

## INTRODUCTION

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In *On the Commerce of Thinking: Of Books and Bookstores*, Nancy provides an apt meditation on what it means to read in a world in which books have become status symbols and often sit without disturbing us (in the strong sense) on coffee tables and library shelves. Beyond the commodity fetishism of the object, long gone are the days in which the world itself was thought to be a “great book” (OC, 23). This loss of the importance of books, Nancy argues, has meant that we risk missing the “new stakes, new sense or lost sense,” unique to each work of writing, senses that would bind and unbind us in our reading. In order to do so, what is required is a “play of opening and closing” in reading by which a book becomes the “subject of a reading” (OC, 35–36). The “closing” of the book refers to the new, literally the unedited (*inédit*), that remains forever illegible to the eyes that scan and remain open onto each page, that is, to what can never be captured synoptically in each reading (OC, 27).

No doubt, all introductions to books like this one are metonymic of the appeal by books in general: calling on the reader to proceed further, to move on to the essays in order to take in what has been left all-too-unedited or what is new (*inédit*) in this very book. Nancy notes,

A book is an address or an appeal. Beneath the melodic line of its singing there intones, without interruption, the continuous bass of its invitation, of its request, injunction, or prayer: “Read me! Read me!” (And that prayer murmurs still, even when the author declares “Don’t read me!” or “Throw my book away!”). (OC, 12)

We will begin with no such grand declarations. Offered here nevertheless, between the opening and closing of the binding of this book, is a singular-plural exposition of Nancy’s plural thinking, divided and linked among four sections on the world, ontology, politics, and sense.

One of the most read and prominent of contemporary French philosophers, Nancy has published more than twenty-five books, along with numerous contributions to journals, art catalogues, and other volumes. He 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. Nancy's work touches on issues as diverse as psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, globalization, community, Nazism, resurrection, Christian painting, German Romanticism, modern dance, and film and has been influential in reconfiguring numerous debates in Continental philosophy. In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy addresses the question of the "with" at the heart of Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Reinitializing Heidegger's analytic of Dasein, Nancy sets out to do no less than reorient our thinking of being to its spacing and plurality, and thus to the plurality of thought and genres of thinking (e.g., artistic, political, theological) necessary for taking on this very plurality. In *The Sense of the World* and *The Creation of the World* or *Globalization*, Nancy provides an important intervention into the question of globalization and what it means to "create" a world beyond the senselessness provided by modern techno-capitalism. In his *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, he argues that if the world no longer has a meaning or sense provided by a transcendent God, this also means that the world is sense itself. That is to say, we must respond to the world as it is without recourse to transcendental discourses, including the still-theological discourses of modernity operating within the logic of Christianity and its messianism. While charting this rethinking of what "sense" and "world" means, especially in his encounters with the texts of Blanchot and Derrida, Nancy also argues that far from a separation from the world, art presents and brings to the fore, as he argues in *The Evidence of Film*, the world itself. Art is nothing other than a plurality of art forms that takes in and gives back another sense of the world in its infinite variety.

Nancy thus continues to address the most pertinent questions remaining after Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God. What makes Nancy's work particularly provocative is his care always to write in such a way as to respond to the contemporary situation; his texts are rarely just abstract discussions of age-old philosophical problems. For example, Nancy addresses questions of the sense of the world in light of a certain view of the world as resource that is part of economic globalization. His writings on Christianity not only come at a time of supposed secularism in western Europe, but also at a time of rising fundamentalisms, from the Christian and other religious traditions. It should also be said that Nancy's work on the deconstruction of Christianity, long awaited, comes after the so-called "theological turn" in phenomenology and post-phenomenology, marked out and discussed by

such thinkers as John Caputo, Jacques Derrida, Dominique Janicaud, and Gianni Vattimo. And Nancy's work on the subject of the political continues to reverberate in contemporary discussions of communities and communitarianism. All of this is led by Nancy's claim that we must reposition and reinitialize—that is, “expose” in its double sense—our thinking of the world, ontology, politics, and sense in the wake of the world's immanence.

