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Putting Community Under Erasure: Derrida and Nancy on the Plurality of Singularities

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In a note at the end of the essay 'The inoperative community,' Jean-Luc Nancy describes the writing of our being-in-common, or of our being-with, as a community of writing: 'inserted, alternated, shared, divided texts, as all texts are, offering that which does not belong to anyone, but which comes back to all: the community of writing, the writing of the community' (1990: 104).¹ In this essay, I wish to focus on the community of thinking between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. The relationship between those two thinkers is far from unambiguous: if they can be said to be thinking together, it certainly does not simply mean that they think the same thing or that they think it in the same way.

To explicate this relationship in all its complexity, I will proceed in four steps. First, I want to show how, despite all the differences in strategy, we can find a certain commonality of project between Derrida and Nancy, namely the need to put community under erasure. Second, I want to focus on some of the different ways in which they carry out that project, namely by a deconstruction of fraternity or by an interruption of myth. In the third part, which represents the bulk of this essay, I want to show how the differences in strategy originate from different interpretations of the current philosophical and political context on the part of the two thinkers. I also want to show how this leads both of them to develop radically different concepts of singularities and of the plurality of such singularities. Lastly, I want to underline the link between both thinkers' concepts of community and the political.

I. Similar project, different strategies

One way of interpreting the community of thinking between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy is as the sharing of a common project while adopting different strategies to carry it out, or placing emphasis on different phases of the project. Though Nancy would probably disagree,² I think that there is some validity to the interpretation of their works in terms of a 'common project/different strategies'...

Both Nancy and Derrida recognise the necessity of putting community under erasure. In a gesture similar to Heidegger's, who crossed out Being in an attempt to remove it from its metaphysical interpretation as presence, as essence, it is also necessary, for both thinkers, to put community under erasure, and to think a community that is not an essence, not an identifiable totality which receives its meaning and determination from a transcendental signified, be it race, birth, gender, etc. Putting community under erasure, one affirms, as Spivak explains in her introduction to the English translation of *De la grammatologie* 'both that the concept is inaccurate and that it is necessary' (Derrida, 1976: xiv). One affirms both the need to write and the need to cross out community. While Nancy finds himself more on the side of the first affirmation, Derrida finds himself on the side of the second.

Derrida has, in his texts, pointed to the inaccuracy of the word and of the concept of community, almost up to the point of obliterating it completely from his texts. Indeed, Derrida admits never having been able to write the word 'community' in his own name, and when the word does appear under his pen, it is neutralised either through quotation marks or through the use of aporetic and undecidable sentences (which are either direct quotations from Blanchot or follow a certain Blanchotian logic): 'community of those who don't belong to any community,' 'community without community,' 'we who cannot completely say we,' 'we, if such a thing exists'.³ Despite the act of crossing-out that disrupts the metaphysical functioning of a concept, the old word can still be seen under the mark of erasure. Therefore, the danger remains, when using a concept under erasure, of forgetting the act of crossing-out and of rebuilding the old conceptual system. Consequently, it is important for Derrida to carry out a constant and careful work of deconstruction and, through his writing style, to repeatedly inscribe the act of crossing-out in his texts. This is why Derrida's style is intricate and careful, full of aporetic formulations, negations and denegations.

Nancy, on the other hand, has pointed to the unavoidability of using the concept of community. He explains: 'Community is given at the same time than Being and as Being, before all our projects, volitions or enterprises. It is impossible for us to lose it. ... We cannot not co-appear' (1990: 87). Consequently, he has used the word frequently, without quotation marks, almost up to the point of forgetting the erasure. Indeed, Nancy does not hesitate to affirm the 'big words' under the erasure, such as *sense*, *liberty*, *being*, etc., which would make Derrida tremble, and his texts are filled with straightforward affirmations in the form of 'X is Y'.⁴ If one accepts this

interpretation of community between Derrida and Nancy, then their respective ways of thinking would be an antidote against the possible excess of the other, reminding the other of what is in danger of being erased.⁵

