

Trans-Religious Dancing Dialogues:  
Michel Henry on Dionysus and the Crucified

**ABSTRACT:**

Perhaps owing to frictions between his Christological worldview and the dominant secularism of contemporary French thought as taken up in the U.S., and persistent worries about a seeming solipsism in his phenomenology, Michel Henry's innovative contributions to aesthetics have received unfortunately little attention in English. The present investigation addresses both issues simultaneously with a new interpretation of his recently-translated 1996 interview, "Art and Phenomenology." Inspired by this special issue's theme, "French Thought in Dialogue," it emphasizes four levels of dialogue in the interview, as follows: (1) the interview as such, with Brohm; (2) its titular dialogue between art and phenomenology; (3) what I term a "trans-religious" dialogue between Christianity's Jesus and Nietzsche's Dionysus; and (4) a related dialogue between painting (Henry's favored genre) and dance that is "Dionysian" (in Nietzsche's sense). And it concludes with phenomenological accounts of literal and figurative dance, namely the social Latin dance called bachata, and an improvised musical dialogue with the mockingbirds of my hometown. In sum, Henry's engaging with various forms of dialogue, including with Brohm, the arts, paganism, and dance, suggests (contra his alleged solipsism) that one can find room in his transcendental subjectivity of Life for others, in dances transcending even humanity.

**KEYWORDS:** Michel Henry; dance; Dionysus; Jesus; phenomenology; art

I. Dialogues Deferred

Perhaps owing to the frictions between his Christological worldview and the dominant secularism of contemporary French thought as taken up in the U.S., Michel Henry's original and creative contributions to aesthetics have received unfortunately little attention, at least in English. For example, as Brian Harding noted in 2012, "The interest in the work of Michel Henry is largely confined to those working in and around the field of phenomenological theology, and readers who do not traffic in such matters may find themselves wondering about this sudden spark of interest in his work."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Simon Jarvis claims that "Henry's writings on art, on culture and on language have received much less attention than his arguments about auto-

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Harding, "Auto-Affectivity and Michel Henry's Material Phenomenology," *The Philosophy Forum* 43(1): 2012, 91-100, 91-92.

affection and auto-donation,” which are central to his phenomenology of Life.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the editors of the only anthology on Henry’s work in English acknowledge that “Future research will need to explore more deeply his contributions to aesthetics,” among other topics.<sup>3</sup>

The few treatments of Henry’s aesthetics in English thus far focus exclusively on painting.<sup>4</sup> On the surface, this seems justified, since Henry’s major book on art, *Seeing the Invisible*, is a monograph on Wassily Kandinsky. At a deeper level, however, this is arguably unfaithful to both thinkers because Kandinsky insists on the strict identity of all forms of art. In his words, “there is no difference at all between Painting—Poetry—Music—Dance—Architecture. All art.” Following his lead, my own previous investigation of Kandinsky draws heavily on, and puts his work in dialogue with, the narrative art of poetry, which in its more temporal (than spatial) orientation is better suited to his emphasis on inner subjectivity.<sup>5</sup>

In sympathy with this trans-artistic interpretation of Henry’s aesthetics, Jarvis’ “Michel Henry’s Concept of Life” marshals the poetry of Wordsworth to get to the heart of Henry’s thought, recognizing that the aesthetic—but not just painting—is foundational for Henry, and not just for his aesthetics. Jarvis also perfectly articulates the double-edged experience of reading Henry for the first time, in the following passage:

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Jarvis, “Michel Henry’s Concept of Life,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17(3): 2009, 361–375, 364.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Hanson, “Introduction,” *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought*, ed. Jeffrey Hanson and Michael R. Kelly (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 1-18, 15.

<sup>4</sup> See, for two examples, Peter Joseph Fritz, “Black Holes and Revelations: Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion on the Aesthetics of the Invisible,” *Modern Theology* 25(3): 2009, 415-440 (which appears, bizarrely, to be an allusion to the 2006 studio album of the same name by the indie rock band Muse); and Christina M. Gschwandtner, “Revealing the Invisible: Henry and Marion on Aesthetic Experience,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28(3): 2014, 305-314.

<sup>5</sup> See Joshua M. Hall, “Kandinsky’s Composition VI: Heideggerian Poetry in Noah’s Ark,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 46:2 (summer 2012), 74-88.

The central thought which the work elaborates over and over again has the force of a revelation. We are alive. We are alive before and irrespective of any world. Yet, over and over again, we mistakenly go out into the world to find life, a life which, however, there is no need for us to ‘find’, since it is, necessarily, just what we already are... For some readers, indeed, Henry’s thought can feel like an incarceration.<sup>6</sup>

Paraphrased in terms of my experience, on the one hand, I was filled with vitality, and felt my vitality answer the call of Henry’s evocation; but on the other hand, I also quickly felt suffocated, claustrophobic. Henry would likely describe the latter feeling as pathos, the almost unbearable weight of being a self, our own-most suffering of auto-affection.

Fortunately, I stumbled upon a way around this suffocating, incarcerating feeling that Jarvis describes. And true to the liberatory powers of Dionysus Lyseus, breaker of chains, whom Henry invokes repeatedly in “Art and Phenomenology,” this solution involves dance. I will recount this solution as a response to another of Jarvis’ poetic articulations of this conflicted experience of thinking with Henry. “I think, that is,” Jarvis reflects, “that wherever I read ‘life’, part of me also heard ‘light’.”<sup>7</sup> He then elaborates, as follows:

when it came to “life” I could not delete the echo of “light,” could not, that is, stop myself from thinking, not only of that Night with which Henry several times identifies life, but also of a hope which, for Henry’s thinking, would be a ruinous confusion: the hope that there might be life in the world, or, indeed, the hope that the world might itself be alive.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jarvis, “Michel Henry’s Concept of Life,” 362-363.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 370.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 370.

