

Key Contemporary Thinkers

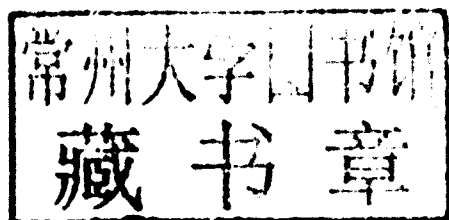
jean-luc

N A N C Y

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Jean-Luc Nancy

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List of Abbreviations

A	<i>L'Adoration. Déconstruction du christianisme, 2</i>
BP	<i>Birth to Presence</i>
BSP	<i>Being Singular Plural</i>
BWBT	<i>"The Being-With of Being-There"</i>
C	<i>Corpus</i>
CC	<i>"The Confronted Community"</i>
Com	<i>"The Compearance"</i>
CW	<i>The Creation of the World or Globalization</i>
D	<i>Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity</i>
EF	<i>The Experience of Freedom</i>
ES	<i>Ego Sum</i>
FT	<i>A Finite Thinking</i>
GI	<i>The Ground of the Image</i>
GT	<i>The Gravity of Thought</i>
IC	<i>The Inoperative Community</i>
IRS	<i>L'"il y a" du rapport sexuel</i>
M	<i>The Muses</i>
NM	<i>"The Nazi Myth" (with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe)</i>
NMT	<i>Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body</i>
OBC	<i>"Of Being-in-Common"</i>
OT	<i>Jacques Derrida, On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy</i>
RP	<i>Retreating the Political (with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe)</i>
SV	<i>"Sharing Voices"</i>
SW	<i>The Sense of the World</i>
TD	<i>The Truth of Democracy</i>

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Introduction

Approaching Nancy's corpus

Jean-Luc Nancy's work spans almost four decades and includes more than fifty authored or co-authored books in French and hundreds of contributions to journals, collected works, and art catalogues. But the breadth of Nancy's work is not best captured by the sheer number of books. Nancy has written on major thinkers in the history of European philosophy, such as Descartes, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, and Heidegger, and has engaged contemporary French thinkers such as Lacan, Bataille, Blanchot, and Derrida. He has written on topics as diverse as psychoanalysis, globalization, hermeneutics, community, Nazism, resurrection, Christian painting, German Romanticism, techno music, modern dance, and film. The diversity of Nancy's corpus obviously represents a challenge for any book that pretends to provide a comprehensive introduction to his thinking. Nancy's work is certainly not systematic and neither are the majority of his books. Some of them are collections of essays loosely connected around one theme (e.g. *A Finite Thinking*, or *Dis-Enclosure*) and even the more straightforward books rarely present a linear development from axioms to arguments to conclusions but rather a plurality of sections that circle around a central idea (emblematic here is *Being Singular Plural*) and are often supplemented by fragmentary notes (for example, the fragments at the end of *The Experience of Freedom* or of *L'Adoration*). Yet, if Nancy's work challenges the modern idea of systematicity, it nevertheless adheres to a certain conceptual

regularity in which all the pieces and fragments cohere or at least “play” together. What holds the fragments of Nancy’s thinking together is the thought of the “singular plural” or of “being-with.” This central ontological insight informs Nancy’s way of approaching the world, the body, politics, art, etc. In a sense, the “singular plural” furnishes the “axiom” of Nancy’s thought, from which everything else follows. Yet it is also this “axiom” that undermines all attempts at finding any “wholeness” or “systematicity” in his thought. Cursorily said, the singular plural means that there are singularities whose identity or selfhood can only be found in their “relation” to other singularities: what exists finds itself in being exposed to or being in contact with other singularities in such a way that nothing exists or makes sense on its own. Nancy’s description of the “play” between what exists can be applied here to his own work:

By itself, articulation is only a juncture, or more exactly the play of the juncture: what takes place where different pieces touch each other without fusing together, where they slide, pivot, or tumble over one another, one at the limit of the other without the mutual *play* – which always remains, at the same time, a play *between* them – ever forming into the substance or the higher power of a Whole. Here, the *totality is itself the play* of the articulations. (IC 76)

Nancy’s ideas make sense but this sense arises more from moving across sentences than from the internal signification of any one particular sentence taken in isolation.

