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Jean-Luc Nancy, a Romantic Philosopher?

on romance, love, and literature

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For T., for J.-L. N.

This paper will, in its successive steps and movements, revolve around one single question, a question that might, at first sight, come across as somewhat irrelevant or even impertinent within the context of philosophical or academic discourse. How romantic is Jean-Luc Nancy? Or: is there a specifically Nancyan sense of romance? There were times when I thought there were more relevant questions to ask, like: what kind of ontology is implied in Nancy's work? Or to what extent is Nancy re-treating religion?¹ But I am increasingly convinced that the question of love, or indeed more specifically of *romance*, is the most intimate inspiration of Nancy's work, the key unlocking all other keys.² The theme of love has always played an important role in his work, from the early essay "Shattered Love" ("L'amour en éclats," 1986) to his later works on the body and pleasure. In this paper, I will touch upon a number of these texts, but I will more particularly refer to two of Nancy's more recent works, the recently translated work *Sexistence* (2021, published in French in 2017) and *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature* (2018, published in French in 2015 as *Demande: Littérature et philosophie*).³

The question of romance, that is, the question of passionate interaction, of intrigue, of writing, of dramatization. This quite heterogeneous web of associations already implies a number of age-old philosophical issues: the relation between love and thinking; the relation between love and literature; and, subsequently,

aukje van rooden

**JEAN-LUC NANCY,
A ROMANTIC
PHILOSOPHER?
on romance, love, and
literature**

between philosophy and literature; the issue of the relation itself. The knot uniting these issues under the single heading of "romance" has been most firmly tied about two centuries ago, in the late eighteenth-century movement of early German, i.e., Jena, Romanticism, that significant moment in intellectual history where the barriers between philosophy and literature were broken down and where, quite generally put, the sense of the world was conceived of as a matter of *romanticization*.

Although Nancy himself would be reluctant to call himself a Romantic philosopher in this

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nancy, a romantic philosopher?

historical sense of the word, this is exactly what I want to argue here: I want to show that Nancy's philosophy of love – and by extension his philosophical thinking *tout court* – should be placed in the tradition of German Romanticism, rather than in that of, for instance, phenomenology, ontology, or philosophy proper. This claim is massive in its depth and scope and can impossibly be explored here in an exhaustive way. Instead, I will flesh out this perspective by advancing four successive hypotheses that enable to mark the contours of what I call Nancy's romanticism. With this exploration, I hope to do three things at once: firstly, to underscore what I take to be the core or pulse of Nancy's thinking; the issue of romance; secondly, to investigate to what extent this romantic pulse might be traced back to the Romantic tradition; and, thirdly, to emphasize why Nancy's romantic thinking is relevant for us today.

let love in

Let me start with the relation between philosophy and love. In a sense to speak of philosophy is always to speak of its relation to love, or rather, of philosophy *as* a relation of love, a love relation. After all, its etymology prevents philosophy from being *unrelated* to love, to the desire or love of wisdom, truth, or thinking, irrespective of the exact meanings attributed to these words. But, as Nancy has pointed out in "Shattered Love," the whole point is to understand what this love relation consists of. If philosophy is to be understood as the love of thinking, then, Nancy holds, "perhaps *only in spite of all philosophies*," that is, only insofar as philosophy is *something else than* philosophy, since what we call "philosophy" has "betrayed" this love ("Shattered Love" 84).

But if philosophy is the betrayer of its own essence, cheats on its own love, it is, according to Nancy, notoriously so, compulsively, and this holds for all philosophies. Philosophy cannot but betray its essence. Or as Nancy puts it: "If thinking is love, that would mean (insofar as thinking is confused with philosophy) that thinking misses its own essence –

that is misses by essence its own essence" ("Shattered Love" 90–91). Predominantly being "lovers" of the possessive type, philosophers usually attempt to "master" what offers itself to thought, to "privilege," "hierarchize," and "exclude" (83) within the "mastery of a triumphant doctrine" (85). According to Nancy, "thinking" should in fact be the opposite of such an attempt to master or possess. Indeed, as befits a love relation, thinking should consist of the exposition to what exceeds it, of "a reticence that lets the singular moments of this experience offer and arrange themselves" (83).

The point, then, for Nancy – and this is my first hypothesis – is not to make room for love in philosophical thinking, but to think love in such a way that thinking itself becomes loving, that it takes place in a loving way, as an "act" of love. Indeed, Nancy asserts: "'love' [...] would name the *act* of thinking as much or as more than it would its *nature*" ("Shattered Love" 84; my italics). But if thinking is an act of love, what does this love consist of? According to what philosophical tradition or model do we have to understand it? Although Nancy, in "Shattered Love," traverses virtually the whole Western tradition, to align himself perhaps mostly with the Heideggerian idea of Care (*Sorge*), I believe it is in his 2008 conference for children, his *petite conférence sur l'amour*, that he has found the most powerful and also most outspoken formulation of this love: namely, in terms of a *passionate romantic* love, in the ordinary sense of the word, the whimsical love that strikes uninvitedly, the love that cannot but be expressed at the risk of changing everything.

