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Hurler avec les loups

Vestiges of beastly writing in Nancy, Derrida, and Cixous

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Abstract

In ‘Le vestige de l’art’, Nancy, rejecting the traditional understanding of art as the sensible representation of the Idea, develops the notion of the vestige as the self-withdrawal and self-effacement of the sensible. In an explicit nod to Jacques Derrida’s thought of the trace, Nancy describes the vestige as ‘smoke without fire’, recalling Derrida’s *Feu la cendre*, and – now echoing Derrida’s preoccupation with the homonym *pas* – as a ‘footprint’.

This article takes the vestige as a way to measure the gap between Nancy’s notion of exscription and Derrida’s *écriture*. Nancy writes that a footprint is ‘just a touch right at the ground’. We find this same figure of liminal touch – touch as the limit and exteriority of existence – used in *Corpus* to describe the body’s being-inscribed outside itself as exscription. Writing, then, for Nancy – like the vestige – is a question of touching in withdrawing from touch, in short of tact.

Nancy’s footprint departs from Derrida’s in another significant way. While he acknowledges that ‘there would be much to say’ about the steps of animals, their rhythms and gaits, Nancy, in contradistinction to Derrida, keeps the vestige firmly planted within the horizon of human existence. In my paper I extend Nancy’s vestigial exscription in the direction of the animal character of writing invoked and practiced by both Derrida and Héléne Cixous, in order to develop a theory of beastly writing. I then return to Nancy’s writings, where traces of the animal voice appear in their retreat, and conclude by asking whether, on the question of the animal vestige, Nancy can be said to run with or away from the deconstructionist pack – *hurle-t-il avec les loups?*

In ‘Le vestige de l’art’, Nancy rejects the traditional understanding of art as the sensible representation of the Idea to develop instead the notion of the vestige as the self-withdrawal and self-effacement of the sensible. In an explicit nod to Derrida’s thought of the trace, Nancy first describes the vestige as ‘fumée sans feu [smoke without fire]’ recalling Derrida’s *Feu la cendre*.¹ At the same time, now echoing Derrida’s preoccupation after Blanchot with the homonym *pas*, the vestige is treated more extensively by way of the figure of the ‘footprint’. Nancy, though, as will become clear, will depart from the Derridean *pas* in a number of ways, not least in his attraction to Christian motifs and especially that of touch. Nancy argues that, far from indicating an essence or presence, a footprint is ‘une touche à même le sol [just a touch right at the ground]’.² This same figure of liminal touch – touch as the limit and exteriority of existence – is deployed in *Corpus* to describe the body’s being-inscribed outside itself as exscription. Writing, for Nancy, like the vestige, is a question of touching in withdrawing from touch – in short, a question of tact. To anticipate the argument developed in the pages ahead, the footprint allows one to take the measure of the gap between Nancy’s notion of exscription and Derrida’s *écriture*. Having established the link between the vestige, in tangibility, and exscription in the first part, I turn in the second to Derrida’s argument in *Le toucher* whereby he credits Nancy’s exscription with thinking the spacing of touch more exactly than phenomenological tradition while nonetheless ultimately succumbing to the temptations of a certain ‘*humainisme*’, in the final instance, like Heidegger, still continuing to privilege the hand as that which is proper to the human.³ As it transpires, the subtle distinction hinges once again upon the issue of infinite finitude that has been much debated between the two of them.

Nancy’s footprint, moreover, departs from Derrida’s in another significant way, which will expose the affinity between the haptic and a persistent anthropocentrism. In the third section, this is seen to contrast with a Derridean-Cixousian writing that both aurally and visually has a tendentiously animal quality, disseminating into yelps, barks, cries, and squirrely handwriting. While Nancy acknowledges that ‘du pas des animaux, il y aurait beaucoup à dire [concerning the step of animals, there would be much to say]’⁴ – not least about their rhythms and gaits – Nancy, in contradistinction to the step taken by Derrida in his later writings or in the writings of Cixous, keeps the vestige firmly planted within the horizon of human existence. What I thus propose is to extend Nancy’s vestigial exscription in the direction of the animal character of writing invoked – and indeed practiced – by both Derrida and Cixous. Derrida refers to ‘une animalité de la lettre [an animality of the letter]’ as early as the essay on Edmond Jabès in *L’écriture et la différence*,⁵ but the passage that interests me most comes at the beginning of his final seminar, *La bête et le souverain*, where he characterises his approach as being as stealthy and noiseless as a wolf – ‘à pas de loup’⁶ – and begins to connect this ‘lyconomy’⁷ to themes of listening and vociferation.⁸ This vestigial sonorosity of writing comes to the fore with much greater force in the flighty prose of Cixous, for whom writing is *le cri de la littérature*, as she puts it in the subtitle of *Ayāi*!⁹ By tracking the animals that scurry back and forth between Derrida and Cixous’ texts and in their various exchanges in writing and on the phone, one could derive a theory of beastly writing but, on the question of the animal vestige, can Nancy in the end be said to run with or away from the deconstructionist pack – *hurle-t-il avec les loups*?