This gives us some hints as to how (or as to how not) to approach Nancy’s work. As Deleuze said in his lectures on Kant, “the important thing is not above all to understand, but to take on the rhythm of a given man, a given writer, a given philosopher.” Of course, we want to *understand* what Nancy is saying but the point is that this can be better done by following the rhythm of the text rather than by getting bogged down by every detail and trying to fully grasp each line before moving to the next. Nancy’s writing is not linear. His sentences and propositions do not build on each other according to some sort of geometric or syllogistic method. Rather, his books or his essays tend to be circular, each section presenting the “same” point, reiterated each time from a different perspective, with a different emphasis or in relation to a different thinker, in such a way that each section sheds a bit more light on the issue in question. We can take *Being Singular Plural*, which in a sense could

be seen as Nancy's treatise on ontology, as emblematic in this regard. In the "Preface" to the book, Nancy explicitly says that the traditional form of the treatise is not adequate for an ontology of the singular plural. He warns the reader:

The first and principal essay of this book, which gives it its title [i.e. the twelve sections making up "Of Being Singular Plural"], was not composed in an altogether sequential manner, but rather in a discontinuous way, taking up over and over again the same few themes. To a certain extent, then, the sections can be read in any order. And there are repetitions here and there. (BSP xv, trans. mod.)

The reader should therefore not expect to understand each individual step as she or he proceeds through Nancy's text. It feels rather as if one were jumping midway into a circle: the beginning only becomes intelligible at the end or indeed after many times around. This is also a consequence of the "singular plural": there is no single, independent truth that could be immediately identified as the beginning. But my wager is that if one keeps reading, Nancy's thought has the power to transform our way of seeing the world and our understanding of what it means to exist with others in the world.

A second comment concerns not so much the structure of Nancy's book as his writing style. Nancy can be situated in the tradition of deconstruction that started with Derrida. Yet, for those who have read Derrida, Nancy's style is bound to strike them as diametrically opposed to that of deconstruction. Derrida's style has been qualified as abstruse and opaque, not only because of his play on French words or expressions, but also because it is essentially aporetic. Derrida shies away from any straightforward, affirmative use of "traditional" concepts. Instead, we find repeated uses of undecidable phrases such as "X without X" ("community without community" – a phrase borrowed from Blanchot) or "X, if there is such a thing" (justice, if there is such a thing), and definitions of central concepts often take the contradictory form of a "both x and not x" or "neither x nor not x."¹ This, of course, can be explained by what Derrida is trying to do. Essentially, we can say that deconstruction is a way of dealing with conceptual systems, a way of engaging with systems by pushing them to their limits so as to reveal their internal tensions, their blind spots. Deconstruction begins from the observation that our conceptual thinking, our conceptual grid, as well as the very intelligibility of our language and our values,

constitute a “total” system, that is, a system that also determines its own “outside”: the other, the irrational, the ineffable, etc. One cannot undermine the primacy of the system by simply positioning oneself outside it, for example, by valorizing madness to undermine reason. No rational person listens to what the self-declared madman has to say. The problem therefore becomes: how is one to work against the system from within without being rejected as a madman or being forced to conform ultimately to the internal constraints of the system? This position on the margin of the system (both inside and outside, neither inside nor outside) allows one to point to instabilities and show how our conceptual systems (and this is true of specific philosophical systems, like Husserlian phenomenology for instance, but also of our basic western ethical categories) are always already deconstructing themselves. What Derrida tries to show in his texts is that our conceptual oppositions are not as rigorous as the system leads us to believe. To do this, he takes a specific opposition that is central to a specific “system” (e.g. the opposition between indication and expression in Husserl or, more generally, the opposition between philosophy and literature or between law and justice) and asks: what exactly is the deciding factor that allows us to discriminate between the two terms? In other words, he tries to find the exact point where something flips from being *x* to being *y*. This tipping point or systematic hinge is the indispensable mechanism of all systems of conceptual opposition. As the decisive criterion that separates one from the other, this zero point of difference makes the system possible, yet it itself remains outside of the system as an undecidability or blind spot that the system cannot account for by means of the discriminating mechanism at its disposal. Since all of the concepts at hand necessarily cover over that blind spot, one can only point to it by means of the operational concepts themselves if we put them into play in a non-binary or aporetic way, erasing them as they are being inscribed.²

