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Jean-Luc Nancy and the Corpus of Philosophy

Gary Shapiro

How to touch, tactfully, the corpus of Jean-Luc Nancy? How can this corpus be shared and divided (*partagé*)? How can these words or thoughts be weighed? This text seems to set itself vigilantly and rigorously in opposition to the mystery of the incarnation and urges us to demystify the discourses of the body. The very translatability of the paper—to whatever degree translation is possible—and its presentation—in whatever way presence is possible—are modalities closely linked to the question of what body and corpus are and can be. The text “Corpus” is exscripted, to speak with Nancy, written out, that is, in a way that distances it from the breath and the tongue. It is already divided, shared. Here is my body, take it and eat, even in my absence, especially in my absence, in remembrance of me, it seems to say. Is there not a whiff of the incarnation here? But then as Jacques Derrida asks, in the text “Ellipsis”—on which Nancy writes elsewhere, or more precisely which he reinscribes—“how can the phantom of the center not call to us?”¹ How can we not ask what sense is to be given to translation in the new “corpuscular philosophy” (deforming the sense of a good seventeenth-century term), to the substitution of one set of sounds and gestures for another? If we can summon up the proper tact, will we then make (con) tact with this embodied and disembodied thought? Or is contact to be scrupulously avoided as it is omitted, along with consensus and consent from Nancy’s set of entries, his anatomy, his “catalogue without a logos”?

I want to inquire concerning Nancy’s relation to philosophy. That will require an interrogation of his relation to the *body* of philosophy, both in the sense that the body appears as an unavoidable philosopheme and in the sense that philosophy itself may be said to be or consist in a body (of texts,

thoughts, questions, and so on). So it will be to question, as Nancy does, philosophy's specular or imaginary conception of itself, that self-conception in which philosophy views itself as having transcended or absorbed the body without remainder. Philosophy in its mirror phase gazes at the body or at its own spoken or written embodiments and sees something that is apparently integral and mastered by the soul, thought, or the logos. We will have to raise the question of how philosophy would have to be deformed and transformed if it thinks *corpus* and not body, if it is seen as having a *corpus* and not the docile body that it imagines.

If we knew only this one text of Nancy's, which whispers, cries, and insinuates in its incantatory rhythms that philosophy cannot tell us of the body, we might all too hastily conclude that he is an antiphilosophical thinker. Yet in fact he is always working at the edge—at the extremities, entries, apertures, disruptions, prostheses—of philosophy, at those places where its body (or corpus) consorts with nonphilosophy. Now surely it is the case that Nancy's corpus means to solicit or shake the body of philosophy and philosophy's body. In his extended corpus, that is, in all of his writings, as well as in the one we have just read, he is exploring and testing the limits of philosophy; these texts are oriented toward that corporeal edge of philosophy where empiricism is risked (in a deeper sense than allowed by self-described philosophies of experience) so that the risk of empiricism becomes the experience of risk.² This working at the edge can be recognized in the way that Nancy has been recently incorporated into the canon of anticanonical philosophy in a collection entitled *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: Nietzsche to Nancy*. (Why Nietzsche? Nietzsche wrote of the bodies [not “the body”] that form the horizons and contexts of all meaning and interpreting; bodies for Nietzsche, *corpus* for Nancy, are what always must transform the hermeneutic contexts.) That collection ends with Nancy's “Le partage des voix,” which argues that the “hermeneutic circle” all too facilely invoked these days is a logocentric reduction of the more radically plural and open *hermeneia* that forms the condition of all meaning.³