EXPOSITIONS OF THE WORLD: CREATION, GLOBALIZATION,  
AND THE LEGACIES OF CHRISTIANITY

The first section of this book delimits Nancy's “sense of the world” in terms of its mundane, immanent character. Nancy's work circles around what he said some time ago in an essay “The End of the World”: “There is no longer any world: no longer a *mundus*, a *cosmos*, a composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation” (SW, 4). For Nancy, this lack of order to the world is our common lot after the death of God and the senselessness of any ideological alternative. In such works as *The Sense of the World*, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, and *Dis-Enclosure*, Nancy centers his thought in this principle (one that is not itself a transcendent principle): “the meaning of the world does not occur as a reference to something external to the world” (CW, 43). The only site of praxis is therefore this disordered world, the unsightly, unworldly space (*immonde*) of modernity wrought by globalization and the cataclysmic devastation it brings about. But this praxis is also a task for thinking, which, as Heidegger argued before him, requires deconstructing the history of ontology in order to expose another sense to the world, one which does not come from another “world” behind or beyond this one. The world is *all there is*, but this does not mean we can simply leave behind ontotheology and the Christian heritage of the West. Nancy, for his part, argues that thinking the “world-forming” (*mondialisation*), still possible in the wake of globalization, means thinking again the Christian *creatio ex nihilo*, thus showing the resources still left in a theological tradition whose legacy, for better or worse, includes deconstruction and all manner of thinking through the meaning of the “end of the world.”

François Raffoul begins this section with an account of Nancy's globalization in light of the Christian notion of creation. Raffoul's chapter, “The Creation of the World,” first reviews Nancy's considerations on the threats of certain forms of globalization. By emphasizing the theme of “creation,” Raffoul argues that Nancy offers a powerful rethinking of the sense of the world, one that furthers the Heideggerian concept of being-in-the-world to take on the current political stakes of globalization. In this way, Nancy

denotes a post-onto-theological conception of creation *ex nihilo*, of political praxis, that necessitates a sense of the world unallied to its representability in the mind of God.

But, as Christina Smerick argues in her chapter, “No Other Place to Be: Globalization, Monotheism, and *Salut* in Nancy,” this conception of the world is one still beholden to the Christian tradition. In this way, Smerick notes, for Nancy there is no thinking the future of thought without deconstructing Christianity. This necessitates, in Smerick’s chapter, a review of Nancy’s deconstructive reading of Christianity as it is linked to his accounts of globalization and the “demonstration” of the sense of the world. She notes that Nancy offers a version of Christianity that is quite removed from its lived, existing versions, but nevertheless his claims for rethinking Christianity should be championed if we are to put at bay the ultimate nihilism of a death drive at the heart of globalization, which makes Nancy’s contributions in this area all too timely.

Alfonso Cariolato’s chapter, “Christianity’s Other Resource: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Deconstruction of Faith,” traces further Nancy’s “deconstruction” of Christianity, summarizing its implications for thinking the “closure” of Western metaphysics and onto-theology. Cariolato notes the repercussions for thinking the inseparability of deconstruction and Christianity, and in the end offers an example of the resources left within the Christian tradition for unworking the notions of community, a concern in Nancy’s writings as well. Reading the Epistle of James, Cariolato argues for a *poiēsis* (making) and a notion of glory that testify to the singularity of each one as unique, thus unworking from within any presuppositions of immanent communities. In this way, Cariolato lays bare a faith in nothing but the fragile existence of each one along the tattered edges of what is thinkable.

This is not to suggest, however, that Nancy’s “deconstruction of Christianity” may not simply return to the very theologies it supposedly puts in question. Jacques Derrida, in *Le Toucher*, argued that Nancy took up resources within the philosophical tradition, including the notions of fraternity and community, whose Christian, indeed Catholic, provenance (no small matter, given Nancy’s early attachment to Catholic political organizations) threatened to overpower whatever displacement he was attempting. One risks taking on the tradition in such a way, Derrida argued, that one is merely repeating the tradition in full. This is a point that also concerns Martin McQuillan, whose chapter, “Deconstruction and Globalization: The World according to Jean-Luc Nancy,” provides a critical overview of Nancy’s work on globalization and *déclousion*. McQuillan argues that Nancy wrongly looks to Christianity for a sense of the world beyond global capitalism. Strategically, this can be done by looking for common Christian and atheistic resources in “nihilism,” he argues, with the upshot of countering the moves

of various forms of fundamentalism all-too-evident in today's geopolitics. In this way, McQuillan notes, Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity should be rethought in order to stand on the side of a certain form of reason under attack by fundamentalists. This requires, he argues, rethinking Nancy's use of such concepts as "creation *ex nihilo*," given their theological provenance and their link to the worldviews of those all-too-busy finding a way to return this world to nothingness in the name of their revelation.

