

Bodies' Touch: The Poetics of Writing and/on the Body in Jean Luc Nancy's *Corpus*

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*Through the ages, and more significantly during the modern and postmodern eras, the human body has relentlessly been the source of inspiration, amazement, repulsion etc. for both philosophers and writers, all currents confounded. From Merleau-Ponty to Bakhtin, Bataille and others, thinkers and artists' approaches to the body abounded from different perspectives. J. L. Nancy's envisionment of the notion of the body, which he compellingly expounds in his essay-book *Corpus*, remains largely overlooked in comparison with other mainstream phenomenological approaches, such as, Merleau-Ponty's. The present essay seeks, through a close reading of Nancy's philosophical oeuvre, *Corpus*, to identify the main characteristics of Nancy's thought pertaining to the body, his 'corporeal' philosophy foregrounding "excription" while writing (on) the body, which originates in a writing that "touches" (upon) both the body and the other.*

Introduction

The ineffable mystery and complexity of (the writing) subject as both a self and a body addressing another self and being is inexorably confronted with a "double failure",¹ the one of producing an inadequate discourse 'on' the body, and also that of the impossibility to avoid such undertaking. Such "double failure" may be summed up as one and unique failure, or at least, formidable difficulty: how to produce a "textual body", a new fibre of writing that "touches" the 'other' "with tact"² without for all that reducing the body to meaning. Nancy points out that the body (and by extrapolation the self with its attendant affects, like tenderness) is not, cannot, be inscribed into discourse as a meaningful construct, a reducible entity; its economy transcends discursive reduction. It is not to be found in what writing encapsulates, but rather, what it "excribes."³ Only "excription," "discharges of writing", can address the "body" in all its complexity and approach its ungraspable character. In his later published long essay, published as a book entitled *Corpus* (2008), Nancy⁴ provides a compelling philosophical inquiry into the sense of the body, the attendant pitfalls when treating such concept in writing or psychology and the proper ways to counter them. The present essay seeks to analyse Nancy's thought pertaining to the body and probe into his notion of "excription" to find out

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1. J. L. Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (US: Stanford University Press, 1993), 320.
2. Ibid, 321.
3. Ibid, 320.
4. Nancy, *Corpus* (US: Fordham University Press, 2008).

what is it that kind of discourse which “excribes”, which allows it to “touch” (upon) both the body and the other.

The Concept of the Body in Modern and Postmodern Thought: Three Key Approaches

Through the ages, particularly in modern and postmodern thought, the human body has sparked a vivid interest among philosophers and writers. From Bakhtin’s “grotesque body” to Bataille’s dead corpses, or still, to Merleau-Ponty’s “gaze, the human body has been subjected to a scrutinous study and relentless reflection. While Bakhtin devoted a whole book to the image of the body in Rabelais’ work, Bataille was obsessed with the dead body as a taboo and the endemic violence associated with its sight. As to Merleau-Ponty, he adamantly denounced the reification, objectified reduction of the body as an objective idea rather than an experiential entity.

As for Bakhtin, was intrigued by the grotesque portrayal of the body in Rabelais’ works, notably *Gargantua*. In his compelling book devoted to the Rablesian oeuvre entitled *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin⁵ dwells on his fascination with Rabelais’ endemic sardonic, bawdy vein when evoking bodily displays like laughter, but also the body’s gluttonous indulgence in epicurean pleasures. Bakhtin is seized by the wealth and variety of the body imagery in Rabelais’ work, notably in *Gargantua*, in which the multifarious manifestations of the body invariably converge into the “grotesque. Bakhtin sustains that the “grotesque body” as displayed, in Rabelais’ literary oeuvre, with its attendant protuberances and orifices is a body which exceeds its own limits, a body set on a perennial self-conception. In this sense Bakhtin points out: “The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming... This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus.” (312) According to Bakhtin, the exaggerated exhibition of the body’s “convexities” and “orifices” in Rabelaisian oeuvre are passageways and contact zones propitious for an “interchange” and an “interorientation” between the body and other bodies and the world: “it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation.” (312) Bakhtin traces the centrality of the bodies’ protrusions and orifices to their vicinity to vital bodily organs and pivotal role in the “bodily drama” (313): “Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body-all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body.” (313)

5. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Indiana University Press, 1984).

