

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

IMPERATIVE SENSE AND LIBIDINAL EVENT

A Thesis in

Philosophy

by

Bryan Lueck

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2007

The thesis of Bryan Lueck was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Dennis J. Schmidt
Professor of Philosophy
Co-Chair of Committee and Thesis Co-Adviser

Charles E. Scott
Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Vanderbilt University
Co-Chair of Committee and Thesis Co-Adviser
Special Member

Vincent Colapietro
Professor of Philosophy

Nancy Tuana
DuPont/Class of 1949 Professor of Philosophy

Jeffrey Nealon
Professor of English

Shannon Sullivan
Head, Department of Philosophy

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.

Abstract

My dissertation presents a comprehensive rethinking of the Kantian imperative, articulating it on the basis of what I call originary sense. Calling primarily upon the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-François Lyotard, I show (1) that sense constitutes the ontologically most basic dimension of our worldly being and (2) that the way in which this sense happens is determinative for our experience of the ethical imperative. By originary sense I mean to name something that is neither sensible sense (sensation) nor intelligible sense (meaning), but rather a kind of unity of these two that is ontologically anterior to their separation.

In the first chapter I follow Merleau-Ponty's argument in *Phenomenology of Perception* that sensible sense and intelligible sense belong originally together at the level of the lived body. We are able to intend the meaning of worldly situations (Husserl's *Sinngebung*) only insofar as we are responsive in an embodied way to the imperatives that are given in the sensible itself. The intelligible lawfulness so characteristic of the Kantian imperative is thus shown to be grounded in a more fundamental unity of intelligible and sensible sense. The second chapter follows Merleau-Ponty's later works, especially *The Prose of the World* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, showing how the sensibility that is inseparable from the imperative introduces important limitations to the universalizing tendencies of Kant's moral philosophy, drawing us back to the irreducible situatedness of ethical situations.

In the third chapter I turn to the very different articulation of sense given by Gilles Deleuze, primarily in his *Logic of Sense*. I show there that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conception of sense does not allow us to think the singularity of the imperative, the fact that the ethical command weighs on a *me* that cannot be grasped in terms of the generalities of my public identity. This singularity corresponds broadly to the idea of dignity in Kant's moral philosophy. I argue that Deleuze, who conceptualizes sense as an event, gives us the resources to think singularity and to understand what it entails for our ethical practice.

Finally, I attempt in the fourth chapter to think these two sides of the imperative—its demand for universality and its emphasis on singularity and dignity—together in the idea of libidinal sense. Calling on Jean-François Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* and, to a lesser extent, on Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, I show that these two apparently incompatible requirements of the imperative have a common source in the event of libidinal investment (cathexis). In thus locating the source of the imperative in originary, libidinal sense, I hope both to shed some light on the irreducible complexity of our ethical being and to present a more humane, less moralizing version of the imperative than is typically articulated in moral philosophy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. Ambiguous Sense: The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.....	3
II. The Two Heterogeneous Orders of Sense: <i>Discours, figure</i>	10
III. Origiary Blocking Together: Libidinal Sense.....	24
IV. The Dream-work: <i>Autodidasker</i>	28
V. The Donative Event: Primary and Secondary Processes.....	34
VI. Imperative.....	41
VII. The Project of the Present Work.....	48
 Chapter Two: EMBODIED SENSE.....	 53
I. Corporeality as Irreducible.....	54
II. Duality and Unity of Intelligible Sense and Sensible Sense.....	61
III. Ambiguous Sense and Corporeal Intentionality.....	66
IV. Sense and the Imperative of the World.....	79
V. The Ambiguous Imperative.....	90
VI. Conclusion.....	99
 Chapter Three: CARNAL SENSE.....	 100
I. Tacit Cogito and the Bad Ambiguity.....	101
II. The Dualism of <i>Phenomenology of Perception</i>	108
III. The Dynamic of Expression: Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Saussure.....	116
IV. The Body as Expressive.....	126
V. Monism of Sense.....	132
VI. The Circular Structure of the Flesh.....	142
VII. Imperative Vulnerability.....	149
 Chapter Four: SUPERFICIAL SENSE.....	 153
I. Singularity and the Monism of Sense.....	154
II. Sense in the Sheep’s Shop.....	158
III. Sense as Virtual Event.....	168
IV. The Serial Structure of Superficial Sense.....	176
V. Singularity and Dignity.....	186
VI. Harlequin, Emperor of the Moon.....	191

Chapter Five: LIBIDINAL SENSE.....	198
I. Ambiguity of Desire in Freud: Wish and Libido.....	200
II. The Flat Space of Libidinal Sense: The Libidinal Band.....	207
III. Desire as Phenomenon: A Three-Dimensional Libidinal Space.....	215
IV. Dissimulation.....	222
V. The Tensor Sign as Immediate Duality.....	227
VI. Conclusion: Three Benefits of Describing the Imperative in the Language of Libidinal Economy.....	232
 Works Cited.....	 237

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Sense does not have a sense. That is not to say that sense is nonsensical or that it is senseless. It is rather to say that sense always exceeds itself: we can never hope to produce a signification that would definitively fix its sense. And sense exceeds itself in this way precisely because it *precedes* itself. At the moment when we broach the question of the sense of sense for the very first time, we find ourselves already oriented within a world of sense, in accordance with which the question makes sense. Sense, then, in this excessive, non-signifiable sense, is originary. It is not an *object* in the natural world, nor even a noema, an intended object. For even to intend some particular sense presupposes that one find oneself already oriented within sense as such.¹ Borrowing the language of phenomenology, we might say that there can be no *epoché* of sense. We can never suspend or bracket our natural orientation toward sense, since the very act of bracketing would already be responsive to the question of sense, which itself makes sense.² Sense, then, cannot even in principle be eliminated as a presupposition. We are, at the most originary dimension of our opening out onto the world, always already given over to a sense whose sense we can never appropriate.

My project in this dissertation, stated most broadly, will be to describe originary sense as rigorously as possible. I will attempt to show how three of the most important movements in twentieth-century Continental philosophy, viz., phenomenology, Saussurian linguistics, and psychoanalysis, can contribute to this description. In addition, I will attempt to show how our anchorage within this inappropriable sense, our finding ourselves responsive to it always already, is determinative for our experience of the moral

¹ Cf. John Sallis, *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 30.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, tr. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 18-19.

imperative. I will begin in this introductory chapter by setting out the terms of the problematic as precisely as possible. I will describe in a preliminary way how the different senses of sense—significant or intelligible sense and sensible or sensuous sense—are understood in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Saussurian linguistics, and a kind of psychoanalysis articulated in the early work of Jean-François Lyotard. I will then describe, again in a preliminary way, how the idea of originary sense can contribute to a reconceptualization of the imperative as it is articulated in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

I. Ambiguous Sense: The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception* that “because we are in the world, we are *condemned to sense*, and we can neither do nor say anything without its acquiring a name in history.”³ As a whole, *Phenomenology of Perception* can be read as a demonstration of the ineluctable ambiguity of that sense to which we are constitutively given over.⁴ On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty refuses the empiricist reduction of sense to sensation, i.e., to the atomic, mute impressions that the subject would experience entirely without mediation. He shows, with the help of Gestalt psychology, that even the most elementary sensation “announces more than it contains”

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), xix (Hereafter *PP*); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1945), xiv (Hereafter *PP-Fr*). Translation modified. Emphasis in original.

⁴ Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 8. “The central intention of *Phenomenology of Perception* is this power of meaning, of escape, this sense always already at work, which is not distinguished from its own accomplishment, and which, in this way, cannot be opposed to the factual foundation from which it would emerge.”

and is thus “already charged with meaning [*sens*].”⁵ On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty also refuses the intellectualist reduction of sense to the acts of judgment that would first grant meaning to otherwise meaningless sense data. For intellectualism, any understanding of things that we cannot simply read off from mute sense impressions is attributed to a purely mental, extra-worldly act. But this abstract reconstruction of our consciousness of objects misses entirely “the primordial operation which infuses meaning [*sens*] into the sensible.”⁶ The thing is never given in actual perception as a collection of sense data that are subsumed under an ideal unity accessible only to the understanding. Rather, “the meaning [*sens*] inhabits the thing as the soul inhabits the body: it is not behind the appearances.”⁷ Intelligible sense, then, always already inhabits sensible sense, and conversely it is sensible sense itself that opens out into intelligible sense.⁸

Having shown that both the subjectivist reduction of sense in intellectualism and the objectivist reduction in empiricism fail to do justice to our actual experience of the world, Merleau-Ponty attempts to “unveil a third dimension in which this distinction becomes problematic.”⁹ This third and more originary dimension, which is simply the level of perception, is concealed from us precisely by the knowledge to which it gives rise. Merleau-Ponty points in this regard to “the tacit thesis of perception,” which maintains that “at every instant experience can be co-ordinated with that of the previous instant and that of the following, and my perspective with that of other consciousnesses . . . [and] that what is now indeterminate for me could become determinate for a more

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 4; *PP-Fr*, 9. Translation modified.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 34; *PP-Fr*, 43. Translation modified.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 319; *PP-Fr*, 369. Translation modified.

⁸ “The passing of sensory givens before our eyes or under our hands is, as it were, a language which teaches itself, and in which the meaning is secreted by the very structure of the signs, and this is why it can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them.” Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 319.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 162.

complete knowledge. . . .”¹⁰ That is to say, perception points beyond itself “quasi-teleologically” to a fully developed science in which all objects and all of the interrelations between them would be rendered completely determinate.¹¹ The level of perception is passed over as such when we attempt to read back into it the clarity and determinacy that characterize its promised result.

How are we to understand this originary level of perception if not in the clear, determinate concepts made possible by the subjectivist and objectivist reductions? In *The Primacy of Perception* Merleau-Ponty suggests that we approach this question by means of a paradox of immanence and transcendence that is proper to the level of perception.¹² This paradox can be formulated as follows: On the one hand, the object perceived must, in some sense at least, remain immanent to the perceiving subject. In other words, that an object is perceived at all entails that it is perceived by somebody. It is this basic insight that is taken up in an exaggerated and one-sided way in the intellectualist thesis. One of the works that laid the foundation for this thesis is Descartes’ *Meditations*. In his attempt to discover truths whose certainty could be established beyond doubt, Descartes arrives at the Cogito. On the basis of this discovery he introduces an ontological gulf between what exists *within* him and what exists *outside* him, or in Merleau-Ponty’s more phenomenological language, between what is immanent and what is transcendent. Owing to the clarity and distinctness that characterize the idea of the Cogito, all truth comes to be anchored to the subjective, immanent side of experience. Any object, then, insofar as it is a *known* object, is strictly immanent to the consciousness of the knower.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 54; *PP-Fr*, 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 16.

The same object considered as transcendent, or as outside the subject, is obscure and confused, and as such untrue.

On the other hand perception, and the knowledge that issues from it, refers to something that transcends the perceiving subject him- or herself. This becomes evident in our actual experience of the world and in our actual attempts to acquire knowledge of it. The things that we encounter are never given to us with the transparency that characterizes the clear and distinct ideas of the understanding. In fact it is only *because* things are opaque, *because* they give themselves only in adumbrations and against backgrounds, that we are motivated to reduce them to flat, self-present conceptual significations. From this perspective, then, the truth of things is firmly anchored on the objective, transcendent side of experience. The exaggerated form of this perspective is the empiricism described above.

Merleau-Ponty's own characterization of the originary level of perception, anterior to the one-sided subjectivist and objectivist abstractions of intellectualism and empiricism, stems from his refusal to recognize the two sides of the paradox as contradictory.¹³ In our experience as we live it, there simply is no ontological gulf between immanence and transcendence, between being-for-us and being-in-itself. As M.C. Dillon demonstrates, if there were such a gulf, then we would be thrown back into a version of Meno's paradox. Either pure being-for-us would be immediately intelligible or else pure being-in-itself would remain wholly transcendent and unthinkable. In either case the phenomenon of coming-to-know would be impossible.¹⁴ But experience just is this ongoing process of coming-to-know. Perception for Merleau-Ponty is always the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1988), 1-2, 35-50.

experience of somebody who nonetheless encounters the thing *in-itself*. As such, the perception of things “poses the problem of a genuine *in-itself-for-us*.”¹⁵ The level of perception, then, which is characterized by the co-presence of subjectivity and objectivity, immanence and transcendence, being-for-us and being-in-itself, is to be understood not as contradictory but rather as essentially *ambiguous*.

Importantly, the ambiguity that characterizes our most fundamental being-in-the-world is not to be understood, as Hegel put it, “simply by running together what thought has put asunder.”¹⁶ Subject and object, significant sense and sensible sense, are not to be thought as immediately identical. Instead, Merleau-Ponty insists on the ontological priority of the *phenomenon*, and of the level of perception at which we encounter it. Perception puts us in direct contact with a world that shows itself as “the sense of all senses and ground of all thinking.”¹⁷ The worldly phenomenon appears only in profiles, each inviting the motility of our bodies to investigate the sides that remain concealed. The thing, whether conceived in terms of its ideal signification or of its sensible presence, is never given all at once. Rather signification *emerges* as we follow the sensible thing’s lead and perceive it as *it* demands to be perceived. Significant sense, in other words, happens not simply when we perceive something, but rather when we perceive *according to it*. This most common, everyday act reveals the irreducible ambiguity and excessiveness of the sense, i.e., of the world, in which we find ourselves always already anchored. “The miracle of the real world,” Merleau-Ponty insists, “is that in its sense and

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 322; *PP-Fr*, 372.

¹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 430; *PP-Fr*, 492. Translation modified.

existence are one, and that we see the latter lodge itself in no uncertain terms in the former.”¹⁸

The ambiguity between the different senses of sense that characterizes the originary world of perception is equally and necessarily an ambiguity between subjectivity and objectivity. The phenomenology of perception “discloses subject and object as two abstract ‘moments’ of a unique structure which is *presence*.”¹⁹ One of the most persistent themes of *Phenomenology of Perception* is that our openness to the world happens in corporeal intentionality. Intentionality names the transcendence of an active, knowing subject toward a known object whose being is wholly in-itself. But, according to Merleau-Ponty, the fact of corporeality has always already complicated this otherwise straightforward structure of phenomenality. In order for the phenomenon to appear at all it must be the case that the depth and opacity of the object already exist right at the heart of subjectivity. Our active, knowing relation to things presupposes our bodily receptiveness to them. Prior, for example, to the known quality of blueness there is the blue as obscure invitation addressed to the motility of the perceiving body, which must orient itself in the way appropriate to seeing the blue successfully.²⁰ In any act of perception, then, it is impossible to sort out what is attributable to the subject and what to the object. And this is not owing to any correctable limitation of our knowledge; rather it is the consequence of an irreducible ambiguity at the level of our most fundamental openness to the world.

This ambiguity between the subjective and the objective is intimately related to the ambiguity between the different senses of sense. The paradox of immanence and

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 323; *PP-Fr*, 374. Translation modified.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 430; *PP-Fr*, 492.

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 214; *PP-Fr*, 248.

transcendence, of a self-transparent being-for-itself and an unknowably opaque being-in-itself, is solved by the thesis of ambiguity. Perception is not for Merleau-Ponty the act of a subject that would transcend itself into the wholly alien sphere of brute, self-identical being. The supposed poles of experience are rather always already mediated at the most originary level. Importantly, though, this originary mediation must not be understood with reference to any completed *synthesis* that would reduce the ambiguity to intelligible theses.²¹ Any attempt to articulate our most basic openness to the world must leave an opaque remainder. And this is just because the knowing subject who would attempt such an articulation always arrives too late on the scene. Merleau-Ponty's own description of this irreducible opacity merits quotation at length:

Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them. Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some *primal acquisition* which prevents my experience from being clear of itself. I experience the sensation as a modality of general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the cause of it.²²

The subject, then, who would thematize the world in an act of reflection always finds him- or herself *pre-reflectively* and irreducibly committed to the world. Indeed that pre-reflective commitment to the world is the necessary condition of any thematic reflection at all.

But world should not be understood only as the pre-reflective *ground* of our experience; it is just as much that ground *as* reflectively thematized. The world, in which we find ourselves always already, is “a perpetual pregnancy, a perpetual parturition,

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 94-5. Hereafter *VI*.

²² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 216; *PP-Fr*, 250.

generativity and generality.”²³ Sensible sense, in which we are constitutively rooted, expands itself with the aid of our corporeal intentionality in the direction of intelligible significations. The face of the cube, for example, presents itself to my body as one profile among many; as I respond to the invitation of that profile and explore the concealed sides, I approach the ideal signification of a cube. The term sense refers exclusively neither to the sensible face of the cube nor to its geometrical idealization. It refers to both, and to the *orientation* of each to the other, simultaneously and ambiguously. Merleau-Ponty expresses this ambiguity of sense concisely: “In all the uses of the word *sens*, we find the same fundamental notion of a being oriented or polarized in the direction of what he is not, and thus we are brought back to a conception of the subject as *ek-stase*, and to a relationship of active transcendence between the subject and the world. The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects.”²⁴

II. The Two Heterogeneous Orders of Sense: *Discours, figure*

This idea of an originary sense irreducible to any one sense is taken up and radicalized by Jean-François Lyotard in his first major book of philosophy, *Discours, figure*. Lyotard insists from the very beginning of the book “that the given is not a text, that there is a thickness in the given, or rather a difference, which is constitutive and

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 115.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 430; *PP-Fr*, 491.

which is not to be read, but to be seen.”²⁵ This thickness, this difference that is proper to the sensible, is always being forgotten when we attempt to *signify* it and to render it intelligible. The act of reflection, then, in which we would turn back from our immersion in the sensibly given and articulate it in intelligible significations, must remain incomplete. To this extent Lyotard is in agreement with Merleau-Ponty. But for Lyotard the difference between sensible sense and significant sense is considerably more extreme than for Merleau-Ponty. Throughout his entire philosophical oeuvre, from *The Structure of Behavior* to the posthumously published *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty presented the difference between the senses of sense as one primarily of degree. Our pre-reflective being-in-the-world, he argued, already contained a kind of nascent *logos*, and this *logos* was simply rendered more determinate in reflective thought. In other words, sensible sense is for Merleau-Ponty always oriented “quasi-teleologically” toward significant sense.²⁶

For Lyotard, on the other hand, this difference “is constitutive of an ontological gap [*écart*].” Instead of a continuum, we are faced here with “two *orders of sense* which communicate, but which are as a consequence separated.”²⁷ While for Merleau-Ponty the act of reflection reveals an originary *ambiguity* between the senses of sense, Lyotard insists that reflection reveals a *heterogeneity*.²⁸ These heterogeneous orders of sense are named in the book’s title. Importantly, these different orders are separated and conjoined in the title by a comma: *Discours, figure*.²⁹ To speak of *Sense and Non-Sense* or of *The*

²⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, 5th ed. (Paris: Klincksieck, 2002), 9. Hereafter *DF*. All translations from *DF* are my own.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 54; *PP-Fr*, 66.

²⁷ Lyotard, *DF*, 211. Emphasis mine.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

²⁹ Cf. Mary Lydon, “Veduta on *Discours, figure*,” *Yale French Studies* 99 (2001):24-5.

Visible and the Invisible, as Merleau-Ponty does, is to suggest a fundamental homogeneity between the different senses of sense. Sensuous sense expands itself into significant sense; the invisible is always only the invisible *of* the visible. The comma that separates the orders of discourse and figure, on the other hand, marks a rupture in this homogeneity. The connection between the two senses of sense will not belong to the logical, significant order (Merleau-Ponty's *and*), but to the order of the event.³⁰

Lyotard presents a rigorous description of the heterogeneity of the orders of sense in the first division of the book, entitled "Signification and Designation." This heterogeneity can be described with reference to three irreducible differences. First, the space of discourse (significant sense) is essentially *flat*, whereas the space of the figure (sensuous sense) is essentially characterized by *depth*. Second, the kind of negation appropriate to discourse is opposition, whereas negation appears within the sensible as distance. Finally, the unconscious of discourse is passive and virtual, while that of the figure belongs to the *act* of perception itself. In what follows, I will discuss each of these differences in detail.

In order to understand Lyotard's claim that the profound space of the sensible is essentially different from the flat space of signification, one need only compare the experiences of viewing a sensible object and reading a text. The description most appropriate to thinking the being of the sensible, according to Lyotard, is the kind of phenomenology we have already seen exemplified by Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, such a phenomenological thinking of the sensible is "a question put to what does not speak. It asks of our experience of the world what the world is before it is a thing one

³⁰ The importance of the event in Lyotard's work, and its role in this dissertation, will be taken up in detail later.

speaks of and which is taken for granted, *before it has been reduced to a set of manageable and disposable significations.*”³¹ As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception demonstrates an irreducible opacity at the heart of the knowing subject, with the result that the task of reflection is shown to be interminable. The world that I would *know* is always already the world in which I am rooted. The object that I encounter from within my originary perceptual faith offers itself to me *in depth*: the side that I see promises sides that are presently concealed. And this promise can only be made to a subject who is him- or herself sensibly profound. To “fill out” the object that is given to me in profile, I must move my three-dimensional body in three-dimensional space. The most basic insight of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of reflection, then, is that the reflected world—the world insofar as it is “reduced to a set of manageable and disposable significations”—is necessarily grounded in a pre-reflexive opacity that it can never surpass.

The experience of reading and understanding a text is strikingly different from this. Most basically, “a text is not sensibly profound; you do not move in front of it or inside it,” following the leads of its various profiles.³² Neither, of course, does one manipulate the text—for example, by turning it upside-down or by holding it at varying distances from the eyes—in order to “flesh out” the significance that it adumbrates from the normal reading position.³³ Of course one can always treat the text as an object in depth, but in doing so one would precisely not be *reading* it. And one must of course *see* the text with the same perceptual apparatus with which one sees objects in depth. But the elements of the text, viz., the letters, words, and sentences that constitute it *as* a text,

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 102. Emphasis mine.

³² Lyotard, *DF*, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 60-1.

immediately efface themselves, giving way to the ideal significations that they merely support. One does not progressively unveil the sense concealed in the thick materiality of the printed word; instead one instantly *recognizes* the immaterial meaning in which the whole function of the printed word is exhausted.³⁴

As Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is the methodology most adequate to thinking the sensible, so the most adequate theorization of the flat space of signification, according to Lyotard, is Saussurian linguistics. The decisive step taken by Saussure was the isolation of the linguistic structure as the proper object of the science of linguistics. This decision inaugurates the well-known distinction between *langue* and *parole*. According to Saussure, this distinction separates "what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less accidental."³⁵ The *langue* constitutes the essential object of linguistics because it can be studied independently of everything external to it, including the *uses* that are made of it by actual speakers and its situatedness within its concrete social and historical contexts. This abstraction of the linguistic structure from everything external to it finds its justification in the "first principle" of Saussurian linguistics, which is that "the link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary."³⁶ The arbitrariness of the signifier does not in any way refer to the free choice of a speaker in choosing which signifiers will refer to which extra-linguistic realities. It means, rather, that the signifier is *unmotivated* by external reality.³⁷ The English-language signifier "tree" signifies a tree

³⁴ Ibid, 211.

³⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1986), 14. Hereafter *CGL*.

³⁶ Ibid, 67. Translation modified. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris : Payot, 1965), 100. Hereafter *CGL-Fr*.

³⁷ Ibid, 69.

not because of any natural connection to the real trees that exist in depth, but because of relations internal to the ideal, immaterial space of the *langue*.

The distinction suggested by the first principle between the reference of language outside itself to objects in depth and its reference to itself as system is the distinction that gives the title for the first division of *Discours, figure*: “Signification and Designation.” The trend of Saussurian linguistics is to reduce the phenomenon of meaning to signification, that is, to a function of *langue* as ideal, immaterial structure. According to Lyotard, Saussure’s “conception of structure leads him to absorb all of signification into a cutting-up, i.e., into the system of intervals between the terms, or a system of *values*.”³⁸ This refers to what is certainly the most well known, as well as the most controversial, claim of Saussurian linguistics, namely that “in the *langue* there are only differences, *and no positive terms*.”³⁹ The signification of a term is not given by its referent—what it *designates* in extra-linguistic reality—but by its place within the system of differences that constitutes the *langue*. The meaning of a term insofar as it is determined by its differential relation to the other terms within the same system is the term’s *value*.⁴⁰ To take Saussure’s own example, the English “sheep” and the French “mouton” have different values even though both words can be used to designate the same extra-linguistic object. The values of the two terms are different because English has a separate term for sheep *qua* food, while French does not.⁴¹ Value, then, is determined entirely

³⁸ Lyotard, *DF*, 93.

³⁹ Saussure, *CGL*, 118; *CGL-Fr*, 166. Translation modified.

⁴⁰ Lyotard underlines this point with a quotation from the manuscript sources of Saussure’s *CGL*, which was itself compiled from students’ notes: “The value of a term results only from the coexistence of different terms.” Also, “The sense of a term depends on the presence or absence of a neighboring term. From the system we arrive at the idea of value, not of sense. The system leads to the term.” Robert Godel, *Les sources manuscrites du Cours de linguistique générale* (Geneva : Droz et Minard, 1967), 238, 237. Quoted in Lyotard, *DF*, 94, 97.

⁴¹ Saussure, *CGL*, 114.

within the differential system of *langue*; it functions independently of what is or is not the case in the external, sensibly profound world. This independence reveals an “ontological gap” between the ideal, transparent sense that emerges on the flat space of signification and the profound, opaque sense that emerges from our irreducible anchorage within the sensuous.⁴²

A second and closely related unbridgeable gap between discourse and figure concerns the kind of negation proper to each. According to Lyotard, the negation proper to figure is “distance, the spacing that is constitutive of space, negation experienced in variability. The experience of this mobility that engenders extension, thickness, figure is a privileged object of description for the phenomenologist.”⁴³ The methodological and terminological apparatus necessary to think this negativity is given in the work of Husserl. This can be demonstrated beginning with the famous principle of all principles: “Every originary presentive intuition [*originär gebende Anschauung*] is a legitimizing source of cognition. . . . Each theory can again draw its truth only from originary data [*originären Gegebenheiten*].”⁴⁴ It is essential here to understand what Husserl means by “originary presentive intuition;” if we do not, then we will lose sight of the decisive advance introduced by phenomenology, and will reduce the latter to just another empiricism. Most importantly, it is essential not to understand donative intuition in accordance with the natural attitude. Givenness does not refer to a *real* relation between a consciousness on the one hand and the thing that would “enter into consciousness” on

⁴² Lyotard, *DF*, 211.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 27.

⁴⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 43 (§24). Hereafter *Ideas I*. Emphasis omitted. Translation modified. Page numbers for *Ideas I* refer to those marked in the margins. Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana, Band III. Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 52 (§24). Hereafter *Ideen I*.

the other.⁴⁵ The given, in sum, does not go into consciousness the way that money goes into a wallet.

The essential difference between this empiricist, natural-attitude understanding of givenness and the properly phenomenological one concerns the primacy of intentionality. Givenness cannot be understood originarily as the givenness of one positivity to another. Instead, originary givenness happens only within the space of intentionality, of a consciousness that is always and constitutively a consciousness of. . . . It is not the case, though, that this intentional consciousness goes out beyond itself in order to encounter the given; this conception still remains within the natural attitude. Intentionality rather *is* the spacing without which presentation, and thus phenomenality, would be impossible. That which is given is given only within the originary spacing of the *of*. To return to Lyotard's terminology in *Discours, figure*, it is also this *of* of intentionality that gives what is presented to be given as *figural*. That is to say, the given is given originarily *in depth*. But this depth must not be understood as the real depth of the "external" world, but rather as the depth extended in the spacing or distancing which constitutes the very structure of phenomenality.⁴⁶

This idea can be made more intuitive by turning to some of Husserl's many descriptive examples of the workings of intentional consciousness. The most basic point to be taken from all of these examples is that our consciousness is always of "unities of

⁴⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations, Volume 2*, trans. J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), 98. Hereafter *LI-2*. Also Husserl, *Ideas I*, 34-37 (§19).

⁴⁶ Without this originary spacing of intentionality, we would be forced back into the paradox of immanence and transcendence discussed earlier with respect to Merleau-Ponty. That is, we would be left with an ontological gulf between the object insofar as it is "within" or immanent to the consciousness of the knower and the object as "outside" or transcendent to that consciousness. We would be unable to think the phenomenon, the in-itself-for-us that we encounter in our day-to-day, unreflective experience. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, trans. Brian Beakley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 54-56.

sense [*Einheiten des Sinnes*]⁴⁷ “I do not see colour sensations but coloured *things*, I do not hear tone-sensations but the singer’s *song*, etc. etc.”⁴⁸ According to Husserl, anything that is perceived is presented in adumbrations. To see a table, for example, is to see it from one point of view at a time. But this limitation in no way prevents us from seeing the table itself. Rather the various adumbrations constitutively *point beyond themselves* to the intended unity of sense that is the table itself. Our consciousness does not lose itself in each sensation or “content of consciousness” precisely because these sensations are not discrete and self-contained.⁴⁹ The spacing of intentionality within which anything like “the table itself” can appear is at the same time a sense-bestowal [*Sinngebung*]: the table as unity of sense is given only across the distance and depth opened up within the structure of intentionality.⁵⁰ It is this originary phenomenon of depth and its relation to sense that characterizes the space of the figure for Lyotard.

To express the phenomenological project of grounding significance in the *Sinngebung* of the intentional act in terms very much foreign to that project, we might say that phenomenology attempts to ground *langue* in *parole*. But it is precisely this grounding that Saussurian linguistics shows to be impossible. As Lyotard puts it, “*langue* precedes *parole* in that no speaker can claim, even modestly, to have instituted the former.”⁵¹ This can be demonstrated simply by imagining an attempt to reform all of the significations of a language: we would quickly realize that the only tool we possessed for carrying out this task is the *langue* itself.⁵² To pick up an example of Saussure’s

⁴⁷ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 106; *Ideen I*, 134 (§55)

⁴⁸ Husserl, *LI-2*, 99. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁹ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 73-76 (§41)

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 128-9 (§55).

⁵¹ Lyotard, *DF*, 34.

⁵² *Ibid*.

addressed earlier, suppose that we wanted to refashion the English word mutton so that it would take on the whole significance presently distributed between the two words mutton and sheep. To do so would be to call upon the whole system of relations that constitutes the *langue*: the words mutton and sheep, and the combined signification that we would like to assign to the former, are given in the first place only against the background of the *differences* that make them possible. And if we succeed in changing the signification of mutton, this will also presuppose the *langue* as system of differences that makes *it* possible. Thus we can see that prior to every *act* of sense-bestowal (*parole*) there is necessarily the *structure* that enables it.

The negation that supports the structure of the *langue* is different from the kind of spacing and distancing involved in the sense of the figural. If meanings appear as self-same, self-contained “unities of sense,” this for Saussure is only owing to a play of *opposition* at the level of the *langue*. Opposition preserves the *values* of the terms within a language by maintaining the regulated differences that constitute the *langue*. If we treat two signifiers within the language as positivities—for example, the signifiers “fat” and “hat”—we would describe their relation to each other as one of mere difference. But this mere difference between positive contents is possible only because of the opposition at the level of structure that regulates that difference, that at once holds them apart and sets them in relation. At the level of structure, to be the signifier “fat” is just to *not be* the signifier “hat,” among others. If this opposition were not maintained—for example if English speakers ceased to differentiate between *f* and *h*—then the positive contents would be undermined. And if the oppositional structure of the *langue* as such were not

maintained, then no sense-bestowing act of any sort would be possible.⁵³ In this way the negations proper to discourse and to figure are shown to be irreducibly different.

The third and final irreducible difference between the two orders of sense that Lyotard discusses concerns the status of the unconscious in each. According to Lyotard, what remains unconscious for the thinking of objects in depth is the *act* of consciousness in which those objects are given. Once again Lyotard points to phenomenology as the privileged site for articulating this unconscious. From the perspective of phenomenology, “it is the act itself . . . which is unconscious of itself and which forgets itself in its naïve, natural fascination with the objects that it has in view.”⁵⁴ As we have seen, intentional consciousness aims at unities of sense; thus we tend in the natural attitude to suppose that in perception we encounter *things* that are given to us as already fully determinate. Only by means of the phenomenological reduction are we able to step back from our natural fascination with fully-formed objects and to thematize the *acts* in which those objects are *constituted*. In the manuscripts preparatory to the 1907 lecture course entitled *The Idea of Phenomenology* Husserl states unambiguously the role of this constitution within his phenomenology: “Transcendental phenomenology is phenomenology of *constituting consciousness*.”⁵⁵ To thematize and articulate the acts of constitution in which objects are given (in the expanded sense of givenness discussed above) is to restore the depth proper to things—a depth that is otherwise covered over by our intending objects as unities of sense.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid, 141-2.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana Band II, Die Idee der Phänomenologie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), x. Translation mine. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ Lyotard, *DF*, 27.

Merleau-Ponty takes up and develops the phenomenological theme of the constitutive unconscious. In thinking through the role of the body within the structure of phenomenality as such Merleau-Ponty shows how “every active process of signification or *Sinn-gebung* appeared as derivative and secondary in relation to that pregnancy of signification within signs which could serve to define the world.”⁵⁷ The task of Husserl’s “phenomenology of constituting consciousness” was to bring to reflective awareness the acts within which objects, conceived as unities of sense, were given. What was unconscious for the natural attitude was to be made conscious under the phenomenological reduction. It is this possibility that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology calls into doubt. For Merleau-Ponty the unconscious that gives there to be objects is not itself something that can be thematized as a unity of sense.⁵⁸ In this way Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the unconscious reiterates the theme of the necessary incompleteness of reflection discussed above.

If it is an unconscious *Sinngebung* that gives there to be objects as unities of sense, and if that *Sinngebung* must remain to some extent pre-reflective, then we can say that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology demonstrates a kind of nonsense at the origin of sense. Nonsense here does not refer to the absence of sense, but rather to what cannot be reduced to a univocal sense. Merleau-Ponty states his own conclusions on this matter as follows:

In sum, what we have discovered through the study of motility is a *new sense of the word “sense.”* The strength of intellectualist psychology and of idealist philosophy comes from their having no difficulty in showing that perception and thought have an intrinsic sense and cannot be explained in terms of external association of fortuitously assembled contents. The *Cogito* was the coming to self-awareness of this interiority.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 429; *PP-Fr*, 490. Translation modified.

⁵⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 180: “This unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our ‘consciousness,’ but in front of us, as articulations of our field. It is ‘unconscious’ by the fact that it is not an *object*, but it is that through which objects are possible. . . .”

But all signification was conceived *ipso facto* as an act of thought, as the operation of a pure *I*, and if intellectualism easily refuted empiricism, it was itself incapable of accounting for the variety of experience, *of the nonsense within it*.⁵⁹

The new sense of sense that Merleau-Ponty refers to here is one that includes the element of nonsense that is at its origin. More specifically, he is referring to our originary rootedness in a pre-reflective world characterized by ambiguity between the different senses of sense. The fully determinate objects of science emerge only from a ground in which the distinctions between sensible sense and intelligible sense, subject and object, and even self and others cannot be sharply defined.

This Merleau-Pontean conception of a constitutive unconscious characterized by a new, excessive kind of sense, has a consequence that is especially relevant to Lyotard's project in *Discours, figure* as well as to the present study, viz., that this phenomenological unconscious is never a *personal* or *individual* unconscious. This point has already been suggested by Merleau-Ponty's claim that the active *Sinngebung* is derivative from a primary pre-reflective rootedness in the world.⁶⁰ This pre-reflective, originary world is not *proper* to any perceiving subject: "Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world."⁶¹ The self of this originary perceptual experience is for Merleau-Ponty the impersonal "one" (*on*).⁶² The pre-reflective anonymity right at the heart of the active subject is the nonsense at the origin of sense.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 146-7; *PP-Fr*, 171-2. Translation modified. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 428-9; *PP-Fr*, 489-90.

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 216; *PP-Fr*, 250-1.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 246; *PP-Fr*, 277.

The unconscious that characterizes the flat space of discourse is, for Lyotard, also an instance of nonsense at the heart of sense. But the unconscious of discourse is even more primordial than that of figure. While the phenomenological unconscious pertains to the *acts* in which objects are given, the discursive unconscious “belongs to the order of the virtual; it precedes and surrounds the act because it is what makes the act possible, it invests the act and remains unknown to it because the act erases it by its presence.”⁶³ This discursive unconscious is not, like Merleau-Ponty’s, a nascent *logos* that comes to be expressed, albeit incompletely, in a determinate sense. It is rather, as virtual, a generative nonsense characterized by the co-presence of impossible senses.

The unconscious of the space of discourse cannot even in principle be made conscious.⁶⁴ This follows most basically from the Saussurian principle discussed above that “in the *langue* there are only differences, *and no positive terms.*” As we have seen, the condition for any act that intends any meaning whatever is the linguistic structure. But the most basic elements of that structure are not themselves meaningful: they neither designate nor signify.⁶⁵ Again, the phoneme *f* is constituted *differentially*, in its relation for example to the phoneme *h*, which is itself differentially constituted. There is no *f* or *h* *as such*. The condition for determinate sense, then, is originary difference, which can never be intended as a unity of sense.

The discursive unconscious must not be understood, though, as a mere condition of possibility for meaningful phenomena. The unconscious structure is both generative of and immanent to the actualities it conditions. This is exemplified perhaps most clearly

⁶³ Lyotard, *DF*, 29-30.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 33.

⁶⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “How Do We Recognize Structuralism?” trans. Melissa McMahon and Charles J. Stivale. Appendix to Charles J. Stivale, *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari: Intersections and Animations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998), 262.

in Althusser's concept of structural causality. The structure, composed entirely of non-signifying elements mutually determined by variable differences, cannot be thought as a self-identical essence external to phenomenal reality. "The structure is not an essence *outside* the economic phenomena which comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations and which is effective on them as an absent cause, *absent because it is outside them.*" Rather "the whole existence of structure consists of its effects. . . ."⁶⁶ Owing to the immanence of the non-signifying structure to significant actualities, those actualities are necessarily *overdetermined*: each phenomenon bears numerous impossible senses simultaneously.⁶⁷ The nonsense of the unconscious ground, then, is just as much a nonsense right at the heart of the *things* we encounter every day in the natural attitude.

III. Originary Blocking Together: Libidinal Sense

What Lyotard has demonstrated, in sum, is the existence of two heterogeneous orders of sense which occupy different spaces, are maintained by different negations, and are conditioned by different unconsciouses. But these two orders still do not comprise the whole of sense. "Signification does not exhaust sense, but no more do signification and designation combined."⁶⁸ Sense rather emerges from, without being in any way reducible to, the communication between the heterogeneous orders. This inevitably raises a difficult question: if, *ex hypothesi*, the two orders of sense are heterogeneous, and indeed incommensurable, then how is communication between them possible?

⁶⁶ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1997), 188-9.

⁶⁷ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1996), 89-116.

⁶⁸ Lyotard, *DF*, 135.

Before detailing Lyotard's answer to this problem, it will be helpful to describe what his answer is not. We have seen that each of the two orders of sense contains an instance of nonsense at its heart and as such is not identical with itself. It would be tempting, then, to suggest the existence of a third order of sense which would constitute a synthesis of signification and designation. Lyotard rejects this solution. He demonstrates, in the context of a discussion of the "Sense-Certainty" chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the immediately intuited sensible which is *designated*, or even *pointed to*, does not simply resolve itself into the *significant* universal. For Hegel any immediately intuited content shows itself to be already something negative, and thus mediated. "The *Here pointed out*, to which I hold fast, is similarly a *this Here* which, in fact, is *not* this Here, but a Before and Behind, an Above and Below, a Right and Left."⁶⁹ Designation, in other words, resolves itself into signification: "Language, as we see, is the more truthful."⁷⁰ Lyotard of course grants that there is a negation proper to the sensible, but insists that "the negating that is there in the field of the sensible is not the invariant negativity which makes of language the medium for understanding each other."⁷¹ That is, the spacing in which something becomes visible in depth is irreducible to the opposition that maintains the values of the terms in a *langue*. The *perceived* negations of left and right, above and below are irreducible to the *structural* negations between the *words* "right" and "left," "above" and "below."⁷² To attempt a synthesis between the two orders of sense, then, is to fail to do justice to the modes of *difference* proper to each.

⁶⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 64.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 60.

⁷¹ Lyotard, *DF*, 38.

⁷² *Ibid*.

The mode of communication between the two orders of sense is rather what Lyotard calls “blocking together.” Blocking together refers to a co-presence of impossibles, unthinkable from the standpoint of representation. More specifically, in the context of the present discussion it refers to the co-presence of impossible spaces—the flat space of signification and the profound space of designation—in one space.⁷³ This mode of co-presence is similar to what Derrida means by inscription: the “proper” sense of one term is determined by its necessary contamination by the presence of its other. This co-presence is different from mediation in that the alterity of the other is not superseded: the other remains unrepresentable in terms of the same.⁷⁴ Or as Lyotard puts it, “one can affirm that everything is sayable; this is true. But what is not true is that the signification of discourse gathers up the whole sense of the sayable. One can say that the tree is green, but one will not have put the color in the sentence. Yet the color is itself sense.”⁷⁵

Let us review the broadly deconstructive strategy at work in *Discours, figure*. In the first section of the book, entitled “Le Parti Pris Du Figural,” Lyotard sets out to valorize the sensible, which tends to be marginalized in a philosophical discourse governed by *logos*. “This book protests” he writes, that “the given is not a text, that there is a thickness in the given, or rather a difference, which is constitutive and which is not to be read, but to be seen; that this difference, and the immobile mobility that reveals it, is what never ceases to be forgotten in signification.”⁷⁶ This valorization of the sensible is not to be understood as the naïve attempt to leap over signification and to establish

⁷³ Ibid, 339.

⁷⁴ Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 29-30.

⁷⁵ Lyotard, *DF*, 51-2.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 9.

immediate contact with the sensible, conceived as the absolute ground of truth. Lyotard's claim is considerably more complex: something of the sensible retains its alterity when it becomes something signified, and this something always already inhabits *and disrupts* the flat space of discourse that would absorb it. Thus no matter how rigorously one reduces language to *langue* and meaning to value, still "there is a fact that our experience of speech does not permit us to challenge, which is that all discourse is cast in the direction of something it seeks to grasp, which is incomplete and open, somewhat like the way the visual field is partial, limited and extended by a horizon."⁷⁷ The object of any act of discourse is given *within discourse itself* in the kind of depth proper to the sensible. To speak of something is to establish it at a *distance* from the act of speaking itself; one then "approaches" the discursive object from various "angles," attempting thereby to flesh out the adumbrations in which it is "given." In fact the *langue* itself is given only within the depth opened up by Saussure's own discourse in the *Course in General Linguistics*! The "depth" interior to discourse disrupts the flatness that is supposed to distinguish it rigorously from the sensible. But it is also this orientation into quasi-visual depth that gives language its *raison d'être* in the first place.

What emerges from this deconstructive examination of the co-presence and communication of the heterogeneous orders of sense is a new, richer conception of sense. This new sense of sense is in no way a third sense *beyond* signification and designation, but rather the *event* of their blocking together. It is this new, more complex sense that is named in the book's title: *Discours, figure*. More specifically, it is suggested by the comma which joins and separates discourse and figure in a manner that is reducible to neither. The relation is not specifically of the discursive, logical order—for example, of

⁷⁷ Ibid, 32.

the representable relations “and” or “or”—but neither obviously is it of the perceptive order. The comma rather points to a complex, non-representable imbrication. It is because each of the orders of sense is *always already* imbricated with the other that sense is never exhausted either by signification or designation, or even by their combination. While discursive sense is significant sense and figural sense is designated sense, this new, more complex sense is the sense of desire. The privileged site for the articulation of this sense, according to Lyotard, is psychoanalysis. Owing to its close relation to desire and to psychoanalysis, we shall refer to this new kind of sense as libidinal sense.

IV. The Dream-work: *Autodidasker*

Lyotard carefully describes the workings of libidinal sense in the third and final section of *Discours, figure* entitled “The Other Space.” Focusing primarily on the works of Freud, he demonstrates how the sense of desire happens as the non-representable blocking together of signification and designation. He shows, moreover, that this blocking together is originary; it is not the case that desire merely *combines* two orders of sense that are otherwise autonomous.

