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The Fragility of Thinking

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One of Jean-Luc Nancy's most characteristic philosophical gestures is to begin by stressing – and thereby confirming – the dialectical reciprocity or solidarity between opposed values, in order then to affirm an excessive third term, suitably redeemed or reconfigured, of which it may then be claimed, following what Derrida once called Nancy's "absolute, irredentist, post-deconstructive realism" (*Le Toucher* 60; *On Touching* 46), that it undercuts or outstrips each and every previous binary couple to which it is properly (or improperly) irreducible. The strategy, it is sometimes suggested, bears a similarity to the classic three-stage speculative dialectic. Its purpose is however quite different. Rather than accrediting teleological progression, the ambition is rather to uncover an origin that, having been hitherto obscured, is yet to be grasped, and to expose or expound a challenging new conceptual or, more accurately, preconceptual self-evidence or evidentiality.

In the prefatory "Coda" or tailpiece to a recent collection of papers, assembled with the help of Ginette Michaud, in which he examines the rivalry or dialogue between the literary and the philosophical, each of which is said not only to be in search of its own truth, but also, and in all senses of the word, to be forever questioning the truth of the other, Nancy begins for instance by underlining the opposed yet symmetrical characteristics of the two.¹ So far, so traditional. The point here, however, is not to

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reinforce the stereotypical idea that the one takes precedence over the other, or that the one is but the continuation of the other by alternative means, but rather to highlight the "demande" – the title of Nancy's book – , that is to say: "the asking, wanting, appealing, beseeching, or frantic requiring" (*Demande* 9; *Expectation* 1; trans. mod.), that the literary and the philosophical each addresses to its counterpart, but with no expectation that either might deliver what its opposite number craves. True, Nancy is quick to add, philosophy and literature each have a different

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understanding of what they are seeking, which necessarily lies beyond their purview, with philosophy conceiving of truth as an “interruption of sense,” and literature portraying truth as “the impossibility of interrupting sense” (*Demande* 10; *Expectation* 2), with the contrary and paradoxical rider that, while philosophy cannot stop itself, devoted as it is to the assimilation or incorporation of all that lies outside it, so literature, condemned as it is to the production of singular, discrete works, only survives by cutting into its never-ending flux.

The question of truth, Nancy insists, remains unanswerable. Were there to be an answer, he rightly argues, it would cause philosophy to lapse into the authority of wisdom (or the wisdom of authority) and literature into the finality of myth (or the myth of finality). “Philosophy and Literature,” he explains, “are Wisdom and Myth once they have entered the time of asking, each having lost itself, or lost the other” (Nancy, *Demande* 12; *Expectation* 3; trans. mod.). Loss, in other words, is always already an unfolding, just as unfolding is itself always already a loss. Paradox again ensues, with wisdom (as in Socrates) ending up unfolding the truth that there is no wisdom, and myth (as in Joyce) unfolding its finality by displaying its essential incompleteness. “Asking,” suggests Nancy, “has perhaps to divide itself to make itself understood: from philosophy to literature and from literature to philosophy.” In which case, what remains, he adds, appealing, as so often elsewhere, to the elusive and indeterminate, yet perpetually self-presenting, self-validating third term with which his thinking has become synonymous, is “simply the interminable coming of sense, synonymous with its own asking” (*Demande* 13; *Expectation* 4; trans. mod.).

The argument is elegantly put. Symmetry continues to rule. But this should not prevent one from asking whether the narrative of loss which Nancy unfolds does not itself beg a number of obstinate questions. For it will be remembered how he began his long career as a philosopher and thinker by detecting in Kant the overwhelming strength, or

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incalculable weakness, of the undecidable, this “sameness of the same [*la mêmété du même*] produced by the same [*le même*] as its alteration.” Which was also to say: “the dialectic of the Same, and therefore the dialectic itself, as its own impossibility,” such that “perhaps the least untenable statement,” he concluded, “is along the lines of: *the same undecides itself* [*le même s’indécide*]” (Nancy, *Le Discours de la syncope* 13; *The Discourse of the Syncope* 9–10). If so, it would follow that the undecidable cannot ever be avoided by any philosophical discourse whatsoever, and the possibility that it might continue to haunt Nancy’s own discourse, as that discourse implies, should not come as much of a surprise. Indeed, it is one of the most properly and knowingly disruptive aspects of Nancy’s thinking, and one that programmes, so to speak, the many questions – questions without answers – his work bequeaths its readers.

But since “asking” is of the essence, one cannot therefore not ask, according to the story of loss or unfolding that Nancy tells, that is, of loss as unfolding and unfolding as loss, how it might still be possible, or not, to tell the difference between, say, philosophy and wisdom, or literature and myth, or even between philosophy and literature “as such,” in so far as what is most in doubt here, following Nancy’s reading of Kant, as Derrida once put it, is the “as-such-ness” of the “as such” “as such”? And if the one is forever haunted by the hypothesis, threat, or would-be truth of the other, and the other by the one, how are we to decide which of the two, in its interminable coming, is presenting itself to us at all?

In the end, in a wilful, throwaway parting gesture (“Let’s just all forget about ‘philosophy, literature, myth, or wisdom,’” the reader is enjoined), Nancy’s tailpiece abandons such questions to their imponderable fate (*Demande* 13; *Expectation* 4). The question now, he maintains, is simply how to pass beyond the fragile limit between the interrupted and the uninterrupted, the complete and the incomplete, and cross the uncertain line between a conclusion and a suspension.

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Passage alone, in other words, is what asks, and passage alone is what is asked for. In only a few choice pages, and five carefully worded fragments or digressions, Nancy, then, takes his reader from dialectical symmetry to wishful transgression to self-confirming aporia, from the one and the other, or the one or the other, to the neither/nor or the in-between.

