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Carnal Hermeneutics

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York ■ 2015

Umbilicus

Toward a Hermeneutics of Generational Difference

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Grammarology must pursue and consolidate whatever, in scientific practice, has always already begun to exceed the logocentric closure.

—Jacques Derrida, *Positions* 36

If we think of bodies, as Descartes did, as entities that cannot occupy the same place at the same time, we find ourselves thinking of solid forms—cones, cubes, spheres—that occupy space to the exclusion of others. Each geometrical shape is clear and distinct, so that when we imagine them as concrete forms their edges are sharp, their surfaces hard and their internal solidity unbroken by gaps or splits or emptinesses. We imagine solid bodies—steel balls, wooden cubes, glass prisms—that abut, touch one another, lie side by side, bump into each other, but cannot be in the same space. Then, when we hear the word *body* as *my body*, *animal body*, *human body*, *warm body*, *your body*, *anybody*, the edges curve and blur, the surface puckers and wrinkles, hair sprouts, gaps open, hearts beat, and the body is in a constant process of inhaling and exhaling, ingestion and elimination, including and excluding.

Fortunately, the *logos* of life is ready to hand, already equipped with the authority to reach us how to see our bodies. All the internal spaces have been explored to the microscopic level, and biology continues to generate ever more detailed images of the living world from the minutest components of living cells to the forms of ecosystems. It has made possible the spectacular medical technologies that led to the elimination of smallpox and is working now to treat and cure cancers. So, with health as the common value and imaging technology as its rhetorical device, it naturally takes the lead in showing us our bodies. Given such knowledge and guid-

ance, what purpose could a hermeneutics of the body serve? After all, a mature science is not captured in a caricature nor exhausted by its accompanying technologies, and biology is already a multi-faceted mode of interpreting the living world. When the biologist engages in basic research and when she is alert to the aporias in her models, she is already approaching a biohermeneutics. What can carnal hermeneutics add?

The carnal problem is the problem of how to *think* about flesh. Biology already *knows* flesh, but the question is how we are to do justice to it immanently?¹ How are we to think of flesh in a fleshy way? According to one tradition of interpretation, this is indistinguishable from the problem of how to find the *meaning* of the flesh: Of what whole is it a part? Of which universal is it an instance? Toward which end does it reach? Basic research and moments of self-reflection notwithstanding, in biology the question itself remains largely obscured by the demands of utility and the epistemologies of the natural attitude. A hermeneutics of the flesh, unlike a *logos*, displaces the categories of use, knowledge, and meaning in favor of carnal sense. We cannot determine in advance what this will be—we need a hermeneutics of the flesh to get to work on it—but just as Heidegger embarked on his existential analytic with the assertion that the Being of what is to be studied is “each time mine,” we can get onto the circle of interpretation just behind him with the assertion that the flesh to be studied is each time *my* flesh.²

Our living bodies appear and announce themselves in motion: the movement by which they differentiate themselves from one another is a movement of coming to be and passing away, growth and decay, going from one place to another. This is not a matter of universal flux, since each body is distinct in the time and place of its coming to be and skin is the semipermeable membrane that distinguishes inside from outside. Nor is it a matter of these bodies being distinct but interchangeable, mere tokens of a type. Geometry supplies the type of which each solid, cone-shaped object is a token, and each object approaches or falls short of the perfection of the geometrical form. Biology indicates the laws with the body and its components must obey and offers paradigms that this or that body may match. Yet the living body has no perfection: it approximates nothing but itself, and this is true at every stage of life. What can we grasp as *all of life* or *the whole body*? Healthy growth is not an approach to wholeness; fruitful maturity is not fulfillment; decrepit aging is not imperfection. Instead, our bodies are finite and are thus subject to the condition of *infinitude*. That is to say, our bodies' limitedness means that they are always unfinished, not because we are too young or too old and not because of the accidents of being in the world. We are ready to die as soon as we are born, but it

is also true that we each die without having completed what was started with our birth. We are constitutively unfinished.³ The wrinkles, blotches, and scars accumulated on our skin as we age are not signs of the fall from pristine newness, since we are never pristine. Our coming into the world involves being marked by the wound of birth. We share with all humans and almost all mammals the umbilical scar it leaves—our first scar, the mother of all scars.

