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## Re-treating Religion

*Deconstructing Christianity with  
Jean-Luc Nancy*

With a Preamble and Concluding  
Dialogue by Jean-Luc Nancy

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words of "Answering for Sense." They immediately raise questions: To whom? To what? To what call? To what other voice? These questions apply both to the call and to the address. The words are "nothing other than sense" defined as "opening the possibility of an answer" (PD 172). Hence the new inflection a few paragraphs later: "whoever writes answers sense" (PD 173). If literature wants to say something, if whoever writes wants to say, then this has to do not with content but with the desire to say: whoever writes hears "saying desire itself as saying" (PD 171) and answers sense. This desire is defined as "the cut and the touch of a singular truth," which can only "come from the outside" (PD 175): from the ex where there is nothing (*nihil*), no god, no muse, no genius. This outside is "that of absolute sense" (PD 176), a stranger to articulate language, to the language of already-given significations, but an opening onto an unheard-of language, to come. To write is to expose oneself to the outside,<sup>14</sup> to a withdrawal of language, to a hither side of language, to a "nothing to say," to a "thing outside," to a "thing of the outside" (PD 176). One last inflection: "whoever writes answers this thing and answers for it" (PD 177) practices an incision "in language, made by the blade of an outside that is both one of nonlanguage and of a language to come or a desire for language" (PD 176). We can call that creation ex nihilo, poetic creation, literary creation.

—Translated by John McKeane

## The God Between

ANNE O'BYRNE

God is not the limit of man but the limit of man is divine. In other words, man is divine in the experience of his limits.

—Georges Bataille, "The Divinity of Laughter"

Jean-Luc Nancy is without doubt a post-Marxist, post-Heideggerian and—I would add—post-Arendtian thinker.<sup>1</sup> His ontology bears traces of all three, but this ontology flows, above all, from an attempt to think creation ex nihilo after the death of the creator God. Even now, so long after Nietzsche, and so very long after Descartes set the process of secularization in motion, it is a thinking that is only uneasily, hesitantly under way. We have gone beyond God, as Nancy puts it, but in a direction still too much determined by the thought of his death and by the necro-monotheist tradition when what is needed is an exploration of the direction—directions, rather—that are constantly newly opened by our rather than God's creative capacities. If we examine the movement of the deconstruction of Christianity insofar as it is the specific deconstruction of creation ex nihilo, Nancy's new ontology emerges as symbolic and poetic but also, as we will see, as a natal ontology.

Kristeva writes that "there is nothing more dismal than a dead God."<sup>2</sup> In "On a Divine Wink," Nancy argues that God has been exceeded, which "is not the same as the supreme being put to death" (D 119/176). What happens, then, to a deconstructed creator? He passes, not in the sense of passing away but of passing into the world. He passes first into

e specifically worldly problem of facticity. "Facticity" (that we are) runs a pair with "intelligibility" (what that means), and the problem arises from the gap that separates the two, a gap that did not exist for a being for whom knowing and being were one. Kant described this mode knowing on the part of the creator God as *intuitus originarius*, a knowing that requires no object beyond itself and therefore allows for no gap between what is thought and what is. But, as Kant also made clear, our mode of knowing as finite beings is *intuitus derivatus*; our knowledge is ways knowledge of something. At this point a gap opens between fact and meaning, leaving us with the question of how it can be possible to understand or grasp or speak about facticity at all. This is a worldly problem for Nancy, given that he, like Arendt, grasps from the start that to be *tal* is to be plural.<sup>3</sup> Because he thinks in terms of plurality ("that we are" rather than "that I am" or "that Dasein is"), the question of intelligibility comes the question of the creation of the world. Whatever is or has been created is in principle meaningful. To create is to mean, and if the world is a created whole, then we and all its parts can have meaning in relation to that whole. After all, what the creator God gave us, beyond variation or eternal life or security or absolute morality, was meaning, and *intuitus originarius* we have a model for the resolution of the problem of facticity. If we can get access to a thought of creation *after* the creator, we are on our own way to meaning or, using Nancy's preferred term, we are on our way to not having but *being* sense (SW 8/19).