The indeed hopeful response I would like to interpolate here, on behalf of Henry and his other readers, is that “light” might also be read and experienced as “lightness,” the overcoming of gravity so dear to Nietzsche, and so highly valued in dance. Three major interpretive benefits of this substitution (of “lightness” for “light”) include its (1) being full compatibility with Henry’s insistence on the invisibility and darkness of Life (as “Night”), (2) explaining the close connection in Henry between Christianity and Nietzsche (and Jesus and Dionysus); and (3) resonating with Henry’s repeated insistence on the polarity (and vacillation) between his primary existential “tonalities” of suffering and joy (with suffering as heaviness, and joy as lightness).

This dancing interpretation of Henry’s Life is buttressed by Jean Racette’s early (1969) interpretation and defense of Henry, which notes that his phenomenology “does not mean that this *root* and *primordial* body is shut up within itself.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, “Our body knows this world with a permanent and connatural knowledge which is coeval with our very existence.” In support of this point, Racette quotes Henry’s claim that “because our interior life as subjectivity is a sphere of absolute certitude, what it is certain of is also itself absolutely certain.” This means “The world as a resistant term comes to us as irreducible, escaping any kind of reduction,” and our body “is sustained in intimate relation with the world and with itself.”<sup>10</sup>

Further support for my reinterpretation of Henry’s Life as dancing lightness is provided by Michael Tweed’s translation into English of “Art and Phenomenology,” in part because this text includes an explicit discussion and affirmation of dance. It is to this interview that the majority of the present investigation is devoted, with an emphasis on the four level of dialogue I identify there, and the descents from one the next. First, an interview á trois between Henry,

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Racette, “Michel Henry’s Philosophy of the Body,” *Philosophy Today* 13(2): 1969, 83-94, 88.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

Brohm, and Heidegger. Second a post-Heideggerian renewal of the dialogue between art and phenomenology. Third, a “trans-religious” dialogue between what Nietzsche calls Dionysus and the Crucified. And finally, the deepest level of dance that is “Dionysian” (in Nietzsche’s sense), elaborated through one literal and one figurative example thereof. To wit, the intimate partner dance from the Dominican Republic called bachata, and an improvised musical exchange between myself and the mockingbirds of my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. Altogether, then, Henry engages in an abundance of dance-like dialogues, including with literal dance, which both challenges those who would dismiss his thought as solipsistic, and also suggests new possibilities for dance that can loosen, like Dionysus, our anthropocentric bonds.<sup>11</sup>

## II. Dialogical Descents

At the most basic level, “Art and Phenomenology” is a literal dialogue, an interview named as being between Henry and Jean-Marie Brohm, contemporary French sociologist and leading proponent of the critical theory of sport. Brohm is also director of the journal where the interview first appeared, *Prétentaine* (meaning “pretentious”). Thus, the interview’s text is already situated, before it begins, in a locus of divided subject positions (between “higher” or pretentious culture and “lower” culture, and between the academy and sports), a dialogue which philosophy continues to struggle to sustain. An even more formidable challenge, however, presents itself with the interview’s first sentence, where Brohm quotes a philosopher who quickly becomes a third interlocutor, and thereby threatens to dominate it entirely.

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Henry, “Art and Phenomenology,” trans. Michael Tweed, [http://www.academia.edu/5595144/Art\\_and\\_the\\_Phenomenology\\_of\\_Life\\_an\\_Interview\\_with\\_Michel\\_Henry](http://www.academia.edu/5595144/Art_and_the_Phenomenology_of_Life_an_Interview_with_Michel_Henry), accessed 6 October 2021.

The quote, from Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art," is as follows: "Where does a work belong? The work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that it itself opens up by its presence. [...] Work-being thus means: to set up a world."<sup>12</sup> For those familiar with Henry's philosophy of art, this forcing of Heidegger into the conversation by Brohm appears as a salvo, for two reasons. First, for Henry (unlike Heidegger), the place of artwork is not in the world, much less the setting up of a world, but rather in the racial interiority of the auto-affectation of subjectivity. Second, for many readers the latter view is the most implausible and counterintuitive aspect of Henry's thought, especially regarding art, as testified by the few responses in the secondary literature in English. In sum, Brohm is challenging Henry where he is most vulnerable to their audience, the point where he is diametrically opposed by no less than Heidegger, and in one of his most enduringly popular texts.

That Henry is cognizant of this opening show of force by Brohm is suggested by how he begins his response, which constitute his own first words in the interview. "On the whole, I do not agree with Heidegger, in spite of the weight of his thought."<sup>13</sup> After this firm response, Henry then deftly pivots to a more general defense of his departure from Heidegger. It is Husserl, according to Henry, who had "Phenomenology's great realization," namely that "the world is in no way limited to the existing world and that basically there is the constant possibility for the installation of a new ontological dimension." More precisely, there are always "new fields" being opened up in reality, and "Art is one possibility among these fields." Henry then defines art as "an original region," as "something like an horizon in which this world is possible." He then completes his riposte by himself naming the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, specifically his

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, "L'Origine de l'oeuvre d'art" in *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992, 43-7.

<sup>13</sup> Henry, "Art and Phenomenology," 1.

account of temporality, which Henry describes evocatively as “a furrow of light on the screen upon which things become visible.”<sup>14</sup>

Undeterred by Henry’s answer to his opening question, Brohm stays with Heidegger, moving laterally to emphasize his “distinction between ‘thing,’ ‘product,’ and ‘artwork’.” As with the first question, this too might reasonably be expected to put Henry on the defensive, since things and products are not just less important for him than Heidegger, but almost irrelevant entirely, which is also a source of worry for both articles on his aesthetics in English.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, Henry manages, by the end of his answer to this second question, to steer Brohm away from Heidegger for the remainder of the interview. Perhaps significantly, this second answer begins with a foregrounding of what is arguably the primary weakness of Heidegger’s aesthetics, namely bodies in space, which has inspired many thinkers to move in a different direction than Heidegger.