Not far from Bakhtin's consecration of the grotesquely repulsive imagery the body ranging from the lower parts to bodily secretions and excrements, Bataille zeroes in on the dead body, the corpse left to rot. Though utterly helpless and harmless, the dead body is associated by Bataille with an endemic sense of "violence" and "contagion". It stands for the materialization of the irrevocable brutality which rounds off human existence: "For each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is the image of his own destiny. It bears witness to a violence which destroys not one man alone but all men in the end."⁶

According to Bataille, the sight of a dead body is fundamentally perceived by all cultures as a "taboo" (44) which we instinctively cringe from and hastily keep away through the burial act. In this sense, "[t]he corpse will rot; this biological disorder, like the newly dead body a symbol of destiny, is threatening in itself. We no longer believe in contagious magic, but which of us could be sure of not quailing at the sight of a dead body crawling with maggots?" (46) In his study, Bataille notes how some primitive burial rites performed by "ancient peoples" which consist of blenching the dead body's bones by way of "pacification of [the dead person's] spirit", and, in the second place, to ward off death's danger. (46)

A further philosopher we may refer to within the scope of the thinkers who broached the concept of the body is perhaps the closest to J. L. Nancy's thought and theory of "corpus": the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. From the perspective of a fervent advocate of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty laments the "obsession" with the intellect or "being" as an abstract, objectified, synthesized notion imposed by Rationalism. Such "obsession", according to him, falls short of the intrinsic "perspectivism of my experience" (73) since it subordinates what is/should be my primary medium to discern the world surrounding us, notably the "gaze". According to Merleau-Ponty, my corporeal, perceptual experience is to be the terminus a quo, the inception of my apprehension of the world and of my own self: "I consider my body, which is my point of view upon the world, as one of the objects of that world. I repress the consciousness that I had of my gaze as a means of knowing and I treat my eyes as fragments of matter." (73) Merleau-Ponty points out how "the objective thought of common sense and science" strips us from the "perceptual experience" which constitutes the core of our perception of and continuation with the world and ourselves. (74) From an exclusively rationalistic approach to my physical being, Merleau-Ponty sustains, "I no longer pay attention to my body, to time, or to the world such as I live them in pre-predicative knowledge, that is, in the inner communication that I have with them. I only speak of my body as an idea, of the universe as an idea, and of the idea of space and of time." (74) Such reification of the body, time and the world coops up formidable repercussions on the subject in his/her experience of subjectivity and engaging with world, causing human consciousness to be numbed, deadened: "The whole life of

6. G. Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (Walker and Company, 1962), 44.

consciousness tends to posit objects... it takes itself up and gathers itself together in an identifiable object. And yet the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals all of experience, as a seed crystal introduced into a solution causes it suddenly to crystallize." (74)

Nancy's *Corpus* (2008)

Like Merleau-Ponty, the contemporary French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy belongs to the phenomenological tradition. His conception of the body and the writing poetics of the body, which he extensively expounds in his book-essay *Corpus* remain largely overlooked in comparison to the thoughts of his contemporary compatriot Merleau-Ponty, for instance. The present essay proposes to closely examine Nancy's conception of the body, and the writing poetics Nancy recommends when broaching the concept of the body.

Ever since the body has been subjected to thought, Nancy points out in the opening sections of *Corpus*, it laid open to the slash inflicted by the sword of sense, the intent attempts of theologians, philosophers, writers at reducing it to a sign, an "organon" (of sense). In reality, Nancy argues, the body "sets trap for the sign"; "it never stops signifying." Nancy asks whether we can survive a new approach to the body, our bodies, which would be sense-free, or would it better for us to keep to our reductive, the construct-loaded conceptions of our bodies and run even the risk the undergo a haemorrhage of meaning; the latter may be more salutary than the loss of sense as meaning. Using a gripping metaphoric blood imagery Nancy argues:

Sense escapes from the wound, drop by drop, frightfully, derisively-perhaps even serenely, if not joyfully? This question is prompted by a bloodless dawn rising on a world of bodies. Can we deal with a loss of sense, and have a sense of that loss—but without concession or deceit concerning the loss itself? Can we reach what has already been extended and opened by this loss? Namely, the world of bodies, as the gaping end of the organon of sense delivers it, or lets it come? (emphasis added, 81)

Nancy hails the advent of a "bloodless dawn" which will inaugurate a new phase in the philosophical treatment of the (written) body: a phase exempt from too stifling and reductive meaning constructs and characterized by a broadening of corporeal horizons through a redistribution of sense as "ectopias". (25) In *Corpus*, from the outset, Nancy sustains that this loss of sense, "or losing this body-of-sense" would lead us, as we shall see, to a restoration of our time and "space", "properly" (81). Surprisingly, according to Nancy, this loss of sense would legitimate "anguish": "it's its melancholic incorporation"/ "hysterical incarnation", but not "suffering" (81). For Nancy, "suffering isn't", shouldn't be, "given a sense": "We suffer because organized for sense, and the loss of it wounds us, cuts us." As a matter of fact, instead of suffering and its attendant meaningful constructs there should lie an open "wound", a "space" where the subject is ready to face his

