

TOWARDS A DIVINE ATHEISM: JEAN-LUC NANCY'S DECONSTRUCTION OF MONOTHEISM AND THE PASSAGE OF THE LAST GOD

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In Briefings on Existence, Alain Badiou calls for a radical atheism that would refuse the Heideggerian pathos of a "last god" and deny the affliction of finitude. I will argue that Jean-Luc Nancy's deconstruction of monotheism, as well as his thinking of the world, remains resolutely atheistic, or better a-theological, precisely because of Nancy's insistence on finitude and his appeal to the Heideggerian motif of the last god. At the same time, I want to underline, by considering it as a Derridean paleonymy, the danger of Nancy's maintenance of the word "god" to name the infinite opening of the world right at (à meme) the world.

In the prologue to *Briefings on Existence* titled "God is dead," Alain Badiou calls for what he terms a *contemporary atheism*, one that would explicitly break out of the aporia posed by Heidegger's thought¹: How is it possible that the thinker who confirmed the Nietzschean death of the God of religions and who determined metaphysics as ontotheology, as the overshadowing of the question of Being by God as the first and highest Principle, how can that thinker end up saying that only a god can save us? (BE, 28–29) Such a saving God would be neither the living God of religions, nor the God-Principle of metaphysics. Rather, following Badiou's reading of Heidegger, such a redeeming power could only be the gods of the poets—i.e., the gods who formerly endowed the world with a sense of enchantment, the gods who have withdrawn and whose return we can therefore await.² Contemporary atheism, on the other hand,

¹ A. Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Treatise in Transitory Ontology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BE.

² See, for example, M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), 148: "Mortals dwell in that they await the divinities as divinities. In hope they hold up to the divinities what is un hoped for. They wait for intimations of their coming and do not mistake the signs of their absence."

“is about no longer entrusting the nostalgic God of the return with the joint balance consisting of the death of the living God and the deconstruction of the metaphysical God. All in all, it is about finishing up with promises.” (BE, 29) To free itself from this nostalgic pathos, atheism must abandon the motif of finitude and set its course toward thought of the infinite. At the same time, however, it must de-suture the thinking of the infinite from its metaphysical collusion with God or the One. (BE, 30)

I want to propose that Jean-Luc Nancy’s deconstruction of monotheism, as well as his conception of world, stakes out a conceptual terrain that is not anticipated by Badiou’s framework. Nancy’s thought contravenes both of Badiou’s axioms for a viable atheism: he continues to insist on the centrality of finitude and he appeals, albeit in a non-straightforward manner, to the Heideggerian motif of the last god. Nevertheless, Nancy’s thought remains resolutely atheistic—Nancy will call it, following Bataille, a-theological—devoid of the slightest hint of nostalgia or messianic promise. Although I will defend the claim that Jean-Luc Nancy’s thinking remains a-theological, a passing and parenthetical comment in *Dis-Enclosure* remains puzzling in this context. Nancy affirms: “If it is simple and necessary to be an atheist, it is neither so simple nor so necessary to be ‘without god.’”³ The trajectory of Nancy’s thinking here seems to be similar to that of his earlier work on community. Our epoch, Nancy argued, has run up against the “exhaustion” of all possible ways in which we could meaningfully appropriate a sense of community. Yet, it is precisely at this extreme limit of exhaustion that we are able to obtain a real sense of what constitutes community. Indeed, a true sense of community can emerge only in the absence or disappearance of any overarching signification or dominant meaning. “At this end point,” Nancy writes, “this limit where we are, there remains in spite of everything—and it shows therefore—that *we* are there.... There remains this remainder of community, that we are in common in or in front of the

They do not make their gods for themselves and do not worship idols. In the very depth of misfortune they wait for the weal that has been withdrawn.”

³ J.-L. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 115, translation modified. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as D.

untying or undoing of the common sense.”⁴ In *Dis-Enclosure*, Nancy applies a similar line of argumentation to the concept of monotheism, showing that a deconstruction of monotheism leads to, or necessitates, not a simple rejection, but rather, a reinterpretation or retrieval of the divine, a divine that is itself properly atheistic, that is, a-theological and anarchical. It is ultimately the maintenance of the word “god,” and the insistence that there is something “divine” in the infinite opening of the world unto itself, that I want to question.

I will first retrace “the narrow and difficult path” laid out by Nancy (D, 13) in his deconstruction of the conceptual grid that conjoins atheism, monotheism and nihilism, in the first two essays of *Dis-Enclosure*. I will then situate Nancy’s “method,” his dis-enclosure, in relation to Heideggerian *Destruktion* and Derrida’s deconstruction. It will then be possible to look at Nancy’s interpretation and displacement of the Heideggerian “last god” and to ask whether, and to what extent, that interpretation remains, as it claims, truly a-theological and anarchical.

