

Jean-Luc Nancy, 1940-2021

Joanna Hodge

One day, what I am saying to you today will no longer have any sense or any handle on the period. But today this is where there is some sense: in saying sense is absent, in saying that this absence is what we are exposed to, and that this exposition constitutes what I will call not only our present history but, along with Rimbaud, our refound eternity.

– Jean-Luc Nancy, 1993

With his recent death on 23 August 2021, Jean-Luc Nancy, the third of the Strasbourg thinkers, joins Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1940-2007) in the Elysian Fields of posthumous fame. The connections between these three are many and various, stretching from the early 1970s up until their deaths and beyond. In June 2004, Derrida attended one more conference at Strasbourg, organised in his honour, invoking town, university and department as his first and latest hosts. He wrote: 'I have just, no doubt in a rather abusive and unfaithful way, privileged, as I thought I had to, our trio.' (*For Strasbourg* 2014, 2004)* For Nancy, the importance of working and thinking with others provides a key to some otherwise puzzling features of his writing, his enthusiasm for the interview as a way of putting concepts in question, and his generous encouragement of those who sought to translate his writings.

In a conversation with Pierre-Philippe Jandin, published as *The Possibility of a World* (2017, 2013), he discusses his formative years and a sojourn from five to eleven years of age, at a school in Baden-Baden in post-war Germany, a child of a member of the French occupying forces. Nancy and Jandin discuss how his early student years and preparation for entry to the *École normale supérieure* ran in parallel with an exit from the Young Christian Movement and a separation from Roman Catholicism. He completed a doctorate in 1973 on Kant's

analogies of experience, under the supervision of Paul Ricoeur, and was awarded a *doctorat d'état* in 1987 from the University of Toulouse for work subsequently published as *The Experience of Freedom* (1993, 1988). Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida were both on the examining committee, alongside the director of studies, Gerard Granel. In his conversation with Jandin, Nancy notes the impact on him of reading Derrida's study of Husserl, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (1978, 1962): 'As for me, the day that I discovered Derrida's text for the first time in 1964, a text that had been published in 1962, I felt that something was bursting open.' That text ends with Nancy expressing reservations concerning uses of Derrida's notion of a messianicity without messiah, to explore the surprise of what arrives, in defiance of expectation.

From 1973 Nancy taught for many years as Professor at the University of Strasbourg in conjunction with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and, after retirement, remained attached as Emeritus Professor. He held at various times visiting professorships at Ohio State University, the University of California and the State University of New York. His ability to travel freely was seriously restricted following major surgery and a heart transplant in 1991, which was followed across the decades by complications following the requisite suppression of the auto-immune system, to prevent rejection of the organ. His anticipated lifespan was then a further ten years, which against the odds turned out to be nearly thirty years more life and activity. His condition is discussed by him with the film maker, Claire Denis, in her film *Vers Nancy* (2002), in which there emerges a shared commitment to an ontology of differences, and to assigning a priority to an analysis of acts, rather than of identities. He discusses the dismemberment of bodily integrity and a suspen-

* The dates here given for Nancy's writings are those of their English translation, followed by their original publication in French.

sion of any authoritative gaze, in relation to her highly controversial film, *Trouble Every Day* (2001). Here bodies are conceived and presented as collections of parts, blood smeared on surfaces, a *corpus* in fragments, *partes extra partes*, rather than as integrated *corps*, or unified organisms. A disintegration of bodies, and of sexual identities, in the grip of desire and sexual activity, returns for attention in the recently published conversations with Irving Goh, *The Deconstruction of Sex* (2021), for which there is no prior publication in French. Denis returns the compliment by responding to his essay on the transplant condition, in her film with the same name, *L'intrus* (2004). A concern for an immediacy of the cinematic image is even more salient in his extended study of the cinematography of Abbas Kiarostami, *The Evidence of Film* (2001).

