

The Body of Sense, the Sense of Body.

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All our semiologies, all our mimologies, all our aesthetics
tend toward this absolute body, toward this oversignifying body,
*a body of sense in the sense of a body.*¹

Corpus: all bodies, each outside the others,
make up the inorganic body of sense.²

1. Body and Meaning

In our world, there have been different traditions of the 'body,' which may be based on religions, old or new, or on national cultures. Thus, we may speak of a 'Greek body,' an 'African body,' a 'Chinese body,' an 'Indian body,' an 'Arab body,' a 'Persian body,' a 'Japanese body' or an 'Aboriginal body,' and so on. One may also speak of a 'Christian body,' a 'Buddhist body,' an 'Islamic body,' a 'Jewish body,' a 'Hindu body,' a 'Zoroastrian body,' an 'Animist body,' etc. These various traditions evidently imply different beliefs, attitudes towards, practices involving and treatments of the living or the dead body. These, in turn, may involve personal or social questions of health, hygiene, sacredness, etc., with regard to the body. How one treats one's own body, the other's body, and other living or dead bodies, are often more or less codified in the traditions. This means that bodies are already marked more often

¹ NANCY (2008: pag. 73)

² NANCY (1997b: pag. 62-63)

than not by a strong cultural meaning. And conversely, meaning itself may or may not be seen as an attribute or extension of the body. For instance, the meaning element may be construed as akin to a seed – implying a certain fertile power of its dissemination, as the word ‘*sēmeîon*’ in the Greek tradition seems to suggest – or, its occurrence may be viewed as akin to the physical ‘bursting forth,’ ‘sprouting,’ or a ‘spurting’ (of blood or semen) as the term ‘*sphoṭa*’ in the Indian linguistic tradition may be interpreted.³

In recent history, there have been several attempts to provide a bodily understanding of mind and meaning. Many of these tendencies are broadly referred to as perspectives on ‘embodiment’ of mind and meaning. Several sections of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) centrally deal with this problem. Philosophical works which are broadly part of the contemporary philosophy of mind and Cognitive Science, have relied on Merleau-Ponty’s perspective of ‘embodiment.’ The works by Francesco Varela et al. (1991) and by Mark Johnson (1987) are seminal in this respect. Taking another trajectory, and following the ideas of the Stoic philosophers, Gilles Deleuze has also suggested a corporeally relevant perspective on meaning, as per which sentences often express, ‘incorporeal transformations’ which exists at the plane of content, but which are attributed to the bodies. Every sentence, thus, even if is in the form of a statement, is a speech act, having an effect on human bodies. According to Deleuze:

³ ‘*Sphoṭa*’ is the mostly widely used semantic term in the Indian linguistic tradition. As expounded by philosophers of language, Patanjali and Bhartrhari, the word refers to meaning as the ‘integral linguistic symbol,’ distinct from ‘*dhwani*’ which refers to the physically differentiable speech sound. We are here relying more on the literal meaning of ‘*sphoṭa*,’ which is “derived from the root *sphuṭ* which means ‘to burst’... In its linguistic sense it is normally defined as ‘that from which meaning bursts,’ i.e. shines forth, in other words the word-as-expressing-a-meaning.” (KUNJUNNI RAJA 1963). In our own interpretation of the term, the individuated and undifferentiated meaning element emerges from as an excess over and from the differentiated physical elements of language, be it a phoneme, word, or sentence.

We cannot even say that the body or state of things is the ‘referent’ of the sign. In expressing the noncorporeal attribute, and by that token attributing it to the body, one is not representing or referring but intervening in a way; it is a speech act. (DELEUZE 1994: pag. 86)

2. On the Christian ‘body’

Jean-Luc Nancy’s work, *Corpus* begins with a consideration of the body in the Western tradition, more specifically in the Christian religion where the sentence, ‘This is my body’ (*Hoc est enim meum corpus* – in Latin) has acquired a ‘cult’ status. Here the body is meant to refer to the God’s body, and Nancy asserts this point rather enigmatically:

The body of *that* (God, or the absolute, if you like)—and the fact that “that” *has a body* or that “that” *is a body* (and so we might think that “that” is *the body*, absolutely): that’s our obsession.⁴

Several questions follow from this statement. Is meaning in this tradition the name for the translation of the Absolute body, into and through its contact, with the worldly bodies, especially the human body? Can we speak of a ‘world body’ or *Corpus*, for which there is no outside (*Il n’y a pas de hors-Corpus*, by parodying Derridas’s well-known, ‘*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*’), and inside of which there is infinite differentiation between sense and body, and of both sense and body? The Western tradition has perhaps oscillated between an idealism of the Platonic philosophy and Christianity’s desire to have a bodily God or even the body of God. This desire was perhaps for a necessary continuity between the God’s body on the one hand and the

⁴ NANCY (2008: 3).

personal and the political bodies, on the other.⁵ The idea of a ‘body-politic’ as elaborated by Kantorowicz,⁶ and discussed by Nancy (more on this later) indeed implied a syntagmatic as well as a paradigmatic relationship with the God’s body. This is where, from Nancy’s deconstructive point of view, it becomes necessary to make a cleavage between the divine body and the sense of that body.

