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Welcome Jean-Luc Nancy

Summary:

The author describes his personal relationship with the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (who died in August 2021), based essentially on interviews, conversations and correspondence. And it is one of these published conversations that the author uses to illustrate Nancy's philosophical relationship to those authors cited by Nancy himself as essential to philosophical modernity: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Freud, Bataille and Derrida. In particular, the author highlights the dimension of the body as Leib and touch in Nancy's philosophical journey.

In 1974 I proposed to an Italian publisher, Astrolabio, to translate and introduce the book of two completely unknown young French philosophers, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. The book was *The title of the letter* and it dealt with one of Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits*. The book was published. It was the first translation, in Italian, of a book by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. I would then become personally acquainted with the former because I followed his beautiful seminars on Hölderlin in Strasbourg, the city where I often went between 1977 and 1978, for love.

When, in the 1990s, I told French friends that I wanted to meet Nancy to record philosophical conversations with him for the Italian state television (RAI), I was told I needed to hurry, because Nancy had one foot in the grave. He had undergone a heart transplant in 1992 and was very ill. Instead, when I met him in his Strasbourg home in 2001, he looked somewhat melancholic – it's the way he always looked, I was told – but he seemed in good health. And in fact he would live until August 2021, always active, prolific, tireless, often caustic. A beautiful rich life for someone who outlived his heart for about thirty years. This never prevented me from always associating a shadow of death to Jean-Luc, a shadow that escapes any conceptuality, as if his entire work were a *fading...* of metaphysics. In this fading, his attention to the body was striking, not only to the *Leib*, to the body that suffers and enjoys, but also to the *Körper*, to the physical body, to the "old wreck" it ultimately is, especially when it is a sick one, to which a heart extracted from an African woman who died in an accident is then added.

When I interviewed him for television – together with his philosophical *twin*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe – he chose "the deconstruction of Christianity" as the topic. But even after this interview he wanted to return to the subject, as if he were dissatisfied with what he'd said, developing a friendly debate with me that we published gradually, in various languages. A few years ago, in the wake of the pleasure from that debate, I offered him other philosophical conversations, and he always raised the same theme with me: monotheisms, religion. Even a year ago, in the midst of the pandemic, he asked me to open a debate on the sacred, which in part we dramatically carried forward... Dramatically because we drifted towards the current events, and my reading of the sense of the Covid pandemic was very different from his... Yet Nancy dealt with an array of issues: politics, Hegel, Heidegger, art, Lacan, psychoanalysis, anti-Semitism, the body ... But he would always propose to me the topic of religion, even though I'd never previously dealt with religion. It was clear that I inspired him with something "religious". Perhaps he found that subject particularly difficult and

obstinate, and perhaps he read in me, a homeless philosopher, the right person to talk about something, religion, which must have appeared to him as an intruder. *The intruder* is the title he gave to his beautiful book about the experience of his heart transplant. And it is perhaps a key to understanding what Nancy wanted *to give*, even more than *say*. Saying, writing, is an act, an act of giving.

To summarize the essential aspect of the work that Nancy gave us, I would like to return to the beautiful conversation he had with me in 2004, in the wake of the death of the living philosopher who had most affected him: Jacques Derrida, ten years his senior^[1]. I believe that the way he locates Derrida also suggests the way in which the *humus* of his thought should be situated.

Here he says that contemporary thought is irreversibly marked by certain authors: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Freud and Bataille – to which he would add Derrida. A peculiar list, considering that Nancy paid little public attention to some of these authors. But what do these thinkers, so diverse in many ways, have in common? Why is it that, if we want to think today in a non-regressive way, one that does not want to restore old metaphysics, without resigning ourselves to the neat, pruned and aseptic garden of so-called “analytical philosophy” (the type of philosophy that is increasingly dominating the Euro-American academic world), we need to go through the sieve of these five thinkers?

I believe that for him the most essential Heidegger was the one who announces the end of philosophy as a construction of *Weltanschauungen*, of *worldviews*. Not only can the role of philosophy no longer be that of giving us a global and coherent vision of the world, but it cannot even be that of *founding* historical, political, ethical, scientific visions... Philosophy does not found anything because it has no solid stable ground in which to lay foundations. Does it therefore mean that we must live without worldviews, tossed around by an ephemeral impressionism of ideas? Of course not. Yet Heidegger does not answer this question.

I would say, however (I am not sure that Jean-Luc would agree with me) that interesting worldviews today tend to be given solely by sciences. Heidegger considers modern science and technology to be the triumph of the metaphysical tradition, so that the founding function that was once reserved for the philosopher is now carried out by science. Today metaphysics must be left to physics. In short, philosophy should no longer claim to legitimize *success* – scientific, aesthetic or ethical and political. Instead, *philosophy should explain their success*. Philosophy has another task, it must give something other than worldviews. And Nancy is someone who attempted to assign a new post-metaphysical task to philosophy.

