

LITERATURE SINGULAR PLURAL: A RETRACTION OF GOD, A SCENE OF FORGIVENESS, A RETREAT OF THE POLITICAL

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Literature would begin wherever one no longer knows who writes
and who signs the narrative of the call – and of the “Here I
am” – between the absolute father and son.¹

1. The word “literature” bears an excessive range of significance, and any singular attempt to define it senses, right as it begins, that so much of literature’s subtlety and possibility are bound to be left out. To speak of literature in a purposely general way, saying, for instance, “it has to do with words”, ends up wide of the mark as well. I open with words of caution not to excuse the attempt I am about to make to think about “literature”, but to help ensure that whatever I say leaves something of this excess at every turn. Additionally, the advent of digital studies and its intersection with critical race theory and manifold gender theories (sometimes at the same and sometimes at different points of intervention) have generated a proliferation of new literary forms while simultaneously advocating a classical *de-authorization* that might make the question of “literature” seem old-fashioned and, perhaps, *beside the point*. Ebots compose thought-provoking poem-aphorisms on Twitter, and the long-awaited (still in process) de-throning of the privileged author of the great novel – irreducibly complicit with the fantasy of genius – continue to reorient *who* produces literature and *what* gets produced. These contaminations of borders seem to render “literature” a name for everything and nothing.

2. With the express purpose to think about “literature” within this flood of ongoing contamination, I will follow a narrow track from Jacques Derrida’s “Literature in Secret: An Impossible Filiation” to Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay “Being Singular Plural”. Derrida and Nancy offer definitions of literature that are sometimes *hyper*-metaphorical and other times practically outside the threshold of intelligibility. They contextualize their literary inquiries by advising us to think about the question

1 J. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 134.

of “literature” as that which names or exemplifies a “political” urgency and possible *resistance* to digitization, *mondialisation*, or, for Nancy, capitalism itself. Nancy and Derrida use the explosion of forms bearing the name of literature to mark chances beyond the imperial, “vectoral”, virtual domination we all – in heterogenous and unequal ways – endure.

3. For Derrida, literature is a scene of forgiveness, one that harbours within its *betrayal* of the Abrahamic tradition *the* promise of a democracy-to-come. For Nancy, literature exemplifies the ontology of “Being-with”, a philosophical-political thought that thinks “Being-common” *prior* to the communal representations imposed by capital or capitalism. Derrida and Nancy are not in complete agreement throughout their reflections on literature, though – friends in life and in thought – their ideas do not oppose each other in a dialectical fashion. In the essay to follow I hope to preserve this non-dialectical tension, so that even when I attempt to merge their ideas, the impossibility of identifying the singular – one of the central concerns of this essay – will reiterate literature’s immense demand. For example, I will treat Derrida’s phrase “retraction of God” and Nancy’s “retreat of the political”, which both say so much about literature, as a disjointure of the same.

4. The question of literature also demands a question about the producer of literature. Preliminarily, I propose, in line with the ideas below, that a singularity produces a work of literature. But, I am extremely concerned that singularity, correlated with literature in this manner, can or will be treated as a synonym for the author, for the human, and even more specifically, with the *imago* of a white man. This figure or *imago* has dominated the history of literature. It is the very same history that violently rejects the supplement (e.g. technology), the animal, and the innumerable “we” marginalized by being identified with supplementation and/or animality. The way this history foregrounds a universal masculine logical figure should make us suspect how sufficiently, even after the death of the author, a new term like singularity can escape this record. In the essay to follow, rather than giving examples of texts that have somehow resisted the stamp literary – I’m thinking for example about Phillis Wheatley’s poetry or Dr. Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*,² I will let Nancy and Derrida co-operatively take literature far outside the conventions of aesthetic sensibility. The manner in which both, together, in their own unique ways, trace literature through betrayal, secrecy, and finitude – through and beyond ontology – while emphasizing the “re-politicization” of these interruptive paths, will hopefully intimate a more intimate interaction with literature than the one that flames out as we click “*add to cart*” once again.

