

Writing the Unreadable

On the Ontology of Bodies in Jean-Luc Nancy's Corpus

Niklas Johan Bystrøm Larssen



MA Thesis in Philosophy at IFIKK, HF
Supervisor: Ingvild Torsen

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It is difficult to delimit an acknowledgement like the current one concerning those who might have had an influence on this piece of work. Where does one draw the limit? Certainly there are a lot of events which make their mark on the process of writing an academic text, and nevertheless is not to be found in the text as such. I am not even certain any longer how I stumbled upon the book *Corpus* by Jean-Luc Nancy, which the current effort is an attempt to read, write and interpret. Nevertheless, there is a concept at the heart this book, which makes its entrance very early on, and which furthermore, I believe, is one of the reasons I would not let this particular book go so easily, giving way to several rereadings, every time uncovering new layers of meaning within the text. The concept is *exscription*, and it designates that which is written away or effaced from every piece of writing, that is, that which is not inscribed into a text. It is difficult to grasp, and yet it is insistent. I believe therefore, that all all the persons and events which would have had an impact upon the current work, is to some extent exscribed or written away from the text, yet the trace of them is certainly there, in a sort of spectral or haunting way. Nevertheless, in order to do a sort of violent selection which is obviously required of an acknowledgement like the current one, I would like to thank the following people:

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Reading and Writing the Body	6
2. Touching and Reading the Sacred Body Of God	11
3. Out of Touch: The Ontological Paradox of Writing the Body	27
4. Whose Touch? The Limits of Corpus	49
5. Concluding Remarks	58
Bibliography	59

1. Introduction: Reading and Writing the Body

What in a writing, and properly so, is not to be read - that's what a body is.

- Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, 87

How to conceive what is outside a text?

- Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 25

It may be that our bodies, this amalgam of flesh, bones and nerves we carry with us at every moment of our lives, from the moment of being thrown into the world at birth to the vanishing of our existence, is usually forgotten by us in our everyday dealings. Either when being absorbed in a conversation, or walking to work, perhaps reflecting on yesterday's events or planning the tasks awaiting ahead, the body usually remains out of view, like a silent backdrop. In this sense, the body might be seen as an example par excellence of the paradox at the heart of being or existence such as Martin Heidegger envisioned it in his *Sein und Zeit* (1927): being at the same time what is most near us at all times, and yet distant and absent to our attention.¹ Even when attentive to its skin, its form or posture, even to the point of obsession or hysteria, there is still parts of the body that obscurely withdraw or pass us by in silence, such as the functioning of its organs and muscles, the continuous pulsation of blood through its veins, or the rhythmic diastole and systole of the heart. In fact, it is not unreasonable to assert that we usually take note of the body first in experiences of rupture, when it passes from health to illness, when it is afflicted by some sort of malfunction or breakdown. All of a sudden, that which had remained as a distant blind spot in the background of existence intrudes into awareness, making the strangeness of its presence felt to us.

As such, it seems fitting that Jean-Luc Nancy wrote *Corpus* (1992)², a book written to the body from a body, after a heart transplantation and during tedious years of blood cancer, so called lymphoma, caused by drugs used to lower the immune system of his body in order to prevent its rejection of the new heart. As he writes several years later in *L'Intrus* (2000), a

¹ For an example on the play between the nearness and remoteness of being, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 107.

² Before being published in book form, *Corpus* was initially published as a shorter text, whose translation can be found in *The Birth to Presence* (1993). I will cite the shorter text where I find the translation to be more lucid or informative. Hereafter, *Corpus* will be abbreviated as *C*, and *Birth to Presence* as *BP*.

heart transplantation does not only mark an unprecedented historical possibility to extend the life of the living body, thereby also exposing the technical conditions of what we often take to be merely “natural,” and thus complicating any rigorous distinction between nature and technics, but the experience of undergoing a transplantation interrupts the sense of several ideas we might have of ourselves and our finite existence.³ For instance, what happens to the sense of self, to the *I*, when you live on thanks to the heart of an *other*? Can this *I* even be localized in a body whose parts now appear to be substitutable? Does the other who now resides “in me” make it problematic to speak of a “body proper”, of “my body” pure and simple? As Nancy asks: “Where am I? In my foot, my hand, my genitals, my ear? Where am I in this face, these traits, traces, eccentricities, tremblings? Who am I on the contours of this mouth that says ‘I?’” (*Corpus II*, 87)⁴ Is it better to say that this *I* can’t possibly be concentrated to a single point of the body, but must rather be spread out across all of its parts, even the ones we might consider as strangers or intruders within ourselves? Like Nancy articulates the apparent dissemination of himself after the transplant: “I am the illness and the medicine, I am the cancerous cell and the grafted organ, I am these ends of steel wire that brace my sternum and this injection site permanently sewn under my clavicle, altogether as if, already and besides, I were these screws in my thigh and this plate inside my groin.” (*Corpus*, 170)

Even when left open, questions such as these concerning the body touches on and interrupts the *sense* of who and what we are, and moreover, the general *sense* of existence and being. After all, do we even know what a body is, and what it is to be a body? And moreover - where would we look to search for answers to such questions? What kind of ideas, images, representations or interpretations of the body do we have at our disposal? Should we look to anatomy, biology or mechanics? Or rather art, politics, theology or philosophy? Moreover, to what extent is different historical representations of the body inscribed into our everyday language that we usually take as familiarly known? To what extent do they structure our thinking on the subject?

Similar to the way some parts of the body enter our attention while others withdraws into absence, representations and interpretations of the body never seem to tell the whole story, never seem to disclose the body *as such*, given that there is any such thing. To interpret

³ *L’Intrus* was published as a book in France. The English translation is appended to *Corpus*, 161-170.

⁴ Contrary to what one might think, *Corpus II* is not a sequel to *Corpus*. Rather it is a collection of texts in translation, which were to begin with published as separate books and essays in French. Hereafter abbreviated as *C II*.

and to represent is always, whether it is or is not conscious, a decision, a selection or a choice to include certain parts or aspects while at the same time excluding others, as if one is cutting out a piece or limb of the body for people to see, like a corporeal exhibition.

From the history of philosophy we have inherited a range of different images, representations, interpretations and senses of the body. In Plato's *Gorgias* the body is described as the "prison or tomb" of the soul, which by its finite weight, as it is later described in *Phaedrus*, hinders the soul access to the "whole simple, unchanging and blissful revelations" of an infinite and transcendental beyond. (Plato, *Gorgias*, 493a; *Phaedrus*, 250c) Centuries later Nietzsche asks, by an apparent inversion of Platonism, whether philosophy has "not merely been an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body*." (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 5) Others yet, like Kant and Heidegger, do not have much to say about the body at all, quietly abandoning it as more or less irrelevant to the fundamental questions of philosophy.⁵ Then again, in the phenomenological works of Merleau-Ponty, the body makes its return to center stage, this time no longer as a shelter for a soul, but divided of itself into a living, spiritual or animating body proper on the one side, and an embodied, incarnated or animated physiological body on the other. FIX: Merleau-Ponty p. 136: "my body is at once phenomenal body and objective body."

Nevertheless, taking a large view, we ought to ask, despite the apparent diversity and difference of these inherited interpretations, whether there is a sense of continuity, or better yet, a continuous sense of the body marking its way through the history of philosophy? Is there a general logic as to how the body makes sense in our philosophical heritage? *Corpus* might be read as a prolonged affirmative response to and meditation upon such a question. Nancy holds that, in one way or another, philosophy always desires the body *to make sense*. That is, in philosophy - "all of us, good Platonists of long standing" (C, 13) as Nancy writes in a rather polemical tone - the body is posited as something meaningful, which would be intelligible or possible to appropriate for our knowledge and understanding. Certainly there are bodies, but what do they mean? Nevertheless, when we ask what a body is from a philosophical viewpoint, we are not so much interested in this or that particular and empirical body. Rather, what typically interests us as philosophers is the body in general, and specifically what constitutes the body's general sense and essence; what, in other words,

⁵ Heidegger makes it clear that the body, or the "spatialization of *Da-sein*" (his word designating the "being which we ourselves in each case are" Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 8) "contains a problematic of its own not to be discussed here" (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 109). In other words, for Heidegger, the body is not seen as crucial for the interrogation of fundamental ontology into the sense of being. For the claim that "Kant the philosopher" has "nothing to say about the flesh," cf. *OT*, 37-40.

makes up its definite or defining character as something to be classified under a general concept or genus. As Jacques Derrida appropriately says somewhere, “Socrates has been teaching us this for thousands of years.” (Jacques Derrida, *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*, 287)⁶ Thus, when philosophy desires the body to make sense, it desires to know that which we shall call *ontological* in it. To talk about the ontological body is thus to speak of the general sense or essence of the body.

According to Nancy ontology takes the form of representational thought in our tradition. That is, we make intelligible what things are and their meaning by means of representations, signs, images, and in general, language. But Nancy takes this thought one step further. In fact, he says that we’ve turned the body itself into a representation. Yet, if the body is representation, it is not necessarily what it is said to represent. For instance, the body might be represented as an sensible *outside* or exteriority that signifies or indicates the sense of an obscure or concealed *inside*, like the interiority of a subject or a soul hiding behind a face or inside a skull.⁷ Or by a logical inversion, the body can represent the inside whose sense is given and guaranteed in a transcendent outside, like that of the Platonic Idea or God. In any case, the body appears as a sort of sign or inscription whose meaning can be read, understood and interpreted in much the same way as we decipher the meaning of a book. When we read and decipher a text, we always aim, in one sense or another, at appropriating a meaning which is intelligible, and not merely the material or sensible black spots and white spacings on a page. According to Nancy, the same can be said about our inherited body.

When it comes to the body, philosophy falls prey to a logic of representation. Nancy therefore holds that philosophy desires that the body, conceived of as a sign, signifies something beyond itself. In other words, he finds that philosophy desires that the body makes sense; that it is endowed with meaning. Nancy insists that we are caught up in this desire for meaning to the extent that we wouldn’t even know what to make of a mute and senseless body, a body whose sense wouldn’t be guaranteed or given by anything outside it, a body exterior to representation. As he writes in a rather polemical style which adorns the whole book, we “always assent to sense: beyond sense, we loose our footing (Plato deserts us,

⁶ Derrida’s *Le toucher*, *Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000) is an extended meditation on the figure of *touch* in the oeuvre of Nancy and in the Western tradition. We will discuss the importance of this figure for Nancy’s ontology in chapter two. Hereafter *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy* is abbreviated as *OT*.

⁷ A lucid illustration of the dialectic between outside and inside might be found in *Being and Time*: “One speaks of ‘appearances or symptoms of illness.’ What is meant by this are occurrences in the body that show themselves and in this self-showing as such ‘indicate’ something that does *not* show itself.” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 29) This is precisely what Nancy accuses the tradition of: in exposing or showing itself, the body indicates or signifies a *hidden* inside.

sacred body of God!)” (C, 13) *Corpus* is above all a book that attempts to deconstruct, analyze and criticise a representational view of the body, of the body as a sign along with the implied dialectic between inside and outside, signifier and signified, that goes along with its logic. This criticism is not restricted to one particular philosophical system or a philosopher among many, but touches on a logic he insists lies at the heart of our Western tradition, which he denotes as nothing other than the “epoch of representation.” (BP, 1)

The most profound assertion of *Corpus* is that the “ontological body has yet to be thought.” (C, 15) Yet, it remains to be thought to the extent that the ontological body, that is, *the sense of the body*, is neither given nor guaranteed by any signs, images or representations we have at hand. In a paradoxical manner, Nancy will have us see that the sense of the body is not something to be read, known, interpreted or deciphered in a book. The body is rather, as Nancy terms it by way of one of his key neologistic inventions, something *exscribed*, which means that the body is written away or effaced “being placed *outside the text* as the most *proper* movement of its text” (C, 11). Nevertheless, it is still through reading and writing that we will have to pass in order to make sense of this assertion, even when trying to figure out how the body is that which *in* a writing “is not to be read.” (C, 87) Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this philosopher and his arguments, is how to grasp this paradoxical double bind. For how can one touch, through language and thought, that which nevertheless exceeds our discourse and has its proper place and sense outside of it.

The guiding question of the current thesis will be formulated in a twofold way. On the one hand, it will question to what extent representational thought does not, and indeed cannot, suffice to make sense of the body. That is, what sort of problems, contradictions or impasses does representation thought necessarily run into when it tries to grasp the sense of the body? And, on the other hand, given that representational thought comes short in thinking the ontological body, how can we think the sense of the body in excess of representation? On these grounds, we will formulate the following thesis: the body does not have its sense outside of itself, that is, it does not incarnate or embody some transcendental or immanent sense. On the contrary, the body *is* sense, and sense *is* body absolutely, here and now, everytime in an always different, irreducible and singular way that transcends the grasp of what is intelligible to thought.

The thesis will take form as a close reading of *Corpus*. In the first chapter I will unravel Nancy’s criticism of “the epoch of representation,” that is, the metaphysical heritage that he asserts delimits and structures our thinking of the body and sense. Following this trail I will subsequently try to disclose how this tradition or way of thinking ends up in an absolute

contradiction which prevents it from grasping the sense of the body. Taking our leave of the negative or critical passages of *Corpus*, the second chapter will thus propose a different approach to think the ontological body that might escape the deadlock of metaphysics and its representational paradigm. That is, I will try to formulate what we might call Nancy's positive ontology of bodies. Finally, in the third chapter, I will engage with some criticisms that have been raised against Nancy's project. Accordingly, I will attempt to problematize certain aspects of his thinking that are either questionable or merely passed over in silence.

Concerning method, I will read *Corpus* in accord with its own premises as a work of deconstruction, or a deconstructive reading on its own terms. What does this mean? Contrary to move from general claims to particular examples, I will begin by reading, sticking to the letter of the text and its discourse, attempting to the greatest degree possible not to import concepts and terminology that might confuse the meaning of the text. As such, I will attempt to follow the trail of the argument that unfolds in *Corpus*, elucidating concepts that might appear obscure or unclear by drawing upon their intertextual reference, and from such a reading be able to assert more general claims. One might call it a bottom-up reading contrary to a top-down reading, if one wish. However, as might have become clear, the choice of method is not arbitrary. As I will return to in the second chapter, deconstruction might be said to differentiate itself from other "philosophical strands," in that it is highly attentive to the language and concepts of its discourse. Deconstruction thrives on the assertion that thought is not free to use language as an instrument or tool-box according to its own desire. On the contrary, thought has its limits and possibilities within the structure of a given language. Accordingly, as Nancy says the epoch of structuralism and deconstruction "was discovering that one does not philosophize outside language and that the body of the latter is also the flesh of thought." (Nancy, *The Speculative Remark*, 148) I will return to the justification of these remarks in my second chapter.

