Salut to Jean-Luc Nancy

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With special thanks to Jean-Luc Nancy’s translators

How shall we commemorate Jean-Luc Nancy? By reading him.

_The blind were a theme that you [Derrida] favoured: salut to the vision that did not cling to forms or ideas but that let itself be touched by forces._

(‘Salut to you, salut to the blind we become’)

_Salut_ – hello and good-bye. A word given by spirit to those at home in French, and who thus also understand better how beginning and end always go together, how we indeed come full circle, how our origins are ahead of us. This can help us get back to the origins of thought where vision and touch belonged together. But after Plato’s forceful intervention in favour of vision, we need reminders that, just like the Presocratics knew, we are touched by the world in all sorts of way, and in the most elemental ways. And we can learn from philosophers for ages to come, especially from those who ‘did not cling to forms or ideas but let [themselves] be touched by forces’ – like Nancy.

_However, I would readily say that it is all about being born rather than being. […] We are born: We are before and after birth. We detach ourselves, we are pushed, we are already born and that is still to come – until death, which is like being born as being no more… Birth is unique. It is the birth of the singular – like death._

(An Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy on Literature, Philosophy and the Present)
It – that is, all of it, everything, existence – is all about being born rather than being. That is a strong statement. Of course, Nancy means it in the ontological sense, coming from, having always already come from. But the body is in this statement as well, the body which Nancy devotes so much brilliant work to later: ‘We are pushed’ – yes, thank you, Jean-Luc, for reminding us that this is true, for all of us. It’s not a small thing, and particularly, not a small thing to say. Saying it, bringing the concepts of birth out into the open, is as important as pointing out that yes, it is singular, unique. It is also facticity, thrownness: into this situation rather than any other, into this ‘here’ and ‘now’. But facticity and thrownness into an uncanny situation it is also for the parents. Parenthood, too, is unique, singular. Thank you for pointing that out, even if implicitly, or rather, for allowing me to read you in that way.

An essential non-coincidence makes us other than ourselves.

(The Ground of the Image)

That is to my mind the shortest way of expressing what is perhaps the single most important insight of the philosophical tradition Nancy belongs to. It contains, in the same sentence, the reason for us being other than ourselves: an essential non-coincidence, echoing Hegel as well as Existentialism. It is essential to us, it is part of our essence – which is always unfinished, provisional, still up for grabs, nicht-feststellbar (Nietzsche) – it is part of our essence that we are not ourselves. We do not coincide. We are an event between events, embodied in a finite, fragile, vulnerable body which is constantly changing – and we are extremely lucky if these changes happen only by way of ageing and not be way of illness or ‘intrusion’. It is essential to our being human that we are not ourselves, that we are always also strangers to ourselves, subliminally yet always on the verge and often in actual manifestation, revelation.
A body does not easily touch another body because it knows that this proximity threatens to strike them both down in a new flaring up of the desire of spirit.

(“Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality”)

Finally, through Nancy, Hegel is becoming more erotic. And he should be, as love is a main topic in Hegel’s early writings, but then his Swabian nature must have kicked in. The matter is different with Nancy where the encounter in the flesh (London, 2005) was definitely erotic somehow, in a very subtle and not at all obvious fashion. It was erotic to sit in the audience and see him think. Nancy’s is a very important insight indeed: A body does not easily touch another body, finds it strange, alien. But in contrast to the way in which even my own body is certainly often alien to me, it is only in the encounter with the body of the Other that a flaring up of desire can occur that strikes both down. A wonder so deep and traumatic that it is justified to be afraid of it, without even considering the plethora of mundane dangers of desire, from misunderstanding to shame, and in the worst case, violence. Spirit will incorporate all that and still desire, through us. When we desire, when one of us desires somebody, existence comes to a point of highest intensity, with the option of utmost ecstasy (being outside ourselves), enthusiasm (having God is us), awe – but also utmost danger, vulnerability, and thus overall, ambiguity. Nancy succeeds in holding that ambiguity of desire open.

What we are calling ‘‘work’’ is much less the completed production than this very movement, which does not ‘‘produce’’ but opens and continually holds the work open—or, more precisely, maintains the work as this opening that it essentially is, all the way to its conclusion, even if this conclusion takes shape from what music calls resolution.

