



**HAL**  
open science

# Lived Body and Fantasmatic Body : the Debate between Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

Thamy Ayouch

► **To cite this version:**

Thamy Ayouch. Lived Body and Fantasmatic Body : the Debate between Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 2009, 28 (2), pp.336-355. halshs-00940733

**HAL Id: halshs-00940733**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00940733>**

Submitted on 20 Feb 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **LIVED BODY AND FANTASMATIC BODY**

**Thamy Ayouch**

## **LIVED BODY AND FANTASMATIC BODY: THE DEBATE BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS**

**Abstract :**

Neither the lived body, taken up by Merleau-Ponty after Husserl, nor the libidinal body theorised by psychoanalysts after Freud, can be reduced to the counted, measured, physical body, apprehended only from outside. Both phenomenology and psychoanalysis set forth the priority of a global subjective lived body, approached “from within”. However, their perspectives seem to differ when it comes to the conception of the interiority of this lived body, which psychoanalysis deems as imaginary. This paper examines the similarities and discrepancies between the Merleau-Pontyan phenomenological body and the Freudian erogenous body. It attempts to show how the very categories of perception and imagination are reversed when moving from one discipline to the other. It concludes by proposing some lines along which the comparison could be prolonged.

# LIVED BODY AND FANTASMATIC BODY: THE DEBATE BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

## Presenting the Problem

The action of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (1598) revolves around a material, moral, and affective debt, and involves two straightforwardly opposite versions of the body. Strikingly enough, the dramatic complication and the denouement of the play highly depend on the contest between two concepts of the body.

Bassanio asks his friend Antonio for 3000 ducats, so that he can woo the wealthy Portia with an appropriate display of pomp and magnificence. The usurer Shylock agrees to lend them the money, with Antonio putting up his property as the bond. Should Antonio default on the loan, a *pound of his flesh* would be the price to pay, as Shylock argues:

“If you repay me not on such a day,  
In such a place, such sum or sums as are  
Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit  
Be nominated for an equal pound  
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken  
In what part of your body pleaseth me”.

The term “pleaseth” highlights Shylock's excitement to choose from which part of Antonio's body he shall delightfully carve a pound of flesh. The polysemic word “pound” deriving from the Old English *pund* (coming from Latin *Pondus*) refers to a measure of weight. Yet in this “pound of flesh”, one cannot but hear the heart beat (Old English *pūnia* : beat), the confined breath (*pyndan*: dam up and enclose) of an abused body and its destruction (*pūnian*: pulverise).

Antonio's body stands at the heart of two intersubjective relationships. The first one is the affective bond between him and Bassanio, which is so intimate that one's body answers for the payment of the other's debt, as though fusing them in a sole body. Here, there is a fantasmatic interchangeability between a detachable part of the body and money, which the Freudian series of equivalences completes with faeces, penis, child, and Lacan finalises with the object a<sup>1</sup>.

The second intersubjective relationship implied by this pound of flesh is the bond between Shylock and his daughter Jessica, flesh of his flesh, whose treacherous elopement should be compensated for by Antonio's flesh.

Yet another dimension of the body surfaces here: that of calculation and measure. This appears in Shylock's greedy and merciless attitude, when he insists that de-incarnated weighing should be performed in the most grave situation. While the other characters express their affects in mellifluous and shimmering metaphors, Shylock reduces the Talmud's Tallion Law "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" to its prosaic, literal, numerical meaning of "measure for measure".

This reduction of flesh to quantified meat is reversed in Act IV. Because Antonio's ships wrecked, he could not reimburse Shylock on time, which entitles the usurer to a pound of his flesh. At Antonio's trial, Portia, disguised as a court clerk, points out that the bond calls for no blood to be shed and exactly one pound to be taken, lest Shylock be guilty of not following the contract:

"if thou cut'st more  
Or less than a just pound, (...),  
Or the division of the twentieth part  
Of one poor scruple, nay, if the scale do turn  
But in the estimation of a hair,  
Thou diest and all thy goods are confiscate."

---

<sup>1</sup> In this Lacanian concept, "a" stands for "autre" (the other), the imaginary other appearing in the mirror stage. In Lacan's structural conception of the unconscious as a system of signifiers, the object a is what stands aside from the other signifiers, and represents the hole in the structure of the unconscious. More corporally, the object a is fantasized as whatever may detach itself from the body, and takes four forms in Lacan's theory: breast, excrement, look and voice. The objet a is then what secretly and enigmatically structures desire, and represents the divided subject's quest, without ever being identifiable in one concrete manifestation.

In this excerpt, Portia gradually passes from a sole (“a just pound”) to a fraction (“twentieth part”), then to a “scruple” which refers both to a unity of measure and to disquietness, and eventually to the human dimension of the flesh (“hair”). Shylock, realizing exact measure is impossible, recants, and Portia reveals that by claiming a pound of human, living flesh, he is conspiring to kill another citizen. Because flesh cannot be reduced to any countable mass, Shylock is defeated.

If the body may be carved and cut out *ad libitum*, in a fantasmatic fragmentation that enables multiple relations, at the end of the day, it cannot be quantified. Every artificial measure of the body is eventually defeated by an intersubjective body that is irreducible to any fixed sense and stands at the core of a complex symbolic net.

