

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

May 28, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/jean-luc-nancy-the-thought-of-the-body/>

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Jean-Luc Nancy: The Thought of the Body

Original text in Italian:

<https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/jean-luc-nancy-il-pensiero-del-corpo>

Jean-Luc Nancy is dead. He was eighty-one years old. I can't write these lines without thinking about the first meeting with him, and also the subsequent ones. He had come to the State University of Milan for a conference. He had spoken for a long time and answered students' questions for a long time. He kept a glass and a bottle of water next to him. He sipped incessantly. A word, a sip of water, a word, a sip of water. An infinite availability ripped out from an infinite thirst. He then explained to me that he struggled with the consequences of a heart transplant that had given him a second life. He had given him, together with the immunosuppression necessary for transplantation, a tumor, which he could keep at bay laboriously. Strange knot, a second life that served at every step a threat, and perhaps lived at every step of that threat. Thirst was the symptom of his condition.

He was writing a book about the experience of transplantation. He then titled it *The Intruder*. He tried to bring to the concept, as his beloved Hegel said, what had happened to him: the heart of another suddenly swooped to the heart of his body. The heart of a woman, in fact. The heart of an African woman who died in an accident, if I remember correctly. How many differences, all layered, all superimposed, one that moves the other, one that sets the other in motion, one that deconstructs the other. Maybe I remember wrong, I'm traveling, I don't have my books at hand. At the same time, *The Intruder* brings the concept to the height of what had happened to him, to Nancy, and perhaps also to the concept, to the act of conceiving. An act that was no longer independent, if it had ever been, from that singular body that implemented it, from that body of which it was one of the acts, together and in the same way as sleeping, making love, listening to the voice of others, all themes to which Nancy has dedicated as many small books.

The day at the State University ended with a dedication that Nancy wrote to me on one of his books, *The Sublime Offering*, on which I was working for my doctoral thesis: With all my heart, with the friendship of a long exchange. We had exchanged many emails, till that day, but what a strange exchange, I had taken a lot and had not given him anything. "With all my heart" says well the law of this exchange that is not an exchange, of this relationship that is made almost without relationship. Even his master Jacques Derrida, how much he had worked on this strange exchange that is the gift, on this difference that is not between something and something, but is a kind of difference without presupposed things, a difference on which depend all the things that we think are assumed, identified in themselves, coinciding with their perimeter.

Perhaps Derrida was a master, for Nancy, perhaps not exactly. He was undoubtedly a road companion ten years older, one who had opened a certain road, the road that put at the center the problem of difference and deconstruction, that is, the theoretical gesture that shows at the heart of beings, identities, and constructions a

deeper upheaval, almost a vibration, a series of small displacements and small balances, a thick network of landslides. A road that Nancy had taken almost simultaneously and with increasing autonomy. One might say in the wrong direction, if we want to keep faith with the road metaphor, and if we want to think about certain angry reactions of Derrida in front of Nancy's positions.

Unlike Derrida, Nancy gave body to the difference. As much as Derrida tried to subtract it in every way. Inexhaustible Judaism of the first, inexhaustible Christianity-Catholicism of the second, however rejected, and then relentlessly reworked? Giving body to the difference, perhaps it is a good formula to say something of the many paths Nancy traced inside that galaxy that is called deconstructionism. Here too a memory assails me, one of those memories that over time we no longer know where they come from, many times we have returned to them, and to the fact of having returned to them. Nancy writes it and tells it somewhere, or maybe Derrida himself writes it and tells it. Derrida, one day, would have said to Nancy: dear Jean-Luc, you know, true, that the titles of your books are increasingly grandiloquent, that they are now bordering on paranoia?

He was referring, I think, to a book called *The Sense of the World*. And in fact, to say that a certain book will expose nothing less than the sense of the world, is something that is halfway between the bold and the insane, and certainly it is something that has gone all around the perimeter of Derrida's deconstruction, and now has almost turned against it, has begun using it paradoxically, in order to construct. Derrida subtracted, scarnified, and Nancy gave body to that subtraction, in his hand the scarnification took shape. That strange phenomenon that we call "sense" is perhaps, Nancy would say, this taking shape of a subtraction or from a subtraction.

