an *entredeux*. Alternatively, it is a fold – never reducible to the difference in which it is created.

When he uses touch as its exemplar, the mirror is the metaphor which operates in reflexivity. More accurately, Merleau-Ponty invokes the metaphor of two mirrors facing each other "where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the reflector of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more and than either of them." (VI, 139) This image corresponds to the *entredeux* which is the body itself, or perhaps

dimensionality as ideality in relation to colour. Ideality cannot be severed from the sensory domain, but is as Merleau-Ponty argues, sensibility's means of articulation.

¹⁹ Levinas, "Sensibility," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*.

²⁰ Alphonso Lingis, "Sense and Non-Sense in the Sexed Body," *Cultural Hermeneutics* Vol. 4 (1977), pp. 345-365.

²¹ Levinas, "Sensibility," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 61, describes the flesh of mind as more than a metaphor. The example which he uses to make the point about the implication of body and mind as flesh is that the "mental gait" is also a movement of the human body.

Reversibility – The Chiasm

Flesh is Merleau-Ponty's articulation of embodiment as the locus of self-production. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the lived body from the physical body, which he argues is an object of biology. The lived body is produced within an elaborate system of correspondences which collectively make up a perceptual field. One of Merleau-Ponty's overriding concerns in his elaboration of flesh is to provide an account of the commonality of perception. The lived body is a cultural identity produced within the perception which dawns through it. Flesh is an account of perception based on the transitivity of a common corporeality. There are two structural aspects of flesh which are essential to Merleau-Ponty's articulation of this commonality. These are the reversibility and the divergence of flesh.

Reversibility refers to the body's simultaneous status as perceiving subject and object of perception. The reversibility of flesh can be "grasped" or "recollected" in its reflexivity.²² As has been discussed above, the double touching is the basis of reflexivity or the doubling of perception upon itself as body. Together identical in their difference, the hands constitute the body:

Consider the *two*, the pair, this is not *two acts*, *two syntheses*, it is a fragmentation of being, it is a possibility for separation (two eyes, two ears: the possibility for *discrimination*, for the use of the diacritical), it is the advent of difference (on the grounds of *resemblance...*) (VI, 217)

Although he uses touch as its exemplar, the mirror is the metaphor which operates in reflexivity. More accurately, Merleau-Ponty invokes the metaphor of two mirrors facing each other "where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them." (VI, 139) This image corresponds to the imaginary body which recollects itself, or persists through the doubling, like a glove that turns back on itself, or two

²² Anne Freire Ashbaugh, "The Philosophy of Flesh and the Flesh of Philosophy," *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 8 (1978), pp. 217-223, uses the term "recollection" in relation to knowledge as the re-embodiment of the co-present, but the term can be applied equally to all forms of experience.

segments of the same circular course, revolving from left to right from above, and from right to left from below (VI, 138).

Reflexivity is the body, always other in its reversibility.

Reversibility is also the transitivity of that reflexivity as intercorporeality. Merleau-Ponty literally extends the body and its *entre-deux* into the communion and solidarity of self and other by transposing the motif of the double touching into the objective world:

...while each monocular vision, each touching with one sole hand has its own visible, its tactile, each is bound to every other vision, to every other touch; it is bound in such a way as to make up with them the experience of one sole body before one sole world, through a possibility for reversion, reconversion of its language into theirs, transfer, and reversal...all together are a Sentient in general before a sensible in general. Now why would this generality, which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible; I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching... (VI, 142)

The other who feels or sees as I do in this extended reversibility is not an alter ego. It is not I who feel or see, but feeling and seeing as an anonymous sensibility which inhabits both of us. The "concordant operations of his body and my own are one intercorporeal being, which supports a perceptual faith in a common world: "...this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own, I recognize in my green his green..." (VI, 142)²³ It is on the basis of this presumptive or imaginary domain opened up within reversibility that Merleau-Ponty theorizes a common world of humanity as "one flesh."

The fundamental aspect of reversibility is its chiasmic structure. This is the idea that every perception is doubled, or underlined, like two leaves inextricably adhering together (VI, 264-265). The chiasm is flesh in its divergence (*écart*), or non-coincidence with itself. It is the originary "dispossession" of reflexivity's "recollection":

²⁴ Lafont, "Flesh and Otherness," *Dialogue and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 5. The

²³ For the sake of concentrating on demonstrating the anonymity claimed in Merleau-Ponty's argument, I leave without further comment here, instances of sexualized difference which Merleau-Ponty cannot account for in the common intentionality of intersubjective relations. The issue will be taken up in Chapter Three.

...every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is *inscribed* and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of. (VI, 266)

The possibility of self-presence is dissipated in the divergence of perception from/within itself. Merleau-Ponty calls this a "fecund negative that is instituted by the flesh, by its dehiscence." (VI, 263) This negative is not nothing. It is an unrepresentable essence which nonetheless presents itself – an intangible or invisible or silence which nonetheless we touch and see and hear.

When Merleau-Ponty refers to sensibility as "empirical pregnancy," he is referring to flesh as a language of self-begetting. Merleau-Ponty has an image of flesh as birth. As Claude Lefort draws attention to in the quotation: "What we are calling flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass...has no name in philosophy" (VI, 147), the word "*travaillée*" [worked-over, wrought, elaborated] has a singular connotation in French, meaning "the moment when a mother is about to be delivered."²⁴ Flesh is thus the double medium of being born, and giving birth. Sensibility is itself the medium of its transcendence, the medium of its own emergence. In Merleau-Ponty's ontology, the agency of constitution is shifted from a transcendental ego which converts brute presence into a field of significance.²⁵ For Merleau-Ponty, brute presence is itself the "issue," and the agency of constitution is the dualism of the chiasm, flesh, the maternal.

The chiasm is the hinge of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, but as such is itself invisible – the figure of pre-ontological indivisibility. In her text "Pierre Roussel's Chiasmas," Michèle Le Doeuff gives a rhetorical definition of "chiasma":

I shall define this abstract figure as follows: the denial of the quality 'X' to an object or place which common sense holds it actually to possess, with the compensating attribution of that same quality to everything but that object or place.²⁶

²⁴ Lefort, "Flesh and Otherness," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 5. The representation of the mother as a passive participant in the moment of giving birth, that is, "about to be delivered" of her baby, is also noteworthy.

²⁵ Alphonso Lingis, "Sense and Non-Sense in the Sexed Body," *Cultural Hermeneutics*.

²⁶ Michèle Le Doeuff, "Pierre Roussel's Chiasmas," *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. Colin Gordon (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), p. 140.

Le Doeuff argues that Roussel draws a figure of the body governed by the chiasm, that is, a negation that counterweighs the general movement of the body. In contradiction to general thought on the matter, which is that men and women are similar except in their sexual functioning, Roussel argues that sexual difference is apparent in every part of women's bodies and lives – except the pubis bone. This bone defies definition in sexual terms because of its common utility for both sexes. The literal point of sexual difference for Roussel is reduced to a utility. The pubis is a pivot of difference, denied its own difference. As a central predicate from which all other predicates derive, the pubis is a non-sexual term.

The chiasm performs a similar role in Merleau-Ponty's account of flesh. While flesh cannot be properly conceived, Merleau-Ponty finds a metaphoric correlate in the body of woman. Flesh is a metaphor of the maternal body. As Le Doeuff explains, reduced to a rhetorical figure, the maternal remains the opacity which upholds difference, but which is devoid of its own difference. Maternal flesh is denied the qualities which common sense would otherwise hold a body to possess. Carnality is produced within the structure of the chiasm. The chiasm itself has no style or concrete form. It is a forever undifferentiated, pre-ontological neuter. While Roussel is engaged in a masking of the very site of his discourse, Merleau-Ponty makes a feature of its masking in his notion of hyperreflection, which incorporates within it a movement of undecideability which prevents transcendental reflection. Hyperreflection takes into account the limits of reflection by including the chiasm as both its condition and undoing. The chiasm has the singular attribute of a universal utility.

As well as a metaphoric correlate in the body of woman, I would also argue that the chiasm has a metaphoric correlate in the optic chiasma. This is an essential structuring element in the physiology of vision. The optic chiasma is the point of cross-over of the fibres of the two optic nerves, so that the shared visual field of each eye is linked to a part of the brain on the opposite side of the body. It is apparent that Merleau-Ponty draws extensively upon this analogy from visual perception, just as he draws upon the metaphor of the maternal body, in his thinking of the chiasm as it functions indistinguishably metaphorically and materially. The structure of flesh is rooted for Merleau-Ponty in the visual. Carnal vision is stereoscopic in essence, not monocular. Monocular vision is the flattened, technicized vision of the disembodied transcendental subject or the mechanical eye:

The binocular perception is not made up of two monocular perceptions surmounted; it is of another order. The monocular images *are* not in the same sense that the thing perceived with both eyes *is*. They are phantoms and it is the real; they are pre-things and it is the thing... (VI, 7)

The thing perceived with both eyes is real in as much as it has the dimensionality of sensibility, which is the diacritical reality of the chiasm. Physiologically, while it is possible to calculate distance with one eye (and we often close one eye in order to do so), the perception of depth (which gives a relational visual sense in terms of object and ground) requires stereoscopic, that is chiasmic, vision. This is not the vision which is the combination of two eyes, but an effect of a different order, created in the in-between of the two. Experimentally, a double, not single delivery of stimulus is needed to elicit the effect of stereopsis by artificial means. Thus it appears that the resultant effect is not the product of a unified field, but instead, is the *inauguration* of such an effect (a sense of "stereoptic" unity) synergically. This doubling which gives depth perception physiologically is reproduced as the ideality of dimension in Merleau-Ponty's language of perception.²⁷

Paradoxically however, the chiasm is out of sight. It is the blank or invisibility in/between visibility. The fold of the chiasm is the in-between, the hymen neologized by Derrida in his analysis of Mallarmé's text "Mimique."²⁸ As hymen, the chiasm describes the unity of the living body as a perpetual resistance to closure; a porosity, subject to a leakage of meaning between figure and ground (VI, 265). The hymen (also pharmakon, supplement, gram) is the figure of undecidability, naming the dehiscence, spacing, temporalization inherent in the consummation of meaning:

²⁷ I am grateful to Professor Anne Sefton of the Department of Physiology, University of Sydney, for outlining for me the technical and historical aspects of the physiology of vision which I have developed here, and in particular, Peter Bishop's experimentation with artificial stereopsis. I would add by way of an historical aside, that since Merleau-Ponty's death, physiological interest in visual perception has shifted from the effects of the optic chiasma, to parallel processing of retinal stimuli in the brain. Parallel processing refers to the discovery that individual retinal cells do not simply respond to light in terms of presence/absence, but that different aspects of visual perception are registered separately in the field of the visual cortex corresponding to each retinal cell. In other words, interest in the physiology of vision has shifted to mapping a multi-dimensional visual field based on the lateral connections of the brain.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session," *Dissemination*, pp. 173-286.

...it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.)²⁹

Merleau-Ponty and Derrida differ in their understanding of this diacritical medium. In a reading which itself employs the figure of the chiasm, Yount refers to reversibility as a point of contact and divergence between the two philosophers in their crossing over from dichotomous logic. Merleau-Ponty understands the chiasm corporeally, as medium of the enigma of sensible "being." Derrida understands the chiasm structurally as an entirely textual medium, a supplement to which all meaning is reducible. There can be no phenomenology of the hymen. Flesh would thus be reduced to a grammatological structure and deprived of a transcendental referent, or Merleau-Ponty's "wild" or sensible meaning. As I would describe it, the blank for Derrida is the between of the text, the spacing without which there can be no sense of meaning (deferral). The blank for Merleau-Ponty is the spacing within meaning, so that sense is present but indefinable (entre-deux). According to Yount, Merleau-Ponty never gives up the quest to elucidate the stuff of experience, while Derrida reminds us that the last thing abandonable is the dream of an original signified.³⁰

In keeping with the figure of the chiasm, the distinction between the two philosophers is not really resolved by this comparison. Derrida has commented that if one might argue that *The Phenomenology of Perception* falls within the metaphysics of presence (a belief in the possibility of coincidence between consciousness and being), with *The Visible and The Invisible* "it is even harder to say."³¹ Far from being a matter for judgement, the problematic linkage between language and embodiment which is opened up between the two philosophers – between phenomenology's bodily text and deconstruction's textual body – is an immensely provocative one. Merleau-Ponty relates meaning to corporeality intentionally in the form of gesture – bodily expression – a

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination*, p. 127.

³⁰ Mark Yount, "Two Reversibilities: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida," *Philosophy Today* Vol. 34 (Summer 1990), pp. 129-140.

³¹ A spoken comment made by Derrida, related in Nancy J. Holland, "Merleau-Ponty on Presence: A Derridean Reading," *Research in Phenomenology* Vol. 16 (1986), pp. 111-120.

gesturing towards an always unfinished articulation of a world. While itself unprepared to acknowledge the existence of perception,³² deconstruction's reference to phenomena owes a debt to Merleau-Ponty's break with the concept of perception as a natural coincidence of consciousness and things. On the other hand (so to speak) from the perspective of deconstruction, the chiasm is textual and thus open to further analysis.³³

Despite the obvious metaphorical association, both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida resist the reduction of the chiasm to the female body. Derrida does so in consistency with the meaning of chiasm as the absence of any fixed opposition, which includes sexual difference. The chiasm is a vaginal invagination:

One could say quite accurately that the hymen *does not exist*. Anything constituting the value of existence is foreign to the "hymen." And if there were hymen – I am not saying if the hymen existed – property value would be no more appropriate to it for reasons that I have stressed in the texts to which you refer. How can one then attribute the *existence* of the hymen *properly* to woman? Not that it is any more the distinguishing feature of man or, for that matter, of the human creature. I would say the same for the term "invagination" which has, moreover, always been reinscribed in a chiasmus, one doubly folded, redoubled and inversed, etc.³⁴

Merleau-Ponty's position is consistent with his description of the carnal body as never proper, but "between the pure subject and the pure object a third genus [genre or gender] of being..." (PhP, 350) This genre is the anonymous gender of sensible being, or the one flesh referred to in the previous section. Neither subject nor object, male or female, the chiasm is a structure of "implication" (PhP, 149), or a folding of opposites together so that they are also mutually reversed. This double enfoldment or

32 Flynn, "Textuality and the Flesh : Derrida and Merleau-Ponty," *J. British Society for Phenomenology*, discusses Derrida's statement: "I don't know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists." Flynn argues that in his later work, Merleau-Ponty has elaborated a profound critique of the metaphysics of presence in his account of hyperreflection.

33 Yount, "Two Reversibilities: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida," *Philosophy Today*.

34 Jacques Derrida and Christie McDonald, "Interview: Choreographies," *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press), p. 181-182.

invagination is the mutual "re-pli-cation" [*plier*: to fold] of differences in each other.³⁵ The identity of differences is never established in this doubling/lining of meaning. The coincidence of the chiasm is nothing more than a recovering, both in terms of surviving and concealing its gaping impossibility.

Described in these terms, the gender of the chiasm is an impossibility which falls within the terms of Heidegger's characterization of ontological difference as an originary and a-sexual neutrality. This neutrality is not an absence of sexuality. It is a sexuality which does not carry the mark of sexual difference. It is the thought of sexuality as desire. Derrida names this neutralization as the enormous problem of attempting to think ontological difference and sexual difference.³⁶ In his account of carnality, Merleau-Ponty does not attempt to address this problem. The chiasm is neither ontologically nor sexually distinct. It is the means of passage between. As will be discussed later, Irigaray responds to Merleau-Ponty with a critique of flesh as a de-sexualized ontology.

The issue of ethical difference is another problem which has been raised in relation to Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility. Merleau-Ponty characterizes the so-called "enigma" or chiasm of perceptual faith as the presumptive domain which exists despite the impossibility of seeing things from the other side. This formulation problematizes the seeing of things from different perspectives, but not the different perspectives themselves. Although Merleau-Ponty notes that the senses vary in this capacity – for example, he considers that the reversibility of sonority is more agile than visibility (VI, 144) – his principle concern lies with articulating the alterity of reversibility in terms of visibility. In other words, it is the problematic of the reversibility of *visibility* which opens up the domain of perceptual faith: the impossibility of seeing things from the other side. This formulation of alterity in terms of an anonymous *seeing things* differently is less absolutely decisive than it first appears. As Merleau-Ponty observes himself, the "sounding" of sonority, for example, is not arrested by the impossibility of seeing things from the other side.³⁷

Rather than choosing the "transcendental violence" of addressing the question of the alterity of the *other*, which would also be to introduce an irreversible asymmetry into his ontology, Merleau-Ponty accepts the

³⁵ Taylor, *Alterity*, p. 71.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Choreographies," *The Ear of the Other*, p. 180.

³⁷ See Wayne J. Froman, "Alterity and the Paradox of Being," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, pp. 98-110, for a discussion of sonority as a transcendental violence exceeding the reversibility of visibility.

limits of a phenomenology of phenomenology and chooses an originary dynamic of perception as support of human communion.³⁸ Here the motif of reversibility as a prediscursive intercorporeal participation is represented as the connection between the chiasm of my eyes and the chiasm of the eyes of an other. Rather than rivalling my own gaze, the two gazes co-function as organs of one unique body (VI, 215). Here, it can be added, we see Merleau-Ponty's reliance on the figure of the optic chiasma to equate the reversibility of experience with the experience of intercorporeality. This is a movement of incorporation. Lefort equates Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeal reversibility with Freud's condensation of the relations to the other into the functioning of an organ that is not only physiologically related but bears the working of an impulse. In Freud's example, eating supports the impulse to swallow up external being, accompanied by the feeling of being at risk of being swallowed.³⁹ This observation has a particular relevance to Merleau-Ponty's statement that "there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision." (VI, 139) As will be discussed in the next chapter, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of narcissism as more profoundly a being seen by the outside than a seeing of oneself in the outside describes a complex association of reversibility and incorporation.

Levinas emphasizes the extent to which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological formulation of intersubjectivity falls short of addressing an ethical sociability. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, Levinas discusses Merleau-Ponty's imposition of a common corporeality which is implied in the self-reflexivity of the hands of the same body, upon the radical separation of the hands of different bodies in the handshake. Flesh refers to an anonymous sensibility, not to a sensibility whose particularity is inadequate to universalization. Levinas's criticism of Merleau-Ponty lies with Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of intersubjectivity in terms of knowledge. The "human" is constituted in terms of *knowledge* in the reversibility of flesh. The extension of the sensible qualities of the carnal into objective relations rests in the tacit agreement of parties upon things. This occurs in the face of a deficiency of knowledge of others. I cannot know what things are to them – I cannot see things from their side. Rather than being an overwhelming insufficiency, the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lefort, "Flesh and Otherness," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 10.

deficiency of knowledge is a positive characteristic of objective perception: "I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts."⁴⁰

Levinas refers to Merleau-Ponty's humanity of one flesh as "but a moment or an articulation of an event of intelligibility, the heart of which is no longer situated within the human being."⁴¹ While sociality is constituted in the language of sensibility, its consciousness is of the order of knowledge. This formulation presupposes the constitution of intersubjectivity and problematizes things. It is not, as Levinas also observes, a sociality which admits much in the way of personal drama.⁴² Taking issue with the intentionality of borrowing oneself from others, Levinas for example, characterizes the relationship in terms of being hostage to the other (a characterization which will be expanded upon in *Part III* of this thesis). However, as Edith Wyschogrod comments in Merleau-Ponty's defense, Levinas's ethics is still parasitic on a presumption of both the face and hostage, and also the other as embodied (and human, I would also add). While Merleau-Ponty's account of the body as the condition for world transactions does not explain corporeality in terms of ethics, neither is the body simply a vulnerability.⁴³ Merleau-Ponty's contribution to a broader consideration of ethics includes an undermining of the concept of disembodied thought and the establishment of embodiment as precondition of all apprehension.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Levinas, "Intersubjectivity," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, trans. Michael B. Smith, p. 58, quotes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 201. I have quoted from "The Philosopher and His Shadow," *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1964), p. 159. In Levinas, "Intersubjectivity," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, the expression is translated as: "I lend myself to others; I create them out of my own thoughts." Although "I borrow (myself) from" is the usual meaning of "*Je m'emprunte à autrui*," differences in translation of Merleau-Ponty's expression give a sense of the ambiguous self-reflexivity of flesh.

⁴¹ Levinas, "Intersubjectivity," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 57.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Edith Wyschogrod, "Does Continental Ethics Have a Future?" *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought*, eds Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott with P. Holley Roberts (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 229-241.

⁴⁴ Levinas acknowledges his debt to Merleau-Ponty in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979), pp. 205-206. Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (TI).

Sexuality and Sensibility

Merleau-Ponty refers to the sexed body only indirectly in "The Intertwining: The Chiasm," as a "massive corporeality" preoccupied with the dimensions of its own desire (VI, 144). In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, he argues the case for considering the body as an historical actualization rather than natural entity: "the body expresses total existence, not because it is an external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence comes into its own in the body." (PhP, 166) Existence is the mode which is common to the intertwined actions of the physical and the psychological.⁴⁵ Considered as an existential expression of intentionality, sexuality is integral to this body. In other words sexuality is inseparable from human existence. In the chapter "The Body in its Sexual Being" (PhP, 154-173), Merleau-Ponty takes issue with two types of theories of sexuality which, according to his interpretation, isolate sexuality from its existential project. Theories which regard sexuality as a system of drives governed either by their own necessity or by innate natural pressures, divorce sexuality from the imperatives of an external world. Theories which regard sexuality as a learned response also divorce sexuality from external necessity by reducing sexuality to a mere representation or construct. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is not reducible to the self-determining necessity of a drive, or a mechanism of nature, or a projected idea. It is reducible only to the intentionality of a body which actualizes its sexuality in conjunction with the world.

As with the articulation of the living body, for Merleau-Ponty the realization of sexual functions depends on the emergence of a language of sexuality. Sexual meaning is operative, an otherwise imperceptible dimension of sensibility generated in an embodied relation with the world. Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes the libido as flesh in its passage from non-sense to sense. In this formulation, the unconscious is equated with the sensible, or flesh. As "intimate perception," the libido is synonymous with perception as something which we participate in intimately, corporeally.⁴⁶ Sexuality and embodiment are inextricable. A body with

⁴⁵ Dorothea E. Olkowski, "Merleau-Ponty's Freudianism: From the Body of Consciousness to the Body of Flesh," *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. XVIII Nos 1, 2 & 3 (1982-3), pp. 97-116, describes Merleau-Ponty's concept of existence as a concept which "gives value to both body and consciousness and makes it possible for us to experience them together as an indistinguishable existential process operating in every human activity."

⁴⁶ Ibid. *French Philosophy*, pp. 85-104.

sense organs is necessarily a body that desires.⁴⁷ It is not possible to close the dimension of sexuality in the living body except by anaesthesia.

The libidinal body is the exemplar of the emergence of meaning in the anonymous circuit of flesh. Neither consciousness nor the unconscious are the source of sexual desire. Instead, both are conjoined in sexual experience as the very experience of the structure of incarnation. Eroticism is the denuding of one's substantiality, or yielding of the structure of one's corporeality to another. Previously I have discussed flesh as a simultaneous dispossession and recollection. The libidinal body transforms this ambiguity into the adventure of eroticism. In an exegesis which I cannot resist paraphrasing, Lingis describes the ambiguity which is sought out in erotic contact as a passage into the anonymous mode. When consciousness and corporeality are no longer distinct, the carnal sense emerges. When consciousness is obsessed by its object, the spontaneity of the erotic verges on the brink of enslavement. Where the obsessive contact with the other is felt as the paroxysm of one's own feeling, the sense of the singular impulse veers towards a limit of equivalence. This is an encounter with an alien being, a denouement of individual existence into a predicament in which one is held. In the very process of its giving up its claim to meaning, the libidinal body exists as an affirmation of the non-sense of the sensuous, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the metaphysical dimension of flesh.⁴⁸

While Merleau-Ponty appears to define sexuality in both concrete historical and corporeal terms, Judith Butler identifies a reversion to a more fundamental naturalism in Merleau-Ponty's account of the genesis of sexual desire as a universal and natural form of human expression.⁴⁹ Butler's critique of Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality emphasizes the extent to which it is based on the assumption of a fixed notion of sexual difference. In so-called "intimate perception," the female body exudes a natural attraction which elicits an appropriate response from the male subject. Butler comments that the body is objectified more drastically by intimate perception than by the objective perception which is the subject of Merleau-Ponty's broad critical project. In fact, in sexuality, perception is

⁴⁷ Lingis, "Sense and Non-Sense in the Sexed Body," *Cultural Hermeneutics*. See also Alphonso Lingis, "Sense and Non-sense in Sexuality," *Libido: The French Existential Theories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 58-73.

⁴⁸ Lingis, "Sense and Non-Sense in the Sexed Body," *Cultural Hermeneutics*.

⁴⁹ Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, pp. 85-100.

reduced to the erotics of an objectifying gaze. In the context of sexuality, the reversibility of the body can be reformulated as follows: the body is an object to the extent that it is desired and it is subject to the extent that it desires. Butler argues that while reversibility is the common feature of the body in general, this is not the case for the *female* body. In relation to Merleau-Ponty's perceptual schema, the female body denotes a natural object, and the body in general denotes existence. As Butler's analysis concludes, despite investing the body with its own historicity, Merleau-Ponty simultaneously limits the sexed body to the world of a reified sexuality.

A further criticism of Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality is directed towards its indistinguishability from sensibility. The intentionality inherent in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is present in the account of the libidinal body. Lingis points out that the libidinal body never quite lets go of a hold on the possible, never entertains the scenario of being held by a presence that one has not taken the initiative of opening oneself to. Merleau-Ponty fails to differentiate between sensuousness and voluptuousness, which is a being enthralled by the impossible rather than the imperceivable. There is another way of stating this problem. Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality does not admit a breach in the singularity of flesh. Sexuality is a passage into anonymous sensibility, but it persists in its anonymity as it does in the singular, in a schema of divergence and reversibility. The anonymity of sensibility in Merleau-Ponty's description of sexual experience is the universal experience of the structure of incarnation. There is no way of specifying any gender asymmetry, such as the asymmetry described by Butler, in Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality as sensibility. As a dimension of sensibility, sexuality is an anonymous mode of existence; a sexually undifferentiated carnality.

THE VISIBLE AS FLESH

The Texture of Phenomenological Light

Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the primacy of perception is reliant on a radical reformulation of light. The photology which sustains the dichotomies of metaphysical thought is inappropriate to Merleau-Ponty's proposition of the corporeal basis of all experience. In its place Merleau-Ponty proposes an account of vision in terms of embodied light. This account is begun in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, where the body is cast as a synergistic whole, and as such, source of our sense of light. In Merleau-Ponty's later project, the origin of light as a sense of synergy existing in common among bodies is itself an object of interest. It is with this problem in mind that Merleau-Ponty sets his task as the recommencement of philosophical thinking in the opening paragraph of "The Intertwining – The Chiasm." He would do this by returning to a redefinition of the pre-discursive, the enigmatic meaning of which represents:

...the insistent reminder of a mystery as familiar as it is unexplained, of a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity. (VI, 130)

In conjunction with his recasting of the terms of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty announces his turn from metaphysical truth to the sensible as the source of the mystery of light.

Merleau-Ponty's general approach to light is supported by the phenomenological reformulation of light in the wake of nineteenth century research in optics. There, the most profound change in theorizing the nature of light is the shift from emission and corpuscular optics to the wave theory of light. In the former, light is composed of rays, which emanate from a source and traverse an optical field longitudinally. The latter theory, which originates with the work of Fresnel, maintains that light is not radiant. The vibrations of light are not streams of particles but transverse interferences created by laterally propagating light waves. It has been both argued and disputed that the wave theory of light represents a paradigm shift, not only in physics, but in nineteenth century vision generally. The most significant changes claimed for the wave theory of

light are first, that perspectival modes of representation no longer have a basis in optical verisimilitude, and second, the "action at a distance" world view is drastically altered.⁵⁰

However, for the purposes of this discussion, the most significant consequence of Fresnel's work is that light loses its ontological privilege. Previously the unique preserve of optics, Jonathan Crary observes that light is now equatable with the phenomena of electricity and magnetism. Light, the noble bond which since Plato had linked together sight and visibility, inexorably begins to part company with vision and visibility. Crary traces the divergence of light into physics, once it is conceivable as electromagnetism, and the divergence of vision into the field of physiological optics, the study of the unique sensory capacities of the eye which had been first explored by Goethe and Schopenhauer. The ontological privilege of light receives its ultimate denouement in Johannes Muller's physiological studies of the senses. In relation to the sense of sight, Muller demonstrates that electrical stimulus, mechanical blows or rubbing, chemical agents and increased blood flow are all capable of producing the sensation of light. In other words, the experience of light has no necessary connection with any actual light.⁵¹ Light is transformed from an external agent into a phenomenon which resides in the capacities of a body to produce it. In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reformulation of physiological empirical research, light acquires the corporeally based necessity which it lacks as metaphysical light. No longer the ultimate undoubtable authority, the existence of light is inextricable from its carnality. Light is an historical phenomenon within the texture of flesh.

Merleau-Ponty begins the introduction to his first phenomenological work, *The Structure of Behaviour*, with an important distinction between the so-called "real light" of scientific understanding, and "phenomenal light" as a qualitative experience.⁵² Rather than distinguishing between these two aspects of light, Merleau-Ponty's task in

50 Eugene Frankel, "Corpuscular Optics and the Wave Theory of Light: The Science and Politics of a Revolution in Physics," *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 6 (1976), pp. 141-84.

51 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: October Books, MIT Press, 1990), pp. 88-96.

52 Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, pp. 7-10. For a discussion of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's early attempts to grapple with the enigmas of perception and his later work on perception see Martin Jay, "Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and the Search for a New Ontology of Sight," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 143-185.

this early work is to demonstrate that the nature of light dwells in the inability to distinguish between the two. Merleau-Ponty asserts that it is not possible to differentiate between scientific and naive perception, because both are ultimately corporeally based. Merleau-Ponty develops this theme throughout his work. Carnal light must be distinguished from the "natural light" of the perceiving subject that in Cartesian metaphysics is converted into the intelligible (invisible) light of ideas. The value of light in Cartesian metaphysics is that it is a medium from which object-less perceptions can be formed. The light we see is not what interests the mind of reason. Our eyes are merely instruments of a mind which "sees" a light which commands our vision from without. In Cartesian metaphysics, sensory qualities such as colour, brightness and transparency are secondary to the sense of vision, and as changeable qualities contribute to errors of judgement about our experience of things. The light of reason is black and white.⁵³ What interests Merleau-Ponty is that Descartes actually abandons the visible in order to clarify it. In Descartes' *Dioptrics*, the action of light is achieved by contact. The blind can see with sticks for eyes or by touching things with their hands. According to Merleau-Ponty, such action gives a supplementary status to the light of perception. Light is contracted into an unlit space, cleared of deceptive reflections, refractions and colour. It is also interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty identifies these supplementary qualities as the very qualities which make vision action at a distance, unlike the spatiality of touch which for Descartes gives only the *idea* of seeing.⁵⁴

Merleau-Ponty returns the seer to a world of light which is inhabited from the inside. Light has the diacritical structure of flesh. The ideality of light has a non-sensory presence which cannot be separated from the carnal experience of light. They form an intimate interlining:

Light's transcendence is not delegated to a reading mind which deciphers the impacts of the light-thing upon the brain and which could do this quite as well if it had never lived in a body. (PP, 178)

Carnal light is not a transparent medium with its own clarity. It is the cloth or interlaced fabric of an anonymous visibility. The experience of light, as with all sensibility, comes into being, as Merleau-Ponty insists

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 133.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty discusses Cartesian optics in general in "Eye and Mind," (PP, 169-178).

"within the framework of a certain setting in relation to the world which is the definition of my body." (PhP, 303) This shift in its composition profoundly transforms the meaning of light.

To begin with, in the experience of vision, the eye loses its instrumental relation to light. Merleau-Ponty stresses that the eye is not an instrument, but an organ. Instruments are detachable organs, not the reverse (PP, 178). The eye cannot be divorced from the carnality of light, it cannot see in terms of sheer light. To see light is to see nothing else. When the eye is represented as the instrument of vision, it is assumed incorrectly that the eye takes the "lighting" of its gaze into account:

The eye is not the mind, but a material organ. How could it ever take anything 'into account'? It can do so only if we introduce the phenomenal body beside the objective one, if we make a knowing-body of it, and if, in short, we substitute for consciousness, as the subject of perception, existence, or being in the world through a body. (PhP, 309n)

For Merleau-Ponty, the eye which sees through light is replaced by the knowing-body as condition of lighting. Lighting is the lining of what it is that we see, the assumed intermediary directing or supporting our gaze. We do not see. We perceive in conformity with a carnal light that already knows and sees, because it is not detachable from the things we see:

What senses = I cannot posit one sole sensible without positing it as torn from my flesh, lifted off my flesh, and my flesh itself is one of the sensibles in which an inscription of all the others is made... (VI, 259)

Visual perception presupposes a visual setting or language, which resides within us as a sensibility which gives us an implicit understanding of the light. This making sense of light, rather than seeing light, is the gaze.⁵⁵ It is a knowledge of light which does not come through laws, but through our kinaesthetic unfoldings as bodies in a world (PhP, 310).

