

## Thinking things: Heidegger, Sartre, Nancy

*That things are out there, it means something  
went terribly wrong. ... Things exist by  
mistake. ... The whole of reality, it's just it. It's  
stupid, it's out there, I don't care about it.*  
— Slavoj Žižek

It is widely acknowledged that Jean-Luc Nancy's most obvious point of reference is the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Indeed, Nancy is most well-known for his attempt at rewriting Heidegger's existential analytic by insisting on the co-primordially not only of Dasein and Mitsein, but more generally of Being and Mitsein, in an analysis that seeks to emphasize the necessary plurality of singularities.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the centrality of Heidegger in Nancy's work cannot be denied. Here however, I would like to focus on Nancy's more furtive relations to another brand of phenomenological existentialism. I would like to examine a series of significant correspondences between Nancy's thought of the "sense of the world" and the notion of nausea, as diagnosed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Nancy can certainly not be termed an existentialist in any traditional sense of the word, yet in 1988, he published a book on a central existentialist, and Sartrean, theme: freedom. As has been remarked by Steve Martinot in his review of that book: "In *The Experience of Freedom*, Nancy maneuvers between two languages, that of Heidegger—of being, presencing, withdrawing, and the ontological difference—and that of Sartre—of freedom, nothingness, precedence, and transcendence. The secret charm of this book," he continues "is that while Nancy owns one language and disowns the other, he ends up speaking them both" (Martinot 1995). While Nancy has no problem owning up to the Heideggerian language, his indebtedness to Sartre is, throughout his entire work, somewhat more hidden. When Nancy mentions Sartre explicitly it is in most cases only to criticize his voluntaristic and subjective understanding of freedom.

Yet, an exception to this critical stance is found Nancy's essay titled "The Heart of Things": "Sartre," Nancy writes there, "was the last to try erecting a monument (a 'historic' totalization, but one integrating an errancy and a singularity of existence), which is also to say that he was the first to touch the breakup or the crumbling of the monument" (Nancy 1993a: 184). Nancy is concerned in this text with the task of thought, when thought seeks to bring itself into relation with things, when it seeks "to think this, that there is something to think, and to think the *some* of this thing at the heart of thought" (Nancy 1993a: 174). In order that thought may come into contact with things, that the thing may touch or weigh upon thought, we must

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Nancy 2000 and Nancy 2008b.

“leave behind all our determining, identifying, destining thoughts. That is: ... leave behind what ‘thinking’ usually means” (Nancy 1993a: 174). In other words, we must think Being neither as the common denominator nor as a highest cause of the multiplicity of beings, nor as the gathering of these beings into the unity of any sort of monistic totality, but rather as the “whatever” of the particular thing that is here, as the “principle” for that which “in principle, does not allow itself to be returned to a unity” (Nancy 1993a: 411 n.16). As Sartre puts this, our task is to think the “necessary contingency of things”; in Nancy’s words, we must think “the creation of the world.”

It is in fact Sartre, as Nancy surprisingly tells us in this text, who has pushed further than anyone else towards a thinking of “the thing”—not *das Ding*, the Thing in its essence, in its Thinghood, but just things, in their plural singularities, in their errancy. What is peculiar about Sartre’s thinking of things, Nancy remarks in passing, is the affective register in which Sartre’s thinking of things operates (Nancy 1993a: 184). Things for Sartre are Nauseating! If indeed we can find a point of convergence between Nancy’s thinking of things and that of Sartre, we must explain how the former can purport to avoid the nauseating consequences of the latter’s diagnosis. How does Nancy make “sense” out of nausea? Or, to turn this question on its head: What is it that is missing in Sartre and that would allow us to think the singular plural of things without becoming nauseated?

In order to give some weight to our tentative rapprochement between Nancy and Sartre, we must right at the outset address a potential objection: Is not Heidegger here too Nancy’s most obvious source in his discussion of things? Does not Nancy’s thinking of things more straightforwardly follow the trajectory of Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world rather than Sartre’s nauseated consciousness? Does not one find in Heidegger a conception of Dasein as the entity that discloses the world itself and things-within-the-world in their intelligibility? Yet there are at least two reasons why I think that Heidegger, at least the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, is unable to provide us with the necessary ground to move in the direction of the breakthrough towards things that Nancy is aiming at (see Nancy 1993a: 411 n.15). The first concerns the being of the entities disclosed in the everyday world; the second the way in which Dasein discloses itself to itself as Being-in-the-world.