I. Monotheism, Atheism and Nihilism, or the Closure of the West

The implicit premise of Nancy’s approach to monotheism is that monotheism is atheism, that is, monotheism already contains within itself the principle of a world without God so that, pushed to its conclusion, it metamorphoses into atheism and nihilism. (D, 36) If monotheism in itself and by its very nature conceals an atheistic and even nihilistic impulse, then it follows that atheistic or nihilistic gestures do not amount to the negation of monotheism but rather to the realisation of possibilities latent within monotheism itself. Yet, while monotheism is necessarily atheistic, atheism is not necessarily monotheistic. Contemporary atheism remains caught up within the monotheistic logic that it purports to negate and will remain so as long as we do not engage with the construction that constitutes “the West,” an engagement that would put into play another “atheism” hidden within it. To understand the “suture”—to use one of Badiou’s terms—between monotheism and atheism, we must look at how Nancy understands the “birth of the Occident” as a shift from poly-

⁴ J.-L. Nancy, “Of Being-in-Common,” in *Community at Loose Ends*, (ed.) Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 6.

theism to monotheism. The birth of monotheism cannot simply be regarded as a shift in the number of gods. Rather, monotheism implies a transformation of the very notion of what it means to be a god, and therefore entails a change in our relation to god. The difference between monotheism and “polytheisms,” Nancy writes “is not due to the number of gods. In fact, the plurality of gods corresponds to their effective presence (in nature, in an image, in a mind possessed), and their effective presence corresponds to relations of power, of threat, or of assistance, which religion organizes through the entirety of its myths and its rites. The unicity of god, on the contrary, signifies the withdrawal of this god away from presence and also away from power thus understood.” (D, 35–36) The polytheistic world is a pre-given, ordered and animated world, populated by the presences of heterogeneous qualities and statuses. (D, 15) The gods “exist” as active powers and stand in a differential relation of power with mortals.

Against this background, the instantiation of monotheism occurs as a drastic and sweeping renunciation of the worldly immanence of the gods in the life of mortals. As Nancy notes, what perhaps most obviously unites the three strands of monotheism is a rejection of the gods who are in the world—the idols. Nancy writes, in the opening lines of a short text titled *Un jour, les dieux se retirent...*: “One day, the gods withdraw. On their own they withdraw from their divinity, that is, from their presence. They do not just go away or become absent: they do not leave for some other place, they withdraw from their own presence, they withdraw from within.”⁵ What withdraws with the gods is the presence of the divine power that assembles the world. Here we must be careful. This movement of withdrawal should not be understood as the liquidation of an occult world by the light of reason. In fact, it is this withdrawal that, in the first place, renders the world questionable with regard to its principle or principles. Gods are no longer immediately accessible and the One above and beyond the world can only be reached by an act of transcendence. Partnership between the gods and mortals is replaced by a relationship of incommensurability. Nancy can therefore say that monotheism is “an aggravation of the relation to the incommensurable and a transformation of the relations with the inaccessible.” (D, 8) The word “God” no longer

⁵ J.-L. Nancy, *Un jour, les dieux se retirent...* (Bordeaux: William Blake & Co., 2001), 7. The translation is mine.

points to anything present, but instead becomes a measure of the ontological distance between that which exists and its principle, condition or ground. (D, 15)

The renunciation of the worldly immanence of the gods through the founding act of monotheism by which the West invented itself is, as Nancy argues, the origin of atheism, or the undoing of theism. In opposition to the mythical function of the gods, monotheism establishes the one God as a radical alterity that is to serve as a first and final orienting principle, upon which the world (or the totality of what is) is dependent.⁶ (D, 18) Within the monotheistic paradigm, the divinity can be replaced by other orienting principles, which serve exactly the same function. For example, atheism is the rejection of a divine principle distinct from the world and can take the form of either an affirmation that both cause and end (the principle) are immanent to the world, or an affirmation that there ought to be no such cause or end. Humanism corresponds to the first type, while scientific positivism is an example of the second type. Nihilism, for its part, affirms that there is no principle and, in doing so, merely makes “nothing” into the ordering principle. Despite their differences, all of these “-ism”s remain caught within a logic of the theological principle.⁷ (D, 23–24)

This conjunction between monotheism and atheism delineates the closure of the West, the closure of metaphysics as ontotheology. Nancy explains: “‘metaphysics,’ in the sense by which Nietzsche and Heidegger have marked this term, denotes the representation of being [*être*] as beings [*étant*] and as beings present [*étant présent*]. In so doing, metaphysics sets a founding, warranting presence beyond the world (viz., the Idea, *Summum Ens*, the Subject, the Will). This setup stabilizes beings, enclosing them in their own beingness [*étantité*].” The closure of this system means that it can account for everything: “Everything—properly and precisely *everything*—is played out in the mutual referral of these two regimes of beings or presence: the ‘immanent’ and the

⁶ The English clause on p. 18 that reads “the reduction of the divine to the premise in a logic of dependence on the world,” should actually read: “the reduction of the divine to the premise [or principle] in a logic of the dependence of the world [*dans une logique de la dépendance du monde*].”