Wittgenstein inaugurates what has been called the “linguistic turn”, which is not only at the origin of a so-called analytic philosophy – allegedly opposed to a “continental philosophy”, Franco-Germanic and partly Italian, in which to fit Nancy. The linguistic turn also characterizes the line of thought that found its vastest breeding ground in France at the turn of the 1960-70s, a trend that the Americans then called post-structuralism (a term unknown to the French, however). The linguistic turn consists in reminding philosophy that it is done using language, in particular *propositional language*. And language only allows us to establish relationships, it is relativistic, language is incapable of saying the absolute. For example, language is incapable of representing our private experience, and our ethical choices. Yet the philosopher seeks the absolute (*absolutus*, disconnected from any relationship) using a relative instrument, which binds and never unbinds.

The Freud that interested Nancy was certainly the one who says “the ego is not master in its own house”. The practice of the unconscious cuts at the knees the great restorative ambition of phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty), which was to found a non-relative knowledge on the unity and mastery of a transcendental operation, on the intentionality of consciousness to which the essential is revealed. Freud tells us that the conscious subject, on the other hand, does not found anything, cannot be the guarantor of anything, because the subject itself is a land of conflicts and differences, it is not the primary and final maternal fold from which we can draw the truth of our being-in-the-world.

As for Bataille, he develops, starting from Nietzsche, a Dionysian critique of contemporary society. Before, philosophy had constructed an image of humanity in which *hubris*, excess, played a marginal or pathological role, hence modern theories of the subject as a utilitarian calculator, *homo oeconomicus*, rational and well-adapted entity seeking to maximize comfort and pleasures. To this idea of a balanced Homo, Dionysian thought has opposed the excessive dimension of human life, which Bataille calls *sacred*, or drunkenness and madness, or sovereignty, something of the order of *dépense*, of wasteful consumption. As Freud had described a subjectivity studded with dysfunctional drives, so Bataille describes humanity and society beyond any good economy of advantages and pleasures. That is, humanity should no longer be thought of on the basis of a reassuring logic of survival and adaptation, but as aimed at the sacred, at excess, at dis-adaptation.

Nancy himself says in our conversation what seems to him essential about Derrida: the *différance*. Neologism that combines *différence*, difference, with deferral. I think that Derrida's philosophy is all basically a critique of phenomenology, from which it came; we could call it a self-deconstruction of phenomenology. A philosophical *kenosis* of it. Phenomenology intended to found a new, non-scientific (non-analytical) knowledge on the basis of an irreducible and immediate original act, the *Erlebnis*, the *adventured experience*. It is precisely this "base" of every phenomenology that Derrida dismantles: consciousness differs from itself, the ground on which to rest the foundation of knowledge does not exist because the ground is in turn a difference. Wittgenstein reminded us that philosophy is a prisoner of propositional language, Derrida reminds us that it is a form of writing. Philosophy is not the basis on which to build a new rigorous knowledge to oppose to the relativism of the sciences, on which to build political or ethical values, to legitimize certain forms of art rather than others, or certain scientific theories rather than others... Husserl (1936/1970) said that the philosopher is '*Funktionäre der Menschheit*' (§7, p. 17.), the official or *functionary* of humanity, while today the philosopher feels a *dys-functionary*. Philosophy now does not construct but deconstructs the implicit, unspoken "philosophies" that underlie our values, aesthetic preferences, scientific truths... Like in its Socratic beginnings, when Socrates would go around the city bursting the bubble of the powerful and wise men of his age, philosophy today destroys. It does not found but it smashes the "philosophies" with which our life is impregnated. Because our social *practices* are all drenched with *philosophical* implications.

In short, Nancy (2004) said that our age is nihilistic because it is characterized by the "ascertainment of the collapse of the representations of Principles, Origins, Values and Senses, and thought resolved to take note of this ascertainment". But he was not nihilistic at all in this sense.

It is against the background of these five sieves, without which modernity, and not just philosophical modernity, cannot be understood, that Nancy elaborates his path. Not by building a system, but by declining certain themes in subjective ways. And offering the uniqueness of his style. Hence the literary value of his works, because philosophical writing is not only argumentation, it is also the testimony of a style, the personal style of the philosopher. Indeed, the literary quality of Nancy's works has assured him of an audience that goes beyond philosophical specialism. I have seen how Nancy was read and enjoyed by people without any particular philosophical training.

Yet, Heidegger said, a true philosopher thinks one and only one thought. Even when he doesn't know it. I believe that Nancy's unique, original thought is precisely that of *the body*, as *Leib* and as *Körper*. What Nancy has tried to give us is the possibility, through philosophical language, to make us *touch the body*. It is no coincidence that Derrida dedicated a book to his friend called *Touch. Jean-Luc Nancy*. The sense of Nancy's work is tactile: philosophy is not there to represent and say, but to touch reality. The philosophy he had in mind was to break that *Noli me tangere* that philosophy has imposed on itself for so long.

I would go further: Nancy belongs to an era in which *the philosopher caresses the real*. It is not the open hand that closes into the fist of a concept, *Begriff*, in a grasp from which the concept cannot escape. It is not a hand waved like a clenched fist to unleash in order to change the world after having interpreted it. It is not a holding hands, a hand-in-hand to make a chain, an image of pragmatist solidarity, of being-with, *être-avec*,

where one hand counts only because it grasps another... Nancy's hand seems to touch its subjects, to caress them, without manipulating them, without grasping them, without snatching them. Toccatas and Fugues on the body.