Vestige

Nancy’s point of departure is the distinction upheld by theologians between image and vestige. Following Aquinas’ definition of the vestige as causality without form, Nancy notes that, while the saying has it that there is ‘pas de fumée sans feu [no smoke without fire]’, the

value of smoke lies precisely in the absence of the form of fire, of its image (*eidos*). Rather, the vestige consists in a withdrawal from and of the image. To be precise, if the vestige is what is left over from that withdrawal, it is because what is left is nothing other than the withdrawal itself: ‘Ce qui reste en retrait de l’image, ou ce qui reste dans son retrait, comme ce retrait même, c’est en effet le *vestige*. [What remains withdrawn from the image, or what remains in its withdrawal, as that withdrawal itself, is the *vestige*].’¹⁰ Eager to cast off any ontotheological vestiges in his vestige, Nancy clarifies further that ‘on ne se rapporte pas à l’imprésentabilité du feu, mais à la présence du vestige, à son reste ou à son frayage de présence [it is not to the unpresentability of the fire that one refers but to the presence of the vestige, to its remainder or to its clearing of a path of presence]’.¹¹ Far from being a ‘quest’ for the insensible mystery, the vestige is a matter of tracing traces, of putting one’s steps in (others’) footprints.

One would want to discern carefully the affinities between what Nancy says here about the vestige and Derrida’s notion of the cinder as he formulates it in *Feu la cendre* and also in one of the interviews in *Points*. Derrida, for instance, points to the difference between smoke and cinder: if the first is spirited away, rising without perceptible remainder, the latter ‘tombe, lasse, lâche, plus matérielle d’effriter son mot, elle est très divisible [falls, tires, lets go, more material since it fritters away its word; it is very divisible]’.¹² And one would want to think Nancy’s invocation of the ground on what the foot falls in relation to this falling and frittering of the cinder that is a matter of ‘se consumer jusqu’à son support [consuming itself all the way to its support]’.¹³ Analysing his own phrase ‘il y a là cendre’ from *La dissémination* and its homophonous, self-effacing ambiguity, Derrida will also insist that the cinder is nothing that remains as an entity [*étant*], as what is. Rather, what remains is the *there is*:

Il y a là cendre, voilà qui prend place en laissant place, pour donner à entendre: rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu. Il y a là cendre: il y a lieu.

Cinders there are, this is what takes place in letting a place occur, so that it will be understood: Nothing will have taken place but the place. Cinders there are: Place there is.¹⁴

It is from this perspective that one should understand Nancy’s notion of vestige as footprint, as the placing of the step that disappears in its taking place. For Nancy, it follows from the very nature of the footprint that the vestige *is* not. It is not of the order of being. It is neither presence, essence, nor substance for it is simply what remains of a step (*pas*). A step, moreover, is not some pre-existing thing that can be set down upon the ground.¹⁵ It is simply the touching itself at the ground: ‘une touche à même le sol [just a touch right at the ground]’.¹⁶ This ground that supports the sole of the foot is, further, not to be thought as ground in the sense of a foundational substratum or as a subject. This would have everything to do with the specific character of negation posed by the *pas* and I shall return specifically to this question later, but first I want to interrogate this figure of touching that encapsulates or otherwise exemplifies the vestige for Nancy.

Why speak of the vestigial in terms of *contact* if one rejects ‘une dérivation continue du “vestige” à partir de la théologie [a continuous derivation of “vestige” from theology]’¹⁷ and if one does not want (its) sense set down – if one wants no more than a footprint of the vestige? This figure allows Nancy – such is the deconstruction of touch that takes place in this thought – to displace the emphasis from immediacy, identity, communion, the point of contact and so forth, onto extension, spacing, distance, prostheticity, deferral and so on – in short, the

withdrawal of touch in all touching or the *tact* of con-tact. When I touch myself or I touch you, ‘I self-touch you’ such that there is always an originary otherness in auto-affection and a minimal repetition in all contact with the outside. Touching, in Nancy’s hands (which might, as we shall see, remain precisely the problem), is all about displacement and exteriority rather than the elimination of space and outside – a spacing out, moreover, that enters right into the heart (literally for Nancy after his transplant) of interiority such that no thing is left intact, including the *is* of being.

It is this notion of touching that defines writing as *exscription*. As Nancy develops the notion in *Corpus* exscription is the exposure of inscription to its outside, that is, to what lies beyond meaning and of the text touching (right at) its limit.

‘Écriture’ veut dire: non la monstration, ni la démonstration, d’une signification, mais un geste pour *toucher* au *sens*. Un toucher, un tact qui est comme une adresse: celui qui écrit ne touche pas sur le mode de la saisie, de la prise en main (de *begreifen* = saisir, s’emparer de, qui est le mot allemand pour ‘concevoir’), mais il touche sur le mode de s’adresser, de s’envoyer à la touche d’un dehors, d’un dérobé, d’un écarté, d’un espacé. Sa touche même, et qui est bien *sa* touche, lui est dans le principe retirée, espacée, écartée. Elle *est*: qu’advienne le contact étranger, l’étranger restant étranger dans le contact (restant *dans* le contact étranger *au* contact: c’est toute l’affaire du tact, de la touche des corps).

