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What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?

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What is diacritical hermeneutics? First a brief word on what I mean by hermeneutics generally, then several words on the qualifier, diacritical.[1]

I understand hermeneutics as an art of deciphering multiple meaning. In its most basic sense this relates to the human capacity to have 'two thinks at a time,' as James Joyce said. More precisely, it refers to the practice of discerning indirect, tacit or allusive meanings, of sensing another sense beyond or beneath apparent sense. This special human activity may in turn call for a method of second-order, reflective interpretation involving a process of disclosing concealed messages, either by a) unmasking covered-up meaning (hermeneutics of suspicion) or b) by disclosing surplus meaning (hermeneutics of affirmation). In short, I understand hermeneutics as the task of interpreting (*hermeneuein*) plural meaning in response to the polysemy of language and life.[2]

Hermeneutics, thus viewed, is an activity carried out in the name of its founding spirit, Hermes: Messenger of gods, guardian of thresholds, and carrier of cryptic codes. The three original disciplines of hermeneutics, formulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher in the 19th century, were theology, law, and philology. Why these? Because each solicited an interpretation of dual meanings: a) divine and human (theology), b) prosecutorial and defensive (law), c) ancient and actual (philology). All three disciplines called for a method of discriminating between different and often conflicting readings. Wilhelm Dilthey would add 'history' to the list as a universal human science devoted to reading between past and present; a science, which he saw as a model for a general hermeneutics of life as it interprets itself. Whence the birth of philosophical hermeneutics.

Later, Heidegger would broaden the definition further in speaking of an ontological hermeneutic committed to understanding the fundamental difference between Being and beings - a task based on a pre-understanding of our everyday existence as being-toward-death. The famous hermeneutic circle. Finally, and more recently, thinkers like Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Caputo have augmented the contemporary project of philosophical hermeneutics in various significant ways (semantic, psychoanalytic, deconstructive). But what all these different hermeneutic movements share is a commitment to the task of adjudicating

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between different levels of meaning.

So where exactly does diacritical hermeneutics fit in? And how might it contribute to the hermeneutic legacy described above?

I have already sketched my project of diacritical hermeneutics in the Introduction to *Strangers Gods and Monsters* and other related texts.[3] But as John Caputo has remarked, this project has, to date, been more performed than explained. I will attempt to redress the balance here by addressing the question under five main headings:

1) In the most obvious sense, dia-critical involves a *critical* function of interrogation. I mean this in the modern sense of the term from Kant's three Critiques down to the more contemporary movements of Critical Theory from Horkheimer and Adorno to Habermas and Foucault. In this broad sweep, I would obviously include critiques of race, class, gender, power, and the unconscious: All critical philosophies, which carry on the legacy, amongst others, of the 'three masters of suspicion' (Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche). In short, I understand critique here as both a) an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of meaning; and b) a critical exposure of 'masked' power in the name of liberation and justice. This latter more ethico-political aspect of critique is one I find lacking in most mainstream hermeneutic methods to date (Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer) until we arrive at Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and Vattimo's hermeneutics of subversion.

2) Second, dia-critical involves the *criteriological* function of discerning between competing claims to meaning. This comprises hermeneutic retrievals of previous testimonies as well as future oriented projects - utopian, messianic, eschatological. 'Emancipation is itself a tradition,' as Ricoeur says; it is a form of 'anticipatory memory.' The idea of emancipation does not erupt ex nihilo. It does not start with modern revolutions and the Enlightenment; rather it draws from a whole palimpsest of prior narratives of liberation going back, in the West, to Biblical stories of exodus and the Socratic awakening. Aristotle addresses the question of ethical criteria already when he remarks that if you wish to communicate the meaning of a virtue you recount the story of someone who embodies it - e.g., Achilles for courage, Penelope for constancy, Tiresius for wisdom. Such narratives - ancient or modern - provide *phronesis* with exemplary paradigms by which to measure, judge, and act. Otherwise how could one tell the difference between just and unjust actions? These differences require careful criteriological discriminations. And there are obviously other essential criteria apart from the narrative one mentioned (e.g., rational deliberation of rights, virtue ethics, pragmatist judgment, phenomenological intuition of values, spiritual exercises, feminist and socio-cultural critiques, wisdom traditions etc.). In short, *pace* deconstruction, I am not against criteria as long as they involve vigilant discernments and distinctions.

3) Third, in keeping with the more precise dictionary definition of dia-critical, I refer to a *grammatological* attention to inflections of linguistic marks. In this technical sense, diacritics provides rules for differentiating between minute units of language (signifiers, graphemes, accents). Think, for example, of the difference, which the following accents - grave, acute, circumflex, and diaeresis - make on the same letter in the French language: é è ê, ë. Or think of how 'où' with an accent (meaning 'where') differs from 'ou' without accent (meaning 'or'). These silent, discreet signs distinguish between values of the same character. Small graphic demarcations thus serve to avoid confusion between otherwise identical letters, helping us differentiate between distinct meanings. More generally, in

structural and post-structural linguistics, diacritics denotes a way of reading differentially, across gaps and oppositions, in keeping with the Saussurian maxim that language is a network of 'differences without positive terms'. In these respects, diacritics is all about micro-reading. And here, I think, I share common ground with John Caputo's radical hermeneutics and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction.[4]

4) In addition to this technical usage in linguistic and semiotic practice, diacritics also has the older *diagnostic* meaning of reading the body. The Greek terms, *dia-krinein* and *dia-krisis*, referred to the medical or therapeutic practice of diagnosing symptoms of bodily fevers, colorations, and secretions. In this sense, the word designated the hermeneutic art of discriminating between health and disease. Such a skill to read between the lines of skin and flesh - in order to sound the movements of the soul (homeopathic or allopathic) - was often a matter of life and death. Needless to say, this model of micrological reading of somatic and psychosomatic symptoms has deep implications for the practice of philosophical reading in its own right. I agree with Wittgenstein that philosophy is therapy. In sum, diacritical hermeneutics should do you good!