"areality" and the world: "Here, at the point of suffering, is only an open "subject," cut, anatomized, deconstructed, disassembled, deconcentrated. The dawn of a spacing, clarity itself, the risk and chance for areality as what we're exposed to, and what exposes us, as we-as a we-world." (Nancy's italics, 81)

Nancy is confounded when realizing that the increasingly crowded, swarming world's population have never come to be truly tangent: "More than...generic being." We have been obsessed by, consumed with, our desire to consecrate difference, our differences whether they be gender, racial, purely physical which keep us from touching upon the generic, essential bond which grounds us as human beings and at the same time reinforces our awareness of every distinct vibrant fiber of every sensing body: "More than five billion human bodies. Soon to be eight billion. Not to mention other bodies. Humanity becomes tangible: but what we can touch isn't "mankind," it's precisely not this generic being... We talk about its nongeneric nature, its nongenerality." Specific senses, culturally-loaded constructs have kept humans from meeting in a *juste-milieu*, reach a space of a "*juste-clarté*", their "a-reality" where they can truly touch (each other). Nancy asks:

What is the space opened between eight billion bodies, and, within each one, between phallus and cephalic, among the thousand folds, postures, falls, leaps and bounds of each? In what space do they touch each other and stray from each other, with none of them, or their totality, being absorbed into a pure and empty sign of the self, into a body of-sense? Sixteen billion eyes, eighty billion fingers: seeing what? Touching what? And if it's only to exist and be these bodies, and to see, touch and sense the bodies of this world, what might we invent to celebrate their number? Can we even think about it, we whom the wound fatigues... (83)

Writing the Body: "A Writing that is Not to Be Read"

Writing the body, according to Nancy, implies, treating it as "the anatomical sign of "self" which doesn't signify, but cuts, separates, exposes." (85) Nancy's written corpus would not be meant to signify, but to reinforce "the dialogue of dialogue", not even abide by "the contract of sense." (85) On the contrary, it absolves, as much as it can, since we are intrinsically programmed for sense, and imposes its own caesura of sense by following its own flow of inspiration. It veers towards countless "swerves" of deconstructed configurations, extrapolations and infinite stretchability of the sign. In this sense, Nancy hails a forthcoming, promising aesthetic "gliding" which operates as follows:

This isn't the philosophico-medical anatomy of dissection, a dialectician's dismembering of organs and functions. An anatomy more of numbering than dismembering. An anatomy of configurations, of the plasticity of what we'd have to call states of body, ways of being, bearing, breathings, paces, staggerings, sufferings, pleasures, coats, windings, brushings, masses. Bodies, to begin with, are masses, masses offered with

nothing to be articulated about them, nothing to link them to, whether a discourse or a story: palms, cheeks, wombs, buttocks. Even an eye is a mass, as are tongue and ear-lobe. (85)

Nancy remarkably catches the fundamentally disjoint nature of the body's reality through his jerky, almost spasmodic language loosely knitted with mere juxtaposition. Similarly, Nancy conceives of each organ of the body, separately, but more importantly, as a "black hole" (84) in its own right, a self-sufficient galaxy which both secretes and sucks the meaning it produces and keeps expanding in the shape of an infinitely malleable mass, a sort of density without core. In other words, Nancy regards the slightest anatomical part of the body as a "mass," not as Freud or Tardes make use of the term in their notion of "mass phenomena" based on the idea of "concentration", which, according to Nancy, even disadvantages the body by omitting its proper space. According to him, bodies are to be treated as "sites of density", not "concentration of meaning", but a sort of gravitational space, delineated but continuously expanding in its own periphery:

They have no center, no black hole. They are right at the surface of the skin-right at the surface of the hand that can grasp them. It's a massed space, a spacious mass, extension exposed like a grain, like a weight, like a swelling, like a limited arrangement, a local color where the *partes extra partes* make their areality more dense, but without falling into *partes intra partes*. (Nancy's emphasis, 84)

Some pages later, Nancy explains that the true "techné of bodies" is not to be conceived as a modally singular form of reproduction, the religious model of thought, according to which (divine) "'Creation' is the techne of bodies." (84) Nancy refutes the Christian version of Creation which he regards as lame, inefficient in accounting for the real weal of the bodies' reality. By conceiving of all the bodies as descendants from one, unique self-begotten body, that of Christ: "Not bodies produced by the autoproduction of the spirit and its reproduction-which, at any rate, can produce only a single body, a single visible image of the invisible (hence the fact that the body of woman is regarded by Aristotle as poorly engendered and defective, or marked, according to Christians, with an impure wound)." (87-88) Nancy evokes Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain* in which Elain sustains that when "the world, the self, the voice are lost in the intensity of the suffering of torture," what ensues is "the dissolution of the world, the uncreation of the created world." (Elain quoted in Nancy, 89) In this sense, Nancy argues that the notion of "Creation" is to be thought as creation of bodies, primarily, a "world of bodies" governed by the "technical" reproduction, proliferation of bodies. Nancy calls for a new thinking of Creation, of the creation of the bodies, which consecrates a whole "echotechnical" (89) system that binds the world of bodies to the world (of sense). According to this system of thought, "...[The] body [is] given as multiplied, multi-sexed, multi-figured, multi-zoned, phallic and aphallic, cephalic and acephalic, organized,

inorganic. Bodies thus created, which is to say, coming, and whose coming spaces the here, the there, every time". (91)

