

A Mêlée Without Sacrifice: Nancy's Ontology of Offering

Against Derrida's Politics of Sacrifice

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In this paper I want to explore a certain community of writing, namely the one between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. The on-going dialogue between the two on the subject of community has left in their writings only traces (with the exception of the first essay in Derrida's *Voyous*): implicit allusions or short references to be found mainly in footnotes. Those allusions turn mainly around the question of fraternity. Derrida claims that it is necessary to deconstruct the concept of community, to sever it from its genealogical ties. It is, according to Derrida, such a deconstruction of the concept of community that is missing in Nancy's work and that might still lead his thinking in the direction of a certain fraternity.¹ Nancy, on his part, answers that he agrees with Derrida's critique of community as fraternity but that he already thinks beyond it and reproaches Derrida for not getting at a deconstructed concept of community which could be used to think our being-with anew. Given the double movement of deconstruction (reversal and displacement),² one could explain the "dialogue" as follows: while Derrida claims that Nancy skips the first phase (that he uses an old concept to name something new without analyzing the genealogical ties of that concept), Nancy claims that Derrida remains stuck in the first phase (that he does not sketch a new, displaced concept – as he did for example with "writing"). Because the two movements are necessary for a full deconstruction of a concept, it is my view that one can

read Derrida and Nancy together, *with* one another in the strong sense of the term, as two sides of the same discourse.

In this paper, however, I would like to read Nancy against Derrida. I want to underline a difference, maybe even an opposition, in their way of thinking the singular plural, the singular in the plural, or the plurality of singularities. To do so, I will oppose what I want to call Derrida's politics of sacrifice to Nancy's ontology of offering.

I. Derrida on the singular plural

Derrida has expressed in many places his reserve not only toward the word community, but also toward the thing itself (Pts 366). One reason for his reserve is that communities tend to neutralize differences and reduce the incommensurable alterity of the other by thinking it under the figure of the brother, the same, the next of kin, the neighbor, the fellow man. By severing the bond that binds the one to, or excludes the one from, a group, Derrida's deconstruction of community wants to make way for an experience of the other which would respect its incommensurable singularity. But one must also ask what kind of plurality remains when singularity is thought in such a radical way.

In Derrida's work, singularity is another name for the *tout autre* (the wholly other) and is associated with two values which Nancy distinguishes from singularity, namely the absolute and the secret, or the absolute secret. Both words serve to describe that which is separated, isolated, remote, inaccessible. What is absolutely secret is the alterity of the other, its singularity: "The secret is not only a thing, a content that would have to be hidden or kept behind oneself. The other (*autrui*) is secret because he is other. ... A singularity is essentially secret, isolated" (PM 296). Or in Husserlian terms, the alter ego is other because he can never be given to me *en personne* (*leibhaftig*) in an originary presentation, but always only in an analogical appresentation

(or presentification).³ I can never gain a direct access to the subjective face of the lived experiences of the other as they are lived by him. This secret – that is the other – is absolute and must be distinguished from conditional secrets, secrets that can be uncovered or deciphered, secrets waiting under a veil, in a crypt, in a book or in one’s heart to be unveiled, decoded or expressed. This thought of singularity as absolute secret introduces a heteronomical and dissymmetrical bend in the space where the one and the other – the absolute other – “meet” (PA 258).

The introduction of the plural will destabilize the incredible relation to the other as wholly other. There is always another other, as wholly other as the first one. In the economy of the French language, this fact is expressed by the phrase: *tout autre est tout autre*. The phrase means at the same time “every other is every other” and “every other is wholly other”: absolute comparability and absolute incomparability in one stroke. We are all comparable in so far as we are incomparable, we all are symmetrical in so far as we are asymmetrical, or in Husserlian terms again: because we are all egos like me, we are all egos absolutely other than, and absolutely inaccessible to, me.⁴ These paradoxical formulations testify to a certain madness that is introduced in the social or political space by the plurality of absolute singularities. The arrival of the third (who/that was always already there in the mere possibility of addressing the other) does not erase the dissymmetry of singularities, it does not flatten out the heteronomical relation. If it does force us to calculate, compare and measure, than in a totally other way.