5) These four characteristics – critical, criteriological, grammatological and diagnostic - comprise the basis of what I call, finally and most primally, 'carnal hermeneutics.' Here we are concerned with a hermeneutics that goes all the way down. It covers diacritical readings of different kinds of Others - human, animal or divine. All with skins on. Such carnal hermeneutics has a crucial bearing, to take just one example, on how we 'sense' subtle distinctions between hostile and hospitable strangers (the same term, *hostis* can refer to guest or enemy). And pursuing this example I would say that diacritical hermeneutics has two patron saints - the god Hermes and the dog Argos.[5] For if Hermes discloses hermetic messages from above, Argos brings animal savvy from below. The former guides our deciphering of cryptic masks and messages (Hermes appears to Baucis disguised as a beggar). The latter, Argos, imparts a canine flair for recognizing the friend or enemy in the visitor (e.g., Odysseus returned to Ithaca to oust the suitors).[6]

Diacritical hermeneutics may thus be defined as both sacred and terrestrial in so far as it ranges up and down - in ascending and descending spirals - from the highest hintings of the absolute to the lowest soundings of the abyss. While hands reach up, feet reach down. But no matter how high or low hermeneutic 'sense' goes, it never leaves us totally in the dark. It is not blind but half-seeing and half-believing. It is a sort of incarnate *phronesis*, which probes, scents, and filters. Something akin to Wittgenstein's seeing-as in our most ordinary perceptions or Heidegger's understanding-as in our most basic moods (see his analysis of *Verstehen-Befindlichkeit* in *Being and Time*). This fundamental form of existential sensibility is further radicalized in Merleau-Ponty's more embodied notion of 'diacritical perception' to which I shall return below.[7]

At this stage, and by way of addressing some of the more recent discussions of hermeneutics, we might ask how our fivefold model of diacritical hermeneutics compares with John Caputo's method of 'radical hermeneutics' inspired by Derrida's deconstruction. While the diacritical and radical approaches share a common commitment to micro-logical reading, there are significant differences. In contrast to deconstructive *sans-savoir*, diacritical hermeneutics practices a certain *savoir*, which goes beyond Derrida's maxim of 'reading in the dark.' Diacritical *savoir* should, I suggest, be understood in its original etymological sense of tasting: *Sa-*

vourer, sapere, sapientia. It is not knowledge, in the purely cognitive or theoretical attitude (here I agree with deconstruction); but it is some kind of savvy nonetheless. Sense as primal interpretation, reading between the lines of skin and flesh. A sensing, which makes sense in the three connotations of the French *sens*: Sensation, direction, meaning. I am concerned here, in short, with a multi-layered sensing which goes all the way up and down - like Jacob's ladder - from thought to touch and back again.[8] Meaning ascending and descending in open-ended spirals.

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By way of elaborating further on the different inflections between diacritical hermeneutics and deconstruction let me explore for a moment the implications of what I call 'diacritical sensation.' I refer here, most simply, to familiar phrases like 'I don't know how to read you?' or 'your face betrays your feelings' or the proverbial 'the eyes are the mirrors of the soul.' Lady MacBeth puts it well to her husband, 'your face is like a book, my Thane, where men may read strange matters.' Mostly such phrases are used in relation to facial expressions - glancing or shading of eyes, widening of pupils, raising of eyebrows, altering of complexion, stiffening or loosening of lips, smiling or grimacing of mouth. But facial vision, as bearer of inner moods, deep feelings and moral emotions, is not the only medium of expression. In addition to our ability to see (or see through) we also have the ability to hear, touch, smell and taste. Each sense has its own special *savoir/saveur* and is deeply structured in terms of body mapping, orientation and negotiation. Sensing is never neutral. Every sense possesses its particular *symbolique*, as Levi-Strauss demonstrated in his structural anthropology of *la pensée sauvage*. Even the most basic culture of food is a way of carving up our universe into edible and inedible, raw and cooked, herbivorous and carnivorous, hostile and hospitable. Matters of taste are often matters of inclusion and exclusion, even of life or death. And taste here is as literal as it is figural (since it subverts the distinction); or, more accurately, it is not just a matter of aesthetic indifference, as Kant held, but of actual savoring upon the lips, tongue and palette. Man is what he eats, as the old adage goes; but he is also how he eats. The contents of the menu are less important than how one chooses this dish or that, or mixes flavors and savors, or why one sits down to the meal in the first place. *Chaqu'un à son goût*.