Bathing in this "echotechnical" envisioning of the bodies' interactional connections with the world, in its larger sense, beyond the demographic world of bodies, the world which bids manifold ways of cerebral and affective engagements with both the body and the community, the body becomes, itself, thus, a cosmic miniature of this multi-layered, functionally zoned connection. In other words, a body is not to be classified, reduced to its gender, race or else. It ceaselessly creates its space, an open site for the interplay, the displacement of functions and fixed associations: "... a body given as multiplied...every time." (89) Nancy makes it clear that such interplay between the body and the world's bodies is neither dialectic, nor immanent, nor transcendental; it simply occurs, openly, extendedly, in the Other's vicinity without prior or subsequently intended end of containment. From this perspective, Nancy proclaims: "The Judeo-Christian-Islamic "neighbor" resided in the particular and the universal, in the dialecticization of the two, which doesn't fail to end up in the universal. But here the neighbor would be what comes, what takes place in an approach, and what also touches and diverges, thus localizing, displacing, the touch." (89)

A compellingly imaginative "paradigm" which Nancy makes use of to illustrate how we should conceive, think and write the body according to the echotechnical, gravitational law of Creation, evoked above, is the woman's breast (85). The latter is to be intimated as a site of "ectopic", fractal associations, orb'd mass/density of extrapolations, gushing from a "space", an "emotion" (motherhood, sexual arousal etc.). Nancy declares:

Its paradigm is probably the woman's breast, a mass that localizes many an ectopia. Nourishment, separate object, visibility of sex, independent movement, erection, overflowing, doubling, the obverse of a vigorous breastplate, the bearing of a curve, bearing fruit: the *b(e)aring* of breasts exemplifies every birth as an essential modalizing of areality-and also lets us see how this modalizing can, in every sense, be called an emotion. This privilege of dense and zoned areality is named, and spaced, as areola. (88)

An "areola", would best embody best the "areality" of the body and the way we should conceive of, write about it in a "corpus" without its subsumption into an "inscriptive surface" or a "recording of signification" (85). As a matter of fact, Nancy's allegory of the woman's breast, notably the areola, compellingly summons the meaning(s) attached to the body as a compactly complex set of (cognitive, affective, philosophical, religious etc.) associations which would pop up like rounded rhizomes of meaning(s) strung together into a hoop, the areola's. Nancy adds, "[i]n this anatomy of masses... [n]o "written body", no writing at the body; and nothing whatsoever of a somatography. ...That we write, no doubt is the body, but absolutely not *where* we write, nor is a body *what* we write but a body is always what writing excribes." (Nancy's emphasis, 87)

But what is it that Nancy's corpus exscribes about/in the body and how?

Nancy has already provided us, already, with an allegorical intimation of the "what," the kind of substance cooped up in the proper writing on/of the body through the paradigm of the woman's breast as an "aureola" of sundry, associative projections revolving around the nipple-centre, a miscellany of zoned spaces or emotions. The question that remains is how this writing against writing, writing against inscription, subsumption into any fixed category of meaning, "exscription," is to be undertaken?

Nancy sustains that what is "excribed" resides at, hinges on the "edge" of "inscription", a sort of incipient, inchoate signification conceived on the verge of a prior inscription/meaning; "In all writing ...body is." (87) Writing the body as "corpus" and reading it would pertain to a new "letricity", that of "tact", a "letricity" of touch, tracking down sensory palpability, a "letricity" of spaced tangibility involving limit, space and contact, each body is touched in a zoned, fractal manner. Meaning turns, thus, into body and not the other way round. The body is no longer expressed in meaningfully reducible constructs. In one word, as Nancy sums it up, "sense senses itself sensing." (83)

