



# NANCY NOW

EDITED BY VERENA ANDERMATT CONLEY  
AND IRVING GOH



# Nancy Now

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**EDITED BY**

**VERENA ANDERMATT CONLEY AND IRVING  
GOH**

**polity**

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**Gregg LAMBERT** is Dean's Professor of the Humanities at Syracuse University, and author of many works in contemporary philosophy and theory, including *In Search of a New Image of Thought: Gilles Deleuze and Philosophical Expressionism* (2012). The present chapter is part of a series of critical reflections on the question of "the return of religion" in continental philosophy.

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**Jean-Luc NANCY** is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Strasbourg. His major works, *The Inoperative Community*, *The Sense of the World*, *Being Singular Plural*, and *The Experience of Freedom*, including the two volumes of *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, have been translated into English. Translations of *Identity: Fragments, Frankness* and *Being Nude: The Skin of Images* are forthcoming.

*Prelude:*  
*The Silhouette of Jean-Luc Nancy*  
*Giorgio Agamben*

If there exists for each author a decisive experience – something like an incandescent core that he or she incessantly approaches and flees from at the same time, where must we situate this experience for Jean-Luc Nancy? Without a doubt, it involves an extreme experience. Nancy is not, as has been suggested, a tender thinker. The landscape of this Chthonian thinker is one of lava, as at the foot of Mount Etna. In pushing to the extreme one of the most aporetic points of Heidegger's philosophy, he thinks of abandonment – the condition of existing entirely and irrevocably abandoned by Being. His ontology is one of abandonment and of the *ban*.<sup>1</sup> Few pages in twentieth-century philosophical prose express this abandonment with as much rigor and harshness as those, under the heading of "Abandoned Being," that seal *The Categorical Imperative*, through the invention of a new genre of the transcendental which dissolves all transcendentals:

Without us knowing, without us being able to really know it, abandoned Being has already begun to constitute an unavoidable condition for our thought, perhaps even its sole condition. The ontology that is demanded of us from then on is an ontology in which abandonment remains the unique predicament of Being, or else transcendental, in the scholastic sense of the term. [...] [That is,] Being [thereby] considered to be abandoned of all categories, and of transcendentals. [...] From what Being was abandoned, from what it *is* being abandoned, and from what it abandons itself, there is no memory. There is no history of this abandonment, neither knowledge nor account of how, where,

when, and by whom it was abandoned. [...] Being *is* not its abandonment, and it abandons *itself* only in not being the author or subject of abandonment. [...] It is by an abandonment that Being comes to be: there is nothing more to say.<sup>2</sup>

It does not matter if, in the final pages of this text, something – a Law – seems, in contradictory fashion no doubt, to precede abandonment and survive it. What matters is that ontological difference, i.e. the apparatus [*dispositif*] that oversees [*gouverne*] occidental culture, attains its critical mass here.

There is an inclination to regard Nancy as the thinker of touch. But how must touch be understood, if it is not to remain an empty metaphor? Aristotle seems to accord to touch a particular prestige when he states that, without touch, the living would not exist. But what defines the very character of touch in relation to the other senses is that it lacks a medium or an exterior milieu. In touching, as Aristotle says, tangibles are sensed not by the action of a medium, but sensed at the same time (*ama*, 423b) as the very medium of touch,<sup>3</sup> hence rendering touch hidden [*caché*] (*lanthanei*, 423b).<sup>4</sup> The milieu of touch is not something with an exteriority, as air or the diaphanous are for sight; instead, it coincides with the flesh that perceives. The flesh is simultaneously the medium and the subject of touch.

If one wants to grasp the thought of Nancy, it is necessary to follow, and once again push to the extreme, the Aristotelian analysis, far beyond what recent readings have done. Giorgio Colli has given a very wonderful definition of contact when he writes that there is contact when two points are separated individually by the absence of a representation. While Aristotle has expressed the latter in saying that “we think that we in fact make contact with things directly and that there is no intermediary” (423b),<sup>5</sup> this absence of representation, this ruin of the medium, is probably Nancy’s very own thought. This ferocious mystic

stubbornly remains in contact, in the dark and blinding night  
where all medium and all representation are wrecked.