But how far is the in-between, or the passage beyond, still indebted to the reciprocity it seeks to overcome? The question, it may be remembered, was the main burden of Maurice Blanchot's discreet yet searching response to Nancy's in-between concept, excessive of immanence and transcendence alike, of "unworked" or "workless" "community," and the main reason for his principled reservations regarding the very concept of "community."² For if it was the case that "workless community," on Nancy's definition, based itself on a dual rejection of collectivism and individualism, i.e., both State communism and capitalist neoliberalism, in so far as the one and the other, in symmetrical and mutually complicit fashion, each embodied the same equally unacceptable figure of "immanentism," it was by virtue of a concept of dialectical reciprocity that inevitably implied the prospect or temptation of their speculative overhaul. And this was why, if some concept of "community" was worth preserving, as Nancy would continue to insist, a contention Blanchot was willing to endorse only in so far as "community" was radically emptied of all positionality, thematicism, and substantiality, then it was essential, in Blanchot's eyes, to dismantle the logic of reciprocity itself rather than aim to pass beyond it.³ It is however noticeable that, in none of the many books, articles, or interviews Nancy devotes to Blanchot's writing, is this objection ever explicitly recognised. Which would tend to suggest that Nancy's conceptual boldness comes at a price, and that in his own thinking, in much the same way as he shows it to be the case with Kant, there is what one might call an inescapable fragility, by dint of which, as the logic of "asking" would also suggest, his thinking is at its most provocative when it is also at its most precarious. And vice versa.

If the word fragility seems appropriate here, it is because, on Nancy's own submission, as we shall see, it is one of the possible names for the neither/nor or the in-between. But before going further, let me recall another piece by Nancy, from the year 2000, also collected in *Demande*, in which the symmetrical relationship or opposition between "literature" and "philosophy" is again recounted. It has as its title a quotation and a parenthesis. The quotation, from Hölderlin by way of Heidegger, though neither author is mentioned by name, uses a kind of French historic or mythic present and reads: "Un jour, les dieux se retirent ...," "One day, the gods withdrew ..." (Nancy, *Demande* 37–44; *Expectation* 25–30).⁴ The parenthesis states more simply, with an oblique appeal to punctuation: "(Littérature/Philosophie: entre-deux)" ["Literature/Philosophy: in-between"]. Here, then, as in Nancy's 2015 tailpiece, the task is to tell a story, albeit one that, being no longer present in itself, since it is a story about the eclipse of presence, leaves in its wake two alternative possibilities, i.e., storytelling or truth, possibilities which, in their separateness, each bear witness to the same withdrawal of presence, the same unavailability of the body of the gods. It is the withdrawal of presence, in other words, that provides for the separateness or the difference between what according to this tale of origins will later become, on the one hand, *muthos*, and, on the other, *logos*, otherwise known as literature and philosophy.

Between the two, suggests Nancy, runs the violence of a cut, a kind of disentanglement that in its very possibility bears paradoxical witness to that which cannot be disentangled, told apart, or decided. At the same time, it is this disentanglement that, separating truth from narration, and narration from truth, institutes each as what it now is: literature, philosophy. "Without that separation," Nancy argues, "there would be neither truth nor narration: there would be the body of god [or the gods]" (*Demande* 39; *Expectation* 26; trans. mod.).⁵ As far as these two offspring of the gods are concerned, that is, as far as these two descendants of the absence, or absent presence,

of the gods are concerned, rhetorical symmetry again seems decisive. On either side of an empty tomb, “a scene of mourning and desire” comes to be staged: “philosophy, literature, each mourning and desiring the other (the other as such, the other as same [*l’autre même*]), but each also competing [*rivalisant*] with the other in fulfilling mourning and desire” (*Demande* 40; *Expectation* 27–28; trans. mod.). “The absence of the gods,” Nancy has it by way of conclusion,

is the condition of both, of both literature and philosophy, the in-between that legitimates the one and the other, both irreversibly atheological. Together, however, they are jointly charged with taking care [*prendre soin*] of the in-between: with keeping the body [*le corps*, i.e., the body of god or the gods] open, allowing it the chance of that opening. (*Demande* 41; *Expectation* 28; trans. mod.)

Inevitable tautology aside, Nancy’s fable of the withdrawal of the gods and the arrival on the scene of the philosophical and the literary as adversaries and accomplices is both suggestive and economical. It remains however a story, one that, according to Nancy’s own presentation, is necessarily in search of its elusive truth. Indeed, one learns,

not only is narration liable to be found lacking in truth or suspected of being so, it is indeed deprived of it from the outset, being deprived of the present body as the mouth of its own utterance, the skin of its own exposure. (*Demande* 39; *Expectation* 27; trans. mod.)

If so, Nancy’s own writing, notwithstanding its fondness for rhetorical symmetry, cannot do other than exhibit an underlying asymmetry which is in equal measure both enabling and disabling. For in order to account for the separation between philosophy and literature, and so as to posit the absent body of the divine as their secret or secretly shared condition, and even as his discourse offers itself to its readers as belonging primarily not to fiction but to thought, so Nancy, as in the case of all founding myths or myths of foundation, and in what is

also plainly a calculated move, is constrained to tell a story, present a fable, or reinvent a myth. Which cannot but leave undecided, and perpetually undecidable, the question of the status of Nancy’s own presentation: is it best seen as a kind of philosophy, or as a kind of literature, or perhaps more accurately as neither, that is to say, as a sophisticated attempt to reach back, in word or gesture, towards the absent presence of the body of god or of the gods? Which would of course explain his decision, amply documented in later work, to attempt to deconstruct Christianity, always at the risk of falling into the trap, encountered by many others in the past, of reconstructing it.

No doubt, since such is the logic of all “asking,” such questions are unlikely to be answerable in one way or in another. In any case, Nancy’s own writing, as readers will be aware, is in its own terms remarkably diverse: there are numerous examples of formal philosophical analysis, rigorous ontological inquiry, or historical or theological commentary. There are translations, poems, fictional or autobiographical writings, interventions responding to urgent political events, probing accounts of literary outputs, exhibitions, artistic installations, films and stage productions. There are many responses to invitations, texts written in the form of fragments, extemporaneous interviews, and numerous cases of collaboration with others, with thinkers, writers, artists of all kinds.