Taste is, perhaps, the primordial sense of carnal hermeneutics. The most alimentary is the most elementary. For tasting is already, *ab initio*, a transfiguring of nature into culture. It involves a splitting of the world into binaries which may remain opposed or symbolically combine.[9] A dialectic of sundering and salvation through food is to be found in most wisdom traditions. Adam and Eve taste the apple. Abraham and Sarah dine with sacred strangers. Krishna swallows the puff of rice giving fullness back to emptiness. Jesus breaks bread in Emmaus restoring his broken body. Isis's fish consumes the dismembered flesh of Osiris. Each great wisdom tradition is, it seems, marked by such moments of inaugural eating.

Let me say a few words about just one of these foundational scenes before returning to a more phenomenological account of diacritical sensation.

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One of the oldest records of sacred eating, in the western Indo-European tradition, is to be found in the Taittiriya Upanishad. Here we read how the divine manifests itself in the offering and eating of food.[10] 'Treat your guests like gods' (1.11.2) when giving food, we are

told, for 'that (food) is Brahman.' (3.1) The true self of mind and vital breath was considered to dwell within food, considered as an interconnection between the cosmic elements of air and earth. (3.9) The task of the host is to discern this culinary 'correspondence' and thereby recognize the god within the guest. Offering hospitality to the guest is a sacred act in that it reminds us of the integrity of body and soul illustrated by the equation: food-true happiness-Brahman. The Upanishad concludes with a resounding paean to the transfiguring power of food. The self becomes sacred in a sacramental identification with eating: 'I am food! I eat him who eats the food! I have conquered the whole universe! I am like the light in the firmament.' (3.10.6) This ancient belief found classic expression in the formula: '*Anna* (food) - the first manifestation of Brahman'; and it later became the basis for a long Vedantic tradition of hospitality where saintly figures offer themselves as food and reveal themselves in the act of eating and being eaten. The unexpected guest (*athiti*) who asks to be fed is a god waiting to become manifest. In feeding the guest we greet the divine and taste its food. A primal act of carnal hermeneutics.

We find clear affinities here with similar acts of sacred hospitality in Biblical literature. Recall again Abraham and Sarah feeding the three divine strangers at Mamre (Gen); or Christ offering his body as Eucharistic bread at the Last Supper and at Emmaus; or returning as the stranger (*hospes)* who asks and receives food from passersby. (Matt 25) I have treated such inaugural scenes of sacred transformation between hosts and guests elsewhere, so I will not dwell further on them now.[11] Suffice it to note that the sacred sharing of food is not confined to Hindu or Biblical traditions but is also to be found in Buddhist, Greek and other cultural myths of Gods appearing as guests at the table of hospitality. On studying such recurring motifs one might be tempted to infer the existence of some trans-cultural, or quasi-universal, practice of gustatory hospitality. And one might be right. But such comparative theologies of the tongue themselves involve a work of diacritical hermeneutics - a second-order methodical interpretation of first-order interpretations of carnal communication between hosts and guests.[12] All such primal scenes of eating, across diverse religions and cultures, bear witness to common practices of tasting the divine in the human and the human in the divine. They offer us choice ingredients for a gourmet guide to the gods. Delicate *dégustations* of hidden things.

It might be noted, finally, that if gustatory hospitality is one inaugural practice of civilizations, sexual hospitality is another. Note, for example, how in Biblical scripture Sarah and Mary both experience 'miraculous conceptions' (Sarah is barren, Mary a virgin) when they receive strangers into their hearts-wombs (*chora*), while many heroines of Hellenic, Celtic and Eastern mythologies have carnal congress with guests-become-gods. In such founding narratives, touch, smell, sight and sound are often synaesthesized with taste in the meetings of gods and mortals. From the beginning divinity becomes flesh in multiple ways. The polysemy of such primal enfleshment is, I submit, a key task of diacritical hermeneutics.

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We do not, however, have to look to the ancient narratives to find evidence for the diacritical connoisseurship of the senses. We already find examples of such carnal hermeneutics in our everyday sensations. Here we might take special heed of the pioneering phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and in particular his notion of 'diacritical perception.' This idea was first developed in his Collège de France Lecture courses, *La Conscience et*

l'acquisition du language (1950) and *Le Monde sensible et le monde de l'expression* (1953, henceforth MSME). Borrowing liberally from Saussure's notion that words only signify by virtue of their differences with other words, Merleau-Ponty argues that meanings are never given as isolated terms or objects but always as parts of a mobile interaction of signs involving intervals, absences, folds and gaps (*écarts*). This is not just a function of language, however, but the very structure of perception itself. Insofar as perception is thus structured like language in its nascent state it is diacritical. Here is how Merleau-Ponty puts it in an important Note from his 1953 lectures:

> Diacritical notion of the perceptual sign. This is the idea that we can perceive differences without terms, gaps with regard to a level (of meaning) which is not itself an object - the only way to give perception a consciousness worthy of itself and which does not alter the perceived into an ob-ject, into the signification of an isolating or reflexive attitude. (MSME, p. 203-204)

In a subsequent note entitled 'Diacritical perception' - no longer merely a 'notion' but now a sensible quality of *perception* itself - Merleau-Ponty adds this intriguing example. To see another's visage is to interpret it carnally 'as' this or that form of expression:

> To perceive a physiognomy, an expression, is always to deploy diacritical signs, in the same manner as one realizes an expressive gesticulation with one's body. Here each (perceptual) sign has the unique virtue of differentiating from others, and these differences which appear for the onlooker or are used by the speaking subject are not defined by the terms between which they occur, but rather define these in the first place. (MSME, p. 211)

This logic of diacritical perception is alien to the classical approach of difference presupposing identity. On the contrary, writes Merleau-Ponty, the identity of terms emerges in the tension of their differences, their contours arising from the encroachment (*empiètement)* of things on things. And here he coins the term 'infra-thing' in contradistinction to the old notion of discrete objective substances.

