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Russell Ford

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1
2
3 The work of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has fallen victim to a
4 peculiar sort of neglect in Anglo-American philosophy, even among those
5 scholars working in the Continental tradition. Although, a significant number
6 of articles have been published that engage his work, often coupled closely to
7 themes and texts of Heidegger and Derrida, the originality of Nancy's
8 philosophical trajectory has generally gone unremarked. It is the chief virtue
9 of Ian James' book that it highlights and makes clear the distinctive and
10 provocative contours of Nancy's work. *The Fragmentary Demand* makes a
11 convincing case for Nancy's work to be ranked as an incisive and original
12 contribution to the philosophical debates central to the (broadly construed)
13 phenomenological tradition of the late 20th century. James' book is divided
14 into two sections: the first offers a historical orientation to the central pre-
15 occupations of Nancy's oeuvre, while the second, thematic discussion
16 emphasizes Nancy's contributions to specific problems in phenomenology,
17 political philosophy, and aesthetics. In both of these parts James shows him-
18 self to be an insightful and sophisticated expositor, carefully situating Nancy's
19 work within the Continental tradition and detailing the central concepts and
20 developments that constitute Nancy's own unique philosophical project. What
21 emerges is the picture of a philosopher intimately involved in contemporary
22 debates, and with a clear and distinct voice that interacts critically with the
23 contemporaries with which he is so often conflated: Heidegger and Derrida.
24 The book opens with a lengthy chapter on the problem of subjectivity
25 that follows Nancy's early work on Nietzsche, Kant and Descartes. Nancy
26 inherits the problem of subjectivity from the two dominant figures of French

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27 philosophical thought in the 1960's: Nietzsche and Heidegger. Like Derrida,
 28 Nancy reads the work of these thinkers as posing the question of the conse-
 29 quences of the disappearance of coordinated structures from thought. For
 30 Nancy, this question of the "overcoming" of the metaphysical tradition is
 31 closely tied to the attendant problem of the style of writing able to express it.
 32 This latter problem provides much of the orientation for Nancy's collaborative
 33 work with Lacoue-Labarthe on the relation between philosophy and litera-
 34 ture. Carefully following the argument of one of Nancy's earliest articles,
 35 James argues that even in the late 1960s Nancy is clearly working out a dis-
 36 tinctive and critical reading of Heidegger's diagnosis of Nietzsche as the "last
 37 metaphysician". While Heidegger takes Nietzsche to task for failing to discern
 38 the metaphysical ground underlying will to power, Nancy argues that, insofar
 39 as Nietzsche the author is himself implicated in this play, genealogy displaces
 40 metaphysics as the diagnosis and erection of values becomes a historical event
 41 rather than a structured development. James uses this genealogical displace-
 42 ment as a guide for reading Nancy's work on Kant and Descartes.

43 Nancy's principal work on Kant, *Logodaedalus*, is chiefly concerned with
 44 the architectonic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the way that the problem
 45 of the ground of the critical project appears in Kant's account of the schem-
 46 atism. Like Heidegger, Nancy reads the *Critique of Pure Reason* as an at-
 47 tempt to provide an account of the possibility of ontological knowledge. Given
 48 this problematic, Nancy zeroes in on Kant's refusal to provide an elaboration
 49 of the transcendental schemata of pure concepts – allegedly out of an exces-
 50 sive dryness and boredom – to argue that this move is not purely rhetorical but
 51 necessary. As Kant works out the absolute ground for ontological thinking,
 52 the *Critique* is confronted with the irreducible particularity of its own dis-
 53 course. Kant attempts to master this particularity by legislating the difference
 54 between *Darstellung* ("presentation") and *Dichtung* (which James, following
 55 Nancy's nuanced and tendentious account, translates as "invention," denoting
 56 the literary impurity of the presentation of pure reason) reserving for philo-
 57 sophical prose the task of the subordination of the latter to the former. This
 58 ultimately unfounded subordination is exposed by the discussion of the
 59 schematism in which Kant is forced to confront the stylistic problem under-
 60 lying the Critical project. In this irresolvable relation of presentation and
 61 invention, philosophy, Nancy argues, hesitates but always decides for the
 62 former, metaphysics recommences, but its legitimacy remains ultimately
 63 unsecured. This hesitation at the origin of metaphysics is also a hesitation at
 64 the heart of the subject, and James follows Nancy as he pursues his problem in
 65 an essay on Descartes, *Ego, Sum*. Primarily concerned with the *Discourse on*
 66 *Method*, Nancy uses the foundational syncopation exposed in his work on
 67 Kant to follow Derrida's prescription that the cogito be "temporalized." What
 68 results is a reading of the *Discourse* as a fable, again stressing the motif of the
 69 presentation or expression of philosophical thought by highlighting the irre-
 70 ducible difference, the hesitation, between the Cogito elaborated in the course
 71 of the text, and the thinking that is recorded in that therefore fictional nar-
 72 rative. This separation of the metaphysically self-same and immediately

73 grounded subject from the expression of its own truthful presence is figured by
 74 Nancy as the parted mouth whose opening precedes and produces enuncia-
 75 tion. This thinking of a syncopated space, of a regulative “spasm” underlying
 76 metaphysics, whose exposure marks its overcoming, organizes Nancy’s
 77 response to phenomenology.