‘Writing’ means: not the monstration, the demonstration, of a signification but a gesture towards *touching* upon *sense*. 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, hidden, displaced, spaced. His very touch, which is certainly *his* touch, is in principle withdrawn, spaced, displaced. It *is*: 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).¹⁸

Writing not on, but perhaps to, by or through the body, then, is an exscription of being, existence addressed to an outside *there*. This entails that exscription ‘swerve’ away from signification. What emerges accordingly is an understanding of reading as more than ‘deciphering’ and as ‘touching, rather, and being touched’¹⁹ and of writing as that which deconstructs itself, specifically its appropriative mastery of ‘its’ outside.

Il n’y a d’exscription que par écriture, l’excrit *reste* cet autre *bord* que l’inscription, tout en signifiant d’un bord, ne cesse obstinément d’indiquer comme son autre-propre bord.

There is only exscription through writing, but what’s exscribed *remains* this other *edge* that inscription, though signifying on an edge, obstinately continues to indicate as its own-other edge.²⁰

Inscription – and Nancy is very exact about this – not only externalises its condition of possibility (the edge on which it signifies) as the other edge, but, moreover, reappropriates the other edge as its *own* other.

This inappropriability of appropriation comes under close examination in Derrida’s *Le toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy*, especially in his attempt to specify to what extent and in what ways

Nancy's thought of exscription allows him to part ways with the entire metaphysical tradition of touch. While Nancy in the passage just quoted introduces a certain spacing by distancing the touching of exscription from the *Begriff* (grasp/concept), his haptology nonetheless persists in crediting the hand a privilege over the other senses. In *Geschlecht II*, Derrida observes that whereas for Hegel the hand is an organ of sensible prehension and thus, by metaphorical translation, of intelligible comprehension 'by taking hold, by laying one's hands on, by mastering and manipulating' the concept, for Heidegger by contrast the hand of *Dasein* is for giving (*geben*) and acting (*handeln*) rather than grasping.²¹ But this critique of organicism leaves untouched and intact the anthropo-teleological logic according to which the human occupies an exemplary and singular status insofar as it touches 'more and better'.²² The paw, prehensile claw, or elephant trunk, limited to grasping, catching, pushing, and pulling can only 'approximate' this hand that gives, receives, extends, welcomes, gestures and so on, which is therefore the distinction of the properly human. This hominising hand cannot be disentangled from the related distinction between the human mouth as the site of the *logos* and the voracious animal maw, between *os* and *bucca*, but on this point Nancy is more exact in showing how buccality originally and irreducibly invades all human speech. The ruse of touch has a much greater hold on him.

This liberation of the hand, as a decisive moment of techno-hominsation that puts the world if not in then, at or to hand, goes hand in hand (if one can forgive the pun) with another privilege accorded to *Dasein* by which its death is in front of it, as if touchable: what Heidegger defines as the experience of *finitude*. Towards the end of *Le toucher* when, having pursued the persistence of haptocentrism throughout the history of metaphysics, Derrida returns to Nancy to assess the relation of his general haptology to that tradition, he cites a passage from *Une pensée finie* on exscription:

C'est pourquoi cette pensée s'appelle aussi 'écriture', c'est-à-dire inscription de cette violence, et de ceci: qui par elle tout sens est *excrit*, ne se revient pas sans reste, et que toute pensée finie est une pensée finie de cet excès infini.

This is why we call this thought 'writing', that is, the inscription of this violence and of the fact that, through it, all sense is *exscribed*, ceaselessly refuses to come back to itself, and that all thinking is the finite thinking of these infinite excesses.²³

Nancy introduces the notion of exscription here to explain the idea of a thinking that would at once violate the very words and discourses that allow it to be present and thus rebels against signification as much as intuition. It is a finite thinking, as Nancy puts it a few pages earlier, 'qui, sans renoncer à la vérité, à l'universalité, bref au *sens*, ne peut penser qu'en touchant identiquement à sa propre limite, et à sa singularité [that, without renouncing truth or universality, without renouncing *sense*, is only ever able to think to the extent that it also touches on its own limit and its own singularity]'.²⁴

Finitude

Nancy sets much store by the finitude of this thinking. For Derrida, though, the problem lies in this anxiety or warning about the renunciation of truth and universality, which promises to safeguard the privilege of touch – along with the privilege of singularity, which Derrida characterises as the privilege of privilege itself. Derrida argues that this attachment to truth and universality risks everything that goes *against* touch, including presumably Nancy's thinking of tact, the untouchable, technics, spacing and so on. Derrida gives credit to Nancy

for the way in which his thinking of touch draws a dividing line with respect to the tradition of hapto-onto-theo-teleology. Exscription challenges the privilege given to immediacy and the indivisibility of the continuous. Specifically, Derrida in *Le toucher* is interested in tracking the line that separates Nancy's ecotechnics and *technē* of bodies from those thinkers, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Didier Franck, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Maine de Biran, who in different ways and to different degrees do register the irreducibility of spacing, of the other, of the untouchable, in all touching – of tact in all contact. And yet Derrida is eager to discern some distinction. The line drawn under the tradition – between Nancy and metaphysics – is that of exscription and the technological supplementarity that it presupposes – that all writing is outside itself, prosthetic.