1) In *Being and Time* things are disclosed first and foremost (primordially and for the most part) as equipment (Heidegger 1962: § 15). Similarly to what Nancy will say about the thing, there is never only *one* piece of equipment, but always already a referential totality of equipment. The piece of equipment is disclosed in its in-order-to, in its readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*), from out of this totality of equipment, work, disposable materials, users and consumers, etc. Ultimately this referential totality points toward a *Worumwillen*, a for-the-sake-of-which, it points toward a possibility or a project of Dasein (Heidegger 1962: 119). We are fundamentally oblivious to the things we encounter in our everyday dealings with the world. A thematization of the thing, and of the world from out which it is encountered, is first made possible by the break-down of equipment. The thing appears, it becomes

conspicuous, when its ties with the network of references are broken. Such breakdowns are the first steps toward the beholding of mere things in the scientific attitude. The thing appears then as “unworlded” (Heidegger 1992: 168, 196), as “deprived of its worldhood” (Heidegger 1962: 147).<sup>2</sup> As long as Dasein is engaged in its worldly tasks however, the plurality of singular things will always already be organized, each singular thing will always already be projected unto its meaning, assigned a place in the network of references, by a project of Dasein. The “mere” thing will only be encountered when concerned absorption is interrupted. To think the thing (to look at it and theorize it) is possible only after a detachment of Dasein from the thing has taken place. Never does the thing in its opacity touch thought.

2) In its concerned dealings, Dasein is absorbed in the world and oblivious not only to the things encountered in the world, but also to the world itself. In *Being and Time*, Anxiety will be the fundamental attunement or disposedness (*Grundbefindlichkeit*)<sup>3</sup> that is capable of disclosing Dasein to itself by freeing it from its absorption in the world.<sup>4</sup> All modes of disposedness, all existential attunements (*Stimmungen*) disclose how Dasein is its “there,” as it finds itself in the world. Anxiety, on the other hand, is a *fundamental* disposedness because, instead of disclosing one particular way in which the world matters to Dasein, it discloses Dasein to itself as being-in-the-world, *and nothing more*. If Anxiety bears the ontological name instead of the ontic one, it is because it permeates our Being, our existence, and is not the mere episodic occurrence of a *Stimmung* like fear or joy. Anxiety as a fundamental characteristic of our Being reveals something about what we are: a “not” at the heart of our Being, an un-ground. This revelation can take two forms. First and foremost, Dasein flees or covers over its fundamental anxiety by getting involved with entities. This movement of flight (falling) takes its source in existential *Angst*. Falling manifests itself in an ontic movement of fleeing away from our Being. This movement reveals something about Dasein’s Being: it reveals the threat in front of which Dasein flees. However, this threat is not fully assumed but rather avoided by turning toward one’s occupations and preoccupations. This is why Heidegger can say that anxiety is the source of fear: only because Dasein flees in the face of itself and becomes absorbed in the “world” of

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<sup>2</sup> Both are translations of the same German expression: *entweltlichen, Entweltlichung*.

<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I follow Kisiel’s suggestion in his review essay “The new translation of *Sein und Zeit*: A grammatical lexicographer’s commentary” (Kisiel 2007: 243) and translate *Befindlichkeit* as disposedness and reserve attunement (following Macquarrie and Robinson instead of Stambaugh) for *Stimmung*, the ontic pendant of *Befindlichkeit*.

<sup>4</sup> In *Being and Time*, anxiety appears to be the only fundamental disposedness. In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger discusses boredom as a fundamental attunement (*Grundstimmung*) of our contemporary existence. I think that the point which I make here about anxiety could also be made about boredom despite the obvious difference in ontological bearing.

its concerns can entities be disclosed to Dasein as “fearful” and only thereby can Dasein experience fear in the face of an entity (Heidegger 1962: 230).

To be able to see the flight for what it is, namely as *flight*, something needs to interrupt the movement of fleeing. This is what existentiell moments of anxiety do. What is disclosed in existentiell anxiety is not this or that entity in particular but rather the very possibility that there be entities at all and as such. In anxiety the toward-which of the falling, the entities within-the-world, “sink away,” the totality of involvements “collapses into itself,” and become “insignificant” so that Dasein feels “uncanny” or “not-at-home” in the world (Heidegger 1962: 231–233). As a consequence, the entity by which the world comes to be, namely Dasein, is freed from its entanglement in the world for its ownmost potentiality-to-be. Anxiety also bears the ontological name because in its existentiell happening, it discloses our Being to ourselves as what it is (falling, thrown, projective) and opens the possibility for authenticity. Anxiety is the passageway to fundamental ontology.

In *Being and Time* then Heidegger does not seem to leave a way open for an authentic thinking of things. Dasein never comes into contact with things as they are in themselves in the finite singularity of their corporeal existence. Instead, we are either oblivious to the thing and absorbed in the world, or we become “conscious” of the things and the world and of ourselves as the origin of their meaning, only in detachment, distancing or, to use Heidegger’s expression, “existential solipsism” (Heidegger 1962: 233). The thinking that ensues from this detachment is then criticized as “theoretical” and “unworlded.” As a result there can be no primordial experience of the thing, of things in their plural singularities, of the world of things.