This thematization of embodiment by Henry also marks the descent to the second dialogical level of interview, namely between a conception of art and a conception of phenomenology as both are articulated otherwise than Heidegger. That is, the interview arguably begins, despite its title, with what amounts to an implicit monologue by Heidegger (as ventriloquized by Brohm) on the relationship between art and phenomenology. Thus, it is only after distancing himself from Heidegger that Henry can renew the interview, treating phenomenology and art in something closer to their independent existence, toward Husserl’s “to the things themselves).

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1.

This fresh start requires, however (as so often happens when challenging an authoritative figure), the invocation of an even older, more authoritative figure. Citing Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Henry writes that "I could never thematically perceive a body if I did not understand, in relation to the bodies and to all being, the role that space plays in relation to the material body in ordinary perception."<sup>16</sup> This does not mean, however, that "the work of art installs the radical world," nor that "there is a specific aesthetic dimension, different from real perception."<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, Henry claims that for most of art's history it was not a separate domain dedicated to beauty, but rather an integral part of the community and functioned "to make a cult to the divinity possible."<sup>18</sup>

This invocation of cult and divinity sets the stage for Henry's introduction, on the next page, of Dionysus, the Greek god of dance who is closely associated with his signature cult. But first, Henry summarizes his unique approach to phenomenology, which concerns "what I call Life, in other words a revelation that is not the revelation of some other thing, which does not open us to an exteriority, but which opens us to itself" (3). The word "revelation" here already hints that we are walking deeper into religious territory. Before taking the final leap, however, Henry pauses, and makes a broad gesture of inclusion of the otherwise than religious. This gesture, and others like it that I will relate below, is what inspired what I am calling the "trans-religious" in Henry, and what makes his work worthwhile for a broader audience.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 2.



Suggesting what he calls “a simple example,” Henry writes that “there is a pathos, a pathetic dimension that is life, which consists simply of the fact of experiencing oneself.”<sup>19</sup> This simplicity, though, almost immediately leads to complexity. “But to experience oneself,” Henry qualifies, “is something absolutely radical, abyssal, because it only happens in suffering and in joy.”<sup>20</sup> Then, with his next sentence, Henry takes us back into the heart of religion, but that heart is stranger and more wondrous than the reader might expect. This remarkable passage merits quoting at length.

To give clear references, god is not—to speak Greek, since these days we speak Greek more than Christian—only Apollo, who is basically the god of light, the god of images, of luminous forms. God is first Dionysus. Yet, Dionysus is not of the world. This is a god of desire or of life crushed against itself, in its joy and suffering. And this is a god who is burdened with self in a pathos so heavy that in effect he wants to relieve himself of his self. At bottom, Dionysus is the one who creates Apollo in order to distance himself from his self.<sup>21</sup>

Henry is channeling Nietzsche’s claim, from *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, that Dionysus is older than Apollo, the night to his day, creating the greatest beauty when Apollo dies back into him at twilight. This seems blasphemous, from the standpoint not only of Henry’s Christianity but also of traditional Classics, in which Dionysus is viewed as a latecomer god foreign to the Greeks, controversial in part for a complex and dynamic gender identity and performance (read as “effeminacy”) attributed to his purported Asian origins.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 3.

Happily, Walter Otto and a line of scholars influenced by him have worked to dispel this illusion, recovering a more comprehensive account of Dionysus.<sup>22</sup> As I have related in two previous essays, these scholars emphasize the Dionysian cult's association with democracy and revolution, earning it active persecution and oppression from an historical series of patriarchal tyrannies.<sup>23</sup> Whereas Nietzsche hides Dionysus' androgyny, and his advocacy for women, queer people, the poor, foreigners, the city, democracy, and peace, Otto refuses to suppress Dionysus' femininity and affirms the intersection of his heroic violence and proto-feminism.

Elaborating on the political dimension of Dionysus' cult, Alain Daniélou claims that monotheistic religions have historically accused his worshippers "of teaching the secrets of wisdom to the humble, and of being accompanied by bands of youthful delinquents who mock the institutions of society and the rule of old men."<sup>24</sup> Additionally, since "persecution of sexuality is a characteristic technique of all patriarchal, political or religious tyrannies," according to Daniélou, at each historical reappearance, Dionysus' cult "has been banished from the city."<sup>25</sup> No matter how severe the repression, however, Daniélou insists that this cult "remains essentially a religion of the people."<sup>26</sup> Three concrete historical examples of this

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<sup>22</sup> See Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, translated by Robert B. Palmer. Indiana University Press, 1965.; Alain Daniélou, *God of Love and Ecstasy: The Traditions of Shiva and Dionysus*, reprint edition. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1992; and Arthur Evans, *The God of Ecstasy: Sex Roles and the Madness of Dionysus*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988.

<sup>23</sup> See Joshua M. Hall, "Dionysus Lyseus Reborn: The Revolutionary Philosophy Chorus," in *Philosophy Today* 66(1): 2022 (forthcoming); and "Newton Contra Alt-Right Nietzsche: Dionysus as Androgynous Black Panther," *The Pluralist* 15(2): 110-128.