Another way of understanding the complementarity between Derrida's and Nancy's thinking would be according to the two movements of deconstruction (reversal and displacement) or according to its two strategies (inside-work and radical break-through).⁶ 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, such a radical putting into question of the concept of community, that is missing from Nancy's work and that might still lead his thinking in the direction of a certain fraternity.⁷ Nancy, on his part, answers that he agrees with Derrida's critique of community but that he already thinks beyond community as fraternity and reproaches Derrida for not considering a deconstructed concept of community which can be used to think our being-with anew.⁸ We could elucidate this 'dialogue' as follows: while Derrida claims that Nancy skips the first phase of deconstruction, that he attempts a radical break-through without doing the careful inside-work (i.e. that he uses an old concept to name something new without analysing where this concept comes from and within which conceptual field it operates), Nancy claims that Derrida remains stuck in the first phase of deconstruction, that he never reaches the point of breaking through the old conceptual field (i.e. 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, we can claim that Derrida and Nancy must be read together, *with* one another in the strong sense of the term, as complement, as two sides of the same discourse.

Given the way I have described the relation between Derrida's and Nancy's thinking so far, we seem to have to do with an encounter in the form of a chiasmus: two paths of thought starting at different corners, going in opposite directions, and encountering each other in the centre. The truth, the truth of community, or the true thinking of a community under erasure, would be located at the intersection of their thinking, in the centre of the figure.

II. Difference in strategy: Deconstructing fraternity or interrupting myth?

The figure of the chiasmus, as I have described it, might be too simple to do justice to the complex *topos* of the encounter between Derrida and Nancy. To expose this, it is necessary to examine in depth each thinker's way of putting community under erasure.

For Derrida, the crossing-out of community necessarily goes through a questioning of the concept of fraternity. Without going into the details of Derrida's analysis of fraternity as it is carried out in *Politiques de l'amitié (Politics of Friendship)*, for the purposes of this argument it suffices to understand fraternity as the mechanism of identification that determines who belongs to the community and who does not. This process of identification, this fraternisation, consists in two movements: making the other my brother, that is, identifying him (or her) as somehow like me, and excluding the false brothers, the others who are not really like me. By the way they function, fraternal communities exert a double violence on individuals: an internal and an external violence.

First, communities tend to neutralise differences by treating all members as brothers, that is, as the same. The other belongs to my community only insofar as he is like me, and the 'us' -- the group of those who belong together -- appears as a homogeneous group. It is because of this tendency to homogenise that fraternity can include apparent non-brothers (such as women) and that the fraternal community can present itself as universal. The woman gets included in fraternity when she becomes a brother for humanity, that is, when she is not (completely) woman anymore. Because 'man' is the archetype of humanity and 'brother' the archetype of the relation between siblings, the woman can become human or sibling only insofar as she resembles the archetypes of 'man' or 'brother'. Fraternity as a process of universalisation is a process of inclusion, but here 'to include' means to neutralise difference. Second, communities are inscribed in a field of opposition; they define themselves in an oppositional logic, by excluding 'them,' that is, those who do not belong, those who are not 'brothers,' not 'the same'. If I can identify my brothers, then by using the same criterion, I can also identify those who are not my brothers. All groups function in the same way: they define a criterion which functions as a wall erected around the group, a wall filled with certain type of openings that let only the right elements in. Of course, some criteria of appurtenance are more inclusive than others because they are shared by more people. But no matter how inclusive a group is, it is always possible to find elements that are excluded. Thus the community of human beings excludes animals, and the community of beings in general excludes ghosts.

To escape this double violence, it is necessary, according to Derrida, to cut the bond that binds me to, or excludes me from, a group. Only then will there be an experience of the other, or a relation to the other, which will respect and do justice to its otherness, its difference.