Lighting is not light itself. Lighting is the chiasm of light, or light as flesh. Lighting belongs to the "body," whose irreducible obscurity is an

⁵⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *Artforum* Vol. 22 No. 8 (April 1984), pp. 36-43, discusses Merleau-Ponty's application of this concept to Cézanne's painting. Of Merleau-Ponty's analysis, Lyotard writes: "...what is really at stake: to reveal what makes one see, and not what is visible...what was at stake for that painter was, in effect, to seize perception and render it at birth – perception 'before' perception; the wonder of 'it happening.'"

opening against which, or in whose absence there can be a coming to light. Merleau-Ponty refers to this chiasmic grounding of the visible as a "provisional partitioning" (VI, 152),⁵⁶ or an imperceptible membrane of latency which divides/makes possible the passage between an interior horizon of light as sensation and an external horizon of lighted things. This tissue of light can be contrasted to the light of a passive or ungazing vision, which ceases to be light, dazzles and invades the eye and becomes pain (PhP, 315). Lighting however, supports our gaze as a background of sensibility:

The lighting is neither colour nor, in itself, even light, it is anterior to the distinction between colours and luminosities.

This is why it always tends to become "neutral" for us. The penumbra in which we are becomes so natural that it is no longer even perceived as penumbra. (PhP, 311)

Supported by a primordial lighting, light appears as a neutral property common to all visibles. "Natural light" is basically a place of contentment for the gaze. But prior to this generality, "lighting" is the appearance of light as a constancy and the articulation of a field.⁵⁷ The consideration of the qualitative nature of both these factors contributes to Merleau-Ponty's recasting of the common nature of light.

The phenomenon of constancy refers to the constancy of light which is maintained throughout its differences. Merleau-Ponty gives a new inflection to the corporeal aspects of light which are elsewhere attributed with introducing errors into vision: "Lighting and the constancy of the thing illuminated, which is its correlative, are directly dependent on our bodily situation." (PhP, 310) In other words, the so-called errors of perception are in fact the feats of perception. The differences of brightness we observe in light are directly related to our establishment within it. A white disc of light from a lamp becomes a light which I no longer see but which envelops me as I move into it. Colour has a constancy as a light which adheres to things even when they change colour. A table can still remain brown when a change in light colours it differently, by my substituting the actuality of colour for the memory of colour (PhP, 304). Colour is also a flesh which adheres only to itself, as an autonomous

⁵⁶ The hyphenated emphasis is Taylor's, *Altarity*, p. 72.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty is referring here to the empirical laws of lighting set out by Katz, as cited in the footnotes of "The Thing and the Natural World," *The Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 299-345.

perceptual system. Merleau-Ponty discusses a wide variety of other empirically observed variables of light from surface effects such as glow, gloss and transparency, to the changes of light in after-images. The quotation with which I began *Part II* is a further example of the constancy of light in its multiple phenomenal dimensions.

The phenomenon of constancy introduces an internal divergence in the experience of light, which gives it a lived temporal dimension. Light has a temporal constancy in the structure of memory. This is a constancy without presence. There is no present in Merleau-Ponty's conception of time.⁵⁸ All chiasmic doubling concerns before and after time. Merleau-Ponty refers to the body's double insertion/enveloping in time as the "Memory of the World." (VI, 194) The reversibility of light as both sensation and thing is bound to this chiasmic structure: "my confidence in reflection amounts in the last resort to my accepting and acting on the fact of temporality...I know myself only in so far as I am inherent in time and in the world, that is, I know myself only in my ambiguity." (PhP, 345)

The constancy of light is also articulated within the organisation of a field. Contrasts in light are directly related to the foregrounding or backgrounding effects of a field. Merleau-Ponty lists differences in the constancy of light which can be accounted for in terms of the effects of peripheral and central vision, monocular and binocular vision, coloured and uncoloured light, brief and prolonged vision. The significance of these observations is not that they prove a functional relation between the phenomenon of constancy, the articulation of a field and the phenomenon of lighting. Rather, they refer to an apparatus which is inseparable from the carnality of light. The constancy of light within a field is indicative of a spatial dimension of light which is experienced only within the perceptual domain. This scope of lighting – as an aim or field of possibility, can be contrasted with a concept of light which majestically traverses an abstract space.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty interprets the feats of perception as a function of a language of sensibility rather than a unifying body-consciousness. His concern is to explain the origin of light as a common phenomenon. In order to do so he is critical of his earlier reliance on consciousness as the source of the qualities of phenomena. Any sense of the sameness of consciousness is itself the effect of a language

⁵⁸ See Yount, "Two Reversibilities: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida," *Philosophy Today*, for a discussion of the similarities in both Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's critiques of the transcendental consciousness attributed by Husserl to the "now" of a living present.

of flesh. The naturalness of light is the emergence of a common sense of being, which occurs in the folding of the visible upon itself:

Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly: this is possible as soon as we no longer make belongingness to one same "consciousness" the primordial definition of sensibility, and as soon as we rather understand it as the return of the visible upon itself, a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient. For as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own.
(VI, 142)

Merleau-Ponty reinvests light with a carnal significance which has been lost in its metaphysical conception. Rather than making light an effect of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty equates the emergence of light with a language of sensibility. The carnality of vision, not consciousness, is the source of illumination.

While reinvesting light with a carnal significance, "lighting" is open to criticism as a "first light" which encourages a vision of the pure intentionality of things in the world.⁵⁹ Foucault expresses his criticism of Merleau-Ponty's faith in the chiasm's mystery, describing it as an attempt to instate empirical experience as a new transcendentalism.⁶⁰ Against the obscurity of this pure intentionality, Foucault distinguishes between the realm of language and the realm of light as two orders – those of discourse and of vision. Rather than lying within the realm of the body, the constitution and interrelation between both these realms is the proper realm of knowledge. Foucault's separation allows him to account for a history of modes of seeing, based on the functioning of knowledges.

⁵⁹ Dana Polan, "Powers of Vision, Visions of Power," *camera obscura* Vol. 18 (September 1988), pp. 106-119.

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, "Man and His Doubles," *The Order of Things*, pp. 303-343. For discussion of Foucault's criticism of as well as influence by Merleau-Ponty, see Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), passim; Martin Jay, "In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought," *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 184; and Richard A. Cohen, "Merleau-Ponty, the Flesh and Foucault," *Philosophy Today* Vol. 28 (Winter 1984), pp. 329-338.

Hence, for example, medical knowledge is able to modulate a "first light" in which it constituted a space of visibility for illness.⁶¹

However, Foucault dismisses Merleau-Ponty's "first light" too quickly. "Lighting" contains within it an account of natural light as an opening onto a common (human) being.⁶² When Foucault refers to the constitution of the field of visibility for illness in terms of the use of, for example, 3D to restore depth to the eye and volume to pain, he relies on the belief in a common language of perception as the universal modulator of this "first light." A more sympathetic reading would recognize Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the fundamental historicity of meaning, rather than emphasize the obscurity of meaning. The lived body is the expression of life as culture. In other words, there is no such thing as "first light," only the "first light" of an historical lived "lighting." The "first light" which is taken on faith in medical knowledge would be a perfect example of the mechanism by which we are corporeally inserted into a common medical world. Despite his hostility to phenomenological faith, Deleuze also is concerned to relate visibility to a common knowledge, and he does this by recognizing a distinction within visual perception.⁶³ Historically, visibility is distinguishable from sight. Visibility lies on the side of intelligibility, that is, visibility is a perceptual experience that is universally knowable. The origin of perception as a cultural phenomenon is the problem which Merleau-Ponty addresses in his account of flesh.

A criticism of a different kind can be levelled at Merleau-Ponty's depiction of the knowing-body as the condition of lighting. The lighting of the knowing-body carries with it an intentionality which is more like a "third eye" that can take its indefinable corporeal meaning into account. Such an organ of vision would be more like Bataille's pineal eye, which is, all things considered, "a sexual organ of unheard-of sensitivity."⁶⁴ capable of seeing all that is so offensive to reason. In Merleau-Ponty's account, this knowledge, or "carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and the sensed to the sentient" is a "ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own." (VI, 142) In Bataille's account, this carnal knowledge is an excrement which is offensive to reason. The hyperreflex

⁶¹ Dana Polan, "Powers of Vision, Visions of Power," *camera obscura*.

⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Man and Adversity," *Signs*, p. 239.

⁶³ D. N. Rodowick, "Reading the Figural," *camera obscura* Vol. 24 (September 1990), p. 11-44.

⁶⁴ Georges Bataille, "The Jesuve," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald Leslie, Jr, *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 14 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 77.

of rational vision is not a metaphysical incorporation of the void. It is a gut reflex to void. The pineal eye spurts tears and blood as its own form of illumination. Its visions are the excessive illuminations of an improper body which far from adhering to knowledge, are so grotesquely ambiguous that they make reason shit and vomit.⁶⁵

Both Bataille and Merleau-Ponty are referring here to a blind spot in the light of reason, but that blindness is represented very differently by each. For Merleau-Ponty the blind spot is the invisible corporeal underlining of all thought. For Bataille, the blind spot is the effect of corporeal illumination, which rents the eye of rational vision. While it can be argued that Bataille's project limits itself to divesting vision of its authority through an evacuation of the rational eye, Merleau-Ponty's knowing-body overlooks the reflex actions of the eye. For example, although he does not forget the phenomenon of blinking:

With each flutter of my eyelashes a curtain lowers and rises, though I do not think for an instant of imputing this eclipse to the things themselves; with each movement of my eyes that sweep the space before me the things suffer a brief torsion, which I also ascribe to myself..." (VI, 7)

Merleau-Ponty cannot account for the imperative of the blink in the intentionality of lighting. While he speaks of the reversibility of light based on an originary contact with the world, he does not speak of the blink as a reflex action which is unrelated to visual field.⁶⁶ He refers to the blink as a primordial divergence in the persistence of perception, which opens up the field of vision. Vision is formed in/between a dividing membrane, a partitioning between an interior and an exterior horizon (VI, 152). But the blink does more than divide the field of lighting. Between the interior and the exterior horizon of the visible there is a thin film of moisture, a milieu maintained between the touching/dividing eyelids. This is an invisible, non-reversible interval in lighting's pro-vision-al divide.

⁶⁵ See Taylor, "Ecstasy: George Bataille," *Altarity*, pp. 115-148.

⁶⁶ The blink is both a reflex action and also an action which is to some extent within conscious control. (Winter 1984), pp. 7-32.

The Specular Body

As well as a harsh critic, Cartesian dualism finds an unlikely advocate in Merleau-Ponty, who refers to its dualism as "perhaps the most profound idea of the union of the soul and the body." (VI, 234) Descartes earns this unexpected accolade for conceptualizing the human body as non-closed, or irreducible to a body in itself. A human body is open to conjecture in Descartes' schema because thought predetermines its existence. Unlike the closed immediacy of an animal body (although I add that Caillois' work on animal mimicry challenges this assumption),⁶⁷ a body has human form only as a different form of itself. In Descartes' case the idea of a human body is achieved in a "view of itself" or thought of itself. In Merleau-Ponty's case, the idea of a human body is achieved in the view or perception of others.

For Merleau-Ponty, the idea of a human body is achieved in the reciprocal perception of others. Although Merleau-Ponty does not limit the idea of a body to a visible image, the visible is paradigmatic of the reversibility and divergence which also characterizes all narcissistic (egological) relations. Body-image is neither an internally derived corporeal schema, nor an externally derived gestalt. It is an image which exists in negotiation between both. Together, vision and narcissism participate in defining each other in a double sense. One of these is the self-reflexive or mirror-sense of seeing "oneself" from the outside, as the subject of visual (and other) phenomena: "since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision." (VI, 139) I will leave discussion of this aspect of body-image aside for a moment. The other more basic sense of narcissism is visibility, or a sense of being seen from without:

...not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contours of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. (VI, 139)

The importance of this second meaning of narcissism as a being visible is that it takes into account the fact that being seen from without is a

⁶⁷ Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, *October* No. 31 (Winter 1984), pp. 7-32.

precondition of seeing anything at all. In "The Child's Relations with Others" (PP, 96-155), Merleau-Ponty charts the emergence of the self-other distinction as a progressive experience of self-alienation in relation to the specular image of both the child and others. The divergence between the immediate experience and image of others is the means by which the infant discovers the body-image as evidence of his or her own self-alienation.⁶⁸ There are, for example, parts of my body which others, but not I, can see. Unlike the mirror-image, which the infant at first regards as indistinguishable from itself, the specular body is not originally "me." It is first an image which is "mine," not insofar as it is a projection of mine, but insofar as it is *given* to me from without. In this latter form, the idea of an image as neither subject nor object, but as mine is the originary meaning of the visible as the domain of dispossession or self-alienation.

The double interaction which Merleau-Ponty analyses in the mirror-image in "The Child's Relations with Others" can be better appreciated by his later refiguring of the divergence which characterizes the possession of a body in terms of the visible as flesh. It is of the essence of visual perception that in order for me to see I must be visible for an other. Visibility is by definition a relation of reversibility:

...he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*, unless, by principle, according to what is required by the articulation of the look with the things, he is one of the visibles, capable by a singular reversal, of seeing them – he who is one of them. (VI, 134-135)

To see is first and foremost to see oneself as being seen by an other. Being seen is a vulnerability which is essential to visibility, but that vulnerability, or danger of visibility, comes only because as a seer, I am of the visible. In other words, seeing and being seen are inextricably bound together. In his discussion of Merleau-Ponty's account of the specular body, O'Neill suggests that the childhood game of "peek-a-boo" is as much a game of mastery of presence and absence as Freud's Fort! Da! The "peek-

⁶⁸ M. C. Dillon emphasizes Merleau-Ponty's theorizing of body-image in terms of a self-alienation which leads the infant out of a syncretic indeterminacy of self and other, "Ecart: Reply to Claude Lefort's 'Flesh as Otherness,'" *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, pp. 14-26.

a-boo" game reaches its pleasurable highpoint each time the hiding child "finds" himself or herself for the other player.⁶⁹

However, in making this association, O'Neill's description does not reflect a distinction which Merleau-Ponty makes in his analysis of the acquisition of a specular image. There are two aspects involved in seeing oneself being seen by others. One of these involves representing others as having experiences the same as myself by borrowing from them my ego, and the other involves seeing myself as a virtual image, visible from the outside to another me. I would suggest that rather than being a means by which the infant begins to master the alternation of presence and absence, O'Neill's "peek-a-boo" game refers to the circulation of an imaginary body, made visible to both players in the reversibility of the look, while the Freud's Fort! Da! is a game of substitution, or means of representing presence and absence.

With this distinction in mind, I return now to discuss the self-reflexive or mirror-sense of seeing oneself from the outside. The body-image is the hinge which inserts the seer within the visible as an object of visual perception. The specular image is the means of translating the visual body into a socio-psychological space.⁷⁰ In this sense the visible underlines one's psycho-social existence in a corporeally-based relationship of reciprocity with the existence of others:

At the frontier of the mute or solipsistic world, where, in the presence of other seers, my visible is confirmed as an exemplar of a universal visibility, we reach a second or figurative meaning of vision, which will be the *intuitus mentis* or idea, a sublimation of the flesh, which will be mind or thought. But the factual presence of other bodies could not produce thought or the idea if its seed were not in my own body. (VI, 145)

Merleau-Ponty bases this reciprocity on the common world of perceptual faith. The common world of perceptual faith is the unsubstantiable presupposition, already discussed, that we share the same anonymous lived-world, based on a prelinguistic postural identification. According to Merleau-Ponty, the infant, unlike the adult, at first makes no distinction between the mirror image and its own body. Prior to self-other

⁶⁹ John O'Neill, "The Specular Body: Merleau-Ponty and Lacan on Infant Self and Other," *Synthese* Vol. 66 (1986), p. 211.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

differentiation, both are situated in a commonly incorporated world. For Merleau-Ponty, the mirror-image represents a primordial reversible subjectivity. The response is gestural, a transitivity no different from the infant's responding with a smile to another smiling face. It is elicited by and elicits a posturally based, rather than calculated correspondence of bodily conduct. This anonymous intersubjectivity is never lost. It persists as the expectation of mutual recognition, which is, according to Merleau-Ponty, the condition of all egological and social interactions in adult life.

As a syncretic being, the mirror image is incorporated within a common postural schema, where seer and seen are not defined. However, because the infant also responds to the mirror-image *as an image*, it makes a distinction between the specular body and itself. The specular body is the point at which the mirror-image turns to visible flesh:

...through a labor upon itself the visible body provides for the hollow whence a vision will come, inaugurates the long maturation at whose term suddenly it will see, that is, will be visible for itself, will institute the interminable gravitation, the indefatigable metamorphosis of the seeing and the visible whose principle is posed and which gets underway with the first vision. (VI, 147)

The first vision is "seeing," or vision in its quintessential "mirror" reflexivity. Seeing refers to the visibility of the look to itself (a replication of visibility supported by the look of others). As Lefort emphasizes, the gaze is detachable from the subject. It can turn around, as in the case of Freud's "wolf-man," and come back as though it came from the thing seen.⁷¹ The replication of the syncretic origin of visual perception is the key to the meaning of terror. (A child is terrified by his own look which he sees reversed in the eyes of the wolves).⁷² However, what is most interesting about Merleau-Ponty's analysis is that the genesis of the dehiscence between seer and specular body is not confined to the visible. Seeing is a reflexivity which is based on touch.

While Merleau-Ponty discusses vision and touch in "The Intertwining - The Chiasm" as though the two senses are metonymically equivalent, this intertwining disguises the dependence of the visible on

⁷¹ Sigmund Freud, "From the History of An Infantile Neurosis," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, trans. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), pp. 1-122.

⁷² Lefort, "Flesh as Otherness," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 7.

the tactile. The dehiscence which Merleau-Ponty poses between seeing and visibility is the analogy of the two hands touching. He claims an equivalence between the stereopsis of the visible and the double touching of the tangible: "because there exists a very peculiar relation from one to the other, across the corporeal space – like that holding between my two eyes – making of my hands one sole organ of experience, as it makes of my two eyes the channels of one sole Cyclopean vision." (VI, 141) The point which Merleau-Ponty is making is that the senses participate in inaugurating multiple experiences of a body as a sensibly constituted unity. However, it is the double touching initially which conveys the chiasm in/between which that unity is interposed:

...if these experiences never exactly overlap, if they slip away at the very moment they are about to rejoin, if there is always a "shift," a "spread," between them, this is precisely because my two hands are part of the same body... (VI, 148)

The unique contribution of the double touching is that its reversibility is a contact with the other which is always imminent, but never realized. Unlike the distance required for mirror reflection, the spacing of proximity is the folding back upon itself of the *same* body. This unity of touch is a tactility which is specific to the hands as the paradigmatic organs of touch, separate from the tactility of the rest of a body. By way of contrast, Derrida argues that a body touching/being touched is not primarily an autoaffective structure because "the surface of my body, as something external, must begin by being exposed in the world."⁷³

Each time Merleau-Ponty refers to the reversibility of the visible, he includes touch with vision, reinforcing reversibility as a combination of touch-vision:

...the flesh we are speaking of is not matter. It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested to in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, *as* tangible it descends among them, *as* touching it dominates them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass...these two mirror

⁷³ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 79.

other arrangements of the seeing and the visible, the touching and the touched, form a close-bound system that I count on, define a vision in general and a constant style of visibility from which I cannot detach myself, even when a particular vision turns out to be illusory... (VI, 146)

As has been discussed, the reversibility of visibility involves a necessary vulnerability. To see is not only to be of the visible, but also to be threatened with being seen. There is a fundamental passivity in vision, which is a being possessed by the visible. When Merleau-Ponty discusses the tangible, emphasis shifts from the touching/touched to the body as the organ they have in common. What is distinctive about this shift is the association between the hands which can be reversed at will and the body that can be reversed between them. The self-contained reversibility of the tangible body as subject and object of perception is transposed onto the specular body. In other words, the reflexivity of "first vision" or seeing rests on a body which, by virtue of its tangibility, can feel the difference in itself seeing and being seen.

It is clear that Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the tangible body gives an intentional inflection to the reversibility of the look which is not universally experienced. For example, he slips into the erotics of the gaze when describing a sexuate specular body:

...a woman in the street feeling that they are looking at her breast, and checking her clothing. Her corporeal schema is for itself—for the other — — it is the *hinge* of the for itself and the for the other — — To have a body is to be looked at (it is not only that), it is to be *visible*... (VI, 189)

The fact that "they" look at her while she looks at herself is an example of the irreversibility of the subject and object of a reifying look. There is no common transitivity in the lived experience of this look, which, contrary to Merleau-Ponty's analysis, impinges on differences in bodily comportment. She reads in their look her *body*, or looks, not her look. Approaching the problem from the side of bodily existence, Iris Marion Young's analysis of pregnant embodiment, for example, challenges the conceptualization of the body's experience of itself in dualist terms of subject and object. In pregnancy, the "intentional arc" that unifies experience bodily is in flux. The pregnant subject is other to herself in a way which defies Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the self as always

other to itself. Merleau-Ponty defines this relationship as one of transcendence. Young argues that in pregnancy the body is neither subject nor object, neither limited to nor different from its material being.⁷⁴

Young's work on various aspects of feminine body comportment reiterates that for women, the body is often lived as subject and object simultaneously, or to be more precise, in a manner which appears ambiguous in terms of that dichotomy. Young adheres more closely than Merleau-Ponty to his own existential phenomenology by stressing the situated nature of experience. Visual experience is not separable from the informative orientation of the postural schema in an historico-cultural milieu. Young cites the example of women's objectification, but I use it more generally, as an example of a visual dichotomy:

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention.⁷⁵

The danger of visibility, or a body's vulnerability in its aspect for an other is of a different order to the danger of visibility experienced as the threat of bodily invasion. Young's criticism of Merleau-Ponty's continuation of the subject and object dichotomy in his existential phenomenology echoes Merleau-Ponty's own motive for his ontological reworking of phenomenology as flesh. However, the same dichotomy is preserved indirectly in his account of the tangible as flesh. What is equally apparent is that Merleau-Ponty's abbreviated schema of touch leaves a space for conjecture about the role of the tangible in the sustained significance of the specular body. As Merleau-Ponty notes in his analysis of Wallon's work in "The Child's Relation with Others," the assumption of a specular body, rather than a mirror reflection, is far from fixed. It remains a fascination which persists throughout life.

⁷⁴ Iris Marion Young, "Pregnant Subjectivity and the Limits of Existential Phenomenology," *Descriptions*, eds D. Idhe & D. H. Silverman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 25-34.

⁷⁵ Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality," *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 155.

while In the following chapter, the structure of a body of one's own will be explored in a way which diverges from the trajectory of reflexivity. This is not a departure from the visual but a shift towards a non-reflexive basis for specularity. Apart from Merleau-Ponty's proposition of hyperreflection, the limits of specularity have been the subject of a variety of poststructuralist critiques. Rodolphe Gasché's critique of specular identity is among the best known of these. Based on Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, Gasché's analysis lays emphasis on the inappropriateness of associating reflection with the unity of consciousness and knowledge:

The alterity that splits reflection from itself and thus makes it able to fold itself into itself – to reflect itself – is also what makes it, for structural reasons, incapable of closing upon itself. The very possibility of reflexivity is also the subversion of its own source...It opens itself to the thought of an alterity, a difference that remains unaccounted for by the polar opposition of source and reflection, principle and what is derived from it, the one and the Other.⁷⁶

Gasché's interest is in highlighting the *différance*, or irreducible otherness which defers the possibility of specular identity. Vision, in its reflexivity, is the sense which attempts to represent the unrepresentable, and necessarily fails in the act.

"With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure," Merleau-Ponty says, "there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never be closed..." (VI, 151) This opening is a hollow, "a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing..." (VI, 151) but a carnal meaning which is encrypted within the flesh of the visible. As will be discussed, Irigaray takes issue with the interpretation of this negativity which is not nothing. In Merleau-Ponty's case, the withdrawal of the visible into itself reverberates with a profound melancholy which eludes all efforts of reflection. The consequences for an identity based on self-reflection are devastating. A comment by Taylor is representative of the overwhelming contemporary artistic and theoretical analyses of the sense of loss which accompanies the universal investiture of the specular,

⁷⁶ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, p. 102. *Alterity*, p. 75n.

while simultaneously spawning an age of figural reinterpretations of the image:⁷⁷

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...the hollow that remains "in" the return of the fold makes it impossible to return to the fold. In a carnal economy, the excessively prodigal son can never return to the home of the father. In different terms, once self-consciousness ventures into the world (as it must for its own sake), it cannot return to itself.⁷⁸

The dilemma as expressed by Taylor is for the lost state of (erection of) a prodigious, incomprehensible and limitless speculative economy, forever denied to a prodigal consciousness which spends itself in the chiasm, the maternal, the world of reflection's prereflective fund. Described in these terms, the specular is the economy in which the subject gives birth to himself as best he can within the traces of his dispersal. The origin of the specular body and the mystery of the visible are incorporated together. The following chapter will concentrate on Irigaray's analysis of this elision in Merleau-Ponty's specular economy.

the world in general, my history must be the continuation of a prehistory and must utilize the latter's required results. My personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the instrument of my personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous 'functions' which draw every particular focus into a general project. (PhP, 254)

Here Merleau-Ponty is describing sensibility as a generality, a character which is refractory to the logic of reflection. The susceptibility of being-other-to-itself of subjective relations is born of the institution or folding back on itself of an anonymous carrier.

For Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is born of the disparity between consciousness and the "being in the world" of passive flesh.

The central phenomenon, at the start of my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others, consists in my being given

⁷⁷ See D. N. Rodowick, "Reading the Figural," *camera obscura*.

⁷⁸ Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 75n.

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The Body As Given

In this chapter I will first discuss Merleau-Ponty's depiction of the sensible body as the reserve of a common understanding. That discussion will be followed by two sections which outline Irigaray's response to Merleau-Ponty's account of the reversibility of flesh. For Merleau-Ponty, "massive" flesh is a presubjective, elemental, anonymous corporeality for whom the world exists before "I" am there. This anonymous flesh "innate to Myself" is not matter, or mind, or substance of any kind (VI, 139). It is an "other subject," in a relation of proximity with consciousness, touching upon but not identical with self-presence:

...since it cannot be oriented 'in itself,' my first perception and my first hold upon the world must appear to me as action in accordance with an earlier agreement reached between *x* and the world in general, my history must be the continuation of a prehistory and must utilize the latter's required results. My personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the instrument of my personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous 'functions' which draw every particular focus into a general project. (PhP, 254)

Here Merleau-Ponty is describing sensibility as a generality, a chiasmic *x* which is refractory to the logic of reflection. The conceivability of being-other-to-itself of subjective relations is born of the idealisation or folding back on itself of an anonymous carnality.

For Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is born of the disparity between consciousness and the "being in the world" of massive flesh:

The central phenomenon, at the root of my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others, consists in my being given to myself. *I am given*, that is, I find myself already situated

and involved in a physical and social world – *I am given to myself*, which means that this situation is never hidden from me, it is never round me as an alien necessity, and I am never in effect enclosed in it like an object in a box. My freedom, the fundamental power which I enjoy of being the subject of all my experiences, is not distinct from my insertion into the world. It is a fate for me to be free, to be unable to reduce myself to anything that I experience, to maintain in relation to any factual situation a faculty of withdrawal, and this fate was sealed the moment my transcendental field was thrown open, when I was born as vision and knowledge, when I was thrown into the world. (PhP, 360)

Consciousness is not reducible to the sensible body, and as such, obliges the subject to an anonymous other (one's carnality) as the source of its givenness. Flesh is the anonymous source of that which appears as universal, mutual knowledge to the world of consciousness. As given to myself, I am also free to lend myself to, to borrow (or withdraw) myself from others in the world.

The inconceivable fund of massive flesh which is always already given in reflection, is given to consciousness, not as a thing but as a gift. As an anonymous self which is innate but irreducible to myself, it has an origin which is prior to the present, and as such, cannot be represented.⁷⁹ There is a problem concerning Merleau-Ponty's depiction of the body as prediscursively given. As gift, the carnal body defies apprehension as an object of knowledge. It is not possible to establish the facticity of the body which is given as a gift. This is a problem because without facticity the prediscursive body cannot legitimate a universal ontology. That I am given to myself is not something which can be so simply claimed. As Derrida states: "For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that is not be perceived or received as gift."⁸⁰ The gift, which both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty, in his later work recognize, is the problem of prediscursive identity. Merleau-Ponty elaborates the carnal body as a prediscursive structure in the reversibility of touch. Touch for Merleau-Ponty is the sense in which the body authorizes itself, is given to itself

⁷⁹ See Taylor, *Altarity*, pp. 79-81.

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Given Time: The Time of the King," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 18 (Winter 1992), p. 173.

presymbolically. However, as I will discuss, Merleau-Ponty assumes the facticity of the body which is given to itself in the double touch.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh as an underlying principle which governs sociability is reliant on a form of exchange borrowed from Marcel Mauss's theorizing of the gift as the foundation of social exchange.⁸¹ In Mauss's theory, the gift is the condition of economic exchange, where equality of identity is assumed. The gift underlies the artifice of this equivalence by constituting the social identity of individuals in relation to one another. Prestige is bestowed on the recipient, together with a moral obligation to maintain a social bond which reflects the generosity and hence status of the giver. The gift has the structure of ritual sacrifice, or "potlatch." In being given, the gift strikes its bond by impelling the return to its origin. Mauss interprets this return in terms of the cyclical pressure of consumption, nourishment and satiation. In other words, the gift is the inauguration of a systematic incorporation. The power of the gift is derived from its remaining perpetually a part of the identity of the giver. The gift establishes a form of circulation imposed by the obligation to return to its origin, the place from which it is given. On Mauss's model, the gift is effectively returnable, acknowledged for example by men materially observing their obligation to their wives and to the families of the wives given to them as gifts.⁸²

Both Bataille and Derrida offer alternative interpretations of the gift, neither of which are in agreement with Mauss's emphasis on its returnable trajectory. Bataille transforms the potlatch into the embodiment of absolute loss, as a movement of exceedingly more excessive squandering. Far from establishing reciprocal relations, the gift defies any form of reasoned calculation. Gift-giving is a compelling ritual of giving oneself away that breaks up the economic circuit which serves the needs of consumption and satiation. Instead, the gift establishes the basis of human relations in an activity which, rather than safeguarding personal needs, strives for incalculable loss. Rather than being put to the purposes of protection from need, the accumulation of possessions in the game of potlatch puts the possessor forever at the mercy of a need for unlimited expenditure.

81 Merleau-Ponty describes and extends Mauss's insights concerning the creation of social equivalences in "From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss," *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology: Selected Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. John O'Neill (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 111-122.

82 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison ((London: Cohen & West Ltd, 1969).

The exchange of women as Mauss describes it, disguises this principle of gift as it is identified by Bataille. While the process of exchange establishes an order of need and satisfaction in the functioning of sexual relations, that order is foreign to the perverse and excessive investment in erotic expenditure. Far from serving need, the profligacy of eroticism takes sexuality to the brink of death. The gift as expression of incalculable loss reaches its culmination as the principle of human activity in a delirious celebration of annihilation in the religious festivities of ritual sacrifice.⁸³ On Bataille's account, the utility of being given to oneself becomes a wildly expendable delusion, which is also the mark of self-consciousness's own death. The gift is an eternal unknowable, but the significance of this is that nothing sensible can come of the gift. The gift is an opening, a "gaping" (which, coincidentally, is also "looking" with excessive abandon) which annihilates, not founds perception. The gift is the means to an exorbitant end, a dispersal without limit, without body, without need.

For Derrida, the gift refers to an apprehended imperative or credit accorded to the other which defies comprehension as an object of knowledge. On this point he and Merleau-Ponty appear to agree. In suspending the return of economic calculation in favour of the no-return, the gift suspends the circuit of exchange which guarantees reciprocity, symmetry and common measure. Derrida calls the gift the very figure of the impossible, the very element of invisibility. The gift has a unique relation to the visible; it presents itself insofar as it absents itself from the economy of being seen, or the common "first light" of day. The given in the gift is a withdrawal from the proper. The difficulty which Derrida's analysis throws up here is the naming of that withdrawal as anonymous being:

By the impossible, what ought one to have understood?

If we speak of it we will have to name something. Not to present the thing, here the impossible, but to try with its name, or with some name, to give an understanding of or to think this impossible thing, this impossible itself...it would not name what one thinks it names, to wit, the unity of a meaning that would be that of the gift.⁸⁴

⁸³ Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, pp. 116-129.

⁸⁴ Derrida, "Given Time: The Time of the King," *Critical Inquiry*, p. 169.