If the deconstructive power of Derrida’s text explains his aporetic writing style, then this observation only renders Nancy’s writing style more puzzling. If we agree that Nancy is not only reaffirming traditional concepts such as freedom, sense, being, and finitude but showing their traditional limits and putting them into play in a new way, we must then ask how he can still (at least on the surface of it) affirm the words instead of pushing them toward their erasure. In *Rogues*, Derrida describes Nancy’s use of tradi-

tional philosophical concepts, in this case the concept of *freedom*, in the following way:

Never one to shrink from a challenge, he dares to call into question this entire political ontology of freedom, while still retaining the word ... and devoting an entire book to it. I, who have always lacked his temerity, have been led by the same deconstructive questioning of the political ontology of freedom to treat this word with some caution, to use it guardedly, indeed sparingly, in a reserved, parsimonious, and circumspect manner.³

Nancy's style is much more straightforward and affirmative, in an almost unsettling way. The most frequent logical structure of his sentences is an affirmation of the form "X is Y," or even more emphatically: "X is nothing but Y." These sentences seem to provide straightforward definitions. Yet, this affirmative tone only amplifies the enigmatic character of the concepts whose equivalence is asserted. Badiou, in a short essay titled "*L'offrande réservée*" ("The Reserved Offering"),⁴ provides a careful analysis of Nancy's style. He shows, by juxtaposing a series of affirmations taken from Nancy's corpus, how concepts are brought into movement: finitude is sense, finitude is existence, sense is existence, thought is finite, freedom is the finitude of sense, etc. Trying to define finitude, we are going around in a circle. Yet, in these equivalences that form a circle, the master concepts are displaced so that none retain their traditional meaning. Again, the signification of any of these words captured in a definition of the type "X is Y" is not going to be very helpful in thinking through what finitude or freedom are. In doing this, we are merely going to be deferred from one concept to the next. Yet, in following this movement, the concepts start to *make* sense. It is worth emphasizing from the start that Nancy's concept of sense, as opposed to signification, is not only central to the content of his philosophy but also to the form of his writing. Essentially, signification concerns the relation of a signifier to its signified (of a word to its content, concept, or meaning); it concerns the relation of reference: a word signifies or means if it exemplifies this relation. Sense, on the other hand, concerns what happens *between* things, ideas, bodies, and people in their encounters, their movements of attraction/repulsion. We could say that the relation of signification is vertical while that of sense is horizontal. It is important to keep this in mind while reading Nancy's texts.

Nancy's intellectual development

Since Nancy's work will be presented in the body of the present study in a "systematic" or non-chronological order, the space of this introduction will be used to present Nancy's intellectual biography and situate his different works.⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy was born in 1940 in Caudéan near Bordeaux in France. He obtained his *licence de philosophie* (the equivalent of the BA) from the Sorbonne in Paris in 1962, his *diplôme d'études supérieures de philosophie* (the equivalent of the Master's) in 1963 and his *agrégation* in 1964 (a competitive examination that allows one to teach in the public education system in France). During his time at the Sorbonne, Nancy worked closely with Canguilhem, a philosopher and historian of science, well known for his criticism both of vitalism (and the politics that arises out of it) and of the reductionist approach to life that tries to understand organisms on the basis of the mechanical model. Instead, Canguilhem argued that the organism is something whose sum is greater than its parts. (Nancy completed a certificate in General Biology alongside his philosophy degree.) Because of his interest in theology and religion, Nancy also worked with Ricoeur during the years when Derrida was his assistant. Ricoeur would supervise Nancy's Master's thesis on Hegel's philosophy of religion. Nancy also associated with a group of Christian students around Jesuit philosopher Georges Morel, who met regularly to discuss Hegel. After his *agrégation*, Nancy taught in Colmar before becoming an assistant at the Institut de philosophie in Strasbourg in 1968. He obtained his doctorate in 1973, again under the supervision of Ricoeur, with a thesis on Kant's analogical discourse. Soon after, he became *maître de conférences* at the Université des sciences humaines in Strasbourg, where he would spend his entire academic career until his retirement in 2004. Unlike most other French philosophers, Nancy was never much of a part of the centralized Parisian academy, but always remained on the margins, never integrating into one of the Parisian elite schools such as the École nationale supérieure (where Badiou finished his academic career) or the famous Sorbonne. He also did not participate directly in the event of May 1968,⁶ which shook the academic milieu in Paris and led to the creation of the Centre universitaire de Vincennes, later known as the Université de Paris VIII, an experimental left-wing university, where philosophers such as Deleuze, Lyotard, Rancière, and Badiou taught. This marginal position gave him more freedom from academic disputes but also less direct impact.