Both phenomenology and psychoanalysis develop their conceptions of lived body and erogenous body precisely in opposition to the quantification of the body, yet without agreeing on the primary dimensions of this non-organic body. In Husserlian phenomenology, the physical, objective and measurable *Körper* opposes the living, subjective *Leib*. The former is a mass of muscles, bones and neuro-physiological connections always approached from outside; the latter proves meaningful only when related to intimate historical life felt “from within”. While Shylock tries to reduce Antonio’s body to the *Körper*, his *Leib* is set forth when the usurer is accused.

In opposition to the *Körper* and before the *Leib*, psychoanalysis articulates a concept of erogenous body, conjured up by affect and the pleasure-pain principle, whose geography corresponds neither to the organic anatomy nor to the phenomenal lived-experience of the body, and whose symbolic structure differs from any perceptive organisation.

Yet both approaches seem to tackle the same body, lived “from within”. For Antonio, the mutilation of his body is a token of his loyalty to Bassanio, and an imaginary castration which at the same time enables and curbs his desire and his expectations. His body stands at the core of phenomenological intersubjective relationships, but is also the crux of various fantasmatic series.

Then, how can the *Leib-Körper* opposition be situated against the psychoanalytic division of erogenous and organic body? What is lost when only one of these couples is taken into account ?

To tackle some of these questions, we shall focus on one particular phenomenological study of the body, the Merleau-Pontyan lived-body (“*corps propre*”<sup>2</sup>), and try and put it in perspective with the Freudian instinctual body. The aim of this paper will be to shed light on similarities and discrepancies between the phenomenological perceptive body and the psychoanalytic erogenous body. We shall highlight two aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the body, mainly from the *Phenomenology of Perception*: how the singular, infra-conscious dimension of the body is paradoxically linked to its impersonality, and how Merleau-Ponty conceives of an anti-cartesian non-dualistic *Leib*. We shall then trace the Freudian ontology of the desire-body and show how it performs a reversal of the phenomenological categories of imagination and perception.

## Phenomenology of the Body

### *The Impersonal Body: Singularity in Generality*

In the *Structure of Behaviour* (Merleau-Ponty, 1942), Merleau-Ponty gives priority to a third path that moves equally away from both objectivising science which would hack the body up into stimuli and responses, and a philosophy of reflection which would give primacy only to consciousness. Hence the late Husserlian injunction from which the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) proceeds: to return to the lived world (*Lebenswelt*), which is prior to the objective world or the world of reflection, and is made accessible only through the lived body. Therefore, one main aspect of the phenomenology of perception, distinct from any constitutional

phenomenology ruled by omniscient consciousness, is the non-conscious, pre-reflective and anonymous dimension of the body it reveals.

Merleau-Ponty deems equally erroneous the scientific conception of the body as a thing, which reduces its affective and practical positions to physiologico-psychological mechanisms, and the reflective constituting subject conceived as an interior devoid of any exteriority. In the chapter “The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), Merleau-Ponty illustrates this neither objectivistic nor reflective dimension of the body with the examples of the phantom limb or the paralyzed member of the anosognosic subject. The anosognosic limb’s refusal can be understood only from the perspective of the being-in-the-world through the lived body. It implies a zone prior to consciousness, linked to the body, and which is infra-personal and non-thetic – that is to say a bodily pre-consciousness that does not pose the existence, reality or temporality of the objects it apprehends. The clinical example of anosognosia shows how a habitual body comes to replace the actual body, and reveals a sense of generality and impersonal being.

Yet, the subject who refuses the anosognosic deficiency or the phantom limb is an ‘I’ involved in the physical and interhuman world which is made accessible through the body and through a special type of intentionality : what Merleau-Ponty calls operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*). One of the specificities of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is that he lays emphasis on this form of intentionality much more than Husserl who rather dwells on act intentionality. For the latter, every “consciousness act” - perception, imagination, remembrance, dream, - poses a perceived, imagined, remembered or dreamt object. Operative intentionality, on the contrary, poses no object: it frees the world, the other and the self from any analytical perspective, and it is the basis of the natural and ante-predicative unity of the world with our lives. It appears in our desires, expectations or affections more clearly than in any objective knowledge<sup>3</sup>. The corporeal experience is the centre of such intentionality: we often inhabit our lived body without thematising it as the perceived or reflective

---

<sup>2</sup> The French phrase “*corps propre*” refers to the subject’s own body. Given Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body in his Phenomenology of Perception, his use of the phrase is perhaps best translated as “lived body.”

<sup>3</sup> See Merleau-Ponty (1945), especially the preface.



object of a subject. As a result, there is no conscious synthesis of the world or the object, but bodily synthesis, which comes prior to any analysis and to any secondary synthesis of perceived objects<sup>4</sup>.

Merleau-Ponty also refers to the concept of “organic repression” (“*refoulement organique*”), previously developed by scientists such as Lhermitte or Schilder, which is equally distant from objective causal explanations and reflective sense-constituting consciousness. He compares the phantom limb to the phenomenon of repression: impersonal time flows under personal time, an unknown knowledge (“*savoir non su*”) maintains a degree of generality. Let us notice that if this unknown knowledge is reminiscent of Freud, Merleau-Ponty does not conceive of repression as a process defined by extremely singular, subjective and historical motives, but rather as a return to the general and impersonal dimension of existence resulting from incarnation.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty extends the idea of Freudian repression to the whole phenomenon of incarnation: existence “represses” the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 98-101), thus revealing its irreducibly anonymous and ambiguous dimension. It seems that this diffusion in the generality of the body corresponds more to the Freudian *Unterdrückung* (suppression) than to the *Verdrängung* (repression). More accurately than an opposition between conscious and unconscious processes, what distinguishes suppression from repression is that the former concerns affects (*Affekten*) while the action of the latter falls upon ideas (*Vorstellungen*). In Freudian metapsychology, when an affect is suppressed, it is not so much repressed and pent up in the Unconscious, as inhibited, canceled, and sent back to its bodily origin. And Merleau-Ponty sounds very reminiscent of this bodily origin of affects, when he conceives the body as the “affective basis that originally throws consciousness out of itself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 110).