Lyotard demonstrates this most clearly in his examination of the dream-work as described in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. To interpret a dream correctly, according to Freud, the symbolic method practiced most commonly by laypersons is insufficient. This symbolic method “considers the content of the dream as a whole and seeks to replace it by another content which is intelligible and in certain respects analogous to the

original one.”⁷⁸ That is to say, the images that constitute the dream are resolved into a discursive significance. The interpretation of dreams, then, would simply be a matter of translating one kind of sense (the manifest dream-content) into another (the latent dream-thoughts). But this would miss what is essential in dreaming. “At bottom,” Freud writes, “dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the *dream-work* which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming—the explanation of its peculiar nature.”⁷⁹ To focus on dream-thoughts and to try to render them articulate by the standards of significant sense, then, is to overlook the very *donation* of sense by the dream-work. As Lyotard puts it in the title of the chapter in which these issues are addressed, “the dream-work does not think.”⁸⁰

The dream-thoughts, which are entirely rational by the standards of waking life, are no more than the raw material of the dream-work: the whole function of the latter is to transform the former. For Freud, these two elements of the dream are radically and qualitatively different.⁸¹ The dream-work does not confront the discourse of the dream-thoughts as a second discourse; it does not *transform* them by *translating* them into different dream-thoughts. Instead the dream-work *distorts* the signification of the dream-thoughts by means that are not themselves properly discursive. This act of distortion is wholly an act of desire, which can only be fulfilled by being rendered unrecognizable by the censorship and by the intelligible waking world that it defends.⁸²

⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. IV*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 96-7. Hereafter *ID-I*.

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part)* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. V, The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 506-7, n. 2. Hereafter *ID-II*.

⁸⁰ Lyotard, *DF*, 239.

⁸¹ Freud, *ID-II*, 507.

⁸² *Ibid.*

The dream-work, then, is not representable as such. It is irreducible to determinate, intelligible sense because it is the very act of distorting that sense. The dream-work, in sum, *is* the originary blocking together of the heterogeneous orders of sense. To return for a moment to the vocabulary of deconstruction discussed above, we can say that the intelligible dream-thoughts are contaminated always already by sensible images which distort their straightforward, univocal sense. The distortion produced in this blocking together must not be understood, however, as the effect of the dream-work on an intelligible sense that would somehow pre-exist it. Rather it is the blocking together which, as the event of desire, *produces* both the significant sense and the sensible sense that disrupts it.

In order to illustrate how the dream-work happens as the originary blocking together of the heterogeneous orders of sense, let us examine Lyotard's treatment of condensation. Condensation is the process of the dream-work which transgresses the order proper to discourse by telescoping the oppositions that maintain the *langue*. The space of pure oppositions that constitute the *langue*, as we have seen above, is flat. To telescope these pure oppositions, however, is to force the words of the *langue* into the space of depth. That is to say, words whose sense is reducible to fully transparent *value* take on the depth and opacity of *things*. Lyotard sums up this process as follows: "Normally, in the linguistic order, a word is transparent; its meaning is immediate, and it is that meaning which is received. *The phonic or graphic vehicle is itself, so to speak, unperceived*. The product of condensation, as its name implies, is on the contrary, opaque, dense, hiding its other sides."⁸³

⁸³ Lyotard, *DF*, 244. Emphasis mine.

An excellent example of condensation as blocking together is furnished by the dream of the *Autodidasker*, reported in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.⁸⁴ *Autodidasker* is a word which formed a particularly vivid part of the content of one of Freud's own dreams. The first point to take note of here is that the word is obviously a neologism: it has no place established for it in advance by the regulated system of oppositions that is the German language. Despite this, the word does bear a sense, which it is the task of the dream interpretation to unravel. That *Autodidasker* can have a sense at all, without respecting the system of oppositions in which it figures, demonstrates already that even the meanings of *words*, to say nothing of *things*, exceeds the transparency of purely linguistic *value*.

The word *Autodidasker* can, according to Freud, "easily be analysed into 'Autor' [author], 'Autodidakt' [self-taught] and 'Lasker'" which latter is associated also with the name Lasalle.⁸⁵ (Lasker and Lasalle are the surnames of German political figures from the time of Freud's youth). But this analysis of the word into its elements does not by itself reveal the sense of the word. This is because the elements are not themselves purely linguistic, but have their senses inextricably bound up with their *reference* outside the flat space of signification. This contamination of significant sense by sensible sense disrupts the order of the former. Importantly, though, the contamination does not arise simply because the new word is put together from elements. The term sociology, for example, was fairly recently a neologism and is made up of the elements *socius* and *logos*. But the new term does not disrupt the discursive order in the least: it respects entirely the system of differences into which it was introduced. That is to say, the

⁸⁴ Freud, *ID-I*, 298-302.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 299. Brackets in original.

linguistic values for society and *logos* are in no way incompatible from the systematic point of view. Any native speaker of English would recognize without difficulty that society was the kind of thing about which one could give an account. The neologism *socioHeracles* would be entirely different in this regard, however, because one could not determine its sense on the basis of the component values alone.

In this respect *Autodidasker* is like *socioHeracles*. While words like sociology articulate two transparent values together into a new, equally transparent value, words like *Autodidasker* compress together terms that are at least as much material realities as linguistic values. The condensation of incompatible realities into a single term gives that term a sensibly profound, thing-like opacity, but without surrendering its significant sense entirely. So, for example, we can recognize in “auto” a transparent linguistic value. We can also recognize in the whole word *Autodidasker* the value “autodidact,” although this value is concealed by the distortion of the sensibly presented word. This second case is importantly different from the first, however, in that the particular combination of signifier and signified—the sensibly given *Autodidasker* and the value “autodidact”—transgress the order of discourse in a way that “auto” by itself does not. This transgression is present to the degree that “the phonic or graphic vehicle” of signification does not itself pass unperceived. Finally, the element “Lasker” has no signification whatever: it is a proper name and thus takes its whole sense from its designating a reality outside the flat space of discourse. The word *Autodidasker*, with its complex imbrication of sensible opacity and significant value, can thus be seen as a case of blocking together the two heterogeneous orders of sense.

That this is the case can be shown by reviewing the process by which the sense of the term comes to be interpreted. To determine the sense of *Autodidasker* one must occupy simultaneously the impossible spaces of signification and designation. On the one hand, we occupy the flat space of discourse in recognizing that the linguistic values of the component terms obviously contribute to the sense of the term. Although the term to be interpreted is very much distorted, it remains the case that the measure of that distortion is given by the *langue*. To recognize *Autodidasker* as requiring interpretation is to recognize simultaneously the norm of transparency proper to the space of signification and the deviation from that norm. The commitment to the space of discourse is also revealed in the goal of interpretation, which is to eliminate the opacity introduced by distortion and to resolve the term into a clear and unambiguous signification. And yet the process of interpretation also opens the interpreter onto the profound space of designation. There would be no way to know, for example, that “Lasker” is a component of *Autodidasker* if one occupied the space of the *langue* exclusively. Since “Lasker” has no signification, one could proceed in the interpretation only by referring to the three-dimensional man designated by the word. This is even truer in the case of “Lasalle:” one would never suspect the presence of this element in *Autodidasker* without knowledge of the world in which the man figured, and even more specifically, of his meaning for Freud as presented in the specific dream in which his name is remotely suggested.

The presence of these non-discursive elements in the word *Autodidasker* renders the word also a thing. As the course of the analysis given in *The Interpretation of Dreams* demonstrates, the sense of the term is given progressively according to the

structure of adumbrations described in Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologies. For example, the word "Lasker," like the famous phenomenological cube, gives itself in such a way as to suggest hidden sides; like sensible things generally, its sense is given within the play of revealing and concealing. In the context of the dream, the name both presented and disguised Freud's concern with the domestic happiness of his brother, named Alexander. "I now perceived that 'Alex', the shortened form by which we call him, has almost the same sound as an anagram of 'Lasker'"⁸⁶ "Lasker," then, both reveals and conceals "Alex." Importantly, the actual man designated by the name Lasker had died of syphilis. The name Alex, in turn, is associated with a particular author (*Autor*), who was a friend of Alex's and had once made a remark to him about marriage. Thus "Lasker" suggests simultaneously Alex and problems with women, while *Autor* suggests the issue of marriage. Each of the elements of that composes *Autodidasker*, then, adumbrates a sense beyond what is immediately given. It is by following up the leads provided by these adumbrations that one arrives at the sense of the whole, just as one arrives at the sense of a cube by picking it up and viewing the sides that are both concealed and revealed in a frontal view.

V. The Donative Event: Primary and Secondary Processes

Importantly, this blocking together of impossible senses is not confined to the language of dreams. If dreams provide a privileged locus for the study of this kind of sense, it is only because the state of sleep relaxes the censorship against the demands of desire, allowing them to appear somewhat more transparently in the form of articulate

⁸⁶ Freud, *ID-I*, 300.

discourse. But the dynamic model according to which repressed, unavowable desires break through into consciousness characterizes the whole of our psychological life. The most primitive layer of our psychological apparatus, which Freud calls the primary process, acts wholly in accordance with the pleasure principle, disregarding reality entirely. It functions by producing a “perceptual identity”—a repetition of the perception which was linked to the satisfaction of a need.”⁸⁷ For example an infant whose hunger has been satisfied by its mother’s breast will recathect, or essentially hallucinate, that same perception the next time it experiences hunger. It must not be supposed, however, that this perceptual identity is very rigorously determined at the level of the primary process: because the task of the psychological apparatus is simply to discharge excitations as quickly as possible it will treat anything associated with the remembered source of satisfaction as identical to it. It does this according to the same processes of condensation and displacement that characterize the dream-work.

The secondary process emerges as an extension of the primary process. Because the strategy of hallucinating a satisfaction so often fails to discharge unpleasurable excitations, it becomes necessary to reproduce the object of satisfaction in the external world. This, of course, requires reality testing and all of the clear and rigorous cognition associated with it. These two processes must not be understood as discrete loci of psychological activity, such as can be suggested by the topographical model of the conscious and the unconscious systems. Rather, “all of the complicated thought-activity which is spun out from the mnemonic image to the moment at which the perceptual identity is established by the external world—all this activity merely constitutes a roundabout path to wish-fulfillment which has been made necessary by experience. *Thought is after all*

⁸⁷ Freud, *ID-II*, 566.

*nothing but a substitute for a hallucinatory wish. . . .*⁸⁸ The clear and distinct signification characteristic of the secondary process, then, is inextricable from the work of the primary process, which is indifferent to that signification. And because the primary process is prior chronologically and genetically to the secondary process, there is no good sense that is not inhabited always already by nonsense, conceived as an impossible profusion of sense.⁸⁹

Any object of internal or external perception is given to us within the interplay of the primary and secondary processes, the first of which renders excitations freely mobile and the second of which binds them into repeatable and recognizable unities. While the secondary process builds up the stable significations of the *langue*, the primary process ceaselessly undermines them, scrambling the code and making of every transparent value a kind of *Autodidasker*. To connect this libidinal sense explicitly to the Saussurian and Merleau-Pontean senses discussed above, we can say that everything we encounter is given at once as an obscure, non-representable invitation to our fundamentally libidinal bodies and as an ideal unity of meaning. The smiling face that I encounter is indeed the smiling face of a real determinate person in a real determinate situation. But it is at least as much a repetition of innumerable, anonymous satisfactions experienced by a premature, incompetent body and an invitation to return, at least for a moment, to that scarcely organic state prior to the onset of the reality principle. Every encounter, in other words, happens as the blocking together of impossible senses.

Libidinal sense, then, appears as excessive to itself, as grounded in a kind of nonsense. In this regard it is not different from the discursive and figural senses

⁸⁸ Ibid, 566-7. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 603.

exemplified by Saussure and Merleau-Ponty. We saw that each of these kinds of sense had its own unconscious. The flat space of discourse, characterized by transparent significations, is made possible by completely non-signifying differences. The profound, embodied sense articulated by Merleau-Ponty has as its ground an anonymity, the *On*, that cannot be recuperated by the reflecting *I*. In both these cases the world of good sense is made possible by a grounding nonsense. But in each of these cases this nonsense at the ground is oriented entirely toward the good sense that it grounds. The non-signifying differences that ground discursive signification do not in any way challenge the order of good sense, but rather secure it. Likewise, the anonymous passivity at the basis of our sensible opening onto the world of objects remains subordinated to that known world. According to Lyotard, the concept of a passivity irrecoverable in reflection “can only operate within the field prepared by phenomenology, as the contrary or the correlate of active intentionality, as its layer of support.”⁹⁰

In both these cases the alterity of nonsense is reintegrated into the world of good sense by presupposing the latter as the norm and end of the former. Both structural linguistics and phenomenology, according to Lyotard, are oriented from the first by the goal of *knowledge*, which is constitutively directed toward a world that is given to us in sense.⁹¹ But there is no space within knowledge for the *event* in which sense is given. “Knowledge supposes the space of signification in which resides the set of syntactical constraints that governs the consistency of its discourse; and inasmuch as it is a referential discourse, it also requires the space of designation at the heart of which the knowing speaker gauges the reference of his discourse. But truth happens (e-vents) as

⁹⁰ Lyotard, *DF*, 21.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

that which is not in its place. It is essentially displaced.”⁹² Discourses of knowledge, then, cannot recuperate the essentially nonsensical event of the *donation* of the two spaces of sense. The nonsense at the origin of sense is not the nascent proto-sense of signification and designation, but rather the donative event that has disrupted those spaces always already.

This is just what we saw in the discussion of the primary and secondary processes. To return to the example of the infant at its mother’s breast, we can say that this situation is given to the infant most basically as a perceived satisfaction. We must not suppose that this satisfaction refers beyond itself to the space of signification, such that it would be related to an ideal thought-content, in this case the signification “mother’s breast.” Nor does the satisfaction refer to the ordered space of designation in which the mother’s appearance and disappearance are understandable and predictable occurrences. All of this rudimentary knowledge presupposes the functioning of the secondary process and the reality principle. To suppose that infantile libidinal excitations are mapped from the first onto the spaces of signification and designation is to miss the alterity of the event in which those spaces of sense are given. At the level of the primary process the given—the felt satisfaction—is not something mediated, not a bit of proto-knowledge. The freely mobile cathexis creates identifications and linkages that are unthinkable within the strictly marked and regulated spaces of the secondary process. And yet it is the primary process and the exigencies of the pleasure principle that open the nascent subject onto the real world of knowledge. Reality is thus libidinal through and through. At some point the infant will learn to instantiate its desire onto the real unity that is its mother’s breast. But the mother’s breast will never cease to bear

⁹² Ibid., 135.

innumerable and impossible meanings and to produce by extension innumerable and impossible satisfactions. This is in no way owing to a correctable error of rational cognition, but is rather the trace of its inassimilable and unavowable ground.⁹³

This alterity at the heart of libidinal sense makes manifest a fissure within the fundamentally knowing subject presupposed in both structuralism and phenomenology. The event of the donation of sense has no place pre-established for it in the ordered world opened up by that very donation. “The event opens up a vertiginous space and time; it is not bound to its context or to its perceptive environment.”⁹⁴ From the perspective of the knowing subject, however, this vertigo shows itself simply as error, as a fall from the rigor of rational cognition. Such an interpretation establishes as a norm for thinking the kind of cognition characteristic of the secondary process and at the same time prepares the way for the effacement of the event.⁹⁵ But knowledge is not our most originary opening onto the world. The objects of our encounters are not in the first instance significations or designations, or any combination of these. This is made manifest in the experience of jarring, unthinkable breaks within the ordered, regulated world of knowledge. The encounters that produce these felt breaks are libidinal. Take for example an encounter with a woman as described by Lyotard:

The slender and very dark finger of her left hand which, in a conversation, the young woman, anxious because she is afraid of what she believes to be your erudition, passes over her eyebrow, while in the other hand she pulls at a cigarette—here is a real region to invest, one can die for it, one can give all one’s organicity, one’s ordered body, one’s functional arrangement of organs, one’s memory of organs, one’s socio-professional status, one’s supposed past and one’s supposed future, one’s agenda and one’s intimate theatre, one can feel like paying very dearly, exorbitantly,

⁹³ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1993), 21-5. Hereafter *LE*. Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie Libidinale* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1974), 31-5. Hereafter *LE-Fr*.

⁹⁴ Lyotard, *DF*, 135.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*.

for this finger which is like an engraver's stylus and the whole orbital space, cranial, vaginal, that it engenders around the eye.⁹⁶

This woman, given strictly as object of this encounter, is not a subject oriented within a world that I might hope to share. And the I, again as strictly given in the encounter, is not the worldly I defined by well-established roles and projects. All of this is precisely what the event of the encounter disrupts. The event dispossesses the subject of itself and of the known, ordered world in which it takes its bearings. In sum, “the event as disruption is always that which defies knowledge; it can defy knowledge articulated in discourse, but it can just as well shake the quasi-understanding of the body, bringing it into conflict with itself and with other things, as in emotion.”⁹⁷

What is given in the donative event, and what undermines always already the orders of signification and designation onto which it opens, is libidinal investment. Cathexis is never given within the spacing which is constitutive of objects in depth nor within the system of regulated differences that constitutes the *langue*. This is just to say that cathexis is never something mediated, never something properly *known*. Rather libido “invests without condition.”⁹⁸ The libidinal investment announces itself within thought as an inassimilable difference. As unmediated the investment is presented as different from mediated knowledge. But this felt difference is incommensurable with the regulated differences that govern the spaces of signification and designation. What is experienced, then, is a different and thus unknowable difference. In order to be able to experience this disruption within the orders of knowledge, “it suffices that there be at the heart of these orders negations irreducible to the gaps of opposition or to the depth of

⁹⁶ Lyotard, *LE*, 4; *LE-Fr*, 12-3.

⁹⁷ Lyotard, *DF*, 22.

⁹⁸ Lyotard, *LE*, 4; *LE-Fr*, 13.

designation, insane events, i.e., operations or effects of operations requiring an “order” that cannot fall under the negativities that we have identified, *precisely because it is inscribed in them only negatively*, an order that one is tempted for this reason to suppose is positive.”⁹⁹

VI: Imperative

This originary blocking together, which is never properly known because it disrupts the space of knowledge always already, manifests itself practically. More specifically, the event of the donation of sense happens as an imperative of the kind that Kant articulates in his moral philosophy. The imperative, according to Kant, can be experienced only by finite rational beings like ourselves for whom the faculty of desire is divided into higher and lower stems, the former of which is determined rationally and the latter pathologically. “All imperatives are expressed through an ‘*ought*’ and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will which in its subjective constitution is not necessarily determined by that law (a necessitation).”¹⁰⁰ The imperative, in other words, is given originally to finite rational beings as irreducibly intelligible *and* sensible. It is given intelligibly as the moral law, expressed in the formula of the categorical imperative, but it would not be an imperative if it were not also given as a command, felt as weighing on our sensibility.

The irreducibly dual nature of the imperative is experienced most acutely in the feeling of respect. Kant examines this feeling most thoroughly in Chapter III of his

⁹⁹ Lyotard, *DF*, 138.

¹⁰⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Allen W. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 30 (Ak 4: 413). Hereafter *GMM*.

Critique of Practical Reason titled “Of the Drives of Pure Practical Reason,” where he situates respect at the very heart of practical life. For Kant “respect for the law is not the drive to morality; *it is morality itself*. . . .”¹⁰¹ Respect, in other words, is not simply one feeling among others, registering the condition of our finite organisms in experiences of pleasure and pain.¹⁰² Respect is rather a “singular feeling,” the “only one which we can know completely a priori and the necessity of which we can discern.”¹⁰³ While the other feelings help to orient us in the sensibly given world by disclosing objects as things to be pursued or avoided, the feeling of respect refers us immediately to the supersensible world of the moral law. It is the effect on our sensibly determined organisms of a second, intelligible world which can never be given in experience, but which we are nonetheless commanded to realize practically in this world. As such the singular feeling of respect exceeds the traditional metaphysical boundary between intelligible and sensible sense.

The moral feeling of respect resembles the event as described by Lyotard in two important and closely related ways. First, it makes manifest an alterity at the heart of experience. Respect is a feeling whose *only* reference is beyond the sensible world conditioned by our faculty of knowledge. We never, properly speaking, respect mere things. We may fear or enjoy things, or even admire them, but to say that we respect them would be to pass over what is essential in our practical opening onto the world.¹⁰⁴ In respect I am revealed to myself as a moral *person*, commanded to exercise my causality in accordance with the laws of freedom, which exceed the laws of causality

¹⁰¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1993), 79 (Ak 5: 76). Emphasis mine. Hereafter *CPrR*.

¹⁰² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1929), 633n (A802/B830). Hereafter *CPR*.

¹⁰³ Kant, *CPrR*, 79; 77 (Ak 5: 76; 74).

¹⁰⁴ Kant, *CPrR*, 80 (Ak 5: 77); Kant, *GMM*, 16 (Ak 4:400).

according to which the natural world is known. To be a person is to acquire a dignity, a value exceeding the mere “price” one commands in the natural world.¹⁰⁵ As a natural being I am always something general and exchangeable, a token of a type. But in respect I am revealed to myself as *singular* and thus as radically incommensurable.

Secondly, the feeling of respect happens as a kind of Lyotardian event in that it disrupts the ordered world of knowledge, and indeed has disrupted it always already. In revealing me to myself as a singularity the moral feeling also gives me over to a lawful, supersensible world as the field for my practical life. The lawfulness of this other world and of the free persons who legislate in it is, of course, wholly different from the lawfulness proper to the sensible, natural world. But it would be a mistake to interpret this to mean that we human beings simply occupy two different worlds, one concerning the sensible side of our being and the other the intelligible side. The moral law revealed in the feeling of respect, in other words, does not command obedience merely from the intelligible side of our being, leaving our sensible side to be determined completely by the laws of the natural world. Rather we are commanded to exercise our free, spontaneous causality within a natural world in which such causality is unknowable. We are required each time to leap across the intelligible/sensible divide, using our faculty of judgment to bring naturally conditioned worldly situations under the supersensible laws of freedom.¹⁰⁶

Our practice of moral judgment, of applying the laws of pure practical reason to the domain of nature, where they are not properly legislative, reveals an excess over experience from within experience. In nature, for which the understanding legislates, we

¹⁰⁵ Kant, *GMM*, 52 (Ak 4: 424).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 5 (Ak 4:389).

know that sensible appearances have as their causes only other sensible appearances. Indeed “experience itself—in other words, empirical knowledge of appearances—is thus possible in so far as we subject the succession of appearances, and therefore all alteration, to the law of causality; and, as likewise follows, the appearances, as objects of experience, are themselves possible only in conformity with the law.”¹⁰⁷ And yet we can all recognize moral phenomena, which presuppose the wholly different causality of freedom, within experience. We encounter other human beings not entirely as the products of natural laws, but also, as Kant remarkably puts it, as instances of “the law made visible.”¹⁰⁸ Owing to this disruption of the uniformity of cause and effect by the “appearance” of intellectual causality within experience, we find the certainty of our empirical knowledge, at least as it concerns human beings, undermined. “It is absolutely impossible to settle with complete certainty through experience whether there is even a single case in which the maxim of an otherwise dutiful action has rested solely on moral grounds and on the representation of one’s duty.”¹⁰⁹ It is, of course, equally impossible to know that an action in accordance with duty is *not* the effect of intelligible causality.

This disruption within the ordered world of knowledge points to an excess that is inseparable from, and ultimately constitutive of, the knowing subject. The faculty of knowledge, for which the understanding legislates, has as its condition of possibility the unity of apperception. The manifold that is given in sensible intuition, and which becomes properly known as it is brought under the categories of the understanding, receives its uniformity through “a necessary relation to the ‘I think’ in the same subject in

¹⁰⁷ Kant, *CPR*, 219 (B234).

¹⁰⁸ Kant, *CPrR*, 80 (Ak 5:77).

¹⁰⁹ Kant, *GMM*, 22-3 (Ak 4: 407).

which this manifold is found.”¹¹⁰ The “I think” to which representations refer is not itself something given in intuition; it is transcendental. It is, in other words, not the same as the empirical I, which appears within sensible nature and is thus subject to its laws. Rather the transcendental unity of apperception is a spontaneous act of synthesis, bringing together the various representations and thus *constituting* them as a nature that can be known.

If this were the complete account of human reason, however, it would be impossible to explain the quasi-appearance of moral acts *within* sensible nature. Our recognition of moral situations in the world raises a basic question: how could such an excess become manifest within the field of experience, which is constituted by the knowing subject? The answer, according to Kant, is that the theoretical interest of our reason is ultimately subordinated to the practical interest: “it is evident that the ultimate intention of nature in her wise provision for us has indeed, in the constitution of our reason, been directed to moral interests alone.”¹¹¹ This must not be interpreted simply to mean that because reason has an interest over and above knowing, it is entitled to an extension beyond experience. This would suggest that the practical interest of reason is merely added on to the speculative interest. In fact reason has always already *legitimately* exceeded the bounds of sensible nature. The field of experience that is constituted by pure reason in its speculative use is also, in a strange way, conditioned by pure practical reason. “Pure reason, then, contains, not indeed in its speculative employment, but in its practical employment which is also moral, principles of the *possibility of experience*, namely, of such actions as, in accordance with moral precepts,

¹¹⁰ Kant, *CPR*, 153 (B132).

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 632-3 (A801/B829).

might be met with in the *history* of mankind.”¹¹² The sensible field, then, has always already been synthesized in accordance with the practical interest of reason, and in such a way as to include the possibility of a causality that is entirely unknowable from the perspective of speculative reason.¹¹³

The synthesis of the intuited manifold that is enacted by the knowing subject is, as we have seen, spontaneous and active. Indeed, to understand the work of synthesis as the mere product or effect of objects in the world would be to overlook what is essential in the critical turn. The lawfulness that nature seems to teach us is in fact legislated spontaneously by our higher faculty of knowing. And yet, given the primacy of practical reason, we must conceive of a kind of receptivity right at the heart of activity. Anterior to the active legislation of the understanding is the command that there be law. The *act*, in other words, by which the understanding legislates to nature is more originarily a *response* to the moral imperative. In short, to think is always more primordially to obey.¹¹⁴

This originary obedience to the demand for lawfulness points to a receptivity more radical than the subject’s mere “capacity to be affected by objects.”¹¹⁵ This latter kind of receptivity concerns sensible intuitions, which come to be known within the unity of experience, and which therefore presuppose the activity of the knowing subject.¹¹⁶

The more originary receptivity, which is a receptivity for the moral law, is characterized

¹¹² Ibid, 637 (A807/B835).

¹¹³ Bernard Freydberg, *Imagination in Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 68-9. Hereafter *Imagination*. Freydberg emphasizes Kant’s use of the subjunctive in the quote above: “*in der Geschichte des Menschen anzutreffen sein könnten.*” In its conditioning of experience practical reason does not properly speaking *determine* objects. It does, however, secure the *possibility* of our experiencing acts as brought about through a purely rational causality.

¹¹⁴ Alphonso Lingis, *Deathbound Subjectivity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 38-44.

¹¹⁵ Kant, *CPR*, 71 (A26/B42).

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 441 (A494/B522).

by Kant as “the sole fact of reason.”¹¹⁷ To describe our consciousness of the imperative as a fact is to highlight its independence from any of the elements proper to human reason. It is neither entailed nor posited by anything within the structure of pure reason. Nor is it, of course, grounded in any sensible intuition. As a brute fact anterior to the articulated structure of reason it is neither identifiably intelligible nor sensible.¹¹⁸ And yet this fact is a fact *of* reason. It is, as Jean-Luc Nancy describes it, “a heterogeneous and incommensurable factuality” at the very heart of reason.¹¹⁹ If this incommensurable factuality is never given to reason as an object of knowledge, this is because it originally gives there to be our rational opening out onto the world. It is here, in the radical receptivity at the heart of reason, that the singular moral subject emerges as subjected to the law, as its pure addressee. And precisely as this incommensurable singularity the addressee is commanded to make itself universal, to become an addressor of the law for the worlds of sensible nature and of morality. The fact of the imperative, in sum, is what first gives the distinction between receptivity and activity, between the subject as subjected to the law and the subject that legislates it. But the unique *factum rationis* radically exceeds these distinctions: it is neither a receptive nor a legislating subject, neither active nor passive.¹²⁰ Characterizing this originary, donative heterogeneity Heidegger writes: “The self-submitting, immediate surrender to . . . is pure receptivity; the free, self-affecting of the law, however, is pure spontaneity. *In themselves, both are originally one.*”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Kant, *CPrR*, 31-2 (Ak 5:31).

¹¹⁸ Freydberg, *Imagination*, 34.

¹¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Impératif Catégorique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 22. Hereafter *IC*.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Fourth Edition, Enlarged, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 109. Emphasis mine.

VII. The Project of the Present Work

In what follows I shall attempt to rethink the phenomenon of the imperative, presenting it as the event of the donation of sense. In order to do this, of course, I will need to think outside the Kantian system within which the imperative was first articulated as such. But certain Kantian themes I could not abandon without losing what, it seems to me, is constitutive of the phenomenon. Most broadly, I will retain the theme of the primacy of the practical, according to which our opening out onto the world is conceived as essentially *responsive*. Moreover, I will retain the correlative idea that that to which we most originarily respond cannot become something properly known, and that it manifests itself only as an inassimilable alterity within the ordered world of knowledge. I will take up Kant's emphasis on the incommensurability of the *person* that first emerges in the response, although I will speak instead of a *singularity*. And finally, it will be essential to my project to maintain the connection established by Kant between this singularity and the significant, law-governed world that is projected in accordance with the command of the imperative.

Other leading themes of the present work will be markedly un-Kantian. Most generally, I shall present the imperative wholly in terms of the kind of originary, excessive sense described above. In doing so, I will be building on the more contemporary insights of phenomenology, Saussurian linguistics, and a certain kind of psychoanalysis, all of which have in common an emphasis on the situatedness of the subject within a ground that it can never recuperate in reflection. The various ways in

which these three lineages of thought articulate the irreducible anchorage of the subject within a pre-reflective ground of excessive sense will be indispensable for my own account. Each of them can be understood to suggest a way of thinking the relation between an always already responsive subject and the broader world extended by originary sense. And each of these ways presents the phenomenon of the imperative in ways importantly different from Kant's own portrayal.

The first two chapters will focus on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Visible and the Invisible*, respectively. Through these works I will articulate an imperative that occurs right here in the sensibly given world, without reference to anything like Kant's pure form of law. Despite his gestures toward bridging the gulf that separates the intelligible from the sensible, for example in the *a priori* feeling of respect, Kant tends to present the imperative in a very traditional, moralizing way as demanding the submission of our sensible natures to the purely intelligible law. Merleau-Ponty's works, on the other hand, argue that this sharp distinction emerges only as an abstraction from what is given in the more originary level of perception. In the natural attitude we orient ourselves wholly to the end-products of the process of constitution, taking the rigorous determinations of these fully-known objects as the measure for thinking as such. In a similar way Kant takes the ideal end-product of speculative reason as the standard for our entire practical being-in-the-world: "*So act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a **universal law of nature***."¹²² But if this ideality is inseparable from the rich, ambiguous world of perception from which it issues, as Merleau-Ponty argues, then it is a serious mistake to hold this abstraction up as the measure for our practical lives.

¹²² Kant, *GMM*, 38 (Ak 4:421). Italics and bold in original.

The third chapter will focus primarily on Gilles Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*, which will be read as a contemporary, post-Saussurian articulation of the flat space of discourse described above. Deleuze demonstrates an irreducible nonsense at the basis of the very structure which gives there to be sense. This nonsense, which is not an absence of sense but rather an excess, ceaselessly undermines the good sense that characterizes the ideal of intelligibility. Between good, univocal sense and this excessive nonsense there exists "an original type of intrinsic relation, a mode of co-presence" that is given right at the objects of experience.¹²³ This nonsense is given within experience not as something to be known, but rather as the object of an encounter which suspends the lawful order of projects and initiatives so important in Kant's account of practical life. The passage from Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* quoted on page 37 above gives an example of such an encounter. It is not the woman as unity of sense that is the object of the encounter. The whole, molar woman would be given along with her own practical world, and would present to the man in the example an invitation to take up that world as his own. It is rather a kind of excess of sense, given right with the proper woman, that is the object of the encounter. This encounter suspends the significant order of practical initiatives in which the subject maintains his public identity, throwing him back onto a singularity that is not properly his own. The singularity made manifest in this encounter is immanent to the world given in sense, and in no way refers to a transcendent beyond that would somehow ground that world. This location of a wholly immanent singularity helps to overcome the piety and religiosity so characteristic of Kant's moral philosophy.

¹²³ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 68. Hereafter *LS*.

In the fourth and final chapter I shall attempt to think the kinds of sense articulated by Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze together as libidinal sense. This latter sense will be thought as the originary blocking together of the profound space of designation and the flat space of signification. I shall focus primarily on two closely related texts: Jean-François Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* and, to a lesser extent, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. Each of these texts presents the connection between a pre-subjective singularity and the ordered, significant world of practice as happening in the event of libidinal cathexis. The irreducible *fact* of this libidinal practical reason is that the libido "invests without condition."¹²⁴ The libido, in other words, does not invest in accordance with some rule or model that would somehow pre-exist and account for it. Indeed this is just what the description of cathexis as event is intended to deny. The vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari is especially helpful on this point. For them all investment is understood as production (which I have been describing with the more phenomenological term donation). But "production is *immediately* consumption and recording, and the recording and consumption determine production directly, but from within production itself."¹²⁵ Libido, in other words, invests unconditionally and originarily. But this investment is inseparable from the establishment of a record that sustains and reproduces the investment by channeling and ordering it. In this way cathexis opens onto the ordered world of significations which becomes the object of knowledge and the field for human practice. And each libidinal investment, directed into repeatable forms by the recording apparatus, yields an affect which gives rise to a pre-

¹²⁴ Lyotard, *LE*, 4.

¹²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 4. Translation modified. Emphasis mine. Hereafter *AOE*. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 9-10. Hereafter *AOE-Fr*.

subjective singularity. The excessive sense that I am articulating as imperative sense is brought together here as the immediate duality of the originary libidinal event.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ I take the term “immediate duality” from Leonard Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 130-5.

CHAPTER TWO: EMBODIED SENSE

In the Introduction, we isolated and described in detail what Lyotard calls the two heterogeneous orders of sense. These two orders can be rigorously differentiated according to their spatiality (the profound space of the figure versus the flat space of discourse), their mode of negation (the distancing of figural sense versus the opposition within discourse), and the structure of their unconscious (unconsciousness of the act in figural sense versus the virtual, passive unconscious of discourse). Figural sense, according to Lyotard, is best elucidated by phenomenology, and especially the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, while discursive sense is best described on the basis of Saussurian linguistics. In the present chapter, I shall be concerned with figural sense and more specifically with its ambiguity. I intend to show, primarily through a reading of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, that our originary opening out onto the world happens as an opening out onto irreducibly ambiguous sense, and that a kind of imperative is at work precisely *in* that opening out.

I. Corporeality as Irreducible

From the outset, phenomenology has been oriented by the question of origins. Already in the *Logical Investigations* Husserl had established as an ideal for phenomenological research the principle of freedom from presuppositions.¹²⁷ Ten years later, in "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," Husserl expresses an even deeper commitment to the question of origins: "Philosophy . . . is essentially a science of true beginnings, of origins, of *rizōmata pantōn*. The science concerned with what is radical

¹²⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations, Volume I*, trans. J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), 177-9. Hereafter *LI-I*.

must from every point of view be radical itself in its procedure. Above all it must not rest until it has attained its own absolutely clear beginnings. . . .”¹²⁸ Phenomenology, if it is to be appropriately radical, must be a phenomenology of origins, in both senses of the genitive. On the one hand, phenomenological discourse is a discourse *about* origins; it aims, by means of its own strict methodology, to disclose and to elucidate “the dimension of origin for all being.”¹²⁹ On the other hand, this origin of which phenomenology speaks is also the origin *from out of which* it speaks. The phenomenological method, which seeks to realize the task of first philosophy, is not itself first. It is rather something *motivated* by the questionability of the origin to which it responds. As essentially responsive, phenomenology can never hope to coincide with the origin it seeks; it can never exhaust the questionability that constitutes its own origin.

Owing to this responsiveness to the questionability of its origins, phenomenology has had from the first a practical orientation in addition to its more obvious theoretical concerns. This practical theme becomes evident in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” and reaches its fullest expression in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. According to Husserl, the dimension of the origin of being is just as much the dimension of the origin of our humanity. The achievement of pure, originary knowledge, which constitutes the *telos* of philosophy as such, would thus not only satisfy our “loftiest theoretical needs” but would also render “possible from an ethico-religious point of view a life regulated by pure rational norms.”¹³⁰ But this ideal, which Husserl calls the ideal of philosophy as rigorous science, has never been realized, even by the

¹²⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 146. Hereafter *PCP*. Translation modified.

¹²⁹ Eugen Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*, trans. Ronald Bruzina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4.

¹³⁰ Husserl, *PCP*, 71.

ancient Greeks who first introduced it. And what is worse, the philosophical tradition that has developed since Hegel, which is characterized by the prominence of naturalist and *Weltanschauung* philosophies, has moved further and further away from the ideal. Husserl believes that this situation constitutes a crisis: in the absence of a realized philosophy, and moreover in the absence even of progress toward a realized philosophy, human beings risk losing their faith in reason, which latter “ultimately gives meaning to everything that is thought to be, all things, values, and ends—their meaning understood as their normative relatedness to what, since the beginning of philosophy, is meant by the word ‘truth’”¹³¹ The recognition of this crisis in philosophy, and consequently in humanity itself, serves for Husserl as a kind of imperative to carry on the task of phenomenology. Husserl gives expression to this imperative in a particularly spirited passage from the *Crisis* which demands quotation at length:

But as philosophers of the present we have fallen into a painful existential contradiction. The faith in the possibility of philosophy as a task, that is, in the possibility of universal knowledge, is something we *cannot* let go. We *know* that we are *called* to this task as serious philosophers. And yet, how do we hold onto this belief, which has meaning only in relation to the single goal which is common to us all, that is, philosophy as such?

We have also become aware in the most general way [through the foregoing reflections] that human philosophizing and its results in the whole of man’s existence mean anything but merely private or otherwise limited cultural goals. In our philosophizing, then—how can we avoid it?—we are *functionaries of mankind*. The quite personal responsibility of our own true being as philosophers, our inner personal vocation, bears within itself at the same time the responsibility for the true being of mankind; the latter is, necessarily, being toward a *telos* and can only come to realization, *if at all*, through philosophy—through *us*, *if* we are philosophers in all seriousness.¹³²

In sum, the essence and *telos* of humanity is rationality, which has never been achieved at any point in history. Nonetheless, this *telos* makes itself felt as an “ought-to-be.”¹³³

Phenomenology, as the necessary beginning point for any realized philosophy, happens

¹³¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 12-13. Hereafter *Crisis*.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 17. Emphasis and brackets in original.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 341.

as the only appropriate response to this originary ought-to-be. Phenomenology must reinvigorate humanity's faith in reason, and thus its faith in itself and in its appointed task.¹³⁴

In order to carry out this task, phenomenology must effect a critique of reason.¹³⁵ If previous attempts at philosophy have fallen short of the ideal and have thus brought about the crisis to which Husserl feels compelled to respond, this is because they have failed to secure their own foundations, the *rizōmata pantōn*. Phenomenology, as a critique of reason, must begin “from the ground up with a foundation free of doubt.” From there the edifice of knowledge must rise up “like any skillful construction, wherein stone is set upon stone, each as solid as the other. . . .”¹³⁶ Failing this, the task of radical self-responsibility to which Husserl so often refers, and in accordance with which we must both judge and act in the world only on the basis of strictly rational norms, will necessarily remain uncompleted.

The first and methodologically most important step for the critique of reason is to gain access to the dimension in which being is given originally. Phenomenology must not adopt the modes of access proposed by any existing philosophical systems or special sciences since, *ex hypothesi*, all of these have failed. Their failure consists precisely in their inability to secure the appropriate beginning point. More specifically, the paradoxes and contradictions that have plagued previous attempts at philosophy arise from their grounding in the natural attitude. In order, then, to arrive at a more secure foundation,

¹³⁴ For a closely reasoned account of the relation between Husserlian phenomenology's concern for beginnings and its explicitly practical orientation, see Marcus Brainard, *Belief and its Neutralization: Husserl's System of Phenomenology in Ideas I* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 1-32.

¹³⁵ Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 20-1; Husserl, *Ideas I*, 121 (§63).

¹³⁶ Husserl, *PCP*, 76.

phenomenology must “put out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude.” That is, it must refuse to accept as originary “the whole natural world which is continually ‘there for us,’ ‘on hand,’ and which will always remain there according to consciousness as an ‘actuality’ even if we choose to parenthesize it.”¹³⁷ This putting into parentheses is not, of course, the same as the skeptical denial of the external world, for such a denial is itself a thesis which takes its bearings from the natural attitude. It is instead simply a refusal to accept *as originary* the world as it appears to naïve, uncriticized cognition.

This reduction of the world as given in the natural attitude opens up the way to the dimension of origins. In one respect, to be sure, natural reality does come first: our *de facto* understanding of the world always begins with our relation to what is given unproblematically and as a matter of course. Nonetheless, phenomenology demonstrates that what is first *for us* is second *in itself*. We must not assume that “the *ordo et connexio rerum* necessarily conform[s] to the *ordo et connexio idearum*.”¹³⁸ Reality, which is first for us, has no being at all considered in itself. Rather what the phenomenological reduction reveals is that reality “has the essentiality of something which, of necessity, is *only* intentional, *only* an object of consciousness, something presented [*Vorstelliges*] in the manner peculiar to consciousness, something apparent <as apparent.>”¹³⁹ The essence of natural reality is *to be given, to be presented*. We pass over this essence in the natural attitude, however, because our attention is directed straightforwardly to the given things and not to their modes of givenness.¹⁴⁰ The structures in accordance with which

¹³⁷ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 56 (§32). Emphasis omitted.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 93 (§50). Emphasis added.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 94 (§50).

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 94-5 (§50).

natural reality is given thus constitute what is first in itself. As we saw in the Introduction, the originary space of givenness is the intentionality proper to transcendental subjectivity. With this, Husserl arrives at what he takes to be a secure beginning: “The realm of transcendental consciousness as the realm of what is, in a determined sense, ‘absolute’ being, has been provided us by the phenomenological reduction. It is the primal category of all being (or, in our terminology, the primal region), the one in which all other regions of being are rooted, to which, according to their *essence*, they are relative and on which they are therefore all essentially dependent.”¹⁴¹

According to Husserl, nothing whatever is lost in the reduction and in the turn to transcendental subjectivity for which it opens the way. That is, the things encountered in the natural attitude obviously do not cease to be once the reduction has been performed. This is true for physical objects, other human beings, cultural and historical objects, and anything else that appears in naïve, uncriticized experience. The only difference—and this makes all the difference for phenomenological method—is that these objects come to be thought strictly as *phenomena*, that is, in accordance with their essence as things *presented*.¹⁴² In this respect, phenomenology closely resembles the Cartesian philosophy, as both are wholly committed to the methodology of reflection. According to Husserl “the phenomenological method operates exclusively in acts of reflection.”¹⁴³ Reflection transforms things experienced as transcendent into phenomena immanent to the

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 141 (§76).

¹⁴² Ibid., 94 (§50); Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 19. Hereafter *CM*.

¹⁴³ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 144 (§77). Husserl concludes his *Cartesian Meditations* in this vein with a quotation from Augustine: “Do not wish to go out; go back into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man.” Husserl, *CM*, 157.

consciousness that constitutes them *as* objects, *as* transcendent in the first place. All naively experienced transcendencies are taken up into transcendental subjectivity, which is the originary dimension of their being.

Is it really the case, however, that everything given in the natural attitude as transcendent can be adequately reconceived as immanent to the transcendental subjectivity that constitutes it? Is there really nothing, in other words, that resists the movement of reflection? The answer, even for Husserl, is no. The course of phenomenological investigation reveals the existence of a certain corporeality that resists the reduction to ideal subjectivity. One sees this theme played out most prominently in the Second Book of *Ideas*. There Husserl shows how absolute constituting consciousness is necessarily an *embodied* consciousness.¹⁴⁴ This is not merely to suggest that transcendental consciousness *has* a body, which would somehow be its vehicle. Husserl's claim is considerably more far-reaching: the body itself contributes essentially to the acts of constitution that give there to be objectivity as such. An example of the role of corporeality at the heart of constituting consciousness concerns the orientation of objects. Any material object that can become present to consciousness, whether it be in the mode of perception, imagination, recollection, etc., is given as oriented relative to a situated body. That is, whatever is given presents itself as to my right or to my left, as approaching or receding.¹⁴⁵ These characteristics of orientation belong to the sense of an

¹⁴⁴ Throughout *Ideas II* Husserl makes important use of the distinction between the German words *Körper* and *Leib*, both of which can be translated into English as body. *Körper* refers to inanimate matter, as for example in the material "bodies" studied by physics, while *Leib* refers to the animated body of an animal or human being. Whenever in this paragraph I use the word body or any of its adjectival modifications, I am using the word in the sense of *Leib*.