Corpus, then, is not just a concept (nor is it an anticoncept) but the body of work, the body that works, a *corpus* that works on philosophy by letting it appear as *corpus*, which is neither the body of tradition nor the tradition of the body. The corpus, in every sense, of Nancy's work aims at rethinking community not as an enclosed and finished circle of meanings in which there is always a mediated return to the origin, but as the sharing of words, senses, and voices and, as he now makes explicit, the sharing of corpus or the corporeal. In *The Inoperative Community* Nancy explores a

spectrum of possible forms of sharing and dividing (*partager*). In love, he argues, we are captive to the contradiction between the desire to enlarge and complete the self by merging with or appropriating the other and the need to maintain desire itself, which requires a condition of separation and distance.⁴ That impossible condition of desire is like philosophy's double wish to embody itself completely and to free itself from the body. Something similar happens with respect to the voice in Nancy's corpus—and note how these questions about the voice and love are also questions about the body; the voice that he explores is always one at the limits of articulation, rather than the voice that would make thought present without intrusion, the voice that sings, howls, complains, growls, or moans as in Nancy's dialogue "Vox Clamans in Deserto."⁵ Here the voices of Rousseau, Kristeva, Derrida, Saussure, Hegel, and others (including assorted animals) constitute an exacerbated and irreducible polyphonic meditation on voicing. That text, like Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* (think of *Zarathustra* IV), should perhaps be described as the libretto for an opera, a staging of possibilities of the voice that are ex-centric and ec-static. These philosophical music-dramas remind us not of Wagner, who, when all is said and done, remained within the traditional melocentric confines of character and integral utterance, but of a work like Arnold Schönberg's *Moses und Aaron*. This opera must orchestrate the voice of God despite the prohibition on representing him, and does so by pluralizing that speech and song into many voices so that there is no one representation; and it must focus our interest on a stuttering hero, whose every choked utterance reinforces rather than obliterates the contingent and ectopic dimensions of speech and song. These are voices in which interruption and the bodily base of the voice have become operative principles.

This corresponds to Nancy's most extended exemplum in "Corpus" of how one should think the thought of the body by weighing one's words. Think of *penser* (or of our English "thinking" for that matter) as "a word not yet uttered, not yet escaped from a mouth, still in the larynx, on the tongue" (see "Corpus," reprinted in this volume). Language, even before it reaches what we call "audible expression," is secreted in the throat, the chest, the tongue. Words, as at the beginning of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, may resist utterance through a terrible inertia ("an ox stands huge upon my tongue," says the watchman on the roof of the palace). And it is fitting that the uncanniest voice in the Nietzschean opera belongs to the Ugliest Man, the man of exorbitant and excessive body, who killed God because he could not bear the gaze of the witness, that is, could not endure to be measured by the standard of the whole or complete body that, as Nancy

tells us, is indeed a theological notion. As he suggests at the beginning of "Corpus," the death of God may mean the death of all bodies; it is not only God's body that is decomposing, as Nietzsche's madman says, but any body (or anybody?) that is conceived as centered and integral, the sort of thing in which God might be incarnate or that reflects the image of the Creator.⁶

The theological tendency in the philosophical conception of the body is confirmed by an analysis of Kant's discussion of the ideal body in the *Critique of Judgment* and of Hegel's account of the symbolic, classic, and romantic forms of the body in his *Aesthetics*. For Kant the ideal body is not of this or that race or stature; it is a norm that expresses the suitability of a bodily being of this type to carry out the purposes of reason. In other words it is the general possibility of the word (or reason) become flesh. In Hegel's philosophy of art this incarnation is no longer merely possible but actualizes itself. It does this first through a series of symbolic hints in bodies of mixed animal and human form (like the sphinx or Hindu deities), then takes on its most beautiful and restful expression in Greek sculpture, and finally goes beyond the limits of the visible in romantic art, in which the body is shown undergoing a total loss of meaning (as God dies and is crucified and humiliated) before spirit manages to emerge through and from the body, effecting its resurrection and *Aufhebung*.