---

<sup>4</sup> “ C’est à partir du lié que j’ai secondairement conscience d’une activité de liaison, lorsque, prenant l’attitude analytique, je décompose la perception en qualités et en sensations et que, pour rejoindre à partir d’elles l’objet où j’étais jeté, je suppose d’abord un acte de synthèse qui n’est que la contre-partie de mon analyse. Mon acte de perception, pris dans sa naïveté, n’effectue pas lui-même cette synthèse, il profite d’un travail déjà fait, d’une synthèse générale constituée une fois pour toutes, c’est ce que j’exprime quand je dis que je vois avec mon corps

The impersonal dimension of the body also pertains to consciousness, to the perceived world and to the other. Merleau-Ponty argues that any single perception proceeds from an atmosphere of generality, is given to us as anonymous, and activates a habitual knowledge sedimented in our corporeal powers. As a consequence, perception may drift towards de-personalisation, and the correct wording of this experience would be “it is being perceived in/through me” rather than “I perceive”<sup>5</sup>.

If the one’s own body becomes impersonal, abandons itself to sleep or to sexual excitement, if it experiences the pathological phenomena of the phantom limb or anosognosia, if it anonymously tends towards the world in an always already made and non-thematisable synthesis, that is because it proceeds neither from a representative nor from an objective flux, but from an affective one. Operative intentionality and the generality of the body are signs of what we conceive of as a Merleau-Pontyan “phenomenology of affectivity”, a perspective that is close to a paradoxical “phenomenology of the Unconscious” .

Yet neither in the *Phenomenology of Perception* nor in the rest of his work, does Merleau-Ponty thematise an Unconscious akin to the Freudian Unconscious. Although the concept of the Unconscious changes throughout Freud’s work, and is finally superceded by the Id, its constant metapsychological characteristic is a radical separation from consciousness.

Let us remember that Freud’s approach to the relations between consciousness and the Unconscious is exactly opposite to that which phenomenology develops. In his *Notes on the Unconscious* (Freud, 1915 b), he argues that every psychic act starts being unconscious, and then either remains unconscious or develops up to consciousness, according to the resistance it may come

---

ou avec mes sens, mon corps ou mes sens étant justement ce savoir habituel du monde, cette science implicite ou sédimentée ”, (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 275).

<sup>5</sup> “ Toute perception a lieu dans une atmosphère de généralité et se donne à nous comme anonyme (...)De sorte que, si je voulais traduire exactement l’expérience perceptive, je devrais dire qu’*on* perçoit en moi et non pas que je perçois. Toute sensation comporte un germe de rêve ou de dépersonnalisation comme nous l’éprouvons par cette sorte de stupeur où elle nous met quand nous vivons vraiment à son niveau ”, (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 249).

across. The ontology resulting from this approach consists in placing beneath every psychic act – perception, imagination, dream, memory, etc. – the layer of an originary repression (as Freud asserts in his text *Repression* (Freud, 1915 a)), yet quite different from the secondary, actual repression. While the latter stems from consciousness, as it is subsequent to the incompatibility of a conscious prohibition and a conscious or unconscious desire, the former moves in opposite direction, and consists in refusing the access to consciousness to the psychic representatives of drives. In other words, primary repression is directly concerned with the body, since the drive is, as Freud asserts, half-way between body and psyche, and consists in a bodily organic pressure linked to a psychic representative. Every psychic act has a primary instinctual moment, after which the ideational-representative (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*) of these drives remains in the Unconscious. This unconscious dimension remains radically separated from consciousness, unless repression is lifted.

Yet this radical separation between consciousness and the Unconscious, which results from either primary or secondary repression, applies only to ideas and not to affects. The latter, Freud argues in many texts, circulate more freely from soma to psyche and from one agency to another. Then, what directly involves the body in a straightforward communication between consciousness and the Unconscious is not the ideational-representative, but the Affect-representative of the drives. Strictly speaking, the affect cannot be unconscious<sup>6</sup>; it comes from the body – source of the drive – and reappears back on the surface of the body – for instance when someone bursts into tears – skirting the unconscious or conscious ideational-representative. Affect is then, we believe, the metapsychological category that should make it possible to bridge the gap between a phenomenology of the body and Freudian psychoanalysis.

---

<sup>6</sup> Freud mentions “unconscious affects” only in a second sens : an instinctual impulse, as he writes in “Notes on the Unconscious (1915 b), means an impulse whose ideational-representative (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*) is unconscious, and strictly speaking, there are no unconscious affects similar to the unconscious ideas. Yet, we could speak of unconscious affects to refer to the displacement of an affect from a repressed idea to a conscious one : the affect is felt, yet not recognised. In another context, an affect can be considered unconscious when it is transformed into a qualitatively different affect, mainly anxiety, or suppressed. The unconscious affects are those revealed to consciousness once repression is lifted. In other words, unconscious affects are never directly attested: they prove always differed.