Body and thought and the Need for Corpus

For Nancy body and thought are necessarily contiguous or at least bound to an inevitable vicinity. They mutually summon each other without, for all that, merging into each other. "...[T]hey *are* only their touching each other, the touch of their breaking down, and, into each other. This touching is the limit and spacing of existence." (Nancy's emphasis, 37) Nancy explains that this seemingly uncanny bound between body and thought being governed by both a frontier/ "limit" and interceding, intermediary area or "spacing" has a "name" which he coins in a quadruply compound term: "body-thought-joy-pain/sorrow." (37) The tangency between body and thought is the spacing margin of existence, a sort of backdrop against which the unanimously common "combination" "body-thought-joy-pain/sorrow" is played out. Nancy even assigns a name for this phenomenon: "sex", which he argues "doesn't name anything that would be exposed: it names the process of touching upon exposition itself." (37) Nancy sustains that sex "touches upon the untouchable" in its relation to the body. He insists that sex cease to be a mere denominator, a sheer gender indicator, a sort of "... the body's *flash-name*", assigning meaning to add a further layer to the separation between bodies, "a supplementary aesthesia." (37) Instead, Nancy exhorts that sex be broached anew as the space or the playground for the integrative, "body-thought-joy-pain/sorrow" drama of our lives is played out and in which body and thought concurrently take part like two actors who would unknowingly pass each other while performing their respective roles.

Nancy sustains that we, our bodies, are desperately in need of a “corpus”: a body of writing that would not be “a narrative”. Nor would it be explicated or theorized⁷ into reducible constructs and meaning-tied terms. This “corpus” would take the form of a “promise”, a silently promulgated “promise”. (51) Articulated as such, it is not subject to theory, recitation or even fictional writing as a technical element like a character or setting. It is “... a kind of promise to *keep silent.*” (51) This does not mean to mute the body but to extort meaning from it, to emancipate it from the oppressive shackles of signification, and ultimately to supplant sense by sense/the sensory. As a matter of fact, Nancy’s corpus is “[s]ilent less “about” the body than *from the body*, subtracting it materially from its signifying imprints: and doing so *here, on the read and written page.* (Nancy’s emphasis, 51)

Nancy argues that the acts of both writing and reading imply a touching, a body’s touching of the page, of the hand holding a book (51), and one may add of the fingers pressing the keyboard’s keys. No matter how infinite the circuit of transmission, the “deferral” or the dispersal of this touching with the book handed down from hand to hand, photocopied, disseminated, there remains, Nancy argues, “[an] infinitesimal dust of contact... In the end here and now, your own gaze touches the same traces of characters as mine, and you read me, and I write you.” (51) This act of touching cannot take place unless what is written or read articulates a “silent promise” about, from the body, as has been suggested by Nancy from the start. He assimilates the “corpus” he extolls to a new technique which would not be meant to improve, accelerate diffusion of information or the literary text through xeroxing or fax. On the contrary, his corpus’ technique operates in a “discrete” and “potent” manner to disseminate touch. (52) Using a pun on the term flash to ironize the relation of writing, as corpus, to technology, he argues that it does not immediately disseminate, as a flash disc would do, but rather holds in a halt with the touching power of imminence, that of a “silent promise”: “Like a silent flash, a momentary suspension of the circuits, the touch of a promise...” (53)

The model of “corpus,” as Nancy conceives of, is at the image of the Roman “Corpus Juris,” (53) which means it has the form of a “compilation,” “a catalogue.”¹ It is a body of law overarchingly personalised; “it is neither chaos nor organism: it doesn’t fall between the two, but lies somewhere else.” (53) Though it is a juridical corpus it is neither absolute nor transcendental, nor synthetic. (53) It is a law which institutes the space of each body. Space is, in fact, juridical, in that it installs “the space of the law”. The latter would be the space/distance incumbent upon, relevant to each body according to its “case”: “The body and the case fit each other. There is a jurisdiction proper to each body: “*hoc est enim*”...” (53) Accordingly, Nancy’s corpus is neither pure categorization, nor abysmal chaos: “It’s prose from a different space, the law of the law being unlawful.” (53) It is, we may infer, a kind of prose which consecrates the idiosyncratic, the specific, the exceptional and encourages contagion, trespassing and experience:

7. “... not subject to a treatise.” (51)

The corpus obeys a law that passes from case to case, a discrete continuity of rules and exceptions, of demands and derogations. Jurisdiction consists less in enunciating the absolute of the Law, or in unfolding its reasons, than in saying what the law can be here, there, now, in this case, in this place. *Hoc est enim ...:* its diction is local, spaced, horizontal, a diction less of the law's being than of its practice, competence, and capacity in this case. But the case has no essence or transcendental synthesis: there are only successive apprehensions, accidental contours, modifications. Here, in an essential, all-embracing and exclusive way, ontology is modal-or modifiable, or modifying. And the writing of this is a corpus. (Nancy's emphasis, 52)

As has been clarified, for J. L. Nancy, there is no such thing as a comprehensive, all-including writing of the body or corpus, but a case for case, local writing approach. The outcome would be a highly atypical writing, a labyrinthine discourse with diverse, varied "enteries". (52)

