How do I return to myself and descend into my heart without you? Is it possible to arrive there alone? Does solitude not extend itself from my feet to my head and beyond? To be two would allow us to remain in ourselves, would permit gathering, and the type of safeguarding which does not restrain, the kind of presence which remains free of bonds: neither mine nor yours but each living and breathing with the other. It would refrain from possessing you in order to allow you to be – to be in me, as well.

To lean on you, not just your body, but to be carried by your spirit: inspired by you, inhabited by you, resplendent with your strength. Trusting in such becoming, neither greedy nor blameworthy, I consent with songs of praise.

If transcendence exists between us, if we are visible and invisible to each other, the gap is enough to sustain our attraction. Why should an object between us be necessary? To be irreducible to one another can assure the two and the between, the us and the between-us. And from where would the need for appropriation arise, if each allows the other to return to his or her to be?

Consuming does not produce one’s existence. Instead, difference can protect this existence: I am if you are, to be together with you allows me to become. The two, this two, is the bit more which is indispensable if I am to be. Closing myself up in consumption, in possession, in production, does not make me one. What makes me one, and perhaps even unique, is the fact that you are and I am not you.

**The wedding between the body and language**

My experience as a woman demonstrates, as does my analysis of the language of women and men,¹ that women almost always privilege the relationship between subjects, the relationship with the other gender, the relationship between two.

Certainly, there are other features characteristic of the feminine world, but it is interesting to compare the three just mentioned with three particular aspects of masculine being and speaking.

With men, one finds both a material and spiritual relationship between subject and object in place of the intersubjective relationship — however incomplete — desired by women. There is another difference: the relationship with the object, with the other, with the world is realized through an instrument which can be the hand, sex, and even a tool added to the body, language, or a third mediator. Finally, instead of the feminine universe’s relationship between two, man prefers a relationship between the one and the many, between the 1-masculine subject and others: people, society, understood as them and not as you.

These differences between the being and speaking of woman and man can help us to interpret the way in which male philosophers — such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Lévinas — have conceived carnal love, and can make apparent the feminine character of my words on loving relations, particularly on the caress.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, the body of the other is a “facticity”,² a fact, a present objective reality, which is beside me. As such, the other is that which I can see and touch. But the other is more than facticity, the other is consciousness: of-itself, for-itself, consciousness of the world, even.

Given that consciousness is transcendent with respect to the body — as Sartre and the majority of Western philosophers think — the other exists beyond what is perceived as a fact.
If this is the case, how do I desire the other and enter into a carnal relationship with him? In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre maintains that the only possible way is to enchant him. It is a matter of making his consciousness descend into his body, of paralyzing his liberty in the factuality of a body. The consciousness of the other must be coagulated in his body — "as one says of a coagulated cream or mayonnaise" — in such a way that the for-itself of the other can surface in his skin, his consciousness can extend itself throughout the entire surface of his body, so that, touching this body, "I ... finally touch the other's free subjectivity."

Thus, I can "possess" the other and, according to Sartre, the fulfillment of desire does not exist without such possession: the fact that the other is already a body possessed of a consciousness determines the desire to possess it. This male philosopher represents the impossible ideal of desire in the following way: the transcendence of the other is to be possessed as pure transcendence inaccessible to sensible experience, but nevertheless as body.

After this hunt for the freedom of the other, the lovers' awakenings are not so happy, paralyzed and weakened as they are in the "facticity" of their bodies.

Desire that wants only the same cannot escape conflict in order to appropriate the other's transcendence.

Emphasizing the difference between man and woman leads to a new consideration of their carnal approach and union.

If both become by linking themselves to a vertical transcendence appropriate to their gender, there is another transcendence between them. For those who are faithful to their own gender, this horizontal transcendence cannot be overcome. The conflict which arises from the appropriation of the freedom of the other no longer makes sense between those who love each other: desire grows from an irreducible alterity.

The other is and remains transcendent to me through a body, through intentions and words foreign to me: "you who are not and will never be me or mine" are transcendent to me in body and in words, in so far as you are an incarnation that cannot be appropriated by me, lest I should suffer the alienation of my freedom. The will to possess you corresponds to a solitary and solipsistic dream which forgets that your consciousness and mine do not obey the same necessities.

Rather than grasping you — with my hand, with my gaze, with my intellect — I must stop before the inappropriable, leaving the transcendence between us to be. "You who are not and will never be me or mine" are and remain you, since I cannot grasp you, understand you, possess you. You escape every enslavement, every submission to me, if I respect you not so much because you are transcendent to your body, but because you are transcendent to me.