<sup>24</sup> Daniélou, *God of Love and Ecstasy*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

defiance and oppression are documented by Dionysus scholar Richard Seaford.<sup>27</sup> First, the “courtesan Phryne was prosecuted for forming thiasoi of men and women and introducing a new god called *Isodaites*, a name which means something like ‘Equal divider in the feast’ and *reappears* much later as a title of Dionysus.”<sup>28</sup> Second, during the Anthesteria (the annual festival of spring renewal), “not even slaves or children were excluded from the wine-drinking,” and “prisoners were released from goal.”<sup>29</sup> And finally, another major Dionysus festival “contained the proclamation – probably throughout the fifth century – of a reward for killing tyrants.”<sup>30</sup> In this light, it is unsurprising that the truth of Dionysus has been suppressed.

Although this emphasis on the sociopolitical might seem foreign to Henry’s phenomenology, Raphaël Gély persuasively argues that, “In the same way that life, according to Henry, needs art to increase the experience that it has of itself,” one could also “say that individuals must engage themselves in collective actions to increase their radically singular experience of life.”<sup>31</sup> More specifically, Gély concludes, “collective action permits individuals to experience and to intensify what founds the radical singularity of each, namely, the original inventiveness of life.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, an inherent connection between the phenomenology of Life and the sociopolitical is at least not ruled out from the beginning.

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<sup>27</sup> See Richard Seaford, “Dionysus as Destroyer of the Household: Homer, Tragedy, and the Polis.” In *Masks of Dionysus*, edited by Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone. Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1993, 115-146.

<sup>28</sup> Seaford, “Dionysus as Destroyer of the Household,” 36.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 18, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>31</sup> Raphaël Gély, “Toward a Radical Phenomenology of Social Life: Reflections from the Work of Michel Henry,” *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought*, ed. Jeffrey Hanson and Michael R. Kelly (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 154-177, 154.

<sup>32</sup> Gély, “Toward a Radical Phenomenology of Social Life,” 175.

As for Henry's discussion of Dionysus in "Art and Phenomenology," its connection to Otto and his followers is complicated. On the one hand, Henry does not reference that line of scholarship, his analysis is ethical rather than political, and he does not affirm the interpretation of Jesus as god of a democratic revolutionary cult. On the other hand, Henry's identification of Dionysus with Apollo echoes Otto's observation that the two might have originally been the same god (as suggested, for example, by the fact that Dionysus occupied Apollo's temple for a certain period of each year). Moreover, Henry's interpretation of Dionysus as prefiguring Jesus is supported by Otto's reference to an ancient Christian legend that Dionysus (qua Pan) "had died on the very day when Christ had mounted the cross."<sup>33</sup> Finally in support of this Henry-Otto resonance, Henry's description of Jesus/Dionysus as "burdened with self" resonates with Otto's insistence that Dionysus is the quintessential suffering god. For example, Dionysus is torn apart and eaten by the Titans, which Otto suggests is ritually reenacted by the maenads, just as Jesus is ritually torn apart and consumed by Christians in the eucharist.<sup>34</sup>

On this jointly Christian/Dionysian ground, Henry then proposes "another explanation of art as a distancing of what first supports oneself, but as an unbearable burden," namely the burden of the suffering of existence.<sup>35</sup> In the example of Nietzsche's philosophy, Henry elaborates, one encounters "this idea that art creates, in this distancing, a kind of luminosity, of figures in which and due to which Dionysus escapes his suffering."<sup>36</sup> Though Henry presents Jesus and Dionysus here as interchangeable, and increasingly moved toward Christianity in his life, I find a major advantage in his Nietzschean refiguring of the point.

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<sup>33</sup> Otto, *Dionysus*, x.

<sup>34</sup> Henry, "Art and Phenomenology," 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

To wit, there are two dominant mythological accounts of Dionysus' parentage, one that makes his origin that of a mere demigod, and another that makes him fully divine from birth. In both versions, Dionysus' father is Zeus, the king of the gods, but in one version his mother is the goddess Persephone, while in the other his mother is a mortal woman, named Semele. According to orthodox Christianity, by contrast, Jesus is both fully god and fully mortal (despite having unquestionably a mortal mother). In other words, unlike the fully divine Jesus, Dionysus is much closer to human beings on the great ladder of Being, and arguably infinitely so, since becoming a demigod is much easier than becoming a god. It is on this metaphysical ladder, but moving in the opposite direction, sliding down it like firefighter's pole, that I locate a descent to the third dialogical level of the interview.

It is also at this point, with Nietzsche, that I find inspiration for using the word "descent" to describe the dialogical levels of the interview. To wit, descent is intended to suggest *Zarathustra's* phrase of "going under," and thereby Dewey's "undergoing," and thereby also Henry's "suffering." Telescoping these ideas, I suggest that Dionysian joy is the perishing of regular human selfhood through fully undergoing the suffering of existence. The result of this third dialogical descent, or going-under, is what I am calling "trans-religiosity." By this phrase, I mean a movement between religions and/or beyond religion entirely.

One example of the trans-religious in "Art and Phenomenology" would be Henry's movement from Christianity to Greek paganism, or from monotheism to polytheism. Another would be his movement from one charismatic and politically transformative cult to another, both worshipping mortal-mothered man-gods, ritually consumed by their followers, who channel that power into the creation of democratic communities that revolt against patriarchal tyranny. Or, in a final example, there is the movement from Henry's Christianity to the nonreligious positions of

those who, like Nietzsche, are better symbolized by Dionysus, suffering and joyful, blissfully lost in the intoxication of life's dance.

As already suggested by these three examples of trans-religiosity, what I find helpful about Henry's trans-religious dialogue is that, rather than setting Jesus and Dionysus against each other, as did Nietzsche (encapsulated in the closing line of his *Ecce Homo*: "Have I been understood?—Dionysos against the Crucified"), Henry offers an "inclusive or." From Jesus to Dionysus, Christian to pagan, religion to irreligion, one can move freely among these positions, linger at the halfway point, or even stretch oneself to occupy both poles simultaneously. Moreover, this movement is suggested and sustained by Henry himself, in another gesture that makes his philosophy worth considering.