The central figure in this conference on love is the famous child's play of plucking the petals of a daisy while singing the rhyme "he loves me, he loves me not" or "she loves me, she loves me not." Picking one petal of the flower for each phrase, the phrase uttered on picking the last one supposedly expresses the nature of the love at stake. Tellingly for his exposé, the French rhyme referred to by Nancy differs in a crucial respect from the English one – a difference that is passed over in silence by the

translator. Whereas the English rhyme – but as far as I can tell also those in most other languages – speak of a binary “yes” or “no” (they love me, they love me not), the – perhaps typically French, but at least typically Nancyan – love is a whole spectrum of loves, a proliferation of different forms and intensities. The French rhyme taken by Nancy as a reference does not indicate *whether* there is love, but *to what extent*. It does not say “I love you, I love you not,” but says “I love you a little, a lot, passionately, madly, not at all” (*je t’aime un peu, beaucoup, passionnément, à la folie, pas du tout*).⁴

This proliferation of love(s) was already anticipated by the title of Nancy’s early essay “Shattered Love,” *l’amour en éclats*, suggesting love to be shattering, bursting, scattering. The figure of the child’s play, however, also enables an important and crucial *assessment* of the gradations of love. In the end – and this is my second hypothesis – , for Nancy a relation is only one of love when it is *passionate*. The first two varieties “I love you a little, a lot” cannot be love according to Nancy because “the emphasis is entirely on me” (“Love” 70). Indeed, measured by *my* preferences, I like you a little, or a lot, better than him or her. Conversely, in the case of madness or *un amour à la folie*, the emphasis is entirely on the other. Where loving “a little, a lot” is too little to be called love, loving madly is too much to be called love: “Love is thrilling, and it can make you want to do anything. But in the end it can also ask too much of the other person and of yourself” (77–78). “At the extreme,” Nancy remarks, “it’s even possible for two people to destroy each other” (77).

The urge to rethink love in philosophy stressed in the essay “Shattered Love,” is now presented in its most acute form. Stretched between the poles of self-absorption and destruction, love is for Nancy the most lively expression of what it means to *be*, together, in co-existence.⁵ If he wants to open or re-open thinking to love, to think lovingly, this is because the forgetfulness of love proper to philosophy is in the end nothing else than a forgetfulness of being. “[L]ove is missing from

philosophical ontology” (89), Nancy therefore concludes “Shattered Love,” reading the Heideggerian history of the forgetfulness of being in terms of philosophy’s blind spot for this law of love (which, in the end, is also the law of philosophy itself).⁶

This law of love is that of a necessary transcendence or transgression, of an “extreme movement beyond the self” (Nancy, “Shattered Love” 86). This is also why passionate love can only be unquantifiable. As Nancy has it: “‘I love you’ is absolute. We must say ‘I love you,’ period” (“Love” 69). The law of love – and we all know this – is to be blown away, to be knocked off your feet, in an unanticipated manner. In Nancy’s words: “[i]n love, we are two [and] from the moment we are two, everything changes” (70).⁷ *Everything changes*, without reserve, and without end. The inevitable option of this one petal of passion, of this one touch by passionate love thus disengages the whole economy of successive, classifiable gradations,⁸ making the love affair not so much a binary affair of loving and not loving, but a *rhythmic*, syncopating one, never guaranteed and therefore to be renewed all the time, both stopping and setting in motion the whole proliferation of intensities of love.⁹

Although setting everything in motion, not much is needed for love to strike as Nancy argues in “Shattered Love”:

As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts across and that disconnects the elements of the subject proper – the fibers of its heart. One hour of love is enough, one kiss alone, provided that it is out of love – and can there, in truth, be any other kind? (96)

So love may well be beyond measure, it certainly doesn’t lack concreteness. What counts in love, or *as* love, is not the ideal or the eternal, but is always *concrete* (sometimes also called “discrete” by Nancy). It is, as Derrida had aptly put it in *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, a matter of “exorbitant exactitude” (26). Not surprisingly then, and in line with

nancy, a romantic philosopher?

Derrida's characterization of Nancy's work as a philosophy of the *touch*, love exemplarily manifests itself for Nancy in the *caress*, which he takes to be the "gesture of love": "The caress teaches us that what counts in love is the presence of the other, the touch of the other, and, in a certain sense, nothing (of the) other (*rien d'autre*)" ("Love" 75).

