Straight Sense

ANDY CAMPBELL

Jean-Luc Nancy. *Corpus II*. Trans. Anne O'Byrne. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. Print.

I often ask undergraduates encountering philosophical texts for the first time to initially read as though they were encountering poetry instead of philosophy. Not only does this tactic soften the array of feelings (overwhelmed indignation is perennially popular) that inevitably seem to arise when reading dense texts, but it also opens a student's capabilities to understand and imagine alongside a text. With Jean-Luc Nancy's new collection of essays on the body and sexuality, *Corpus II*, it might actually behoove the expert as much as the neophyte to read these essays as though they were poetry *as well as* philosophy.

Jean-Luc Nancy's contributions to philosophy are just now beginning to be felt in earnest throughout the United States, perhaps owing to fact that English translations of his texts only started to appear in significant numbers in the 1990s. A secondary literature on the philosopher followed suit in the 2000s. More recently, the Guggenheim organized an exhibition in 2012 of Southeast-Asian video/mixed-media art under the title "Being Singular Plural", which is also Nancy's formulation for a preliminarily relational foundation of Being (*Being Singular Plural* 12). A brief discussion of Nancy's essay "Shattered Love" appears in Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's new dialogue-as-theoretical-structure, called *Sex, or The Unbearable*. And this is to say nothing of the countless authors discussing community with any modicum of criticality who continue to refer to, and riff on, Nancy's landmark text, *The Inoperative Community*.

Corpus II affirms Nancy, now in his seventies, as a strong technician of language. Encountering the essays in this collection is akin to meeting new members of an extended family at a reunion—they're all related, sure, but there are eccentricities and charms particular to each person. Likewise, we could place some of the key ideas operating in *Corpus II* within the atmosphere of Nancy's decades-long core concerns: when he says, "It follows that relation is not in any way a being: it is not anything distinct, but rather distinction itself" (*Corpus II* 7) he reiterates a longstanding interest in relationality's paradoxical structure. One might reasonably compare this statement with Nancy's earlier call to focus on and loosely hold the "in" of "being-in-common" (*The Inoperative Community*, xxxix). The essays in *Corpus II* are an extension of Nan

cy's musings on communitarian relationality, and they all concern, to lesser or greater degrees, the most vexing and (literally) exciting of relationalities: sex.

In the opening essay, "The 'There Is' of Sexual Relation," Nancy takes as his starting point Jacques Lacan's statement "There is no sexual relation." Mulling on Lacan's invective, Nancy allows "resonances to emerge for me that will not harmonize with the unison of the Lacanian program" (1). This essay is a circling-back for Nancy, whose first book *The Title of the Letter* (1973) was uniformly cool on Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts. Happily he admits to a desire to consider topics more dovish writers might shy away from: "When I fuck, I'm fucked, but how are we to understand this?" (3). One of the productive ways that Nancy understands this paradoxical embodiment is through a discussion of the concept of "zones" as "mobile and fleeting circumscriptions" of the body, too numerous and multifarious to adequately nail down. The zoned body "emblazons itself as the actual taking place of differing and deferring" (17). Some of the best passages in this essay, like many in *Corpus II*, are frustratingly victim to Nancy's exploratory style: important thoughts, –often framed as rhetorical questions, – get lost and become fleetingly tangential. For example, Nancy asks, "What is the mutual relation of the body of pleasure and the body of a child? The child's body could be understood as an erogenous zone that detaches itself and takes on an autonomous destiny" (17). Such an insight is bracing and thrilling, especially because this reframing of psychosexual development could fundamentally tug at accepted notions of childhood and motherhood (and thereby a whole slew of writers who find these relationships fascinating). Still, there's more to say; the generous assumption to make, and I think it's an accurate one, is that Nancy is merely pointing out trails for others to blaze.

The other disappointment is the archival breadth (or lack thereof) of Nancy's extended meditation on breasts, "The Birth of Breasts." The essay, which is the longest in the collection, wonders aloud what would happen if we took the breast as the primary expression of Being? "'I am' forms the breast of thought," (44) Nancy suggests without a hint of irony. That in German 'breast' and 'Being' are homophones (sein/Sein) sweetens Nancy's premise. Nancy's essay is too much informed by the nurturing capacities of breasts, and their erotic possibilities, without paying much mind to their potential for negativity, anxiety, and loss. Nancy's thoughts on breast/Being are interpolated with the words of other writers. Some are novelists, some philosophers – but a disproportionate number are male. You would think women would have some interesting things to say about breasts. Deceptively, *Corpus II*'s dust-jacket declares that Nancy's "beautiful reflection on human anatomy" is culled from a broad range of subjectivities and historical periods; "Sappho to Beckett" is the pitch. But Sappho appears once in "The Birth of Breasts", Beckett appears– twice, and Modernist writers like James Joyce more times than either. For all the discussion of embodiment,

Nancy's archive is fairly flat. One can't help but suspect that the inclusion of radical lesbian writers could have enriched Nancy's canon. The capitalized lists of body parts from Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, for example, would be a welcome tonal interruption of Nancy's archive. Or Cixous, for that matter. Or Kristeva. If we're raiding the Modernist closet: Virginia Woolf. Or Gertrude Stein. Or, if we're raiding the erotic closet (which is generally more fun than the Modernist closet): Anaïs Nin. Or Pauline Réage. Nancy dodges this responsibility early on in the essay by telling his reader that he is making "no treatise, then, no book of breasts. They exist" (25). And while Nancy rightly excoriates the "idiocies and obscenities" (50) of the fantasy of twinned undifferentiated and perfectly round breasts, the quoted interspersed texts develop a different argument altogether. Perhaps Nancy is merely playing descant to the canon's melody. My question is, where's the syncopation?