Qui l'a prise en compte, comme il m'a toujours semblé qu'on devait le faire et comme Nancy n'y a jamais manqué, avec une insistance de plus en plus lisible, avec une puissante cohérence conceptuelle toujours indissociable d'une force d'écriture (ou d'excription)? En dehors de lui, et s'agissant au moins du toucher, qui a reconnu à cette suppléantarité *technique* du corps, comme il me semble toujours qu'on doit le faire (et c'est bien entendu ce qui m'oriente ici), son lieu d'essentielle et de nécessaire originarité?

Who takes it into account, as it has always seemed to me that one should do, and as Nancy has never failed to do, with an increasingly legible insistence, a powerful conceptual consistency that has always remained indissociable from his forceful writing (or exscription)? Apart from him, in dealing with touch at least, who has recognized the locus of this *technical* supplementarity of the body and acknowledged its essential and necessary originarity, as it seems to me that one should always do (and that of course is what is orienting me here)?²⁵

A thinker like Chrétien would instead reduce the spacing of exscription to a certain phenomenon of finitude as mediating interval that would be elevated and uplifted by an infinite spiritual touching (the hand of God). This Christological thinking would also continue to think a passage or continuity between the infinite immediate and the finite mediate – the Logos made flesh in the guise of transubstantiation or incarnation. There is a thought here of substitution, but one that is quite different from Nancy's technological prostheticity and one in which the finite is always a substitute for the infinite and will have therefore always already have been relieved. For Nancy, by contrast, the logic of exscription necessitates the finite only substitute for the finite albeit ceaselessly. This is expressly stated in the passage quoted above that is cited by Derrida: 'the fact that, through [writing], all sense is exscribed, ceaselessly refuses to come back to itself and that all thinking is the finite thinking of these infinite excesses'. What worries Derrida is precisely this 'ceaselessly' which suggests that, notwithstanding the fact that Nancy thinks the untouchable more exactly than the metaphysical tradition, he still succumbs to a temptation to subordinate the finite to the infinite. Finite thinking remains a thinking *of* the infinite.

D'ailleurs, Nancy doit aussi prendre en compte l'arrachement à cette finitude, l'ouverture à l'excès de l'infini dans l'expérience même de l'*excrit*, et là sans doute se produit le moment de la vérité, sinon le moment de vérité.

Furthermore, in the very experience of the *exscribed*, Nancy must also take into account a tearing away from this finiteness and an opening toward the excess of the infinite, and there, no doubt, the truthful moment is produced, if not the moment of truth.²⁶

In short, the failure to renounce truth and universality risks losing all the credit that Nancy has gained over the metaphysical tradition by giving too much credit to touch, despite his explicit warning against precisely that. Derrida picks up on this notion of ‘credit’ throughout the book and deploys the metaphor to warn against a transcendental reduction that would credit everything to touch:

Le discours s’y étend à tous les registres [...] touche ainsi à tous les sens. Il y intègre la dimension infinie du ‘se toucher’ qui touche à tous, au tangeant, au tangible, *et* à l’intangible. Transcendentalisant ou ontologisant tout ce qui revient à ‘le toucher’, il dépense comme un fou, jusqu’à la ruine, les ressources, le crédit, le capital et les intérêts du transcendental-ontologique. Il les réduit, me semble-t-il, à des simulacres monétaires.

His discourse extends to all the registers [...] it touches on all the senses, it integrates the infinite dimension of the ‘self-touching’ that touches on everything, on the tangent, the tangible, and the intangible. Nancy transcendentalizes or ontologizes everything that comes down to ‘touching’, and like a madman he goes on a ruinous spree, spending the resources, the credit, the capital, and the interest of the transcendental-ontological. He reduces them to monetary simulacra, it seems to me.²⁷

Derrida’s deployment of the metaphor of monetary exchange should be understood in the context of the general economy of fetishism described in *Glas*, a text in which one of the primary arguments concerns the relationship between the transcendental and a generalised logic of substitutability.²⁸ The difficulty, from Derrida’s standpoint, is that, if touch is diversified to the point where *everything* comes down to touch – where such an exorbitant privilege is thus accorded to touch that it is erected as a transcendental – everything will come crashing down, all the credit and financial resources dissipated. This auto-immunity of such fetishism is why Derrida will describe touch as a quasi-transcendental – ‘*Quasi*, parce que le toucher se donne comme intouchable. Si c’était une catégorie, elle serait aussi ce qui l’emporte au-delà d’elle-même, comme l’écrit s’exporte dans l’*excrit* [*quasi*, because the touchable of this touch gives itself over as untouchable. If it were a category, it would also be that which carries it off beyond itself, just as writing exports itself into *exscription*]’.²⁹ Insofar as touch is awarded this exceptional privilege, it undoes and ruins it in advance by becoming what it is not, namely tact. Inscription likewise is always already exscribing itself.