In his recent book *Sexistence* (2017), Nancy (inevitably I would say¹⁰) takes his work on love and the touch to a point that some would perhaps consider most unromantic: he suggests to consider *sex* to be the truth of love. Sensationalist as this claim might seem, *Sexistence* is in my view a work of invaluable importance, and unprecedented both in the philosophical tradition and, for reasons that will become clear, in Nancy's oeuvre. Although Nancy considers love and sex to be "almost similar" (*Sexistence* 158; all translations are mine), his point is not to take them as completely synonymous.¹¹ Rather, Nancy considers sex as that what *in* love makes up, in a paradigmatic way, its ontological disposition. In his 2001 essay "The 'There Is' of Sexual Relation," Nancy already described this specific ontological disposition as a non-substantial one. Insofar a sexual relation is to be considered a relation, this relation "is" not, according to Nancy; it does not have any permanence or substance, since sex is not there before or independently of the act: "If relation is pursued from the angle of a 'something,' we can say that here is no relation *of* the sexual, or that the sexual does not relate anything" ("The 'There Is' of Sexual Relation" 5). Not only can the sexual act be dispersed over an unlimited series of looks, hints, advances, and retreats, it is also never really "there," which is to say that it designates "that which is not any thing [...] but happens between things" (6).¹²

Indeed, we can see how all three characteristics attributed to the passionate romantic love relation are intensified in sexual intercourse: firstly, the *lack of permanence* of this always to be renewed relation; secondly, the *immeasurability* of unreserved passionate exposition; and, thirdly, the material *concreteness* of the loving touch. By situating sex at

the heart of his view on love, Nancy also dissociates his thinking of love more clearly from competing models like that of divine, parental, or marital love. Furthermore, the perhaps still somewhat rosy picture of the crushing nature of passionate love given in his conference for children, now more explicitly includes the physicality, the *eros* and *jouissance* of love-making.

making love (with language)

The next step is to link this view on romantic, passionate love with Romanticism. What makes *Sexistence* and Nancy's earlier texts on love Romantic in the historical sense of the word – and in my view also particularly interesting –, is the key role attributed to *language*. As is well known, the register used by Nancy to describe the love relation is predominately one of the physical body, of touch, and *jouissance*. But on closer inspection – and this is my third hypothesis –, Nancy considers the most exemplary gestures of love to be *expressions of language*. Or rather, if the caress is the paradigmatic gesture of love, as we saw earlier, it seems that Nancy takes *caressing by means of language* as the caress par excellence. Caring by means of language, that is, being touched by language, touching language. In what way exactly, then, are we to relate touch, language, and love? And in what sense can this way be called Romantic?

Let me start with the most basic and most exemplary form of love's linguistic expression: the sentence "I love you." Love, Nancy already claimed in "Shattered Love," is not expressed by the word or concept "love," but by this avowal or expression: "[L]ove's name is not 'love,' which would be a substance or a faculty, but it is this sentence, the 'I love you' just as one says 'the cogito'" (100). The specific nominalist status is of importance here. This sentence does not describe a love I already feel, nor does it perform what we can call a standard performative speech act. It is according to Nancy a statement that opens the self to the other, and that expresses – if anything – an engagement with this opening.¹³

Paradigmatically, then, the linguistic expression “I love you” lacks, or rather exceeds, every possible informative content; it is an address at the limit of speech, an excessive form of speech at the basis of which is nothing else than the desire to exceed ourselves in an exposition to one another. This was also one of the key claims alleged by Nancy in his seminal work *Being Singular Plural* (1996), written ten years after “Shattered Love.” The singular plurality of our relation, Nancy asserted here, is not expressed by “the representation of something that is real” but by “what is real in the representation – its effectiveness and its efficacy. (The paradigm for this is ‘I love you’ or, perhaps more originally, ‘I am addressing myself to you’)” (*Being Singular Plural* 58). More basically, this fundamental ontological status of the phrase “I love you” is also asserted by Nancy in his conference on love: “In a certain sense ‘I love you’ says it all, everything is contained in it. When we say ‘I love you’ we say everything” (66). Or inversely: “As long as we haven’t said ‘I love you’ we haven’t said anything” (84).¹⁴

Both in *Sexistence* and in the essay “Exclamations” (*Expectation: Philosophy, Literature*) Nancy pushes this claim to its extreme when he presents sexual exclamations to be the ultimate form of such an address at the limit of speech. Most literarily, these exclamations are language *à bout du souffle*, bursting of sense according to Nancy.¹⁵ By taking these sexual exclamations as paradigmatic, Nancy does not hint at the peculiar, private language of lovers, but at language *as such*, or, better still, at the *heart* of language, at what makes it tick so to say:

The speaking being [is] the desiring being [...] This is perfectly clear when I say “I love you, I long for you.” But in the end this holds for every true utterance that somehow exceeds the mere informative (for instance “hello” or “goodbye” or even a whole philosophical treatise, a novel or a poem, or a conversation). (*Sexistence* 47)

So it doesn’t matter if it is a single word, a silence even, or a whole narrative or book,

when expressed out of the love to exceed ourselves – and what else is expression after all? – , these are all gestural significations, modes of touching language.

