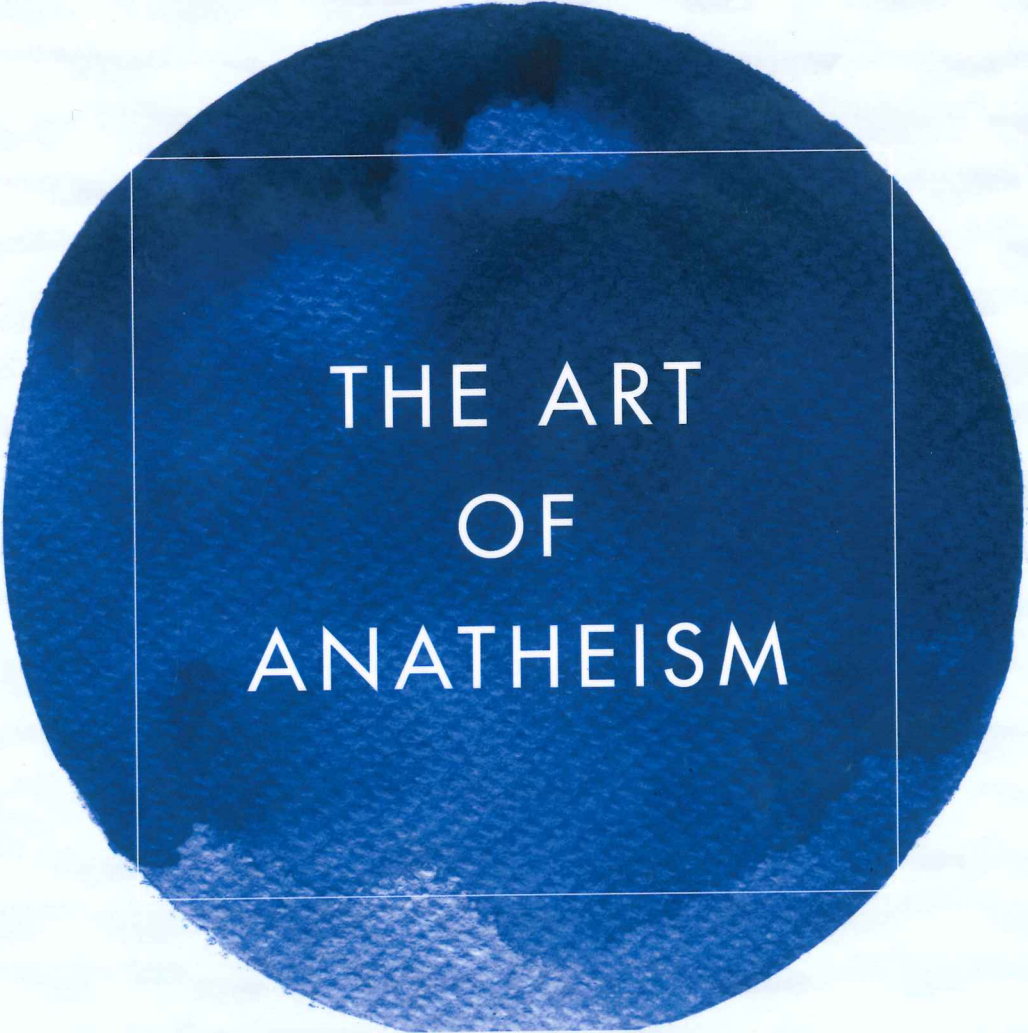


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ANATHEISM

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Chapter 9

The Annunciate and the Self-Deconstruction of Mon-a-theism

Jean-Luc Nancy

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON THE TWO WORKS BY CHRIS DOUDE VAN TROOSTWIJK

A curious apposition and opposition seems to exist between the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and that of Richard Kearney. In his *Deconstruction of Christianity*, Nancy describes the advent of atheist modernity as born of a logic inherent to monotheism itself. This thought, at first, seems far from Kearney's effort to think the possibility of God after the death of God. Indeed, Nancy appears to be directly at odds with Kearney's suggestion that theism and atheism are both choices that reflect the experience of the encounter with the Other, that both lack absolute foundations and are thus equally plausible options. For him, the true opposition is not between theism and atheism but between monotheism—which includes atheism—and polytheism. Nancy avoids using Kearney's neologism "anatheism" and instead prefers to talk about the transformation of religion in history—a transformation that found its apogee in the atheism that Christianity prepared and incubated from within.