Expeausition (Skin-Show)

Nancy conceives of the body's "seity," that is its most intimate foundation, its proper being as fundamentally elusive, "on the verge of a movement", geared towards departure; he confirms that "[t]he body is self in departure." (33) He relentlessly, in an almost cherishing manner, refers to Christ's consecrated statement on the Last Supper evening: *Hoc est nimabsentia corporis et tamen corpus ipse*⁸ to attest the "singularity," "the spacing," the "extremity" delineating every part of the body, its movements and its very being as fated to a swirling "swerve." Such notion of "swerve" is essential to Nancy's definition of the body in relation to itself and to the other. Its intimacy "exposes", not a self-contained "seity" but following this "swerve", the trajectory of a positively fragmented, compartmented seity an "a-seity" which foregrounds movement, spacing and departure (back again to the self or the other). Thus, Nancy argues: "The intimacy of the body exposes pure a-seity as the swerve and departure that it is. Aseity-the a-self), the to-itself, the by-itself of the Subject-exists only as the swerve and departure of this a-(of this a-part-self), which is the place, the moment proper of its presence, its authenticity, its sense. The a-part-self as departure, is what's exposed." (33)

Nancy deconstructs the godly attribute of "aseity" which he confers upon the body by typographically distancing the "a" from seity in attempt to allude to its antagonistic meaning as a prefix which would suggest a twofold meaning, a sort of double bind which is intrinsic to the body being both self-sufficient, self-contained and whole, on the one hand, and wide-ranging, motile and transferrable, on the other. Nancy insists that "exposition", as he construes it, is not a sort of "a translation", a "putting on view" or "staging" of the body's intimacy or an attempt to extirpate this intimacy from "withdrawal" which is one of its fundamental

8. Nancy's emphasis (33).

properties. Expression as “expeausition” should enact the body’s very truth, the “a-part-self” truth, “*partes extra partes*”, leaving room for spacing, “a lone gulf in the spacing the [the body] himself is” (33) as withdrawal. As a matter of fact, “Expostion” as expeausition” or “excription” should enact the very being of intimacy, not to say of existence itself which is the perennial withdrawal of the self into the self, its revelation as undisclosable.⁹ To recapitulate, the “exposition” of intimacy as the understanding of the body’s innermost truth would lead to fathoming the inmost meaning of existence itself, of being. This is possible only on the condition that exposition of the body be broached as self-reflexity, a merging of the subject’s being and the body according to which the “essence” of its being is “self-positing”; the body “is the being exposed of the being” in and of itself. In this sense, Nancy evokes the notion of “*the aesthetic body*” (Nancy’s emphasis, 35).

The body as construed by Nancy is a congregate of senses, a piling up, a separation, delineation and interpenetrable contiguity at the same time. The body is to be intimated, according to Nancy, a site for a merging of spacing and intimacy, an infinity of friction, brushing, tapping, penetration, interpenetration of textures, tissues, impressions, memories, tastes, etc., a sort of sublation of “phallus and cephale”:

One on top of the other, inside the other, right at the other, thus exposed are all those aesthetics whose assembly-discrete, multiple, and swarming is the body. Its members-phallus and cephale-its parts-cells, membranes, tissues, excrescences, parasites-its teguments, its sweatings, features, colors, all its local colors (we'll never get past racism unless we stop saying generic human brotherhood is its contrary instead of linking it to the dis-location, affirmed and confirmed, of our races and characteristics, black, yellow, white, thick-lipped, snub-nosed, frizzy, thick, shaggy, oily, braided, flat-nosed, coarse, fine, prognathous, hook-nosed, creased, musky ...). Everywhere, from bodies to bodies, from place to place, from places where *bodies are in zones and body-points, everywhere the random disassembly of what might allow a body to be assumed.* (My emphasis, 36)

Accordingly, Nancy fervently lays emphasis on the necessity to restore to each part, each sense of the body its aesthetic singularity which has been wrongly subsumed into generic categories or constructs, whether racial, aesthetic or other. Only by displacing, deconstructing those generic reductive constructs, can we put an end to that “auto-anesthesia” we have inflicted upon our bodies by treating them all alike, both in themselves and with other bodies. Instead, they should be regarded locally, case by case, sense by sense to come to realize their singularity,

9. “Exposition” doesn’t mean that intimacy is extracted from its withdrawal, and carried outside, put on display. Because then the body would be an exposition of the “self,” in the sense of a translation, an interpretation, or a staging. “Exposition,” on the contrary, means that expression itself is an intimacy and a withdrawal. The a-part-self is not translated or incarnated into exposition, it is what it is there: this vertiginous withdrawal of the self from the self that is needed to open the infinity of that withdrawal all the way up to self. The body is this departure of self to self. (*Corpus*, 33)

their richness as inherent in their cohesive disassembly. What he refers to as “singular dis-assembly of the “five senses.” (37)

