The Five Senses

intermingling of subject and substance, of the intelligible and the sensible, of book, body and world.

Since the appearance of The Five Senses, the force and prerogative of the linguistic model have begun to wane in the Anglophone academy. One of the symptoms and vehicles of this waning has been the extraordinarily energetic revival of interest of the senses. Hitherto, readers and writers in English have not been in a position to take full account of Michel Serres's remarkable contribution to this question. Perhaps the long delay in the appearance of The Five Senses will be propitious, and in any case Serres has never set much store by orderly chronology. Now, with the appearance of this remarkable springy, sinuous translation, readers of English will have the opportunity not only to appreciate the richness of the conversation Serres has continued to conduct with himself over the subject of the sense

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CHAPTER 1

VEILS

Birth – Tattoos – Canvas, veil – Hermes and the peacock – Subtle – Variation – Vair – Mists – Common sense – Mixture, unveiling

Birth

Fire is dangerous on a ship, it drives you out. It burns, stings, bites, crackles, stinks, dazzles, and quickly springs up everywhere, incandescent, to remain in control. A damaged hull is less perilous; damaged vessels have been known to return to port, full of sea water up to their deadworks. Ships are made to love water, inside or out, but they abhor fire, especially when their holds are full of torpedoes and shells. A good sailor has to be a reasonable fireman.

Fire training demands more of the sailor and is harsher and more uncompromising than anything that he needs to learn as a seaman. I can still remember several torturous exercises which teach not only a certain relationship to the senses, but also how to live or survive. We were made to climb down dark, vertical wells, descending endless ladders and inching along damp crawlways, to low underground rooms in which a sheet of oil would be burning. We had to stay there for a long time, lying beneath the acrid smoke, our noses touching the ground, completely still so as not to disturb the thick cloud hanging over us. We had to leave slowly and deliberately when our name was called so as not to choke our neighbour with an ill-considered gesture that would have brought the smoke eddies lower.

The breathable space lies in a thin layer at ground level and remains stable for quite a long period. Knowing how to hold your breath, to estimate the distance to the heart of the blaze or to the point beyond which one is in mortal danger; how to estimate the time remaining, to walk, to move in the right direction, blind, to try not to yield to the universal god of panic, to proceed cautiously towards the desperately desired opening; these are things
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I know about the body. This is no fable. No-one sees dancing shadows on the walls of the cave when a fire is burning inside. Smoke stings your eyes, it fills the whole space, chokes you. Blinded, you have to lie down. You can only grope your way out. Touch is the last remaining means of guiding yourself.

But this knowledge was academic until the day of genuine wrath arrived without warning, one winter’s day at sea. The fire was rumbling, a terrifying sound like thunder. In a moment all the bulkheads were closed. I admired those who rushed without thinking into the manholes, down the ladders. I heard a lot of noise and remember nothing.

All of a sudden I am alone. What has happened? In the closed compartment the unbearable heat makes me feel like fainting. I have to get out. The door, behind, is immovably blocked, panels and levers locked water-tight, firmly fastened from the other side. I choke under the thick smoke, lying on the moving floor, shaken by the movement of the waves. Then all that remains is a porthole. Get up without breathing, quickly try to unscrew the rusty flanges preventing its opening. They resist, they have not been used much, once or twice probably since the vessel was launched. They do not yield. I lie down again at ground level to get my breath. The weather conditions are worsening, as if the sea were becoming choppier. I get up again, holding my breath, trying to undo the screws that seem slowly to be yielding. Three or four times, I do not recall, I lie down again; as many times, jaws clenched, muscles locked, I work on, with the porthole closed. Suddenly it opens.

Light, and particularly air, rushes in, churning the smoke, which becomes even more choking. I quickly stick my head out through the open hole. Horrible weather, the brutal cold takes hold. I cannot open my eyes in the fury of the icy spray, my ears, hurt as they passed through, feel as though they are being ripped off; suddenly my body curls up, demanding to remain motionless in its warm retreat. I pull my head back inside, but choke, and can now hear small explosions. The fire must have reached the munitions store; I have to get out as soon as possible. I push my head through, then one arm, not yet as far as my shoulder, only my hand and wrist. The angle of my elbow is a problem in the small space between my neck and the rim of brass around the porthole. I cannot get out, I have to get out. Everything is burning and my head is frozen.