At any rate, the current effort will be careful to explicate the conceptuality of *Corpus*, in order to make sense of its argument. Following the advice of Emmanuel Levinas gives to the readers of Derrida, I will avoid to interpret Nancy using his entire conceptuality at one and the same time, like "those who - frightfully well informed and prodigiously intelligent and more Derridian than Derrida - interpret the latter's extraordinary work with the help of all the key words at once, though neither having nor leaving to their readers, the time to return to the thinking that was contemporary with those words." (Levinas, *Proper Names*, 59) The method might thus be summarized and illustrated by taking one step at the time.

2. Touching and Reading the Sacred Body Of God

The signifying body - the whole corpus of philosophical, theological, psychoanalytical, and semiological bodies - *incarnates* one thing only: the absolute contradiction of not being able to be a *body* without being the body *of a spirit*, which disembodies it.

- Jean-Luc Nancy, *C*, 69

We will begin at the beginning with the first chapter of *Corpus*, which like the last is simply entitled “Corpus.” Nancy begins by asserting the historical and cultural heritage which haunts “our” thinking of the body. Frequently throughout it is a matter of addressing “us” - referring to a certain delineation and delimitation of the West - emphasizing that when it comes to our language, representations and thoughts, we are inheritors through and through.⁸ Likewise, it must also necessarily be a matter of discerning our words and thoughts from “*their* words” which tells us nothing “about *our* body.” (*C*, 7) Above all, then, the text is concerned with insisting that the sense of our body is thoroughly historical, or a piece of heritage. The attentive reader might interfere to ask whether, for Nancy, this historicity merely applies to representations, signs and images of the body which we have inherited through our cultural archives and linguistic treasure-house, or if material bodies themselves are historical as well. Yet, as we will see, it is precisely a question whether it is possible to rigorously distinguish between the “thing itself” on the one hand, namely, that which we might take to be the mere presence of our material and tangible bodies, and the intelligible representations we have of them on the other hand. Do we have access, or “*entries* into the body,” (*C*, 55) as Nancy says, except through language and representation? By way of anticipation, we will eventually see how Nancy contends that such a division is in fact impossible, and moreover, that our bodies and our access to them are always already contaminated by the representations we have been handed over through history.

Accordingly, taking its departure from the question of inheritance, *Corpus* appropriately begins by tracing where our representations of the body stem from; by identifying where one can locate the logic which haunts our thinking of the body. In accord with educational or pedagogical convention Nancy locates the birth of the West and its history in ancient Greek and Christian culture, and this is also where the representation of the

⁸ Yet it is uncertain who this “we” refers to, a problem we will return to in chapter three concerning Gayatri Spivak’s criticism of *Corpus*.

body as we have inherited it is found in its beginnings, which he asserts, has reproduced itself in one way or another throughout history to such an extent that particular “philosophical perspectives don’t greatly alter things.” (C, 69) What is at stake is thus to grasp a representational logic of the body that, to a certain extent, forces itself somewhat unaltered, as a discrete continuity, throughout the tradition. As I indicated in my introductory remarks, Nancy sees this logic as one where the body, in one way or another, signifies or represents a sense other than itself, either inside or outside of itself, that is, either as a transcendent or an immanent sense.

Already in the first chapter of *Corpus*, this representational logic receives the name of *incarnation*, which one, by extension, can also designate, in a less spiritual locution, as embodiment: the body incarnates or embodies something other than itself. Yet, as Nancy emphasizes elsewhere, this is traditionally not taken to mean that the material body embodies something other which is also material or sensible, like a foreign organ grafted on to the body. Rather, “*incarnation* is usually understood in the sense of the entry into a body of some incorporeal entity (spirit, god, idea).” (Nancy, *Dis-enclosure*, 81)⁹ In etymology we can also hear a similar meaning in the Latin word *incarnatio*, designating the “the act of being made flesh,” which means that something lacking in flesh, something incorporeal or merely intelligible takes on the form of a body, that is, becomes sensible. Moreover, within the gospel of John in the New Testament, we find the logic of incarnation illustrated in the famous dictum that the “Word was God” and that the “Word became flesh.” (John: 1:1; 1:14) A body is accordingly not merely a body, but is necessarily twofold, divided into a corporeal and an incorporeal aspect: a body *and* a spirit, and moreover, the body *of* a spirit. Through the logic of incarnation, life and existence is thus divided into two opposite areas, which we can designate through the traditional philosophical opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, that is, between that which can be seen or touched and that which is only grasped or reflected in thought. Accordingly, following the logic of incarnation or embodiment, the body is determined as something sensible, and what is intelligible *in it* is determined as something spiritual.

Nevertheless, as is pivotal to Nancy’s argument, this binary logic is not restricted to theology or philosophy alone, but is indeed inscribed into the grammar of our everyday language, as when we speak of “my body,” thus indicating not only an object possessed or

⁹ The book *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, published in French in 2005, develops elements of *Corpus* into an extended analysis of the Christian heritage today. Yet, the extent of that book exceeds the reach of our current effort. We will therefore only refer to it occasionally where it offers lucid remarks on concepts or thoughts with which we are engaged.

owned by a subject, but moreover, that “me” and “body” are in fact two different things or two distinguished substances. Nancy thus insists that we descend from and are “within the space of a way of thinking in which the body is necessarily in a position of exteriority and sensible manifestation, as distinct from a soul or spirit given in interiority, and not directly representable.” (Nancy, *Dis-enclosure*, 81) Of course, the latter is not directly representable because it, in itself, is lacking of body or flesh, and thus requires a body in order to become sensible. What is at stake in this opposition is therefore not merely that the exteriority of a body differs from the interiority of a soul or spirit, but that the sense of the body is above all, as sensible manifestation or medium, to manifest, disclose, reveal, represent or signify something *other* than itself which only presents itself in its presence indirectly through the body.

The opening pages of *Corpus* deals with nothing else than the opposition established by this “way of thinking”, and the subsequent dialectic between an intelligible sense and its manifestation in a sensible body. Contrary to Jacques Derrida, who in his extended commentary on Nancy’s work says he will “not even attempt to comment, paraphrase or gloss the first chapters of this *Corpus*” their prose apparently being “too rich, and their stitches too tightly woven,” this is precisely what we will attempt to do here. (*OT*, 60) Yet, giving heed to the warning of this thinker, an exegesis of these pages will require extensive commentary and contextualization. The text mobilizes a range of intertextual references, to philosophical and literary works and ideas, but it does so persistently without citing any references.¹⁰ We will therefore necessarily have to explicate concepts and lines of reasoning which, in lack of a proper context, may appear obscure at first sight. Let us therefore proceed by quoting a passage at length, wherein Nancy identifies what he perceives to be a certain obsession or desire at the heart of our culture and tradition to see in a body something *more* or *other* than a body, that is, to see in it some intelligible or transcendent sense present in the flesh.

We’re obsessed with showing a *this*, and with showing (ourselves) that this *this*, here, *is* the thing we can’t see or touch, either here nor anywhere else - and that *this* is *that*, not just in any way, but *as its body*. The body of *that* (God, or the absolute, if you prefer) - and the fact that

¹⁰ In fact, *Corpus* gives only two references in total, both to literary works published in 1991, despite the fact that it draws upon concepts from well-known philosophical concepts by Lucretius, Freud, Deleuze and Heidegger, as well as the philosophical traditions associated with Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Hegel. I will neither defend nor criticize this choice of style or rhetoric in *Corpus*. For the apparent lack of “philological seriousness,” I refer the reader to *BP*, viii.

“that” *has a body*, or that “that” *is* a body (and so we might think that “that” is *the* body, absolutely): that’s our obsession. The presentified “this” of the Absentee par excellence... (C, 3)¹¹

What unfolds in this passage is not necessarily a dialectic between a particular *this* (this sensible body here) and an universal *that*, like that which famously opens Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, even if the current chapter under scrutiny carries several references to the latter. Rather, the significance of these pronouns should be taken in the sense that *this* has a certain nearness or proximity, it signifies *this* body present *here and now*, while the opposing *that* indicates something farther off, something remote, withdrawn or absent.¹² Through this opposition of distance Nancy articulates the paradox or theological mystery at the heart of incarnation: God, being properly outside or beyond the world, something “we can’t see or touch, either here or anywhere else,” presents or manifests himself in *this* body here as something to both see and touch. Above all, this is what the body of Jesus in Christian theology represents: to be the “visible image of of the invisible God.” (BP, 412)¹³ Thereby, we also see how the logic of incarnation is nothing else than the logic of representation, as when Nancy says that the body becomes the “body of *that*,” thus indicating that the body is above all a sign, image or representation of something remote or withdrawn which is not directly representable.

Yet, in the theological mystery of incarnation the chain of representation goes even one step further, as is witnessed in the Christian rite of the Eucharist. This rite, which is above all a repetition or reiteration among Christians of the Last Supper where Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples, uttering the phrase which also opens and is repeated throughout *Corpus* almost like a chant, and which in Latin says “*hoc est enim corpus meum*” (“this is truly my body.”) In this way, Jesus wants his disciples to believe that the present bread and wine they will devour and incorporate in communion are literally his body, which in turn is nothing other than the body of God. Subsequently, the consummation of *this* bread

¹¹ In Christine Irizarry’s translation of Derrida’s *On Touching*, the phrase “that’s our obsession” is instead translated as “that is what haunts us,” thus emphasizing to a larger extent the spectral inheritance that I have emphasized earlier in this current chapter. (OT, 61)

¹² This is also the case with the French pronouns *ceci* (“this”) and *cela* (“that”), which likewise expresses the nearness of *this here* and *that there*.

¹³ In his more recent book on Christianity, Nancy underlines, in a different jargon, the mystery of incarnation as the most important trait of Christian thought: “It is well known that the heart of Christian theology is obviously Christology, that the heart of Christology is the doctrine of incarnation, and that the heart of the doctrine of incarnation is that of *homousia*, consubstantiality, the identity or community of being and substance between the Father and the Son. This is what is completely unprecedented about Christianity.” (Nancy, *Dis-enclosure*, 151)

and *this* wine, is in the last instance also the spiritual incorporation of *that*, of God. Through the phrase *hoc est enim corpus meum*, Nancy envisions Jesus saying to his disciples: “I’m telling you *truly* that *hoc est enim* [in truth, truly, indeed, in fact], and that *I*’m the one saying this: who else would be so sure of my presence *in flesh and blood*? And so this certainty will be yours, along with this body that you’ll have incorporated.” (C, 5) What gives itself as a mystery or revelation in incarnation is not only the fact that Jesus would present and make visible the body of God, but that every Christian through the consummation of bread and wine at the Eucharist would also “eat the body of God,” and thus “*be that body, and be nothing but that...*” (C, 5) The liturgic incorporation of bread and wine therefore produces a communion between body and spirit, it infuses or permeates the corporeal body with incorporeal spirit.

Further, we should also pay attention to the parenthesis making its appearance in the middle of the quoted passage above, and its apparent unproblematic substitution of concepts, wherein it says that *this* is the “body of *that* (God, or *the absolute, if you prefer*)” (C, 3 - my emphasis). In other words, if “you” prefer, indicating an address to the reader, we can just as well say “the absolute” everytime we read the name “God” in the text. This might appear trivial, yet, it grants us the means to understand how Nancy contends that the logic of incarnation, by a discrete continuity, touches the whole tradition on the question concerning the body, and moreover, that the theological mystery we have just explicated is not merely a particular “way of thinking” about the body, but that it surfaces and modulates itself, in one way or another, throughout our history and culture.

What is the meaning of “the absolute” here? *Corpus* make use of the concept several times, yet it doesn’t offer any lucid definition. Yet, in *Le sens du monde* (1993), Nancy gives a clarification of the term by opposing it to that of the *fragment*: “That which, for itself, depends on nothing is an *absolute*. That which nothing completes in itself is a *fragment*.” (Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 152) In other words, the absolute is that which in itself is independent, self-sufficient, closed and unconditional, but which everything else, every fragment of being, if we are to expand upon the distinction, necessarily depends upon. Moreover, we can also recognize within this distinction an extended ranked division or hierarchy wherein the absolute is grasped or determined as something primary, principal, constitutional and essential, while the body therefore designates something secondary, contingent, constituted and auxiliary. Such binary distinctions, in whatever form they may take, is what Roberto Esposito, whose thinking is quite sympathetic to that of Nancy, identifies as a metaphysical way of thinking that dominates our history and culture. As he

says, this logic “divides the world of life” like a watershed, through which existence is “variously sectioned into two areas that are valued differently, one of which is subordinated to the other.” (Esposito, *Persons and Things*, 5-6) In other words, the body, as something subordinate and secondary, cannot offer its own sense, or cannot *make sense* on its own, but requires the supplement of an absolute, however this is thought, which as its unconditional foundation will come to make sense of it.

According to Nancy, every epoch or every philosophical system within the history of philosophy, understood as this Platonic and Christian tradition, establishes an “absolute” that despite their differences corresponds more or less to this definition.¹⁴ Apart from the theological God with whom we have already been acquainted, there is of course the absolute Idea of Plato with its “whole, simple, unchanging and blissful revelations.” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250c) While these modes of thought establishes the absolute as something transcendent, something outside or beyond the world, there is also those who inversely determine it as something immanent. For Nancy, the most prominent example of the latter is found in Aristotle, whose *substance* or *hypokeimenon* designates “what’s under something and what, underneath a certain number of attributes or accidents, *no longer belongs to anything other than itself.*” (C, 123 - my italics) Belonging to nothing but itself, the absolute thereby also receives the trait of being a ground, basis or foundation for everything else. For Aristotle, to grasp the unconditional absolute substance is above all the primary concern of ontology. As he says, the science of ontology is “strictly a science of that which is first and elemental, both on which the other things depend and through which they are dominated. If then, this is *substance*, the Philosopher or Metaphysician must be in possession of the first principles and causes of substances.” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1003b) In Aristotle one can also identify in this regard the desire for the absolute. For as he contends in the opening of his *Metaphysics*, all “men are actuated with the desire for knowledge,” which is posited as the desire to grasp that which is principal, absolute and essential. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980a)

The unconditional nature of the absolute is, moreover, also the characteristic trait of the modern conception of the *subject*, or the “I,” according to Nancy. Specifically as this

¹⁴ As such, the history of the West, is also, as Derrida writes, the history of “metaphors and metonymies,” that is, a history which through different concepts attempts to name the presence of this absolute ground or foundation, which in turn would come to make sense of that which is and exists. “It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or the center have always designated an invariable presence - *eidōs, archē, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 353)

concept was developed through the works of Descartes, Kant and Husserl among others.¹⁵ Accordingly, Nancy appears to contend that despite the differences that separates and distinguishes the metaphysics of old and the philosophical achievements of modernity, there still persists the logic pertaining to the mystery of incarnation “à la moderne” (C, 87). Even if the body perhaps no longer incarnates God, it nevertheless still works in a similar manner, this time being the embodiment of a self, that is, the instrument or vehicle through which the subject makes itself known. Furthermore, in Hegel the absolute corresponds neither to substance nor subject alone, but to their dialectical synthesis as he makes clear in the introduction to his *Phenomenology*: “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10) Concerning the absolute, one can thus identify as structural affinity which runs throughout the tradition.