This direct circulation between soma and psyche contests any Cartesian dualism of body and soul. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body rises precisely in opposition to this classical dualism.

### *Beyond Dualisms*

Cartesian dualistic ontology is built on the opposition between the thinking substance, entirely transparent to itself, and the extended substance, impenetrable, and merely mechanical. Yet Descartes, in his letter to Elisabeth of 28<sup>th</sup> June 1643 (Descartes, 1643), questions this dualism, adding a third substance to the previous two: the *union* of soul and body. The problem of the union of soul and body then consists in conceiving how two heterogenous substances participate in the same substance, which would account for the interactions between the immaterial and the material. Things pertaining to the union of soul and body "are known only obscurely by understanding (*l'entendement*) alone, and even by understanding and imagination; yet they can be known very clearly by the senses" (Descartes, 1643), p. 44. I translate). Here lies what we call affectivity, a focus hardly developed by Descartes except in a few letters, and upon which, in our opinion, Merleau-Ponty bases his phenomenology.

Descartes carried on this investigation of the union of body and soul in the *Treatise of Passions*, where he came up with the solution of a metaphysical construction through the concept of "pineal gland". Merleau-Ponty defines his phenomenology in opposition to this metaphysical solution, and aims to comprehend the psycho-physical event beyond a dualistic ontology that separates "third person processes" and *cogitatio*. For Merleau-Ponty, the union of body and soul is performed at every moment through the movement of *existence* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 142), the third term between the psychic and the physiological (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 103-104).

If, in phenomenological terms, the body is never completely constituted, that is to say posed only as a perceived object by my constituting consciousness which could totally account for it, then the duality that may apply to it is not that of subject-object but rather that of perceiving-perceived, an idea Merleau-Ponty illustrates with the Husserlian example of the left hand touching the right one (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 108).

In this sense, a work of art is the most appropriate model for thinking the body: both my body and a work of art show the same fusion between expression and what is expressed<sup>7</sup>. As a manifestation of sense to itself, expression is a form of affectivity. My body is the very centre of expression because of the perceptive intersensoriality that characterises it: it realises the unity of visual, auditive, and tactile experiences as well as their communication.

Body expresses existence in the sense that speech expresses thought, beyond conventional means of expression. Hence the parallel Merleau-Ponty draws between speech and the body : he conceives of speech and language as an articulated gesture, refusing to distinguish between pre-linguistic and linguistic phenomena. For Merleau-Ponty, there is only a phenomenological level, from which radiates “an open and indefinite potentiality of meaning” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 226).

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, the perspective does not go from the body, that transcends itself, to the world, but from the flesh of the world to my own flesh, the body being then included not in a centrifugal but in a centripetal movement. The human body grasps itself as a visible entity among other visible entities, and conjures up the enigma of a *voyant visible* (seer who is seen) at the same time. In this passage from the *voyant* to the *visible*, thought becomes extension and extension thought, through the fundamental mystery of reversibility.

It is precisely in opposition to Cartesian dualism, and to any objectifying anatomy, that Pierre Fédida psychoanalytically defines the body in his book *Corps du vide et espace de séance* [Space and Void: Body and Psychoanalytic Session] (Fédida, 1977). Anatomy is what remains from the Cartesian notion of extension in the consciousness of the body. It is an objectifying representation of the body that overlooks its irreducible fantasmatic dimension. Fédida’s argument is quite similar to Merleau-Ponty’s indictment of mechanistic physiology as a secondary construction that takes place only after a primary preobjective perception of the body. The positive body, the object of calculation

and measure, the physiological organism deprived of its historicity and penetrated by the scientific and medical gaze that attempts to fathom its interior: all these are “anatomic” dimensions of the body denounced by Fédida and opposed by Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, it goes without saying that a psychoanalytic approach stands against any reduction of the body under the reign of an omniscient consciousness transparent to itself.

However, despite the anti-anatomic and anti-reflective concepts of the body presented by both Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology and Freudian psychoanalysis, there remains an unbridgeable gap between them.

## Phantoms and Fantasies : the Psychoanalytical Body

### *Body and Illusion*

The specificity of a psychoanalytic perspective is to invoke a fantasmatic dimension of the body that cannot be attested by direct phenomenological description. The concept of lived body does not seem likely to coexist with the fantasy cathexis of the body: the preobjective in psychoanalysis is not only the lived body but another body shaped primarily by fantasy.

This is the basis of various psychoanalytic critiques of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body. According to J.B. Pontalis (Pontalis, 1960), Merleau-Ponty takes a path different from that of conventional phenomenology, he does not refute the Unconscious, and directs attention more to the body than to consciousness. Yet he fails to grasp the very specificity of the Unconscious when reducing it to the implicit, ambiguous, or overdetermined dimension of existence. The body is central in Merleau-Ponty’s apprehension of the Unconscious, but this centrality is precisely what drives the philosopher away from the psychoanalytical Unconscious. As a matter of fact, Merleau-Ponty’s subject-centered philosophy of sense accounts for the Unconscious through a theory of the sensitive

---

<sup>7</sup> This notion of expression was first developed by Max Scheler ( *Nature and forms of sympathy*), whom Merleau-Ponty often quotes to counterbalance the somewhat solipsistic aspect of Husserlian phenomenology.

body, from which every phenomenon of expression proceeds. On the contrary, a structure-centered perspective such as the one of psychoanalysis would decenter the subject and give priority to anonymous processes happening through the subject, in which linguistic and unconscious processes compare in no way to perceptive ones. In this respect, a philosophy of the perceptive body, according to Pontalis, can only bring about a misconception of the Freudian theory.