I remain there, motionless, vibrating, pinioned, gesticulating within the confines of the fixed necklace, long enough for me to think, no, for my body to learn once and for all to say ‘I’ in the truest sense of the word. In truth, with no possibility of being wrong. No mistake about it, since my life quite simply depended on this dark, slow, blinding meditation.

I am inside, burnt to a crisp with only my frozen, shivering, blinded head outside. I am inside, ejected and excluded, and my head, arm and left shoulder are outside in the howling storm. Inside, amidst the insane fire which pushes me outwards, my head and second shoulder, half out, caught in an agonizing necklace, emerge, at the mercy of the storm. I am neither saved, nor even outside. I am still imprisoned, completely on one side of the window. The round hoop of brass open in the flank of the burning vessel is not as big as the compressed circle of my thorax. Still inside, even though both shoulders are out in the winter weather. The porthole compresses my chest to the limit – any further and it would be crushed. So I am going to die. I cannot get a foothold anywhere. Behind, in the burning hell in which I am still trapped, my arms are of no use, pressed against my body. I am a wisp of straw caught in a hole, unable to go forward, with no hope of going backwards, I will choke to death. Is it worse to breathe in the smoke, or the icy blast, or stay in the rusty iron collar, I can’t possibly decide.

Then a big wave, coming suddenly from the side, violently jolts the necklace towards my suspended ribs. God be praised, I am out. I breathe the cold air and almost faint. To my horror, the sea, still more relentlessly, hammers randomly at the bottom of the boat which tilts over on to the other side and I am inside again, rammed again into the iron circle up to my chest. It felt as though the hull were passing over piles of stones. The shock on one side freed me; a shock from the other side imprisoned me again.

I was inside, I was outside.

Who was this ‘I’?

It is something everyone knows, unemotionally and as a matter of fact. You only have to pass through a small opening, a blocked corridor, to swing over a handrail or on a balcony high enough to provoke vertigo, for the body to become alert. The body knows by itself how to say I. It knows to what extent I am on this side of the bar, and when I am outside. It judges deviations from normal balance, immediately regulates them and knows just how far to go, or not go. Coenesthesia says I by itself. It knows that I am inside, it knows when I am freeing myself. This internal sense proclaims, calls, announces, sometimes howls the I like a wounded animal. This common sense apportions the body better than anything else in the whole world.
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If I slide a leg through, I am still inside, while my leg, thigh and knee are outside. They become almost black. My pelvis goes through, my genitals, buttocks and navel are most certainly outside but I remain inside. I know what it is to be a man without legs; I know for a moment what phantom limbs feel like. At a precise moment, the very moment when the totality of the divided body shouts ego in a general toppling movement, I slide out and can drag through the remainder of my body, pull through the pieces that have remained inside, yes, the scattered pieces that have suddenly been blackened in the violent overturning of the iceberg.

The random jolting of the vessel as it heaves to throw the I to the left and right of the window of hope. I dwell inside, I dwell outside; the I inside the boat finds itself outside, in the icy gusts of wind. The movement of the waves pushes or pulls the thorax a few millimetres in either direction, a tiny distance. My body is aware of this deviation; it is able to appreciate the movements around it. I am delivered or debarred, breathing or asphyxiated, burning from the fire inside or stripped bare by the biting wind, dead or alive. I go under or I exist. There is an almost identifiable point which, in the spatial experience of passing from inside to out, is proclaimed by the whole body. The I as a whole leaps towards this localized point and moves decisively from one half of the body to the other when the point slides, in contact with the separating wall, from its internal to its external surface.

Since my near shipwreck I have become accustomed to calling this point the soul. The soul resides at the point where the I is decided.

We are all endowed with a soul, from that first moment of passage when we risked and saved our existence.