One ought to question however, following the argumentative thread of the opening pages of *Corpus*, what it is that, in the first place, animates the desire or obsession for “the absolute” within philosophy and theology. For why does the absolute present itself to, or indeed force itself upon, thought as something necessary and altogether natural? Let us pick up our reading where we left off:

The presentified “this” of the Absentee par excellence: incessantly, we shall have called, convoked, consecrated, policed, captured, wanted, absolutely wanted it. We shall have wanted the assurance, the unconditional certainty of a *THIS IS: here it is*, nothing more, absolutely, here it is, here, this one, *the same thing*. (C, 3-5)

Following the text we come to sense that the question concerning the representation of *that*, the absolute, in *this* body, is a matter of attaining an assurance, guarantee or certainty about what a body *is*, about its sense or essence. The absolute comes into play when we ask: what is this thing we call body? What does the body mean, and how does it make sense? But also what we mean to say when we speak of bodies in the plural, trying to understand in what

¹⁵ Nancy therefore seems to be in agreement with Heidegger who sees in Descartes’ reflective subject, or *ego cogito* “the *hypoikeimenon*,” “what is unclearly enough called ‘substance’ in traditional language” as “transferred to consciousness” (Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, 61-62). When it comes to modern conceptions of the subject, *Corpus* engages first and foremost with Descartes’ *ego cogito*, while neither Kant’s “*P*” nor the transcendental subject of Husserl is mentioned extensively. Moreover, when it comes to Kant, the “*I*,” doesn’t attain the trait of unconditional absolute within the system, as it does for Descartes and Husserl, but is rather given to the *thing itself* (“das ding an sich”). Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B XX) The “absoluteness” of the Kantian subject and its relation to the thing in itself implies an enormous problematic that cannot be pursued here.

general, definite or defining way they are bodies. Is every *this* in a certain sense “*the same thing*”? And, if so, how do the vast multitude of bodies, the more than “five billion human bodies,” which are soon “to be eight billion,” not “to mention other bodies,” how do they manifest, embody or represent something like “the body” in general, that is, *the thing itself*? (C, 83)

As a response to all our questions, doubts, distrusts, confusions and ambiguities, the absolute appears to offer a soothing and stable answer as it makes sense of what there is. It is in this sense that Nancy goes on to write that *hoc est enim corpus meum*, is the exemplary articulation of the mystery of incarnation and embodiment, that is, of a *that* in a *this*, which “challenges, allays all our doubts about appearances, conferring, on the real, the true final touch of its pure Idea: its reality, its existence.” (C, 5) What Nancy appears to be describing here is above all a certain idealization of the body, the effort on behalf of the philosopher and theologian, to turn the Idea, God or the absolute, if we prefer, into what is most real in a body and thereby making it intelligible to us. Therefore, he goes on, in what might at first appear to be one of the most vague or obscure sentences of the book, to say that we “could never finish modulating the variants of this phrase... *Hoc est enim*... can generate the whole *corpus* of a General Encyclopedia of Western Sciences, Arts, and Ideas.” (C, 5) Despite how hyperbolic this statement might appear, it claims above all that we desire to make the sensible world of bodies, “the whole fabric, finally, from which we’ve been woven,” intelligible to us through idealization. (C, 5) Moreover, we ought to emphasize how this idealization offers a privileged vantage point for the philosopher or theologian from where one can truly see, grasp, appropriate, subsume and judge what a body is, that is, a site from which one can know the sense of the body as *that*, whatever it is.

Through establishing the absolute as an originary ground or guarantee for sense, the philosopher or theologian apparently achieves, as Nancy describes it in the chapter “Mystery?” what Plato, named *epopteia*. This is a concept that Plato borrows from the cult rites of the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries, and which can be translated as a “completed sight,” or a “super-sight.” (C, 45) To attain *epopteia* is certainly the preeminent achievement of the philosopher, such as Plato describes this ideal figure in *Phaedrus*, it is the means through which the philosopher can see beyond the world of sensible “reflection, or floating shadows” to the ideal reality hidden behind it. (C, 5) There, we can read about the apparent delirium or madness of the ideal thinker who sees past or beyond the images or representations of our finite world, and who “observe the nature of what is imaged in them” (Plato, *Phaedrus*,

250c).¹⁶ In other words, it appears to be a persistent belief in the inaugurating texts of Western philosophy and theology, that the sensible, *this* body here or there, is insufficient to offer its own sense, and that the true access to its reality and existence is achieved only in and through the ideality of a transcendent or immanent absolute.

Even Hegel appears to be more or less in agreement with Plato on this score, when he asserts in regards to the question concerning “sensory certitude” of “the things below” that: “we can tell those who assert the truth and certainty of the reality of sense-objects that they should go back to the most elementary school of wisdom, viz., the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus, and that they have still to learn the secret meaning of the eating of bread and the drinking of wine.” (Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 65)¹⁷ As in the Eucharist, where God is *in truth* devoured by those participating in the sacrament, Hegel insists that “the fruits consumed” in these ancient pagan rites “are the *living* Ceres and Bacchus themselves.” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 434)¹⁸ Again, this time for Hegel, *this* only makes sense insofar as it incarnates or embodies the ideality of *that*. On its own, *this* body here has no value, or no reality or truth as Hegel warns his empiricist contemporaries to refrain from thinking, and as such it requires mystical or metaphysical supplement of *that* in order for us to grasp its reality and existence as intelligible. What the outcome of this dialectic between *this* and *that*, is for Hegel, is that what is the truth, reality or sense of *this* is, as Nancy says, “*nothing but that*,” or “*THIS IS: here it is, nothing more*,” neither “too much” nor “too little, to be *that*.” (C, 5)

What is touched or seen in the body or the sensible then, is *nothing but* the intelligible or spiritual absolute. Yet, we ought to be attentive to the paradox or contradiction that lies at the heart of this metaphysical or mystical logic: what is touched or seen, *is*, as Nancy articulates it, “the thing we can’t see or touch, either here nor anywhere else.” (C, 3) Here, in one way or another, Christian or not, we touch upon what is properly untouchable, that is, we touch what is intelligible, spiritual or incorporeal in a body, or as Nancy says, we touch upon sense, or *that which makes sense of the body* but which in itself is not a body. This desire to touch the untouchable, and not merely what we think of as touchable in a sensible body,

¹⁶ The madness or delirium is not only in the eyes of the uninitiated, but the ideal philosopher *is* truly mad, even when it goes “unrecognized by the many”. It is moreover the “madness of the man who, on seeing beauty here on earth, and being reminded of true beauty, becomes winged and... looking upwards like a bird, and taking no heed of the things below, causes him to be regarded as mad” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d-e)

¹⁷ Ceres and Bacchus are Gods who were central in ancient Roman and Greek rituals.

¹⁸ Through Hegel’s example we can also come to understand Nancy’s assertion that the eucharistic phrase *hoc est enim corpus meum* is “the most visible repetition of an obstinate or sublimated paganism: bread and wine, other bodies of other gods, mysteries of sensory certitude.” (C, 3)

might also give us reasons to understand, for instance, Plato's contempt for the body; that is, to understand the reasoning behind his assertion that body is inferior to soul, and to make sense of his desire to be rid of the corporeal as it is envisioned in *Phaedo*. Here Socrates is heard saying that the soul "thinks best when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight... but it is, so far as possible, alone by itself, and takes leave of the body, and avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body, reaches out toward the reality." (Plato, *Phaedo*, 65c) Again, we see how reality and existence is posited not as something sensible, as something belonging to the "things below," but rather pertains to the absolute, here determined as the truth and reality of the Idea.

As Jacques Derrida writes, commenting upon this passage in *Phaedo*, it is only "by no longer touching on touching, namely, on the corporeal and sensible letter of the tangible," that the soul, or *psyche*, "thus touch on truth... of what really *is*; and realize in idealizing." (*OT*, 120) Of course, this might appear quite strange. After all, who has ever seen or touched truth or meaning? Who has ever touched something intelligible? That we can touch a body is quite certain, but how does one touch the *sense* of the body? Nevertheless, this is what is being avowed in these inaugurating texts of Western history, that sense appears "right with the sensory" (*C*, 73) Obviously, this is what properly constitutes the logic of incarnation as a mystery and a revelation, that untouchable sense should be up for grabs. But what it produces in the end is an absolute identity between the sensible and intelligible, or as Nancy says, it produces "a sensory joining of the elements of the intelligible, an intelligible joining of the elements of the sensory." (*C*, 73) Within such a circular identity there is no longer any real difference between the body and its sense.

Such a circular identification of the sensible with the intelligible in their absolute indifference is what Nancy names "the closure of sense, or sense as closed." (*C*, 27) The word *closure* appears only once in *Corpus*, but it is a significant concept in his extended *oeuvre*. Of course, the word brings to mind the delimiting or demarcation of an area by putting up a fence or barrier, or even the sense of protecting oneself within a fortress. But, perhaps even more fitting here is the sense of closing a gap between two things, such as that between the sensible body and intelligible sense. Finding itself within a closure, the sensible is no longer *open* to be anything else, or to be anything other than its intelligible determination, or better yet, it cannot be anything but its own representation. This is why Nancy says elsewhere that "closure is named in many ways... in particular, it is named 'representation.' Representation is what determines itself by its own limit." (*BP*, 1)

Yet, in *Corpus*, we'll often find that the word *representation* is more often substituted by the word *signification*, or better yet, just *sign*. This metaphorical or metonymical displacement is not insignificant. The concept of the sign lies at the heart of French structuralism and deconstruction, which was the significant strands of thought during the time Nancy was "awakened to philosophy" (Nancy, "You ask me what it means today," 109). Above all, these strands of thinking was fueled or sustained by the conviction that the philosopher does not simply employ language as an instrumental tool box in order to express thoughts or reflections that would somehow exist before or outside the grammatical structure of language. As Nancy says elsewhere, "this epoch was discovering that one does not philosophize outside language and that the body of the latter is also the flesh of thought." (Nancy, *The Speculative Remark*, 148) As its founding text, this epoch drew upon the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure such as it was developed in his posthumously published *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), and which marked, in a certain sense, a decisive break or breach with earlier theories of language. In this book, Saussure brands linguistics as one part among several others of a more general science "that studies the life of signs within society" which he names *semiology*. (Saussure, *Course of General Linguistics*, 16) Yet what does Saussure understand by this concept of the sign?

We might think that a sign is something that points out or indicates something other than itself, like that of a road sign which tells us how distant or close a certain location is. Or it might mark off, designate or distinguish a certain area or place from others, such as signs used to name cities, shops, houses and so on. Yet, in each of these cases, we find what Saussure takes to be a referential conception of the sign and of language, namely, that the sign as a word refers to or names things. As he says, some "people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only - a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names." (Saussure, *Course of General Linguistics*, 65) As such, the word "body" would somehow name and correspond to the body as a thing, that is, to an sensible thing somewhere present in its plenitude. Or as Derrida puts it, the "sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing... [it] represents the present in its absence." (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 9) But *which* or *whose* body are we then talking about?

To answer such a question would require the supplement of a chain of other words in order to determine the reference of its utterance. Not only would we have to determine which and whose body we are talking about, but also where it is, when it is, and perhaps even how it is. Moreover, is it even certain that when we speak about "the body" we are in fact, at all, speaking about a thing? Saussure's contention is that we are not. What is signified or referred

to in a word according to him, is not a thing but a concept or idea. He therefore proposes that the “linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image.” (Saussure, *Course of General Linguistics*, 66) The term *sound-image* might appear quite vague and obscure. However, as Saussure does not refrain from making clear right away, it designates the sensory or sensible aspect of the sign, that is, the impression that it makes upon our senses, as when we utter a word, or conceive it in our minds. Thereby it differentiates itself from the intelligible aspect of the sign, which Saussure above named *concept*.

However, in order to emphasize the fact that a sign therefore is a double entity, or a two-sided unity, or better yet, that it consists of the unity of a sensible and intelligible aspect, Saussure goes on to propose “to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts.” (Saussure, *Course of General Linguistics*, 67) What differentiates this view of language as a system of signs, from the tradition, is that it contends that it is impossible to think a signified concept, idea or meaning without or separate from a sensible signifier, whether it is a spoken or written word. Accordingly, every concept, or intelligible sense, is always already entangled and interweaved in language as a system of sensible signifiers.¹⁹ Or as Saussure says: “Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.” (Saussure, *Course of General Linguistics*, 112)

Therefore, when Nancy says that the body in our tradition is reduced to a sign, or that “the body of the incarnation is *the sign*, absolutely” (C, 67) we must grasp this word in its Saussurean sense as the closure between two entities, a sensible signifier and an intelligible signified, within a unitary whole. That the sign incorporates two different things in one is also what appears to make this word favourable to Nancy’s discourse, in that it gives a precise expression to what is at stake in the logic of incarnation or representation. Returning to the question concerning the closure and limitation that the incorporeal sense bring to bear upon the sensible body, Nancy therefore says that this closure presents “the accomplished

¹⁹ There is therefore also a structural lineage between the double entity of the sign and the philosophical opposition between the sensible and intelligible. This proximity is emphasized by Roman Jakobson who says that “the medieval definition of sign - ‘*aliquid stat pro aliquo*’ [something stands for something] - has been resurrected and put forward as still valid and productive” for modern Saussurean linguistics, wherein “the constitutive mark of any sign in general and of any linguistic sign in particular is its twofold character: every linguistic unit is bipartite and involves both aspects - one sensible and the other intelligible, or in other words - both the *signans* ‘signifier’... and the *signatum* ‘signified’.” (Cited in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 13)

community of the signifier and the signified” (C, 73). Now, what happens to the body when is absolutely reduced to a sign? Is there something we neglect or forget about the body when it becomes entirely readable, interpretable and understandable?

We might get a preliminary idea if we continue reading the passage just invoked: “the accomplished community of the signifier and the signified, *the end of exteriority*” (C, 73). What disappears or vanishes within the production of meaning and the desire for sense, is the body as something exterior to signification and meaning, the materiality of *this* body here and now. This is what Nancy tries to express in the citation I used as an epigraph to the current chapter: “The signifying body... *incarnates* one thing only: the absolute contradiction of not being able to be a *body* without being the *body of a spirit*, which disembodies it.” (C, 69) What Nancy appears to say, is that the desire or obsession, on behalf of our tradition and our history, for the body to make sense, produces a sort of paradox, contradiction or impasse where we are merely given a general sense or signification, but no longer any body. Or to play on the pronouns invoked earlier, we end up getting *that* but not *this*. If we then return to the beginning of *Corpus*, this is what is said, this time referring to the desire and “laborious efforts” of phenomenological research to think the *sense* or *meaning* of the body otherwise than the tradition, but nonetheless obsessed with making sense of the body, namely that “they only expel the thing we desired.” (C, 5)

However, we must also come to see that the current paradox pertaining to the body as signifier, or the “signifying body,” is a linguistic problem, or rather, that the problems pertaining to the metaphysical mystery of incarnation also involve language as such. We have already seen that what Nancy designates as an “incorporeal sense,” that could come to make sense of the body, is always some sense said, pronounced or enunciated in discourse. Recall the eucharistic phrase, *hoc est enim corpus meum*, and note that the mystery of incarnation is first and foremost something Jesus *tells* and *says* to his disciples; in other words, that it is something uttered. Yet, it is precisely this desire to say or write what the body means, to grasp and appropriate it in and as discourse that for Nancy makes it disappear. Roberto Esposito has pointed out in this regard, the the similarity between the “ancient and modern philosophical traditions of the West,” wherein the material “thing has somehow ‘decorporealized’ by being dissolved into the idea” on the one hand, and the way language, being composed by general and abstract concepts, strips away the fleshy parts of things on the other. (Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things*, 5) Like philosophy and theology, which we have thought under the rubric of incarnation and embodiment, language “also causes a similar stripping effect when it names the thing. By transforming the thing into a word,

language empties it of reality and turns it into a pure sign. Not only does the name of the rose not coincide with the real rose, it also eliminates the singular concreteness of the flower, turning it into a general signifier.” (Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things*, 9) What Esposito here names a “general signifier” is exactly what troubles Nancy as to how the tradition has thought the body, turning it into a signifying body, grasping it as merely referring to a general or ideal sense.