Similarly, André Green (Green, 1964) stresses that for Freud, the body is originally libidinal, whereas for Merleau-Ponty it proves only secondarily related to desire. The pre-reflective, impersonal subject that Merleau-Ponty reveals does not correspond to the barred, separated subject of the Unconscious: Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology stops at the preconscious. The impersonal dimension of the body, and even the non subject-centered perspective of the philosophy of flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible*, by remaining linked, though indirectly, to consciousness, fail in rendering the unconscious primary processes. The Unconscious is in no way similar to ambiguous perception, or to what, in French, has been referred to as "imperception" (meaning slight subtle perception nearly unperceived, and therefore almost unconscious). Yet the psychoanalytical unconscious is not only the other side of perception, but is defined, Green reminds, as the "other scene". Once again, the centrality of the body in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is what both opens him to psychoanalysis and moves him away from it. To some extent, the Merleau-Pontyan non-dualistic mind-body free circulation turns out to be paralleled by a consciousness-Unconscious non-division, and the *soma* is the "fringe" of the *psyche* just as the Unconscious may stand, for Merleau-Ponty, as the fringe of consciousness.

Even more severe is Lacan's critique (Lacan, 1961), when he states that Merleau-Ponty fails to comprehend the Symbolic, and does not conceive of reality as the result of a net of signifiers. Lacan asserts that by giving priority to a presence through the body, phenomenology remains stuck to the Imaginary.

The question then posed is double: is the lived body, the *Leib* or phenomenal body as conceived of by Merleau-Ponty only Imaginary? Furthermore, how may the Merleau-Pontyan lived

body coexist with the Freudian instinctual body, and to what extent can a phenomenological perspective account for the body of desire?

First, according to many psychoanalysts, any psychological discourse on the body proves problematic. In his “metapsychology of the somatic”, P. Fédida stresses that when it enters the field of consciousness, the body is the object of what he calls an “introjective illusion” (Fédida, 1977, p. 69) which casts the erroneous notions of “consciousness of the lived body”, “body experience”, or “body image”. According to Fédida, the only way to realise a psychology of the body that is distinct from a psychology *of the consciousness of the body* is to listen to the body. The only viable phenomenology here is one that focuses on an imaginary discourse of the body, the “poem of the body” (Fédida, 1977), p. 99), which appears in myths, fantasies and dreams.

Hence, this paradoxical “psychoanalytic phenomenology” defines the body as indissociable from the language that speaks it. During the psychoanalytic session, the only approach to the body is through language that enables one to hear what is seen. Apart from that, there is no-body<sup>8</sup> but only the imaginary illusion of a lived body, a screen raised before an archaic unconscious childhood body. According to Fédida, even Merleau-Ponty’s account only phenomenologises the body-envelope; it overlooks the Unconscious and makes the body lose its genuine speech (Fédida, 1977, p. 110).

Now, is every discourse on the lived experience of the body bound to be illusory? Is the lived body as revealed by phenomenology only a secondary construction, the artefact of a fantasmatic formation, just as (for phenomenology) the objective body instituted by natural sciences is an artefact? Fédida would tend to say yes, following Lacan’s critique of the Imaginary in phenomenology. The concepts of “body experience”, “consciousness of one’s own body” or “body image” derive from a subjective narcissism that is confirmed by lived experiences and imaginary identifications. This is expressed by an “ideology of the body” that, according to Fédida, stretches from Kant to Bergson and even to

---

<sup>8</sup> With the double-entendre this phrase may have in English.



Merleau-Ponty (Fédida, 1977, p. 31). But what, then, entitles psychoanalysis to cast such a judgement on phenomenology, and what are the assumptions of its own concept of the body?

### *Genealogy of the Fantasmatic Body*

To answer this question, let us first recall the link Freud established between body and Ego, in *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1923). The Ego is localised on the surface of the Unconscious Id; it is a part of the Id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world, through the perception-consciousness system. In the separation of the Ego from the Id, the lived body plays an important role as the transitional surface between internal and external perceptions. The Ego is then first and foremost corporeal: it is the mental projection of the body surface and results from bodily sensations derived from that surface. Freud compares this sensitive construction of the body to the experience of pain. Just as pain enables one to have a new knowledge of the pain-affected organ, these surface sensations are decisive in the construction of one's representation of the lived body.

Hence, the Ego stems from the body, but as a sheer physical effect produced on the surface of it. Therefore, when the Ego tries to refer to the body, it falls into a game of appearances, a mirror-set that reinforces the ideology of a powerful Ego. Let us remember that for Freud in *The Resistance to Psychoanalysis* (Freud, 1925 b), the reduction of the psyche to mere consciousness by many philosophies is a manifestation of this narcissistic institution of the Ego. In other words, in a psychoanalytical perspective, the Ego, built up throughout bodily sensations proves deluded when it refers to the body. The knowledge of the body it may claim (through the categories of lived body, body-image, consciousness of the body) begs the question, following a logical fallacy: it can only refer to what it was constructed on, and therefore fails to grasp any other, deeper, unconscious dimension of the body.