According to Derrida, in order for there to be gift, some "one" has to give some "thing" to some "one other." Giving would be meaningless without these terms. At the same time, there can be no recognition of this giving. Any recognition of gift would annul it by casting it in terms of return, or symbolic equivalence. To recognize or name the gift as gift would be to constitute it in the economy of exchange, thereby simultaneously establishing its facticity in terms of equivalence and annulling it as gift. Mauss's analysis of the gift is caught in the contradictory insistence that there is no gift without the bind of obligation, and yet unless the gift is free of contractual obligation, it is not a gift. The impossibility of gift is the impossibly dispersed structure of identity, which cannot be claimed without entering into reckoning and debt.

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, Merleau-Ponty assumes an exchangeability of subject and object when describing the self which is given to itself in the double touch. Derrida's criticism of Mauss's concept of gift as a form of exchange can be extended to Merleau-Ponty's assumption of the conditions for the establishment of such reciprocity. It is not possible to account for gift either in terms of or outside of exchange. According to Derrida, both donor and recipient of the gift are already given credit as such in Mauss's model, thereby pre-empting and destroying the possibility of the gift. Likewise, it can be argued, Merleau-Ponty pre-empts the conditions of gift, that is, he already credits the distinction between the body as subject and object of perception in the body which is given to itself in the double touch.

The possibility of gift would be, for Derrida, the possibility of a difference beyond oppositional equivalence. The giving of gift means the difference of ethics, or the inauguration of a relationship which takes nothing into account. It would be nothing but the inauguration of difference, and would have to come into being nondiscursively. Such difference would have to be incalculable and yet creditable, or, in other words, impossible but given in that which is present. The gift is Derrida's way of evoking the passage between difference which can and cannot be thought. However, the problem as Derrida puts it is that this gift is a gap in being or a being "without being (it)":⁸⁵

Perhaps there is nomination, language, thought, desire, or intention only there where there is movement still for thinking, desiring, naming that which gives itself neither to

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 183.

be known, experienced, nor lived – in the sense in which presence, existence, determination regulate the economy of knowing, experiencing and living.⁸⁶

While Merleau-Ponty interprets being without being as the pre-discursive "empirical pregnancy" of flesh, Derrida announces the challenge of the pre-discursive as the structure of gift. The origin of a given phenomenon becomes the "aporetic paralysis" of a giving whose forgetting by donor and recipient must be so radical that it never even engages in the structure of remembering (to which it could return as to a debt or sacrifice).⁸⁷

Derrida approaches this aporia by acknowledging the necessity of "rendering an account" of the possibility of this impossibility, that is of creating the space of the gift. Even more importantly, Derrida refers to the rendering of an account of the desire to render an account. This is the desire to place the gift within the resources and limits of the need to answer for a gift that cannot be remembered but cannot be ignored. In other words, the gift insists on the rendering of an account of the ways in which gift is annulled, even as it engages in and sets off the economy of reciprocity and exchange. While Derrida's reading of gift recasts the concept of the body as given in interrogative terms, it passes over another question which must be asked rather than settling on the question of gift. It is not an account of the gift which is called for, but an account of *who* desires to render such an elliptical account, to so mythologize and obscure the imperative of gift to the point where it becomes a mystical experience. Derrida's analysis locates the ambivalence of the gift between the demand for an economically renderable account, and the demand of a missing account. His concern is to divide the gift and thus disrupt the economic appropriation of its mythology. However, although Derrida's analysis makes space for it, the analysis falls short of considering the substantial determination of the account. That would be the rendering of the account in terms of the body produced within a system of equivalences and exchanges, or the body as lived.

If through Derrida's analysis of gift, Merleau-Ponty can be interrogated for assuming the givenness of self and other in the double touch, Derrida can be equally interrogated for his rendering of the pre-discursive as the desire for the given. Although he is scrupulous in contesting the possibility of gift's appropriation (which would be the

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 183.

prescription of difference), Derrida confines the concept of non-reciprocity to giving with no return, or the dispersion of identity (*différance*). In the last two sections, I will outline Irigaray's concept of an irreversible fluidity which is infinitely more passive and unaccountable than gift.

The basis of intersubjectivity is a mutual knowledge of belonging to the world as flesh. Merleau-Ponty extends the egological relation to the knowledge of an alter ego by the literal extension of the touching hands in the mutual touch of the handshake. The double touch, the language of perception, is the irreducible basis of self-knowledge and knowledge of others. Merleau-Ponty uses the double touch to convey the relation between self and other as dual elements of a singular intercorporeality. Paradoxically, the possibility of intersubjective relations rests on the opacity of reversibility. This opacity involves a two-fold implication; first, that I represent others as having experiences the same as I do (I imply their interiority in borrowing my ego from them), and second, that I myself am visible only from the outside (that is, I see myself only as a virtual image, as represented to an other me).

In the preceding chapter I have sketched out some of the ethical limitations of this schema. Pursuing the discussion in that direction, Levinas in particular draws a limit between knowledge and ethics at the point of the handshake. There is a fundamental difference between a sociality born of prior knowledge and the novelty of intercorporeality. Rather than being a means of replicating the presupposition of the sameness of experience, Levinas stresses that there is an element of the gift in the handshake:

...the unique other who precisely is other in relation to all and any generality, is bound to me socially. That person cannot be represented and given to knowledge in his or her uniqueness, because there is no science but that of generality...It is, in proximity, all the novelty of the social proximity to the other, who eluding possession, falls to my responsibility...⁸⁸

Levinas makes a distinction between the proximity of the other, whom I acknowledge as my responsibility, and the virtual image of the visible other, whose interiority is implied by me. Rather than a co-incidence of two elements in a mutual knowledge, the unique *différance* to

⁸⁸ Levinas, "Sensibility," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 66.

The Tangible Invisible

Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh attempts to account for the origin of intersubjective relations in the anonymous world of perceptual faith. The basis of intersubjectivity is a mutual knowledge of belonging to the world as flesh. Merleau-Ponty extends the egological relation to the knowledge of an alter ego by the literal extension of the touching hands in the mutual touch of the handshake. The double touch, the language of perception, is the irreducible basis of self-knowledge and knowledge of others. Merleau-Ponty uses the double touch to convey the relation between self and other as dual elements of a singular intercorporeality. Paradoxically, the possibility of intersubjective relations rests on the opacity of reversibility. This opacity involves a two-fold implication; first, that I represent others as having experiences the same as I do (I imply their interiority in borrowing my ego from them), and second, that I myself am visible only from the outside (that is, I see myself only as a virtual image, as represented to an other me).

In the preceding chapter I have sketched out some of the ethical limitations of this schema. Pursuing the discussion in that direction, Levinas in particular draws a limit between knowledge and ethics at the point of the handshake. There is a fundamental difference between a sociality born of prior knowledge and the novelty of intercorporeality. Rather than being a means of replicating the presupposition of the sameness of experience, Levinas stresses that there is an element of the gift in the handshake:

...the unique other who precisely is other in relation to all and any generality, is bound to me socially. That person cannot be represented and given to knowledge in his or her uniqueness, because there is no science but that of generality...It is, in proximity, all the novelty of the social; proximity to the other, who eluding possession, falls to my responsibility...⁸⁸

Levinas makes a distinction between the proximity of the other, whom I acknowledge as my responsibility, and the virtual image of the visible other, whose interiority is implied by me. Rather than a co-incidence of two elements in a mutual knowledge, the unique indifference to

⁹⁰ Lyliard, *Phenomenology*, p. 103.

⁹¹ "The Other," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 59.

⁸⁸ Levinas, "Sensibility," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 66.

calculated exchange tendered in the proximity of the handshake is annulled by its representation in the circuit of reciprocity.⁸⁹ The handshake signifies a gift which cannot be given with intention, it is the givenness of affection (the event of being affected, the transitivity of sensibility). The handshake is an unconditional giving over of oneself to the other. But this gift comes to pass without knowledge of it. It is an always already past, an inaugural affection. The handshake is merely the trace of this given, affection.

Levinas's criticism of Merleau-Ponty lies with his portrayal of intersubjectivity in terms of knowledge. He is in agreement with its basis in a preobjective, anonymous sociability. However, Levinas's account of sociality differs with the "common flux of intentionalities," as (I add) Lyotard describes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of an underlying originary sociability.⁹⁰ Levinas locates the problem in a common corporeality, which is implied self-reflexively by the hands of the same body. However, the handshake is between the hands of different bodies:

One may especially wonder, then, whether such a "relation," the ethical relation, is not imposed across a *radical separation* between the two hands, which precisely do not belong to the same body, nor to a hypothetical or only metaphorical intercorporeality.⁹¹

The handshake belongs to an ethical order of sociality, which is a radical separation expressed in the hand one shakes which is *not* one's own. Levinas calls this relationship the "non-in-difference" or strangeness of humans to one another.⁹² The consequences of Levinas's analysis of an ethical order of sociality includes a reconsideration of the mysteriousness of the enigma of the visual. Levinas rebukes Merleau-Ponty for misunderstanding or forgetting the extent of this mysteriousness in his too hasty faith in exchange. Against Merleau-Ponty, for whom perception is diacritically constituted, Levinas puts the origin of sensibility before history, before the order of representation. There is a fundamental disinterestedness or non-intentionality in the visual. The dispossession

⁸⁹ Levinas's comments do not contradict the fact that the handshake is an integral part of business and masculine social exchange in some cultures. He is referring to the conditions of possibility of handshake as a form of expression.

⁹⁰ Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, p. 103.

⁹¹ Levinas, "Intersubjectivity," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, p. 59.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

lurking within the universality of its investiture is not of the order of invisibility (non-presentability), but of appresentation (other in relation to representation):

Here is vision turning back, re-turning into non-vision, into the insinuation of a face, into vision's denial at the heart of vision, into that of which vision, already espousing a plastic form, is but forgetfulness and re-presentation.⁹³

Levinas transforms the visual into the sense par excellence of the supreme precariousness of investing in the circuit of a common sensibility; of its undoing in a unique other. This radical difference is not representable, but sustained only carnally. Sensibility is born of the trace of an originary sociality. Sensibility does not found sociality, it is secondary to an unaccountable sociality. Levinas identifies that at the same time as Merleau-Ponty discusses the genesis of the represented other for me, he presupposes the non-in-different constitution of intersubjectivity, that is, an intersubjectivity sustained by the affection of touch. In other words, before it is autoaffection (flesh representing itself as other to itself), the tangible is already the non-indifference to touch. I will take up Levinas's account of ethical subjectivity in *Part III*, but at this stage am noting that for Levinas, the tangible and the visible are sensibilities of entirely different orders of intersubjectivity.

While Levinas concentrates on the a-presentation of the tangible, Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty's account of the double touch can be summarized as a more radical adherence to the indeterminacy of flesh than Merleau-Ponty is able to consider. In deference to the prerequisite of visibility (objective existence) for the seer, Merleau-Ponty divides the indeterminacy of the tangible body between the realms of subject and object. Irigaray contests this division in an alternative account of the two hands touching:

Is it still "valid," if the *two hands* are *joined*? Which brings about something very particular in the relation feeling-felt. With no object or subject. With no passive or active, or even middle passive. A sort of fourth mode? Neither active, nor passive, nor middle passive. Always more passive than the passive. And nevertheless active. The hands joined, palms together, fingers outstretched, constitute a very particular

⁹³ Ibid., p. 66.

touching. A gesture often reserved for women (at least in the West) and which evokes, doubles, the *touching of the lips* silently applied upon one another. A touching more intimate than that of one hand taking hold of the other. A phenomenology of the passage between interior and exterior. A phenomenon that remains in the interior, does not appear in the light of day, speaks of itself only in gestures, remains always on the edge of speech, gathering the edges without sealing them. (SE, 161)

Against Merleau-Ponty's preoccupation with an agent for whom perception is a holding onto things as objectives and thus a means of maintaining oneself in the world,⁹⁴ Irigaray invokes an internally maintained indeterminate sensibility. As Lingis states of Merleau-Ponty's perceptually based ontology: "perception *has to* perceive things, coherent and consistent beings."⁹⁵ While one hand attempts to grasp the other in Merleau-Ponty's double touch, Irigaray's contiguous touching refers to a mode of sensibility which, in maintaining itself as sensible, parts company with things.

Irigaray's formulation of the tangible body evokes a touching which defies the implication of reversibility, or the perception of things:

Neither my hand nor the world is a "glove," nor can either be reduced to its clothing. Neither my hand nor the world is thus reversible. They are not pure actual phenomena, pure pellicles that are graspable one by the other, even empathetically. They have their roots, which are not reducible to the visible moment. (SE, 160)

What Irigaray finds extraordinary about Merleau-Ponty's account of flesh is that he actually chooses the touching of two lips as a figure to express the intimacy between the reversibility of seer and visible: "The body unites us directly with things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two lips..." (VI, 136)⁹⁶ On

⁹⁴ Alphonso Lingis "Imperatives," *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, ed. M. C. Dillon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 114.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁹⁶ In Alphonso Lingis's translation, *Face To Face With Levinas*, "levres" appears as "laps." In their translation of Irigaray's quotation from Merleau-Ponty's text Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill correct this to "lips," adding the comment that this typographical error "seems to mime what Irigaray calls the invisibility of the feminine." (See p. 166). It is also possible that Lingis meant "lapses," which while

Irigaray's reading, Merleau-Ponty's choice of the "two lips" is consistent with his general appropriation of the morphology of the tactile. The lips of which Merleau-Ponty speaks are divided between the sensible body and the idealized body of the seer. These lips do not however belong to the same sensible, which would be the case if they are a body's lips. (SE, 166) which Merleau-Ponty describes a body which can see but not touch itself. By way of contrast, Irigaray argues that "two lips" express a tangible intimacy which divides the invisible without reference to the visible. This is not a pro-vision-al partitioning of flesh, but an interiorly constituted dimension of a different order. Taking issue with Merleau-Ponty's undifferentiable feminized invisible, Irigaray refers to the intimately constituted indefinable join between the invisible of a body's tangible constitution and the sensible from which the body emerges. She calls this the phenomenology of the "tangible invisible." Refractory to the distinction between Merleau-Ponty's "massive" flesh and idealized flesh, the tangible invisible describes the singularity of a body as a subjectless, objectless difference in the flesh; a constitution that remaining in the interior, is never experienced as either an idea or a thing. The tangible invisible is the body as a positive reserve, a vitally constituted dimension, an indeterminate rather than a non-presentable interior.

The tangible invisible curtails Merleau-Ponty's intertwining of the visible and the tangible, in which the look, while not superposable, would be a variant of touch. First, Irigaray argues, the look cannot take up the tangible, because the tangible is not constituted in terms of the visible. Second, the visible is reliant on touch, but the reverse is not the case. Tactility is the primordial sense in which the body's interiority is constituted. Irigaray observes that consciousness is not possible without the sense of touch. I would add that this observation is also an ancient one. In his work on the psyche, "De Anima," Aristotle also called touch the most basis sense of animate being.⁹⁷ Before the intentionality of the "double touch," (which divides touch between sentient being and the touched object) the indeterminacy of the "hands that touch without taking hold – like the lips" (SE, 170) constitutes the body as threshold or passage, neither an interior or exterior world. Irigaray calls this intimate and imperceivable join of flesh the *mucous*, that is: "that most intimate

still justifying the translators' comment, would be closer to Irigaray's understanding of "lips."

⁹⁷ Aristotle, "De Anima," Book II 2, 413b, *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931).

interior of my flesh, neither the touch of the outside of the skin of my fingers nor the perception of the inside of these same fingers, but another threshold of the passage...between..." (SE, 170) The mucous is an interior which could not be more intimately me, yet which evades my mastery. Margaret Whitford gives an itemized explanation of the way in which Irigaray uses the concept of the mucous repeatedly in her work. First, the mucous is *interior*. Defining sexuality as interior precludes women's sex from being captured on flat mirror surfaces, at risk of being interpreted as reflecting them as a hole. Second, the mucous is accessible to touch more than sight. Third, the mucous is always partly open, beyond control or closure. It cannot be reduced to the *maternal-feminine* body and an attendant container-like sexuality. Fourth, the mucous indicates a body which is not easily incorporated into the male imaginary. The mucous is neither exclusive to one sex, nor a part-object separable from the body. It is neither subject nor object, solid nor fluid. It expands and changes, but not into a shape, or readily visualized form. Finally, Irigaray defines the mucous as the medium of the "two lips," a contiguity in which she articulates her controversial proposition of female sexuality and women's speech.⁹⁸

The mucous is an indeterminacy unopposable to any other, an interval of freedom and attraction which is refractory to concepts of containment and dissipation, penetration and recollection, visibility and form. To describe the indeterminacy of the mucous as unrepresentable would be to miss the point. The mucous is a continuation of the body beyond the threshold of flesh, and its erasing in an indistinguishable contiguity and porosity of interiority and skin.

Irigaray states: "I see only by the touch of light" (SE, 165), which is a beginning which cannot be grasped. The reversibility of the visible is not possible except through the latency of the tactile, which makes passage between the seer and the visible possible. As discussed in Chapter Two, Merleau-Ponty refers to the "lighting" which supports the gaze. Lighting is the world of light which is inhabited from the inside: "lighting is neither colour nor, in itself, even light, it is anterior to the distinction between colours and luminosities." (PhP, 311) This is light which, before it is accountable to the language of the look of the seer, conducts me (without knowledge) to my dwelling in the landscape of my interiority. I add that it should not be read that this interiority exists outside of culture.

⁹⁸ Margaret Whitford, "Irigaray's Body Symbolic," *Hypatia* Vol. 6 No. 3 (Fall 1991), pp. 102-103.

To the contrary, it is my substantial, inescapable, and constantly vulnerable place within it.

My eyes, no less than the lighting of my gaze, are situated in what Irigaray refers to as this "living crypt of my body." (SE, 165) The double touching without grasping refers also to vision:

...it can also be performed with the gaze: the eyes meet in a sort of silence of vision, a screen of resting before and after seeing, a reserve for new landscapes, new lights, a punctuation in which the eyes reconstitute for themselves the frame, the screen, the horizon of a vision. (SE, 161)

Irigaray's point can also be extended to include the blink as part of the tangible invisible. The blink of an eye is an involuntary action upon which vision depends. Merleau-Ponty refers to the blink as a primordial divergence in the persistence of perception, which opens up the field of perception. He refers to a torsion in the light corresponding to the reversibility of the seer and the visible. In other words, Merleau-Ponty associates the blink with the eye's intentional grasp: "with each movement of my eyes that sweep the space before me the things suffer a brief torsion, which I also ascribe to myself..." (VI, 7)⁹⁹ However, the necessity of the blink for vision is bound to the necessity of touch to vision. The blink is a touching of two lids, maintaining the eye as mucous tissue, as a latency which while not of the visible, perpetuates vision. The interruption of vision in the blink is not a torsion in the relation between seer and things. It is the flesh of which the eye is formed, but cannot see.

What Irigaray finds valuable in Merleau-Ponty's account of vision is the extent to which it incorporates the tactile, even without being aware of the significance of the inclusion:

⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils," trans. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics* Vol. 13. No 3 (Fall 1983), p. 19, discusses the blink as an instant for reflection as "the chance for turning back on the very conditions of reflection, in all senses of that word, as if with the help of a new optical device one could finally see sight..." For Derrida's deconstruction of the indivisibility of this instant see "Signs and the Blink of an Eye," *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, pp. 60-69. Derrida also discusses the "aperspective" of the retina in Merleau-Ponty's account of vision as an analogical index of vision itself, that is: "of that which, seeing itself see, is nevertheless not reflected, cannot be "thought" in the specular or speculative mode – and thus is blinded because of this, blinded at this point of "narcissism," at that very point where it sees itself looking." *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 53.

His analysis of vision becomes even more detailed, more beautiful, as it accords him the privilege over the other senses, as it takes back a great deal of the phenomenology of the tactile. (SE, 175)

While critical of Merleau-Ponty's subordination of the tactile to the economy of the visual, Irigaray argues that it is precisely because he incorporates the tactile into the visual that Merleau-Ponty is able to privilege the visual. Irigaray reads "The Intertwining – The Chiasm" as an intricate exercise in substitution. The contacts between the threads of the visual are replaced by the labyrinthine reversibility of the chiasm. Disavowing this exercise, Merleau-Ponty claims that the specular and the carnal belong to both the same and to different orders. The question which Irigaray asks instead is: "How do they articulate with each other, exclude each other?" (SE, 169)

Irigaray identifies the most graphic example of Merleau-Ponty's reliance on the tactile in his discussion of colour. In general, because of its relational rather than fixed qualities, colour has been assigned a supplementary role in the history of photology.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, Merleau-Ponty takes up colour as the very thing that "imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence..." (VI, 131) Colour is a constancy modulated within a constellation of differences, confronting me with a lability in the expression of the visible:

...a naked color, and in general a visible, is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to vision which would be only total or null, but is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the coloured or visible world resound at the distances, a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world – less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things, and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility. (VI, 132)

According to Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty's willingness to be seduced by colour is born of its resuscitation of the grounds of his existence prior to anything of which he can distinguish himself as a part. Colour is the reminder of

¹⁰⁰ For an outline of this history see Fóti, "The Dimension of Color," *International Studies in Philosophy*.

his immersion as medium. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray is unprepared to idealize this medium. For Irigaray, the medium is invisible but tangible insofar as it is that which "far from being able to yield to my decisions, obliges me to see." (SE, 156) Colour constitutes a given, not in any subjective sense, but in the (unaccountable) undertaking to see. "Red, color is more in the mode of *participation* than of the solitary emergence of the concept." (SE, 158) This affective participation is an interval in rather than an affect given in perception. Before perception, affection is an undertaking of sensibility to which I have never agreed.

Despite Merleau-Ponty's preliminary sensitivity to the interval of the tangible in the visible, or the "difference between things and colors" (VI, 132), Irigaray notes that he moves from an appreciation of the lacy of the medium to its description as an organizing medium or pre-existent thing. As reversible flesh, the medium becomes a place of emergence or "pre-possession," which supports the division of subject and things. The medium is simply neutral ground that makes possible the alternation between subject and object, visible and tangible. First, this formulation renders the tangible in terms of the visible, that is, as a touching subject and an object being touched. Then Merleau-Ponty reverses the formulation, turning the look into a variant of touch: "Indefinitely, he has exchanged seer and visible, touching and tangible, "subject" and "things" in an alternation, a fluctuation that would take place in a milieu that makes possible their passage from one or the other "side." (SE, 159) The result is a privileging of vision (the language of the look of the seer) and a forgetting that the visual is grounded in the indeterminacy of touch.

establishes the seer in the visible. The indeterminacy of light is the "lighting" of my gaze, or the medium in which the look refers to itself. The visibility of the seer is born of this carnal light, which forms a tissue with that which it signifies, enveloping the seer in a world which, for all its ambiguity between the seer and the visible, is a closed system of meaning. Irigaray argues that "If my words have any meaning, it is because they touch the other from the starting point of my perception, and having touched me and touching the other, they organize a possible dwelling for these perceptions." (SE, 172) Irigaray conceives of a mutual dwelling of the sensible within between language rather than an incorporation of the sensible in a language of self-enfolding.

¹⁰¹ For a discussion of the similarity between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger on the *Logos* as an "obscure region whence comes instituted light" see Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 75.

An Interval of Light

As discussed in Chapter Two, Merleau-Ponty characterizes the sensible as a reserve of a common understanding. Irigaray takes up and reconsiders this starting point of Merleau-Ponty's account of the language of perception, which is described by him as the "mystery, as familiar as it is unexplained, of a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity." (VI, 130, quoted in SE, 151) Irigaray, however, takes issue with the elision of the mystery of light and the language of light. Instead, her analysis concentrates on the indeterminacy of a light that remains in obscurity, not because of its non-presentability, but because it does not participate in the visibility of the seer.

For Merleau-Ponty, language is directed towards something which escapes its determination. As logos, light represents the obscurity of its own appearance, not as a transcendent ideality, but as inextricable from the nonrepresentability of its carnal constitution:

...if my words have a meaning, it is not *because* they present the systematic organization the linguist will disclose, it is because that organization, like the look, refers back to itself: the operative Word is the obscure region whence comes the instituted light, as the muted reflection of the body upon itself is what we call natural light. (VI, 154, quoted in SE, 172)¹⁰¹

Merleau-Ponty argues that the indeterminacy of light is the reserve that establishes the seer in the visible. The indeterminacy of light is the "lighting" of my gaze, or the medium in which the look refers to itself. The visibility of the seer is born of this carnal light, which forms a tissue with that which it signifies, enveloping the seer in a world which, for all its ambiguity between the seer and the visible, is a closed system of meaning. Irigaray argues that "If my words have any meaning, it is because they touch the other from the starting point of my perception, and having touched me and touching the other, they organize a possible dwelling for these perceptions." (SE, 172) Irigaray conceives of a mutual dwelling of the sensible within/between language rather than an incorporation of the sensible in a language of self-enfolding.

¹⁰¹ For a discussion of the similarity between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger on the Logos as "obscure region whence comes instituted light" see Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 75.

Irigaray interprets the solipsism of this self-enfolding as an attempt to recreate an intimacy with the sensible world which has never existed. She argues that the association between the intimacy of the visible and a nostalgic view of intra-uterine life in Merleau-Ponty's first description of flesh is striking:

The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible. (VI, 130-131)

Irigaray's objection is not to Merleau-Ponty's allusion to intra-uterine life, but rather, to its representation. It is significant that at the same time as flesh is described in terms of an indeterminate fluidity, it is associated with the risk of disappearance of the seer and the visible, indicative of a polarity which needs to be sustained in his account of flesh (SE, 152).

For Merleau-Ponty, the visible is a totality which is organized around the reversibility of the look of the seer. There is a "fundamental narcissism of all vision" (VI, 139) which involves first, a being seen from without: "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen." (VI, 139) While representing the visible in terms of a maternal fluidity, Merleau-Ponty incorporates the intra-uterine into the economy of visibility. Irigaray notes two invisibles operating here. First there is the inability to be seen, which corresponds to the disappearance of the seer. Second there is the darkness corresponding to the visible of maternal vision, which counts for nothing since it does not incorporate the seer:

...he uses "images" of the sea and the strand. Of immersion and emergence? And he speaks of the risk of the disappearance of the seer and the visible. Which corresponds doubly to a reality in intra-uterine nesting: one who is still in this night does not see and remains without a visible (as far as we know); but the other seer cannot see him. The other does not see him, he is not visible for the other, who nevertheless sees the world, but without him. And if everything, the totality, is organized around him, then the

other, one could almost say, sees nothing? A disorganized world? If the mother, or the woman, only sees the world from the perspective of the maternal function, she sees nothing. (VI, 152)

Irigaray's point is that Merleau-Ponty represents fluidity in terms of the visible, which has the consequence of appropriating the tangible invisible, and casting it in terms of what Irigaray calls a "look forever organized, or disorganized, around the impossibility of seeing." (SE, 153).

Against this depiction, Irigaray insists that the fluidity of the tangible invisible is not a loss of vision, but a difference which cannot be incorporated in the reversibility of the visual:

...the tangible is, and remains primary in its opening. Its touching on, of, and by means of the other. The dereliction of its ever touching this first touching... (SE, 162)

Merleau-Ponty figures this dereliction as a nostalgia for an irretrievable prenatal vision. Irigaray argues that what is irretrievable in vision is neither lost to vision nor lost to touch. What is given in touch is an immediate affection, which rather than being unrepresentable, obliges us to see:

The look cannot take up the tangible. What is at play in the caress does not see itself. The in-between, the middle, the *medium* of the caress does not see itself. In the same way and differently, I do not see that which allows me to see, that which touches me with light and air so that I see some "thing." (SE, 161-162)

For Irigaray, seeing "things" is conditional on their constitution within a medium. There is always a provisional quality in the constitution of the visible, but in terms of a fluid mobility, not in terms of the pro-visual reversal of a body that sees "only because it is a part of the visible in which it opens forth." (VI, 153-154)

Irigaray questions Merleau-Ponty's description of the inhabitation of flesh. In her reading of "The Intertwining – The Chiasm" this inhabitation is achieved by recreating an imaginary solipsistic "intra-uterine" universe whose carnality is determined by his own incorporation in it:

Enveloping things with his look, the seer would give birth to them, and/yet the mystery of his own birth would subsist, in them. For now they contain this mystery of the prenatal night where he was palpated without seeing. A passive forever lacking an active. More passive than any passivity taken in a passive-active couple. A passivity that tries to turn itself into activity by sculpting, moving the totality of the world into a reversion of the intra-uterine abode. (SE, 154)

The illusion of a closed world comes from the institution of a solipsistic fantasy in the place of a maternity which is a mystery without him. Instead of leaving an opening for the fundamental sensitivity of sight to touch, Merleau-Ponty closes the circuit of this mystery, using the fantasy of an invisible other that forseees me to "turn the world back on itself and return to myself after having passed to the other side." (SE, 183) Weaving back and forth, the world becomes a texture in which the subject sees everything, both from inside and from inside-out.

The reversibility of the chiasm perpetuates the fantasy of an incestuous prenatal situation with the whole. This fantasy doesn't acknowledge the cutting of the cord, is not interrupted by an irreversible, non-incorporable other:

Between these two extremes [the totality of the world and the intra-uterine abode], *there is* a breach: the place of the other. The seer tries to put back together the most passive and the most active, to overcome the invisible of/in the other in so far as it would constitute a night that his look needed to reduce in order to organize his field of vision. He tries to establish a *continuum*, a duration, between the most passive and the most active. But he cannot manage it. Especially without memory of that first event where he is enveloped-touched by a tangible invisible of which his eyes are also formed, but which he will never see... (SE, 154)

In the elision of the carnal and the maternal, maternal difference becomes a mystery. The carnality of the maternal is absorbed within the circuit of the one ontological tissue which gives birth to itself. Merleau-Ponty's elision can be contrasted to Derrida's reference to the ontological priority of the maternal, alive without end, encrypted, forever/never there: "The calculus of the mother—that I am (following): Ah! if my mother could

¹⁰⁷ Derrida, *Glas*, p. 117.

assist me at my interment."¹⁰² Even in attributing his birth to woman, the son cannot acknowledge her. In remembering her she stands apart from him, as irreducible to an object of his own memory. He has no memory of his mother. The memory is his introjection. The maternal keeps open the question of sexual difference in terms of an other of whom the son has no memory but through whom he addresses himself: "I call my mother in myself, recall myself to my mother."¹⁰³

Irigaray's analysis discloses an interval of the tangible invisible in the constitution of carnal light. Merleau-Ponty renders that interval in terms of darkness, from which issues a light with a mystery of its own: "a light which illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity." Irigaray reformulates that darkness in terms of blindness, as far as flesh is concerned. Furthermore, if the sexed body is part of the visible in which it opens forth, then differently sexed bodies must be blind to each other. The non-substitutibility of bodies, or "That-in-which-their differences-consist" (SE, 167) is experienced in the divergence of touch, but this divergence cannot be recovered in the reversal between seer and visible. Nothing equivalent fulfills/takes the place of the invisibility of touch.

The association of the indeterminacy of the medium with the visibility of the seer by Merleau-Ponty is the issue which Irigaray addresses in the interval of carnal light. The longing which Merleau-Ponty projects into the desired prediscursive interworld is for a medium in which the seer can imagine being seen. His obscure light is a medium with eyes that watch from the depths of the night. For Irigaray the indeterminate no-return of the interval is represented not in terms of darkness but in the touch of light. The tangible invisible is a non-reflexive transcendence of flesh in/between flesh, a resistance without resistance, a difference in the flesh. It is the body as passage; neither subject nor object, but a pure passivity, a medium perpetually open to the touch of light.

¹⁰² Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 117. For a discussion of Derrida's argument that the structure of maternity disrupts Reason's claim to self-sufficiency see Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, p. 209. For an interpretation of Derrida's account of maternal disruption of phallic law see Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 88-92.

¹⁰³ Derrida, *Glas*, p. 117.

PART III

PERVERSE LIGHT

PART III

PERVERSE LIGHT

(Levinas and Irigaray)

When Orpheus descends into the underworld, he is the power that causes the night to welcome him. In the power of art, the night welcomes him. In the power of desire, the night welcomes him. In the power of intimacy, the night welcomes him. In the power of the first night. But Orpheus has gone down to Eurydice for him. Eurydice is the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead. She is the instant in which the essence of the night approaches as the other night.

Yet Orpheus' work does not consist of securing the approach of this "point" by descending into the depths. His work is to bring it back into daylight and in the daylight give it form, figure and reality. Orpheus can do anything except look this "point" in the face, look at the centre of the night in the night. He can descend into it, he can draw it to him – an even stronger power – and he can draw it upwards, but only by keeping his back turned to it. This turning away is the only way he can approach it: this is the meaning of the concealment revealed in the night.¹



Introductory Comments

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, which prioritizes ethics ahead of all other philosophical thought, is a sustained counter-argument to the primacy of self. Within his theorization of subjectivity, Levinas insists on the transcendence of otherness, which is not definable in terms of identity. Levinas makes his challenge to the philosophical privileging of self within the context of the centrality of metaphors of light and vision in the history of Western philosophy. Despite this, it would be a mistake to describe Levinas's project as an anti-visual one. Levinas

1. Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and other literary essays*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. 98.