⁷ Here I use principle, in the sense of “first principle,” to translate the Nancy’s use of *principe*. It should be noted that the translators of *La Déclosion* sometimes use the term “premise” instead of “principle.”

two regimes of beings or presence: the 'immanent' and the 'transcendent'; the 'here-below' and the 'beyond'; the 'sensuous' and the 'intelligible'; 'appearance' and 'reality.' Closure is the completion of this totality that conceives itself to be fulfilled in its self-referentiality." (D, 6) Within this closure, we find two formally identical logical gestures, each of which is the dialectically inverted mirror image of the other. Either we think of the West as having conquered a certain obscurantism, a certain religion, and see the progress of atheism as the emancipation of reason, or we think that secularisation and the progress of atheism is responsible for nihilism and the lack of transcendent meaning in the contemporary world, and then appeal to religion to cure or save us. Neither of these gestures, Nancy wants us to see, really allows thinking beneath (and beyond) the closure of the West, since they both remain caught in a logic of foundation. On the one hand, supposedly enlightened humanism seeks to ground the meaning and value of the world purely within the world itself, and in so doing reifies meaning itself and submits it to the endless circulation of capitalism. On the other hand, reactionary nostalgia for the comfort of religion appeals to a re-grounding of the meaning and value of the world in a beyond, since only the solid axis of the divine can put an end to general equivalency and effectuate a true grounding. If both the philosophical and the religious gesture can be seen as merely two sides of one and the same coin, it is because they both seek answers to the question of the world in its principle, to the search for a ground or a sense of world outside of the world, in a transcendent principle. Hence, philosophy and monotheism are co-implicated and Christianity is nothing other than the name of this co-implication. This is why, for Nancy, Christianity is the "most Westernized form of monotheism." (D, 35)

II. Whose Deconstruction? What Christianity?

We must pause here and meditate on Nancy's "methodology," his strategy for posing the problem of the enclosure of the West within a monotheistic paradigm. What is the methodological apparatus that both enables Nancy to gain leverage on Christianity as a singular internally coherent conceptual framework and, at the same time, affords him the vistas toward its overcoming or deconstruction? In what way is his approach different from Heidegger's *Destruktion* of the history of ontology

and his notion of the overcoming of metaphysics as ontotheology, or from Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence?

For Heidegger, de-structuring is a procedure that requires the retrieval or repetition (*wiederholen*) of a possibility that remains futural since it has never been or has never happened. This "retrieval" necessitates that we work through the past, loosening up the sediment that covers what has been transmitted to us, traversing "deficient conceptualizations to free up possibilities of questioning which the tradition has not yet explored."⁸ Heidegger insists that the target of *Destruktion* is not the past but the present, the way the tradition is present for us. *Destruktion* is aimed at what has been handed down to us as ontology—i.e., the operative concepts we inherit and within which our understanding of Being operates. *Destruktion* seeks to free up the "elemental words of philosophy," first by rendering them puzzling for us again, and then by bringing them back to their source in a primordial experience of Being,⁹ which is inaccessible to historicist or philological accounts. No ontology can forgo this engagement with its own history; indeed, as Heidegger shows in relation to Descartes, the philosopher who naïvely tries to break with the tradition remains all the more caught up within it. If this *Destruktion* is closely linked, in *Being and Time*, to the possibility of reawakening the question of the meaning of Being, its implications will ultimately be spun out in Heidegger's thinking of the "destiny" of Being and of the necessity of a "leap" (*Sprung*) into the "other beginning."¹⁰ In other words, it

⁸ J. Greisch, "The Eschatology of Being and the God of Time in Heidegger," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 4, n. 1 (1996), 24.

⁹ On elemental words, see M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), 262, H. 220: "Nevertheless, the ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the *force of the most elemental words* in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep the common understanding from leveling them off to that unintelligibility which functions in turn as a source of pseudo-problems." On *Destruktion*, see M. Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), 23, H. 31: "a *destruction*—a critical process in which the traditional concepts, which at first must necessarily be employed, are deconstructed down to the sources from which they were drawn. Only by means of this destruction can ontology fully assure itself in a phenomenological way of the genuine character of its concepts."

¹⁰ M. Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). Hereafter referred to parenthetically.

will lead Heidegger to look for a possibility of thinking underneath or on this side of metaphysics.

Heidegger never directly engaged in a *Destruction* of Christianity or of monotheism more generally. Christianity seems to fall fully on the side of metaphysics as ontotheology. It is true that, in the early lectures on the phenomenology of religious life, Heidegger engaged in a reading of early Christianity in an attempt to retrieve the lived experience of the early Christian community as, among other things, an authentic experience of temporality. Yet, this retrieval aimed at the temporality of factual life, which was formally indicated through the phenomenological study of the early Christian experience. Even there, Heidegger mentioned that there is no Christianity that does not understand itself through Greek philosophy. It would seem, then, that the thrust of Heidegger's engagement with the history of thought was to strip away the Christian veneer which has occluded our comprehension of the unique wonder before the mere coming into presence of beings that characterised the inception of Western thought. Indeed, the possibility of an "other beginning" depends on our capacity to "think the Greek from what is Greek alone," that is to say, apart from the Christian and apart from that which, in the beginning—in Plato and Aristotle—already announces this adjoining of philosophy and Christianity in onto-theo-logy. This adjoining finds its possibility in the necessity of grounding what is a whole in the sense of the