To better seize Nancy’s claim, we need to be acquainted with his notion of “finite thinking” which he advocates as the approach we should endorse when philosophically broaching notions like the body, the world, history, religion, being itself. “Finite thinking”, according to Nancy should consecrate the plurality of “sense” [sens], which constitutes the absolute singularity of the notion probed: a sense that makes sense, “the sense that exists or produces existing.” (5) As such, “sense” senses itself while making sense of the world, existence etc. This leads to a sort of double bind, or what Nancy refers to as “chiasmus” (6). The self-reflexivity of sense is traceable, according to Nancy, to the fact that “what senses in sense is that it includes what it senses, and what produces sense in sense is the fact that it senses itself while producing sense.”(6) Elsewhere, Nancy draws upon the metaphor of touching as he asserts that “sense” touches itself while touching and “pertinence” is a matter of touching.¹⁰

Derrida's Reading of Nancy's *Corpus*: “Self-Touching You”

In his book *On Touching -Jean Luc Nancy-*, Derrida provides a thorough philosophical review of the sense of touching from Plato and Aristotle to Nancy with a particular focus on Nancy’s compelling oeuvre entitled *Corpus*. Derrida starts from one of the anchoring points of Nancy’s thought which is the ineluctable self-reflexivity of the act of touching which is ascribable to its intrinsic twofolded purport: literal, that is the physical, tactile act of palpating, but also metaphorical or figural: to touch as a cerebral effort, “to touch upon” “to tamper with”, “to grope for.” (268) The “aporetic” intertwinement between both senses of touch, touch as one of five senses and touch (upon) as sense that is meaning is, according to Derrida, both baffling and inexorable. He asserts:

When this non-distinction becomes troubling, one can no longer avoid eyeing this double writing. Is it touching upon something or is it touching upon touching itself, there where, having more or less surreptitiously drawn our attention to the *irreducible* figure of touching, this writing makes us put our finger on language, touching itself by touching us and getting to us while making us notice what is going on with touching, to be sure in a manner that is as obscure as it is aporetic, but above all in a touching manner to the point where all affect, all desire, all fascination, all experience of the other seems to be involved, in an unavoidably sensitive, or sentimental, fashion? (270)

10. *Corpus*, 86.

Whether it is in relation to language, oneself or the other, touch, or the act of touching, seems to summon more than one sense. The act of writing draws, in fact, upon a miscellany of senses: the tactile, visual,¹¹ cerebral and affective ones.

This notion of touch pushed to the extreme, to the periphery, peripheral touch, if we may venture the expression, can only be broached through what Nancy identifies as “finite thinking.” The latter is a mode of thinking which, at the image of touching, touches upon its own limit, acknowledges its own finiteness and specificity, which leads to the experience of “excription” (of meaning). Nancy, thus, defines “finite thinking” which Derrida evokes, as a “... a thinking that, without renouncing truth or universality, without renouncing *sense*, is only ever able to think at the extent that it also touches on its own limit and its own singularity.” (Nancy quoted in Derrida, 272) “Touching”, acknowledging its own limit does not, for all that, mean the disavowal of notions like “universality” or “truth” or even “sense”, Derrida clarifies (272). “Finite thinking”, Derrida adds, operates as a sort of “confession”, a “reminder” of the so-far overlooked, in the history of (philosophical) thinking, of the “privilege of touch” in foregrounding periphery, singularity and contingency. It is a “privilege” which has been snubbed by philosophers like Plato and Descartes whose philosophical theories adamantly consecrated the (in)visible, the eidetic at the detriment of the tactful. Derrida evokes “... this battle between the haptic and the optical, and in the places where the value of the visible (*eidos*, revelation, unveiling, intuition, and so forth) ...” (272)

The Heart and the Will to Touch

Derrida points out that in Nancy’s thought, the “heart” is indissociable from the act of touch: “... it [“finite thinking”] acknowledges this certainly that touching, in any case, touches the heart and on the heart, but inasmuch as it is always the heart of the other.” (Nancy’s emphasis, 273) We note in Nancy’s statement about the “heart” its intrinsic bind with the notion of alterity, so dear to phenomenological thought, or what Derrida refers to, elsewhere, as “absolute nonabsoluteness”.¹² There is no self-appropriation of one’s heart without mutual “originary expropriation,” a willing for interchange with the heart of the other, and that would be “love” which is, according to Derrida, a manifestation of self-touching (273).¹³ Referring ourselves to Nancy’s envisioning of the act of touch,

11. Derrida’s use of “eyeing” is not inadvertent; it has sublating intentions as touch is also visual. It reminds us of the French expression “deshabiller du regard” which we may translate as ‘strip someone naked through the gaze’.

