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Irving Goh, ed., *Jean-Luc Nancy among the Philosophers*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2023. viii + 218 pp. Notes and index. \$125.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9781531501969. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 9781531501990.

Review by Paul Earlie, University of Bristol

In his introduction to this superb collection of essays, Irving Goh situates the late philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy as a transitional figure in contemporary thought. Nancy's work "exposes...the troubling impassés that underlie the very linguistic medium of thought" while probing "how these same impassés play out sensorially, if not materially" (p. 1). Instead of considering how Nancy negotiates the not-always-sympathetic linguistic and materialist legacies of recent continental thought, however, these essays wisely pivot to Nancy's relationship to a much longer philosophical tradition. The result is a series of sharp, overlapping accounts of how Nancy's understanding of sense and the senses emerges in dialogue with canonical figures of Western thought, an ambition which distinguishes this collection from the somewhat narrower focus of similar works available in English.[1]

In exploring what Nancy's encounter with thinkers such as Descartes, Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger says about our messy entanglement with the world, this book embodies Nancy's characteristically "relational" mode of thinking (p. 17). To borrow a somewhat gloomy theme from Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, what we have lost with Nancy's passing in 2021 is a series of worlds brought into being by his idiomatic, generous, and probing readings of the philosophical tradition.[2] Like the visiting noblemen of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, through Nancy we learn to see with fresh eyes what can otherwise seem fixed or sedimented, as in his provocative early reading of Descartes in *Ego Sum* (1979) or his reinvigorating account of speculative philosophy in *The Speculative Remark* (1973) and *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative* (1997). Nancy's later work is characterized less by such defamiliarizing monographic treatments than by what one contributor, Georges Van Den Abbeele, terms Nancy's "problem-oriented studies" (p. 21) in which his encounters with the philosophical canon are oriented towards a specific issue or question. This more "touch-and-go" (p. 8) approach, as Goh calls it, culminates in the works for which Nancy is best-known in the English-speaking world: *The Inoperative Community* (1983), *Being Singular Plural* (1996), and *The Sense of the World* (1997), in addition to his deconstructions of Christianity, neoliberalism in crisis, and sex (on which more in a moment).

It is a mark of the collection's richness that its account of Nancy's engagement with a select group of interlocutors opens up, rather than closes down, avenues for further relational exploration. (To this reviewer, for example, the collection's recurrent interest in freedom suggests the potential of a parallel reading of Nancy with Beauvoir, given the concern of both thinkers for

transcendence, immanence, and the situated imbrications of mind, body, and world.) Goh's introduction points, too, to ways in which Nancy's exploration of the philosophical tradition resonates with a number of contemporary concerns, such as the renewed saliency of touch in the pandemic's wake, or evolving discourses on sex and feminism in a post-#MeToo age. As Goh argues, if we are to develop plausible answers to the most pressing questions of today, we must necessarily begin with "critical reflection" (p. 16) on how longstanding metaphysical assumptions continue to distort how we see the world.

Van Den Abbeele's opening chapter examines Nancy's early "interruption" of Descartes as a thinker of a *cogito* that is less cognitively constative than dynamically performative. John H. Smith explores the importance of Hegel's understanding of infinity for Nancy's rethinking of finitude beyond "privation" (p. 53). Rodolphe Gasché's contribution traces a suggestive but revelatory series of references to Marx in Nancy, while Eleanor Kaufman reads Nancy on Heidegger, notably his response to the latter's *Black Notebooks* in *The Banality of Heidegger* (2015), in a not always comfortable dialogue with Simone Weil. Emily Apter develops Nancy's rejoinder to Lacan's infamous *Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*. Marie-Eve Morin follows the motif of *écart* in Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, and Nancy. Timothy Murray continues Morin's comparative approach in his essay on Nancy's and Lyotard's thinking of technology and the sublime. Finally, a remarkably rich and wide-ranging essay on the nature of philosophical thinking by the late Werner Hamacher precedes a short closing text by Nancy himself on Pascal and the human condition. Each contribution provides a lucid and generously thorough account of its chosen theme, though there is some occasional unevenness in the detail of specific chapters (parts of Smith's excellent chapter on Hegel and infinity consider the relevance of calculus, which may be too much in the weeds for some readers). As a whole, the collection represents an invaluable companion piece to those who already possess familiarity with Nancy's work and are looking to deepen their understanding of his more specific philosophical interventions.

Apart from the better known touch-points of Nancy's work—community, the body and the senses, the relationship between the arts, etc.—a number of shared themes emerge across each standalone contribution. One is the category of thinking itself, a privileged concern for Nancy from his early interest in the capaciousness and diversity of cognition in Descartes. For Nancy, the latter can help us think a form of thinking beyond the dualistic clichés of subject-object, one which ceaselessly transcends the fixity of essence and immanence, a "finite thinking...surprised each time by its own freedom." [3] For Goh, Nancy's idiomatic form of thinking is inextricable from his distinctive mode of writing, a "thinking/writing" (p. 4) oriented towards a broader ambition of poeticizing philosophy. Nancy's liberation of thinking—or rather his argument that thinking *is* freedom—is performed again and again in his writings, which continually seek to transcend simplistic binaries, clichés, or other doxic modes of reflection. The centrality of Nancy's writing to his thinking is not really a central focus of this collection, though Apter is fascinated by a number untranslatable formulations in Nancy's reflections on sex, and Smith is interested in the "pleasure of speculative writing" as a means of opening up "'fissures' within the finite" (p. 54).