Nancy's thinking is often associated with two provocative phrases: the 'inoperative community', which he explores in the wake of the writings and commitments of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, in proximity to those of Lacoue-Labarthe; and the 'deconstruction of Christianity', which he disputed with Derrida, who was sceptical about the implied privilege to Christianity. This deconstruction of Christianity is in turn associated in Nancy's enquiries with two further phrases, retained in Latin: firstly, from the Latin Mass, *hoc est enim corpus meum* (for this is my body), and *noli me tangere* (do not touch me), addressed by the risen Christ to Mary Magdalen, at the empty tomb on the Sunday morning of resurrection. These serve as disruptive pediments to Hegel's focus on a Good Friday of speculative dialectics. Each phrase captures a moment of substitution and metamorphosis. The first marks the transubstantiation of the communion wafer into the body of Christ, commemorating the sharing and divine revelation at the Last Supper, before the Crucifixion. The second marks the transitional status of that divine embodiment, in transit between human death and eternal, divine life. These phrases from the Christian tradition mark limit conditions within Christian doctrine and a disruption of boundaries between religious doctrine, on the one side, and, on the other, both metaphysical and artistic commitments and practices. For Nancy is committed to the thought that the arts and metaphysics of the Western world are irretrievably connected, in their development and dissolution, inventions and multiplication, to these moments of manifestation, in which presentation is con-

ditional on an absence. For Nancy, the hospitality in Christianity to the making of images, and to a proliferation of narratives, marks it out from other monotheisms, Judaism and Islam, to which nevertheless Christianity in all its variants remains so intimately linked. He diagnoses this hospitality as one aspect of a tendency within Christianity to develop its own distinctive atheism and denial of divinity – in his phrase, an absentheism – and to a dissolution of a unified functioning religion.



Photograph: Daniele Silvestri (2008)

Two collections of papers, *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (2008, 2005) and *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II* (2013, 2010) are preceded

by a study of paintings of the encounter at the tomb between the risen Christ and Mary Magdalen, under the title, *Noli me tangere* (2008, 2004). There, delimitations and boundaries between day and night, the visible and the invisible, life and death, the human and the divine are traced across the apparently two-dimensional surface of a series of emblematic paintings. Here is another exploration of a truth in painting, *La vérité en peinture*, put in focus by Derrida in his study of 1978, affirming an inheritance of the technical and pedagogical functions of painting biblical scenes, in an age of general illiteracy. In *The Look of the Portrait* (2006, 2000), Nancy had already explored how the gaze of the one portrayed displays a world, not exposed as a spectacle in front of me, but rather as forces traversing a self, plunged into a world, and formed by those forces. In 'On the Threshold' (1993), a text read before Caravaggio's *The Death of the Virgin*, in the Louvre in 1992, Nancy writes: 'Here there is no message, and no passage. Between John and the two Marys, there is only a present of light, color, cloth and the body.' This connects to another key feature of his enquiries, a commitment to a version of materialism, itself in process of transformation, not held in place by given concepts, or an essence of matter, 'bound by no other essence than the inimitable existence of singularity.' The various materialities of art practice are to be respected in their distinctness.

Nancy affirms Heidegger's account of a withdrawal of being, leaving human beings in a world of inert entities, but proposes in addition an opening for an account of matter, as flows of forces forming singularities in an areality of the spaces those bodies occupy. In *The Experience of Freedom*, there is an invocation of a transcendental, or ontological materiality, as a site for the arrival of this areality, as a term for space, as occupied, extended and distended, by bodies. A primacy for a body in dispersal, *partes extra partes*, is subsequently expanded on, in writings collected under the title *Corpus* (2008, 1992), and developed in *Coming* (2017, 2014), in conversation with Adele van Reeth, and in *Sexistence* (2021, 2017), which explore the pleasure of sex and the interactive nature of a human experience of embodiment. These writings underpin Nancy's notion that there is something distinctive about human embodiment, but not to be defended on the basis of any imitation in the human of some divinely given form. He develops a commitment to modes

of materialisation which occur across a boundary usually held in place between concepts of nature (*physis*) and concepts of artifice (*techne*). This generates an account of relations in the world as ecotechnics, systems of semio-technological transformation, most explicitly in *The Sense of the World* (1997, 1993) and in the essay in *Being Singular Plural* (2000, 1996), 'War, Right, Sovereignty-techne', where its status as successor term to political economy is rehearsed.