Our thinking runs up against the fact *that* we are, materially; our thought is confounded by the fact *that* the world is. Wittgenstein testifies this experience of running up against in the *Lecture on Ethics* when he gives the example of the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world."<sup>4</sup> It is another way of framing the first question of metaphysics—*Why* is there something rather than nothing?"—and what for medieval Christianity was the enigma of creation *ex nihilo*. According to the Christian model, when the creator created creation, he separated the world from himself. He brought it into being as distinct from his own being and brought us into being in his image. Thus we too were at a remove from him, and our being was separated from his, not least by the fact of our ignorance and wonder, glaring indicators of the separation in us of knowing and being. In this way the gap opens between facticity and intelligibility, between fact and sense. Nancy writes: "The world is the infinite resolution of sense into fact and fact into sense: the infinite resolution of the finite. Resolution signifies at once dissolution, transformation, harmonization, and firm decision. The world is the finite opening of an infinite

decision" (SW 155/235). The world is not a space or place but the movement of fact and sense toward and into one another. Neither is exempt from the condition of finitude, but their resolution must happen infinitely, without limit and specifically without end.

As Nancy writes in *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, if the creation of the world is understood as the result of an act that produced all of Creation out of an inert nothing (as though the nothing were its material cause), it is the story of a mysterious and now completed act of creativity. This understanding came under pressure early on from Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz, whose work began to turn us toward an understanding of Creation as a never-ending activity (CW 65/82), yet only with Kant was the possibility of God as creator and *ens summum*, the efficient cause of the world, eliminated, and only then could philosophy begin to work out the death, or the exceeding or passing, of God. One sense of the word *creatio* slowly gives way to another: the thought of creation as a given state of affairs cedes to an active sense where it is a matter of bringing into the world a world.

Yet, by replacing the thought of a completed act with that of ongoing activity, do we not make the need for an actor more pressing than ever? What sort of activity is creating? Who is capable of bringing into the world a world? Since it is mothers who are responsible for bringing each of us into the world, does this mean that He, the Creator God, becomes She? In a certain regard it does; He has become She to the extent that the world is not made but born.<sup>5</sup> Nancy ascribes to the "the world itself in its fact" an innateness, "whose structure is throughout the structure of birth and surprising arrival" (SW 155/234). Creation is not now a matter of production but rather of pro-creation or generation. But if this is so, it must put into question our understanding of birth, which has thus far meant being brought into a world already here, already old, and already constituted as world. This has been a crucial and by no means incidental element of what we understand by "birth"; it is what makes our mode of being historical. Yet even though we all know—or have an idea of—what it means to bring a baby, a being, into the world, it remains unclear what it can mean to bring a world into the world. If the world is a totality (at least a totality of sense), then how can one totality emerge into another (CW 64/79)?

The conundrum springs from the mistake of thinking in terms of a world, or a world among possible worlds, or, indeed, of world as distinct from some other unworldly realm. This is the Christian, Platonic mistake. There is no other, no place, no-thing, nothing out of which world, babies, beings, meaning, or sense emerge. There is no form according to which

we were made, no Idea of which we are the shadow, no source of meaning other than the world itself. Coming to terms with this is the central work of the deconstruction of Christianity. Creation is the bringing (in)to world of world as such, the opening up of world. While it is true that there is no thing that is the source of creation, creation *ex nihilo* also turns out to be something that does not exactly happen *ex nihilo* because it does not exactly happen *ex* at all. Nancy writes: "The most famous mystical version of the creation, the *zimzum* of the Lurianic Kabbalah, states that the 'nothing' of creation is what opens up in God when God retreats into himself (in his entirety) in the act of creating. God annihilates himself as 'self' or as distinct being in order to retreat into his act—which is the opening of the world" (CW 70/93). The Lurianic God does not historically displace the Christian God, only to be displaced by godless modernity. Rather, the single God whose singularity coincides with the unique act of creation cannot survive above and beyond his creation. He folds himself into it, empties himself into it in the emanation and contraction that is the movement of creation: "This emptying is the opening of the void. Only the opening is divine, but the divine is nothing other than the opening" (CW 70/93; trans. modified). The question "Who creates?" folds into itself.

