

J E A N - M I C H E L R A B A T É

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S T R A S B O U R G

The Nancy School?

My title assumes that the reader knows what “the Nancy School” is. In fact, there is more than one. I will mention at least three. There is the school, celebrated at the Museum of the Nancy School, that we associate with Art Nouveau, with vases of fluid lines, with organic decorations, and with a handful of emblematic names from the turn of the last century: Gallé, Majorelle, Prouvé, Daum. In the medical field, there is the school founded by Hippolyte Bernheim, who had studied in Strasbourg but who left that city when it became German in 1871 and settled in Nancy. With Liébaut, Liegeois, Baunis and a few others, Bernheim focused on hypnosis, understood as a practice of suggestion. Freud translated Bernheim’s most important book, *Suggestive Therapeutics: A Treatise on the Nature and Uses of Hypnosis*, in 1888, and he debated for a while whether to study with Charcot, which he eventually did, or with Bernheim, whom he visited. Freud decided he could not follow the practice of hypnosis: it was, for technical reasons, too difficult to master. Lastly, there is the group of Strasbourg philosophers that we associate with the names Lacoue-Labarthe, Borch-Jacobsen and Nancy. It is not my intention to suggest that Jean-Luc Nancy is the group’s inspirer, animator, or even grey eminence. If this group has achieved renown, it is because of the steady flow of wide-ranging work it has produced.

Working at the very limits of psychoanalysis and (Derridean inspired) phenomenology, the group cleared a new path for French phenomenology. They sharpened its edge and renewed its meaning-effects, without falling prey to the ‘religious turn’ that laid claim to most French phenomenologists, from Levinas to Marion, and possibly also Derrida.¹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, in any case, have been fighting on the political front just as vigorously as on fronts of religion and anthropological

1. I am referring to the polemic Dominique Janicaud unleashed with *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham UP, 2000). For a reading of Derrida that rejects the ‘theological turn’ thesis, see Martin Häggglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008).

knowledges. Whatever minimal differences we might observe in Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's reading of Freud and Lacan, they probably owe to Freud the distance they have taken to the religious itself. We might see a confirmation of this point in the analysis Nancy recently gave of Freud's global impact to a Japanese audience: "the Freudian invention is the most clearly and resolutely unreligious of modern inventions. It is also for this reason that it cannot even believe in itself."² Conversely, we could say that it is precisely when psychoanalysis started to believe in itself that it became imperative to make it see its delusion, whether religious or not, and that is what Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe have tried to do with Lacan's work. For that reason, I propose to approach their multi-faceted oeuvre from a very specific angle: their relationship to Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Before coming back to the term "relationship," a term so loaded with hidden meanings that it is impossible to avoid the scare quotes, I would like to call attention to an irony of cultural history in the propagation of the works of this group in the United States, a country that is keen on bringing very different thinkers under the label of one school. For a good decade or so, Borch-Jacobsen was regarded as an authorized interpreter of Lacan's thought. His book, *Lacan: The Absolute Master* (1991), figured in the bibliography of every self-respecting Lacanian in the US. Meanwhile, an older book, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan* (1973), co-written by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, was seen as a ferocious attack on Lacanian doctrine by Derrideans. Does this mean, then, that the Nancy school (if there is such a thing) in Strasbourg is primarily Derridean? Or does it mean that that school is marked by a Derridean-Lacanianism that must be problematized and contextualized? Or by a complex game between the local, the regional, the national and the international?³

The irony of the American story became even more apparent when Borch-Jacobsen followed the publication of his beautiful book on hypnosis in 1993 with a scathing critique of Freudian (and Lacanian) psychoanalysis from the end of the 1990s, claiming to find nothing in it other than mystification and charlatanism. Nancy, in turn, published in 2001 *L' "il y a" du rapport sexuel* (The "There Is" of the Sexual Relationship), where he picks up anew and elaborates the old confrontation between his "school" and Lacan. Indeed, it was Lacan himself, with his ambivalent reaction to the publication of *The Title of the Letter*, who gave the impression that the "Stras-

2. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Freud — So To Speak," trans. Liz Wendelbo, in *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 26/27 (2008): 11.