Being, sovereignty, divinity, are for Nancy all names for empty spaces, opening up as a consequence of a withdrawal of anachronised meanings and a decline of sclerotic institutions: spaces in which unprecedented and unconfigured forces gather and circulate, for good and ill. Christianity for Nancy is tied to a specific form of sovereign power, expressed in the papal phrase, *urbi et orbi*, addressing both city and globe, conjoining the city of Rome to a global reach. This global reach empties out any determinacy of meaning for its doctrinal commitments and generates an emergent distinction between weakening forces of world making, *mondialisation*, in which meanings are formed and contested, and expanding processes of globalisation, in which a single set of uniform relations, with systems of general equivalence, displaces and overrides localised systems of evaluation. In his pamphlet, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes* (2014, 2012), responding to the earthquakes and nuclear disaster at Fukushima in 2011, Nancy meditates on the disruption of the boundary between natural and man-made disasters, and on the imminence of ecological catastrophe, both man-made and natural, across the globe. This provides the backdrop for his very recent discussion of the Covid pandemic in *Un trop humain virus* (2020), shortly to appear in English translation from Polity Press. There he deploys distinctions between three kinds of ill (*maladie, malheur, malfaisance*), illness, misfortune and ill-doing (malfeasance) as active harm-doing. A preoccupation with thinking evil is in evidence along the length of his enquiries. Already in *The Experience of Freedom*, he disputes Heidegger's seeming affirmation of Schelling on an ontodicy, a necessity for evil in the world, instead identifying evil-doing as hostility to, and the attempt to destroy, existence itself. It arrives again in a borrowing from Hannah Arendt, on a banality of evil, in *The Banality of Heidegger* (2017, 2015), his response to the anti-Semitic observations in Heidegger's commonplace

books, recently published as the *Black Notebooks*. Thus the classically theological concept of evil is taken up and transposed, with the assistance of readings of Schelling, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Arendt, in a context no longer governed by theological concepts of good and evil, and the satanic and divine powers, which traditionally hold them in place. This move he also makes in relation to a concept of creation, in a fourth key text from the past twenty years: *The Creation of the World, or Globalisation* (2007, 2002), in which the phrase *urbi et orbi* is identified as marking an anonymised ‘anywhere and everywhere’.

The theological notion of a creation of a single world as universe, out of nothingness, is there put into tension with human technological invention, resulting in multiple worlds. Nancy appropriates and redeploys Heideggerian themes – the end of philosophy as unified metaphysical system – and he develops a contrast between a single phenomenologically derived concept of a unified world, and multiple worlds, as lived in. Nancy champions a neglected articulation of *Mitsein*, a being with, in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1962, 1927), as prior to and constitutive for an affirmation by Heidegger of a determinacy of being, *Dasein*, in its being-towards-death. He shares with Arendt a compensating emphasis on a moment of birth and on natality, as the arrival, and new entry into world making. Metaphysics, as a once-for-all-time determination of the nature of things, is for Nancy no longer an option, and maybe was always in error; nor for him will a Last Judgement reveal what was up until that closure of time seen only through a glass darkly. In *The Creation of the World*, Nancy also expresses doubts about the viability of the term ‘biopower’, as taken up by admirers of Michel Foucault. This connects back to a question posed by him to the term ‘political technology’ in his earlier *The Experience of Freedom*, in which he reads Heidegger on freedom as, at base, not a characteristic of human beings, but as a feature of ontological opening, making possible an arrival of self-affirming and self-destructive individuals. He appears there to find more in common with Jacques Rancière, with Jean-Francois Lyotard and indeed with Hannah Arendt, than with either Foucault or Heidegger.