The discrepancy between the phenomenological and the psychoanalytic conceptions of the body is more conspicuous in Freud's text *Negation* (Freud, 1925 a), . Freud asserts that the sense of

reality derives only from an original loss of objects that previously brought about real satisfaction. The first object relations at the beginning of psychic life follow an attributive judgement (*Bejahung*), and consist in granting a property to things: “this is good” or “this is bad”. In the language of instinctual impulses, what is deemed good by the infant is introjected into the Ego (affirmation) , and what is considered bad is projected outside (expulsion), thus constituting an originary pleasure-Ego. Only at a second stage does a judgment of existence intervene, to verify this pleasure partition of inner Ego and external reality. This second judgement is what establishes a reality-Ego out of the initial pleasure-Ego. Therefore, perception occurs one first time, and is resumed by a judgement of attribution which inscribes it in the Ego in the form of a representation – mainly unconscious. Later, the test of reality comes as a second perception which confirms or invalidates the first one. Hence, actually perceiving is not only apprehending an objet for the first time, but *rediscovering* an object already perceived once, turned into a pleasure-pain (good-bad) representation, and then checked as belonging to reality<sup>9</sup>.

As a consequence, secondary (i.e. actual) perception is underwritten by the principle of pleasure-displeasure: it stems from the fantasmatic level of good and bad, interior and exterior. This fantasmatic layer is a pleasure-displeasure oriented filter through which perception is performed: it structures, orders, and hence discriminates the zones of the world that are actually perceived. In other words, it is only through and out of a layer of unconscious representations that perception can be enacted: what is perceived or non-perceived in the world follows those primary representations and unconscious fixations.

Let us note, however, that the genesis of primary and secondary perception is based on the conception that there are originary loving and aggressive drives which determine the judgement of attribution or negation. This mythical model should not be taken literally as a positive psychology; however, its validity shows through the interpretation of fantasies during the psychoanalytic session.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Freud, 1925 a. What matters in the judgement of existence, is not so much proving the existence of something as being able to find this thing again in reality. Hence, an original loss is constitutive of reality: the past representation – issuing from a primary sensation – does not correspond anymore to any object in reality, though it may have with the primary sensation. See the commentary made by Jean Hyppolite about this text (Lacan, 1954).

Lacan's reading of this text in response to Jean Hyppolite's commentary on Freud's *Negation* (Lacan, 1954) defines a connection between secondary perception and language<sup>10</sup>. Linguistic structuration is founded upon this primary symbolisation enacted by the interiorisation and expulsion.

Using the *a contrario* example of the hallucinated cut finger of the Wolf Man, Lacan points out the necessary symbolic articulation of perceptive reality. Although the Wolf Man may have intellectual access to genital sexuality, he displays a fixation to the "infantile sexual theory" of the anal phase, showing then how perception remains linked to his primary representations. Recognising the feminine position of the child assumed in the primary fantasy of the parents' coitus *a tergo* would mean accepting genital reality and being castrated. Hence, castration is not first perceived and then repressed (*verdrängt*) but literally cut out, repudiated (*verwert*). This is what Lacan translates as foreclosure, a symbolic abolition. The process of *Verwerfung* is the exact opposite of the primary *Bejahung*: it impedes symbolisation, insofar as it prevents the formation of a representation out of a primary attributive perception. What was then denied symbolisation through this foreclosure appears again in the Real, in the form of a hallucination. The Real is what does not exist for the subject insofar as it was not "imaginarised" and symbolised, that is to say built up on and through fantasmatic representations issued from the pleasure-displeasure filtering. For the Wolf Man, non-symbolised castration comes back under the form of hallucination.

What shall we conclude from this Freudian text and its reading by Lacan? What phenomenology calls perception is, from the psychoanalytic perspective, only a secondary perception. It is a form of perception that confirms or invalidates an imaginary representation built on the pleasure-displeasure filtering – which comes itself from attributive or negative judgment based on a primary perception. Hallucination, however, is an originally denied (*verwert*) perception, expelled

---

<sup>10</sup> Hyppolite's Hegelian reading highlighted Freud's argument that the function of judgement is possible only thanks to the creation of the symbol of negation: intellectual affirmation is a negation of negation. Negation has to be distinguished from denial (expulsion), as there is no "No" in the unconscious. The "No" appears with the Ego, which is a function of ignorance and misappreciation.

into the Real, which emerges in a delayed moment. Hallucination is then the reappearance of what had not been originally perceived, imaginarily and symbolised.

We are here presented with a reversal of the categories of perception and imagination, real and imaginary. For phenomenology, hallucination is imaginary in Husserlian terms, it is a “consciousness act” which proceeds from imaginary, non-intersubjective, non-temporalised intentionality. For psychoanalysis, however, it is the exact contrary: far from being based on an imaginary layer, hallucination is a bare, non-symbolised, and delayed perception. Through hallucination, the Imaginary is, so to say, short-circuited by the Real, which corresponds to the return of a non-performed, foreclosed, non-imaginarily primary perception. What is actually imaginary for psychoanalysis is paradoxically perception, insofar as it stems from a fantasmatic structure based upon an originary symbolic filtering.