It is something we can also see in *Corpus*, the other famous book by Nancy, destined for a much wider circulation than that which philosophy books usually know. Even in form, the book looks like a "corpus", namely a set of works, writings, documents, testimonies, that are together and not together, a heterogeneity not without insistence. *Corpus* is not a treatise, a "book". We do not go from one chapter to another, there is no single style, there is no single voice that speaks from beginning to end, there is no single thesis with clear premises and declared implications. They are splinters that from so many perspectives approach the elusive heart of the problem, they are attempts to touch now on one side now on the other that strange thing that is the body, as we could attempt to touch a body now with one hand, now with one foot, now with a word, now with the tongue.

A certain sensuality, perhaps even this Christian and Catholic, is always present in the pages of Nancy, and eroticism, enjoyment, sex, are also always present in the background or in the foreground of his speeches, maybe descending from his often discussed antecedents, Nietzsche, Bataille and Lacan. To Lacan, Nancy dedicated, in direct contact with the performance of his famous Seminar, a book written with four hands with the friend of a lifetime Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, a book which Lacan, equally in direct contact, always in his Seminar, had recorded with mixed respect and suspicion: *The title of the letter*, it was 1973. So, if that's how Nancy talks about the body, isn't it also the body itself, and isn't that what Nancy ultimately says about the body itself? That our bodies are just where they are touched and because they are touched? Or caressed, kissed, licked? And of course hit, pierced, injured?

Then there was, in 2006, the magnificent conference that the University of Strasbourg, where Nancy had entered as an assistant in 1968, had called for the twenty years of his book *The Idle Community*. We had met again with great affection, and there had found a whole community of young people, as we were at that time, scholars from all over Europe, to celebrate that book that with enormous acumen and enormous success had drawn the extreme consequences of a long season of political philosophy and philosophy tout court. Can we share something, besides the fact that there is a non-shareable, that we have gone through and deconstructed in every way the specters of sharing? Is it possible to be together, to gather together around the impossibility of being together and the impossibility of the gesture of gathering together?

So many paths of democracy, so many impasses of what is pompously called the West, so many stakes of what is our most burning contemporaneity (read: Afghanistan) have to do with this extreme edge in which the West meets itself and exposes to itself its limit, or exposes to itself the naked fact that itself is a limit, a threshold. With all the precariousness of this condition you do not know whether to call conclusion or opening, beginning or end of the game. With all the fragility of this threshold, which our democracies do not know whether to assume or question, democracy being perhaps the tension between assuming and questioning that threshold. With all the tremor that our being on that threshold entails. Tremor, by the way, is a key word of Nancy, for example in his magnificent reading of what in the university is always called “the philosopher of Stuttgart”: *Hegel. The Restlessness of the Negative*.

This threshold, this thought of the body that is always a body in the balance, this investigation of the places where the tremor of this undecidable balance takes shape, this consistency that opens up in the balance between assuming a limit that we have seen and embodied to the marrow and making use of that limit also seeing something else, making ourselves something different from that thing that we embody to the marrow: this is one of the most difficult, most aporetic, most problematic, most paralyzing thoughts that Nancy leaves us. Nancy took the point where we are to an extreme, saw it and mapped it with all the acumen in the world, and maybe looked through it. Can we do anything else and better than deconstruct? Are we already doing something else, are we already constructing? Was he already, Nancy, constructing? And if so, what? Maybe Nancy marks the point where the difference takes body, i.e. where the difference becomes affirmative? Is this why Derrida loved him and distrusted him, and wondered, in a long and tormented tribute to his younger friend, with a strange reversal of the usual order of tributes and masteries, how and where the hell to get to *Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy?*

Bio:

Federico Leoni teaches Ethics at the University of Verona. He is the co-editor of two journals, “Chiasmi. Trilingual Studies concerning Maurice Merleau-Ponty” and “Phi/Psy. International Journal of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis”. His most recent books include “Jacques Lacan, una scienza di fantasmi” and “Henri Bergson. Segni di vita” (Feltrinelli, Milano 2021).