PERVERSE LIGHT

When Orpheus descends to Eurydice, art is the power that causes the night to open. Because of the power of art, the night welcomes him; it becomes the welcoming intimacy, the understanding and the harmony of the first night. But Orpheus has gone down to Eurydice: for him Eurydice is the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead. She is the instant in which the essence of the night approaches as the *other* night.

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makes a critical distinction between phenomenologically based experience, for which vision remains his paradigm, and an ethical respons(e)ibility. As was mentioned in Chapter Three, Levinas criticizes Merleau-Ponty for misunderstanding the extent of the mysteriousness of the invisible. According to Levinas, Merleau-Ponty's adherence to the intentionality of sensibility indicates a disregard for the full significance of the sense of dispossession lurking within the visible.

Rather than being anti-visual, Levinas's regard for the visual is charged with the intensity of being enthralled by its goodness, and is better described as an obsession with his dread of the night. Philosophical method, as Levinas is aware, is meant to be "a walk beneath the noon-day sun,"² but he is equally preoccupied with reconsidering the limits of the notion of illumination. Maurice Blanchot might as well have been describing the project of his philosopher friend in relation to the history of Western philosophy when he says of Orpheus: "...the whole power of his art and even the desire for a happy life in the beautiful light of day are sacrificed to this one concern; to look into the night at what the night is concealing – the *other* night, concealment which becomes visible."³ Blanchot's allegorical account of the gaze of Orpheus lends itself as a clue to Levinas's prevarication on the central metaphor of Western thought – in both his turning from and his desire to make visible the invisible of light.

As is the case with Merleau-Ponty, much of Levinas's work is an engagement with and response to the phenomenological systems of Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas's work is a confrontation with the ideal existence of consciousness in Husserl's phenomenology. Similarly, Levinas's work is a critical engagement with the ideal existence of Being in Heidegger's phenomenology. However, I will not be discussing Levinas's work in direct relation to either of these two philosophers, which would be a major philosophical project in itself.⁴ The orientation

2 Emmanuel Levinas, "Questions et reponses," *Le Nouveau Commerce* Vol. 36-37 (Spring 1977), p. 75, quoted in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 73.

3 Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, p. 100.

4 As well as Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 79-153, Levinas's associations with Husserl and Heidegger are also discussed extensively by Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974). Adriaan Peperzak has also undertaken such a task in his introductory commentary, *Levinas, To the Other – An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993).

of my discussion will be towards the elaboration of those aspects of Levinas's ethics which have been developed in the work of Luce Irigaray.

If Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can be characterized as a philosophy of ambiguity, Levinas's philosophy can be characterized as a philosophy of anarchy, or more specifically, an-arche. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the fundamental indeterminacy of self and other in the appearance of phenomena. Levinas argues that there is a radically different other whose existence is incommensurable with the existence of phenomena. He characterizes this other as "otherwise than being," meaning an other about and without whom I can do nothing, that is, an other who exceeds the totality of my own existence. This otherness is a difference which persists without the weight or force of any formal structure. It commands presence without the mediation of language or law, but immediately, as my responsibility.

In Merleau-Ponty's account of ontology, the phenomenon of radical difference, or alterity, is explained in terms of temporalization, in the lived reality of the self grasping itself in its difference. In Levinas's account of alterity, the transcendence of the other is theorized as a heteronomy which never enters into the temporality of presence. The alterity of the other is an an-archival space in time – an opening always already past. Derrida describes Levinas's philosophy as an attempt to locate radical heteronomy – as the desire for a thought of original difference.⁵ In his early writings Levinas uses the term "alterity" to express this heteronomy. In *Totality and Infinity* he uses "exteriority" (this book is subtitled "An Essay on Exteriority"). In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*⁶ and in his most recent work he uses "Other" (*l'autrui*, the personal Other, or you), reflecting his turn to language rather than the face for the expression of heteronomy.⁷

The absolute past of an-arche is referred to by Levinas as the trace, a concept which although fundamental to Levinas's philosophy is certainly not unique. Derrida acknowledges his debt to Levinas, as well as his distance from him, in their differing conceptualization of the trace.⁸

5 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 90.

6 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (OBBE).

7 I have borrowed this mapping of the term for originary heteronomy from Edith Wyschogrod, "Doing Before Hearing," *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. François Laruelle (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980), pp. 179-203.

8 See in particular, Jacques Derrida, "At this Very Moment in this Work Here I Am," *Re-Reading Levinas*, pp. 11-48.

Irene E. Harvey gives a comparative analysis of the trace as it circulates within the work of Husserl and Freud, as well as Derrida and Levinas. In Husserl, the trace is related to an originary temporalization which constitutes the "Now," or condition of possibility of perception. In Freud it is related to the written trace, or structure of the mystic writing pad. In Derrida, the trace is theorized as *différance*.⁹ Levinas employs the trace to insist on an infinity which always exceeds the possibility of appropriation within consciousness. Although this infinity never enters into presence, it alters consciousness. The nonrecuperability of the trace changes consciousness so that it never remains the same.

Joseph Libertson identifies many parallels between Levinas's work and that of two of his contemporaries, Bataille and Blanchot. Like both these writers, Levinas's interest in subjectivity and its situation within being centres on differentiation rather than illumination. Differentiation, unlike illumination, is not dependent on distance, but on dispossession. In every instance of consciousness which Levinas considers, be it the subjectivity of sensation in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* or the subjectivity of *jouissance* in *Totality and Infinity*, each is an interiority within a totality which is refractory to manifestation.¹⁰ Rather than consciousness, the foundation of totality is theorized as an alterity which is irreducible to it.

Despite having been acknowledged as an important influence by a number of intellectuals ranging from Lyotard, Derrida, Klossowski, Blanchot, Bataille, Foucault and Deleuze, Levinas is not a philosopher who is widely known outside of France. Also, apart from Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of Levinas's account of sexual relations as a self-interested objectification of women,¹¹ and some mention by Kristeva and Cixous, Levinas's work has not figured widely in feminist scholarship. However, his concept of radical heteronomy has significantly influenced Luce Irigaray in her formulation of an ethics of sexual difference.¹² Although similarly to de Beauvoir, Irigaray is critical of Levinas for his self-centred preconception of feminine sexuality, her interpretation of his

9 Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 163-181.

10 Joseph Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), p. 32.

11 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 16n.

12 For an account of Irigaray's debt to Levinas in her formulation of a sexual ethics see Elizabeth Grosz, "Luce Irigaray and the Ethics of Alterity," *Sexual Subversions* (Sydney and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1989), pp. 140-183.

ethics is more attentive to the contradictions which beset his attempt to separate sexual difference from his account of ethical difference. As will be discussed in the following chapters, Irigaray's careful reading of Levinas's idiosyncratic conceptualization of alterity is turned to a reconsideration of sexual difference and the relationship of the feminine to light.

For Levinas, existence in the world is defined in the relation of light. Light is the sensuous element within which consciousness exists and sustains itself, and makes itself at home. Light is "our possession," or the condition of the apprehensibility of sensibility. Levinas's analysis of the subject of light is based in part on Husserl's account of the intentional structure of consciousness.¹³ This intentionality is preserved in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal account of light as "lighting," or the assumed intermediary of the unfolding and enfolding of the sensible world. As mentioned in *Part II*, for Merleau-Ponty the experience of light, as with all sensibility, comes into being "within the framework of a certain setting in relation to the world which is the definition of my body," (PhP, 303)

Levinas regards the phenomenologically given world as a self-defined totality. As Derrida describes this apparent totality: "[e]verything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself."¹⁴ The lucidity of things and ideas is primarily the egotism of finding oneself in the light. For Levinas, any emanation of light, from either the sensible or the intelligible (Platonic) sun, betrays the desire to take hold of something or appropriate something for oneself which lies at the origin of phenomenological sense. As intentionality, sensibility has a possessive structure which is determined by the graspability of things. Light is the medium which sustains and bridges the difference between a subject of perception and perceivable things: "Light makes objects into a world, that is, makes them belong to us."¹⁵

Levinas theorizes light as the emergence of a separate existence through a polarization in which the self appears present to itself. Light is a form of violence, an appropriation of existence through realization, or the law of the Same. The egotism of intentionality is based on the

¹³ See Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, for an outline of Levinas's assessment of and break with Husserl's ontology.

¹⁴ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 92.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), p. 48. Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (EE).

SCINTILLATING LIGHTING

The Sensuousness of Light

For Levinas, existence in the world is defined as the sphere of light. Light is the sensuous element within which consciousness finds and sustains itself, and makes itself at home. Light is "first experience," or the condition of the apprehensibility of sensibility. Levinas's analysis of the subject of light is based in part on Husserl's account of the intentional structure of consciousness.¹³ This intentionality is preserved in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal account of light as "lighting," or the assumed intermediary of the unfolding and enfolding of the sensible world. As mentioned in *Part II*, for Merleau-Ponty the experience of light, as with all sensibility, comes into being "within the framework of a certain setting in relation to the world which is the definition of my body." (PhP, 303)

Levinas regards the phenomenologically given world as a self-defined totality. As Derrida describes this apparent totality: "[e]verything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself."¹⁴ The lucidity of things and ideas is primarily the egoism of finding oneself in the light. For Levinas, any emanation of light, from either the sensible or the intelligible (Platonic) sun, belies the desire to take hold of something or appropriate something for oneself which lies at the origin of phenomenological sense. As intentionality, sensibility has a possessive structure which is determined by the graspability of things. Light is the medium which sustains and bridges the difference between a subject of perception and perceivable things: "Light makes objects into a world, that is, makes them belong to us."¹⁵

Levinas theorizes light as the emergence of a separate existence through a polarization in which the self appears present to itself. Light is a form of violence, an appropriation of existence through totalization, or the law of the Same. The egoism of intentionality is based on the

¹³ See Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, for an outline of Levinas's assessment of and break with Husserl's ontology.

¹⁴ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 92.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), p. 48. Referred to hereafter by the abbreviation (EE).

establishment of a sense of interiority at the centre of a panoramic objective world. The reflexivity of "lighting" is a dual projection and enveloping of the world, which engenders the subject's interiority. The graspability of phenomena is conditioned by the interiorization of light. Likewise, intellectual apprehension is sense, understood in terms of the luminosity of light relative to the mind which desires clarity for itself:

Light makes possible...this enveloping of the exterior by the inward, which is the very structure of the cogito and of sense. Thought is always clarity or the dawning of a light. The miracle of light is the essence of thought: due to the light an object, while coming from without, is already ours in the horizon which precedes it; it comes from an exterior already apprehended and comes into being as though it came from us, as though commanded by our freedom. (EE, 48)

Light is the chiasmic coincidence of exteriority and interiority in the moment of illumination. The exteriority of things is circumscribed by the being that embraces them. This ego distinguishes itself from its object as a light source always held in reserve. On the other hand, the exteriority of things is underlined by a givenness that, as with Platonic anamnesis (knowledge as recollection), awaits our apprehension.

Equally, the subject which comes into being in this totality is possessed by the light. Levinas distinguishes between the transcendental ego and the ego of sensuous enjoyment. Enjoyment is the ego at home with itself in the world, in-corporated with the sensible in a way which deformalizes any notion of an intentionally defined separation of the subject in the world (TI, 115). The light which fills and maintains the interval of separation is also the medium of our substantial immersion in life. Sensuousness is a receptivity to existence at the level of its elemental materiality. Levinas finds this form of egoism in the structure of enjoyment, or an experience of self based on its dependence on the material world:

Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents make up the worth [prix] of my life. (TI, 112)

The affectivity of our bodies begins with their elemental participation in light, air, and water as qualitative media. As a quality, a medium is not determinable as information, recollectable data or unifiable multiplicity.¹⁶ As a sensuous element, light is a medium in which we are able to enjoy ourselves. In defining the indeterminacy of the medium as the condition of enjoyment, instead of the chiasm of meaning, Levinas adheres more closely than Merleau-Ponty to Irigaray's understanding of the interval of light. Rather than a means of conveyance, the medium sustains the sensuousness of sensation, experienced as the enjoyment of life.

For Levinas, enjoyment is the pleasure derived from the satisfaction of needs. The paradigm of this form of egoism is alimentation. The activity of nourishing oneself by incorporating or assimilating the non-self into the same as one's self is the accomplishment of enjoyment: "We live from "good soup," air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc..." (TI, 110) Humanity thrives on need. Its self-interestedness binds human beings into economic communities, within whose structures individuals relate to one another in order, ideally, to satisfy their mutual needs. "Living on" is neither a state of freedom (because it is a dependent freedom), nor a dependence (because it is enlivened by its own necessity). It is a form of identity which is constituted as the same as, rather than dependent on or in opposition to the non-self.

Levinas disagrees with the Platonic denunciation of the illusory nature of the satisfaction that can be generated by need (TI, 116). The lack which satisfaction makes good for Plato is a negative notion of need. Instead, Levinas describes a self-sufficient ego which withdraws into itself in the state of enjoyment. Enjoyment is an autoaffective structure, not a state mediated by an ideal self. It is an internalizing movement which Levinas describes as a "coiling" into a self (TI, 118). There is no assumption of existence in the singular sameness of this mortal coil: "[f]or the I to be means neither to oppose nor to represent something for itself, nor to use something, nor to aspire to something, but to enjoy something." (TI, 120) Being at home with itself is an immediacy of existence which comes from its assimilation of the other on the basis of need. The pleasures and pains of enjoyment and need are uniquely

17 Martin Jay, *Disorganised Eyes*, p. 556, compares how Levinas characterizes of the gaze as "a form of desire, a form of avidity." This is a useful historical analysis of

16 See Alphonso Lingis, "The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," *Face to Face With Levinas*, pp. 222-223.

engendered in the solitary self. This is a state of existence whose autonomy does not lie in its assumption of being, but in the enjoyment of its capacity for enjoyment (a plenitude which does not exceed itself). The narcissism which springs from need is corporeality savouring the agreeableness (agreement to assimilation) of its own substantiality.

Based on this autoaffective mechanism, Levinas argues that sensuousness is of the order of enjoyment rather than the order of experience (TI, 137). Experience is "experience of" something, and as such is representational. According to Levinas, representation consists in the possibility of accounting for something as though it was an idea, or product of thought. All phenomenal experience is representational. Experience is the reduction of the multiplicity of objects to the unity of thought. Sensuousness is the coexistence of a body and a world. Levinas associates the subject of experience and thought with sound, or a hearkening to oneself, rather than to the chiasmic coincidence of exteriority and interiority in the sensuousness of light (TI, 128).

Unlike experience, sensuousness is an unreflective undertaking, and is unrelated to thought. Sensuousness has no object in mind. Its aim and end is to gratify need, which is satisfiable without resort to the representation of a source:

One does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset. Objects *content* me in their finitude, without appearing to me on a ground of infinity. (TI, 135)

In embracing its dependency and thereby internalizing or becoming content, corporeality is a constant challenge to the assumption that the attribution of meaning is the preserve of consciousness. The formulation of meaning changes sense in the living body, for which sensibility is not an experience with an absent referent, but a condition: "I but open my eyes and already enjoy the spectacle." (TI, 130)¹⁷ In sensuous sensibility, things only take form within the medium in which they are constituted: "Every relation or possession is situated within the non-possessable which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped. We shall call it the elemental." (TI, 131) Like the surface of

17 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 556, comments that Levinas conceives of the gaze as coming into being as a pure avidity: "Going beyond Debord's historical analysis of the society of the spectacle, he insisted that vision itself was the root of the problem."

the sea, or the edge of the wind, they are indeterminate, elemental, formless, without beginning or end. Levinas finds this distinction implicit in Cartesian mind/body dualism, which acknowledges the uniqueness of sensibility in its refusal to give sense data the status of clear and distinct ideas (TI, 129-131). The unrepresentability of the source of enjoyment is of no concern to enjoyment. Need is its only grounds, and nourishment a "happy chance." (TI, 141)

The subject of light is a totality which is only *qualitatively* present in the indeterminate sameness of self and other in sensuous existence. It is not possible to experience totality objectively, as a something else. In Levinas's account of sensuous sensibility, the separateness of self is a totality inseparable from its medium. Levinas does not regard the separateness of sensibility as a separation or transcendence of one's own existence. Instead, as enjoyment, sensibility is an egoism which bespeaks a being which is limited by its sensuous totality. It is a participation in the elemental which is not yet (re)cognizable.

Confronted at the outset with a certain dilemma: "...it is difficult to maintain a philosophical discourse against light."¹⁸ To do away with the violence of light for the sake of ethics would be to abandon what to philosophy appears to be the natural means for counteracting the blindness of mysticism and the violence of history. It would also be to base ethics on the martyrdom of Reason.¹⁹

Levinas approaches the dilemma by playing on the double qualities of the Platonic sun, as that which both creates and destroys the relation between language and presence. This is a strategy which parallels Bataille's emphasis on the duplicity of solar forces.²⁰ As well as a source of illumination, Bataille emphasizes the destructive, burning, wastefulness of the sun. While Bataille develops a form of expression based on the concept of a rotten carnal sun devoid of light, Levinas turns from the sun in search of a nocturnal powerless source of light. Levinas begins his difficult task by reconsidering the limited freedom of the ego as a self-defined totality:

The I always has one foot caught in its own existence.

Outside in face of everything, it is outside of itself, tied to

¹⁸ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 85-86.

¹⁹ Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Possibility of Difference*, p. 227.

²⁰ Georges Bataille, "Eaten Sun," *Essays of Eroticism*, pp. 57-58. Edith Wyschogrod, "Derrida, Levinas, and Violence," *Derrida and Deconstruction, Continental Philosophy II*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 194-195, discusses the difference between the two philosophers in relation to this sun.

The Dead of the Night

In his early work, Levinas refers to the separateness of the ego of light in knowing and consciousness in terms of *hypostasis*, as an entity, a subject of the verb *to be*; the event by which the act expressed by a verb becomes a being designated by a substantive. However, Levinas wants to break with the ontological basis of this philosophical term, and the various shifts in his work trace his development of different strategies with which to address the problem. In the essays collected together in the 1947 work *Existence and Existents* Levinas explores the Platonic notion of an ideal beyond existence as a movement which leads to a sun beyond light. In Levinas's formulation of ethics, the challenge to hypostasis is not conceived of as a transcendence towards a superior being, but an *ex-cendence*, or departure from the light of being. Derrida's comment in response to Levinas's approach is that in attempting to philosophize without the violence of light Levinas is confronted at the outset with a certain dilemma: "...it is difficult to maintain a philosophical discourse against light."¹⁸ To do away with the violence of light for the sake of ethics would be to abandon what to philosophy appears to be the natural means for counteracting the blindness of mysticism and the violence of history. It would also be to base ethics on the martyrdom of Reason.¹⁹

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The *I* always has one foot caught in its own existence.

Outside in face of everything, it is inside of itself, tied to

¹⁸ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 85-86.

¹⁹ Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différence*, p. 227.

²⁰ Georges Bataille, "Rotten Sun," *Visions of Excess*, pp. 57-58. Edith Wyschogrod, "Derrida, Levinas, and Violence," *Derrida and Deconstruction, Continental Philosophy II*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 194-195, discusses the difference between the two philosophers in relation to this sun.

itself. It is forever bound to the existence which it has taken up. This impossibility for the ego to not be a self constitutes the underlying tragic element in the ego, the fact that it is riveted to its own being. (EE, 84)

As well as discussing the independence of the egoism of enjoyment, Levinas draws upon the significance of its adherence to the elemental. The pleasure derived in enjoyment also reveals that the materiality which determines the ego is also something which it is not:

...what is distinctive about the sovereignty of the I that vibrates in enjoyment is that it is steeped in a medium and consequently undergoes influences. The originality of influence lies in that [sic] the autonomous being of enjoyment can be discovered, in this very enjoyment to which it cleaves, to be determined by what it is not, but without enjoyment being broken up, without violence being produced. It appears as the product of the medium in which, however, it bathes, self-sufficient. Autochthony is at the same time an attribute of sovereignty and of submission; they are simultaneous. What has influence over life seeps into it like a sweet poison. (TI, 164)

The dependence of the ego on the elemental is as much an affliction as it is a source of enjoyment. In its elemental existence the ego is a pure substantive. In the endurance of this substance in pain, sensibility is reduced to matter. Pain demonstrates that the ego is not based on any assumptions about the substantiality of its existence, but that it exists, inescapably, substantially. To give an example of what Levinas means by the ego's substantiality: light is not merely something to be enjoyed; the ego can perish from exposure to the elemental. A body can be burned and blinded, and in the case of lasers, cut by light.

In order to account for the ego's dependence on an *exteriority* which is not reducible to intentionality, but as in the case of pain, reduces sensibility to a passive endurance of substance, Levinas turns to the concept of a purely affective dimension of anonymous existence. He seeks the evidence of this exteriority in the anonymity of the elemental, or the medium of existence as an undifferentiated substantive. Rather than an indeterminate other, which is reduced to the ends of enjoyment, anonymous existence is the singling out of the substantive as a pure verb,

a pure enduring in the very anonymity of being backed up on itself. This is a presence without content, in a state of sensitivity rather than sensuousness.²¹

Levinas distinguishes between the self of perception and anonymous sensibility. This is a distinction which marks Levinas's theorizing of perception from Merleau-Ponty's. Levinas maintains that anonymous sensibility cannot be the source of perception. For Levinas, perception is intentionally constructed, which means that it is neither based on nor takes the form of an indeterminate sensibility. Levinas distinguishes between the night of anonymous existence and night as the opposite of day(light). This latter night is a dimming of the light, which means the disappearance of things from sight, the lapse of consciousness in sleep, or the night of dreams.²² Here, the absence of light is a night of concealment or loss of visibility, where the given is obscured in the chiasm of illumination.

The night of anonymous existence, on the other hand, is unrelated to light and its phenomena. Unlike the manifestations of consciousness, the purely affective dimension of anonymous existence emerges in the total exclusion of light, and is devoid of things and distance. This is the indeterminacy of nocturnal space, which is not empty, but a presence "full of the nothingness of everything." (EE, 58) The void of night is an absolutely unavoidable *there is*. The term *there is* refers to an anonymous being in general which persists without anything or anyone being there. Rather than the absence of light as concealment, *there is* exposes the subject of hypostasis to a difference which resists incorporation, to a presence without a substantive:

...nothing approaches, nothing comes, nothing threatens; this silence, this tranquility, this void of sensations constitutes a mute, absolutely indeterminate menace. The indeterminateness constitutes its acuteness. (EE, 59)

It is not possible to distance oneself, position oneself, withdraw into oneself in the face of this unapprehensible impersonal immediacy. Anonymous existence is being exposed; invaded; submerged; given

21 Alphonso Lingis, "The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," *Face to Face with Levinas*, uses the term "sensitivity" to describe the exposure to alterity which paradoxically emerges within sensuous enjoyment.

22 Emmanuel Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 64.

(indistinguishably) in the night. The presence of night is both without interval and an interval which is refractory to the distinction required for illumination. The paradigmatic endurance of this condition of undifferentiated consciousness is the relentless monotony of insomnia, as an inability to close one's eyes and find oblivion, and yet an inability to see. The *there is*, or "it" which is neither avoidable nor illuminating, is a "nothing to see" which is indefinable in terms of the consciousness of phenomena. Rather than having a night to oneself in the lapse of consciousness into unconsciousness and sleep, the indeterminacy of insomnia is wakefulness without manifestation (EE, 65-66).

For Levinas, the nothingness of *there is* is the key to the meaning of horror. Horror is the term he draws upon to counter Heidegger's proposition of the ego's anguish and anxiety in the face of nothingness.²³ Levinas does not equate horror with nothingness as a fear of death. Horror is the fear of an invading and persistent nothing which cannot be negated. Horror overwhelms consciousness with a closeness that is suffocating, pervading, and contaminating but whose materiality has no correlation with oneself:

...horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua *entity*, inside out. It is a participation in the *there is*, in the *there is* which returns in the heart of every negation, in the *there is* that has "no exits." It is, if we may say so, the impossibility of death, the universality of existence even in its annihilation. (EE, 61)

Consciousness and its phantasmagoria are not the source of the horror of this night, alive without end. The reverse is the case; consciousness sweats in the night itself that watches in the absence of light (EE, 66). The presence of night – a collapse of things into indeterminate nothing, a horror which can also occur in the midst of daylight – erodes the continuity of consciousness. This passivity which encroaches without appearing is the means by which Levinas expresses his proposition of the *there is* as "existence in general," or a non-visual, non-ontological precursor of presence. *There is* (also referred to in Levinas's work as alterity, illeity, the trace of the Other) cannot be reduced to the totality of

²³ See also Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, pp. 228-236, for a discussion of Derrida's response to the Heideggerian principle of death.

egological understanding, but persists as a participation with an exterior which is extraneous to the finitude of "lighting."

The interval of night in Levinas's conception is not an indeterminacy or ambiguity of light. It is an anonymity which is uninterrupted, never revealed or concealed in lighting. The subject of light, the ego, is defined as a positioning, whose lapses and returns, are a respite, or time from this infinite anonymity:

...the appearance of the existent is the very constitution of a mastery, of a freedom in an existing that by itself would remain fundamentally anonymous. In order for there to be an existent in this anonymous existing, it is necessary that a departure from the self and a return to the self – that is, that the very work of identity – become possible. Through its identification the existent is already closed up upon itself; it is a monad and a solitude.²⁴

The present referred to in this passage is the event of hypostasis, which Levinas characterizes as the departure from self: "The present rips apart and joins together again; it begins; it is beginning itself."²⁵ Hypostasis is a tear, a moment of consciousness, a materialization of the otherwise unending anonymous *there is*. The escape from the horror of the *there is* is a recoiling into the finitude of solitary existence. Horror is averted in the violence of consciousness.

As well as a qualified mastery of anonymous materiality, Levinas argues that the recoiling from horror is a movement of discrimination which simultaneously creates a receptivity to an encounter with alterity. As Merleau-Ponty also argues, through the carnality of perception we are exposed to the alterity or ungraspability of a self underlying things. Rather than a presupposition or totality, Levinas argues that the subject of light is a condition, or position based on a passive subjectivization. Light is a scintillating phenomenon, harbouring an anonymous contaminating materiality in the oscillations of consciousness. Immobilized by the limitlessness of night, consciousness is the turning of this immobilization into a base, a stance, a self, a *here* or recess in the *there is*: "Position is not added to consciousness like an act that it decides on; it is out of position, out of an immobility, that consciousness comes to

24 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 52.

25 Ibid.

itself." (EE, 70) Each spark of light is a fixation of its surrender to the impersonal night; each conscious moment a night suspended in light's sparkling hesitations. The abandonment of a position is a dissipation of light, a disintegration of the subject into the *there is*. Night is the disaster of which Blanchot writes; an abandoning of the firmament of vision, and with it a dimming of an enlightened consciousness reflected in the starry heavens.²⁶

The importance of night in Levinas's theorization of vision is that it sustains the transparency of light. Light is not an absolute certainty, but a tenuous condition. Rather than a source of clarity, light is the effect of immobilization:

The contact with light, the act of opening one's eyes, the lighting up of bare sensation, are apparently outside any relationship, and do not take form like answers to questions. Light illuminates and is naturally understood; it is comprehension itself. But within this natural correlation between us and the world, in a sort of doubling back, a question arises, a being surprised by this illumination. The wonder which Plato put at the origin of philosophy is an astonishment before the natural and the intelligible. It is the very intelligibility of light that is astonishing; light is doubled up with a night. (EE, 22)

Night differs from Merleau-Ponty's chiasm of light insofar as night's invisibility breaks open the indeterminacy of phenomenological light. Night reveals the limits of phenomenology in the body's carnality. The confrontation with anonymous carnality is a dissipation of self, which can only be avoided by encountering some thing other than this amorphousness. The wonder of light is the absolute coincidence of something other – an undefineable being – with self, a moment of intelligibility, momentarily suspending the anonymity of materiality in the apparition of presence. Light, whether it be the light of dreams, reason, or the mapping of the universe in light years, is an immobilization of *there is*. This is a vocation which, away from the anonymity of night, we discover is the totality of the position we find ourselves in.

26 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

By referring to lighting as scintillation, Levinas limits consciousness to the place which it establishes for itself, rather than a locus in an abstract space. Existence has a concrete setting in one's own body as a place. To leave this place is to lose oneself, to dissolve into the anonymous *there is*. It is not as materiality, but in the realization of itself in its materiality, that the sub-stance of the body is taken as an event – the event of position – here. The body, as the event of position, is the very advent of consciousness. Levinas rejects the dualist notion that consciousness can be divorced from a substantive. Consciousness is an ambiguity, a sense of corporeality: "The corporeality of one's own body signifies, as sensibility itself, a knot or a denouement of being..." (OBBE, 77) The body is consciousness's base or place, its point of departure, the condition of its inwardness.

Levinas uses night to describe a state of dispossession which underlies all sensibility, not only vision. To further explain the point which Levinas makes, comparison can be made between the absence of vision in the night, and blindness. The affective state of eyes which are unable either to close or see in the night is not the same as eyes that have been blinded. Blindness, as an "unseeing in the eye" has been treated abstractly in philosophy as a quality of knowing, whether as innocence, denial, madness, sacred and apocalyptic insight or ignorance. Alternatively, it has been treated as a differential form of knowing, achieved by the supplanting of vision by other senses. From Locke's argument that a man born blind and restored to sight would not be able to recognise visually what was familiar to touch, to Diderot's argument that blindness favours relational rather than representational thought, blindness has been regarded as a difference in understanding rather than an absence of sight. Finally, blindness, as an otherwise potentially unknown difference of thought in a visually constituted symbolic order, has been granted an imaginary transparency by the possibility of cure, with a potentiality for conversion to the universality of sight.²⁷

Blindness, as an inability to see, is defined in relationship to the grasping of things. As such, it, and all the senses recruited in its place, are dependent on, even if they differ with, the presuppositions of illumination. Levinas adds another dimension of unseeing to the eye, which is the *inability to not see* one's blindness. *There is* describes the

27 See William R. Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987).

culmination of sight in its material impossibility. This is the grasping of absence through a non-in-difference, rather than a difference of vision. However, instead of the cessation of vision, the unavoidable *there is* extends the lack of sight beyond the inability to see. The same indeterminate nothing which dissolves sight into a useless state is responsible for the inexhaustibility of seeing. The best known development of this vision of the night is found in the literary works of Bataille and Blanchot, who both describe eyes which take on extraordinary proportions when penetrated by an obscurity which prevents them from seeing.²⁸

The difference between blindness and the precariousness of vision can be found in contemporary accounts about visual perception, such as an account of a blind man's restoration to sight, written for a lay audience by the neurologist Oliver Sacks. In an article called "To See and Not See," Sacks describes the troubling events surrounding the cure of a man who had been blind from early childhood after a debilitating illness. Much of the case discussion reiterates previously held assertions that the blind establish identity through discursive rather than formal relations with things. For example, once cured, the blind man was unable to correlate the ears and tail and paws he could see separately, with the cat that for many years he had recognised sequentially by touch.

Sacks relates the man's struggle with and eventual relinquishment of the power of sight for the comfort of a more familiar un-distanced world. He draws on many similar instances of the ultimate withdrawal of the cured blind from their restoration to the visual world, sometimes by the election of blindness, sometimes by the more drastic measure of suicide. It is arguable that as well as being "restored to sight" the cured blind man is introduced to a newly found anonymity, or a nothing to see which has no correlation with oneself. The relentless horror of this amorphousness is only avoided by the violence of adopting a visual stance. Along with being able to see, the cured blind man must deal for the first time with the precariousness of an alien visual identity.

Sacks also describes the so-called moment of truth when the bandages were removed from the first surgically corrected eye:

No cry ("I can see!") burst from Virgil's lips. He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focussing, at the

28 See Joseph Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), pp. 205-208.

The surgeon, who stood before him, still holding the bandages.

Only when the surgeon spoke – saying "Well?" – did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face.²⁹

There are two aspects of differentiation related in this anecdote. Sacks' analysis concentrates on the emergence of sight out of the state of confusion of a meaningless blur. On this reading, the face of the surgeon represents a moment of identification, brought about by an association of a face with a voice. Other patients in similar situations had also reported that they were able to recognize a face because of a previous knowledge that voices came from faces. But there is another interpretation of the significance of the face in this anecdote about the restoration of sight. As stated in the passage quoted, the face is "heard" rather than seen. The face has a peculiar significance to the blind as well as to the sighted. It is associated with the voice of another, which interrupts the consistency of egological existence by another existent who is irreducible to oneself. The face, as I will discuss in the following section, is the means by which Levinas thematizes his proposition of a transcendent other.

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing in my own measure and to the measure of its idea – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by those qualities...It expresses itself. (L, 96-97)

30 Edith Wyschogrod discusses a further example of misleading visual analogies which obscure the moment of the face as a lived equivalent for alterity, "Doing

29 "To See and Not See," *The New Yorker* (May 10, 1993), p. 59-73.