¹⁴⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 56 (§18). References to page numbers for *Ideas II* refer to those marked in the margins of the text.

objective material thing as such. Phenomena of orientation point back to a situated body as “the bearer of the zero point of orientation, the bearer of the here and the now, out of which the pure Ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses.”¹⁴⁶ If Husserl’s descriptions of embodiment in *Ideas II* are correct, then the body cannot be understood as one object among others. A thoroughgoing effort of reduction can never reduce corporeality to our *consciousness of* corporeality; it can never render it wholly an object. Rather the reduction presents us with a corporeality that is neither subjective nor objective, neither constituting nor constituted, and neither transcendental nor worldly. In sum, it presents us with corporeality as irreducible ambiguity.

II. Duality and Unity of Intelligible Sense and Sensible Sense

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty takes up the account that Husserl gives in *Ideas II* concerning the body and its inextricable bond with constituting consciousness, articulating “an unthought-of element” in that work which nonetheless “opens out on something else.”¹⁴⁷ While Husserl had demonstrated that our embodied being could not be entirely bracketed in the reduction to ideal, transcendental subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty argues even more radically that intentionality belongs to the very essence of corporeality.¹⁴⁸ The difference between these two positions may seem slight, but its consequences are far reaching. Despite his isolation in *Ideas II* of a certain corporeality within the absolute sphere of subjectivity, Husserl retained throughout his

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 160. For Merleau-Ponty’s account of the relationship between his own work and Husserl’s *Ideas II*, see the chapter titled “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, 159-181.

¹⁴⁸ Alphonso Lingis, *Phenomenological Explanations* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 31.

career a commitment to the methodology of reflection and to the classically metaphysical conclusions to which it gives rise. Thus in the *Crisis*, his last major work, Husserl still insists that the phenomenological reduction makes evident “the absolute correlation between beings of every sort and every meaning, on the one hand, and absolute subjectivity, as constituting meaning and ontic validity in the broadest manner, on the other hand.”¹⁴⁹ Husserl continues to regard as basic the distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity, constituting consciousness and constituted world, intelligible sense and sensible sense. The thesis of corporeal intentionality that Merleau-Ponty articulates throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* challenges the priority of these distinctions and in doing so renews the phenomenological project of returning to the most originary dimension of being. In this context the quotation from *Signs*, referred to in the Introduction, takes on its full significance: “From *Ideen II* on it seems clear that reflection does not install us in a closed, transparent milieu, and that it does not take us (at least not immediately) from ‘objective’ to ‘subjective,’ but that its function is rather to unveil a third dimension in which this distinction becomes problematic.”¹⁵⁰

In the introductory chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception*, collectively titled “Traditional Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena,” Merleau-Ponty shows that these traditionally metaphysical distinctions, and especially the distinction between intelligible sense and sensible sense, are not originary, but are rather abstractions from our more primordial relation to the world. The first chapter, “The ‘Sensation’ as a Unit of Experience,” examines the idea of sensible sense in itself, completely uncontaminated by intelligible sense. Such a pure sensation would be “the experience of an undifferentiated,

¹⁴⁹ Husserl, *Crisis*, 151-2.

¹⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 162.

instantaneous, dotlike impact.”¹⁵¹ Of course, we are never presented with such pure, meaningless qualia in any actual experience; even the positivists’ minimalist patch of green is already qualified as a patch and as green. We could not even imagine a pure sensation, precisely because we would imagine it *as* a pure sensation. This demonstrates that sensation, whether given in the mode of perception, recollection, or even imagination, always already points beyond itself to some intelligible sense. The imagined green patch points beyond itself to the intelligible signification “green”; if it did not, it could never have been given as a green patch in the first place. Sensible sense, then, is always already contaminated by intelligible sense.

In the third chapter of the Introduction, titled “‘Attention’ and ‘Judgement’” Merleau-Ponty addresses the intellectualist thesis according to which intelligible sense has its origin entirely in acts of consciousness, and not at all in the sensible given. Intellectualism grounds itself on the obvious failure of the extreme kind of empiricism described above: since the intelligibility of things clearly cannot derive from mute, meaningless sense data, it must have its origin in consciousness. In this way intellectualism appears to be a version of the philosophy of reflection described in the context of Husserlian phenomenology. To return to a previous example, the green patch that seems to be given immediately in sensation is in fact nothing but the *judgment that I am seeing a green patch*. That is, the significance of my seeing a green patch owes everything to an act of consciousness and nothing to the unmediated sensation of green that I *seem* to be having. But this reflection of sensuous givenness into acts of judgment loses sight entirely of that which it was supposed to reflect. It yields the surprising conclusion that all of our words that seem to refer to sensing—seeing, touching,

¹⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 3; *PP-Fr*, 9.

perceiving, etc.—turn out in fact to name acts of judgment. Merleau-Ponty sums up this rather extreme position as follows: “Judgement is everywhere where pure sensation is not—that is, absolutely everywhere.”¹⁵²

Merleau-Ponty objects to this thesis on the ground that it accounts very poorly for our actual experience in the world. First, it cannot account for the undeniable experience we have of learning. If consciousness “eternally possesses the intelligible structure of all its objects” then it is unclear how anything in the world could motivate its acts of attention and judgment.¹⁵³ If we were not in some sense ignorant about things, we would have no motive to investigate and to learn about them. This, of course, is another version of Meno’s paradox, which we discussed in the Introduction with regard to the problem of immanence and transcendence. Second, if the intellectualist thesis were correct, then experiences of persistent ambiguity in the sensible given would never arise. But of course they do. Suppose that, fully aware of what I am doing, I draw a cube on a piece of paper. I will find that the drawn figure presents itself ambiguously: it appears sometimes as if seen from the side and sometimes as if seen from above. According to the intellectualist thesis, this can only be because I am alternating between two different judgments about the cube. But I myself drew the cube knowing in advance its geometrical properties, which represent a kind of view from nowhere. Intellectualism cannot account for why I experience the cube as ambiguous, why I seem always to view it from *somewhere*.¹⁵⁴ Of course the answer is that the sensible, given cube motivates the ways that I direct my consciousness to it. If this degree of receptiveness to the sensible given manifests itself in cases in which I have explicitly *constructed* the given, we can be

¹⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 34; *PP-Fr*, 43.

¹⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 28; *PP-Fr*, 36.

¹⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 34; *PP-Fr*, 43-44.

certain that the contribution of sensible sense to intelligibility is irreducible in experience generally.

Husserl's phenomenology marks an important advance concerning the relation between these two categories. This is especially clear in his conception of sense-bestowal (*Sinngebung*). To be sure, Husserl's account does privilege the active moment of sense-bestowal, in which consciousness *intends* unities of sense. Under the phenomenological reduction, we will recall, the essence of consciousness was revealed as consciousness *of* something, as intentionality. Correlatively, the object of consciousness, that *of which* consciousness is conscious, comes to be clarified according to its essence as something presented, as noema. It follows directly from this that "every intensitive mental process is precisely noetic, i.e., it is its essence to include within itself something such as sense."¹⁵⁵ That is to say, according to its essence *as* intentional, consciousness necessarily bears meaning within itself. To be conscious of *something* just is to intend the sense of an intentional object. For example, as I write these words I am conscious of the notebook in which I am writing. As soon as I turn my gaze to the notebook, I am presented with a multiplicity of sensuous, hyletic data. I then "animate" these data by intending across their adumbrations the unity of sense "notebook." Without this power to intend unities of sense there could be no consciousness; I could never perceive, recall, anticipate, or even desire a notebook or any other determinate *something*.

¹⁵⁵ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 181. Translation modified. Husserl expresses the same idea on p. 185: "Like perception, *every* intensitive mental process—just this makes up the fundamental part of intentionality—has its 'intentional Object,' i.e., its objective sense. Or, in other words: to have sense or 'to intend to' something [*etwas 'im Sinne zu haben*'], is the fundamental characteristic of all consciousness which, therefore, is not just any mental living [*Erlebnis*] whatever, but is rather a <mental living> having sense, which is 'noetic.'"

Despite his emphasizing the active moment of sense-bestowal, however, Husserl also recognizes that the intention of unities of sense cannot be indifferent to the specificity of the hyletic data that come to be animated. That is to say, consciousness does not bestow sense arbitrarily. Rather the hyletic data *present* the thing that comes to be grasped in its intelligible unity. They motivate and sustain the sense-bestowal. Sense data, then, are never experienced as undifferentiated, meaningless impressions. This is especially evident in cases where we have been mistaken in our bestowals of sense. Suppose, for example, that I catch sight of a person approaching from a distance. The person seems to be tall, slender, and blonde. On the basis of these data I come to intend the person as my friend Paul, who is indeed tall, slender, and blonde. As the person comes nearer, however, I realize that I am mistaken, that I am not in fact seeing my friend Paul but rather some other person whom I do not know. When this change in sense-bestowal occurs, the hyletic data do not remain stubbornly what they were; instead they come to motivate a new, more adequately founded sense-bestowal. Try as I might, I am no longer able to intend “Paul” across the adumbrations that present this person to me. This demonstrates an irreducible receptivity right at the heart of the activity by which consciousness grants meaning to things and reveals, in Husserl’s words, “a remarkable *duality and unity* of sensuous ‘ὄλη and intentive μορφή.”¹⁵⁶

III. Ambiguous Sense and Corporeal Intentionality

When Husserl’s meaning-giving, world-constituting intentionality comes to be reconceived as belonging to the essence of corporeality, as it is in Merleau-Ponty’s

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 172. Emphasis altered.

Phenomenology of Perception, then our conception of the nature of the *Sinngebung* must be revised accordingly, rendering that “remarkable duality and unity of sensuous ‘ὄλη and intentive μορφή” even more remarkable. What will become apparent as we follow Merleau-Ponty’s descriptive accounts of our opening out onto the world of sense is that the body is necessarily the site of an ambiguous intentionality. We will see moreover that this ambiguous intentionality reveals the originality of a dimension of ambiguous sense, within which we as embodied subjects find ourselves situated prior to all reflection. The two categories of sense described above—intelligible sense and sensible sense, or in Husserl’s vocabulary, *intensive* sense and *hyletic* sense—will come to be recognized as abstractions from this original dimension of ambiguous sense. Finally, we will be able to see the ways in which this ambiguous sense functions also as a kind of imperative sense.

Before we move on to a detailed account of the body as site of ambiguous intentionality, it would be well to offer at least some preliminary remarks concerning how the concept of ambiguity ought *not* to be understood as it figures in *Phenomenology of Perception*. (To appreciate the more positive sense of the term will require our following Merleau-Ponty through his descriptions of our embodied opening out onto the world, which we will take up presently.) Most basically, ambiguity ought not to be understood as something negative: it does not refer to a provisional lack of clarity that will be corrected during the course of phenomenological investigation. As we will see, Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of our embodied opening out onto the world rejects this conception explicitly. Ambiguity is rather to be conceived as a positive phenomenon in its own right. Merleau-Ponty will attempt to show that our most originary being-in-the-world happens ambiguously, and that attempts to eliminate this ambiguity return us to the

traditional prejudices refuted in the introductory chapters. The second point that must be made about the thesis of ambiguity is that it ought not to be conceived exclusively with reference to the dualisms that it rejects. That is to say, it is not simply the case that ambiguity names the phenomenon of neither/nor, for example neither subject nor object, neither intelligible nor sensible, neither immanent nor transcendent, neither finite nor universal, etc.¹⁵⁷ Again, such an understanding reverses the sense of Merleau-Ponty's contention. It is not at all the case, according to Merleau-Ponty, that the various dualisms enjoy an ontological priority relative to which ambiguity would need to be understood. Rather it is ambiguity that is first; the dualisms emerge only on the basis of *it*. Merleau-Ponty refers to this "neither/nor" conception of ambiguity as the "bad ambiguity." By his own admission, he had only succeeded in articulating the bad ambiguity in *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the trajectory of his thinking moves undeniably in the direction of the "good ambiguity" which characterizes the dimension of origin for our being-in-the-world, and which is already on the horizon in the earlier work.¹⁵⁹

Having suspended the traditional dualisms of subjectivity and objectivity, intelligible sense and sensible sense, that characterize the philosophy of reflection, Merleau-Ponty undertakes a fundamental redescription of our opening out onto the world. Philosophies of reflection, according to Merleau-Ponty, tend to take their stand in the

¹⁵⁷ Hugh J. Silverman, *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 63-91. In these pages Silverman shows in great detail how this understanding of ambiguity was shared by all of Merleau-Ponty's early major commentators and gives compelling arguments showing why it is inadequate.

¹⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy*, 11.

¹⁵⁹ That Merleau-Ponty's project in *Phenomenology of Perception* failed because of his inability to articulate ambiguity on its own terms, and that his work from the fifties up to the posthumous *Visible and the Invisible* succeeded in that regard is one of the theses advanced in Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*.

results of reflection, leaving behind both the *process* of reflection and that which originally *motivated* that process. This is not to say, though, that reflection as such is a philosophical mistake. It means rather that reflection must be carried out more thoroughly, that it must be expanded into what Merleau-Ponty calls radical reflection:¹⁶⁰ “Reflection cannot be thorough-going, or bring elucidation of its object, if it does not arrive at awareness of itself as well as of its results. We must not only install ourselves in a reflective attitude, in an impregnable *Cogito*, but must furthermore reflect on this reflection, *understand the natural situation which it is conscious of succeeding and which is therefore part of its definition.*”¹⁶¹ The reduction, in other words, is entirely necessary: one does not achieve an understanding of the unreflected world by attempting to coincide with it in an unthinkable immediacy. The reduction rather constitutes a stepping back which allows the unreflected to become manifest *as such*. We must not, however, come to accept the results of reflection as giving unproblematically the truth of the unreflected, for we never free ourselves existentially from its firstness; we only seem to do so in our abstractions. For Merleau-Ponty, then, “the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.”¹⁶² In redirecting our attention to “the world [that] is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins, as an inalienable presence” Merleau-Ponty takes up and radicalizes the characteristic phenomenological orientation toward the question of origins.¹⁶³

This originary dimension which is always already there this side of reflection, and which first calls for reflection, has its locus in what Merleau-Ponty calls the *corps propre*,

¹⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 219; *PP-Fr*, 253.

¹⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 62; *PP-Fr*, 75. Translation modified. Emphasis added.

¹⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, xiv; *PP-Fr*, viii.

¹⁶³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, vii; *PP-Fr*, i. Translation modified.

the lived body. The lived body must be rigorously distinguished from the objective, worldly body as well as from the transcendental subjectivity that would merely “have” a body. Both of these conceptions belong to the various dualisms that Merleau-Ponty suspends in order to reach the level of the phenomenon. The lived body is neither simply subject nor simply object, but is rather the locus of an ambiguous corporeal intentionality.

The ambiguity of the lived body is made manifest in an especially striking way in the case of one hand touching the other.¹⁶⁴ Suppose, for example, that I run my left hand slowly up and down the fretboard of a guitar that I am interested in purchasing, in order to get a feel for the quality of its construction. It is not at all difficult for me to comprehend my body in this situation as playing the role of subject: I am making use of the tactile surfaces of my body in order to realize a project that I have actively taken up. As long as I am absorbed in this project I do not *feel* like an object. While it is true that I can only gather tactile sensations from the guitar to the extent that I make myself receptive to those sensations, i.e., to the extent that I let myself be touched by the guitar, I nonetheless do not concern myself with this aspect as long as my active sense-bestowal, my concern with the quality of the guitar, dominates the experience. But now suppose that with my right hand I touch my left hand while the latter is still touching the guitar. Immediately the straightforwardly subjective orientation of my left hand is interrupted as it becomes in addition an object for my right hand. In this case the phenomenon that had previously been unattended to, viz., that touching entails being touched, becomes manifest right there in the *felt* ambiguity of touching-being-touched. This touching-being-touched is a unitary phenomenon, as indicated by the hyphens. That is to say, I do not experience my left hand alternately as a fully constituted worldly object and as a

¹⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 92-3; *PP-Fr*, 108-9.

constituting subjectivity, as a description guided by the “bad ambiguity” would dictate. Rather in the phenomenon of touching-being-touched, the very same body which seemed originally to *give* me the world is revealed as also something already given in the world, as something non-positated, stubbornly *there* prior to all constitution.

The phenomenon of touching-being-touched, of the irreducible ambiguity of the lived body, makes manifest our rootedness prior to all reflection in an originary *ek-stase*. This originary *ek-stase*, which I have been calling corporeal intentionality, must not be conceived as a gap between the subject and the object, as if these latter enjoyed a kind of ontological priority. Rather it is the *ek-stase* that is originary, that happens as the spacing within which subject and object can appear at all. This *ek-stase* happens right at the level of the lived body. In the privileged phenomenon of touching-being-touched I experience “the perpetual beginning of reflection,” the very *advent* of the difference-from-self that comes to be fixed in the traditional oppositions of subject and object, intelligible and sensible.¹⁶⁵

This can be clarified with reference to our previous example. On the one hand, the lived body certainly puts me in contact with a world that is already there without my having constituted it. When I inspect the guitar with my touch, I feel myself to be in direct contact with the thing itself: I am not merely feeling my own representations, but rather the very particular texture of this wood. If this is not sufficiently certain on the basis of the lived experience alone, then I can also know that my lived body puts me in contact with something transcendent simply because I must touch the wood as *it* demands to be touched. If I move my hand either too slowly or too quickly over the surface of the fretboard, I will not feel its texture and will therefore fail in my objective. In short, I

¹⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 62; *PP-Fr*, 75.

cannot touch the guitar without touching *according to* it. On the other hand, this very same touch that puts me in direct contact with the world also gives me immediately to myself. The tactile sensations of a guitar are just as much tactile sensations of myself as touched by the guitar. If I could not touch myself touching the guitar, then I could not properly speaking *touch* the guitar at all, any more than my books touch the shelves on which they sit. We experience right at the level of the lived body, prior to the categories of reflection that would make of it a subject or an object, an ambiguous unity of centrifugal and centripetal orientations: in “going out” into the world, we equally “return into” ourselves. But of course we neither really go out nor return. Rather we *are* this spacing, this originary *ek-stase*.

The categories of subject and object emerge only as abstractions from this originary dimension. From my experienced certainty of contact with a world that is not reducible to my private representations I generalize to the hypothesis of an objective reality independent of my consciousness of it. And from the centripetal orientation of my embodied relation to the world I conclude that all being is ultimately being-for-me. As Merleau-Ponty notes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “the ‘natural’ man holds on to both ends of the chain, thinks *at the same time* that his perception enters into the things and that it is formed this side of his body.”¹⁶⁶ These natural convictions, along with the empiricist-realist and intellectualist theses that develop them, would be unthinkable without the originary *ek-stase* that sustains them. If in remaining within myself I did not also transcend myself into the world, I could have no experience whatever, and thus no conception of immanence and transcendence, subjectivity and objectivity.

¹⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 8.

In the phenomenon of the lived body we experience ourselves as rooted in an originary, ambiguous sense. Our unreflected being-in-the-world takes place within the element of what Merleau-Ponty calls the “nascent *logos*.”¹⁶⁷ That is to say, our originary opening out onto the world cannot be adequately articulated in terms of the reflected categories of intelligible sense and sensible sense. Merleau-Ponty describes our bodily ambiguity succinctly when he writes that the body “is always something other than what it is.”¹⁶⁸ On the one hand, we might be tempted to think that the body resolves itself into the unity of its intelligible sense, into the idea of the body. But as we have seen, such a reflective attention to the body always arrives too late: I can intend my body as a unity of meaning only because my body has always already been there, giving me to myself in the first place. The intended unity of intelligible sense, then, is sustained by another sense that *presents it* and that it cannot recover in the act of reflection. On the other hand, we might think of the body simply as the most immediately given sensible. But this sensible givenness cannot be thought according to the model of the brute, self-identical *quale*, since the body is sensibly given *for itself*. This mutual reference that first constitutes the two kinds of sense is the nascent *logos*. The sensible given is never an intrinsically meaningless *hyle*, but rather opens out toward a meaning. The left hand that I touch with my right is not given as a bundle of sense qualia for me to animate, but rather as my own left hand, or even as my own left hand touching the guitar. In my experience of the lived body, I find myself always *between* sensible and intelligible sense without ever coming to a rest in either. This between, this ambiguous sense, however, is ontologically prior to the reflected senses of sense that it sustains.

¹⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy*, 25.

¹⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 198; *PP-Fr*, 231.

To describe originary ambiguous sense as a nascent *logos* is to address in a new way the pre-eminently phenomenological question: how, anterior to the natural attitude and to the categories of reflection to which it gives rise, do beings become manifest? Merleau-Ponty's answer, as suggested by his account of the lived body and of its experience of touching-being-touched, is that beings are given as gesturing toward a signification with which, however, they never wholly coincide. My ambiguously intentional body brings to light the guitar *as such*, as a significant part of a significant world. But owing to the irreducible centripetal orientation of my embodied being-in-the-world, I never reach the guitar as a fully transparent signification. In the very act by which I transcend myself toward the guitar as promised intelligibility, I find myself subjected to the guitar, as stopped up in myself. This being-subjected is manifest as an opacity that I am unable to reflect. Thus, my sensuous opening out on to the world truly happens as a perpetually nascent *logos*, a *logos* always promised but always withheld.

To an extent, this conception of the nascent *logos* follows from what we have already discussed. We have seen that originary sense is not the unity of meaning intended across a multiplicity of hyletic data. Nor is it the mute *quale* that would affect the sentient body from without. What both these conceptions of sense have in common is complete presence to consciousness. The philosophy of reflection grounds itself on the insight that my thought, as opposed to anything that might be given in or by that thought, is immediately present to me. While the sensible cube appears only through adumbrations that suggest but do not immediately give the cube as a unity, the intelligible sense that I intend is given all at once. Likewise, the pure *quale* gives itself immediately and without reserve. If I mistake the given *quale* for something else, then I have

committed an error in judgment, for the *quale* as such is unambiguous; it is no more than it gives itself to be. If neither of these kinds of sense is originary, if both are rather abstractions from a more primordial ambiguous sense, then clearly originary sense will have the kind of density and opacity characteristic of the nascent *logos*.

But this description is still too negative, taking the form of neither/nor that characterized the “bad ambiguity.” Merleau-Ponty offers a more positive description in the chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* titled “The Body in its Sexual Being” (“*Le Corps Comme Être Sexué*”). The purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate that beings come to exist for us not through sensation or through intellection, but rather more originarily through an opaque affectivity. “If then we want to bring to light the genesis of being for us, we must finally look to that area of our experience which clearly has sense and reality only for us, and that is our affective life. Let us try to see how an object or a being begins to exist for us through desire or love and we shall thereby come to understand how objects and beings can exist in general.”¹⁶⁹ Nowhere is this emergence of beings through affectivity more evident than in our sexual being-in-the-world. We can recognize here a kind of erotic intentionality which is not at all the self-conscious positing of unities of sense across hyletic data. “Erotic perception is not a *cogitatio* which aims at a *cogitatum*.”¹⁷⁰ To encounter another person as seductive is not, in other words, primarily to predicate seductiveness of him or her. Rather I grasp the erotic *sense* of this seductive person with my own ambiguous intentional body. I am able to perceive the other as seductive only because he or she evokes in my body the postural schema

¹⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 154; *PP-Fr*, 180.

¹⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 157; *PP-Fr*, 183.

necessary to take up the erotic situation that is presented to me.¹⁷¹ We do not understand the sexual gestures of animals in anything resembling the way we grasp the incarnate sense of human sexual drama. Moreover, infants do not understand the sense of the sexual activity that they witness, but are rather likely to interpret it as aggression.¹⁷² In both these cases, the inability to grasp the erotic sense of a situation has its origin in the inability of the perceiving body to take up that situation and live it as its own.

Erotic intentionality can only be the intentionality of an irreducibly ambiguous body.¹⁷³ In order even to recognize a situation as erotically charged, I must be able to experience the ambiguous unity of centrifugal and centripetal orientations that characterizes our most originary embodied being-in-the-world. On the one hand, I must perform a kind of *Sinngebung*. Freud has shown us that human sexuality is meaningful through and through, that it cannot be reduced to a set of biological or mechanical functions.¹⁷⁴ When I find another person sexually attractive, I am not merely reacting to objectively existing sexual stimuli. What attracts is not simply a body, but rather a stylized, meaningful body. In the other, I recognize the embodiment of a culture, a social and economic class, a level of education, an aesthetic style, an erotic style, etc. Across these data—or better, across these expressions, these incarnate senses—I intend the other as an erotic object. With this sense-bestowal the object takes on a new meaning for me and at the same time opens up a world of possible future meanings.

On the other hand, this erotic *Sinngebung* also demands a centripetal orientation; one cannot be an erotic subject without at the same time being an erotic object. Although

¹⁷¹ Alphonso Lingis, *Libido: The French Existential Theories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 50-1.

¹⁷² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 184; *PP-Fr*, 215.

¹⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 167; *PP-Fr*, 195.

¹⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 158; *PP-Fr*, 184.

human sexuality is saturated with meaning, it is certainly not reducible to it. Thus, to take up and to live an erotic situation as such, it does not suffice merely to intend the other as a sexual object. I must also make of myself a lure for the gaze of the other, and thus take on the role of object. Intentionality is revealed in this erotic situation as a kind of active passivity. Just as in touching the guitar I allow myself to be touched by it, so in transcending myself toward the erotic other I encounter myself as seen by the other. This centripetal orientation, which is inseparable from the centrifugal one, is experienced as a dense, opaque affect that resists reflection into a fully self-present signification. The possibility for this affect is given by the ambiguous, intentional body. “At the very moment when I live in the world, when I am given over to my projects, my occupations, my friends, my memories, I can close my eyes, lie down, listen to the blood pulsating in my ears, lose myself in some pleasure or pain, and shut myself up in this anonymous life which subtends my personal one.”¹⁷⁵ In the context of sexuality, this anonymous opacity can be called voluptuousness. Far from being a mere side effect of erotic sense, this pre-personal, pre-worldly voluptuousness is more nearly its consummation. But this passive consummation is inseparable from the active erotic sense-bestowal; for corporeal intentionality every act doubles back on itself and is experienced as a voluptuousness that interrupts the order of intelligible sense always already.

The careful elucidation that Merleau-Ponty gives of our erotic intentionality is not meant merely as a description of one isolated component of our total being-in-the-world. The ambiguity of the centrifugal and centripetal orientations of corporeal intentionality which is revealed so clearly in sexuality is in fact present in every modality of our

¹⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 164-5; *PP-Fr*, 192. Translation modified.

opening out onto the world.¹⁷⁶ The ambiguity of corporeal intentionality is especially evident in sexuality owing to the prominent role of voluptuousness in that sphere of our lives. But there is a kind of voluptuousness in all intentionality. That is to say, every act of sense-bestowing transcendence into the world is accompanied by an affect that presents the subject to him- or herself, simultaneously as something significant and as something which resists that signification.

Let us take as an example my own role as a lecturer at the university. In order for a university class to take place, I must intend its meaning; I must be able to take up the situation *as* what it is. So, for example, I must understand the role requirements that all the participants of the situation must satisfy, as well as the purposes that the roles serve. I know that a lecturer in general must come to each class prepared to lecture on or discuss a specified portion of the subject matter. I know that students in general must comport themselves in more or less explicitly understood ways that are conducive to their being educated. This set of role requirements, which is of course greatly truncated for the purpose of exposition, constitutes the intelligible sense of a university class. If I could not intend this meaning, I could not even conceive of being a lecturer. One becomes an actual lecturer by conforming one's behavior to this set of idealities.

But I can never really *be* the lecturer as such; I can never be a mere instance of "lecturer" as intended unity of sense. This is because of the centripetal orientation that is included in any sense-bestowing intentionality. To stand at the front of the classroom and to look out onto the class as constituted unity of meaning is equally to see myself as seen within the context of that meaning. Here again, intentionality is revealed as a kind of active passivity. Standing before the class, I feel myself subjected to the meaning that

¹⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 169; *PP-Fr*, 197.

I intend. I must not only intend the meaning of a university class, but must give myself to be seen within the context of the class. So, for example, I see myself being seen in the dress shirt, slacks, and tie that I wear. I hear myself being heard as I adopt a particular tone of authority. This mode of dress and this tone of voice are not external signs of my position within the university system, in the way that the numbers on a football player's jersey represent the position he plays. They rather *stylize* the role of lecturer, giving it a particular *expression*. Expression for Merleau-Ponty names an incarnate sense, a meaning that is inseparable from the opaque materiality that presents it. One is presented to oneself and to others only through such a stylization or expression. It is in seeing myself being seen in a dress shirt, slacks, and tie that I become present to myself as a competent and professional lecturer. Although *one* becomes a lecturer by conforming one's conduct to the set of idealities that constitutes the meaning "lecturer in general," *I* become a lecturer only through an affectivity that emerges in my own necessarily situated and stylized response to that meaning.

IV. Sense and the Imperative of the World

The ambiguous, embodied sense within which we find ourselves rooted always already, prior to all reflection, is also an imperative sense. We have seen in a number of different contexts that our sense-bestowing transcendence into the world is equiprimordially an obedience to that world. Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated that we do not open originally out onto a world of meaningless sense data, which we would subsequently animate in our acts of judgment. Nor do we open directly onto a world of

fully determinate significations. Both of these rejected theses posit as originary a world of sense that is self-identical and that makes no demands on the subject who would open out onto it. The pure *quale* of the empiricist is nothing more than what it gives itself to be; it opens onto nothing other than itself. If the empiricist were to postulate an imperative to *know* the world of qualia, then this imperative would have to originate wholly on the side of the knowing subject. But since, *ex hypothesi*, these qualia give only themselves, then anything further that cognition might make of them would be essentially unmotivated, and hence not even knowledge. The subject would need to be understood in this case as obligating him- or herself to know a world that does not give itself to be known. On the other hand, if we opened directly onto a world of determinate significations, then again the world would have nothing to teach us. It would be arrayed before us in full transparency, leaving the subject nothing to do but to behold it.

Merleau-Ponty has shown, through the kind of radical reflection described above, that originary sense is a nascent *logos*, an incarnate sense that opens out onto a promised intelligible sense while at the same time holding it in reserve, withdrawing into the opacity and density of sensuous sense. This ambiguous sense *does* make a demand on the subject. The house that I perceive from the front presents itself *as* holding itself in reserve, as promising more intelligibility than it offers from the frontal perspective alone. This presentation and this promise are addressed to a mobile and intentional body, which can fulfill the promise only by orienting its perceptions according to the house itself. The sensibly-given house can have this power of summoning the intentional body only because of its irreducible ambiguity. On the one hand, the embodied subject finds its gaze stopped in the dense materiality of the house. This opacity serves as the most

primordial evidence that the perceiving subject achieves direct contact with a transcendent world. But the opacity of the given house is not the infinitely dense, self-identical being of the *quale*. Rather the house is given as a solid, material reality that points constitutively beyond itself toward its own ideal signification. Merleau-Ponty describes concisely the intimate relation between these two moments of the sensibly given when he writes that “the aseity of a thing, its unchallengeable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws, are two inseparable aspects of transcendence.”¹⁷⁷ Ambiguous sense thus functions both as anchor for the perceptual orientation of a fundamentally intentional body and as a summons to that body for further anchored perceptions. It is this anchoring and drawing power of ambiguous sense that makes of it also an imperative sense.

Opening out onto a world, then, requires much more than simply opening one’s eyes. It is not at all the case that the world is already there, fully formed, waiting only for a subject who would turn his or her attention to it. Rather one must know *how* to see the world. This knowledge belongs not to the pure mind or intellect—whatever these might be—but rather to a body that knows how to orient itself relative to a world which demands of it a certain postural schema, a certain focus, a certain angle and distance of vision, in order adequately to be seen. Perception, then, can never be accounted for solely in terms of the categories of reflection. I do not call upon the reflective science of optics in order explicitly to direct my body into the position requisite for seeing the notebook in which I write. Rather, I am able even to conceive of something like a notebook only because my knowing body has *already* responded appropriately to its summons. “In perception, we do not *think* the object and we do not think ourselves

¹⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 233; *PP-Fr*, 270.

thinking it; we are rather *given over* to the object and we merge into this body that is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal for synthesizing it.”¹⁷⁸ The notebook, then, is there for me first as a nascent *logos*, as a sensuously experienced *something* that suggests, but never resolves itself into, an ideal signification. And this originary, nascent *logos* is conceivable only as given to a fundamentally knowing, intentional body.

This conception of our ambiguous opening out onto the world is supported by case studies of persons who have been blind from a very young age and who have had their sight restored through surgery. One would suppose, at least from the perspective of the natural attitude, that once the surgery had been completed and the bandages removed, the patients would look out immediately onto the same world as those who have been sighted their whole lives. This, however, proves not to be the case. The world onto which the newly-sighted person first looks is a world of scarcely determinate colors and forms; the patient finds him- or herself unable to see coherent, integral *things*, but only the sensory qualities which, under normal conditions, would *present* those things. Merleau-Ponty, quoting from Marius von Senden’s *Space and Sight*, presents a particularly striking case of this inability to encounter a visual thing: after the operation, “form as given by sight is for these patients something quite new which they fail to relate to their tactile experience”, “the patient states that he can see, but does not know what he sees. . . . He never recognizes his hand as such, and talks only about a moving, white patch.”¹⁷⁹ One might suppose that the patient could recognize at least his own hand, which he must have long since learned to *feel* as an integral whole, and not as a medley

¹⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 238; *PP-Fr*, 275-6. Translation modified. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 222-3; *PP-Fr*, 257.

of incoherent sense data. That he could not suggests very strongly that perception amounts to much more than simply opening one's eyes, that it names an ambiguous, essentially cooperative relation to the world.¹⁸⁰

It is important to understand precisely why the post-operative patients are unable to see coherent things. Is it because their eyes are not yet coordinated in the manner necessary for seeing things? Or is it rather because the visual field is itself confused, offering nothing stable at which they could fix their gazes? It seems to be a matter here of determining "whether they fail to see through failure to focus, or whether they fail to focus through not having anything to see."¹⁸¹ The answer, of course, is that both of these are true simultaneously. On the one hand, it is certainly true that the newly-sighted person does not yet know how to focus his eyes in such a way as to see things, as opposed merely to colors, shapes, and movement. His prior relation to the world had been primarily tactile; he came to know this world by running his hand over the surfaces of things. When, after the surgery, he is able to see, he naturally attempts this same movement with his eyes. The case reported by Von Senden is once again exemplary: "To distinguish by sight a circle from a rectangle, he has to run his eyes round the outline of the figure, as he might with his hand. . . ."¹⁸² But of course one does not *see* a thing the same way that one *feels* it, namely little by little, segment by segment. One sees a thing by fixing on its Gestalt, on its integral sensuous physiognomy, just as one reads by taking in at one glance whole meaningful units, and not by moving the gaze successively from

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, xx; *PP-Fr*, xvi. "True philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world. . . ." Also, Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 4; *VI-Fr*, 18. "It is at the same time true that the world is *what we see* and that, nonetheless, we must learn to see it. . . ."

¹⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 231; *PP-Fr*, 267.

¹⁸² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 223; *PP-Fr*, 257.

left to right, letter by letter.¹⁸³ Thus it is certainly true to say that the newly-sighted person fails to see things owing to a failure to focus his eyes in the ways necessary to see them.

As it stands, however, this explanation remains abstract and one-sided. The act of focusing presupposes something in the world that gives itself to be focused on. All focusing, in other words, is prospective; we focus only with the expectation that something given as vague, as a nascent object, will become something given “in the flesh,” as a fully coherent thing.¹⁸⁴ This coming-into-being of the thing demands a cooperation between the perceiver and the perceived, such that the perceiver takes up the summons of the nascent *logos* to which he most originally opens out. It is not, in other words, the thing *in itself* which gives itself to be seen, but rather a thing whose very being is to be presented to an embodied subject. “To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things.”¹⁸⁵ Thus it is true as well that the newly-sighted person fails to focus through not having anything to focus on. To speak more generally and more phenomenologically, we might say that a coherent world can be given only to a subject who can intend unities of sense across sensuous *hyle* that evoke and sustain that sense. In the case at hand, the failure of the patient to see such a world cannot be localized on the subjective side (failure to focus) or on the objective side (lack of something to focus on), but must rather be located beneath this duality, at the more originary level where they are not yet distinct. The patient’s lack

¹⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 224; *PP-Fr*, 259.

¹⁸⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 232; *PP-Fr*, 268.

¹⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 320; *PP-Fr*, 370.

of embodied knowledge and the world's seeming failure to provide anything that would motivate that knowledge are not two separate phenomena, but rather a failure within the structure of phenomenality as such.

These case studies concerning restored vision demonstrate that originary sense plunges the perceiving subject immediately into the world. But it is important to clarify here what we mean by world. Most basically, the world is that which is there, prior to all reflection, as the horizon for all of the subject's perceptual experiences.¹⁸⁶ Perception, which provides us with our most originary openness to being, is defined by Merleau-Ponty as the appearance of a figure against a background.¹⁸⁷ This background is the world, the horizon presupposed in the givenness of anything whatever. Owing to the elementary figure/background structure of perception, anything that is given to the perceiving subject is given only as referring beyond itself to its antepredicative setting. This, of course, explains why there can be no experience of pure sense data: they are wholly meaningless, wholly foreign to any possible world because, *ex hypothesi*, they make manifest nothing but themselves. Meaning emerges only in the reference of a given to its horizons, and this reference happens right at the level of sense. The white that I sense before me is immediately the white *of* the page on which I write. The depth I sense before me is immediately the depth *of* the notebook. And, shifting away for a moment from our exclusive emphasis on vision, the purring that I hear is immediately the purring *of* my cat, who is lying on my arm as I write. By "immediately," I do not mean to suggest that the white just *is* the paper, that the purring just *is* the cat. I mean rather to emphasize that the sensuous givens themselves refer beyond themselves; I do not first

¹⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, x-xi; *PP-Fr*, iv-v.

¹⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 4; *PP-Fr*, 10.

encounter whiteness and then perform a separate act of intellection wherein I judge the whiteness to belong to the paper. The sensuously given whiteness itself motivates my seeing it as the whiteness of the paper. In sum, to perceive anything whatever is necessarily to perceive a meaningful world.

The world that is presented along with the sensuously given is presented as an imperative, as a demand for unity addressed to our sentient and sensible bodies. The world is not given originally as that completed, objective system that would be presented transparently and all at once in a view from nowhere. Rather “the world is an open and indefinite unity in which I am situated. . . .”¹⁸⁸ This indefinite unity is not presented as such to the perceiving subject, but as an ongoing task. The case of perceptual illusion helps to bring out clearly this imperative of the world. It often happens in the summer that when I am driving, I seem to encounter a thin sheet of water some distance further ahead on the road. This appearance creates a perceptual imbalance: on the one hand, it does appear to be a thin sheet of water, but on the other hand, there is something I vaguely perceive as “wrong” in the appearance. The perceived sheet of water actually *gives* itself as somehow “unreal,” not unlike the colored spots I see after I have looked into a bright light. I experience the sheet of water as vaguely unreal because it seems to be entirely out of place there on the hot, otherwise dry road. That is, given the choice (albeit an unconscious, bodily choice) between accepting the real existence of an appearance inconsistent with its worldly horizons on the one hand, and denying its real existence for the sake of a united, coherent world on the other, my perceiving body chooses the latter. My body chooses this way because it has always already sided with the world, has always already oriented itself to its imperative.

¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 304; *PP-Fr*, 351. Translation modified.

In denying the validity of the illusion, I do not take refuge in a purely intelligible world that I would posit as distinct from the apparent one. Rather I respond to dubious appearances by supplementing them with more appearances. I continue driving and when I approach the place where I thought I had seen the sheet of water, I see that it is not really there. I accept this second appearance as authoritative for two intimately related reasons. First, worldly things themselves demand to be seen from a certain perspective and not from others. “For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency.”¹⁸⁹ I do not see a book, for example, when I place it a millimeter from my eyeball. To be sure, I see *something*, but nothing that gives itself as a book. Likewise, there is a range of privileged positions from which to observe a sheet of water; if the water does not appear from these perspectives, then it is the world itself that suggests the illusoriness of the appearance. Second, I accept the later appearance as authoritative because it is consistent with the vast majority of appearances I would have of that place were I to survey it from every possible perspective. I do not need actually to view the place from every possible perspective to know how it *would* appear. In adopting one of the privileged perspectives on a thing, my body takes up in a virtual way all the others. For example, in taking up a frontal view of the book, I know virtually, and not by an explicit act of judgment, that I would see its back side if I were either to turn the book around in my hands or to move my whole body around to its other side. Again, we see that the sentient and sensible body is drawn, prior to all reflection, by the sensuously given world as imperative for unity and coherence.

¹⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 302; *PP-Fr*, 348.

The imperative of the world is not merely an imperative for maximal visual unity, as our example of optical illusion might suggest, but rather an imperative for full, intersensorial unity. Worldly things do not engage the senses separately and discretely, but rather call upon the integrated sensory-motor powers of the whole body in order adequately to be experienced. Merleau-Ponty describes the ways in which the different senses are “pregnant one with the other,” a remarkable phenomenon which sustains the antepredicative unity of the world.¹⁹⁰ We quite literally *hear* the brittleness of the glass when it breaks and *see* the weight of the block of iron resting on the earth.¹⁹¹ Thus, he writes, “what I call experience of the thing or of reality—not merely of a reality-for-sight or a reality-for-touch, but an absolute reality—is my full co-existence with the phenomenon, at the moment when it is in every way at its maximum articulation, and the ‘data of the different senses’ are oriented toward this one pole. . . .”¹⁹² If, for example, I hear someone calling my name, I fully expect to see the person who did so as soon as I turn my gaze in the direction from which the call originated. Once I see and recognize the person who had called, I feel myself to be unchallengeably present to the real situation. If, on the other hand, I turn and see no one, or at least no one who could possibly have been the one who called, then I conclude that I must have misheard, for in a coherent and unified world, disembodied and unlocalized voices do not call out my name. If I continue to hear a call that I cannot localize, I will begin to feel unsettled. I will either redouble my efforts to locate the source of the call or I will try very hard to pretend that I did not hear it. The unsettled feeling and the options I have for dealing with it testify to the force of the imperative for intersensorial unity.

¹⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 235; *PP-Fr*, 271-2.

¹⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 229-30; *PP-Fr*, 265.

¹⁹² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 318; *PP-Fr*, 367-8. Translation modified.

It is this imperative that creates such difficulties for those who have recovered their sight after having spent most of their lives blind. According to Marius von Senden, newly-sighted adults tend to arrive, after an initial period of exhilaration, at a “motivational crisis,” where they sincerely question whether they want to continue to live as sighted, or would rather return to their former lives as blind persons. One patient is reported to have threatened to tear out his own eyes, so frightened was he of the new manner of taking up the world that sight required of him.¹⁹³ Richard Gregory reports the case of one of his patients, S.B., as follows:

We formed a strong impression that his sight was to him almost entirely disappointing. It enabled him to do a little more . . . but it became clear that the opportunities it afforded him were less than he had imagined. . . . He still to a great extent lived the life of a blind man, sometimes not bothering to put on the light at night. . . .¹⁹⁴

S.B. became deeply depressed shortly following the surgery, and within two years he was dead. Oliver Sacks reports the case of one of his own patients, Virgil. Following his operation, Virgil was able to see and to identify colors quite well, and shapes somewhat less well. He was especially interested in cars, which he perceived as moving masses of color. But Virgil had a very difficult time correlating the colors and shapes that he saw with the coherent and determinate *world* that he had long since learned to experience through touch. Thus, although he was fascinated by the colors and shapes of cars, he could not identify the one that belonged to his wife.¹⁹⁵ He could perceive the discrete parts of his cat—its paws, head, tail, etc.—but could not synthesize these into the perception of one integral cat.¹⁹⁶ In sum, Virgil had a very difficult time experiencing the

¹⁹³ Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 138.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121-2.

world as an intersensorial unity. Like many newly-sighted persons, Virgil experienced the imperative of the world so strongly that he eventually gave up entirely on the sense of sight in order to return to the tactile world in which that imperative was already satisfied.¹⁹⁷

V. The Ambiguous Imperative

The world extended in imperative sense is first and foremost a practical world. Our most basic encounter with a worldly thing does not happen according to the requirements of abstract knowledge, as the subsumption of a sensible given under an ideal identity term. Rather we encounter things by linking up with them, by joining our own sensory-motor forces to the practical worlds of significance that they open up. The worldly thing, then, is given most originally as an incarnate *practical* sense.