It is to a relatively well-known example of this last category that, briefly, I now turn. It again appears or, better, reappears, by now for at least the third time, in Nancy’s 2015 collection. Its significance has both to do with what it argues and the way it chooses to do so. Titled “Noli me frangere,” i.e., “Break Me Not,” it was first published in 1982, jointly authored by Nancy and his long-term collaborator Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, following on from the pair’s anthology and analysis of texts by the Jena Romantics, *L’Absolu littéraire (The Literary Absolute)* of 1978. Prompted in part, the authors explain, by a section of Blanchot’s 1980 volume of fragmentary writing, *L’Écriture du désastre (The Writing of the Disaster)*, the

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principal focus of the paper is the question of the status of the literary fragment in Romanticism and literary modernity. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's discussion is not however in any standard form of literary or philosophical exposition. Taking its cue from Friedrich Schlegel's "Gespräch über die Poesie" ("Dialogue on Poetry"), it begins as a sequence of unattributed fragments, then turns into a brief dialogue between two voices (which convention suggests one should identify with the two authors), followed by a lengthy section in which the two take on the names and roles of the interlocutors from Schlegel's 1800 dialogue, i.e., Ludovico (presumably JLN) and Lothario (presumably PhLL), after which there is a further brief exchange between the two. Taken as a whole, so to speak, the piece, at one and the same time, displays and interrogates that cleverly self-conscious, half-serious, half-ironic Witz, much prized by the Romantics, that Nancy discusses in an earlier, 1977 essay, also contained in *Demande*, where it appears immediately after the inaugural Coda under the title: "A Kind of Prologue: *menstruum universale*," and explores what Novalis once described as the phenomenon of "literary dissolution."

Once again, as in the case of numerous other inherited and inescapably metaphysical binary oppositions – literature and philosophy, *muthos* and *logos*, the religious and the secular, monotheism and atheism, myth and demythologisation, even the immanent and the transcendent – , the first task Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy give themselves is to emphasise, and reinforce, the dialectical solidarity of a thinking of the work and a thinking of the fragment. Each in fact, it is quickly suggested, despite appearances to the contrary, is but the mirror image or photographic negative of the other. All works, it would appear, are always already fragments, and all fragments works. "Dialectics, i.e., discourse," it follows (Blanchot had argued much the same in *L'Écriture du désastre*), "is indestructible." And this is duly one of the meanings of the title of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's text: "*Noli me frangere*, commands the dialectic in every

text, both in the fragmentary text as well, and in any discourse in fragments on the fragment. Break me not, fragment me not" (*Demande* 196; *Expectation* 132; trans. mod.).

But at the very moment when it would appear that all thinking of the work or the fragment is destined to be trapped in a vicious circle from which there is no way out, the dialectic having always already determined and appropriated all available alternatives, Nancy, or his partner, advances the word "fragility" to address that which, being neither the work nor the fragment, is not only irreducible to each, but, just like the absent presence of god or the gods, is also the joint, in-between condition of possibility of both. And it is a condition of possibility that is itself indestructible, not least because it precedes both the fragment (which, being always already fragmented, cannot properly be now what it purports to be), and the whole (which is likewise anything but what it claims). And being "indestructible," one learns, "*fragility*," underlined in the text, "is more tenuous, more trembling, more unbearable than any fragmentation" – while also, in acknowledging no opposition, being thereby insuperable, not to say omnipotent. Fragility at any event, write Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, is what there is

in beginning to speak or to write. In opening one's mouth, or inscribing a word. There, or then, is when it breaks – nowhere else, and at no other time. The fragility of a glorious body (neither transcendent nor immanent, neither yours nor mine, neither body nor soul) breaks a throat or a hand. Thus arises a word, a discourse, a song, a writing. The glorious body will never stop repeating this command, as fragile as an entreaty: *Noli me frangere*. (*Demande* 197–98; *Expectation* 133; trans. mod.)

In the title of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's text – "*Noli me frangere*" – , two different, contrasting, even opposed meanings compete, then, for attention. On the one hand, "break me not" are the words uttered by the dialectic, by the discourse of philosophy in general, which, from the summit of its authority, tells us that what literary history has hitherto

called the fragment, i.e., that of the Romantics, of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and so many others, and that of modernity, of Nietzsche, Kafka, Artaud, or Beckett – is impossible. “Break me not, fragment me not,” we are told, because, however much we try, we will have failed, not least by trying to try, since to will fragmentation is always already to subordinate the fragment to the energy or the will, which is to say, to the desire for a work. On the other hand, “break me not” are (almost) the words pronounced by a glorious body, warning a human, all too human hand to refrain from retaining or capturing it. The scene alluded to here, taken from the Gospel according to John 20.17, is of course well known. In what follows, Nancy, in the guise of “Ludovico,” glosses it more fully by reminding readers how, after the crucifixion, after Christ’s body has been laid out for burial, Mary Magdalene goes to the empty sepulchre, and, seeing a man she takes to be a mere gardener, fails to recognise who it is. “Jesus, however, calls out to her: ‘Mary!’ Turning on her heels, she replies with the word: ‘Rabboni!’, in Hebrew, meaning ‘Master!’,” i.e., Magister, according to the Latin Vulgate text that Nancy, for reasons he explains elsewhere (in *La Déclosion* 142n2; *Dis-Enclosure* 183n19), is here closely following. And Jesus goes on, with now proverbial words: “*Noli me tangere*,” “Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (Nancy, *Demande* 204; *Expectation* 138; trans. mod.).

Two versions, two readings, two opposing interpretations of “mastery” seem to be at stake here. Both imply the imminence, that is, both the threat and the promise of an ascent, of a dialectical raising of one thing into its other, here the fragment into the work, there the mortal body into evidence of its inalienable immortality. And in both cases, “*Noli me frangere*” or “*Noli me tangere*” enacts a prohibition, an injunction instructing us as to what is not possible, or at least not desirable, not worth wanting or willing: not possible, it would appear, to write according to the fragment, and similarly not possible to retain the transcendent. And yet, here as well

as there, is something – though, in truth, it is barely a thing at all – fragile and yet indestructible, which is to say, fragility “as such” (though one can but tremble at the idea of using the expression here, since fragility is precisely what dissolves any “as such” “as such”), or, equally well, the glorious body which, being neither immanent nor transcendent, eludes all apprehension.