cally in the text as CP. See especially the sections on inceptual thinking in the first part, titled "Preview." For a discussion of *Destruction* understood in terms of *Wiederholung*, see R. Bernasconi, "Repetition and Tradition: Heidegger's Destructuring of the Distinction between Essence and Existence in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*," in *Reading Heidegger From the Start*, (ed.) T. Kisiel and J. van Buren (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 123–36. In "Time and Being," Heidegger hints at the link between the early *Destruction* and the later thought of the destiny of Being: "Only the gradual removal [*Abbau*] of these obscuring covers [*Verdeckungen*]*—*that is what is meant by 'dismantling' [*Destruction*]*—*procures for thinking a preliminary insight into what then reveals itself as the destiny of Being [*Seins-Geschick*]. . . . The only possible way to anticipate the latter thought on the destiny of Being from the perspective of *Being and Time* is to think through what was presented in *Being and Time* about the dismantling of the ontological doctrine of the Being of beings." M. Heidegger, *On Time and Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 9.

ground both as common being and as highest being.¹¹ That Heidegger's vast interpretation of the Pre-Socratics is accomplished, as he tells us, in a silent "confrontation with Christianity," and that it requires, as Didier Franck shows, the light of the Christian revelation, does not change the fact that what it attempts to reach lies underneath Christianity.¹²

We could interpret Nancy's description of his own deconstruction of monotheism as an "inquiry or search consisting in disassembling and analyzing the constitutive elements of monotheism, and more directly of Christianity, thus of the West, in order to go back to (or to advance toward) a resource that could form at once the buried origin and the imperceptible future of the world that calls itself 'modern' (D, 34) as an application of Heideggerian *Destruktion* or an adaptation of the ontotheological paradigm—i.e., a hermeneutic engagement with the Christian history of the West. Yet, there is at least one crucial difference between Nancy and Heidegger: the retrieval of the buried origin, which always remains futural, is, for Nancy, not accomplished in an overcoming of Christianity or in a step back into the "ground" of metaphysics. The possibility that Nancy is trying to retrieve is internal to the framework of Christianity itself, is the "heart" of Christianity "itself." This is made clear by Nancy's more structural or more Derridean description of his "deconstruction" as a taking apart, a disassembling, a loosening up of "the assembled structure in order to give some play to the possibility from which it emerged but which, qua assembled structure, it hides." (D, 148) The movement of deconstruction that belongs to any construction testifies to the excess of a structure over itself, to the opening of a closed system.¹³

¹¹ "Not only does Being as ground ground beings, but beings in their turn ground, cause Being in their way. Beings can only do so insofar as they 'are' the fullness of Being: they are what 'is' most of all [*das Seiendste*]." M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 68–69, H. 75.

¹² The German word is *Auseinandersetzung*. See M. Heidegger, "My Pathway Hitherto," in *Mindfulness* (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), 368. See D. Franck, *Heidegger et le christianisme: l'explication silencieuse* (Paris: PUF, 2004).

¹³ Hence, the characterisation of Derrida's deconstruction as structural by opposing it to its historical or genetic counterpart cannot hold in light of such essays as "Structure, Sign and Play," and more generally, in light of Derrida's

This is why Nancy will say not only that the con-struct of Christianity deconstructs itself, but that deconstruction is essentially Christian, that the movement of deconstruction is the movement of Christianity in its own action of exceeding itself. (D, 149) If Christianity is understood as a construction, then it is not possible to ask, as Christopher Watkin does, *which* Christianity is deconstructing itself; such an empirical objection simply amounts to a refusal to think the divergent strands and internal tensions of Christianity as relational and differentiated terms within one single (and historically contingent) force field or structure.¹⁴ But the point is that this structure itself is constantly moving, turning against itself, exceeding itself, doubling back on itself. Where does this movement come from? If history does not befall Christianity by accident, then the law of this movement is what opens Christianity to history in such a way that there is no Christianity, no *essence* of Christianity, prior to the opening and, indeed, in such a way that Christianity consists in nothing but this opening itself.¹⁵ This is what Nancy means when he says that Christianity is a subject. (D, 38) The impulse of the dis-enclosure can be found within the movement of Christianity itself, at the moment when Christianity exceeds itself—and therefore is itself.¹⁶ This same logic of self-dis-enclosure that Nancy associates with Christianity as a con-struct, was theorised by Derrida in his later writings using the trope of auto-immunity. Essentially, the movement of dis-enclosure runs parallel to the

discussion of history as the play between a closure and its opening. See J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 278–93, especially 278–79. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as WD.

¹⁴ Christopher Watkin, “Neither/Nor: Jean-Luc Nancy’s Deconstruction of Christianity,” *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 37, n. 1 (2007), 143.