When the hiker reaches for her boots, her view does not stop on the shape of a mass of leather; she turns to the mountains, the crisp air and pellucid light, the rocks that rise sovereign over those that scurry back and forth in the plains. Her boots are not for her raw material that sustains the shape the cutter has put on it, but a force sustaining the forms of her advance, a power to forget the mud and the thorns. In the materiality of the boots, she sees the consistency, the reliability that sustains the harsh rigor of the mountain paths.¹⁹⁸

This is more than a fanciful, poetic way of describing our relation to things. We might be tempted to believe that the given thing just is what it is, and that any practical significance we might attach to it must originate in our own subjective projects. But Merleau-Ponty has already refuted this conception. In his description of touching-being-touched, which is the most basic phenomenon of the intentional, sentient and sensible body, he showed that our projects, our being out ahead of ourselves toward the open-

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 147-152.

¹⁹⁸ Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 83-4.

ended world, are grounded in originary ambiguous sense. It is sense that gives us to *be* an *ek-stase*, to be simultaneously given to ourselves and drawn out beyond ourselves. To say, then, that the sensible boots are given to the hiker immediately as extending a practical world is just to unfold the implications of that core insight.

In order rigorously to think through the practical world of projects extended by imperative sense, it is necessary to begin with the phenomenon of behavior, of particular embodied modalities of being-in-the-world. According to Merleau-Ponty, “we understand the thing as we understand a new kind of behavior, not, that is, through any intellectual operation of subsumption, but by taking up on our own account the mode of existence which the observable signs adumbrate before us.”¹⁹⁹ At approximately fifteen days old, a baby begins to smile in response to its mother’s smile. There can be no serious suggestion here that the baby is responding in anything other than a bodily way. That is, the baby clearly does not recognize its mother’s smile as a particular geometrical configuration of her lips and then interpret that configuration as a sign for her happiness. The smile is rather an *expression*; its meaning is inseparable from its manifestation. The baby “knows” the meaning of the smile by “catching on” to its incarnate sense, by taking up that sense with its own sensory-motor powers. In taking up its mother’s expression, the baby extends a very simple little practical world. In smiling, the baby occupies a world that it perceives, albeit dimly, as safe and happy. This capacity to pick up on others’ expressions obviously expands during the course of the child’s maturation, thereby rendering possible increasingly determinate practical worlds. In “The Child’s Relations with Others,” Merleau-Ponty recounts the case of a boy who had been the youngest child in the family until the recent birth of a brother. The new arrival was very

¹⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 319; *PP-Fr*, 369.

difficult for the boy to accept, since he had been until then the primary focus of attention within the household. Eventually, though, the boy adjusted to the situation by adopting toward the new baby the same comportment that his older brother had adopted toward him. In taking up this new set of behaviors, the boy came to occupy a rather complex familial world characterized by multiple, determinate role requirements. The boy *became* an older brother, not through arriving at an abstract conception of the institution of the family, but by *living* his role through his behavior.²⁰⁰

In a very similar way, our embodied relations with things extend practical worlds. A thing is not given simply as standing there, over against a perceiving subject; it is given as an imperative *to* the sensory-motor powers of a body that is capable of taking it up and of following its directives. This idea is expressed in a striking way by Hilary Putnam:

If I dared to be a metaphysician, I think I would create a system in which there were nothing but obligations. . . . Instead of saying with Mill that the chair is a 'permanent possibility of sensations,' I would say that it is a *permanent possibility of obligations*. . . . What I do think, even outside my fantasies, is that fact and obligations are thoroughly interdependent; there are no facts without obligations, just as there are no obligations without facts.²⁰¹

Perception encounters things in their full, unchallengeable reality only to the extent that those things play a role in the practical world of the embodied subject.²⁰² This becomes especially manifest in our perception of things as spatial. For intellectualism, and for the transcendental, non-embodied subject that it posits, space is not oriented: there is no left or right, up or down, in *objective* space. According to this thesis, we should not perceive things as having *their own* proper orientations in space. But of course we do. For example, I perceive an easy chair standing upright very differently from the way I

²⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy*, 109-10.

²⁰¹ Hilary Putnam, *Realism With A Human Face*, Ed. James Conant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 115. Quoted in Lingis, *Imperative*, 228.

²⁰² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 253; *PP-Fr*, 293.

perceive one that is upside down. Of course, in both cases I am able to subsume the sensuously given under the ideal identity term “easy chair.” But this ideal sameness masks important differences in the modes of givenness of the two chairs. To return for a moment to the language of Husserlian phenomenology, the hyletic data do not sustain the sense-bestowal in the same way. When I encounter the easy chair in its proper, upright position, I find it to be given immediately and unproblematically *as* an easy chair. But when I encounter it upside down, I find there to be something unnatural about it. My gaze becomes fixed in the materiality of the spectacle, in the thickness and softness of the chair’s padding, in the texture of its fabric, its color, etc. In short, the hyletic data do not recede as readily to make way for the meaning that they sustain. The easy chair standing upright appears as more solid and more real because it exists as a summons to which my body knows how to respond. It is the concretion of a practical situation. “Thus the thing is correlative to my body and, in more general terms, to my existence, of which my body is merely the stabilized structure. It is constituted in the hold which my body takes upon it; it is not first of all a meaning for the understanding, but a structure accessible to inspection by the body, and if we try to describe the real as it appears to us in perceptual experience, we find it overlaid with anthropological predicates.”²⁰³

The things that we encounter as correlates of our intentional bodies extend coherent, determinate practical worlds in which we take our bearings as fundamentally practical subjects. It is not the case, in other words, that subjects impose their intelligible projects onto a world that would be wholly indifferent to them. Rather one becomes a subject by being subjected to the imperative of the world. The agent, according to

²⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 320; *PP-Fr*, 369.

Alphonso Lingis, is delegated by things.²⁰⁴ When I report for my first day of work at the factory, I encounter an assembly line whose workings I do not understand. I am at first unable to see the assembly line in its full determinacy because my body does not yet know how to orient its sensory-motor powers to it. To learn the job is not to master intellectually the processes by which the raw materials are converted into the final product; one must rather learn new modes of perception and of muscular coordination. One must learn to see and to evaluate what is coming down the line and to organize one's bodily forces in the manner required to deal with those things correctly. One comes to understand the intelligibility of the factory's system in an irreducibly bodily manner. Now, having acquired this bodily knowledge, I look at the assembly line and its meaning is immediately and unproblematically present. At that point I have been delegated by the things. I have truly become a factory worker.

But the things do not delegate the agent as a *particular* human being. I do not become the individual I am through having mastered the correct bodily comportment to the machines in the factory. I am rather delegated by the machines as a factory worker in general, interchangeable with any other body that has mastered the same skills. This follows directly from what we have already said about reflection. The sentient and sensible body cannot be reduced; it is there prior to all reflection, prior to becoming a body-for-consciousness. "There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it."²⁰⁵ Because I cannot reduce this embodied self wholly to *my* self, I experience an anonymity and generality right at the heart of my sensuous opening out onto the world. It is not an already

²⁰⁴ Lingis, *Imperative*, 91.

²⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 254; *PP-Fr*, 294.

constituted *I* that responds originarily to the imperative of the world, but rather an impersonal “one.” Merleau-Ponty refers to this impersonality and generality at the heart of personal experience as *l’*on* primordiale*.²⁰⁶ The machines in the factory link up with *one*’s body, making one, anyone in general, into a factory worker. The world of the factory that is extended by the correlation between things and one’s body is likewise a practical world for anyone.

The Kantian imperative, as we have seen, is an imperative for lawfulness. The law, for Kant, is characterized essentially by universality and necessity. This conception of the law is evident both in nature and in political society, which serve as models for the moral imperative: “So act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a **universal law of nature**” and “act in accordance with maxims of a universally legislative member for a merely possible realm of ends.”²⁰⁷ Kant believes that these principles already prevail, at least vaguely, in moral common sense, that they are not merely the products of abstract philosophizing.²⁰⁸ And indeed it does seem that one of the most basic tenets of our moral common sense is that it is impermissible to make an exception of oneself, that if an obligation legitimately binds others similarly situated, then it binds oneself as well.²⁰⁹ This common-sense belief articulates informally the very idea of a *law*, whether it be natural, political, or moral: a law that is not universal and necessary, that allows for exceptions in particular cases, is not properly a law at all. The

²⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 175.

²⁰⁷ Kant, *GMM*, 38 (4:421); 56 (4:439).

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 (4:397)

²⁰⁹ This is one of the few points of agreement between two of the dominant trends in contemporary moral philosophy, viz., deontology and utilitarianism. In his influential article titled “An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics,” J.J.C. Smart articulates the principle as follows: “The utilitarian’s ultimate moral principle, let it be remembered, expresses the sentiment not of altruism but of benevolence, the agent counting himself neither more nor less than any other person.” J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 32.

imperative, then, addresses itself not primarily to what is particular in human beings, but rather to that which is impersonal and universal in them, to their humanity in general.

We are now in a position to understand this imperative lawfulness as the dynamic proper to originary, ambiguous sense. We have seen that our embodied relations with things extend a coherent, intelligible world as the field for our practical activity. In linking up my body's forces with those of the assembly line, I become part of the world of the factory. This world is a practical world, a coherent layout of demands addressed to the factory worker in general. In this respect there is nothing exceptional about me, or about any of the other factory workers. I perform my function correctly when I do what anyone in my situation would do. And, it should be noted, this kind of imperative for universality is not confined to dreary, mechanized settings like the factory. We can see the same phenomenon in the other examples that we have discussed in the present chapter. There is, for example, a *world* of guitar aficionados. When I inspect the quality of a particular guitar, I do so with hands that are responsive to the demands that guitars in general make on one's sensibility, and in the same way that anyone with similar skills would do it. Likewise, I drive well when I account for possible hazards on the roadway in the same way that a good driver in general would. In sum, our originary, embodied relations with things extend a practical world which makes demands on us as pre-personal, general beings. In being subjected to these imperatives, we become moral subjects.

We must not suppose, though, that in rethinking the Kantian imperative on the basis of originary ambiguous sense, we leave it exactly as it was. Our conception of the imperative of the world has up to this point focused exclusively on the centrifugal

orientation of corporeal intentionality. That is, we have focused on the ways in which our perception of some particular thing necessarily opens us out to the *world* in which that thing has its place. Exclusive consideration of the centrifugal orientation yields a kind of imperative that emphasizes lawfulness, intelligibility, and wholeness. But, as we have seen, our fundamentally embodied opening out onto the world entails a centripetal orientation in our intentionality as well. We cannot open out onto a world without at the same time being presented to ourselves as particular, situated beings. This, of course, was revealed in the phenomenon of touching-being-touched, and in its analogues in the other senses. We saw in this regard that the lecturer can never be given to him- or herself as the ideal unity “lecturer in general.” One can *live* the role of lecturer in general only as backed up into oneself by the gazes of the particular students that one actually teaches, and thus as a particular embodiment and stylization of the role. If it is true that the imperative happens according to the dynamic of our originary sensuous opening out onto the world, then there must be a moment of particularity and situatedness in the imperative which interrupts always already the moment of generality and wholeness.

Taking this irreducible moment of particularity into account, we can see that “the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible at the same time the finitude of my perception and its opening out upon the completed world as a horizon of every perception.”²¹⁰ When I view the front of the house, I find the house as a whole given in adumbrations as a task for my sentient and mobile body. But this nascent wholeness is given only because my gaze is *anchored*, because this particular side of the house is unchallengeably present from a

²¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 304; *PP-Fr*, 350. Translation modified.

particular point of view. The front of the house can promise the whole only if my gaze can, to a certain extent, become absorbed in it. It is from *this* anchorage that I receive the summons to examine the other promised perspectives. The house as a whole, then, is never arrayed transparently before me. Nor, by extension, is the neighborhood, the city, or the whole practical worlds of construction or of reality.²¹¹ The wholes promised by the centrifugal orientation of our corporeal intentionality are always only provisional and indefinite.

There are situations in which the incompleteness of the world becomes especially pressing from a practical perspective. In these cases it is one's own particularity that is addressed by the imperative; to act as anyone in general would act in these situations would demonstrate a profound failing of ethical sensibility. Just recently my father died from lung cancer and emphysema, the products of a lifelong three-pack-a-day smoking habit. Each breath of air demanded great exertion from him, even with the help of the oxygen mask. Visiting him each day in the hospital, I linked up to his world with the forces of my own body. Seeing him struggle to breathe, I felt my own chest tightening up sympathetically, fighting along with him for air. But the world that was made manifest in this bodily connection to my father's situation was not the impersonal and generalized world of projects and tasks that we saw in the factory. Rather it was the finitude, the closing off of his world that presented itself most forcefully. In this constricted world, in which those present are given as backed up into themselves, as situated firmly in this place and at this time, I feel myself called upon imperatively to be myself, and no one else. I must not comfort my father in the same way that any son

²¹¹ Cf. Lingis, *Imperative*, 88. "He who grasps the hammer does not comprehensively envision the carpentry of the whole world."

would in similar circumstances. I must respond to the particularities of the situation as it is informed by a very particular relationship with a very particular history. I must respond in this way without the possibility of knowing in advance, according to some clear, intelligible model, how to do so.

VI. Conclusion

We have seen that there is something irreducible, something that resists all reflection, right at the heart of our opening out onto the world. This unreflected element, whose locus is the lived body, we have called originary, ambiguous sense. We have seen that the different modalities of our being-in-the-world are essentially *responsive* and *obedient* to this ambiguous sense, which we have therefore also called imperative sense. Finally, we have seen that this imperative also commands ambiguously. We are called upon to orient our practical lives to an intelligible, complete world of projects and tasks, but also to resist the wholeness of the world, to respond to particularities *as* particularities. Responsibility, in sum, must always be an ambiguous responsibility.

CHAPTER THREE: CARNAL SENSE

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty attempts to articulate an originary, ambiguous sense relative to which the traditional metaphysical dualisms—those of the sensible and the intelligible, subject and object, universal and particular, etc.—are revealed as abstractions. We mentioned in the previous chapter, however, that Merleau-Ponty came to believe that he had failed there to articulate ambiguity in a sufficiently rigorous way. In a brief text written in pursuit of his admission into the Collège de France, in which he summarizes the trajectory of his philosophical work to date, Merleau-Ponty admits that “the study of perception could only teach us a ‘bad ambiguity,’ a mixture of finitude and universality, interiority and exteriority.”²¹² In the present chapter, I will show how this failure to articulate ambiguity in a sufficiently rigorous way amounts to a failure to articulate sense as originary. I will then show how Merleau-Ponty’s work following *Phenomenology of Perception*, beginning with *The Prose of the World* and concluding with the posthumous *Visible and the Invisible*, moves progressively closer to a more adequate articulation of ambiguity, and thus of originary sense. Finally, I will show how the conception of imperative discussed in the previous chapter is enhanced by the more originary conception of sense achieved in Merleau-Ponty’s later works.

I. Tacit Cogito and the Bad Ambiguity

The task of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is, as we have seen, to unveil a “third dimension” that would ground, but also disrupt, the distinction between

²¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy*, 11.

subjectivity and objectivity.²¹³ The more originary dimension that Merleau-Ponty hopes to unveil is that of the phenomenon, of the paradoxical in-itself-for-us that is brought to light in the phenomenological reduction.²¹⁴ But in order to articulate this third dimension of phenomenality, Merleau-Ponty begins with the very categories that conceal it. In every chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, he shows that the categories of objectivity and subjectivity, which are represented by the theses of empiricism and intellectualism respectively, provide inadequate accounts of the phenomenon being discussed. Merleau-Ponty states this methodological principle explicitly: “In order not to prejudge the issue, we shall take objective thought on its own terms and not ask it any questions which it does not ask itself.”²¹⁵ The method, in other words, is one of critique. Merleau-Ponty shows from within the theses of empiricism and intellectualism that there is something for which they cannot account on their own terms. We have seen, in our discussion of Husserl’s *Ideas II* for example, how the lived body escapes from the intellectualist thesis that would reduce it to an object for constituting, transcendental consciousness. This thesis was unable to account for the orientation of objects in space, which is essential to the sense of any constituted object. We have also seen, in our discussion of patients whose vision has been surgically restored, that the body cannot adequately be conceived as an object that simply receives and processes visual “data” from the external world. This empiricist thesis was unable to account for the plainly observable fact that post-operative patients could not immediately see determinate things, and could do so later on only with great difficulty. By presenting the failures of the two

²¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 162.

²¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 322; *PP-Fr*, 372.

²¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 71-2; *PP-Fr*, 86.

theses, Merleau-Ponty hoped to bring into relief the originary dimension that they had covered over.

It is this critical methodology that prevents Merleau-Ponty from thinking ambiguity in an originary way. Throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the originary dimension of phenomenality "remain dependent on the very terms that [he] refuses and that he claims to overcome: subject-object, world-consciousness, unreflected-reflection."²¹⁶ That is, he discovers in many different phenomena an opacity, an unreflected element that resists the movement of reflection. There is, for example, an embodiedness that refuses to be resolved into consciousness of embodiedness. There is an anonymity (*l'on primordiale*) at the heart of the subject's perceptual opening out onto the world. And there is a stubborn perspectival anchorage that challenges the unity and totality of the perceived world. But when Merleau-Ponty undertakes to describe these phenomena, he tends simply to graft the unreflected elements onto the familiar categories of reflection. Thus intentionality becomes motor intentionality; the subject becomes the embodied subject; the body becomes the lived body; and the unity of the world becomes an "open and indefinite unity."²¹⁷ Because these new concepts remain tied so closely to the concepts of reflection that they are meant to challenge, and that, according to Merleau-Ponty himself, tend to cover over the originary dimension of phenomenality, they succeed in describing that dimension only

²¹⁶ Isabel Matos Dias, *Elogio do Sensível: Corpo e Reflexão em Merleau-Ponty* (Lisboa: Litoral Edições, 1989), 145. All translations from this work are my own. Hereafter *Elogio*. Cf. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 6. "On this condition, the pure domain of experience will be describable precisely insofar as it escapes from these two directions of thought. But his approach then consists not so much in reconceiving the originality of the perceptive field as in making the irreducibility to realism and intellectualism obvious. The result is that its description in the end remains dependent on this double presupposition.

²¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 304; *PP-Fr*, 351.

indirectly and negatively. The ambiguity that they describe is the kind of “neither/nor” that characterizes the bad ambiguity.²¹⁸

The clearest, and for our purposes the most important, example of Merleau-Ponty’s failure to think ambiguity in an originary way is his concept of the tacit cogito. We have seen that *Phenomenology of Perception* can be read as a sustained critique of the philosophies of reflection, which according to Merleau-Ponty tend to take their stand in their own transparent results, failing thereby to recognize the necessary opacity at their ground. Central to the critique of reflection is the demonstration of an opacity, a non-self-presence right at the heart of the cogito. That is, the egos of the Cartesian and Husserlian traditions can perform their world-constituting functions only on the condition that they never be able to achieve total self-transparency.²¹⁹ I am, for example, able to see this thing before me *as* a house only because my body already knows, prior to all reflection, how to adopt the posture and the series of perspectives necessary to do so. I am able to reflect on myself, to encounter myself as consciousness of the house, only through the opaque medium of the world. My vision puts me in direct contact with the thing itself, which is given unchallengeably as transcendent to me, as something more than my own private representation. But this transcendence into the thing itself is equiprimordially a return into myself as the one who is seeing it. Without this centripetal orientation being given right along with the centrifugal one, I could never, properly

²¹⁸ Dias, *Elogio*, 146. “The new terms and concepts to which the author appeals, as well as their nature, remain in this way conditioned by and subordinated to the critical course itself. These terms are “ambiguous,” constitute “mixtures.” Ambiguity thus supposes mixture, the coexistence of opposed poles and an oscillation between them.”

²¹⁹ John Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1973), 64.

speaking, see the house at all. “It is by communicating with the world that we communicate beyond all doubt with ourselves.”²²⁰

The method of “radical reflection” that is employed throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* thus reveals the existence of an opaque tacit cogito more originary than the cogito of reflection. Both Descartes and Husserl discovered, through different versions of the methodology of reflection, that the essence of being is being-presented. Reflection shows that the thing naively encountered in the natural attitude must be conceived more rigorously as an object *for* a cogito. Radical reflection takes up this result and presses further, reflecting on the reflection itself.²²¹ If being is being-presented, must this not be true of the cogito as well? And if the cogito is indeed something essentially presented, does it not follow that it is something derived? Merleau-Ponty addresses this point explicitly with regard to the Cartesian cogito. He shows how the cogito, the immediate and indubitable presence of the self to itself, is *presented* by means of the words and sentences that constitute the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. “The *cogito* at which we arrive by reading Descartes (and even the one which Descartes effects in relation to expression and when, looking back on his own life, he fixes it, objectifies it and ‘characterizes’ it as indubitable) is, then, a spoken *cogito*, put into words and understood in words. . . .”²²² Just as our intentional consciousness plunges us directly into things and forgets itself in the process, so too the words of the *Meditations* present us with the cogito in a manner so direct that we overlook the presentation itself.²²³ Radical reflection shows that the cogito is essentially the conclusion of a demonstration. If it were not—if our

²²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 424; *PP-Fr*, 485.

²²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 62; *PP-Fr*, 75.

²²² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 402; *PP-Fr*, 460. Translation modified.

²²³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 401; *PP-Fr*, 459.

presence to ourselves were immediately present to us—then the *Meditations* would not constitute a watershed moment in the history of philosophy.

Despite his discovery of the essentially derivative character of the cogito, Merleau-Ponty was unable in *Phenomenology of Perception* to break free entirely of the philosophy of consciousness. The method of radical reflection in effect recreates the solution of ordinary reflection, except at a supposedly more fundamental level. Merleau-Ponty argues in this regard that the cogito, as something essentially presented, must be presented *to* a pre-existing, more originary self-consciousness. This more originary self-consciousness is the tacit cogito. His argument here is entirely Cartesian: “. . . I should be unable even to read Descartes’ book were I not, before any speech can begin, in contact with my own life and thought, and if the spoken *cogito* did not encounter within me a tacit *cogito*.”²²⁴ If radical reflection is possible at all—if I am able to reflect on the linguistic constitution of the cogito revealed in ordinary reflection—then it must be the case that I as tacit cogito pre-exist both the cogito and the language that presents it. The tacit cogito must therefore be conceived as a non-thetic, unreflected presence-to-self. Of course, what an unreflected presence-to-self might amount to is not at all obvious. The only purpose this conception could serve in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is that of placeholder, an unthematizable *something* that grounds the appearance of phenomena. But such a purpose makes sense only within the philosophy of consciousness that he is struggling to overcome.

The concept of the tacit cogito reveals in an especially clear way Merleau-Ponty’s failure in *Phenomenology of Perception* to think the “third dimension” of being on its own terms. It recreates the dualisms that characterized the philosophies of reflection

²²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 402; *PP-Fr*, 460-1.

which, in the forms of intellectualism and empiricism, serve as Merleau-Ponty's foils throughout the book. To be sure, these dualisms are no longer conceived as distinct spheres of being, but are instead mixed together in the form of the bad ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty strives throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* to articulate our originary opening out onto the world as an essentially *worldly* phenomenon, and thus to reach a dimension anterior to the dualisms of interiority and exteriority, subject and object. "The acts of the I are of such a nature that they outstrip themselves leaving no interiority of consciousness. Consciousness is transcendence through and through. . . ."²²⁵ And again, "what I discover in the *cogito* is not psychological immanence, the inherence of all phenomena in 'private states of consciousness', the blind contact of sensation with itself. . . . It is the deep-seated momentum of transcendence which is my very being, the simultaneous contact with my own being and with the world's being."²²⁶ But the tacit *cogito* reinstates, right at the heart of our opening onto the world, the very dualisms that Merleau-Ponty was attempting to overcome. For example, our most originary being-in-the-world is described not as the *unity* of transcendence and immanence, centrifugal and centripetal orientations, but rather as a *mixture* of interiority and exteriority.²²⁷ The tacit *cogito* names a pure interiority that must always remain separate from the movement of transcendence into the world. Thus my consciousness is interior precisely to the extent that it cannot be exterior and exterior precisely to the extent that it cannot be interior. Likewise, the dualism of *cogito* and tacit *cogito* recreates the Cartesian dualism of object and subject. As tacit *cogito*, I am the pure subject for

²²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 376; *PP-Fr*, 431.

²²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 377; *PP-Fr*, 432.

²²⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty's own characterization of the bad ambiguity as "a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority." Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy*, 11.

whom the spectacle of the world takes place, while as cogito I am an object presented within that spectacle. Again, I am a subject to the extent that I cannot be a pure object and I am an object to the extent that I cannot be a pure subject.²²⁸ In both of these cases, the dimension of origin that Merleau-Ponty is attempting to articulate appears here as something secondary, derived from the dualisms of reflection. Thus in my most originary opening out onto the world I am neither immanent nor transcendent to myself, neither subject nor object, but an ambiguous mixture of these.

II. The Dualism of *Phenomenology of Perception*

Merleau-Ponty articulates the problem that we have seen revealed in the tacit cogito as succinctly as possible in a famous working note for *The Visible and the Invisible*: “The problems posed in *Ph.P* are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction--.”²²⁹ As the title of the working note suggests, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that a philosophy of consciousness must always remain a dualistic philosophy.²³⁰ More specifically, such a philosophy presupposes an essential distinction between ground (consciousness) and grounded (object). “For consciousness there are only the objects which it has itself constituted. . . . There is nothing in the objects capable of throwing consciousness back toward other perspectives. There is no exchange, no interaction between consciousness and the object.”²³¹ This is true of the

²²⁸ Isabel Matos Dias makes a very similar point, though in a slightly different context, in Dias, *Elogio*, 155.

²²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 200; *VI-Fr*, 253. *Ph.P* refers, of course, to *Phenomenology of Perception*.

²³⁰ Ibid. The title for the working note is “Dualism—Philosophy.”

²³¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960*, trans. John O’Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 39.

philosophies of reflection—e.g., those of Descartes and of Husserl—but also of the philosophy of radical reflection that is carried out in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Insofar as the tacit cogito is opaque and unthematizable, a presence-to-self so immediate as to be almost vacuous, it seems entirely inassimilable to the Cartesian cogito with its characteristic clarity and distinctness. However, the functions performed by the two cogitos within their respective systems are nearly identical: each serves as the *conditio sine qua non* for the appearance of objects. The problems that arise for Descartes concerning the possibility of communication between the two kinds of substance are well known. Similar problems arise for Merleau-Ponty. If the tacit cogito is something essentially unreflected, how can it be given for radical reflection without losing its nature as unreflected? If the tacit cogito is entirely pre-verbal, how can it be thematized? And if the tacit cogito is a pure interiority, how can it ground knowledge, which pertains to a transcendent world? All of these cases raise the problem of the relation between two spheres of being that seem incommensurable. That this problem arises testifies to Merleau-Ponty's failure to articulate an originary third dimension anterior to the dualisms of reflection.

These results bring to light a certain equivocation in Merleau-Ponty's methodology of radical reflection. On the one hand, the methodology has a definite ontological orientation. By subjecting the dualisms of the traditional philosophies of reflection to critique, Merleau-Ponty attempts to unveil the structure of our most originary being-in-the-world. From this ontological perspective, the most basic fact for philosophy is that "there is absolute certainty of the world in general, but not of any one

thing in particular.”²³² That is to say, we find ourselves always already anchored within a pre-reflective world, relative to which particular, determinate worldly things are secondary and derived. Merleau-Ponty’s more ontological task, then, and one of the tasks of phenomenology generally, is “to re-achieve a direct and primitive contact with the world, in order to endow that contact with a philosophical status.”²³³ This direct contact with the pre-reflective world happens, according to Merleau-Ponty, at the level of perception. An ontological description of that world, then, would be one that describes the level of perception in an originary way, independent of the prejudices of intellectualism and empiricism.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty uses the method of radical reflection in the service of transcendental arguments, which are concerned less with our originary opening out onto the world and more with the determinate, known world that is built up on the basis of that opening out. In order to provide a ground for the world of knowledge, Merleau-Ponty reinstates the kind of subjectivity that the ontological descriptions had already surpassed. Thus, after having shown the ontological primacy of the unreflectively present world, Merleau-Ponty introduces the tacit cogito as the subject for whom and on whose basis the world can appear. Likewise, the lived body that is described at the ontological level as the open-ended unity of touching-being-touched is made also to serve as the ground of the known world by means of its pre-thematic, latent understanding of objects and of objectivity in general. It is this latter, transcendental tendency that prevails in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This is what Merleau-Ponty was referring to when he criticized that text for beginning on the basis of the consciousness-

²³² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 297; *PP-Fr*, 344.

²³³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, vii; *PP-Fr*, i. Translation modified.

object distinction. The problem with this transcendental orientation is that it causes the ontological phenomena to be articulated in terms that are not their own. Although these phenomena are first in the *ordo et connexio rerum*, they are presented as second according to the *ordo et connexio idearum*. Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the originary phenomena bear the marks of this secondness throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*.²³⁴

All of the equivocations and bad ambiguities that we have discussed—those of the transcendental and the ontological, subject and object, unreflected and reflected, and, most important for our purposes, the sensible and the intelligible—have their locus in the lived body. More specifically, the lived body functions throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* as the mediator for these dualisms.²³⁵ Merleau-Ponty had hoped there to articulate the body as a “third genus of being,” originary and anterior to the dualisms that characterize the philosophies of reflection.²³⁶ Nonetheless, the body as described in *Phenomenology of Perception* functions more as the locus for the ambiguous co-existence of these dualisms than as the originary dimension from which they arise. Once again, the supposedly originary dimension is conceived on the basis of what is derived.

²³⁴ This basic tension within Merleau-Ponty's project was pointed out already in 1946 by Jean Beaufret in his response to Merleau-Ponty's presentation of his thesis at the Société française de philosophie. Previous questioners had noticed Merleau-Ponty's criticism of intellectualism and thought therefore that he was endorsing a kind of naïve phenomenism. Beaufret, remarkably, voiced the opposite objection: he did not feel that Merleau-Ponty was sufficiently consistent in his phenomenology, and that he had retained *too much* idealism. “To say that Merleau-Ponty stops at phenomenology without any means of going beyond it is to fail to understand that the phenomenon itself, in the phenomenological sense of the term, goes beyond the realm of the empirical. The phenomenon in this sense is not empirical but rather that which manifests itself really, that which we can really experience, in opposition to what would be only the construction of concepts. . . . The only reproach I would make to the author is not that he has gone ‘too far,’ but rather that he has not been sufficiently radical. The phenomenological descriptions which he uses in fact maintain the vocabulary of idealism. In this they are in accord with Husserlian descriptions. But the whole problem is to know whether phenomenology, fully developed, does not require the abandonment of subjectivity, and the vocabulary of subjective idealism as, beginning with Husserl, Heidegger has done.” Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy*, 41-2.

²³⁵ Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 7; Dias, *Elogio*, 151.

²³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 350; *PP-Fr*, 402.

This failure to conceive embodiedness as an originary dimension of being is evidenced by the different terminologies that Merleau-Ponty employs to describe its functions. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty often refers to the “embodied subject” or the “embodied I.”²³⁷ Whenever Merleau-Ponty uses these terms, he intends to critique the notion of a fully ideal, constituting consciousness. More specifically, he shows how the transparent, self-present consciousness that characterizes various transcendental philosophies is anchored always already in an unreflected embodiment that it cannot comprehend on its own terms. “If reflection is to justify itself as reflection, that is to say, as progress towards the truth, it must not merely put one view of the world in place of another, it must show us how the naïve view of the world is included in and transcended by the sophisticated one.”²³⁸ This is precisely what the ideal constituting subject cannot do: it presupposes an unreflected dimension of being as that which it must supersede, but it cannot comprehend that dimension as such, i.e., *as* unreflected. To comprehend it would be to transform it into something reflected, which *ex hypothesi* it is not. “To say that it is myself who conceive myself as situated in a body and furnished with five senses is clearly a verbal solution, since I who reflect cannot recognize myself in this embodied I. . . .”²³⁹

The notions of embodied subject and embodied I mark a turn away from the transcendental perspective and toward a more ontological one. By demonstrating the irreducible situatedness of the constituting subject within an unreflected dimension of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty opens up the possibility of describing that dimension in a

²³⁷ The consistency of Merleau-Ponty’s terminology in this regard is not reflected in the English translation. Smith translates “sujet incarné” variously as embodied subject, incarnate subject, and subject incarnate.

²³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 213; *PP-Fr*, 247.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

vocabulary proper to it. Such a description would attempt to articulate our most originary opening out onto the world, but without relying on the kinds of understanding appropriate to the derived world of reflected knowledge. This more ontological conception of the task of philosophy, and more specifically of *Phenomenology of Perception*, is expressed most forcefully in the book's preface, where Merleau-Ponty stresses the priority of the unreflected over the reflected, of the world as facticity over the world as reflected totality, and of inchoate, nascent meaning over fully determinate, well-ordered meaning. "To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is."²⁴⁰ The true task of phenomenology, then, is somehow to articulate this dimension that is essentially prior to knowledge, "to seize the meaning of the world or of history *as that meaning comes into being*."²⁴¹ As we have seen, this advent of the sense of the world happens, according to Merleau-Ponty, at the level of the lived, pre-reflective body. A rigorous phenomenology of the body, which puts out of play all of the prejudices of the philosophies of reflection, ought then to function primarily as an ontological articulation of our most originary being-in-the-world.

In turning away from constituting consciousness and toward the more primordial unreflected body, Merleau-Ponty appears to discover a starting point essentially different from the consciousness-object distinction referred to in the working note from *The Visible and the Invisible*. Nonetheless, the phenomenology of the body that is carried out

²⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, ix; *PP-Fr*, iii.

²⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, xxi; *PP-Fr*, xvi. Emphasis mine.

throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* retains both the concepts and the general orientation of transcendental philosophy. Even the notion of the embodied subject, which marked the turn toward more ontological concerns, retains the classically transcendental idea of subjectivity. The passages in which the embodied subject appears usually address the impossibility of a pure, ideal subject. Merleau-Ponty shows in these passages that pure subjectivity cannot comprehend the richness and thickness of our being-in-the-world, and that a more adequate comprehension requires that subjectivity be situated always already in the unreflected body. But rather than undermine the priority of constituting consciousness, this move in fact grounds it. The lived body is thought simultaneously as that which escapes a certain kind of subjectivity and as that which *supplements* it. Embodiment is simply added onto the traditional idea of the subject without calling it radically into question.

The persistence of the transcendental problematic is reflected in another set of concepts that Merleau-Ponty uses throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*. The most important of these is the concept of the knowing body (*corps-connaissant*). While the concept of embodied subject serves as a corrective to the one-sidedly ideal understanding of constituting consciousness, the concept of the knowing body is meant to replace the one-sidedly objective understanding of the body that characterizes mechanistic philosophies. The knowing body is the transcendental body, i.e., the body insofar as it contributes to the constitution of objects and of the world as ordered totality of objects. As such, the knowing body takes on the functions traditionally assigned to the subject. Merleau-Ponty quotes with approval the psychologist Paul Guillaume who writes, concerning the constancy of perceived colors through variations in lighting, that the eye

“takes the lighting into account.”²⁴² In terms of Husserlian phenomenology, this intending of a unity of sense across varying sensuous data would have to be understood as an act of *Sinngebung* performed by the transcendental subject. Guillaume, however, locates the act of *Sinngebung* in the eye itself. Merleau-Ponty agrees with this substitution of the transcendental body for the transcendental ego. “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.”²⁴³

The transcendental character of this account of the body is confirmed in other passages where Merleau-Ponty explicitly assigns the characteristic functions of subjectivity to the body. Addressing the way in which the subject finds him- or herself always already oriented in the world, Merleau-Ponty argues that there must be “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. . . .”²⁴⁴ Far from unveiling a “third dimension” that would be anterior to the distinction between subject and object, and that would in fact undermine that distinction, the method of radical reflection merely discovers another, more originary subject. This transcendental, subjective body is essentially oriented toward the fully constituted world, whose order it prefigures with its own “latent knowledge.”²⁴⁵ Finally, this nascent bodily understanding is built up into

²⁴² Guillaume, Paul, *Traité de Psychologie* (Paris: PUF, 1957), 175. Quoted in Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 309 ; *PP-Fr*, 357.

²⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 309; *PP-Fr*, 357.

²⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 254; *PP-Fr*, 294. Emphasis mine. Cf. *PP*, 240; *PP-Fr*, 277.

²⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 408; *PP-Fr*, 467.

determinate, objective knowledge through acts of “motor intentionality.”²⁴⁶ To return to an example from the previous chapter, I am able to constitute the house as an object of knowledge only by intending it across various perspectives that my mobile, knowing body can take on it. This phenomenology of the transcendental body corresponds term for term with the Husserlian account of transcendental consciousness. In both cases the constituted world is grounded in a subject *for whom* that world appears. In both cases the subject possesses the meaning of the world in advance, and in both cases that meaning is bestowed through acts of intentionality. In this regard, then, Merleau-Ponty’s self-criticism in *The Visible and the Invisible* is certainly correct: insofar as he fails to undermine the foundational position of subjectivity, and in fact insofar as he grounds that position even more firmly in the lived body, Merleau-Ponty has not succeeded in adopting a starting point outside the consciousness-object distinction.

III. The Dynamic of Expression: Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Saussure

Merleau-Ponty’s failure in *Phenomenology of Perception* to overcome the dualisms that haunt the philosophies of reflection stems from his failure to think originary sense in a sufficiently rigorous way. Methodologically, Merleau-Ponty takes as his beginning point the already accomplished ideal sense that characterizes objective knowledge.²⁴⁷ Each chapter performs a critique of the intellectualist thesis, showing how this reflected, intelligible sense cannot account for itself on its own terms, and how it therefore requires the unreflected density and opacity of the perceiving body as its

²⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 138; *PP-Fr*, 161.

²⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 71-2; *PP-Fr*, 86.

ground. But as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty articulates this unreflected ground almost entirely with reference to the ideal sense that it grounds. The unreflected elements are not thought through on their own terms, but are simply grafted on to the familiar categories of reflection, yielding such composite notions as the knowing body and the tacit cogito. In this way, the traditional dualisms are mixed together, but never properly overcome.

In his works from the 1950s, beginning with *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty makes a decisive advance over *Phenomenology of Perception*. The relation between these two works can be articulated without too much simplification in terms of a very basic reversal: while *Phenomenology of Perception* attempts to think sense on the basis of the unreflected, perceiving body, *The Prose of the World* attempts to think both perception and the body on the basis of sense.²⁴⁸ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, fully accomplished, ideal sense is conceived as first in the order of investigation, but *not* as first ontologically. In that work, our perceptual opening out onto the world is conceived as ontologically basic. In a classically phenomenological way, the ontologically basic level of perception is conceived as *constituting* the level of objective, ideal sense. In *The Prose of the World*, on the other hand, Merleau-Ponty begins to recognize that the perceiving body cannot constitute sense *except insofar as that body belongs always already to a world of originary sense*. In isolating sense as the ground of sense, Merleau-Ponty moves decisively beyond the consciousness-object distinction that grounds his earlier work, and thus beyond the various dualisms and bad ambiguities that that distinction entails. The dualisms of subject and object, ground and grounded, unreflected and reflected, and intelligible and sensible are replaced by a monism of sense.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 50.

To understand how a monism of sense can overcome all of these dualisms, it will be necessary to examine Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure, which informs so much of his work after *Phenomenology of Perception*. As we discussed in the Introduction, Saussurian linguistics takes as its point of departure a basic distinction between *langue* and *parole*.²⁴⁹ *Langue* refers to the language insofar as it is a self-contained, describable system, while *parole* refers to the particular, *ad hoc* speech acts in which individual speakers make use of the system. Saussure articulates the distinction between the two as that between "what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less accidental."²⁵⁰ Because the *langue* is presupposed in every linguistic act, and because it is a self-contained, describable totality, Saussure insists that it, and not *parole*, constitutes the true object of the science of linguistics.²⁵¹

While the philosophers traditionally labeled post-Saussurian or post-structuralist tend to insist on a sharp separation between *langue* and *parole*, and to prioritize the former unambiguously over the latter, Merleau-Ponty understands their relation from the perspective of the speaking subject. Merleau-Ponty, like Saussure, makes much of the basic insight that "in the *langue* there are only differences, and no positive terms."²⁵² A language, in other words, is never merely one positivity alongside others; it is never reducible to a collection of signs, each of which would denote a single worldly thing or idea.²⁵³ To adopt this common-sense understanding of language is to remain within the

²⁴⁹ The English translation of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* renders these as "linguistic structure" and "speech" respectively. I will follow contemporary practice throughout and leave these terms untranslated.

²⁵⁰ Saussure, *CGL*, 14.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8-11.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 118; *CGL-Fr*, 166. Translation modified.

²⁵³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 28. Hereafter *PW*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Prose du Monde* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), 40. Hereafter *PW-Fr*.

standpoint of the natural attitude, which posits the world as already there, unproblematically present, independently of its mode of presentation. It is to suppose that the world is a totality of already determinate things and that language simply doubles that world in a system of signs.

According to Merleau-Ponty, we can be certain that the natural-attitude conception of language is inadequate because it is entirely incompatible with the experience we all have as speaking subjects when we attempt to give expression to ourselves or to the world. In many situations—for example, when I order a hamburger or when I enter into a legally binding agreement—it seems that I merely exchange well-established significations in order to achieve a well-defined end. “Hamburger” names unambiguously the category of food that I would like to eat and that the restaurant specializes in preparing. “Jointly and severally liable” is a well-established signification that leaves little doubt as to my obligations to the landlord in the event that my roommate fails to pay his share of the rent. But in other situations I struggle to express a meaning that is at least partially new, and for which there does not exist an already established codification. The present dissertation is an example of this. The meaning that I am attempting to express is given to me at first only vaguely and provisionally. I must call upon the resources of my language to say something that, until now, has not been said in that language. Of course others have already expressed meanings similar to the one that I am attempting to express. Nonetheless, the norms of graduate education require that I do something more than to reprint the formulations that other philosophers have already advanced. I must offer a novel variation on what has already been expressed. If any genuinely new meaning is possible, as our experience as speaking subjects suggests that

it is, then it must not be the case that language is simply one positivity among others.²⁵⁴

There must be in the *langue* a difference that is somehow more basic than the positivity of its terms.

The second major difference between Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure and those of the post-structuralist philosophers concerns the way in which this difference within the *langue* is conceived. This second difference is closely related to the first, which concerned the status of the speaking subject relative to the structure. As we discussed in the Introduction, the standard post-structuralist interpretation of the difference that constitutes the *langue* is that it is oppositional. That is to say, the positive terms, and even more basically the positive phonemes, have their content not in themselves, but rather only in virtue of *not* being the other terms or phonemes. To return to an example from the Introduction, the term "hat" can have the content it has only through the opposition between "h" and such neighboring phonemes as "f" and "ch." If English lost the distinction between "h" and "f" or between "h" and "ch," then it would also lose the specific content presently signified by "hat." Positive significations are thus dependent on completely non-signifying oppositions. The relevance of this in the present context is that such an oppositional conception rules out the possibility that the speaking subject could ever re-appropriate that difference in an act of reflection, or even in an act of Merleau-Pontean radical reflection. The *langue* as system of non-signifying differences is the necessary condition for any positive content whatever, including that of the subject. This is the reason that the so-called post-structuralist philosophers have insisted on the priority of the *langue* and have de-emphasized the role of the subject in constituting the world.

²⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 22; *PW-Fr*, 32.

Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, understands the difference within the *langue* in accordance with the phenomenological conception of spacing. Difference, in other words, is conceived horizontally, as presentive difference. Just as the perceived house is given in adumbrations which are not self-identical positivities, but which rather point constitutively beyond themselves toward the fulfilled intention “house,” so the non-self-identical elements of the linguistic system point beyond themselves toward their fulfillment in an achieved signification. Thus, whereas the post-structuralist interpretation conceives differences within the *langue* as wholly other to and prior to signification, Merleau-Ponty’s more phenomenological interpretation thinks that difference as oriented, quasi-teleologically, toward achieved significations.

The phenomenon of horizontal, presentive difference within the *langue* can be seen especially clearly in literature, the very purpose of which is to produce new expressions using only the resources provided by the stock of already-existing significations. Writers would never feel compelled to produce new works, nor would readers derive any enjoyment from them, if literature did no more than to recycle established significations.²⁵⁵ Nonetheless, works of literature are composed almost entirely of these significations. Literature is able simultaneously to express something new and to make these expressions understandable to readers who come to the text armed only with their knowledge of the language as it exists prior to the work they are about to read. Literature can do this because the significations shared by the writer and the reader are different from themselves, and can thus adumbrate new and as yet unrealized significations.

²⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 11; *PW-Fr*, 18.

Merleau-Ponty points to Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* as an example of this horizontal structure of linguistic difference. "Before I read Stendhal, I know what a rogue is. Thus I can understand what he means when he says that [Rassi] the revenue man is a rogue."²⁵⁶ Because Rassi is an important character, it is a necessary condition of my understanding the text that I know the established meaning of "rogue." But this knowledge is far from sufficient: I do not know the character Rassi simply by knowing that he is a token of the type "rogue." (Neither would I know Rassi by knowing the established significations of all the predicates that Stendhal attributes to him.) As I read the text and come progressively to catch onto Stendhal's unique style of expression, I come to acquire a more nuanced, but also more vivid, understanding of the stock signification "rogue." This general idea becomes incarnated and thus fulfilled in the unique man Rassi. All of the situations in which Rassi is described, along with all the other qualities that he is presented as having, contribute toward drawing the idea "rogue" beyond its sedimented signification and toward a new, richer one. In Stendhal's work, and indeed in any successful work of literature, stock significations "are given a new twist. The cross references multiply. More and more arrows point in the direction of a thought I have never encountered before and perhaps never would have met without Stendhal."²⁵⁷

This example from literature illustrates a dynamic that applies to all forms of expression, including even the wordless expressions of painting and music. All of these cases of expression presuppose a sedimented stock of meanings from which subjects must draw. In the non-linguistic arts, this stock of meanings corresponds to a set of

²⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 12; *PW-Fr*, 19. In both the French original and in the English translation, Merleau-Ponty refers to the character from Stendhal's novel as Rossi. The character is in fact named Rassi.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

stylistic conventions. For example, the set of musical conventions from which Western music has traditionally drawn is based on the division of the octave into twelve tones and on the articulation of those tones into the various major and minor scales. The tones of the scale, like the words that make up the novel, cannot be reduced to self-identical positivities, but rather point beyond themselves in adumbrating expected resolutions. To simplify somewhat, we could say that in a piece of music written in the key of C, the tones that are played point ahead to some version of the C chord as their proper resolution. In the nineteenth century, Western musicians began to seek new expressive possibilities beyond strict adherence to the major-minor system. This trend reached its culmination in the twentieth century with such composers as Schoenberg and Webern, for whom all twelve tones had equal value. In their twelve-tone compositions, the individual tones came to adumbrate a much wider variety of possible resolutions: any tone could be followed by any other. Within this new system, the *meaning* of the individual tones changes radically, allowing for possibilities of expression that were previously unimagined. As listeners learn to hear this new music, it comes to be accepted as making a kind of musical sense, in much the same way that linguistic innovations come to be adopted into the commonly accepted stock of significations.

These examples illustrate a quasi-dialectical dynamic of sense in which the *langue* envelops the speaking subject (*parole*) while at the same time being enveloped by it. Let us address the envelopment of the subject by the *langue* first. In any attempt to express myself—whether it be in language, in the non-linguistic arts, or even in my bodily, gestural comportment toward the world—I find myself always already given over to a sedimented system of meanings. That is to say, I could never situate myself anterior

to the *langue*, reducing it in a Husserlian fashion to the correlate of my intentional, constituting consciousness. This is because to intend the *langue* already presupposes the resources of the *langue*. “*Langue*” and “system” and “signification” are themselves values within the *langue*. I could not hold these unities of sense within my intentional gaze if these were not already held fast within the differential structure of the *langue*. Even when I intend a sense that has never been expressed before, I call upon the open possibilities that are constitutive of the *langue* as expressive system. James Joyce and his readers, for example, are able to intend the “museyroom” as a unity of sense owing to the fortuitous differential relation between the English-language values “museum,” “to muse,” and “room,” along with the expressive morpheme “ey,” which connotes something silly, childlike, or diminutive.²⁵⁸ The expressive possibilities constitutive of the *langue*, then, always condition the possibilities of the intending subject. This is what we mean when we say that in the dynamic of expression, *langue* envelops *parole*.

On the other hand, the subject is never *reducible* to the *langue*. It is important not to conceive the subject and the *langue* as two positivities, related in such a way that the latter produces the former as a kind of optical illusion, like the mirage on the hot road. Rather the *langue* is what it is only when it is *animated* by the speaking subject’s intention to express him- or herself. Without the subject’s intention to bend the system of language in order to express a signification that did not already exist, the language would be reduced to a code, where signifiers corresponded one to one with their already determinate signifieds. It would be inconceivable in such a situation that a term could take on a new or expanded sense without ruining the equilibrium of the whole system.

²⁵⁸ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 8-10. The museyroom is the setting for one of the episodes in Book I.

For example, I am able successfully to express affirmation by using the conventionally accepted sign for negation. If a friend is a guest at my home and asks if he can have a glass of water, I might smile and say no. In smiling and saying no, I of course intend yes, and my friend understands the intended sense entirely unproblematically.²⁵⁹ That I can express myself successfully while violating one of the most fundamental differential relations within the *langue*—that yes is not no and no is not yes—suggests that it is my subjective intention, along with that of my friend, that carries the sense. Terms can take on new and even contradictory significations without in the least endangering the stability of the *langue*. This is because the successful new expression is fed back into the system, where it becomes another stock signification and is integrated into a new equilibrium.²⁶⁰ Insofar as the speaking subject has this power to re-establish the equilibrium of the system, and insofar as the expressive system is what it is in virtue of enabling this subjective power, it is legitimate to say that the *langue* is enveloped by *parole*.

In Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure, then, the orders of *langue* and *parole* cannot be adequately conceived in isolation from each other, but rather exist in a relation of mutual implication. More specifically, *langue* is related to *parole* as a latent totality of sense to a particular, achieved expression of sense. The subject, who is given over always already to this latent totality, responds to the possibilities that it adumbrates and expresses a sense that is understandable to the members of his or her community of expression. In my own case, I have more or less appropriated the successful expressions of a number of philosophers in the twentieth century Continental tradition. These expressions constitute a stock of sedimented significations for the community of

²⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 30; *PW-Fr*, 43.

²⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 36; *PW-Fr*, 51.

philosophers conversant with that tradition. But once again these expressions are not self-identical positivities. Rather they constitute a horizon, presenting new possibilities of sense. As a speaking subject given over to these possibilities, I experience in an obscure way that something calls to be said. Specifically, I sense that there is something new to be said about the bond between the phenomenon of the imperative and the originary character of sense. These stock significations, along with the whole tradition of which they are a part, gesture beyond themselves to an accomplished signification that will complete them, just as in perception the background phenomena point toward the object that calls to be focused on. Conversely, the sense that is achieved by the speaking subject is what it is only as fulfilling the promise of the latent sense. In sum, the sense achieved in *parole* has no meaning except as referring back to the sedimented *langue* whose promises it fulfills, and the *langue* has no meaning except as referring ahead to the acts of *parole* that will crystallize it.

IV. The Body as Expressive

This dynamic, in which sense refers ceaselessly to sense, is originary. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had attempted to ground the achieved sense of the world on the ambiguity of the intentional, perceiving body. But this ambiguity turned out to be a bad ambiguity, and to reinforce the very dualisms that Merleau-Ponty had hoped to dissolve. In *The Prose of the World*, he begins to recognize that the perceiving body cannot ground the dynamic of expression, but must rather be reconceived on the basis of that dynamic. With this reversal, Merleau-Ponty moves

decisively beyond the transcendental perspective that still haunts *Phenomenology of Perception* and beyond the dualisms that that perspective entails.

In *The Prose of the World* and in other works of the 1950s, Merleau-Ponty reconceives our embodied being-in-the-world as more primordially an embodied giving expression to the world. We have seen how in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty begins methodologically with the system of ideal, objective knowledge that is posited by the philosophies of reflection. He goes on to show how this world of fully completed knowledge cannot be conceived as first in itself, but must rather be constituted by the embodied subject. The body described in this context by Merleau-Ponty is a transcendental body, constitutively oriented toward the world conceived as *telos*, as adumbrated totality of fully achieved, objective knowledge. The body is able to play this transcendental role because it, and not the purely ideal transcendental subject, already possesses the knowledge of the world implicitly. In *The Prose of the World*, by contrast, Merleau-Ponty begins to take as his starting point the dynamic of expression as it is exemplified in the arts and as articulated in a certain reading of Saussurian linguistics. Here the subject is no longer primarily an embodied subject, but rather a speaking subject. That to which the subject is given over is no longer the implicit *knowledge* of the fully determinate objective world, but rather a sedimented, latent totality of *sense*, which demands to be expressed. And instead of the world being figured as the *telos* of completed knowledge, it now comes to be thought as the infinite *arche* of a sense which no subject could ever bring to conclusive expression.²⁶¹ There is, for example, no painting that could bring the entire history of painting to its successful conclusion. There is no proposition or series of propositions that could gather up all of sense, leaving

²⁶¹ Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 60-1.

nothing more to be expressed. The world as *arche* of sense is inexhaustible because, as we have seen, all successful expressions are recycled back into the stock of latent sense, adumbrating new possibilities that call in their turn to be expressed. The music of Mahler and of Wagner, for example, gave expression to the possibilities opened up by Beethoven. Eventually, Mahler's and Wagner's expressions came to be reabsorbed into the musical *lingua franca*, opening up still new possibilities for composers such as Schoenberg and Webern. The world as infinite *arche* happens as the perpetual opening out of latent sense onto expressed sense and as the perpetual reintegration of the latter back into the former.

When this dynamic comes to be understood as originary, the embodied, perceiving subject loses its transcendental, constituting function. The subject is able corporeally to intend a fixed world of stable significations only insofar as it is *subjected* to the demand that "arises from every lived thing (at times trifling), namely, the demand to be expressed."²⁶² Renaud Barbaras articulates this change in the function of the subject in an especially clear way: "Subjectivity thus is open and traversed by the expressive teleology: subjectivity no longer bears teleology; subjectivity is born in teleology."²⁶³ That is to say, I become who I am only in responding to the solicitations of the meaningful world in which I find myself. For example, I am among many other things a male. To live my life within the set of meanings that constitutes the culture of the contemporary United States is to experience the pervasive demand that I give some kind of expression to my gender. But, contrary to the position of intellectualism, the determinate meaning "male" does not pre-exist my expressing it. Thus, if I were to

²⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 75; *PW-Fr*, 106.

²⁶³ Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 63.

express my masculinity in accordance with some model that had been successfully established long ago—for example, if I were to comport myself in all of my dealings like Clark Gable—my expression would be unsuccessful. My expression would fail to serve as a horizon gesturing toward the whole subject that I am, and would be encountered by others simply as an object: people would ask me why I continuously impersonate Clark Gable. “Masculinity” is not objectively present as a positivity, as an already determinate model that needs only to be re-enacted: I can never make of myself simply a token of the type. “Masculinity” rather names a *style*, an open-ended, never fully determinate theme for which I must produce a variation.²⁶⁴ In taking up this demand to give expression to the various possibilities of meaning that exist for me in my culture, I become the subject that I am.

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty reconceives the role of the body and of perception on the basis of this imperative to give expression to the world that we live: “All perception, and all action which presupposes it, in short, every human use of the body, is already *primordial expression*.”²⁶⁵ The human body, in other words, is most originally an expressive body. My posture, my gait, the expressions on my face, and the way I form my words all express communally understood meanings. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, has shown how social and economic class is incarnated in certain characteristic ways of carrying the body. He finds in the France of the 1960s that whole sets of social class markers are gathered together in relatively coherent styles of relation to one’s own body, and to one’s mouth in particular. The French lower classes, for example, tend to

²⁶⁴ In the margins of the manuscript for *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty makes the following note to himself: “Style as preconceptual generality—generality of the “axis” which is preobjective and creates the *reality* of the world[.] Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 44; *PW-Fr*, 63.

²⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 78; *PW-Fr*, 110.

refuse the various forms by which the “natural” body is stylized. This is manifested in more boisterous forms of expression than one sees among the bourgeoisie and in uninhibited expressions of satisfaction in the “natural” pleasures of the body. The French bourgeoisie, on the other hand, are concerned in all things to stylize or to repress the naturalness of the body. Thus, for example, the bourgeois does not so much speak with his whole mouth as by articulating his words primarily by means of the lips, which he holds at a relatively high degree of tension.²⁶⁶ These styles of inhabiting the body do not signify social class externally, in the way for example that a uniform signifies which team an athlete plays for. Rather one *lives* the meaning of one’s social position through these bodily comportments. The status of Bourdieu’s characteristic French bourgeois becomes incarnate right there in the muscular tension of his lips, in the uprightness of his posture, and in the dexterity with which he manipulates the silverware at dinner. Of course this is true more generally as well. One’s masculinity is incarnated right there in the way he sits with his legs somewhat splayed and in his throwing the baseball with the force of his whole torso. One’s status as manager at the fast food restaurant is registered right there in one’s authoritative tone of voice and in one’s comically self-important bearing.²⁶⁷ In short, one’s subjectivity is wholly embodied, and one’s embodiment is meaningful through and through.

The embodied act of perception, which Merleau-Ponty had articulated in *Phenomenology of Perception* as the most ontologically basic stratum of our being-in-the-world, comes also to be seen as a function of the more originary dynamic of expression. According to Merleau-Ponty, “perception already stylizes, that is, it affects

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 86-7.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Aphonso Lingis, *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 1.

all the elements of a body or behavior with a certain common deviation with respect to some familiar norm that I have behind me.”²⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty borrows an example from Malraux to illustrate what this means. “A woman passing by is not first and foremost a corporeal contour for me, a colored mannequin, a spectacle in a given spot. . . . She is a unique way of varying the accent of feminine being and thus of human being, which I understand the way I understand a sentence, namely, because it finds in me the system of resonators it needs.”²⁶⁹ My perception is immediately a perception of incarnate *meanings*. I do not see the woman as a mere exemplar of femininity, but rather as the embodiment of a certain style of femininity. I perceive in her, for example, the style of a particular social class, educational level, racial or ethnic group, regional subculture, etc. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had discussed the way in which perception is drawn quasi-teleologically to focus on an object in the way best suited to making that object fully present, “in the flesh.” The body was able to achieve this unchallengeable presence owing to its latent knowledge of the object and of the world of which it was a part. Now we can apply a similar analysis to the body’s direct perception of expression. Our bodies orient themselves to things in the manner necessary to bring out the relevant meanings that they bear. To return to Malraux’s example, I know more or less how to pick out women who are compatible with me in terms of such things as social class and educational level. I am able to focus on those elements of their embodied being-in-the-world that bring out these social meanings in an especially vivid way. Particular ways of walking, of speaking, and of gesturing constitute solicitations to my perceiving body. That is, I perceive the expressions of these women immediately

²⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 60; *PW-Fr*, 84.

²⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 59-60; *PW-Fr*, 84.

because my own perceiving body belongs to the same community of meaning and expresses itself through variations on the same stock of social significations. I perceive expression because my body is always already responsive to the solicitations of the world as latent totality of sense.

V. Monism of Sense

This new conception that presents the dynamic of expression as ontologically prior to the level of perception and to the transcendental body that sustains it helps to overcome the dualisms that plagued *Phenomenology of Perception*. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty reconceives the terms of the various dualisms as moments within the onefold of the dynamic of expression. The dualisms of transcendental and ontological, unreflected and reflected, and sensible and intelligible are reduced to a monism of sense. In what follows we shall examine precisely how Merleau-Ponty uses the insights gained from his reading of Saussure to resolve these three dualisms. In doing so, we shall also see how Merleau-Ponty's work on expression points to a more adequate conception of originary sense.

The dualism of the transcendental and the ontological emerged from a basic ambiguity within the task of *Phenomenology of Perception*, and indeed of phenomenology generally. On the one hand, the phenomenological reduction revealed that the world naively experienced in the natural attitude is more fundamentally a presented world. This insight opened up for phenomenology the task of accounting for the constitution of the natural world. This, of course, gives phenomenology the

transcendental orientation that still dominates *Phenomenology of Perception*. On the other hand, the reduction makes apparent a level of being more originary than the natural world, and which therefore cannot be described within the discourses of the natural attitude. This opens up for phenomenology the task of describing *on its own terms* the level of our originary opening out onto the world. This conception of phenomenology is reflected especially clearly in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: phenomenology is “a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence, and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, *and endowing that contact with a philosophical status.*”²⁷⁰ This dualism of orientations revealed itself in Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body, which he attempted to describe both in terms of its constituting function and ontologically as the place of our most originary opening out onto the world. By his own admission, Merleau-Ponty was unable to integrate these perspectives, articulating only a bad ambiguity of the two.

In the works of the 1950s, though, the body loses its central role and is thus no longer charged with supporting the dualism of transcendental and ontological orientations. Instead, Merleau-Ponty reconceives this dualism as immanent to the dynamic of expression. More specifically, the relation between ontological and transcendental orientations is replaced by the relation between the latent totality of sense on the one hand and successfully expressed sense on the other. We have seen how the world that is “always ‘already there’ before reflection begins” is a world of latent sense. This latent sense adumbrates a particular, determinate sense that would be its achievement. The movement from latent to achieved sense is the movement that, within

²⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, vii; *PP-Fr*, i. Emphasis mine.

a philosophy that prioritizes the transcendental subject, appears to be the movement from constituting consciousness to constituted world. Nonetheless, it remains the case that latent sense cannot be conceived adequately in terms of the successfully expressed sense that it “constitutes.” This excess of latent sense over expressed sense corresponds to the ontological orientation in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Let us first examine in detail the movement from latent to determinate, successfully expressed sense. This movement becomes evident, for example, when a writer feels vaguely that he has something important to say, and then struggles to bring that presentiment to expression. The writer is certain that language gives him sufficient means to express himself. Indeed, without the linguistic competence already at his disposal, he would never have experienced the intimation of something that called to be expressed. Nonetheless, he is at first unable to find the words to express his nascent thoughts. “Then suddenly a flood of words comes to save this muteness and gives it an equivalent so exact and so capable of yielding the writer’s own thought to him when he may have forgotten it, that one can only believe that the thought had been expressed before the world began.”²⁷¹ That is to say, when the writer finally finds the right words, it seems to him as if only those exact words could have given adequate expression to his thoughts. The act of successfully expressing himself retroactively produces the illusion that the proper expression was already there, waiting only to be discovered. According to this illusion, “language is there, like an all-purpose tool, with its vocabulary, its turns of phrase and form which have been so useful, and it always responds to our call, ready to express anything, because language is the treasury of everything one may wish to say—because language has all our future experiences written into it, just as the destiny of men

²⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 6; *PW-Fr*, 11.

is written in the stars.”²⁷² In this experience, language appears to have been oriented always already toward the determinate expressions that it supports as their ground and condition of possibility.

But, once again, this exclusively transcendental orientation of language is illusory. It is not the case that language, like God’s intellect, prefigures all the truths of the world. It is not the case “that every signification which enters man’s experience carries within it its own formula, as the sun, in Piaget’s children, bears its name in its center.”²⁷³ In short, it is not the case that language is simply the double of the natural world. While it is certainly true that language tends, quasi-teleologically, toward its fulfillment in successful expression, it is equally true that language as latent totality of sense always contains more than its expressions. We mentioned above that no proposition, or set of propositions, could gather up the whole of what can be said, leaving nothing more to be expressed. But we can make the case for the inexhaustibility of latent sense still more strongly: even if we gathered together all of the propositions that have been uttered to date, we will not have said everything. And this statement will be true at any time that it is uttered. Moreover, it is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for other, not strictly linguistic forms of expression such as music and painting as well. There is thus always a reserve of sense which cannot be thought in terms of the achieved sense of the natural world.

The excess of latent sense over its expressions has its origin in the differential structure of the *langue* that Merleau-Ponty discovered in Saussurian linguistics. The ability of speakers to express themselves—and not merely to encode their already

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 4; *PW-Fr*, 8-9.

determinate thoughts—brings to light this differential structure. If the *langue* were reducible to a totality of positive significations, then the subject could never express, or even feel compelled to express, a signification that she did not already know. Moreover, she would be unable to learn from reading or from conversation any significations that she did not already know. But we do not, of course, express ourselves or understand others simply by exchanging linguistic tokens. Rather expression calls upon the differences of which the *langue* is constituted. Our language “is expressive as much through what is *between* the words as through the words themselves, and through what it does not say as much as what it says.”²⁷⁴ “Museyroom,” for example, owes much of its expressive power to Joyce’s *not* having written “museum.” In any linguistic expression, there is any number of other expressions that are virtually present and that contribute toward presenting the sense. “And if we want to grasp speech in its most authentic operation in order to do it full justice, we must evoke all those words that could have come in its place that have been omitted. . . .”²⁷⁵ It is this insistence of difference right at the level of expressed sense that guarantees the irreducibility of language to its particular expressions.

From this we can see that the *langue* is able to open onto particular expressions only by concealing itself. Just as the perceptual horizons withdraw in order to make room for the foregrounded object, so the differential structure of the *langue* recedes in favor of the positive signification that it enables. When I read *Finnegans Wake* and encounter the signification “museyroom,” for example, I do not need explicitly to bring to mind the neighboring significations “museum,” “to muse,” and “room.” In fact,

²⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 43; *PW-Fr*, 61-2.

²⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 45; *PW-Fr*, 64.

insofar as I am occupied with these virtually present significations, I fail to reach the museyroom itself, to encounter it “in the flesh.” In this movement of revealing-concealing, we encounter the dynamic proper to originary sense. The two sides of this unitary dynamic correspond to the terms of the dualism of transcendental and ontological orientations. On the one hand, latent sense refers beyond itself to the expressed sense that it grounds. On the other hand we see something in latent sense that resists being gathered up in expression, and that cannot be adequately conceived in terms of the positive significations that it grounds. But here both orientations are describable in terms of sense alone: sense refers both forward and backward only to sense. We no longer need to posit the lived body as the locus and as the mediator for these two orientations. Insofar as the body is indeed describable both in terms of its transcendental function and more originarily in terms of its opening out onto the world, this is because, as we have seen, the body is more primordially an expressive body, a body given over always already to the ambiguous dynamic of originary sense.

A very similar analysis will show how Merleau-Ponty resolves the dualism of the reflected and the unreflected into a monism of sense. This dualism arose out of Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to refute the intellectualist thesis, which takes the fully determinate, intelligible significations of the cogito as methodologically first. These significations, of course, are the products of reflection. In order to refute intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty had to demonstrate that reflected significations were built up on the basis of a more primordial unreflected being-in-the-world. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty articulated this unreflected being-in-the-world as embodied being-in-the-world. The problem arose when Merleau-Ponty attempted to describe our unreflected

embodiment but could do so only by using the conceptual tools that are the products of reflection. This is similar to the problem that arose when he had attempted to describe the ontological level of human embodiment, but could do so only in terms of the body's transcendental function. Once again, the dualism was not resolved in *Phenomenology of Perception*, but rather localized on the body as another bad ambiguity.

The key to resolving this dualism is the insight that the unreflected dimension to which the subject is always already given over is the world as infinite *arche* of latent sense. As we have seen, one becomes a subject only through being subjected to the demands and solicitations of this latent sense. Or, to state the same point from a different perspective, the unreflected totality of sense becomes expressed in reflected significations through the medium of the subject. The dynamic of unreflected and reflected, then, is most fundamentally a dynamic of sense, and not of the embodied subject.

We have already seen, at least in broad outlines, how the unreflected and reflected levels of sense can co-exist without the former being reduced to the latter. Reflected sense is articulated into positive, determinate significations; this is true just as much for intellectualism as it is for Merleau-Ponty. But what Merleau-Ponty has discovered, through his phenomenologically inspired reading of Saussure, is that reflected significations depend on a differential structure that must remain unreflected in order for the sense of the significations to be achieved. Once again, if I intend the differential relations among "museum," "to muse," and "room," I cannot at the same time successfully intend the signification "museyroom," which these relations enable. One might object here that by articulating the positive signification "museyroom" *in terms of* a series of differences, we have in fact *reduced* the unreflected dimension to the reflected.

But this objection misses the mark for two reasons. First, to refer the positive signification to the differences that enable it is not the same as to perform a reduction. It is not the case that “museyroom” *equals* the differential relations among “museum,” “to muse,” and “room.” Rather this set of differences is *virtually* present in the positive signification. That is to say, the three terms are present in the positive signification, but not *as* positive significations themselves. Their virtual presence right at the level of the positive signification is thus necessarily unreflected. Second, the terms of the differential relations themselves rely on a set of differential relations as their support. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception corresponds to his account of expression. In perception, every foreground requires a background. If what had been part of the background becomes an object in the foreground, then this new foreground will require a new background. Likewise, if we focus on a background signification, then its sense will depend on a different background set of differences. There is, then, no term or set of terms *to which* any reduction could be performed. The relation between unreflected and reflected is accounted for from within the monism of sense.

The final, and most important, dualism that Merleau-Ponty’s work on expression helps to resolve is that between the sensible and the intelligible. This dualism, of course, is not unique to Merleau-Ponty, but has played a prominent role throughout the whole of Western philosophy. In fact, one of the primary tasks of *Phenomenology of Perception* was precisely to rethink this dualism. The critique of the philosophies of reflection that is carried on throughout that work is concerned almost entirely to show that our knowledge of essences is inseparable from the lived, factual world to which those essences refer and from which they derive. Merleau-Ponty brings the sensible and the intelligible, the

factual world and the world of essences, together in the lived body, whose sensuous opening out onto the world is already informed by the world thesis, i.e., by an orientation toward the world as self-consistent totality of intelligible laws. But insofar as Merleau-Ponty conceives the perceiving body, plagued by all the bad ambiguities described above, as the most ontologically basic level, he fails to reach the level of ordinary sense and its good ambiguity. In bypassing the embodied subject and taking the phenomenon of expression as the true dimension of origin for our being-in-the-world, Merleau-Ponty is able to arrive at a more satisfactory resolution of the dualism of the sensible and the intelligible.

The most important distinction that we can make in approaching this issue is that between the “I think” and the “I speak.” “The ‘I think’ means there is a certain locus called ‘I’ where action and awareness of action are not different, where being confounds itself with its own awareness of itself, and thus where no intrusion from outside is even conceivable.”²⁷⁶ The “I think,” then, is the constituting subject. Let us examine this subject from the perspective that is most relevant here. If any words, or any signs of whatever kind, have meaning for the subject, this can only be because the subject has intended the meaning across the signs. This is the case because, *ex hypothesi*, the contents of this subject’s consciousness could never be alien to it. All meaning, in short, must be actively meant. We can see clearly how this conception entails the dualism of sensible and intelligible. The sensible sign—the printed or spoken word, the directional signal on the car, the blindfolded woman holding the scales of justice, etc.—must have no signifying power of its own that it might in some way *impose* on the subject. Rather the subject must impose the intelligible sense on the sensible sign, thereby constituting its

²⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 17; *PW-Fr*, 26.

meaning. Once the meaning is constituted, the sensible sign can have no role except as index for an intelligible sense that is entirely self-sufficient.

But this conception of the subject is untenable, for reasons that we have discussed above. The thesis according to which intelligible sense is entirely constituted by the self-identical “I think” fails to account for some of our most basic experiences with meaning. It cannot, for example, account for our experience of literature. I do not understand a work of literature solely with my own thoughts. Rather the work “makes use of everything I have contributed in order to carry me beyond it.”²⁷⁷ When I first begin to read a novel, I do indeed understand the world that the author portrays in reference to my own world. To that extent, one might rightly say that I constitute the sense of the novel. But at some point in the course of my reading there occurs a kind of Gestalt shift, such that I now participate in the fictional world on its own terms, and no longer on my own. Or, more accurately, I come to transcend my own world and to *share* a new world with the fictional characters who are portrayed in it as well as with others who have read the same book. This perfectly familiar experience would be inconceivable if I were indeed this subject who constitutes all the contents of its own consciousness.

If this experience of literature is possible, then it must be the case that *the words themselves* exert a kind of power over the reader.²⁷⁸ It must be the case that the subject finds herself immersed always already within the language that exercises this strange power to draw her outside her own meaningful relation to the world. This subject is the “I speak.” The language within which this speaking subject is immersed cannot be conceived as the set of intelligible significations that she and her community have at their

²⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 11; *PW-Fr*, 18.

²⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 10; *PW-Fr*, 16-17.

disposal. Neither can it be conceived as the set of spoken or written words that would correspond to those significations. We cannot maintain any dualism of the sensible and the intelligible aspects of language here without losing our ability to account for the kind of openness to new meanings that we see exemplified in literature, but also in our most common encounters with other speaking subjects. Just as in music the tones themselves convey the musical idea, so too in language the words themselves sustain the ideas that they express. In all forms of expression, then, sensuous sense opens out onto intelligible sense, and intelligible sense points back to sensuous sense as its necessary support. Neither the sensible nor the intelligible, then, can be thought as originary in their own right. What is first is the divergence (*écart*) that sets them apart but also unites them within the dynamic of originary, ambiguous sense.

VI. The Circular Structure of the Flesh

The monism of sense that Merleau-Ponty first establishes with regard to the dynamic of expression reveals yet another ambiguity proper to originary sense: the ambiguity between activity and passivity. When I follow the sense of the book that I am reading, “I am receiving and giving in the same gesture.”²⁷⁹ I must contribute my knowledge of the language and of its various stylistic possibilities. I must also bring to the text my understanding of interpersonal relations, historical situations, different cultures, and of any number of worldly facts that might pertain to what I am reading.²⁸⁰ Insofar as I bring my prior knowledge to bear on the text, it would not be entirely

²⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 11; *PW-Fr*, 18.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

inaccurate to say that I actively intend the meaning of the text across the signs of which it is composed. But as long as I stand in this one-sided relation to the text, there can be no expression. “The expressive moment occurs where the relationship reverses itself, where the book takes possession of the reader.”²⁸¹ This happens when the author’s words guide me to a thought or to a style of thinking that was not already a part of my repertoire. This passive moment within the dynamic of expression is easy to overlook because, when expression is successful, language conceals itself in favor of the signification that it presents. It thus appears to us in retrospect that we possessed the signification all along. Our passive relation to the text is concealed by the presentive power of language itself.

In his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty develops the philosophy of expression established in *The Prose of the World* into a fully-fledged ontology. In doing so, he takes up once again the set of problems that had occupied him in *Phenomenology of Perception*. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty had attempted in that work to isolate perception as the level of our most originary opening out onto the world. However, owing to the persistence of certain classically phenomenological themes, such as subjectivity, intentionality, and constitution, the ontological orientation of that work was overshadowed by a predominately transcendental one. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty brings the insights from the philosophy of expression—especially the thesis of the monism of sense and the ambiguity between activity and passivity that it entails—to bear explicitly on the question concerning our perceptual opening out onto the world. These insights help to eliminate the dualisms that persisted in *Phenomenology of Perception* and thus allow Merleau-Ponty to focus entirely on the ontological dimension of our embodied being-in-the-world.

²⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 13; *PW-Fr*, 20.

The most basic insight for the thesis of the monism of sense, as Merleau-Ponty articulated it in *The Prose of the World*, was that the subject could apprehend the sense of things—of a text, a conversation, a painting, a gesture, etc.—only insofar as that subject was immersed always already within the world as infinite *arche* of sense. On this view the subject does not *constitute* the sense of the world. Rather, the subject is itself constituted in responding to the teleology proper to sense itself, whereby the virtual totality of latent sense opens out onto particular, achieved significations. These achieved significations are then recycled back into the stock of latent sense, so that sense refers both forward and backward only to more sense.

This same basic insight applies also to our embodied, perceptual opening out onto the world. We saw in *Phenomenology of Perception* that the perceiving body does not so much perceive things as perceive *according to* them. This is especially evident in the case of those who had been blind from childhood and had had their vision restored through surgery. We saw that it was not sufficient for these patients simply to open their eyes in order to see the world. They had to learn to focus on things in the manner necessary to make them visible *as* the things they were. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty takes up again a question that he had not answered sufficiently in *Phenomenology of Perception*: how is this remarkable ability to see *according to* the things possible? “What is this prepossession of the visible, this art of interrogating it according to its own wishes, this inspired exegesis?”²⁸² It is not enough to say that the subject *knows* the world in advance, that the perceiving body is more fundamentally a knowing body. This, as we have seen, suggests a transcendental perspective that passes over what is originary in our embodied being-in-the-world. To overcome the dualism

²⁸² Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 133; *VI-Fr*, 175.

entailed by this perspective, Merleau-Ponty must discover a monism of perceiving subject and perceived world.

The monism of sense that Merleau-Ponty advances in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and particularly in the chapter titled “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” is articulated as “the visible.” On the one hand, the visible obviously names the totality of things that can be seen. But this does not begin to capture what is at issue here. To think the visible simply as what can be seen is to remain within the dualism of seer and seen, subject and object. The crucial insight that carries Merleau-Ponty beyond these dualisms is that the seer, in order to be able to see at all, must himself be among the visibles. Or, more precisely, the perceiving subject must be immersed always already in the visible. The subject “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.”²⁸³ Just as one can apprehend particular significations only insofar as one is given over to sense as latent totality, so more fundamentally one can perceive the visibles of the world only insofar as one is constitutively immersed in the visible.

We can understand what Merleau-Ponty means by the visible through a comparison with the conception of language advanced in *The Prose of the World*. Language is of course composed of words that can be regarded as self-identical positivities. But the successful expression that is reflected in these positivities conceals the more originary difference that makes the words’ identity possible. Words are different both from themselves and from other words, and this difference is essentially a

²⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 134-5; *VI-Fr*, 177-8.

presentive difference. The words themselves gesture beyond themselves toward possible expressions. The word “rogue,” for example, is an open field of expressive possibilities that can be actualized in Stendhal’s Rassi from *The Charterhouse of Parma*, but also in any number of other ways. Words, then, are neither the sensuous sounds and figures that represent them nor the purely intelligible significations that they would indicate. They are rather sensibles gesturing toward intelligible significations that they never achieve once and for all. As we have seen, if words did not occupy this middle place between sensible and intelligible sense, then the phenomenon of expression would be impossible.

Merleau-Ponty’s argument with regard to the visible is very similar. When we look out onto the world we seem to perceive self-identical things. But this is an illusion of the natural attitude. The given is in fact always given in depth, adumbrated through the different perspectives that the perceiving subject’s mobile body can adopt toward it. Just like the word, then, the perceived thing is reducible neither to its immediate sensuous manifestation nor to its intelligible signification. The house that I see, for example, is never just the color of its paint or the texture of its siding, but neither does this sensuous given ever disappear entirely in favor of the intelligible signification “house.” Rather, the visible thing, again like the word, is a fundamentally presentive difference-from-self.

“Perception is not first a perception of *things*, but a perception of *elements* (water, air. . .), of *rays of the world*, of things which are dimensions, which are worlds, I glide over these elements and here I am in the *world*, I glide from the “subjective” to Being.”²⁸⁴ To

describe the visible as most fundamentally dimensional or elemental is to highlight its role in presenting a world whose meaning is promised but never definitively given. I am in the hospital room when somebody brings in a vase of roses. I notice the vibrant red,

²⁸⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 218; *VI-Fr*, 271. Translation modified.

which might be conceived as a pure *quale*, a sensuous this-here-now that I experience entirely subjectively. But the roses are never just that. As dimensional and as elemental, the roses quite literally extend a world. The vibrant red ensnares the gaze, punctuating the otherwise wholly functional space of the hospital room and making of it a more human space. Again, “the redness of the roses functions as the color-level against which our arms appear pallid and the faces of visitors vibrant.”²⁸⁵ The roses, by means of their differential relation with the rest of the hospital room—the sterile white of the sheets, the non-stop beeping of monitors, the persistent groaning, wheezing, and snoring of other patients—contributes toward presenting a new variation on the meaning of the situation.

This meaning that is presented by the dimensional visible cannot be constituted by a transcendental subject. As we saw with regard to language in *The Prose of the World*, the subject can apprehend the sense of the world only insofar as she is subject to it. Once again we find an originary ambiguity between activity and passivity in our perceptual opening out onto the world. In *The Visible and the Invisible* this ambiguity is named reversibility. In a working note, Merleau-Ponty writes that “the chiasm, reversibility, is the idea that every perception is doubled with a counter-perception (Kant’s real opposition), is an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens. Speaking-listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived circularity. . . . Activity = passivity.”²⁸⁶ This, of course, is very similar to the unity of touching-being-touched that we discussed with regard to *Phenomenology of Perception*. In that work, however, Merleau-Ponty had retained a trace of dualism within the unity: the experience of touching and being touched was conceived ultimately as an experience *for* the tacit

²⁸⁵ Lingis, *Imperative*, 30.

²⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 265; *VI-Fr*, 318.

cogito. The reversibility thesis articulated in *The Visible and the Invisible* attempts to overcome that dualism.²⁸⁷ Instead of the gap that still remains between the perceiving body and the tacit cogito, Merleau-Ponty articulates the non self-identity between subjectivity and objectivity, activity and passivity, as *écart*, as a spacing internal to the one indivisible Being.

We can apprehend what is new in the account of reversibility as it is presented in *The Visible and the Invisible* by returning to the example we used with regard to the unity of touching-being-touched that was articulated in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I can actively touch the guitar only if I am at the same time touched by it. I actively determine the sense of the guitar—is it well crafted? Is it worth the price that is being asked?—only by letting the surfaces of my body be subjected to the guitar. Up to this point, the description is the same as the one given previously. The essential difference here is that it is not really *I* who experience the sensations localized on the surface of my perceiving body. To conceive of the matter that way is to hypostatize the two sides, the active and the passive, that are set apart but also gathered together within the *écart*. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty thinks the touching and the being touched as *one phenomenon* with *one locus*, which he names the flesh. This structure of the flesh is the structure of the visible as a whole. It, along with the unity of activity and passivity that is proper to it, is “an ultimate notion,” “not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself.”²⁸⁸ There is, then, one phenomenon: the touching of the guitar. This one phenomenon has two orientations—the active touching and the passive being touched—but it is impossible to say precisely where one of these orientations ends and

²⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 136-7; *VI-Fr*, 180.

²⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 140; *VI-Fr*, 185.

the other begins. And this is because the two orientations are more fundamentally one. In the previous chapter we discussed the unity of centrifugal and centripetal orientations. But this unity turned out to be yet another bad ambiguity, localized on a body conceived primarily with respect to its active, constituting function. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty reconceives this unity of the flesh as circular: the active touching and the passive being touched are “two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases.”²⁸⁹ It is true, then, to say that I, as embodied subject, constitute the sense of the guitar in my act of touching it. But we must recognize that that truth is one-sided. For it is equally true that I am constituted as subject in being subjected to the touch of the guitar. As the analogy to the circle suggests, neither of these sides enjoys the least priority relative to the other.

VII. Imperative Vulnerability

In the previous chapter, we focused on the ways in which the originary sense to which we are given over always already extends worlds that are most essentially practical. When I look out onto the assembly line on my first day of work at the factory, I perceive it as a set of tasks to which I must learn to adapt the forces of my body. In learning to operate the machines, I take my place within the practical world of the factory. In this opening out of perception onto a world of practical tasks we recognized one of the most salient features of the imperative: the demand for lawfulness. The world

²⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 138; *VI-Fr*, 182.

that takes form as my body adapts itself to the assembly line is not at all my own private world. Rather I learn to operate the machines as anyone in general would operate them. I am a good factory worker to the extent that I do what anyone else would do in similar circumstances, and thus to the extent that I bring my own behavior into conformity with the practical law of that particular world.

But there is another salient feature of the imperative that we have not yet addressed. Lawfulness, of course, does not by itself constitute the whole of the phenomenon of the imperative. The imperative is also necessarily something *received*, addressed to a passivity in us that is irreducible. It happens, then, as a contestation. Unfortunately, the language of contestation suggests all too readily an attitude of piety, directed toward a transcendent Other that would be the locus of that contestation. Merleau-Ponty's revised conceptions of sense in *The Prose of the World* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, however, give us the tools necessary to conceive this passivity and this contestation immanently, from within the monism of sense.

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty argues that “there can be speech (and in the end personality) only for an ‘I’ which contains the germ of a depersonalization. Speaking and listening not only presuppose thought but—even more essentially, for it is practically the foundation of thought—the capacity to allow oneself to be pulled down and rebuilt again by the person before one, by others who may come along, and in principle by anyone.”²⁹⁰ I as subject carry out my life in various worlds that are practically meaningful—the world of the factory, of guitar aficionados, of Americans, etc. By participating actively in these worlds, I mold myself into the person I am. But the condition for my living these meaningful worlds and for my consolidating my

²⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 19-20; *PW-Fr*, 29-30.

subjectivity in accordance with them is precisely that I put those worlds and those subjectivities perpetually at risk. Let us look once again at Merleau-Ponty's example concerning Stendhal. Because I read French, know the history of the Napoleonic Wars, and am familiar with the cultures of nineteenth century Europe, I belong, more or less, to the world that Stendhal depicts. And yet my very belonging to that world leaves me open to Stendhal's unique variation and stylization of it. When I have finished reading the book, I am won over to Stendhal's version of the world. My active participation in Stendhal's world shades imperceptibly into my vulnerability to it.

This vulnerability is imperative. The circular conception of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty worked out in *The Visible and the Invisible* suggests that the imperative of the world happens equiprimordially as the imperative to allow others to contest that world. Let us say, for example, that I know of someone who has developed an addiction to some drug. It is my opinion that drug use and, *a fortiori*, drug addiction is immoral. What I mean by that is that drug use is incompatible with living an orderly, law-governed practical life. Someone who is addicted to drugs is obviously less capable of performing the functions that correspond to her various roles in the public world. In holding these moralizing views, I consolidate my own identity as one who sides with the law and with the imperative of the world. And in passing judgment on the addict, I perform a kind of *Sinngebung*, unilaterally determining the sense of the situation in general and of the addict in particular.

But now let us suppose that the addict is someone I know well, perhaps even a friend. In this case, my ability unilaterally to determine the sense of the situation is contested. When I meet her I can perceive the pain she experiences from the addiction

directly in her tone of voice, in her posture, and in the expressions on her face. Her embodiment, along with the story she tells about herself, makes sense. And my ability to apprehend that sense is inseparable from my vulnerability to it. The sense that she makes contests me and my subjectivity. This, of course, does not entail my renouncing entirely the imperative of the world. Rather it means that right then while I share her world, I put that imperative and the identity that corresponds to it in brackets. In picking up the sense of her situation, I find that she has repositioned my subjectivity in ways that I could not have predicted. I find, for example, a capacity for compassion and for understanding that I did not know. I can no longer simply *be* the partisan for the imperative of the world. As Merleau-Ponty says, my friend has, to an extent, pulled my world down and rebuilt it.

Of course this imperative vulnerability is not a second imperative, contradictory to the imperative of the world. The encounter with the drug-addicted friend does not merely reduce me to passivity. Rather a new practical world emerges from the experience. I will not be content simply to feel compassion for my friend, but will want also to take active measures to ameliorate her condition. To do that, I need to situate myself within a practical world that is new to me: I must learn about addiction and the world of addicts in order to act rationally and helpfully. There is thus no contradiction between the demand that I constitute a lawful practical world and the demand that I remain perpetually vulnerable to the others' contestations of that world. Merleau-Ponty's conceptualizations of expression and of the flesh help us to recognize the imperative as one phenomenon with one locus in the ambiguous, originary sense to which we as practical subjects are given over always already.