On this note of openness to the otherwise-than-religious, Henry then shifts back to the realm of the philosophical, identifying "the fundamental question" of "phenomenology of life" as "that of the transcendental Self."<sup>37</sup> In his view, "all perception, all imagination, all conceptual thought is a hetero-affection," meaning "an affection by an alterity, by this milieu of alterity where anything other can show itself to me, give itself to me as originally other," for "there is no Ego to which it gives itself." Compared to this relatively superficial level, for Henry, instead "to be an Ego" means being a Self that is "unable to separate itself from itself, unable to escape the burden of being." Henry terms the "pathetic dimension" of existence, "of which Dionysus is an image but in which Christianity also unfolds."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 3.

It is in this context, Henry suggests to Brohm, that “another theory of the work of art” is possible, which he finds in Kandinsky.<sup>39</sup> Fleshing out this theory, Henry posits “a ‘duplicity of appearing:’ a way of giving oneself in a hetero-affection, as all that we see, and a pathetic way, what we never see.”<sup>40</sup> In the latter form, “there is no distance, revelation occurs solely in the flesh of affectivity,” and therefore “this dimension of life is invisible.”<sup>41</sup> One can imagine how difficult and counterintuitive it would be to apply this emphasis on invisibility to painting, which is usually assumed to be the most vision-centric art. More concretely, this notion of flesh, as Renaud Barbaras rightly insists, pushes Henry’s phenomenology in the direction of bodily movement and engagement with the world. And this push, I add, suggests an advantage from the interview’s later pivoting to the art of dance—thank to prompting of Henry’s embodiment-conscious interviewer, the critical philosopher of sport.<sup>42</sup>

Also better expressed via dance is Henry’s subsequent analysis of form in art, wherein he argues that “form is not actually a kind of exterior entity, but the expression of a force.”<sup>43</sup> For this reason, Henry continues, “the theory of forms, which refers to forces, refers at the same time to subjectivity, because the forces inhabit our body, our lived body, our subjective body that is our actual body,” which is quite simply “made of forces.” As if sensing that dance might be more promising here than painting, on this same page Henry then moves even closer to dance by way

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Renaud Barbaras, “The Essence of Life: Drive or Desire?” trans. Darian Meacham, in *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought*, ed. Jeffrey Hanson and Michael R. Kelly (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 40-61.

<sup>43</sup> Henry, “Art and Phenomenology,” 6.

of its sister temporal art of music. “The purpose of painting is to express life,” Henry writes, “as does music.”<sup>44</sup> His elaboration of this point could easily have been written about dance.

The body first presents itself to us in the world and it is immediately interpreted as an object of the world, something that is visible, that I can see, touch, feel. However this is only the apparent body. The real body is the living body, the body in which I am found, that I never see and which is a bundle of powers—such as: I can, I grasp with my hand, etc.—and I develop this power not from the world but from inside. This reality is metaphysically fascinating since I have two bodies: one visible, another invisible. The inner body that I am and which is my true body is the living body, and it is with this body that I walk in truth, that I grasp, embrace, and am with others.<sup>45</sup>

In summary, there is for Henry a true, living, invisible body, a body of powers developed from inside, whereby I “am with others.” Thus, contra Heidegger’s de-temporalized substantive phrase “being-with,” Henry conjugates being’s verb, putting it in the first person present. I am, not alone, but with others (the solipsistic isolation feared by Henry’s critics notwithstanding). Finally from this passage, the phrase “walk in truth” recalls Henry’s startling definition of dance, from *Barbarism*, namely “an ethical form of walking and an expression of bodily mastery.”<sup>46</sup> I therefore mark this moment in the interview as the descent to its final dialogical level.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Continuum, 2012), 126.



### III. Deepest Dances-with Henry

Henry's definition of dance in *Barbarism* is offered suddenly and almost offhandedly, with virtually no further discussion or elaboration. It occurs in the last few pages of the book, in a discussion of his claim that culture, as "the self-fulfillment of life," is therefore "essentially practical."<sup>47</sup> Culture is also, Henry continues, "co-extensive" with ethics, because "every living act, including the theoretical, is a practical act, a mode of ethos," and therefore is "derived from an axiological appreciation."<sup>48</sup> It is the subsequent sentence that contains his definition of dance. Thus, dance serves as the first, privileged example of how, at least in cultures before the barbarism of the contemporary West, there was no distinction between ethics and aesthetics. To dance was the right thing to do, locus and opportunity for virtuous movement.

Bringing this back to "Art and Phenomenology," there is an art of subjectivity, of the suffering of affectivity, and it manifests in part in how closely one's movements approach dance. Henry's next paragraph in the interview only deepens this resonance with dance, by turning from the question of inner impulsions or drives (how I feel my body as the power to move) to the question of desire. Perhaps this shift was inspired by Racette, who in 1969 called for Henry to make it. Desire, according to Racette, is "fundamental," which "is why it is necessary to substitute Henry's phenomenology of drive with a phenomenology of desire."<sup>49</sup> Twenty-seven years after this exhortation, Henry articulates his own phenomenology of desire as follows:

It is this invisible body that is moreover the source of desire: in the presence of another's body, I perceive a visible body, but I sense a subjectivity and that is what I want to touch.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>49</sup> Racette, "Michel Henry's Philosophy of the Body," 59.