Here Merleau-Ponty departs from the Aristotelian habit of defining something new in terms of a preexisting genre or foundation. Diacritical perception through gaps reveals the inadequate character of the traditional one-to-one correlation between consciousness and object; such derived correspondence arises only in retrospect and ignores the fact that there never was an object in the first place but only several different infra-things, and at the very minimum a reversible interplay between figure and ground (*fond*). This plurality of infra-things is irreducible to the dualist framework of an isolated mind faced with an isolated object. Diacritical perception is, Merleau-Ponty insists, the sensing of meaning as it expresses itself in the intervals between such infra-things of our experience. It involves our sense of identity through differentiation rather than differentiation through identity.[13]

Our most basic carnal sensations may thus be said to be structured diacritically in so far as they are structured like the phonetic differentiations of language. "To have a body capable of expressive articulation or action and to have a phonetic system capable of constructing signs, is the same thing" (MSME, p. 204). Our body schemas, Merleau-Ponty claims, operate like phonetic systems which function according to principles of which they are not conscious (e.g., *parole* is not conscious of *langue*). But to compare carnal perception to linguistic structure in this way is not to reduce the latter to the former (naturalism), nor to

reduce the former to the latter (structuralism). Nature does not make the body any more than it makes phonetic systems. And it would be a mistake to construe the perceptual capacity to play with principles of which it is not immediately aware as some kind of 'unconscious.' Perception of figure is not simultaneously perception of ground - but rather 'imperception': the sensing of the invisible in and through the visible, a '*sentir en profondeur,*' by negations, absences, gaps (*écarts*). Or as Merleau-Ponty puts it in Gestalt language: "consciousness of the figure is consciousness without knowledge of the ground (*fond)*" (MSME, p. 204).

We may say therefore that diacritical perception witnesses the birth of expression, against an unformed background, as a meaning which begins and re-begins, an awakening which takes the form of a figure that is prefigured and refigured again and again, now fore, now aft, now here, now there.[14] Hence the importance of Merleau-Ponty's metaphor of modulation: "Consider sensation itself, the act of sensing (*le sentir)*, as the intervening of a figure on a *fond*. Modulation. As a sound modulates silence. As a color modulates an open space by varying it. Every sign is diacritical" (MSME, p. 206). And Merleau-Ponty adds significantly, "This is Valéry's idea," thereby indicating that his use of the term 'diacritical' is as indebted to literary poetics as it is to structural linguistics. Either way, this birth of meaning occurs not in the manner of a foundational cause (as in the old metaphysics) but as a diacritical play of visible and invisible, an embodied vigilance capable of signaling and resuscitating full being (*l'être total*) on the basis of a fragment (MSME, p. 204-205). This diacritical interplay between *figure et fond* represents an endless reversibility - for what is one perceiver's *figure* is another's *fond* and vice versa. The diacritical art of perception, enacted in the advent of sensing, ultimately amounts, in Merleau-Ponty's view, to the displacement of natural cause by cultural expression.

In the 1953 lecture notes, Merleau-Ponty offers one further telling illustration of the diacritical isomorphism of perception and language. He compares the perception of movement to the comprehension of a sentence. We only understand the beginning of a sentence from its end, he says, just as we only perceive movement in light of its goal. Perception does not follow something as it displaces itself from one fixed place to another, as if one solid object succeeded another; it proceeds rather as a wave which stretches back and forth across distances in the same manner as a sentence circulates through a whole linguistic field. Carnal sensation is a fold (*pli*) in the moving flesh of the world; there is no world without it and it cannot be without a world. "Like signs in language," writes Merleau-Ponty, "the points traversed in movement have only a diacritical value; they do not function in themselves as places but rather as passages in the same way as words of a sentence are traces of an intention which (invisibly) transpierces them" (MSME, p. 205). Or to put it another way, perception operates like language in that it does not confront an ob-ject head on, but senses things which speak to it laterally, on the side, provoking one's 'complicity' in the manner of an 'obsession.' Less objective than obsessional, then, the thing perceived 'solicits' us (Valéry). Like an epiphany that calls for remembrance (Proust); or a poetic word which invites co-naissance (Claudel); or a pregnancy that yearns for birth and rebirth (Bachelard); or a frosted branch whose every crystal signals a whole order of emergent meanings (Stendhal). With all these literary analogies, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that each perception of the world constructs itself on the basis of an emerging part which solicits our co-creation of this world; just as language constructs itself in terms of a circular movement between a

present part and absent whole. (Merleau-Ponty also uses here the analogy of a film montage where each frame functions in the movements between gaps across an invisible background).