I understood that evening the meaning of the cry: save our souls. Saving this point is enough. I found myself outside, in the horrifying cold, when the point passed the threshold of the constraining collar. I was still inside until that moment. Descartes is right to say that the soul touches the body at a particular point, but he was wrong to locate it in the pineal gland. It hovers around the region of the solar plexus. From there it illuminates or obscures the body, in bursts of light or dark, making it translucent or epiphanic, transmuting it into a black body. It is somewhere in that area for everyone, according to the dictates of each individual's body. We all retain it, marked and definitive, where it was fixed on the day we were born. More often than not, it is forgotten and left in the shadows of internal meaning, until the day when the sudden fury of nature causes us to be born a second time, through chance, pain, anguish or luck. It is not such a bad thing, pace Descartes, that on that youthful day, piloting a ship, we were to discover that a pilot says I for his whole vessel, from the depths of the keel to the tip of the mast, and from the quarter to the boom, and that the soul of his body descends into the soul of the boat, towards the central turbines, to the heart of the quickwork. To free yourself from that vessel, you have to search for your soul in the hold, where the fire is at its most dangerous – one perilous day.

Tattoos

The soul inhabits a quasi-point where the I is determined.

Athletes do not have one, they run or throw; but jumpers do, and hurl themselves over the bar pole and beyond; they gently curl their bodies around the place where it projects itself forward. The difference between athletics and gymnastics, with the exception of the long jump, lies in the practice of the soul. The fixed bar, somersault, rings, floor work, trampoline and diving are useful as exercises in experimental metaphysics, like the passage through the small porthole, where the body goes searching for its soul, where both play, like lovers, at losing and finding each other, sometimes leaving each other, then coming together again, in risk and pleasure. In certain collective games, players have lost their souls because they entrusted them to a common object, the ball: they organize themselves, spread themselves out, wrap themselves around it, collectively. The metaphysical exercise is transformed here into a manoeuvre in applied sociology.

Lose your soul in order to save it; give it away in order to regain it.

The soul, not quite a point, reveals itself through volume, with precision in a ship, in the space traced by unusual displacements. Can we find it superficially now? A more difficult study.

I am cutting my nails.

Where is the subject determined? As a left-hander, I take the tool in my left hand and place the open blades at the tip of my right index finger. I place myself in the handles of the scissors. The I is now situated there and not at the top of the right finger. My nail: awkwardly placed along the steel blade; my hand: agile and clever in managing the cutting. The left-hand subject works on the right-finger object. The left hand has something of the nature of the self, bathed in subjectivity, the right finger is the world. If the scissors
change hands, everything changes or nothing changes. The I stays in the vicinity of my left index finger, the nail of which knowingly and shamelessly caresses the sharp blade, just touching it. The handle of the tool grasped by the right hand is abandoned by me. An external motor drives the machine and my proffered index finger determines the exact limits of the cut to be made. On the one hand, I am cutting a nail, on the other, my nail is cut. The presentation of the finger to the blade, its flexibility or rigidity at the moment of cutting, the precision of the process, are sufficient for the external observer to determine the state of the soul, the place where it is now in a state of equilibrium, as it were. The soul of the left-hander is on his left side, on his right side he is a dark body, a hybrid when forced to write with his right hand.

But that changes and varies. In the case of toenails, the reversal does not take place. So far away, it is still the body, or the world. So far away, the soul is absent. No toe touches the blade the way my left-hand middle finger does. That's enough about tools.

I touch one of my lips with my middle finger. Consciousness resides in this contact. I begin to examine it. It is often hidden in a fold of tissue, lip against lip, tongue against palate, teeth touching teeth, closed eyelids, contracted sphincters, a hand clenched into a fist, fingers pressed against each other, the back of one thigh crossed over the front of the other, or one foot resting on the other. I wager that the small, monstrous homunculus, each part of which is proportional to the magnitude of the sensations it feels, increases in size and swells at these automorphic points, when the skin tissue folds in on itself. Skin on skin becomes conscious, as does skin on mucus membrane and mucus membrane on itself. Without this folding, without the contact of the self on itself, there would truly be no internal sense, no body properly speaking, coesthesia even less so, no real image of the body; we would live without consciousness; slippery smooth and on the point of fading away. Klein bottles are a model of identity. We are the bearers of skewed, not quite flat, unreplicated surfaces, deserts over which consciousness passes fleetingly, leaving no memory. Consciousness belongs to those singular moments when the body is tangential to itself.

I touch my lips, which are already conscious of themselves, with my finger. I can then kiss my finger and, what amounts to almost the same thing, touch my lips with it. The I vibrates alternately on both sides of the contact, and all of a sudden presents its other face to the world, or, suddenly passing over the immediate vicinity, leaves behind nothing but an object. In the local gesture of calling for silence, the body plays ball with the soul. Those who do not know where their soul is to be found touch their mouths, and they do not find it there. The mouth touching itself creates its soul and contrives to pass it on to the hand which, clenching itself involuntarily, forms its own faint soul and then can pass it on, when it wishes, to the mouth, which already has it. Pure chance, each time.