Translated from the French by Irving Goh



# 1

## *Introduction: Time in Nancy*

*Irving Goh and Verena Andermatt Conley*

As with every great philosopher, there is something inexhaustible in Nancy's writings. In that respect, one can immediately refer to his prolificacy: indeed, publishing his major philosophical writings since the 1970s, for example, *La Remarque spéculative* (1973), *Le Discours de la syncope* (1976), and *Ego sum* (1979), followed by what Derrida considers to be Nancy's "most powerful works" – *Corpus* (1992), *The Sense of the World* (1993), *The Muses* (1994), and *Being Singular Plural* (1996)<sup>1</sup> – Nancy shows no sign of stopping today, given the appearance of recent titles such as *Tombe de sommeil* (2007), *Identité: fragments, franchises* (2010), *Dans quels mondes vivons-nous?* (written with Aurélien Barreau, 2011), *L'Équivalence des catastrophes* (2012), and *Ivresse* (2013). This is not to mention the great breadth of his writings, which encompasses the history of philosophy (Hegel, Kant, Descartes), aesthetics, ontology, politics, literature, psychoanalysis, religion, and "deconstructive" engagements with philosophical topics such as subjectivity, community, sense, freedom, and the world. The inexhaustibility of Nancy's writings also pertains to the fact that there always remains something to be explicated or elucidated further in his philosophy, which proves critical not only in making sense of contemporary issues, but also in suggesting

political and ethical implications for the future of the contemporary world.

This present collection of essays testifies to that inexhaustible force. At the same time, we would also like to think that a certain preoccupation with time forms an implicit backdrop to this collection, thus setting it apart from other collections on the work of Nancy. That preoccupation can be said to exist on at least two counts. Firstly, it is almost inevitable to think of the time of mortality when we think of Nancy, who underwent a heart transplant operation more than twenty years ago. In light of that, we have a greater appreciation of Nancy's prolificacy, reminding ourselves that the inexhaustibility of his writing is neither a given nor absolute: instead, it is always threatened by finitude and contingency. The second instance that gives us occasion to think about time is the collection's title itself – *Nancy Now*. With the "now" of the title, one cannot help but expect this collection to touch in one way or another on the topic of time, especially that of the present. In effect, time is very much at the back of most of our contributors' minds: most of them readily took the cue from the title, which they knew in advance, and evaluate the state of Nancy's philosophy *now*, taking stock of how far-reaching his thoughts are, and assessing the stakes for philosophy and the world today. Or else, they foreground the philosophical motifs mobilized by Nancy in his recent publications and explore their future theoretical and empirical potentialities.

We will speak more about the individual essays later in this introduction. First, we would like to concern ourselves with giving an explication of time in Nancy, which is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of his philosophy. Time, as a philosophical question, is already no doubt difficult in itself. The difficulty of speaking about time in Nancy becomes particularly striking when one takes into account his reservation in dealing with this topic in any explicit or extended manner in his writings, as compared to his

sustained engagement with other topics such as community, sense, touch, *corpus*, and the world, not to mention that all of these apparently privilege the question of space. Symptomatic of this reservation before time is Nancy's "Finite History": there is indeed a discursion into the question of time there, but it is veiled by the question of history, which Nancy argues is still not really so much about time as about community or being-in-common. In that regard, one could say that the question of time constitutes some sort of limit in Nancy's writings, as if one were approaching the impossible in his philosophy. And yet, the limit, as Nancy would say in *The Sense of the World* for example, is not where everything ends. Instead, it is where everything has the chance to begin again, differently. In that case, one could argue that if the question of time is indeed the limit of Nancy's thought, it is perhaps also with the question of time that we could begin again, *now*, to look at Nancy's philosophy anew.<sup>2</sup>

Time for Nancy is not just any time. It is not time past that is of interest to him; neither is it future time, especially not that which is already programmed or calculated beforehand. Time past and time future, according to Nancy, are but "categories [...] relevant only to time already interpreted as social and historical."<sup>3</sup> In other words, they are but anthropological constructions, barely touching on time itself, or else concealing its very dimensions. Against such constructions, Nancy is preoccupied with present time, or more specifically, the time *of* the present, *now*, which is not of the order of chronology. Identifying this present that is of specific interest to Nancy does not alleviate the difficulty of speaking about time in Nancy, however. This is because, while Nancy appears, as we will see, to speak more favorably of the present in more recent texts, it is not quite the case earlier on. This is rather evident in the essay "Espace contre temps" (1991), whose title only immediately reinforces the impression that Nancy seems to privilege the