EXPOSITIONS OF ONTOLOGY. OR A  
POST-DECONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

Reading *The Sense of the World*, *Being Singular Plural*, *Corpus*, and other key texts in Nancy's explicit writings on ontology, one is opened onto "excriptive" writing, which often begins and ends with catalogued lists (rocks, lizards, skin, grass, etc.) that seems to offer barely an ontology. Nancy's prose is often elusive, but at the heart of his texts is an attempt to rethink the very act of "writing" as "excription," a movement of sense always in excess of the inscribed meaning that allows writing to touch the thing. This requires a particular bare writing because in order to testify to the "spacing of an indefinite plurality of singularities," Nancy must refuse the gesture through which his writing would offer a system, a *logos*, by which to grasp and hold being, *ontos* (BSP, 35). In this way, Nancy sets out to describe what he calls the "*différance* of the real" by rethinking the disseminative deferral/difference of Derridean *différance* in terms of the writing of the real, or rather the real as a form of "writing," as a form of communication of sense between, with, and among things (FT, 136). For Nancy, this originary "excription" of sense provides the basis for what Derrida dubs "an absolute, irredentist, and post-deconstructive realism," that is, "an absolute realism, but irreducible to any of the tradition's realisms" (OT, 46). In turn, this sends Nancy searching for means of writing the contact or inscribing the touch of existing bodies, providing in this way a thorough "haptological" realism.

This haptological realism is explained in the first chapter of this section in Anne O'Byrne's "Nancy's Materialist Ontology." Describing what she calls Nancy's "ontology in motion," O'Byrne sketches out the stakes of Nancy's materialist ontology, which she says contests the main lines of traditional materialisms. In particular, Nancy locates the sense of the world in the displacements of meaning, the changing elements of material bodies, which she contends shows an attunement for corporeal being rather than matter as such. In doing so, she argues that he upends the Cartesian *res extensa* while offering a conception of singularity in line with what she suggestively dubs "natal finitude."

Graham Harman, for his part, is skeptical that such a thinking of bodies offers much more than a tip of the hat to the being of objects. Harman begins his chapter, "On Interface: Nancy's Weights and Masses," by arguing that, of those aligned with post-structuralism, it is the work of Nancy that offers most to "object-oriented philosophy." He is critical of Nancy's thicket of self-references and parenthetical phrases—an often heard critique about Nancy's writing style—but he contends that in fact Nancy's cataloguing and listing of things has much in common with the "carnal phenomenology" of Alphonso Lingis, among those thinkers Harman champions. In his other works, Harman has argued, in line with Quentin Meillassoux's "speculative realism," that by giving up on all manner of realism, Continental philosophy has thus handed over the real to mystics and theologians. Yet, he sees little to be found in Nancy's notion of "touch" to overcome this situation. For Harman, although promising, this "touch" of the real has less to do with thinking objects as such than with turning them into something indeterminate that doesn't necessarily touch or weigh on other things.

On the other hand, Peter Gratton, in his chapter, "The Speculative Challenge and Nancy's Post-Deconstructive Realism," argues that Nancy's thinking of contact is well suited to confront Quentin Meillassoux's so-called "speculative challenge" to contemporary philosophy. By repeatedly marking the relation between things in terms of the same "*à même*" ("right at" or "at the heart of") that Nancy has long used to describe the relation within and among things, Meillassoux offers an *entrée* back to the heart of Nancy's work. In turn, Nancy provides an avenue for unworking what Meillassoux's "speculative" method must affirm, namely the "dualism" between things as they appear (the phenomenal) and things as they are (the noumenal). The point, Gratton argues, is to rethink the real as excriptions of sense passing along *à même* the things themselves without answering the speculative challenge with a redoubled opposition between thinker and things.