The body cannot play ball, at all times or in all places. There are zones where this contingency does not come into play. I touch my shoulder with my hand. In relation to my hand or mouth my shoulder remains an object in the world. It needs a natural object, a rock, tree trunk or waterfall in order to become a subject again. The shoulder has no soul, save in relation to what takes place outside the body. Now determine where the soul is, by putting your elbows on your knees, by placing one part of your body on another.

There is no end to it, the only limit is your own suppleness.

Metaphysics begins with, and is conditioned by, gymnastics.

Let us now draw or paint. Isolate, if you can, the chance encounters of corners or folds, the small secret zones in which the soul, to all intents and purposes, still resides. Then isolate as well, if possible, the unstable zones which are able to play at souls with one another as if playing ball. Surround also the balls or blocks, which only become subjects in the presence of objects, the dense or compact regions which always remain objects or black, soulless deserts, in themselves, or in relation to those zones which turn them into objects. Drawing rarely defines compact zones. These explode, burst forth and escape along narrow corridors, form passes and chimneys, pathways, passages, flames, zigzags and labyrinths. Observe on the surface of the skin, the changing, shimmering, fleeting soul, the blazing, striated, tinted, streaked, striped, many-coloured, motled, cloudy, star-studded, bedizened, variegated, torrential, swirling soul. A wild idea, the first after consciousness, would be to trace delicately and colour in these zones and passages, as in a map.

Tattooing: my white, constantly present soul blazes up and is diffused in the unstable reds which exchange with other reds; deserts lacking a soul are black, and fields where the ochre, mauve, cold blue, orange and turquoise soul very occasionally settles are green . . . This is what our complex and somewhat frightening identity card looks like. Everyone has their own original card, like their thumbprint or dental record, no map resembles another, each one changes through time. I have made so much progress
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since my sad youth and bear on my skin the tracks and paths traced by the
women who have helped me in the search for my scattered soul.

Those who need to see in order to know or believe, draw and paint and
fix the lake of changing, ocellated skin and make the purely tactile visible by
means of colours and shapes. But every epidermis would require a different
tattoo; it would have to evolve with time: each face requires an original
tactile mask. Historiated skin carries and displays a particular history. It is
visible: wear and tear, scars from wounds, calluses, wrinkles and furrows of
torner hopes, blotches, pimples, eczema, psoriasis, birth-marks. Memory is
inscribed there, why look elsewhere for it? And it is invisible: the fluctuating
traces of caresses, memories of silk, wool, velvet, furs, tiny grains of rock,
rough bark, scratchy surfaces, ice crystals, flames, the timidity of a subtle
touch, the audacity of aggressive contact. An abstract drawing or painting
would be the counterpart of the faithful and honest tattoo in which the sense
impressions are expressed; if the picture imitates readymade illustrations,
icons or letters, everything is reduced to a mere reflection of the social. The
skin becomes a standard bearer, whereas it is in fact imprinted.

The beginnings of a drawing changing amidst caresses: naked, stretched
out, curled up at my side, tiger, cougar, armadillo, you seek to guess the
secrets of my historiated, liquid, shimmering skin. Our soul expands, we are
not monochromatic.

The global soul: a small, deep place, not far from the region of the
emotions. The local, storm-prone, surface soul: a viscous lake, ready to flare
up, on which the multiple, rainbow-coloured, slowly-changing light plays.
A sharp point and peacock feathers, the soul pricks us and struts about.

It is there that history truly begins. How can two such complicated
labyrinths meet, be superimposed and complement each other? Ariadne is
lost in Theseus’ labyrinth. Theseus is lost in the avenues and roundabouts
on Ariadne’s mountain. One would have to imagine the relationship
between two species, genres or kingdoms, tiger and peacock, zebra and
jaguar, ladybird and poppy, centipede and chalcedony, a chameleon on
marble. Miracles happen, ligers and tigons, although there are not many of
them, and they are rarely long-lived. Otherwise, Ariadne has to turn white,
and Theseus to wind back on his distaff all the threads that entangle and
divide up her bedizened body. Failing a miracle, our surface soul is an
obstacle to our amorous activities. It is as if we were wearing a tattooed
breastplate, unless we lay it down, melt the map of pathways and crossroads,
and redeploy our soul or make it burn with a different light, so that the
flames mingle.