This seems to be the context in which Nancy suggests that the sentence, ‘This is my body,’ must be read as devoid of any representational content. According to him, “if it says something, it’s beyond speech. It is spoken, it’s exscribed—with bodily abandon.”⁷ This body, that is, the Christian body, is perhaps to be seen less as a body of or for knowledge, and more as an artistic body. Religious discourse at its core, might very well be taken as aesthetic, having the least representational value. Thus, in *Noli me tangere*, Nancy interprets another well-known Christic sentence, “Do not touch me” that follows the ‘resurrection’ of Christ, in terms of the body’s absenting and its departure. In the place of the death-and-resurrection often seen as the context of Jesus’ utterance addressed to Mary Magdalene, “Do not touch me,” Nancy sees there, a “dying indefinitely” and an “incessant parting.”⁸ Christ’s body, in resurrection, as per this view, instead of being in a state of life after death, is rather in a state of permanent departure, and hence not available to be touched. Thus, according to Nancy, ““resurrection” is “the surrection, the surging of the unavailable, of the other, of the disappearing *in body and as body*.”⁹

⁵ NANCY (2008: 5) says: “The anxiety, the desire to see, touch, and eat the body of God; to *be* that body and be *nothing but the that*, forms the principle of Western (un)reason.”

⁶ KANTOROWICZ (1997). In this classic work, the author describes the conjunction posited in ‘medieval political theology’ between the king’s body and the body -politic. The ‘body politic’ was in turn indistinct from the ‘mystical body,’ a notion which is said to have maintained a ‘crypto-theological’ relationship with the body of Christ. Focusing on the medieval political-theological fusion of the two bodies, he noted that, ““Body politic” and “mystical body” seemed to be used without great discrimination.” (cf. pp. 15-16)

⁷ NANCY, (2008: 7) We shall see later the precise meaning of Nancy’s neologism, “exscription;”

⁸ NANCY, (2003: pag. 31) (my translation)

⁹ NANCY (2003: pag. 29).(emphasis in the original)

3. The plurality of bodies.

These remarks have to be understood in relation to the philosopher's treatment of what we wish to call the body-mind-sense complex. How does Nancy seek to deconstruct not only the Absolute body, but also the particular bodies, and especially the micro-bodies, say, the neurons – bodies, each in permanent physical contact with other bodies – passing through a deconstruction of the human community, both particular, and general, that he calls the 'world'? Furthermore, how does he deconstruct sense, not only as semiotic signification, but also the sense that exists in its phenomenological relationship with the body, both of which are frequently considered as a property of the human mind?¹⁰ These are the questions that are examined in this paper.

What is remarkable about 'body' today, Nancy wants us to note, is that there are bodies everywhere in the world, but philosophers have seldom liked to talk about this teeming multiplicity. There are over 6.8 billion bodies in the world today,¹¹ just to talk of the human bodies, without counting the seemingly preponderant variety and number of bodies of other living beings. Irrespective of the similarity in overall shape, human bodies, in addition to their gender and age distinctions, are themselves of a variety of hues and colours, of skin and of hair, differentiated in height, weight and blood-types. Bodies are often displaced in philosophical discourses by a mere conceptual body, or a body that has a more or less unified signification.¹² In relation

¹⁰ We may recall here particularly F. de Saussure's embedding of the realm of semiology in 'social psychology' and the latter in 'general psychology' (SAUSSURE 1974: pag. 16), as well as to perspectives on the 'embodiment' of mind and meaning.

¹¹ As per United States Census Bureau estimate the population of the world was 6.804 billion in February 2010. (Source Wikipedia)

¹² Of course, there's no denying the fact that 'body' has recently made a significant return in philosophy. This is particularly evident in the philosophies of MERLEAU-PONTY, LEVINAS, DELEUZE, FOUCAULT, and certain others. We may also refer to the recent interest in 'embodiment' especially with reference to Merleau-Ponty's inspiration, rather widely prevalent in contemporary

to the spirit or the idea, often privileged by philosophers, the body is treated, especially in idealistic philosophies, as a subordinate counterpart, made up of mere material substance.

It would not be banal to say that millions of bodies make up our world today, and these millions of bodies are making or involved in making exponentially millions of senses. Millions of bodies are sensing and meaning. Ascribing an agency – conscious or unconscious – to all these bodies, we can perhaps assume that from every body emanates the utterance: ‘We are meaning.’¹³ Ours is indeed an epoch of bodies, and of teeming and thronging meanings. Bodies are surging everywhere in our world, by themselves as well as in and as their meanings and images in written and visual discourses, and in this universal surge everybody seems to be saying, ‘This is my body,’ which may now be deemed as the desacralized version of that very sacramental utterance.