That which was supposed to afford us the means to understand what a body is, to let us make sense of the body, apparently ends up making the body disappear or vanish. Let us be attentive to the double movement making its appearance here. Commenting upon the above-cited passage from *Corpus* on the idealization of the body - on how the ideal allays our doubts about appearances by granting us access to “what really is” - Derrida further says that the philosopher or theologian, with the mystical gesture like that of a “magician’s finger,” “make the body vanish in *producing* it, and so as to reduce it in affecting its *production*.” (*OT*, 61 - my emphasis) On the one hand, it might seem odd to say that the body is *produced*, yet what Derrida is getting at here is not how material bodies are born, it is not a matter of sexual reproduction. Rather, what is at stake here is the production of the *sense of the body*, that is, an ontological idealizing of the body which happens as discourse or as language. However, on the other hand, this idealizing production is Janus-faced: what is produced along with this ideal body, as a sort of offshoot or side-effect of this production, is the material body, the singular concreteness of *this* body here, as what Nancy terms a *naked* body. In fact, Nancy says of this idealizing production of the body that it is nothing but an *invention*: “The *body*: that’s how we invented it. Who else in the world knows about it?” (*C*, 5) Or likewise but differently in the page that follows: “what civilization could have invented it? Such a *naked* body: the body, therefore...” (*C*, 7)

It is, in other words, our civilization - the western civilization - that has invented the body either *as* the body *of* spirit, or the body *as* the imprisonment or entombment *of* the soul, or further, *as* the embodiment of a subject and so on. The mere multitude of interpretations should testify to the fact that it is unreasonable to assert a natural or given connection between what a body is on the one hand, and how we interpret or make sense of it on the other. Yet, what appears to interest Nancy when it comes to the invention of the body, is the “*naked* body” produced alongside it, which he does not refrain from immediately designating as “the body, therefore...” as if we were now talking about the body itself (*C*, 7) But why is this body naked? What is the sense of speaking of the body as naked, or even, invoking a few metaphors or metonymies which at times takes the place or substitutes this word throughout

Corpus, what is meant by alluding to the body as something *bare, raw, nude, exposed* or *abandoned*?

Above all, the naked body is like a blank page, which is neither clothed nor covered by inscriptions, writings and marks. Accordingly, it offers nothing to be read, deciphered or interpreted. Therefore it is also, as Nancy says, something *foreign* or *strange* to the idealizing sense of philosophy and theology: insofar as it is something indecipherable it cannot but disturb or interrupt the desire or obsession of the philosopher or theologian to make or produce sense. However, this does not mean that the body has never been thought as something foreign within the discourse of philosophy. As we have already seen, Plato's *Phaedo* expresses its contempt for the body by determining it as something foreign to the soul, which the latter ideally ought to do away with or liberate itself from. Nancy is not unaware of this, rather he is concerned, as he says, "with misjudging the radicality of this thought," that is, he wants to push the strangeness that a body is even further. (C, 9) This appears to mark out something like a program from which *Corpus* can develop another thought of the body that will be at odds with that of the tradition, even while employing its concepts, trying to touch and ponder the body otherwise than as a sign. Whereas our history and culture has believed itself capable of expressing or articulating the sense of the body, Nancy contends that the "body, bodily *never happens, least of all when it's named and convoked.*" (C, 5) His appeal to the naked and indecipherable body must therefore necessarily also be at odds with language and discourse as such. According to him, the body has its proper place outside discourse, being what is expelled from every utterance, and exscribed from every inscription. *Corpus* thus initiates a different thinking of the body which rests on a certain paradox or double bind: it will attempt to speak of that which withdraws in every attempt to speak of it. Or as he writes in the concluding lines of the first chapter of the book: "If *hoc est enim corpus meum* says anything, it's beyond speech. It isn't spoken, it's exscribed - with bodily abandon." (C, 7) The body as *abandoned* and *exscribed*, is precisely what will afford us an opening towards an ontology of the body which is not merely the signifying body of the tradition.

3. Out of Touch: The Ontological Paradox of Writing the Body

That which constitutes sense is senseless.

- Jacques Derrida, *Echographies of Television*, 109

A naked body gives no sign and reveals nothing, nothing other than this: that there is nothing to reveal, that everything is there, exposed, the texture of skin, which says no more than the texture of a voice.

- Jean-Luc Nancy, *BP*, 204-205

... it runs from difference to difference, arranged in the great syntagm of bodies.

- Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 98

What is a body outside the realm of language, knowledge and understanding? Is it even conceivable? The French ethnographer and surrealist Michel Leiris has perhaps come close to express such an aphasic and unintelligible body:

If we had to stand alone, confined to the use only of our bodies in the face of external nature, this position would perhaps be grand - that of a god or a hero - but more dreadful than any other, for we would never understand what was that *other thing*, so distinct from our being, so indifferent to us, strange with a strangeness so very distant and glacial. (Michel Leiris, *Brisees*, 42)

Without language everything might turn strange and foreign, and ourselves dumbstruck. Yet, it appears that Nancy wants us to sense the strangeness of bodies, but without taking leave of language. A body that is not the intelligible body of metaphysics might stand “in the naked presence, outside and far beyond all language” (*C II*). However, our access or entry to this body goes through the sense of language and discourse. This double bind marks the entire argument that unfolds in *Corpus* and the ontology of bodies that it professes. As Nancy says, a “twofold failure is given: a failure to speak about the body, a failure to keep silent about it. A double bind, a psychosis.” (*C*, 57) Let us leave the psychosis aside for a moment, and ask about that which supposedly produces it, namely, this double bind of speaking without being able to. In fact, the figure of the double bind has a long

history within the tradition of deconstruction within which we have situated *Corpus*, and a short explication of it might offer us a more lucid insight into the attitude towards language which appears to govern Nancy's discourse.

In *De la grammatologie* (1967) and *L'écriture et la différence* (1967), two of the inaugurating texts of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida set himself the task to rework our understanding of the relation between thought and text, speech and writing, in a way which would differ from that he contends we have inherited from our metaphysical heritage. However, as he insists several times, this undertaking can only be effectuated by making use of the historical concepts under critical scrutiny. As he says, deconstruction as criticism is "a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 357).²⁰ Of course, the philosophical concepts we have inherited are not neutral - they are not free to use as we wish - but are burdened, or saturated rather, with historical meaning, even when they make their way into everyday language.²¹ When it comes to our current interrogation, the word "body" carries with it considerable indications and meanings which are tightly woven to the metaphysical and theological tradition I discussed in my previous chapter. If Nancy aims to think the body *otherwise*, to make this word say something else, he will also have to twist and turn the connotations it brings along with it, all the while avoiding the imminent danger of merely reproducing the meanings he wants to avoid. This danger is above all what Derrida wants a critical or deconstructive discourse to be attentive to:

"Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24)

It is a matter then of borrowing inherited concepts *without being able to isolate their elements and atoms*. It is at all possible in this connection to speak of the body without invoking its sense of being - is it possible, in other words to invoke the body without

²⁰ Also quoted by Gayatri Spivak in her lucid and sustained (amounting to almost a hundred pages) introduction to the English translation of Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (1967). Gayatri Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, xviii.

²¹ Without travelling into the enormous assemblage of questions and problems which pertains to Derrida's own discourse, we can merely note a certain attitude concerning the supposed distinction between the technical terminology of metaphysics and "everyday language": "Now, 'everyday language' is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system." (Derrida, *Positions*, 19)

invoking, in one sense or another the incarnation or embodiment of a psyche, subject, soul or spirit?

As I have demonstrated, Nancy contends that the tradition, in one way or another always falls prey to a thinking which resembles that of the incarnation when it attempts to think the sense of the body. In this tradition “regardless of perspective used... the body remains the organon, the instrument or the incarnation, the mechanism or the work of a *sense* that never stops rushing into it, presenting itself to itself, making itself known as such and wanting to tell itself there.” (*BP*, 192) Now, is it possible to think the body, while still holding on to this word, in a sense which would render it neither a vehicle or incarnation of incorporeal sense, that is a signifying body? Leaving aside or in suspense whether the answer can be confirmed as merely affirmative or negative, *Corpus* is nonetheless marked by this attentiveness, it knows that it is borrowing its resources from the great lexicon of metaphysics, and that it has to take a number of precautions when it comes to develop its own ontology of the body. As Derrida does not hesitate to point out, Nancy is a thinker who “mistrusts himself” and his own discourse. (*OT*, 307) This safeguard characterizes *Corpus* in that it seldom proposes any positive or affirmative statements without simultaneously taking its distance, in a negative or critical form, from those views that it tries to overcome or exceed.

However, it appears that Nancy takes this double bind of deconstruction one step further. In *Corpus* it is not merely a matter of altering the sense of words, or wrestling with the inherited significations of the tradition, but of touching upon that which exceeds language and discourse.²² By turn of a paradox then, it is a matter of reading what cannot be read, and saying what cannot be said. It is a matter of grasping the naked body which does not offer any “signs, images or ciphers of the body” but which is nevertheless “the body.” (*C*, 9) But, one might object, is this not a contradiction? Is it not, by definition, impossible to say that which cannot be said? Is Nancy a madman trying to convince us that this is in fact possible, trying to persuade us that the “only entry into the body... is an access of madness”? (*C*, 57) Again, we will leave this psychosis aside for the moment, and pursue an argument that might reveal a glimpse of its sense.

As Derrida has pointed out concerning a discourse which would attempt to speak about something unspeakable, something which withdraws or disappears through language, such a discourse might resemble “those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point

²² However, Derrida is not merely engaged with linguistic problems, and as we will see, he shares a concern for that which exceeds language and signification.

of being indistinguishable from negative theology.” (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 6)²³ A negative theology, opposed to the sort of revealed religion which I have explicated in the previous chapter where God reveals himself in the flesh, is rather one where God or the absolute is posited as something *inconceivable* or *ineffable*, that is, something that is beyond or too great for speech. Does this not resemble the unsayable and unreadable body that Nancy is aiming at? Perhaps due to the fact that his discourse always risks turning out indistinguishable to that of a negative theology, Nancy takes a number of precautions in distancing himself from those who would hypothesize the body as something ineffable. As he says, “we won’t claim that bodies are ineffable, that access to them is gained through the ineffable.” (C, 59) However, how does an access through the ineffable distinguish itself from an access of mute madness? For Nancy, the difference lies in the theological and metaphysical connotations of the concept of the ineffable: “The theme of the ineffable always serves the cause of a certain kind of speech - or a fable - more elevated, more refined, more secret, silent and sublime: a pure treasure of sense, accessible to those *connected to God*.” (C, 59 - my italics) Of course, insofar as Nancy wants to develop an ontology of the body different from any logic of incarnation, it will also necessarily not be one connected to but disconnected from God, or to use Nietzsche’s infamous words, which Nancy immediately brings into play in the following sentence, one where “God is dead” and thus one where “God *no longer has a body*.” (C, 59) For Nancy then, the ineffable is a mystical or metaphysical concept, which tries to grasp by negation, or a negative theological approach, something which cannot be conceived in language, but which nonetheless receives a name and is therefore appropriated into discourse. Let us dwell a bit further on this concept of the ineffable, so that we might get a better idea of what Nancy does *not* have in mind when he seeks a body, and the sense of the body, outside language.

In a chapter dedicated to the theme of the ineffable as a part of his book *Logique et existence* (1953), French Hegelian Jean Hyppolite finds its perhaps most prominent or exemplary representative in the German philosopher F. H. Jacobi, a contemporary and eager adversary of Hegel.²⁴ Contrary to the conviction of the latter, Jacobi contends that the body is

²³ We could also mention by analogy a negative philosophy, such as that of Kant developed in his first critique, wherein the unconditional and absolute *thing in itself* is something outside and ineffable to “our representations of things as they are given to us”, so that, our cognition “reaches appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself but unrecognized by us.” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B XX)

²⁴ On a side note I can mention that the choice of Hyppolite’s book is far from arbitrary. Along with Alexandre Kojève, he was the most prominent mediator and translator of Hegel into French in postwar France, as well as the teacher and advisor of Derrida. Nancy who was first schooled in Hegelianism also draws upon Hyppolite in

not an object of knowledge, it cannot be appropriated and mastered by the concepts and discourse of philosophy. Rather, his philosophy, perhaps more fittingly called an anti-philosophy “claims to replace knowledge with an immediate apprehension of being, to which Jacobi gives the general name, faith.” (Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, 9) *Faith*, or *glaube* as Jacobi writes in German, a concept which appears at the heart of his thinking, is described as our access or entry to that which really is. Faith is what makes possible our assurance of reality, the sensory certitude of a *this*, but this time without an intelligible *that*. This, of course, runs contrary to Hegel who, as we described in the previous chapter requires the presence of an absolute *that* in a *this* for the latter to be intelligible. For Jacobi, on the contrary, it is merely faith - a concept obviously saturated with theological connotations - that grants us access to that which in language and speech is inconceivable or ineffable. Thus, Hyppolite goes on to cite Jacobi when he writes that it “is through faith that we know that we have a body and that outside of us other bodies and other sensible beings are present.” (Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, 9)²⁵ Jacobi seems therefore not only to contend that knowledge can not grant us the sense of the body, but appears moreover, to hold that it cannot assure us that we have a body at all.