Apart from being unfinished, our bodies are not hermetic, and their ways of being permeable and penetrable have occasionally emerged not just in biology but also in the philosophical conversation, sometimes in the service of philosophical argument, sometimes as a source of somatic wisdom to either complement or disrupt philosophy's abstractions. Philosophy is full of eyes that see; the fact that light enters our eyes is the classical starting point of philosophies of perception. Aesthetics, for its part, is attuned to sensation but has largely adhered to the custom of privileging sight. Yet if we take seriously the thought that aesthetics is the philosophy of taste we must think of bodies as more than eyes and ears. The mouth opens and the tongue begins to feature not as the tool of and metaphor for language but as the organ of taste and the site where the metabolic transformations of consumption begin. Saliva begins that work of dismantling and digestion. A solid body cannot absorb other substances; it has none of the internal differentiation and none of the hollows and tubes that make it possible to incorporate the materials that our bodies must take in if we are to live. Those bodies are packed full of organs that slip against one another, held together by the strings and tubes of sinew and vein. Moreover, while there is no place in a solid body for other bodies, the innards of a living being must have room for the essential microscopic fauna that inhabit us, occupying the gaps and spaces inside us.

These beings—we—who eat and excrete and breathe are also beings who kiss and have sex, who bring into play other orifices and openings, other modes of bodies' being in the same place at the same time. Our skin keeps us apart, marking the limit of the mass of matter we each think of as our own, but—particularly in our sexual and sexualized being—this means we are utterly exposed to one another, *ex-peau-sed*, in Jean-Luc Nancy's term, in the most generalized sort of openness, that is, to the touch of others. While Merleau-Ponty led us to the importance of touch as perception, Nancy leads us to consider skin as an existential condition, and touch as what always puts us in touch with the world. This turn to touch is not just a shift in emphasis, an attempt to give an undervalued sense organ its due. In the context of Nancy's renovation of the Heideggerian thought of *Mitsein*, and his insistence on our existential *ex-peau-sition*, it turns out to be

a radical reworking of our practices of interpretation that turns us toward the flesh and eventually displace meaning in favor of sense.

Hermeneutics already guarantees that the point of embarkation is not determinative and is itself radically underdetermined, but it is not trivial. So when Heidegger begins his existential analytic with the statement that the Being of the entity under consideration is "each time mine," he opens mineness as a question of belonging and being: Does my being belong to me? Am I my being? Much of what follows in *Being and Time* is a struggle to unfold these questions. Now, embarking as an embodied being with the fact of embodiment in mind, the questions shift and expand: Am I flesh? What is the carnal sense of being? Is this flesh mine? Does it belong to me? What is the carnal sense of belonging? The body that is mine is inevitably a navel-scarred body, so this means starting with the flesh understood as wholly mine *and* wholly entwined with another.

I propose here a circle of carnal interpretation that is an umbilical circle. The navel marks the flesh that is most mine as also once belonging—and in certain ways still belonging—to another. It marks us as vulnerable and disrupted from the beginning, and as generated and generational. It suggests our beginning in sexual difference but its universality offers the commonness of origin rather than the difference of phallus and vulva. It directs us to the phenomenon of gestation, apparently well-known by medicine in the age of medical imaging but still impossible to produce technologically, and still surprisingly mysterious to biology and obstetrics. It leads our thinking toward what has been famously unthinkable in our individual psychic histories.