Far from wanting to possess you in linking myself to you, I preserve a "to", a safeguard of the in-direction between us — *I Love to You*, and not: I love you. This "to" safeguards a place of transcendence between us, a place of respect which is both obligated and desired, a place of possible alliance. You do not, then, find yourself reduced to a factual thing or to an object of my love, and not even to an ensemble of qualities, which make you into a whole perceivable by me. Instead, I stop in front of you as in front of an other irreducible to me: in body and in intellect, in exteriority and in interiority.

It is not necessary to bestow upon the other a capital letter, an excessively quantitative valuation, in order to make this other's transcendence appear. Such a valuation places transcendence beyond you, where it annuls and repudiates you as you, you-other for I-me. This capitalization of the Other paralyzes us by means of a fictitious freedom, by means of an absence from ourselves, extrasures from our incarnation. In fact, the consciousness represented by this "O" remains exterior to a language which is made flesh in you, in me, in us. Before being law or truth exterior to us, "consciousness outside of us", as Sartre writes, language should make our body and our history into a single subjectivity, possibly in relationship with the subjectivity of the other. Does language not exceed its own power, truth, ethicality, as long as it is not the way for being I in me and I with you?

Certainly, I will never understand you, I will never grasp who you are: you will always remain outside of me. But this not being I, not being *me*, or *mine*, makes speech possible and necessary between us.

No manner of speaking about desire is valid without this muted question: "Who are you who will never be me or mine, you who will always remain transcendent to me, even if I touch you, since the word is made flesh in you in one way, and in me in another?"
In their desire for the other, male philosophers generally evoke sight and touch. Thus, like their hand, their gaze grasps, denudes and captures. The transcendence of the other, however, requires that the invisible in him be respected, including when he is perceived with the senses. Beyond the color of his eyes, the tone of his voice, the quality of his skin, things that are sensible to me, for me, there exists in the other a subjectivity which I cannot see, either with my senses or with my intellect. Male thinkers dodge this irreducible invisible, choosing not to appeal to language as a path towards sharing the mystery of the other.

In a passage from *The Phenomenology of Perception* dealing with the “sexuate body”, Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the relationship between modesty and immodesty in a way which recalls Jean-Paul Sartre’s treatment of enchantment, possession, and the amorous ambiguity that is born from belonging both to a body and to a consciousness.

There is no doubt at all that we must recognize in modesty, desire and love in general a metaphysical significance, which means that they are incomprehensible if man is treated as a machine governed by natural laws, or even as a “bundle” of instincts, and that they are relevant to man as a consciousness and as a freedom. Usually man does not show his body, and, when he does, it is either nervously or with an intention to fascinate. He has the impression that the alien gaze which runs over his body is stealing it from him, or else, on the other hand, that the display of his body will deliver the other person up to him, defenseless, and that in this case the other will be reduced to servitude. Shame and immodesty, then, take their place in a dialectic of the self and the other which is that of master and slave: in so far as I have a body, I may be reduced to the status of an object beneath the gaze of another person, and no longer count as a person for him, or else I may become his master and, in my turn, look at him. But this mastery is self-defeating, since, precisely when my value is recognized through the other’s desire, he is no longer the person by whom I wished to be recognized, but a being fascinated, deprived of his freedom, and who therefore no longer counts in my eyes. Saying that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject, that another can be my master or my slave, so that shame and shamelessness express the dialectic of the plurality of consciousness, and have metaphysical significance. The same might be said of sexual desire: if it cannot accept the presence of a third party as witness, if it feels that too natural an attitude or over-casual remarks, on the part of the desired person, are signs of hostility, this is because it seeks to fascinate, and because the observing third person or the party desired, if he is too free in manner escapes this fascination. What we try to possess, then, is not just a body, but a body brought to life by consciousness (. . .) The importance we attach to the body and the contradictions of love are, therefore, related to a more general drama which arises from the metaphysical structure of my body, which is both an object for others and a subject for myself.4

The desired possession, therefore, is not just the possession of a body, but of a body animated by consciousness, a suggestion which also has much in common with that made by Jean-Paul Sartre.

My first critique of this pessimistic phenomenology would be that, in so far as I belong to a gender, my body already represents an objectivity for me. Therefore, I am not a simple subjectivity which seeks an object in the other. Belonging to a gender allows me to realize, in me, for me – and equally towards the other – a dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity which escapes the dichotomy between subject and object.