What does the plurality of singularities change in my relation to a singularity? An answer can be found in Derrida’s reading of Abraham’s sacrifice in *Donner la mort*. Abraham was called by God, the one and only, who commanded him to sacrifice his son, the one and only, on Mount Moriah. God is here the name of the absolute other (the one who sees without being seen, the one who demands without explaining, the one who calls without entering into a conversation). One

can interpret this sacrifice in two ways. It is first the sacrifice of ethics (in Kierkegaard's sense), of the duty that binds me to everybody, to others in general. But it is also the sacrifice of the irreplaceable, unique son, the sacrifice of that which I love and must love incommensurably. Because *tout autre est tout autre*, the difference between universality and singularity trembles: "Abraham is faithful to God only in the perjury, in the treason of all his loved ones, and of the uniqueness of each of his loved ones, here exemplarily, of his unique and beloved son; and he could not prefer to be faithful to his loved ones, or to his son, without betraying the absolute other: God if you want" (DM 69). In an other context while discussing Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, Derrida will write: "Living, that has to be heard with *with*. ... But every time, it is only one who *lives with* only one: I live, myself, *with (suzao)*, and with each one, each time with only one" (PA 37-38). Because of the plurality of others and because I can only live with one other at the time, every decision, every election, is the unbearable sacrifice of other singularities. For Derrida, the extraordinary story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son on Mount Moriah illustrates the most common structure of our everyday experiences.

Moreover, because it is each time an incalculable and incommensurable singularity that is sacrificed to another, it is impossible of justifying one's choices, one's preferences: "Whether I want it or not, I will never be able to justify the fact that I prefer or that I sacrifice the one (one other) to another (to another other). I will always be isolated and hold in secrecy on that matter, because there is nothing to say about it. That which binds me to singularities, to this or that one rather than to this or that other one, this remains ultimately unjustifiable (it is the hyper-ethical sacrifice of Abraham), as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice that I commit in this way at every moment" (DM 70). There is no objective standard to which I could compare each singularity so as to place each of them in order of importance. Each one of them is beyond standard, exceptional, incommensurable. But if every decision is an unjustifiable preferring, does it matter

what I choose? Doesn't this thought of plurality lead to an "anything goes"? There is no absolute standpoint from which we can judge each other's choices, but this does not mean that one can be satisfied with one's preference and rest with a good conscience. I have to prefer, it is not possible not to sacrifice,⁵ but this does not mean that the sacrificed others go silent (exactly as Abraham's preference for his God does not mean that he stops loving Isaac). My decision remains an unbearable betrayal. One can therefore judge those who do not see that they sacrifice: those who do not make decisions in the night of non-knowledge (those who think they can objectively justify their preferences) and those who do not make decisions at all (those who remain on the level of generality and forget the irreplaceable singularity of every other).

Transition: Nancy against Derrida: Sacrifice or Offering

There are similarities between Derrida's and Nancy's thinking of the singular plural. Both want to think a certain equality, not as fraternity,⁶ but as the dissymmetry of singularities. Their project (measuring the incommensurable) is at first glance similar, but as Nancy remarks, there are two ways to measure the incommensurable: according to the Other, and according to the 'with' (ESP 105). The first leads to sacrifice, while the second leads to offering. It is necessary according to Nancy to think a community of singularities offered to one another, and not sacrificed to one another (or to the Other).

II. Nancy on the singular plural

Nancy always distinguishes singularity from individuality (see CD 17; 23-24). A singularity is not a substance or an atom, one and indivisible, closed upon itself, absolved from any contact with others. A being is singular and essentially finite not because it is enclosed within a limit that would separate it from other beings – the etymological sense of 'secret' - but because it is

concerned with its limit (CD 69). It exists on the limit, on the edge, it is neither inside nor outside (neither in the immanence of being identical to oneself, nor in the transcendence of a communion with the Other), but essentially ex-posed, turned inside out. This exposition or being-at-the-limit is that which Nancy calls “offering”. The offering is a reserved, suspended gift that remains hanging at the limit between two or more singularities (two or more freedoms).