This is certainly no dead God. God has passed into the world, and now we have the altogether more interesting story of an ongoing, never-finished, natal activity of emerging despite being posited by nothing (SW 155/234). The *nilil* is mobilized as the opening of the world; the *ex* becomes the *ex-* of existence, which is neither produced nor constructed but *is*, transitively. Understanding the verb *to be* transitively and in an active sense means understanding that creation is plural and that we are together, with, and toward other beings. That is to say, what creation creates is relation. Letting God pass—that is, becoming an atheist—means opening the sense of the world (SW 158/238–39).

Put another way, creation happens according to the movement of Derridean *différance*. According to Nancy, *différance* is too often thought as the self-deferral of presence, "a sort of permanent flight from the asymptotic and unattainable 'self,'" whereas it should be understood as the generative structure of the *ex nihilo* (CW 72/97). Creation as active—more accurately, as both passive and active, not only reflexive but indeed middle-voiced—does have the temporal structure of deferral; as plural, it has the spatializing structure of differing. The self is quite displaced, and what comes to the fore is the world as constituted by the unending activity of differing and deferring among and between. It is not a matter of selves denied or refusing presence. As Jacques Derrida puts it in "Différance":

"One is but the other different and deferred, one differing and deferring the other."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, his essay is itself an attempt to think "being" as the "ex-" of existence, where the "ex-" is also the "ex-" of *ek-stasis*, of being ex-posed, of being in the world with others.

Derrida sets out to demonstrate the emptiness of Heidegger's ontological difference, and Nancy's work takes up the same project of inheriting and overturning Heideggerian ontology. Not only is being always an *instance* of being for Nancy; it is also always an instance of being *with*. Whatever exists co-exists. The world is the coexistence that puts existences together, and the question of the meaning of Being has become the question of being with and being together in the world, or *as* the world. When he argues that we are singular plural beings, it is not a matter of individuation, that is, of our having been individuated out of a primal unity, since being itself is singular plural, never merely present to itself. Being is as co-being. Since this co- is not subject to a logic of presentation, the with, or co-presence, "is . . . not pure *presence to*, to *itself*, to *others* or to the *world*. In fact, none of these modes of presence can take place, insofar as presence takes place, unless co-presence first takes place" (BSP 40/60). He insists on this a little later. The with as such is not presentable; it is "a mark drawn out over the void . . . constituting the drawing apart [*traction*] and drawing together [*tension*] of the void" (BSP 62/84). Presence is not so much displaced under these conditions of singular plurality as it is dismantled. "Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [*se dis-joindre*] in order to be itself *as* such" (BSP 2/20).<sup>7</sup>

### Symbolic Being

The space that thus opens means that Nancy's ontology is an ontology of symbolic being. In a footnote to *Being Singular Plural*, he writes: "the Greek *symbolon* was a piece of pottery broken in two pieces when friends, or a host and his guest, parted. Its joining would later be a sign of recognition" (BSP 100n51/79n1). The Greek *sum* is the equivalent of the Latin *cum* (and of the English *con*); symbolism is, properly speaking, a matter not of representation but of relation, and not relation between idea and instance, object and representation, reality and image. It goes behind and beyond theories that take such relations as their starting point, since each such theory already presupposes being social or social being. Habermas's rationalist theory of communication, for example, relies on the thought of a subject capable of articulating her thoughts and desires to her fellows.<sup>8</sup> Marxist analyses of commodity and commodification, use and exchange value, depend finally not on a category of absolute value but on