EXPOSITIONS OF THE POLITICAL:  
JUSTICE. FREEDOM. EQUALITY

Nancy first came to wide prominence in the English-speaking world after the translation and publication of *The Inoperative Community*. The words that infuse this work (*désœuvrement* or unworking, communication, Heideggerian *Mitsein*, or Being-with, etc.) are found in all of his writings, making it impossible to tease out Nancy's political from nonpolitical works. What Nancy thus offers is a thoroughgoing political ontology. Following up on Heidegger's argument in *Being and Time* that being-in-the-world is always already *being-with*, Nancy contends that any notion of community must

be thought in terms of “being-ecstatic of Being itself” (*IC*, 6). Weighing the legacy of all manner of communisms, Nancy argues that this originary being-with or the “being-ecstatic,” explored at length in *Being Singular Plural*, requires a thinking of politics that charts its way between the rough waters of liberal atomism and religious and authoritarian “worked” or “essentialized” communities. We know well, he notes, the *telos* of the logics of fully immanent communities, and the praxis before us, as ever, is to avoid the “thanatology” and suicidal logic that would make any given community live up to “the criteria of pure immanence” (*IC*, 12). No doubt, Nancy’s call for a politics that “opens onto a community . . . that does not weave a superior, immortal, or transmortal life between subjects” will be found wanting by readers looking to Nancy for a world-historical program. “Willing the world, but not willing a subject of the world (neither substance nor author nor master),” Nancy writes, nevertheless, “is the only way to escape the *immonde*,” and is thus not without its consequences (*CW*, 49). It is for this reason that Nancy argues for a displacing of the regime of thought, including the traditional thinking of political subjectivity, that has heretofore “permitted” but a limited set of “options” for the political (*TD*, 9): atomistic globalization or essentialized authoritarianisms, market freedoms or deadened corporatist socialisms, etc. This requires a rethinking of justice, freedom, and equality that measures up to the “division of the sharing-out of the incalculable, and therefore, strictly speaking, the unsharable” that always “exceeds the political” (*TD*, 17).

The task of this section is thus to take the measure of the political, there where it meets its limit in that which always exceeds it. In his chapter, “Archi-ethics, Justice and the Suspension of History in the Writing of Jean-Luc Nancy,” B. C. Hutchens begins by arguing that Nancy contests traditional conceptions of equality premised on subjectivity and the sovereign individual. By doing so, Nancy calls for understanding a “sharing of relations” among singularities that gives rise to but is not derived from political states, classes, or social structures. Nancy hence offers a thinking of the “suspension of history” to the march of the progress of the further immanence of fully worked communities. Justice, if there is any, must answer, Hutchens argues, to freedom’s groundlessness, not the supposed substance of communities always already put in question by the free being-with of each singular existent sharing the world.

Andrew Norris situates this thinking of the sharing of the world in his chapter, “Jean-Luc Nancy on the Political after Heidegger and Schmitt,” by showing the relation between Nancy’s account of the inoperative community and his rethinking of Heidegger and Schmitt’s concepts of the political. Norris argues that Nancy furthers Heidegger’s conceptions of Being-with to rethink notions of justice and all manner of political institutions and norms,

which in turn contests Schmittian biological conceptions of community. Nevertheless, Norris contends that in the end Nancy does not avoid Heidegger's dictum from the "Letter on Humanism" that thinking is the highest praxis. In this way, he argues, while Nancy offers much to reconceptualizing the political, his work remains curiously abstracted from politics as it is practiced in the everyday.

In his chapter, David Pettigrew attempts to fill this lacuna by linking Nancy to his own work on the genocidal regimes of post-Cold War Yugoslavia. His "The Task of Justice" provides a masterful overview of Nancy's work connecting finitude and justice. For Nancy, Pettigrew argues, each being is "singular" in the finitude of their existence, one that is theirs alone—a singularity to be thought in relation to Heidegger's conception of being-towards-death. What the finite singular that is each of us testifies to is what Pettigrew calls the task of justice. Laying out this task against a Levinasian version of ethics, Pettigrew grounds his analysis in what is still left to be thought in the wake of the horrors of the 1990s-era massacres in the former Yugoslavia.