Hyppolite does not hesitate to emphasize that this privileging of our supposed immediate access to the sensible body over intelligible or conceptual knowledge of it, coincides with a privilege of silence over speech. Yet, where does this leave us insofar as we want to touch upon the *sense* of the body, that is, upon its meaning? Does this not necessarily resemble a situation like that which was illustrated by Leiris above, that is, an estranged and unintelligible relation between bodies? Indeed, this is what Hyppolite, following Hegel, contends concerning such a situation, saying that philosophy or ontology understood as “the expression of being in concepts or in discourse - would destroy itself.” (Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, 10) Giving up on discourse and conceptual determination, the philosopher might as well retire and his discipline implode in the face of dumbstruck immediate being. However, is there not something absurd or bizarre in this privilege of ineffable and inconceivable existence? One could on these grounds imagine a world where no one exchanged a word, being merely satisfied with their silent adoration of the immediately sensible given. No doubt, it resembles a *caricature*, or perhaps a utopian vision of the world. And a caricature is precisely what, sticking to the letter of *Corpus*, Nancy contends that the

his book on Hegel (*La Remarque spéculative. Un bon mot de Hegel*, 1973). Therefore it is not unreasonable to assert that Nancy has this chapter in mind when he writes on the theme of the ineffable.

²⁵ Hyppolite, like Nancy, doesn't appear to be interested in offering any philological seriousness except when it comes to the oeuvre of Hegel, and hence doesn't give any reference to Jacobi's text.

theme of the ineffable always turns out to be, in one way or another. Against a view such as the one professed by Jacobi, nancy stated goal is to think

the body, and not as pure and simple exteriority of sense, or some unknown, intact, untouchable matter, thrust into some improbable transcendence closed in the densest immediacy (such, indeed, is the extreme *caricature* of ‘the sensory’ in all idealisms and materialisms)... (C, 23).²⁶

What Nancy is getting at here by invoking the philosophical trademark labels of idealism and materialism in the plural, is an attitude that insists upon taking sides to one extreme or another when thinking of the body. Either the body is something which can be absolutely known, as is the case for Hegel’s idealism, or it is something which cannot be known at all, as Jacobi seems to profess. However, as we have seen, Nancy neither embrace absolute intelligibility nor the absolute separation between the sensible and intelligible. Rather, he wants to speak of that which withdraws from discourse in discourse. Therefore it is neither a matter of abandoning intelligible discourse nor to capitulate to the supposed silence of sensory being. Rather, it is a matter of addressing a body which is not merely identical to signification or representation, or better yet, which is not merely a signifying body, saturated with meaning, without being at the same time a naked body outside discourse and signification. Nancy therefore asks: “How, then, are we to touch upon the body, rather than signify it or make it signify?” (C, 9)

Above all, it is this word “touch,” making its appearance in the midst of the question, that will turn out to be decisive for Nancy’s ontology. But is there not something banal about this question? For to touch upon the body does appear as being one of, if not the most simple act there is.. However, it is not certain that Nancy is thinking of touch merely in its literal sense, as when we say that two hands are touching. For while “touch” does carry this sense it also has a figurative sense as when we use it as a metaphor or metonymy for “to think,” “to speak of,” “to thematize,” “to mention,” “to describe,” and so forth. Moreover, Nancy is not asking how we can touch upon *a* body, but rather how we can touch upon “the body,” that is, the body in its general definite and defining article, the supposed sense or essence of the body. Why, however, is touch brought into play in the text in opposition to the signifying body and why does Nancy favour this concept when thinking the sense of the body?

²⁶ The emphasis on “caricature” is mine.

An attempt to answer these questions might begin by analyzing a distinction that Nancy introduces between touch and its apparent opposite, the grasp. This opposition is introduced at the outset of the chapter entitled “Or Writing by the Body,” wherein Nancy asserts that ontology “is affirmed as writing,” to the extent that writing does not mean “the demonstration, of signification but a gesture toward *touching* upon *sense*.” (C, 17) Why is ontology equated with writing? And what is sense if it is not signification? I will contend that these answers can only be properly answered insofar as we first understand what Nancy means by the word “touch.” Therefore, let us begin by reading a passage that is concerned with the opposition touch and grasp:

A touching, a tact, like an address: a writer doesn't touch by grasping, by taking in hand (from *begreifen* = seizing, taking over, German for ‘conceiving’) but touches by way of addressing himself, sending himself *to* the touch of something outside... (C, 17).

That Nancy immediately turns to emphasize the German word for grasp as *begreifen* is not insignificant. For as is made clear in the passage the word has a double sense. On the one hand, it has the literal sense of taking something in hand, seizing and holding onto something. On the other hand, it also carries the figurative sense of understanding, conceptualizing or conceiving. Taking into account this double meaning it is clear that the concept resembles that of touch. However, as Nancy is surely well aware of, the concept of *begreifen* lies at the heart of Hegelian philosophy. And as I have already noted Hegel is a philosopher who desires, in accord with the logic of incarnation, to make the sensible intelligible, to incorporate the sensory into discourse and speech. Hegel wants, in other words, to conceptualize the sensible by grasping it in through, by turning it into a concept, into something that can be absolutely thought, reflected and articulated in speech. As Hegel makes clear in the preface to his *Phenomenology*, true “thoughts and scientific insight are only to be won through the labour of the concept (*Begriff*). Only the concept can produce the universality of knowledge” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 43). True thought is produced then, by grasping the sensible as concept or ideality. Hegel's spiritual grasp holds on to and keeps within its reach the sensible in its ideal or intelligible form.

As Emmanuel Levinas has written, this philosophical gesture might be summarized as one which says: “Leave nothing lying about! Don't lose anything! Keep everything that is yours!” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, 57) The grasp (*begreifen*) symbolizes this desire of absolute appropriation, where nothing disappears or is lost in the work of idealization.

However, as I have demonstrated in my previous chapter, it is precisely such a gesture that leads to the disappearance of the body within accomplished signification. In order to bypass this impasse, Nancy turns away from the grasp and chooses touch, which he contends is nothing but “the sole condition for true thought.” (C, 17) As such, it is touch that will, according to Nancy, somehow be able to grant us the means to think the body without disembodying it into an incorporeal sense. However, in order to understand the sense of this statement, we need to venture further into the sense of touch, and specifically how it can grant us the means to think the ontological body.

A writer, a person who in a general sense attempts to inscribe sense and signification onto the written page, is one that, as Nancy writes “touches by way of addressing himself *to* the touch of something outside” (C, 17). What does a writer touch? Obviously he touches the written page by the tip of a pen or by the use of a keyboard. But the writer also ends up touching, even though only indirectly, a reader, as when we say that “I was touched by reading that book.” Nevertheless, Nancy says that all this happens only insofar as the writer is touched by something outside, something separate from the writer and his discourse, and moreover, by addressing himself *to* this touch, by responding to it. First of all then, a touch is something that brings into *contact* that which nevertheless remains *separate* - the writer and the text, the body of the writer and the body of the reader. As such, a touch is neither an absolute contact, a seizure or grasp like that which characterizes the mystery of incarnation, where the sensible body and intelligible spirit comes into contact to the extent that they melt into each other, founding their accomplished identity. Nor is it an absolute separation, like the estranged relation between body and external nature as Leiris imagines it. In fact, to the extent that touch has this double or paradoxical sense, it appears to interrupt the possibility of incarnation and representational thought, insofar as it denies an accomplished dialectic between sense and body, the sensible and intelligible, or signifier and signified. And it is precisely this interruption or suspension that appears to interest Nancy: “Touching on the interruption of sense is what, for my part, interests me in the matter of the body.” (C, 125) It is evident then, that it is not merely a matter of sensible or literal touch, but how thought and writing can touch upon the sense of the body. After all, we already read Nancy saying that touch is the condition for true thought. But we might interfere to ask why touch is posited as the privileged sense, that is, the sense that constitutes thought and sense? Why not sight, hearing, smell or taste? Such considerations are certainly part of the reason for why Jacques Derrida went on to write *Le toucher - Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000), Nancy being for him “the greatest thinker about touching of all time” (OT, 4).

We should pay attention to the fact that Derrida opens his interrogation into the sense of touch by revisiting and resuscitating Aristotle, who in his *Peri psyches*, regards touch as “the only sense that the existence of the living as such cannot dispense with.” (*OT*, 47) That is to say, bodies can be deprived of any of the other senses and still continue living, but the loss of touch would bring about the death of an animal, which makes it for Aristotle “the essential mark of life” (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 345b, cited in *OT*, 47) Like Nancy then, Aristotle appears to grant touch a significant conditional and ontological function. Nevertheless, Aristotle acknowledges the difficulty of deciding upon what touch really is, as concerns its nature or essence:

It is difficult to say whether touch is one sense or more than one, and also what the organ is which is perceptive of the object of touch; whether it is flesh, and whatever is analogous to this in creatures without flesh, or whether this is only the medium, and the primary sense organ is something distinct and internal. (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 422b20-25)

Hence, when thinking about touch, we are confronted with a series of undecidable difficulties. When it comes to the other senses, we can more easily recognize what is the *medium* or *organ*: eyes are the medium or organ of sight, nose the medium for smell, ears for hearing and so forth. Yet this is not the case for touch, whose extent and delineation remains uncertain. In fact, this aporetic or enigmatic ambiguity concerning the nature of touch remains unresolved in *Peri psyches*, it persists as an *aporia* or *impasse* for thought. This ambiguity also appears to interrupt the possibility to confer upon it a proper sense or essence, or even a representation, it hinders us from knowing what touch *really is*. In fact, the figure of touch becomes irreducible to either its literal or figurative sense. However, for Nancy, this *aporia* does not really constitute a problem, but rather a possibility. It grants us the possibility to think the relation between body and thought otherwise than by representational thought. Giorgio Agamben has emphasized this point when he says that the one who wants to “grasp the thought of Nancy” has to take into account the problems pertaining to the Aristotelian analysis of touch, but also how Nancy pushes “to the extreme,” this “absence of representation, this ruin of the medium” (Agamben, “Prelude: The Silhouette of Jean-Luc Nancy,” xi).²⁷ On these grounds will thus keep in mind that it is not given what touch is, and that its sense is not necessarily something familiarly known in advance. Let us return to

²⁷ Agamben also offers a “very wonderful definition of contact,” which resembles that of Nancy’s touch: “there is contact when two points are separated individually by the absence of representation.” (Agamben, “Prelude: The Silhouette of Jean-Luc Nancy,” xi)

Corpus, sticking close to its letter, so that we might get a better idea of what Nancy is getting at when playing with this enigmatic word.

Pursuing the chapter with which we have already been engaged, wherein ontology is affirmed as writing, and writing in its essence is determined as touch, we encounter yet another determination, which in truth is already implied in what we have already said about touch, namely that touch is a *limit*. Obviously, the double trait of touch as a simultaneous contact and separation indicates that it is also a sort of limit. Yet, again, it is not merely the limit between two sensible things, a body and another, but in a preeminent manner a limit between thought and body, between something corporeal and incorporeal, even when this limit occurs within a singular body touching itself, so to speak. As Nancy says:

Now, writing takes its place at the limit. So if anything at all happens to writing, nothing happens to it but *touch*. More precisely: touching the body (or some singular body) *with the incorporeality* of 'sense.' And consequently, *to make the incorporeal touching*, to make of meaning a touch.... Writing touches upon bodies *along the absolute limit* separating the sense of the one from the skin and nerves of the other. Nothing *gets through*, which is why it touches. (C, 11)

This passage calls for numerous clarifications, so let us proceed one step at the time. If writing takes place, that is to say, that it occurs or happens somewhere at a certain time and place, it takes place at the limit which means that it comes into contact with something while at the same time being separated from it. Moreover, insofar as writing is not merely sensible - insofar as it is not merely a hand inscribing black marks and white spaces onto a piece of paper - but is also the production of incorporeal sense and meaning, this cannot occur except on the condition of touch as limit. So even when sense is produced in the encounter with a body, it is still at a certain distance from it. That is to say, writing does not absolutely grasp or appropriate that which it touches or is touched by. As such, in a rather paradoxical fashion, there remains something untouchable in that which nevertheless is touched. Derrida articulates this paradox as a "touch without touching," "contact without contact," or even more dizzying "contact without contact between contact and noncontact." (*OT*, 68) Thus Nancy will say that writing as touch both *inscribes* signs to be read, deciphered and interpreted while simultaneously *exscribing* the bodies that writing must touch or be touched by in order to occur, but which nevertheless remains outside the text. And it is precisely here, with the concept of *exscription*, an apparent neologism or linguistic creation of Nancy, that

we once again encounter the naked or abandoned body that cannot be read, but which disappears in the production of sense or meaning even while constituting it.

However, it is easy to misconstrue these notions of writing, touch and limit. We might think that what the body writing touches upon or is touched by is first and foremost *a thing* or *an object*. But if we imagine that an anatomist were to write a treatise upon the body, like those engravings in Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), and that he was taking a cadaver, perhaps the most exemplary objectified body, as his model, this body would nevertheless remain present to him even after closing his manuscript and laying down his pen. Therefore, it cannot be the body as object that concerns Nancy. Of course, a body can be said to be a thing as well, but then it is all too easily taken as an object of knowledge and discourse, and here we are precisely concerned with a body outside the epistemological and discursive realm.

A better understanding of the body as exscribed might be gained if we consider that the notions of writing and touch above all indicates events or encounters. After all, a singular touch, *this touch here*, happens only once, which means that it is perhaps in the order of what Hegel articulated as “what we will never see twice,” as that which passes away or exscribes itself after its occurrence (Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, 15). Nancy offers a quite banal example of this in a different book when he writes that “at the moment at which I am writing, a brown-and-white cat is crossing the garden, slipping mockingly away, taking my thoughts with it.” (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 4) It is thus not the writer alone, or the cat in itself that is exscribed, but the event of their encounter, their mutual touch, so to speak. Peculiarly, the garden is also at the center when Nancy elsewhere gives an account of how the concept of exscription first came to him. After having invoked a sentence from George Bataille saying that language “alone indicates the sovereign moment where it no longer has any currency,” a sentence which resonates well with the problems we encountered in the previous chapter, Nancy goes on to say:

This reminds me of a very early meeting with [Paul] Ricoeur, at his home in Châtenay. He had just read my first book on Hegel [*Le Remarque spéculative*, 1973] and, after opening the garden door said: ‘This is all very well, but what about the garden in all that?’ I have never forgotten: the ‘excrit’ [*exscription*] is the garden, the fact that writing indicates its own outside, is decanted and shows things. (Nancy, “Le partage, l’infini et le jardin,” *Libération*, February 17, 2000, cited in Nancy, *The Speculative Remark*, 157n 16)

The concept of *exscription* point us toward the outside of language and its intelligible significations, interpretations and meanings. It shows, or *exposes*, as Nancy likes to say, that which constitutes and makes possible the production of language, but which nevertheless remains different to language. If an encounter, let us say with the cat in the garden, by chance produces a piece of writing, then Nancy's point is that the *inscribed* incorporeal sense is never identical to the *exscribed* corporeality or materiality of the encounter. Because the touch separates as much as it puts into contact, there must necessarily be an interruptive spacing or interval between the corporeal and incorporeal. Thus the sense of the body and the body can never absolutely coincide, or better yet, the body always remains foreign or strange to its incorporeal sense and conversely. Accordingly, thought touches upon the body, and yet does not touch upon the body. This applies also to the writer's body, as when Nancy says that if "I write, this strange hand has already slipped into my writing hand." (C, 19) There is thus a spacing between the writer and himself. Certainly, it is a body that writes, but this body is, if we are to believe Nancy, never identical to itself, it doesn't coincide with its own sense. Thus he says that writing is "thinking addressed, thinking sent to the body, sent, that is, to the very thing that displaces, estranges it... It is from my body that *I have* my body as a stranger to me - expropriated" (C, 19).