In a theory of eroticism one could demonstrate that actually desire—and this is why it begins again and again—strives to touch something that I cannot in the world, but that touches itself beyond the world and which is life, the invisible life of who or what I desire. In fact, all the gestures of desire are, in some way, symbolic acts in which I attempt to reach the place where I coincide for example with another's pleasure.<sup>50</sup>

This language of gestures and symbolic acts brings Henry's eroticism even closer to dance, which is itself a nonverbal language of symbolic gestures, shaped by and shaping the erotic. To dance with the other, at least in the most flourishing ways, is not to dance with an objectified body, fetishizing the partner's body as a thing to paw or grope, but rather to desire the other's desire, to attenuate to another's subjectivity, the life within swaying with the other's life. And the phrase "coincide with another's pleasure," especially, with its etymological suggestion of into dance together, beautifully describes the experience of a welcomed intimate partner dance, such as the Latin social dance known as bachata, which I have explored in similar terms elsewhere.<sup>51</sup>

Responding to this description, Henry's interview partner raises the question of his theory of the subject. Claiming inspiration from Kandinsky, Henry frames his answer in terms of painting when understood as "a mediation between beings."<sup>52</sup> More precisely,

the one looking at a form experiences the same pathos as the one who conceived it, to the degree in which the form can only be read by reactivation—in a kind of pathetic, or in the

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<sup>50</sup> Henry, "Art and Phenomenology," 6.

<sup>51</sup> See Joshua M. Hall, "Consensuality," *The Philosophers' Magazine* 82: 2018, 32-38.

<sup>52</sup> Henry, "Art and Phenomenology," 7.

least imaginary symbiosis—of forces that are within us, which are identically the forces of the living body of the creator or spectator.<sup>53</sup>

The forces within self and other, for Henry, are identical. The experience of this truth in dance is necessarily both more complex and nuanced, yet also immediate. Put in the first person, if I am a bachata dancer looking at the dance form that my partner and I are in the process of creating, in part through my look and the way it consciously and unconsciously shapes my evolving moves, then in that look I also experience the pathos of my partner, if I am mindfully attuned to them, and am reactivated by the inner forces that are cocreating our partnering moves.

That is, I am not a passive spectator of my partner's art, not processing later what they created at an earlier date. Rather, we are cocreators of the dance artwork, and our processing is inherent to the work as it unfolds in a potentially joyfully revelatory present. Thus, like painting's spectator, each dance partner "becomes the contemporary of forces," in the sense, as noted by Henry, that Kierkegaard writes of becoming a contemporary of Jesus, and as Nietzsche might have written of becoming a contemporary of Dionysus. In all cases, this means, in Henry's words, "to repeat in an inner repetition, in the re-actualization of what was previously actualized."<sup>54</sup> In dance, in sum, the here and now artists become contemporaries of a shared living present.

In response to Brohm's next prompting question, as to whether art therefore involves "an ethics of the community or intersubjectivity," Henry responds with a ringing affirmation.<sup>55</sup> We "are not," he observes, "the ones who bear us into this life," and "our life is a kind of history not

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 7.

separated from itself,” “in which there is only a single living present.”<sup>56</sup> In short, as is vividly true in dance, “We are constantly with ourselves.”<sup>57</sup> Or, in Henry’s even more dance-resonant paraphrase of this point, “The living self is actually a kind of self-movement, a self-transformation, like a rolling ball that never parts from itself.”<sup>58</sup> Or like the enwound sphere of bachata partners’ torsos and limbs, rolling in a spin around their temporarily shared axis, life rippling outward from hearts close to centrifugal joy.

Given the idea, which Henry (inaccurately) attributes uniquely to Christianity, that “man is the son of God,” a human being therefore “is a living being generated in life.”<sup>59</sup> Perhaps sensing this inaccuracy, in another moment of admirable self-correction, Henry immediately qualifies this point. “This could also be put otherwise,” he allows, “—namely in a Nietzschean manner—and claim that this life constantly tends to expand (*s’accroître*).”<sup>60</sup> That is, the human being is a child of Life, which means that we attempt to expand life’s power, as for example in the artistic creation of dance.

What distinguishes the artwork, for Henry, is that “there is a kind of awakening (*mise en éveil*) of my subjectivity”—etymologically, a placing into wakefulness or arousal, both senses of which are reflect in intimate dance—“because the forms, colours and graphic elements arouse within me those forces that they are the expression of.”<sup>61</sup> That is, arts’ forms express those of Life, and therefore naturally stir living forms through a sympathetic response to them, or a

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 8.

transfer and amplification of shared force. More precisely, art takes what Henry calls “the weak tonalities” in the environment, and “will completely actualize those tonalities and give them a much greater dynamic emotional intensity.” “There is then,” he concludes, “through the mediation of the artwork, a kind of intensification of life.” For this reason, and getting back to Brohm’s prompting query, “The creator is thus someone who creates an ethical work, if it is true that ethics consists in living our bond to life in a more and more intense manner.”<sup>62</sup> Recall, on this note, *Barbarism*’s definition of dance as “ethical walking” and “bodily mastery.”

Henry then connects art’s ethical bonding to that of religion (whose etymological basis is *ligare*, “to bind”). As on the two previous instances in the interview, however, Henry immediately qualifies this religious gesture with a trans-religious one. In this case, he notes that this ethical bonding “is Christian, but it could also perhaps be Nietzschean—the living being, instead of falling back into its limited restricted condition, senses the life within it, in a kind of experience” that Henry is tempted to call “mysticism,” before settling instead on the phrase “a radical intensification of life.”<sup>63</sup> Dance too often approaches or joins with mysticism, and whether religious or not, is certainly a radical intensification of life.

Dance also manifests the truth of Henry’s elaboration of this point. “To the degree that someone is attached only to material things and their demands,” he writes, “they are continuously distracted from their true bond,” but fortunately, as for example with dance, “they can revive it, not by an intellectual reflection, but most likely in pure pathetic experiences.”<sup>64</sup> That is, in literally feeling each other in dance, we can revive our ethical bonds. In Henry’s

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 9.

superlative expression, “To the degree that art awakens in us the affective and dynamic powers of a life that is both itself and more than itself, it is the ethics par excellence.” Henry justifies this latter strong claim with the follow-up observation that “aesthetics is a kind of religion in the sense that the fundamental bond, constitutive of all transcendental living, with absolute life—there is no other life than transcendental life.”<sup>65</sup> This sounds, again, very much like the cult of Dionysus and his dancers.