4. Extended bodies and sense

The body that is resurrected between the philosophically dominant poles of spirit or idea, and matter, is not just any body, but a sacralised body, a *Corpus*. It is a body in all its ramifications, a laterally and outwardly swerving body, a spurting body, an internally and externally extending and a differentiating body. Body, Nancy tells us, is different from a mass, because the former is already internally differentiated and externally formed. It differentiates from itself towards its outside, like an extension of itself, and in this extension towards the outside, further bodies come to be, as well as

cognitive science and philosophy of mind. René Thom’s ‘morphogenesis’ is also concerned with the isomorphism of structures with regard to body, mind and language. (See, PETITOT 2004.) There is also a meager reference to ‘flesh’ in philosophy. Nancy refers us to Merleau-Ponty’s plaint: “What we call flesh, this inwardly worked mass, has no name in philosophy.” (NANCY 2008: pag. 75)

¹³ This phrase, ‘We are meaning,’ is the title of an essay in NANCY (1997a: PAG. 57-64)

thought or sense. In this regard, Nancy draws our attention to a statement of Freud on the nature of the human mind: *'Psyche is extended, but knows nothing of it.'*

By way of its own extension, or through its extension as sense or thought, the body is constantly touching other bodies. It also touches itself, producing more and more variegated same and other selves. The self is thus always selving, and the other is always further othering and the 'intersubjectivity' involving the self and the other, that is, the 'in-between' is always reconstituted. It is the *touch*, directed both internally and externally to the other, that differentiates the body and the bodies, infinitely. Bodies are, at any given point, touching and extending towards the outside, and infinitely. In touching, differentiating and extending, bodies need not have an intention of their own. In this endless extension towards the outside, bodies do not permit an entry into their insides, "except through murder or surgery."¹⁴ This is what renders the body infinitely impenetrable. This is also what makes the body a 'secret'. When a body touches another body, it is the extremities that are touching, and the bodies continue to remain impenetrable to each other. In this touch, a body can *present* itself to the other, but cannot represent it. That is what makes the 'other' a secret. (According to Derrida: "The other (person) is secret because he is other."¹⁵) At the same time, Nancy clarifies, a secret, in its impenetrability, is like a body (but it can be blown open to scrutiny by violence). In its impenetrability and therefore in its secrecy, the other remains distinct from the self.¹⁶ (Nancy: "An other: if it is an other, it is a body."¹⁷) The other which manifests itself in its compactness and distinctness can only be a body. "Bodies are first and always other—just as others are first and always bodies."¹⁸ Or, further: "*An other is a body, because only a body is an other.*"¹⁹

¹⁴ NANCY, personal communication.

¹⁵ DERRIDA (2000 : pag. 107)

¹⁶ The notion of 'impenetrability' the body and its relationship with the 'secret' was also conveyed to me By NANCY in a personal communication.

¹⁷ "Un autre: si c'est un autre, il est un corps," words spoken by NANCY in the film, *Le corps du philosophe* (GRÜN 2003)

¹⁸ NANCY (2008: pag. 29)

¹⁹ NANCY (2008: pag. 31; emphasis in the original)

i. The weight of thought

Nancy attempts a rapprochement between body and mind and between world and sense by introducing a rather surprising notion of the ‘weight’ of thought, alongside the weight of the body. Etymological connections between thought and weight can be language-specific and hazy, even if one notices the proximity between the French verbs *penser* and *peser*. Metaphorically, thought and particularly rational thought involves ‘weighing’ of alternatives that oscillate as if on a pendulum from a hanging point. ‘Pensiveness’ can suggest our being weighed down by thought. There’s clearly an experience of the weight of the body, irrespective of whether it is the cause or the consequence of what is referred to as the Fall. That is to say, there is a specific ontology of weight, independent of the law of gravity. “The body *is* weight.... The body itself weighs.”²⁰ This weight, Nancy seems to say, is not only vertical, but also horizontal. “Our world has inherited the world of gravity: all bodies weigh *on* one another, and *against* one another, heavenly bodies and callous, vitreous bodies and corpuscles.”²¹ When bodies touch – and they touch lightly – at their extremities, it as if an “irresistible force is being applied at the place of a possible eruption of meaning...”²²

The body comes with its own weight, but its touch is light, and tender. Every touch further differentiates the body and the bodies, and that is how body touches thought and thought touches body. This touching of extremities is what *writing* essentially is. Nancy views this as body-writing, or *exscription*. Sense is what appears in every finite touch in the incessant contact and the infinite interval between exteriorities. Each time, the bodies, and bodies touching, exscribe a different sense, and each time a

²⁰ NANCY (2008: pag. 7)

²¹ NANCY (2008: pag. 93; emphasis in the original)

²² NANCY (1997a: pag. 77)

sense in every sense. Body is what senses, or to put in another way, bodies sense as sensible bodies.²³

Between the body and the sense, from body to body, and from body to sense, Nancy visualizes the possibility of proliferating sense. And: “Let there be writing, not *about* the body, but body itself.”²⁴ Nancy:

Now comes *mundus corpus*, the world as proliferating peopling of (the) body(‘s) places.