But the subject-object dichotomy also depends upon the manner in which sexuality itself is conceived. Maurice Merleau-Ponty considers sexuality as “ambiguity” and “indeterminacy”, which are related not only to the body but to life in general. As a result, sexuality does not favor the emergence of intersubjectivity but, instead, maintains a duplicity in subjectivity itself in such a way that all of its actions, its sentiments, its sensations are ambiguous, murky, and incapable of being turned towards an other as such.

Similarly sexuality, without being the object of any intended act of consciousness, can underlie and guide specified forms of my experience. Taken in this way, as an ambiguous atmosphere, sexuality is co-extensive with life. In other words, ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or
think has always several meanings (...) Thus there is in human existence a principle of indeterminacy, and this indeterminacy is not only for us, it does not stem from some imperfection of our knowledge, and we must not imagine that any God could sound our hearts and minds and determine what we owe to nature and what to freedom. Existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure (...) There is no explanation of sexuality which reduces it to anything other than itself, for it is already something other than itself, and indeed if we like, our whole being. Sexuality, it is said, is dramatic because we commit our whole personal life to it. But just why do we do this? Why is our body, for us, the mirror of our being, unless because it is a natural self, a current of given existence, with the result that we never know whether the forces which bear us on are its or ours- or with the result rather that they are never entirely either its or ours. There is no outstripping of sexuality any more than there is any sexuality enclosed within itself. No one is saved and no one is totally lost.3

In such a phenomenology, it seems that Maurice Merleau-Ponty is forgetting the function of sexuality as a relationship-to and that he is overlooking the role of perception as a means of acceding to the other as other. Perception represents a possible path for sensing the other, respecting him as subject, and it also allows me to remain a subject while perceiving the other. Perception can establish a link between the reception of a fact exterior to me and an intention towards the world, towards the other.

But our tradition is not dedicated to the cultivation4 of sensible perception. We are accustomed to living thought as a night of the senses, as a transmission of language and its truth, without putting either of these to the test of everyday perception. Already in Plato’s work, the handmaidens laugh at the philosophers who fall into wells because they fail to look at what is around them and are oblivious to the holes in their way. Another example: all of the great spiritual masters – apart, perhaps, from those who live in nature? – have testified to the necessity of having a woman close to them, better still if she is a virgin or spiritual mother, to act as a living memory of the common sense of everyday life. But, more generally, it seems that a man weds to have a woman in his home who will remind him of his immediate context and of sensible perception.

As a contrast to our tradition which does not heed the cultivation of perception, it is interesting to read several Far Eastern texts. I am thinking especially of the Upanishad of yoga, of several sutras of Patanjali, of Buddha’s gaze upon the flower (see I Love to You). Buddha’s contemplation of the flower suggests that we learn to perceive the world around us, that we learn to perceive each other between us: as life, as freedom, as difference.

Such a cultivation of perception would modify our loving relationships, whether intimate or communal. In fact, there is no rupture between intersubjectivity in the strict sense and the intersubjectivity of a collectivity, and the desired changes in the relations between man and woman, men and women, form part of a transformation which is helpful to all of our social relationships.

Merleau-Ponty’s text shows that we lack a culture of perception and, because of this flaw, we fall back into the realm of simple feeling.

But sensation corresponds to a more passively lived experience and leads to a partitioning of intersubjectivity between two poles: a pole of the subject and a pole of the object. Sensation, sensations are divided according to a dichotomous logic: pleasure/pain, hot/cold and also active/passive, masculine/feminine, along with other dichotomies which exile the body from its organization in a whole and from its incarnation via language, a language which remains, for this reason, distinguished by listening and fecundity.

This elementary economy of sensation is too abstract for the life of the flesh, for its harmony, for intersubjectivity, and causes sensibility to decline into simple “experience”. The fact that loving relations are, for the most part, considered a sort of decadence, seems to come from a tradition of the sensible which has no respect for intersubjectivity or the exchange of words between those who love each other. This tradition reduces the feminine to a passive object which must experience sensation, while man must distance himself from woman in order to protect his relationship both with the realm of the intelligible and with his God.

As far as sensibility is concerned, we lack a culture which is subjective and intersubjective. Such a culture would require being faithful to the reciprocity in touching-being touched, itself a matter of perceiving or of speaking.

