As one of his translators, I would like to say a few words about Claude Lefort’s style; Raymond Aron, who was on Lefort’s doctoral committee, commented on it. I have the following information in the form of a note Lefort wrote to me as I was about to take on the translation of his thesis (*Le travail de l’oeuvre Machiavel: The Work of the Oeuvre Machiavelli*). It reads as follows: “I am sure my book is difficult to translate. My thesis director, Raymond Aron, vigorously criticized my style, which he considered to be Proustian; that was by no means a compliment! Since those days I have tried to be more concise.” He goes on to authorize my shortening and/or simplifying of his sentences, which I was indeed sometimes able to do. But was Aron’s allusion to Proust entirely negative? Or did his ears hear all that his lips were saying? And does Lefort’s propensity for jovial self-deprecation forbid our application of a broader interpretation of the Proustian allusion? For, although in this early (1972) thesis the sentences do indeed tend to meanderings and tucked-in afterthoughts (or what the French call “repentirs”), both authors thereby remain faithful to their mental movements’ ranging through the depths of a meditation followed through to its reluctant release. A case in point: at the very beginning of his book, Lefort imagines a critic accusing him of the “perversion” of desiring to pursue the discourse of his interpretation of Machiavelli even beyond the silence that would hypothetically be imposed, were one to stumble upon an interpretation that would end that discourse. And, just as Proust inserts the origin of his text within the text of *Remembrance of Things Past* itself, so Lefort manages to foreshadow, not only his technique of interpreting the oeuvre of Machiavelli, but his own interpretive work as well, as oeuvre of the oeuvre: he defers the end of Machiavelli’s discourse “by freeing it from the fatal cycle in which it was lodged, by attaching it
to the possibility of a new origin, by soliciting its further survival in a reader.” If I insist on this example, it is to emphasize that the fertile difficulty of Lefort’s text is not just one of translation. If all translation is to some degree or in some sense interpretation, let me say that the translation of Lefort is mostly interpretation. His language is in the mode of “entendement,” that is, of “understanding.” You read the lines, you read between the lines, you read the words in their current meaning, and if you come up short you try running the gamut of their etymological resonances… The context, the historical milieu, everything is relevant. Sometimes one finds oneself speaking, as old couples are wont to do, “à demi-mots.”

All translation is made possible (and impossible) by the same fallacy: the separability of form and content. Strip down the content baby, bundle it up in a new form, and you have a spanking new translation. But form is not an envelope, and this is the truth conveyed by the term “style”. Let us not be misled by the metaphorical origin. The stylus, the pen, the “stylo,” is far more than an incidental instrumentality. Merleau-Ponty (and the intertwining of his thought with that of Claude Lefort has already been, and will continue to be, touched upon in this volume) had much to say about style, and that is a rich labyrinth I will not enter here, but only pause at the brink to say that style is an affair of movement, and that its mystery has two modes: the active and the passive. We have style, and style has us. It is the former – the active – that Lefort had in mind, of course, when he wrote in his note to me, since those days I have tried to be more concise. Yet the “repentir” style to which I alluded is, after all, part of an entire philosophy of communication, and one that is not foreign to him: the first approximation has a certain value, which, being crossed-out but not erased by what follows, has a cumulative effect that cannot be denied. By participating vicariously in the spontaneous generation of ideas, the reader may achieve a sense of what the author means that is fuller and livelier than the most accurate summary or “précis.” Was Lefort saying that he was willing to give up this doubling back of language upon itself? Perhaps he was aware that there is a trap here: the danger of becoming a “stylist.” The writer who goes too far in this direction, who outlives himself (l’écrivain qui se survit), or who imitates himself, may be the one who fails to understand that language does not accept such homage, but prefers, as Lefort quotes Machiavelli as saying, to seek out approval among the young, and, like Fortuna, favors from her master a more impetuous, commanding approach.

Beyond the rather strict dichotomy between the active and the passive lies the realm Merleau-Ponty sometimes referred to as that