What is coming is not at all appearance and spectacle would have us presume (a world of appearances, simulacra, and phantasms, lacking flesh and presence). This kind of discourse is only a Christian discourse on trans-substantiation, but lacking substance ... A ruined discourse: bodies are starting to pass right over it. What’s coming is entirely different version, and entirely different articulation of *hoc est enim...* (W)hat is coming is *whatever images show us*. Our billions of images show billions of bodies – as bodies have never been shown before. Crowds, piles, melees, bundles; columns, troops, swarms, armies, bands, stampedes, panics, tiers, processions, collision, massacres, mass graves, communions, dispersions, a spill-over, an overflowing of bodies always both in compact masses and in pulverizing dispersions, always collected (in the streets, group housing blocks, megapolises, suburbs, points of transit, of surveillance, business, of treatment, of forgetting) and always abandoned to the stochastic

²³ Nancy clarifies this point: “As such, the body is the articulation, or better yet, the *organ* or *organon* of the sign: it is for our entire tradition, that *in which* sense is given and *out of which* sense emerges. But as such; regardless of the perspective used – dualism of body and soul, monism of the flesh, symbolic deciphering of bodies – , the body remains the organon, the instrument or the incarnation, the mechanism of the work of a *sense* that never stops rushing into it, presenting itself to itself, making itself known as such and wanting to tell itself there. The body, *sense*—in this double sense of the word fascinated Hegel.” (NANCY 1993: pag. 192)

²⁴ NANCY (2008: pag. 9).

confusion of the same places, to the structuring agitation of their *departure*, to the agitation that structures them, for their endless, generalized *departure*.”²⁵

5. Touching and the ‘birth to presence’

In Nancy’s deconstructive quasi-onto-psycho-semiology, the basic mode of existence of bodies is not presence, but rather their ‘birth to presence.’ Bodies are in a permanent state of eruption. For any given body, there is it and its outside, which may or may not be another well-formed body. Even in the case of Heidegger’s examples, ‘the stone on the path,’ and ‘the lizard basking on a stone,’ Nancy attributes a contiguity, one that is characterized by ‘touching.’ This ‘touching’ or ‘*touching-on*’ involves not the possibility of an access, as Heidegger seeks for the ideal touching, but rather a ‘passive transitivity.’ In other words, Nancy sees there a ‘brute entelechy of sense’ that is derived from “contact, an absolute difference and an absolute *différance*.”²⁶ In the touch of the one and the other, there is a *to-ness* or a ‘being-toward,’ and that is what makes it something more than merely spatial. A mere touch is *touching-on*, just as living is *living-on* or survival. There is the possibility of a *sur-touch*²⁷ which is more of a temporal dimension of touch, and distinct from a mere touch, that is only spatial. Nancy calls this possibility of a touching-on or a sur-touch, the *passibility*: “the world is passible to sense, it *is* this passibility because it first comes to be in accordance with this – ... atomistic – distancing.”²⁸ Thus for Nancy, touching what really and persistently exists, even if this amounts to saying that there is “no pure space and time. (...) There are only places, which are simultaneously

²⁵ NANCY (2008: pag. 39 and 41; emphasis in the original)

²⁶ NANCY (1997b: pag. 61)

²⁷ We are using this word as analogous to ‘survival,’ or *survie* in French, which is also translated as ‘living-on.’

²⁸ NANCY (1997b: pag. 62)

locations and extensions of bodies.”²⁹ This constant passing to sense is also the incessant ‘birth to presence,’ which is the ceaseless result and consequence of this touching-on. “Presence is what is born, and does not cease to be born” and being born is “transforming, transporting and transiting of all determinations.”³⁰ It is also “finding ourselves ex-posed, exist-ing.”³¹ And by way of a corollary, “sense [is], matter forming itself, form making itself firm: exaction and separation of a tact.”³²

i. Touching and Sense

Thus, this near-predicative relation between sense and touching³³ implies a kind of morphogenesis of meaning, but a morphogenesis which is rather of a syntagmatic kind, and distinct from the paradigmatic and emergential kind of a ‘morphogenesis of meaning’ proposed in the works of René Thom and Jean Petitot.³⁴ It is possible that a social and dialogical sense of touching as well as the idea of sense itself that Nancy develops has a more or less identifiable Levinasian flavor.

²⁹ NANCY (1997a: pag. 77)

³⁰ NANCY (1993: pag. 2)

³¹ NANCY (1993: pag. 3)

³² NANCY (1997b: pag. 61)

³³ NANCY (1997b: pag. 63): “In a sense, ...sense *is* touching.”

³⁴ See THOM (1972), and PETITOT (2004). Without going into the technical details of the differences between the two approaches, we shall simply state that the Thomian morphogenesis and its further development by Petitot involve the dynamic actantial schema à la TESNIÈRE (1959) or ‘archetypal morphologies’ associated with the actions of one or a small number of actants, and hence is based on mimological (and therefore paradigmatic) semiotics, while Nancy’s sense is directly material and corporeal, having to do with the individuation resulting from the constant interaction of a body with itself or a multiplicity of other bodies, yielding each time and infinitely singular and plural meanings (therefore syntagmatic).