Since the pleasure-displeasure filter is affective, and directly involves the surface of the body, the body appears as the very centre of the Imaginary. As a result, a subject can perceive her/his own body only through the symbolisation of her/his desire: perception is never primary, it depends on the history of a “jouissance” that shapes it. For psychoanalysis, perceiving is not direct and obvious: reality rests on the structuration of desire by language, and our body exists only through its symbolisation.

## Conclusion

The use of similar terms by phenomenology and psychoanalysis does not mean that they speak about the same things. Here, we are confronted to a downright reversal of the terms real/imaginary, yet not in a merely semantic debate, but through the opposition of two incommensurable epistemologies, if not ontologies. Psychoanalysis contests post-Cartesian ontologies that conceive of perception as an attitude of knowledge, objectively constructed by a legislating and omniscient subject. Merleau-Ponty

---

reveals that at the heart of every perception, there is a pre-objective, ante-predicative, non-reflective, impersonal and non-thematisable dimension, closely linked to the body. The perceiving subject is therefore always inadequate to her/himself; he/she is not so much a subject of knowledge as a subject of affect, in our opinion. Still, perception remains the original relation to the world, the other, and the self. Merleau-Ponty underscores the excentricity of the subject; he rejects any ontology that polarizes subject and object; he proposes an ontology of sentient, desubjectivised flesh. Nevertheless, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, his position is insufficiently radical.

For Merleau-Ponty, the *Lebenswelt* (the world of life) given to me through my body, the other to whom I am linked in primary intersubjectivity, or the sensing of myself, are direct and self-evident relations that derive from a lived, historical world organised by sense. For psychoanalysis, by contrast, these relations derive from an Imaginary Ego constructed out of a primary filtering of perception through the principle of pleasure-displeasure. They arise from a level of fantasies coloured by my personal history and structured by my affectivity. What I consciously grasp as my body is a misconception; my “genuine” desire-body can appear only insofar as it is spoken, in the unwinding series of associations that express my unconscious desire. The surface of my body, though it can be perceived as real, is based on an instinctual assemblage: it is designed only through a pleasure-displeasure filter issuing from drives, an unconscious layer of fantasmatic representations which shape the self, the body-consciousness, and all the perceived world. In other words, the body stands at the very heart of the Imaginary.

This imaginary experience of the body is especially prominent in a clinical practice of psychotherapy with patients suffering from serious physical illnesses. For many a patient operated for cancer for instance, and submitted to radiation or chemotherapy, the fantasmatic body lying under the lived body moves to the foreground in the course of the illness and heavy treatments. The perception of their own body is often distorted and haunted by unconscious representations. Their phenomenal body is inhabited by strange presences: indeed, these patients may hardly recognise the contours of their body and its reactions, they are no longer masters of its capacities, and may even experience

hallucinatory representations of their body. The only way to bridge the gap between the perceptive and fantasmatic body is then through a wording of the body in psychotherapy.

In this respect, the phenomenological *Leib* would be a secondary imaginary construction of the more primary, psychoanalytic, erogenous body. From a phenomenological approach, however, the erogenous body and the drive apparatus summoned by psychoanalysis to theorise it are simply secondary constructions whose foundation is a primary *Leib*-based relation to the *Lebenswelt*<sup>11</sup>.

Still, this frontal opposition should be nuanced. Here are a few lines, which we shall not develop because of this paper's limitations, but along which the comparison could be prolonged and some solutions worked out:

- To deal with this reversal between real and imaginary, we would need to focus on the Husserlian notion of *phantasia*, which he understands as a mixed act of consciousness that stretches from perception to imagination. The act of *phantasia* is distinct from imagination. For Husserl, imagination is always an intentional act which poses its objects. The intentionality of image is double: the *Bildsujet* (image-subject), namely the thematic apprehended scene (for instance the extatic floating corpse of Ophelia in John Millais' *Ophelia*) is grasped through a *Bildobjekt* (image-object), which has either a physical support (the colours on the canvas in Millais' *Ophelia*) or a mental one (in the case of "mental images"). *Phantasia* precisely lacks this *Bildobjekt*: there is no support, not even mental, to it. It suddenly appears and disappears, keeps fluctuating, is discontinuous, changing, non-positional, and quasi non-intentional. It does not proceed from perceptive temporality (based on the continuousness between retention, presentation and protention), and therefore may be reminiscent of the temporality of the Unconscious. As Marc Richir argues in *Phénoménologie en esquisses* [Phenomenology in Shadows] (Richir, 2000), the most archaic layer of the phenomenological field is not perception, but

---

<sup>11</sup> To some extent, psychoanalysis takes up the classical metaphysics problem of perception and its erroneous deceitful nature – the Lacanian imaginary could be understood as a modern version of the impassable illusion of

*phantasiae*. Perception only comes from the “architectonic transposition” of *phantasiae* into more structured phenomena : it is at the crossroad of anarchic, chaotic and wild phenomena (that Richir calls “Phénomènes de monde” – World-phenomena) on the one hand, and institutionalised, intersubjective, symbolic phenomena (“Phénomènes de langage” – language phenomena) on the other. Hence, *phantasia*, a psychic act, mid-way between imagination and perception, allows one to conceive of the imaginary dimension of any perception.

- The concept of body archeology might also bring together psychoanalysis and phenomenology. The body that medicine and psychology overlook is the infantile, archaic body of imaginary desire. Psychoanalysis may then be considered as an archeology of the body, in the sense that it brings to light a level that is prior and more primordial. The archeological dimension that unites phenomenology and psychoanalysis is specifically referred to by Merleau-Ponty in his preface to Hesnard’s book on Freud (Merleau-Ponty, 1960 b). We think affectivity is at the centre of this archeology. We would tend to consider that the corporeal *operative intentionality* is an affective quasi-intentional movement that corresponds to the non-representative bodily motricity of affect, as described by Freud.