Expropriation might be taken as a metonymical substitute for *exscription*, as it designates the body insofar as it withdraws from contact in contact. But it also designates the opposite of *appropriation*, the act of making something one's own, which Nancy readily would identify at the heart of the metaphysical desire to grasp and make the sensible known in its intelligibility. However, touch indicates the double movement of expropriation and appropriation, or what Derrida has named *exappropriation*. For the two thinkers, this double or paradoxical movement, whether we call it touch, writing or exappropriation, is not merely a symptom of existence, a structure of reality. In a more decisive way it constitutes sense, or the production of sense as such. Derrida has described, in a dialogue with Bernard Stiegler, the "general structure" of exappropriation (or touch and writing) in the following way:

What I call 'exappropriation' is this double movement in which I head toward meaning while trying to appropriate it, but while knowing at the same time that it remains - and while desiring, whether I realize it or not, that it remain - foreign, transcendent, other that it stay where there is alterity. If I could reappropriate meaning totally, exhaustively, and without remainder, there would be no meaning. If I absolutely don't want to appropriate it, there is no meaning either... It is necessary that I try to make the thing mine but that it remain other

enough that I have some interest in making it mine, other enough that I desire it. (Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 111)

Touch as exappropriation is therefore what makes possible sense while at the same time denying it full access. Concerning the absolute or exhaustive reappropriation of sense, such an apparent accomplished desire must according to the general structure of touch necessarily deceive itself, because it founds its own project on the assumption or presupposition that the foreign thing is absolutely susceptible or submissive to the work of appropriation. Accordingly, such a fulfilled desire ends up in what Nancy has termed an “absolute contradiction” symptomatic for philosophy insofar as it grounds its project upon a logic of incarnation or representation. In a paradoxical fashion, the accomplishment or closure of sense inverts into its absolute opposite where there no longer is any meaning, or as Bataille says, where language no longer has any currency. Hence, expropriation or exscription is necessary for there to be sense in the first place. In *Corpus*, this double movement is invoked in order to argue that there can be no proper body, or that I can come to know my body and its sense absolutely as it is articulated in the eucharistic phrase *hoc est enim corpus meum*. For Nancy, the body is never *exactly* what we say, write or think it is, and therefore thought cannot grasp a proper body closed in on its own identity, but merely a reconstruction. Expropriation or exscription therefore names this thing which is not intelligible sense, but which makes it possible. From this we might infer that it is something nonsensical, obscure or irrational. Yet, it might also merely be that it does not belong to the field we designate as intelligible, or that which has meaning. As Derrida says:

That which bears intelligibility, that which increases intelligibility, is not intelligible... This does not mean that it is a source of irrationality, that it is irrational or that it is obscure. It means only that it does not belong, by definition, by virtue of its situation, to the field of what it makes possible... That which constitutes sense is senseless. (Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 108-109)

Thus, that which is exscribed in writing makes possible inscription of sense, but is itself something senseless. In other words, as long as the exscribed is not appropriated into intelligibility or sense, it can therefore not belong to the field of the latter. It is merely different from the intelligible, divided by their mutual spacing or touch. Nancy is also cautious to emphasize that the body exscribed or expropriated as non-sense or senseless is not

necessarily something “absurd, or upside-down, or somehow contorted” as these words might have it. (C, 13) For to conceive of the senseless is something like a surreal phantasm merely because it does not belong to the field of sense would be too simple, a caricatured either/or. Rather, according to Nancy, it means to say “no sense, or a *sense* whose approach through any figure of ‘sense’ is absolutely ruled out. Sense making sense where sense meets its limit.” (C, 13) But what kind of limit does sense meet, or hit its skull against, so to speak? We might think that a limit separates two different things, like an intelligible entity on the one hand, and a sensible on the other. However, the body is not merely intelligible or sensible, but both corporeal and nevertheless thinking, so that we must say that sense makes sense at its limit then “this limit *is the body*” (C, 23). Touch therefore informs a logic that spaces the body from itself, and a body from another. What is significant about this logic is that it subverts or disrupts the body as an accomplished whole, and renders impossible that there could be something like a unitary *sense of the body*.

However, even if what Derrida and Nancy here thinks under the rubric of exappropriation, touch or writing is asserted as a “general structure,” it must nevertheless not be misconstrued as something abstract. If the example of Ricoeur's garden in Châtenay testifies to anything, it is to the fact that Nancy wants to emphasize that the touch between thought and body is *local*, that is, *it takes place somewhere*. Or as Nancy says, the sense of bodies happens “by way of being here... and not by way of being elsewhere or nowhere.” (C, 119) According to Nancy touch does not happen in general, in the sense that it would be the same no matter who or what is in touch, or independent of where and when touch occurs. After all, it is the desire that the body would incarnate a general sense that Nancy contends has led the tradition into impasse, expelling the very thing it desired in the process. Contrary to this general or fundamental ontology, Nancy proposes a local ontology, which as writing is constituted by its concrete time and place, its *hic et nunc* (here and now) as he often emphasizes in Latin: “Ontology has yet to be thought out, to the extent that it’s basically an ontology where the body = the place of existence, or *local existence*.” (C, 15)

This summarizes the program for what I will call Nancy’s positive ontology of bodies, and which offers an alternative to the metaphysical body of the tradition, that is, the signifying body. However, again, to speak of place of existence and local existence, might easily be misconstrued into thinking that we are speaking of a merely sensible or empirical area. This would be wrong for two reasons.

On the one hand, as Nancy immediately points out, he is first and foremost concerned with place as an event and not as objectified space available to the appropriative knowledge

of a subject. As he says in a parenthesis following the programmatic statement: “(Here ‘local shouldn’t be taken as a piece of ground, a province or a reservation. It should be taken, rather, in the pictorial sense of *local color*: the vibration and singular intensity - itself changing, mobile, multiple - of a skin-event or of skin as the place for an event of existence.)” (C, 15) The aesthetic term *local color*, might seem like a strange choice for a work of ontology. Yet, it is entirely consistent with his overall argument, when we take into account that it designates in art the unmodified color of a raw material like that of a sculpture. As such it aims at that naked or merely exposed aspect of a body which is not saturated with signs, meaning, or painting, so to speak. Moreover, we should also note the significant emphasis on *skin*, and on local color as a “skin-event”. Above all, this jargon indicates that writing touches upon surfaces and not depths. Hence, it is not a matter of disclosing the depth of an immanent interiority hidden from and underlying all appearances, like a metaphysical substance or subject. Rather, to use Nietzsche’s words, touch makes us stop “at the surface, the fold, the skin” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 8)

On the other hand then, that which is local is not merely the body as place of existence, but as the program makes clear, it is also the body as ontology, that is, the writing and thinking of sense. As such, there can be no sense or meaning in general, but only here or there, according to this or that local place of existence. This might explain why Nancy also gives this locality a name which immediately differentiates it from the incarnation of a generalized sense: “Another name for local color is *carnation*... not *incarnation*, where Spirit infuses the body, but *carnation* plain and simple, referring to the vibration, color, frequency, and nuance of a place, of an event of existence.” (C, 17) Taking our departure from the paradox of touch, the incarnating logic of infusion and penetration of spirit is made impossible, and what we seem to be left with is merely *carnation*. But, this also means that the sense of the body is not given or accomplished. On the contrary, Nancy will say that sense has neither beginning nor end. Insofar as it is not concentrated into a sign, representation or signification, it is spread out or extended across all local places of existence. As such sense is born or is coming anew every time in a different way according to time and place, according to historical and geographical differences. This leads Nancy to say that the ontology or thinking of bodies should be thought in the sense of a verb rather than as a substantive or noun. As he says, “to think is not yet to have thought, and already to have thought.” (BP, 2) Accordingly, if we say that the ontological body is yet to be thought to the extent that it is an ontology of corporeal local existence, this is not a situation to be resolved or overcome, but rather an infinite truth, forever behind and ahead of us.

However, if this local ontology might offer a way out of the disembodiment or decorporealizing tendencies of metaphysics and theology, it still encounters numerous problems for thought. On the grounds that ontology is determined as local, pertaining to this or that local place of existence, it will necessarily interrupt the possibility for a general ontology, a general sense of the body. And this is precisely what Nancy, at the beginning of the closing chapter of *Corpus* also entitled “Corpus,” ends up professing: “There is no ‘the’ body, there is not ‘the’ touch...” (C, 119) Or as it is written in *Birth to Presence*, without the quotation marks: “There is no such thing as *the* body. There is no body.” (BP, 207) It might appear as if Nancy is thereby accusing language of forcing us to use the grammatical definite article, and thus that it misleads us into thinking that there is something like “the” body in general, while in truth there are only bodies and their local place-taking. As Derrida has pointed out, even when this bifurcation or dissemination of ontology calls itself necessary as an escape route from metaphysics, to abandon the definite article “could deprive [Nancy] of any conceptual determination and virtually any discourse - or hand over discourse to the most irresponsible empiricism.” (OT, 287) Yet, as we have seen, Nancy is engaged with determining at least some general ontological structures, like that of touch and writing, even while distancing himself from their definite or defining article.

Again, this resembles a situation of a double bind like we have discussed earlier in the current chapter. Nancy appears to be forced to use a general language, or a language of generalized meanings, even when he mistrusts its truth value and refrains from subscribing to its premises. As Derrida says further: “The definite or defining article is already engaged or required by the discourse that disputes it. It is with this limit that Nancy grapples, within this transaction, in this wrestling match of thinking.” (OT, 287) In other words, Nancy does not abandon discourse to embrace some irresponsible empiricism or relativism, but wrestles or makes negotiations with language. What this means, or what kind of agreements that might ensue from these negotiations, so to speak, might become more clear by taking a look at the chapter entitled “Corpus: Another Departure.”

At the beginning of this chapter the meaning of the title of the book finally receives a certain determination. “A *corpus*” he Nancy says, “isn’t a discourse, and it isn’t a narrative.” (C, 51) Earlier in the book, the ideal model of philosophical discourse had been imagined through Plato, who requires that a discourse has the “well constituted body of a big animal, with a head, stomach and tail.” (C, 13) Despite the fact that Nancy does not give any reference to Plato’s assertion, we can locate it in *Phaedrus*, where Socrates is heard saying that “every speech should be put together like a living creature, as it were with a body of its

own, so as not to lack either a head or feet, but to have both middle parts and extremities, so written as to fit both each other and the whole.” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 264c) In other words, discourse is required to form an intelligible and organized whole, so that each part would not be foreign to each other, but would make sense together as a totality. A corpus, on the contrary, is a writing of local fragments of existence, that does not provide the general sense of the body, but rather records, like a catalogue, the proliferating possibilities of what bodies can be in all their senses as foreign to themselves as they are to each other.²⁸ Adhering to the double structure of inscription and exscription, Nancy says that a corpus can only write insofar as it also subscribes to “keep silent about the body, leaving it to its places, writing and reading only to abandon bodies to the places of their contact.” (C, 53) That is, it is a writing that touches but does not grasp, and that is attentive to the fact that it cannot appropriate bodies totally, but that they are exscribed at the moment of inscription, this being the condition of possibility of writing in general. But of course, we might ask, what is the point of such a corpus? Is it merely to expose a multitude of bodies and the diversity of their being? Does this “maximal cataloguing of heaped bodies,” to use an expression of Gayatri Spivak, have a purpose or *telos* other than itself? (Spivak, “Response to Jean-Luc Nancy,” 49) Perhaps it has a value in itself, but it also exercises such a proliferating or maximal writing in order to undermine the metaphysical assumption that there could be something like a general sense of the body, even while holding on to a certain generality.

Hence, we know what a corpus is not, that it is not a closed or accomplished philosophical discourse, but when it comes to articulate its general structure in positive terms, Nancy will do so only through analogy, drawing upon a historico-juridical example: “The model of the *corpus*” he says, “is *Corpus Juris*, a collection, or compilation of Institutions, Digests, and other Codices comprising all the articles of Roman Law.” (C, 53) The analogy might seem peculiar, but it has an argumentative force. *Corpus Juris*, which can be translated as “body of law,” is divided into three parts. While the Codices contained an incomplete and always proliferating selection of historical enactments and cases, the Institutions professed more general laws and concepts, whereas the Digests was composed of fragmentary extracts or documents from jurists always in the making.²⁹ As such, the *Corpus Juris* is not a *closed* law, but one *open* to revision and modification according to the occurrences of new cases. And it is for this reason that Nancy appears to find it a suitable model for what he means with

²⁸ The word *corpus* thereby also resembles one of its usual senses as a collection of facts and things. Nevertheless, here it is not a matter of a merely empirical collection, but an ontological.

²⁹ Cf. James Allan Stewart Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*, 23-25.

the word *corpus*. For him, the structural relation between case and law in the *Corpus Juris* mirrors the one between thought and body as writing or *corpus*, as we should be ware when reading the following passage:

The law surveys every case, but itself is the *case* of its institution, as foreign to God as it is to Nature. 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. (C, 53)

At first sight it becomes clear that the law is neither before nor after the case, but always appears together, a compearance as Nancy prefers to say, with every singular case, whether it be here or there. This compearance of law and case, or thought and body, undermines the assumption that the law would have its secure residence in a place, or rather non-place, outside of any here and now. Nancy would therefore say that the law is neither presupposed nor post-posed, whether it be in God or Nature, or a subject for that matter, but *exposed* passing from case to case. (C, 91) It is therefore no longer a matter of “enunciating the absolute of the Law,” which would mean to say, in accord with the logic of incarnation, enunciating that *this* is *that*, absolutely nothing more and nothing less. On the contrary, from case to case, the sense of the law is interrupted. Of course, the adjective *exposed*, which is among many words Nancy invoke to designate the naked or non-signifying body, also implies that the law, along with the case, is susceptible or vulnerable to change and modification. If there is a law, a general definite or defining article of *the* body and its sense, it is not as a pure continuity, but rather as a discrete continuity interrupted by the discontinuity of every singular case or body. Therefore Nancy goes on to say that “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*.” (C, 53) I cannot avoid remarking on the paradox inherent to this statement. Ontology is both essential and all-embracing, which would be fine or characteristic of a metaphysic of incarnation, where all bodies would receive their sense from the absolute or God. But it also takes place exclusively *here*, in this or that case, which is further said to have no essence. Yet, despite the difficulties of this thought, it doesn’t seem that Nancy wants to escape the paradox, rather he wants, and wants us, to stand right in the midst of it, *hic et nunc*, contending that such a

paradox is indeed the condition of bodies and thought. This paradox epitomizes Nancy's ontology, as when he says, again, that the body "makes room for the fact that the essence of existence is to be without any essence. That's why the *ontology of the body* is ontology itself: being's in no way prior to or subjacent to the phenomenon here." (C, 15)

In the midst of this paradox, there is in writing, between thought and body, accordingly a double interruption that pushes sense away from the body, and body away from sense, refusing any mediation, or any Platonic *epopteia* or completed sight of existence. However, have we not already been led into contradiction by speaking and writing of the exscribed or expropriated body as a local place of existence? Have we not already effaced its singular existence by sublimating it into language and general discourse, designating it by its definite article? Certainly, but this is also why Nancy not only insists on the double bind that is produced by exscription, and writing about that which is not to be read, but also insists on turning the attention of his reader outside of the text to what is "the most *proper* movement of its text: the text *itself* being abandoned." (C, 11) In the end, Nancy's ontology might not offer an argument which belongs merely to discourse and the signifying order, but also something much more simple, but yet so difficult: that each body is certainly a body like every other, but nevertheless other and foreign to each other, making sense only right at its event or exposition, here or there. But, as Nancy says, "this is visible only in the space of bodies, to an eye attentive to bodies - not to a discourse about generic and general humanity." (C, 93) In the fascinating chapter "Millions of Bodies," in *The Empire of Signs*, a semiological study of Japan, Roland Barthes has written on this double bind, or dialectic as he calls it, where the body is simultaneously the *same* and *different*:

One might say Japan imposes the same dialectic on its bodies as on its objects: look at the handkerchief shelf in a department store: countless, all different, yet no intolerance in the series, no subversion of order. Or again, the haiku: how many haiku in the history of Japan? They all say the same thing: season, vegetation, sea, village, silhouette, yet each is in its way an irreducible event. (Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, 97)

Let us emphasize Barthes dialectic here. Like haiku, bodies all *say* the same thing, but according to their irreducible and singular event, their touch, which according to Nancy is *not sayable*, or is exscribed from discourse, they are all different. This is a general structure which Nancy describes as "at once world-wide and local, one within the other," or by the same token, all-embracing and exclusive (C, 91). In other words, the general or the *same*

differs and defers itself as it passes from case to case. As such, this general but paradoxical structure of writing and ontology as local touch resembles what Derrida has attempted to think under the often misconstrued word or concept of *différance*. Therefore, I propose that an elucidation of this concept will be a resource in understanding the structure at the heart of Nancy's ontology.