Nancy published his first books during the 1970s. Two of them came out of his intense study of Hegel and Kant, *La remarque spéculative* (1973; translated as *The Speculative Remark*) and *Le discours de la syncope. I. Logodaedalus* (1975; translated as *Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus*), while two others arose from his collaboration and are co-written with his long-term friend and colleague Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: a book on Lacan, *Le titre de la lettre* (1973; translated as *The Title of the Letter*) and one on early German Romanticism, *L'absolu littéraire* (1978; translated as *The Literary Absolute*). In 1979, Nancy then published a book on Descartes, *Ego Sum*, which is only partially translated into English.⁷ While these early works will not be directly discussed in the following chapters (except for the book on Descartes), it is important at least to underline their lines of questioning and their central problematic since these still inform some of the central motives of Nancy's mature work. In a word, the underlying question is that of the Subject. Nancy's post-metaphysical or deconstructive questioning of the Subject is well anchored in the intellectual context of the 1960s, which saw the rise of the thinkers, especially Foucault and Derrida, who would later become identified as post-structuralists.

The roots of this intellectual context, and hence of Nancy's first question, can be found in the event or rupture of western philosophical thinking marked by the proper names Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud. In Nietzsche's affirmation that God is dead and in his critique of Platonic and Christian metaphysics, in Heidegger's diagnosis of metaphysics as ontotheology and his attempt at overcoming metaphysics through poetic thinking and in Freud's psychoanalysis as the overthrow of the illusion of the subject as a pure, transparent self-consciousness, what is accomplished (or at least attempted) is a destruction or decentering of the foundation of thought. This rupture forms the background of Derrida's famous 1966 address, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences," in which he explicitly points to an "event" in the history of the concept of "structure."⁸ This event occurs, according to Derrida, when the structurality of the structure comes into view or is reflected upon, in such a way that it becomes apparent that a structure necessarily implies a center around which it organizes itself (an empty center that can be filled with any transcendental signified: God, Reason, Man, etc.). This broad understanding of structure is not limited to what structuralist thinkers explicitly have in view but encompasses, for Derrida, all of western philosophy. The center of the structure, if it is to serve as its anchor, can only

be an autonomous self-grounding presence, but this self-grounding presence will be unmasked as an illusion. That same year, Foucault closes his *Les mots et les choses* by announcing the crumbling of our arrangements of knowledge, for which the figure of "man" is central. This event would cause "man," a recent invention, to disappear "like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea."⁹ During the same years, Derrida, through a careful deconstruction of Husserlian phenomenology, shows how the pure self-consciousness that phenomenology relies on is always already pried open by an essential difference, or absence.

What Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe propose in their first co-authored book, *The Title of the Letter*, is a deconstructive reading of Lacan's essay, "The Agency of the letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud." In other words, they show how the Lacanian subversion of metaphysical discourse fails, in that the text reinscribes the values it seeks to subvert, that is, the certainty of subjectivity, the ideal of scientificity and systematicity, and the positing of a ground. Lacanian psychoanalysis consists in a radicalization of Freud through a diversion of Saussure's theory of the sign. Lacan rejects Freud's theory of the unconscious and any depth psychology and insists rather on the fact that the subject is an effect of the signifier. According to the Saussurian theory of the sign, signifiers are what they are only through their differential relations with other signifiers, yet the relation that each signifier entertains with a signified, even though it is arbitrary, remains essential. This essential relation is the relation of signification. In the Lacanian appropriation of Saussure, the signifier is barred from its essential relation with the signified, so that the production of signification becomes problematic. The signifier slides in a field of signifiers without being able to cross the bar and reach the signified. Along with the signifying sign (that is, the relation of a signifier to its signified), the subject for whom the sign is supposed to traditionally function is destroyed. What we are left with is an "operativity" without referent and without subject, an indefinite deferral of meaning whose logic is that of lack and desire.¹⁰