Levinas, even while forcefully asserting ethics as the first philosophy, is also a philosopher of sense and sensation,³⁵ just as he is a philosopher of touch. However, a more or less humanistic framing of both sense and touch is discernible in Levinas, articulated through notions of ‘Eros’ and ‘caress’ which are described under the rubric of a certain ‘phenomenology of voluptuousness’ and mediated by a certain feminine ‘mystery.’ Caress yields voluptuous sensation, but it however is not constituted by any intentional touch. For Levinas,

The caress is a mode of the subject’s being; where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This ‘not knowing,’ this fundamental disorder, is the essential.... The caress is the anticipation of this pure future (*avenir*) without content.³⁶

While this contact ‘beyond’ contact is similar to Nancy’s touch without touching, or, that which is always in ‘parting’ or ‘departing.’ Levinas’s notion of ‘caress’ involves a strong sexual asymmetry, which is also a social polarity. The lover and the beloved that make up the scene of the caress are clearly masculine and feminine respectively. And further, it is the open-ended character of the feminine alterity that is (seemingly) the object of a (supposedly masculine) caress, that makes the “voluptuousness... the very event of future, the future purified of all content, the very mystery of the future...”³⁷

³⁵ Cf. Levinas’s “Meaning and Sense,” in LINGIS (1987)

³⁶ LEVINAS “Time and the other,” in HAND (1989: pag. 51)

³⁷ HAND (1959: pag. 51).

ii. Touching the untouchable

In this context, Derrida notices in what Levinas and Nancy suggest as the ‘touch without touch’ and a ‘phenomenology of touch’, there’s a certain neutralization of the category of touch, which is not without consequences.³⁸ The distinction between the touchable and the untouchable (that which does not render itself to be or cannot be touched, and not that which must not be touched as in the Indian caste system) in the act of touching can only be made in the absence of a phenomenological neutralization. Not all touching nor all non-touching be equated. Who or what is involved in the process of touching? And how can one distinguish, in touching, between stroking and striking? It is therefore important, according to Derrida, to understand the virtualization involved in touching. A directly phenomenological approach to touch tends to evade the question of this virtualization, which is precisely the phenomenological framing that seeks to curtail the incessant eventmental movement in the real world. Further, for Derrida touch is not unrelated to law, that is, for the source of the ‘force of law’ is always virtualized, and even when one seeks to touch the law, the law never allows itself to be touched.³⁹ Does not a law of *tact* (i.e., touching without touching) foreclose the possibility of touching the fictional and therefore inaccessible core of law? Is the law as such as well as the law of touch already inscribed within a law of untouchability. Derrida poses the problem sharply:

Perhaps the law is always a law of *tact*. This law’s law finds itself there, before anything. There is this law, and it is this law itself, the law of law. One cannot imagine what a law would be in general without something like *tact*: one must touch without touching. In touching, touching is forbidden: do not touch or tamper with the thing itself, do not touch on what there is to touch. Do not touch what remains to be touched, first of all law itself—which is the untouchable,

³⁸ DERRIDA (2005) See, especially the chapter, “The Untouchable, or the Vow of Abstinence (pag. 66-91).

³⁹ Cfr., DERRIDA (1992) ‘Before the Law’ for a clear exposition of the problem.

before all the ritual prohibitions that this or that religion or culture may impose on touching...⁴⁰

iii. Touching and the sexual *différance*

Nancy addresses the question of sex, and to a certain extent that of Eros, in his work, *L'“il y a” du rapport sexuel*⁴¹ (*The ‘there is’ of Sexual Relation*). Sex is clearly a domain that involves body, meaning, and the relation between body and meaning. While attempting to deconstruct, two well-known statements of Jacques Lacan, ‘There is no sexual relation,’ and ‘Sexual pleasure / orgasm (*jouissance*) is impossible,’ Nancy, presents his own thought on sexuality and touch. The first part of the work is an exposition of the notion of relation, which leads to the notion of a ‘relationless of relation.’ The absence of relation in a relation is to be understood as the ‘in-between’ (*entre-deux*) which is

the emptiness ... that relates without bring them [the two related things] together, or which brings together without uniting, or which unites without completing, or which completes without carrying on till the end.⁴²

Essentially, sex involves an open-ended, or endless relation or activity, and therefore, as Lacan states, there can neither be sexual relation as such, nor a well-identifiable ‘orgasm.’ Of course, it must be noted that Nancy does not distinguish between masculine and feminine sexuality, or between homosexuality and heterosexuality (unlike Levinas who assumes a masculine-feminine asymmetry, and ignores homosexual relationship in his account of *Eros*.)

⁴⁰ DERRIDA (2005: p. 66); emphasis in the original)

⁴¹ NANCY 2001 (my translation here and elsewhere of citations from this book)

⁴² NANCY (2001: p. 24)

Certainly, the question about the sexual relation leads both Levinas and Nancy to its ability to take existence from being to something like an ‘other than being’ or towards the infinite future. For Levinas, this is essentially a function of ‘femininity,’ which is “not merely the unknowable, but a mode of being that consists in slipping away from light,” and whose way of existing is “hiding,” where “this fact of hiding is precisely modestly.”⁴³ While, for Nancy, the ‘sexual’ cannot be something of a ‘predicate’ and it can exist only in our ability to identify it as sexual. We identify it each time in its differential occurrence.