78 Having argued in the first chapter that Nancy’s project, while drawing on
 79 Derrida’s deconstruction, is much more influenced by Nietzsche than
 80 Heidegger, James turns in the second chapter to Nancy’s engagement with the
 81 phenomenological tradition and his reworking of the concept of space. The
 82 Cartesian roots of Nancy’s conception of syncopation provide James with a
 83 ready linkage between *Ego, Sum* and Husserl’s 1907 lectures *Thing and Space*.
 84 Whereas Nancy’s engagement with Descartes and Kant was direct and textual,
 85 James’ argument for Husserl as a primary interlocutor for Nancy’s conception
 86 of space is organized around the importance of the critique of objective space
 87 to the wider project of 20th Century phenomenology. Nancy’s contribution to
 88 this tradition is to follow Heidegger’s deepening of Husserl’s work and to
 89 think space as consequent upon a more originary “spacing” (*espacement*) that
 90 is both temporal and spatial. To this extent, Nancy’s thought reflects the
 91 development of Heidegger’s thinking from *Being and Time* to the emergence
 92 of *Ereignis* (event of appropriation) in his *Contributions to Philosophy*. Even
 93 in that later work, however, Nancy argues that *Ereignis* maintains a link with
 94 the discussion of authenticity in *Being and Time* through an emphasis on what
 95 Lacoue-Labarthe terms an “archaic” attempt to join a certain provincial
 96 aesthetic with political “organicity” (which culminates in a re-subjectivized
 97 “people”). Nancy’s work attempts to expose *Ereignis* as an event consequent
 98 upon a more originary ek-static spacing that is the converse side of the limit
 99 marked by the singular event of worldly meaning. This development is
 100 extended as Nancy figures this event as a birth to sense that occurs in and
 101 through distinct bodies – bodies whose limits form the community that Nancy
 102 develops out of Heidegger’s under-developed concept of *Mit-sein*. This
 103 matrixial limit that Nancy develops in his engagement with phenomenology
 104 gives rise to his own “thinking in the singular-plural”. According to such a
 105 thinking, ontology is both an ethos, as the disclosure of the spacing that is
 106 anterior to sense and praxis insofar as this spacing is only given through the
 107 bodily practices of sense-erecting individuals who discover their community in
 108 the roots of their actions.

109 The first thematic chapter of James’ book is cantered around Nancy’s
 110 treatment of the body which James indexes to two traditions, both with their
 111 roots in classical phenomenology. On the one hand, is the tradition of French
 112 thought that links classical phenomenology to Christianity which supplements
 113 the former’s paucity of physical description. The other tradition is that of
 114 Derridean deconstruction, here explicated primarily through Derrida’s text
 115 *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*. In relation to the phenomenological tradition,
 116 Nancy’s thought follows the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of the
 117 embodied intentionality that culminates in the chiasmus of *The Visible and*
 118 *the Invisible*. The thought of an intertwining that disjoins and allows both

119 phenomenal intentionality and the world is central to Nancy's 1992 work
 120 *Corpus* which James emphasizes as an important text in Nancy's recent,
 121 ongoing project of a "deconstruction of Christianity". With this phrase Nancy
 122 indicates that a specific thinking of incarnation forms the locus for what
 123 Christianity introduces into the Western philosophical tradition. In the various
 124 moments of the incarnation (birth, death, resurrection, Eucharist) investigated
 125 by Nancy in a series of works that precede and follow Derrida's book, he
 126 elaborates a "materialism" that follows the limit Christianity draws between
 127 what appears and what precedes appearance – a limit that Christianity
 128 repeatedly effaces through its various determinations. This materialism is the
 129 provenance of Nancy's deconstructive reworking of Heidegger's notion of
 130 technics and technicity. Again taking up the material limit that sets bodies in
 131 relation to one another prior to their intentional coordination in a meaningful
 132 world, Nancy takes technicity to be an ontological matter that reflects the
 133 concrete coming-together of worlds of technical involvement. This original
 134 technicity – "ecotechnics," a technics of and at the limit of bodies – is a way of
 135 cashing out the Derridean notion of *différance* or arche-writing which still
 136 bears too much Husserlian abstraction. James concludes this chapter by
 137 returning to the question of style, arguing that this technics of ekscription is
 138 the very limit of writing since, in it, writing "touches" the outside that makes
 139 meaning possible.