12. Derrida, *Points*, 163.

13. Derrida evokes a delicate episode in Nancy’s own life course which is his heart transplant which he relates in his book *L’Intrus* and which would deeply impact his conception of himself and the other. (257)

one may ask: Is there a "limit of touch" of and upon the "heart," one's own and the other's, touch as "self-touching"? The answer, as Derrida points out, is simply no.

Derrida sustains that for Nancy, the self-reflexivity endemic to the act of touch, merging it with "self-touching" itself enacts, stages the essence of sense in general, as conceived by Nancy's phenomenological thought, and referred to above: "sense sensing itself". It transpires that the sense of touch is the sense of all senses since it "... is the being of every sense in general, the being sense, the condition of possibility of sensibility in general, the very form of space and time, and so forth." (247) Such self-reflexive property of (the sense of) touch does not, however, undermine personal will and alterity, or even the Other. On the contrary, Derrida explicates, touch as self-touching "vicariously" summons the Other by foregrounding the sense of empathy and congenial connectedness even though via a "masturbatory" or by proxy experience: "... a vicarious surplus of masturbatory pleasure does in no way reduce the alterity of the other who comes to inhabit the self-touching, or at least to haunt it, at least as much as it *spectralizes* any experience of "touching the other" (My emphasis, 274). In order for this experience of "self-touching" to subsume, 'incorporate' the Other, so to speak, an "affect" is called upon: "desire". (274) Desire for Derrida, is nothing more than the "the *passive* activity of the will" (Derrida's emphasis, 274) Derrida draws a parallelism between "desire," "the ontological" and "the transcendental": all three strike up their own condition of possibility as soon as they come into contact , touch upon their own quintessence, which is found in the will, or to be more precise, "the will to touch." Derrida makes it clear that "[l]ike the ontological and the transcendental, the will affects itself with its other from the first contact, as soon as it touches or one touches on touch, as soon as one wants *touch*, wants to *touch it, itself* [*dès qu'on veut le toucher, lui-même*]" (Derrida's emphasis, 274)

Conclusion

Accordingly, starting from Christ's overarching statement during the Last Supper, "*Hoc est enim*", in which he respectively assimilates his flesh and blood with bread and wine, J. L. Nancy seizes upon the sensually rich, allegorical dimension of Christ's words to elaborate a new poetics of writing the body. He proposes a multi-layered, both tactful and tactual writing which rather than seeking to inscribe the body, contents itself with touching it, touching upon its endless semantic and experiential associations. Nancy recourses to the allegorical paradigm of the woman's breast, notably the areola to suggest a new cosmos of meaning(s) ascribed to the (written) body, a gravitational order of senses operating around the body and each part of it. According to this new register of the body which he dubs "Corpus," each organ lends itself to a miscellany of corporeal dimensions partaking of the experience of touch(ing). Nancy evokes a "system," what we may refer to as a sort of double bind inherent in touch

and/or the will to touch, which is the irrepressible desire to reach out for oneself or the other without the least intention for (self)-appropriation. It is rather a kind of open solicitation for merging boundaries, the periphery of both skin and the writing printed on paper. To touch the other and let oneself, inexorably, be touched simultaneously, is assimilable to that fateful encounter between the writer and the reader via a writing which “excribes,” a writing which thaws the stultified meaning-constructs attached to the body and acknowledges its open, exposed penetrability, the epidermal porousness laying ready for haptic contact and sense transfer. From this perspective, Nancy declares:

It is the will to touch: the wish that the hands touch, across the book, and through the book; that its hands touch, reaching just as far as its skin,¹⁴ its *parchment*; that our hands touch always through the *intermediary* of skin, but touch nonetheless. To touch oneself, to be touched right at oneself, outside oneself, without anything being appropriated. That is writing, love and sense. (My emphasis, 93)

Despite pertaining to the mimetic tradition, the act of writing the body, according to Nancy, is/should not be an act of appropriation, but rather an act of (sense-) liberation. It is a writing, almost ritualistic, performed on skin, “a parchment”, as evoked above, a sort of scribbling which titillates, tickles and tingles the skin. To write (the body) inexorably implies, for Nancy, some form of touch, both a tactical and tactful contact, the breaking of the reader-writer frontier, whether geographical, ideological or historical. It is a type of touch which consecrates the notion of limit, the “intermediary”, the edge, only to trespass it, to celebrate it as the outer, violable limit of (codified/stultified) meaning(s) and the passageway to a new experience of writing based on the intrinsic double-bind of the act of touch.

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14. Note the pun Nancy uses in “skin” to imply both the epidermis and the book’s cover, which heightens this merging by the act of touching between writer and reader.