Of course, Heidegger does affirm that authentic disclosedness (in other words, resoluteness) does not cut us off from the world but only “modifies ... the way in which the ‘world’ is discovered,” yet he fails to specify what this modification amounts to beyond stating that “one’s Being towards the ready-to-hand ... [is] now given a definite character” (Heidegger 1962: 344). As Magda King points out in her commentary on *Being and Time*, the descriptions of Being-in-the-World focus on the average everyday absorption in using and handling utensils and on the temporalizing of Being-in-the-world as retaining-awaiting making-present [*gewärtigend-behaltendes Gegenwärtigen*]. The authentic way of Being-in-the-World remains underdeveloped and its authentic temporalizing is never discussed (see Heidegger 1962 § 69). King asks, “But how does an instant attending to the situation [that is, authentic Present or *Gegenwart*] discover the things within it? Do these things reveal themselves in a different possibility of their being from the handy-being [the readiness-to-hand] of utensils?” And she adds: “Judging from Heidegger’s later work, they do” (King 2001: 252). The place to look in Heidegger’s corpus for an (authentic) thinking of things would obviously be the 1951 essay “The Thing.” Yet, here too Heidegger shies away from a thinking that could touch, or let itself be touched, by the opacity or the weight of singular things. As Heidegger writes, “Each thing stays the fourfold into a happening of the simple oneness of world. If we let the thing be present in its

thinging from out of the worlding world, then we are thinking of the thing as thing. Taking thought in this way, we let ourselves be called [*gerufen*] by the thing's worlding being" (1971: 181). From Nancy's perspective, such a thinking of the thing remains appropriative. To be sure, Heidegger frees thinking from representationalism, from having to represent things. Yet the task of thinking is to correspond to the thing by answering appropriately to the call of things. In this way, the thing itself becomes the thing *of* or *for* thought. Or, put differently: a thinking of the thing is possible only because the thing itself is also the thing of thought. The question thus persists: can there be a thinking of things which is not appropriative, which does not usurp the independent existence of the thing but rather comes into contact with the thing as it is in itself? (see Nancy 1993a: 177–178).

We have noted that for Heidegger, anxiety is the fundamental disposedness under which Dasein is disclosed to itself as concerned Being-in-the-world and consequently as the source of the intelligibility of all things disclosed within the world. For Sartre as well, in *Being and Nothingness*, anguish will be a fundamental way in which human reality apprehends itself.<sup>5</sup> When walking on a cliff for instance, I can be afraid of slipping on a stone and falling into the abyss (Sartre 1993: 66). This possibility of mine comes to me from without in so far as I am an object in the world and subject to the laws of causality and gravity. Faced with the fear of falling, I can very well decide to tread carefully, I can "project before myself a certain number of future conducts destined to keep the threats of the world at a distance from me. These conducts are my possibilities" (Sartre 1993: 67). Yet, I could, as frightening to me as this might seem, just as well choose to be reckless or simply to willfully plunge myself into the abyss. For, why, by what absolute reason should I not do so? Herein lies the dark groundwater of anguish. I am in anguish when I realize that there is no determining reason for choosing this conduct instead of that one, when I realize that neither fear nor any other motive by itself compels me by some absolutely binding logic to be careful (Sartre 1993: 68–69). Thus "Anguish appears at the moment that I disengage myself from the world where I had been engaged" (Sartre 1993: 78); it is the immediate apprehension of the pure undetermined possibilities of consciousness cut off from the world and from my "essence," or from my "having-been."

Yet, for Sartre, unlike Heidegger, there is yet another fundamental disposedness through which human reality is disclosed. In nausea, human reality does not apprehend itself as freedom but rather as facticity. Indeed, nausea is essentially as close as consciousness can come to grasping facticity in its brute nudity, to experiencing pure being-in-itself. In other words, it is consciousness pushed right up to the edge of not being "conscious" at all or of surrendering its power to nihilate. To understand exactly what nausea is and what is disclosed through it, we should first remind ourselves of the basic premises of Sartre's ontology, especially of the relation

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<sup>5</sup> Heidegger's *Angst* is translated in English as anxiety and in French as *angoisse*. Sartre's *angoisse* on the other hand gets translated as anguish in English.

between consciousness (or the for-itself) and the in-itself, and of the role played by consciousness in “making the world.” We will then be better positioned to grasp both the importance of nausea as an experience of things, as well as the conceptual difficulties it presents.