¹⁵ As Derrida writes in “Violence and Metaphysics”: “history...is the history of the departures from totality, history as the very movement of transcendence, of the excess over the totality without which no totality would happen.” (WD, 117)

¹⁶ In the second volume of his *Déconstruction du christianisme*, Nancy explains in more detail why his focus is on Christianity more than the two other strands of monotheism, and why this focus does not amount to any privileging of one religion over the other. Christianity has less to do with religious observance than with this movement of excess in which religiosity undoes itself. See J.-L. Nancy, *L’Adoration* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), especially the second essay, “Au milieu du monde.”

movement of auto-immunity: the self, in order to stay alive, needs to attack its own self-protection. In other words, the self is only itself by destroying what protects it from invasion by foreign elements; it is only itself by being radically open to the non-self that threatens to destroy it. The pure life of the self is its death; the death of the self is itself life. It is this aporetic logic that constitutes any "selfhood." The movement of auto-immunity is more complicated than the self's mere suicide, since the self finds itself (its life) in losing itself.¹⁷ In "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida links this auto-immunitary logic to the possibility of religion. The unscathed (the pure, uncontaminated, untouched), which is (one of) the source(s) of religion, is the result of a double process of immunisation and auto-immunisation, and is therefore never as unscathed or pure, never as protected, as it may appear.¹⁸

It is this excess or exceeding of the self over itself that Nancy's thinking of the world attempts to conceptualise: a transcendence in immanence or a self-opening of world. The world demands, or is nothing but, an opening of the world from within to an unconditional alterity.¹⁹ This alterity cannot be that of a grounding principle; it has to be an "outside" of the world without being another world, an "outside" that does not exist (that is nothing that "is") but which, as Nancy says, can "mobilize" existence. (D, 10) To think this alterity, we need a thinking that is

¹⁷ See J. Derrida, *Rogues* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 45.

¹⁸ See J. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," in *Religion*, (ed.) J. Derrida and G. Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 44.

¹⁹ Nancy repeats the same movement with regard to reason. The movement that constitutes reason essentially is an opening of reason to thinking something that exceeds its power. With regard to Anselm's "ontological argument" in the *Proslogion*, Nancy writes: "The argument rests entirely on the movement of thought, insofar as it cannot not think the maximum of the being it is able to think, but thinks also an excess to that maximum, since thought is capable of thinking even that there is something that exceeds its power to think. In other words, thinking (i.e., not the intellect alone, but the heart and the demand itself) can think—indeed, cannot not think—that it thinks something in excess over itself.... In this sense, Anselm is much less a follower of Christianity than the bearer of a necessity that defines the modern world of thought, of the existential ordeal of thought. 'God' is for Anselm the name of this ordeal. This name can assuredly be rejected for many reasons. But the ordeal or trial cannot be avoided." (D, 11)

strictly atheistic without being the simple denial of theism, a thinking that, in other words, would not be “absentheistic” (D, 18), that would not think within the horizon of the withdrawal of the principle or would not think the absence of principle as an *absence* pure and simple.²⁰ This thinking would not attempt to *save* the world from its senselessness or groundlessness. To ask for salvation, in the sense of a panacea, for the senselessness or groundlessness of the world is already to confirm nihilism, and to confirm its monotheistic character, since it implies that the world needs to be saved by something outside or beyond itself; we therefore remain caught within the necessity for closure, which is, in the first place, the origin of our unhappiness. (D, 20) What is needed instead is an affirmation of worldly immanence (the *ici-bas*) that would not be lived as the absence of a transcendent principle and in which the opening of the world would happen right at (*à meme*) the world itself. Monotheism, as the establishment of the divine principle, annuls the possibility that the divine (or something divine) may provide such an opening. Instead, we have to think that which in monotheism itself “dis-encloses” the world and does so without re-grounding it in a transcendent principle. In Nancy’s terms, the overcoming of nihilism necessitates a rethinking of the Christian notion of the “*ex nihilo*” creation of the world. While, for Heidegger, the struggle against nihilism is likewise a struggle against Christianity, for Nancy, that struggle requires a retrieval of certain notions internal to Christianity, which must be salvaged from their entrapment within ontotheological closure. We could, therefore, say that Nancy’s deconstruction of monotheism makes possible his ontology of the singular plural of the world in that it allows for an interpretation of the *nihil* not as the firm sediment of a ground, but as opening. Beyond the programmatic nature of the essays found in Nancy’s *Dis-Enclosure* a deconstruction of Christianity would read the “text of Christianity” in order to show how, within it, the non-metaphysical or non-ontotheological interpretation of its major concepts or figures—here, in an exemplary way, the *ex nihilo*—runs in the background and unsettles its more “traditional” interpretation.

²⁰ On absentheism, see J.-L. Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 50–51. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CW. See also his *Philosophical Chronicles* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 20.

Creatio ex nihilo is, for Nancy, another way of saying that beings are *only* what they are, that there is nothing outside of the world.²¹ That the world is created out of nothing implies that it has no pre-supposition or pre-condition—neither an undifferentiated prime matter nor an omnipotent creator capable of producing something out of nothing:

The idea of *creation ex nihilo*, inasmuch as it is clearly distinguished from any form of production or fabrication, essentially covers the dual motif of an absence of necessity and the existence of a given without reason, having neither foundation nor principle....*Ex nihilo*, which is to say: ...nothing but that which is [*rien que cela qui est*], nothing but that which grows [*rien que cela qui croît*] (*creo, cresco*), lacking any growth principle....[*E*]*x nihilo* means: undoing any premise, including that of nothing. That means: to empty *nothing* [*rien*] (cf. *rem*, the thing) of any quality as principle. (D, 24)²²

The *ex nihilo* of creation essentially signifies the groundlessness of the world, the ever-renewed coming-to-presence of the world: singularities, each time 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.” (BSP, 21, translation modified) Nothing but the world, nothing but the coming to presence, the *surgissement*, of the world. (BSP, 2–3, 16) A world without “God,” but not without opening, even if this opening opens unto—nothing.