the existence of a plurality of singulats who engage in the activity of valuing? Even Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality, composed of simulacra, relies for its coherence on the thought of a lost social reality of which the spectacle is a representation.<sup>10</sup> The *sum* of *symbolon* addresses this; it refers not to the specific relation of reality to the image but to the relation between beings. Nancy writes: "spectacle," communication, "commodity," and "technology" are no more than figures (albeit perverse figures) . . . of social reality—the *real* of social being [*l'être-social*—laid bare in, through, and as the symbolicity that constitutes it" (BSP 57/79; trans. modified).<sup>11</sup> The relevant distinction here is between the concept of the real as such on the one hand, a concept that lurks behind the assumption of meaningful, lost symbolic orders as much as behind the assumption of otherworldly meaning, and a concept of reality as social, on the other. Social reality is always already symbolic; symbols form the texture of social reality. The symbol *is* the relation. Nancy writes:

it is the job of the symbolic to create a *symbol*, that is, link, connection, and to provide a figure for this linking or to make an *image* in this sense. The symbolic is the real of relation as it represents itself, because relation as such is, in fact, nothing other than its own representation. . . . The relation is the real of a representation, its effectiveness and its efficacy. (The paradigm is "I love you," or perhaps more originally still, "I'm talking to you.") (BSP 57–58/79; trans. modified)

The word *symbolon* means "to put with." The friend puts her shard of pottery with her friend's shard. Doing so symbolizes their relationship. It is not something distinct from their relationship; it *is* their relationship. Furthermore, bringing home the critique of the hyperrealists, it is not a question of this being a symbol *rather than* an image. Symbolization does not require the banishment of the (mere) image; it only requires that the image/symbol be in play with connectedness and distance, in the space *between*. As he puts it: "The 'symbolic' is not an aspect of social being; on the one hand, it is this being itself and, on the other, the symbolic does not take place without (re)presentation: it is (re)presentation to one another according to which they are with one another" (BSP 58/80; trans. modified).

In addition, the *symbolon* has a material existence; specifically, it has a surface and edges that will be set alongside and touch the edge of its companion piece. It functions through touch as much as by sight, allowing Nancy to make a shift away not from the ocular metaphor as such but from the assumption that what is primary is the singular seeing eye/I,

seeing an object that is understood as not itself seeing. Instead, one edge touches the other, just as we touch one another. He writes: "We touch each other insofar as we exist. Touching each other is what makes us 'us,' and there is no other secret to be discovered or hidden behind this touch itself, behind the 'with' of co-existence" (BSP 13/32; trans. modified).

Yet this would seem to introduce another problem. If the emphasis is shifted to or shared with touch, does this not return us to the matter of skin touching skin or, if the set of beings regarded as relevant is appropriately increased, of surface touching surface? That is to say, does it not demand an understanding of the world and specifically the others who populate it in terms of accessible exteriors hiding inscrutable interiors? Does it not return us to the most troublesome aspect of modern subjectivity? In Nancy's hands, it is relations, trajectories, touches, glances, movements across a space that constitute the I. Interiority and exteriority are always in play, whether we mean the interiority and exteriority of the I or of the community, the we. For instance, in *The Experience of Freedom*, freedom is characterized as the "interior exteriority of the community" (EF 75/100). The fragments remain fragmentary. In *The Sense of the World* he writes: "Symbola are the potshards of recognition, fragments of pottery broken in the promise of assistance and hospitality. The fragment carries the promise that its fractal line will not disappear into a gathered whole but, rather, will rediscover itself elsewhere, lip against lip of the other piece" (SW 136/208). The surfaces where the pottery was broken are external to the pieces, but internal to the reassembled pot.<sup>12</sup> Claiming its surfaces as exterior, the shard remains a fragment, a part of something lost; its incorporation into the reassembled pot, the transformation of those surfaces into internal surfaces, does not keep it from continuing to be a fragment. According to another quite beautiful image, the world is "a constellation whose compossibility is identical with its fragmentation, the compactness of a powder of absolute fragments" (SW 155/234). This compactness is our being with as fragments for whom being a fragment is neither an accidental or temporary state of affairs nor a question of having fallen away from an intact whole or of waiting to be gathered up (again) into a healed or mended unity.