Sartre describes Being in the following way: “Being is Itself, it is glued to itself. Being is opaque to itself precisely because it is filled with itself” (1993: 28). This is why Being is called the In-itself. At the same time, Being lacks the distance from itself necessary to be able to relate to itself. It is *massif*; it is “full positivity. It knows no otherness, it never posits itself as other-than-another-being” (Sartre 1993: 29). Consequently, Being cannot be created, or derived from anything that would be prior to it. Being is, but it is not justified in being: it is stupid, contingent, superfluous (*de trop*). Since there is no articulation or differentiation amid the one indeterminate (w)hole of Being, we can say with Hegel that pure Being is nothing. The plenitude of oneness is equally the void. The upsurge of the For-itself in the midst of the In-itself is that which will make a world appear.<sup>6</sup> Consciousness, itself a nothingness, a nothingness that breaks into the nothingness of being, is that whereby there can be beings as such, or the world as the multiplicity of beings. Consciousness can do this because it is the nihilation of Being, it can hold Being at a distance and therefore make it appear as such by saying: “I am *not* the whole of being.” This negation reveals the world but adds nothing to Being, “it is nothing but the manner in which being is revealed as not being the for-itself, the manner in which there is being” (Sartre 1993: 251). On the ground of this totalizing negation, particular beings can appear as “thises” which were already there, “hidden” in the undifferentiation of the ground. A particular “this” is also brought to appearance through a negation: “by ‘a withdrawal into the ground of the world’ on the part of all the other ‘thises’; its determination, which is the origin of all determinations, is a negation” (Sartre 1993: 253), by saying: “It is *this* and *not* everything else.”

On the basis of this double nihilation, the “world” can be understood either as a syncretism of undifferentiation or as a collection of “thises,” an external multiplicity. Because the totalization effected by the nihilating consciousness is not a real synthesis, the relation between the “thises” remains one of pure exteriority. On the other hand, the relation between the For-itself and the In-itself is not one of indifferent exteriority but of internal negation. Sartre explains the difference:

This newspaper does not deny concerning itself that it is the table on which it is lying; for in that case the newspaper would be ecstatically outside itself and in the table which it denies and its relation to the table would be an internal negation; it would thereby cease even to be in-itself and would become for-itself. The determinative relation of

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<sup>6</sup> Why this happens is a metaphysical question, and therefore one that ontology can only answer in the “as-if” mode: “*everything takes place as if* the in-itself in a project to found itself gave itself the modification of the for-itself” (Sartre 1993: 789–790).

the “this” therefore can belong neither to the this nor to the that; it enfolds them *without touching them*. (Sartre 1993: 255–256, my emphasis)

He continues:

In fact it is because the inkwell is not the table—nor the pipe nor the glass—that we can apprehend it as an inkwell. And yet if I say, “The inkwell is not the table,” I am thinking *nothing*. Thus determination is a *nothing* which does not belong as an internal structure either to the thing or to consciousness, but its being is to-be-summoned by the For-itself across a system of internal negations in which the in-itself is revealed in its indifference to all that is not itself. (Sartre 1993: 256–257)

To say that Being is “massive” means that nothing can be added to it or subtracted from it, nothing can happen to it. In the absence of the For-itself “there is being before as after the storm—that is all” (Sartre 1993: 39). It is not even possible to say that there is something else. The world, on the other hand, is fragile. What is destroyed or modified, for example in a storm, is not Being but the distribution of the masses of Being that were the result of a “limiting cutting into being” (Sartre 1993: 39) by the For-itself.<sup>7</sup> It is a destruction of *this* in favor of *that*.

Consciousness cannot grasp the In-itself without at the same time grasping it as nihilated and grasping itself as projected beyond it. There is no pure, given in-itself for the For-itself, but only facticity and situation: that which I utilize for my assumed (freely chosen) project (Sartre 1993: 430). In nausea however consciousness comes as close as it can to touching Being without being already beyond it. The For-itself chooses to be, chooses to go on living, chooses to become this or that, chooses to value or disvalue this or that being, chooses to bring this or that being into being. At the same time, the For-itself chooses on the ground of something un-chosen: Being. That it finds itself in the midst of Being, this the For-itself does not choose. It is necessary that the For-itself be as freedom (it cannot stop being free, stop detaching itself from what is) but it is not necessary that the For-itself *be*. It is necessary that the For-itself be this or that but it is contingent that it should be this, and not something else (Sartre 1993: 407–408). This double contingency is what the For-itself apprehends in nausea. It can come into contact with the contingency of Being and of

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<sup>7</sup> This limiting cutting into being is prior to Heidegger’s readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and the ordering of the world as totality of involvements: “In order for the totality of being to order itself around us as instruments, in order for it to parcel itself into differentiated complexes which refer one to another and which can be used, it is necessary that negation rise up not as a thing among other things but as the rubric of a category which presides over the arrangement and the redistribution of great masses of being in things. Thus the rise of man in the midst of the being which ‘invests’ him causes a world to be discovered. But the essential and primordial moment of this rise is the negation” (Sartre 1993: 59).

things because it already exists in this contingency as a body. Indeed, Nausea is what reveals my body and the general sense of bodily existence to my consciousness. It is an experience of the body that is almost not body-consciousness, almost not surpassed toward a project. It is the taste of contingency as such, unqualified, insipid, without color (Sartre 1993: 444–445).<sup>8</sup> In nausea, consciousness apprehends itself, others, and the world in the pure contingency of bodily presence.

