

Being-Singular-Plural as Being-With-The-Subject:

Questioning the Singular in Nancy

Jean-Luc Nancy would appear to have avoided the aura of conceptual determinativeness plaguing Bennington's and Caputo's readings of Derrida. His rendering of the interweaving of experience is vigilant at depriving us of the ability to capture and possess a temporary presence in the event itself. In 'Elliptical Sense' (Research in Phenomenology, pp.175-190) and 'Differance' (Sense of the World, pp.34-36) he thinks Derrida's quasi-transcendental as a being-singular-plural. Differance is passion, the in-between, a being-divided and multiplied, simultaneity itself as the 'with' of origin and destination. Meaning is a "repetition already comprised in the affirmation of the instant, in this affirmation/request seized in the letting go of the instant, affirming the passage of presence and itself passing with it,(BSP4)". We do not have a singular meaning until we have a space between singularities; this spacing is in fact the very essence of the singular. One must think of a point in timespace as a differential; a 'from here to there' that cannot be reduced to either an immanent here or there. That gesture which would institute-affirm a meaning and that which would dislodge-transform it are simultaneous in the structure of an event of meaning.

The law, substance, justice of the event is a summons, "the act of the enchainment of singular sense to every other singular sense, the act of apportioning and interweaving that, as such, has no sense but gives a place to every event of sense (once again, people, country, person, and so forth)(115,SOW)." "The (k)not:that which involves neither interiority nor exteriority but which, in being tied, ceaselessly makes the inside pass outside, each into (or by way of) the other, the outside inside, turning endlessly back on itself without returning TO itself-the link of ...confrontation and arrangement, need and desire, constraint and obligation, subjection and love, glory and pity, interest and disinterest. The tying of the (k)not is nothing but... the placing-into-relation that presupposes at once proximity and distance, attachment and detachment, intricacy, intrigue, and ambivalence. Now we must ask, is Nancy's differential communication of events understanding itself as Derridean differance? Nancy himself reminds (Ellipsis34) that while there is a great proximity between his work and Derrida, it is not a complicity. What might Nancy not be apprehending of Derrida's thought? He acknowledges that in the passage from one event to another there must be both effacement and affirmation, expressed in his structure of the 'with' as simultaneously proximity and distance, togetherness and separation. But notice that 'together and separate', 'proximity and distance', all imply modes of plurality. Does not a play of proximity and distance between singulars imply, even though it is not articulated by Nancy, a pre-communicative equivocity of presence-affirmation and negation-effacement within the thinking of the singular itself?

Should Nancy not be able to say that the singular event is paradoxical, double before it could ever simply exist as a being-with another event? Is not an 'event' both a yes and a no that puts into question the economy of a singularity in contact with another singularity? Derrida re-marks "For it is in the form of a thinking of the unique, precisely, and not of the plural, as it was too often believed, that a thought of dissemination formerly introduced itself as a folding thought of the fold-and as a folded thought of the fold"(MO26). If we say that the single instant or event is two gestures together, the effacement of a previous event and the affirmation or presencing of the new, then it precedes a 'being-with', relation or communication

between two poles; it simply IS two poles, which is to say that it both IS and IS NOT. Only when presence and negation are allowed to take place or space as thicknesses is their being-simultaneous articulated as 'co-existence' or 'relation between'. Differance is not simply between or with, it intervenes before the ex-tension of a relation, a difference. Nancy offers the singular-plural as transformation, trans-cription, displacement, movement, change, novelty; in short, the dis and trans of movement is the re-location of a location, place, form, inscription. It is not as if he is claiming that the presence of place exists BEFORE or independent of dis-placement, as a presence-to-itself. But even as radically co-dependent with its effacement, even as just the positive pole of the bi-polarity of a 'being between something and nothing', are this pole and its other not expected to say too much? Must not 'location', 'inscription', 'place' and 'form' themselves be understood as already bifurcated, doubled before their meeting with a 'trans' could even be justified or necessary? If so, then the mobility that Nancy sees as originary to the event is a repression of a more radical effect prior to relationality.

The event as 'Being-with' is the tension between forceful sides. The familiar proximity of Betweenness is also disruption, 'surprise', the 'shock of meaning', discord, the 'irreducible strangeness of each one of these touches to the other (BSP6)', 'odd', 'curious', 'disconcerting', 'bizarre', incommensurable, heterogeneous. Com-passion as Being-with is "the disturbance of violent relatedness"(Being Singular Pluralxiii). The force of relation modalizes itself as regions of inscription, as the 'many'. There are configurations, ensembles, schemes, masses, tissues, complexes. But how do we know what a mode or grouping is without pitting a way of being-in-common AGAINST another grouping? Even if a mode as singular-plural is a multiplicity of differentiated singularities, even if it can only be thought sequentially and non-abstractively, particular relation after particular relation, is it not unified 'as a whole' via some property absent in an opposing mode? its internal heterogeneity then would be united by degrees of commonality (against that which the mode-as-a-whole differs by kind. Do we not find such named modes in Nancy's analyses: 'the West', 'philosophy', the 'universe', 'humanity', 'animals', 'stones', etc? The opposing of kind and degree is implicated in this thinking of meaning as being-between. Just as meaning is a distinguishing one from the other, so kind and degree are distinguished. Number retains a function as degree; magnitude as its own excessive measure, as Nancy says.