One consequence of crediting everything to touch is, as Nancy never tires of saying, ‘il n’y a pas “le” toucher [there is no “the” sense of touch]’.³⁰ Among so many kinds of touch there is no original that is then replaced by substitutes. Rather, every register and sense is just another prosthetic supplement that can be substituted for any other without origin. This is what is meant by a generalisation of fetishism. But what these prosthetic substitutes for touch share is the irreducibility of the untouchable. Derrida will thus speak of ‘cette hyper-transcendental-ontologisation du tact (plutôt que *du toucher*) [hyper-transcendental-ontologisation of *tact* (rather than *touching*)]’.³¹ The deconstruction of Merleau-Ponty in *Le toucher* is illustrative here. The phenomenologist is to be given credit for observing that the experience of touching my own hand involves an encounter with alterity *like* touching the hand of the other. Merleau-Ponty, however, in fact suppresses difference on a higher level by preferring the coincidence of coincidence (my hand) with noncoincidence (the other’s hand) over their noncoincidence. As Geoffrey Bennington has observed, Derrida’s argument about Nancy would appear to credit him with thinking exteriority more exactly than the phenomenologists while objecting

that, in the end, he too prefers coincidence to noncoincidence albeit at a higher level.³² This would be because all the myriad proliferations of different kinds of tact – all these noncoincidences – would share and coincide in the law of *noli me tangere*, do not touch.

Addressing Nancy's definition of touch as finitude, Derrida remarks in the book's closing pages: 'On pourrait en conclure à une irréductible pensée de la transcendance, au risque d'aller contre la lecture que beaucoup font de l'œuvre de Nancy, à commencer par Nancy lui-même. [One could conclude from this – at the risk of going against the reading that many have done of Nancy's work, beginning with Nancy himself – that what we have here is an irreducible thinking of transcendence]'.³³ He promises to 'show some tact' and 'leave it be', and then begins to point towards the self-deconstruction of this quasi-transcendental, to 'la différance du tact [the *différance* of tact]' in its undecidability between not only touch and tact but also self-dividing between the intangible ('le ne-pas-pouvoir-toucher [*cannot-touch*]') and the untouchable ('le ne-pas-devoir-toucher [*must-not-touch*]') and within that between a must-not because one cannot, a must-not because one can, a must-not must-not because one cannot not have to, and a must that must not insofar as it exceeds all obligation. The trick is to refuse any gathering of this self-dissemination. Otherwise put, the *différance* of tact is *écriture* in the enlarged sense in which Derrida uses this term or, in Nancy's terms, writing insofar as it is always already exscription.

Derrida, however, retains a certain scepticism towards Nancy's notion of exscription, wondering whether the inscription of the uninscribable in its inscription itself is not still a way of appropriating the impossible, albeit as 'l'appropriation de l'inappropriable [the appropriation of the inappropriable]'³⁴ as Nancy has it. This will be recurring site of a disagreement that Derrida has with Nancy and Heidegger alike, who both make the impossible – whether as a being-towards-death, tact, the inappropriable or the uninscribable – into something of which one is capable, whereas for Derrida the impossible marks the limit of a power or possibility – of an 'I can'. On two occasions when he responded to talks by Nancy in 1980 and 2002, Derrida raised the same concern, affirming that, for him, the 'you must, therefore you cannot' of the imperative must be distinguished from the 'performative power' of the 'I can'.³⁵ In a footnote in *Le toucher* commenting on a passage quoted from Nancy's *Corpus* where he defines a body as 'ce qui, d'une écriture et *proprement* d'elle, n'est pas à lire [that which of a writing – *properly* of it – is not for reading]',³⁶ this 'properly' gives Derrida pause. Continuing to harbour doubts as to the possibility of a 'properness' of writing, Derrida goes straight to the definition of exscription given in the preceding paragraph and quoted earlier in this article according to which what is exscribed is the edge that remains for inscription 'son autre propre bord [its own-other edge]'. While he concedes that there is perhaps a pedagogical justification for this phrasing, Derrida nonetheless warns that 'la chose est grave [it is a serious matter indeed]'.³⁷

These anxieties are closely related to a longstanding point of contention and possible misunderstanding between Nancy and Derrida regarding the latter's elliptical definition: 'la différance infinie est finie [infinite *différance* is finite]'.³⁸ In one of the Strasbourg conversations from 2004 with Lacoue-Labarthe, when Nancy mischievously raises the issue of distinguishing his 'infinite finitude' from Derrida's 'finite infinitude', Derrida rolls his eyes ('Voilà, ça commence... [Okay, here we go...]').³⁹ Even as one tries to think the deconstruction of the opposition between infinite and finite – something which Derrida, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe all strive to – there is always the risk of ontologising deconstruction's autoimmune condition of possibility. From Derrida's perspective Nancy risks hypostatizing impossibility in his attachment to Christian motifs of fraternity,

community and touch. Bennington notes how in *Une pensée finie* Nancy even misquotes Derrida's pithy phrase, switching the 'infinite' with the 'finite', in a footnote shortly after the passage quoted above on exscription.⁴⁰ These tensions over the infinity of finitude are manifest across Nancy's oeuvre. In addition to the examples discussed by Bennington, in a recent dialogue between Nancy and Badiou the former again twists Derrida's phrase in the direction of the infinite: 'infinite jouissance is finite', echoing Derrida's construction, is immediately followed by, 'The finite opens itself infinitely'.⁴¹ Much earlier, before he misquotes Derrida's slogan in *Une pensée finie*, Nancy was concerned with the articulation of the infinite with finitude in texts such as 'The Inoperative Community' where he speaks of 'l'interruption finie du désir infini, et l'infinie syncope du désir fini [the finite interruption of infinite desire, and the infinite syncope of finite desire] that takes place in community',⁴² of 'la naissance infinie de la finitude [the infinite birth of finitude]'⁴³ and of community as 'une tâche infinie au cœur de la finitude [an infinite task at the heart of finitude]'.⁴⁴