III. The Passing God or Something Divine

Just as Heidegger’s “last god” was thought in clear opposition to the God of ontotheology, so Nancy’s “positive” conception of the divine differs markedly from the notion of God as *causa sui* as thought by monotheism. In the essay “On a Divine *Wink*,” Nancy uses the word “god” to ges-

²¹ J.-L. Nancy, *Birth to Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 196.

²² See also J.-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 16. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BSP.

ture toward the opening of the world or the pulsation (*battement*) of what comes to presence. As such, he reinterprets the notion of the divine in light of Heidegger's "last god," whose intimating gesture consists entirely in its *pas* or passing-by and the movement or play of Derridean *différance*, whose transgressive "a" winks at the "toward" (the "à") of the address, of the aseity of Being.

Heidegger's "last god" *winkt*, makes a sign. But the *Wink*, Nancy contends, is not a sign in the sense of a *Zeichen*, a signifying sign. It is "an indication given at once from afar and in passing, without explanation, without any genuine signification, evasive as to sense but specific as to direction." (D, 106) It is for this reason that Nancy decides to translate *Wink* as "blink of the eye," in order to emphasise its fugaciousness, "the beating [throbbing] of the instant according to which what arrives leaves and, *in leaving*...remains absent, remains outside its own arrival." (D, 108) We should therefore not speak of the passage *of* the god, but rather, of the god *as* nothing but this passage—the god is not a thing that first exists and then winks; rather, its being consists only in its passing-by, its *Vorbeigang*. The temporality of the god is not *aion*—neither *sempiternitas*, as an incessant procedure in time, nor *aeternitas* or *nunc stans*, as the ever-present moment or the constant presence of the present. The eternal (as Heidegger says in the *Beiträge*) is that which can in an instant (*Augenblick*) withdraw in order to return, but not to return as the same.²³ The god whose way of being is its passing-by or winking is called the "last god" not because that god comes after a long procession of other gods, but because it gathers in a moment all the possibilities of the god. It is nothing but its wink, the *Augenblick* of passing-by.²⁴ This god is neither present nor absent, but is the movement of withdrawing/appearing. Thinking the "last god" allows us to get away from the problematic of Appearing and non-Appearing, of Being and non-Being, and to move toward a thinking of the passage, away from a phenomenol-

²³ See, for example, "Time – Eternity – Moment," in *Contributions to Philosophy*, 259. This emphasis on the "passing-by" opens up an avenue for understanding the withdrawal and return of the god in a non-nostalgic way.

²⁴ See J. Greisch, "The Poverty of Heidegger's 'Last God,'" in *French Interpretations of Heidegger: An Exceptional Reception*, (ed.) F. Raffoul and D. Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 245–64.

ogical and ontological problematic toward a dynamic of the passing-by. (D, 111)

The translation of *Wink* as “blink of the eye” allows Nancy to relate Heidegger’s “last god” to the movement or play of *différance*. Nancy’s interest is not in theologising either of these terms. Rather, he wants to “discern what is divine in the *Wink* as different, radically different from *theos*” or to “discern a divine trait in *différance*.” (D, 111) In *La voix et le phénomène*, Derrida discusses the *Augenblick*, the blink of the eye, in relation to Husserl’s *Lectures on the Internal Time-Consciousness*. The instant, which is purported to be undivided and undividable, as it must be if it is to serve as the focal receptive point for what is presented to intuition and thereby to guarantee Husserl’s principle of principles, “has a duration and it closes its eye.”²⁵ A certain absence, a certain moment of blindness, is necessary for what is present to appear as present. As such, the blink of the eye makes evident the structure of *différance*: the spacing-out of presence itself.

This spacing-out is not mere distantiation; it is also inclination. The non-accented *a* (of *différance*) points toward an *à* with an accent, toward what Nancy names the aseity (or the towardness) of Being. This *à* as “toward” is the originary meaning of the “with”: it implies that beings or singularities are not merely indifferently juxtaposed, but are ex-posed to, or dis-posed toward, each other.²⁶ (BSP, 37–41) Presence is appropriated “to itself by this wink, by this inclination that, in inclining the same toward (*zu*) the same, even in order to incline itself in this way, to give it that narcissistic inclination, separates itself from itself, renders itself absent and differentiates itself into the other.” (D, 112) *Différance* is inclination, the “origin” of sense, which, for Nancy, consists only in its sharing. If this sharing disintegrates, sense becomes absolutised and consequently stops *making* sense.²⁷

²⁵ J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 65.

²⁶ See J.-L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 29. See also *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 32–33.