Although we recognize *différance* as a word or concept, Derrida hesitates to emphasize that it is in fact "literally neither a word nor a concept." This appears quite strange, but less so insofar as it, like touch, tries to articulate something which is not itself strictly or absolutely intelligible - it is not grasped by a representation - but which rather produces intelligibility. (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 3) Moreover, Derrida contends that ontology and theology, which he following Heidegger combines into the neologism ontotheology, has always founded or organized its own discourse around differences, most exemplary that between the sensible and intelligible, the sensory and the ideal. However, what has remained unthought or neglected in this tradition according to him, is not how the intelligible is different from the sensible, and conversely, but rather difference itself, or better yet, the productive differentiation, that which produces differences. While ontotheology has attempted to ground its appropriation of knowledge and certainty in the intelligible, which we already have identified with the absolute, or names such as God, the Idea, Substance or Subject, Derrida holds that there is something "older" than these, which is neither an intelligible nor a sensible thing, but rather the spacing or empty interval between them and this is what he terms *différance*. (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 26). He would thus have it that *différance* as spacing or interval produces these differences while being irreducible to either of them. But how can a spacing, which is properly *nothing*, produce anything at all?

We might get an idea as to what Derrida is getting at here, if we think of *différance* in terms of touch. As we recall, touch is according to Nancy that which puts into contact, it is the condition of contact, while it simultaneously separates. As such, it interrupts the possibility that the things which are brought into contact can achieve something like an identity or closure. Nevertheless, it is only on the condition of this separation or spacing, that something like a desire to appropriate or move towards the other, whether a body or its sense, in contact can come about. Spacing, or what Derrida terms *différance*, is therefore productive in the sense that it interrupts contact while making it possible, which does not relinquish the desire to touch, but rather makes it possible. Spacing separates a body from itself, and a body from another, it marks their difference, and yet it constitutes the desire of a body to know itself or others, to make sense of itself or others, *because* they are differentiated. As such,

Nancy says about spacing, or the interval, that it is “because of the interval that everything is possible or impossible... if it weren’t for the interval, there would be neither ‘together’ nor ‘apart.’” (*BP*, 317)

It is this structure, then, which has been understood under many names - *différance*, touch, writing, exappropriation, spacing, interval - appears to reside at the heart of this ontology. The ontological absolute is not God, but rather nothing, that “*absolute limit* separating the sense of the one from the skin and nerves of the other.” (*C*, 11) But the center being precisely *nothing*, which will mark *the* major break with metaphysics, also indicates that it is impossible to represent or appropriate it.³⁰ *Nothing* defies and interrupts representational thought, which is certainly why Derrida says that *différance* is literally neither a word nor a concept. But where does this leave us? What are we left with? According to Nancy, it appears that we are left with the task of writing a corpus, cataloguing the infinite and proliferating touches between the finitude of foreign bodies and their thoughts, from place to place, and case to case. Certainly, as Nancy says, this marks something like an “*end of philosophy*, and especially of any philosophy of the body” (*C*, 111), understood as the desire for accomplished sense or absolute certainty. Yet on the other hand, it ends up, through this opening of philosophical closure, as a sort of celebration of the multitude that bodies are: “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?” (*C*, 83) The answer is of course not a discourse that would neglect their multitude, but a corpus attentive to each and everyone as an impossible appropriation. As Nancy says, it is perhaps time to take leave of the book, and pay attention to what is properly outside the text:

Corpus: some dispersed, difficult points of reference, uncertain place names, plaques erased in an unknown country, an itinerary that can never anticipate its trace in foreign places. A writing of the body: of a strange land.... Countries: not territories, domains, or lands, but extensions that we cross without ever gathering them into a synopsis or subsuming them under a concept. Countries always foreign - and the foreigner as countries, regions, surroundings, passages, crossings, the opening of countrysides, unexpected surfaces, pathways leading away, off to nowhere, departures, returns. (*C*, 55)

³⁰ Derrida lays emphasis on the fact that spacing must not be misconstrued as something substantive, like a thing or being, but is rather nothing: “*Spacing* designates *nothing*, nothing that is, no presence at a distance; it is the index of an irreducible exterior, and at the same time of a *movement*, a displacement that indicates an irreducible alterity.” (Derrida, *Positions*, 81)

There is something like an ethos residing at the heart of this ontology of touching and writing bodies, perhaps an imperative to touch but not grasp (subsume under a concept), or touch knowing that the body as foreign or other also remains untouchable: “may the foreign contact draw near, with the foreigner remaining foreign in that contact (remaining a stranger *to* contact *in* contact: that’s the whole point about touching, the touch of bodies.” (C, 17-19) As such, it is not a touch that reveals the absolute or God *in the flesh*. It reveals *nothing* but this body here or there. However, are there anything which this *Corpus* neglects or passes over in silence? What potential problems might this ontology be susceptible to? Before venturing onto my concluding remarks, I will engage briefly with some objections which has been raised against Nancy’s ontology.

4. Whose Touch? The Limits of *Corpus*

Deconstructionist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was among the first to respond to and write on *Corpus*. Her text “Response to Jean-Luc Nancy,” published in 1994 in the anthology *Thinking Bodies* offers some of the most poignant but still rigid criticisms raised against the ontology of Nancy.³¹ This might appear strange insofar as she mostly shares the same theoretical framework and concerns as Nancy, both identifying themselves with the strands of deconstruction, and in particular, with their shared sympathy and friendship with Jacques Derrida.

As such, Spivak begins by emphasizing these shared concerns. As Nancy, Spivak is above all interested in philosophizing at the *limit* of an other which is impossible to appropriate, and therefore is not a philosophy in the traditional sense. (*TB*, 33) Drawing upon, to a larger extent than Nancy, a Heideggerian terminology, Spivak describes this limit as ontico-ontological *différance*. In terms with my itinerary so far, we can translate the “ontic” as the exscribed body, that is, *this* body here and now, here or there, while the ontological still designates a thinking of sense. In accord with Nancy, Spivak describes this *différance* as one where “the ontic is different from and pushes away the ontological, and the ontological does the same but differently; and both do so in the interest of the event of living and the task of making sense.” (*TB*, 33) None of these assertions diverges greatly from those I have explicated in *Corpus*. So what constitutes their difference and potential for disagreement? To use Spivak’s own expression, if both are attempting to make sense or ponder the sense of the ontic, are initiating attempts at “ontologizing the ontic,” and that this effort is “precisely the rock on which Jean-Luc Nancy and I are both hitting our skulls,” then with what difference? (*TB*, 41) Of course it is not a matter of decorporealizing or disembodiment of the ontic, or as Spivak says, it is not a matter of giving in to “a more magisterial discourse” that would remove the rock, so to speak, making it vanish or disappear. (*TB*, 41) What then?

Above all, Spivak is concerned with the extensive breadth or scope of the ontology of *Corpus*, which she asserts deviates from a more careful or prudent deconstructionist approach, such as that of Jacques Derrida. In fact, Derrida emphasizes this difference in his own reading of Nancy, often responding to the sharper claims in *Corpus*, such as that there is no *the* body, by asking himself “why I would never have dared to write that.” (*OT*, 116) The deconstructive gesture of Derrida is to a larger extent marked by a certain distance,

³¹ Hereafter cited as *TB* for textual economical reasons.

exemplified for instance in his excessive use of quotation marks, indicating that he is using a word belonging to the metaphysical tradition without subscribing to its premises, a gesture which is notably more absent from Nancy's discourse: "Is it my fault if these words have never made any sense, I mean to say any *exact* sense" Derrida asks, and this attitude marks his careful distance from the major concepts of the tradition. (*OT*, 7) We might say that Derrida is content with the critical or negative project of delimiting the impasses or paradoxes where the tradition runs up against an inappropriable and foreign other at its limits, while Nancy seeks to push this project further by inaugurating a positive ontology on the basis of these impasses. The objection Spivak raises against the ambitions of Nancy is that they risk asserting a too general ontology which would neglect or erase the singular and irreducible difference of the other in the same vein as those metaphysical projects he sought to distance himself from.

Spivak acknowledges that Nancy has delimited his deconstruction of the body to that of the West, taking a certain distance and caution to assert that the body would mean the same for everyone and everywhere. Yet, this is reduced to taking a distance for a certain East: "Strange foreign bodies, endowed with Yin and Yang, with the Third Eye, the Cinnabar Field, and the Ocean of Qi... not a single one of *their* words tells us anything about *our* body." (*C*, 7) Yet, there are also less careful analogies marking the text, as when Nancy says that *hoc est enim corpus meum* is "our *Om mani padme*" (*C*, 3). As Spivak does not hesitate to point out, the reference to this Sanskrit mantra also contains the only typo in *Corpus* (corrected as *Om mani padme*), which can roughly be translated as "the jewel is in the lotus". This analogy or identification ("is our") opens up the space for a critique: "For why is 'the jewel in is in the lotus' substitutable (to mark a difference of course) for 'this is my body'?" (*TB*, 39)

What Spivak eventually is getting at, is whether the argument in *Corpus* would be able to unfold in the same way, arriving at the same conclusions, if it had taken its departure from a polytheist tradition. The response is mostly negative. Through the quotation from an exchange with a friend, Spivak seeks to emphasize that in Indian philosophy and theology - leaving aside whether this forms a unicity or general identity - there is no word for "one" or "mono," but rather the opposition *dvaita* (meaning "two") and *advaita* which can be translated as "un-two-ed", "a strange way of saying One!" (*TB*, 39) Of course, this logic undermines the possibility that one could depart from the the point of an absolute monotheist God who through the incarnation in a body could come to utter "this is *my* body." On the contrary, it appears that the body under the rubric of *Om mani padme* is always already

shared out, disseminated across an originary plurality that cannot, and would not ever, establish a single origin, or an unique sense.

However, while *Corpus* might intend to distance itself from traditions different from the West, Spivak holds that it ends up professing an ontology for bodies in general - exclusive and local but yet *all-embracing* - where, as she says, “any example will do the job.” (TB, 44) Accordingly, Spivak has limited sympathy with *Corpus* when it addresses the billions of bodies, supposed to render it impossible to decide upon an absolute sense of the body. Contrary to broaden its cataloguing corpus and ontology “world-wide,” Spivak to an even larger than Nancy, would see it better fit to delimit oneself to the *local*, to the irreducible difference that make up *this here*. Everywhere in her response, it is a matter of putting into question *who* is speaking, on behalf of whom, where and when. As such, she is in affinity with Derrida who asserts that the “greatest risk is run at the very moment when one does have to try to *know*. Know what? Not what, but whom; not about what one speaks, but first of all who to whom one says, ‘and me, and you.’ Never trust any tongue for that” (OT, 309). The citation in the middle of the quotation is a reference to the concluding sentence of *Corpus*, which at length runs:

A body is an image offered to other bodies, a whole corpus of images stretched from body to body, local colors and shadows, fragments, grains, areolas, lunules, nails, hairs, tendons, skulls, ribs, pelvises, bellies, meatuses, foams, tears, teeth, droolings, slits, blocks, tongues, sweat, liquors, veins, pains, and joys, and me, and you.” (C, 121)

Certainly, this sentence exemplifies the whole argument of the book, that the sense of the body cannot be reduced to a single absolute sense, but is shared out and disseminated from body to body, and case to case. Yet, in accord with the double bind between language and body, it is impossible for language to utter the irreducible singularity of each body without erasure or exscription. As Derrida points out, we cannot assume or trust that language will convey the difference, or rather, *différance* of each irreducible body as event, and that there is always a risk in adhering to the effacements of discourse. Spivak then, is concerned with *whom* Nancy is writing to, the address of his touch, so to speak. After all, this naked or exposed body of *Corpus*, has been invented as a offshoot of the metaphysical body saturated with signs and meaning. Can it thereby be recognized by everyone?

Spivak interrupts her reading of *Corpus* at a point, which we have not yet read, referring to the cyclone that hit Bangladesh in april, 1991. Here, Nancy is in the midst of

arguing that insofar as the sense of the body is not given in advance, is not presupposed in a metaphysical or mystical absolute, then it must be created or produced as the local place of existence, everytime in an irreducible and different way, here or there. Nancy asserts that this creation or production of sense happens inasmuch due to what is natural in a body as due to its technical surroundings. We could easily make sense of this statement if we take into account that ontology as writing implies just as much the vital organs of the body as it does the technical supplements of tools and machines. This leads Nancy to assert that the sense of the body is no less technical than it is natural (an entire problematic we have avoided until now).³² On these grounds he makes the following comment concerning the local production of sense: “Everything comes back to this production: there’s no difference between ‘natural’ and ‘technical’ phenomena (a cyclone in Bangladesh, with its hundreds of thousands of deaths, its tens of millions of victims, being indissociable from demography, economy, the linkage of North and South, etc)” (C, 79).