The inclination towards the infinite recurs in the essay on 'Le vestige de l'art' where the vestige is defined as 'sa touche [...] ou bien encore, dans les termes que j'employais tout à l'heure, il en serait la *finition infinie* (ou l'*infinition*) et non la *perfection finie* [its touch {...}] or in still other terms, those I was using a moment ago, it would be its *infinite finishing* (or *infinishing*) and not its *finite perfection*']'.⁴⁵ As Nancy explains a few pages earlier, by *infinishing* he means a perfection that is always in progress without reaching completion, but one can see here that this '*per-fectio finie, ou vestigiale* [*finite or vestigial per-fectio*]'⁴⁶ bends towards the infinite with Nancy characterising the vestige as:

cette *finition finie*, si on essaye d'entendre par là un achèvement qui se limite à ce qu'il est, mais qui, pour cela même, ouvre la possibilité d'un autre achèvement, et qui est donc aussi bien *finition infinie*

this *finite finishing*, if one attempts to understand thereby a completion that limits itself to what it is, but that, to achieve that very thing, opens the possibility of another completion, and that is therefore also *infinite finishing*.⁴⁷

The difficulty here is that it risks upholding teleology in the form of its suspension – a perfection that is infinitely deferred, an inscription ceaselessly exscribed, touch in endless retreat – but still *on track* for competition, inscription, contact and so forth, rather than ruined and strewn hither and thither from the outset. A finitely infinite *différance* instead produces the goal of unity as impossible from the outset, as a merely phantasmic effect of its irreducible, originary spacing and sharing out (*partage*) which thus divides into finite and infinite, and finitely infinite and infinitely infinite, and so on.

Animality

There is another name for the finitude of infinite *différance* and for its dispersive, prosthetic effects – one which points to another lacuna in Nancy's thinking of the vestige. This lacuna came to play an increasingly conspicuous role in Derrida's later thought, but it was also thoroughly imbricated with the earliest thought of *différance*: in the essay on Edmond Jabes in *L'écriture et la différence* he defines *différance* as 'une animalité de la lettre [an animality of the letter]' which is 'l'équivocité première et infinie du signifiant comme Vie [...] cette surpuissance comme vie du signifiant [the primal and infinite equivocality of the signifier as Life (...)] this super-power as life of the signifier'.⁴⁸ Against this openness towards the animal, Derrida observes an intimacy between the metaphysics of touch and the anthropocentrism he

dubs ‘humainisme [humanualism]’. It is Nancy’s emphasis on technicity and plasticity that sets him apart from the anthropocentric tradition:

Celle-ci, s’ouvrant à l’histoire des animalités et de l’hominisation, portent d’un coup au-delà des limites anthropologiques ou anthropo-théologiques, voire onto-théologiques dans lesquelles se tient en particulier, malgré tant de réductions dénégatives, [...] la phénoménologie.

Opening onto the history of animalities and hominization, the latter reach, at a stroke, beyond the anthropological, anthropotheological, or even ontotheological limits within which phenomenology stands, in spite of so many reductions and denials.⁴⁹

If Nancy’s ecotechnics leaves room for the question of the animal, in contradistinction to the metaphysical tradition, this gap is brusquely closed in the thinking of vestige. One of Nancy’s privileged figures for spacing is the syncope or rhythmic interruption – the ‘métronome de mon hétéronomie [metronome of my heteronomy]’,⁵⁰ as Derrida puts it. The step, Nancy suggests, ‘rythme le visible d’invisible, ou bien l’inverse [rhythms the visible and the invisible, or the other way around]’⁵¹ – and, one assumes by extension, the finite and the infinite. But animals, however fascinating the rhythms of their steps may be, are explicitly excluded from vestigial perfection:

Du pas des animaux, il y aurait beaucoup à dire, de leurs rythmes et de leurs allures, de leurs traces multipliées, vestiges de pattes ou d’odeurs, et de ce qui chez l’homme fait vestige animal. Ici encore, il faudrait se tourner vers ce que Bataille nomma la ‘bête de Lascaux’. (À supposer qu’on puisse ignorer, en deçà de l’animal, toutes les autres sortes de pas ou de passages, les pesées, frottements, contacts, toutes les touches, striures, rayures, marbrures, éraflures...) / Mais je prendrai le risque de dire que le vestige est de l’homme.

Concerning the step of animals, there would be much to say: about their rhythms and their gaits, about their proliferated traces, vestiges of their paws or odors, and about that which in man is an animal vestige. Here again, one would have to turn in the direction of what Bataille called the ‘beast of Lascaux’. (All of which presumes that one can overlook, on the other side of animality, all the other sorts of steps or passages, the pressures, frictions, contacts, all the touches, ridges, scratches, blotches, grazes...) / But I will take the risk of saying that the vestige is man’s, of man.⁵²

Can one, though, presume that one can simply overlook all those animal steps? Curiously enough Derrida’s animality, at least in its earliest conception, seems to have been stepless. In ‘Ellipse’, Derrida offers a colourful description of writing’s animality:

Le volume, le rouleau de parchemin devaient s’introduire dans le trou dangereux, pénétrer furtivement dans l’habitation menaçante, par un mouvement animal, vif, silencieux, lisse, brillant, glissant, à la manière d’un serpent ou d’un poisson. Tel est le désir inquiet du livre.