It is thought-provoking, then, that at the wake of God staged by Nietzsche, the Ugliest Man alone affirms the thought of eternal recurrence (an uncanny thought, a thought at the limits that must explode all the philosophical appropriations of the body because it disallows and displaces any centering tendency), and he does so in a voice hardly distinguishable from noise, a voice that hardly vocalizes at all: "for something welled up from the ground, gurgling and rattling [*gurgelnd und röchelnd*] as water gurgles and rattles by night in clogged waterpipes."⁷ Nancy undertakes another testing of the limits of philosophy and body in the essay "Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death," where he says that philosophy, despite all of its theories of wit, comedy, and irony, has never been able to subsume laughter, this corporeal convulsion, this unmasterable bodily transformation that exposes the limits of meaning (transforming the hermeneutic context).⁸ This is the laughter invoked by Nietzsche and Bataille as the other side of nausea. Laughter is verbal entropy; it is one of the points at which we can no longer maintain the illusion that language is a self-contained structure of meanings, but are forced to acknowledge its corporeality, as bodies shake manically and uncontrollably.⁹

Is there a body then, or only a corpus? Is there a body now? In his essay

on Derrida's "Ellipsis" Nancy writes of the lost body (*corps perdu*) that is the ellipsis, the absent center, of Derrida's writing. *The* body does not exist, Nancy repeats. Has something happened to what once was the body, something analogous to what has happened to the words "corps" and "corpus," which once enjoyed a rich and multifaceted life in English but which have now been reduced to the forms of "corpse" and military "corps" (the last denoting the artificial and imposed uniformity of death in life)?¹⁰ In *corpus* there is an extra sound to trip over, a parasitic consonant to give us pause, to interrupt the stream of vocalization (Michel Serres says that the consonants have a parasitic function, intervening in the spontaneous flow of the sound of vowels).¹¹ We are forced to weigh our words differently.

Certainly Nancy wants to evoke a certain history of the complex relations and incestuous intercourse of philosophy and the body. What is the deep structure of these gestures of inclusion and exclusion of the bodies that philosophy is destined to incorporate or disincorporate? What if philosophy and its discourse, Nancy asks in effect, were determined from the beginning by this struggle with the bodily? I select for the time being just part of one sentence from Nancy's sketch of this *agon*: "The body was born in Plato's cave . . ." *Is* there a body before the correlative notion of the soul, the immaterial, indissoluble animating principle? The body was born out of the need to distinguish the soul from its other. It is coeval with philosophy, as Nancy suggests that love and philosophy are coeval. We might speculate, as did Bruno Snell some years ago in *The Discovery of the Mind*, that before philosophy, if such a form of speech is allowed, the psyche was just another part of the anatomy or corpus, the breath that went down to Hades when one's limbs were left behind, and that perhaps those prephilosophical Greeks, having no notion to contrast with that of the corpus, had no concept of the body as integral, whole, and totalized. They had a corpus and an anatomy but not a body. What Plato did in simultaneously inventing body and soul was to introduce a set of categories that would henceforth provide the matrix within which all valorizations and permutations of these thoughts would be played out. Rather than say with recent fashion that philosophy has just begun to think the body (since Nietzsche or since Merleau-Ponty), we should say that it has *necessarily* been thinking the body from the beginning. Let me now cite the entire sentence: "The body was born in Plato's cave, or rather it was conceived and shaped in the form of the cave: as a prison or tomb of the soul, and the body first was thought *from the inside*, as buried darkness into which light only pene-

trates in the form of reflections, and reality only in the form of shadows." The cave or *hystera* of Plato is indeed a womb, a matrix in the fullest sense, as Luce Irigaray has reminded us, so the body is indeed "born" there.

Once these initial binary distinctions have been generated—the inside and the outside, the prison and the prisoner, the light and the dark, true meaning and its simulacra—the machinery of all philosophical discourse concerning the body is in place. Which is the signifier and which the signified? The machinery lumbers on, producing all possible variations on these themes and exhausting all the options for valorization and all the permutations of separation and fusion. At its limits this discourse performs its miracle of incarnation, death, and resurrection, demonstrating that the body is the necessary, if fortunate, fall of the soul so that the integrity of both is attained by a dying unto the body that wins it back again. The high and the low change places; the body becomes full of meaning rather than the obstacle to meaning.