3. We see an example of this in the polemic that broke out over the question of a "Derridean psychoanalysis," that put Alain Badiou against René Major during the organization of the conference, *Lacan avec les philosophes*. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who tried to steer clear of the dispute, explains that his equanimity started to falter (he sided with Badiou's intervention) when he learned that two members of the University of Strasbourg group *Psychoanalyse et philosophie* had not been invited because they were not that well known, though he himself had been unable to do anything about it because he was in the US at the time. See the account of the organization of the conference and Lacoue-Labarthe's explanations in *Lacan avec les philosophes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991) 448.

bourgers” had launched a blistering and direct philosophical attack on Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In 1973, Lacan himself conceded that not even his own students had read him so thoroughly and so carefully.⁴ But he immediately added that the authors – whose names he refuses to mention, claiming that they are but “pawns” (*Ibid.* 65/62) at the hands of their secret leader, whose name likewise remains unmentioned, though everyone knew it to be Derrida – were motivated by the very worst intentions. Their commitment to read him word for word, patiently, to mobilize all the philosophical rigour demanded by the task, attests to certain love, but a love lined by an evident hatred. (*Ibid.* 67/64 and 69/66) Although he recognizes that the book undertakes an “extraordinary task,” Lacan refuses to credit the beautiful analyses of his text to “authors” or “subjects”: “To even mention their feelings is perhaps to recognize them too much as subjects’ (*Ibid.* 65/62). Does he mean by that that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy could disappear as subjects because their reading mechanism was so polished, so powerful, so unrelenting even, that any old reader from their “school” could have done just as well? Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy only “set themselves this extraordinary task” to lead Lacan’s discourse to an impasse. Still, even if their conclusions are “inconsiderate” (*Ibid.* 66/62), Lacan urges his audience to put themselves to the task of the book and to weigh on their own its claims about their master’s theses on Saussurean linguistics, the signifier and the truth of Being, in the Heideggerian sense.

Finally, skipping over the obstacle, Lacan hurries to state a page later that he has always held that “There’s such a thing as One” (*Y a d’l’un*). (*Ibid.* 66/63) The claim, which becomes the foundation for a series of theses about love, proves well enough that Lacan knew what he was talking about when he talked about Being. A little further on, Lacan does not hesitate to add insult to compliment when he recognizes the prescience of his – always anonymous – readers, who “discovered” that he planned to bring up the Aristotelian concept of *enstasis* in relation to his “formulas of sexuation”:

they even discover the *enstasis*, the Aristotelian logical obstacle that I had reserved for the end. It is true that they do not see the relationship. But they are so used to working, especially when something motivates them – the desire, for example, to obtain their Master’s, a truly serendipitous term here – that they even mention that in the footnote on pages 28 and 29.” (*Ibid.* 69/66—translation slightly modified)

This venomous insinuation (that the authors are still MA students dependent on the discourse of the Master, which they try to “use” but which they do not really “understand”) does not seem borne out by their note on Aristotle. There, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy comment on the term “instance,” used by Lacan in the title to the essay, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or: Reason since Freud,”

4. Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998) 69/65. (French pagination after backlash.—Trans.)

the text they have chosen for their close reading and commentary. They refer to Émile Benveniste, who had suggested the term “agency [*instance*] of discourse” in 1956 to speak about the insertion of the speaker in his/her speech; they move from there to Jakobson and his famous *shifters*, and thence to Aristotle. I cite the end of the note, which, in my edition, is rendered obscure by the permutation of two lines, indicated here between brackets (I assume Lacan had no problems determining the proper order of the lines and that he did not base his claim that the authors “do not see the relationship” on this typographical error):