Set against a somewhat dramatized historical background, the *way* in which language touches, however, has changed according to Nancy and this is where his philosophical project overlaps with that of the eighteenth-century Jena Romantics. Nancy, in *Sexistence* and elsewhere, understands this background in terms of what Hölderlin had called the “flight of the gods” and what Nancy himself in *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature* calls the absence of a “metalanguage” (57).¹⁶ In this situation, we need to “think afresh [...] how we address ourselves to ourselves” (Nancy, *Sexistence* 63). The most important point to consider in this respect is that both language and sex have entered, after the “flight of the gods,” what Nancy calls a “regime of infinitude”: “Language and sex entered a regime of infinitude at the moment their sacred character had disappeared, that is to say, at the moment when sense is no longer given as an original depot in speech and in semen” (53–54).¹⁷

Whereas love and language – that is, also loving language, exposing language – once had a well-defined meaning and goal (that is, transmitting the divine or cosmic order that was also the very source of their sense), they are now liberated from meaning and end, literally end-less, directionless, and motivated by nothing else than their own movement and circulation. Importantly, this liberated, infinite movement of sense is for Nancy, just like for the Jena Romantics, not so much a *desacralization* of our world, but rather a disclosure of its very truth, which is indeed that of being motivated or moved by nothing else than its own movement or circulation, by “*l’élan ou la poussée du sens*” as Nancy has it (*Sexistence* 54), by the vigour or impetus of sense. Already in *Being Singular Plural* Nancy had described this as “just another sort of ‘Copernican Revolution’”: social being no longer revolving around something else, but “revolving around itself or turning on itself [or also *turning on itself*]” (57).

nancy, a romantic philosopher?

What Nancy takes from the Romantic tradition, then, is, firstly, the idea that this self-excitement happens in and through language, through ways of speaking and writing, and, secondly, that it is in the end perhaps *nothing but* this happening or “passing,” this passage or movement of thinking. Indeed, the Romantic’s hope for such a new Copernican revolution was what Novalis famously called a *romantization* of the world: the appeal to exposing ourselves anew, for the first time, or again and again as if for the first time, to its original sense, to the sense that originates from – or rather *is* – the everyday world itself, expressed with new élan, in our common language, the *lingua romana*.¹⁸ In Nancy’s romantic vocabulary the world’s self-exiting movement is called the *pulse*, the *pulsation* or *drive*. Indeed, as Nancy asserts, this pulse has been, in a variety of forms, the central motive of modern thought:

[...] Kant opens an epoch where Reason has to consider itself as *Trieb*, pulse, impetus [*poussée*], tension and desire moving towards an “unconditioned” that in the end proves to consist of nothing else than its own push. Called “will” by Schopenhauer, and later by Nietzsche, then appearing as “drive” with Freud – after having passed through the “labour power” of Marx and the “leap” of Kierkegaard. Definitely also through the parallel “differences” of Deleuze and Derrida – differentiation and differance that share at least the involvement of a tension, a pulse and a pulsation.¹⁹ (*Sexistence* 31)

In a sense, Nancy’s oeuvre aspires nothing else than continuing this train of modern thought, pushing it further, in unforeseen directions. Yet, even if Nancy would rightly claim that post-Kantian philosophy *as such* is a thinking of this self-excitement or pulse, it is with Jena Romanticism that it becomes an overtly *relational, plural, and linguistic* affair.²⁰

To be sure, the Jena Romantics wanted to generate a form of thinking and writing that was grafted on the infinite “energy” or

“chemistry” of connection, interaction, and exchange – of what they called “symposy” or “symphilosophy.”²¹ Moreover, as Nancy also stressed on a number of occasions, Jena Romanticism designates the moment in the history of philosophy when philosophical thinking is presented as a *literary* affair (cf. *The Literary Absolute*). Especially in their short-lived journal *Athenaeum* (1798–1800), the Jena Romantics experimented with a variety of philosophical-literary and dialogical forms of writing, many-voiced collections of fragments, letters, and conversations – all of which included, perhaps for the first time in philosophical history, the voices of women. More specifically, the moving force of what Nancy calls “*l’élan ou la poussée du sens*,” is what the Jena Romantics called the *Witz* – the witty remark or thoughtful match, the spark or *je ne sais quoi* of thinking, that what *makes sense* but is itself irretrievable. Indeed, in his book-length study of Jena Romanticism, co-authored with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy takes the Romantic *Witz* as the life-force of Romantic thinking, being “not merely a ‘form’ or a ‘genre,’” but “a spiritual faculty, a type of spirit” that “can seize upon and bring to light new, unforeseen, and, in short, creative relations” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 53).