#### EXPOSITIONS OF SENSE: ART AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

Readers should hear the multiple meanings of the French *sens* in the title of this section: meaning, sensation, and also direction. Nancy's influential writings on the multiple arts touch (to use his favored term) on all these meanings, and one should not miss the fact that his work on poetry, film, dance, painting, techno-music, and all manner of artworks also indelibly concern bodily sensations such as seeing, hearing, and touching, as well as the question of meaning and the sense of the world for us today. Nancy's writings on the arts include the two volumes of *The Muses*, *Multiple Arts*, *The Sense of the World*, *The Evidence of Film*, *Noli me tangere*, *The Ground of the Image*, and *Listening*. In many of these works, Nancy critiques both the Hegelian view of the death of art, which sublates all art in the name of its idea, and the Heideggerian reduction of the work of art to an originary poetic thinking. For Nancy, what is missed in these accounts is the sensuous aspect of art, one that disorients any sense that we would want to give to the arts from the side of philosophy. The point, he argues, is to testify to the inadequacy of any signification or representation of artworks or the arts as such.

In the first chapter of this section, "De-monstration and the Sens of Art," Stephen Barker reads Nancy's *The Muses* as extending his meditations on the "sense of the world." For Barker, artworks break themselves into ever



increasing categories from the inside due to their excess of sense. They thus “de-monstrate,” or show from out of themselves, the fragmentary sense of the world. Disorienting, this sense of the world, however, is not only nonsense, but rather an excess of sense that disrupts any figuring of the art, and indeed any figuring of art in its relationship to the world. Such a figuring, he suggests, would simply be “monstrous.”

William Watkin’s chapter, “Poetry and Plurality: On a Part of Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Muses*,” develops Nancy’s thinking of this “excess of sense” described by Barker in order to conceive the arts in the wake of his work. Calling for what he dubs a “promiscuous” poetics, Watkin first reviews Nancy’s thinking of the multiple arts in the two volumes of *The Muses*. Traditionally, Watkin notes, poetic practice had been reduced by philosophers such as Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger to concepts and thoughts said to underlay the arts’ material exterior. Although Nancy calls into question such a dualism between material exterior and conceptual interior, Watkin counters that Nancy does so by reinscribing the dualism between the “whole” and the “parts” of arts. In this way, poetry, as but one of the “whole” of arts, would be similar in essence to all other arts, and any investigation of the whole (the “multiple arts”) is thus *a fortiori* extendable to the part of the arts known as poetry. Rethinking poetry promiscuously, however, means accepting a conception of the arts as too slippery to be subsumed under this rigid, traditional schema.

It is the end of such rigid representation and schema that is the focus of the last chapter in this section. Beginning with Dan Pagis’s remarkable poem, “Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freight Car,” Andrew Benjamin’s “Forbidding, Knowing, Continuing. On Representing the Shoah,” reads Nancy’s own contribution to thinking about writing and representation after the Shoah. For Benjamin, Nancy’s meditations on the logic of representation throughout his work come to fruition in his reflections on the Shoah, particularly in *The Ground of the Image*, where Nancy shows the fragility of each and every image. Ultimately, the question Benjamin evokes is what Nancy’s considerations mean for the “act of continuity” after the Shoah and what such continuing on would mean for philosophy, poetry, thinking about Judaism, and our common being-together.

The last chapter of this book returns us explicitly to the “commerce of thinking” in the form of an interview with Nancy vis-à-vis the questions raised in the critical engagements in this volume. The dialogues that make up this book do not end with this interview. Each book, Nancy writes, “is a dialogue,” one that opens itself beyond its own avowed significance to the sense of the world to which it is exscribed. As such, we hope in this book to provide no less than, as Nancy writes, a “world” that “comes to mingle with the plurality of worlds” that already “inhabit” the reader (OC, 23).

These “mêlée of worlds” on offer in the excellent contributions here are meant to take the measure of the weight of Nancy’s thought. This will take the form of an ever-interrupted dialogue with his plural thinking, one that should not be reduced, by definition, merely to that thought subsumed under the proper name Jean-Luc Nancy because it communicates in this volume and elsewhere beyond this name. We end with an exscription from Nancy:

May there be, each time, in the scrolling of a volume, in the binding of a book, a burst of sense that shines and is eclipsed, and so on further and further, from book to book, . . . always echoing from one to another, indefinitely and each time unique. . . . Whoever really reads it, enters into nothing less than commerce with it. (*OC*, 14)