Also in communal relationships, the objective of words, their
linguistic and phonetic economy, as well as their syntactic production, should be made to preserve a reciprocal touching in the act of communication. If a discourse or a collective organization prevent us from remaining in or returning to intersubjectivity, it is worth considering their potential as a totalitarian and deadly power.

Before suggesting the elements of a new philosophy of the caress, I will cite some passages from Lévinas taken from the chapter, “Phenomenology of Eros”, in *Totality and Infinity*. My aim is to unveil certain tendencies in this philosopher’s thought having to do with intersubjectivity and to highlight the differences between his philosophy and the intention of a woman in love. It is a way of responding to Lévinas’ desire for a feminine discourse on virginity and on a possible carnal future for woman, for those who love each other.

The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. It [and I wish to add: this is man’s caress] searches, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search (...). In a certain sense it expresses love, but suffers from an inability to tell it. It is hungry for this very expression, in an unremitting increase of hunger (...). The desire that animates it is reborn in its satisfaction, fed somehow by what is not yet, bringing us back to the virginity, forever inviolate, of the feminine (...). Beyond the consent or the resistance of a freedom the caress seeks what is not yet, a “less than nothing”, closed and dormant beyond the future, consequently dormant quite otherwise than the possible, which would be open to anticipation. [And since this goes beyond the possible, there is always profanation in the caress].

The profanation which insinuates itself in caressing responds adequately to the originality of this dimension of absence (...). In the caress, a relation yet, in one aspect, sensible, the body already denudes itself of its very form, offering itself as erotic nudity. In the carnal given to tenderness, the body quits the status of existent [it is no longer the flower which Buddha contemplates]. The Beloved, at once graspable but intact in her nudity, beyond object and face and thus beyond the existent, abides in virginity. The feminine essentially violable and inviolable, the “Eternal Feminine,” is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity, the untouchable in the very contact of voluptuosity, future in the present (...). The virgin remains ungraspable, dying without murder, swooning, withdrawing into her future, beyond every possible promise to anticipation. Alongside of the night as anonymous rustling of the *there is* extends the night of the erotic, behind the night of insomnium the night of the hidden, the clandestine, the mysterious, land of the virgin, simultaneously uncovered by Eros and refusing *Eros* – another way of saying: profanation. The caress aims at neither a person nor a thing. It loses itself in a being that dissipates as though into an impersonal dream without will and even without resistance, a passivity, an already animal or infantile anonymity, already entirely at death. The will of the tender [and that through which Lévinas essentially fixes the feminine] is produced in its evanescence as though rooted in an animality ignorant of its death, immersed in the false security of the elemental, in the infantile not knowing what is happening to it.

Beyond the fact that Lévinas thinks beginning only with himself, as man, and not in two or the reciprocity therein, there are many differences between his phenomenology of the caress and the one which I am attempting to think. Certainly, the differences are not limited to the gesture of caressing but also testify to a conception of carnal love which bears no resemblance to the eros of Lévinas.

The caress is an awakening to you, to me, to us.

The caress is a reawakening to the life of my body: to its skin, senses, muscles, nerves, and organs, most of the time inhibited, subjugated, dormant or enslaved to everyday activity, to the universe of needs, to the world of labor, to the imperatives or restrictions necessary for communal living.

The caress is an awakening to intersubjectivity, to a touching between us which is neither passive nor active; it is an awakening of gestures, of perceptions which are at the same time acts, intentions, emotions. This does not mean that they are ambiguous, but rather, that they are attentive to the person who touches and the one who is touched, to the two subjects who touch each other.
The caress is an awakening to a life different from the arduous everyday. It is a call to a return to you, to me, to us: as living bodies, as two who are different and co-creators. It is a common act and work, irreducible to those acts and works dedicated either to individual or collective needs.

The caress is a gesture-word which goes beyond the horizon or the distance of intimacy with the self. This is true for the one who is caressed and touched, for the one who is approached within the sphere of his or her incarnation, but it is also true for the one who caresses, for the one who touches and accepts distancing the self from the self through this gesture.

Thus, the gesture of the one who caresses has nothing to do with enslavement, possession or submission of the freedom of the other who fascinates me in his body. Instead, it becomes an offering of consciousness, a gift of intention and of word addressed to the concrete presence of the other, to his natural and historical particularities. To caress is to be aware of the qualities veiled in communal life, qualities that civil laws and practices should guarantee to all, removed from the violence of an everyday life which has no concern for intersubjectivity, removed from the violence of utilitarian practice – whether it involves commerce in the strict sense or the commerce of sexual desire – removed from a gaze or a practice not concerned with respecting the other.