The link between *Witz* and love imposes itself here. Not surprisingly, then, analyses of the *Witz* were at the centre of Nancy’s early writings.²² In one of the earliest of these writings, entitled “Menstruum Universale” (1978), Nancy suggests – tentatively, but clearly anticipating his most recent work on love and *sexistence* – that the logic of *Witz* should be compared to the logic of non-reproductive love-making. In a footnote to his definition of *Witz*, Nancy advances that “once again, and in many different ways, we find the union of the sexes which obeys in every respect the ‘logic’ of *Witz*” – teasingly concluding: “This aspect of the sexuality of *Witz*, [...] will not be developed here” (*The Birth to Presence* 416n3). Tellingly, it is this very essay that is republished as the programmatic prologue to Nancy’s 2018 book *Expectation: Philosophy*,

Literature. Containing a large collection of philosophical-literary texts written by Nancy over the past thirty-five years, this volume stages, as Jean-Michel Rabaté remarks in his preface, “a courtship between philosophy and literature that has never been presented with such wit, grace and finesse” (xii–xiii) and encloses in many respects the Romantic philosophical itinerary of Nancy’s that I am trying to sketch here.²³

resuscitating the romantic heart

Although the Jena Romantics are amongst Nancy’s earliest and most important sources of inspiration, Nancy is reluctant to call himself their inheritor and references to Jena Romanticism are virtually absent in his later works on love, sense, or *sexistence*. The trouble with the Jena Romantics – highlighted by Nancy – is that they, too, somehow betrayed the love of thinking. By wanting to contain it, and idealize it into a work that would famously be “complete in itself like a hedgehog” (Athenaeum fragment 206 (Firchow 1971)), they have absolutized the non-economy of love’s passionate proliferation in the form of a complete return to the self, “the torn borders folded back into the sweetness of microcosmic self-enclosure. Exposition itself ends up as introjection, return to self” (Nancy, “Art, a Fragment” 660). Having tried to turn unreserved exposition into complete self-enclosure, the Jena Romantics have perhaps even reached the opposite of love, that is, the opposite of being, a work of death, “[converting] its interruption, noncompletion, and in-finitude – into finish” (125).²⁴

Certainly, we could understand the Romantic project in terms of a necessary failure, resulting from an ambiguity at the heart of Romanticism, of a thinking that somehow, perhaps out of “naïveté” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 17), will always miss its own opportunity, that cannot but eclipse its own “unthought possibility” (Hoffman-Schwarz 202). This is what Maurice Blanchot suggests in his essay on “The Athenaeum,” where he describes this unthought possibility as “the

non-romantic essence of romanticism” (357). Critically inheriting Jena Romanticism would then be to embrace the fundamental ambiguity or aporia of Romanticism, in which the whole and the fragment, the work and its unworking, the finite and the infinite hold each other captive in a never-ending oscillation.

Nancy at times also seems to endorse this view by stressing equivocality, fragmentation, and dissolution as the main heritage of the Jena Romantics. The reason why Nancy is, in my view – in his heart – , *more* romantic than his contemporaries, is that he eventually takes another route. This is my fourth and final hypothesis. What Nancy takes from the Romantic moment is not the break, disruption, or *inoperativity*,²⁵ but – in it or behind it – the love, energy, pulse, and passion. Rather than ascribing Romanticism’s failure to a necessarily unworking, non-romantic heart of Romanticism, Nancy speaks of the “petrified” heart of Romanticism (*Expectation* 20), that is, a heart that stopped beating, that stopped opening itself to what exceeds it. We should therefore perhaps say that Nancy does not aim at pursuing the *unromantic* heart of Romanticism, like Blanchot and others do, but rather at *defrosting* the heart of Romantic thought, reopening it, resuscitating it. Not by revealing a hidden, alien core, but by *stimulating* it.²⁶ Or, as Nancy puts it in plainly Romantic terms in *Sexistence* by “alchemy, magic, chemistry, fortuitous processes, manoeuvres or encounters, by combinations and re-combinations, mutations – whatever” (119).

This is exactly – including the uncomfortable feeling of “whatever” – what makes this work unprecedented in the clarity of its attempt. The pulse used by Nancy to resuscitate the Romantic heart of thinking, the heart of Romantic thinking, is, to be sure, a plainly *romanticized*, dramatized, fictionalized language.²⁷ More so, and also more convincingly so, than in his earlier works, Nancy extends, interrupts, or rather *relays* philosophical discourse by fragments and portions from popular novels, poems, cinematic dialogues. He crosses and combines ages and places, genders and voices, from Lucretia to Céline,

nancy, a romantic philosopher?

from Pasolini to Audre Lorde – shifting from masculine to feminine voices, from the singular to the plural – letting a stammering poetic rhythm or experimental blogpost take over where his philosophical discourse risks to enclose itself upon itself, or where it gets out of breath.