Yet the question remains: does Nancy's skepticism about the return of God or gods necessarily imply the loss of transcendence? Can we rethink the space of "mon-a-theistic emptiness" as the sphere in which a kind of polytheism might appear? Do we experience even today a sort of divine creativity, an artistic sublimity, a *theo-poiesis*?

Painting, Nancy will tell us, is already addressing—already a kind of prayer. It is a performative act that evokes the Other without insisting upon a communicative *retour*. But does this addressing, this praying, not at least gesture at the reappearance of the divine? Does it not open up the possibility of the return of God after God? *Anatheism* and *theo-poetics* are not terms that Nancy himself uses. But his own writings on art have frequently

focused on the philosophical importance of specifically *religious* paintings. In addition to his reflections on the representations of Mary Magdalene and Jesus offered by painters such as Rembrandt, Drier, Titian, Pontormo, Bronzino, and Correggio in *Noli Me Tangere*, Nancy recently offered a commentary on da Messina's *Annunciata* that Sarah Horton has translated below.¹ The piece originally served as a companion to Richard Kearney's own commentary on da Messina's painting that Kearney has expanded upon in this present volume. Where Kearney reads the painting as the secular made sacred, Nancy reads it as the sacred made secular. Here, perhaps, we find the painterly reflection of difference between anatheism and mon-a-theism.

THE ANNUNCIATE (TRANS. SARAH HORTON)

EKPHRASIS

Is she receiving the announcement? Is she going to receive it? Has she already received it? Can one imagine her refusing it? Or that she is asking for a moments reflection?

She is saying that it is not possible, that she cannot have a child because she is a virgin. She insists, she turns away the importunate one at whom she does not even want to look. She holds him back, prevents him from approaching at the same time as she pinches together the two sides of her veil. She is looking down, to her right, at the visitor's feet; she watches to see if he is going to want to come closer.

Meanwhile, the lectern's empty eyes, turned and somewhat raised toward the left, wish to disregard the woman's gesture, for they well know what the book laid above them contains. Since the text on the page begins with the letter M, it is quite possible that it is the name of Melchizedek, the king of peace who Abraham meets and who some think is already the figure, even the anticipated reality, of the son of God.

But the reader has not understood the announcement—neither that of Melchizedek nor that of the angel. And yet her mother has taught her well to read the Scriptures (her mother, who, already, conceived her because God took pity on her sterility).

The Annunciate seemingly shows us that she pays no heed to the announcement. But the painting, for its part, shows us something else: between the two vanishing lines of the divergent gazes, almost at the center, a small violet triangle: it is the Annunciate's tunic, which her ample blue veil covers and which also appears around her right wrist. The blue of virginity cannot entirely hide the crimson where the body is already caught.

EXEGESIS

The annunciation is the communication of *news*. The verb *nuntio* belongs to the family of *novus*. The newness is brought by a revelation, and the revelation itself is prepared by a prophecy. The Old Testament (*testament ancien*) or, more precisely, the former attestation (*ancienne attestation*), that of the Covenant of a god with his people, is so designated in distinction from the new one that is to be its accomplishment. The newness consists not in any progress but in another covenant, which is to be made between this same god and humanity entire. The newness is also what I have learned—*novi*—by an unprecedented declaration or revelation (*novum* and *novi* are not related, since the latter is the perfect of *nosco*, but the play on words has been made, for example, in Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*).

Quite obviously, Myriam, daughter of Anne and of Joachim, does not read the new attestation. She herself is it. One notices how the fingers of her right hand repeat the opening that gapes between the raised pages of the book. Her body is the new book. Her body is the news; it is already the text of the New Testament.

This text is enveloped and developed in the weave of its cloth. That is why the cloth takes up the largest part of the painting, which consists above all in the unfolding and refolding of the fabric that covers the raised hairstyle necessary for creating the effect of a sort of tiara, that advances above the forehead it shades, and that descends in heavy folds onto the shoulders and arms.

The hand that gathers and holds on the chest—thus hidden away—the sides of this stole confirms the closing of this body's doors. *Porta clausa*, door of the East through which only the King passes. But this closing serves to better protect and to highlight the multiplied opening: that of the clothing on the face and the throat, that of the fingers, that of the book, that of the apertures in the lectern.