Though Nancy does not criticise fraternity directly, his discussion of the interruption of myth serves the same purpose. The myth presents the community to the community itself; it is the identificatory mechanism of a community. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy explain:

A myth is a fiction in the strong, active sense of shaping or moulding, or as Plato himself says, of 'plasticity': it is a fictioning, whose role is to propose, if not to impose, models and types, -- types by

whose imitation an individual ' or a city, or a whole people ' can grasp and identify itself. (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1991: 34)

The interruption of myth means that it becomes impossible for us to represent our common origin. Because the genealogical relation rests on a phantasmatic commonality of origin, the loss of common origin means the impossibility of recognising each other as brother. In their having been interrupted, myths do not disappear, but they no longer function as the ground of communal belonging: it becomes impossible for us to gather around the narration of our common origin. The interruption does not build a community, it un-works it, that is, it lets a space open in the identification of the community with itself. This un-working is the active incompleteness of community: it prevents the community from effecting itself as work.

III. Origins and consequences of the difference in strategy

The different strategies of Derrida and Nancy should not be downplayed as different ways of achieving the same end: namely, putting community under erasure through either a deconstruction of fraternity or through the interruption of myth. The choice of a strategy is never neutral or meaningless. If Derrida and Nancy adopt different strategies, it is because their interpretation of the political and philosophical context is radically different. Moreover, it is precisely this interpretation that will lead each of them to develop a radically different concept of singularity and of the plurality of singularities.

A. Derrida on singularity and plurality: The unavoidability of sacrifice

Because Derrida sees the political danger of our times in the gathering that threatens the respect for the singularity and alterity of the other, he will insist on separation and on the secret (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001: 58). Singularity is for him another name for the *tout autre* (the wholly other) and is associated with two values, 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' (Derrida, 2001b: 296). Or in Husserlian terms, the alter ego is other because it can never be given to me *en personne* (*leibhaftig*) in an originary presentation, but always only in an analogical appresentation (or presentification). 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' (Derrida, 1994: 258).

The introduction of the plural will destabilise the unique 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 Derrida in 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, we all share the unsharable, or in Husserlian terms again: because we are all egos like me, we are all egos absolutely other than, and absolutely inaccessible to, me. 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.⁹ If it does force us to calculate, compare, and measure, then it does so 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* (*The Gift of Death*). 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. First it is 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. (Derrida, 1992: 69)

In another context, while discussing Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, Derrida will write:

One must not have too many friends, for there is not enough *time* to put them *to the test* by living with *each one*.

For one must live with each him. With each her. Is that possible?

Living -- this is understood with *with*. Whatever the modalities may later be, living is living with. But every time, it is only one person living with another: I *live*, myself, *with (suzao)*, and with each person, every time with one person. (1994: 37-38; 1997: 20)

Because of the plurality of others and because I can only engage with one other at a time, every decision, every election, is the unbearable sacrifice of other singularities. For Derrida, the extraordinary story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son 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 to justify 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. (Derrida 1992: 70)

There is no objective standard to which I could compare singularities so as to place 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 a relativist position of '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, but this does not mean that the sacrificed others become silent (just 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 only those who do not realize that they sacrifice: those who do not make decisions in the night of non-knowledge (those who think they can objectively justify their preferences), as well as those who do not make decisions at all (those who remain on the level of generality and forget the irreplaceable singularity of every other).

Derrida's definition of singularity as secret leads to the unavoidability of sacrifice. One could think that it is possible to avoid sacrifice by remaining at the level of generality, by addressing groups; but it is exactly this possibility that Derrida considers the most violent. 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 cannot speak more than one language at a time' I would still be sacrificing singularities. By remaining on the level of the general and by not attending to the singularity of anyone, I would be sacrificing all singularities. Because there are innumerable others, each one absolutely other than every (other) other, and because I need to do justice to each singularity in its absolute alterity and not treat it as brother or non-brother, as a member of a definite group, then, to heed the singularity of an other will necessarily mean not to heed to the singularity of other others, that is, to sacrifice them.

B. Nancy on singularity and plurality: The exposition of the world

Unlike Derrida, Nancy interprets our present time as one of disjuncture and chooses to insist on the fundamental type of being-together that remains present even in those times.¹⁰ He explains:

At this endpoint, at this limit where we find ourselves, something is left, something appears then, namely, that we find ourselves there. The epoch of the limit abandons us together on the limit, otherwise it would be neither an 'epoch,' nor a 'limit,' and we wouldn't find ourselves there. There remains this rest of community (supposing that there ever has been something else than that before and elsewhere), there remains the fact that we stand *in-common* in or before the disjuncture of common sense. (1990: 220-21)

In this disjuncture, singularities are not seen as secret and separated, and therefore they are not sacrificed to one another (or to the Other). Singularities are seen as bodies, necessarily offered or exposed at their limits to other singularities.

