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The Heart and Guts of Cultures

Book Review

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Jean-Luc Nancy

A Finite Thinking

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Reflecting, in part, on *A Finite Thinking*, Jacques Derrida, writing for and about Jean-Luc Nancy, and hoping to give a gift beyond the reciprocal economy of gift-giving, touches (on) the heart of his friend. In an essay composed entirely of tangents, Derrida, parenthetically, writes:

(I have just remembered, and this still touches me, that our first meeting after he had received in himself the living heart of another, we embraced, spontaneously, in an apparently spontaneous double movement, apparently of an instant [why?], which we had never done before, because of the reserve of old friends. My real friends always intimidate me.)¹

Writing, earlier, on Derrida, in 'Borborygmi' in *A Finite Thinking*, Nancy engages not in a heart-to-heart dialogue with Derrida but speaks rather of the rumbling gut (borborygmi). Nancy interrogates the rumbling and haunting sounds of the word 'Derrida' and the murmuring neologistic devices by which Derrida attempts to point toward the inarticulable.

In English 'borborygmi' is simply a rumbling in the bowels but in French a further figurative sense attaches to this word: 'incomprehensible and inarticulate remarks'. (112) While Derrida has too often and naively been attacked as incomprehensible, Nancy here explains that this is the necessary plight of any serious philosophy. Philosophy attempts to articulate the inarticulable, to 'name that which has no name'. (113) Or, as Nancy, attempting to be more precise, clarifies, the task of philosophy is 'to name de-nomination itself, put a name to the very withdrawal of the name, as opposed to naming a 'that' which would have no name'. (113) If this is philosophy's project, then, Nancy speculates, a 'badly formed, mumbled, stammered' other language or foreign language—a 'barbaric idiom'—will be inevitable in order to gesture toward this beyond of the known and named world. (114) This endeavour results in a profusion of new terms that attempt to point beyond or behind the named world: 'destinerrance, emasculation, peniclitosis, logoarchy, signsponge, the jerky spasm of an eructojaculation, *logoroperatergo*'. (117)

But if Derrida's task is the naming of the unnamable, he does this, also, Nancy explains, through an examination, a deconstruction, of his own name—Derrida. He thus transforms philosophy, overturns and disperses it, by writing autobiography that reaches through the name to that which is beyond, behind or outside the name, thus creating 'auto-hetero-graphy'. (114) Derrida follows the link between the name 'Derrida' and the word 'derriere' (behind) which it echoes. Taking his clue from derriere/behind, Derrida looks beyond the name, examining and overturning the assumption that there might be 'a genealogy, antecedence, foundation, or substance'. (114) Nancy, also reflecting on the name 'Derrida' and focusing on the 'da', traces a link to Heidegger's *dasein* (being-there) and also to Freud's description of the child's *fort-da* (here-there) game. Derrida 'cut off from his da' is like *dasein* without da, which would be 'like *Sein* [Being], or, who knows, like *Mit-Sein* [being-with]' . (121) Derrida without da is like *Sein* or being alone, or like *Mit-Sein* or being-with. Derrida without 'da' is not being-there (an autonomous being), but a being-with-others. Derrida without 'da' ventures behind the there (the named and known world) seeking 'being ... behind the there, what is not there, offered, indicated, or localized, but inscribes itself beneath'. (121)

This also, Nancy continues, indicates that the there (da) is not a locality, distinguishable from another, but that 'the *da* is not opposed to a *fort* [here], but rather the *fort* [is in] all *da*'.

(121) Nancy points to Derrida's investigation behind (derriere) Derrida finding not a there (da) to be named but finding that there (da) is indissociable from here (fort), that the self is indissociable from the other; that being is being-with.

The name 'Derrida' and the language of Derrida rumble, mumble and stammer attempting to say the impossible and 'this makes the impossible itself snap and crackle'. (115) Nancy, listening to Derrida's rumbling bowels, hears 'its sound, its echo, its muffled cry, its rustle, its murmur, or its shout' that speaks of the unnamable haunting of the name. (115) Derrida, however, listens not to Nancy's gut but to his heart.

Writing in turn on Nancy in '*Le toucher: Touch/to touch him*' Derrida traces the theme of touch that is so central to Nancy's corpus. Touching on various essays in *A Finite Thinking*, Derrida nevertheless avoids direct mention of 'Borborygmi'. Wishing to avoid returning Nancy's rumbling and murmuring gift, Derrida instead follows the syncopated rhythm of Nancy's other essays. Hesitantly, tangentially, developing an observation and then retreating to start afresh on a new tangent, Derrida's writing mimics the fading and fainting syncopation of the sublime imagination in Nancy's 'The Sublime Offering'. Here, Nancy, rearticulating Kant's sublime, distinguishes and entwines the unity of the beautiful from and with the sublime 'pulsation of unity'. (231) 'In beauty', Nancy writes, 'it is a matter of accord; in the sublime, it is a matter of the syncopated rhythm of the trace of the accord'. (231) And he adds that syncopation is 'at the heart' of the sublime, creating 'reunion and distension, position and vanishing ... flight and presence ... grouping and strewn division'. (231)

Derrida quoting from a page or two further on—'the sublime ... makes itself felt as such at the moment when the limit is touched, in the suspension of an impulse, the broken tension, the fainting and fading of a syncopation'—observes that touching the limit would also involve not-touching and perhaps excessive touching.² This movement of contact and retreat, touch and caress, connection and disconnection is also the movement of syncope that will characterise Nancy's later thought on the self-other relation.