There is of course at least a third function of the phrase “*Noli me frangere*.” For it should not be forgotten it is also the title of a singular piece of writing, jointly signed by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, which, in its playfulness, its tongue-in-cheek irony, its allusiveness, and heterogeneous composition (fragment, dialogue, pastiche, etc.), is already an egregious example of that Romantic Witz explored by Nancy in the 1977 paper that serves his 2015 book as “A Kind of Prologue.” “Witz,” Nancy had explained,

barely belongs to literature or does so, as it were, only just, and only by the back door, or in a roundabout way; it is neither a genre nor a style, nor even a figure of rhetoric. But nor does it belong to philosophy, not being a concept, judgement, or argument. And yet it has the capacity to assume all these roles, but only in an act of derision. (*Demande* 15; *Expectation* 8; trans. mod.)

This, then, “in a certain sense,” he adds,

is the lesson of the Witz: the uncontrolled – and uncontrollable – genesis of the blurring of genres, or what one might be tempted to call the “genre of the West,” literature and philosophy, neither literature nor philosophy, literature or philosophy. In a word, literary dissolution – where “literary” solely means the realm of the letter and of writing in general, the scriptural West. (*Demande* 22–23; *Expectation* 13; trans. mod.)

In its French guise, as “esprit” (meaning “spirit” and “wit”), or as English “wit,” suggests Nancy, Witz “is the specific modern product of the philosophical crisis of *judgement*,” which itself is but “the modern restaging of a ‘crisis’ constitutive of all

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philosophical discourse,” and “thus marks the element or structure of undecidability in all ‘logical’ decision-making itself” (*Demande* 23; *Expectation* 13–14; trans. mod.). If, on the one hand, then, “Witz may be said to be nothing other than the dialectical thought of identity, beginning with the thought of the *self-identity of ‘wit’ itself*,” such that “the separation and total opposition between *Witz* and Reason only ever occurs so as to allow that dialectic to function,” and has only ever “opposed literature to philosophy the better to maintain mastery over their divide,” so, on the other, it appears that “outside philosophy, outside literature (outside of psychoanalysis too), outside the mixture or coupling of the two (or the three), *Witz* neither delivers nor releases anything” (*Demande* 28, 32; *Expectation* 17–18, 21; trans. mod.).

This *witzig*, “witty,” or “spiritual” re-presentation of its two contradictory earlier instances of indisputable mastery – of the dialectic and of the risen Christ – has, it would appear, at least two corollaries. First, it fragilises, by derision, so to speak, or by outplaying it, the two friends’ dialogue as a fragmentary discourse on the fragment (this, the reader is told, is what should be avoided at all costs). In that sense, it draws it in the direction of what no longer belongs either to philosophy or to literature, but resides in their semi-serious, semi-laughable in-between. It endeavours, in other words, to outwit – or, more properly, to out-*Witz* – the dialectic in the name of that fragile, glorious body that has been brought forth, leaving their presentation to plummet, as it were, into the depths of an abyss. Not for nothing does one of the pair – Lacoue-Labarthe, one may guess – joyfully exclaim: “let us dance, then, on the edge of the abyss” (Nancy, *Demande* 199; *Expectation* 134; trans. mod.), an abyss, it would seem, whose principal task is to contest the spectre of dialectical mastery.

But this, as always, is only one part of the story. For at the same time, in attempting to outwit or out-*Witz* the dialectic, as Nancy’s commentary on the *Witz* duly explains, what *Witz* does is not to force the dialectic to unravel, but rather to strengthen it, in so far

as it is itself already but an exemplification of “the dialectical thought of identity.” Even as the fragility of a glorious body seems to interrupt the dialectic, so in return the dialectic duly takes possession of that selfsame fragility of the glorious body. The rising of the one turns imperceptibly into the raising of the other. Weakness becomes strength, fragility the indestructible, the immanent the transcendent. And if this is what they all are in the end, it is surely because that is what they already were in the beginning.

What remains, however, in so far as “*Witz*,” according to Nancy, “neither delivers nor releases anything,” is a kind of performative gesture – indeed what could be more expansively performative than Nancy’s and Lacoue-Labarthe’s Romantic dialogue? – one which, as its closing words make clear, is both inconclusive and interminable.

So where, then, it might be asked, does this leave the attempt, desire, or will, if that is what it is, to break the closure of the dialectic, break free from its strictures, and break out into the open? As I’ve tried to show, following in Nancy’s and Lacoue-Labarthe’s footsteps, as their 1982 title already had it, the enterprise is an impossible one.

But if so, there still remains a chance – a caesura, or perhaps just a syncope – which is none other than the possibility of that impossibility. There is, in other words, in writing itself, in the dialectic, even, a fracture or fissure, a fragility, so to speak, that allows thinking – and thinking with Nancy – to continue at all. It is this no doubt that Nancy has in mind when he speaks of “the interminable coming of sense, synonymous with its own asking.” And this is also why it is to that possibility of an impossibility, and to the impossibility of that possibility, that Nancy comes to devote much of his thinking. It is however essential to remember that “sense,” on Nancy’s idiosyncratic definition, is never given “as such.” “Sense [*le sens*],” he writes,

defies all completion. At every stage, one thinks one is positing a meaning [*poser une signification*]: sense deposes them all [*le sens les dépose toutes*] and despatches

them elsewhere, towards an outside that is both before and after. Patiently, frantically, this elsewhere inscribes, exscribes its traces. (Nancy, *Demande* 86; *Expectation* 62; trans. mod.)

Its impossible possibility, then, remains vulnerable and exposed: imponderable, undecidable, and perilously fragile.

Let me cite here an example, which, naturally enough, is anything but an example. Much of Nancy's earlier work, it may be recalled, following on from his engagement with German Romanticism, is given over to the question of myth. Myth, being tautegorical rather than allegorical, as Nancy never tires telling his readers, quoting time and again a famous passage from Schelling, itself based on a remark by Coleridge pertaining to the Gospels, is that which always already contains its own interpretation, its own explanation, its own commentary. It has no outside that is not always already another version of itself (Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* 124–25; *The Inoperative Community* 49; trans. mod.).⁶ But if so, Schelling, and Nancy too, if only for a fragile, flickering moment (it is of course the moment of "sense"), must nevertheless have the possibility of stepping beyond myth in order to describe it in these very terms. Myth, in other words, like time, like history, necessarily incorporates its own interruption, without which it would not be graspable at all. Whence the fundamental question that occupies much of Nancy's thinking about myth: is the interruption of myth merely a dialectical continuation of myth by other means, or is it an epochal caesura or syncope which makes it possible to set myth aside?