For Nancy, democracy is not a given form of government, with a fixed meaning, but a term whose meaning is in contestation, always in process of reconfiguration and of arriving (*a-venir*). It does not provide a given standard

by which to measure current relations and conditions. Nor is his thinking utopian in the sense of envisaging a new improved order: there is only a here and now, with its dynamic of a given order, claiming sovereignty, and a correlative potential for an insurrection of as yet unconfigured forces. An essence (*Wesen*) of being as oscillation between arrival and departure (*Anwesen* and *Abwesen*) is displaced in favour of a notion of a contingent being in common. With Rancière, Nancy has in common a notion of a *partage*, a sharing or distribution of meaning and sensibility; with Lyotard, he shares a sensitivity to a demand for sense, arriving in the absence of given significations, and a preoccupation with figures of a Last Judgment, a day of wrath, in which first and last things (*res ipsa et ultima*) arrive in order. His paper in honour of Lyotard from 1982, recently published in English translation as *Dies Irae* (2019, 1982), day of wrath, day of judgement, concludes: ‘in this genesis, there is no day of rest’. Nancy is sceptical about both a secularisation thesis, whereby political community is supposed to arrive in an emptied-out space of collective religious observance, and about Carl Schmitt’s hypothesis concerning a relocation of theological concepts, as concepts of and for the political. Each separates out religion from theology, in a way characteristic of Christianity, and then seeks to re-deploy one or other, without taking into account the full force of a European inheritance – monolithic, imperial, colonising and anti-Semitic. so many people have suffered Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy organised the first of the major conferences addressing Derrida’s thought at Cerisy la Salle in 1980, ‘The Ends of Man: Concerning the Work of Jacques Derrida’, to which Nancy also contributed his essay ‘The Free Voice of Humanity’. The first joint publication by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan* (1992, 1973), has the distinction of being recommended by both Jacques Lacan, in *Seminar XX: Encore: on Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973* (1998, 1975), and by Jacques Derrida, in a footnote to *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987, 1980). The second joint publication, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (1988, 1978) sets out a third term, circumscribing a commonality of themes: philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature, to which might be added a fourth: the politics of translation, in the first instance from German into French, and then of everything

into English. The conference proceedings for *The Ends of Man* might be thought to be their third joint publication. In due course, Derrida invented for each a term to capture the distinctive gestures of their thought. The term *désistance* marks Lacoue-Labarthe's respect for what does not give itself for inspection, and is developed by Derrida in an introduction to the English translation of *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (1989). For Nancy, the term is *le toucher*, ambiguously 'the touch', 'touching him' or 'touching it', in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005, 2000). This citation from Nancy's brief foreword conjoins three terms important for his analyses: sense, absence, exposition. Derrida approaches his thinking through an elaboration of a notion of tangents, a circumscription without framing, exploring a distinctively French reception of Husserl's phenomenology, with its emphasis on a difference between inanimate bodies (*Körper*) and lived flesh (*Leib*), from Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, to the Christian phenomenologists, Didier Franck and Jean-Louis Chretien. Derrida there interrupts himself to remark that this touch is both that of this phenomenological reception, and for Nancy, in addition, that of a self-dividing voice, resulting from processes of hearing oneself speak, and of a writing on skin, the *expeausition* and *excription*, as explored by Nancy in *Corpus* (2008, 1992) and *The Sense of the World* (1997, 1993).