In this way, we make a world. Nancy writes: "One could say that worldhood is the *symbolization* of the world, the way in which the world symbolizes in itself with itself, in which it articulates itself by making a circulation of meaning possible without reference to another world" (CW 53/59). Here, for all their richness and beauty, the images of pots and powder falter; they give us the shape and the ontological structure of the

space of meaning without being able to account for the *movement* of circulation and the *innovation* essential to creativity. For this we need touch—skin to skin, lip to lip, surface to surface—and then some. After all, natality refers us to the fact that our very skin, itself the gift of our parents, was formed under the skin of our mothers and that our birth is our emergence from our mother's bodies. The loss of the maternal body may have to be mourned, but it alone is not determinative. The possibilities of our new, fragmentary being with others are essentially undetermined. The constitutive immemorial at the root of our natal being is a loss but also the opening for creativity. Our fragmented way of being demands not that we long for an original wholeness but that we reach for the power of creative newness. We have seen that birth sets us into an old world and orients us to the past by giving us the task of making the past our past; it also turns us to the future by having us make the world our world. We are engaged in a work of inheritance that is also a work of creation.

### Being Poetically

While a symbolic ontology preserves a space for the God who folds himself into creation, it does not go far in helping us think about what becomes of the creative capacity or what the activity of creating or the movement of creation looks like now that God has passed. For this we need a poetic ontology: not a Platonic or Aristotelian ontology of *poiesis* but a (post-)Romantic understanding of what it is to be, poetically. It is an ontology that grasps the relationship between godly creation, artistic creativity, and procreation. In Nancy's opus, what is at stake here is a movement from *The Literary Absolute* (written with Lacoue-Labarthe in 1978) to "Urbi et Orbi" (2001) in *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*. These texts are not endpoints delimiting an epoch before which there is no thought of poetic ontology and after which it becomes a moot point thanks to resolution or irrelevance. These are, rather, two attempts among many to think poetic being in a way that avoids the constraints imposed by separating *poiesis* and *praxis* and that complements the play of interiority and exteriority is vital to symbolic ontology.<sup>13</sup> Nancy initially uses the language of production but turns later to a thought of creation that "is the exact opposite of any form of production in the sense of a fabrication" (CW 51/55). In the same way, what begins as a dialectic between artificial production and natural production (LA 49/70) develops into an understanding of the intimate link between creation and growth (CW 51/55). However, the neglected element—which is by no

means absent from Nancy's work but which nevertheless does not find its properly generative place in this train of thought—is natality.

Already in Plato, *poiesis* is understood as production and most often as an activity devoted to copying an ideal model. Thus, when the demiurge sets about creating the cosmos in *Timaeus*, he shapes matter after the Idea.<sup>14</sup> In the *Republic*, *poiesis* is the activity by which the artisan produces an artifact in the material world by copying the Idea;<sup>15</sup> poetry, in turn, produces a copy of the copy. Yet in the *Symposium*, poetry in the true sense of the word is "calling something into existence that was not there before."<sup>16</sup> In each case, the thought of birth and reproduction is not far off; indeed, it could be argued (though this is not the place to do so thoroughly) that the context for each case is formed by the question of reproduction. For example, in *Timaeus* the *khōra* is both the *space* in which the cosmos comes to be and the unformed *matter* that will be shaped by the demiurge, just as the womb is the space for the formation of the new being and, in Plato's world, the maternal body provided the matter that would take the form determined by the paternal contribution.<sup>17</sup> In the *Republic*, the anxiety that motivates the construction of the ideal city is anxiety over the unpredictability of reproduction. After all, it can only be founded by a generation that is convinced it has no human parents; it falls when the marriage festivals fail and its citizens begin to reproduce in natural and unregulated ways. When Plato writes that "mimetic art, then, is an inferior thing cohabiting with an inferior and engendering inferior offspring,"<sup>18</sup> that is, a copy of a copy mingling with the lowest part of the soul and engendering unruly passions, he is relying on his own myth that like married with like will generally produce like.<sup>19</sup> This is the myth that informs all thought of reproduction. Yet that thought is efficiently displaced in the *Symposium* by Diotima's story of Eros and his parents, Resourcefulness and Need, whose very point is that mingling difference generates the new and that birth is the paradigm for calling into existence what was not there before. In all these cases, however, *poiesis* maintains the sense of an activity undertaken for the sake of an end external to itself. This persists through Aristotle's inheritance of the term. Plato avoids separating *poiesis* and *praxis*, instead thinking of *praxis* as a variety of *poiesis* and an activity that is judged, like it, according to criteria of usefulness.<sup>20</sup> But for Aristotle the distinction is significant, with *poiesis* understood as action or production that is judged in terms of an external object (*ergon*), while *praxis* is its own end.