Such an apprehension is precisely that of Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of the novel *Nausea*. “I was going to throw that pebble, I looked at it and then it all began: I felt that it existed. Then after that there were other Nauseas; from time to time objects start existing in your hand” (Sartre 1969: 123). “Objects should not touch because they are not alive. ... But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts” (Sartre 1969: 10). Roquentin is starting to grasp bodily existence, to touch it; he is starting to exist (only) as a body in-the-midst-of-bodies: “I was the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it—since I was conscious of it—yet lost in it, nothing but it. An uneasy consciousness which, notwithstanding, let itself fall with all its weight on this piece of dead wood” (Sartre 1969: 131). What he grasps are not categories or concepts anymore (explanations, abstractions), but singular existences: “In vain to repeat: ‘This is a root’—it didn’t work any more. I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a breathing pump, to that, to this hard and compact skin of a sea lion, to this oily, callous, headstrong look. The function explains nothing: it allowed you to understand generally that it was a root, but not *that one* at all” (Sartre 1969: 129). It would seem then that Sartre is approaching the sort of contact between thought and thing that Nancy striving to bring to light. Consciousness here touches things in their singularities and lets itself weigh upon them. Yet Roquentin’s consciousness *s’empâte*, thickens, in this thought. Indeed, the revelation of existence is oppressive (Sartre 1969: 133) and the abundance of beings does not give Roquentin the effect of generosity; it is a *trop-plein*, a too-much. Why? Because the world, the differentiated totality of “thises” that was the result of the nihilating power of consciousness, of its “limiting cutting into being,” only put a coat of veneer on Being. Nausea befalls Roquentin because this veneer has melted: “the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness” (Sartre 1969: 127). The world is returning to the undifferentiated In-itself. Or rather the undifferentiated In-Itself flashes through the existents in the world. The oppressiveness of the contact with the world arises because Roquentin is unable to differentiate himself from the world

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<sup>8</sup> Bodily existence can be apprehended by consciousness in other ways, for example in physical pain. Pure “lived” pain would be pain that is neither apprehended as part of a disease nor surpassed into a project of not being pain. It would be pain that is not pain-consciousness (Sartre 1993: 438).

around him (“I am not the whole of being”) and to differentiate between singular beings (“It is this and not that”). The nauseating experience of the fullness of being is not therefore the meaningful experience of a multiplicity of singular existences. Because there is no differentiation and no articulation between the existents, there remains only the oppressive paralysis or stiffness of Being.

In significant ways, the undifferentiated and nauseating contact with worldly things in their sheer existence that Sartre describes would seem like a description of the same phenomenological experience that Nancy is seeking to uncover via his notion of the “sense” of the world and his foray towards a thought that would touch the brute existence of things themselves. Yet Sartre lacks an essential touchstone of Nancy’s conception of what the world is. For Nancy, Being is not an undifferentiated whole, lying in wait until the For-itself of consciousness breaks in upon it and configures a world. Rather, Being is always already the plurality of articulated beings, which already themselves make sense, and which can, only because of this original and intrinsic articulation, come to be signified. To understand how this is possible, it is necessary to consider Nancy’s concept of the plural singular, the world of bodies, sense and exscription. Because Nancy is not any sort of existentialist, we cannot expect that the world of bodies be disclosed in a specific *Grundbefindlichkeit*, be it anxiety or nausea. If one were to point to a “fundamental experience” of existence in Nancy, this could probably only be “touch” as something taking place between singularities or between bodies, in a liminal zone between ineffability and meaninglessness.

To comprehend Nancy’s ontology of the singular plural, we must begin by distinguishing singularity from individuality. A singular being is not a substance or atom, closed upon itself and unrelated to other atoms. If Nancy insists on the finitude of singular beings, this must not be taken to mean that each singularity is encircled within a limit that separates or absolves it from all other singularities. The finitude or limitation of the singular being must be distinguished from what Nancy calls “finiteness” (*finité*) (see 1990b: 87).<sup>9</sup> Finiteness (for example Cartesian finiteness) is only thinkable against the backdrop of an infinite, against which it will then be essentially regarded as deficient, and against which it will necessarily be seen as engaged in an infinite process of finition or completion. The end or finition of finiteness can only lie in its overcoming its limitation through the appropriation of what lies beyond itself. The *telos* of the finite will thus be only the bad infinite, an infinite that is never actually present but can only be dreamed to be achieved at the end of an infinite process. Unlike finiteness, finitude denotes that which exists at its limits. Since it does not cease to be exposed at its limits, its exposition is endlessly repeated and therefore never finished. Thus finitude itself is the true infinite: “It is the

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy takes the distinction from Henri Birault’s essay “Heidegger et la pensée de la finitude,” in Birault 2005. The theme of finitude runs throughout Nancy’s work but see especially the first eponymous essay “A Finite Thinking,” in Nancy 2003.

good infinite or the actual infinite—the infinitude in act of the act itself as the act of exceeding oneself” (Nancy 2001: 39).