2 The unique way both of these writers get reduced to novelty acts, rather than novelists or poets, by Thomas Jefferson and Freud respectively, marks an intersection of exclusion I hope to analyze elsewhere.

Scene of Forgiveness

5. As mentioned, in “Literature in Secret”, Derrida describes literature as a scene of forgiveness. But forgiveness for what? The quickest answer: literature asks forgiveness for being singular – that is, for keeping or guarding a secret. Literature is thus a scene of impossible forgiveness, because at the moment of inscription, the secret has already been kept: in the mark (the seal), the time for the secret’s exposure has passed.
6. Derrida premises his assessment of literature on two narrative moments from the Old Testament; in both, Derrida observes a “retraction of God” (*GD* 125). The first retraction is found in the story of Abraham and Isaac: this is the moment that God stays Abraham’s hand and allows Isaac to survive. The second moment occurs in the story of the flood: God responds to a “sacrificial holocaust offered by Noah” (141) by deciding, in direct contrast to his original intention, to preserve humans and animals. He promises never to destroy the living again. One of a couple unique features Derrida draws from these scenes is their genealogical nature: the fact that these stories from the Old Testament are not only metaphorically powerful in their interpretative relevance, but given the way these stories occupy a certain heart of ourselves, these memories which constitute what we are (viii), Derrida asserts, and quite surprisingly (I think) – and in doing so he distinguishes his aporias from those of Nancy’s below – that literature is more Abrahamic than Greek (132). More Abrahamic because God’s retraction initiates literature’s *supposed* scene of forgiveness, and the “God of philosophers and of ontotheology” is not one who retracts (125).
7. Another feature Derrida draws out from these scenes is the theoretical relation of forgiveness to God’s retraction. I admit, Derrida doesn’t make it easy to understand this relation, not only because of his usual difficulty, but because this retraction, though evocative throughout the essay, feels more suggestive than expository. That is to say, Derrida leaves the reader wondering in what way a work of literature responds to, replicates, countersigns, or gives significance to a retraction of God. Put another way: if God is not something like a big Other, how does the retraction of God “allegorize” literature’s relation to otherness? The first invaluable clue that Derrida gives us is to link the retraction of God, this hesitation, this going back on what was originally decided, to a kind of *figurative* admission by God himself that he is implicated by finitude.
8. Derrida’s “Literature in Secret” follows the essay “Gift of Death” in both its English and French edition. “Gift of Death” is a monumental text, one that analyzes / deconstructs the manner in which death, in the strictures of Judeo-Christian history, has served as a secret that provides each of

us with a sense of separation or individual singularity that results in the very possibility of *our* freedom and responsibility. Derrida *read-writes* this secret of death *into* the secret Abraham keeps from Sarah as he ascends Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac – that is, as Abraham sets off to deliver Isaac to God as a gift of death. Derrida is already deconstructing the purported individualism of death's secret – exemplified by Heidegger's idea in *Being and Time* that death is *Dasein's* ownmost authenticity, one that can never be replaced by another (i.e. no one can take our death from us: even if someone saves our life by sacrificing their own, each of us will still have to die one day) – by offering Abraham as a counter-example where death is not appropriated (taken within) but expropriated (given to the other). What Derrida does affirm, regardless of whether the gift of death prioritizes the self or the other, is that singularity is always constituted around the guarding or keeping of a secret.