However, as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe argue in *The Literary Absolute*, the Romanics make their appeal to *poiesis*—translated into German as *Poese*—in the course of a maneuver away from the product toward

production. This gives every indication of being a move toward *praxis*, in this case a romantic poetic practice. For Romanticism, the art object produced by creative labor is less interesting than the activity of artistic creation itself; indeed, the Romantic artist's essential—perhaps his only—product is himself, a self that is neither an object nor quite a subject, neither finished nor ever completable. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe describe Romanticism as “a poetics in which the subject confounds itself with its own production” (LA xxii), and thus the creator God finds itself transformed into the figure of the poet and creation becomes ongoing autopoiesis. This is not just a work for the poet-genius; rather, in this regard, “all cultivated people should be capable of being poets” since “man is by nature a poet.”<sup>21</sup>

If the Kabbalah gives us the figure of God disappearing into his creation, becoming what is between his creatures, Romanticism famously reconfigures thought in terms of creativity as the province of the self-creating individual. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's contribution is to show that the Romantics had a sophisticated understanding of the formation of this individual within a generative system and thus could envision creativity as happening between. They write:

The poetic is not so much the work as that which works, not so much the organon as that which organizes. This is where romanticism aims at the heart and inmost depths . . . of the individual and the System: always *poiesis* or, to give at least an equivalent, always *production*. What makes an individual, what makes an individual's holding-together, is the “systasis” [association, arrangement, standing together] that produces it. What makes its individuality is its capacity to produce, and to produce itself, first of all, by means of its internal “formative force”—the *bildende Kraft* inherited from the organism of Kant, which romanticism transcribes into a *vis poetica*—by means of which “in the Self all things are formed organically.” (LA 48–49/69–70, quoting Friedrich Schlegel, “Athenaeum Fragments,” 338)

What makes God's creatures creative is the nothing of and in creation. As the space between, it is the indetermination that makes way for what is new. At the same time, the fact of this space gives rise to the question of these finite creature between whom space opens up; how is such a finite creature held together? How can it resist the vacuum pull of nothing? The Romantics' answer comes in the form of the *vis poetica*, which is neither a universal force that surges through us all nor the manifestation of a sentimental interiority but rather the production of individuality by systasis

and by the individual. These are neither two different things nor even two moments in a dialectic. The *vis poetica* consists in the individual creating itself in association with others; it is our being together generating us as instances of being with. For us autopoiesis is always also co-poiesis, and this will always mark our separation from the creator God and separate our mode of creativity from his. Poietic praxis is our self-creation with others.