One final gripe, which would be small were this collection concerned with any other subject besides sexuality: Nancy sometimes misses the opportunity to *revel* in obscenity. Discussing the differences between the heart and breast in Kantian philosophy, Nancy states, "It is a matter of nothing less than the two meanings of *cum*: 'with' and 'together'"(47). Of course, "cum" has a third meaning, but then Nancy is primarily concerned with the Latinate meanings of the word, not the hard-parsed spellings found in toilet stalls.

Because of these issues, or more precisely my frustrations which arose from them, this 46 page essay took me the better part of a month to read. Yet the essay also contains a brilliant discussion of Freud's posthumously published note, "I am the breast", which makes an appearance more than once in "The Birth of Breasts." Going on a Foucauldian Archeological "dig" on Freud's wonky assertion, Nancy translates and presents a block of text (by far the longest of his array of quotations) from Theodor Lipps on the topic of empathy. Empathy is a fascinating import into a discussion of Nancy's mostly-male discussion of breasts, not least because many people physicalize empathetic response by touching their own breast. Lipps, who counted among his many fervent admirers a young Viennese student named Sigmund, surmises that "the aesthetic contemplation of female form is—or can be—the same for a woman as it is for a man, and vice versa" (61). Despite Lipps's suggestion otherwise, Nancy correctly points out that the German philosopher's text is really only "a matter of women's breasts for men and not for women" (62). Setting aside Nancy's capabilities to point out the gendered tone-deafness of his source material and not reflect critically on his own, Nancy's maneuvering of empathy and identification is generative and open: "[…] identification itself, like the eye that has no vision of a sameness that is differently disposed, indefinitely different—an insubstantial substance […]" (66).

Perhaps I am unfair in my extended assessment of "The Birth of Breasts", because at

its best, this essay, like many in the book, takes the formal and material properties of its supposed subject and turns it into a kind of deliciously meditative droning on appositeness: "There is neither unity nor multiplicity. There is the one and the other, the one to the other, the one beside the other between the one and the other" (50). Reveling in Nancy's language is one of the great pleasures of reading his texts, and reason enough to become familiarized with his catalog. For example, Nancy's "Paean to Aphrodite" (previously published in English in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, 2006) is literally a praise-song to the fecund foaminess of the Aphrodite myth. The "vague, effervescence weight that weighs nothing on the deeps" (80) is descriptive of Aphrodite's birth as well as the general firmament of the essay, which contains the initial kernel of "The Birth of Breasts."

Corpus II continues some of the body-centric work evident in his previous collection of essays, *Corpus* (published in English in 2008), where Nancy notably elucidated a deconstruction of Christianity—as architecture, as process. One of his most stunning and transparently personal essays to date, entitled "The Intruder," is enfolded in that 2008 collection of essays (although I prefer the 2002 Susan Hanson translation published in *The New Centennial Review*, which I'll quote from here). The intruder, by the way, is Nancy's new heart after transplant and perhaps also the cancer growing in his body. In that essay, deadpan statements such as "my own heart in fact was worn out, for reasons that have never been clear. Thus to live, it was necessary to receive another's, an other, heart" are tense with multiple-meanings. Posed with such existential questions Nancy's mind soars, and he re-renders the dramatic experience of his surgery as a deep philosophical treatise on the self, "sharp and spent, stripped bare and over-equipped, intruding upon the world and on itself" ("L'Intrus" 13).

Similarly in *Corpus II* some of the shortest essays shine brightest. I read "Strange Foreign Bodies" as a companion-piece to "The Intruder." This essay is enough to make a Romantic of any reader, and has quickly become a go-to text for me. In the hopes of conversion, I'll quote at length for any nonbelievers:

> [The body] is a stretched strap and a relaxed fist, the hidden mass of sleep, palm to forehead, the echo of the voice in his head, vertigo, magnanimity and perspiration, the meanest excoriation, hardenings and cramps, irritations, obstructions, extrasystoles, sneezes, a whole machinery that is too sensitive, to susceptible to what is only the ever-renewed excess of all things—and of itself—beyond the simple maintenance of its machine. For there is no machine; there is only desire and expectation, fear and hunger, need, want, impulse, and despondency. There is only the terrible struggle between forces that constrict one another, that pull and push on all sides from all the extremities of the skin and of the world (89-90).

In this paragraph of both "limitless expansion" (92) and constrictive forces Nancy gives voice to his particular gift—to turn and re-turn the subject at hand, in hand. It is here, and places too numerous to count in *Corpus II* that Jean-Luc Nancy fashions poetry from the crucible of philosophy. Perhaps in telling young scholars to read philosophical texts as poetry I am merely making good on Nancy's dictum: "The poem is the jouissance of language and the language of jouissance" (22).

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Andy Campbell, Ph.D., is a Core Program Critic-In-Residence with the Glassell School of Art/Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He is an independent critic and curator. Recent scholarly interests include Black Negativity, Foliage and Modernism, Gay/Lesbian leather and BDSM communities, and #realness.