But it is important to remind ourselves here that the diacritical model of carnal interpretation is not a matter of voluntarist invention (à la Sartre). It is not a question of reading *into* something but of reading *from* (*à partir)* something. We are solicited by the flesh of the world before we read ourselves back into it. Carnal attention is as much reception as creation. We are far from idealism. And this is why I think Merleau-Ponty insists that the solicitation of our body schema functions symbolically, laterally, indirectly, like a sexual or ontological *surprise*. Diacritical sensation, across distances and intervals, comes not just from us but from another person or thing that meets us 'like a stranger in the dark.' Merleau-Ponty again cites Paul Valéry to make his point. "A man is nothing so long as nothing draws from him effects and productions which surprise him" (MSME, p. 205). But to be surprised one must be ready to receive, open to solicitation and seduction, prepared to partake of the thing sensed and symbolized. Every sense, as Merleau-Ponty concludes, has its own *symbolique*. Every carnal act and organ inscribes its own *imaginaire*. From sexual expression to the act of eating itself. Nature is already culture as soon as we sense it as this or that. Sensation is expression and expression sensation. Flesh is word and word flesh. Hence the significance of Merleau-Ponty's description of perception in terms of a diacritical Eucharistic communion:

> Just as the sacrament not only symbolizes, in sensible species, an operation of Grace, but is also the real presence of God, which it causes to occupy a fragment of space and communicates to those who eat of the consecrated bread, provided that they are inwardly prepared, in the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body, provided that it is capable of doing so, so that sensation is literally a form of communion.[15]

What we have here is a basic analogy of proper proportionality: A is to B what C is to D. Namely, the sacrament of transubstantiation is to the responsive communicant what the sensible is to the capable perceiver. Merleau-Ponty goes on to delineate this quasi-eucharistic power of the sensible as follows:

> I am brought into relation with an external being, whether it be in order to open myself to it or to shut myself off from it. If the qualities radiate around them a certain mode of existence, if they have the power to cast a spell and what we called just now a sacramental value, this is because the sentient subject does not posit them as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them, makes them his own and finds in them his momentary law.[16]

In other words, each sensory encounter with the strangeness of the world is an invitation to a 'natal pact' where, through what we might call 'diacritical sympathy,' the human self and the strange world give birth to one another. Sacramental sensation is a reversible rapport between myself and others, wherein the sensible gives birth to itself through me.

A fine example of carnal hermeneutics. Everyday perception as exquisite empathy.

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Let me add, finally, that because diacritical hermeneutics is carnal - in the first and last instance - it fulfills itself as *applied*.[17] To say that understanding is incarnate is to say that it answers to the life of suffering and action. Its application to human embodiment is its original and ultimate end. And here we return to its diagnostic role as a caring for lived existence - a listening to the pulse of suffering and solicitation between one human being and another. And, at times, between human being and that which precedes and exceeds it. It is in the passages 'between' that the *dia* of diacritical takes on its full meaning. *Diagnosis* calls for endless *dialogue*: between disciplines, between text and action, between word and flesh, and above all between human persons who give and receive wisdom, attention, and healing.

Notes

[1]This essay is a development of a talk delivered to the Canadian Hermeneutics Institute at the University of Calgary in June 2011.

[2] This outline of a general philosophical hermeneutics is particularly indebted to Paul Ricoeur, in the wake of the prior formulations of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. See also note 8 on Ricoeur below.

[3] For my previous descriptions of diacritical hermeneutics see the Introduction to my *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2003); interview in my *Debates in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, p. 249- 250); 'A Dialogue in Diacritical Hermeneutics' in *Le Souci du Passage*, essays in honour of Jean Greisch (edited by Philippe Capelle, Edition du Cerf, Paris, 2004); 'Entre soi-meme et un autre: l'herméneutique diacritique de Ricoeur' in *Ricoeur: Cahier de l'Herne* (edited by Francois Azouvi and Myriam Revault d'Allonnes , L'Herne, Paris, 2004); 'Eros, Diacritical hermeneutics and God' in *Philosophy Today*, vol. 55 special SPEP issue (edited by Cynthia Willett and Leonard Lawlor, 2011); and 'Diacritical Hermeneutics' in Maria Luisa Portocarrero, Luis Umbelino, and Andrzej Wiercinski, ed., *Hermeneutic Rationality/La rationalité herméneutique* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), p. 177-196. I find my thinking on diacritical hermeneutics resonates, at times, with the recent work of Jean Greisch, Merold Westphal, Peter Kemp and David Tracy.

[4] I am particularly indebted to John Caputo and Jacques Derrida on this question of micrological reading and the attendant notion of our textured experience as a basic form of *écriture,* which for me rejoins in interesting ways the old medieval idea of the *liber mundi (*'semiological ontology') and the earlier Greek idea of the logos of nature as a primary tacit language (*logos endiathetos*) calling for a more articulate verbal language (*logos prophorikos*). Heraclitus and the stoics were obvious proponents of this notion of *logos*-in-*phusis* which, of course, was later retrieved in the Christian notion of the 'Word made flesh' (see Augustine's reworking of the Stoic *logoi spermatikoi)* and the Kabbalistic notion of the world as traced by the secret letters of Creation (*Sefer Yetsirah*). In his late work, *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty offers an interesting hermeneutic retrieval of the *logos prophorikos/ endiathetos* distinction from the point of view of what I am calling a carnal-diacritical phenomenology. See also his essays on embodied language in *Signs* (in particular 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence') and our discussion below of his notion of 'diacritical perception' in his Collège de France Course Notes of 1953.