Nancy always distinguishes singularity from individuality (1990: 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 not because it is enclosed within a limit that would separate it from other beings, but because it is concerned with its limit (1990: 69). The singular being 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 it is essentially ex-posed, turned inside out. This existence-as-exposition or this being-at-the-limit is an 'offering,' a reserved gift that is suspended 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 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' (Nancy, 1990: 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, and there is no existence without place, without *there*, without a 'here,' 'here it is,' for the 'this' [Nancy is playing on the phrase *Hoc est enim corpus meum*]. The body-place is neither full nor empty, it has neither an inside nor an outside, neither parts, nor totality, functions, or finality. Aphallic and Acephalic in all senses, if one can say it that way. But it is a skin diversely folded, unfolded, multiplied, invaginated, exogastrulated, orificed, evasive, stretched, relaxed, excited, staggered, tied, untied. In all these modes and in thousand of others -- the body *gives (a) place* to existence. (1992: 16)

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 penetrate. 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 singularisation, 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' (Nancy, 1996: 52). In 'Cum', Nancy points out different French expressions using the prepositions *avec* (with) or *d'avec* (literally: from with). In these expressions, there is a sense of a proximity of proximity and distance. On the one hand, 'with' always denotes a certain contact. You and me, you with me, but also you with the table, me with the paper,¹¹ is not a mere juxtaposition, but a certain disposition toward, a mutual exposition (be it in the mode of caution, surveillance or distrust, or as a mere taking notice of, having to do with ' this passer-by, whom I avoid or this stone over which I step). But one should not mistake Nancy's exposition with fusion: the contact always happens through a distance. This is the reason Nancy prefers the expression '*se toucher toi*' [touching yourself] or '*se toucher peau*' [touching one's skin] to the 'touching oneself': 'I am for myself an outside. -- It is through my skin that I touch myself. And I touch myself from the outside, not from the inside' (1992: 117). In the same vein, when I speak with myself, I am already to myself in the distance between the voice and the ear; 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 (Nancy, 1990: 17; 1996: 24). In other words, the 'with' cannot only be a clinamen that would bend the atoms toward or away from one another. For the clinamen to affect the atoms, for it to make the atoms slope toward or away from one another, they must first be inclined outside of themselves, toward their edge or limit (Nancy, 1990: 17-18). There are only singularities, nothing between them, but their articulation, their exposition.

This entanglement, a *mêlée* without a mixture of exposed bodies running across each other, without penetrating each other, is what makes up the world. Even in a sexual act or in pregnancy, the bodies are not in one another, but touch each other according to a form of exteriority. Each singularity is each time a turn of existence, a stroke of existence, and each time each singularity configures a world. As origin of the world, a singularity is not the origin of a perspective on the world. In other words, a singularity is not the origin of one of the many subjective worlds that would then have to be, in one way or another, pieced up together to form the one and only world, that is, the objective world. Even though Nancy would probably agree that the world (in the broadest sense) does not appear to an individual but only to a community, he would disagree that a community can ever gain a perspectiveless view of the world, that is, that the community constitutes the objective world. The world is not constituted or perceived by the community; on the contrary, there is only the community of the world without any possible totalisation of the origins of the world, of the world-singularities:

The unity of the world is nothing other than its diversity, and this diversity is in its turn nothing other than a diversity of worlds. A world is a multiplicity of worlds, the world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the sharing and mutual exposition in this world of all its worlds. (Nancy, 2002a: 173)

In each point (of space, of time), the world is created, or better: the world is being created continuously/discontinuously, continuously in its discontinuity (Nancy, 1996: 22, 106). The motive of the creation is used by Nancy to denote the groundless and continuous/discontinuous arising 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' (Nancy, 1996: 21). To illustrate Nancy's concept of 'world' ' the explosion and dissemination of beings ' I would like to turn to Sartre's *Nausea*. The comparison is illuminating, even if the world does not give rise in Nancy to waves of nausea as it does for Antoine Roquentin.