Developing this syncopated rhythm of touching, Derrida reflects that Merleau-Ponty had already described the experience of touching other objects that simultaneously involves touching oneself, and that Nancy introduces the other into this analysis of touch.³ For Nancy, it is the touch of the other that constitutes the self. Referring to the essay 'Shattered Love' in *A Finite Thinking*, Derrida explains how Nancy's concept of the touch of the other interrupts self-presence. As Nancy elaborates, the experience of being touched by the other, which is also the experience of love, transforms the self 'interrupt[ing] the process of relating oneself to oneself

creating 'a break in his self-possession as a subject'. (261) Love, for Nancy, even the smallest gesture of love, touches the self, breaks into or cuts the self, transforming and reconstituting the self:

From then on, I is *constituted broken*. As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts across and disconnects the elements of the subject proper—the fibres of its heart. (261)

What this means, for Nancy, is that the subject is constituted through its relation with others so that the subject is never simply a singularity but is always in the plurality of a shared world. (268) Love not only constitutes the subject, then, but is also, for Nancy, the basis of community.

In the essay 'In Praise of the Melee' Nancy dispenses with any idea of harmonious community or of a reasoned, consensus politics and instead elaborates an impassioned play of Ares and Aphrodite in the becoming of cultures and communities. Repudiating any multicultural mixture (which risks homogenising differences) as well as any politics of purity (that validates racist crimes of purification), Nancy instead praises the turmoil, the dissent, and the passion of melee. Melee—'an action rather than a substance'—involves Ares and Aphrodite: Ares, not as the war of obliteration, but as combat, jousting, difference and dissent; Aphrodite, not as orgy and pornography, but as the touch and cut that breaks the I, installing the other within. (281)

Cultures, for Nancy, are constituted through this melee: indicating ongoing exchange, contact, dissemination across cultures, while also recognising the emergence of distinct cultures constituted through these relations. (282–3) Writes Nancy: 'It is a melee that, within any given "culture," brings out a style or a tone; equally, however, it brings out the various voices or vocal ranges that are needed in order for this tone to be interpreted'. (283) There is, Nancy concludes, no pure identity as all subjects and all cultures are formed through the melee of Ares and Aphrodite that cuts, breaks into, and transforms selves and cultures. Indeed, for Nancy, 'a pure identity would not only be inert, empty, colorless and flavourless (words which describe many of those who uphold pure identities): it would be an absurdity'. (284) There is neither a pure culture nor an autonomous individual as we are always touched by others through 'the always-incessant mix-up of one with the other'. (287)

Writing about *A Finite Thinking* and other Nancian texts, Derrida mimics the cut and thrust pulsation of the heart, love, and cultural melee that Nancy exposes. Structured as incomplete tangents that stop and start over, Derrida's '*Le toucher*' touches, embraces and kisses the heart of Jean-Luc Nancy. Concluding with a confessional anecdote Derrida writes: 'I dreamed that I

kissed him on the mouth; it was not long after the transplant of his new heart ... I would have liked to be capable of recounting what was and remains, for my old heart ... the ordeal of this other heart that Jean-Luc Nancy was nevertheless alone in undergoing at the bottom of his heart, his, the only one, the same.⁴

From the bottom (derriere) of one's heart, to the other's rumbling gut, Derrida and Nancy exposed each to the other, and each touching and cutting the other, write with and through the other to explore the relation of self, other and culture via analyses of the pulsations of love, touch, and being-with-others. Their writings can be differentiated, but they are also entwined: Derrida's stammering neologisms like Nancy's syncopated formulations both gesturing to the singular/plural existences of subjects and cultures. Can cultural studies participate in this politics of heart-wrenching melee that transforms us, recreating us, and opening us to the intrusions and border-crossings of others? This is not just a matter of studying culture or cultures but of a sublime imagining (syncopation of reunion and distension) of cultures exposed to and formed in melee:

Melee of Ares and melee of Aphrodite, melee of melees: blows and embraces, assaults and truces, rivalry and desire, supplication and defiance, dialogue and dispute, fear and pity, and laughter as well ... configuration of spaces, borders made to cross, so that crossing becomes sharing, because there's identity only when shared, divided, mixed, distinguished ... exposed. (287)

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¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Le Toucher: Touch/to touch him', *Paragraph*, Vol 16, No 2, 1993, p. 45.

² Nancy, p. 223; Derrida, p. 127.

³ Derrida, p. 136.

⁴ Derrida, p. 148.