GLOSS

It is less a matter of showing a person than a presence. Less an attitude than an insistence. Less an encounter than an affirmation. Less a virgin than a tower of David. Less a figure than a background.

The breadth and depth of the veil, its weight and its folds unveil not a slender face but on the contrary a firm, robust one, the features of which are shaped as much with power as with gentleness. The vigorous line of the nose divides shadow and light, a vertical line that is found again higher in the veil's crease in the middle of the forehead and lower in the accentuated canal of the upper lip. From there to the angles of the lectern is composed a testimony of verticality: bearing, imposing manner, dignity, elevation, and ascension or even assumption.

Theology here stands at the limits of a singular profanation: everything happens as if the announced incarnation—in all likelihood already carried out in the moment of the announcement—were first, if not entirely, that of this majestic body that assumes a gesture of benediction accompanied by authority.

Is it not precisely here that the divine body is born? Is it not his life that lives by the breath of these nostrils and that fills with the blood that is risen to the rim of the full lips?

Is this before us not the very matter of salvation? That most splendid gem sung of by Hildegard von Bingen?

*illa lucida materia
Perquam hoc ipsum verbum
Exspiravit omnes virtutes
Ut eduxit in prima materia omnes creaturas*

Yes everything is dense here, everything is impenetrable and penetrated with spirit in the same way that the primary matter, the depth of the world, was penetrated with creative force. Everything is firm, compact, one block from whence a sign comes, but a sign that is in its turn impenetrable.

Nothing and no one penetrates, nothing and no one is penetrated: it is an infusion, an impregnation, an invasion, and a maceration.

*Serenum decus solis
Qui tibi infusus est*

As with dye and cloth, as with complexion and skin, as with letters and book.

SCHOLIUM

The angel is no longer there. We are in his place.

THE SELF-DECONSTRUCTION OF MON-A-THEISM (A DIALOGUE WITH CHRIS DOUDE VAN TROOSTWIJK)

CDvT: I want to talk, first, about the deconstruction of Christianity. On the one hand, it seems to be a historical process. On the other, you sometimes suggest that it is a kind of inner necessity or quasi-transcendental configuration, especially when you refer to Schelling's idea of *monotheism being an atheism*, an idea that I baptized for the sake of brevity as *mon-a-theism*.

JLN: For me, this is primarily a historical idea. In no civilization other than the Occidental, has this mon-a-theistic equation, as you call it, appeared. In

Schelling we find maybe for the first time the thought that monotheism is an atheism. But indeed, there is some necessity of atheism inherent within each monotheistic religion. Therefore, it must have appeared at the same time as the historical arrival of Judeo-Christianity. On this point, I still have much work to do for the deconstruction of Christianity. I have not yet sufficiently showed what has happened historically with Christianity, or more precisely with Judeo-Christianity, because they are two twins who grow up in a parallel configuration. What I would like to say is that before applying whatever religious name, you have to look first behind appellations like Christian, Jewish, and so forth, for the historical and anthropological mutations that were going on. Because what happened was a mutation of religion as such, or, better, a transmutation of the divine. Maybe primarily a mutation of the divine that subsequently meant the formation of different types of religion, that is, Judaism, Christianity—and later especially Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. They functioned for a long time, at least until the Reformation, the same way religions always functioned—with representations of the divine (even if they were representations of the non-representable as icons purport to be), with rites, cults, prayers, etc. What happened at the end of the Roman Empire could be called in purely “profane” terminology the transition of religion from divine presences toward a relation with the Infinite. Antiquity ignores infinity—“ignores” in the sense that she considers it worthless, bad or even dangerous. It is *apeiron*. Consequently all religions are inscribed in well-defined frameworks, and every religion concerns, in one way or another, a *belonging* to a people, a culture, a place, a theocratic regime, and so on.

CDvT: Would you say: “belonging to the sphere of immanence”? The creative invention of gods? A *theo-poetics* if you will?