Spivak responds to this passage by asserting that, even while it is “correct and good,” ends up becoming “no more than a pious litany for trivializing readers” with an example that could just as well been replaced by any other. (TB, 44) In other words, this invocation of Bangladesh is nothing but an example - a local place among many - to demonstrate a more general ontological point about local bodies, sense and existence. Therefore, Spivak accuses Nancy of not being attentive enough to the resistance and responsibility that this local “once” (*hic et nunc*) offers to thought. Contrary to Nancy, Spivak was in fact there when “the cyclone and tidal wave” hit the Bay of Bengal 29 April 1991. After having recited a rather long and nuanced memoir of this event - which I neither have the capacity nor competence to comment upon in detail here - recording the particular struggle of those bodies affected by catastrophe, she goes on to assert that this event is not only more than an example in *Corpus*, it might even be totally foreign to its Western logic: “The Death of God has not been rehearsed, then, in my space of everyday. Can *we* say, ‘with the death of God, *we* [Spivak’s emphasis] have lost this glorious body, this sublime body... this visibility of the invisible’...?” (TB, 46)³³ What is put into question is nothing but the address of Nancy’s ontology, whom it addresses when it says *we* and *us*.

³² This problematic could also open up to a dialogue with works of anthropology, such as Marcel Mauss’ *Les techniques du corps* (1936) which among other things asserts that the body “is man’s first and most natural object, and at the same time technical means”. (Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” 75) Such a dialogue could take its point of departure from a close reading of the chapter “*Techné* of Bodies,” in *Corpus*. We have, however, delimited our current effort to the more theological and metaphysical concerns of the book.

³³ Spivak does not give any reference to the citation, but it can be found in *BP*, 191.

However, Spivak is not so much concerned with speaking on behalf of a polytheist theology, or “speaking in the defense of ‘the Hindu case [being] different,’ both being cases which imply their own problematic. (TB, 42) On the contrary, she invokes these perspectives in order to question and get “out of the dominant monotheist narratives in thinking *Corpus*.” (TB, 42) Again, what is put into question is that *Corpus* begins from our culture and our heritage, implying a delimited Western tradition having its spiritual resource in a monotheist God, and ends up articulating a local but yet *all-embracing* ontology, with *corpus* designating the program of a maximal cataloguing of bodies and their senses, no matter where or when. Yet, in defense of Nancy, *Corpus* is also marked by numerous precautions concerning other bodies, or bodies as others, along with their infinite excriptions: “We know nothing about the ‘writings’ or ‘excriptions’ preparing to come from these sites.” (C, 11) All he knows is that these writings will never a universal and general sense of the body, rather testifying to this impossibility by their very multitude.

Nevertheless, if one were to offer a response to Spivak’s response to Jean-Luc Nancy, offering something like a justification of the ontological project set forth in *Corpus*, then one could point to its apparent break with the deconstructive gesture of Derrida and Spivak which mostly, or at least apparently, delimits itself to negative or critical analysis. Under the aegis of an ethics of mistrust, undecidability and distance, Derrida’s book on Nancy and the subject of touch, for instance, extends over well three hundred pages without settling on any exact statements or decisions about its subject matter, but always thrown back into a web of preliminary questions. Nancy on the contrary, shows less constraints for positive judgements, professing that writing “touches upon bodies *along the absolute limit*” and so on. (C, 11) The deconstructionist always keeps herself at a distance, careful not to *cross the limit*, that is, not to, or not believe oneself capable to, appropriate the impossible and unspeakable other. That is perhaps why Derrida appears to share Spivak’s concern for Nancy’s absolutist tendencies, as when he says that “touch remains” for Nancy “the motif of a sort of absolute, irredentist, and post-deconstructive realism... an absolute realism, but irreducible to any of the traditions realisms.” (OT, 46) However, this philosophical stamp is ambiguous. As Ian James points out the word *irredentism*, designates “a form of political ideology whose origin lies in the nationalism of the newly unified Italian state in the late nineteenth century, is a doctrine of borders or limits, a doctrine which demands the assimilation of what lies immediately beyond the frontier into the orbit of the state.” (Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, 118)

In other words, Derrida counters Nancy with his own criticism of the appropriative tendencies of the tradition, namely to believe itself capable to grasp what lies beyond the

limit of touch. But certainly, Nancy has drawn upon the figure of touch in order to assert that sense does not occur except in touch, and furthermore, that touch does not happen in general, but takes place as local existence, thereby undermining metaphysics attempt at grounding an absolute sense. The disagreements within the deconstructionist camp appear above all to concentrate around the amount of prudence with which one encounters the limit between language and that which cannot be said or read. Thus Spivak's criticism of Nancy is perhaps best summarized when she says that to "be able *state* a problem is not to perform the solution, may indeed be the opposite." (TB, 34) This phrase summarizes the difference of attitude. If traditional deconstruction has first and foremost been a practice that problematizes the great encyclopedia of Western thought, then it is perhaps justified in labeling Nancy's ontology "post-deconstructive" insofar as it attempts to rebuild a positive philosophy from the negative or critical grounds of deconstruction.

However, the second criticism raised by Spivak, is slightly surprising, not concerned with the excessive or maximal tendencies of *Corpus*, but rather a certain passivity in its relation to the cataloguing exscription of bodies. Here, Spivak replies to Nancy's celebration of multitude and difference ("what might we invent to celebrate their number?" C, 83) by saying that the answer "is really nothing or everything by just hanging around as bodies" even if they are the unreadable "possibility of reading." (TB, 36) Nancy's *corpus* is on these grounds caricatured as a sort of ethnographic field book, travelling and documenting the difference of bodies as "strange lands." But, Spivak asks, what difference does it *make*? What she has in mind is the lack of involvement with political practice in Nancy's *Corpus*. Contrary to merely being attentive to "millions of bodies," caught in the double bind of exscription and inscription of their events or traces (what Spivak names their "memory-event" - that is, memory constituted by inscription, but also by the forgetfulness of exscription or effacement), she asks: "Why not imagine them as other subjects of knowledge caught in the same sort of but not the same bind?" (TB, 37) Of course, *Corpus* has unfolded its argument around the assertion that we cannot truly *know* this or that body, insofar as it is properly foreign or other, but merely touch upon this strangeness. Spivak does not refrain to subscribe to such an ontological assertion. However, she contends that it must be supplemented by a rational political practice, for instance, that of "rationalized labor power" envisioned by Marx, where bodies are not first and foremost touching upon their mutual impossible appropriation, but rather "agents of production." (TB, 48) In other words, *Corpus* appears to build the foundations of an ontology of difference, but without any practical orientation as to what to do with this difference. "I think the memory-event of the *corpus* is

critical to all practice. But I must also insist that memory-event cannot usurp the place of practice, even in the name of the most careful catalogical philosophizing.” (TB, 36)

Yet, it is wrong to assert that *Corpus* does not offer any thoughts on bodies as agents of production in Marx’ sense. In fact, it contains an entire chapter to the subject entitled “Work, Capital” (even if the chapters in *Corpus* never extend more than three pages). What does Nancy say about work and capital in a book concerned with bodies? First of all it attempts to ground these concepts in the body, at the level of skin, so to speak. For instance, at its very opening:

Where are bodies anyway? Bodies are first of all at work... First of all, bodies are going to work, coming home from work, waiting for rest, taking it and promptly leaving it, and working, incorporating themselves into merchandise, themselves merchandise, a work force, nonaccumulable capital, sellable, exhaustible, in the market of accumulated, accumulative capital.” (C, 109)

Of course, it is bodies that goes to work, and not pure spirit. However, we ought to be attentive to how the dialectic in this passage between body and capital mirrors that between discourse and body. Like discourse and knowledge, capital is appropriative - it accumulates and invests - but that which it tries to grasp and gather into itself remains expropriated, nonaccumulable, and impossible stranger. Also within the realm of class-struggle, work and capital then we relocate the desire for representation. In fact, it is curious that Nancy does not pursue this problematic further, as he says that capital means “a system of over-signified bodies” and furthermore that there is “nothing more signifying/signified than class, and suffering, and class-struggle.” (C, 111) If there is nothing that exceeds capital and work in incarnating a semiology of representation, why did not *Corpus* depart from the factory rather than the eucharist? Was it perhaps because it first had to unravel this metaphysical and mystical logic of incarnation, in order to understand how capital might *incorporate* itself into the corporeal workforce of bodies? At any right, there is here an opening towards thinking the shared logic, and perhaps origin, of capital and our Christian heritage, which nevertheless exceeds the boundaries of my current effort.

In the midst of this chapter on work and capital, we also find another example pertaining to Spivak point that “any example will do” in *Corpus*, a sort of exposition of difference, a chain of examples, which nevertheless is reduced to a general argument: “Capital means: a body marketed, transported, displaced, replaced, superseded, assigned to a

post and a posture, to the point of ruin, unemployment, famine, a Bengali body bent over a car in Tokyo, a Turkish body in a Berlin trench, a black body loaded down with white packages in Suresnes or San Francisco.” (C, 109-111) Obviously this passage offers an effort to ground the sense of capital in bodies as local existence, it testifies to the fact that capital is not something residing in sky or spirit, but takes place in a singular and irreducible way *hic et nunc*. However, as Spivak points out, it does not supplement this ontological effort with any ethico-political orientations as what to do with this information, or in Marx terms, it does not inform any “public use of reason.” Rather, politics and capital, is according to Spivak “symptomatically sentimentalized by *Corpus* at the level of body-talk.” (TB, 48)

In order to sum up this encounter, however, without closure, or without “gathering up the trash and sublimating or recycling it” (C, 103), we can say that the ontology of *Corpus* is certainly vulnerable or open to the criticisms raised by Spivak. On the one hand, it certainly contains a certain void or lack concerning some engagement with a political practice that could supplement its ontology of the body as local and radical alterity. However, this criticism does not so much undermine the initial ambition and following implementation of this ontology, as it opens up for a different reading of *Corpus*, a reading which, for example, would be accompanied by a reading of Marx’ corpus. According to Spivak, this would not only benefit the initial project of Nancy, but likewise, ground Marx’ analysis of capital, workforce and class-struggle in a local ontology which would deny it to fly off into general abstraction (it would for instance regard “the *people* in the many (con)texts of the globe rather than the [anonymous] masses” TB, 48).

On the other hand, it is impossible to say what kind of ontology would have sprung forth from an analysis of the body taking its departure from the Sanskrit mantra of *Om mani padme* rather than the eucharistic *Hoc est enim corpus meum*. If Nancy, like an Italian irredentist, spreads his ontological conclusions across the borders of Europe, then he might have been better off, in accord with Spivak, with regarding these geographical limits with the same prudence as he does the limits of corporeal alterity. After all, as he says himself: “The *body*: that’s how we invented it. Who else in the world knows about it?” (C, 5) Nevertheless, this naked and indecipherable body ends up being applicable to bodies from Bengal to Tokyo, or from Turkey to Berlin. Yet, *who* are they? Do they know about *the* body? Are they the people who Nancy designates as “us” and “we”? Obviously, these questions opens onto an enormous problematic which I do not have the time or space to pursue here. Let us rather say, that they, in accord with the initial ethos of *Corpus*, leaves the sense of what a body can

be open to revisions and modifications rather than closed within in an accomplished circle of signification.

5. Concluding Remarks

I have followed an itinerary taking my departure from a close reading of the tightly woven argument concerning the body of the Eucharist at the outset of *Corpus*, through its critical deconstruction of the logic of incarnation through the figures of touch and writing, in order to arrive at its paradoxical but yet affirmative ontology of bodies as local existence. Sticking close to letter of *Corpus*, I have attempted to explicate the problems pertaining to a signifying body, whose sense is to be read, deciphered and interpreted insofar as it is founded in a metaphysical or mystical absolute, exemplarily that of God. Through this explication I arrived, following Nancy, at the “absolute contradiction” or paradox inherent to this traditional conception the sense of the body, namely, that it ends up decorporealizing or disembodimenting there very thing it desired to grasp by transforming it into something spiritual, abstract and conceptual.

Necessarily, it was necessary to ask how one might think the sense of the body otherwise in order to escape the impasse or contradiction inherent to the signifying body of the tradition. The contention of Nancy is that this is possible insofar as one does not conceive of sense and body as something abstract, merely pertaining to discourse and the signifying order, but grounds it in the local irreducible and singular event that thought and body is everytime they occur, whether it is *here* or *there*. In other words, for the body to make sense, it must take place somewhere and not in the nowhere of discourse. Or as Nancy says in *Corpus*, “*body cannot mean body’s real sense beyond body’s reality horizon.*” (C, 43) This absolute realism is supposed to counteract any philosophical or theological attempt to reappropriate the sense of the body into the lofty sphere of idealism. However, as I have demonstrated, this realism is not merely empiricism, it does not claim to know what bodies are in themselves. On the contrary, it contends that the condition on which we access bodies and their sense is through touch. However, touch has the paradoxical or double structure of coming into contact while nevertheless being separated from that which it touches. Therefore it never properly appropriates or grasps the body whose meaning it seeks to know.

As philosophers engaged with ontology we seek to grasp the sense of being and existence, and through writing papers and books, we attempt to articulate and demonstrate this sense in one way or another. However, according to Nancy, writing *is* touch, and as I have demonstrated, it necessarily excribes the body and the sense it attempts to grasp or inscribe. This paradox lead us to assert that the sense of the body is not something general,

but can only be written or exscribed, every time in a new and different way, in places of local existence. Here or there, but never nowhere. Following Nancy I ended my itinerary by articulating the infinite task of writing a *corpus*, that is, a cataloguing of the ever proliferating and bifurcating senses that a body might have, its multitude and immense variety or alterity as it is exposed in its local color or carnation.

Of course, like every other work of thought, *Corpus* is neither perfect nor invulnerable to criticism. I therefore decided to bring the Nancy's ontology into dialogue with one of its most prominent criticisms, namely, that of Gayatri Spivak in her written response. This dialogue showed that while *Corpus* might offer an escape route from metaphysics and its attempt to think the absolute sense of the body, it is nevertheless susceptible to the accusation that the scope of its ontology is too general or all-embracing, and therefore runs the risk of inverting into what it sought to escape, namely, an abstract ontology of bodies wherein "any example will do." Moreover, Spivak demonstrated the need to supplement *Corpus*, and its bringing to light of "a forgetfulness of the ungrounded body" with rational political practice which could afford an orientation as to what to do with the bodies' multitude, in order not to merely document it through a *corpus*, but effectuate political change. Certainly, the latter claim opens on to a project which it would be interesting to pursue elsewhere.

At any rate, and in accord with its own ambition, *Corpus* offers an ontology which is necessarily *open*, contrary to a closed metaphysical system, and it should therefore also be infinitely open to revisions and modifications. Despite the fact, in accord with the criticism of Spivak, that its scope might be too all-embracing, it never claims to know what the sense of the body might be elsewhere, in a different place or different time, that is, in other contexts. This prudence is epitomized by Nancy's own words, when he writes that we "know nothing about the 'writings' or 'excriptions' preparing to come from these sites." (*C*, 11) Let us end there, touching and tampering with sense while keeping our distance.

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