Given the obvious limitations of such collections, the range of topics covered is impressive. Among the standout contributions, at least for this reviewer, are the articles by Gasché, which boldly suggests that Nancy "may be more indebted to Marx than to Heidegger" (p. 82) while keeping in sight what in Marx's thinking sits uneasily with Nancy's deconstruction of teleologism and consciousness. Apter's account of Nancy on sex, notably in *Coming* (2011), *Corpus II* (2014), and *Sexistence* (2021), is another highlight, which explores the actuality of Nancy's

attempt to rethink sex as “essentially trans” (p. 141). For Apter, Nancy’s sexistence is less about sex-based activism than about “philosophizing in sex” (p. 136), that is, rethinking sex not as oriented towards objects or identities (straight, bi, gay, queer, trans, etc.) but in terms of what Nancy calls “an enormous quantity of energies, representations, valences, emotive charges, and modes of excitation.”[4] Transcending the fixations and privations of the Oedipal triangle, sex becomes the site of freedom (what Apter terms “sexy being”), with ontology rethought as originally sexed, as “sex differing and deferring itself.”[5] The reader may see certain problems with this vision of sex(uality), to which Apter’s contribution is attentive, in particular the place of sexual violence in Nancy’s account of sex as transcendence or “transport” (p. 139).

Apter’s sensitivity to certain difficulties in reading Nancy raises an important wider question. Deconstruction, Derrida tells us in “Et Cetera...,” is always a deconstruction of the *and*, fascinated by doubling, including its own. As Nancy’s work exemplifies, there is always—happily!—more than one deconstruction. Each of the contributors to this collection reflects on this doubling in different ways, with Van Den Abbeele’s article on Descartes, for instance, distinguishing between a Descartes we know (the dualistic thinker of body and mind, of the transparent certainty of the *cogito*, and so on) and a Descartes who is a more troubling, dispersed, and mercurial thinker. What are the implications of this kind of deconstructive mitosis for Nancy’s own legacy? What would a reading of Nancy “among” the philosophers look like that would begin from the premise that there are always at least two Nancys, Nancy and Nancy, Nancy with Nancy, Nancys among the philosophers? If the contributions assembled here are conscious of this doubling among the philosophers Nancy reads, the plurality of the latter’s own work, differing and deferring from itself, remains an intriguingly open question.

Nancy’s brief but remarkable closing contribution, “Infinitely Passing (or, Pascal Passes),” is itself a poignant reflection on the condition of never being at one with(in) ourselves, of always moving beyond ourselves in our relation to the other-as-outside. Nancy reads Pascal’s observation that “man infinitely transcends [*passe infiniment*] man” as an intimation that the condition of freedom, of transcendence, is structurally one of passing or passage: “to go beyond, to exceed, to surpass, to bypass, and first of all, very simply, to traverse. To not stop” (p. 205). For Nancy, philosophy is the attempt to grasp sense at this point of passage, a passing which frustrates philosophy’s distinctive modes of thinking while also making these forms of cognitive investment possible. The challenge of thinking—within and beyond philosophy, between and among the philosophers—involves thinking this movement of passage beyond conventional oppositions of questioning doubt and categorical assertion, a challenge characteristic of our “modern age” (p. 209). Nancy passed away on August 23, 2021. As he noted in an earlier work, “each time, what is passed or passes itself [*se passe*] is a singularity.”[6] With great lucidity and rigour, this collection shows us that what we have lost with Nancy’s death is a way of seeing the unexpected and the unfamiliar. The collection is a testament to the painful nature of this loss, but it is also an injunction to remember and reaffirm Nancy’s singular vision of philosophy.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Irving Goh, “Introduction: Jean-Luc Nancy Passes”

Georges Van Den Abbeele, “The Iterative Cogito, or the Sum of Each and Every Time (Reading Descartes with Jean-Luc Nancy)”

John H. Smith, “Nancy with Hegel: The Restless Pleasures of Calculus and the Infinite Opening in Finitude”

Rodolphe Gasché, “The World, Absolutely: On Jean-Luc Nancy (and Karl Marx)”

Eleanor Kaufman, “Worldless: Heidegger, Simone Weil, and Anti-Judaism via Nancy”

Marie-Eve Morin, “Flesh and Écart in Merleau-Ponty and Nancy”

Emily Apter, “Sexistence: Nancy and Lacan”

Timothy Murray, “Sublime Seizures in Lyotard and Nancy: The Political Blooming of Art and Technology”

Werner Hamacher, “D’avec: Mutations and Mutisms in Jean-Luc Nancy”

Jean-Luc Nancy, “Infinitely Passing (or, Pascal Passes)”

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Susanna Lindberg, Artemy Magun, and Marita Tatari, eds., *Thinking With—Jean-Luc Nancy* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2023); Carrie Giunta and Adrienne Janus, eds., *Nancy and Visual Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Sanja Dejanovic, *Nancy and the Political* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Serena Andermatt Conley and Irving Goh, eds., *Nancy Now* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

[2] Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[3] Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 15.

[4] Jean-Luc Nancy and Irving Goh, *The Deconstruction of Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 34.

[5] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus II*, trans. Anne O’Byrne (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 11.

[6] Jean-Luc Nancy, “Passage,” in Jean-Claude Conesa, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-Marc Cerino, eds., *Être, c’est être perçu*, trans. Irving Goh (Saint-Étienne: Cahiers intempestifs, 1999), 20.

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