9. At this point, Derrida relays a great deal from Kierkegaard, who, in *Fear and Trembling*, reads Abraham's story as a lesson that faith is beyond ethics and that in order to commit to *the* infinite God, one must relinquish or sacrifice one's commitment to the Ethics of society (in this case, Abraham sacrifices the societal consensus that one shouldn't murder your son, and then proceeds to guard his faith by keeping silent).³ Derrida reroutes Kierkegaard's conclusion by arguing that every commitment commits itself to the totally other (e.g. God but also...) while simultaneously neglecting, abandoning, or sacrificing the other others, the other commitments. Derrida offers himself at the instance of this lecture as an example: at that time, he (a French-speaking professor) could have been speaking other languages, devoting himself to other obligations, or connecting with other *fellow-citizens*. (69). What he wants to demonstrate is that every decision contains this secret of death (ambivalently designated as both our own and the other's), insofar as it is only by keeping such a secret that a sense of singularity makes us responsible for the decisions we make; we feel responsible by feeling how each activity or commitment we participate in cuts itself off irreparably from those we "avoided". Rather than bringing us before finitude in the classical sense of individual mortality, this deconstructed secret of death brings us before finitude in the violent undecidability of *each* choice and *each* responsibility: once Abraham chooses to obey his love for God, he must, in the most literal way, surrender his love for Isaac. What's so secret about this choice – aside from the fact that Abraham doesn't tell anyone about it – is that the choice does not offer any rational guidelines by which to make legible the reason for deciding for one (God) over the other (Isaac). Not only is this calculation illegible to an observer or a witness, it is also illegible to Abraham, who must endure the anxiety of his incalculable decision: and this makes keeping the secret that much

³ It's important to note that had he confessed to Sarah or Isaac, he would have already entered the field of Ethics by giving a reason – no matter how illogical – to his actions.

more definitive.

10. Derrida restates all of this near the end of “Literature in Secret” (155-56), but, acknowledging the role of God’s retraction, he now adds that “the veritable object of the divine injunction [to sacrifice Isaac] had to be something other than putting Isaac to death. In any case it is not the thing to be hidden, the content of a secret to be safeguarded” (155). Rather, the object of God’s injunction, and thus the secret to be concealed, is the senselessness of an unconditional responsibility to this singular appeal or covenant with God. This senselessness, or suspension of sense (Nancy will bring us back to sense), is equi-primordial, we might say, with the fact that such a decision is made in secret: hiding this bond from everyone assures there is no third party to countersign the commitment, “no generality, no calculable knowledge, no conditional deliberation, no hypothesis, no hypothetical imperative, so that the covenant remains absolute and absolutely singular in its act of election” (155). The singularity of the choice, the secrecy of this choice, its unconditionality and its senselessness – they each articulate one another together. This “quadratic articulation” is first articulated, that is marked, when a third party can testify to it – and that occurs at the moment God stays Abraham’s hand: Isaac is now a witness to the secret. Let’s be absolutely clear, a secret marked, a secret articulated, does not mean that it is no longer a secret. A secret marked is a testament to the fact that a secret took place, that something singular, incalculable, and beyond the codes of family and societal regulations has occurred. The secret itself remains buried in this mark. If Abraham now feels compelled to ask forgiveness for his unconditional love for God, it is only because he has no way to explain to Isaac, to God, and to himself why he was willing to kill Isaac.
11. The forgiveness and the presence of a witness (a third party) occur simultaneously, and they both occur because of God’s retraction. Had God let Abraham kill Isaac... We see how impossible it is to imagine this, little of our history and orientation toward life would make sense. By preserving Isaac, Abraham must bear the full weight of what he was willing to do – without the support of God’s love. Not that God’s love is no longer there for him, but it is now implicated by an inconsistency manifested in the retraction: God doubting an earlier decision of his, God doubting the logic of his own covenant, God reflecting on his shortcomings, “as if he were the same time finite and infinite” (146). This quasi-finitude of God, this image of God asking himself – or even Abraham – for forgiveness, has a surprising *effect*: Abraham, that is man, must ask forgiveness of God for something God himself retracted. Once Abraham (man) perceives God as capable of retracting, Abraham (man) can no longer expect God to respond with absolute authority. In this way, asking for forgiveness from the infinitely other reflects itself immediately as asking for forgiveness from one-self.