Philosophical approaches to umbilical bodies fall easily into taxonomy, into a habit of moving from perception to breathing to sex, as if each orifice, opening, and organ had to be assigned to one category and only one, as if seeing, breathing, eating, and love-making were all discrete events or activities or ways of being. Skin and touch ruin these attempts at categorization and Nancy's response is often to eschew taxonomies in favor of lyrical, fluid lists. In *Corpus* he writes: "Ego forever articulating itself—*hoc, et hoc, et hic, et illic* . . . —the coming and going of bodies: voice, food, excrement, sex, child, air, water, sound, color, hardness, odor, heat, weight, sting, caress, consciousness, memory, swoon, look, appearing—all *touches* infinitely multiplied, all *tones* finally proliferating."⁴

After all, skin is complicated, in the sense of *complicatio*, to fold together. It is not simple and sometimes it will take lyrical convolution to do it justice. It does not mark the inside from the outside with one smooth surface, like the shell of an egg. It is turned and folded where our joints move and where our eyes open; it gives way to nails at the fingertips, and to wet tissue

on the other side of the lips: it folds over cartilage on the ears. It is a barrier, but a permeable one, and one that can be penetrated and wounded but that also heals and scars. So, as we live, as our soft, vulnerable bodies knock around a world of sharp edges, our skin accumulates its own idiosyncratic scars and folds from exposure to the walls and trees of our childhood, the surgeon's knife, the machines we get caught in, the weapons wielded against us, the sun. Our common scar, the circular fold of skin at the center of us, is the place where the hermeneutic circle makes a Mobius twist and interpretation turns inside out. We all have navels because we were attached before we were anything else; an umbilical hermeneutics thus allows us—obliges us—to resist singular reductive interpretations and to approach by a circuitous route.

The Circuitous Route

Is carnal hermeneutics then a sort of navel-gazing? Is it merely self-referential and detached from the world? No, since hermeneutic practice necessarily demonstrates that attachment to the world comes in many forms beyond the reductive responses of technology. But it shares something with the fourteenth century navel-gazers—*omphaloskopsi*—of Mount Athos, who were practitioners of hesychasm, a style of meditation that required turning inward and using a combination of prayer and breathing, a psychophysical technique developed to open the mediator to the light of Christ. Although always reaching for an experience of the divine, the practice was intensely embodied in ways that lead to deep confusion on the part of the monks as they tried to translate their experience into recognizable and orthodox terms. They offered accounts “of miraculous separations and reunions of the spirit and the soul, of the traffic which demons have with the soul, of the difference between red lights and white lights, of the entry and departure of the intelligence through the nostrils with the breath, of the shields that gather together around the navel, and finally of the union of Our Lord with the soul, which takes place in the full and sensible certitude of the heart within the navel!”⁵ If the teachings spoke of the mind descending to the heart, was what the mediator experienced the movement of the mind to the physical, beating heart? What was the nature of those lights? Were they perceived with the eyes? At least, the doctrinaire Barlaam of Calabria saw the exercise as confused at best and its related doctrines as heretodox at worst. It was he who gave the practice its nickname. Carnal hermeneutics is not a meditative practice or a dogma, but hesychasm, understood as a set of somatic exercises paired with repetitive incantation, engaged the problems of a Christian Platonist tradition in ways that were

both embodied and interpretive. Carnal hermeneutics is not navel-gazing, but what was ridiculed as *omphaloskopsis* was surely a carnal hermeneutics *avant la lettre*.

Far deeper in the past of our Greek-Christian-Jewish traditions, Plato himself offered a distinctly un-Platonic history of the navel or *omphalos*. In Aristophanes's speech in the *Symposium* the navel is the wound left by Apollo when he split those mythical and monstrous circle people in two:

[Zeus] bade Apollo turn its face and half-neck to the section side, in order that every one might be made more orderly by the sight of the knife's work upon him; this done, the god was to heal them up. Then Apollo turned their faces about, and pulled their skin together from the edges over what is now called the belly, just like purses which you draw close with a string; the little opening he tied up in the middle of the belly, so making what we know as the navel. For the rest, he smoothed away most of the puckers and figured out the breast with some such instrument as shoemakers use in smoothing the wrinkles of leather on the last; though he left there a few which we have just about the belly and navel, to remind us of our early fall (190d–191a).