But one will not forget that for [Aristotle, *enstasis*, in the theory of refutation, designates the obstacle which] one opposes to the reasoning of an adversary (*Rhetoric* II, 25, 1402a); cf. *Prior Analytics* II, 26, *Topics* VIII, 2, 157ab. This “agency” is, in particular, what the exception opposes to a universal prediction. An example of this *topos* happens to be the following, to be appreciated according to its most “proper” meaning: “it is honourable in some places to sacrifice one’s father, for example amongst the Triballi, but it is not honourable in an absolute sense” (*Topics* II, 11, 115b);⁵

It is not clear from reading this note what prompts the accusation that they “do not see the relationship,” unless it is that Lacan is afraid, perhaps too much so, that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy might have recognized, before he did, the little known concept that runs through Aristotle’s *Analytics*, *Rhetoric* and *Topics*. The term refers back to the logical couple composed of “exception” and “universal.” It is this logical couple, in fact, that allows Lacan to set in place the mechanism through which he establishes that, properly speaking, there is not sexual “relationship.”

Lacan continues his acid praise as he guides his audience to the very same passages in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Topics*, and he announces that *enstasis* will allow him to put in place such formulas as, $\exists x \Phi x$, that is, a two-sided table that approaches sexual difference in terms of ‘all’ and ‘not-all.’ Very curiously, when Lacan lays out his formulas and begins to unpack the Φx , that being “the pole where man is situated,” (*On Feminine Sexuality*, 71/67) he mentions the *Nichomachean Ethics*, (*Ibid.* 70/66) but he does not bring up the concept of *enstasis*. If the concept plays a role in that discussion, it does so silently. It is as if the two “pawns” had given him at the outset this crowned piece in a checkers game (*jeux de dames*) in which the pieces (as Ladies, “*donne*” in Italian) do not exist as such, that is, in a substantial and essential manner. (*Ibid.* 57/54)⁶

5. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, trans. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 24n5. (E. S. Furster’s translation of Aristotle’s *Topics* is slightly modified by Nancy’s and Lacoue-Labarthe’s translators. — Trans.)

6. It is impossible to render the play on words here, since in French checkers pieces are called ‘dames’ and the game itself, *jeux de dames*. In the passage Jean-Michel Rabaté refers to, Lacan is relating how a talk he gave in Milan was described in a newspaper: “According to Dr. Lacan, Ladies,’ — *le donne* — ‘do not exist.’” — Trans.

In my remarks, I have underlined the strategic intervention of the term “relationship.” This same term guides Nancy’s reading (alone this time) in *L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (The “There Is” of the Sexual Relationship). Here, once again, a Lacanian might be tempted to see in Nancy’s title nothing more than a simple negation: while Lacan says, repeatedly, that “there is no sexual relationship” — a thesis he embraced towards the end of the 1960s — Nancy states the opposite: “there is a sexual relationship.” Still, and contrary to our expectations, that is not what is happening. Nancy begins his examination, it is true, with observations that could be seen as critical: he notes that Lacan’s expression, “There is no sexual relationship”, has the air of a provocation, that it is paradoxical to common sense and flies in the face of most banal empirical observation (after all, do what we call “sexual relationships” not happen every day?). The expression is primarily intended to shock by stating that “What there is, is not.”⁷ That is a gesture that could easily be inscribed in a long philosophical genealogy. It is typical, for example, of claims that we find in Hegel and Heidegger (we might think here also of Plato’s *Sophist*) to the effect that Being, in some ways, is not. Thus, a well-known Heideggerian logic suggests that we should consider the “sexual relationship” as a “being” without Being. The real Being coupled to the human subjects engaged in an active sexual life does not allow itself to be seen, counted, or even defined.