With increasing pertinence, Nancy's oeuvre shows that we need a new way of thinking, a new way of addressing ourselves to ourselves, a way that helps philosophy's petrified heart to open up and fall in love, again, anew. In doing so, Nancy's work shows that what matters is not so much its propositional content, but the fact that his texts are themselves performative acts of touching, texts that address us, act upon us, rather than communicate something to us. I have suggested to call this way "romantic," because it draws its motivation from a reflection on relationality, love, and passion. And because it involves, in line with the historical moment of Romanticism, an appeal to connect philosophy, in a fundamental way, to what since then is usually called "literature" – not the non-positional tenderly touching literary-philosophical style that we have gradually become used to, but a more excessive, exorbitant one, as unsettling as the unexpectedly uttered phrase "I love you."

echo by jean-luc nancy

Aukje van Rooden leaves me speechless: she has brought something to light, the extent of which at least, but probably even its precise existence, I did not know myself. I mean to say that I have often taken recourse (like others, admittedly) to the phrase "I love you" as an example of a statement that is at the same time performative as well as void – thus, performing a void (but a void can be filled ...) – and by the same token does not make for an "example" but rather constitutes the borderline-case of the address: not a call but a statement, a declaration that declares itself overwhelmed by what it declares. Aukje van Rooden, in her final note, is right to cite the interview where I express my desire to write, not "about" sex, but "motivated" by sex (the

original French expression I used at the time escapes me, but she translates it as "motivated" ... I would say "mobilized" (*mobilisé*), "pushed" (*poussé*) – for I think that 'I love you' is in a way sexual realization (*performance*) itself: crossing the uncrossable distance ...

But, at the same time, for a very long time now, I have also thought that the gesture of philosophy is less one of knowing or even understanding than a gesture of love: philosophy means saying, or wants to say, "I love you" to being, reality or existence – precisely because it experiences the strangeness, indeed resistance or even hostility, of this reality.

What can really (*vraiment*) be said to be? Perhaps what really is, is such only if I love it. So, if I give it a place or a role that is as indispensable as it is impossible.

It seems to be that any philosophy is an attempt at not contenting oneself with saying "I love you," making this realization (*performance*) on the edge of language really real (*réellement performante*).

In fact, I will certainly have to come back to this. If I can ... For Aukje van Rooden rightly points towards the genre of fiction, which exceeds philosophy precisely because fiction performs a declaration of love (it gives existence to another). Reciprocally, "I love you" turns out or confesses itself to be fiction (not, of course, philosophy or true knowledge), but according to a faith that makes it real ...

Yet, not everyone who wants to has the voice (or the way) of fiction ...



disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 Cf. Bram Ieven, Aukje van Rooden, Marc Schuilenburg, and Sjoerd van Tuinen, eds, *De nieuwe Franse filosofie: Denkers en thema's voor de 21^e eeuw* [The New French Philosophy: Thinkers and Themes for the 21st Century] (Amsterdam:

Boom, 2011); and Alena Alexandrova, Ignaas Devisch, Laurens ten Kate, and Aukje van Rooden, eds, *Re-treating Religion. Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy* (New York: Fordham UP, 2012).

2 In many respects, this claim follows naturally from Derrida's influential portrayal of Nancy as a philosopher of the *touch* (*On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*). Albeit highly rewarding, this approach cannot but – and from Derrida's perspective of course also needs to – address the possible risks of what the latter would call a metaphysics of presence or immediacy. I believe that a characterization of Nancy as a romantic rather than a haptocentric thinker, more clearly situates Nancy's work within a framework that defies any metaphysics of immediate presence, drawing, as we will see, not only from the phenomenological tradition, but also from a thorough reflection on the thinking of *energeia* and of language.

3 The shift from “littérature et philosophie” to “philosophy, literature” – that is, from literature and philosophy as two distinguishable category genres to a presentation of the two in an interrupted continuity – is telling, as is perhaps the inversion of the order.

4 Not only the rhyme, but also the flower seems to slightly differ between languages and cultures. In France, one plucks the *marguerite* (*Chrysanthemum leucanthemum*), but for instance in The Netherlands and Germany it is the *madelief* or *Gänseblume* (*Bellis perennis*). They are related, but the latter is much smaller. In English both flowers are called *daisy*, but in American-English it refers to the *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum* and in British-English to the *Bellis perennis*.

5 “Is there life more lively than in the love-relation? [*Est-il vie plus vivante que l'amoureux rapport?*],” Nancy asks elsewhere. “Lettre à Descartes.” 4 September 2018, Stockholm (unpublished).