- The dialogue could also be prolonged around the implicit, dualistic ontology of subject and object discussed in Freud’s essay on *negation* (Freud, 1925 b), and by considering how Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of flesh makes it possible to overcome the philosophical aporia posed by this ontology. The Merleau-Pontyan models of chiasma and flesh-reversal (Merleau-Ponty, 1960 a) could then account for the fantastical and perceptive genealogy of reality for the infant. In a few words, the Freudian ontology of pleasure-Ego and reality-Ego is based on certain incoherences: in the mythical genealogy of perception for the infant, the Ego is both fused with non-Ego (the Ego is not primary but results from a progressive process), and paradoxically distinguished from it (good is “me”, bad is “non-me”). The classical inside/outside, subject/object distinction is both turned down by Freud and yet conjured up to account for the attribution judgement (which locates good objects inside, and bad ones outside). Merleau-Ponty’s model of the flesh (Merleau-Ponty, 1960 a) may help work out

---

reality, governed by the unreachability of transcendence of God or the big Other. A comparison between Lacan and

those contradictions, as it aims to achieve a non-dualistic ontology: flesh is a dimension which precedes the subject-object duality and institutes it. It renders the original indivision/separation of the sentient and sensible, which appear at the same time : the figure of the chiasma (when my hand is both touching and touched) shows how I, sensible, am related to all the sensible, and yet am distinct from it as a sentient. This ontology of flesh could then provide more accurate philosophical tools to apprehend the Freudian conception of a genealogy of reality both fantastical and perceptive, stemming from a fusion/separation process between Ego and non-ego.

- Eventually, the construction of the psychoanalytic fantasmatic body and of the phenomenological lived body is linked to intersubjectivity. Interiorisation and expulsion occur within a primary intersubjective relation, insofar as those operations are performed by the infant only within the illusion-space created with the mother, whose function, in Winnicottian terms, is to present the world in small doses. The affective body that would enable to draw together phenomenology and psychoanalysis is closely linked to this genesis of intersubjectivity.

In the *Merchant of Venice*, Antonio's body undergoes various affective metamorphoses, from melancholy, at the beginning of the play, to the excitement of being the physical and symbolic token that secures various relationships, and the final terror of castration. Such extreme transformations are made possible only because what the body of love seeks is a surrender to the lover that is unclosed, unclogged and unconditionnal. On a fantasmatic level, when Antonio mortgages one part of his body, he is giving away his whole body, his whole being and the omnipotence of his desire to Antonio, whom he addresses in these terms :

“Within the eye of honour, be assured,  
My purse, my person, my extremest means,  
Lie all unlock'd to your occasions”.



## References

- Descartes, R. (1643). Lettres [Letters]. *Œuvres philosophiques III, 1643-1650* [Philosophical Works, 1643-1650]. Paris: Classiques Garnier.
- Fédida, P. (1977). *Corps du vide et espace de séance* [Space and Void: Body and Psychoanalytic Session]. Paris: Editions universitaires Jean-Pierre Delarge.
- Freud, S. (1915). The Unconscious. *The Standard Edition, Volume XIV: A History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1915 a). Repression. *The Standard Edition, Volume XIV: A History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1915 b). Notes on the Unconscious. *The Standard Edition, Volume XIV: A History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1923). *The Ego and the id*. London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Freud, S. (1925 a). Negation. *The Standard Edition, Volume XIX: The Ego and the Id and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1925 b). The Resistance to Psychoanalysis. *The Standard Edition, Volume XIX: The Ego and the Id and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Green, A. (1964). Du comportement à la chair : itinéraire de Merleau-Ponty [From Behaviour to Flesh, Merleau-Ponty's Evolution]. *Critique*, 211, 1017-1046.
- Lacan, J. (1954). Réponse au commentaire de Jean Hyppolite sur la " *Verneinung* " de Freud [Response to Jean Hyppolyte's Comment on Freud's *Verneinung*]. *Ecrits* [Other Ecrits]. Paris: Seuil, 381-401.
- Lacan, J. (1961). Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Autres écrits* [Other Ecrits], Paris: Seuil.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1942). *La Structure du comportement* [The Structure of Behaviour]. Paris: P.U.F.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *La Phénoménologie de la perception* [The Phenomenology of Perception]. Paris: Gallimard.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1960 a). *Le Visible et l'invisible* [The Visible and the Invisible]. Paris: Gallimard.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1960 b). Preface to A. Hesnard's work, *L'œuvre et l'esprit de Freud et son importance dans le monde moderne. Parcours Deux (1951-1961)* [Various Texts (1951-1961)]. Paris: Verdier.
- Pontalis, J.-B. (1993). La position du problème de l'inconscient chez Merleau-Ponty [Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem of the unconscious]. *Après Freud* [After Freud], Paris: Gallimard. (Original work published in 1960)

Richir, M. (2000). *Phénoménologie en esquisses* [Phenomenology in Shadows]. Grenoble: Jérôme Millon.

Shakespeare, W. (1982). The merchant of Venice. *The illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*. London: Chancellor Press. (Original work published in 1598)