concept of space over time. To be precise, though, the essay will make clear that if there is a disenchantment with time, it is not with time itself but exactly with how it has come to be understood and schematized, i.e. time as chronology, or time in endless succession, calculated, accumulated, and ordered, such that each second or even nanosecond must always be followed by the next second or nanosecond. Chronology is not time, according to Nancy: as chronology, time cannot take time, or it cannot have time to exist since it must always move on to the next chronological unit without delay. Time cannot breathe here: chronology or chronometry is “without respiration” or “irrespirable.”<sup>4</sup> All this also means that the present in chronology has no real significance except as a step between the past and the future.<sup>5</sup> The very singularity of the present then is always glossed over by an imposed chronometric operativity: it is subject to a *passing* from the past to the future, never allowed to dwell in itself and to see what *happens* to itself in that dwelling.<sup>6</sup> It is this chronological present, which does not allow what arrives in the present *as the present* to take time to happen, that Nancy renounces, calling it even “a bad concept.”<sup>7</sup> This is also where Nancy turns his back on (chronological) time and turns toward space instead, especially “free space,” where “free disposition of places, openings, circulations of perceptions, conceptions, affections, volitions, [and] imaginations” take place or happen.<sup>8</sup>

The reduction of the present to the “bad concept” of chronologic present does not mean that we should henceforth abandon all thoughts of time, especially not time of the present *other* than its chronological conceptualization. That *other* present must still be a subject of thought, except, in “Espace contre temps,” it is still articulated in spatial terms. As Nancy argues there, if (non-chronological) present time concerns the instantaneous, then “time itself is space.”<sup>9</sup> This is because the instant,

according to Nancy, is something spatial, circumstantial, contingent upon how things and beings gather themselves at a particular place: “The instant is not of time: but topical [*topique*], topography, circumstance, circumscription of a particular arrangement [*agencement*] of places, openings, passages.”<sup>10</sup> Given the association between the instant and the non-chronological present, the latter then must also be thought of spatially, as a gap or opening-up, or simply an opening, where its coming-to-presence can happen: “there is only this opening-up [*écartement*] of the present, of its extemporaneous coming.”<sup>11</sup> It is in that sense of space allowing the coming of time and the time of the present to take place that Nancy clarifies that “space is therefore against [*contre*] time only to free time,” to “let it happen” as a “spacious welcome,” while “refusing the duration, succession, the rule of causes, retentions, and propensities [*propensions*]” of “compact, unshakeable [*inébranlable*]” chronological time.<sup>12</sup>

But must the thought of non-chronological time, of non-chronological present time, be articulated in spatial terms, as if subordinated to the latter? Can it not be thought in terms closer to temporality, if not in its own terms? That possibility would take some time to materialize in Nancy’s writings, and it appears to take shape in his more recent texts. One such instance is in *L’Équivalence des catastrophes* (2012), where Nancy will say unequivocally: “what would be decisive [...] would be to think in the present and to think the present.”<sup>13</sup> As in the case of “Espace contre temps,” Nancy says this in response, or rather in reaction, to chronological time. In *L’Équivalence des catastrophes*, though, Nancy adds to the problematic of what mankind has made of chronological time, or more specifically, what it has projected for human “progress” along the linear, homogeneous trajectory of chronological time. Writing in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident, Nancy has in mind the problematic turn to nuclear

power for the supposed greater efficiency in the running of cities. The drive for that power, however, and this is Virilio's thesis as Nancy acknowledges, is only waiting for the general accident to happen, i.e. nuclear fallout, as testified not only by Fukushima in 2011 but also by Chernobyl in 1986. In other words, projecting "progress" in this way only risks sending cities with comparable nuclear ambitions toward similar, catastrophic ends. According to Nancy then, we live in such times where we let slip the present and project a supposed greater and better future, which, unfortunately, only awaits a catastrophe to happen. "Our time," in that case, is but "time capable of an 'end of time.'"<sup>14</sup>

Against such time, where the present is again chronologic, merely passing and therefore without its own temporality or dimension, Nancy calls for another thinking of the present. He calls for a present "in which something or someone presents itself: the present of a coming, an approach."<sup>15</sup> Initially, Nancy would still articulate this present in somewhat spatial terms, as "the element of proximity" or "the place of proximity – with the world, others, oneself," in contrast to the thought of time predicated on 'the end of time,' which "is always distanced [*éloignée*]."<sup>16</sup> This time, though, Nancy would go beyond spatial categories. The non-chronologic present must be thought of as "the non-equivalence of singularities: those of people and those of moments, of places, of a person's gestures, those of the hours of day and night, those of locutions, those of passing clouds, of plants that grow with a learned slowness [*lenteur savante*]."<sup>17</sup> We have then a more literary, or more precisely a Proustian, sense of the present. It is after all Proust who had written that "an hour is not just an hour, it is a vase filled with perfumes, sounds, projects, and climates."<sup>18</sup> The Proustian reference becomes explicit when Nancy goes on to say that this present of non-equivalence "exists by the attention attuned to these singularities – to a color, to a