The sexual is its own difference, or its own distinction. To be identified as sex or as sexed, is precisely what constitutes sex or sexuation...⁴⁴

and therefore, Nancy insists, “no one is either man or woman indefinitely, nor is anyone either, homo- or hetero- sexual indefinitely...”⁴⁵ Sex, according to Nancy is a result of both internal and external differentiation, that is, by means of a somatic or non-somatic touch involving a ‘relation’ between one and the other. This relation of the being-together in sex, is further,

nothing but the unhinging of the identical or of the self-in-self. Sex is really nothing but the unhinging of one-itself: but this one does not pre-exist sex.⁴⁶

In other words, essence of sex, if at all there is one, consists in this touching-unhinging, a division and multiplication, that is, in fact, sexuation. Sex is this endlessly proliferating differentiation itself, and correlatively there is the sexual at the base of all difference or differentiation. He is goes on to claim that even

⁴³ LEVINAS, in *Levinas Reader*, HAND (1989: p. 49).

⁴⁴ NANCY (2001: p. 27)

⁴⁵ NANCY (2001: p. 27)

⁴⁶ NANCY (2001: p. 28)

Derrida's difference must be sexual. This means that ontological difference is sexual... Thus being is sexed and sexuating. And similarly "god" (masculine or feminine?) of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics, involved in his sexuating auto-deconstruction.⁴⁷

6. Touching and 'exscription'

This 'relationless relation' or this permanent touching-unhinging is the principle of *being-in-common*, according to Nancy, not only for the sexuating *couple*, but also, and perhaps even more so for the *community*. A community consists in the differentiating relations of its always differentiating members. They are devoid of a communal fusion, or a communion. This is clearly where Nancy attempts a political use of the Derridean *différance*. But then the being-in-common of the political / social realm is articulated in terms of sense, having a deconstructive sense with its provenance both in corporeality and in literature. *Exscription* is Nancy's term for this differentiating being-toward-the-outside of both body and language, that constitutes and deconstitutes the ever singular and ever plural being-in-common of a community, including the community that is often easily designated as 'the world.'

Nancy's notion of difference / *différance*, though clearly related to Derrida's, is yet carefully distinguished from the latter. Derrida's notion of difference, as we know, arose as part of his criticism of the strong notions of sign and signification in the context of semiotics and structuralism. *Différance* can be understood as a rather pragmatic articulation of a difference in relation to an existing signification. But it still has a materiality which is expressed by the notion of 'trace,' itself partially adopted from Levinas. 'Trace,' for Derrida, allows us to consider signification as 'a formal play of differences,' and it further implies 'a new concept of writing,' which

⁴⁷ NANCY (2001: p. 8) footnote.

can be called, “*gram* or *différance*.”⁴⁸ The ‘trace’ in this definition, is more of a textual trace, as per which no element of a structure or text can exist without its difference with regard to its other elements “of the chain or system,” and which does not bear a trace of those elements. Therefore no element can be either merely present or absent. And thus, it follows that:

There are only everywhere, differences and traces of traces. The gram, then, is the most general concept of semiology—which then becomes grammatology—and it covers not only the field of writing in the restricted sense, but also the field of linguistics.⁴⁹

Now, it is interesting to note that it is precisely this ‘gram’ of Derrida, which is clearly a grammatological and perhaps a graphological notion, that becomes in Nancy, as we have already seen, a notion that is additionally endowed with a certain ‘weighty cognitive’ value.⁵⁰ The shift is from a graphological⁵¹ and a textual sense of writing in Derrida to a ‘bodily writing’ or ‘body writing’ in Nancy, which is also inseparable from ‘exscription’ and the ‘weight of a thought.’ It seems that while Derrida’s infinitizing textuality (*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*; there’s no outside of the text.), fails to incorporate the material or the bodily, Nancy’s bodily writing and exscription abandons the linguistic from its analytical perspective. For Nancy, the exscription’s linguistic dimension that carries the ‘weighty cognitive’ forward is itself differentiating, both with respect to its own structural elements, and with respect to the bodily and cognitive. What surges forward to the outside—and everything does—infinity in the ‘corpus’ is cognitive, bodily, and semiotic all at the same time. All is thus, exscription, and sense is always the counterpart, produced each time anew in the

⁴⁸ DERRIDA (1981: p. 26)

⁴⁹ DERRIDA (1981: p. 26-27)

⁵⁰ Words like ‘pensive’ and ‘pending’ / ‘pendant’ may have a common (Latin) source.

⁵¹ From, Gk..*graphein* ‘writing,’ perhaps from the action of, etching and scratching on rock, or granite.

endless contact of extremities.⁵² Exscription is thus the touch of extremities which involves the withdrawal or deconstruction of an already given signification, and the swerving to the outside, towards an alternative sense, or a sense of the other, each time.

i. Unworking of the community

The central proposition of our discussion so far is the following. Just as there is no language without text or literature (DERRIDA), there is also no text or literature without the body or the bodies of individuals. A further proposition that we can introduce here is: Literature takes place at the limit of the community. This is in fact, what Nancy speaks of as the ‘inoperative community.’ Community, from this perspective, cannot be sustained in terms of its own self-sameness, or in terms of its ‘immanence’ (NANCY 1991) or ‘immunity’ (ESPOSITO 2000). It can only be, always, its own unworking, that is, by way of writing and exscription. Literature and writing are thus to be seen in their role of interrupting both community and the ‘myth’ that binds a group of individuals together in a communal or communitarian fusion. Community “takes place always through others and for others;” and in this sense, it “occupies a *singular* place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of communitarian being in the form of a subject.”⁵³