To this abiding question, Nancy gives, however, perhaps unavoidably inconsistent answers. Particularly revealing is his shifting account of the emblematic figure of Blanchot, whose writings, both fictional texts and critical essays, occupy a central, if discreet role in the overall composition of *Demande*. Before going further however, it is worth recalling a passage which does not feature in the collection, but in Nancy's 1986 volume, *La Communauté*

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désœuvrée (*The Inoperative Community*), itself written in partial response to Blanchot's *La Communauté inavouable*. Glossing the expression Blanchot takes as his title, explicitly borrowed from Bataille (and subsequently from Derrida),⁷ as many commentators, including Nancy, seemingly fail to observe, Nancy asks:

Does the unavowable have a myth? By definition, it does not. The absence of avowal amounts neither to a manner of speaking [*une parole*] nor to the telling of a story [*un récit*]. But if community is inseparable from myth, must there not be, by paradoxical necessity, a myth of unavowable community?

To which he provides this unambiguous, decisive answer: "This is however impossible." Nancy then adds: "It bears repeating: unavowable community, the withdrawal of communion or communitarian ecstasy, are revealed in the interruption of myth. And the interruption is not a myth" (*La Communauté désœuvrée* 147; *The Inoperative Community* 58; trans. mod.).

In 2014, however, revisiting these same questions apropos of the very same text by Blanchot, Nancy chooses to argue the opposite, now insisting that the expression "unavowable community" is a tell-tale symptom of regressive nostalgia for mythic communion, linked "not necessarily to fascism, far from it," as Nancy rather coyly puts it, echoing a widespread but unsubstantiated rumour regarding Blanchot's political past, but nonetheless "most certainly to right-wing thinking." "The avowal of the unavowable," he now claimed, "is the avowal of a recourse to myth." "Such recourse," he added,

also means that Blanchot's thinking on literature and on community are more than just closely interconnected: perhaps they should be viewed as essentially the same, if indeed there is no literary communication [according to Blanchot] other than in the register of myth [...] and no thought of the common (of community or sharing) without recourse to that register.⁸ (Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée* 134; *The Disavowed Community* 62; trans. mod.)

Here then, the unavowable (and its so-called “avowal”), myth, literature, and community in Blanchot are explicitly aligned as exhibiting a single continuous thought, in a way specifically excluded in 1986, suggesting that Nancy in 1986 somehow got matters badly wrong – unless of course it is in 2014, conversely, that he loses sight of what he had expressed so trenchantly nearly thirty years earlier.

True enough, major thinkers are no more immune than others to fatal misprisions, wild assertions, false conclusions, or palinodic conversions. Philosophers too make mistakes, have second thoughts, or come to see matters differently, and there is little doubt that, just like others, they should be allowed to change their minds. This however does not necessarily imply that with maturity of age comes a firmer grasp on the truth or that relative youth be seen as an impediment to wisdom. There are, as one knows, many instances of the opposite. At any event, Nancy’s change of mind is remarkable, as is the decisiveness with which, in 1986 and 2014, he felt able to put forward what are, in retrospect, two diametrically opposed interpretations of Blanchot’s reliance or non-reliance on foundational myth. There is nothing however gratuitous in any such shift. For the prior condition for Nancy’s contradictory pronouncements, both the readings they embody and the self-certainty with which they are delivered, paradoxically enough, is the abiding and inescapable undecidability which makes all decisions both possible and necessary from the outset, and yet, as numerous sleepless nights bear witness, inevitably precarious and fragile.

In 2015, in conversation with Mathilde Girard, reviewing the question of myth and its outside, Nancy, with admirable frankness, acknowledged as much. “The expression ‘interrupted myth’ I used in *La Communauté désœuvrée*,” he told his interviewer, “was not challenged by Philippe [Lacoue-Labarthe], quite the opposite, it seems to me, but neither he nor I knew exactly how it should be understood. And I still do not know” (Girard and Nancy 53).

II

Given the profound turbulence and abiding indecision associated with the name Blanchot in Nancy’s writing, it was to be expected that it should feature as a recurrent, if intermittent point of reference in several of the diverse essays, dating from 1977 to 2013, brought together in *Demande* under the heading of “literature.” Blanchot’s texts, Nancy writes, in one of the earliest of these essays, together with the works of Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Bataille, Borges, and Laporte, are among those which “today,” i.e., in 1977, are impossible to ignore (“incontournables”), and mark an obligatory point of passage in which it was imperative steadfastly to “remain” (*Demande* 45; *Expectation* 31–32). True, this early endorsement of Blanchot’s writing rarely leads to more than a series of fleeting allusions on Nancy’s part to signature words or phrases borrowed from Blanchot, including terms or topics such as work (“œuvre”) or worklessness (“désœuvrement”), the apocalypse, the “immemorial” past, or “the terrifyingly ancien” (“l’effroyablement ancien”). More importantly, however, now under the heading of “Sense” (“Sens”), *Demande* also contains three further texts devoted to Blanchot. The first, “Noli me frangere,” co-authored with Lacoue-Labarthe, and arising from a discussion of Blanchot’s *L’Écriture du désastre*, as seen earlier, is chiefly concerned with the question of the fragment and with the fragility said to precede it. The two remaining texts are more explicitly in the form of detailed commentaries on motifs in Blanchot’s writing, “Résurrection de Blanchot [Blanchot’s Resurrection],” from 2004, and “Le Neutre, la neutralisation du neutre [The Neuter and the Neutralisation of the Neuter],” first published in 2011 (Nancy, *Demande* 253–70; *Expectation* 177–90).⁹