Consequently, Being approximates a word that can be read either as a verb or as a noun: “kiss/screw” (*baiser*). From its classical sense (to give someone a kiss) to its current slang use (to make love), this noun-verb condenses the Lacanian paradox — provided we conjugate it in the active and the passive voice. Nancy nimbly concludes his semantic overview as follows: “the founding claim of psychoanalysis is that I am kissed/screwed every time I kiss/screw.” (*L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel*, 12) What does he mean by that? Deploying a logic that is more Freudian than Lacanian (one might think here of the letters Freud sent to Fliess while they were exploring the inversion and demultiplication due to bisexuality), this utterance means basically that I am mistaken if I firmly believe in the “sexual relation.” For to believe in that, I would have to believe that there is such a thing as One — i.e., union — when in fact there is only two — i.e., separation. And there is a second critical intervention: at the end of his reflections on passivity and activity, Nancy adds that the provocative force of the Lacanian utterance does more than shock: it “prohibits.” The pragmatic effect of this prohibition can be compared to that of the “coitus interruptus.” (*L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel*, 14) This outlines the horizon, if not of a certain castration, at least of a renunciation of the straightforward empirical evidence: “An ethics of the pathetic presupposes that the couple prohibits coitus on another mode than that of renunciation.” (*L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel*, 15) Having reached this point, Nancy knows that the Lacanian analyst will cry foul at this hermeneutic scandal and denounce the errors of such a partisan reading. We could think that Nancy has deliberately misunderstood Lacan’s lesson. And, indeed, by now it is no longer possible to reconcile his reading with those passages where Lacan makes

7. Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (Paris: Galilée, 2001) 11.

love the ideal means men and women have found to overcome this fateful “There is no...” Nor is it possible, by the same token, to understand how writing and necessity (or that “which never ceases to be written”) are implicated in the management of the non-relationship.

As if noticing that he had strayed too radically from the dynamics specific to the Lacanian text, Nancy backtracks when he finally defines the key term, “relationship.” The relationship, whether sexual or not, is not the “act,” sexual or not, even if common usage treats them as synonyms. Nancy here moves in closer to what Lacan’s sentence suggests. He notes that common usage assumes that the “relationship” is something, when in fact it is more of an action than a product. And he proceeds to unpack, brilliantly, the intertwined meanings that Lacanians claim to recognize in “There is no sexual relationship”:

The claim that there is no sexual relationship might mean that there is no return, no final report, no conformity or pre-established proportion for what is involved when a couple mates. And, indeed, there is not. If the claim is about the relationship *of or to the* subject of the sexual act, if it is about saying what this act *relates* or what one can *retain, retell, calculate* or *capitalize* (and hence inscribe or write in this sense) from it, then undoubtedly we have to say that the report, the measure, or even, in general, the appropriation or the determination of it as “some thing” is not possible. (ibid. 17)

The critical attitude disappears at this point of Nancy’s argumentation, and what he offers in fact is a profound and subtle philosophical commentary of Lacan’s sentence, one that remains entirely in accord with its logic (though not always in relationship with it).

Only one point of contention remains: the link between this utterance and the problematic of sexual difference. For Lacan’s sentence, whether we stress the beginning (“*There is no sexual relationship*”) or the end (“*There is no sexual relationship*”) – in other words, whether we stress the ontology (the being of the relationship) or the epistemology (the nature of this relationship, or the very possibility of calculating the relationship by framing it as a fraction or as a simple complementarity, as the homology between the two sides of a straightforward and clear-cut opposition – masculine-feminine, active-passive, lover-beloved, etc. – pairs of opposites that must, of course, be applied to subjects of the same biological sex) – always presupposes a dialectical relationship between two terms that we have not highlighted so far: “*no*” and “*sexual*.” In short, it is a question of thinking the negativity and restlessness the sentence disseminates in relationship with sexual difference itself.