The caress is a gesture-word which penetrates into the realm of intimacy with the self in a privileged space-time. It is a gesture which goes beyond the civil cloak or border of a proper identity, which exceeds the right to exist as a subject with one’s own gender: a male or a female subject.

In order to go beyond a limit, there must be a boundary. To touch one another in intersubjectivity, it is necessary that two subjects agree to the relationship and that the possibility to consent exists. Each must have the opportunity to be a concrete, corporeal and sexuate subject, rather than an abstract, neutral, fabricated, and fictitious one.

It is important that each has been able to assent freely before the other approaches and goes beyond the sphere of subjective integrity, an integrity which should be protected by a right.

A yes from both should precede every caress.

A yes which gives permission to go beyond the limits of communal life towards your concrete presence.

A yes which is proof of my consent to your approach to my body, to my sensibility and to my most intimate language, all of which are foreign to the coexistence between citizens.

The caress is the spell directed at you in a way which is irreducible to the common, to the general, to the relative neutralization required by collective life. It is the awakening of you to yourself, and also to me. It is the call to be us, between us.

The caress is also praise. It is an homage of the evening, of the feast, of the spring to what I have perceived, sensed and experienced of you during the day, the week, the winter, during daily life clothed in the grey of ordinary demands, of urban transit, of the submission of sensible rhythms to the instruments of labor and to the rules of citizenship.

The caress is an invitation to rest, to relax, to perceive, to think and to be in a different way: one which is more quiet, more contemplative, less utilitarian.

The caress is a gift of safety, a call to return to yourself through the rediscovery of your virginity, here and now, thanks to me and us: your virginity understood not as a simply physical or phantasismic thing which is lost or preserved, violable or inviolable, and thus always beyond, never present but still and yet future (to speak as Lévinas does). I think of virginity, instead, as your repose with yourself, in yourself, you as irreducible to me, irreducible to what is common in community. Rather than violating or penetrating the mystery of the other, rather than reducing his or her consciousness or freedom to passivity, objectuality, animality or infancy, the caress makes a gesture which gives the other to himself, to herself, thanks to an attentive witness, thanks to a guardian of incarnate subjectivity.

The caress leads each person back to the I and to the you. I give you to yourself because you are a you for me. You remain you thanks to the you which you are for me, which you are “to” me – to recall the “to” of I Love to You, which has nothing to do with possession. Your body does not resemble an object for me, as
subject, and the same is true for my body. For me, an incarnate subject, you are an incarnate subject. We are two woven of bodies and words, beings and to-bes; and not merely beings under the spell of a master who vanish in imagined virginity.

An invitation to peacefulness instead of to passivity, the caress unfolds as an intersubjective act, as a communication between two, a call to an in-stasy in us and between us, and not to an ecstasy outside of us.

I would not say that desire makes the body ambiguous or equivocal, but rather that it renders it I-me together with I-you. A double intention animates me: I want to return to myself, in myself, and I want to be with you.

For this reason, the sexuate body and the sexual relationship are not bewitching or possession, submersion or nausea (as Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*), they are not ambiguity (according to the language of Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "The Body in its Sexual Being"), and the feminine body, or the feminine, is not equivocation (as Lévinas suggests in *Totality and Infinity*). Enchantment, possession, ambiguity and equivocation alike signify a two which expresses both the existence and absence of two subjects as well as of intersubjectivity.

In my desire for you, in the love that I share with you, my body is animated by the desire to be with you or to you, with me or to me, and it also longs for the existence of a between-us. It wishes to love and to be loved, to leave itself and to re-enter itself. Wanting to go towards you and still attempt the return in myself, I seek an alliance between who you are and who I am, in myself and in yourself. I seek a complex marriage between my interiority and that of a you which cannot be replaced by me, which is always outside of me, but thanks to which my interiority exists.

If I go astray, it is not so much because of an ambiguity or an equivocation between the body's materiality and a more or less aroused consciousness; if I lose the way, it does not happen because of a confusion between subjectivity and objectivity or "facticity," and not even because there is a wavering of identity between you and me, between who you are and who I am, but rather because I wonder how to sustain a relationship between us, between two facts of body and language, between two intentions constituting an incarnate relationship which is realized by flesh and words.

In this double desire, "you" and "I" always remain active and passive, perceiving and experiencing, awake and welcoming. In us, sensible nature and the spirit become in-stasy by remaining within their own singularity and grow through the risk of an exchange with what is irreducible to oneself.