The Expressive Body – The Face

Levinas's proposition of an ethically based transcendence of difference is thematized in the face. In his adoption of the face as a means of formulating alterity, Levinas is also negotiating and challenging many other philosophical propositions based on analogies of the face. Levinas is attempting to argue for the uniqueness of the face, rather than make use of the face as an analogy. The use of analogies of the face trade on this uniqueness. The face must be distinguished from the Hegelian specularity of intersubjective recognition. Instead of a figure of rationalizable commensurability or mutual recognition, the face is an incommensurability which effaces, or suspends the possibility of reciprocity through recognition. The expression of the face must also be distinguished from the broader humanist tradition of associating the face and the eyes with the mirrors of the soul, or body parts which have the power to express and to communicate what is inward, thus perpetuating the fantasy of transparent face-to-face encounters (EE, 72).³⁰ For Levinas, the face is not a sign of something, it is the exposition of a sign. Levinas considers that the face, as a mode of regard, is not founded on visual perception. To regard means not only to look but also to have regard, or give particular care. Looking is the condition of sight, a violation which incorporates an object into the field of one's gaze. Regard is a generosity towards the face in its material particularity. Over and above its presentation as an image, the face is an irreducible other, which eludes the speculation of the gaze:

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities...It *expressses itself*. (TI, 50-51)

30 Edith Wyschogrod discusses a further range of misleading visual analogies which cling to Levinas's recruitment of the face as a visual equivalent for alterity, "Doing Before Hearing," *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*.

The chiasm of the face is a crossing between the totality of vision, and the inadequacy of the discursive. Levinas draws a distinction between the violence of vision as an habitual immobilization and incorporation of difference, and the transformation of the "avidity of the gaze" into a generous ear for the other's voice. Levinas's project is to recount the scope of this "eye that listens" in terms otherwise than the resonance of essence or the reverberation of light (OBBE, 30). In encountering the face, the eye ceases to see difference in terms of its possibilities for negation. It becomes a seeking for the means to do justice to the other's singularity.

As a persistence of difference which cannot be grasped, the face simultaneously prolongs and falls short of the sur-facing of sight. While apparently similar to Merleau-Ponty's argument that the self cannot grasp its own act of grasping, Levinas's argument is that the face is a trauma that cannot be represented. Rather than an eclipse of sight, the subject of light is indebted, without apprehension, to the anarchy of the face. The anarchy of the face is an infinite difference, theorized by Levinas as a never presentable deferral of identity, difference as a nonrecurrence, an anticipation always already past. The effacement of the face is the trace of an indefinable other, which Derrida develops in his deconstruction of the idea of origin, and which has much in common with Merleau-Ponty's chiasm of flesh. However, in his thematization of alterity in the face, Levinas places an emphasis on the radical singularity of the trace.³¹ The trace cannot be thematized. Singularity, unlike individuality, is not defined within the logic of the universal, where one term is other in relation to all the rest. The uniqueness of the other's face is an excess which resists totalization.³² Richard A. Cohen lists the four component terms of the excess as follows: first, the *alterity* of the other person; second, the *passivity* of the self, and their "relations"; third, the other's *command*; and fourth, my *responsibility* to respond.³³ Devoid of systematic character, uncontainable and incomprehensible, the other's

34 Levinas makes a distinction between a face and a figure in relation to a

31 See Taylor, *Alterity*, p. 204-205, for a discussion of the trace in the work of a variety of post-Husserlian philosophers, and also a strict parallel between Levinas and Kierkegaard's contrasting of singularity and individuality.

32 Levinas clarifies this excess as the diachrony of that which cannot be brought together – language and existence. This is an excess which is not the surplus of any economy, but the non-coincident *better* of proximity, or a more elevated Goodness: "an excellence, an elevation, ethics before Being or the Good beyond Being, to quote [Plato]." "Wholly Otherwise," *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 7.

33 Richard A. Cohen, *Face-To Face With Levinas*, p. 6. [emphasis added]

face is a strangeness, a transcendence of the other which requires a response which is different from recognition or knowing.³⁴

In Levinas's work the relationship between subject and other commences in the inequality of their terms. In this inequality, each term is transcendent to the other. Alterity is what constitutes the identity of each. The relationship is produced between unequal singularities and precludes the possibility of there being an exterior or third party or universal which could incorporate them (TI, 251). The subject can never identify with the other, only respond to and provide for the other's needs. To be a self is to be a subject in the accusative – not "I think" or "I see," but "Here I am." The other impels the acknowledgement of one's responsibility, in responding to the other's address.³⁵ In this sense, Levinas inverts Kantian ethics, by insisting that responsibility to others does not conflict with and demand the suspension of particular desires, but precedes and makes possible their realization.³⁶

Derrida challenges the proposition that alterity, or the non-thematizability of the singular, can be thematized in the face. As the experiencing of a presence of any kind, the presence of the face is textually defined. The unthematizable expresses itself as a figure which is always already thematized: "Is not experience always an encountering of an irreducible presence, the perception of a phenomenality?"³⁷ For Levinas, there is no encounter of presence in the face. The face commands presence; it is experience *par excellence*. In his work subsequent to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas does not refer to "experience," which is the thematization of equivalence, but to "transcendence," where the subject must answer for what has not been included in thematization.³⁸ The face-to-face is an asymmetrical, immediate, irreversible relation, in which the face of the other transcends all thematization. The face is a trauma or disturbance of presence rather than a perception of phenomenality. It is, beyond the egoism of existence, a visitation un presupposable within the

34 Levinas makes a distinction between strangeness and difference in response to a question about Derrida's interpretation of the face of the other as an alter ego which begins in the symmetry rather than dissymmetry of the ethical relation. Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainsley, "The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 179.

35 Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas*, p. 8.

36 Lingis, "The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," *Face to Face With Levinas*, p. 224.

37 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 152.

38 Emmanuel Levinas, "Signature," ed. Adrian Peperzak, trans. Mary Ellen Petrisko, *Research in Phenomenology* Vol. VIII (1978), p. 189.

visible world. This disturbance is neither a revelation nor a dissimulation of presence, but a bleeding without recovery.³⁹ In his second major work, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas attempts to avoid the problem of phenomenality which adheres to the face as a visible presence. He does this by refiguring the trace in terms of an apprehension which is unrelated to appearance. In his account of "Saying," Levinas finds a lacuna in the natural passage of the "I" of representation from the particular to the universal. The pronomial "se" of Saying remains an accusative self, refractory to the resonance of the Said.⁴⁰

The epiphany of the face presents for Levinas the challenge of proposing a sense of unapproachability which is "prior to history." The trace is a lapse, a departure, an insertion of space in time.⁴¹ In the anarchy of the face the present falls out of synchrony with itself into diachrony, faced with the transcendence of another time which is incommensurable with the present. This lapse of time is a profoundly passive senescence, or a removal of time which can never return to the present. The source of this passivity is a subjectivity which is unthematizable. Unlike the recurrence of incarnation of the subject in the world, the lines of aging on a face bear out its subjection to the unrecoverable passage of a never present, immemorial past (OBBE, 51-52).

While Levinas criticizes Merleau-Ponty for proposing the emergence of meaning from the obscurity of flesh,⁴² Derrida criticizes Levinas for proposing a sense of infinity which is beyond the metaphysics of presence.⁴³ The difficulty confronting Levinas is expressed by Derrida as a problem of light:

Who will ever dominate it, who will ever pronounce its meaning without being pronounced by it? What language will ever escape it? How, for example will the metaphysics of the face as the *epiphany* of the other free itself of light? Light perhaps has no opposite; if it does, it is certainly not night.⁴⁴

39 Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 102-107.

40 See Edith Wyschogrod, "Doing before hearing," *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*.

41 Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 105.

42 Levinas, "Sensibility," *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*.

43 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 152.

44 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 92.

Levinas poses the question of ethics as, simultaneously, the inauguration of responsibility and the impossibility of its representation. The very proposition of the infinity of the face as an originary opening of the question of ethics is, according to Derrida, itself a metaphysically based presupposition. Derrida's criticism serves to highlight the difficulty which confronts Levinas in his proposition of an a-historical responsibility in the singular, with no identificatory or phenomenological basis.

Levinas approaches the trace as a disturbance, devoid of meaning, which irreparably interrupts and changes, rather than underlies phenomenological sense. As such, the face does not have a visibility which originates within the visible universe. The abstractness of the face founds discursivity, not visibility. One hears and speaks to a face. There is a voice supplanting its image. Its particularity is a heteronomy which commands a direct form of sociality of me, independently of rational discourse, without recourse to the possibility of the reverse command from me:

The face, the countenance, is the fact that a reality is opposed to me, opposed not in its manifestations, but as it were in its way of being, ontologically opposed. It is what resists me by its opposition and not what is opposed to me by its resistance. This means that this opposition is not revealed by its coming up against my freedom; it is an opposition prior to my freedom, which puts my freedom into action. It is not that to which I oppose myself, but what is opposed to me. It is an opposition inscribed in its presence before me. It does not follow my intervention; it opposes itself to me insofar as it turns to me.⁴⁵

Before meaningful speech, the face speaks, signifying only itself: "A face has a meaning not by virtue of the relationships in which it is found, but out of itself; that is what *expression* is."⁴⁶ Derrida refers to this autoreferentiality as an "unthinkable unity of a speech able to assist itself and a glance which calls for assistance,"⁴⁷ but however haunted by complicity with phonocentric plenitude, Levinas means there to be no intentionality or force in the signifying of the face. It expresses itself as an

45 Levinas, "Freedom and Command," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 19.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

47 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, p. 106.

invitation to speak, an undoing of phenomenality, a rending of the very sensible in which it expresses itself, which Levinas contrasts with the disclosure of communicable speech.⁴⁸ The epiphany of the face is a transcendence which is alive in its openness, constantly divesting itself of its formal presence, denuding and disrupting its own manifestation.⁴⁹

In contrast to the violence of the gaze, the face confounds any intentionality in the nakedness of its look. For Levinas, the eyes interrupt the formal unity of the face as a phenomenon. In their absolute nakedness, the eyes of the other exceed my own vision. I will never see directly what the other sees, I will never see my own eyes. In looking back at me with a singularity inconvertible to my own consciousness, the openness of the face is an expression of welcome, while demanding a response that calls the totality and security of my own position into question. Delivering a frustrating twist to the Hegelian opposition of warring consciousnesses, the face of the other has a defenceless vulnerability which commands me to offer my regard. The commandment is delivered without the force of signification. It is a command from a different time, a different place, from a totality which transcends my own. In the face of an absolute independence which disrupts my own, the only alternative to regard would be the total annihilation of the other's existence. Such action, when it is undertaken, is bound to fail. To kill this intolerable other would be to renounce comprehension completely; murder is left only with the sensible remains. Even in taking the other's life, their difference would remain inviolable: "Infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyses my powers and from the depths of defenceless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution." (TI, 198-200)

The nakedness of the face has a rationality all of its own, as an invitation to either comprehend or murder, and a command to do neither. The face is seen in the light of a voice, which lends nothing to its visibility beyond resistance to disclosure:

The light proper to expression, which enters into relationship with me through speech, this absoluteness of a

48 — As well as outlining the charge of phonocentrism directed at Levinas by both Derrida and Blanchot, Jill Robbins also discusses the necessity, in a philosophical tradition weighted towards the hermeneutical and the dialectical, to avoid the reduction of the face-to-face to the tranquil plenitude of a humanistic conversation. "Visage, Figure: Reading Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*," *Yale French Studies* Vol. 79 (1991), pp. 135-149.

49 Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 96.

thing in itself, revealed by the impossibility of murder, belongs neither to the order of the disclosure of forms, nor to that of irrational contact. It is rational, but with a rationality prior to all constitution. Expression is just this way of breaking loose, of coming toward us, yet without deriving its meaning from us, without being a work of our freedom. If a face is not *known*, that is not because it does not have meaning; it is not known because its relationship with us does not refer to its constitution...⁵⁰

The light of the face establishes the space for a virtually theological encounter with an other, whose transcendence is refractory to self-interest, dogma or speculation. Rather than a light establishing its visibility, the face is lit by a light which establishes discursivity. This light is a form of communication whose fragility exceeds the face's visibility. The light of the face has a gentleness which, while disrupting figuration, assumes the unapproachable proportions of divine command.

Comparison can be drawn between the theorization of anarchic light in the different projects of Levinas and Walter Benjamin. I will preface this comparison with a few contextualizing remarks. Like Levinas, Benjamin's philosophical interests centre around a re-theorization of experience. Gyorgy Markus identifies two fundamental constancies in Benjamin's approach to this task.⁵¹ First, Benjamin institutes a program of regaining the fullness of the concept of experience of earlier philosophers, lost in the narrow subject-object paradigm of Kantian experience. Second, Benjamin insists on the radical historicity of experience, including the organisation of sense perception itself. Adriaan Peperzak argues that in the revision of the primordial significance of infinity in metaphysics, Levinas is concerned to recover in philosophy a concept of experience surpassing the experience of meaning.⁵² To that extent Levinas and Benjamin have a similar task in mind. However, a fundamental difference emerges between Levinas and Benjamin regarding their emphasis on the historicity of the organisation of sense perception.

50 Levinas, "Freedom and Command," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 22.

51 Gyorgy Markus, "Excursion II: Walter Benjamin and the Commodity as Phantasmagoria," *Marxism & Theories of Culture* (Department of General Philosophy, University of Sydney), manuscript.

52 Adriaan Peperzak, *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, pp. 38-72.

In his theorizing of the "condition" of vision, Levinas verges on a genetic formulation which is indifferent to aspects of experience in modernity which Benjamin struggles to come to terms with. By way of contrast, Benjamin's interest in experience must be placed in the context of his attempt to reconcile two apparently opposing tenets of the critique of modernity, which are on the one hand that individuality and difference are subsumed within mass culture, and on the other hand, that modernity's far reaching atomization annihilates community and communication. Benjamin's interests are less directed to the ethics of self-other relations than to theorizing the communal experience of subject-object relations.

Benjamin argues that every expression of human spiritual life can be conceived of as language, by which he means that all experience is based upon a mimetic capacity, or ability to produce and apprehend similarities. Formal language, which is a means of apprehending such similarities, functions at two levels. It is both a medium of communication, and a system of physiognomic features which allow communication to occur. Ways of communication, by facial expression, tone of voice and manner of speaking are modes of force, conditioning the reception rather than the meaning of things. Language shows the *manner* in which that which is communicated is meant (for example by differences in intonation, facial expression), rather than showing what is meant. Physiognomic aspects of language change historically, as do forms of human expression.

For Benjamin, ways of experiencing are historico-socially imposed relations between a recipient and things which underly conscious perception. In an effort to bring the unconscious presuppositions of understandability into play, Benjamin embarks on a project of making that which appears familiar into something strange, while rendering the unfamiliar familiar by drawing upon resonances with the past. While Benjamin's interest is directed in particular to novelty as it is fetishistically mass-produced in the culture of modernity, the central inflection he places on modernity's mode of operation is its spiritualization of the value of economic exchange in the reification of experience. In other words, the emphasis is not on spiritual values becoming commodified, but commodities acquiring a face. "Authentic" experience is transformed into a private, uncommunicable disjunction with a shocking immediacy, disarticulated from and resistant to the economy of reproduction. Through its aura – the unique maintenance of

distance, however close it may appear in its material aspect – the experience of a thing becomes identical with its authenticity, with an appearance refractory to human manufacture. The promise of auratic distance is the fetishistic promise of a participatory relation with nature which never comes to pass.

The relationship between auratic experience and the politics of cultural phenomena in Benjamin's work is an ambivalent one. On the one hand aura is a false distance, and on the other hand this false distancing offers a space for a dialogical relation with cultural phenomena. For example, in his analysis of the destruction of aura in film, Benjamin speaks of audiences distancing themselves from artworks rather than experiencing artworks as apparently distancing themselves.⁵³ Benjamin theorizes this ambivalent movement of proximity and distance as a function of the artwork's acquisition of a face. An alternative definition he gives for aura is the perception of an object's ability to return the gaze.

For Benjamin, as for Levinas, the face thematizes an element of humanity which is other than self-same in origin. Like Levinas, Benjamin envisions the experience of an irreducible other as an encounter which oscillates between redemption and death. The face of the other withstands the gaze. Aura is the perception of an unapproachable distance, exemplified in facial encounters, which is transposed onto a relationship with a non-human other, and experienced as an object's ability to return the gaze. To experience the aura of a phenomenon means to invest it with the capacity to look back at oneself: "...the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze. But looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze."⁵⁴ Rebecca Comay draws attention to the difficulties of understanding the sense of such an economy. If looking is a "gift," she asks, what kind of gift would it be that would carry with it the expectation of a reciprocation or counter-gift? In other words, the question arises as to what extent the auratic moment is inscribed within the economy of an egological or narcissistic order of the Same.

In Levinas's work, the face, in looking back, refracts the possibility of symmetry in the face to face: "This curvature of the intersubjective space inflects distance into elevation; it does not falsify being, but makes

53 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 217-251.

54 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 188.

its truth first possible." (TI, 291) Benjamin's own answer to such a question is provided by his theorizing of the disruption of the specular economy in terms of involuntary memory. For Benjamin, the expectation of a countergaze is associated with the mimetic faculty of finding opaque resemblances, rather than identical images, in an external nature that "can open its eyes."⁵⁵ Instead of appropriation, such similarities appear in a "flash," which allows no opportunity for identification. They are a space in time. Resemblance invades the immediacy of the sensuous present with the anarchy of a textual moment: "language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behaviour and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity."⁵⁶ The non-sensuousness of resemblance, which is the store of involuntary memory, is lost to conscious recollection, which can find nothing to incorporate. The sensuousness of light is interrupted and overpowered by the unanticipatable resemblance.

Such flashes are not sources of illumination. Their ungraspability reveals only a countergaze which transcends the anticipatory projection of the gaze. Drawing a parallel between Benjamin and Levinas, Comay argues that, far from reinforcing the egological order of the visible through the reciprocal exchange of looks, the auratic image has a fragile reality which opens up the space of reciprocity. The irreducibility of this reciprocity simultaneously opens the space for and undermines the possibility of symmetry. The essence of reciprocity is not symmetry, but the non-reciprocal interruption of the gaze, exemplified for Benjamin in the shyness of the early subjects of photography, who "drew back" in the moment of being photographed.⁵⁷ The re-experience of aura in its transference to objects is a form of reminiscence whose originality exceeds reproduction, speculation and conscious control. Auratic experience does not operate at the level of adequation. It is breathed, not grasped. In short, auratic vision is a non-phenomenological perceptibility theorized

55 "While Benjamin alludes to a phenomenological concept of the gaze, he above all invokes the romantic metaphor of nature opening its eyes...the notion ...implies both a particular kind of attentiveness or receptivity (the human capability of responding to another's gaze, whether visual or intentional) and the actualization of this intersubjective experience in the relationship with non-human nature." Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience," *New German Critique* Vol. 40 (Winter 1987), p. 188.

56 Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," *Reflections*, p. 335-6.

57 Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," *One Way Street*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 251.

as the delay of memory, a delay which is never experienced but always already past.

Miriam Hansen comments on the peculiar temporality of Benjamin's auratic memory, whose unique manifestation in a non-human image is related, she argues, to Freud's notion of the "uncanny." Hansen argues that the auratic image is a daemonic double whose familiarity has a life-threatening strangeness rather than the anticipated identity of a narcissistic ego-ideal. Like the return of the repressed, it is remembered without ever having been seen before. Hansen argues that Benjamin's writing seems driven by a desire to reverse and rehearse a displacement of a utopian past. The difficulty of his task is to avoid succumbing to fetishistic illusions, while preserving the promise of a better nature or different self which such illusions sustain. The prerequisite of auratic experience is in fact a purposeful forgetting, which Hansen identifies as the activity upon which Benjamin pins his conceptualization of a dimension of reciprocity which expresses a desire which transcends the fetishistic organization of the gaze. The conjuring of resemblances by the "optical unconscious," refers to the distortion of a familiar gaze in the non-human, nameless appearance of things.⁵⁸ By means of this term, Benjamin proposes a mode of psychical ambivalence for tracing the auratic gaze as an absorption in the realization of missed fulfillment. Such an attitude breaks up the simplicity of the opposition of narcissistic proximity and fetishistic distance in the complacency of the gaze.

On the one hand, the political significance of the optical unconscious is that it introduces an awareness of temporality and historicity into the proximity and distance of the gaze. The clammy, claustrophobic experience of anonymous materiality, which for Levinas is the nameless "there is," is theorized by Benjamin as the physiognomy of modern experience – an occluding of the gaze through the homogenizing erasure of origin in the given. On the other hand, Benjamin speculates that, despite its withering away in the cult of the commodity, auratic contact is renewed in all its revolutionary power, in the erotic eye contact which he characterizes as the distanced closeness of the eyes of the beloved. The attentiveness to non-reciprocal reciprocity has a naked materiality in a lover's gaze. In this lacuna in the falsity of a restrictive

58 For an extensive exploration of the dream images of the optical unconscious see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: October Books, The MIT Press, 1993).

economic organization of the gaze, it is possible to invest the gaze of the other with a better, timeless nature.

It is here, for the purposes of explaining Levinas's theorization of the ahistoricism of the face, that differences between Benjamin and Levinas can be drawn. Benjamin calls the task of emancipatory art the transformation of aura into the trace, by which he means the elevation of aura to an un-nostalgic movement of a desire which does not desire satisfaction or the recovery of presence. Art would strive for the transformation of forces which evoke the private experience of aura into the object of a collective experience: "The trace is the manifestation of a closeness however distanced it may be. The aura is the manifestation of a distance however close it may be. In trace we enter into the possession of the thing, in the aura the thing overpowers us".⁵⁹ For Levinas aura refers to the sensible divesting itself of its sensibility in becoming an idea, while the trace is the sensible as never apperceptible, or graspable as an idea (OBBE, 61). Benjamin suggests that aura can be transformed into the trace, where we enter into the open possession of things with the asymmetrical unthematizable possessiveness of lovers. Levinas argues that the trace is an opening before all voluntary or involuntary seizure. We are held by but cannot enter into the senescence of the trace. There is no possibility of universalization or historical appropriation of its alterity. It is always already before history. While it is full of the danger of an uncontestable transcendental claim, Levinas aims to avoid the ontological presuppositions of unconscious or purposeful forgetfulness in his theorization of the singular, irrecoverable transcendence of the face. Consciousness has no power.⁶⁰

Levinas's own development of proximity is enunciated by the thematization of the alterity of "there is" in the infinity of the other's face. Although the thematization of the face as transcendence has been outlined in the previous chapter, the significance of proximity as an ethical disjunction has not yet been addressed. Proximity is a key term in Levinas's account of an ethically based subjectivity, in which subjectivity is a subjection to alterity before it can be posited as the locus of its own manifestation. The term does not refer to the experience of a thing's exteriority, but is used to convey the exposure to alterity which occurs before the subject can gather itself into a position of relation to this openness. The exposition of incarnation is in the alterity of sensibility,

59 — Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* Vol V/1, p. 560, translation by Gyorgy Markus.
60 — *Proximite: Levinas, Blanchot, Totalite and Communication*, p. 205.

THE LIGHTNESS OF TOUCH

Proximity – the Maternal Touch

Levinas's account of anarchical experience is unconcerned with the perception of phenomena, but deals instead with the signification of matter. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Levinas describes sensibility in terms of vulnerability and enjoyment, or exposedness to a non-phenomenal other rather than in ideational terms. Prior to any conscious sensation, and irreducible to it, sensibility is a relationship of proximity, which is distinguished from the conjunction which occurs in experience and knowledge. Joseph Libertson outlines some basic themes of proximity which operate in the work not only of Levinas, but also a range of post-Hegelian thinkers of non-negatable difference, from Blanchot and Bataille to Nietzsche, Freud, Proust and Artaud. First, proximity is a contaminating communication rather than a communication based on a relationship between subject and object. Second, subjectivity is infinitely passive in its exposition. Third, rather than describing an adequation, there is an obsessive urgency and repetition of a rapport with alterity. Fourth, a heteronomous, compelling excess persists in negation. Fifth, the communion of proximity is an involvement which is irreducible to manifestation. Finally, proximity is an approach of an exteriority which itself has no power, but against which consciousness has no power.⁶⁰

Levinas's own development of proximity is enunciated by the thematization of the alterity of "there is" in the infinity of the other's face. Although the thematization of the face as transcendence has been outlined in the previous chapter, the significance of proximity as an ethical disjunction has not yet been addressed. Proximity is a key term in Levinas's account of an ethically based subjectivity, in which subjectivity is a subjection to alterity before it can be posited as the locus of its own manifestation. The term does not refer to the experience of a thing's exteriority, but is used to convey the exposure to alterity which occurs before the subject can gather itself into a position in relation to this openness. The exposition of incarnation is in the diachrony of sensibility,

⁶⁰ Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication*, p. 208.

which cannot be assembled in a representational present, but is consequent to the signification of matter. In relationship to subjectivity, proximity is a restlessness which is irreducible to but suspended in presence. Rather than being apprehended, matter is infinitely altered in its exposure to unthematizable difference. A body materializes in this disjunction, and corporeality is signified in its alterity.

Levinas approaches the autonomy of subjectivity as dependent on an interval in which it is given over as a pure passivity. This passivity is not an impassive state of inertia or oblivion. It is infinitely more passive than any act of holding back or failure of initiative. Levinas characterizes the exposedness of sensibility in its passivity as a being held hostage, or being offered without self-defined cause, without having initiated or conditioned the offering: "Proximity is the subject that approaches and consequently constitutes a relationship in which I participate as a term, but where I am more, or less, than a term." (OBBE, 82) The non-initiative of anarchical sensibility is a signalling of passivity which is older than the active generosity of offering oneself. It is matter being put into question in its being affected, an "in itself through the Other" in the same way as the initiative for incarnation is put into question in the burden of maternity:

Sensibility – the proximity, immediacy and restlessness which signify in it – is not constituted out of some apperception putting consciousness into relationship with a body. Incarnation is not a transcendental operation of a subject that is situated in the midst of the world it represents to itself; the sensible experience of the body is already and from the start incarnate. The sensible – maternity, vulnerability, apprehension – binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self. In this plot I am bound to others before being tied to my body. (OBBE, 76)

For Merleau-Ponty, corporeality is an ontological question within the language of flesh. Maternity refers to sensibility grasping itself in its difference, giving birth to itself. For Levinas, maternity is a pre-ontological past, an Other that cannot be subordinated to the vicissitudes of representation and knowledge, openness upon images, or an exchange of information (OBBE, 79). It is instead, a being affected, a being grasped without grasping, an incessant bearing of exteriority without recovery.

The intimacy and distance of proximity operates within the metaphor of touch, which Levinas is concerned to develop as a sense which is radically different from vision. The "being in touch" of proximity is not aligned with the vagaries and intertwinings of subjectivity and objectivity of phenomenal sense. Sight tends to polarize the exteriority with which it is implicated, divesting itself of the turgid ambiguity of unthematizable matter. Unable to exhaust its excess in any totalized form, sight disperses its shadow, as an opacity to be reabsorbed within the transparent autonomy of light:

Sight, by reason of its distance and its totalizing embrace, imitates or prefigures the "impartiality" of the intellect and its refusal to hold to what the immediacy of the sensible would dispose, or what it would constitute. The proper sense of this disposition moreover is in fact something different; it is not at all exhausted in arresting the movement and dynamism of knowledge. (OBBE, 63)

Sight abandons the materiality of the sensible for a preconceivable given. The sensible however, persists in its passivity as an exteriority which is continually disruptive. Proximity, the alterity of matter, is an affection which, while hopelessly anarchical, is inexhaustibly given. Unlike the polarization of difference in the separation of sight, Levinas refers to being in touch as the exposition of an unlimited, irreconcilable heteronomy, or a contiguity which cannot be embraced.

Although Levinas's development of touch as a sense of proximity is original in its conceptualization, its unique association with incarnation (recognized by Aristotle), is also prefigured by Kant in his analysis of the signification of the senses. In his *Anthropology*, Kant divides the senses relatively into objective senses (touch, vision and hearing) which contribute to knowledge of objects in their externality, and subjective senses (taste and smell), through which objects are enjoyed according to one's own disposition: "By touch, hearing and sight we perceive objects (on the surface); by taste and smell we partake of them (take them into ourselves)."⁶¹ The value of the senses for Kant is their delineation of a folded corporeal schema which establishes the interiority of perceptions and the exteriority of objects. In this context, vision is the

61. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 33-37.

noblest of the senses because it maintains the most emphatic exteriority of its object – it is most distanced from touch. The object of vision is mediated by light.

Kant values vision as a transcendental faculty that renders the difference between an object and its appearance equivalent. Vision, like reason produces a theoretical relation with an object which, through the mediation of light, can be perceived in its material absence. Any symmetry that occurs is only within reflective judgement. Hearing is likewise mediated, but by air. The exteriority of its object is preserved even as sound enters the ears' labyrinths, because the sound in itself conveys nothing but the meaning given it. Both these senses avoid the vagaries of the more subjective senses – taste and smell – where for example, one's own saliva is involved in mediation. Touch, however, is the sense which most troubled Kant. In its immediacy of perception, touch is the most important of the senses, but its certainty is also the grossest of pressures. There is no denying the contact of touch, but no means of objectifying the experience. Touch is the sense most affected by its object.⁶² Despite attenuating the extent of touch into the tips of the fingers (it is a credit to Kant's honour, according to Nietzsche, "that he should expatiate on the peculiar properties of the sense of touch with the naïveté of a country parson!"),⁶³ Kant is unable to ignore that bodies are differentiated in their contiguous relations.

Although Kant does not refer to it explicitly, there is an equivocation in touch, which he resolves by a distinction which is relaxed for the other senses. In general, sensibility has two moments; sensation, which can be referred to objects, and feeling, which has no cognitive associations, and refers only to one's own body. While vision and hearing, and taste and smell are only relatively divided in this respect, touch is radically split. As an objective sense, it is sensation in the finger tips. As a feeling it is a sixth or supplementary sense of vital sensations.⁶⁴ This is purely the feeling of the responsive parameters of one's flesh, from hot and cold to the thrill of gooseflesh.⁶⁵ As far as Kant is concerned, the necessity of touch remains completely obscure. It is the basis of the objective senses, but in the directness of its relation to its

62 Jacques Derrida, *Economimesis*, *Diacritics* Vol. 11 (June 1981), p. 19.

63 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books), p. 104.

64 Translator's notes, *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View*, pp. 198-199.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

object it has no space for reason – no grounds to escape the weight of the sensation.⁶⁶

Levinas also distinguishes between two forms of touch. Touch as a sense of grasping is mediated by vision. Touch as the difference remaining in contact cannot be phenomenologically embraced. As a concept of alterity different from any concept of subjectivity, the duality of touch cannot be resolved into a consciousness which is conscious of another, as is the case in Merleau-Ponty's doubling and refolding of the touching and the touched. The lightness of touch is an infinite lightness; it is the lightness of the touch of light. While there is nothing which can come closer, there is nothing to take hold of in the proximity of touch:

To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in the other. In contact itself the touching and the touched separate, as though the touch moved off, was always already other, did not have anything in common with me. (OBBE, 86)

Levinas is not concerned with touch in any phenomenal sense, as an ambiguity in sensation. Proximity is an obsession with the designation of sensation. It is both contact and an involvement with discontinuity for its own sake, a dedication of identity in a transcendent other.

The dawn of subjectivity for Levinas is dependent on a donation of matter beyond the point of no-return, to a being given over to, a being pre-occupied by an Other. Sensibility is signified in the for-the-other of one's own materiality. This signification of the materiality of sensibility is analysed by Levinas in the phenomenon of suffering. Levinas's account of ethics, as already mentioned, reverses Kantian ethics by proceeding from the singularity of responsibility to the other's materiality. For Levinas, one's life and one's awareness of being here are dependent on being singled out to answer and provide for a need which is not one's own, but upon which one's own life and existence depends. Suffering for Levinas is the supreme ethical principle of bearing another's materiality as my own responsibility. The constitutional or congenital uselessness of suffering "can take on a meaning, the only

⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1956), p. 14, comments in the Preface that touch is the paradigmatic sense of empiricism.

meaning to which suffering is susceptible, in becoming a suffering for the suffering – be it inexorable – of someone else."⁶⁷

The vulnerability or exposedness to the other at the level of their materiality, which is for Levinas the basis of subjectivity, is demonstrated in everyday life. It is a being affected, a being grasped without grasping. Levinas refers to maternity – by which he means an incessant bearing of alterity without recovery – as the paradigm of responsibility:

Signification signifies...in nourishing, clothing, lodging, in maternal relations, in which matter shows itself for the first time in its materiality...

...It is because subjectivity is sensibility – an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the one-for-the-other, that is signification...that a subject is of flesh and blood, a man that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin. (OBBE, 77)

The sensible is refractory to universalization. It is meaningful in its materialization. The maternal hostage bears the burden of supplying the needs of another, responding unconditionally to an outside alien demand for one's own body to be offered over as a source of the other's nourishment. Maternity for Levinas is a reversal of the autonomy of subjectivity, which enjoys its materiality by incorporation. While virility is the paradigm of the consumption and inhabitation of matter, maternity, "for an other," is the paradigm of donation.