Which would also mean that man now emulates God in this scene of forgiveness; emulates or, perhaps, “metonymizes” God’s retraction: “forgiveness is a history of God. It is written or addressed to the name of God. Forgiveness comes to pass as a covenant between God and God through the human” (148). Derrida does not exactly help us understand, at least in this text, what kind of psychic incorporation allows the human to take upon himself the absolute power of the infinite Other only at the moment that the Other hesitates, but he does allow us to observe how the inheritance of this particular relation between finitude and infinity results in literature’s promise to say and hide everything. As if man can at last emulate God’s own seeming infinity the moment God marks himself finite. Here, I note, like Derrida notes as well, that this entire scene of forgiveness and by transitive property this entire scene of literature is one that excludes women, sacrificing them to silence prior even to the sacrifice of the promising young man (109-10).

12. Literature (God’s retraction) is a *betrayal* of the inheritance of Abraham’s secret commitment to God. Derrida here plays with the double meaning of the word *trahison* (which the English *betrayal* *betrays* as well). In the “non-traitorous” sense of betrayal, literature betrays, records, marks, reveals, testifies to Abraham’s lineage. In the traitorous sense, literature can be said to betray in two ways: one sense is ahistorical, simply due to the structure of the trace; the other is historical, due to a secularization that allows holiness to apply to any commitment, not just a commitment to God. The ahistorical sense of treason, the structure of the trace, carries within it the non-traitorous sense as well. The trace marks, records, inherits, and yet it does so in a way that can never translate, signify, or replicate what it is marking. The trace keeps the secret sealed. Derrida describes this mere tracing of Abraham’s singular commitment to God as that which descends from Abraham to Isaac. What can Isaac say about his father after that day? What can he accurately transmit to the generations that will follow? In a sense, the fact that the witness of a secret (that includes Abraham trying to transcribe his own experience of the secret) can never faithfully bring the secret to meaning (i.e. the secret remains secret by its untranslatability), also leads to the historical divergence from this “inaugural” scene. For Derrida, this divergence can be understood by thinking about the way literature *desacralizes* God.

13. In “Gift of Death”, Derrida introduced the untranslatable phrase *le tout autre est tout autre*, the totally other is every bit other. Derrida uses this phrase to contaminate Kierkegaard’s assessment that God alone names the infinite Other, i.e., for Kierkegaard, it is only by acting in the name of God that one can achieve a beyond-heroic commitment that sacrifices family and community. Derrida wants us to think that every commitment – whether to one’s family, one’s country, one’s philo-

sophy, one's crime, or one's hedonism – imbeds within itself a devotion to something totally other while simultaneously neglecting to commit to an other that's also totally other. With specific reference to Kierkegaard, Derrida wants us to understand that a commitment to Isaac, and a refusal to put faith in God, would have been no less a singularly unconditional decision. Derrida's point is that it is only when what one is unable to commit to is as totally other as what one does commit to that that commitment has the quality of an unconditional responsibility cut through with a trembling sense of finitude. *Le tout autre est tout autre* is thus a way to think about the secularization of literature: if literature mimics Abraham's scene of forgiveness, it does so by testifying to secrets that do not solely commit to the name of God. These secrets conceal a singular commitment to anything. (Or: God is only the name of that which you commit to.) Literature is capable of transmitting, by the seal of secrecy, a singularity of commitment to the most low and the most high – neither of which maintain their rank in the literary. The betrayal of the Abrahamic is then literally a *betrayal* of the holiness of that other for which one keeps one's secret. One can commit as secretly and as singularly to the cause of misanthropy as to that of philanthropy.

14. One might wonder, thinking about certain libertine-type novels (e.g. *Justine*) or other more psychedelic celebrations of pleasure, how these stories remain scenes of forgiveness. If I could put it simply, since forgiveness is the recognition that one committed to one thing over the other, the basic sense of literature, “this is what happened”, would contain (and thus transmit) the consistent trembling intimation that so many other things were forsaken. As if by detailing *anything* one marks the senseless or incalculable limits where that detail is not something else. – As if literature says something like: “forgive me, reader, for not knowing you before”. Literature says this with its *destinerrant* marks, marks which continue to guard a secret by leaving the exact context or source of the details hidden from view.
15. The appearance of the “reader” should give us pause for a second. Exiting briefly from Derrida's intense scholarship, entering a more colloquial register, we might wonder what interest the reader has in this situation. In other words, if literature guards a secret, if it exposes a range of details cut out into their own limits by the fact of their having been exposed *in place* of others, how does an engagement with these marks manage to impress, fascinate, excite, sadden, and in general affect the reader with so much passion? The question could also be asked in this way: what can be read where something is marked unreadable? Before answering these questions, I want to suggest that they also demand that we consider something like the nature or structure of the author, i.e. they who are capable of marking this way. The question of the reader's response immediately asks the