Within the overall structure of Nancy’s *Demande*, there is however something odd, even anomalous about the inclusion of these two later essays. In his prefatory “Coda,” Nancy makes the valid point that solely those texts “that relate to literature” were selected for the volume, which meant leaving out

many other, occasional studies devoted to the analysis of “specific works” (*Demande* 13; *Expectation* 4), such as those by Jean-Christophe Bailly, Michel Deguy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Laporte, Shakespeare, or others, not to mention essays readily available elsewhere on, say, Flaubert, Edmond Jabès, or Michel Leiris.¹⁰ Why then include two essays dealing quite explicitly, and in some detail, with particular aspects of Blanchot’s work? The most likely answer is that, in addressing specific textual passages occurring in Blanchot’s inaugural novel, *Thomas l’Obscur* (*Thomas the Obscure*, 1941) and in his post-1968 volume of fragmentary writing, *Le Pas au-delà* (*The Step Not Beyond*, 1973), Nancy was also conscious of using Blanchot’s writing, albeit indirectly, in order to reflect (and reflect on) aspects of his own thinking. Prominent among Nancy’s concerns from 1995, it will be remembered, and in particular during the early years of the new century, coinciding with his return to Blanchot, was his project for the “deconstruction of Christianity,” in which the work of Blanchot would play a not insignificant role as symptom and illustration, so much so that “Résurrection de Blanchot,” together with an essay on “Le Nom de Dieu chez Blanchot [The Name *God* in Blanchot],” initially served as a centerpiece in Nancy’s 2005 *La Déclosion* (*Déconstruction du christianisme, I*) [*Dis-Enclosure, the Deconstruction of Christianity*].

In turn, in much the same way as the question of the interruption of myth had done two decades earlier, so the deconstruction of Christianity, as Derrida was often heard to remark, posed in acute form the question of its own possibility, not least the availability of some Archimedean lever simultaneously outside and inside Christianity, at once integral to it yet inassimilable by it, from which to undertake the task of deconstruction. That this should entail renewed scrutiny of the limits or inner or outer margins of the Hegelian dialectic was something of which Nancy and Blanchot were both intensely aware, and it is telling that in his 2011 essay on Blanchot it should be in close, and potentially dangerous proximity to

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Hegel (following, it is true, an indication of Blanchot’s own) that Nancy should choose to locate the thought of the neuter. Also worth noting, and continuing to rumble on from the mid-1980s, was the memory of unfinished business between the pair on the subject of “community,” with Nancy underlining in 2001 the extent to which he still felt *La Communauté inavouable* of 1983, as far as his own *La Communauté désœuvrée* was concerned, to be “simultaneously an echo, a resonance and a rejoinder, a reservation, or even in some respects a reproach” (*La Communauté affrontée* 38; “The Confronted Community” 40; trans. mod.).

In each of these diverse instances, it is readily apparent that the work of Blanchot, with which Nancy in 1977 deemed it essential to pause, and to which he indeed returns time and again in almost obsessive fashion, continued to function as a provocative reference point, an example of what to follow or what to avoid, even at times as a convenient lightning rod for some of the difficulties and ambiguities of his own thinking. That another author or thinker should in this way become a kind of secret sharer existing within or without one’s own thinking, it may be said, is far from unusual. Indeed, such haunting of one body of work by another is intimately connected with the process of thinking itself, which is also in the form of an asking and an answering in dialogue both with the living and with the dead.

It was in that regard only logical that, in his 2004 paper, “Blanchot’s Resurrection,” presented as part of a series of public lectures delivered less than a year after Blanchot’s death at the age of ninety-five, the topic Nancy should choose to address was precisely the question of living and dying. As the point of departure and main focus of his talk, Nancy took a brief, relatively little-known passage from *Thomas l’Obscur* in which one encounters the following sentence: “He walked on, the only veritable Lazarus [*seul Lazare véritable*] whose very death was resuscitated [*ressuscitée*]” (49).¹¹ While the grammatical subject of the sentence, as Nancy points out,

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is unambiguously Blanchot's protagonist, i.e., Thomas, it is readily apparent that the burden of Blanchot's formulation, as persistently elsewhere in the novel, is to put into doubt any notion that a subject might own his or her experience, or that experience be anything other than an abyssal absence of foundation. It is in this respect far from coincidental that, according to Jacobus da Varagine (or Voragine), author of the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*, the name Thomas should signify "abyss" or "twin" (de Voragine I: 57).

Was this idiosyncratic reference to the New Testament, Nancy asks, evidence of a lingering commitment to Catholicism, as he would increasingly claim, in so far as Blanchot here was thought to want to "preserve, at least in part, the monotheistic, or more precisely Christian roots of the thought of resurrection" (*Demande* 254; *Expectation* 178; trans. mod.)? Or did Blanchot's attempted "rewriting of Holy Scripture" (*Demande* 263; *Expectation* 184) already announce something of what Nancy had come to call the "deconstruction" of Christianity? Or if it did something of the latter, did it not do so at the risk of clinging to the former, and reflect a fundamental tension, not to say an inescapable fragility inseparable from thought itself? Such, at any event, according to Nancy, was the "danger" it was necessary to avoid, and it comes as no surprise, notwithstanding Nancy's Socratic questioning of Blanchot's text, that this should also be the trap into which Nancy, in his own efforts to deconstruct Christianity, is himself sometimes thought to fall, not least by Blanchot himself.¹² Which might suggest that the consequences of the abiding fragility of thinking are less easily averted than is sometimes claimed, and have the unerring capacity of displaying themselves in places where, and at times when, they are least expected.