If Nancy sometimes calls the infinitude of the finite being its “absoluteness” (1997: 78), we should not confuse it with the ab-soluteness of an absolved being. Such a being would be, according to Nancy, an essential contradiction, since not only would it have to be separated from its outside by a limit, but this limit itself would have to be without relation to its outside (see 1993b: 4). The logic of absoluteness leads the absolute to the black whole of immanence: “A total absence of exteriority, a non-extension concentrated in itself, not something impenetrable, but rather its excess, the impenetrable *mixed with* the impenetrable, infinite intususception, the *proper* devouring itself, all the way to the void at its center—in truth deeper, even, that the center, deeper than any trace of spacing (that the ‘center’ still retains), in an abyss where the hole absorbs even its own edges” (Nancy 2008a: 75). In the similar way, for Sartre, Being, or the In-itself, is nothing. It becomes something, some things, when it is articulated by consciousness into a world.

We can understand the finitude of singular beings more easily if we add that for Nancy, a singular being is always a corporeal being, a place of existence (see 2000: 18; 2008a:15). A body is impenetrable, but it is not isolated or absolved. To explain this relation of impenetrability without isolation between bodies, Nancy borrows the Cartesian notion of *partes extra partes*, parts outside parts. Because they are impenetrable, bodies (and also the components or constitutive parts of material bodies) exist in a relation of exteriority, never occupying the same place. This necessary distance is what allows bodies to articulate themselves as bodies and come into contact with other bodies. The relation between bodies is one of touch, of dis-junction, of contact-separation.<sup>10</sup>

Now we can understand why there cannot be just one singular being, one body: “But as long as there is something, there is also something else, other bodies whose limits expose them to each other’s touch, between repulsion and dissolution” (Nancy 1993a: 206). The concept of singularity necessarily includes the dissemination of singularities, their singularization and distinction from other singularities (see Nancy 2000: 32; 39–40). One distances oneself from the other so that one cannot be mistaken for the other but this differentiation is only possible thanks to the other from which one differentiates oneself. This “self-differentiating” process is similar to nihilation in Sartre except that it is not something done to Being by consciousness. As we already saw, Being for Nancy, is not In-itself. It is also not For-itself. To escape the constraints of Sartre’s (or Hegel’s) dichotomization of Being, Nancy will describe Being as the To-itself or the Toward-itself (*à-soi*) and speak of the *aséité* of Being (see 2000:

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<sup>10</sup> Derrida in *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* recognizes that Nancy breaks with the traditional haptocentrist metaphysics in as much as he emphasizes the moment of break and distance which interrupts the immediacy and continuity normally associated with touch. See Derrida 2005: 156.

93–99; 1990a: 205–209).<sup>11</sup> This *à* as *toward* is the originary meaning of the *with*: it means that singularities are not merely juxtaposed, but are ex-posed or dis-posed (see Nancy 1993b, 29). At the same time, what is between the singular beings, the *with* or the *between* is not a third thing. It is “no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge” (Nancy 2000: 5). Nor is the *between* an empty space, a milieu or container, within which bodies would come into contact. Bodies do not come into contact because they are in space or because there is space between them. Space is not the condition of possibility of bodies. On the contrary, space (and time) has its condition of possibilities in bodies, in their articulations, that is, in the play of their juncture:

By itself, articulation is only a juncture, or more exactly the play of the juncture: what takes place where different pieces touch each other without fusing together, where they slide, pivot, or tumble over one another, one at the limit of the other without the mutual *play*—which always remains, at the same time, a play *between* them—ever forming into the substance or the higher power of a Whole. (Nancy 1993b: 76)

The articulation of bodies as the “origin” of space (and time) can be understood, along the lines of an embodiment of Derridean *différance* as temporalization and spacing, as space’s becoming-temporal and time’s becoming-spatial (see Derrida 1973: 136). The differentiation or articulation between bodies is prior to the difference between space and time and in order to be thought requires that space be temporal(ized) and that time be spatial(ized). In other words, two bodies exposed in space can differ or be seen to differ only if one is referred to the other (a process which “takes time”). In the same way, two expositions of bodies (or of the same body) in time can differ or be seen to differ only if the first carries over to the next such that both can be juxtaposed in space. The interval or distance between differing, articulated bodies must occur actively, dynamically, but also with a certain perseverance in repetition (see Nancy 2000: 83).

There are only singularities, with nothing between them but their exposition. Something can only happen between us (a *rappor*t,<sup>12</sup>—or the circulation of sense) if there is an openness or nothingness between us, that is, if being withdraws (Nancy 1994: 68; 2000: 94). The “with” or the “withdrawal” shares or divides (*partage*) Being in such a way that a world come to be configured. When Nancy speaks of the creation of the world, he is not in principle contesting Sartre’s affirmation that being is uncreated and hence contingent. Creation is, for Nancy, another way of saying that bodies are *only* what they are (1993a: 196), that there is nothing outside of the world of bodies. That the world is created out of nothing implies that it has no pre-

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<sup>11</sup> One should note that Nancy translates Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world with *être-au-monde* (with the preposition *à*) and speaks in the same way of an *être-à-plusieurs*. Nancy also translates Heidegger’s *Sein-zum-Tode* (Being-towards-death) with *être-à-la-mort*.