The circle people were cut in two because they launched an attack on the gods, so Zeus felt compelled to cut them down to size. The navel is the reminder of that punishment, the scar of separation. In this story it precedes even sex: only later, when the half-people start dying off because they spend all their time clinging to each other, does Apollo pull their genitals around to the front so they can at least have sex and then get on with things. The umbilical scar they bear is the sign not of a lost *togetherness* but a lost *oneness* that can never be reclaimed. We may have a certain temporary access to it in the ecstatic union of sex, or we may achieve an attenuated version of it in the generation of children, but that original unity is irretrievable.

Still earlier, in another myth of Zeus, the navel takes on a sacred function.⁶ Zeus wanted to figure out the exact center of the flat, round earth, so two eagles were released from opposite ends of the earth. They met at Delphi, which Zeus then marked as the Omphalos, the navel of the world, setting in place there an egg-shaped stone. According to Jane Ellen Harrison's research into the origins of Greek religion, the myth marked the accession of the Apollo cult at Delphi, displacing the cult of the matrilineal gods and taking over the sacred stone that had been placed there long before in the service of an older ritual. Henceforth the priestesses who inhaled the vapors from the cleft in the rock would be priestesses of Apollo. By the time

of Aeschylus the cult is thoroughly ensconced, but the opening scene of *Emmenides* nevertheless gives us pause. The oracle of Apollo inspired Orestes to murder his mother and now we see him, stained with the blood of Clytemnestra, at the altar in the innermost sanctum at Delphi; if we now know that this altar was the *omphalos*, and if we see him depicted in many vase-paintings draped over or clinging to the white cone- or dome-shaped stone, we have an intimation of what lay beneath Apollo's triumph and what survived and exceeded it.⁷

Luce Irigaray places Clytemnestra at the center of an umbilical psychoanalysis, arguing that just as the killing of the father in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* obscures the possession of the mother, Oedipus's defining diffricuity is not his ambivalence towards his father but the power he does not have over his mother. His own blinding madness is a reactualizing of the madness Orestes undergoes in the aftermath of his own matricide. Psychoanalysis allows us to shy away from the maternal body, fearing it as the darkest continent and falling—as does the culture at large—to provide an image of the placenta and womb that surrounded us as our first home. Instead it empowers us to loathe that body as silent and ensnaring. Such obscure power as it holds must be tapped and appropriated by the phallus. She writes:

The genital drive is theoretically that drive by which the phallic penis captures the mother's power to give birth, nourish, inhabit, center. Doesn't the phallic erection occur at the place where the umbilical cord once was? The phallus becomes the organizer of the world through the man-father at the very place where the umbilical cord, that primal link to the mother, once gave birth to man and woman.⁸

Once we understand its place, the phallic erection becomes the masculine version of the umbilical cord.⁹

In another omphalic reading of Sophocles, Elizabeth Bronfen concentrates on the events that immediately succeed Oedipus's moment of recognition.¹⁰ He rushes offstage, into the polluted sanctum of his house, and when he appears again he is blind. But what has driven him to this? Is it the realization that he is his father's killer? Is this an Oedipal moment (in all the received senses of the word) or does it instead belong to Jocasta? Like Irigaray, Bronfen suggests that Oedipus's blinding has less to do with his father's murder and more with his mother, specifically the opportunity he is denied to kill his mother/wife. His mother's moment of recognition precedes his own, allowing her to flee into the house before him and take her own life before he can do it. When he turns into the room, at last

knowing everything, he finds Jocasta already dead on their marriage bed, leaving him facing his own fate and his own powerlessness to expunge his guilt. If Freud's Oedipus complex is the fantasy of patricide and possession of the mother, the Jocasta complex is the fantasy of matricide that is frustrated precisely by the mother's self-possession.