(‘‘How Music Listens to Itself’’
I would like to maintain that this holds for all works of art, music and everything else, and furthermore, that this is one of the ideas missing from Heidegger’s ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ – an idea which, if we could add it, would contribute significantly to the concept of work that Heidegger develops. For Heidegger, a work of art sets up a world and sets forth the earth, and as world and earth stand in a relation of strife, it is this strife that the work holds open. Yet Nancy’s emphasis on movement – and on the way in which a continuous holding is a movement which requires effort and devotion – allows us to see that the work of art is by no means static. Language seduces us into thinking of the artwork as a static thing that can be contained and to which things happen; but that is not so. The work *is* only by not being a work: by being a process, a happening, a development, a becoming. Work works, *Werk wirkt*, not as a production but as a holding. Listening means being touched, Nancy says, and this holding is thus also a touching, in a moment. Music holds open a hope: it holds open all hopes. Music is about beginning and ending, and beginning again – like we will hopefully do, with Nancy’s writings.

*This world is only this world; it has no other sense, and it is in this sense that it is the world of the history-of-the-world.*

*(The Restlessness of the Negative)*

By saying this, Nancy takes Nietzsche’s warning to be weary of any *Hinterwelten* all the way – while also challenging us, with the claim that already Hegel did this, since it is Hegel’s concept of world that Nancy is outlining here. Hegel, the philosopher who is often still read as reactionary and conservative in the worst sense, and who has admittedly also contributed to such readings; but in a different way from what most think, as Nancy also shows.

This world – ‘the world of the history-of-the-world’ – has no other sense. And yet, it has so much sense, from within, from immanence turning itself inside out and outside in,
being restless in all the senses. It is spirit wanting to grasp itself, ‘grasping itself and relating itself to self’ (5). There is urgency and seriousness to this grasping; but there is also laughter: ‘Hegel plays with us; he turns the whole thing into a comedy – the comedy of the tragedy of separation’ (10).

Hegel holds a special role for philosophy because he was ‘the witness of the world’s entry into a history in which it is no longer in control’ (6). Nancy shows how the events of the twentieth century which are often evoked to show that Hegel was ‘wrong’ or has been ‘disproven’ by history, in fact show how Hegel began to witness a development in which world indeed became capable of undergoing ‘transformations’. Spirit had become complex enough to give rise to the kinds of counter movements which turned world inside out and outside in. Revolutions, convolutions, labour, birth to new worlds, entirely new transfigurations, and thus also unheard-of conflicts. This means taking uncanniness to the extreme – which is at stake in the next citation.

*We are, along with all my more and more numerous counterparts, the beginnings of a mutation: man recommences going infinitely beyond man (this is what “the death of god,” in all its possible senses, has always meant). Man becomes what he is: the most terrifying and troubling technician, as Sophocles designated him twenty-five centuries ago.*

*(L’Intrus)*

The human being is the most *deinon*, the most terrifying and uncanny, amongst the many uncanny things, Sophocles says (*Antigone*, Second Choral Ode). That is because humans notice the uncanniness they are confronted with and choose to counter it – thereby creating more uncanniness, or rather, higher and more complex levels thereof. Uncanniness can take us down to death, destruction, deterioration. However, it is also related to the awesome,
amazing. Techne, technology bewitches us because it is amazing – at first. It secures us against the uncanny out there and in us. We feel uncanny because we are never fully at home in the world (as Heidegger explains in *Being and Time*, Section 40).

The ‘death of god’ also means that we are now securely, safely-unsafely, placed as mortals; nobody even remotely promises us any care of our souls after our deaths. Which is why we create ever higher levels on uncanniness especially in response to death and sickness. Is it worth it, Nancy asks; is it worth all the mutations and counterparts? For the person undergoing the experience, that is very difficult and possibly impossible to decide. But the rest of us, we have certainly benefitted tremendously from Nancy carrying on, all the way into the pandemic – which has brought us even more uncanniness. Nancy carried on long enough for him to undergo the experience with us and be able to speak to us about it, uncannily, in a video which has him speaking to us on YouTube, part of the new uncanny but to my mind so far much less vicious than other technological genres (like Facebook or Twitter), speaking about ‘making an experience together’. Merci, danke, Jean-Luc, for staying with us for so long, making so many experiences, and writing about them. So that we can read them and say: salut.

*Works Cited:*


Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, translated by Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002).


‘Salut to you, salut to the blind we become’ in Jacques Derrida, On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005).