6 For a similar claim, see also Abbott 146.

7 This is also what makes love at the same time a matter of desire and of loss. Speaking of love and pleasure in his interview with Erik Meganck and Evelien Van Beeck, Nancy remarks: “Instead of meeting the other or myself in pleasure, I lose myself in it, as well as the other. Pleasure is therefore the *locus*, the register, of loss, of the *perte totale*” (“Jean-Luc Nancy over seks en wetenschap” 347; my translation).

8 In “Shattered Love,” Nancy had already presented love as an unsettling of economic laws, as “that which brings an end to the dichotomy between the love in which I lose myself without reserve and the love in which I recuperate myself” (96).

9 Love shares this incalculable syncopation with poetry according to Nancy. See the essays “The Poets Calculation” and “Narrative, Narration, Recitative” in *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature*.

10 In retrospective, one can discern the trajectory leading to this point from, amongst others, *Corpus* [1992], “The ‘There Is’ of Sexual Relation” [2001], and other texts on pleasure and the body (collected in English in *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013)), to *Coming* (with Adèle van Reeth (New York: Fordham UP, 2017); translation of *Jouissance* (Paris: Plon, 2014)).

11 Cf. also “Love is stimulated by sex, like sex is aroused by love [...] The one is the truth or the virtue of the other” (Nancy, *Sexistence* 158).

12 Nancy's essay draws from Lacan's famous (interrelated) claims that “there is no sexual relation” and that “*jouissance* is impossible.” I will not elaborate on Nancy's reading of Lacan or Lacanian psychoanalysis, since the intention of Nancy's essay is not to explore these statements within the tradition of psychoanalytic theory, but to investigate what exactly one is saying, ontologically, when making these claims. In this respect, the notion of the “there is” (*il y a*) of the title is less a reference to Lacan than to Levinas, and perhaps via Levinas to Blanchot. To say that sex “is” “nowhere” and can be dispersed over a possibly unlimited series of acts or events is of course also to say that it is “everywhere,” always at stake, as Nancy suggests in *Coming* “Perhaps it begins very, very far from the sexual act itself” (Nancy and van Reeth 20).

13 This is why Nancy calls the phrase “I love you” the “promise” to relate oneself to an other, a promise that is itself already a form of relating, if not the ultimate form of relating – because nothing else than that:

Love [...] always arrives in the promise and as the promise. It is thus that it touches and that it traverses. For one does not know what one says when one says “I love you,” and one does not say anything, but one knows that one says it and that it is its

nancy, a romantic philosopher?

law, absolutely: instantly, one is shared and traversed by that which does not fix itself in any subject or in any signification. ("Shattered Love" 101)

The passage continues:

if one more proof or account were necessary: the same holds true when one hears "I love you" said by an other whom one does not love and whose expectations will not be met. Despite everything, it cannot be that one is not traversed by something that, while not love itself, is nonetheless the way in which its promise touches us. (101)

14 The expression of the singular plurality of existence investigated by Nancy in *Being Singular Plural* in terms of the "I love you" or "I am addressing myself to you" is that of the *symbol*. There is no room to elaborate this line of argumentation here, but it would be very well possible to investigate Nancy's romanticism as well as its sources in the German Romantic tradition in terms of the symbolic.

15 Quoting Paul Celan in "The 'There Is' of Sexual Relation," Nancy already remarked that "[t]he kiss, at night, burns sense into language [(s)imprime une brûlure de sens]" (16).

16 This was already the main point in his 2000 text "'One day the gods withdrew ...' (Literature/Philosophy)" (inserted in *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature*) but is in an interesting way reiterated in *Sexistence*. The first version of this 2000 text, called "Entre-deux," was published in *La Magazine Littéraire* no. 392, November 2000, before being published as "Un jour, les dieux se retirent ..." (*Littérature/philosophie: entre-deux*) (Bordeaux: William Blake, 2001). Cf. also Nancy, "Éros est revenu au-devant de la scène lorsque Dieu est mort." Here we see how Nancy's work on Christianity intertwines with his work on love and language and Collins is right in noting that Nancy's work on love, mainly "Shattered Love," "can be seen as a prefiguring of his later deconstruction of Christianity project" (Collins 309). In the same vein, it would be interesting to reread Augustine's *deus interior intimo meo, superior summon meo*, often quoted by Nancy, as an expression of amorous or sexual interaction.

17 On the regime of infinitude and on the relation between sex and language, see also Nancy, "Sexistence" and "Aux bords de l'intime."