Nancy now summons Hegel, a thinker who has shown quite well that self-relationship is a relationship of negation and that, consequently, if one wants to talk about “union,” one cannot but “confront the fact that union can only be achieved through its immediate self-suppression.” (*Ibid.* 30) The passage calls to mind the

superb pages Nancy devotes to desire in Hegel.⁸ His very short introduction does not give him the chance to spell out in detail the notion of sexual difference Hegel develops in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The reader will recall that the issue comes up in the context of Hegel's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*, a reading in which Hegel tries to conceptualize Antigone's position vis-à-vis her two dead brothers — one a hero, the other a traitor — and vis-à-vis Creon as a first philosophical approach to sexual difference:

The difference of the sexes and their ethical content remains, however, in the unity of the substance, and its movement is just the constant becoming of that substance. The husband is sent out by the Spirit of the Family into the community in which he finds his self-conscious being.⁹

Hegel thus posits “the community” and “the family” as separate horizons, one of which is suited to man, the other to woman. This ethical substance, however, is immediately blown to bits by the battle to the death between Eteocles and Polyneices, on the male side, and by the challenge Antigone represents to Creon's law, on the female side.

Hegel had just contrasted the ethical law, founded on the universal, with desire, which is always particular:

The difference between the ethical life of the woman and that of the man consists just in this, that in her vocation as an individual and in her pleasure, her interest is centred on the universal and remains alien to the particularity of desire; whereas in the husband these two sides are separated; and since he possesses, as a citizen, the *self-conscious power of universality*, he thereby acquires the right of *desire* and, at the same time, preserves his freedom in regard to it. (*Ibid.* 274-275)

The relation of the sexes cannot be abstracted from power relations, and it is not enough to pit the unwritten law of the Family to the written law of the State. What Hegel explicitly names “Unterschied der Geschlechter,” the difference of the sexes, traverses the ethical and the political world. The conflict between passion and duty can all-too-quickly develop comic overtones, as Hegel himself concedes, while real tragedy is sourced in the conflict between duty and duty. It erupts suddenly, when each party knows immediately what it must do.

We all know the story: Creon sentences Antigone to be buried alive for having disobeyed his decree and buried her brother's corpse. She commits suicide, precipitating a series of dramas, beginning with the suicide of Creon's son, who was in love with her. We might think that there is something scandalous in Hegel's reading, for it seems to side with Creon, or at least to validate his push to coerce an

8. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 55-65.

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 276.

agreement from the citizens of Thebes that would justify his tenacious pursuit of the traitor even after his death. But this is a ruse on Hegel's part, one that allows him to watch, as a disenchanted observer, the ethical substance of the Greek city crumble to pieces. The culprit for this irremediable dissolution is Antigone, who embodies a new version of sexual difference: feminine irony.

Since the community only gets an existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family, and by dissolving [individual] self-consciousness into the universal, it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy – womankind in general. Womankind – the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community – changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family. Woman in this way turns to ridicule the earnest wisdom of mature age which, indifferent to purely private pleasures and enjoyments, as well as to playing an active part, only thinks of and cares for the universal. She makes this wisdom an object of derision for raw and irresponsible youth and unworthy of their enthusiasm. (*Ibid.* 288. Square brackets are by Hegel's English translator)

Mined from within by womankind, whose “petulance” has led it to take up the torch of sexual difference in order to shake off age-old bonds and moribund laws, the ethical world of unified substance implodes. This collapse is needed to explain the passage to the world of the unhappy consciousness and the Enlightenment – in short, to modernity.

We should revisit these dense and difficult texts at greater length, but here I must limit myself to referring the reader to the superb reading of Antigone Lacan gives in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, and to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's commentary on that reading in “On Ethics: *a propos* of Antigone,” originally presented at the conference *Lacan avec les philosophes*. As space is limited, I must limit myself to mentioning only the precious motif Lacoue-Labarthe identifies in Lacan's seminar, and which he calls an “aesthetics” (with two “h”s) of tragedy and desire – the portmanteau word combines ethics and aesthetics. Once Lacan had decided to base his analysis on a thesis about Antigone's stunning beauty, the convergence of the two problematics became inevitable: Lacoue-Labarthe's, informed by his meditations on Aristotle's *Poetics*, and Lacan's, informed by his readings in Heidegger. This convergence led them towards a more obscure, but nevertheless crucial, point: Lacan's “relationship” to Bataille through Hegel.