²⁷ This absolutisation can occur in two ways: “either in the order of a supreme, ultimate value that measures everything else without itself being measured by anything, or in the system of a general equivalency, in which everything has worth by the same thing as everything else, while at the same time value

The question we should pose at this point is: Why should this movement of passing-by, of spacing-out, of inclination, be named *god*? Why should the *Wink* and *différance* be referred to as “divine”? The question is posed by Nancy himself, who appeals to the relation of the Latin *divus/deus* to *dies*. “God,” in Latin, denotes neither a being nor Being, but gestures toward “the difference of day—*dies*—and night, the division light/darkness by which everything takes place, taking place *between* those two modalities, those two accents or those two sides of the same peak or the same height of being.” *God* is “the common name of the separation between light and darkness, seeing and not seeing, day and night, something and nothing, without that—namely, that separation, that step—being properly named.” (D, 118) The divine *Wink* is therefore the blink between presence and absence, between night and day. Of course, there always remains, and Nancy is well aware of this, the possibility that the triple movement of the wink as passing-by, as spacing-out and as inclination might be caught and captured in a perception and become fixed in a look (*eidōs*). In that case, Nancy writes, “the god no longer passes: he becomes God. Then *différance* turns—not into transcendence..., but into something transcendent installed as domination.” (D, 120, translation modified)

Does Nancy’s use and displacement of the term “god” remain faithful to his own insistence on a truly a-theological and anarchic thinking? Certainly. Nancy rejects any kind of Being or principle outside of or beyond the world. Furthermore, Nancy’s divine satisfies Badiou’s exigency for a contemporary atheism. First, it does not share in the nostalgic pathos of the Heideggerian gods of the poets.²⁸ In fact, we could even say

consists in producing value and in reproducing that productivity.... This contrasting couple of the exclusive ineffable and the general equivalent [of theism and capitalism],...is the result of the disintegration of sharing itself.” (D, 127–28)

²⁸ It is not clear that the “last god” is imbued with any of the nostalgic or messianic pathos Badiou attributes to the gods of the poets. The “last god” is foreign to any making (*Machen*) or prediction (*Vorsehen*) and “does not dispense any solacement [*verteilt keine Tröstung*].” See M. Heidegger, *Die Geschichte des Seyns* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Klostermann, 1998), 211. A thorough engagement with Badiou’s claim would have to start by differentiating the different figures of the divine in Heidegger’s work: the last god, the Greek gods, the coming gods, the divinities, the Godhead, the holy, etc. See B. Vedder, *Heidegger’s*

that Nancy's reading of the "last god" reduces it to a purely ontological (*seynsmäßigen*) figure. For Heidegger, the god is neither a being nor Being, but needs Being as *Ereignis*, as the "event of appropriation" of man to Being, as the opening of the open. The "last god" points man toward *Ereignis*, toward his belonging to Being. For Nancy, on the other hand, god seems to name *Ereignis* itself, the opening/closing that gives world. Second, the infinity of this divine is the infinity *in actu* of the movement of *surgissement*, not the Cartesian One-Infinite against which finite beings are seen as deficient.²⁹ This distinction between two kinds of infinity also explains how Nancy can, according to the terms set by Badiou, insist on the finitude of beings without falling into any nostalgic or messianic pathos. In the same way that we must distinguish between an infinite in act and a potential or spurious infinite, we must also distinguish between finitude and "finiteness" (*finité*).³⁰ Finiteness (for example, Cartesian finiteness) is only thinkable against the backdrop of an infinite, against which that finiteness is then regarded essentially as deficient, and against which finiteness will necessarily be seen as engaged in an infinite process of finishing or completion. The end or finishing of finiteness can only be achieved by that finiteness overcoming its limitation by appropriating that which 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 imagined as the final completion of an infinite process. This is what Badiou calls the potential infinite, an infinite which always runs the risk of being understood as an ineffable divine, which can only be articulated negatively. In *Being and Event*, Badiou seeks to subtract the thinking of the infinite from any thought of finitude with the help of set

Philosophy of Religion: From God to the Gods (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008).

²⁹ In Hegelian terms, this infinity *in actu* is the good and not the spurious infinite. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic* (New York: Hackett, 1991), §§93–95.

³⁰ J.-L. Nancy, "Sharing Voices," in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, (ed.) G. L. Ormiston and A. D. Schrift (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 211–59. Nancy takes the distinction from Henri Birault's essay, "Heidegger et la pensée de la finitude," in *De l'être, du divin et des dieux* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2005). The theme of finitude runs throughout Nancy's work, but see especially the first eponymous essay in J.-L. Nancy, *A Finite Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

theory. Set theory provides the tools to think an actual infinite while at the same time dissolving the singular, ineffable One-Infinite (God) into an infinity of orderable infinities and hence avoiding the danger of a “theological” turn.³¹ While Badiou thinks pure infinity (as the bottomless infinity of infinities) independently of finitude, Nancy, with similar results, equates finitude and actual infinity. Unlike finiteness, finitude, for Nancy, denotes that which exists at its limits and is therefore caught up in an infinite movement of transcending. Since beings do not cease to be, at each moment, exposed to and disposed toward one another at their limits, their exposition is endlessly renewed and therefore never finished. Yet, despite this infinite opening, the finite being is not promised to any beyond. Its infinite opening is nothing outside of itself; it is that which, in the first place, allows the finite being to be itself for itself. As Nancy writes, finitude itself is the true infinite: “It is the good infinite or the actual infinite—the infinitude in act of the act itself as the act of exceeding oneself.”³²