When the soul comes to an organ, that organ becomes conscious and
the soul is lost. If my finger touches my lip and says I, my mouth becomes
an object, but in reality it is my finger that is lost. As soon as the soul settles
on it, it takes over. When I lift these bricks, stones, concrete blocks, I exist
entirely in my hands and arms and my soul in its density is at home there
but, at the same time, my hand is lost in the grainy body of the pebbles. The
object is reduced to a black body and the soul to a white void. The soul, as
transparent as an evanescent angel, whitens the places where it alights;
the skin, imprinted elsewhere with the varied colours of history, is brighter,
lighter and correspondingly whiter at these points, because it has become
alive. Behold: the skin of his face was shining. Behold: he was transfigured
before them, as white as snow. The soul, in patches, shapes the tattoo, the set
of crossed lines drawing a force-field: the space occupied by the formidable
pressure of the soul in its efforts to erase gently the shadows of the body, and
the major entrenchments of the body to resist this effort. On the skin, soul
and object are neighbours. They advance, win or lose their places, a long,
hazy mingling of the I and the black body, resulting from time to time in a
peacock’s tail of mingled colours. The struggle ends with the alabaster-white,
mythical body. I am no longer anything. Or with the cybernetic body, a black
box, another total nothingness.

The ecstatic transfiguration, the loss of the body into the soul, removes
the tattoo. The totally fayed man, the perfect automaton, also replaces the
body with a total black box. Thus the mingled body finds itself in the middle,
between heaven and hell; in everyday space.

All dualism does is reveal a ghost facing a skeleton. All real bodies
shimmer like watered silk. They are hazy surfaces, mixtures of body and
soul. It seems simple, although perverse and laughable, to tell of the loves of
a larva and an automaton, or of a phantom and a black box, but the loves of
the composite and the many-hued are consummated wordlessly.

I have only described tattooing in order to show the traces of the soul
and those of the world. We always believe that we know something better
when we have seen it, or that we can explain better by deploying shapes and
displaying colours. To be sure, seen and visible tattoos, imprinted with a
hot needle, have their origin in this gaudy thing that is the soul, a complex
labyrinth of sense striving alternately towards the internal and external, and
vibrating at the limits of each. But I have drawn, coloured or painted tattoos
only in order to reveal the tangible: an abstract picture of the sense of touch.
Abstract insofar as it abandons the visible in order to rejoin the tactile. The
shimmering, vaguely fluid and, as it were, elastic identity card, obeys the
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tender map of touch. It favours topology and geography over geometry. Neglecting point of view and representation, it favours mountains, straits, footpaths, Klein bottles, chance borders that are formed through the contingencies of contact. It turns the skin into a generalized thumb. The skin can explore proximities, limits, adhesions, balls and knots, coasts or capes, lakes, promontories and folds. The map on the epidermis most certainly expresses more than just touch, it plunges deeply into the internal sense, but it begins with the sense of touch. Thus the visible tells more than just the visible. There is no word corresponding to touch to designate the untouchable or intangible, as there is for the invisible which is present in, or absent from what is seen, complementary to it, although abstracted from it, and incarnated in its flesh. However, the sense of touch is keen, sensitive and subtle. The soul is intact, in that sense. The intact soul entrances touch just as the topological invisible haunts and illuminates the experiential visible, from within. In the lavish luxury of tactile sensation, I feel as though I am touching a new abstract, at least on two sides, one of mixture and coloured patterns, and the other being one where the geometer abandons his measuring stick to assess individual shapes, ridges and corridors.

Many philosophies refer to sight; few to hearing; fewer still place their trust in the tactile, or olfactory. Abstraction divides up the sentient body, eliminates taste, smell and touch, retains only sight and hearing, intuition and understanding. To abstract means to tear the body to pieces rather than merely to leave it behind.
Veils

When in fact it is love.

Canvas, veil, skin

In the 1890s, Pierre Bonnard painted a bathrobe; he painted a canvas in which a bathrobe is depicted, and a woman amidst leaves.

The brown-hair as she was hid