The structure is embodied in Hegel's discussion of the crucifixion, to which Nancy constantly alludes, and in his famous saying "The wounds of the spirit heal without leaving a scar behind." Hegel plays with such a dizzying exchange of signs in a passage to which Nancy glancingly refers. After a critical review of physiognomy and phrenology, the two great reductive sciences of the body in his time and the forerunners of speculative neuroscience, Hegel says that a better example of the supposed identity of the high and the low can be found on the level of bodily activity and function rather than in static structure: "The infinite judgment, qua infinite, would be the fulfillment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgment that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as pissing."¹² In this all too facile philosophical joke, a *Witz* devoid of "wild laughter," all the signs are still in their proper places. Genuine speculation is represented by phallic generation, just as Plato in the *Symposium* had identified the longing for immortality by which men generate children with the dialectical ascent to the eternal and unchanging. Hegel doesn't discuss wounds here, and he would no doubt consider circumcision as one of those symbolic deformations of the body in which a culture is still desperately searching for its true meaning.

Even Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher of the body and of the flesh, simply inverts the structure of sign and meaning established by Plato, according to Nancy's matrix. The principles of Nancy's dissection or anatomy of philosophy here are very close to those deployed by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida in their diagnosis of the metaphysical malady. When Nietzsche

describes the history of metaphysics as culminating in the claim that the apparent world (of nineteenth-century naturalism) is the only world, to be awarded all of the positive characteristics previously reserved for the world behind the scenes, he is preparing the way for Nancy's claim that the body of phenomenology is just the inverted form of the meaningful soul to which the body was once opposed.¹³ Similarly, Heidegger wants to say that Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence is nothing but an inversion of Platonism, affixing the sign of eternity to the flux of the moment. And Derrida adds that the call and the voice in Heidegger retain the appeal to presence that Heidegger had sought to erase from his thought. In each case the point of the analysis is to show the complicity of the contrasted terms; to praise the wisdom of the body is still to speak of *the* body, as the valorization of the "apparent" world still moves within the limits of metaphysics because the apparent world has been constructed from the beginning in terms of its relations with the "real" world.

But beyond the reversal of signs something else occurs, something that Nietzsche (in *Twilight of the Idols*) names "Zarathustra's beginning," that Heidegger terms the thinking of Being, and that Derrida calls *différance*. Nancy will call this thing or *monstrum* that comes: *corpus*. It emerges out of a repetition that "carries with it an unlimited power of perversion and subversion."¹⁴ Now Nancy follows Derrida's reading of Heidegger's story closely enough to be able to say (although he does not do so here) that these philosophies from Plato to Merleau-Ponty have their own textual and thinking bodies and that once the inevitability of the matrix described is no longer taken for granted they can speak and touch beyond the limits it establishes. So we can now rewrite Nancy's statement that philosophy is not the one to tell us of the body. Although he says "philosophy will not help us," this holds only of philosophy as the thought of the body, not of philosophy insofar as it becomes *corpus*. As one of the many voices asks in "Vox Clamans in Deserto," isn't a great voice always more than one voice?¹⁵ The philosophers can now appear as bodies of thought, embodied thought, and not only as theories of bodies; but this is possible only because of a certain event whose consequences Nancy relentlessly traces without regard to sensitive noses and stomachs: namely the decomposition of God's body after his death. Nietzsche's madman says of this decaying body, "Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition?—gods too decompose."¹⁶