If a singularity is not an individual, it should also not be thought as an individual that would have been breached, ripped or torn: “There is, strictly speaking, no tearing of the singular being: there is no open cut through which an ‘inside’ would flow and lose itself in the outside. This would presuppose an inside, an interiority” (CD 76). This is why Nancy will prefer, instead of speaking of the other (*autrui, l’autre*), to speak of the body: “Bodies are places of existence. ... The body-place is neither full nor empty, it has neither an inside nor an outside, neither parts, nor totality, functions, or finality. But it is a skin” (Corpus 16).⁷ Even the most intimate fold of the skin is still a surface exposed to the outside. A singularity is offered on its limits, on its edges, to touch and not to penetration. The only way to penetrate a singularity as body is with a dagger, in putting it to death. A body as such is therefore not impenetrable, even though penetration is murder; what remains impenetrable is its limits, its exposition, its offering.

‘Singularity’ so defined can only be heard in the plural. A singularity is offered, each time, to other singularities: “The concept of singular implies its singularization, and therefore its distinction from (*d’avec*) other singularities. ... The singular is immediately each one, and therefore also each one with and between all the others” (ESP 52). In “Cum”, Nancy points out different French expressions using the prepositions *avec* (with) or *d’avec* (literally: from with) (PD 118). In these expressions, there is a proximity of proximity and distance. On the one hand, ‘with’ always denotes a certain contact, not a mere juxtaposition, but a certain disposition toward, a mutual exposition. But one should not mistake Nancy’s exposition with fusion: the contact

always happens through a distance. Even in order to touch myself, I need a spacing in proximity (ESP 23). In the same vein, when I speak with myself, I am already to myself in the distance of the voice to the ear (ESP 107-108); I am already plural to myself. Proximity needs distance, spacing, to make sense, to let sense circulate.

But the distance of exposition, the ‘with’ or the ‘in-between’ is not a third thing, a bond, a web or a bridge between singularities; neither is it a place, a void, a milieu or a container, in which bodies would come into contact (CD 17, ESP 24). In another vocabulary, the ‘with’ is not first of all a *clinamen* that would bend the atoms toward or away from another. Before the *clinamen*, before the inclination that makes the atoms slope toward or away from one another, the atoms must be inclined outside of themselves, to their edge or limit. There are only singularities, nothing between them, but their articulation, their exposition.

The being-with of bodies in the world remains between the aggregation of the group and the disaggregation of juxtaposition.⁸ Between those two interpretations of the group (*l'ensemble*): “either the group as juxtaposition *partes extra partes*, isolated parts without relations, or the group as gathering *totum intra totum*, unitotality where the relation overcome itself in pure being” (ESP 81), between those two, being-together (*l'être-ensemble*) happens.

The ‘with’ exposes ‘us’ to each other, but it is not a mixer. The idea of mixture, Nancy writes, “presupposes the isolation of pure substances, and the operation of a mixture” (ESP 172). As a political example of such mixture, Nancy will mention the systematic rape of women of one ethnic group by men of another ethnic group. Even though this gesture of mixing creates mixed children, a mixture of blood, it at the same time reaffirms in this mixture the pure identities of both races and the absence of relation between them (ESP 179). The reaffirmation of pure elements is a danger always looming over any discourse of *mélange* (multiracialism, multiculturalism, etc.).

If Nancy wants to speak instead of a *mêlée*, it is because there is no purity to start off with. There are no bloods, no races, no subjects to be mixed, but there are still identifiable elements that entangle and disentangle themselves. How are those “identities” to be thought? A man: a *mêlée* of traits, moods, thoughts, gestures, etc.; a city: a *mêlée* of people, places, encounters, stories; likewise for a language, a country, a culture... All those things can be named; they can be identified by a proper name. But this name should be the name of no one, of nothing presentable in person, *leibhaftig*. The singular plural does not only mean that there is always a plurality of singularities, but first and foremost that a singularity is itself plural or multiple. There are singular differences in that which we call ‘identity’. But those differences, or this plurality within singularity, does not prevent identification from taking place. It is those identifications that Nancy will name ‘ipseity’ (ESP 178).⁹ Thanks to the concept of ipseity, it is possible to think of a style, a language, a culture, a city, not as unity, but as a certain identifiable tone that is never contained in any fixed set of features and that, consequently, always remains at the same time unidentifiable, inimitable. To posit, to fix an identity once and for all, to use the proper name as the sign of pure, punctual, identical unity – be it to adopt it or to reject it – would be to dismiss both the *mêlée* and the *démêlé*. It would be to kill the *mêlée* within each ipseity, and therefore to do without the necessity of a *démêlé* with other ipseities. It would be to kill both the singular and the plural.