JLN: Yes, in the sense that in antiquity the divine is always a divine proper to a particular community. Such was the case with Greek politics: Athens was the town of Athena. But with Rome something changed, something more important than we manage to see today. And precisely in the new sphere, Christianity happens. The Roman transformation is the change of a town that is, to itself, its own cult. Rome represents to itself its proper sacredness. It has been said that Rome was the most religious culture that ever existed. There was a piling up of cults, rites—they had a cult for everything in Rome. At the time that Christianity first occurred, Rome knew an absolutely phenomenal multiplicity of religions: the cult Orpheus, Isis, Mithras. Civilization entered in a process of transformation at the time. This transformation, I think, could be equally explained in terms of a failure of Greek and Greco-Romaine antiquity. The divine of the old period did not manage to survive, and initiation cults emerged. So here was indeed some kind of religious inventivity, creativity, *theo-poiesis* at work. Of course, this continues throughout the history of humankind. But this mutation was at the same time political and social, and even anthropological in character. Rome represented for the first time that there is globality (*mondialité*). It covered the space from Syria to Scotland. It embraced a quantity of different peoples and kingdoms.

self-causing-cause—the love between three persons expresses the desire for a fourth. There is a free place at the table, indicated by the pointing hand of the green-garbed Spirit and the inviting mirror-image—welcoming us to take part in the ongoing work of *theopoeisis*.²²

This radical openness to the other, the stranger, the guest, signals the ecumenical promise of Rublev's art, now displayed throughout the world in Christian churches of various denominations, as it replays two primal scenes of Abrahamic and Trinitarian hospitality. It is a summons to move beyond closed denominational circles to an open embrace of the new, the seemingly "impossible" beyond one's accredited possibilities. Hence the hermeneutic importance of reading the chora-chalice at the heart of perichoresis as both Sarah's and Mary's womb receptive, in each case, to an "impossible" child: Sarah is barren, Mary is a virgin. Or more exactly, the *chora* is that crack or cleft in the divine that incubates a divine possible (*dunamis*) beyond the impossible (*adunaton*) of the humanly possible. A point signaled in the fact that the same phrase used in the Septuagint to describe Sarah's exchange with the Strangers at Mamre (Genesis 18:14) is used to describe Mary's exchange with Gabriel in Luke 1:30. "Nothing is impossible to God." Hearing the respective annunciations of a future child, Sarah laughs and Mary says Amen. In both inaugural scenes, an unexpected child is conceived: Isaac to Sarah, Jesus to Mary. Both miraculous natalities reside at the heart of the Trinitarian dance. But if Rublev's image of hospitality to strangers is an anatheist bridge between Jewish and Christian narratives, it also extends to non-Abrahamic wisdom traditions celebrating triple divinities and trimurtis equally welcome at the table. Perichoresis serves as portal to interreligious hospitality.²³

Rublev's icon, I am proposing, offers a theopoetic artwork that reveals the Trinitarian mystery of creation in a manner that goes deeper than any treatise of speculative theology—and is more affective and effective in its testimony of divine *poiesis*.

b. Da Messina's *Annunciata* (1474)

Antonella da Messina's painting features another anatheist visitation. This time a girl alone in a room. There are no doves, no rays of light, no doorways, arches, or lilies. No celestial sky or gilded halo. No Father, Son, or Holy Ghost. Not even an angel. Only her and us. In the moment.²⁴

This painting embodies Luke's phrase about Mary at Nazareth when confronted with Gabriel—she "was troubled and pondered (*dialogizomai*)."²⁵ Here we see her pondering. "Will I or won't I?"—or *Trasi e nesci* as they say in Sicily where the image hangs today in the Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo. She hovers on the threshold.



Figure 1.2. Antonello da Messina (1430–1479), *Virgin Annunciate*, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Palermo. (Public Domain)

Da Messina paints a line running from the top of the girl's blue mantle along the bridge of her nose straight down through the V of her shawl and the knuckles of her hand to that light/dark dividing edge of the lectern. The lectern has two sides: one illuminated, one shadowed, bearing a book with a page lifting and falling. Like her gown opening and closing, a hint of carnal red between the folds of chaste blue.

Openings and closings in an "anatheistic instant." *Ana-theos*: meaning both after God and before God. Too early and too late. So what exactly is she pondering? And why must we, observers of the painting, wait like the page suspended in midair as she responds to what calls her in the flesh, from writing to touch, from parchment to skin? Infinitesimal suspension mirroring, in turn, her hands: one opening toward the viewer—the messenger, the painter,