[5] The name of the dog, Argos, who recognizes Odysseus in Bk 17 of the *Odyssey* is derived from the Greek word *argos* meaning gleaming, shining (from which the Latin term for

silver, *argentum,* is derived). The word *enargeis* is used by Homer in Bk 16 to mark the 'shining' of the Goddess Athena which transforms Odysseus from a beggar-stranger back into himself, but unlike the dog Argos, his own son, Telemachus, does not at first recognize his father, mistaking him instead for a god. It is telling, I think, that this connection between *argos/enargeis* and diacritical hermeneutics occurs in one of the oldest texts in Western literature: A lesson in how to discern between mortal and immortal strangers through our carnal senses; indeed a lesson which, Homer suggests, dogs may well have to teach men! I am grateful to Richard Capobianco for bringing this passage from the *Odyssey* to my attention in Martin Heidegger, 'On the Question Concerning the Determination of the Matter for Thinking', trans. Richard Capobianco and Marie Göbel, *Epoché* 14(2) (Spring 2010) p. 213-23.

[6] It is telling that the first thing father and son do in the moment of mutual disclosure is to eat a meal, the two 'strangers' (*hospes)* becoming host (*hospes*) and guest (*hospes)* to each other. One finds a similar polysemy at work in the Greek term *xenos* (stranger, guest, enemy). A good example of diacritical hermeneutics as hospitality (*xenizein*). See our discussion of these terminological and etymological variations of *hospes, hostis* and *xenos* in *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (Columbia University Press*,* New York, 2010, pp. 27-28, 47-49).

[7] We could also include here Max Scheler's account of embodied ethical feeling in *Forms of Sympathy*, Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic reading of semiotic unconscious experience in *Desire in Language* and later work; and Emmanuel Levinas' ethico-phenomenological analysis of pre-conceptual 'sensibility' in *Otherwise than Being*. See, for example, how Levinas describes the relation of subjectivity as one of 'sensibility' and 'vulnerablity' to pleasure and pain (Ibid., chapter 3) - a form of radical carnal 'contact,' 'proximity,' and 'exposure' prior to intentionality and consciousness. "The exposure to another is," he writes, "proximity, obsession by the neighbor, an obsession despite oneself, that is, a pain" (Ibid., p. 55). Levinas does not deny this is already a form of language: but it is language in its most primordial expression/obsession: an ethical 'saying' before the 'said' of thematization and representation, a language where the self does not give signs but is itself a sign of saying (Ibid., p. 47). This is what Levinas means when he says that sensing is 'saying' (*le dire*) or pre-thematic 'signifying' (signifyingness or *signifiance)*. I am indebted here to James Taylor's essay, 'After the Modern Subject: Between Activity and Passivity in Heidegger, Levinas and Gadamer' in Maria Luisa Portocarrero, Luis Umbelino, and Andrzej Wiercinski, ed.**,** *Hermeneutic Rationality/La rationalité herméneutique* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011). See also the recent phenomenological work of Jeffrey Bloechl on Levinas' notion of sensibility as well as the recent phenomenological writings of Jean-Luc Marion on the erotic phenomenon, Jean-Louis Chrétien on the mystical-poetic body and of Michel Henry's phenomenology of life. Michel Serres' work on the five senses, though not directly of the hermeneutical-phenomenological tradition, is also of relevance here.

[8] For earlier sketches of a carnal hermeneutics of discernment see our *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, chapters 3-5 and 7; *Anatheism*, chapters 1-2 and 5; and 'At the Threshold: Foreigners, Strangers, Others' in Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch, eds., *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, pp. 3-29). One might also mention here the seminal work of my mentor, Paul Ricoeur, and especially his sketch of a phenomenology of the body in

Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary (1960). In this volume, Ricoeur states that human existence is torn between "two fundamental projects", namely "the organic life" searching for immediate completion and "the spiritual life" of thinking aiming at the perfection of the whole. This 'most primordial conflict' epitomises "the disproportion of *βίος* and *λόγος*". The site of this conflict between *βίος* and *λόγος,* he writes, is 'my body' and it is unbridgeable. The governing principle between the animal and the human is "my body" - a point that is analysed in three sections of *Freedom and Nature,* i) "Introduction: corporeal existence within the limits of eidetics"; ii) "Body and the total field of motivation: the level of history and the level of the body" (4); and iii) "Life: Birth". In the context of his subsequent work, *Fallible Man* (1960) - while perhaps still under the formative influence of both Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of *Leib* and of Gabriel Marcel's existential notion of 'incarnation' - Ricoeur takes "my body" to be "an originating mediator '*between*' myself and the world". And, he claims, it is precisely this body which provides the means for both acting in the world and distancing myself from the natural:

> It opens me onto the world, either allowing perceived things to appear or making me dependent on things I lack and of which I experience the need and desire because they are elsewhere or even nowhere in the world…In a word, my body opens me to the world by everything it is able to do.

This analysis he concludes with the claim: "[My body] is implicated as a power in the instrumentality of the world, in the practicable aspects of this world that my action furrows through, in the products of work and art." This shift from "my body" to the more linguistic functions of work and art (poetic language) already anticipates Ricoeur's hermeneutic turn in the Sixties.