Nancy begins his reading of Blanchot's sentence by observing, rightly enough, that the resurrection of Thomas's death is anything but a resurrection of Thomas dead, since it substitutes for the dialectical passage from death to life, as understood in Christian, not to say Hegelian doctrine, a much more fragile

exposure to the experience or, better, the non-experience of life in death and death in life, i.e., the radical inaccessibility of the experience of dying and, by that token, of living itself, irreducibly defiant of all presence. ("Inner experience" in Bataille, it will be remembered, was similarly for Blanchot "experience of non-experience" (*L'Entretien infini* 311; *The Infinite Conversation* 210).) At the same time, even as he makes this argument, Nancy still allows himself, by sleight of hand, by attributing to Blanchot, as though they were a statement of critical or aesthetic principle, comments made in 1953 apropos of Rilke, whose poetic experience, one knows, was very different to that of Blanchot, in order to subordinate the motif of "death resuscitated" in Blanchot (much as Nancy would subsequently do with the non-concept of "unavowable community") to a still lingering concept of the artwork, albeit of "the artwork in its essential worklessness [*de l'œuvre en son désœuvrement essentiel*]" (*Demande* 253–54; *Expectation* 178; trans. mod.).¹³ The formulation, as has been pointed out, owes more to Blanchot's at times severe critical assessment of the thinking of the Jena Romantics¹⁴ than to any of his own fragmentary writings. It is nevertheless striking that Nancy, two pages later, citing the same Romantic notion of the immanence of the artwork, still felt able to suggest how, for Blanchot's Lazarus, unlike the Lazarus of the Gospels,

truth does not consist in any such return [from death to life]: it resides in the concomitance of death and of a life within death that does not revert to life, but vivifies [*fait vivre*] death as such [*en tant que telle*]. In other words, the true Lazarus [*le vrai Lazare*: Nancy's gloss substitutes "true" for "veritable" in Blanchot] lives his dying [*vit son mourir*] just as he dies his living [*meurt son vivre*]. (*Demande* 256; *Expectation* 179–80; trans. mod.)

Nancy's formula is not without its aphoristic force. Rather surprisingly, however, it omits to take account of that indisputable fragility of living and dying in Blanchot, as a result of

which neither the one nor the other is ever accessible “as such,” and never available to be signified, even by an artwork, in its supposed self-identity. This in turn cannot do other than cast an aura of troubling fragility over the sternly reductive definition of “literature” with which Nancy’s paper concludes, “literature,” that is, as Nancy puts it, as that which, embodied in the logic of the work with which he precipitately identifies Blanchot’s thinking, “writes only the present of what has always already happened to us, that is, the impossible into which our being consists in disappearing” (*Demande* 256; *Expectation* 185; trans. mod.). What one misses most of all in such a definition, which also might seem to contradict much of what is argued elsewhere in *Demande*, is any awareness of the conjectural uncertainty of any such decisive judgement and what one might rightly call its fragility, as though Nancy’s own concept of fragility was in the end, for some reason, not fragile enough, and only able to reach so far and no further. “Literature,” Blanchot once replied to a questionnaire in 1992, “is a potency [*puissance*] that takes account of nothing.” He then added: “But when is there literature?” (Blanchot, *La Condition critique* 465). Literature, in other words, as at least some of the texts collected in *Demande* appear to agree, is inseparable from a radical questioning, an asking rather than an answering, and to that extent, as Blanchot’s comment suggests, it arises only when it comes from the outside, and belongs, not to the “present,” but only to the in-between or neither/nor.

But how to respond to what falls between positions, how to give it a name, and how to make its voice heard? How, then, to understand the fragile interruption of myth, power, and presence, with which “literature” is said to be synonymous? And with what words to affirm the withdrawal and absence of the god or gods?

In an effort, if not to provide an answer, then at least to prolong the demands made by such questions, Nancy in 2011 immediately chose to construe Blanchot’s use of the non-concept of the neuter, this fragile trace synonymous only with its withdrawal, elision, or erasure, as

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a response to the death of “God,” this “surplus word,” or “word too many,” as Blanchot had put it in *Le Pas au-delà*, and which had somehow been allowed to “rise above language by taking control of it, perhaps by breaking it apart, at the very least by claiming to set a limit to it” (*Le Pas au-delà* 84–85; *The Step Not Beyond* 59–60; trans. mod.). Nancy follows up his remark by suggesting however that, in so far as it too, according to an earlier text by Blanchot (albeit in a very different sense), was a “word too many,” so the word “neuter” in Blanchot enjoyed similar status as that of “God.” In which case, it would be just another instance of a dubious master concept destined to foreclose any futural “sense.” It is true, as Nancy points out, that Blanchot in *Le Pas au-delà* draws attention to the possible parallels between the “neuter” and Hegelian *Aufhebung*, not least, of course, to stress that the neuter was radically irreducible to Hegelian negativity, to being and to non-being alike, and only “evoked” the “movement” of *Aufhebung* from a suspensive and interruptive distance, without producing any dialectical result, be it in the form of an artwork or of some superior concept (*Le Pas au-delà* 101–07; *The Step Not Beyond* 72–76).

Nancy in 2011 seems however to have been less than convinced, and only too keen, in responding to the challenge of thinking the “in-between” of “sense,” to resist the temptation or, better, to exorcise the threat of the covert reliance on speculative dialectics he suspects, impatiently, to be at work in Blanchot. But if the neuter, according to Nancy’s 2011 presentation, runs the risk of too great a proximity to Hegelian dialectics, it seems elsewhere that the opposite is equally true. In *La Communauté désavouée*, for instance, Nancy dismisses Blanchot’s commitment to the neuter as a mere “Romantico-Idealist” vestige, “more reminiscent of the negative theology of Nicolas de Cusa,” far removed from the “tragic” rewriting of Hegel by Bataille (*La Communauté désavouée* 40, 84; *The Disavowed Community* 15, 35). What, in other words, seems to irk Nancy in Blanchot’s thinking – and the

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objection is self-evidently paradoxical – is the ineradicable fragility of the neuter invoked for instance in a passage from *L'Entretien infini* partially quoted, but hastily interrupted by Nancy, in which one reads:

The neuter: this word *too many* that subtracts itself [Nancy breaks off at this point in order to privilege negativity over dissemination] either by reserving for itself a place from which it is always missing while leaving a trace, or by provoking a displacement without place, or else by distributing itself, in multiple fashion, in a supplement of place. (*L'Entretien infini* 458; *The Infinite Conversation* 312–13)

Which was also to say that, for Blanchot, the neuter, this name without name for the always other word, the word always too few and always too many, was not only the condition of possibility of all literature, but also the reason for literature's radical fragility, or, in other words, its insuperable force and immeasurable weakness, as always other than what it is, or is not.