Hermeneutics lends us tools for the interpretation of symptoms as well as scripts and, at its origin as a tool for the understanding of sacred texts, it deployed the categories of literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical levels of interpretation. Plato's words, spoken by the character Aristophanes, make up a comic speech that engages us on many levels at once, though the literal version would be hardly compelling. The myth of the *omphalos* at Delphi could likewise be approached literally, but why would anyone want to? The drama *Oedipus Rex* wholly resists literal understanding. Yet when it comes to reading socially contested sacred texts, the literal approach takes its place among others and, in certain circles maintains primacy. Thus, in the history of Christian Bible studies, the navels of Adam and Eve would occasionally become a lively problem. After all, since the first two people had no parents—specifically, no mother—and were not born but created, why do we imagine them with navels?¹¹ Indeed, when artists depict them with navels, are they confounding the divine act of creation with a posterior natural fact of birth, as Thomas Browne argued in the seventeenth century when he wrote of “that tortuosity or complicated nodosity we usually call the Navel?”¹² In the Middle Ages, Adam and Eve were sometimes depicted with navels and sometimes without, but by the Renaissance, and certainly after Michelangelo, navels were the norm. Indeed, it is hard to imagine artists of the era, preoccupied by human anatomy, sacrificing the navels of their nudes. Leonardo puts the navel of Verruvian man at the center of the circle, the circumference of which is touched by the figure's fingertips. We can imagine humans—humanoids or primates—who look quite different from us in many ways, and still think of them as our relatives, but we stumble at the image of an an-umbilical human. We may be able to grasp, on some level of abstraction, what it would be to be descended from someone who was in turn descended from no-one, but the thinking of it runs aground on the image. We all came from flesh, unavoidably.

Epistemology of the Flesh

The moment we decide that the question of Adam and Eve's navels is *not* relevant is the moment we shift away from words or bodies as bearers of literal meaning to other levels of understanding. This is where we find ourselves reaching for and needing to theorize on other hermeneutic planes. It

reminds us of the historical awareness that cannot be excised from the practice.¹⁷ A hermeneutics of the umbilicus begins innocently, with the fold of skin on our bellies that signifies nothing or whose significance is already merely known. The umbilicus is not the problem. But when the hermeneutics takes an umbilical turn, acknowledging its circling journey as a journey undertaken in the flesh, by embodied beings, each of whom came from the body of a woman, each of whom bears the mark of that relation, it gives rise to unfamiliar thought, some of it retrieved from the past, some of it arising now, some of it addressing old problems, some of it creating problems where we saw none before. The accumulation of authority to one mode of thinking about bodies—biology—is a problem when we see it naturalized and allowed to slip beyond the deepest questioning. The accumulation of authority to another mode of thinking about who we are—the Cartesian conception of the autonomous individual—becomes a problem in the same way. If the fold at the center of us is the memory of our beginning in another body, autonomy was never a given but an achievement. We were brought into the world; we did not come of our own accord; it took action by others to sustain us before we were even aware of self or world.

Thus an umbilical hermeneutics opens itself to a set of questions that can be gathered under the heading *generational difference*. Dilthey writes of the stream of historical generations arising enigmatically out of the lap of creating nature.¹⁸ We encounter that nature in the person of parents and grandparents—not to mention branching lines of impersonal, immemorial ancestors—who made us come to be, even though none of us asked to be born. What do we owe them, the living and the dead? What is it to us that we were born to them? Then? There? What is the significance of our starting life dependent and vulnerable? Why will we be thrown into a category with the others born around the same time and called “the younger generation,” and expected to know what that means, and expected to know what is required of us when the older generations age and die? What injunction do these expectations place on us? How are we to keep interpreting a set of generational relationships that constantly shift and develop? Does being born mean that we owe the world a death? More life? Another generation?

Just as it reminds us of our generational difference from our parents, the umbilicus gives us oblique access to the questions of sexual difference by pointing to the sexual difference between them, the very difference that drives generation. The navels of all of us, men and women, are vestiges of the material connection between each of us and our mother, a woman who came to be a mother in the context of her (at least) material relation to a

man. We are confronted with sexual difference—the question that Irigaray has long pointed to as *the* philosophical question of our time—in the origin of each of us. Our umbilical relation is to a woman, but the condition for its possibility was the coupling of a man and a woman, or, at a minimum, the joining of a sperm from a man and an egg from a woman.