Although Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe point out that it is necessary to grasp the dialectical unity of artificial production and natural production—that is, procreation, germination, and birth—and although they direct us to Schiller's use of *naïve* to refer to nativity as well as naïve innocence and indicate Novalis's treatment of the fragment as the seed that must germinate, they do not turn their attention to the richly relevant thought that co-poiesis is the essential form of our procreation. Novalis's image is vital and apt to a degree; the seed is indeed incomplete and will complete itself only through growth and maturity. Whether or not it will in fact germinate remains in doubt—“there may be many sterile grains among them”<sup>22</sup>—yet the form its maturity will take is already determined. That is to say, the image of the germinating seed gives us no hint of the radical indeterminacy that sent a tremor through Plato. The uncertainty and anxiety occasioned by the fact of sexual reproduction are only hinted at in Novalis's thought not of the seed but of the grain of pollen, the gamete that will grow and become only provided that it meets, fertilizes, and *grows with* the ovum into something other than either of them. Without sexual difference, reproduction really is only the production of the same; given sexual difference, we are obliged to abandon *reproduction* as an inadequate term in favor, in Nancy's case, of *creation* and *procreation*.

In fact, *creation* is precisely the term in which to uncover both growth and generation; the word is the etymological descendant of *creo*, “to be born, to grow,” via *creo*, “to make something emerge [*faire naître*], to cultivate a growth.” Yet when Nancy draws our attention to this history, he picks up only one of these threads, describing the creation of the world as “the *nothing* growing [*croissant*] as *something*. . . . In creation, a growth grows from nothing and this nothing takes care of itself, cultivates its growth” (CW 51/55). On the one hand, this helps ensure that, in the aftermath of the Romantic shift to the activity of production, we do not lose sight of the fact that production produces products and creation creates creatures. In each case, something comes to be that was not there before; and this is what warrants calling the activity production or creation. (The language of things will eventually run aground, but we are

forced to use the least specific formulation—*something*—at least provisionally, given the difficulty of even forming sentences without it.) On the other hand, to think of creation only in terms of growth is to ignore the differentiation that makes possible co-poiesis and indeed being with at all. As we have seen, the generative structure of the *ex nihilo* is *différance*; being with is the ontological condition of beings who share difference that is more than numerical or vegetative.

While thinking creation in terms of growth has the great advantage of letting it emerge as radically material (CW51/55), only when we also pick up the other thread—creation as birth—does the origin of poetic being emerge. Arendt is right to claim that, when we each appeared, the world had never seen anyone quite like us before. Our natality is our plurality, the origin of the co- of co-presence and co-poiesis. Natality is also our singularity and singular newness, and the fact that no one has ever seen my like means that my birth brought into the world a being that was essentially unknown; unknown to the world, to those most intimately involved in bringing me to be and to myself. We have seen that the separation between being and knowing sets us apart from the creator God. Now it becomes clear that, under conditions of plurality, this separation happens in more ways than one. I begin to know myself only at a point when I have already long been surrounded by others who can claim already to know me. I *am* in the third person (“We’re having a baby”) and the second person (“You’re a good child”) before I come to be in the first person. I embark on the process of self-creation in a context created by those who have come before me, and I create myself in the face of a self already formed in that context and on my behalf. Much as our adolescent selves revolted against the thought, the people who raised us can rightly say that they have known us longer—if not better—than we know ourselves. Thus, insofar as I was anticipated, expected and had a place prepared for me in the life and the world of my family, I was known before I was. My co-creation was already under way before I was capable of taking it up as self-creation. And yet the truth of that adolescent resistance lies in the fact that we never are wholly known and the gap between knowing—on the part of whomever—and being, between being and knowing is where *poiesis* happens.

## Conclusion

This gap is the syncope to which Nancy guides us as early as *The Discourse of the Syncope* and as recently as “*Verbum caro factum*” in *Dis-enclasure*.

The term gestures in at least three directions, all relevant to Nancy’s projection: toward syncope as a fainting fit, a spell of unknowing; toward syncope as the variation in a piece of music when a shift in rhythm puts a weak note at the beginning of a bar; and toward the Greek root *syncope*, which includes the verb “to cut” and the word “with.” We are subject to syncope in the sense that, when we come to self-consciousness, we already are and have already been for some time *with others*. From the start we are trying to catch up. If Hegelian dialectic works according to a three-part rhythm, this is the offbeat on which we each begin, the modulation that the dialectic absolutely requires in order to stay in motion and that it recognizes but cannot think.<sup>23</sup> Instead, it finds itself constantly interrupted, stalled, thrown off-kilter by new arrivals; a shudder runs through it just as the self is trembled through (*durch-zittert*) by the self of the other individual (BP 30/40) but also by its difference from itself.