In an early essay, 'The Sublime Offering' (1993, 1988), Nancy explores the claim: 'What is at stake in the sublime is a suspension of art, a placing in question of art within art itself, as work or as task.' This he does by placing alongside each other texts by Benjamin and Heidegger, Adorno and Kant, Bataille and Blanchot, seeking out the nature of an art expressive of anguish as much as one expressive of joy. He finds them inseparably touching on one another: 'The beautiful and the sublime, if they are not identical – and indeed quite the contrary – take place on the same site, and in a certain sense the one upon the other, the one along the edge of the other and perhaps ... the one through the other.' He concludes a later essay, 'Strange Foreign Bodies' (2013, 2009), in *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality* (2013): 'Still it is not that "art" domesticates and thereby reduces the strangeness of the body. On the contrary, it exposes it and deepens or accentuates it, exaggerates it if need be, aggravates it, tracks it down only in order to let it escape. It opens for it the space of limitless expansion.' This essay reproduces the

script of a short film, *Outlandish: Strange Foreign Bodies*: part of a joint program of work with the film maker Phillip Wallard. *Corpus*, now the title of two collections of Nancy's writings in English published in 2008 and 2013, is a theme through which are conjoined three of Nancy's central concerns: the legacy of Christianity; the affirmations of embodiment in phenomenology and of sexuality in psychoanalysis; and an infinite expansion of bodies in artistic practices of all kinds. To these should be added his preoccupation with the dismemberment of the body politic in the various crises of nation and state.

The reception of Jean-Luc Nancy's writings in the Anglo-American world began with translations of the joint work with Lacoue-Labarthe, which then extended into the discussions of a *retrait* of politics, a retracing and withdrawal of politics, associated with their *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur la politique* (1980-1984). Some of this discussion arrived in English in *Retreating the Political* (1997), edited by Simon Sparks. Explorations under way there underpin both the hypothesis of an unworking of community, and the extended discussion by Nancy, in *The Experience of Freedom*, of the fate of concepts of freedom, and indirectly of politics, in the volatile conditions of the second half of the twentieth century. Two collections of papers edited by Nancy in the late eighties appeared in English translation, in the early nineties: *Who Comes after the Subject?* (1991, 1988), questioning the structure of question and response, and *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question* (1993, 1988), in which the essay 'The Sublime Offering' is to be found. In *Who Comes After the Subject?*, there appears a complete version of the interview, 'Eating well: or the calculation of the subject, an interview with Jacques Derrida', conducted by Nancy. Nancy there boldly states: 'For Heidegger, nevertheless, the epoch that comes to a close as the epoch of metaphysics, and that perhaps closes epochality as such, is the epoch of the metaphysics of subjectivity, and the end of philosophy is then the exiting of the metaphysics of subjectivity.' In their juxtaposition, these collections explore connections between concepts of subjectivity and sublimity, in art and in politics, revealing a metaphysical complicity, which extends to concepts of sovereignty and substance.

Alongside the joint work with Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy published responses to Hegel, Kant and Descartes, which have been translated as *The Speculative Remark*

(*One of Hegel's Bons Mots*) (2001, 1973) by Céline Surprenant, as *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus* (2008, 1976) by Saul Anton, and as *Ego Sum: Corpus, Anima, Fabula* (2016, 1979) by Marie-Eve Morin. The translators remark both the difficulty of the enterprise and the generous participation of their initiator. These texts have proved difficult to respond to, no less in French than in English, as a consequence of a very distinctively dense style of close reading practiced in them. Starting with *The Experience of Freedom*, Nancy adopted and adapted a mode of writing in juxtaposed fragments, which, while freighted with references to the tradition, and with many invocations of current discussions, provide interruptions in which to pause and consider what has taken place on the page. The sensation of towering heights of learning

is curiously at variance with the tone of approachable conviviality, notable in the many interviews Nancy encouraged his readers to conduct with him, including in the most recent and now posthumously published conversations, from Duke University Press, *The Deconstruction of Sex*. Some thinkers may die already in their own lifetimes. Jean-Luc Nancy is revered in memory and, as author, living on in the modes of recent, and imminent publications.

Joanna Hodge is Professor Emerita in Philosophy: Aesthetics, Critique, History, at Manchester Metropolitan University, and author of The Singular Politics of Jean-Luc Nancy, forthcoming with Bloomsbury.