CHAPTER FOUR: SUPERFICIAL SENSE

I. Singularity and the Monism of Sense

We saw in the previous chapter that the imperative sense to which we are constitutively given over contains an irreducible moment of passivity. In his examination of the phenomenon of expression, and later of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty discovered that our subjective power of intending sense is inseparable from our being subjected to it. The moments of activity and passivity are described as “two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is one sole movement in its two phases. . . .”²⁹¹ This description of sense according to the analogy of the circle helped us to revise our conception of the imperative developed in Chapter One, which focused too much on the traditionally Kantian motifs of lawfulness and subjective mastery. We saw that our originary anchorage within imperative sense demands a kind of vulnerability, a willingness to renounce our mastery of the ethical situation and to submit to a meaning that is not already our own.

As Jean-François Lyotard shows in *Discours, figure*, however, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenologically inspired accounts of expression and of our embodied being-in-the-world fail to capture the passivity of our relation to originary sense in all its radicality. For Lyotard, the indispensable contribution of phenomenology toward our understanding of sense is its conception of negation as spacing or distancing.²⁹² This spacing—represented in Husserl as intentionality, in *Phenomenology of Perception* as corporeal intentionality, and in *The Visible and the Invisible* as chiasm—gives objects in a depth that is irreducible to the flat space of signification. My perception of the house, for example, can never be reduced to a particular relation between the house and me,

²⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 138; *VI-Fr*, 182.

²⁹² Lyotard, *DF*, 47.

conceived as two positivities. Because the spacing between the terms is primary, the house can only be given in adumbrations, and never all at once; the house as such is always further on. To say that the house is given in depth, then, is to say that the perceived house always holds itself in reserve, that it is never given as the pure, self-identical signification “house.” This irreducibility of the given to the flat space of signification is what Lyotard calls the figural. The figural character of the perceived object makes demands on the perceiving subject, interrupting always already his identity and his self-mastery, and subjecting him to the imperative of sense in depth. The subject is who he is only by following the lead of the given.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the sense in depth that Merleau-Ponty describes in *The Prose of the World* and *The Visible and the Invisible* is articulated on the basis of a monism of sense. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty showed that the perceiving subject could perceive *according to* the things only because both subject and object belong more primordially to the same dimension of sense, viz., the flesh. And in *The Prose of the World*, he showed that I am able to understand the meaning of persons, situations, and cultures that are radically foreign to my own experience only because the other’s sense is a variant of my own, much as the music of Bach and of Burt Bacharach, as different as they are, are nonetheless variants within the wider tradition of Western music. While this thesis of the monism of sense helps to explain how the imperative can have its locus right here in the world, and not in some transcendent region of being, it cannot account for the way in which we experience the imperative precisely as an interruption, as a radical break within the meaningful world. In the experience of the imperative, I am revealed to myself as incommensurable and as singular. The *I* that

experiences the command is not primarily the one that takes its bearings within the world of socially accepted meanings—I as son, as employee, or as citizen. This singular I that is revealed in the imperative cannot be adequately thought on the basis of the monism of sense. Insofar as Merleau-Ponty is able to isolate something pre-personal within the subject, that something takes the form of an anonymity, of *l'on*. So, on Merleau-Ponty's account, when I find myself compelled to subject myself to the sense of someone whose life experiences differ radically from my own—the case of the drug-addicted friend from the last chapter, for example—it is not I *qua* friend or I *qua* partisan of the moral law and of self mastery who feels the force of that imperative. Rather the I that is addressed is the I as the completely generalized, anonymous locus of the circular dynamic of sense.²⁹³ It is this that seems importantly wrong in Merleau-Ponty's account and which motivates our search for a conception of originary sense capable of accounting for the singularity and the break with the ordered, meaningful world that happen with the imperative.

In Lyotard's terms, we require a conception of sense that can help us to think the event. For Lyotard, "the event as disruption is always that which defies knowledge; it can defy knowledge articulated in discourse, but it can just as well shake the quasi-understanding of the body, bringing it into conflict with itself and with other things, as in emotion."²⁹⁴ The event discloses a radical passivity within the structure of subjectivity, which Merleau-Ponty attempts to think in terms of the anonymity of *l'on*. But this conception of passivity "can only operate within the field prepared by phenomenology, as the contrary or the correlate of intentional activity, as its layer of support."²⁹⁵ Since its introduction in the works of Husserl, phenomenological methodology has been oriented

²⁹³ Lyotard, *DF*, 21.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

primarily toward knowledge, i.e., toward achieved significations whose ground it sought in the structure of intentional subjectivity.²⁹⁶ The conception of passivity that Merleau-Ponty introduced into phenomenology still functions within that knowledge-centered problematic. The passivity of the perceiving or speaking subject is conceived as a precondition for the worldly significations that are achieved in active intentionality. So, for example, I am able as a contemporary American to understand a French novel from the early part of the nineteenth century only because my openness and vulnerability to the dynamic of sense in general supports my act of intending the sense of this particular novel. This intimate bond between passivity and active intentionality is expressed in Merleau-Ponty's description of the dynamic of sense in terms of circularity and reversibility. This kind of passivity, oriented always already toward a world conceived as essentially meaningful, can never constitute a radical break with that world. It cannot, in sum, account for the imperative in its character as event.

I shall attempt in the present chapter to demonstrate that Gilles Deleuze offers a conception of sense adequate to a rigorous thinking of the event in his *Logic of Sense*. I will discuss first how Deleuze isolates a dimension of sense that is irreducible to the sense in depth articulated by Merleau-Ponty. This second, surface, dimension of sense challenges Merleau-Ponty's monism of sense with what might be called an immediate duality of the actual and the virtual.²⁹⁷ Second, I will demonstrate that the flat space of sense is also the space of the event. Following Lyotard, we shall take event to designate that which disrupts the ordered world of significations within which the practical subject takes its bearings. We will see that the Deleuzian event defies knowledge (the world of

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ I borrow the helpful phrase "immediate duality" from Leonard Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 130-5.

good sense and of common sense in Deleuze's terminology) by showing how it bears within it always already a kind of nonsense conceived as excess of sense.²⁹⁸ Finally, I will show how the Deleuzian conception of the event helps us to think the singularity that is disclosed in the phenomenon of the imperative.

II. Sense in the Sheep's Shop

We saw in the Introduction how Saussure's concept of linguistic value introduced a dimension of sense irreducible to the space of things in depth. For Saussure, the *signification* of a term is in no way grounded in the *referent* of that term. The signifier "apple," for example, does not borrow its linguistic value from real, three-dimensional apples. Rather the value "apple" is determined from within the flat space of the *langue*, which is composed of purely differential linguistic elements. As a speaking subject, my relation to the linguistic system is wholly passive. In order even to intend the signification "apple," I must submit to the constraints imposed by the system. Indeed, if I were to disregard the *langue* entirely, I would be unable even to intend myself as the one

²⁹⁸ *Le bon sens* and *le sens commun* are both used to translate the term *doxa* in French editions of Plato's works. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy Through the Looking-Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1985), 103.

As Deleuze uses these terms in his own works, however, there is a slight but important difference. Common sense is "defined subjectively by the supposed identity of a Self which provided the unity and ground of all the faculties, and objectively by the identity of whatever object served as a focus for all the faculties." Common sense is thus the *form* of unity, the guarantee that the object that is known, perceived, imagined, willed, etc. is the same one and that the subject who knows, perceives, etc. is also one. The most straightforward example of this is probably Kant's object = x and transcendental unity of apperception. Good sense, on the other hand, bears on the unity of particular determinations of the indeterminate object = x. A particular apple, for example, is a self-identical one. We would violate good sense, then, if we were simultaneously to affirm the propositions "this is an apple" and "this is not an apple." We shall see in sections 2 and 3 of the present chapter how sense as event exceeds the limitations of both common sense and good sense. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 226; Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 291. Hereafter *DR* and *DR-Fr*.

who would like to intend “apple.” This demonstrates that the locus of sense is not primarily in things, nor in the subject who intends them, nor even in any kind of circular relation that may obtain between them. Sense in depth, we saw, presupposes a flat space of sense that must be conceived as autonomous.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze offers a different, and for our purposes more fruitful, demonstration of the irreducibility of the flat space of sense. In the “Third Series of the Proposition” Deleuze examines “the circle of the proposition,” attempting to discover therein the locus of sense. The circle here consists of the three relations generally recognized by linguists within the proposition: denotation, manifestation, and signification. Deleuze attempts to discover whether sense can be localized in any one of these relations or within the system of their mutual references.

Let us begin with the relation of denotation. Denotation “is the relation of the proposition to an external state of affairs (datum).”²⁹⁹ From the perspective of the natural attitude, the denotative function of the proposition appears to be the most important and most fundamental. The proposition as denotation is understood as *pointing* to a world that is already there, providing the measure for truth and falsity. I say “there is Paul.” If it is indeed Paul whom I see when I utter the proposition, then I have spoken truly; if not, I have spoken falsely. Or, at a more abstract level, I might say “a bachelor is an unmarried man.” This proposition is not only true, but necessarily true, which means that nothing in the world will ever appear that fails to correspond to my denotation: I will never encounter a bachelor who is not an unmarried man. It seems, again from within the natural attitude, that there is nothing more to determine than the truth or falsity of

²⁹⁹ Deleuze, *LS*, 12; *LS-Fr*, 22.

propositions considered as denotations. The whole of sense seems to be captured in this relation of the proposition to the states of affairs that it denotes.

We have known, however, at least since Descartes, that the whole of sense cannot be captured within the denotative relation, which leaves out of account the very *ground* of that relation, viz., the subject for whom the denoted world appears. This realization forces us to recognize manifestation as a second relation within the proposition.

Manifestation “concerns the relation of the proposition to the person who speaks and expresses himself.”³⁰⁰ All propositions, whether explicitly or not, contain a reference to the subjects that utter them. I might, for example, utter the proposition “this is a piece of wax,” but as Descartes has shown, this proposition would be stated more accurately as “I judge that this is a piece of wax.” This addition to the proposition is not superfluous: the reference to the speaking subject shifts the focus from truth and falsity to the subject-centered criteria by which these can be determined. The proposition “this is a piece of wax” opens inevitably onto the question, “how do you know that this is a piece of wax?” Contrary to the thesis of the natural attitude, this question cannot be answered simply by reference to states of affairs in the external world, since it is precisely the speaking subject’s representation of that world that is being called into question. The role of subjectivity in helping to clarify the epistemological status of our relation to the external world, then, is irreducible.³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ Deleuze, *LS*, 13; *LS-Fr*, 23.

³⁰¹ This should not be taken to suggest that the function of subjectivity is indispensable within philosophy generally. Rather the question concerning the recognition of external states of affairs (is this really a piece of wax?) and the subjective conditions of our doing so (how can I be sure that it is really a piece of wax?) emerges only within a philosophy that takes as its beginning point what Deleuze elsewhere calls the “natural Image of thought,” according to which “thought has an affinity with the true; it formally possesses the true and materially wants the true.” The conception of the circle of the proposition that Deleuze examines in *The Logic of Sense* presupposes entirely this natural image of thought. In what follows we will

But, as we saw in our discussion of Saussure in the Introduction and briefly in the present chapter, the I that is manifested in the proposition itself depends on its having a place marked out within the system of language. Descartes had already recognized this phenomenon in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*: “What then did I formerly think I was? A man, of course. But what is a man? Might I not say a ‘rational animal’? No, because then I would have to inquire what ‘animal’ and ‘rational’ mean. And thus from one question I would slide into many more difficult ones.”³⁰² Descartes, of course, attempted to avoid this problem by identifying himself with the cogito, which was supposed to be understood as soon as it was uttered. We have already seen why this solution fails, though: the cogito is less an immediately graspable denotation than the conclusion to the argument that constitutes Book Two of the *Meditations*.³⁰³ This dependence of manifestation on a series of determinations that it entails requires us to recognize a third relation within the proposition, which is called signification. “Signification is defined by this order of conceptual implication where the proposition under consideration intervenes only as an element of a ‘demonstration,’ in the most general sense of the word, either as premise or as conclusion.”³⁰⁴ It seems now that the relation of signification must be the most originary locus of sense, since all denotations and manifestations presuppose it. As we have seen, I cannot denote an apple in the external world without calling upon the *langue* as system of significations. Nor can I

see how Deleuze undermines that image from within, along with its characteristic turn to the grounding function of subjectivity. Deleuze, *DR*, 131; *DR-Fr*, 172.

³⁰² René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 108. (In the marginal pagination to *Meditations on First Philosophy*, page 25.)

³⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 401-2; *PP-Fr*, 459-60.

³⁰⁴ Deleuze, *LS*, 14; *LS*, 24.

even isolate myself as the one who would denote the apple. The primacy of the cogito, then, seems to be replaced by that of the *langue*.

But this return to signification as the most originary locus of sense is only apparently decisive. Although it is indeed the case that both denotation and manifestation presuppose signification, it is just as much the case that signification presupposes denotation. The system of language exists not for its own sake, but to point beyond itself to the worldly states of affairs that it denotes. Even propositions that articulate the theory of signification as prior to denotation presuppose the phenomenon of signification as their own denotatum. This suggests, once again, that we should regard denotation as the most fundamental locus of sense. This development brings into view the circularity that characterizes the three relations within the proposition. We see how sense is perpetually displaced within this circle, from denotation to manifestation, from manifestation to signification, and finally from signification back to denotation, where the circular course begins again.

I would like to emphasize two similarities between the circle of the proposition and the circular dynamic of sense articulated by Merleau-Ponty. The first similarity is that in both cases, sense is presented as irreducible to any of its positions within the circle. Within the circle of the proposition, sense can never be localized within denotation, manifestation, or signification, but is rather perpetually displaced from itself within the circuit. Likewise, we saw that for Merleau-Ponty sense could not be localized within the subject or the object, within the active or the passive relation, or within the intelligible or the sensible. Merleau-Ponty's name for this perpetual displacement of sense was ambiguity: when the displacement was thought on the basis of the various

positions within the circle, it was called the bad ambiguity, whereas when the dynamic of displacement was thought on its own terms, it was called the good ambiguity.

The second similarity that I would like to emphasize is that in both cases, the circle of sense is closed. And in both cases, the closed space of the circle serves to contain the perpetual displacement of sense within the limits of good sense. The reference of denotation back to manifestation, for example, does not undermine the natural image of thought, with its characteristic focus on the truth or falsity of recognition (is this really a piece of wax?). It rather serves to ground that image of thought. My judgment about the wax is rendered more secure by the criterion of clearness and distinctness that derives solely from my certain knowledge of myself as subject. Or again, Hume's skepticism about the external world is overcome in Kantian subjectivity, which prepossesses the categories that will apply to anything that can be denoted. The same effect can be seen in Merleau-Ponty's circle of sense. The passive relation to sense that Merleau-Ponty comes to emphasize in *The Prose of the World* and *The Visible and the Invisible* does not open us out onto a sense that is incommensurable with the world as ordered system of significations. In terms of the analogy, it does not open us to anything outside the circle. Rather, my passive relation to sense is assimilated to the process by which I as subject intend good, achieved significations. For example, my vulnerability to the other's narrative is inseparable from my successfully intending its sense. This intention will extend a new, orderly practical world where I will be able once again to be master. This closure of the circle of sense—which is another way to describe the monism of sense—is what prevents Merleau-Ponty from thinking the event as incommensurability with any world of ordered significations. For this reason, it will be especially important

to see how Deleuze proposes to open the circle to an outside that it will never be able to re-appropriate.

The most important move in Deleuze's attempt to open the circle of the proposition to the outside is to repeat the conditioning operation that first set the circle in motion. We saw that denotation, with its characteristic concern for truth and falsity, presupposed manifestation as its condition of possibility. Manifestation, in turn, presupposed signification, and finally signification presupposed denotation. But there is something essential that is presupposed by the circle as a whole, and this is what Deleuze calls sense:

When I designate something, I always suppose that the sense is understood, that it is already there. As Bergson said, one does not proceed from sounds to images and from images to sense; rather, one is established "from the outset" within sense. Sense is like the sphere in which I am already established in order to enact possible denotations, and even to think their conditions. Sense is always presupposed as soon as *I* begin to speak; I would not be able to begin without this presupposition.³⁰⁵

Sense, then, is originary.³⁰⁶ When I denote something, for example when I say "this is a piece of wax," my act makes sense both to myself and to others: it occurs *in response* to the sense of a particular situation, such as providing an example to show that acts of perception are more adequately described as acts of judgment. Without this presupposed sense, the *I* that is manifested in the proposition would have nothing to say. Even signification, which seems to be the highest condition, presupposes sense: when I attempt

³⁰⁵ Deleuze, *LS*, 28; *LS-Fr*, 41.

³⁰⁶ Deleuze writes explicitly that "sense is essentially *produced*. It is never originary but is always and derived." This does not contradict the point the point being made here, however. What Deleuze means in this context is that the sense of things does not pre-exist the things themselves, as their model or normative ideal. Rather, the sense of things is produced as a kind of surface effect by the actions and passions of the things themselves. The things, in a manner of speaking, are prior to their senses. And yet we can speak of the things—denote them—only because we and they are already established within sense. It is this feature of sense that I am referring to when I say that sense is originary. As we will see shortly, sense names the originary difference that both separates and unites words and things, giving at once the possibility of language and the possibility of its referents. Deleuze, *LS*, 95; *LS-Fr*, 116.

to understand myself as rational animal, I do so in response to the question of the *sense* of my being.

Is this not really just to introduce a distinction without a difference, though? Is there really a distinction to be made, for example, between a denotatum and the sense of the denotatum? When I say “this is an apple,” is the sense of the proposition really something different from the apple that I denote? Or, at a higher level, is the sense really different from the belief I have in my own mind that this is an apple? If so, what precisely is the difference? It is difficulties like these that have made it particularly difficult to recognize sense as a separate relation within the proposition. Language suggests to us that there is something called sense and that it is not the same thing as denotation, manifestation, or signification. To speak, for example, of the sense of an apple is perfectly intelligible to any native speaker of English. But what is this sense? Does not the very question call for a response that makes of sense just another denotatum? Moreover, *where* is sense, if not in the things denoted or in the mind of the speaker who denotes them?

The first step that is necessary in working through these difficulties is to recognize that sense, as condition for the kind of representational thinking exemplified in the circle of the proposition, cannot itself be represented. Representational thinking is characterized most basically by the subordination of difference to identity. According to what Deleuze calls the natural image of thought, our cognitive faculty is constitutively oriented toward the true. In order to speak the truth about a denoted object, it must be the case that the object is a self-identical unity. As Kant notes, “if cinnabar were sometimes red, sometimes black, sometimes light, sometimes heavy, . . . my empirical imagination

would never find opportunity when representing red colour to bring to mind heavy cinnabar.”³⁰⁷ Indeed, the standpoint of representational thinking is nicely captured in this regard by Bishop Butler’s famous maxim: “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.”³⁰⁸ The unity of the denoted thing is guaranteed by the unity of the subject’s cognitive faculty, and the unity of the subject is in turn guaranteed by the unity of the significations of language. Sense, however, cannot be thought representationally. The attempt to pin down the nature of sense is akin to Alice’s experience in the Sheep’s Shop in *Through the Looking-Glass*:

The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was that, whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.

“Things flow about here so!” she said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so vainly pursuing a large bright thing that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at. “And this one is the most provoking of all—but I’ll tell you what—” she added, as a sudden thought struck her. “I’ll follow it up to the very top shelf of all. It’ll puzzle it to go through the ceiling, I expect!”

But even this plan failed: the “thing” went through the ceiling as quietly as possible, as if it were quite used to it.³⁰⁹

Sense is, to borrow a phrase from Lacan, pre-eminently that which is “*not in its place* [manque à sa place].”³¹⁰ It is what defies the requirement of representational thinking that every object be determinable within the unifying spaces of good sense and common sense, that it be localized unproblematically on its assigned shelf in the Sheep’s Shop of knowledge. We can, like Alice, catch a glimpse of sense in its paradoxical presence-as-absence by trying to pin it down to a determinate locus that would be proper to it. Let us begin at the most concrete level by trying to locate sense at the level of

³⁰⁷ Kant, *CPR*, A100-1.

³⁰⁸ Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 20.

³⁰⁹ Lewis Carroll, *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2001), 185-6. Hereafter *Complete Works*. Cf. Deleuze, *LS*, 41; *LS-Fr*, 56.

³¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 25. Page numbers for this text refer to those given in the margin, which correspond to the French original. Cf. Deleuze, *LS*, 41; *LS-Fr*, 56.

denoted things. We see quickly that sense is wholly indifferent to this level: propositions, for example, that refer to the golden mountain are no less sensible than those that refer to Mount Rushmore. Perhaps, then, we might try to localize sense within the judgment that bears upon these denoted objects. Once again, though, sense eludes our grasp: “Sense is strictly the same for propositions which are opposed from the point of view of quality, quantity, relation, or modality. For all of these points of view affect denotation and the diverse aspects of its actualization in a state of affairs. But they do not affect either sense or expression.”³¹¹ For example, propositions opposed from the point of view of quality, such as “God exists” and “God does not exist” have precisely the same sense, viz., the existence of God.³¹² The problem of denotation, we can now see, is simply to determine whether the sense expressed by the proposition—here “the existence of God”—is actualized in a state of affairs external to the proposition. Sense is not *in* the denoted things or *in* the proposition that states the determinate sense of those things, but is rather anterior to both.

We might finally attempt to map sense onto signification, which is concerned with the *conditions* under which propositions can be true. This strategy seems more likely than the others to succeed. If a concept has no possibility whatever of being actualized in a denoted state of affairs—if, that is, it lacks signification—then it seems appropriate to say that the concept is nonsensical. Examples of such concepts without signification include the square circle, the *perpetuum mobile*, and the mountain without a valley.³¹³ Conversely, it seems appropriate to identify concepts *with* signification with those that possess sense. This mapping is still not adequate, however. The square circle

³¹¹ Deleuze, *LS*, 33; *LS-Fr*, 46.

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ Deleuze, *LS*, 35; *LS-Fr*, 49.

and the mountain without a valley are indeed absurd: it is impossible that they should truly denote any object in the external world. But the impossible or the absurd is not coextensive with the nonsensical. Although that which is impossible can never have real, worldly being, it is nevertheless something, *aliquid*.³¹⁴ More specifically, it is that *something* whose most salient property is its impossibility. That there should *be* something that has the property of impossibility violates the most basic requirements of representational thinking. And yet propositions referring to that *something* somehow make sense. At this point we witness sense passing “through the ceiling as quietly as possible, as if it were quite used to it.” This passage through the ceiling is the passage outside the apparently closed circle of sense.

III. Sense as Virtual Event

We are attempting here to think sense in its character as event, as disruption of the ordered world of good sense and common sense within which the practical subject takes its bearings. We have shown at this point how sense always *exceeds* this world, but we need to show in addition how it actively *disrupts* it. In order to do this, we will need to describe in more positive terms the relation between sense and things. In doing so, we will see that the relation of sense to the circle of the proposition is not merely one of mutual externality, but rather one in which the good sense of the inside is compromised by the outside that has contaminated it always already.

Let us begin at the apparently most concrete level of corporeal things. In the “Fifteenth Series of Singularities,” Deleuze articulates the specific relation that obtains

³¹⁴ Deleuze, *LS*, 31; *LS-Fr*, 44-5.

between bodies and their sense with reference to a military battle. On the one hand, we can think about the battle wholly in terms of the bodies that enact it—the soldiers, tanks, guns, ammunition, and even the earth on which it is fought. From this perspective we would focus on the physical qualities of those bodies and on their active and passive relations with each other.³¹⁵ The pointed lead bullet, moving through the air at a velocity of 5000 feet per second, pierces the skin and destroys the delicate tissues of the heart. The bunker busting bomb, with its 650 pounds of explosives, is dropped from an altitude of 40,000 feet and penetrates 100 feet into the earth. But on the other hand, we can think about the battle as *incorporeal*, as indifferent to these bodies acting and being acted upon in this particular time and place. While bodies are either passive or active, the battle itself³¹⁶ is “neutral and impassive in relation to the victor and the vanquished, the coward and the brave.”³¹⁷ These latter categories name potential *actualizations* of the battle: someone = x will be the victor and someone = y will be the vanquished. The battle itself, though, is indifferent with respect to who in particular actualizes someone = x and someone = y. Likewise, while bodies act and are acted upon in a specifiable place and time, the battle itself is, to borrow again from Lacan, not in its place and not in its time. The battle is not limited to the battlefield where it is most prominently actualized, but is also present in the soldiers’ families, in the factories where the weapons are produced, and in the newsrooms that report it. Nor is it limited to the time of active hostilities, but is also present in the war games that prepared for it, in the political rhetoric that

³¹⁵ Cf. Deleuze, *LS*, 4; *LS-Fr*, 13.

³¹⁶ By “the battle itself” I mean simply the battle insofar as it is irreducible to its corporeal actualizations. Strictly speaking, of course, the battle as I am articulating it here, namely as an event of sense, lacks an “itself.”

³¹⁷ Deleuze, *LS*, 100; *LS-Fr*, 122.

advocated or opposed it, and in the books, patriotic songs, and festivals that commemorate it.³¹⁸

What, precisely, is the relation between corporeal things and their incorporeal sense? From the Stoic perspective that Deleuze takes as his point of departure in *The Logic of Sense*, their relation is one of cause and effect. According to this fundamentally anti-Platonic position, corporeal things are conceived not as mere instantiations of their Ideas, which would pre-exist them and serve as their measure. The bed, for example, is not what it is through its resemblance to the Idea of a bed. Rather the idea—the incorporeal sense of the bed—is *produced* by the actions and passions of bodies—by the carpenter’s router that mortises the bedpost and by the quilting machine that stitches together the mattress pad. But the cause-effect relation between the actions and passions of bodies and their incorporeal sense is unique. In straightforward, everyday cases of causality, both the cause and the effect exist at the same level of being. The carpenter, for example, and the particular bed that he produces are both bodies, which can enter into active and passive relations with other bodies. In the case of bodies’ production of sense, however, the effect does not, strictly speaking, *exist*. We would not say that the battle consists of soldiers, tanks, guns, ammunition, and “the battle.”³¹⁹ Whereas the bullet can pierce the skin and the bomb can penetrate deep beneath the surface of the earth, “the battle” can neither cut into bodies nor be cut into by them. It is thus an effect more in the sense of an optical effect³²⁰, an “incorporeal event[] which would play only on the

³¹⁸ Cf. Deleuze, *DR*, 1; *DR-Fr*, 8. “As Péguy says, it is not Federation Day which commemorates or represents the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation Days; or Monet’s first water lily which repeats all the others.”

³¹⁹ Whenever I refer to “the battle,” with quotation marks, I mean to denote the battle *qua* incorporeal sense, and not the corporeal state of affairs *of which* it is the sense.

³²⁰ Deleuze, *LS*, 7; *LS-Fr*, 17.

surface, like a mist over the prairie (even less than a mist, since a mist is after all a body).”³²¹ This superficial, mist-like sense does not exist, but rather only *inheres* within the corporeal states of affairs that produce it.

To describe in detail the way in which incorporeal sense *inheres* in corporeal states of affairs is at the same time to illustrate its disruptive force. From one perspective, the mode of inherence seems to be that of the epiphenomenon. Insofar as sense cannot shoot a gun or pilot an F-16, it appears to be sterile and unproductive, powerless to intervene in the “real” battle, which is composed of bodies and their relations of force. But from another perspective, nothing could be more essential to bodies than their sense-events.³²² “The battle” is *why* these bodies and their forces are set into relation, *why* the bullet pierced the flesh and the bomb destroyed the factory.³²³ But for “the battle,” this body would not be a soldier’s body and this lump of lead would not have become a bullet. Sense—this incorporeal event that is constitutively missing from its place and time, present everywhere and nowhere, that hovers indifferently over the good sense and common sense of determinate bodies and their determinate relations—somehow exerts a force of its own over the corporeal being that produced it.

The event of sense, considered as generative of determined bodies and states of affairs, must be conceived as an immediate duality. The two sides of this duality are what Deleuze calls the actual and the virtual, which are reflected in the distinction we have been making between the battle and “the battle,” respectively.

With every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person, the moment we designate by saying “*here*, the moment has come.” The future and the past of the event are evaluated only with respect to this definitive present, and from

³²¹ Deleuze, *LS*, 5; *LS-Fr*, 14-15.

³²² Deleuze, *LS*, 5; *LS-Fr*, 14.

³²³ Deleuze, *LS*, 101; *LS-Fr*, 122.

the point of view of that which embodies it. But on the other hand, there is the future and the past of the event considered in itself, sidestepping each present, being free of the limitations of a state of affairs, impersonal and pre-individual, neutral, neither general nor particular, *eventum tantum*. . . . It has no other present than that of the mobile instant which represents it, always divided into past-future, and forming what must be called the counter-actualization.³²⁴

The event as actualized belongs to the world of good sense and common sense. It is a unity that is recognizable by reference to its spatial and temporal localization and to its determinate qualities. The Battle of Waterloo that we all learned about in history class is an example of an actualized event. The battle took place on June 18, 1815 just south of the town of Waterloo, in present-day Belgium. It was fought by recognizable and determinate groupings of men: the English, Dutch, and Prussian armies on one side and the French army on the other. These armies were commanded by well-known, determinate persons: the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon. And finally, the relations that obtain between these persons are fixed and irreversible: Wellington was the victor and Napoleon was the vanquished. The event as virtual, or “the Battle of Waterloo,” on the other hand, is the transcendental field from which the actual Battle of Waterloo emerged. Importantly, this transcendental field must not be conceived in the image of what it grounds, as its bare form of possibility.³²⁵ Rather, for reasons that we have already seen, the virtual sense-event must be conceived as impersonal and as indifferent to the unities of good sense and common sense, “free of the limitations of a state of affairs.” So, for example, in the actual Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon was defeated. But in the virtual event, Napoleon is *both* the great French national hero who secured the Revolution and extended its benefits to all the peoples of Europe, twice bringing the reactionary governments of the Continent to their knees, *and* the tragic figure who came

³²⁴ Deleuze, *LS*, 151; *LS-Fr*, 177. Ellipsis in original.

³²⁵ Deleuze, *LS*, 99; *LS-Fr*, 120. “The foundation can never resemble what it founds. It does not suffice to say of the foundation that it is another matter—it is also another geography, without being another world.”

so close to bringing about a new era in European political culture but who was ultimately defeated in one of the most disastrous and momentous battles in military history.

Why, though, should we think of the virtual sense-event as a transcendental field from which actual states of affairs derive? From the standpoint of common sense and its representational orientation, this seems to reverse the real order of priority. It seems that what is ontologically basic, and thus what ought to serve as the beginning point for our thinking about the battle, is the actual event, the so-called fact of the matter. The fact of the matter is that Wellington and his Anglo-Allied forces defeated Napoleon and his French forces. All of the various determinations that we gather together in the virtual event would represent merely what *might* have happened. This enumeration of the states of affairs that might have been actualized belongs, from this perspective, to reflection and thus exists only in the minds of those who think about the real battle. As such, the virtual event cannot account for the *genesis* of the actual and ought not therefore to be conceived as a transcendental field in the specific sense that Deleuze intends.³²⁶

Michel Serres offers a powerful image that helps to render more intuitive this non-representational idea of the virtual event as transcendental field:

Have you ever tending goal for your team, while an adversary hurries to take a clean, close shot? Relaxed, as if free, the body mimes the future participle, fully ready to unwind: toward the highest point, at ground level, or halfway up, in both directions, left and right; toward the center of the solar plexus, a starry plateau launches its virtual branches in all directions at once, like a bouquet of axons.³²⁷

³²⁶ In more specifically Deleuzian terms, this objection reflects a confusion of the virtual with the possible. To think the transcendental as possibility is to think it wholly on the basis of what it conditions. Within the world of representation, we recognize certain unities—persons, nations, battles, etc. The transcendental as possible would merely double the represented world in the mind of the subject. Cf. Deleuze, *DR*, 211-12; *DR-Fr*, 272-4.

³²⁷ Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, tr. Sheila Faria Glaser and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 9. Hereafter *Troubadour*.

The event depicted here is a shot on goal within a soccer game. “Soccer” is an enormously complex meaning, a sense-event in our vocabulary. Its meaning, of course, comprises all the rules of the game. But it comprises much more as well. It comprises a psychological meaning: the fans identify with their favorite teams, celebrating their victories as if they were their own and likewise lamenting their defeats. It also comprises an economic meaning: the various teams sell millions of dollars worth of tickets and merchandise to the fans, who indirectly pay the extraordinarily high salaries of the players. The more famous players will appear in advertisements that help to sell everything from candy bars to high-end athletic apparel. All of this virtual sense is *present* right there in the soccer game. It is *why* these twenty-two players are gathered together on this rectangular field of grass, approximately 120 meters long and 90 meters wide, and more particularly, *why* one of the players is about to kick a ball in the direction of the net that is being guarded by our goalkeeper. This sense is not merely present in the *minds* of the various participants; it is directly immanent to their bodies. “Soccer” has formed this goalkeeper’s body into a very particular set of skills and dispositions, different from the skills and dispositions that characterize a “basketball” body or a “cycling” body. If this point is not self-evident, it is because the sense-event as such is never wholly and clearly expressed in a corporeal state of affairs. The event *as actualized* is limited by the constraints of good sense and common sense, whereas the virtual event gathers together what from the perspective of representation are impossible states of affairs. In the example of the imminent shot on goal we can say, simplifying somewhat, that there are fourteen possible actualizations: the attacker could kick the ball to the upper right or left, the middle right or left, the lower right or left, or in

the middle. For each of these possibilities he could either score or fail to score. Of course, only one of these will actually happen.³²⁸ But at certain privileged, highly sensitive points like the one that Serres describes, we can *feel* the virtual co-presence of impossibles. The goalkeeper virtually occupies seven different spatial positions in seven different futures. Five seconds later, one of these virtual possibilities will have been actualized and this state of heightened sensitivity will have passed. The actualized event will dominate our awareness of the soccer match and the virtual transcendental event will once again recede.

It is this immanence of virtual, transcendental sense to its actualizations that accounts for the disruption to the ordered world of representation that characterizes the event. The virtual is not an abstract representation of an actual that would be conceived as ontologically prior; it is, rather, the metastable element, the real difference-from-self from which the actual is produced.³²⁹ It follows that “the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object—as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it plunged as though into an objective dimension.”³³⁰ Thus, wherever there is an actual object, determinable within the limits of good sense and common sense, there is also, right there with it, a virtuality that radically exceeds those limits and that never ceases to exert its force over the object and the orderly world of which it is a part.

³²⁸ This is a simplification because there are, of course, other possibilities that could be actualized. The attacker might strike the ball very poorly, so that it flies far away from the goal. Or it might be the case that the attacker is offside and that the referee will whistle the play dead before the shot is attempted. These possibilities, however, would not very greatly affect the goalkeeper’s virtual position, since there is little that he could do about them.

³²⁹ Deleuze, *LS*, 103; *LS-Fr*, 125.

³³⁰ Deleuze, *DR*, 209; *DR-Fr*, 269.

IV. The Serial Structure of Superficial Sense

The account that we have given up to this point of the relation between the virtual and the actual has been somewhat simplified. Specifically, we have artificially represented it as merely a two-term relation: on the one hand there are actual states of affairs, characterized by the good sense and common sense of representation, and on the other hand, immanent to these states of affairs are virtual sense-events that exceed the limits of representation and thus disrupt the unity of the actual. We have simplified in this way in order to bring out as clearly as possible the event character of the immediate duality of sense and to emphasize the contrast with the monism of sense that we saw in Merleau-Ponty. In order, though, to understand the imperative force of the event of sense, it will be necessary to take into account the more complex, *serial* structure of sense that Deleuze articulates in *The Logic of Sense*.

We have seen that sense does not properly *exist*, but rather *inheres* in states of affairs. The sense “bed,” for example, has no independent existence, but is rather that which is attributed to the actual bed. Sense, in other words, is always the sense *of* something. But this is only half of the story. Sense stands in relation not only to states of affairs, but also to propositions. More specifically, sense is inseparable from the proposition that expresses it.³³¹ The proposition, then, is the third term that we must introduce in order more adequately to account for the relation between the virtual and the actual. To see how this three-term relation works, let us examine a very simple proposition: the tree is green. We can easily recognize here the two terms that we have been discussing. On the one hand, there is an actual state of affairs *about which* we are

³³¹ Deleuze, *LS*, 19; *LS-Fr*, 30.

speaking: the tree that is green. On the other hand there is the sense that is attributed to the tree: the being-green-of-the-tree. The being-green-of-the-tree inheres in the tree, but is not actually in the tree or a part of the tree. It hovers over the tree like a mist over the prairie. The third term of the relation is easy to overlook owing to a fundamental prejudice that phenomenology calls the natural attitude. Specifically, we overlook the circumstance that the being-green-of-the-tree is *presented* as the attribute of the actual tree. It is the proposition that presents, or in more Deleuzian terms, expresses, the sense. Without this element of presentation, we would never experience the being-green-of-the-tree that we attribute to the tree. The apparent two-term relation between states of affairs and their sense thus requires the proposition as a third term.

Of course we could re-establish the simpler two-term relation if we could show that sense is coextensive with the proposition. However, Deleuze shows that this reduction of sense to the proposition is impossible by drawing our attention to the circumstance that a proposition can never state its own sense.³³² It is never nonsensical to inquire about the sense of a proposition, precisely because the proposition and its sense are not the same thing. If someone were to ask, “what is the sense of ‘the tree is green’?” it would be entirely unhelpful to reply, “the tree is green.” The sense of the proposition “the tree is green” must be stated by another proposition. And this process could continue indefinitely: the sense of a proposition becomes the object of another proposition, whose own sense in turn becomes the object of a further proposition, *ad infinitum*. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll highlights this paradox of the infinite regress of sense in a scene involving the Duchess, who loves to discover the morals of things. She is unable, however, to begin the process of discovering the moral

³³² Deleuze, *LS*, 28; *LS-Fr*, 41.

herself, and so she demands that Alice utter a proposition—any proposition at all—so that she can extract its sense, or moral.

“The game’s going on rather better now” she said, by way of keeping up the conversation a little.

“’Tis so,” said the Duchess: “and the moral of that is—‘Oh, ’tis love, ’tis love that makes the world go round!’”

“Somebody said,” Alice whispered, “that it’s done by everybody minding their own business!”

“Ah well! It means much the same thing,” said the Duchess, digging her sharp little chin into Alice’s shoulder as she added “and the moral of *that* is—‘Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves.’”³³³

In each of these cases the Duchess’ proposition expresses the sense of Alice’s proposition. That the sense of a given proposition is always deferred to another proposition has important consequences for the conception of imperative that we are developing here. Before we can show precisely how this is the case, however, we will need to complete our account of the relation between propositions, states of affairs, and sense.

We can see from the examples of the green tree and of the Duchess’ quest to discover the morals of things that the event of sense happens in an encounter. More specifically, sense happens in the resonance that is established between two heterogeneous series. These series can be constituted in many different ways. The most intuitive way to think the heterogeneity of the series is exemplified by our proposition, “the tree is green.” Here we can recognize an encounter between the series of words and the series of things, or the series of propositions and the series of states of affairs. We saw that the green tree does not contain its own sense within itself, and that its sense emerges only when the proposition is brought to bear on it. The sense is neither in the tree nor in the proposition, but rather emerges as an event right at the surface that both

³³³ Lewis Carroll, *Complete Works*, 88.

separates and joins the two. This relation, of course, obtains not only for trees and propositions about them, but for the series of things and the series of propositions generally. We might say then, at least in a very provisional way, that sense happens at the point of encounter between the series of words and things.

But the heterogeneity of the series takes other forms as well. In our example from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we saw that the Duchess' propositions were brought to bear not on things and their states of affairs, but rather on Alice's propositions. Here the event of sense emerged at the surface that separated and joined the series of the Duchess' propositions, which expressed a moral, and the series of Alice's propositions, whose moral was expressed. Does this not violate the basic requirement of the heterogeneity of series, leaving us with two homogeneous series of propositions? It does not because, just as in the example of the green tree, we see that one series *presents* the sense that is *attributed to* the other. It does not strictly matter that the two series are of propositions, as long as the more essential heterogeneity between a presenting series and a series whose sense is presented obtains. Indeed, one could even produce sense by constituting two heterogeneous series, both of which were composed of *things*. The classic example of this kind of constitution of series is given by Lacan in his seminar on *The Purloined Letter*.³³⁴ Deleuze sums up the serial organization of Poe's story as follows:

First series: the king who does not see the compromising letter received by his wife; the queen who is relieved to have hidden it so cleverly by having left it out in the open; the minister, who sees everything and takes possession of the letter. Second series: the police who find nothing in the minister's hotel; the minister who thought of

³³⁴ Lacan, *Écrits*, 11-61.

leaving the letter in the open in order better to hide it; Dupin who sees everything and takes possession of the letter.³³⁵

The sense of the story emerges in the resonance between these two series. The story is not *about* any of the actual characters—the king, the queen, the minister, or even Dupin, who eventually solves the case. Rather what holds the story together is the letter, which belongs to neither series but which becomes manifest only at the surface where the two series meet. In this respect, the letter functions in the same way as the complex meaning “soccer” from the example of the goalkeeper preparing for a shot on goal. It is the letter, which is never something actual, that positions the actual characters in the relations that are depicted: the queen fears the minister and the minister fears Dupin, all because of their relation to the letter. Once again we see that sense is at once *derivative* of the series that “cause” it and *originary*, in that it makes of the series what they actually are.

We can express what is common to all these different kinds of relation between heterogeneous series by returning to some explicitly Saussurian themes. Most basically, the event of sense requires the encounter of two series, one of which is determined as signifier and the other of which is determined as signified. “We call ‘signifier’ any sign which presents in itself an aspect of sense; we call ‘signified,’ on the contrary, that which is defined in a duality relative to this aspect.” The signified is thus “any thing which may be defined on the basis of the distinction that a certain aspect of sense establishes with this thing.”³³⁶ So, for example, the proposition “the tree is green” belongs to the series of the signifier and the tree upon which the proposition bears belongs to the series of the signified. The signifier *presents* a sense *of* something, here the tree. The tree is

³³⁵ Deleuze, *LS*, 38; *LS-Fr*, 52. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 182-184. Hereafter *Desert Islands*.

³³⁶ Deleuze, *LS*, 37; *LS-Fr*, 51.

determined as signified in this relation with the sense presented by the signifier. At the surface between the two series there emerges a sense that cannot be reduced to either, viz., the being-green-of-the-tree. But we must not suppose that the proposition is determined as signifier owing to any characteristics that would be proper to it. Rather signifier and signified are determined differentially. Thus we could easily constitute the series in such a way that our proposition “the tree is green” would be determined as the signified. To do so, we need only produce a signifier that would present the sense of the proposition. (This is possible, once again, because a proposition can never state its own sense.) So, for example, we might say that “when we look at the tree, we perceive a phenomenon of color that corresponds roughly to the wavelength of 510 nanometers.” The structure here is isomorphic to the structure involving the proposition and the tree: the signifier presents a sense that is the sense *of* the signified, which cannot contain its own sense within itself. Finally, we can show by means of an entirely commonplace occurrence how two series of things or states of affairs enact the serial structure of signifier and signified. At the nightclub one person makes eye contact with another. The other person responds with a smile. Here we have an encounter of a signified (the eye contact) and a signifier (the smile) that presents and consolidates its sense. The sense in this case is obviously an erotic sense and belongs to neither of the two series, but rather hovers at the surface where they meet.