sound, to a perfume.”<sup>19</sup> What we have effectively then is a present as a multiplicity of senses. It no longer restrictedly bears a chronometric sense, a chronologic unit awaiting its future projection. It now also bears visual, acoustic, and olfactory sensations, including sensations of touch and movement. One could even follow Nancy to say that the present, in short, is filled with the sense of the world. To be in touch with the non-chronologic present, the present where time is taken for singularities to come to presence, where singularities, including the singularity of the time of the present, have time to breathe, Nancy goes further, saying that it is all a matter of “a particular consideration, an attention, a tending [*tension*], a respect, what one can even go all the way to name an adoration turned towards singularity as such.” All this is not subjected to a certain obligation or duty, but moved by a voluntary or even spontaneous esteem for the coming of singularities.<sup>20</sup> Only then can we have the present that “opens itself to the esteem of the singular and [which] turns away from general equivalence and its evaluation of time past and time future, and from the accumulation of antiquities and the construction of projects.”<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, we are still rather distant from articulating a non-chronologic present in more temporal terms. We get closer to that perhaps in Nancy’s interview with Pierre-Philippe Jandin, published as *La Possibilité d’un monde* (2013), when Jandin poses the question of the present in relation to the Japanese *hanami*, through which one takes time to admire the cherry blossoms, and to which Nancy, following Haruki Murakami, makes reference in *L’Équivalence des catastrophes*. In the interview, Jandin asks Nancy to speak a little about the sense of the ephemeral that one attains through the contemplation of the cherry blossoms, and Nancy’s response here touches on the present in more temporal terms. The ephemeral, for Nancy, is not that “which only passes,” or which “ends once and for all by

conferring everything to a projection of the future that essentially renders it present in advance.”<sup>22</sup> Rather, it is something rhythmic, of “moments of absence and presence,” close to the quotidian rhythm of sleeping and waking, “a rhythm that is also of day and night,” by which “we absent ourselves from the world and return to it.”<sup>23</sup> According to Nancy, such a rhythm brings one away from chronological time: “one is no longer in succession [...].”<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is a rhythm by which one takes leave from regulated time and from the ordered routine of a life productive of future projects, so as to experience the ephemeral that is opening up in the present. It is the attention to this rhythm that draws Nancy to articulate time in the following manner: “I would readily say that ‘time itself’ is *tempo*: there is in the latter a very important matter of rhythm.”<sup>25</sup>

*Tempo*, a common term in music, is indeed a time-marker. However, in the musical context, *tempo* not only sets the pace of the music, but also regulates its rhythm, keeping the music in time. In other words, it keeps the music flowing in succession in an orderly manner, not missing a beat. In that regard, *tempo* seems to run counter to Nancy’s notion of rhythm. For that kind of arrhythmic rhythm, and to keep to musical references, perhaps it is more accurate to consider certain cadential points in music, for example, where a musical phrase, especially the last, finds its resolution. At times, a *rubato* may be marked just before the resolution of the phrase, allowing the music to deviate from the general regular and regulated *tempo* of the piece and to take its own time. At other times, this *rubato* may be expanded into a *cadenza*, where the music can breathe even more, or take even more time, by revisiting a certain motif of the composition (a *ritornello* here no doubt), contemplating it in a different *tempo* and allowing it to flourish with *bravura* even, hence giving the motif an entirely different air. To put all these in Nancy’s terms,

*rubato* and *cadenza* can be considered an extended syncope or syncopation with respect to chronometric musical time.<sup>26</sup> They are also no less ephemeral in Nancy's sense, given that the *cadenza* and/or the *rubato* are never permanent digressions, but always eventually return to the principal music or musical phrase. This is also not to mention that the *cadenza* especially is regarded with high *esteem* by both musicians and audiences, which recalls Nancy's claim in *L'Équivalence des catastrophes* that *esteem* is the proper mode of attention to singularities in the experience of the ephemeral. But to return to the question of a different air borne by the singularity of the *cadenza*: perhaps time could be thought in terms of a musical *aria*, which also means "air" in Italian, where all the above-mentioned *rubato*, *cadenza*, and even *tempo*, are at play. It is time's *aria* to which we must listen (*à l'écoute*, as Nancy would say in a text of the same title),<sup>27</sup> an attention to which we may experience the coming to presence, if not witness the *déclension* or dis-closure,<sup>28</sup> of presents that sidestep chronological time, of presents taking their time with ephemeral *rubati*.