Ricoeur's early phenomenology of the body remains, however, largely a promissory note. After his embrace of a hermeneutics of signs he rarely returns to an exploration of the flesh, though it is tempting to see his preoccupation with the relation between *force* and *sens* - that is between an energetics of drive/desire and a philosophy of interpretation in Freud - as a gesture in this direction (*Freud and Philosophy,* 1965). His engagement with Aristotle's notion of cathartic passions in Volume I of *Time and Narrative* (1983) and Proust's world of involuntary sensations and embodied epiphanies in volume 2 of *Time and Narrative* (1984) might well have been further occasions to sound a carnal hermeneutics of taste, smell and touch (Proust's own favored senses); but Ricoeur opts instead for an 'apprenticeship of signs' which largely ignores the deeper opacities of the carnal unconscious. And his sustained fascination with Spinoza's *conatus* does not alas connect the 'desire to be' with an incarnate bearer of this desire. It is desire without skin. Finally, though one's hopes are revived somewhat when one comes to Ricoeur's mention of our 'corporeal/terrestrial' condition in Study 6 of *Oneself as Another* (1990) and his dialectic of embodiment and alterity in the final Study 10 of *Oneself as Another,* this turns out to be minimalist - a five page adjudication between Husserl and Levinas on the Other. It is more a mediation between two rival positions on the flesh as action/passion - too much activity in Husserl, too much passivity in Levinas - than a serious diacritical engagement with the enigma of enfleshment per se. (And this in-spite of his invocation of 'flesh' in his summary list of imponderable Others' in the final paragraph of the book). Work remains to be done on bringing Ricoeur's phenomenology of the body/*bios/eros* into fertile dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's radical analysis of 'diacritical perception' and *la chair*. (I am indebt-

ed to Timo Helenius for several of these references).

Another missed dialogue that could be mentioned here is that between Ricoeur and the feminist hermeneutics of the body running from Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva to Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz. See the timely essay, 'Understanding the Body: The Relevance of Gadamer's and Ricoeur's View of the Body for Feminist Theory', Louise Derksen and Annemie Halsema, in George Taylor and Francis Mootz, *Gadamer and Ricoeur*: *Critical Horizons or Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Continuum, New York, 2011). Amongst other texts, they discuss Ricoeur's little known essay, 'Wonder, Eroticism and Enigma' in *Cross Currents,* vol. 14, 1969.

[9] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Penguin, 1968).

[10] See Francis Clooney, 'Food, the Guest, and the Taittiriya Upanishad: Hospitality in the Hindu Traditions' in Richard Kearney and James Taylor, ed., *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (New York: Continuum, 2010), pp. 139-146.

[11] See chapters 1, 4 and 5 of *Anatheism.*

[12] For comparative cultural/religious examples of gustatory hospitality see also the recent essays of Kalpana Seshadri, Andy Rotman, Joseph Lumbard, and Marianne Moyaert in Kearney and Taylor, ed., *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions.* The example of the classic Graeco-Roman myth of Baucis and Philomen is also relevant here in that it tells how this old poor couple became hosts to Zeus and Hermes who first appeared as beggars and only revealed themselves as gods when Baucis offered them her best herbs and Philomen his precious goose. Here is a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* book VIII which shows the central transformative role of 'food' in this primal scene of carnal hospitality. Note the detailed description of the culinary preparation and offering of each dish, comprising a good portion of Ovid's short text:

> The old woman (Baucis), her skirts tucked up, her hands trembling, placed a table there, but a table with one of the three legs unequal: a piece of broken pot made them equal. Pushed underneath, it countered the slope, and she wiped the level surface with fresh mint. On it she put the black and green olives that belong to pure Minerva, and the cornelian cherries of autumn, preserved in wine lees; radishes and endives; a lump of cheese; and lightly roasted eggs, untouched by the hot ashes; all in clay dishes. After this she set out a carved mixing bowl for wine, just as costly, with cups made of beech wood, hollowed out, and lined with yellow bees' wax. There was little delay, before the fire provided its hot food, and the wine, of no great age, circulated, and then, removed again, made a little room for the second course. There were nuts, and a mix of dried figs and wrinkled dates; plums, and sweet-smelling apples in open wicker baskets; and grapes gathered from the purple vines. In the center was a gleaming honeycomb. Above all, there was the additional presence of well-meaning faces, and no unwillingness, or poverty of spirit. Meanwhile the old couple noticed that, as soon as the mixing bowl was empty, it refilled itself, unaided, and the wine appeared of its own accord. They were fearful at this strange and astonishing sight, and timidly Baucis and Philemon murmured a prayer, their palms upwards, and begged the gods' forgiveness for the meal, and their unpreparedness. They had a goose, the guard for their tiny cottage: as hosts they prepared to sacrifice it for their divine guests. But, quick-winged, it wore the old people out and, for a long time, es-

> caped them, at last appearing to take refuge with the gods themselves. Then the heaven-born ones told them not to kill it. 'We are gods,' they said. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk VIII: "Philomen and Baucis," trans. Anthony S. Kline, University of Virginia, 2000)