A second explicitly Saussurian theme that reappears here in Deleuze’s articulation of the logic of sense is the differential character of the elements that belong to each series.³³⁷ We saw in our discussion of Saussure that the phonemes that belong to a particular *langue* are determined through their differential relations with the other

³³⁷ Deleuze, *LS*, 50; *LS-Fr*, 65.

phonemes. For example, *b* is a determinate phoneme because it is not-*p*: without the difference that determines them, we would hear these phonemes as having the same value, much as we English speakers in fact hear the phonemes *b* and *bh* as having the same value.³³⁸ The differential determination of the elements of the two series is especially important for the project being undertaken in this dissertation because it entails that the terms of any encounter must be conceived outside the limits of representation, i.e., as excessive to the unities of good sense and common sense. In sum, no term that enters into an encounter “is what it is, and not another thing.” Claude Lévi-Strauss has demonstrated this point on a larger scale in his studies of societies that are divided into totemic clans. We can recognize in these societies two heterogeneous series, one of nature and the other of culture. The natural series is composed of animals, plants, minerals, etc., while the cultural series is composed of clans that correspond to these terms. One might suppose that the clans are associated with their natural totems through the representative relation of resemblance. Members of the eagle clan, for example, would have the characteristics of nobility and boldness, while members of the bear clan would be characterized by strength and ferocity. But such an understanding overlooks the differential determination of the elements of the series. In fact, the eagle clan is not determined by the resemblance of its members to eagles, but rather by their *difference* from members of the bear clan, which differences are homologous with those between natural eagles and bears.³³⁹ As a member of this society, then, I am never simply who I am; rather my identity is scattered over a whole system of differences among all of the

³³⁸ These phonemes are different, for example, in Sanskrit but not in English. For a native English speaker, *Bhagavad Gita* has the same value as *Bagavad Gita* because in our language *b* is not determined through its difference from *bh*.

³³⁹ Different cultures will articulate these differences differently.

totems that exist in the society.³⁴⁰ In short, I am never a unity, but always already a multiplicity.

The values that correspond to the differentially determined elements of the series are *singularities*.³⁴¹ A singularity is pre-personal and pre-individual, anterior the unities of good sense and common sense in terms of which we habitually think about the world and about ourselves.³⁴² We must be careful not to think of a singularity as the *true* being of a thing, as that which would somehow underlie the thing's publicly observable qualities. To conceive singularity in this way is to conceive it on the basis of the unities that it would underlie: my own singularity, for example, would be conceived as the singularity *of me*, a determinate person with determinate and recognizable qualities. We have already seen that the unities of good sense and common sense are effects, in the sense of optical effects, and that the condition for these unities does not resemble the unities at all. Singularity, then, must be thought on its own terms as the condition for actual unities.³⁴³ Once again, Saussurian linguistics provides a good example of this. In the English language, we have the phoneme *b*, but *b* does not actually exist *as a* phoneme. Rather *b* exists only in its actualizations, which in principle can never be complete. To borrow the language of complexity theory, we can say that the phoneme *b* functions as an attractor toward which particular actualizations tend but which they can never equal. The actualization can never equal the attractor because the latter is not a

³⁴⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 115.

³⁴¹ Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 176.

³⁴² Deleuze, *LS*, 107, 109; *LS-Fr*, 130, 133.

³⁴³ Deleuze, *LS*, 103; *LS-Fr*, 125. "Far from being individual or personal, singularities preside over the genesis of individuals and persons; they are distributed in a 'potential' which admits neither Self nor I, but which produces them by actualizing or realizing itself, although the figures of this actualization do not at all resemble the realized potential."

model that the actualization would attempt to copy.³⁴⁴ The attractor—the phoneme *b*—does not exist at all, but rather inheres in the *langue* as a virtuality. Thus while the *b*'s that are actualized when we say things like “baseball” or “barbeque” can be localized within a determinate space and time, the phoneme *b* exceeds these actualizations, hovering indifferently over all of them. To speak somewhat loosely at this point, the phoneme *b* functions as a very basic imperative addressed to anyone who would pronounce an actual *b*. The singular phoneme, then, is necessarily anterior to its actualizations, but does not resemble them.

Deleuze writes in the “Twenty-First Series of the Event” that “either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us.”³⁴⁵ In light of what we have just discussed, we could modify this to say: do not be unworthy of the singularity that is revealed in the event of imperative sense. In the example from Saussurian linguistics, we saw that the actualized sound “*b*” is inseparable from the phoneme *b* that functions as its condition. The singularity and the actualization constitute an immediate duality, where the two “halves” do not resemble each other at all. We could say, then, that Saussurian linguistics discovers an incommensurable singularity *right at* the level of the actualized unity. This structure of immediate duality of two incommensurable halves, one a singularity and the other its

³⁴⁴ We can also make this point in a way that does not require the language of complexity theory. When I pronounce a *b*, for example when I say “baseball,” I do not have before my mind a perfect example of *b*, which I then approximate in speech. Likewise, when I listen to someone else, I do not listen for an approximation to an ideal *b*. Rather what guides my listening and my speaking is the phoneme *b* as a purely differential entity, as a not fully determined *something* that is not-*p* and not-*g*, etc. When I hear a sound somewhere within that differential space, I hear it *as* an actual *b*. So, for example, if a native of India says “Bhagavad Gita,” I hear the first sound as a *b*. This, once again, is because the English *langue* does not differentiate between *b* and *bh*. In sum, that toward which my listening and speaking tend is a *difference* and not an identity. This is why the actualization can never equal, or even resemble, the singular value that it approaches.

³⁴⁵ Deleuze, *LS*, 149; *LS-Fr*, 174.

actualization, obtains also at the level of persons and their practical relations with the world. The most vivid illustration of immediate duality at this level is given in the event of death. Like any event, death can be described from two different perspectives. First, the event of death can be described as actual. From this perspective, death sustains an intimate relation with me, with the self of good sense and common sense. My death will have its basis in *my* body. Its coming will be expedited or delayed depending, in part at least, on the choices that I make throughout my life. Whenever my death does happen, it will be a determinate, publicly verifiable event that can be situated in a particular place at a particular time.

But there is another, incommensurable side of death that is wholly indifferent to me and to the world of good sense and common sense in which I take my practical bearings. This second half of the immediate duality can be called the moment of *counter-actualization*.³⁴⁶ From this perspective, my death is that which can never be actualized, which can never be a possibility *for me*. Death, in other words, is that which is never in its place: it is everywhere and nowhere, at all times and at no time. Maurice Blanchot describes this second, singularizing face of the event of death as “the abyss of the present, the time without present with which I have no relation, toward which I am unable to project myself. For in it *I* do not die. I forfeit the power of dying. In this abyss *one* dies—one never ceases to die, and one never succeeds in dying.”³⁴⁷ This one (*l’one*) that is revealed most vividly in the event of death must not be confused with the one that we

³⁴⁶ Deleuze, *LS*, 151; *LS-Fr*, 177. Cf. Deleuze, *DR*, 259; *DR-Fr*, 333 where Deleuze characterizes this side of death as a “de-differenciation.” Both of these characterizations suggest a kind of dynamic relation between the two sides, one tending toward unification and the other tending toward a decomposition of that unity.

³⁴⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 160. Quoted in Deleuze, *LS*, 152; *LS-Fr*, 178. Translation modified.

encountered in the work of Merleau-Ponty. There we discovered the one as an anonymity conceived as anterior to the known, represented world, but not as radically heterogeneous to that world. Merleau-Ponty's anonymous one was constitutively oriented toward the good sense that it conditioned, and was therefore unable to account for the alterity of the event.³⁴⁸ For Blanchot, on the other hand, the one names a singularity that is revealed in the event right at the level of the actualized self. The singular one is manifest as a felt indifference that weighs on the self, challenging its actualization with the force of counter-actualization. Singularity thus happens as a dynamic opposition to the self and to the actualized world, much as in Freud's later work the death drive happens as a dynamic principle in opposition to the unifying tendencies of Eros. With this we might finally restate Deleuze's definition of the ethical imperative as follows: do not be unworthy of the force of counter-actualization that accompanies every actualization. Or alternatively, do not flee the singularity that is revealed in the event and establish your practical orientation solely with reference to the actual.

V. Singularity and Dignity

In Chapter Two I addressed the circumstances of my father's death, showing how an imperative emerged through the corporeal *Sinngebung* appropriate to the process of dying. I showed there how that *Sinngebung* at once *extended* a practical world and also *constricted* it, limiting the applicability of the kind of rules that are typically associated with the imperative. But this account, formulated in the terms of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, failed to account for the event-character of death and for

³⁴⁸ Cf. Lyotard, *DF*, 21-2.

the singularity that is revealed in the event. Given the resources of Deleuze's logic of sense, with its emphasis on the encounter between the heterogeneous series of the signifier and the signified and on the event of sense that happens at the surface where they meet, I believe we can account for the moment of singularity that is inseparable from the phenomenon of imperative.

Let us begin by completely redescribing the situation using the broadly Saussurian terminology of *The Logic of Sense*. First, we can distinguish here between the series of the signifier and of the signified. In this case my dying father belonged to the series of the signified, while my brother and I belonged to the series of the signifier. How can we determine who or what, in any encounter, belongs to which series? There is certainly nothing in the *nature* of things that situates them within one or the other of the series. As we saw with regard to the proposition, "the tree is green," the same thing—the same proposition, object, or person—can function equally well as signifier or as signified. In each case, the determination of the series will depend entirely on the facts of the situation. In this particular case, my father knew that he was dying, but could not contain within himself the sense of his own death. The sense of his death was deferred onto the series of the signifier—my brother and me—who had the power in this very particular case to present and to consolidate that sense. To explain precisely why this is the case will require some autobiographical detail, which I will keep to a minimum. Our parents were divorced when we were quite young, with my mother retaining sole custody of us. Even before that, though, we rarely saw our father, owing to his being a truck driver and thus being away from home for long stretches of time. As a result, neither of us ever developed a strong relationship with him. He was certainly our father, and we

were his sons, but that relationship was never really *actualized*. By the time he became terminally ill, we had long since fallen out of communication with him. When he entered the hospital for what he must have known would be his final weeks, he wanted his sons to be there with him. He was genuinely afraid, though, that we would refuse to see him, owing to his not having been very involved in our childhood years. He was, then, going to die either completely alone or as the father of two sons. It fell to my brother and me to function as signifiers, determining which of these would be the actual sense of his death.

All of this, of course, is a retrospective reconstruction; it takes the *result* of an encounter between a signifier and a signified and reads it back into the context of that encounter, giving it a sense that it could not have had at the time. The encounter itself only happened when I spoke with my father on the phone for the first time since he had entered the hospital. He wanted very badly to express his regret about our falling out of communication and to know whether I would be able to drive out to Wisconsin to visit him. Because his lung cancer and emphysema were so far advanced, he could speak only with the greatest difficulty. Nonetheless, the regret, the uncertainty, and the hope in his voice came through perfectly clearly. In hearing this man speak, I knew immediately that I must drive out to see him as soon as possible. In the event of this encounter, I found myself obligated unconditionally. But who, exactly, was this “I”? It would not be entirely accurate to say that I *qua* son felt the weight of this obligation. At no point did I explicitly link my feeling of obligation to this *actual* relation. Of course the fact that he was my father was a salient feature of the situation, but it was not by itself determinative. In many important ways, my father and I had never *actualized* the father-son relationship at all. It had therefore never been an important part of my moral identity that I was this

man's son. In fact, even "father's son" as a *general* moral category had never played an important part in my moral understanding. How, then, could I experience an obligation to be binding on me *as* my father's son? The answer, of course, is that I did not. Rather the encounter between us produced an *event*, a sensitive point where for a moment all the already actualized meanings and identities are held in suspense, and where a wholly new sense has the chance to come into the world. In this respect the situation resembles that of the goalkeeper who, in a brief moment of heightened sensitivity, simultaneously occupies seven different positions in seven different futures. This state of heightened sensitivity is the moment of counter-actualization that accompanies every actualization. In the encounter, I am not the determinate person that I actually am, with the determinate relation (or non-relation) that I actually have with my father. In counter-actualizing me and my relation with my father, the imperative event commands me as a pre-personal, pre-individual singularity. The imperative, then, did not command me *as* son; rather in response to the imperative, this singular I actually became my father's son at the same time that he actually became my father. There was, then, what Deleuze calls an "incorporeal transformation." Incorporeal because, from a perspective oriented toward the actual, nothing at all changed. The same determinate person would die from the same determinate diseases whether he died reconciled with his sons or not. Likewise, the determinate persons who were his sons would have lost their father, whether that relationship was meaningful to them or not. From this perspective my father might have said, had he ever read any Deleuze, that an incorporeal transformation plus ninety-five cents will buy you a cup of coffee. From another perspective, however, the incorporeal transformation changes everything. In an instant, when an incorporeal sense flashed

across the space of the encounter between a signifier lacking its sense and the signifier that could supply it, all that was wrong in that sphere of our lives was set right. In an infinitesimal present, the sense that I had of my past was uprooted and the sense that I had of myself looking into the future became open for something genuinely new and unexpected.

The event of sense that happens in the encounter reveals the singularity not only of the one who feels the weight of its imperative force, but also of the other term or terms of the relation. The other is revealed imperatively as incommensurable and irreplaceable, as absolutely irreducible to the kinds of practical universals that we discussed in Chapter Two. “Father” is such a practical universal; it names a more or less well established set of role requirements that perhaps my own father never quite lived up to. From one perspective, these universals are enormously important. They help to orient us within the practical world, rendering determinate what is morally required of us and what we have the right to expect from others. But from another, equally valid perspective, they count for almost nothing at all. From this angle, it does not matter in the least that my father never successfully actualized the moral meaning “father.” In the highly sensitive, metastable instant of the encounter, it is his singularity that stands out most prominently, and that I am commanded by the imperative sense-event to respect. This singularity that remains indifferent to the kind of value we assign to persons with reference to moral universals is figured in Kant’s moral philosophy by the concept of dignity, which he contrasts with price: “What has a price is such that something else can be put in its place as its *equivalent*; by contrast, that which is elevated above all price, and admits of no

equivalent, has a dignity.”³⁴⁹ Dignity, or the irreducible singularity of the other, becomes manifest only in the movement of counter-actualization. In order “not to be unworthy of what happens to us,” we must allow ourselves to undergo this movement. We must maintain ourselves in that heightened state of sensitivity that opens us to the incommensurability and irreplaceability of the other, whether he be our own father, our waiter at the restaurant, or a random passer-by.

We thus arrive, once again, at the idea of immediate duality, but this time in its explicitly moral guise. We find ourselves obligated to orient ourselves within a practical world characterized by the unities of good sense and common sense, but also to counter-actualize that world, to relate to others as singularities and as deserving of our unconditional respect. There is no either/or here: we must not comport ourselves toward others whom we conceive *either* according to the practical universals of good sense and common sense *or* according to their irreducible singularity. All of us are immediately both. The singularity of the other (and of oneself) is given within the event of originary imperative sense *right at* his or her practical universality.

VI. Harlequin, Emperor of the Moon

There is, of course, no way to gather together the impossible demands of this imperative sense in a moral rule or law. This is because the imperative happens precisely as an event, as a disruption to the orderly, lawful world of representation. Owing to this event-character of imperative sense, we can never have mastered our morally challenging situations in advance. How, for example, do we judge the woman who has been trapped

³⁴⁹ Kant, *GMM*, 52 [Ak 4: 434].

for years in an emotionally or physically abusive relationship and who finally one day reaches her limit, lashing out in violence against her partner? Or how do we judge the doctor who, sympathizing with the patient's painful condition and determining there to be no likelihood of recovery, arranges with her to administer a lethal dose of medication? We certainly would not want to have a *rule* to the effect that any woman who judged herself to have been abused retained the right to injure or kill her partner. Likewise, we would not do well to allow doctors and patients to work out assisted suicide arrangements completely *ad hoc*, without the intervention of neutral third parties who could limit the very real potential for abuse of these arrangements. But neither would we want indiscriminately to condemn all of these abused women and all of these doctors. There can be no rules or protocols that determine in advance how we must deal with cases like these. Despite the efforts of philosophers and moralists throughout history, there have never been any such effective rules or protocols. But this circumstance does not reduce us to moral chaos. In the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant warns us against deviating from the purity of the moral law, taking our bearings instead from the empirical givens of the particular case: "One cannot be given too many or too frequent warnings against this negligent or even base way of thinking which seeks out the principle among empirical motivations and laws. . . ." Such a procedure "supplants the place of morality with a bastard patched together from limbs of quite diverse ancestry, which looks similar to what everyone wants to see, but not to virtue, for him who has once beheld it in its true shape."³⁵⁰ But perhaps, in light of the immediate duality and the non self-identity that are revealed in us by the imperative event, such a bastard morality is precisely what is called for.

³⁵⁰ Kant, *GMM*, 44 [Ak: 4:426].

Michel Serres presents such a bastard morality not as a system of rules or laws, but rather in the image of Harlequin.³⁵¹ Harlequin, of course, is a stock character from the tradition of Commedia dell'Arte, recognizable most readily by his multi-colored patchwork costume. He is usually depicted as a comically unintelligent and unscrupulous servant in love with Columbine, whom he attempts incompetently to court. In his *Troubadour of Knowledge*, Serres draws particularly on the seventeenth-century popular farce titled *Arlequin Empereur dans la lune*.³⁵² Columbine is depicted here as a servant to Dr. Balouard, who is obsessed with the idea that the moon is inhabited by people whose civilization resembles our own. In the first scene, Harlequin overhears the doctor saying that three different men—an apothecary, a farmer, and a baker—have asked him for Columbine's hand in marriage. Recognizing that his window of opportunity is closing rapidly, Harlequin adopts a succession of disguises, hoping to gain entry into Dr. Balouard's home and thus to gain access to Columbine. In one scene, he disguises himself as a woman, trying to convince the doctor's wife to take him in as her chambermaid. He also attempts unsuccessfully to impersonate the apothecary and the farmer who had requested marriage with Columbine. And most comically, he announces himself to Dr. Balouard as an ambassador from the Emperor of the Moon who, impressed by the doctor's erudition concerning lunar government, requests his daughter's hand in marriage. In the final scene, Harlequin arrives in the guise of the Emperor of the Moon himself, but his illiteracy betrays him and his trick is revealed.

³⁵¹ That this morality is presented by means of an image already entails, of course, that it is a bastard morality.

³⁵² *Arlequin Empereur dans la lune* was first performed by the Comédiens Italiens du Roy at the Hostel de Bourgogne in March of 1684. The text is traditionally attributed to Nolant de Fatouville. The play became popular in England at around the same time when it was translated and considerably revised by Aphra Behn as *The Emperor of the Moon*. All references to the play in what follows pertain to the French version.

In the Preface to *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, Serres gives a variation on the theme of Harlequin as comical Emperor of the Moon. Harlequin is giving a kind of lecture to report on the recent tour of inspection he has made of his lunar territories. The audience ask excitedly about the wondrous differences that must exist between lunar life and life here on earth. But Harlequin has nothing wondrous to report: “everywhere everything is just as it is here, identical in every way to what one can see ordinarily on the terraqueous globe.”³⁵³ This corresponds to the well-known scene in *Arlequin Empereur dans la lune* where Dr. Balouard enthusiastically queries the Emperor about life on the moon. Because his powers of imagination are so limited, Harlequin is able only to envision circumstances that correspond to those he already knows from life on earth. Each time Harlequin describes a particular feature of lunar life, his interlocutors respond with amazement, “*c’est tout comme icy!*”, “it’s just like here!” In the original farce, the characters are excited to hear about the similarities between the two worlds. In Serres’ retelling, though, the audience are incredulous. It cannot really be the case that everywhere everything is the same. Rather, it must be the case that the Emperor has lost his ability to see anything genuinely new and different. The Emperor here is quite literally the legislating subject. The point that Serres draws from this depiction is that legislating “reason never discovers, beneath its feet, anything but its own rule.” Or, in the words of the decidedly un-comical King Solomon, “there is nothing new under the sun.”³⁵⁴

The audience in Serres’ retelling quickly recognize the contradiction—or we might better say, immediate duality—between Harlequin’s words and his appearance.

³⁵³ Serres, *Troubadour*, xiii.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

His costume is a “motley composite made of pieces, of rags or scraps of every size, in a thousand forms and different colors, of varying ages, from different sources, badly basted, inharmoniously juxtaposed, with no attention paid to proximity, mended according to circumstance, according to need, accident, and contingency. . . .”³⁵⁵ In his appearance, Harlequin is a multiplicity of relations and encounters, each of them singular. Indeed, it is not at all obvious how we would answer the question, who is Harlequin *himself*? In *Arlequin Empereur dans la lune* he is presented always in disguise; he is, in Lacan’s terms, not in his place. But Harlequin does not recognize this about himself. He tries to prove to the audience that he is indeed a self-same unity by removing his motley garment. But underneath it is another just like it. Harlequin continues to remove layer after layer of multi-colored garments, but there is always still another beneath. He is, it soon becomes clear, multiplicity all the way down.

The motley appearance of Harlequin, Emperor of the Moon brings out a second, more primordial sense of what it is to be a subject. “Wasn’t the word *subject* itself an adjective that belatedly became a noun? First dependent, submitted, compelled, exposed, indeed obliged, just as I can say to whomever I am speaking to: thank you, I am much obliged to you. . . before taking myself for the point of departure of a logical and grammatical statement where this individual being becomes a person and the basis for acts and knowledge.”³⁵⁶ As legislating subject, Harlequin, Emperor of the Moon finds himself subjected to his subjects. In fact, to be the emperor is to be subjected to others to a greater degree than anyone else. Everybody desires to occupy his place, and there are more than a few who would take his life in order to do so. He will remain emperor only

³⁵⁵ Ibid., xiv.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 144. Translation modified.

by maintaining a high degree of sensitivity—again like the goalkeeper—to the needs and aspirations of his many subjects.³⁵⁷ Harlequin *is* this virtuality, this heightened state of sensitivity. His costume, then, conceals nothing at all, but rather reveals his multiple nature for all to see. Harlequin spoke more truly than he knew when he insisted that everywhere everything is the same, *c'est tout comme icy*. Everywhere, everything is multiple, everything is constituted of relations and encounters, each of them singular.

Eventually, the audience tires of Harlequin's striptease; they had long since figured out that he would continue indefinitely to reveal himself as multiple. As the audience began to walk out of the hall, however, some took a final look back toward the stage and noticed a startling transformation: Harlequin had become Pierrot.³⁵⁸

“How can the thousand hues of an odd medley of colors be reduced to their white summation?”

“Just as the body,” the learned responded, “assimilates and retains the various differences experienced during travel and returns home a half-breed of new gestures and other customs, dissolved in the body's attitudes and functions, *to the point that as far as it is concerned nothing has changed*, so the secular miracle of tolerance, of benevolent neutrality welcomes, in peace, just as many apprenticeships in order to make the liberty of invention, thus of thought, spring forth from them.”³⁵⁹

Pierrot figures the state of heightened sensitivity, of perpetual counter-actualization, that helps us to see what is occluded, or even excluded, by the law, and that opens us to the very singular demands of singular events. The secular miracle of tolerance that Serres evokes here entails just the kind of bastard morality that Kant warned us so importunately against. But only with the help of such a bastard morality can we genuinely aspire to be worthy of what happens to us, “to will and release the event, to become the offspring of one's own events, and thereby to be reborn, to have one more birth, and to break with

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 145.

³⁵⁸ Pierrot is another of the stock characters of the Commedia dell'Arte. He is most recognizable by his all white costume, which is the feature that Serres plays on here.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., xvii. Emphasis mine.

one's carnal birth—to become the offspring of one's events and not of one's actions, for the action is itself produced by the offspring of the event.”³⁶⁰

³⁶⁰ Deleuze, *LS*, 149-150; *LS-Fr*, 175-6.

CHAPTER FIVE: LIBIDINAL SENSE

In the Introduction we presented Jean-François Lyotard's distinction between the profound sense of designation and the flat sense of signification. These two senses of sense, according to Lyotard, are not merely different, but are rather heterogeneous and even incommensurable. The profound space of designation, we saw, is unthinkable within the flat space of signification, where meaning is reduced to *value*. And conversely, linguistic value and the negation that sustains it are invisible to the intentional act wherein the space of designation is made manifest. Despite the fact that we cannot *cognize* either sense within the space of the other, however, we *feel* their co-presence in the experience of the event. Once again, the event for Lyotard is "always that which defies knowledge; it can defy knowledge articulated in discourse, but it can just as well shake the quasi-understanding of the body, bringing it into conflict with itself and with other things, as in emotion."³⁶¹ We experience this event only in the feeling of a difference that we cannot assimilate to the spacing of designation or to the negation of signification. In the feeling of the event we are presented with the blocking together of the two senses of sense. Blocking together here names a co-presence of the two spaces of sense that is not a synthesis: there is no third space of sense in which the spaces of designation and signification would be sublated. Rather, in blocking together the two spaces remain impossible in their co-presence.³⁶² For Lyotard, the non-representable space of this blocking together is a libidinal space.

³⁶¹ Lyotard, *DF*, 22.

³⁶² An example of the blocking together of the two spaces of sense is the dream of the *Autodidasker*, discussed in the Introduction. On the one hand, the word belongs to the flat space of signification: one can recognize in it the value, albeit disguised, of autodidact. But the meaning of the term, especially in the context of the dream in which it figured, is obviously irreducible to its value. The extra dimension of meaning in the term comes from the presence of designation within the space of signification. The two spaces are blocked together, but they do not surpass themselves in a synthesis. The word *Autodidasker*, just like the things in depth described in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, is never given all

In this concluding chapter I will show how the two spaces of sense, represented in the previous chapters by Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, can be thought as blocked together. In doing so, I will follow Lyotard in articulating the non-representable space of their co-presence as a libidinal space. I will redescribe the profound space articulated by Merleau-Ponty in terms of the Freudian secondary process and the flat space articulated by Deleuze in terms of the primary process. Finally, I will show how blocked-together, libidinal sense constitutes the space of our most originary opening out onto the world and how the happening of this originary sense is determinative for our experience of the imperative.

I. Ambiguity of Desire in Freud: Wish and Libido

In order to commence with this libidinal-economic re-articulation of imperative sense, it will first be necessary to determine precisely the meaning of the term libido as Lyotard understands it. The best place to begin here is with an ambiguity that Lyotard finds in Freud's conceptualization of desire:

There are two poles: a pole desire-*Wunsch*, desire-wish, which implies a negativity, which implies a dynamics, which implies teleology, dynamics with an end, which implies object, absence, lost object, and which also implies accomplishment, something like a fulfillment of the wish. All of this forms a set-up that implies the consideration of meaning [*sens*] in desire. The other pole of the category of desire in Freud is desire-libido, desire-process, primary process.³⁶³

Desire as *Wunsch* is oriented within what we called in the previous chapter the world of good sense and common sense, or the world of representation. It is oriented toward

at once, but always with sides that give themselves as hidden. The two spaces are given together in the felt experience of the dream, but cannot be represented together within a third space that would contain them both.

³⁶³ Jean-François Lyotard, *Des Dispositifs Pulsionnels* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1980), 228. Hereafter *DP*. All translations from *DP* are my own.

things or persons as unities that straightforwardly are what they are. This kind of desire is founded on a lack, on the absence of an object that it strives to reappropriate. A classic example of desire as wish is given by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he describes the *fort-da* game staged by his grandson. The boy invented the game to help ameliorate the painful experience of his mother's departure. When his mother was away, the boy would repeatedly take a reel with a string attached to it and "very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o'."³⁶⁴ According to Freud, this expression corresponded to the German *fort*, away. Following this, the boy would pull the reel back toward himself and exclaim "*da*", there. In this game we can recognize the dynamic of loss and reappropriation that is proper to desire as wish, a dynamic set in motion by the boy's painful experience of missing his mother. The reel thrown out of sight straightforwardly represents, and thus *means*, the missing mother and its retrieval represents, and thus means, the fulfillment of the boy's wish for her return.

Freud's tendency to treat desire as displaceable quantity of excitation or libido, on the other hand, is best exemplified in the metapsychological paper "The Unconscious." The most important characteristic of desire as libido, from Lyotard's perspective, is its operating according to a dynamic that is unthinkable from within the space of representation. Libidinal impulses, as opposed to wishes, are not understood as oriented toward unified objects that are represented as lacking. Rather libidinal cathexis is *mobile*: "By the process of displacement one idea may surrender to another the whole volume of its cathexis; by that of condensation it may appropriate the whole cathexis of several

³⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVIII*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 15. Hereafter *BPP*.

other ideas.”³⁶⁵ In Freud’s dream of the *Autodidasker*, for example, the word *Autodidasker* is the “object” of cathexis.³⁶⁶ I put the word object between quotation marks because the cathected word is in fact a condensation of things and significations that are impossible from the perspective of representation. The final two syllables of the word condense the ideas of Freud’s brother Alex and a German political figure named Lasker who had died of syphilis. The first two syllables figure an author (*Autor* in German) who was a friend of Alex’s and whom Freud recalled as having once made a remark about marriage. In the world of representation, of course, Alex, Lasker, and the author are discrete persons. For someone to be Sigmund Freud’s brother Alex, it is necessary that he *not* be Lasker, the author, or anyone else. Alex is who he is and not another person. But desire as libido is indifferent to the negations that are necessary to sustain the unities of good sense and common sense. Libidinal impulses “are coordinate with one another, exist independently side by side, and are exempt from mutual contradiction. When two wishes whose aims must appear to us incompatible become simultaneously active, the two impulses do not detract one from the other or cancel each other, but combine to form an intermediate aim, a compromise.”³⁶⁷ For the unconscious, then, Alex is not yet a discrete object of representation, but is indifferently Lasker, the author, Freud himself, marriage, women in general, dream interpretation, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and in principle anything at all. From this perspective according to which desire is understood more as displaceable quantity of excitation than

³⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 134. Hereafter *GPT*.

³⁶⁶ I discussed the dream of the *Autodidasker* in detail in the Introduction.

³⁶⁷ Freud, *GPT*, 134.

as wish, libidinal cathexis is always only the cathexis of such incompletely individuated and even contradictory patchworks.

What interests Lyotard most is not to determine which of these conceptions of desire is correct, but to understand the relation between them. In certain texts—especially in *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—Freud seems to derive the kind of mental functioning that is oriented toward the orderly, regular world of representation from the dynamic of pre-representational, freely mobile quantities of libidinal excitation. In fact, Freud often refers to the latter dynamic as the primary process and the former as the secondary process. For Freud, the primary process is primary in the straightforwardly chronological and genetic senses of the term: “the primary processes are earlier in time; at the beginning of mental life there are no others. . . .”³⁶⁸ Let us take as an example the case of a hungry infant. The infant’s hunger makes itself manifest as an unpleasurable excitation. This excitation can be discharged only in the experience of a satisfaction, which in this case necessarily involves the presence of food. In the experience of satisfaction, a libidinal connection is established between the unpleasurable excitation and the cathected memory-image of the food that discharged it. The next time the infant feels the same unpleasurable excitation, it will simply re-cathect the memory, essentially hallucinating a satisfaction. In doing so, the infant aims at what Freud calls a perceptual identity, i.e., a simple repetition of the perception associated with the earlier satisfaction. Because the goal of the primary process is to discharge excitation by the shortest route possible, the infant is never concerned to determine the perceptual identity very precisely. The infant does not, for example, connect the satisfaction of his hunger to the cathected

³⁶⁸ Freud, *BPP*, 63.

memory-image of Gerber Simple Recipe pears and chicken dinner. Rather the cathexis established with the memory-image associated with the first satisfaction is readily transferable to any other memory-images that can be related to it in any way. That is just to say that cathexes at the level of the primary process are unbound and freely mobile.

The secondary process emerges as a modification and corrective of the primary process, supplementing its rather obvious shortcomings as a method for achieving satisfaction. When the hungry infant re-cathects the memory-image of the original satisfaction, the unpleasurable excitation remains. The attempt to discharge the excitation fails and thus necessitates a more reliable procedure for achieving satisfaction, which Freud calls reality-testing. Instead of establishing a merely perceptual identity, the mental apparatus must aim at a thought-identity, determining more precisely the “connecting paths between ideas without being led astray by the *intensities* of those ideas.”³⁶⁹ Only at the level of the secondary process does the mental apparatus come to concern itself with determinate, self-identical objects and with the regular relations between them, or in short, with the world of representation. But it would be wrong to suppose that the orderly, determinate world of the secondary process comes simply to *replace* the “world” of the primary process. Rather the secondary process continues to pursue the goal of the primary process, viz., to discharge excitation as efficiently as possible. “All the complicated thought-activity which is spun out from the mnemonic image to the moment at which the perceptual identity is established by the external world—all this activity merely constitutes a *roundabout path to wish-fulfilment* which has been made necessary by experience.”³⁷⁰ The difference, then, is that the secondary

³⁶⁹ Freud, *ID-II*, 602.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 566-7.

process more consistently achieves its aim, but at the price of requiring the mental apparatus to renounce its claim to *immediate* satisfaction.

The relation between the two different conceptions of desire in Freud's work can be stated rather simply according to Lyotard: "the *quanta* of energy (= desire as force) that cannot be *discharged* in a specific action relative to reality, have themselves *represented* on a *stage* open 'to the interior' of the mental apparatus (or of the subject?)—and open by this impossibility, by this lack itself."³⁷¹ In this transformation, desire *tout court*—desire "as work, metamorphosis without end, functioning without memory"—becomes *significant* desire, desire of or for something that is presented as absent.³⁷² Once again, the *fort-da* game that Freud describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* serves as an especially clear example. At first, Freud's grandson relates to his mother not as a self-identical person, but rather as a patchwork of heterogeneous, pre-personal and polymorphously perverse connections. There is a connection between breast and mouth, loving voice and ear, caressing hand and skin, but not yet any connection between "baby" and "mother." At this stage of his development, the baby's mental apparatus is nothing but primary process. The transition to the secondary process and to desire as wish happens when mother ceases to be constantly available to the baby and the satisfying connections are broken. Mother's departure leaves the baby helpless: he does not yet know how to take action in the external world that will achieve the discharge of the unpleasurable excitations he experiences. Indeed, at this stage the baby does not yet have the sense of an external world at all. The baby's only option, then, is to *bind* the freely mobile excitations and thereby to master them, at least to a degree. This

³⁷¹ Lyotard, *DP*, 128.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 269.

he does by *representing* his desire, making it play a meaningful role in the newly hollowed-out theater of his mind. All of the various excitations that are no longer satisfied by mother's breast, voice, hand, etc. are gathered together in the reel, which plays the role of mother. The reel thrown over the cot and the proto-word 'o-o-o-o' gather together and thus represent the absent mother and the pain that her absence causes. The reel pulled back and the joyful 'da' represent mother's reappearance and the satisfaction that is sure to result. Of course this theatrical representation of mother's departure and return can never recapture the intensity of satisfaction characteristic of the primary process. It does, however, give the baby a measure of mastery over his own libidinal impulses and allows him at least to ameliorate the painful effects of separation.

But Lyotard believes that this Freudian account of the transition between the primary process and the secondary process begs the question by treating freely mobile cathexes as already oriented toward wish fulfillment. For Freud it is the pain of separation from the mother that accounts for the representative space of desire that we see exemplified in the *fort-da* game. But if the infant really experiences himself as the subject of this pain and experiences his mother as the missing *object*, then his desire must already have taken the form of a wish.³⁷³ According to Lyotard, "the nipple, the swelling breast, the shoulder, arm and eyes, already had to be instantiated on a *person*, a *unity*, the mother, in order that this present-absent bobbin could take her place, substitute itself for her."³⁷⁴ Desire *tout court*, the singular, intense, pre-personal satisfaction experienced in

³⁷³ Lyotard, *LE*, 23. "Pain as caesura, as fissure, split and disconnection, only hurts unitary totality. In conceiving pain as the motor of theatricality, Freud gives it the metaphysical consistency of the negative, he is therefore a victim of that theatricality, since only representation of a unitarist calling is hurt by fissure and disconnection, only through the already proper, proprietary body is loss felt as aggression, only for an already organized consciousness is death a horror."

³⁷⁴ Lyotard, *LE*, 22.

the coupling of breast and mouth, voice and ear, is treated already in the primary process as desire *of the baby for the mother*. That is, the coupling is understood by Freud as one between the breast *of the mother* and the mouth *of the baby*, the voice *of the mother* and the ear *of the baby*. If the baby's desire is oriented always already toward self-identical wholes, as Freud's genetic account implies, then the baby could never really have been that polymorphous perversity that the account posits him as having once been. This *petitio principii* is so important for Lyotard because it marks a place where Freud betrays the radicality of one of his most revolutionary innovations, viz., a conception of desire as intensity, as productive investment that knows nothing of lack. This wholly positive libido, according to Lyotard, "never fails to invest regions, and it doesn't invest under the rubric of lack and appropriation. It invests without condition."³⁷⁵ That libido invests is for Lyotard an ultimate fact, a kind of *factum libidinis* not unlike Kant's *factum rationis*. This *factum* of investment without condition, without orientation toward the ordered world of knowledge and representation, is essential to the character of libido as *event*. In presenting desire as always already representational, Freud obscures the event along with its ethical and political import.

II. The Flat Space of Libidinal Sense: The Libidinal Band

How, then, does Lyotard himself account for this transformation of freely mobile cathexes into wishes that are oriented toward wholes that are experienced by the desiring subject as lacking? He doesn't. Moreover, he rejects the very possibility of giving an account of this transformation, since any attempt to do so could not help but to smuggle

³⁷⁵ Lyotard, *LE*, 4.

representation and lack into the full positivity of the primary process. With regard to the *factum* of libidinal investment, “there is no answering the question why, which implies precisely nihilism and thought.”³⁷⁶ To conceive cathexis as always a cathexis *for the sake of*. . . or cathexis *in order to*. . . is to conceive desire as oriented always already toward a represented or representable content. It is to treat desire *tout court* as if it were only a disguised or provisional form of desire as wish. The very attempt, then, to supply the *reason* for cathexis necessarily obscures its character as event, as disruption of the order of representation and knowledge, and reduces its alterity to the order of the same.

Instead of giving an *account* of libidinal investment, Lyotard provides an image of its functioning in the libidinal band, a one-sided Moebius strip without depth, without the theatrical space necessary for the appearance of represented objects. This libidinal band is precisely the body, conceived not as an integrated and unified totality, but as a flat surface, a patchwork of pre-personal cathexes.

Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces: not only the skin with all of its folds, wrinkles, scars, with its great velvety planes, and contiguous to that, the scalp and its mane of hair, the tender pubic fur, nipples, nails, hard transparent skin under the heel, the light frills of the eyelids, set with lashes—but open and spread, expose the labia majora, so also the labia minora with their blue network bathed in mucus, dilate the diaphragm of the anal sphincter, longitudinally cut and flatten out the black conduit of the rectum, then the colon, then the caecum, now a ribbon with its surface all striated and polluted with shit. . . .

And this is not all, far from it. . . . Against the palm, all latticed with nerves, and creased like a yellow leaf, set potter’s clay, or even hard wooden handles encrusted with jewels, or a steering wheel, or a drifter’s sail are perhaps required. Don’t forget to add to the tongue and all the pieces of the vocal apparatus, all of the sounds of which they are capable, and moreover, the whole selective network of sounds, that is, the phonological system, for this too belongs to the libidinal “body”. . . .³⁷⁷

We can see how this image denies the theatrical space of representation. Most basically, there is in this image no distinction between inside and outside, between me and not-me.

³⁷⁶ Lyotard, *LE*, 25. By nihilism, Lyotard means the tendency of thought to subordinate the intensity and positivity of cathexis to a lack, a non-presence that provides its meaning and orientation.

³⁷⁷ Lyotard, *LE*, 1-2.

Lyotard asks us to think the depths of our organic bodies—that depth within which representation takes place, in which the outside becomes manifest as an outside *for me*, the phenomenologists’ immanent transcendence—as the complex enfolding of surfaces. And these surfaces include not only “my” body but all those things, persons, words, sounds, capacities, sensations, etc. with which “my” body has linked up. At the level of the libidinal band, there is no *I* that has as its properties the ability to speak English, an ear for the music of Boulez, or the capacity for pleasure in good food. Rather the *I* emerges only as a surface effect of the coupling of tongue and food, ear and music, vocal apparatus and the English language.

This is just to say that “in the beginning, at the core of life, *there are excitations.*”³⁷⁸ Originally, there is the *fact* of cathexis. We can understand this cathexis on the model of the encounter between the series of the signified and the series of the signifier articulated in the previous chapter with regard to Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*. Like the encounter of signified and signifier, the libidinal encounter is never an encounter between pre-existing, self-identical terms. We saw in the previous chapter that, owing to the differential structure of sense, things and propositions could not contain their meanings within themselves. Their sense only became consolidated, i.e., they only became what they were, in the space of the encounter. The encounter, then, was the event of the *production* of sense. This same structure characterizes the libidinal encounter. Perhaps the clearest example of this in the literature of psychoanalysis is that of Judge Schreber and his relation to the physician in charge of his care, Dr. Flechsig. Flechsig is for Schreber the object of a very important cathexis. But this Flechsig is not

³⁷⁸ Alphonso Lingis, *Libido: The French Existential Theories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 75. Emphasis mine.

at all to be equated with the “real” Dr. Flechsig, the one who can be localized within the space and time of representation and the facts of whose life can be known according to public standards of evidence. Of the Flechsig of the libidinal encounter we can say at once “that he is a cop, that he is God, that he is a lover seduced by Schreber’s feminine charms, that he does everything he can to prevent the president [Schreber] from shitting, that he is a member of a noble family of long standing which was involved with Schreber’s family.”³⁷⁹ This cathected Flechsig is manifestly not the “real” Flechsig, who of course was not God, a cop, an aristocrat, or seduced by Schreber’s femininity. The cathected Flechsig is much more like the being-green-of-the-tree or being-a-father and being-a-son. All of these are flat surface effects. Being-a-father is not so much a property of the real man who is a father as it is a kind of mist over the prairie, an incorporeal, ungraspable sense. This sense, as we saw, is in one way indifferent to the man whose sense it is, but in another way it is more his own than anything else. In the case of Schreber, Flechsig names a kind of free-floating surface effect that can never be appropriated or reduced to a property. Flechsig, like the being-green-of-the-tree or being-a-father, is indifferent to good sense and common sense. Despite not being “real” though, the cathected Flechsig constitutes the meaning of Schreber’s existence in a much more intimate way than do the things and persons of the world of representation. Schreber *is* the one who is persecuted by God, who is being turned into a woman so that he might redeem the world and restore a lost state of bliss. That is the incorporeal meaning of his existence in the same way that being-a-father is the meaning of a father’s existence. Schreber’s cathexis of Flechsig, then, is a cathexis of this complex meaning.

³⁷⁹ Lyotard, *LE*, 55.

We can also understand these libidinal surface effects in terms of the special characteristics of the primary process that Freud articulates in the essay “The Unconscious.” First, the processes of the unconscious are indifferent to reality.³⁸⁰ What is originary are libidinal excitations and not their reference to an independent reality. One morning, in a state between waking and sleeping, Schreber had the idea “that after all it really must be very nice to be a woman submitting to the act of copulation.”³⁸¹ Based on what Freud calls the anaclitic deviation of the organ-function, there emerges in the region of Schreber’s anus a felt intensity. This intensity is a surface effect, a kind of by-product of the functioning of his digestive system.³⁸² The intensity is not *meaningful* in that it does not refer beyond itself to that *for which* it would be an intensity. It is not a wish. The delusional narrative in terms of which Schreber verbalizes these excitations is not an account of them, but is rather another libidinal surface that extends and intensifies the libidinal surface of the anus. Flechsig, then, does not name the man who would really be responsible for the excitations in Schreber’s anus. He is in no way the product of any reality testing on Schreber’s part. Flechsig-God names and intensifies the glorious and miraculous character of Schreber’s excitations; “for nerves in a condition of great excitement, as his were for a long time, have precisely the property of exerting an attraction upon God—though this is touching upon matters which human speech is scarcely, if at all, capable of expressing, since they lie outside the scope of human experience and, indeed, have been revealed to him alone.”³⁸³ But Flechsig-God also

³⁸⁰ Freud, *GPT*, 135.

³⁸¹ Daniel Paul Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* (Leipzig, 1903), 36. Hereafter *Denkwürdigkeiten*. Quoted in Sigmund Freud, *Three Case Histories: The “Wolf Man,” The “Rat Man,” and The Psychotic Doctor Schreber* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 108. Hereafter *Three Case Histories*.

³⁸² Lingis, *Libido*, 82.