Levinas's theorization of maternity is related to his understanding of the feminine. Levinas derives his notions of the feminine from Talmudic commentary on the essential contribution of women to the continuity of messianic history. In this history, morality has the weight of an ontological basis, in which the emphasis of the foundation of ontology shifts from incorporation to donation. The ontological function of the feminine is the vocation of the "one who does not conquer." The feminine is selfless humanity, "the light of [man's] eyes."⁶⁸

For Levinas, the feminine is an aspect of human existence rather than a human existent, or ethical other. The feminine is existence as habitation – being at home with oneself – the familiar (TI, 155). This is

67 Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," *The Provocation of Levinas*, p. 159.

68 Emmanuel Levinas, "Judaism and the Feminine Element," trans. Edith Wyschogrod, *Judaism* Vol. 18 No. 1 (1969), pp. 32-33.

an intimacy with (not an incorporation of) the other, which is the condition of all possession and donation. As I will discuss in the next section, as a subjectivity rather than an aspect of human existence, woman is inviolate, the eternal feminine, disingenuous, mysterious, seductive, dangerous, the inexpressible Other of erotic love.

As the concretization of human habitation, the feminine is the welcoming of the Other. The donation of hospitality depicts the dimensions of interiority as one's own dwelling, which commences only in being open to a stranger's prior claim. The welcome of hospitality is an understanding without words. All possibility of transcendental relations is dependent on the establishment of this dimension of human intimacy. The feminine reveals itself in this familiarity, not the face. It welcomes the stranger without regard even for their prior claim, but in the interests of preserving the dimension of discretion, or a possibility of withdrawal. This space of withdrawal is presupposed in the egoistic assumption of and separation from an objective world (TI, 154-155).

The feminine as maternity, or the substitution of one's own vulnerability as hostage to another's, is the signification of matter. In his theorization of proximity as maternity, Levinas considers the feminine in terms of its ontological *function*. Merleau-Ponty makes metaphoric use of maternity in his conceptualization of flesh. In Levinas's work maternity does not refer to any woman, but to an ethical subjectivity. The feminine is the original manifestation of all kindness on earth, rather than an ontological presence in its own right.

Levinas perpetuates a humanist conceptualization of maternity. Levinas calls the maternal the commonest everyday demonstration of the ethical relation, but it is precisely at such a level that in humanist discourses, maternity becomes an issue which demonstrates a relationship which challenges the humanity of women. Maternal subjectivity is based on the tenuous elision of a distinction between dependency and autonomy, in which being held hostage is the paradigm of responsible motherhood. Any deviation from the paradigm slides into an adversarial relationship in which the humanity of the infant is pitted against feminine autonomy. This humanist construction of the maternal relation is perhaps most apparent in legal issues, which consider the relation in terms of the designation of autonomy and responsibility. For example, in instances where women have been found culpable of damaging their unborn children, the fetuses have been effectively

construed as innocent victims, held as hostages rather than accommodated in their mothers' wombs.⁶⁹

Catherine Chalièr interprets the function of the feminine in relation to Levinas's work as a calling into question the virility of being. The feminine is a disruption of being by selflessness: "...an identity without security and without guarantee." The disruption of being by self-sacrifice is the meaning of the feminine in the human being.⁷⁰ By way of contrast, Derrida argues that sacrifice is possible only within a schema of human virtue based on carnivorous virility.⁷¹ Also, as will be discussed in the following sections, this interpretation does not address the question which other commentators, including Irigaray, Derrida and Tina Chanter, address to Levinas: whether the feminine is absolutely other and thus primary (transcendent), or secondary to ethics.⁷² The suspicion remains that in calling into question the "supreme lucidity and hence a supreme virility" of being,⁷³ Levinas preserves an opening for an ethically based transcendence which occurs at the expense of radical difference – that is, the subordination of feminine transcendence. This aspect of Levinas's ethics is most apparent in the final section of *Totality and Infinity*, titled "Beyond the Face." There, Levinas deals with the possibility of concretizing the relationship of transcendence, or non-indifference, in another self. The feminine as embodiment of alterity is outlined in the phenomenology of the caress.

with the other (an obsession with signification, the disparity of the one-for-the-other). The caress is an obsession with alterity, a need for disappointment, a loss of identity sought in the (absence of) presence of the feminine:

In a caress, what is there is sought as though it were not there, as though the skin were the trace of its own withdrawal, a languor still seeking, like an absence which, however, could not be more there. (OBBE, 90)

69 Isabelle Karpin, "Reimagining Maternal Selfhood: Transgressing Body Boundaries and the Law," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* Vol. 2 (1994), forthcoming, quotes a bumper sticker, Philadelphia, March 1993: "The Most Dangerous Place in America to Live is in a Mother's Womb."

70 Catherine Chalièr, "Ethics and the Feminine," *Re-Reading Levinas*, pp. 119-129.

71 Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, *Who Comes After the Subject?*, eds Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 96-119.

72 See Tina Chanter, "Antigone's Dilemma"; Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love"; and Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am"; all in *Re-Reading Levinas*.

73 This is a reference to Heidegger's account of authentic existence, which Levinas addresses in his analysis of the sensuousness of light, *Time and the Other*, p. 70.

The Stereoscopy of the Caress

The caress is Levinas's analysis of the phenomenon of the feminine. The phenomenon of the feminine completes Levinas's phenomenology of night. As has been discussed, the phenomenology of night begins with the persistence of materiality experienced as the anonymous restlessness of "there is." The feminine belongs to the same order of existence – the feminine is an invisible presence which persists in the absence of light. Levinas conceives of feminine existence as a mystery lying beyond the hiddenness of "there is." For Levinas, this mystery is experienced in the erotic encounter. As the body loses its status as an existent in the night, it is exposed as an unsignifiable materiality in erotic nudity.⁷⁴

In the notion of proximity, Levinas outlines sensibility in terms of the signification rather than incorporation of matter. In the caress, Levinas describes the materiality of the face as a singularity which is both inadequate to and surpasses expressivity. This is not an exorbitance which is donated or grasped, but rather, in going beyond contact, it is a withdrawal which exposes carnality as the evasion of significance. As Levinas characterizes it, the carnal, the feminine, withdraws from the harshness of the light. The caress is not an expression of desire. It is both a desire and a need. Proximity is an obsession with the other (an obsession with signification, the disparity of the one-for-the-other). The caress is an obsession with alterity, a need for disappointment, a loss of identity sought in the (absence of) presence of the feminine:

In a caress, what is there is sought as though it were not there, as though the skin were the trace of its own withdrawal, a languor still seeking, like an absence which, however, could not be more there. (OBBE, 90)

In soliciting what constantly escapes it, the caress is a sensibility which parts with sense. In carnal love the other appears as an object of need while also resisting and remaining entirely other. Love is an encounter of both lust and transcendence. This is an anarchic relationship which underlines all others, and its equivocation is the originality of the erotic (OBBE, 100-101).

⁷⁴ Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, pp. 118-119.

Levinas describes carnal intimacy as the most intense experience of alterity. In his account of love, there is no question of possessing the other – possession would extinguish eros: "The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, of coinciding into sameness. From an ethical perspective, two have a better time than one..."⁷⁵ From an *ethical* perspective, the feminine, carnality, is an exorbitant presence which is unrecuperable, unidentifiable; a materiality which exhibits its inexpressivity; nudity itself. The inexpressibility of the caress is a hunger which suffers from an inability to tell it. Voluptuousity is an abandonment of sociability, a movement into the invisible in favour of an amorphous and indefinable community. Erotic intimacy is not an attempt to assimilate an irreducible other, but an obsessive delight in contacting the alien, and losing it and one's own perspective simultaneously.

Although manifestly a form of sensibility within the metaphor of touch, the caress is theorized as the negative of light. Erotic love takes place in the dark – away from rational sociality, turning clarity into ardor and night. The indeterminacy of carnality is a movement from corporeality into the invisible:

...what the caress seeks is not situated in a perspective and in the light of the graspable. The carnal, the tender par excellence correlative of the caress, the beloved, is to be identified neither with the body-thing of the physiologist, nor with the lived body [corps propre] of the "I can," nor with the body-expression, attendance at its own manifestation, or face. In the caress, a relation yet, in one aspect, sensible, the body already denudes itself of its very form, offering itself as erotic nudity. In the carnal given to tenderness, the body quits the status of an existent. (TI, 258)

In the anonymity of eroticism, the existent is relieved of the solitude of existing. The intensity of alterity is a delight in the frivolous, in the evasion of form and fixity of meaning. Carnal intimacy is the diffusion of formal identity which is sought out in the elusiveness of an encounter which cannot be located, fixed and given form.

Levinas's account of eroticism is grounded in the presupposition of a subject whose incarnation is bound to a desire for the abyss. Rather

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," *To the Other*, p. 113;
⁷⁵ Levinas, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," *Face to Face with Levinas*, p. 22.

than conceiving desire in terms of lack, Levinas conceives of desire as a yearning for a breach of satisfaction and rupture of solipsistic existence through another whose alterity cannot be overcome. Eroticism is a loss of perspective. It does not aspire to the infinite transcendence required for desire, which is reserved for the absolute alterity of the divine. The feminine, existence as evasion of significance, can never take on the aspect of the divine for Levinas. The dimension of *intimacy* in the midst of existence is opened by the feminine, not the dimension of transcendence.⁷⁶ The anarchy of eroticism is a simultaneous needful/desirable disruption of any ontological project. Eroticism relieves egoism of its stiflingly lonely project, the repetitive affirmation of a closed ipseity, of a being grafted to its incarnation in the world of light. Carnal intimacy is the revelation and renewal of the alterity of matter, not an opening of the infinity of desire. For Levinas, eroticism is the ex-static dissolution of corporeality, rather than the achievement of the fecundity of incarnation. Levinas's association of love with the anarchy of eroticism is distinguished from romantic love, which he describes as love becoming its own end. Romantic love is the perpetuation of the mere profanity of erotic sensibility: "remain[ing] without any "intentionality" which spreads beyond it, a world of pleasure, or a world of charm and grace, which can co-exist with a religious civilization."⁷⁷ Eroticism is also distinguished from the eros of philosophical passion. Philosophy as eros is an idea of the infinite. Unlike the impossibility of a caress beyond the caress, "[a] thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire."⁷⁸ Levinas subordinates the anarchy of eroticism to the linear propagation of desire: "In fecundity the I transcends the world of light – not to dissolve into the anonymity of the *there is*, but in order to go further than the light, to go *elsewhere*." (TI, 268) Voluptuousness is time out, or an interruption in the time of being, and its inexpressibility is a communion contrary to any social relation. Fecundity is not achieved with, but away from the feminine. Self-transcendence is ultimately achieved in paternity, while the feminine is irretrievably forgotten. The renewal of being lies in the discontinuity or transportation of egoism outside of itself, in the diachronous encounter with another self. The fecundity of existence is

76 Levinas, "Judaism and the Feminine Element," *Judaism*, p. 37.

77 Ibid., p. 36.

78 Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," *To the Other*, p. 113; also *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 54.

revealed in the proximity of the encounter of one's own face, no longer merely one's own, but also the face of a son: "Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other ("And you shall say to yourself, 'who can have borne me these? I was bereaved and barren..." *Isiah*, 49) is me, a relation of the I with the self which yet is not me." (TI, 277)

This brief account of fecundity does not reflect the progressively more complex relationship between eroticism and responsibility which develops chronologically in Levinas's work. There is a shift from a preoccupation with the erotic in his early writing, to a concern with the ethical, as described above in his conceptualization of fecundity in *Totality and Infinity*. Tina Chanter also notes that while *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* concentrates on maternity at the expense of feminine eroticism, in his most recent work there is a restatement of two earlier themes. These are that the transcendence of alterity starts with femininity, while the structure of transcendence starts with paternity. This re-affirmation of the feminine as originary difference indicates a renewed adherence to the alterity of the feminine rather than its subordination to the non-indifference of the ethical relation.⁷⁹ As well as the temptation to suggest a correlation between stages in Levinas's own life and these shifts between ethical and sexual alterity, there is a temptation to explain the tensions in Levinas's conceptualization of feminine alterity in terms of these discrepancies. Alternatively, the shifts can be read as symptomatic of a tension within Levinas's account of feminine alterity. Commentators who engage with Levinas on this issue will be addressed in the following chapter.

There is another tension, related to vision, which is evident in Levinas's conceptualization of the caress. The alterity of the caress is theorized as the negative of light, rather than an indefinable transcendence of touch. The feminine eludes the grasp, withdraws from the light. In his earlier work Levinas states that the ethical and the feminine are brought together on the plane of eros, and cannot possibly be grasped in terms of light. In *Totality and Infinity* he describes the erotic relation in phenomenological terms. The phenomenological is a form of description which, as Levinas states in his earlier work: "by definition cannot leave the sphere of light." (EE, 85) Conceived of in phenomenological terms the ungraspability of the feminine is a foregone conclusion: "It is not possible to grasp the alterity of the other, which is to

79 Tina Chanter, "Antigone's Dilemma," *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 133.

shatter the definitiveness of the ego, in terms of any of the relationship[s] which characterize light." (EE, 85)

Levinas never quite sacrifices his ethics to, never quite lets go of a need to maintain a distance from, a femininity whose nudity he characterizes as a paroxysmic ultramateriality whose fragility and weight of non-signifyingness exceeds the oppressiveness of the formless *there is* (TI, 256-257). The originality of the erotic is explained in terms of the equivocation of the visible (light and night) more than of touch. The caress is a disorder of light. In going beyond the sensation of contact, the caress is a losing sight of touch rather than a perpetuation of touch with another. This point is made more explicitly in Levinas's account of eroticism in *Time and the Other*:

The caress is a mode of the subject's being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This "not knowing," this fundamental disorder, is the essential...always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come. The caress is the anticipation of this pure future [*avenir*], without content. It is made up of this increase of hunger, of ever richer promises, opening new perspectives onto the ungraspable. It feeds on countless hungers.⁸⁰

When Levinas embraces the absence of the feminine in the caress, he does so in visual terms. Beyond and inadequate to language, the erotic encounter is an obsession with an eternally never-present other. This is not an encounter whose indefinability is an opening of ontology to a transcendent other (TI, 254). To the extent that Levinas considers eroticism within a phenomenological paradigm, the caress is an allegory of night, a breaking up of sensibility rather than a bringing the ethical and the feminine together on the plane of eros. I would suggest that the action of the caress is conceived by Levinas as the obverse of *groping*, or the hand's blind venturing in its attempt to alter and bring the elemental

80 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 89.

to light.⁸¹ Levinas's continued adherence to the visible in his account of the caress is an indication of his failure to break with ocularcentrism. However, I would argue that the significance of Levinas's adherence to the visible is less related to a failure to break with ocularcentrism than to the attenuation of touch in his account of eroticism. In the "Phenomenology of Eros" Levinas is mainly concerned with the exteriorization of sensibility. He barely considers the erotic possibilities of the caress. In going beyond the face, the caress oscillates between the feminine as the embodiment of alterity and the feminine as a transcendence of contact. In doing so, the equivocation of the feminine engenders the insistence of the absence of an object: "what is caressed is not touched." I would like to consider this dynamic of a going beyond yet withdrawal from contact more closely.

In a careful study of a series of Levinas's works, Paul Davies identifies a changing relationship between sensibility and eroticism in the conception of the caress. Davies argues that in "Language and Proximity," which is an essay later than the book *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas confronts the question of what happens to sensibility if the caress can be described as transcending sensibility. In Davies' assessment, in the earlier work, by drawing a distinction between contact and the caress, the caress ceases to be identified with touch. By divorcing the caress from touch in the account of eroticism, the ethical implications of theorizing the caress as a ceaseless evasion of contact are kept at bay. In the later work, contact and touch are rethought together in an analysis of the caress. Reconsidered as ethical contact, the equivocation of sensibility becomes manifest in a reading of the face in terms of proximity, approach, responsibility and obsession (but not, I would add, eroticism). Davies comments that as far as a transcendence of the caress is concerned: "The answer is not, as it would seem in the very layout of *Totality and Infinity*, a more rigorous demarcation of the sensible, but rather a complete alteration of sensibility."⁸²

81 Wyschogrod, "Derrida, Levinas, and Violence," discusses the relationship between work and the groping hand in Levinas. For a discussion of the hand's action of differentiation see also Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand," trans. John P. Leavey, Jr, *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 161-196.

82 Paul Davies, "The Face and the Caress: Levinas's Ethical Alterations of the Sensibility," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 252-272.

Davies maps the caress as an alteration of sensibility rather than a break with sensibility in his analysis of the movement away from vision in "Language and Proximity." Looking becomes akin to touching, which is understood as caressing rather than grasping. And yet, at the very moment that the look appears to be free of the gaze, it recoils back into sensibility by being *likened* to caressing. The impossibility of disentangling the ethical from the sensible is related to a need to maintain an account of the caress as a contact which is not only radically other but also intelligible (a difficulty which Derrida has also highlighted in Levinas's work). Davies interprets the language of Levinas's later work as a reading of the moments where consciousness can no longer be an object of phenomenological analysis, but instead, those moments where consciousness can only be described as implicated, obsessed and obligated. With this brief outline of Davies analysis of the tensions in Levinas's likening of vision to the caress in "Language and Proximity," I now to turn to a re-evaluation of the alteration of sensibility in the "Phenomenology of Eros." My argument is that in this text, Levinas's account of the caress has less to do with a radical distinction between contact and the caress than the preservation of an intelligible negotiation of the anonymity of erotic sensibility. Rather than being subsumed within the alterity of the feminine, the caress, in its transcendence of contact, is an aestheticization of touch.

For Levinas, the basis of art consists in substituting an image for an object. The significance of this definition of art is that it draws on the Platonic distinction between the substitution of an image for an object (as occurs in art), and the substitution of a concept for an object, as occurs in the initiation of representation and thought. Levinas adheres to a notion of art as a dimension that contests the reality of incarnation. Art is not an obscure residue of existence, but a sort of erosion of its ideality in the disclosure of the nature of sensibility. The aesthetic is an ontological dimension which does not exist between a subject and a world to be grasped:

Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow...art does not belong to

83 Emmanuel Levinas, *Reality and its Subject* (Levinas, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 17)
84 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
85 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation, which moves in just the opposite direction.⁸³

The appearance of images is not an action of consciousness. Images are an involvement in the alterity of sensibility. Aesthetic experience is a captivated participation in the disclosure of disincarnation, a loss of grasp of perceived reality in the insubstantial presence of sensation.

Levinas defines art as an absorption in rhythm, incantation, ecstatic ritual and stasis. Art prolongs and exceeds perception, stifling the infinitesimal flash of light in the eternity of the instant perpetually suspended. "Paradoxical as it may seem," writes Levinas, "painting is a struggle with sight." (EE, 56) The image is an allegory of the un-ending immobility of incarnation, revealed in art as "never finished, still enduring – something inhuman and monstrous."⁸⁴ Art is a "[letting] go of the prey for the shadow,"⁸⁵ a flirtation of corporeality with a non-incorporable living death. It is a dimension of evasion, charming irresponsibility, lightness and grace, whose value is in the endurance of the meanwhile. This value of art is also its limitation. Never-ending, it cannot be surpassed. It cannot open onto a better, transcendent other, an incarnation radically different from oneself. It endures only in the flesh.

If, as Davies argues, the caress ceases to be identified with touch in "The Phenomenology of Eros," I am arguing that it becomes more identifiable as an obsession with the ambiguous carnality of stereoscopic vision. In *Part II*, I have commented on the extent to which Merleau-Ponty draws on the analogy of stereoscopy in his conceptualization of the chiasm. Stereoscopic vision is not the combined perspective of two eyes, but an effect of a different order, the creation of an in-between, in the touching of the two. The result is not the product of a unified field, but the inauguration of a sense of "stereoptic" unity synergically. There is a correlation between this doubling, which is the exposition of depth perception, and the ideality of dimension in Merleau-Ponty's account of perception. It can be argued that the infinity which is described in Levinas's conception of art is confined to a dimension of stereoscopic vision:

83 Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 3. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-127.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Sensation and the esthetic effect...produce things in themselves, but not as objects of a higher power; in sidestepping all objects, they open upon a new element foreign to the distinction of a "without" from a "within," eluding even the category of the substantive. (EE, 54)

The ambiguity of sensation is repeated in Levinas's account of subjectivity in eroticism: "Voluptuousity, as the coinciding of the lover and the beloved, is charged by their duality: it is simultaneously fusion and distinction." (TI, 270) For the moment I am noting the Levinas confines the ambiguity of the caress to the order of the image. I leave aside discussion of the construction of the two lovers as active/passive until the next chapter.

Levinas's account of the caress as both an absence of contact rigorously demarcated from the sensible, and a complete alteration of sensibility describes the sense of optical contiguity in the stereoscopic image. The technical reproduction of the effect of stereoscopy was first explored in the nineteenth century. The early developers of stereoscopic images analysed stereoscopy in terms of the resolution of a simulated binocular disparity. The effect of apparent tangibility was created, it was suggested, in the sensory confounding of image and solid object.⁸⁶ The application of stereoscopes in nineteenth century pornography extends the view of stereoscopy into an obscene form of unmediated ocular possession.⁸⁷ While the emphasis in these analyses is on mechanisms of convergence, this does not explain the significance of the illusion of perspective, or perpetual negotiation of a point of view by which the participant becomes incorporated in the lure of layers of stereoscopic space. On the one hand, pornography has capitalized on the implied tangibility of stereoscopic images. On the other hand, scientific optical technologies – from stereoscopic microscopes to virtual space simulators – have capitalized on its infinitely manipulable objectifying effects and shifting points of view. Thematically, the effect of stereoscopy suggests something more constitutive of disjunction than unmediated tangibility. If anything it is oscillating between a lawless and an uncontaminated optical contiguity; between a means of touching without being touched, and a means of touching what cannot be touched.⁸⁸

86 Charles Wheatstone, quoted in Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 122.

87 Crary, *ibid.*, pp. 122-127.

88 See my paper, "Virtual Bodies/Virtual Worlds," *Australian Feminist Studies* Vol. 19 (May 1994), forthcoming.

The restraint with which Levinas yields to the beloved is less related to an incommensurable intimacy than to a depth reminiscent of the carnality of stereoscopic vision. Participation in the profanation of the feminine is qualified by a project, a (dis)engagement of vision, in which the feminine, while remaining secret, must be brought to light. The "Phenomenology of Eros" perpetuates a vision of absence, as it loses its grasp, of the feminine. In the caress, the extent of the dispossession of the feminine is disguised in the inhumanity of night, which *art*, in its erosion of *light*, has the power to open and extend, but not transcend. The alterity of feminine subjectivity is not addressed, but suspended in a sense of touching what cannot be touched. Levinas reduces the feminine to his own carnal being, his alter ego, his own night. These issues will be considered in the next chapter, in the context of Irigaray's responses to Levinas's account of the beloved in the caress.

abandon, the night which remains is full of the horror of "it." With perfect hospitality the beloved restores the room into an intimate space by slipping off her clothes and turning herself into a little night light. It delights the lover that he no longer has any sense of her, or himself for that matter, as a human being. However, the little light also reminds him of his childhood, and how he used to lie awake in his room at night, listening to the adults still up and enjoying themselves in the living room.⁸⁹ Mindful now of his responsibilities in the grown up world, he leaves the beloved and goes back to that world, where who should he meet up with but his own son.

In depicting this scenario I mean to stress that there is clearly some ambivalence in Levinas's attitude towards eroticism, not least in the extent to which its separation from the ontological is imbued with an obsession with man's temporality. In the first section of this chapter I would like to present some questions raised by several of Levinas's commentators, mentioned briefly in the last chapter, concerning the distinction made between the ethical and the sexual in his work.

Irigaray's text "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" will be the focus of

89 In response to a question from Philippe Nemo asking Levinas to name the subject of *Existence and Existents*, Levinas replies, "I look at it with what I call the "there is"... "there is" is the phenomenon of appearance being "it." My reflection on the subject starts with childhood memories. One night alone, the adults continue life; the child feels the silence of his bed-room by "listening." *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 47-48.

90 Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," *Reading Levinas*, trans. Margaret Whitford, pp. 109-118.

A PASSION FOR LIGHT

A Little Night Light

The setting in which the erotic encounter takes place in Levinas's "Phenomenology of Eros" is an intimate interior, a room made by the beloved in her dwelling. When the lover first enters this space it is lit by a faulty overhead light. The light goes on and off intermittently, casting the lovers into the time-warp of an ambiguous night and day world, at the mercy of a tentative arc of connection. The problem is solved by the beloved switching off the light, whose illumination was too distinctive for comfort anyway. But far from being conducive to voluptuous abandon, the night which remains is full of the horror of "it." With perfect hospitality the beloved restores the room into an intimate space by slipping off her clothes and turning herself into a little night light. It delights the lover that he no longer has any sense of her, or himself for that matter, as a human being. However, the little light also reminds him of his childhood, and how he used to lie awake in his room at night, listening to the adults still up and enjoying themselves in the living room.⁸⁹ Mindful now of his responsibilities in the grown up world, he leaves the beloved and goes back to that world, where who should he meet up with but his own son.

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89 In response to a question from Philippe Nemo, asking Levinas to name the subject of *Existence and Existents*, Levinas replies: "It deals with what I call the "there is"... "there is" is the phenomenon of impersonal being: "it." My reflection on the subject starts with childhood memories. One sleeps alone, the adults continue life; the child feels the silence of his bedroom as "rumbling." *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 47-48.

90 Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," *Re-Reading Levinas*, trans. Margaret Whitford, pp. 109-118.

the discussion. In the second section, I will give an outline of Irigaray's reconceptualization of the caress and its relation to light in her earlier text, "The Fecundity of the Caress." (SE, 185-217)

Asym The first of the dozen or so questions which Irigaray addresses to Levinas is: "Is there otherness outside of sexual difference?" The question is intended to highlight both the need to address the meaning of sexual difference, and the extent to which Levinas's understanding of sexual difference in no way suggests an other who is not defined in terms of himself: "...the feminine appears as the underside or reverse side of man's aspiration toward the light, as its negative." Irigaray continues by taking up Levinas's comment that the caress is a "fundamental disorder" which does not touch the other. Order, she observes, is restored with the transformation of the flesh into a temporality which includes himself, in his encounter with a son.

Hum Irigaray argues that the disorder of Levinas's ethics is that he loses any idea of the function of the other sex as an alterity irreducible to the self. She notes that there are at least two reasons for this. First, despite speaking of a loss of all distinctions, there is always a distance maintained with the other in his account of love. This distance is not something produced together, between each other, by the lovers in their difference, as their shared pleasure or work or child. It is a one sided distance of the self from its invisible other, rather than an "im-mediate" ecstasy. Second, instead of the feminine other, Levinas uses the son to mediate man's sexual and ethical relations. By way of contrast, Irigaray's adoption of Levinas's theory in her own elaboration of sexual ethics follows from Levinas's insistence that erotic intimacy is necessarily an unmediated encounter with an entirely different other.

para Both Irigaray and Derrida observe that there is an unacknowledged assumption of sexual difference in Levinas's insistence on the primacy of ethics (otherness as wholly other, always already before sexual difference) over sexual difference (otherness as otherwise sexed, the other sex). Irigaray makes the point as follows: "To become other to himself, to return to the other, Levinas needs the son. The son is his being as same/other, in a simultaneous engenderment that he seems to forget somewhat."⁹¹ Derrida makes the point in the form of a question: "How can one mark as masculine the very thing said to be anterior, or even

91 Ibid., p. 110.

foreign, to sexual difference?"⁹² What both Irigaray and Derrida are asserting is that it is not possible to argue for the asexuality of ethical relations while specifying fecundity in (homo)sexual terms. Asymmetrical subjectivity, which is the site of transcendence, is already conditioned by an exclusion in the form of sexual difference. In deconstructing Levinas's position, Derrida cites the prioritization of the human other over the sexed other in a commentary by Levinas on the Genesis story:

Humanity cannot be thought beginning from two entirely different principles. There must be some *sameness* common to these *others*: woman has been chosen above man, but has come after him: the very femininity of woman consists in this initial afterwards...⁹³

Humanity is the necessary first principle in Levinas's ethics. Ethics is a relationship to an other which allows no other determination beyond otherness. This universal unconditionality would be compromised by any differentiation according to sex: "It isn't woman who is secondary, it is the relation to woman *qua* woman that doesn't belong to the primordial human plan. What is primary are the tasks accomplished by man as a human being, and by woman as a human being."⁹⁴ Levinas argues that woman, or the feminine, is not secondary to man, or the masculine, but rather the inauguration of difference, which is secondary to ethics. So the feminine is only secondary in its sexuate being, insofar as it is a relationship of sexual difference.

The problem which confronts Levinas here is that in the name of ethics he reinstates sexual neutrality in all its masculinity as the human paradigm. His solution which in no way engages with this problem, is to maintain that humans are sexual beings, but their sexuality is secondary to a transcendental humanity. Furthermore his masterful answer is a violation of his own ethics. As Chanter describes Derrida's question of Levinas: "...precisely in making sexual difference secondary, has [Levinas] not affirmed as neutral what is in fact masculine, has [Levinas] not

92 Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 40.

93 Emmanuel Levinas, "Et Dieu Créa la Femme," *Du sacré au saint*, 132-42, quoted by Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 41.

94 *Ibid.*

mastered femininity by mastering its origin, sexual difference[?]"⁹⁵ Thus mastered, writes Derrida, femininity always falls back within the sphere of the same: "Included in the same, it is by the same stroke excluded: enclosed within, foreclosed within the immanence of a crypt..."⁹⁶ Derrida reverses the significance of Levinas's naming of femininity as sexual difference: "[Levinas's formulation] is always to make sexual difference secondary *as* femininity."⁹⁷

The question of the relationship between sexual difference and ethics in Levinas's work can be pursued further. While self-realization is ultimately a relationship of proximity between father and son, Levinas's account of femininity and maternity does not allow for the possibility of an ethical responsibility between mother and daughter as *sexed* beings – the feminine has no other, no face to face. There can be no encounter with the feminine face – Levinas's account of carnal intimacy revolves around feminine effacement; it does not refer to faces which kiss.⁹⁸ On the other hand, maternity is a contact with the other divested of the eroticism of sexual difference. A consideration of the difference between woman and mother is not possible in Levinas's account of ethical subjectivity, while paternity – in relationship to a son – is the fulfillment of man's erotic and metaphysical relations with the Other. It is not a nostalgia for an unmediated relation with the (m)other which is the issue here,⁹⁹ but rather that the effacement of the feminine precludes any such relations at all. In Levinas's terms the feminine is not a sexuate incarnation which I can share with others; there is no touching to speak of in its mode of (non)expression; nothing of this other can be born of the caress.

Tracing the various levels used by Levinas in his work, Irigaray questions why fecundity is an ontological category opening onto a metaphysical desire, while carnal intimacy is defined as a phenomenological relation. Carnal intimacy does not open onto a

95 Chanter, "Antigone's Dilemma," *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 143.

96 Derrida, "At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am," *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 43.

97 Ibid.

98 Levinas does in fact speak of kissing, but only as either an ambiguous grasping/being grasped (OBBE, 75), or as a simulation of devouring – more a love-bite (EE, 43).

99 The mother-daughter relationship is the relationship, as Irigaray stresses, whose significance most eluded Freud, and the relationship whose non-signifiability most threatens women with psychosis. See Whiford, "Luce Irigaray and the female imaginary: Speaking as a woman," *Radical Philosophy* (Summer 1986), pp. 3-8.

transcendental being or the other, but rather, constitutes a perverse phenomenological interval in being. Irigaray challenges Levinas for the way he chooses to employ these two different levels of discourse in his writing – both a metaphysical level, and a phenomenological level from which metaphysical entities have been detached.¹⁰⁰ In choosing a phenomenological approach to describe the carnal relation, Levinas allows erotic love to fall within the constitution of the (one) subject in a universe of light. The alterity of the feminine is defined in relation to this ethical subjectivity, which realizes its responsibility through the feminine – through its donation, self-effacement and accommodation. The ethical is ultimately expressed in a social (face-to-face) as opposed to carnal interaction with the other. Invoking the figure of a female lover (*amante*) Irigaray rebukes Levinas for reducing the beloved to a passive femininity, which he turns from to claim his own infinity. Woman remains a being who is infantile and perverse,¹⁰¹ robbed of a chance of her own incarnation in order to grant man his.

Irigaray considers that Levinas's privileging of paternity as the locus of ethical self-realization is a displacement of the genealogy of mother/daughter relationships. As far as she is concerned this displacement is symptomatic of the extent to which Levinas's phenomenology of the caress remains implicated in an ontotheological framework. In this ontotheology, the divine is a transcendent ideal-ego or the Other from which man is separated, while woman is without genre of her own, defined negatively as man's material other, or alter-ego.¹⁰² There can be no sense of transcendence in an act reserved for man's animal nature, as an existence which he desires to overcome. Levinas's conception of sexual difference is set within the context of a suprasensory god who has withdrawn from the act of carnal love. Nothing of this monotheistic god is accessible to the senses – he can be grasped only in invisible form:

100 Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 113.