18 In Novalis' words:

The world must be made Romantic. In that way one can find the original meaning [*den ursprünglichen Sinn*] again [...] This operation is as yet quite unknown. By endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite, I am making it Romantic. – The operation for the higher, unknown mystical, infinite is the converse – this undergoes a logarithmic change through this connection – it takes on an ordinary form of expression. Romantic philosophy. *Lingua romana*. Raising and lowering by turns. (151).

19 To this philosophical-historical overview, we can also add Spinoza's *conatus* explained by Nancy in terms of love and desire, or rather of a "desire of the subject or desire as subject, and here I even dare to say: being as desire" (*La pensée dérobée* 90; my translation).

20 As well as perhaps a reflexive one, as is stressed by Nancy in his interview with Florian Pennanech, "Undoubtedly, Romanticism was the first moment in Europe's development when there was a self-awareness of that pulsation" ("Le souci poétique").

21 Exemplary in this respect are the Athenaeum fragments 112 and 375, and Ideas 23 (Firchow 1971). Moreover, the Jena Romantics oftentimes put their energetic thinking in terms of love, e.g., in Ideas fragments 83, 103, and 104.

22 Amongst the earliest texts of Nancy's on Jena Romanticism are the translation of and introduction to Jean Paul's "Sur le Witz" (with A.M. Lang). *Poétique* 15 (1973); "Le dialogue des genres" (with Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe). *Poétique* 21 (1975); "Menstruum Universale." *SubStance* 21 (1978 [1976]); *L'Absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemande* (with Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe) (Paris: Seuil, 1978); the translation of and introduction to Brentano's "Entretien sur le romantisme" (with A.M. Lang and Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe). *Po&sie* 8 (1979).

23 Also for Rabaté, then, the Romantic Witz is what most clearly characterizes the genre, form or spirit of Nancy's texts. Although Rabaté stresses the key role of Romantic Witz in the

Nancyan courtship between philosophy and literature, he, somewhat surprisingly, does not so much present Nancy as an heir of Romanticism, but as an heir of Paul Valéry, and, consequently, of symbolism. As argued above, this asks for a reflection on the role of the “symbol” in Nancy’s work, which should undoubtedly also draw from the typically Romantic preference of the symbolic over the allegoric. On Nancy’s reiteration of the Romantic theme of the Witz, see also Rabaté, “Wet the Ropes” and Kollias, “Kant with Lacan, Freud with Romanticism.”

24 In *The Literary Absolute*, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe interpret the Romantics in a similar vein as Heidegger had interpreted Schelling in *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Freedom*, that is, as one of the last metaphysics, still under the spell of some form of idealism. I want to suggest that this Heideggerian (or Schellingean) lens perhaps leads them to too hastily denounce Romanticism as a form of “eidesthetics,” while overlooking – or not choosing to follow – the romantic focus on *energeia* described by them as “the second Schlegelian path” that is, according to them, however only “a single element lost in the ensemble of the fragments” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 56–57):

The second, Schlegelian path might be indicated by *Athenaeum* fragment 375 as the path leading toward “energy” or toward “the energetic man,” defined by the “infinitely flexible... universal power through which the whole man shapes himself,” well beyond the “genius” who “shapes a work.” Energy extends to the limit of the work and of the system; its “infinite flexibility,” linked to “an incalculable number of projects,” effects an infinite fragmentation of work and system [...]. The fragment on energy, however, is unique, a single element lost in the ensemble of the *Fragments*. (56–57)

25 This is what Simon Critchley calls “unworking Romanticism.”

26 Nancy hints at this in his interview with Florian Pennanech, “The romantic desire was denounced and revived at the same time: we had to be wary of falling again in its trap and we needed to give it a fresh impetus, to find a new incentive [resort]” (“Le souci poétique”).

van rooden

27 This does not mean that Nancy has entered the domain of novelistic or fiction writing. Or he does so only, as he himself would assert, when “fiction is not limited to the invented character of a story [but when] invention is taken to be nothing but the outer face of speech edging its way to the extreme where it will designate itself as being exceeded” (Nancy, *Sexistence* 169). We could perhaps also call this kind of writing “intrigue” or “intriguing writing” as Nancy himself does in his Preface “L’intrigue littéraire de Levinas” to Emmanuel Levinas, *Œuvres 3: Eros, littérature et philosophie: essais romanesques et poétiques, notes philosophiques sur le thème d’eros* (“L’intrigue littéraire” 14). In an interview preceding the publication, and even the writing process, of *Sexistence*, Nancy said that although he had the plan to take up the theme of sex, he had not yet found the right way of writing about it:

I do say that the question of sex remains absent in philosophy, but I cannot solve this by employing an objectifying discourse. This might work when talking about sex, but what I am looking for is in fact a writing that is motivated by [gemotiveerd door, engagé par] the question of sex. (“Jean-Luc Nancy over seks en wetenschap” 344; my translation)

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nancy, a romantic philosopher?

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van rooden

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