There is a first annunciation of this towards the end of *The Title of the Letter*, when the authors write:

The ultimate effect of Lacanian strategy, at least in that it is a strategy of system and combination, thus turns out to be a surprising but rigorous repetition of negative theology – that is to say of what Hegel (him again) had

already repeated and displaced. And with Hegel we happen to come even closer to Bataille. Unless, precisely, we note that a Lacanian atheology, in accordance with the process of its production, would retain the epithet “metaphysical” in its strategic ambiguity, and thus would be a “negative theology.” (*The Title of the Letter*, 127)

This would be Lacan’s true home, the point towards which he tried ceaselessly to take Freudian theory, from the Name-of-the-Father to that extreme point where “non-dupes err.” As a result, we should not reduce Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Nancy’s book to an attack mounted by philosophers against the errancies of Lacanian theory. That pinpoints only one of the effects of their multifaceted reading, an effect that, as is often said, usefully reminds us that it is far from simple to articulate the coexistence of a post-Saussurean linguistics of the signifier and Heideggerian ontology, even when the latter issues in the negative theology of absent being, reduced to a “hole” of *jouissance*. Doing that would be to admit that *The Title of the Letter* limits itself to showing that mixing Saussure and Heidegger does not produce a Freudian cocktail.

But by showing Lacan torn between flaunting his scientific credentials and his ultimate philosophical goals, his two commentators in fact save Lacanian doctrine from closing itself in a facile systematicity. They fully acknowledge Lacan’s power for poetic creation, and see a saving grace in the very inconsistencies and contradictions of Lacanian theory. Lacoue-Labarthe returns to this insight when he discusses Lacan’s reading of *Antigone*. He observes that when Lacan, with characteristic enthusiasm and petulance, is transported by the sight of *Antigone*’s blinding and purifying beauty, he longer needs Freud, much less Saussure. Everything would hold together on its own, or at least as strongly and rigorously as it can, if only Lacan had been satisfied with citing Aristotle and Heidegger (or even a better-understood Hegel):

This feverish transport is evident in both Hölderlin and Heidegger. For Lacan, this transport itself is responsible for my saying, not that ‘the interpretation owes nothing to the analysis,’ but rather that ‘it can in fact do very well without it.’¹⁰

Indeed, just as Freud needs Oedipus, so too Lacan could not have arrived at his key insights into ethics, desire and tragedy without *Antigone*. Lacoue-Labarthe concludes this passage with a new reference to Bataille: “Psychoanalysis would in this case proceed from what Bataille called *tragic horror*.” (*Ibid.*)

Lacan’s secret master, more than Hegel or Kojève, is Bataille: he is, at the very least, an expert on *enstasis*, and he is also the one who opposes the obstacles that “prohibit” and derail reasoning, as well as being the one who can appreciate — according to its most “proper” meaning — that “it is honourable in some places to sacrifice

10. Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, “On Ethics: A Propos of *Antigone*,” trans. Joan Tambureno, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 24 (2007).

one's father." How can exception be arranged into a practice of non-knowledge without precipitating the collapse of theory as a system? We cannot look for the exception only on the side of the "other *jouissance*" that supposedly invests femininity with a distinctive mystic tonality, for it is produced just as much by a school, this 'Nancy School,' which designates neither a place (Strasbourg) nor a theory (an unlikely Lacanian-Derridianism), but rather a crossroad (*chasse-croisé*) of places and theories, a multiplication of all names. This school — where I continue to learn something every day — is also Lacoue-Labarthe.