While the term *aria* lets resound the notion of a present that is able to take time to unfold, resonating as well with Nancy's conception of the non-chronologic present as "the time of inaudible songs,"<sup>29</sup> its operatic backdrop might nonetheless appear to privilege or demand a particular sense for the experiencing of ephemeral presents, i.e. the sense of hearing, or even an Italian sense of hearing. To avoid that sensory (and nationalistic) delimitation, should we just simply say *air* then? In both English and French, *air* still retains a musical sense, but it also points to its more quotidian sense: the ethereal matter that not only surrounds us, but also that which we take in in our respiration, in other words, that with which we are always in contact, regardless if we can or cannot hear, see, smell, taste, and even touch.<sup>30</sup> (One underscores here too that if non-chronologic present is

“of *inaudible* songs,” one does not necessarily have to hear it, in contrast to chronology or chronometry, by which “we hear time ticking away.”<sup>31</sup>) As ethereal matter, one could also say that air is nothing tactile or concrete, and yet not nothing, nor without existence. This aspect of air seems to correspond to Nancy’s characterization of time in “The Soun-Gui Experience”: “Time is taken from nothing. It *is* nothing, and it is made from nothing.”<sup>32</sup> Or, if there is always time, and Nancy would say that time “is always here,” “its permanence is that of the *nothing* that is hollowed out and turned back on itself to become another nothing: a nothingness that is continually shifting while still remaining the nothingness that it is.”<sup>33</sup> That means that the “nothing” that time is is not mere nothingness. Like air, time is there, around us, without us seeing it, without us seeing its passing. In any case, there is a materiality to the “nothing” of time; or, as Nancy puts it, there is [a] “matter of time,” and “time is matter that spaces.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, we sense this matter too, this nothing-that-is-not-nothingness: “A jolt of nothing is continually shaking us. This is the time of presence leaping ahead of itself, an always-new image, always ready to fade away; nothing imaginary but, quite the contrary, the unimaginable real.”<sup>35</sup> More than air, shall we then consider time as *areal*? As Nancy notes in *Corpus*, *areal* signifies both a nonempirical or non-deictic real, and an area or perimeter. For our purpose, *areal* captures both breath and breadth, both time and space, where “the distinction between the two is untenable.”<sup>36</sup>

Time as *areal* then is where *and* when the non-chronologic present of time can come to presence, take time to exist, or have time to breathe. In the esteem or dis-closure of time as *areal*, however, one must always be vigilant or attentive not to fixate on a particular present, reifying it into an immobile, unchanging, and permanent presence, immanent only to itself. And if we are inclined to call the non-chronologic present a *now*, then this “now [...] is not immobilized,”<sup>37</sup> as

it “presents the present, or makes it *come*,”<sup>38</sup> always “offering [...] itself to another movement of coming.”<sup>39</sup> Presence in that case is also never fixed, but is always happening in time, in rhythm, or in *tempo* with all “the *presents* of time that always arrive and always disappear.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the presence of each present is always accompanied by its withdrawal or retreat, just as sleep falls [*tombe le sommeil*] or one falls asleep after a period of wakefulness, or just as the *cadenza* will take its bow to return to the principal music for the resolution of the final cadence, and this is also how the present is ephemeral. Difference is at stake here, for the movement or rhythm of withdrawal is not only in recognition or esteem of *other* presents coming to presence, but also of the self-differentiation of a particular present. Time, if not “time *itself*,” even though it is “utterly singular, always the same,” is that self-differentiation, or *différance*, deferring and differing (from) itself, such that the “‘same’ is nothing but the continual movement and change of all time at all times.”<sup>41</sup> Or, as Nancy writes in “Finite History,” time is but “the radical alterity of each moment of time.”<sup>42</sup>

The question that remains then is how to articulate or be attentive to time as *areal* in its “continual movement and change,” to its “radical alterity of each moment.” Perhaps, alongside the consideration of time as *areal*, we must give thought to the notion of *à chaque fois* or *at each time*, a phrase that Nancy turns to from time to time in his writings. Sometimes, Nancy just writes *chaque fois* or *each time*, and in relation to time, this *chaque fois* pertains to time’s difference, to the other present of time, or to another coming to presence of another present: “each time another circumstance, another instant, another topic [*topique*] of the instant.”<sup>43</sup> But if *chaque fois* concerns a coming to presence (of time, of another present), then it is also a question of the freedom of existence according to Nancy in *The Experience of Freedom*: “*each time* it is freedom at stake, because