101 In Lingis's translation of "The Fecundity of the Caress," *Face to Face With Levinas*, p. 240, "*enfantine*" is rendered, with translator's licence, as "infantile," suggesting a perverse infinite childhood.

102 For a detailed discussion of Irigaray's analysis of ontotheology see Penelope Deutscher, "Passing From the Man/God Schism to the Feminine-Divine (Irigaray on Divinity: From Speculum to J'Aime à toi)," *Hypatia* Vol. 9 No. 3 (Fall 1994), forthcoming.

The law [of Moses] creates invisibility, so that God (in his glory?) cannot be looked upon. What happens to seeing, to flesh, in this disappearance of God? Where can one's eyes alight if the divine is no longer to be seen? And if it does not continue to dwell in the flesh of the other in order to illuminate it, to offer up to the look the other's flesh as divine, as the locus of a divine to be shared?¹⁰³

Against this ontotheological configuration of love and desire, which renders both gods and women more invisible than night, Irigaray proposes a divinity which is constituted in the everyday world, and partaken of by women in the fabrication of their existence. Irigaray describes the alternative as a "sensible transcendental," an apparently impossible configuration of carnality and divinity consisting of dual vertical and horizontal trajectories.¹⁰⁴

The vertical component of this divinity is an ideal feminine genre, which contrary to the charge of some feminist critics, has no biological essentialist basis,¹⁰⁵ but rather, is an ideal constituted within the alterity of sexual difference: "I will never be in a man's place, never will a man be in mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other – they are irreducible one to the other." (SE, 13) Irigaray is not proposing heterosexuality as the paradigm of irreducible difference, although she has been criticized for doing so.¹⁰⁶ If anything, in *Speculum* she argues (and as I have already noted, has been challenged for her global assertion) that no such relationship currently

103 Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas; On the Divinity of Love," p. 117.

104 The "sensible transcendental" is a key term of Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Margaret Whitford admits that she finds the term difficult to explain. She gives a provisional definition: "...the sensible transcendental is not a precise concept; it is a condensed way of referring to all the conditions of women's collective access to subjectivity...it can be seen as the symbolic order *in its possibilities of and for transformation*, in other words, language as a field of enunciation, process, response, and becoming, but a field in which there are *two* poles of enunciation, so that the 'I' may be 'male' or 'female,' and so may be the 'you,' so that the speaker may change positions, exchange with the other sex; it follows, too, that the divine other must also be potentially of the female sex." *Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 47. For Irigaray, the changeability of 'you' and 'I' is not a changeability of positions but a complicity of naming.

105 Critics of Irigaray's "biologism" as well as her "essentialism," "anti-essentialism," "positivism," "empiricism," "negativism," "ahistoricism," "apoliticism" and "phallocentrism" are discussed by Diana J. Fuss, "Essentially Speaking: Luce Irigaray's Language of Essence," *Hypatia* Vol. 3 No. 3 (Winter 1989), pp. 62-80.

106 See for example, Judith Butler's discussion of various theorists who criticize Irigaray for failing to disassociate feminine sexuality from compulsory heterosexuality, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 1-34.

exists in Western culture. Her statement is aimed at an entrenched masculine based "timeless" heterosexual paradigm which reproduces a hom(m)o-sexual sexuate identity – an identity defined in terms of the Same. In this configuration of sexual difference, woman has no ontological status; her existence is unrepresentable. Woman is the nonincorporable remainder of a masculine identity, which defines both itself and the feminine in binary opposition. By way of contrast, in her statement about the irreducibility of one sex to the other, Irigaray is emphasizing that each sex is not entirely incorporable by the other; *between* the sexes, there is always a material remainder.¹⁰⁷ This remainder is the grounds of sexuate existence, which Irigaray compares with the anonymous materiality of existence which Levinas proposes: "[t]he *there is* remains a present that may be subject to pressure by the god, but it does not form a foundation for the triumph of sexual fecundity." (SE, 14) The point of the non-substitutibility of heterosexual relations would be that sexual difference could never be fixed; *sexual difference* (which Irigaray calls hetero-sexuality) would be irreducible difference.

In her later work, particularly *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray describes gender as a style, as an identity which resists formalization and is unable to be incorporated, rather than a fixture of identity. Irigaray argues for an historicity of sexual ethics which means that changes in sexual ethics require and are produced as cultural changes in the expression of desire. The non-substitutibility of the sexuate other – or a (hetero)sexuality conceived of as different desires, would be expressed as different sexual identities in cultural (which include sexual) relations. In other words, Irigaray is arguing that gender is itself a transcendence rather than a relationship confined to the reproduction of a ho(m)mo-sexual sexual economy. Irreducible to the same, each sex would be an horizon of difference for the other. While unable to account for the other sex, sexual difference cannot be realized by each sex on its own. Sexual difference is expressed in intersubjective relations, in the sensible or horizontal component of the sensible transcendental.

¹⁰⁷ The remainder of sexual difference can be contrasted with the remainder of masculine identity: "If there is no more "earth" to press down/repress, to work, to represent, but also and always to desire (for one's own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains for the ex-istence of the subject?" (SF, 133)

The horizontal component of the sensible transcendental is the materiality of existence – morphogenesis, the domain of embodiment, encounters with others, sensibility. Instead of creating a schism between this domain and the domain of a suprasensible divine, Irigaray argues that the creation of an irreducible vertical plane of the sensible transcendental is the mediator of all horizontal relations. The importance of this mediation is the establishment of relations of distance. Irigaray is referring here to the non-substitutibility of others (one-for-the-other) in intersubjective relations. The sensible transcendental limits the incorporation or possession of others, or the reduction of identity into sameness and excess, as otherwise occurs in "mirror-like" or specular identificatory relations: "Gender stands for the unsubstitutable position of the *I* and the *you* (*le tu*) and of their modes of expression. Once the difference between the *I* and *you* is gone, then asking, thanking, appealing, questioning...also disappear." (SG, 170) For Irigaray, the reversibility of speaking positions is not the condition of linguistic identity, but rather, intersubjective relations are dependent on the complicitous production of conjunctions.

Both vertical and horizontal vectors of the sensible transcendental are necessary for intersubjective relations between women. The horizontal component is the field in which women negotiate with others the envelope of their own desire. Within a ho(m)mo-sexual economy women have no means of representing what Irigaray calls a "love of self," or the positioning of the self within the self. Without reference to an imaginary or ideal identity, constituted in the interval of the vertical component of the sensible transcendental, women have no means of self-differentiation, no genre. Irigaray argues that the representation of women in their materiality as an absence/lack of differentiation of self falls within the sexual ethics of a masculine ho(m)mo-sexual economy. Irigaray's insistence on the need for a feminine love of self is a response to this abyss/confusion of feminine identity. Paradoxical as it may seem, the need for a love of self is most critical in sexual relations between women, where the differentiation of self and other tests the limits of equivalence: "She herself cannot watch herself desiring (except through another woman? Who is not herself? One of the dangers of love between women is the confusion in their identities, the lack of respect for or of perception of differences.)" (SE, 63)

The questions of sexual and ontological difference are not opposed in Irigaray's configuration of the sensible transcendental. They are

inseparably chiasmically co-constituted. I prefer a different neologism to Derrida's "hymen" to think this difference as passage. Rather than problematizing the terms sexuality and sexual difference as hymen I propose the term *sexuality*, whose double chiasm "xx" refers to the vertical vector of feminine difference, which, as Irigaray insists, is missing from Levinas's conception of sexuality and the divine. It would not be possible to think "sexuality" as a singular and originary desire without reference to sexual difference, but neither would it be possible to think sexual difference without a feminine desire. In terms of mother-daughter and other feminine relationships, be they linguistic, erotic, identificatory or political, *sexuality* would refer to a sexual difference which is not constituted in binary terms, but as a continuous positioning of self in the divergence of self: "...love of the same, within the same, is a form of innerness that can open up to the other without loss of self or of the other in the bottomlessness of an abyss." (SE, 69) *Sexuality* is not a monosexual discourse. It is a feminine transcendence-in-embodiment, which unlike the ho(m)mo-sexual, or mono-sexual economy of Levinas's ethics, is not a loss of identity but a sexual being.

Irigaray's notion of a "sensible transcendental" inverts the spheres of sensible and transcendental relations. Sexual difference is an ethical difference, which must be realized at the level of linguistic, legal and cultural differences, that is as visible difference. Sexuality is an irreducible, that is transcendental relation, within whose ideality the visible is materially constituted. In her questioning of Levinas's ethics, Irigaray argues that by passing over the genealogy of women in pursuit of man's divine other, Levinas has lost all sense not only of the ethics of sexual difference, but also the link between what Irigaray calls the two most spiritual of the senses, listening and seeing.¹⁰⁸ Thus, contrary to Levinas's intentions, humanity is left without the possibility of either sexual or divine relations. This, and not the anonymous materiality of existence is what Irigaray discovers is the extent of the dispossession lurking within Levinas's account of the invisible.

108 Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 117.

Fecundity and Light

Irigaray begins her reading of Levinas's "Phenomenology of Eros" with her own description of erotic pleasure, which she describes as a pleasure taken by sensuality in its beginning. This is not an archeological or a "new age" conception of eroticism, a re-discovery or re-enactment of an original birth. Erotic pleasure is an imaginary beginning, a birth after and before the present, which will never have taken place. It is an opening only to a perpetuation of that opening. Voluptuousness undoes all schemas, all thematization of the world. It is a beginning without memory, a beginning which knows no other. In contrast to conscious motivation, erotic pleasure is an acceptance of that which gives of itself, of that which is of no account. It has no basis in the subject that sees things, but is a state of immersion, a being lost in the "sensual pleasure of birth into a world where the look itself remains tactile – open to the light." (SE, 185)

Rather than associating eroticism with the birth of language, as is the case in Merleau-Ponty's account of "wild meaning," Irigaray associates eroticism with the encounter of wonder. In her reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, Irigaray draws on Descartes' reading of wonder as the first of the passions:

Wonder is not an enveloping. It corresponds to time, to space-time before and after that which can delimit, go round, encircle. It constitutes an *opening* prior to and following that which surrounds, enlaces. It is the passion of that which is already born and not yet re-enveloped in love. Of that which is touched and moves toward and within the attraction, without nostalgia for the first dwelling. Outside of repetition. It is the passion of the first encounter. And of perpetual rebirth? An affect that would subsist among all forms of others irreducible each to the other. The passion that inaugurates love and art. And thought. (SE, 81-82)

Irigaray refers to the touching in wonder as the touch of the caress. The caress is not so much a touch as it is the gesture of touch, an alternation between movement and posture, simultaneously dissolving and constituting itself without memory or distinction. This gesture is a first touching, an attraction without consummation, always on the threshold of appetite, not yet anticipating or yearning an other. The caress affirms

and protects its in-finite otherness in the prolongation of a birth which will never come to pass. Untouched by mastery, it is before and beyond any subject or setting. Life, made familiar in its consumption and habitation, is suspended and reopened in the gesture of the caress.

Levinas concentrates on the withdrawal of the feminine in his phenomenology of the caress. Eroticism is a movement away from light, beyond contact, a dissolution of incarnation into an unsignifiable carnality. Irigaray, however, regards the dimension of touch in the caress as an incomparable sense of incarnation, as a gesture prolonging its incompleteness. Rather than a diffusion of formal identity which is sought out in the elusiveness of touch, Irigaray conceives of the caress as a participation in the alterability, or transmutability of flesh. This conception is not set against Levinas's text, but instead, extends the significance of touch in a way which he does not consider.

Irigaray is not alone in re-evaluating the significance of touch in Levinas's work. Edith Wyschogrod, for example, also gives a reading of touch which emphasizes its unique relationship to incarnation. Wyschogrod considers touch within the phenomenological premise that the subject in the world is based on a corporeality which eludes observation, yet is the principle through which the world appears. According to this corporeally based subjectivity, as soon as we apprehend the given, we apprehend ourselves. Rather than including touch in a general theory of sensation, Wyschogrod goes so far as to insist that it is not a sense at all. Instead, tactility is a generic sensibility which constitutes the opposition of interiority and exteriority. In terms of Levinas's theory of proximity, touch becomes the body's vulnerability to the impingement of the world. Seeing is predicated on the alterity of touch. Founded upon tactility, interiority is defined as that which remains inaccessible to contact.

In Wyschogrod's interpretation, touch escapes any general theory of sensation. The body positioned by touch is not manifest in consciousness. Anterior to and underlying all sensation, tactility is the actualization of the subject as a singling out of the body in proximity with the given. Touching does not incorporate the body into the world as a whole. It is an exposition based on a disruption of context. Wyschogrod refers to "being touched" as a "being moved," a comportment of the body which requires the abandonment of a previous schema. The motility of the body points to the contingency of totality, rather than the unified totality of an overriding consciousness. The importance of tactility is that

before any conscious determination of one's being in the world, touching is a way of actualizing without reference to any schema or telos, without beginning by way of the possible. Devoid of reference to any locatable origin, touching is the condition of possibility of ritual transfigurations rather than conscious acts.¹⁰⁹

In Levinas's account of proximity, the given is free of conscious determination, but this freedom is not defined in terms of autonomy. It is a freedom which is inescapable, one which must be borne without choice or control. Consciousness is an illusory freedom compared to the insistence of the exteriority of its possibility. The immediacy of sensation is underscored, as Levinas has sought to argue, by the fundamental alterity of the given. In Irigaray's reconceptualization of this freedom, incarnation is dependent on an other, not an absent, imperceivable or misconceived other, but on an other whose indefinability contests and reaffirms the givenness of (a different) position. The alterity of the other in eroticism is an encounter which recommences the substance of being. In Levinas's ethics of alterity, my own incarnation commences in the unconditional "Here I am" for an other. However, Irigaray argues that ethics must involve another question: "Who art thou?" – an acknowledgement of wonder. This sensibility is a passion for the other's resistance or position of unstitutibility, an opposition which positions me, by grace of which "I am." (SE, 74) It is within the framing of this non-autonomous freedom that Irigaray reconsiders the significance of touch as the (re)exposition of incarnation.

Irigaray describes the tactile as the most archaic and subtle mode of perception. Touching abides by a contact which does not dissolve or remember borders but seeks a perpetual reaffirmation of palpable flesh. Touch is the sense which underlines all others, and the sense which forgets and reconstitutes itself in the moment of touching:

Before orality comes to be, touch is already in existence. No nourishment can compensate for the grace or work of touching. Touch makes it possible to wait, to gather strength, so that the other will return to caress and reshape, from within and from without, a flesh that is given back to itself in the gesture of love. The most subtly necessary guardian of my life is the other's flesh. (SE, 187)

109 Wyschogrod, "Doing Before Hearing," *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*.

Irigaray describes the mode of touching in the caress as an encounter in which all desire of imposing an identity on the in-stance is sacrificed to remaining perpetually on the threshold of its attraction. Irigaray's account of the caress is not a notion of pure being, but a perpetual opening within the language of being. The verb "to be" is not absent in the caress; it is the indefinitely present "will have been" of the future perfect.

Voluptuousness is an abandonment of the familiar, a staking of life in the insecurity of each moment. Levinas describes this as a movement away from the light. Irigaray takes this movement further. Voluptuousness is a re-turning to a state of movement, a corporeality oscillating between matter and light. Far from simply being a movement into night, this is a passion for an unopposable, unknowable, unfixable light. The sheer novelty of light, and not the clarity of knowledge, is what animates the thoughts of the philosophers. For Descartes it is a passion for a light which, free of an object, rejuvenates the brain. For Nietzsche, it is the lightness of losing one's gravity in a contact with newness – in a spark which annihilates thought (SE, 80).¹¹⁰

Levinas calls the wonder of light which Plato put at the origin of philosophy "an astonishment before the natural and the intelligible." (EE, 22) Irigaray notes Descartes' comment that astonishment is wonder turned to a kind of stupor which paralyzes. Astonishment is an excess of wonder, and unless rid of all memory of the encounter remains incapable of more (SE, 80-81). In Levinas's own account, discussed in the previous chapter, light is described as the effect of immobilization. Irigaray is more interested in considering illumination as a passion, as a first and inexhaustible love.¹¹¹ Wonder is not only an astonishment by light, but a perpetual movement, an opening up to light within the immobilization of sight.

For Irigaray, the caress is the most elementary gesture of fecundity. She links this gesture, attentive to the regeneration and renewal of life, with a love that is given over to the source of light. The source of light, as far as Irigaray is concerned, is the fecundity of matter – a night in whose elemental indivisibility there is a future "where things have not

110 "How you looked in your morning, your sudden sparks and wonders of my solitude, you my old beloved – *wicked* thoughts." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 202.

111 See "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato's Symposium, Diotima's Speech," (SE, 20-33). Irigaray discovers within the unfolding of Diotima's speech a form of love as a mediator of fecundity, which is excluded and passed over in the founding of an operative, teleological love of things and ultimately, truth.

yet taken their places but remain possible." (SE, 197) The movement of illumination is what precedes any ordering of and incorporation into a world, prior to any vision. Conceived of in terms of touch, light is the first discovery, the first (re)enfolding of flesh, the materialization of the body, the birth into a world. It is the matter necessary to the creation of form – the possibility of morphogenesis, the body which is never coincident with itself. Illumination is "that less-than-nothing which is not nothing – light." (SE, 197) Rather than theorizing matter as the abyss of light, for Irigaray light is a never-to-be grasped beginning, the matter without which there can be no emergence of life out of chaos and formlessness.

The abandonment of the loving gesture is not simply a quitting of the status of existent, but for the woman lover as much as a man, the most absolute trust in the transcendence of life. The depth of night to which Levinas refers in his phenomenology of Eros is described by Irigaray as a place to which the woman lover returns, to which she allows herself to sink, given over to the source of a light in which she can be reborn. The primordiality of this depth must be distinguished from the concept of depth as "bathos" which refers to a geometrical depth of already formed material things. Irigaray conceives of depth as a medium, as an immersion in a medium whose density is not nothing, without which it is not possible to conceive of things.¹¹² The lightness of the caress is an opening of the foldings of flesh to the point of non-signifyingness, to the nothingness of matter. It is a sinking into a night where the female lover waits for light. The night of Eros is for her the future of matter, pregnant with the promise of a new day. The night is a nothingness that she cultivates for its grace. This grace is the bestowal of a renewed vision of the cosmos, an assumption of the flesh, with the coming of light.

Irigaray's conception of love differs from Levinas's theorization of love as a desire for the abyss. For Irigaray, lovers negotiate the chiasm which together they become, entrusting between them in their exchange of love that they will each be delivered separately into the world:

112 For a discussion of different phenomenological accounts of depth see Edward S. Casey, "'The Element of Voluminousness': Depth and Place Re-examined," *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, p. 11. Irigaray explores the concept of elemental depth as a state of immersion in "Speaking of Immemorial Waters," *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

...surpassing the corruption of what has already been seen. Return to a certain night whence the lovers can arise differently illuminated and enlightened. They give themselves to each other and give up what has already been made. Of themselves and of reason. Opening to an innocence that runs the risk of folding back on itself in defense of the past. In this gesture each one runs the risk of annihilating, killing, or rescuscitating. (SE, 193)

The simultaneity of desire and transcendence in this cycle of eros and incarnation is equated by Irigaray with the life of angels, messengers of the divine yet to be brought to light on earth (SE, 200).¹¹³ Irigaray invokes the angelic not only for its touching upon the divine, but in the name of an exorbitant ultramateriality, which in its unsignifyingness has been generally discarded from, and considered at best, supplementary to meaningful exchange. Angels are symptoms of a love divided from its flesh, not yet incarnate, not yet in the world. The fate of matter in its equivocacy has been left as Levinas leaves it, to a future too far beyond and not yet far enough to be expressed in language. Within the confines of Levinas's enclosed and enclosing world, angels rather than/like lovers, argues Irigaray, circulate as mediators of a horizon, opening up the present to the possible: "Angels destroy the monstrous, that which hampers the possibility of a new age; they come to herald the arrival of a new birth, a new morning." (SE, 15)

Irigaray theorizes the exorbitant ultramateriality in which lovers are absorbed, as an indefinability which she calls the mucous. I have already discussed Irigaray's concept of the mucous as it relates to the tangible invisible in Merleau-Ponty's account of vision. The mucous is theorized there as an interval of light refractory to the oppositions required for reversibility, but nevertheless an indeterminacy which "far from being able to yield to my decisions, obliges me to see." (SE, 156) In her study of Levinas and also in her theorizing of the elemental, Irigaray elaborates on the mucous. Levinas limits his experience of erotic love to the phenomenology of the caress. Irigaray describes a phenomenology of orgasm:

¹¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Jeanne Cooke & Judith Poll (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), p.13. Irigaray describes the text as "a shifting forms of ... from a woman's ... search of her

¹¹³ For discussion of the angel as intermediary in Irigaray's work, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, pp. 161-162.

Luminous night, touched with a quickening whose denseness never appears in the light. Neither permanently fixed, nor shifting and fickle. Nothing solid survives, yet that thickness responding to its own rhythms is not nothing. Quickening in movements both expected and unexpected. Your space, your time are unable to grasp their regularity or contain their foldings and unfoldings. The force unleashed has an intensity which cannot be anywhere measured, nor contained.¹¹⁴

Here, Irigaray proposes a carnality which surpasses Levinas's reckoning of night. The use of the mucous in the discussion of the relationship between eroticism and incarnation is consistent with, and the fundamental articulation of, Irigaray's general concern with a "parousia of the body."¹¹⁵

The concept of mucosity plays a strategic role in Irigaray's refiguration of desire and sexual difference. While desire conventionally designates the place of the copula or interval of meaning, Irigaray argues that this configuration is tantamount to suppressing any change in desire by relegating it to an unchangeable place in relation to sexual difference. Irigaray proposes different economies of desire rather than a perpetuation of the problematic of desire theorized as a tension within the configuration of presence:

...desire ought to be thought of as a changing dynamic whose outlines can be described in the past, sometimes in the present, but never definitively predicted. Our age will have failed to realize the full dynamic reserve signified by desire if it is referred back to the economy of the *interval*, if it is situated in the attractions, tensions, and actions occurring between *form* and *matter*, but also in the *remainder* that subsists after each creation or work, *between* what has already been identified and what has still to be identified, and so on. (SE, 8)

¹¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie & Judith Still (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), p.13. Irigaray describes this text, with its shifting forms of address as "some fragments from a woman's voyage as she goes in search of her identity in love." p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Whitford, "Irigaray's Body Symbolic," *Hypatia*, p. 102-103.

Irigaray accuses Levinas of confining the feminine to the interval in his account of love, abandoning the beloved to a non-existent dwelling in an unlit and infantile place. The beloved disappears into the anonymity of flesh, a non-human animality in the night and a humanist maternity by day. While the caress is the threshold of his fecundity, it is the exhaustion of hers in an extravagant carnality that will never dwell in the light of day.

Against Levinas's proposition that sexual difference is a dichotomous relation constituted secondarily to an ethical other, Irigaray argues that "in order for an ethics of sexual difference to come into being, we must constitute a possible place for each sex, body, and flesh to inhabit." (SE, 17-18) This possibility is constituted, not in the desire of the interval, but on the threshold which opens onto the mucous. This is the opening up of an interval in which each sex, each desire can establish a chiasmus "in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself." (SE, 9) Beyond and before the return to this threshold, Irigaray conceptualizes sexual difference as a possibility realizable only in its incarnation in the world, as an immanent transcendence of difference:

To do this requires time, both space and time. Perhaps we are passing through an era when *time must redeploy space?* A new morning of and for the world? A remaking of immanence and transcendence, notably through this *threshold* which has never been examined as such: the female sex. The threshold that gives access to the *mucous*. (SE, 18)

Temporality, as Levinas observes, is original light, in the divergence of the identical from itself (OBBE, 30). This is how light differs from both sight and visibility – it is the bond, the *being between them*. Levinas's theory of experience is an elaboration of the extent to which the condition of phenomena is the temporality of light: "Things are discovered in their qualities, but the qualities are in lived experience, which is temporal. The exposition, the phenomenality of being, can not be separated from time." (OBBE, 31) The trajectory of Levinas's ethics can be characterized as a dream of passing beyond light. Derrida describes Levinas's conception of erotic light as: "A community of non-presence, and therefore of non-phenomenality. Not a community without light...but a community anterior to Platonic light. A light before neutral light, before the truth which arrives as a third party, the truth "which we look toward

together..."¹¹⁶ Irigaray's conception of erotic light is not a dream of going beyond light, but of a sexual community within light, of a movement between night and light. Her conception of a light before Platonic light does not take her into the night of non-phenomenality, but to a philosophy of the elemental, a philosophy before and after Platonic light.¹¹⁷ In her gesture towards a new day, Irigaray is calling for nothing less than a new history of light, the grammar for which she begins to address in the conceptual space of the mucous. I would describe it as a genealogy of photosensitivity,¹¹⁸ rather than a light that illuminates reason or nature or god.

Irigaray continues Levinas's analysis of the caress beyond the point where he resigns when he loses all concept of matter. Irigaray takes this issue up as one of wonder, in the unforeseeable nature of exposure to otherness.

Is it the place of man's second birth? And of Woman's? A birth into a transcendence, that of the other, still in the world of the senses ("sensible"), still physical and carnal, and already spiritual...Is it the place of incidence and junction of body and spirit, which has been covered over again and again, hardened through repetitions that hamper growth and flourishing?...Wonder would be the passion of the most material and the most metaphysical, of their possible conception and fecundation one by the other. A third dimension. An intermediary. Neither the one nor the other. Which is not to say neutral or neuter. (SE, 82)

Irigaray describes the encounter of wonder as a sensitivity which brings nothing into relief, provides no outlines or resistance, but moves with

¹¹⁶ Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, p. 92.

¹¹⁷ For an account of Irigaray's reliance on the work of pre-Socratic philosophers in her development of the elemental see Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, p. 168-172.

¹¹⁸ The term "sensitivity" as a form of sensibility is a nineteenth century aesthetic term. Discussion of the political deployment of this humanist attribute is beyond the scope of the thesis. For example, Sander Gilman, "Touch, sexuality and disease," *Medicine and the five senses*, ed. W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 198-224, describes the depiction of the sense of touch, conceptualized as the least discriminating of the senses, as the dominant sense of blacks and primitivism. The implication to be drawn from this insidious assertion was that dark-skinned races had no aesthetic sensibility. In using the term "photosensitivity," I am emphasising the extent to which Irigaray's genealogy of light is directed at a re-reading of sensitivity in her conceptualization of touch.

impulsion, intensity, energy, colour and rhythm. Against Levinas's restless matter suspended in light Irigaray invokes the mobility of flesh remembering and abandoned in the lightness of an untraceable touch. Light, temporality, is a being in passage, a being between two interiorities; an immemorial interiority of the mucous, the lability of matter devoid of the separation of night and light; and an interiority of the body-skin, defined as that which remains inaccessible to contact, the interiority of bodily inscription. The extent to which this equivocacy in light is granted to each sex together is the extent to which each can be incarnate. Light, the transmutability of matter, is the medium of our separate birth into a world.

PART IV

EROTIC LIGHT

Neutered Light

Irigaray's analysis of "lighting" in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas can be placed in the broader context of her work on the question of sexual difference. As Judith Butler comments, in Irigaray's later texts, most notably in the various lectures collected together as *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray revises her argument of the unrepresentability of women in phallogocentric discourse.² Irigaray discusses the issue along a double axis of the genders, by which she means both in terms of their current states of existence, and in their coming into being through time. Irigaray refers to this relationship between the sexes as their genealogies, by which she means to distinguish genealogies from Western "timeless" familial models of gender:



No social and cultural relationship between the sexes is possible without that double consideration. Actually our History has collapsed male and female genealogies into one or two family triangles, all stred by the male. The oedipus complex as elaborated by Freud is one example of such triangles. But Freud's model can be traced back at least as far as ancient Greece. In order to have two genealogical lines, it is always necessary to have recourse to a transcendent and unique God-Father. Sometimes his name is Zeus, sometimes Jupiter. He is also God the father of Judeo-Christian tradition. (SG, v)

1. *Volley* (Ursula Pürzer), a utopic and pyromaniac fantasy film, a science-and-horror film, set in the year 2700 in the burnt out city of Aedra, and described in its press material as "a Midnight Movie." Angela Hesse Schönel, Diether Schipek, Ursula Pürzer, Vienna: Loop TV-Video-Film Production, 1991. Shot on Super 8, blown up to 16mm. Color/84 mins.
2. My emphasis here is different to Judith Butler's, *Gender Trouble*, p. 153, 25n. Her note suggests that Irigaray's revision of her argument is indicative of an inconsistent position.

EROTIC LIGHT

"We burn our hands fighting for the sun."¹

Neutered Light

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- 1 Volley (Ursula Pürner), a utopic and pyromaniac: *Flaming Ears*, a comix-and-horror film, set in the year 2700 in the burnt out city of Asche, and described in its press material as "a Midnight Movie." Angela Hans Scheirl, Dietmar Schipek, Ursula Pürner, Vienna: Loop TV-Video-Film Production, 1991. Shot on Super 8, blown up to 16mm. Colour/84 mins.
 - 2 My emphasis here is different to Judith Butler's, *Gender Trouble*, p. 153, 25n. Her note suggests that Irigaray's revision of her argument is indicative of an inconsistent position.

In her analysis of Plato's *Hystera*, Irigaray emphasizes that the representation of feminine participation in reproduction is subsumed within an exclusively patrilineal economy, where it remains supplementary to a fantasy of masculine autogenesis. The exclusion is achieved in the differentiation between form and matter, in which matter remains the site of an unthematizable materiality. While masculine identity is formulated in opposition to matter, the feminine as matter cannot be thought. As Butler explains: "For Irigaray, the "feminine" which cannot be said to be anything, to participate in ontology at all, is – and here grammar fails us – set under erasure as the impossible necessity that enables any ontology."³

Irigaray changes from an emphasis on analysing the metaphoric displacement of matter in Western philosophy when she discusses the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology and Levinas's distinction between ontology and ethics. Her interest lies with the significance of matter as a precedent which alters being, but which being cannot claim as its self. Irigaray is mindful that matter has an historical determination as the catechresis within which the ideal subject finds accommodation, and as such, cannot be embraced as the site of the feminine. Rather than aligning the feminine with matter, Irigaray is insisting on a feminine morphology.

Irigaray works against the metaphoric displacement of matter as the inconceivable site and receptacle for the reproduction of an intelligible form. In place of this neutralization of the participation of matter, Irigaray develops a sexualized morphology; the alterity of matter is implicated in morphology, or the body as it is lived and represented culturally. Her aim is to reopen the constitution of matter which has been directed towards the establishment of an isomorphism between phallic sexuality and systems of representation. She does this, not by valorizing a maternal-feminine origin, but by considering matter as it originates within current ideas of sexual difference. What Irigaray discovers at the heart of this discourse is the mythology of an immutable form of engendering which, historically, sexual difference serves to reproduce:

Sexual difference has always served procreation. For some time now, sexual difference has not played a part in the creation of culture, except in a division of roles and functions that does not allow both sexes to be subjects. Thus we are

3 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), p. 39.

confronted by a certain *subjective pathology* from both sides of light of sexual difference. (SG, 172)

The effect of reproducing subjectivity as an ideal which divorces itself from any participatory matter is that as a cultural manifestation, sexually differentiated subjectivity completely disappears. Instead, sexual difference is a formal distinction which upholds the ideal of a singular subjectivity which is universally reversible. Devoid of formal distinction, matter itself is neutral. Challenging the view that the neuter is an originary asexuality, Irigaray comments that the neuter arises only after sexual difference has been eradicated (SG, 173).

Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference is directed towards the redeployment of the cultural divisions which act to naturalize the materiality of the feminine and establish culturally the intelligibility of the masculine. As has been discussed in *Part III*, Irigaray approaches sexuate identity in terms of a corporeally based ideality which she calls the "sensible transcendental." As both an ideality and a materially constituted singularity, the sensible transcendental precludes the possibility of basing a feminine subjectivity on the notion of a familial origin. It is not possible to think the sensible transcendental as exclusive to one sex, nor is it possible without an other sex. The sensible transcendental is the condition of possibility of the instantiation of sexual difference at the level of cultural, linguistic and legal relations.

Along with her calls for the representability of feminine incarnation, identity and kinship there is an accompanying shift in Irigaray's attitude towards light. Instead of confining her project to an elaboration of the implication of photology in the representation of an isomorphic imaginary, I am arguing that Irigaray also adopts and develops a genealogical approach to the material conditions of that which comes to light. There are several aspects of the genealogical approach to origins which are adopted from Nietzsche, which are of particular relevance to Irigaray's approach to light. First, genealogy does not pursue origins as distant ideals, but attends to the concrete and tangential details of their beginnings. Second, genealogy is not concerned with establishing origins in terms of sameness, but with the operative possibilities opened up within irretrievable differences. Third, genealogy regards as animating and generative the risks associated with the dissipation of form into carnality. Carnality is not something to be transcended, but the unsurpassable labour of desire.

chiasm. By defining the parameters of embodiment within the sphere of light, or the medium of inhabitation of a world, Merleau-Ponty makes an important contribution to Irigaray's mobilization of light in her argument for the sexualization of morphology. Merleau-Ponty's anti-Platonic, phenomenological conceptualization of light is integral to his account of the profound intertwining of the cultural and carnal in lived embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's subordination of the concept of "natural light" to carnally constituted light adds weight to his consideration of the body as an historical actualization, existing temporally rather than as a natural entity. Light's diacritical structure as an ideality inseparable from its experience is the means by which Merleau-Ponty inscribes embodiment as a modality of sensibility rather than a thing perceived. Definable neither as a concept nor object, but within the language of sensibility, any notion of a body is produced by the light or perception which dawns through it.