<sup>12</sup> On the semantic of *rappor*t, see Nancy 2001: 16–23.

supposition or pre-condition—neither undifferentiated prime matter nor an omnipotent creator capable of producing something out of nothing:

Not only is the *nihil* nothing prior but there is also no longer a “nothing” that preexists creation; it is the act of appearing [*surgissement*], it is the very origin—insofar as this is understood only as what is designated by the verb “to originate.” If the nothing is not anything prior, then only the *ex* remains—if one can talk about it like this—to qualify creation-in-action, that is, the appearing or arrival [*venue*] *in nothing* (in the sense that we talk about someone appearing “in person”). (Nancy 2000: 16)

The *ex nihilo* of creation essentially signifies the groundlessness of the world, the ever renewed coming-to-presence of the world: singularities, each time an other, each time with others. To speak of the creation of the world is therefore to see the world as the “explosion of presence in the originary multiplicity of its partition” (Nancy 2000: 21; *trans. mod.*). Nancy also calls this partition a free dissemination of being: “The free dissemination [of existence] (whose formula might well be only a tautology) is not a diffraction of a principle, nor the multiple effect of a cause, but is the anarchy—the origin removed from every logic of origin, from every archaeology—of a singular and thus in essence plural arising whose being *as being* is neither ground, nor element, nor reason” (Nancy 1994: 13).

At this point we can bring into relief a crucial difference between the ontology of Sartre and that of Nancy. For Sartre, it is the undifferentiated whole of Being, the In-itself that is contingent. For Nancy on the other hand, this contingency or groundlessness pertains to each unique being, in its singular coming-to-presence, or its singular ex-position. For Sartre, things and their meanings are “created” and “justified” by consciousness on the ground of the ungrounded In-itself. The plurality of singular beings, the articulation of the world in singularities is for Sartre/Roquentin a mere coat of veneer. Being is massive, nothing can be added to it or subtracted from it, nothing can happen to it. It is the For-itself’s “limiting cutting into being” (Sartre 1993: 39) that distributes the masses of Being into a world. For Nancy, the relationality of the “with” already occurs amid Being itself. In Nancy then, bodies do not depend on conscious to arrive and articulate them (1993a: 197). There is nothing for *us* to articulate because beings are already articulated through their junctures, they are conjoint/disjoint by the nothing of the “with” that exposes them to one another. The articulation of bodies does not depend on a consciousness that would determine them as “this and not that.” The nothing is not, as in Sartre, that which the For-itself brings into the world in order that Being (as beings) can appear; it is already there as the “with” that Being essentially is. So that there is something rather than nothing, there must necessarily be “the explosion of presence in the multiplicity of its partition.” This “with” is nothing more than the process of Being happening. Prior to the explosion of the “with” there simply “is” no Being. As such there cannot be any flashes of unarticulated, meaningless Being, no nauseating limit-experience of Being

before its partition. Of course, we are left with the problem here of how Sartre's quite valid phenomenological description of the experience of nausea could be incorporated in Nancy's ontology. We mentioned at the beginning of our exposition of Nancy's ontology that the basic experience of existence is always one of touch. Nausea can therefore only be described as a form of touch. This is, in fact, not very far from Sartre's own phenomenological description of Roquentin's first nauseating experience: "Objects should not touch because they are not alive. ... But they touch me, it is unbearable" (Sartre 1969: 10). What would be required here is a phenomenological analysis of various forms of touch, of contact-separation between bodies. At the ontological level, the notion of exposition lets us see that all bodies touch/are touched, but a phenomenology of touch would allow us to differentiate nauseating touch from other touch-experiences.

Sartre's and Nancy's differing conceptions of the origin of Being's articulation bring about a similar divergence in their understanding of language and sense. For Sartre/Roquentin, language is universal. It consists of categories that cannot grasp singular existence but only relations of appurtenance to genus and species (Sartre 1969: 176). As Roquentin tries to put down his nauseating experiences in his diary, he notices: "[There] I thought without words, *on* things, *with* things. ... [Now] I struggle against words; down there I touched the thing" (Sartre 1969: 129). Only when Roquentin is without words does he start grasping existence. But the absence of words leaves him unprotected: "I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenseless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me" (Sartre 1969: 125). Roquentin experiences bodily existence because he is outside of language, outside of sense and meaning.