Conclusions (in the plural)

What conclusions can be drawn from the exposition of Derrida’s and Nancy’s thinking of plurality? The most obvious difference between their thinking is certainly one of vocabulary. Although they both use the word singularity, they do not agree on what words should be used to describe this singularity and its measurement: Derrida speaks of the absolute, the infinite, the

secret, the impossible; Nancy of ipseity, finitude, equality and fraternity. But it is more than a disagreement on words: what they think is different. And so I would venture to say that while there is a place for a (genuine) plurality in Nancy, there is none in Derrida, the plurality of others being always sacrificial. But we could underplay the difference between offering and sacrifice – and avoid having to decide who is right, that is, to sacrifice one thinker for the other – by saying that Nancy's and Derrida's projects are concerned with two different things (ontology and politics), that they happen on two different levels.

Nancy's project is an ontology of being-with, it is a description of the way we are, singular plural, with others, with the world. It is a laying bare of the ontological presupposition of all thinking of the political, or of the politico-philosophical sphere (ESP 57). In the retreat of the political, that is, when all political figures have retreated, the question of the political comes to us anew, not as the question of the best form of political organization, but as the necessity of thinking the space in which our being-together happens. Derrida's thinking of plurality addresses explicitly what politics is, i.e. the essence of the political decision. It is on the concrete level of decision that plurality leads to the sacrifice of that which should have co-existed.

Endnotes

1. For Derrida's critique of fraternity in Nancy, see PA 57 note 1), and §§ 4-5 of *Voyous*. In this book, Derrida also mentions that he had already expressed his concern with Nancy's use of the concept of fraternity at the latter's doctoral defense *Voyous* 91 note 1). Nancy dismisses Derrida's concern in ESP 44 note 3).
2. On reversal and displacement, see *Marges* 392.
3. See among others ED 182, PA 286, DM 76, TS 73, PM 383.
4. See ED 154, DM 76, PA 209, TS 58.
5. Even if I were to turn myself toward, or respond to, everyone at the same time – which is empirically impossible, be it only because I can't speak all languages at the same time – I would still be sacrificing singularities, I would even be sacrificing all singularities by remaining on the level of the general and by not heeding to the singularity of everyone. There is no doubt that for Derrida, one has to address singularities – even though it means always a limited number of singularities – rather than none at all.
6. Even though it is the word Nancy used in *L'expérience de la liberté* and which prompted Derrida's questioning in *Voyous*.
7. See also ESP 37: "A singularity is always a body".
8. In a similar way, the 'we' lies between the Heideggerian 'they' (dispersion in anonymity) and the 'I' (fusion into a subject of a higher order) and remains closer to the expression *les gens*, 'the people' (ESP 24-25).
9. See Derrida's critique of ipseity as a power, as an 'I can' in *Voyous* 30-31, 71.

List of abbreviations:

(All references are to the French texts. I am responsible for all translations.)

- CD Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1999).
- Corpus Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris: Métailié, 2000).
- DM Jacques Derrida, “Donner la mort”, in *L'éthique du don : Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté and Michael Wetzel (Paris: Métailié, 1992).
- ED Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967).
- ESP Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).
- Marges Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).
- PA Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994).
- PD Jean-Luc Nancy, *La pensée dérobée* (Paris: Galilée, 2001).
- PM Jacques Derrida, *Papier Machine* (Paris: Galilée, 2001).
- Pts Jacques Derrida, *Points de suspension: Entretiens* (Paris: Galilée, 1992).
- TS Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).
- Voyous Jacques Derrida, *Voyous: deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Galilée, 2003).