Phenomenology has insisted on overcoming the soul / body difference, on the fact that we are always a living and sentient body, that the soul is always embodied, etc. In Nancy, as in the thought developed in France since the 1960s, what matters is rather the body as it is, as *something else*. Not "other" in the sense of *heteros* (opposing *homo*), *other* in the sense of *allo* as opposed to *autos*, other as opposed to oneself. It is the external body with respect to itself, an intruder. In this sense, Nancy takes up his personal experience of being a "transplant patient" and gives it a radical philosophical sense. That is, our whole body is transplanted.

Thus, in Nancy the heart – which in our language designates the most intimate and vital center – is precisely *allo*, other than ourselves. At the center of ourselves, there are no others... as a relational philosophy prevailing today, which I would call "socialist", according to which we always exist in relation to others, dictates. At the center of ourselves there is the Other, something that does not belong to us, which is not ourselves. It is an intruder, not a guest, we could call it a self-invitee. But this unwanted guest is the heart of our being. Paraphrasing Freud, we could say that the body is its own intruder.

Deleuze and Guattari said in *What Is Philosophy?* that the latter is above all production of concepts. I don't know if Nancy commented on this idea. In my opinion, however, he would have said that concepts are *the means* of philosophy, not *the ends*. And what were these ends according to him? I would say that they were precisely what lies behind every concept. And a non-conceptualizable is the body itself. This breaks with the philosophical tradition, which from the beginning has focused on the spirit or mind, which is then also thought; while the body has mostly been relegated as a special thing among things, a part of nature. With Nancy, the *corpus* – as he writes – becomes the central object of philosophical conceptualization. The body is an intruder with respect to the reassuring house of conceptuality, but conceptuality today only touches the real to the extent that it is measured with this non-conceptualizable otherness.

A concern certainly not without political implications. Today our ethical-political problem is not to assimilate what is similar to us, it is not to say "we are all human beings, therefore we are all the same". Because part of humanity does not want to be "equal to us", and reminds us of this... noisily. So, the great problem is what to do with that radical human otherness that history continually throws at us, and that challenges all our virtuous programs of tolerance, assimilation, inclusion. The excluded who refuse to be included are at the heart of our history, it is precisely what Western society, including philosophy, must measure itself against. And I believe that any reference to the most pressing current events is superfluous.

Jean-Luc's desire to write, converse and debate was surprising. Over the course of twenty years we accumulated a correspondence of which he was almost always the instigator. Our exchanges – sometimes even controversial – have taught me a lot. But one of his responses in particular made a mark on me.

Years ago I confided to him a certain perplexity of mine on twentieth century philosophy, which, in my opinion, was far too fascinated by *emptiness*. I thought of Being as *Lichtung*, clearing, in Heidegger. But also Sartre's *per-se* as nothingness, Beckett and Cioran's voids, Blanchot's insistence on nonsense, Lacan's *lack* as structuring every subjectivity, the pure trace in Derrida... I wondered whether this passion for emptiness did not disguise a secret desire to exterminate entities, a contempt for the dense world that was perhaps not alien to the disasters of the "short century"... It was not my desire to return to positivism, to a world that is all and only positive, in which there is no space for lack, difference, the negative, but I perceived this attraction to the void, which is today the badge of the "intellectual" as such, as morbid.

Jean-Luc replied by saying that *the void was needed for entities to breathe*. The metaphor of breathing impressed me. After all, what drives us to philosophize is precisely this need to breathe, it is the desire to see that gap between entities which is the condition of their moving, sliding, swapping places ... Philosophy actually cares for entities, therefore it provides them that oxygen of absence that allows them to move, as

entities, independently of us. And Nancy gave us a great deal of oxygen.

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Notes:

[1] J.-L. Nancy, “On Derrida”, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/on-derrida-jean-luc-nancy/>

Bio:

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He contributed to the volumes: « Perversion and charity : an ethical approach », in D. Nobus & L. Downing, eds., *Perversion. Psychoanalytic Perspectives / Perspectives on Psychoanalysis* (London : Karnac, 2006). “Does Perversion Need the Law?”, in W. Müller-Funk, I. Scholz-Strasser, H. Westerink, eds., *Psychoanalysis, Monotheism and Morality* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013). “Ethics, Wonder and Real in Wittgenstein”, in Y. Gustafsson, C. Kronqvist, H. Nykänen, eds., *Ethics and the Philosophy of Culture: Wittgensteinian Approaches* (Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013). *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy Conversations on Pandemics, Politics and Society*, in F. Castrillón & T. Marchevsky, eds., (London: Routledge, 2021); and in D. Busiol, editor, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis in Practice. Insights from Fourteen Psychoanalysts* (London: Routledge, 2021).

He is author of the books: With A. Molino, *In Freud's Tracks* (New York: Aronson, 2008) nominated for Gradiva Award. *What are Perversions?* (London: Karnac, 2016). *Conversations with Lacan. Seven Lectures for Understanding Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2020).

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