Later in the interview, in a discussion that appears to provoke Brohm’s subsequent explicit naming of dance therein, Henry affirms the philosophy of the body of Maine de Biran. “The body is a movement,” Henry writes, “but this movement moves some thing,” thus summarizing de Biran in a way that applies perfectly to dance, wherein the body is a movement that moves the dancer. “Now, first the power that grasps or moves must possess itself. And it possesses itself impressionally, in other words I am an ‘I can’ and this ‘I can’ is given to itself affectively.”<sup>66</sup> Put in terms that are as dance-resonant as those Henry himself deploys shortly thereafter, “I can dance, therefore I am.”

In support of this application, dance also perfectly exemplifies Henry’s elaboration of de Miran, regarding how “movement auto-affects itself,” and “is one with itself, in this immediate experience that it creates from itself.”<sup>67</sup> That is, dancing auto-affects the dance, which is one with itself, and immediately creates itself from itself, especially in improvised partner dance such as bachata. The latter too, as Henry claims of the soul acting on the body “is a continual bit of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 13.

magic.”<sup>68</sup> This connection is even strong since, as Racette notes, Henry elsewhere tentatively identifies the soul with “the root-body” or primordial body, which (by substitution) means the body’s action on the body is magical, a truth with no more powerful testament than dance.<sup>69</sup>

On this note of soul as root-body, dance also reveals an additional layer to Henry’s subsequent claim that “There are two bodies just as there are two selves (*deux moi*): a transcendental Self (*un Moi transcendental*) that perceives itself in the world in the form of an empirical self (*moi empirique*).”<sup>70</sup> In the case of improvisational partner dance such as bachata, this would mean that there are in truth four bodies and—not four, but three—selves. Namely, there is my body, my partner’s body, and the transcendental Self that each of us always already is, and which from that Self’s two vantage points (i.e., our two empirical selves) perceives itself in its ongoing dance. This dancing interpretation also provides further evidence against criticisms of Henry’s phenomenology of Life as necessarily solipsistic.

It is right after Henry makes these bodies and selves distinctions that Brohm, explicitly raises the question of dance. “*You have evoked movement, effort, and the pure form of movement,*” he begins, but “*What about dance and the voice?*”<sup>71</sup> Disappointingly, Henry’s answer to the dance portion of this question is the shortest one in the entire 14-page long interview. I can therefore easily quote it in full.

Kandinsky has shown that dance does not have to be mimetic. Dance is not figurative, it doesn’t represent anything, it deals with the body’s actual movements, its potentialities.

What it expresses are the body’s motor capacities, the powers within it as I originally live

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Racette, “Michel Henry’s Philosophy of the Body,” 91.

<sup>70</sup> Henry, “Art and Phenomenology,” 13.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 13.

them; whence the idea of an abstract dance in Kandinsky's writings. Dance does not tell a story, it reveals powers by offering them to be felt by the spectator in her own body. Just as the painting's forms cause me to feel the forces that inhabit me, with which I am mingled.<sup>72</sup>

Most impressive here is Henry's early anticipation of Susan Leigh Foster's pioneering work on what she calls "kinesthetic empathy" in dance, wherein the spectator feels the dance in their own body (and which has been supported by neuroscientific research on motor neurons, which fire when a behavior is merely observed rather than engaged in oneself).<sup>73</sup> Though Henry is of course mistaken regarding the existence and importance of explicitly mimetic dances (such as those observed in Indigenous South American communities by Rodolfo Kusch), and of figurative dance (including the contemporary philosophy of dance called "figuration"), I am less concerned here with Henry's strengths and weaknesses as a philosopher of dance than with dance's power to revitalize interpretations of his philosophy.<sup>74</sup>

Finally from the interview, in Henry's answer to the "voice" portion of Brohm's question, he claims that "It's the same for the voice," affirming Biran's concept of "phonation" (comparable to the vision of a painting). This provides additional support for my interpretation, in the concluding section below, of my musical duet with the mockingbirds as a figurative dance. More generally, Henry also affirms that "Kandinsky's theory of painting is valid for all the arts," which "is what allows the arts to be able to communicate among themselves and that there can

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>74</sup> See Rodolfo Kusch, *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América*, trans. María Lugones and Joshua M. Price (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 36-37.



be a global art, what he calls a ‘monumental art,’ namely an art that would no longer be only painting, sculpture, dance or decoration.”<sup>75</sup> Since, in Henry’s view, “One can employ different arts to the same effect, make them express the same pathos,” there is “thus a kind of subjective, absolutely fantastic, unity of objective elements.”<sup>76</sup> As Nietzsche might say, and Dionysus shows in dance, there is kind of unified art of life.

#### IV. Evolutionary Dialogues: Ancestors and Mockingbirds

By way of conclusion, I wish to offer a new phenomenological account of one literal dance, and one figurative (or discursive) dance, to further buttress my claim that Henry’s phenomenology of Life need not imprison us in a dark night of the solipsistic soul. The first, literal dance phenomenology is inspired by neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux’s new book, *The Deep History of Ourselves: The Four-Billion Year Story of How We Got Conscious Brains*.<sup>77</sup> Though I disagree with his conclusion that emotions are exclusively conscious (and instantiated only by the specific complexity of the human brain), and that other species are therefore not conscious or feeling-beings, I was filled with wonder at the earlier episodes in his narrative, which emphasize the behavioral continuity between humans and billions-year-old single-cell organisms such as bacteria.