The volume, the roll of parchment, was to have insinuated itself into the dangerous hole, was to have furtively penetrated into the menacing dwelling place with an animal-like, quick, silent, smooth, brilliant, sliding motion, in the fashion of a serpent or a fish. Such is the anxious desire of the book.⁵³

By Derrida's final seminar, having passed through an entire menagerie across his corpus, the beasts that populate the pages of *La bête et le souverain* are no less furtive, but their furtiveness is now precisely a function of the step – writing's silent, stealthy approach now comes *à pas de loup*. Derrida confesses that he chose the expression containing the *pas/step* because of the negation of the homonym: it names an animality present in its absence, present only as a phantasm, whose approach is noiseless and almost imperceptible.

L'une des nombreuses raisons pour lesquelles j'ai choisi, dans ce lot de proverbes, celui qui forme le syntagme 'à pas de loup', c'est justement que l'absence du loup s'y dit aussi dans l'autre opération silencieuse du 'pas', du vocale 'pas' qui laisse entendre, mais sans aucun bruit, l'intrusion sauvage de l'adverbe de négation (*pas, pas de loup, il n'y a pas de loup, il n'y a pas le loup*), l'intrusion clandestine, donc, de l'*adverbe* de négation 'pas' dans le *nom*, dans 'le pas de loup'. Un adverbe hante un nom. L'adverbe 'pas' s'est introduit en silence, à pas de loup, dans le nom 'pas'.

One of the many reasons why I chose, in this bunch of proverbs, the one which forms the syntagm *pas de loup*, is precisely that the absence of the wolf is also expressed in it in the silent operation of the *pas*, the word *pas* which implies, but without any noise, the savage intrusion of the adverb of negation (*pas, pas de loup, il n'y a pas de loup* [there is no wolf], *il n'y a pas le loup* ['the wolf is not here', perhaps even 'there is no such thing as the wolf']) – the clandestine intrusion, then, of the *adverb* of negation (*pas*) in the *noun*, in *le pas de loup*. An adverb haunts a noun. The adverb *pas* has slipped in silently, stealthy as a wolf, *à pas de loup*, into the noun *pas* [step].⁵⁴

The *pas* is part of a painstaking deconstruction of the opposition between beast and sovereign that is undertaken throughout the seminar. If *bêtise* cannot be the property of the beast but is only proper to humankind, in the same way that cats cannot be naked, it is because there is nothing more human than to touch the limits and even to step across the threshold of the human. Conversely, the line that divides sovereign man from beast is also blurred insofar as power of the vestigial wolf turns out to be all the stronger and all-conquering – all the more sovereign – 'que le loup n'est pas là, qu'il n'y a pas le loup lui-même, fors un "pas de loup", excepté un "pas de loup", sauf un "pas de loup", seulement un "pas de loup" [for the fact that the wolf is not there, that there is not the wolf itself, were it not for a *pas de loup*, except for a *pas de loup*, save a *pas de loup*, only a *pas de loup*]'.⁵⁵ To translate this 'force of the insensible' back into Nancy's discourse of vestigial in/finishing, it is precisely to the extent that it appears in the guise of a mere footprint, scarcely there, the mere trace of a touch at the limit, that the infinite has tremendous power. But the stronger and more omnipotent it becomes, the more this bestiality threatens to invert into animality.

Returning to Nancy's ellipsis, his intention is clearly not to reinstate the man of humanism, who recognises himself in the imitation of his own Idea or the Idea of his ownness and propriety – the man-image through which he reappropriates himself to himself. Nancy is instead interested in the differential rhythms of "Les gens", mot-vestige s'il en est [*gens*, a vestige word if ever there was one]⁵⁶: genres, genders, generations, engenderings, genericity without generality or what he calls being-singular-being. Nancy's reference to this family of words recalls Derrida's *Genèses, généalogies, genres et le genie*, one of a small number of texts dedicated to the writing of Hélène Cixous. Animals of all kinds – ants, silkworms, spiders, hedgehogs, moles, hares, bees, swans, birds of all kinds, horses, cats, yelping dogs, half-buried squirrels, elephants, as well as the mythical hybrid faun, and even telefauns and

elephones where animality and inanimate, technical life become indiscernible – dart or creep more or less stealthily across the pages of their various exchanges, often functioning as metaphors for the life of writing. It is also in its *body*, where it touches the page, that Cixous' writing exhibits an animal quality:

Qui n'a pas vu la ligne même de son écriture manuelle manquera quelque chose d'essentiel dans ce qui communique au corps du texte publié cette vie inspirée et cette animalité, cette manualité souple de la plume, cette accélération patiente de la lettre, fine, vive, agile, sûre, économe, claire, lisible, emportée dans une cursivité ininterrompue et inimaginablement curieuse [...]. Son écriture me rappelle tous les écureuils du monde.