"..creation" is now understood as the act of Being which is without measure its own measure. Perhaps we can understand the universal constants of modern physics in this way, for example, the speed of light or quantum of energy. These do not measure themselves against other things, but, on the contrary, are the origin of all possible measure.(BSP182)"

"The epoch that appears to us as the epoch of very large numbers, the one we can describe as that of 'exponential Being', is in fact the epoch of Being which is exposed to and as its own immensity in the strictest sense; nothing measures it, and it is precisely that which measures the existence which engages it, and which it engages in the mode of a responsibility that is itself immense."

There would be magnitude as moral magnitude, "as an absolute which touches upon another propriety of Being(178)", exposition, exponentiality, responsibility, engagement. Number, figuration indicates not the surpassing of a norm but "an order, a register appropriate to engagement and responsibility, of which they are themselves a part.(BSP178)" "Thus, measure is the propriety of

Being to itself. It is its mode (its temperament, its rhythm, its own coherence, not its dimension(BSP180))."

As its own proper measure, the event has amount before it is also its effacement. This amount or magnitude is internal or intrinsic to the presence that effaces itself as the event of being-with, which means that the basis of the enumeration which gives each act of presenting its magnitude is effaced only after it has already been counted.

Is this 'measure beyond measure' a deconstruction of number? If we were to suggest that difference of degree and difference of kind were equivocal in a 'singular' instant of experience, what would this imply? It would imply not only that a figure of amount established no norm or standard against which other events could be measured (Nancy says, "In a certain way, all calls to "measure" are in vain, since there is no excess that can be determined with relation to a given measure, norm, scale, or mean (BSP180)."), but that the figure of numeration cannot justify itself as simple, absolute mode. Nancy makes the former point, but seems to leave unquestioned the assumed internal coherence of number. He says the "question is not how many people the Earth or the universe can support, but rather which people it can support, which existences.(180)" But a counting of 'how many' is already demanded by the making of distinctions between existences, to the extent that the question of 'which' turns on the modalization of humanity into (internally heterogeneous) groups distinguishable from each other.

Do multiplicities emerge within experience such that we can distinguish one group, ensemble 'as a whole' from the other, one variant of humanity from another, the human from the non-human? And on what basis are we to do this other than via the counting of a difference between internal degree and extrinsic kind, an opposing of the universal and the singular?

Nancy says "That which does not maintain its distance from the "between" is only immanence collapsed in on itself and deprived of meaning."(5,bsp).If measure is thought via the 'with' of comparison, then measure yields to a deconstruction whereby the distance between singulars is thought more rigorously as the distance of the singular in and as itself, the unitary as irreducibly two BEFORE there could be any notion of dispersion, plurality, contact, difference as a relating to, against, with a something that would act as singular.

One can construe the thinking of modalization and numeration in connection with what Derrida has examined under the guise of name, body, self, subject, figure, humanity. He writes "...the discourse on the subject, even if it locates difference, inadequation, the dehiscence within autoaffection, and so forth, continues to link subjectivity with man"(268). And "The origin of the call that comes from nowhere, an origin in any case that is not yet a divine or human "subject", institutes a responsibility that is to be found at the root of all ulterior responsibilities (moral, juridical, political), and of every categorical imperative. To say of this responsibility, and even of this friendship, that it is not "human", no more than it is "divine", does not come down to saying that it is simply inhuman...Something of this call of the other must remain nonreappropriable, nonsubjectivable, and in a certain way nonidentifiable, a sheer supposition, so as to remain other, a singular call to response or to responsibility. This is why the determination of the singular "Who"?-or at least its determination as subject-remains forever problematic"(PT276).

As if to illustrate this thinking of subjectivity, Nancy remarks: "The difference between

humanity and the rest of being (which is not a concern to be denied, but the nature of which is, nevertheless, not a given), while itself being inseparable from other differences within being (since man is "also" animal, "also" living, "also" physio-chemical), does not distinguish true existence from a sort of subexistence. Instead, this difference forms the concrete condition of singularity. We would not be "humans" if there were not "dogs" and "stones".

"...humanity is the exposing of the world; it is neither the end nor the ground of the world; the world is the exposure of humanity; it is neither the environment nor the representation of humanity"(BSP18).

Even when denying that he is giving exclusionary privilege to humanness (stones animals, humans would be the same in their heterogeneity), allowing for such calculatively singular modes as humanity and animality sets up the basis for subjectivity as univocal judgement, the ethics of belonging turned against not-belonging, interior-in-common against exterior difference. An animal can only be an animal on the basis of a common denominator which thinks it knows what is common in difference, from one to the next. The ethical as being-with appears and then disappears, justice wants what it wants, counts on it, in opposition to injustice. For Nancy justice is always "the need for justice" as "the objection to and protest against injustice(BSP189)". The just thought in this way opposes itself to the unjust, but it could not oppose the unjust without faith in 'need' (the need for justice) as the in-common (even as relative gathering of heteronymous dispersal of singularities). The ethical basis of need as preference depends on justice OVER AGAINST injustice. A deconstructive justice, instead, would not oppose itself to injustice but be of or as its other already, before ever being able to count a judgement, objection and protest.

This reflection on self-reflection discovers that its own glance is split into a double move both affirming and surpassing, stabilizing and destabilizing which is prior to, and deconstructs, disseminates, the identity of any sense which could be referred back to as itself and which could determine a multiplicity of other senses.

"To risk meaning nothing is to start to play, and first to enter into the play of difference which prevents any word, and concept, any major enumeration from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences"(Positions, p.14).

Before a meaning would gather itself as a formidable in-itself presence, it would be already divided and repeated.

Derrida says "The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be PRESENT in and of itself, referring only to itself. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. "p.26,P.) "...the subject is not present, nor above all present to itself before difference, that the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporalizing, in deferral..."p.29, P.)