Lacanian psychoanalysis as the science of the signifier is still, as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe show, a centered, organized system. Despite the diversion of transcendent meaning, meaning is maintained as the origin and the end of the movement of signifiers. As such, meaning cannot find its origin in a traditional subject since the subject instituted in and by the signifier can never identify itself as the subject of enunciation.¹¹ Despite this decentering, splitting

or hollowing of the subject, a center rebuilds itself, which allows psychoanalytic discourse to "master" the logic of desire. This center is "the bar" that bars the signifier from the signified and launches the movement of desire; the bar is the halting point of the system. In this sense, Lacanian psychoanalysis is a traditional philosophical discourse whose center or organizing principle is a gap or a hole (whose name will be the Other as empty place). Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe will call it a negative theology.¹²

Nancy's first book on Kant, *Logodaedalus*, also starts with a consideration of how a discourse that seeks to contest metaphysics is, by necessity, recuperated within metaphysics. And this also holds, as Nancy witnessed in the middle of the 1970s, for the deconstructive texts: the "signs" that arise out of deconstructive readings and point to the excess or overflow of the system are, as soon as they are fashionable, "converted into values and thereby erected into truths and hypostasized into substances."¹³ Yet, if attempts at overcoming or exceeding metaphysics are always taken back into the orbit of metaphysical discourse, on the other hand, metaphysical discourses never succeed in establishing the foundation they desire.

Nancy's reading of Kant is interested in the failure of foundation. At the same time, the consequences of that failure allow us to think ground otherwise (rather than merely leading us to conclude that there is not ground). Kant's goal in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to secure a ground or foundation for knowledge; in this sense, the critical project is foundationalist at the same time as it assigns limits to what can be grounded as knowledge. Nancy's anti-foundationalist reading of Kant focuses on the critical discourse as such, that is, on the manner in which it is presented or exposed. Nancy shows that the Kantian system articulates itself around a syncope. Indeed, the cornerstone of the foundation of knowledge, the condition of possibility of knowledge of object, is neither receptive sensibility nor spontaneous understanding, but the schematism that articulates one with the other. Yet, even though Kant recognizes the necessity of a presentation (a *Darstellung*) of schematism, this "secret art residing in the depth of the human soul,"¹⁴ he shies away from it in the *Critique* itself. For Nancy, unlike for Heidegger, this is not just a failure on the part of Kant but the point at which the question of the relation and separation between philosophy and literature is posed within critical philosophy. The necessity of the schema points to the necessity of an articulation of the intelligible with the sensible and to the problem of presentation.

Unlike in mathematical presentation, where the presentation is adequate or equivalent to what is presented, philosophical presentation demands a literary device. Yet, as philosophical presentation, it strives for pure presentation and differentiates itself from literature. What interests Nancy is the way in which this failed presentation is inscribed in philosophical discourse in the form of a rupture, or better, a syncope of discourse. The figure of the syncope allows Nancy to think the “absence” of ground without turning this “lack” itself into a foundation. Foundation is thought as the interruption of identity and substance, as the syncope of the Same. The presentation of the foundation skips a beat so that, in the very enunciation of the philosophical discourse (“this is the ground”), the ground is withdrawn.

Nancy’s early reading of Hegel in *The Speculative Remark* is also focused on the mode of “presentation” of Hegel’s philosophical system. For Nancy, Hegel is not so much the thinker of totality and of the system but rather the thinker of movement, of identity as activity. In *The Speculative Remark*, Nancy does not look at the structure of the “Hegelian system” as such but starts from a remark of Hegel on the speculative proposition and the necessity of a “plastic” reading. In this remark, Hegel points to the threat that hangs over the speculative proposition: the difference between the subject and the predicate of a proposition threatens the unity of the concept. The reader’s repetition of the speculative proposition should restore the “plasticity” of the author’s exposition. Plastic reading is the ideal philosophical attitude since it frees the life of the concept from any congealed thought structure, especially from the artificial fixity of the grammatical proposition. In this sense, reading is neither passive nor active, but it is an act of both receptivity and formation. The question is: what is the status of the Hegelian text where we read the *Aufhebung*, if the very act of reading it (philosophically) requires that we already have understood its propositions? Again, Nancy pays more attention to the way in which the system is presented than to its argumentative legitimacy. This emphasis allows him to “read” *Aufhebung* not merely as the governing method of a totalizing and self-enclosed thought, but as a movement that dissolves and restores, fractures and reweaves.

Three years after the publication of *Logodaedalus*, Nancy returns, with Lacoue-Labarthe, to the problem of *Darstellung* or presentation in Kant. *The Literary Absolute* articulates the philosophical grounding of the romantic conception of literature in the Kantian philosophical problem of the sensible rendering of a concept. As