It is this Nietzschean moment that Nancy also invokes in his *L'oubli*

de la philosophie, which anatomizes the reactive will to meaning of that form of contemporary philosophy that seeks a return to meaning (*sens*) under the signs of liberty, communication, and the subject. In that polemic Nancy demonstrates that reactive philosophy is fueled by the impossible desire of appropriating a meaning that must yet always remain at a distance.¹⁷ The critique is reminiscent of Hegel's depiction of Kantian ethics as a series of dissemblances or displacements (*Verstellungen*) in which the unity of freedom and nature and their eternal separation are two sides of the same desire. In "Corpus" we're told that "the body is the last signifier" after the death of God, and we're provided with an anatomy of the inversions, perversions, and diversions—from bodybuilding to genocide—by means of which we are rapidly exhausting the possibilities of this matrix of signification. The technologized, prosthetic, electronic body is simply an extension of this will to meaning. None of these variations hears the force of Nietzsche's question "Now that God is dead, who is speaking?" The alternatives posed by the will to meaning are all too simple: either a stand-in speaks—if not God, then the glorified body, the idealized subject, or the state—or nobody speaks. Either willful repetition, a repetition blind to its perversity, or the nihilism of the no-body. But the body might speak and think. Zarathustra says that the honest ego "speaks of the body and still wants the body, even when it poetizes and raves and flutters with broken wings."¹⁸ (This orgasmic "fluttering with broken wings" belongs in Nancy's catalogue too. It is an active, frantic movement, one that can reach no goal outside itself, one in which all the bodily powers are ectopically evoked and focused. It is a joy, an expenditure that makes no sense, as Nancy says; it is simply transformation, or as Nietzsche orchestrates it, metamorphosis, or becoming-animal.)

Has philosophy always and only spoken of the body within the totalizing framework that Nancy delineates so well and that is so clearly at work in the canonical thinkers from Plato to Hegel? Let me suggest that philosophy exists as *corpus* and not only within the dialectic of the body, and that as *corpus* philosophy sometimes offers anatomies. As far back as Aristotle, "anatomy" is used to designate the laying out or articulation of a subject matter in thought or writing, but for Aristotle this is fundamentally a preliminary operation prior to the structuring of the logos. If the tradition itself is a *corpus* and not merely the narcissistic mirroring of the will to meaning of the speculative subject (a phrase that must now appear pleonastic), then we should be able to find resources there for the "new thresholds, new anatomies" (Hart Crane's words) that Nancy envisions.

One begins to encounter anatomies and catalogues of experience and excess in those interstices of the grand, official tradition that appears to Hegel as the self-development of the logos or to Heidegger as the tragic destiny of the metaphysics of presence in all its hubris. One key, like *corpus* and its derivatives, is linguistic and is to be found in “experience” in the experimental sense that it had before it was captured by official empiricism, a sense that is still partially retained in the Hegelian sense of *Er-fahrung*, wandering or journeying. (*Erfahrung* can be opposed to *Erlebnis* as *Körper* to *Leib* or as, in Nancy, *corpus* to “body.”)

For example, between Scholasticism and Cartesianism the program of anatomizing, which as Nancy says has always been around, is actively pursued and thematized. After the decline of neo-Aristotelian accounts of human beings as ensouled matter and before the extravagant constructions of Cartesian medicine and the artificial body politic of the Hobbesian Leviathan—two bodies that may be taken as having instituted modernity—there are other ways of writing about the body or of allowing the body to write. Montaigne’s *Essays*, or “experiments,” test the limits of philosophy by juxtaposing its *corpus* and the narcissism of neo-Platonizing humanism with the body of “Experience,” the body that suffers from the stone, sees the decline of its powers and the approach of death, worries about eating and defecation. Like Nancy’s text, Montaigne’s must be read as a motivated confrontation of the philosophical and the anatomical, and it is for these reasons that Nietzsche recurs to Montaigne’s example, especially in *Ecce Homo*, where he relates that in order to become what one is (the body one is) one must not have the slightest idea who one is. For the same reasons Barthes adopts the models of Montaigne and Nietzsche (Montaigne mediated through Nietzsche) in his later *corpus*, praising the style of the aphorism as a form of writing that manifests its contingent, written, embodied nature rather than masking itself as discourse, encyclopedia, or system. In English there is of course the great work of Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which is an anatomy in a double sense. It is both a catalogue without a logos and an exploration of the body as the site of the “indefinitely ectopic” displacement of the melancholy passion itself. Melancholy, the superfluity of black bile, is seen at first as a disruption of the presumed totalizing and integral body of health; as the catalogue continues, it becomes clear that this passion is not one thing but many, infinitely productive of excesses of love, madness of every sort, rapture, nausea, dejection, ecstasy, jealousy, abjection. The radical empiricism of these pre- and non-Cartesian thinkers has been all too often forgotten or repressed, but they offer some paths that could be explored by a philosophy oriented