Nancy will avoid this situation by differentiating the broader category of sense from its narrow understanding exclusively in terms of linguistic signification. Understood as sense, language is the incorporeal of the world (see Nancy 2000: 94). As such, it is outside the world, yet not detached from it. It lies neither beyond the world, in an ultimate referent that would provide a definite terminus to the circulation of sense, nor within a consciousness that would produce sense separated from the world. What Nancy calls sense is nothing other than the exposition of bodies. It circulates without beginning or end between bodies (see Nancy 2000: 84).<sup>13</sup> Consciousness does not first constitute sense and then in a second moment impose sense onto the world. Rather consciousness exposes the world *as* sense. This is possible because consciousness itself is exposed in its Being towards the world, or as we could also say, because consciousness itself is embodied. Or again, and to stay closer to Nancy's formulation: because consciousness (or "the soul") is nothing but the difference of the body to itself, the To-itself of the body (2008a:126). Making sense does not mean producing sense or possessing sense but rather letting sense circulate between ourselves and between each other according to the *to* or *towards*

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<sup>13</sup> On sense in Nancy see especially 1998: 4–15 and 2000: 1–5.

of Being. Roquentin cannot make sense of the world because there he does not have the necessary distance in his proximity to things for a touch as contact-separation to occur: "The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes" (Sartre 1969: 127).

If language is understood purely as linguistic significations, it becomes an inessential part of the world, something external. But when it is understood more primordially, when it is grasped as sense, it appears as an essential "component" of the world. For a world to make sense (and since a world is necessarily a place of sense, we can equally say: for a world to be) it is not enough that a plurality of beings be "mutely" juxtaposed, there must also be an inter-pellation of singularities. There must be not only the plurality of beings but also the *aséité* of Being. This inter-pellation of beings precedes any way in which language might address these beings. Yet, inter-pellation constitutes the very possibility of language doing so (see Nancy 1993b: 29).

The relation that sense entertains with bodies is similar to the relation between bodies: a contact-separation, a touch, an exposition. The polysemy of the word exposition is not overlooked by Nancy. Exposition denotes at once 1) bodily exposition, that is, bodies touching bodies and the "vulnerability" that ensues, 2) phenomenological exposition, that is, consciousness exposing the exposition of body, and 3) linguistic exposition, that is, sense being inscribed in language, in ideal meanings. The relation between body and sense, and between sense and linguistic signification, Nancy calls exscription. Sense is always finite and embodied, it is always a "concrete" event: the bodily exposition of ideal meanings. It is the point where language can weigh or touch. Meanings, inscribed significations (categories, as Roquentin calls them) are always already beyond language, in contact with a material point. What is inscribed—the meaning of the word "tree" for instance—is at the same time exscribed, placed outside of language by its contact with a material instance or a technical apparatus (lips, fingers, paper, ink, keyboard). Sense does not happen outside of signification (ideal meanings, categories), yet it happens as that which is outside signification (a singular bodily event). Sense as a singular bodily event is at the outer limit of language and signification. In a similar way, the body as impenetrable matter is at the outer limit of sense: "Exscription then describes the relation of exteriority, or separation which is maintained between impenetrable matter and bodily sense, and between bodily sense and linguistic signification" (James 2005: 149–150). It is through this double exscription of signification and sense, and of sense and bodies, that thinking can touch the thing. The word "tree" in its abstract meaning can come to touch "this tree," "this thing," (impenetrable matter, what really "matters") through the exscription of its sense (as a singular bodily event) (See Nancy 1993a: 338–339). At the same time, the ex- of exscription reminds us that the thing is that which weighs *outside* of thought (Nancy 1997: 79). The experience of bodily existence is therefore not ineffable, as it is in Sartre. Sense, as the middle term between material bodies and ideal meanings, remaining beyond both of them but touching

them at their outer limits, is what allows for a “meaningful experience” of singular beings.

We started with the question: why are things nauseating for Sartre? We concluded that what nausea discloses is not so much things themselves but rather the obdurate contingency of all existence that resists all attempts to impose meaning upon it. In a world without divine consolation, the task of assigning meaning, according to Sartre can only fall back to humans. It is we who must draw Being from its collapse into nothingness and indistinctness and let a world appear from the massiveness of Being. Overcoming nausea can only happen by consciousness projecting itself and thereby giving meaning to that which it transcends. Nevertheless the perpetual human task of creating meaning will always rest upon nothing other than absolute contingency and the essential meaninglessness of things will never be eradicated. This is why nausea is a fundamental experience of human reality for Sartre. In looking at Nancy’s “response” to Sartre, we saw that his thought as well is guided by the “death of God” and the groundlessness of existence. Yet, Nancy undercuts the problem of the “meaning” of the world in the face of an absurd universe. As opposed to Sartre, it is not the task of the human to give meaning *to* or impose meaning *on* the world. Rather Being itself as Toward-Itself already makes sense. Our task is therefore not to create sense, but to let ourselves be exposed to—in more Derridean language we could say: let ourselves be caught up in the play of— “things,” of those singularities that are already exposed one to another.

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