In brief, everything from bacteria to humans can perceive things in the environment that are beneficial (such as food) and dangerous (such as toxic chemicals), and can all move selectively (in what is called “taxic movements”) toward and away from these stimuli. If one

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph LeDoux, *The Deep History of Ourselves: The Four-Billion Year Story of How We Got Conscious Brains* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

pictures these early unicellular organisms, many of which have a single tail (technically, a flagellum), then a new vista suddenly arises, with a marked continuity between bacteria to sponge larva to tadpoles to human sperm—tiny entities swimming intelligently from destruction and toward flourishing (one is tempted, contra LeDoux, to say from figurative suffering to joy). Thinking this together with Henry’s phenomenology of Life, and of its vacillations between suffering and joy, as well as the Dionysian experience of losing oneself on the dance floor, I offer the following figure or representation:

individual ↔ human ↔ dancer ↔ animal ↔ being ↔ nothingness

To flesh out this figure, in the Dionysian experience of dance, for example in the intimate, improvisational partner dance of bachata, I experience my subjectivity or inner experience as sliding up and down a spectrum of identities, or qualitative states of selfhood, from feeling like Joshua the singular individual, to feeling like just a human being in general with my human partner, to feeling like a dancer among all the dancers on the floor (which, as I have explored elsewhere, transcends evolutionarily the imagined hard line between human and nonhuman species), to feeling our pure shared ecstasy of being itself (as captured unforgettably in Kundera’s famous novel), to something like nothingness or emptiness, a zero-degree of separate conscious awareness that is not at all negative or unpleasant, but rather a blissful lack of feeling despite remaining fully alive (comparable, perhaps to higher states of meditation or prayer).

This movement of dissolving/resolving self or experience, across the qualitative phases of the spectrum, from the present to the billions-year past of the lives from which we all descend, is one way of thinking about Henry’s Life, whose advantages include an emphasis on Life’s non-egoism, non-anthropocentrism, and even a kind of metaphysical agnosticism or indifference to

being per se. Put in terms of my “dancing-with” method of interpretation, it is a dancing-with one’s evolutionary ancestors, with that which we were and are before and beyond our humanity.

Turning to the figurative dance phenomenology, and by way of conclusion, I was inspired during a recent daily walk, punctuated in spring with birdsong, to connect to my reading of Henry an experience that I have never committed to paper. Years ago, during these same cherished walks in my hometown of Birmingham, which (for all its horrendous injustices) is in many neighborhoods beautifully green and richly forested, I was inspired to compose a little musical phrase (thinking perhaps of Proust’s *la petite phrase de Vinteuil*, as well as Kant’s famous remark about artificial birdsong), and to sing it in the presence of the city’s ubiquitous mockingbirds (the official state bird, at various times, for four other southern U.S. states).

Along with the mockingbird’s pervasive presence, and of course its titular representation in Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (which helped shape my own social justice activism), its Latin name, *mimus polyglottos* (“many-tongued mimic”) suggests another reason why I have long felt it to be my closet, most familiar fellow animal. To wit, especially as a poet, I have also experienced myself as a mimic, one who takes the words and sounds from others and the environment and improvises on them, trying to help beautify my little corner of the world, and partially fill the oft-lonely nights with humble figurative music.

Put plainly, I wanted to see if I could compose a simple phrase that the mockingbirds would be able to learn, as determined by their singing it back to me. For weeks, every day whenever I saw a mockingbird, or passed a wooded area, or an area where I remembered having seen them before, I would whistle my little tune. It consists of six notes, in two groups of three, each beginning with a lower note, followed a note almost an octave higher, and completed with a note almost back down to the first, and a long trill on the sixth and final note of the phrase. I

could easily jot the intervals down on sheet music, but for some reason I am reluctant to do so, preferring perhaps to let them fly.

To my joyful delight, not only did mockingbirds in multiple neighborhoods quickly learn the phrase and repeat it to me, but each mockingbird (still) performs the phrase in its own unique way, such that the sounds vary pleasantly and intriguingly from one area to the next. Whether this is a matter of imperfect imitation, or deliberate craft, I do not know. What is clear, and the most surprising result of this experiment for me (perhaps due to my merely informal knowledge of the species) is that they frequently begin singing my tune before I make a sound. This began not long after I started, and it continues to this day, whenever I am in my hometown, between peregrinations for one academic job after another across the country. Presumably, the birds are somehow prompted to remember the phrase merely by the sight of me. And each time they do, I feel far less alone, not only in this world, but in our cosmos.

Put in Henry's terms, but with an expanded scope of living reference, the mockingbirds and I share, not merely a beautiful home, but a Life, a subjectivity that is not merely humanly (or rationally) Transcendental, but transcends two species whose most recent common ancestor lived roughly 320,000,000 years ago. As G ely puts it, in his chapter on collective action in Henry, "In acting together, individuals share a single power to be a living self."<sup>78</sup> More generally, he continues, "Henry's fundamental thesis is that individuals' power to engage themselves deeply in common projects rests on their experience of belonging in solidarity to a single life-force."<sup>79</sup> This subjectivity, this Life that transcends me, which cuts across religions, and is shared by even such distant living relatives, is what empowers the figurative dance of a shared musical

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<sup>78</sup> G ely "Toward a Radical Phenomenology of Social Life," 158.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 162.

performance between the mockingbirds and myself. “It is a question then,” in Géry’s apt expression, “of individuals’ solidarity in life’s desire to be experienced, to enjoy its very power to be life.”<sup>80</sup> This is not far, again, from Nietzsche and Dionysus. And so far am I from radical solitude (and so far, perhaps, Henry’s Self as well) that we can all still learn to hear the dialogue all around us, stretching back from before we were human, and to what we may yet be.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 163.