Whoever has not set eyes on the lines of her handwriting will be missing something essential of the vivacity and animality they communicate to the body of the published text, the supple handling of the pen, the patient acceleration of the letter: fine, lively, agile, sure, economical, clear, legible running on in an uninterrupted and unimaginably curious cursiveness [...]. Her handwriting reminds me of all the squirrels in the world.⁵⁷

In Cixous' *écriture*, handwriting and the animality of the letter become undecidable, but this ought not be mistaken for the *gens* of which Nancy speaks. Nor should the vestiges of her hand be confused with any other phantasm of the *humainist* tradition: filiation, sovereignty and so forth. What separates Cixous' genius from the seamless continuity of genesis, genre or genealogy is the undecidable line it draws between literature's absolute secret and how it appears – between the infinitely secret and the vestige of the secret. If literature comes in the footsteps of the dream, it at once guards the dream's secret and hands it over to reader without allowing it to be grasped as such and without allowing reading to choose, Derrida suggests, between reality and fiction – in other words, between the wolf and its vestigial phantasm. Writing's power is the *Toute-Puissance-Autre*, in Cixous' phrase,⁵⁸ because it gives the power to read all the while taking it back, denying any authority or sovereignty over the text, and it thus forces the reader to give way to writing as what comes from the other. Exscription, then, is that 'test of unconditional hospitality'⁵⁹ which opens us up to being touched by the other whose clandestine approach, far from following any generic track or in the footsteps of any filiation or tribe, creeps up unnoticed *à pas de loup* and thereby breaks away from the pack. Writing is always this surprise because there is no touch, no contact with the page, that would not already have been scattered and dispersed by animal prints and cries and by the beastly prostheticity of all the senses.

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Notes

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- ¹ Nancy, 'Le vestige de l'art', 154/96. [In the case of French texts, the page number before the slash refers to the original pagination, the number after the slash to that of the English translation. In the bibliography, the French original and its English translation are combined into a single entry, ordered according to the French title.]
- ² *Ibid.*, 156/97.
- ³ See Derrida, *Le toucher*, 176/152–153.
- ⁴ Nancy, 'Le vestige de l'art', 158/99.
- ⁵ Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, 108–109/72–73.
- ⁶ Derrida, *La bête et le souverain I*, 1ff./19ff.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 140/96.
- ⁸ See Derrida, *La bête et le souverain I*, 46/23.
- ⁹ See Cixous, *Ayā!*
- ¹⁰ Nancy, 'Le vestige de l'art', 152/94.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 153/95.
- ¹² Derrida, *Feu la cendre*, 57/72.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Derrida, *Feu la cendre*, 21/37.
- ¹⁵ Nancy, 'Le vestige de l'art', 156/98.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156/97.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 153/95.
- ¹⁸ Nancy, *Corpus*, 16–19. [Note that this is a bilingual edition, so the page ranges include both the French and the English.]
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 86–87.

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- ²¹ See Derrida, *La main de Heidegger*, 46–47/40. See also the passage where refers *Le toucher*'s deconstruction of *humanisme* in *La bête et le souverain II*, 130/83.
- ²² Derrida, *Le toucher*, 176/152.
- ²³ Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, 18/8.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13/5.
- ²⁵ Derrida, *Le toucher*, 251/223.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 308/272.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 306/271.
- ²⁸ Derrida, *Glas*, 230a/209a.
- ²⁹ Derrida, *Le toucher*, 311/275.
- ³⁰ Nancy, *Corpus*, 118–19. Cf. Derrida, *Le toucher*, 125/107, 129/111, 147/128.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 326/291.
- ³² Bennington, 'Handshake', 182–183.
- ³³ Derrida, *Le toucher*, 334/298.
- ³⁴ Nancy, 'Le poids d'une pensée', 9/80.
- ³⁵ See Nancy, 'La voix libre de l'homme', 183/49. Also see Nancy, 'Responsabilité du sens', 177/67.
- ³⁶ Nancy, *Corpus*, 86/87.
- ³⁷ Derrida, *Le toucher*, 146n1/338n28.
- ³⁸ Derrida, *La voix*, 114/ 87.
- ³⁹ Derrida et al., 'Dialogue entre Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe et Jean-Luc Nancy', 88/18.
- ⁴⁰ See Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, 20n/321n11.
- ⁴¹ Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*.
- ⁴² Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, 51/19.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 70/28.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 89/37.
- ⁴⁵ Nancy, 'Le vestige de l'art', 156/98.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 144/88.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 143/87.
- ⁴⁸ Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, 108–109/72–73.
- ⁴⁹ Derrida, *Le toucher*, 249/220.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 326/290.
- ⁵¹ Nancy, 'Le vestige de l'art', 156/98.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 158/99.
- ⁵³ Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, 433/298.
- ⁵⁴ Derrida, *La bête et le souverain I*, 24/5.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25/6.
- ⁵⁶ Nancy, 'Le vestige de l'art', 159/100.
- ⁵⁷ Derrida, *Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie*, 50/39.
- ⁵⁸ Cixous, *Manhattan*, 1/viii.
- ⁵⁹ Derrida, *Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie*, 59/48.

Biography

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