We stumble after ourselves; the dialectic shudders; identity trembles. In each case, Nancy generates a way of thinking about what separates and unifies at once. He writes in *The Discourse of the Syncope*:

The syncope *simultaneously* attaches and detaches (in Greek, for example, the suppression of a letter in a word; in music, a strong beat over silence). Of course, these two operations do not add up to anything, but neither do they cancel each other out. There remains the syncope itself, the same syncope, that is to say, cut to pieces (its first meaning) and somehow rejoined through amputation. *The same is erected here through its resection*: the undecidable figure called “castration” derives from this. (DS 10/14)

The sentence gives the word *resection*—which normally refers to the surgical removal of part of an organ—a double function: the same comes to be by being removed or removing itself from the (m)other; simultaneously, it comes to be by having part of itself removed. The loss is both that of being part of a whole, which we know from Dilthey is the structure of meaning, and the loss of part of oneself. We are born the same, syncope, in the sense that we are neither part nor whole, neither imbued with meaning granted by that of which we are part nor already meaning ourselves. Meaning is the symbolic, poetic task conferred by birth.

This is what is at stake in the Greek *syncope* and the thought of cutting with. We are severed from ourselves and from our origin in another, but this cut both opens the space across which relation happens and establishes us as plural beings. As Nancy develops the Arendtian thought of natality and plurality, our being singular plural emerges as what gives

meaning to us, jointly, but as a task or vocation. This is the *meaning* of finitude. He writes:

The identity of the soul is finite identity, the finitude of difference that comes to it as actual difference, from another that is infinitely other. The finitude of the soul stems from this constitutive alterity of its *self*—whose vocation as subject requires an infinite completion and closure. Beyond birth, the subject will complete itself infinitely, it will be the sublation of its infinite determinations. It will be what originally divides itself, *sich ur-teilt*, engendering from itself its difference and its identity. (BP 31/41)

When we let the creator pass, we open the space where we generate a meaningful world. It is a symbolic endeavor in that it is a work we undertake with others, a work in which I and we and our world are all at stake. It is a poetic endeavor in which “production” is no more (and no less) than the name for our engagement in the creation of our world. It is our natal endeavor because both the demand that we inherit and create and the power to create both unfold from our natal being. The difference between the creativity of the creator God and this creaturely capacity is, finally, the difference between an innatal being who never was not and a creative being who comes to the world with and out of others and undergoes a life of growth and transformation.

## The Immemorial

### *The Deconstruction of Christianity, Starting from “Visitation: Of Christian Painting”*

DANIELA CALABRÒ

A short but unusually charged essay by Jean-Luc Nancy, “Visitation: Of Christian Painting,” will help us align his meditations on art with his deconstruction of Christianity. Let us begin with its opening words:

Art never commemorates. It is not made to preserve a memory, and whenever it is set to work in a monument, it does not belong to the memorializing aspect of the work. . . . If art in general has any relation to memory, it is to that strange memory that has never been deposited in a remembrance, which is therefore susceptible neither to forgetting nor to memory—for we have never lived it or known it—but which never leaves us. . . . Art is what always exceeds itself in the direction of that which precedes it or succeeds it, and, consequently, also in the direction of its own birth and its own death. (V 108/9–10)

According to Nancy, Pontormo’s painting *Visitation* can be understood as the immemorial place where the “dis-enclosure” of Christian religion in particular, and monotheistic and polytheistic religions in general, begins.

How can art without memory dis-enclose the chronological framework of religions? How can this immemorial place of art become birth and therefore dis-enclosure? What is it that art exposes? What does it make visible? What does it dis-enclose? And how, exactly, does *Visitation* represent the moment in which all of this is “set to work”?