What Nancy attempts to think by means of a deconstruction of Christianity is a world without transcendent origin or end, that is, without a God-principle. This absence of a transcendent principle does not mean that the world ought to be thought of as pure immanence, as a closed system without any opening. But the problem is: After the death of the God-principle, how are we to think the opening of the world, its dis-enclosure, as a movement that opens, but opens onto nothing, onto no beyond. In order to broach this line of thought, Nancy redeploys the name “god”: “god” names the movement of passing-by, of spacing-out, of inclination, of the opening of the world right at the world. From the delineation of Nancy’s thought that I have carried out here, it should be clear that

³¹See A. Badiou, *Being and Event* (New York: Continuum, 2007), especially chapters 13–15. See also Adam S. Miller, “Re-Thinking Infinity: Alain Badiou’s *Being and Event*,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 8, n. 1 (Winter 2006). In his intervention at the colloquium *Sens en tous sens* at the Collège international de philosophie in January 2002, Alain Badiou developed the motif of finitude in Nancy’s thinking. There, he mentioned discussions with Nancy in which the latter maintained that what he meant by finitude was the same as what Badiou meant by infinity. See F. Guibal and J.-C. Martin, eds. *Sens en tous sens. Autour des travaux de Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 13–24, especially 20.

³²Nancy, *L’‘il y a’ du rapport sexuel* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 39, my translation.

Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity undermines the distinction between theism and atheism to such a degree that these categories cannot be used to assess his deployment of the name "god." In this sense, his "god" is neither theistic nor atheistic; it is truly a-theological.

One might still feel uneasy with Nancy's use of the word "god" in this context. Indeed, one might wonder why the movement of self-opening must bear the name "god." Is this word not simply too imposing, as Blanchot would put it, to be used in such a strategic way? Such questions do not target Nancy's ontology or even its conceptual apparatus. Nevertheless, they must be addressed here since they concern the economy of a deconstructive *text*. A redeployment of the name "god" might seem implausible, if not impossible, since "God" is *the* metaphysical concept par excellence. Yet, Derrida, and deconstruction in general, has shown that there "is no metaphysical concept in and of itself. There is a work, metaphysical or not, on conceptual systems."³³ In fact, "Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order." (MP, 329) Merely changing words or inventing new ones is not necessarily deconstructing a conceptual order, even though these strategies might play a role in the transformation of a conceptual order. Nonetheless, one might wish for another word to name the self-opening of the world. Yet, what other word is available for us in the context of the Christian West? And would a new word be able to intervene upon our conceptual order as effectively as the word "god"? Would a new word be able to make language, and therefore thought, move? Or would such a new word be merely a clever invention that could not gain any traction within our language? Nancy's displacement of the conceptual order surrounding the concept "god"—his undoing of the metaphysical God as the highest being or the ground of beings discussed above—exemplifies, I think, the kind of non-metaphysical intervention in a conceptual system that Derrida has in mind. For Derrida, this operation consists in grafting onto a new concept the predicates that were subordinated or excluded but nevertheless held in reserve in the classical concept. In the case at hand, it consists in using the relation of the Latin *divus/deus* to *dies*—the separation of day from night—in order to graft it onto the transformed concept of god. But this

³³ J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 329. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MP.

displacement is not without danger. Derrida is clear that the necessity of maintaining the classical term across the procedure of grafting is “provisional and strategic.” This strategic move, this paleonymy, is necessary because the metaphysical conceptual field is hierarchically ordered—one term is always subordinated to another. The name that is retained and transformed as a means of intervention in a given conceptual field is always, for Derrida, one that has traditionally been seen as non-privileged or subordinated (the most famous example is writing). According to Derrida, then, the breakthrough from the hierarchic to the anarchic can only come about if a subordinated term is used to reverse and displace the conceptual field. But what about the name “god,” which, far from being a subordinate term, is the most privileged of all privileged terms? Can Nancy’s paleonymic deployment of the term “god” remain faithful to Derrida’s strategic logic of paleonymy? The danger of misreading of Nancy as a theist remains, without a doubt, acute. Today, as we are witness to a so-called return of the religious, accompanied by a so-called theological turn in certain strands of Continental philosophy, to say nothing of the intensification of religious fundamentalisms around the globe, Nancy’s deconstruction of Christianity and his ontology of the world seem to offer a certain counterweight. But, within such a context, will a deconstruction of Christianity be able to gain traction if, at the crucial moment when it seeks to name the sheer movement of opening, it inscribes the word *god*? The success of such an enterprise might ultimately depend on our ability to read, that is, to follow the movement of the deconstructive text, so that we may learn to hear in the word *god* more—or rather less—than the master signified of Western metaphysics.

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