Upon rereading the preceding pages, I am struck by the fact that, notwithstanding my effort to ‘take Foucault into phenomenology’ and thus in a sense to dissolve what I learned from him in a new element, there remains an insight that is decidedly Foucaultian which resists this current and, in reversing it, seems to draw phenomenology into Foucault. It can be summarized in one word: dissociation. By ‘dissociation’ I mean something quite simple which nonetheless might explain a great deal of the fascination that Foucault’s early work exercised on my generation: it is the dissociation between understanding in the sense of comprehension and understanding in the sense of sympathy. What Foucault calls “discourse” gives rise to such a dissociation: between different epochs of our culture, but also, between different cultures or within one single culture between, for example, social classes or generations or even – and I will come back to this – between individuals. Discourse works as a kind of filter through which certain things or statements literally can be seen or heard, but not others. Before the truth of a proposition can be decided, for instance, it must first be heard (it must be able to appear, Heidegger would say) and taken seriously. As I have suggested in my introduction, what is at stake here is a different sort of relativism than the one which people usually try to discredit by invoking the ‘self-refuting argument’ which has been used from Plato to Habermas (“performative contradiction”) to supposedly settle the matter. As one can learn from the smile which appears involuntarily on our lips, or the strange unease which comes over us when we are confronted with differently structured discourses (like those Foucault describes in The Order of Things), the ‘self’ that is supposed to synthesize without contradiction the content of its statement with the fact of stating it, is too finite to carry that weight. If this synthesis fails, this is because the ability to take something seriously belongs to the constitution of our subjectivity without itself having been constituted by us. Though we might well understand how another culture or another discourse is structured (for instance, by examining, like Foucault, the rules underlying its coherence), such understanding does not automatically mean that we show understanding for it, that we sympathize
with it. Our finite ability to take something seriously, to attach importance to it, shows that we are already occupied by something, gripped by something, tied to something, and that it is this past which has never been present which is responsible for the gap between the subject's 'saying' and its 'said' – a gap which one only begins to notice through contact with true others, or with the true other. In such an experience of the other, something about us is revealed to us which we cannot completely appropriate: we feel ill at ease, we laugh – nervously or a bit too uproariously – at the strangeness of that other, but this laugh is not like the other kind of laugh where we let ourselves go. It is more a laugh with which we protect ourselves from something, and it is because we feel this protection that it remains strange to us. There is in us something strange that nevertheless makes us who we are, and that resonates within us and for us whenever another stranger passes by. Even before we know it, we are assaulted by an affect which, in a certain sense, itself takes the initiative to protect us but, in so doing, also confronts us with or exposes us to something in ourselves which is older than we are. We are not only dissociated from the other; we are dissociated within ourselves. I say within ourselves rather than 'from' ourselves (and certainly not from our 'self') because such a dissociation does not mean the death of the subject, but gives the subject its very structure: the dissociated subject may be a split subject, but it is clearly still a subject, albeit one that is 'decentred'.

This decentring of the subject is obviously a term deriving from (post)structuralism, but I have been giving it in this volume a kind of existential spin by not only linking it with discourse, cultures, structures, etc. – in short, with a field which articulates the subject – but also by using it to indicate the structure of our singularity as such. A kind of existentialization of Foucault, then. And why not? If one defines discourse as what establishes the difference between what in principle might have been said and what in fact was said¹, then what prevents us from using the same or a similar definition to refer to what is singular about each one of us? The difference between the possibilities offered us by language and the use which each subject makes of them, or the difference between opening one's ears and what one hears, or the difference between one's ability to understand others (an ability which seems unrestricted) and one's ability to sympathize with them – would it be an exaggeration to extend this decentring of the subject with regard to a discourse which he has not instituted toward the subject himself, and to find in it the structure of a singularity which he does not give to himself, but which gives him to himself, which he does not institute, but

¹. As we have seen Foucault do in his 'Réponse à une question', Esprit, 1968(36:5), p. 863 (cf. chapter 2).