The following quotes illustrate what is happening to Antoine Roquentin, or better, what is happening to his world, to the objects he touches:

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)

Hold the paper, existence against existence, things exist one against the other, I drop the paper. (Sartre, 1969: 101)

In other words, Roquentin is starting to grasp existence, to touch it; he is starting to be-with, to co-exist with the world: 'To exist is simply to be there, those who exist let themselves be encountered' (Sartre, 1969: 131). What he grasps are not categories or concepts anymore (explanations, abstractions), but singular existences:

This root, on the other hand, existed in such a way that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, brought me back to its own existence. 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)

The naked world suddenly starts to reveal itself, but this revelation is oppressive. The fullness of beings presses against him: 'Existence everywhere, infinitely, in excess, forever and everywhere; existence ' which is limited only by existence. I sank down on the bench, stupefied, stunned by this profusion of beings without origins' (Sartre, 1969: 133). This abundance of beings does not give him the effect of generosity; it is a *trop-plein*, a too-much. The oppressiveness of the contact with the world arises, I would say, from Roquentin's inability to differentiate himself from the world around him. Two attitudes toward others, toward the world, are prevalent in *Nausea*: dissociation (absence of relation, being estranged from other beings) or fusion (being compressed, losing one's limits in the overflow of beings). Touch, contact is not understood as the 'disjunction' that it is. Because there is no distance anymore, there can be no sense, no circulation, but only the oppressive paralysis or stiffness of beings.

The being-with of bodies in the world that Nancy describes remains between the aggregation of the group and the disaggregation of juxtaposition.¹² 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 overcomes itself in pure being' (Nancy, 1996: 81), between those two, being-together (*l'être-ensemble*) happens.

Nancy's singular plural does not only mean that there is always a plurality of singularities; it means first and foremost that a singularity is itself always 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' (Nancy, 1996: 178). Because no identity is pure, Nancy will prefer to speak of a *mêlée* instead of a *mélange*. The idea of mixture presupposes the isolation of pure substances and the operation of a mixture. There are no bloods, no races, no subjects to be mixed, but there are still identifiable elements that entangle and disentangle themselves. 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*, the entanglement, within each ipseity, and therefore to do without the necessity of a *démêlé*, of a disentangling, with other ipseities. It would be to kill both the singular and the plural.

Because of its insistence on separation, Derrida's thinking is still a thinking of the one and the other and retains a Levinasian flavour that is absent from Nancy's. Nancy's thinking insists on plurality, on the 'explosion of presence in the manifold of its partition' (1996: 21). It insists, in other words, on the world. If Nancy prefers the fabric of the world to the Other, it is because it only allows one to think a plurality that doesn't sacrifice the gift that each singularity is.

IV. Opening up a space for the political

A community under erasure is a community which is not built around a necessary bond determined by a transcendental signified (God, Man, the Race) that organises in advance the field of our belonging and fixes our appurtenances. This can be linked to what Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe referred to, in the 1980s, as the retreat of the political, that is, the retreat of transcendence that would foreclose the space of the political. The retreat of the political is not the end of the political as such, even though it may be the end of the theologico-political. It does not mean that the political disappears but only that political figures, meanings, directions and destinies retreat so that

our naked, formless and meaningless being-together can appear. In other words, it lets the call for a community under erasure be heard.

This opening of a political space takes up different shapes in Derrida and in Nancy. If politics is, as Simon Critchley defines it in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 'the moment of decision' of judgement, of justice, of action, of antagonism, of beginning, of commitment, of conflict, of crisis' (1992: 187); if it is 'concerned with struggle, dissension, contestation, and negotiation' (1992: 215), then there is in Derrida's thinking of plurality an explicit addressing of what politics is, of the essence of the political decision. In thinking the aporia of choice inherent in plurality, that is, the necessity of choosing and the impossibility of fully justifying one's choices or of deducting them from a principle, Derrida's texts outline the space where politics happens. They do not tell us what to choose, but that we must choose.