⁵² This notion of ‘exscription,’ as well as the preceding one of ‘birth to presence,’ both in which the differentiating movements of body, text and sense converge, seems compatible with Gilbert Simondon’s notion of ‘individuation’ which is formulated as a technical-scientific ‘principle.’ The principle of individuation, according to Simondon, works, in specific ways, with respect to the physical, living, social and psychic systems. (Cf. SIMONDON 2009)

⁵³ NANCY (1991: 15) Nancy’s main point is that the community is not something calculable or programmable. So, instead of seeing it as an ‘operative’ entity, it is seen as something to be constantly ‘unworked’ (*désœuvré*). The French version of the book, *La communauté désœuvrée* was followed by

Unlike the notion of a liberal community, which is supposed to consist of individual subjects interacting by means of their interior contents or essences, Nancy's 'inoperative' argument favours a community that is constituted by the exposition (or, *ex-peau*-sition, posing the body to the outside via the skin; Fr. *peau* = 'skin') of singularities. Instead of an emphasis on production and completion, here the emphasis is on interruption, fragmentation and suspension. "Community is made up of the interruption of singularities, or the suspension that singular beings are."⁵⁴ What this means is that the pre-constituted process / definition of a community always undergoes a shift, a change or an 'interruption.' This sort of an unworking of community, Nancy tells us, is not different from what G. Bataille called the 'unleashing of passions.' Bataille himself had associated this unleashing with a 'contagion' than with a 'communication.' 'Passions' here may be taken in the sense of 'passivity' or responsiveness to the other. According to Nancy, "only exposition to the other unleashes my passions."⁵⁵ And further: "Singularity is the passion of being."⁵⁶

In his essay, "The Myth Interrupted"⁵⁷ Nancy discusses the function and the notion of literature in relation to myth and community. Though myth is rather remote for the modern and the post-modern man, we tend to see ourselves as the 'fulfilment' of myths. And yet, we are keen to distance ourselves from the mythic truth and mythic life. For, myth can normally be only in the past. For the community, the myth thus has both a *founding* and a *fictional* function. Nancy: "When we speak of 'myth' or of 'mythology,' we mean the negation of something at least as much as the affirmation of something."⁵⁸ We may say that the community is *founded* by a mythic thought that is admittedly *fictional*. In relation to the community (and this relation is anyway central to it), the myth has the basic feature of *founding by fiction*. Though myth

Blanchot's response to it, *La communauté inavouable*, translated into English as *The Unavowable Community*. (BLANCHOT 1988) See also, AGAMBEN (1993) and ESPOSITO 2000.

⁵⁴ NANCY (1991: p. 31)

⁵⁵ NANCY (1991: p. 32-33)

⁵⁶ NANCY (1991: p. 33)

⁵⁷ NANCY (1991: p. 43-70)

⁵⁸ NANCY (1991: p. 52)

appears to be the founding principle, there is myth only when there is no longer myth. Myth can therefore be regarded as the *founding fiction*. That is why one can say that ‘myth is a myth.’ Now, Nancy argues that, “the phrase ‘myth is a myth’ means in effect that myth, as imagination or as foundation, is a myth, in other words, a fiction, a simple invention.”⁵⁹

This founding by fiction, as well as the fiction of founding can have a powerful effect on community. It can translate itself as the ‘mythic will’ which is totalitarian, and which seeks to impose a communion, or the principle of all communion, aiming for the goal of an ‘absolute community.’⁶⁰ Myth represents here a communal fusion, based on a unique fiction, which is forcefully propagated within the community. Myth and a mythic community are therefore mutually necessary, and mutually implicated. And this we know is the source of all totalizing or totalitarian closures of a community. If this is indeed so, Nancy will argue, “[t]he interruption of myth is... also, necessarily, the interruption of the community.”⁶¹

ii. Compearance

In contrast to a community that is mythically founded by fiction, Nancy offers the idea of ‘being *in* common.’ As being-in-common, the beings are said to ‘compear’ (present outside together), that is, “they are exposed, presented, or offered to one another.”⁶² This ‘compearance’ is the middle way that Nancy seeks between a mythic

⁵⁹ NANCY (1991: p. 52)

⁶⁰ NANCY (1991: p. 57). The connection between ‘absolute community’ and myth is further developed with reference to the context of Nazism in LACOUÉ-LABARTHE and NANCY (1991)

⁶¹ NANCY (1991: p. 57).

⁶² NANCY (1991: p. 58)

community and its contrary, the community's disappearance.⁶³ Community as compearance is the way by which the community resists its 'infinite immanence,' and continually creates an open space within it. The community of compearance comes to be not through a mythic process – which leads to a community as communion – but through the 'interruption of myth.' Nancy notes in *Corpus* that the assumption of the mythic community or the 'body politic' (in the sense of Kantorowicz, or its political-theological equivalents) as a signifying body, has led to a circularity between body and sense.