In 'Departures: Hospitality as Mediation', Kalpana Seshadri offers a hermeneutic commentary on an analogous story in the *Bhaghavata Purana* (Bk 10, cantos 80-81). It relates how a poor man Kuchela offers a meager bowl of puffed rice to his friend Krishna who gleefully eats the mere nothing and returns the gift of a nothing that is the ultimate fullness. This emptiness in fullness recalls the emptying/filling wine bowl of Philomenon and Baucis, as well as the Buddhist notion that 'emptiness' is the highest form of fullness. Seshadri offers this commentary:

> The poor scholar (Kuchela) gathers together, in a piece of clean sari torn from his wife's shoulder, a heap of puffed rice, itself borrowed from a kindly neighbor emptiness itself, rice with kernels removed, with nothing inside. And this he sets out to give to him, the friend who had the great capacity to receive...The friend sinks his palm in the heap of rice and opening his mouth wide eats a fistful with sheer delight, of the emptiness and the nothing, and reaches for more, and yet more...and as the friend empties the emptiness within the puffed rice, the scholar feels himself filling up. His satisfaction is immeasurable. Incalculable happiness and fortune accrue to him, the more he gives of what he does not have, the more he finds himself receiving what he could not imagine. Can something come out of nothing? Is it possible to give, eat and be full of the nothing? Is this the meaning of grace? And is this also the time of hospitality? ...Later Kuchela recalls that he had asked nothing, indeed he needs nothing... He is again blessed. (Kalpana Seshadri, "Departures: Hospitality as Mediation" in Richard Kearney and James Taylor, eds., *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions,* p. 52).

It might also be interesting to do a comparative analysis of the role of the goose as a sacred bird in other cultural-religious myths, for example, the "Paramahamsa" in both Buddhist and Hindu scriptures, referring to the divinely enlightened sage. For Kabir, the Sihk-Sufi-Hindu poet, the Hamsa or Himalayan Goose, was considered to be a wandering migrant soul who bore secret messages and we also find the Goose-Swan playing a key role in the Rig Veda story of Puru Ravas and his wife Uruvasi. The goose that flies over Mount Kailash, and bathes in the lake of Manasarova (the lake of the mind, Manas) remained a recurring poetic theme. The goose-swan also plays a key role of 'transformation' in the popular story of Nala and Damayanti from the *Mahabharata* as well as in the Celtic and Greek mythologies and popular folktales like Grimm's Goose Girl. I am indebted to my colleagues, Francis Clooney, Jyoti Sahi, Joseph O'Leary and Kalpana Seshedra for this and related information on Buddhist and Hindu narratives of hospitality.

[13] I am indebted to Emmanuel de Saint Aubert for bringing these passages to my attention, and especially those from Merleau-Ponty's Collège de France Lecture Notes of 1953, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression (*Metispresses, Geneva, 2011). In his "Introduction," 19 f, de Saint Aubert offers a very illuminating commentary on the importantance of 'diacritical perception' in the later work of Merleau-Ponty. See also here Merleau-Ponty's essays on embodied language in *Signs* (in particular 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence'). I would also like to express deep gratitude here to my close col-

league and friend, Kascha Semonovitch, who first introduced me to the later Course Notes of Merleau-Ponty, especially those on 'Nature.'

[14] See our development of this play between prefiguration and refiguration in our *Poétique du possible* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984) and *The God who May Be* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001). See also Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, chapter 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[15] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 246. One finds a moving poetic metaphor for this idea of sacramental sensing as transubstantiation in George's Herbert poem 'Love bade me welcome' which concludes with the very carnal line: "You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat. So I did sit and eat." See Kascha Semonovitch's essay on this subject in 'Incarnate Experience and Keeping the Soul Ajar', *Religion and the Arts,* vol. 14, no. 5, Special Issue: "Hospitality: Imagining the Stranger", ed. Christopher Yates (2010), pp. 515-690. See also the commentary on this poem as a phenomenology of the embodied stranger in our joint essay, 'At the Threshold: Foreigners, Strangers, Others', in Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch, eds., *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 25-29.

[16] Merleau-Ponty, Ibid. For further elaborations of a phenomenology of flesh see the recent work of Didier Franck, Renaud Barabas, John Manoussakis, Anthony Steinbock and Jean-Luc Nancy (in particular *Corpus* and *Noli me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body,* both Fordham University Press, 2008-2009). For a more feminist hermeneutics of embodiment, drawing from the Continental movement of thought, see the seminal writings of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva; and more recently the work of Kelly Oliver, Karmen McKendrick, Virginia Burrus, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz. There are interesting opportunities opening up here for dialogue between a hermeneutics of flesh and recent pioneering work on notions of embodied intelligence - beyond the traditional sensation/cognition divide - by thinkers like Antonio Damasio, Evan Thompson, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (see in particular Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books, New York, 1999).

[17] This idea of 'hermeneutic application' was originally formulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer and later developed in an ethical direction by Paul Ricoeur and Peter Kemp (refiguration and attestation), in a political direction by Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala (subversion and emancipation), in a religious direction by David Tracy, Kevin Hart and Merold Westphal (fragmentation and community), in an eco-environmental direction by David Wood, Brian Treanor and Edward Casey (earth works and borders) and in a therapeutic direction by James Risser and Nancy Moules (healing, grief, and compassion).