140 For Nancy the originary spacing whose ekscription is situated by the body is
 141 not internal but external; what is constituted by the ekscription of meaning is a
 142 community, not a subject. The particular difficulty of Nancy's thought about
 143 community is that it is both a rigorous engagement with the tradition of
 144 political philosophy and, at the same time, an attempt not to take sides within
 145 the constituted positions of that tradition but to subject the very positioning of
 146 the historically-conditioned system to critique. James explores this aspect of
 147 Nancy's thought through a detailed consideration of Nancy's involvement
 148 with Lacoue-Labarthe and the Centre for Philosophical Research on the
 149 Political from 1980 until 1984. As the brief life of the Centre attests, the
 150 attempt to create a space for the questioning of the political was met with
 151 questions as to the legitimacy and usefulness of its Heideggerian outlines. For
 152 James, the work of the Centre forms a sort of preamble to Nancy's own
 153 project of rethinking the political as found in works such as *The Inoperative*
 154 *Community*. There Nancy reads Bataille's work on death, sacrifice, and sov-
 155 ereignty alongside Heidegger's ontology. Although, Bataille's work remains
 156 problematically subjective, Nancy infuses it with the resources of Heidegger's
 157 thought of finitude in order to argue for the dependence of being-with upon
 158 mortality. As the common limit of death, community then marks and situates
 159 the individual. Such an ontological community is termed an "absent com-
 160 munity," absence marking the limit from which multiple political meanings
 161 come. Nancy elaborates this play at the limit through his notion of "myth,"
 162 conceived both as the bestowal of meaning that structures a community and as
 163 the delimiting gap that interrupts and refuses the foundational gesture of each
 164 narrative.

165 It is the recurrence of issues of fiction and style that marks the transition to
 166 the final theme of the book: art. As James emphasizes, for Nancy, art is the
 167 exposure of the passage of meaning, the manifestation of the limit that marks
 168 the ekscription of bodies. Nancy's work on art has developed in close prox-
 169 imity to the thought of Hegel and Heidegger. Having already developed the
 170 specific ways in which Nancy's project finds its roots in Heidegger's ontology,
 171 James focuses in this final chapter on carefully tracing the debate with Hegel.
 172 What is chiefly of interest in Hegel's aesthetics is the limit between art con-
 173 ceived as the sensible manifestation of an intelligible idea and art's historical
 174 origins. Nancy emphasizes the way that art, insofar as it reconciles and con-
 175 cretely presents the concept, is indissociable from the expression proper to
 176 speculative philosophy. James insightfully links this claim back to his discus-
 177 sion of Nancy and Kant showing how Nancy accentuates the limit of dialect-
 178 ical resolution as an irreducible syncopation that reveals only its own insistent
 179 presence or presentation. This insistence is proper not only to art but to
 180 philosophy as well since, for Hegel, both are determined by the same struc-
 181 ture. The limit of presentation common to art and philosophy again exposes
 182 the problem of meaning, now in terms of the possibility of a common sense or
 183 a hierarchy of senses. For Nancy this is the "presentation of presentation," the
 184 disclosure of the limit that marks the birth of a world as a meaningful or
 185 sensible structure. The limit exposed by art is also the image-character of the
 186 artwork itself; its being as presentation of the presentation of sense. It thereby
 187 distinguishes itself – marks itself off from – the distinct realm of differentiated
 188 and meaningful things. The artistic image therefore touches the limit with the
 189 face of that limit itself, forming a pure repetition of the birth of sense. Rather
 190 than being solipsistic, however, the experience of such a repetition recalls
 191 thought to its lived world even as it opens this particular concrete instantiation
 192 of meaning to critique.

193 James' book is a significant and important contribution to contemporary
 194 Continental scholarship. The rigorously argued but clearly formulated linkage
 195 of Nancy's thought with Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others
 196 highlights both the constellation of problems within which Nancy works, as
 197 well as the distinctive concepts and contributions that Nancy makes to this
 198 tradition. Even as he engages thinkers much maligned for an over-reliance
 199 upon jargon, James manages to convert even the most idiosyncratic formu-
 200 lations into common philosophical currency. Far from diminishing its value,
 201 this reveals the worth of such thought not only to ontology or the overcoming
 202 of metaphysics, but also to ethics, aesthetics and politics.