The political foundation rests on the absolute signifying circularity: that the community should have body as its sense. Consequently, that the body should have the community—its institution—as its sign, and the community should have the body—of king or assembly—as its sign. Thus there's the infinite presupposition of a body-community...⁶⁴

7. From inoperative community to neuroplasticity

The connection between deconstruction on the hand and corporeality of the mind (plasticity of the human brain, to be more specific) and political community on the other, is further extended in the works of Catherine Malabou.⁶⁵ The potential for unworking or *désœuvrement* at the level of subjectivity or of community is comparable with the plasticity of the human brain, which is characterized by continuously developing, modifying and regenerating neuronal connections. Both our

⁶³ This idea of 'compearance,' seems compatible, on a broader plane, with the 'middle way' Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna's central principle of *paticcasmuppada*, or 'codependent origination.' (cf. KALUPAHANA 1991)

⁶⁴ NANCY (2008: p. 71)

⁶⁵ Cf. MALABOU (2004) and (2005b)

world/s and our brains are continuously being recreated.⁶⁶ “*Plasticity of the brain is the real image of our world.*”⁶⁷ The brain is endowed with sense by means of the “being-in-connection” of the neurons, which are continuously being reconfigured, though our mental activities, creating alternative worlds and alternative brains endowed with alternative senses. Through the works of neuroscientists like Jean-Pierre Changeux⁶⁸ and Antonio Damasio,⁶⁹ it has become increasingly evident that the human mind and brain are made up of images and image like patterns (which have extension, unlike the point-symbols like the numbers) that are constantly being formed and modified in relation to the images and patterns that we receive from the external world. Thus, neuroplasticity through its poetic and deconstructive activity inherent in the human brain, works against the possibility any predetermined structure of either the world or the brain. As per Malabou’s proposal of a “biological alterglobalisation,” “*plasticity, far from producing a reflection of the world, is the form of another possible world.*”⁷⁰ Plasticity, in this sense, has clear affinity to writing and exscription, though Malabou insists on the relative importance of the neuronal mutation. Thus, she notes:

...from the graphic to the plastic, the sense of the pure images can be grasped only in the light of their mutual transformations. Sense, is metamorphosis.⁷¹

Malabou’s engagement with plasticity goes back to her doctoral work published as *The Future of Hegel* (1996 / 2005 Eng. trans.). This work is an essay on plasticity and ‘plastic individuality’ from a Hegelian perspective. For Hegel, plasticity is the

⁶⁶ Nancy (2008: p. 63) relates this corporeal and worldly (re-)creation to plasticity : “*the body is the plastic material of spacing, without form or Idea. It’s the very plasticity of expansion, extension—where existence takes place. ... The body’s not an image-of. But it’s the coming to presence...*”

⁶⁷ MALABOU (2004: p. 82) (emphasis in the original; my translation.)

⁶⁸ CHANGEUX (1986)

⁶⁹ See DAMASIO (2003)

⁷⁰ DAMASIO (2003: p.163)

⁷¹ MALABOU (2005b: p. 115)

temporal conjunction of the universal and the particular. It involves the ‘becoming essential of the accident’ or the ‘formation of form.’ The plastic individuality or the individual as singularity is the result of “psychosomatic unity [that] results from an auto-interpretation independent of any referent.’ (MALABOU 2005a: 71) “‘Plastic individuals’ are those who synthesize in their very ‘style’ the essence of the genus and the accident which has become habitual.” (MALABOU 2005a: 74) Malabou is reading plasticity here as a human trait by which habitual or accidental somatic practices are transformed with respect to the universal form of the spiritual or the psychic resulting in the ceaseless mutual modification of the essence and the accident, the form and the substance, without any external point of reference. She is self-consciously submitting, in surprising ways, Hegel’s own philosophy to a mutation, a mutation informed by the recent developments in the neurosciences. Plasticity, she suggests is discovering an open future within the Hegelian closure. Malabou; “It is not by chance that the notion of plasticity today operates in the domain of cell biology and neurobiology. For example, the ‘plasticity’ of the nervous or the immune system means their ability to tolerate modifications, transformations of their particular components which affect their structural closure, or modifications and transformations caused by perturbations from the environment.” (MALABOU 2005a: 193) These transformations are, moreover, accompanied by ruptures involving the destruction of what has existed previously.

Malabou’s *What Should We Do With Our Brain? (Que faire de notre cerveau?)* is more specifically focused on brain plasticity and its possible consequences, both biological and socio-political, Evidence supporting the adaptability and the flexibility (as opposed to its biological rigidity) of the human brain, as understood by the term neuroplasticity, have led to claims and speculations regarding treatment of a host of brain or brain-related disorders.

According to Malabou, the process of the brain representing the changes associated with self-generation would involve “a series of swerves and leaps.” (MALABOU 2004: 153) In this context, with regard to the ‘representation’ in the brain of events involving personal or political trauma, it is possible to say that even “traces can change sense.” (MALABOU 2004: 156)

This idea of the modification even of trace, in terms of plasticity, in Malabou's view, points clearly to the theoretical mutation of the Derridean idea of writing itself (and by extension, that of 'exscription'). According to her, "plasticity *configures the traces, erases them in order to form them, without however rigidifying them.*" (MALABOU 2005b: 114; my translation, emphasis in the original) Using a Hegelian term, she goes on to say, "plasticity is the sublation [relève = 'erasure and altered reappearance' — FM] of writing." (MALABOU 2005b: 114; my translation.)

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