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 (Nancy, 1996: 57). In the retreat of the political, 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 organisation, but as the necessity of thinking the space in which our being-together happens. Nancy thinks the political as spaciousness, as the space of movements and encounters.¹³ This demands a putting-into-play of a community without bonds, a thinking of the space where the bond always has to be bound and is never bound once and for all, of the political as the gesture of binding. Though this might seem overly abstract, it does leave us with an imperative, namely to make room for all singularities, or in other words, to create a world in which every singularity can expose itself.

Notes

1 For all quotations of Nancy and Derrida, I provide the reference to the French original. All translations are mine.

2 In an interview with Andreas Wagner, Andreas Niederberger, and Deitmar Kövaker, Nancy comments: 'There is no common project between Derrida and me. There is something that runs deeper and that is less definite' (Nancy, 2002b).

3 The first expression is originally from Bataille, the second from Blanchot. For the references to those expressions in Derrida, see Caputo (1997: 106-24).

4 This remark follows Alain Badiou's comments in his paper 'L'offrande réservée', presented at the colloquium *Sens en tous sens: Autour des travaux de Jean-Luc Nancy* at the Collège international de philosophie in January 2003. For example, we can list the following affirmations, which circle around a definition of the word 'sens': 'The world is a totality of sense' (2002a: 34); 'The world does not have any sense anymore, it is sense' (1993: 19); 'Sense is the singularity of all the singular beings' (1993: 111); 'Finitude is the truth, whose infinity is sense' (1993: 51); 'Finitude is the sharing of sense' (1990b: 27); 'Sense is itself the sharing of being' (1996: 20); 'Sense is touching' (1990b: 293); 'The body is the archi-tectonic of sense' (1992: 25).

5 Erasing the erasure means that one hypostasizes the term which is under erasure; yet if you erase the term under erasure, one hypostasizes the erasure itself. Both movements are needed to avoid constituting either the term or the erasure as substantial.

6 On reversal and displacement, see Derrida (1972: 392). On inside-work and break-through, see Derrida (1972: 162).

7 For Derrida's critique of fraternity in Nancy, see *Politiques de l'amitié* (1994: 57 note 1), and paragraphs 4 and 5 of *Voyous* (2003). 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 (2003: 91 n.1). Nancy dismisses Derrida's concern in *Être singulier pluriel* (1996: 44 n.3).

8 Nancy writes in *Corpus*: 'we will not put an end to racism as long as we continue to oppose it with a generic fraternity of men, instead of reflecting the dis-location, affirmed, confirmed, of our races and of our traits onto it' (1992: 33).

9 In *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Levinas speaks of the appearance, or the arrival [*l'entrée*], of the third, but specifies that this arrival should not be understood empirically (1974: 200-205). Despite this clarification, I believe that the couple remains for Levinas the condition of possibility of the third and of plurality. Yet for Derrida, the couple is impossible without the third. Without the third as distance (as the possibility of the sign that marks the in-between and that is always available to the third party), the other would melt into the one. The narcissistic jealousy of the couple, which always pervades the relation between me and myself (between me and my image, my soulmate) is first interrupted by the plus-one. We start to count with the number three, since the couple without the plus-one has all the traits of solipsism. See Derrida (1994: 203-204, 243; 2001a: 99).

10 Even though Derrida chose to insist on separation instead of on the bond, he also recognised that our epoch is one of disjuncture (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001: 7). See also Derrida (1992: 98-99). It is not clear whether Derrida would want to put his own discourse beside the ones he names there (Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy) and identifies as belonging to the times of a tremor in the structure of belonging.

11 To the discussion of '*se distinguer d'avec*,' Nancy adds the following footnote: 'The others are not only the other human beings, but all other beings in general. There is a philosophy of nature ' if one call still use that name ' that needs to be redone, from bottom up, as a philosophy of co-existence' (Esposito, 2000: 7).

12 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' (Nancy, 1996: 24-25).

13 On the political as spaciousness, see Nancy (1988: § 13).

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