We undergo generation, but if we approach the experience with the hermeneutic method as we have known it, that is, with a hermeneutics that is not yet carnal, generation acquires meaning as history. This was the project set out by Dilthey. On the one hand, there is everything to suggest that this would give rise to sophisticated and valuable thinking. We come to be in a world that already belongs to older generations and it somehow becomes our world just as their history is incorporated into ours. Hermeneutics can claim to be historical thinking *par excellence*, not least on the basis of its near constant attention to its own history, which led Ricoeur to describe it as more aware of its history than any other form of philosophy.¹⁹ That very awareness goes hand in glove with an attunement to the repercussions of contingency and finitude in historical life, and leaves it committed to radical nonmaternity and non-self-transparency in relation to its own projects.²⁰ (Indeed, it is precisely this commitment that makes it too modest to claim surpassing excellence at all.) The meaning of generation is certainly richly historical.

Yet, on the other hand, must hermeneutics insist on meaning? More to the point, will carnal, umbilical hermeneutics insist on it? While hermeneutics's constant self-examination means that the role of meaning develops and changes, there is still a worry that clings to the term, an anxiety that what really matters is not here but elsewhere. Rather than approaching bodies with the interpretive apparatus of sense and explanation, reference and interpretation,²¹ might carnal hermeneutics choose to disburden itself of those anxieties? In the search for an immanent, carnal version of *meaning*, *sense* is a promising candidate, and Nancy undertakes the work of unfolding it in *The Sense of the World*.²² He writes:

The sense of the word *sense* traverses the five senses, the sense of direction, common sense, semantic sense, divinatory sense, sentiment, moral sense, practical sense, aesthetic sense, all the way to that which makes possible all these senses and all these senses of “sense,” their community and their disparity. . . . *The identity of sense is indissociable from its materiality.*²³

For Nancy, sense happens in the touch of bodies. *Meaning* lends itself to the thought of hidden meaning, a plan to be discerned if only we have the right eyes for it or if only we apply the right tools. In contrast, sense can-

not be given in advance but comes to be in the worldliest way, between us. "Nothing is lacking in our being," he writes. "The lack of given sense is, rather, precisely what completes our being."²⁴

The umbilicus gives us the image and the carnal experience of that completeness in lack, our in-finitude. We already *know* that the sort of beings we are come to be in our mothers' bodies, quickened into being in her flesh. Even if, for each of us, it is an immemorial coming to be, the convolution at the very center of our bodies reminds us that what cannot be called to mind can nonetheless be shown on the body. We just have not learned to make sense of it yet.

Getting in Touch

Aristotelian Diagnostics

EMMANUEL ALLOA

Constituting the Corpus, Disregarding the Body

If we look at its history, hermeneutics never was anything but diacritical. In his seminal essay on the origins of hermeneutics ("Die Geburt der Hermeneutik," 1900), Wilhelm Dilthey argued that hermeneutics was born in Alexandria, in the Hellenistic period. Although according to Dilthey the art of *hermeneia* (interpretation) was already practiced in classical Greece, it is only with the post-classical Alexandrian school of philology that hermeneutics became a self-standing discipline. As it were, the problem of the correct understanding becomes all the more insistent as the object of interpretation is far away: from the perspective of the Alexandrian philologists, the ancient Greek world that Homer or Hesiod talked about no longer had much to do with their own. The question which concerned the Alexandrian philologists was whether any criteria could be established in order to corroborate any reading of such remote sources and avoid arbitrary projections. The problem which the Alexandrians first formulated, Dilthey states, is that of hermeneutics as such, and thus "to preserve the general validity of interpretation against the inroads of romantic caprice and skeptical subjectivity, and to give a theoretical justification for such validity, upon which all the certainty of historical knowledge is founded." For the task of securing the legitimate interpretations, the diacritical method was developed, which was both a method for establishing the right reading