A feature of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of light is that as light loses its ontological privilege, the body also becomes an ontological question within the terms of perception. Nevertheless, in the course of considering embodiment as an ambiguity whose structuration defies figuration in phenomenological terms, Merleau-Ponty still preserves the dualisms of subject/object, form/matter, and seer/visible. Irigaray identifies the problem as residing with Merleau-Ponty's assumption of the indivisibility of the chiasm. In support of an indefinite reversibility of seer and visible, touch and tangible, the chiasm is the "neuter" indeterminate ground which supports and mediates a closed circuit of alternations between subject and object, visible and tangible.

In response to Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray undertakes a phenomenology of the chiasmic passage between interior and exterior. Her intervention into Merleau-Ponty's demonstration of the reversibility of flesh is made by way of her example of two hands touching, in contact but without grasping anything. While visibility is organized to incorporate the look of the seer, Irigaray argues that the recruitment of the tangible body in the articulation of that totality is based on the *irreversibility* of touch. Seeing things is conditional on an interval of irreversibility, an unaccountable difference between the visible and the tangible. The difference is between the body as a reflected space and the body as an intuitive space. Merleau-Ponty cannot entertain the origin of this difference except in terms of the subject. The invisibility of the

chiasm which does not see itself is an absence of presence or invisibility defined only in terms of the visibility of the seer.

Irigaray credits an other which bears no divisions, not the reversibility of the chiasm, as the origin of the indeterminate affection of the touching hands. Irigaray refers to the affection of touch in metonymic terms, as a primary opening which cannot be recovered or grasped by substitution. It is a passage which remains perpetually on the threshold of opening; an intimacy which could not be closer, and yet an interval which cannot be closed. With the invisibility of the tangible thus thematized, Irigaray argues that any illusion of closure of the visible in the reversibility of the visible and the tangible is achievable only through the institution of a solipsistic fantasy of an other whose look establishes the seer in the visible. Merleau-Ponty himself acknowledges this solipsistic structure as a "fundamental narcissism of all vision." As an empirical pregnancy which is mediated by the reversibility of the seer and the visible, the concept of flesh displaces a maternity which is a mystery without the seer.

Irigaray extends her analysis of the chiasm to the mystery of the carnal resourcing of light. While illuminating all but itself, this prediscursive light remains at its source in obscurity. Merleau-Ponty equates the invisibility of light with the non-presentability of its carnal constitution, an indeterminacy which is the reserve that establishes the seer in the visible. The indeterminacy of light is the "lighting" of the gaze, or the medium in which the look refers to itself. Merleau-Ponty encrypts the mystery in an elision of the carnal and maternal, absorbing the carnality of the maternal-feminine within the one ontological tissue which gives birth to itself. Irigaray figures the obscurity of the invisible differently, as a passing over an originary difference without which there can be no difference within same. As a result, Merleau-Ponty cannot speak of different forms of flesh. If the sexed body is part of the visible totality in which it opens forth, then differently sexed bodies must be blind to one another. In Merleau-Ponty's hands, instead of an interval of dialogue or passage, the chiasmic interval of material indeterminacy is a neutralization of light.

In his critique of totality, Levinas takes up the question of the origin of the diacritical constitution of light. The issue, which is related to Levinas's radicalization of the indeterminacy of the other in his prioritization of ethics, also hinges upon Irigaray's articulation of an ethics of sexual difference. In order to thematize existence, Levinas argues that it is not sufficient to account for the contents of consciousness. Light is the

medium which makes things into a world, or a distantiated object inhabitable by and belonging to the seer. However, it is also necessary to consider the disappearance of the phenomenal world into that which is refractory to representation, or the sense of an unthematizable materiality which still endures in the absence of light. Rather than a chiasmic ambiguity, Levinas argues that there is a fundamental dispossession or exteriority of origin underlining the totality of the visual. This dispossession, refractory to manifestation, is of the order of differentiation rather than illumination.

Levinas describes the visible as a supremely precarious investment in the commonality of sensibility. Unlike Merleau-Ponty he does not regard carnality as the basis of communication and sociability. For Levinas, sensibility is secondary to a sociality determined by the transcendence of an other whose singularity is unaccountable in terms of a universal visibility. For Levinas, the visual is the sense *par excellence* in which consciousness polarizes itself from the exteriority with which it is implicated. Levinas distinguishes between the qualitative presence of the visual as a totality limited by its dependence on an indefinable materiality, and proximity as the infinity of unthematizable disjunction. It is by means of the latter that Levinas conceives of an originary, transcendent other, in ethical rather than ontological terms. Proximity, which is the term around which Levinas bases his ethics, is a subjection to alterity before subjectivity can be posited as the locus of its own manifestation.

Unlike Merleau-Ponty, for Levinas the advent of consciousness is an opening without the recovery. This is not a being given to oneself, but a being given over without initiative. Consciousness is infinitely passive in its beginning. Levinas describes it as a subjection by unthematizable anonymous existence, against which it is not possible to distance or position oneself. The unthematizable exteriority of this otherness is an immediacy which affects and changes presence irrevocably rather than underlies or mediates the presentability of visual phenomena. Levinas describes the subjection of proximity as a heteronomy, not in terms of the vagaries of subject and object of visual phenomena, but as an unrecoverable departure from, or space in time. This departure is thematized in the caress as a giving up of sensibility in favour of an interlude of anonymity. Instead of illumination, the ethical and the sensible are impossibly bound up together in an obsessive involvement with the discontinuity, or the loss of any conscious hold over an other which itself has no formal basis or power.

Levinas's contribution to Irigaray's own work stems from his explication of an ethically based subjectivity. First, the prioritization of an unthematizable other displaces the mythology of a visually based autogenesis. Second, in the course of formulating his ethics, Levinas considers the exterior origin of the indefinability of matter in vision. Rather than an excess which can be reincorporated, the polarization of matter in the visual is an immobilization of a contaminating materiality which would overwhelm consciousness. Third, Levinas theorizes the ethical relation as an immediacy which evades conscious thematization, and a diachronous encounter which transcends the solipsism of the subjectivity of light.

Irigaray's disagreement with Levinas begins with his limitation of the feminine to an interlude in light. The feminine is not an ethical other but the passive un-doing of a virile aspiration in relation to light. Levinas characterizes the resistance of the feminine to incorporation as a self-effacement which eludes the grasp. Irigaray argues that in his subordination of sexual difference to a humanist ethical subjectivity, Levinas preserves the opening for a patrilineally based ethical transcendence at the sacrifice of a feminine transcendence. Irigaray's consistent complaint is that Levinas considers sexual difference as secondary to ethics, while naming femininity as the paradigm of ethical responsibility and paternity as the paradigm of self-transcendence.

The evidence that Levinas's understanding of sexual difference is confined to an other who is defined in terms of himself is most apparent in his account of carnal intimacy. Despite Levinas's suggestion that the ethical and feminine are brought together on the plane of eroticism, the possibility of ethical transcendence of the feminine is abandoned in his account of the caress. Levinas confines eroticism to a perverse phenomenological interlude. The alteration of sensibility of the caress is related in negative terms as a "fundamental disorder," or distantiation of a feminine other rather than a differentiation of lovers where each is transcendent to the other. Self-transcendence on the other hand, is an ontological category, a (son)light which opens onto a metaphysical desire.

Irigaray approaches Levinas's phenomenology of the caress by questioning his touch. While Levinas concentrates on the withdrawal of the feminine in the caress as a movement away from the light, Irigaray concentrates on the caress as a sheer subjection before any division into night and light. In Levinas's interpretation of the caress as a movement away from light, eroticism is a dissolution of incarnation into an

unsignifiable carnality. In Irigaray's interpretation of the caress as an infinite opening, eroticism is an incomparable exposition of incarnation. This opening is not a sense of corporeality as it is immobilized in light, but a gesture in which any desire for formal sense is given over to the prolongation of its incompleteness.

As Irigaray reads Levinas's account of eroticism, the abandonment of the caress is a quitting of the status of existent for both lovers. For both lovers that quitting is also an absolute trust in the transcendence of life. However, Levinas's concerns lie only with man's self-transcendence, which is a desire transcending the world of light. This desire is realized between men, their sons and their gods, while the woman lover lives an anonymous existence as man's material other, without a genre, without light. It is against Levinas's conception of love and desire that Irigaray proposes the "sensible transcendental" as a divinity which is constituted in the light, that is, in the every day cultural fabrication of existence. In the course of this project, Irigaray reformulates light in terms of carnality, not as the preconceivable first light of consciousness, but an illumination which is erotically constituted.

The issue for women is not to go one better than technology, even if this were in their power, but to discover gestures that have been forgotten, misunderstood, gestures that are also words, that are different from the gestures of maternity and shed a different light upon generation in the body, in the strict sense of the term. (SG, 181)

Irigaray's account of generation in the body refers to the fecundity of matter as a heterogeneous affection which cannot be defined in isomorphic terms. The dissipation of form into carnality is an erotically constituted opening, an encounter with an other which is irreducible to memory, consummation or destruction. Irigaray theorizes this opening as the mucous, or a continuation of the body beyond the threshold of sensible flesh.

Irigaray is not alone in rethinking the notion of light, and she draws on several other philosophers in the course of doing so. In Part II of this thesis I discussed Merleau-Ponty's notion of *enchaînement* as the very adventure of incarnation. As concluded upon there, Merleau-Ponty's equation of the ambiguity of sensibility with the anonymity of "intimate perception" does not however differentiate between the abandonment of

4 See Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," (1980) Vol. 7 (1980), pp. 202-232.

The Caress of Light

Irigaray's genealogical refiguration of the spacing of light can be regarded as a doubly purposeful mobilization of the opacities of vision. First, as the condition of visible phenomena, light is a medium in which women's corporeality unfolds, not as a generic or physical determination nor as a cultural or technological determination, but both at once – as a genre.⁴ Second, Irigaray's account of the caress as different but not opposite in relation to the visual reformulates the difference in terms of alterity rather than maternity. Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of maternity to refer to sensibility grasping itself in its difference, and giving birth to itself. Levinas refers to maternity as a pre-ontological past that cannot be subordinated to the vicissitudes of representation or exchange. In both instances, matter is excluded from participation in history, in the sphere of light. According to Irigaray, the failure to appreciate this participation is reflected in a culture of representation divorced from matter:

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Irigaray is not alone in eroticizing the interval of light, and she draws on several other philosophers in the course of doing so. In *Part II* of this thesis I discussed Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of eroticism as the very adventure of incarnation. As commented upon there, Merleau-Ponty's equation of the ambiguity of sensibility with the anonymity of "intimate perception" does not however differentiate between the abandonment of

⁴ See Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Glyph* Vol. 7 (1980), pp. 202-232.

eroticism and the intentionality of sensuousness. For Merleau-Ponty, light is always a means of revelation. Seeing is a making sense of light. Levinas's account of the evasion of form in the naked light of the face and the night/light of carnal intimacy comes closer to Irigaray's formulation of erotic light. Levinas proposes a light of discursivity that lends nothing to visibility beyond resistance to disclosure, but in engendering incarnation, is before and beyond the light of reason. Bringing together the projects of Irigaray and Levinas, Elizabeth Grosz refers to the non-disclosure of the trace as an erotic light: "...the light proposed by Levinas and Irigaray confirms the primacy of alterity over the apparent certainty of self."⁵ Although the two philosophers are similar in proposing a light that subverts identity, in discussing Irigaray's responses to Levinas, I have emphasized the extent to which Levinas's account of the caress remains within a phenomenological paradigm which falls short of an erotic light.

While only mentioned in passing here, Bataille's sustained eroticization of light also stands as an important precedent to Irigaray's work. Bataille taunts the eye of detached vision with the toxic light of its own erotic waste, from the carnal excesses of *lumen naturale* to the searing excrements of the sun.⁶ Bataille's unconditional rejection of the metaphor of an illuminating sun is a move which has resonances in Irigaray's analyses of mysticism and Plato's *Hystera* in *Speculum*, although her eroticization of light in her more recent work takes a different turn from Bataille's. Her critical project is located more within a utopian than an Icarian topos in relation to the sun.⁷ The emphasis in

5 See "The 'People of the Book': Representation and Alterity in Emmanuel Levinas," *Art & Text*, pp. 36-37.

6 Georges Batailles, "The Pineal Eye" and "The Solar Anus," *Visions of Excess*, pp. 5-9 and pp. 79-90 respectively.

7 For a discussion of the various strands of utopias dealt with in Irigaray's work see Margaret Whitford, "Irigaray, Utopia and the Death Drive," *Engaging With Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*. A quotation by Whitford from Irigaray's text *J'aime à toi* illustrates Irigaray's qualified position in relation to utopias: "I am militating politically for the impossible, which doesn't mean I am utopian. Rather what I want is what does not yet exist, as the only possibility of a future." Jonathan Strauss describes Bataille's adaption of the plight of Icarus in "The Inverted Icarus" *Yale French Studies* Vol. 78 (1990), pp. 106-123: "Bataille stresses the indissociability of greatness and humiliation: as soon as the celestial overwhelms him, he becomes aware of his own abjection, and this single moment is described as a glorious self-perception. The moment of solar greatness is its opposite: the fall of Icarus, but an inverted fall of Icarus, who at his lowest moment - 'the task I am pursuing' - is swept upwards in an act of self-immolation. Indeed, the fall of Icarus, the futile expenditure of self in the raptures of freedom, which contrasts so fiercely with the science and self-preservation of his father, was already a sort of fall into the sun." p. 121.

Bataille's writing falls on the dissolution of intelligible vision in the incalculable profligacy of eroticism, while my argument is that in the portions of Irigaray's work which have been considered here, Irigaray conceptualizes the source of light's heterogeneity in erotic terms. Bataille is concerned with exposing the profanity of the illumination which lies at the basis of humanity's highest strivings. Instead of a noble state of communion with the infinite through the mediation of light, Bataille describes the couplings of sight as a wanton excessiveness which resists idealization in any form.

In stark contrast to Merleau-Ponty's account of the ideality of light originating in flesh, Bataille strips away any fantasy of the conditional intelligibility of carnally constituted light. The extent of Bataille's inversion of the source of Descartes' *lumen naturale* is expressed by Jay: "The enucleated eye was a parodic version of the separation of sight from the body characteristic of the Cartesian tradition; no longer able to see, it was thrust back into the body through vaginal orifices in ways that mocked in advance Merleau-Ponty's benign reembodyment of the eye in the "flesh of the world."⁸ For Bataille, horror is a preferable means of breaking the hold of photology's appropriation of vision, and returning to the carnal source of light: "...it alone is brutal enough to break everything that stifles[.]"⁹ By way of comparison, Irigaray resists the association of the diffusion of formal identity in the profligacy of eroticism with the non-negatable nothingness of horror. Horror exposes matter as an exorbitance which disrupts form. However, left exposed as such, horror also perpetuates the fate of matter as eternal supplement to incarnation, or as Irigaray discusses in "La Mystérieuse," a bride whose only value is to be wasted (SF, 193). Instead of horror, the emphasis in Irigaray's work falls on the caress as an abandon of the sensible body in favour of an erotically constituted, inexhaustible expressiveness of matter.

Having drawn links between photology and phallogocentrism in *Speculum*, Irigaray links light and sexual difference together as historical phenomena in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Entertained as an historical phenomenon, the "origin" of light, Foucault comments, "no longer seems to flow from the depths of the sky or to arise from the first moments of the

8 Jay, "The Disenchantment of the Eye: Bataille and the Surrealists," *Downcast Eyes*, p. 220.

9 Bataille, "Eye," *Visions of Excess*, p. 19, makes this comment in relation to Bunuel's week-long sickness after filming the eye-slitting scene in the surrealist film *Le chien Andalou* (1928).

day."¹⁰ As well as a break with a metaphysical sun, Irigaray's formulation of light is a departure from the modern heliocentrism of atomic light. Atomic physics is generally credited with uncovering the sun residing at the core of every atom of matter. Woman occupies a place in this paradigm as a negativity which circulates towards but never returns to herself as a locus of development of a positive form:

In terms of contemporary physics, it could be said that she remains on the side of the electron, with all that this implies for her, for man, for their encounter. If there is no double desire, the positive and negative poles divide themselves between the two sexes instead of establishing a chiasmus or a double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself. (SE, 9)

For the purposes of explaining Irigaray's position, the model of atomic physics can be extended to include Levinas's conception of light. Against Levinas's claim of its ahistoricity, the anarchic light of the trace pursues a trajectory synonymous with the electron, perpetually in motion, ever diverging, never in touch with itself, lacking a proper place. Capitalizing on the unprecedented potential for the destruction of matter contained within this atomic schema, Irigaray argues to the contrary, that a culture of sexual difference requires that negative and positive poles be present in each sex: "What is missing is the double pole of attraction and support, which excludes disintegration or rejection, attraction and decomposition, but which instead ensures the separation that articulates every encounter and makes possible speech, promises, alliances." (SE, 9)

The atomic notion of the disclosure of presence is based on the transformation of matter into light.¹¹ In Irigaray's hands, disclosure is both a perpetual opening and a communicative gesture. Instead of transcending and falling short of representation, the equivocacy of matter is a dynamic opening expressed as morphology, as a body never identical with itself. The articulation of a morphology of such an opening is a key objective of Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference.

10 See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 144.

11 Gaston Bachelard analyses the ontological convertibility of radiation into matter and vice versa in contemporary physics. See "Matter and Radiation," *The New Scientific Spirit*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 61-84.

Rather than a distinction existing in the tension between form and matter, morphogenesis finds its expression within a constantly negotiated interval of desire. As mentioned earlier, a feature of Irigaray's genealogical approach to sexual difference is that the dissipation of form into carnality is a generative labour of desire rather than a loss of presence. Irigaray criticizes the relegation of desire to an unchanging place within the economy of the interval, which she interprets as a fixation of the copula within the configuration of presence. For Irigaray, the interval is an erotically constituted conjunction, subject to the fragility and vulnerability of sexuate bodies. Irigaray regards erotic love as the establishment of an intermediary, not a thing which can be replaced by something else, like knowledge or children or work.¹² Irigaray reverses the order of fecundity and reproduction in her theorizing of eroticism, by claiming that fecundity is the opening which must be created *before* conception can occur. The fecundity of erotic love exists in the discovery of conjunctions which allow movements from one state to another, by means of the double poles of attraction and support alluded to above in Irigaray's comments about atomic materialism.

Irigaray theorizes the opening of the interval in terms of touch. Tactility is both an indeterminate affection, and the primordial sense in which the body's interiority is constituted. Touch is an inaugural affection, or a non-in-difference to an irreversible, non-negatable, unincorporable other. The primordially of touch is the impossibility of ever touching what is given in being touched. It is the exposition of a difference which is never experienced as either an idea or a thing. The depth of tangibly constituted interiority is an ungraspable imaginary reserve which is perpetuated in touch while remaining inaccessible to contact. Irigaray contrasts this contiguously differentiated interiority with the cave or vessel-like inhabitable morphology of traditional femininity. Her concept of the mucous conveys the spacing of interiority as a continuation of the body beyond the subject/object reversibility of sensible flesh. It is the passage between or immersion within the folds of flesh. The graspability of the phenomenal body is suspended in the prolongation of an unsignifiable carnality of the mucous, which dissolves and constitutes itself without trace.

12 This position is outlined in "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato's Symposium, Diotima's Speech." (SE, 20-33)

In her study of Merleau-Ponty's account of the visible as flesh Irigaray argues that Merleau-Ponty intertwines and reverses tactility and vision without appreciating the indeterminacy of touch as an interval in visual perception. Irigaray is attentive to Merleau-Ponty's claims that the specular and the carnal belong to both the same and to different orders. Within an elision of the visible and the tangible as flesh Merleau-Ponty loses sense of their differences while prioritizing the visual. Irigaray makes more of the difference between the specular and the carnal, arguing that one sees only by the touch of light, by an immersion in light.

The interval of touch is not a means of passage, but the making of a passage to the visible possible. Lighting is the world of light which is inhabited from the inside. The tangible invisible is light, which before the lighting which is accountable in the language of the seer, is an exposure to alterity which conducts the seer passively to a non-objectifiable interior which is refractory to vision. This is not a loss of vision, but the inauguration of a difference between the specular body, which exists as a virtual image within lighting, and the interiority of the tangible body, which is a subjection, or a body which resists thematization as a perceivable thing. The interval of light is a latency which persists indeterminately, as the flesh of which visible is formed, but which cannot see itself.

Irigaray's interest is directed to the reconsideration of the origin of the expressive potential of light, long exploited by photology, and described for example by Hans Blumenberg as: "...the gift that makes no demands, the illumination capable of conquering without force."¹³ Rather than conceiving of the source of illumination as a mysterious anonymous carnality whose intentionality underlines the appearance of phenomena and the commonality of perception, Irigaray conceives of the source of illumination as a pure inscription, or vulnerability of consciousness to an unopposable light which cannot be apprehended in its elemental indivisibility.

In this respect, Irigaray is closer to Levinas's critique of lighting. Levinas argues that the experience of light begins as a subjection by an anarchical light which, unlike the light which conditions the apprehensibility of sensibility, has nothing to do with oneself. As discussed in *Part III*, the phenomenologically given world is a self-defined

13 Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 31.

totality, where the lucidity of things is primarily the egoism of finding oneself in the light. The anonymity of a non-incorporable light which reduces the ego to a pure substantive is a heteronymy which is unaccountable in visual terms. It is a light in which corporeality dissolves, not an exteriority which can be incorporated. Levinas conceptualizes this lapse in manifestability as a light of discursivity, not disclosure.

As an inadequacy of definition which in its unopposability, undermines the totality of self, the an-archival light of the face differs from Merleau-Ponty's account of a carnal origin of light. The unthematizability of the face reveals the limits of phenomenology in the body's materiality. For Levinas, the eye is not of the visible; the visible caresses the eye. The transcendence of the face is a contact with a light whose singularity of expression is incommensurable with the self. The persistence of that inexpressible incomensurability is described in the caress as an obsession.

Irigaray pushes Levinas on his account of the caress as a one-sided withdrawal from contact. Although Levinas describes this as a feminine withdrawal from the light, it is apparent that it is Levinas who withdraws from the conjunction of ethical and sexual alterity in the erotic encounter. With this withdrawal goes any responsibility on the woman lover's side. Rather than being ontologically opposed, Levinas characterizes the withdrawal of the feminine other as a phenomenologically defined failing. Irigaray reconsiders the caress as "an ecstasy that remains *instant*," or a re-turning with/in the self (SE, 14).¹⁴ In figuring the source of light in terms of the caress, Irigaray makes a fundamental break with the system of ex-static relationships of photology. One factor in Irigaray's formulation that works against such relationships is that erotic light is unsurpassable, unopposable. It is a light which is materially conceived. There is no means of transcending this erotic beginning, which in remaining on the threshold of the instance, will never have come to pass.

A second factor in Irigaray's account of erotic light is that she proposes a receptivity to light which has no basis in the subject that sees. The tactile preconditions the eye as an organ of vision. The prolongation of an unsignifiable carnality in the caress is an opening of flesh to the touch of light. Erotic light is a less-than-nothing which is not nothing, makes no demands, and is of no account. A third factor is Irigaray's

14 The translators' note here draws attention to Irigaray's emphasis on the root meaning of "instance" as standing within the self, as opposed to "ecstasy," which is a standing outside the self.

direction of attention to the caress as a threshold of attraction and withdrawal, a movement without trace or distinction. This is the movement of illumination, of flesh oscillating between matter and light. It is the eye as mucous tissue; medium of which the eye is formed but cannot see. Fourth, in the same way that Irigaray reverses fecundity and conception, illumination must be made possible before there can be any vision. Illumination is an elemental passion, a first and inexhaustible love, a perpetual opening up to the novelty of light within the immobilization of sight.

In her work, Irigaray demonstrates the extent to which a familial mode of light's engendering has served in the illumination of a singular imaginary, or relation of self to self. Irigaray actively works against the accumulated sediments of neutrality in Western practices of light, which today is perpetuated in various ways. Some of these neutralizations can be listed to illustrate Irigaray's point. One strategy is the use of light as a source of universal illumination, or the noble bond between existence and truth. This strategy, which treats light as a metaphor, separates matter from illumination. A second strategy is the use of light as common end, as an objective which can be universally achieved, and the most desirable means of making things accessible. Here, light is regarded as a transparent medium which offers no resistance to incorporation. A third strategy is the figuration of light as a dazzling inchoate medium, which once rendered legible, forms the basis of a language of subjectivity. In each of these uses, any joining or passage between matter and light in illumination is effaced.

Against a familial mode of light's engendering, Irigaray conceives of the origin of light as a sexual beginning. This is not a biological or pre-cultural beginning, but a mobile differentiation or spacing – a giving up of all that is familiar, a being given over to the elemental indeterminacy of a non-incorporable other. Levinas theorizes eroticism as a passion for an other whose materiality is inadequate to and transcends meaningful exchange. Irigaray theorizes eroticism as the passion of the first encounter: "Of that which is touched and moves toward and within the attraction, without nostalgia for the first dwelling." (SE, 82) For Irigaray, the sexual encounter is not as Levinas theorizes, a lapse in presence, but an opening which cannot be assumed, without schemas or telos or anticipation of presence.

Irigaray's refiguration of illumination is ultimately directed to the narcissism of vision. Levinas argues that consciousness is by definition a

sense of incarnation. The self is grafted to its material existence. It comes into its own, so to speak, in its sensuous absorption and subjective involvement in light: "...due to the light an object, while coming from without, is already ours in the horizon which preceded it; it comes from an exteriority already apprehended and comes into being as though it came from us, as though commanded by our freedom." (EE, 48) Irigaray questions the means of this doubling and positioning of the self in relation to the self. Merleau-Ponty recovers the passage textually, as a co-extensivity of exteriority and interiority folded within itself. As Irigaray notes, he does not do so without reliance on the unthematizable contiguity of touch. What interior relation, asks Irigaray, is mediating the positioning of active and passive, of self affecting and affected by its self?

I do not set a completely inchoate material in motion. The material is, in some measure, already given. Neither the subject nor the self is fixed in its position or its given, otherwise the two would be separated without any possibility of love. A liaison takes place which corresponds to no other coded or codable operation: neither active nor passive nor middle passive, even if this operation is the closest. (SE, 59-60)¹⁵

Rather than an identity grasped within difference, Irigaray theorizes the self as a touching upon itself in an unaccountable affection, or what Irigaray calls a "love of self." The tactile is the first sense in which we constitute and assume a living space, or an opening within the self. To assume is to both anticipate or remain open to, and to achieve or become something with which the self is implicated. It is in this sense that Irigaray confronts woman's exclusion from claiming her share of her act in illumination, in the dawning of (the implication of her carnality in the renewal of) light: "If we still have a chance, it lies in *confronting the night of man's act with that part of woman that still lies in the night.*" (SG, 119)

For Irigaray, gender is an ethical difference which resists formalization. Gender, argues Irigaray, "constitutes the irreducible differentiation that occurs *on the inside of "the human race."*" (SG, 170) Conceived of as irreducible difference, *sexed* difference resists rather than

15 There is a translators' note explaining that "middle passive" is more commonly known as the middle voice – which often carries a reflexive sense, conveying the performance of an action which is in the subject's interest, or in which the subject is implicated.

is the mark of the formalization of identity. Where subjectivity is sexed, any subjective involvement or relation of self to self is grounded in an irreducible difference, which is not a loss of identity but an exposition of self. It is through a passion for the other's resistance that each sex realizes its own materiality in the (re)exposition of incarnation, or the assumption of self. Where this movement is denied or erased, or an attempt is made to substitute it with a body/thing, then identity becomes fixed and any sexual creativity is paralysed.

The issue which Irigaray raises but Levinas and Merleau-Ponty gloss over in their consideration of morphogenesis, is the question of style. The problem is not simply one of ethical responsibility in relation to formalization, as Levinas proposes. It is also, and inseparably linked to this, the problem of an identity that resists formalization. The problem of the self's doubling in relation to the body, to gender, as well as to light, to thought, and to speech, is in Irigaray's words, "also the problem of the expression or translation of identity into a style." (171) The problem which Irigaray addresses is the need for a movement or language which allows the creation of new, changing forms of identity. Style is a continuous becoming which poses itself as a problem of translation. The informal liaisons of style create conjunctions which resist translation or reduction or resolution. Devoid of any systematicity, style is a creativity which cannot be fixed.

Irigaray argues the need for gender to be expressed as a subjective involvement which resists formalization, not as a lack of identity, but as a style. This argument can be extended to the need to claim a carnal involvement in light. It is not in the interests of clarity that such involvement is entertained, but in the interests of creating new forms of illumination which express the necessity of assuming a material participation in the generation of light. In Irigaray's account of erotic light, illumination refers to the fecundity of matter as a mode of pure inscription whose elemental indivisibility holds nothing but possibility. The source of light is not an obscure prediscursive flesh, as Merleau-Ponty suggests. It is an affection which cannot be surpassed, an ecstasy which is perpetually in-stant.

Irigaray does not describe illumination as a coincidence of exteriority and interiority, but as an irreducible, inexhaustible passion. Illumination is an equivocity of matter and light which is different from the immobilization of sight. Irigaray describes the movement as an encounter of wonder, an encounter with a carnality which cannot be

apprehended. This wonder is a source of animation – a movement in one's being, not of any lasting impression. It is an opening up to light which brings nothing into relief, conveys no sense of things, is unfixable and unopposable. It is a touching/touched upon in affection.

Irigaray's emphasis on light's tactile beginnings forces a reconsideration of a feminine commitment to light as a medium of expression. Levinas reiterates that the mastery of light is not a feminine vocation. Both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty argue that through the carnality of perception we are exposed to the alterity or ungraspability of a self underlying things. Aligned on the side of the self in its carnality, rather than a subjectivity in its own right, the feminine represents the limits of phenomenology in the body's materiality. Irigaray addresses this issue by challenging Levinas on his adoption of a timeless model of sexual difference, portrayed/disguised as an interlude in time, when he describes the encounter with the feminine other in eroticism. In his account of ethical subjectivity, Levinas differentiates between phenomenological light and a discursive light which is proper to the expression of transcendence. He extends the latter only to the expression of the transcendent singularity of the human other. The feminine other remains the inexpressible embodiment of that alterity.

Within this scheme the feminine embodies a descent into carnality, and accompanying this, a loss of visibility. The association of a turning from light with the loss of self has broader consequences for a feminine genre. There is, Irigaray argues, a whole history that separates woman from taking on the envelope of her "own" desire, the material garb of her "own" *jouissance*, of her love "of" herself, of her "own" light (SE, 65). Each conjunction placed in quotation here marks a fluidity of self in relation to self. This is an interval which Irigaray describes as a quitting of the status of existent in an absolute trust in the transcendence of flesh, in an unthematizable sensible transcendental. There is no way of prolonging this movement without an horizon of sexual difference, meaning that whilst ever the feminine is theorized as secondary to humanity, any genealogy of a feminine relation to illumination remains frozen in the abyss or "night" which sustains photological self-conception.

The metaphoric displacement of matter in illumination is challenged by Irigaray in her account of the tangible invisible as a spacing of flesh which completely recasts the nature of any relation between corporeality and light. To begin with, it is not possible to conceive of a common light, or light as a means of the translation of matter into a

language of a universal sensibility. The tangible invisible is a latency of vision in the still organic membranes of living tissue, which defies any play of similitude between illumination and the displacement of matter by light. Second, the tangible invisible forces a reconsideration of the nature of the fundamental narcissism of all vision. Irigaray demonstrates the association between matter which is refractory to illumination, and the lack of presence of women. The interval of the tangible invisible is a return to an elemental beginning rather than a loss of self in an unrecognizable carnality. Irigaray argues that without a means of relating to their own desire or a "love of self," without the assumption of their participation in illumination, no linguistic, identificatory, political or love relations between women, or between women and "the other man" can come to light or be visibly expressed.

In making it my task in this thesis to explore the styles of illumination in the work of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Irigaray I have ignored the myriad current-day practices of the act. Irigaray comments that there are two simultaneous procedures required for producing changes in norms or things which are taken for granted, which I add, includes light. The first is an analysis of the formal structures of discourse and the second is the creation of new styles of expression. In practice the procedures are indistinguishable: "...an alliance is not easily transposed outside of its act." (SG, 177) Irigaray's eroticizing of the act of illumination has yet to be investigated as a practice, as the opening of conjunctions which allow different movements of affection to take place. This work has not begun to address the sexual d/alliances of light.

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