³⁸³ Freud, *Three Case Histories*, 112.

names the humiliation and the feeling of violation associated with the excitations: “Rays of God not infrequently thought themselves entitled to mock at me by calling me ‘Miss Schreber,’ in allusion to the emasculation which, it was alleged, I was about to undergo.”³⁸⁴ Or again, “So *this* sets up to have been a *Senatspräsident*, this person who lets himself be f----d!”³⁸⁵ We see clearly from these passages that Flechsig is not an intelligible sign, referring beyond itself to something that has its place in the real world. Flechsig is not an element in the real world that accounts for Schreber’s excitations, but is, as cathected, another patch added on to the patchwork that is Schreber’s libidinal body.³⁸⁶

Closely related to this indifference to reality are two other special characteristics of the primary process that we can see demonstrated in Schreber’s cathexis of Flechsig. First, the cathexis is mobile. We have seen how readily Schreber’s cathexis slides from Flechsig to God and from God to Flechsig. In addition, the normal intensities that accompany the functioning of the digestive system can shift readily from being a particularly feminine kind of voluptuousness that Schreber himself enjoys to a humiliating assault on his masculinity that God enjoys. On the one hand, defecation for Schreber “is always accompanied by the generation of an exceedingly strong feeling of spiritual voluptuousness. For the relief from the pressure caused by the presence of faeces in the intestines produces a sense of intense well-being in the nerves of

³⁸⁴ Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 127. Quoted in Freud, *Three Case Histories*, 116.

³⁸⁵ Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 177. Quoted in Freud, *Three Case Histories*, 116.

³⁸⁶ Lyotard, *LE*, 60. “And so it is the alleged frontier of Schreber’s body which finds itself violated by the name of Flechsig (just as much as the alleged frontier of the body of Flechsig). This limit itself is pulverized by the vertiginous rotation, the President’s body is undone and its pieces are projected across libidinal space, mingling with other pieces in an inextricable patchwork. The head is now simply any fragment at all of the skin.”

voluptuousness.”³⁸⁷ But on the other hand, it is God who “demands a *constant state of enjoyment*,” and if Schreber happens to take a little pleasure himself from this, then he “can feel justified in accepting it as some slight compensation for the inordinate measure of suffering and privation” that he has had to endure.³⁸⁸ At the level of the primary process, it is not essential to determine very precisely *who* experiences the enjoyment or *who* is the agent of persecution. As we have seen, what is essential is that these cathexes successfully extend a libidinal surface.³⁸⁹

The other special characteristic of the primary process that is exemplified by the Schreber case is its atemporality, or perhaps better, its omnitemporality.³⁹⁰ Of course Schreber’s delusion develops over time. In the earliest stage, the agent of persecution is determined unambiguously to be Flechsig, who aims to have Schreber declared incurable, to have his body transformed into that of a woman, and then to sexually abuse him/her. At this stage, Schreber thinks of God as allied with him against Flechsig and his unnatural designs. Only later does Schreber come to see God as the being ultimately responsible for his emasculation. This new determination is accompanied by a new affective relation to the situation: assuming the role of a woman is no longer an intolerable affront to his noble and masculine station in life, but is rather a duty undertaken for the sake of redeeming the entire world. At the level of Schreber’s unconscious, though, this development happens entirely in the present tense. At the basis of the delusion, according to Freud, is Schreber’s homosexual libidinal cathexis of

³⁸⁷ Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 225. Quoted in Freud, *Three Case Histories*, 123-4.

³⁸⁸ Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 281. Quoted in Freud, *Three Case Histories*, 131.

³⁸⁹ Cf. Lyotard, *LE*, 59. “If Flechsig, like our previous example Roberte, is a tensor sign, and not merely ‘meaningful’, it is not through the polysemia of statements which are attached to her name, it is through the vertigo of anal eroticism which grips the libidinal Schreberian body of which the name of Flechsig is the extension.”

³⁹⁰ Lyotard, *DF*, 337.

Flechsigt, which is itself a displacement of a similar cathexis of his own father. Because this cathexis is unacceptable, it is repressed and disguised by a reversal of affect: Schreber does not love Flechsigt, but rather *hates* him. And this disguised content is again transformed into Schreber's hating Flechsigt *because* Flechsigt hates him.³⁹¹ This final variation is what gives Schreber's delusion its specifically paranoid form. While these three propositions, representing three different libidinal relations, can only be stated and understood consecutively, they are felt in the unconscious as simultaneous. Schreber hates Flechsigt *only because* he simultaneously loves Flechsigt. And Flechsigt hates Schreber *only because* Schreber simultaneously loves and hates him. These three libidinal relations are inextricable and exist as superimposed in a kind of perpetual present tense.³⁹²

These special characteristics of the primary process—its indifference to reality, the mobility of cathexes, and omnitemporality—suggest a flat space of libidinal sense that is inconceivable within the space of representation. To describe this space of the primary process as flat or two-dimensional is to contrast it with the profound, three-dimensional space of Merleau-Pontean phenomenology. We have seen how for Schreber the cathexis of his father was easily transferable to Flechsigt and to God, and how this transfer took place within a perpetual present tense. This means that at the level of the primary process, Schreber's father *is* Flechsigt and that both of these *are* God. It is not the case that Schreber's father *adumbrates* Flechsigt, or presents him by setting him into a

³⁹¹ Freud, *Three Case Histories*, 165-6.

³⁹² Another example of the superimposition of impossible states is given in Schreber's affective relation to his own emasculation. We have seen that at first Schreber is humiliated by his condition, but is later exalted by it. Again, for the unconscious these states are simultaneous. What seems to come last, viz., Schreber's enjoyment of the feminine sexual position, is in fact there all along as the repressed and disguised content. Schreber is angry and humiliated by his emasculation *only because* he simultaneously enjoys it and desires it. The humiliation and the enjoyment are inextricable and, once again, superimposed in a perpetual present.

distance. Neither, of course, does Flechsig adumbrate God. This distancing that is characteristic of the phenomenology of perception opens a three-dimensional space or depth of field within which real things, persons, properties, etc. can be distinguished from each other.³⁹³ At the level of the primary process, though, Flechsig is not a discrete, self-identical person who merely represents or *means* Schreber's father. He occupies the very same libidinal space as Schreber's father, and both occupy the same libidinal space as God. Locations within the space of the libidinal band, then, are not *partes extra partes*, but rather each part is, or at least can be, superimposed on any other.³⁹⁴ That Schreber's relation to his father took place in a different time than his relation to Flechsig, or that all three men occupy a space incommensurable with the space of God, is no obstacle to the functioning of the primary process. In its non-representational, two-dimensional space, impossibles co-exist in a manner wholly indifferent to the essentially three-dimensional space of reality.

III. Desire as Phenomenon: A Three-Dimensional Libidinal Space

One would miss the sense of *Libidinal Economy* if one took it primarily as advancing a thesis about desire and about the two-dimensional space of the libidinal

³⁹³ Lyotard, *DF*, 338.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud gives an especially helpful image of the kind of superimposition that happens at the level of the primary process. Freud asks us to imagine Rome during the various periods of its history, to visualize all of the buildings and the city walls in their proper locations and in their proper times. He then asks us to imagine all of the different periods of Roman history, with all of their different architectural features, co-existing in one time and one place, so that, for example, the Coliseum and Nero's Golden House could be seen together in the very same space. Of course we cannot really represent this state of affairs to ourselves, since in reality "the same space cannot have two different contents." Nonetheless, this coexistence of different contents within the same space is precisely what characterizes the space of the unconscious. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 17-20.

band. The book is not primarily *about* the libidinal band, but is itself an extension of the band, a “Harlequin’s costume of libidinal fragments.”³⁹⁵ It is not so much *about* singular intensities as it is itself a singular intensity. In *Peregrinations*, a book based on a series of lectures he gave in 1986, Lyotard states that his task in *Libidinal Economy* was “to destroy or deconstruct the presentation of any theatrical representation whatsoever, with the goal of inscribing the passage of intensities directly into the prose, without any mediation at all.”³⁹⁶ To represent desire theatrically, to present it within a theoretical discourse as something absent or set at a distance, would necessarily be to falsify it. Desire is figural; it happens as an event that is felt immediately as a disruption of the order of discourse. Thus one will have caught the sense of *Libidinal Economy*, according to Lyotard, only if one experienced it directly in its character as event.³⁹⁷

And yet the third dimension constituted by the text’s reference outside itself, to an absence that it represents within its own theatrical space, is irreducible. Desire and its two-dimensional space are never really given to us entirely without mediation; we have no access to these except insofar as they are *presented* in language. And with this presentation we find ourselves once again within the space of representation that Lyotard had hoped “to destroy or deconstruct.” We can also make this point in more explicitly Freudian terms: although we conceive the primary process as originary both chronologically and genetically, it nonetheless remains the case that this originary status is affirmed only within the orderly, regular world of the secondary process. We can imagine the superimposition of all the eras of Roman history within the same space only

³⁹⁵ Lyotard, *LE*, 261.

³⁹⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 13. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 3-5.

³⁹⁷ Cf. Lyotard, *DF*, 18.

on the basis of our reality-tested knowledge of Rome and, more generally, of space. Lyotard, of course, was aware of this contamination of the flat space of the libidinal band by the three-dimensional space of representation. “All speech is endowed with a truth-value, whatever this expression means. Even for us libidinal economists, and not just for you, theoreticians, what is said here *counts as true*. . . . One could even show that Nietzsche was a Platonist.”³⁹⁸

All of this is to say that desire, in addition to being a freely mobile, pre-representational libidinal excitation, is also a *phenomenon*, in the strictly phenomenological sense of the term. A phenomenon, we will recall, is that which is revealed by means of the phenomenological reduction, i.e., by the suspension of the natural attitude’s fixation on the objects that appear and its consequent inattention to the various *modes* in which those objects appear. The phenomenon, then, is neither the real object “out there” in the world nor the idea of that object that would be somehow “in” the mind of the subject. The phenomenon, rather, is irreducibly correlational. It is given only within a spacing that, from the phenomenological perspective, is originary. For Husserl, this spacing is the spacing of intentionality, the extension of the phenomenon across the noetic and noematic poles. Merleau-Ponty thinks this spacing in *Phenomenology of Perception* as the phenomenal field, and later in *The Visible and the Invisible* as flesh. In all of these conceptions, the phenomenon appears as the in-itself

³⁹⁸ Lyotard, *LE*, 262; *LE-Fr*, 310-11. Translation modified. Cf. Lyotard, *LE*, 50; *LE-Fr*, 64-5. “We know your objection, semioticians: whatever you do or think, you tell us, you make a sign of your action and reflection, you cannot do otherwise, due to the simple perspective it provides on the referential axis of your action-discourse, hollowed out into a two-faced thing, meaningful/meaningless, intelligible/sensible, manifest/hidden, in front/behind; whenever you speak, you tell us, you excavate a theatre in things. Fair enough, we don’t deny it, we’ve been through it and go through it all the time, it is in no way a matter of determining a new domain, another field, a *beyond representation* which would be immune to the effects of theatricality, not at all, we are well aware that you are just waiting for us to do this, to be so ‘stupid’. . . .”

for-us or as an immanent transcendence.³⁹⁹ The condition of its being present is that it be given only as set into a distance.

The irreducibility of spacing in the structure of appearance entails that the phenomenon can never be given *immediately*. It is given, rather, only in adumbrations. To see this, we can turn once again to Husserl's example from *Ideas I* of the experience of seeing a table.⁴⁰⁰ At no point do I ever hold the entire table in my gaze. I see it only from perspectives that necessarily conceal other perspectives that I could take on it. But these perspectives are never given as self-sufficient and as closed in on themselves; my consciousness does not lose itself in each discrete sensation or content of consciousness. Rather each perspective is given precisely as a perspective *of* the table. The perspectives, in other words, adumbrate the table, which is never given immediately, but is always present as set into a distance. This same kind of description could be given for desire, which, as phenomenal, would correspond to desire as wish. The desire that is manifest in the *fort-da* game staged by Freud's grandson provides an especially clear example of this phenomenal desire. There is, no doubt, a mobile, pre-representational excitation that happens at the surface of mouth and breast, ear and voice. And no doubt there is a stage in the infant's development at which these excitations do not refer to the baby as an organic unity who would be their subject or toward "mother" as a self-identical whole who would be their object. And yet these excitations cannot be understood exclusively as displaceable quanta of libidinal energy. If they were nothing more than this, then the development of the *fort-da* game and of the profound, theatrical space that it presupposes would be unthinkable. The excitations that the infant experiences must adumbrate

³⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 322; *PP-Fr*, 372.

⁴⁰⁰ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 73-76 (§41). This example was discussed in the Introduction.

something, however dimly this “something” is conceived. The infant experiences this something that the excitations adumbrate as present in the mode of absence, or in other words, as the object of a wish.⁴⁰¹

But does this account not recreate the *petitio principii* that Lyotard had pointed to in Freud’s discussion of the *fort-da* game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*? Does it not present freely mobile libidinal excitations as if they were already wishes? And does it not therefore conceal the event-character of the primary process by conceiving of it within the three-dimensional, representational space of the secondary process? Not necessarily. Freud’s *petitio principii*, according to Lyotard, consisted in his isolating the pain of separation as the point of transition from the primary to the secondary process. In conceiving pain as fission and as negation, Freud treated the primary process as if it were already the secondary process, rendering superfluous his account of the transition from the one to the other. The *petitio principii*, then, does not consist in Freud’s having posited an imbrication of the secondary process within the primary process, but rather in his having conceived the imbrication from the perspective of the former. An account that articulated the imbrication from the side of the primary process, on the other hand, would not beg the question, as it would not presuppose the priority of what it itself posited as secondary. Thus “it is necessary that the attempt be made to describe the circumscription of a theatre where there had been flat skin, affirmatively, energetically, without presupposing lack, when this would be under the name of pain.”⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ For a much more detailed discussion of the irreducible phenomenal character of desire and of its relation to the kind of distancing that happens in the presentation of phenomena through adumbrations, see Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Paul B. Milan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 108-127.

⁴⁰² Lyotard, *LE*, 24.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari offer a description that seems to meet these requirements in *Anti-Oedipus*. This description is not an explanation: it does not attempt to tell us why or for what purpose the freely mobile quanta of excitation of the primary process come to be oriented toward objects that are present as lacking. As we have seen, Lyotard believes that the question *why* already presupposes the theatrical space of representation.⁴⁰³ Rather their description begins with something like the *factum libidinis* that we saw in *Libidinal Economy*. In the beginning is desiring-production which, like Lyotard's wholly positive cathexis, is not oriented or governed by any representational order. It invests without condition. But this "production is *immediately* consumption and recording, and the recording and consumption determine production directly, but from within production itself."⁴⁰⁴ That is, production or cathexis immediately *is* the production of the space of recording, the theatrical space of representation in which what is given is present as absent, as a sign for something that is lacking. This account thinks negation and spacing on the basis of positive cathexis, and not vice versa. For Deleuze and Guattari, "desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire: they are counterproducts within the real that desire produces."⁴⁰⁵

To show more explicitly how this is the case, we can reconstruct the example of the *fort-da* game from a Deleuzo-guattarian perspective.⁴⁰⁶ Just as in Freud's account,

⁴⁰³ Lyotard, *LE*, 25. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *AOE*, 24; *AOE-Fr*, 31. "The great discovery of psychoanalysis was that of the production of desire, of the productions of the unconscious. But once Oedipus entered the picture, this discovery was soon buried beneath a new brand of idealism: a classical theater was substituted for the unconscious as a factory; representation was substituted for the units of production of the unconscious; and an unconscious that was capable of nothing but expressing itself—in myth, tragedy, dreams—was substituted for the productive unconscious."

⁴⁰⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *AOE*, 4; *AOE-Fr*, 9-10. Translation modified. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁰⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *AOE*, 27; *AOE-Fr*, 34.

⁴⁰⁶ A similar, though longer and more detailed, version of this example is given in Eugene W. Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999), 26-36. My own account borrows considerably from Holland's.

we can begin with a conception of the infant as polymorphously perverse, as libidinally coupled with his mother not as a molar whole (as “mother”), but rather in terms of various partial objects (mouth to breast, ear to voice, eye to smile, etc.) And just as in Freud’s account, we must posit that these couplings, along with the satisfactions that accompany them, are broken. According to Freud, as we have seen, these breaks are painful. Unable to obtain satisfactions in his accustomed ways, the infant binds his unpleasurable excitations by representing them in the theater of his mind. The transition to the secondary process is thus accounted for in terms of lack and negation. For Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, the breakings of couplings are *affirmative*. The cathexis that joins mouth to breast is a production of consumption or of consummation, of the feeling of satisfaction. Once the product is produced, i.e., once the satisfaction is experienced, the infant *himself* breaks the connection. Moreover, the infant breaks the connection in the interest of more production, of making more and more connections.⁴⁰⁷ But as we saw, the products of cathexis do not simply disappear when a new investment is made. They are timeless, co-existing impossibly on the flat space of the primary process. There remains, then, a record of the couplings, even when these are not present sources of satisfaction. In short, they become *signs*, referring to satisfactions that are present as absent. The three-dimensional space of the theater, then, is the product of wholly positive cathexis and exists, in a geometrically non-representable way, within the two-dimensional space of the libidinal band.

⁴⁰⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *AOE*, 8; *AOE-Fr*, 14. “Desiring machines work only when they break down, and by continually breaking down.”

IV. Dissimulation

To say that the profound theatrical space of representation exists on the flat space of the libidinal band is to say that these two spaces are blocked together. Within the non-representable space of this blocking together, profound space and flat space co-exist in such a way that each dissimulates the other. With his concept of dissimulation, Lyotard brings into play simultaneously the senses of dissimulate and dissimilate, to conceal and to alter.⁴⁰⁸ The theater within which the reel and string *represent* the absent mother, within which they present her as a unity whose absence is painful and whose return would bring satisfaction, dissimulates the flat space of pre-personal, freely mobile cathexes. Desire as wish conceals desire as displaceable quantum of excitation, such that we are able to catch sight of the latter only in seemingly non-rational phenomena like dreams, parapraxes, jokes, neuroses, and psychoses. In the case of Freud's grandson, it is not at all easy to recognize the multiple, mobile cathexes of partial objects in the more manifest wish for the mother's presence. The theater of representation functions as a *dispositif*, an apparatus that alters libidinal excitations by conducting them into regular channels, enabling the repetition of determinate, representable satisfactions in accordance with the principle of constancy and, more generally, the pleasure principle.⁴⁰⁹ The

⁴⁰⁸ Lyotard, *LE*, 52; *LE-Fr*, 66. Cf. James Williams, *Lyotard : Towards a Postmodern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 97-100.

⁴⁰⁹ Lyotard, *DP*, 227-231. Lyotard's *dispositif* is generally translated by "set-up." This, it seems to me, fails to capture what is most important in the concept. What is most important about the *dispositif* is that it *functions*; it gathers together and channels otherwise disorderly (i.e., freely mobile) quanta of excitation and renders them regular and repeatable. "Set-up," it seems to me, does not sufficiently capture the active, dynamic sense of Lyotard's *dispositif*. In what follows, I will leave the word untranslated.

dispositif, in short, functions according to the demands of the reality principle, rendering the mobile, disorderly cathexes of the primary process literally unrecognizable.

Importantly, the *dispositif* is a *dispositif* of the libido in both the objective and subjective senses of the genitive. On the one hand, the *dispositif* is the apparatus that organizes, or dis-poses, libidinal energy. But as we saw in Deleuze and Guattari's description of the immediate unity of production, recording, and consumption, it is also the case that the *dispositif* is itself a disposition of libido. This corresponds broadly to Freud's insight that thinking and its orientation toward reality are ultimately in service of the same end as the primary process. The duplicity of the genitive in *dispositif* of libido entails that there are neither two *kinds* of desire—wish and quantum of excitation, Eros and Thanatos—nor two discrete *spaces* of desire—the theater and the libidinal band. There is *one* libido that operates simultaneously according to two impossible but inextricable dynamics and within two impossible but inextricable spaces.⁴¹⁰

Lyotard offers an example of dissimulation in the case history of Dora, first presented by Freud in his *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*.⁴¹¹ Dora suffered from, among other things, a nervous cough (*tussis nervosa*) and hoarseness, which Freud diagnosed as a hysterical conversion, i.e., a detachment of libido from a repressed idea and its transformation into a symptom that expresses, but also conceals, the idea in a bodily way. Dora's persistent cough and hoarseness tended to appear when Herr K, a friend of the family and the husband of Frau K, with whom Dora's father had

For more on the relation between the pleasure principle and the principle of constancy, see Freud, *BPP*, 75-78.

⁴¹⁰ Lyotard, *LE*, 52-3; *LE-Fr*, 68.

⁴¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. VII*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 3-122. Hereafter *Dora*.

been carrying on an extra-marital affair, was away. This condition had its origin in one of Dora's earliest experiences, at age fourteen, with the world of adult sexuality. Herr K had arranged to meet Dora at his place of work, where they would have a good view of a religious festival. When Dora arrived at the office, Herr K kissed her on the lips. Her response to this was a feeling of disgust. According to Freud, this feeling was a disguise for Dora's true feeling of sexual excitement, which she could not acknowledge. The strong cathexis of the area of the mouth, then, functioned to maintain Dora's repression of her unavowable sexuality. The cathexis was reinforced by the circumstance that Herr K was often away for long periods of time and that during these periods he communicated with Dora in writing. When Herr K was away, Dora's voice was useless for communicating the thoughts she most wanted to convey, and this was expressed in her somatic condition.⁴¹²

We can easily recognize Dora's cough as a libidinal *sign* with a relatively straightforward meaning. The cough *intends* Herr K, who is absent and whose return would bring about a satisfaction. We can, then, unfold the meaning of the sign into a series of propositions that are perfectly sensible from the perspective of the secondary process and thus of reality: Dora loves Herr K. Herr K's absence is painful to Dora and his presence would make her happy. This interpretation of the meaning of the cough is further supported by the fact that Dora herself tended to associate other people's illnesses with their attempts to get something that they wanted. She had noticed, for example, that when Herr K was away traveling, Frau K was generally in good health, but when he returned, her health deteriorated. "Dora realized that the presence of the husband had the effect of making his wife ill, and that she was glad to be ill so as to be able to escape the

⁴¹² Ibid., 40.

conjugal duties which she so much detested.”⁴¹³ Moreover, Freud points out that it is common for young children to experience as painful the arrival of younger siblings and the consequent requirement that they renounce their exclusive claim on their parents’ affections. Children tend to learn quickly that they can direct their parents’ attention back toward themselves by the simple expedient of being ill.⁴¹⁴ All of this suggests that Dora’s cough functions like the reel and string in the *fort-da* game: both *represent* at once the painful absence of a loved one and the promise of satisfaction that would accompany that person’s return.

And yet Dora’s cough as sign, as reference beyond itself to Herr K and his present-absent love, also *dissimulates* a multitude of cathexes that are impossible within the space of representation. During the course of the analysis, Freud came to understand the cough as grounded ultimately in Dora’s love for her father, who had suffered for most of his life from tuberculosis and whose cough had made a strong impression on Dora. From this perspective, the libidinal meaning of Dora’s cough consisted in her sympathetic identification with her father. At a later stage in her life, however, this original cathexis took on a very different sense. According to Freud, Dora often spoke of Frau K in ways that only thinly disguised her homosexual attraction.⁴¹⁵ This homosexual current of feeling represented a reversion to the kind of same-sex identifications that characterize that stage of children’s libidinal development just prior to their taking an interest in the opposite sex.⁴¹⁶ When Dora’s investments in men—specifically Herr K—failed to yield satisfactions, she reverted to earlier channels of

⁴¹³ Ibid., 58-9. Dora also reported having judged both her father and her cousin to be malingerers.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 44-5.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 61-2.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 60.

investment that had once met with greater success. These two cathexes are joined together in Dora's identification with Frau K *qua* lover of her father. Freud concluded that "with her spasmodic cough, which, as is usual, was referred for its exciting stimulus to a tickling in her throat, she pictured to herself a scene of sexual gratification *per os* between the two people whose love affair occupied her mind so incessantly."⁴¹⁷ Dora's cough, then, constitutes a libidinal identification with her father, which is subsequently displaced into and disguised as a libidinal identification with Frau K. Because investments are omnitemporal and occupy the same libidinal space, Dora's identification with her father is inseparable from her identification with Frau K. Both of these unstable libidinal identifications, and probably many others besides, are dissimulated by the cough's relatively fixed reference to Herr K. Dora's cough, then, is a complex libidinal *dispositif* in which the impossible spaces of the primary and secondary processes are blocked together. The cough functions as a *sign* of Herr K within the three-dimensional space of representation, but it functions just as much as a *consumption* of singular, non-representational intensities, as a repetition of innumerable, non-localizable satisfactions.⁴¹⁸ It is "at the same time a sign that produces meaning through difference

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁴¹⁸ Lyotard's emphases in his discussion of the Dora case are slightly different from my own. Instead of the blocking together of the flat space of the libidinal band and the profound space of representation, Lyotard focuses on the ways in which Eros and Thanatos dissimulate each other. We can regard Dora's cough as an example of Thanatos, as unbinding the system of bound cathexes that constitutes Dora's organic body. But we can just as well understand the cough as an example of Eros: it is not merely an unbinding, but also a *dispositif* that functions perfectly well on its own terms as an apparatus for producing certain satisfactions. For Lyotard, there is no choice to make between understanding the cough as Eros or as Thanatos, because it is immediately both. The cough is at once a binding and an unbinding and must thus be understood at once in accordance with the secondary process and with the primary process. These two spaces are blocked together in the cough. Lyotard, *LE*, 52-54; *LE-Fr*, 68-70.

and opposition, and a sign producing intensity through force [*puissance*] and singularity.”⁴¹⁹

V. The Tensor Sign as Immediate Duality

Dora’s cough, Dr. Flechsig, and the *Autodidasker* are all tensor signs. Tensor sign is the translation into libidinal terms of the idea of an immediate duality of the actual and the virtual that we discussed in the previous chapter with regard to Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*. The goalkeeper preparing for a shot on goal, we saw, occupies simultaneously at least seven different positions and fourteen different futures. These spaces and times are, of course, impossible from the perspective of good sense and common sense. They co-exist *virtually* in much the same way that impossible cathexes co-exist on the libidinal band. But that same goalkeeper is equally one person in a determinate space and time. Even as he prepares for the shot on goal, Gianluigi Buffon can be located at one determinate time—the 104th minute of the 2006 World Cup final match on July 9, 2006—and at one determinate place in the Olympiastadion in Berlin, Germany. It is not the case that the goalkeeper is *either* virtual *or* actual; rather he is always immediately both. Likewise, Dora’s cough is immediately both a sign of the self-identical person Herr K and a felt intensity that joins together numerous impossible cathexes. Dr. Flechsig is at once the determinate person who is actually responsible for Schreber’s care at his clinic in Leipzig and the impossible feelings experienced by Schreber of humiliation and exaltedness, persecution and glory. Finally, *Autodidasker* is at once a word that appeared at a particular time and place in Freud’s dream and a condensation of numerous

⁴¹⁹ Lyotard, *LE*, 54; *LE-Fr*, 69.

affects, including concern for the healthy development of his children, fear for his brother's and sons' being harmed in their relationships with women, and embarrassment at his having misdiagnosed a case of neurosis.

From the perspective of Lyotard's libidinal materialism, anything that can be cathected, which is to say, anything at all, can function as a tensor sign. We have been focusing on specifically Freudian examples only because Freud has shown in such detail the way in which the primary process is given right at the level of the secondary process. What is essential to the tensor sign is not that it is a neurotic symptom, a dream-content, or a parapraxis, but simply that it functions as a libidinal *dispositif*. Like any libidinal *dispositif*, the tensor sign *signifies*. This signification, as we have seen, is the product of the binding of cathexis into regular channels. Dora's numerous unavowable cathexes are rendered meaningful when they are gathered together in her love for Herr K. The painful experiences of Freud's grandson become significant when they are instantiated onto the person of his mother. But this erotic, binding moment of the libidinal *dispositif* is inseparable from the unbinding moment of Thanatos, which ceaselessly disrupts the order of representation. As itself a disposition of libido, the *dispositif* never wholly transcends the disruptive, disordered, and deconstructing dynamic of the primary process.⁴²⁰ The signification of Dora's affect, the instantiation of her desire onto Herr K, is always already destabilized by the ineliminable mobility of her cathexis. As a result, Herr K is always more than he "really" is, where real is understood according to the requirements of the reality principle. Likewise, Dora's cough, her father, Frau K, and Dora herself are

⁴²⁰ Lyotard, *DP*, 229.

more than they really are. It is this being more than they really are that constitutes the objects of cathexis as tensor signs.⁴²¹

This fact that anything at all can be a tensor sign, and can thus be more than it really is, has a special relevance for our understanding of the imperative and of what it commands. The ethical import of the tensor sign corresponds broadly to the ethical import, described in the previous chapter, of the moment of counter-actualization in every actualization. There we discussed the example of death, which, as Blanchot has argued, can never be fully actualized. To be sure, one's death always has its place within the ordered, regulated world of representation. One dies at a determinate time and place from causes demonstrable according to public, well-established rules of evidence. But it is equally the case that one's death is never given in the present tense. It is pre-eminently that which is not in its place, that which I can never appropriate by making it a possibility *for me*. Death, in other words, is always in excess of its actualization. It was in this moment of counter-actualization that we isolated the possibility for an attunement to the *singularity*, and thus to the absolute, unexchangeable *dignity* of others. As a formula for the imperative that arose from this attunement, we suggested the following: do not be unworthy of the force of counter-actualization that accompanies every actualization. Do not close yourself off from the singularity that becomes manifest in the event of the encounter. This formulation resembled the second formula of the imperative that Kant

⁴²¹ We could, of course, also describe the various elements of the Schreber case with reference to the tensor sign. Flechsig is really the doctor in charge of Schreber's care at Leipzig, but is also obviously much more than that, owing to the extreme mobility of Schreber's cathexis. Again, the same could be said of God, femininity, homosexuality, Schreber's anus, the process of defecating, and of Schreber himself. All of these are significant, and yet they all exceed themselves in ways that destabilize their significations. This excess is the excess proper to the primary process. It should also be noted that this experience of an excess over the real significations of cathected objects is not at all limited to psychotics and neurotics. If the Schreber case is so valuable for our understanding of the economics of the libido, it is simply because it presents the workings of the primary process right at the surface, in the form of his delusions. These same processes are at work, albeit in a considerably better disguised way, in all mental functioning.

himself gives in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*: “Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means.”⁴²²

In an essay titled “A Short Libidinal Economy of a Narrative Set-up: The Renault Corporation Relates the Death of Pierre Overney,” Lyotard presents this same insight and this same imperative in the language of libidinal economics.⁴²³ Pierre Overney was among a group of protestors who had gathered at the entrance to the Renault factory at Billancourt on February 26, 1972 in order to distribute literature condemning the company for its labor practices. During a confrontation between the protestors and Renault’s uniformed security staff, a Renault employee in plain clothes shot and killed Overney. Shortly thereafter, the management of Renault issued a press release whose purpose was to contextualize Overney’s death and to consolidate its meaning in a way favorable to the company.

The death of Overney was an *event*. It was not an event because of its playing a prominent role in the French political life of the time, because it was the subject of press releases of the kind issued by Renault or of editorials in the newspaper, or because it was the inspiration for various demonstrations against the Renault corporation and the French government. All of these are rather *dispositifs* for the channeling of the event into regular, repeatable social meanings. As such, they function not to highlight the event-character of Overney’s death, but rather to dissimulate it. Overney’s death is an event not because of its significance, but because “it is libidinally linkable neither upstream to

⁴²² Kant, *GMM*, 46-47 [Ak 4:429].

⁴²³ Keith Crome and James Williams, eds, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 200-230. Hereafter *LRG*; Lyotard, *DP*, 171-213. In the title of the essay, set-up translates *dispositif*, which I have been leaving untranslated.

causes or precedents nor downstream to effects or consequences. It is a *vain* death. It is its *inanity* that makes of it an event.”⁴²⁴ It is an event because it resists all ready-made significations.⁴²⁵ As such, it was experienced by the French people as a tensor, as a felt intensity that at once gestured beyond itself toward a consolidated meaning and resisted that consolidation. People experienced their encounters with Overney’s death, whether through the newspaper, word of mouth, or with their own eyes, as a shock, as an afflux of unbound, and thus non-signifying, cathexis. The narratives that arose from this event, put forward by numerous institutions for numerous purposes, functioned in the same way as the reel and string of Freud’s grandson, viz., as *dispositifs* to channel that unbound affect and to give it a meaning within the social theater of representation. In the vocabulary of *The Logic of Sense*, Overney’s death was an event that, like all events, gestured toward an actualized sense, but that was radically destabilized by the force of counter-actualization. That counter-actualization, redescribed in the language of libidinal economy as the persistence of the mobility of the primary process within the formations of the secondary process, or as the blocking together of the flat space of the libidinal band with the profound space of the theater, makes manifest Overney’s death as something more than it “really” was. That something more is the singularity and the alterity to which we are commanded to remain open.

⁴²⁴ Crome and Williams, *LRG*, 204; Lyotard, *DP*, 177. Translation slightly modified.

⁴²⁵ Cf. Crome and Williams, *LRG*, 204; Lyotard, *DP*, 177. “Deaths on the roads, the deaths in Indo-China are not vain; they inscribe themselves, or could easily be inscribed, in a ledger, a register of income and expenditure, credits and debits, the sum total of which is calculable, endowing them with meaning and direction. That the accountants might not be in agreement on the bottom-line is not of any interest here; they all agree on the principle that there is a bottom-line.” Deaths on the road or on the battlefield have well-established significations. There is certainly disagreement about what that signification is: a death on the battlefield in Iraq an example of the meaning “noble sacrifice for the sake of the American people and their security against the forces of global terrorism” or of the meaning “unnecessary sacrifice for the sake of an unjust and ill-conceived war of aggression,” or of some other meaning? But this does not alter the fact that all of those deaths have *some* ready-made significance, even before they actually happen. At the time it occurred in France, Overney’s death did not have such a ready-made significance, and this is what caused it to be experienced as an event.

VI. Conclusion: Three Benefits of Describing the Imperative in the Language of Libidinal Economics

In translating the results of the previous chapters into the language of Lyotard's libidinal economics, we enable ourselves to conceive in a rigorous way the intimate connection between the two moments of the imperative's dynamic. On the one hand, there is right at the level of our embodied or incarnated opening out onto the world a pull toward a profound, three-dimensional space, hollowed out and oriented toward significations adumbrated by *phenomena*. This moment of the imperative's dynamic we discovered in the work of Merleau-Ponty. On the other hand we found in Deleuze's *Logic of Sense* an articulation of a flat space of sense right at the surface of the space of representation. This superficial sense, we saw, destabilizes the intelligibility of representational sense, and thereby makes manifest a kind of pre-representational singularity that we find ourselves commanded to respect. In the discourse of libidinal economics we can think the connection between these two moments as their blocking together. As we have seen, we can conceive the two sides of the blocking together in different ways, which bring to the fore slightly different aspects of our experience of the imperative. We can speak of the blocking together of the theater and the libidinal band, thereby emphasizing the spatial element of our experience. Or we can speak of the blocking together of the primary and secondary processes, which draws attention to our affective experience, to intensities that we feel as pleasurable or painful. Finally, we can

conceive the blocking together with respect to Eros and Thanatos, which brings out the connection between productive cathexis, the *dispositifs* that channel it, and consumption. But what all of these formulations have in common is an articulation of the divergent, and perhaps even contradictory, orientations of the imperative's dynamic as one complex phenomenon.

A second benefit is that the discourse of libidinal economics helps to clarify the role that feeling plays in orienting us toward singularities in their alterity and their dignity. We saw in our attempt to understand the relation between the primary and secondary processes that, although the former is prior chronologically and genetically, it can only ever be conceived in terms of the latter. We saw this specifically with regard to Freud's difficulty in describing the primary process in a way that did not already presuppose the functioning of the secondary process. For the secondary process, there are no singularities: the binding of cathexes and the constitution of thought-identities makes of everything a sign, and thus a generality. How, then, can we become aware of pre-representational, non-signifying singularities as making any kinds of demands on us? Lyotard's answer is that our access to the figural, to that which exceeds representation, happens by means of a feeling of resistance to the ordering operations of the secondary process. These ordering processes can be understood with reference to the *fort-da* game. As we saw, this game represented the transformation of desire as displaceable quantity of excitation into desire as wish. The game served to bind cathexes according to the two modes of negation that Lyotard had described in *Discours, figure*, viz., the spacing that is described in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the opposition that is described in Saussurian linguistics. The game hollows out a phenomenological space by making

“mother” present *as* absent, while also establishing the negation proper to the *langue* in the basic *opposition* between *fort* and *da*, absent and present. The game, then, functions as a libidinal *dispositif* that establishes the conditions for reality, for the reign of good sense and common sense. Singularity is experienced within the space of reality precisely as a disruption of that order.⁴²⁶ It is an experience of difference, but of a difference that is inassimilable to the kinds of difference that sustain the space of representation. It is, in sum, the experience of a different difference which, precisely because of its difference, cannot assume a place within the order of good sense and common sense, but can only be *felt*.⁴²⁷

We can take as an example Pierre Overney, whose death is a tensor sign that is certainly significant, but that also resists being resolved into its significations without remainder. Overney and his death are rendered significant in various ways by various *dispositifs*. There is Overney as Maoist revolutionary, as enemy of the French state whose death is, if not entirely justified, at least not very regrettable. There is Overney as victim of an unfortunate accident: according to the press release issued by Renault, the employee who shot and killed Overney did not mean to do so, as evidenced by the fact that he turned himself in spontaneously to the police.⁴²⁸ Then there is also Overney as hero of the Maoist revolutionary movement, confirmation of the righteousness of its cause and of the inhuman brutality of the capitalist system. And finally, there is Overney

⁴²⁶ Lyotard, *DP*, 229.

⁴²⁷ Lyotard, *DF*, 138. “It suffices that there be at the heart of these orders negations irreducible to the gaps of opposition or to the depth of designation, insane events, i.e., operations or effects of operations requiring an ‘order’ that cannot fall under the negativities we have identified, *precisely because it is inscribed in those negativities only negatively*, of an order one is for this reason tempted to assume is positive.”

⁴²⁸ Crome and Williams, *LRG*, 208-9; Lyotard, *DP*, 183.

as commodity, as a good story that sold newspapers.⁴²⁹ But Overney was manifestly something more than these significations. In their encounters with the story of his death, the French people *felt* the free mobility or metastability of its sense. They *felt* that the meaning of his death was not consolidated. Indeed, it was this very feeling of a “something more,” of something beyond the established significations, that spurred the furious efforts of various parties to consolidate a sense. But it was also this same feeling that made manifest a singularity and an alterity that resisted signification and that could never be resolved into something general.

The third benefit follows from the other two. The description of the imperative in the language of libidinal economics helps to bring out the complexity and the uncertainty that are ineliminable features of our moral experience. The case of Pierre Overney demonstrates the way in which the formal or significant *content* of the imperative cannot exhaust its imperative *force*. In doing so, it demonstrates the broader point that moral action can never be reduced to rule-following or to a kind of ethical protocol. Morally charged situations emerge within the spaces opened up by encounters, which are always encounters with tensor signs. We have seen that the tensor sign pulls us in two directions at once, one toward the theatrical, representational space of the secondary process and the other toward the flat space of the primary process where representations are ceaselessly deconstructed. We can never have mastered this dynamic in advance of the singular encounters that set it in motion. This means that we can never know with certainty the content of the imperative’s command. Or, if the imperative did invariably command a determinate content, it would simply be this: maintain yourself always in a state of

⁴²⁹ There are, of course, many more possibilities for capturing the sense of Overney and his death. I have limited the number to four only for the sake of simplicity.

openness and sensitivity to the ephemeral, inappropriable senses that emerge from encounters that are always singular and always new.

WORKS CITED

- Althusser, Louis. *For Marx*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 1996.
- Althusser, Louis and Étienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 1997.
- Barbaras, Renaud. *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Translated By Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- _____. *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Paul B. Milan. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *L'Espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955.
- Brainard, Marcus. *Belief and its Neutralization : Husserl's System of Phenomenology in Ideas I*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Butler, Joseph. *Five Sermons*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.
- Carroll, Lewis. *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2001.
- Crome, Keith and James Williams, eds. *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Différence et répétition*. Paris: PUF, 1968. [*Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. New York : Columbia University Press, 1994.]
- _____. *Logique du Sens*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969. [*The Logic of Sense*. Translated by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.]
- _____. *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*. Edited by David Lapouliade. Translated by Michael Taormina. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *L'Anti-Oedipe*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1973. [*Anti-Oedipus*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1977.
- Descartes, René. *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*. Edited by Roger Ariew. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000.

- Dias, Isabel Matos. *Elogio do Sensível: Corpo e Reflexão em Merleau-Ponty*. Lisboa: Litoral Edições, 1989.
- Dillon, M.C. *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Fink, Eugen. *Sixth Cartesian Meditation : The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*. Translated by Ronald Bruzina. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. IV*. Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1953.
- _____. *The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. V*. Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1953.
- _____. *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. VII*. Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1953.
- _____. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVIII*. Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1955.
- _____. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961.
- _____. *Three Case Histories: The "Wolf Man," The "Rat Man," and the Psychotic Doctor Schreber*. New York: Collier Books, 1963.
- _____. *General Psychological Theory*. Edited by Philip Rieff. New York: Touchstone, 1997.
- Freydberg, Bernard. *Imagination in Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Gasché, Rodolphe. *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- Guillaume, Paul. *Traité de Psychologie*. Paris : PUF, 1957.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Fourth Edition, Enlarged. Translated by Richard Taft. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Holland, Eugene W. *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Husserl, Edmund. *Husserliana Band II. Die Idee der Phänomenologie*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950. [*The Idea of Phenomenology*. Translated by William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964.]

_____. *Husserliana Band III. Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff: 1950. [*Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*. Translated by F. Kersten. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998.]

_____. *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*. Translated by Quentin Lauer. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

_____. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Translated by David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

_____. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989.

_____. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorion Cairns. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995.

_____. *Logical Investigations, Volume I*. Translated by J.N. Findlay. London: Routledge, 2001.

_____. *Logical Investigations, Volume II*. Translated by J.N. Findlay. London: Routledge, 2001.

Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929.

_____. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Lewis White Beck. Upper Saddle River, NJ: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1993.

_____. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Allen W. Wood. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006.

Lawlor, Leonard. *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

Lecerle, Jean-Jacques. *Philosophy Through the Looking Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire*. London: Hutchinson and Co., 1985.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Lingis, Alphonso. *Libido: The French Existential Theories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

_____. *Phenomenological Explanations*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986.

_____. *Deathbound Subjectivity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

_____. *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Humanities Press, 1996.

_____. *The Imperative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Lytard, Jean-François. *Économie Libidinale*. Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1974.
[*Libidinal Economy*. Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1993.]

_____. *Des Dispositifs Pulsionnels*. Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1980.

_____. *Just Gaming*. Translated by Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

_____. *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

_____. *Phenomenology*. Translated by Brian Beakley. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

_____. *Discours, figure*, 5th Edition. Paris: Klincksieck, 2002.

Lydon, Mary. "Veduta on *Discours, figure*." Yale French Studies 99 (2001), 10-26.

- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Paris : Gallimard, 1945.
[*Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.]
- _____. *Le visible et l'invisible*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. [*The Visible and the Invisible*.
Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.]
- _____. *The Primacy of Perception*. Edited by James M. Edie. Evanston:
Northwestern University Press, 1964.
- _____. *Signs*. Translated by Richard C. McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern
University Press, 1964.
- _____. *La Prose du Monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969. [*The Prose of the World*.
Translated by John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.]
- _____. *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960*. Translated by
John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *L'Impératif Catégorique*. Paris : Flammarion, 1983.
- _____. *The Sense of the World*. Translated by Jeffrey S. Librett. Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Putnam, Hilary. *Realism With a Human Face*. Edited by James Conant. Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Sacks, Oliver. *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*. New York: Alfred
A. Knopf, 1995.
- Sallis, John. *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne
University Press, 1973.
- _____. *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental*. Bloomington: Indiana
University Press, 2000.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris : Payot, 1965. [*Course in
General Linguistics*. Translated by Roy Harris. Chicago : Open Court, 1986.]
- Schreber, Daniel Paul. *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*. Leipzig, 1903.
- Serres, Michel. *The Troubadour of Knowledge*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser and
William Paulson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Silverman, Hugh J. *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*. New York:
Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.

Smart, J.J.C. and Bernard Williams. *Utilitarianism For and Against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Stivale, Charles J. *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari: Intersections and Animations*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1998.

Williams, James. *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

VITA

Ph.D. Philosophy, The Pennsylvania State University, 2007

B.S. Philosophy, History, Political Science, Sociology, University of
Wisconsin-La Crosse, 1996