It is no doubt the task of philosophy, in its pursuit of truth, to assert authority over the unruliness to which literature bears witness, just as it is the business of literature to set philosophy aside and ignore its would-be foundations. If so, between the two, the undecidability of a relation without relation remains ineliminable. And if thinking is to remain possible at all, Nancy tells us, it is only in so far as it allows itself to affirm the fragility on which it relies, and which constantly traverses, and forcibly outlives it.

echo by jean-luc nancy

I thank Leslie Hill for his precise and valued attention to my fragilities. He is right to be so concerned about what inevitably makes thought come short in relation to what it thinks. It seems to me that in Blanchot there is such a recurring shortcoming, not in what he seeks to preserve – the elusiveness (*l'insaisissable*) of what is essential, the impossibility of having a “last word” – but in the fact that

in the end he himself grasps this elusiveness and presents it. This movement is not always present or visible, but is in any case what drives *The Unavowable Community*. It is a political movement or impulse: a sovereign authority must ensure the truth of the discourse. The hierarchical and archi-aristocratic political model is not always active in Blanchot's work, but it is so at times, especially when he began addressing the question of “community,” always affirming a “communism” (which he was more or less forced to confess “officially,” so to speak, by his time – and by Mascolo in particular), which he immediately subjected to the condition of being neither communitarian nor common in general (it is here, perhaps, in the “common,” in a repulsion for the common, that the deep impulse is nested). The fragility of Blanchot's thinking lies in this rejection of the common, the vulgar, and at the same time in what is given only commonly, banally, effacing itself in giving itself – not, however, to transfigure itself (like the woman-Christ in *The Unavowable Community*), but simply to confess itself in its poverty or even in its common indigence.

Leslie Hill argues that the title “The Unavowable Community” is borrowed from Bataille. He does not give a reference, nor do I have one to provide. But the “avowal” is so present in Bataille – in a way, it is even essential – that I can well imagine that he spoke of an “unavowable community” – thereby indicating what should be confessed: both the obscenity and the non-knowledge inherent in the communication of the intimate. I won't elaborate any further: that alone should suffice to indicate the considerable difference that then opens up between Bataille and Blanchot. It could be summarised as follows: the unavowable in Bataille is confessed humbly, even miserably and as if dying; in Blanchot, it slips a revelation about its secret, which is a kind of resurrection.

I also thank Leslie Hill for reminding me that I had mentioned *The Unavowable Community* in my *Inoperative Community* in 1986. I had forgotten about that, otherwise I would of course have mentioned it in 2014. Leslie says that, from one day to the next, I contradict

myself. This is only partly true because what I said about Blanchot's book in 1986 was so vague and undeveloped that not much can be drawn from it. Instead, one should be surprised by this lack of precision and rather light and carefree way of treating the book with which Blanchot responded to my initial text. It is then my turn to confess: this indigent passage bears witness to the fact that in 1986 I still hadn't understood a thing of Blanchot's book (and that no one allowed me to understand it – everyone had remained mute, as I pointed out in 2014). I had only perceived a refusal and recoil from me that remained poorly determined. I didn't know what to do with it and resolved, out of perplexity and respect for Blanchot's authority, to do what is known as "going down a tangent." So I said nothing, but it is not surprising that with time and Blanchot's death my perplexity has matured, my respect shifted (not been lost!) and I have come to understand what I can now only confirm about *The Unavowable Community*.

Who would have thought that fragility sometimes husbands some unforeseen resources?



disclosure statement

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notes

1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Demande: littérature et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 2015); *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature*, trans. Robert Bononno, with an introduction by Jean-Michel Rabaté (New York: Fordham UP, 2018). While the French edition comprises a total of thirty-three texts of diverse genres from different periods, its English counterpart contains only twenty-eight, to which it adds an introduction by Jean-Michel Rabaté. A coda, according to the dictionary, is "a passage of more or less independent character introduced after the completion of the essential parts of a movement, so as to form a more definite and satisfactory conclusion."

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2 For a detailed account of the dispute between Nancy and Blanchot on the subject of "community," literature, religion, and politics, see Hill.

3 See Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* 12–13; *The Unavowable Community* 3–4. On the frequently misunderstood and widely misrepresented motif of the "unavowable" in Blanchot, see Hill 103–16.

4 Robert Bononno's over-literal English version uses an unconvincing unidiomatic present tense here: "One day the gods withdraw ..."

5 Nancy's original text has "le corps divin."

6 For the passage to which Nancy refers, see Schelling, *Ausgewählte Schriften* V: 205–06; *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* 136 and 187ne.

7 On this prior history of the term "unavowable," and for the precise reference to the source of the double quotation in Blanchot's title, see Hill 103–16.

8 It should be emphasised here that there is no truth in the much repeated but unsubstantiated allegation that Blanchot before 1940 was sympathetic to "French fascism" (or any other kind of fascism).

9 Somewhat regrettably, in translating the second of these titles as "The Neutral, Neutralization of the Neutral," Robert Bononno follows the established but misleading convention of rendering Blanchot's "neutre" or "neuter," which is primarily a linguistic or syntactical category, with the predominantly political term "neutral," one of the prime meanings of which, according to the OED, is "taking neither side in a dispute, disagreement, or difference of opinions; not inclining toward either party, view, etc.; assisting neither of two contending parties or persons." It should however be emphasised that the "neuter" in Blanchot never corresponds to such non-partisan equanimity between extremes.

10 Several other "literary" essays not included in *Demande* may be found in the English translation in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Multiple Arts*.

11 As Nancy points out, unlike some of the surrounding material, the sentence recurs unchanged in Blanchot, *Thomas l'Obscur, nouvelle version* 42. For Nancy's citation and commentary, see *Demande* 255; *Expectation* 179. According to etymology, "ressusciter," as commonly used in French translations of Matthew 28.6, means: to "reanimate" or "restore to life."

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12 See Hill 193–208.

13 For the essay on which Nancy is drawing, see Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* 121–66; *The Space of Literature* 120–59. It is a curious feature of Nancy's reading of Blanchot (also in evidence in *La Communauté désavouée*) that he seems unwilling to distinguish between Blanchot's own thinking as a writer and his observations regarding the works of others.

14 See Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* 515–27; *The Infinite Conversation* 351–59.

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