to *corpus* rather than to the body. They provide *entrées* into the writing of the body. But one can go further, and Nancy does, when he explores the corporeality of the writing of Descartes, who cannot maintain the dualism that is all too easily attributed to him. “While I am writing,” writes Descartes in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, as he implicates an entire apparatus and instrumentality by which he realizes himself as the one whose thoughts are embodied by being written and being read. In “Dum Scribo” Nancy traces how far Descartes (who perhaps should not be called a Cartesian here) “mind and body take form together—in writing which is imprinted.”¹⁹ Descartes’s word for body, of course, is *corpus*. Descartes can be reread and rewritten in his corporeality, as a thinker who fantasized his body as a pen and for whom the prosthetic language in which he describes his bodily activity is not a mere metaphor.²⁰ And Descartes is not alone. Philosophy is a corpus, which also means that it is a plurality of corpora, and what Nancy provokes us to do is to read that corpus anatomically.

I would like to recall the first sentence of “Corpus,” “A *corpus* is not a discourse: however, what we need here is a corpus.” The *corpus* is and must be needed in many senses, subject to the double bind that Nancy, just a bit later, says must overtake any project of presenting the unrepresentable. There can be no *corpus* as such, itself, but the *corpus* can be catalogued, anatomized, and seismographed. As Heidegger spoke of the ontological difference of *das Sein* and *das seiende*, Being and beings, so Nancy has written of the difference between bodies as they become present in philosophy (for example) and *corpus* as what comes, what emerges, yet what cannot be fully here. When Nancy says that a body is needed “here,” where is the “here”? Mustn’t we read this “here” as a “here, now”? Nancy wants to say both that the need for a *corpus* has arisen, that it is an event, and also that the need can never be fulfilled, except in the modes of writing-out, of cataloguing, of anatomizing.

It is something uncannily close to and distant from this structure that he has himself sketched in the essay “Elliptical Sense,” which repeats Derrida’s “Ellipsis.” There Nancy describes Derrida’s thought as the passion for a lost or absent center, as the passion to “touch and tamper with the center.” Derrida, he says, “endlessly inscribe[s] this presence of the lost body” and also speaks of “[t]he foreign body which is the body of our foreignness.” And he denominates Derrida’s writing as taking place *à corps perdu*—in reference not just to a lost body but also to a writing with abandon, a nonreflective (nonspecular) passion for the limits. Nancy would

seem to be alluding to one of Hegel's exemplary programmatic pronouncements on the nature of philosophy here. In his early essay on Fichte and Schelling, Hegel had written:

The essence of philosophy . . . is a bottomless abyss for personal idiosyncrasy. In order to reach philosophy it is necessary to throw oneself into it *à corps perdu*—meaning by “body” here the sum of one's personal idiosyncracies. For reason, finding consciousness caught in peculiarities, only becomes philosophical speculation by raising itself to itself, putting its trust only in itself and the absolute which at that moment becomes its object.²¹

This hurling oneself *à corps perdu*, Nancy says, constitutes a “material” movement in philosophy, “the moving of a lost body presented on the limits of language.”²² Philosophy has not merely “budged,” or moved its body, it has become *corpus*. We can now attempt to name the nature of this movement and to suggest that the *corps perdu* and the emerging corpus are two foci of an ellipse: the disappearance of the body, the coming of the *corpus*. This is not a hermeneutical circle, and it is not the integral figure of a new program; it is a structure that doubles gaps and distances while intensifying tact and touch. One might think here of that scene in Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary* where Joseph discovers that the proper tact in touching Mary's miraculously pregnant belly is not to apply the hand, not to stroke or caress, but to withdraw the hand in love. As Zarathustra says, “it is the smallest cleft [*Kluft*] that is most difficult to bridge.”²³