question of the who or what of the author because if something in the reader clicks, something resonates, then this resonance, from across what certainly reads in Derrida like a great abyss, can only be possible if these marks of a senseless secret share, reflect, or repeat something recognizable on the other side (i.e. that of the author, the marker/maker of the secret).

16. As we acknowledged in the introduction, we are tentatively calling the author a singularity. Since then, we have spoken about the way in which responsibility and the secret – first conceived as one's ownmost relation to death – clarifies one-self as singular. In brief, where *there is a secret*, there is singularity. Though singularity is certainly not identical to an individual, and though Derrida makes it clear, in passing, that places, animals, and languages (71) can also be singularities, by using Abraham as the exemplar of the author, it is hard not to imagine that the singularity is both human and man. That literature occurs, at the very least, without the identity man, could, on the one hand, be read as nothing more than affirmation that literature does successfully betray its Abrahamic origin, but it could also give us the sense that if singularity encroaches on the static nature of gender so too might it encroach on the "individual human". Can something like a machine or an animal write literature? Or, at the very least, a collection of humans? I want to leave these possibilities wide open as I turn now to Jean-Luc Nancy's "Being Singular Plural", published one year after Derrida's "Literature in Secret".

Sharing the World

17. I'm turning to Nancy's essay because it too thinks about the relation between literature and the singular, though, with its emphasis on sharing [*partager*], and its emphasis on the "essence" of what is singular, it might provide a clearer sense of the *who* and *what* that "ex-scribes" (i.e. the author) and how this ex-scription of a hidden secret resonates for "someone else" (i.e. the reader). I should remind us that though Nancy was a student and friend of Derrida's, there's no assurance that they are in agreement – so it would be unwise to read Nancy's text as a simple shading in of certain shadows cast by Derrida's. Rather, I hope that the closeness of their concerns combined with the irreducible differences in their approach gives us more chances, rather than less, to analyze, think, remark, and expose ourselves to our questions and the way they continually bring us beyond the limits of each term.
18. Regarding approach, Nancy's text has a more traditional method, and he spends much more

time defining it⁴. “Being Singular Plural” is meant to be a “first philosophy”, an “ontology” that weaves *praxis* and *ethos* together⁵. Specifically, Nancy aims to write an ontology that flushes out, exposes, or lays bare the full effects of Heidegger’s term *Mitsein*, Being-with [others], from *Being and Time*. Nancy argues, while also appealing to a certain consensus, that though Heidegger did indeed assert that “Being-with” is co-originary with *Dasein*, he failed to pursue the consequences or stakes of this co-originary without reservation (*BSP* 26). There are many signs of this reservation, and they can be complicated or defended, but one could point, for example, to the manner in which Being-towards-death, as *Dasein*’s ownmost Being, calls *Dasein* to mineness in a manner where no other can substitute themselves for “your” or “my” proper death⁶. Where Heidegger writes “*Dasein*’s... understanding of Being already implies the understanding of others”, Nancy’s ontology will radicalize this thought – i.e. alter the emphasis and thus alter the ontological structure – by declaring “the understanding of Being is nothing other than an understanding of others” (27). As Nancy explains a few pages later, the “Meaning of Being”, the pre-ontological understanding without which Heidegger’s existential phenomenology would not have been possible, is nothing more than the “with” of meaning (37). Nancy directly states his intention to renew or “reinitialize” Heidegger’s existential analytic (the description of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*) by treating Being-with as the “minimal ontological premise” (27). Though Nancy doesn’t christen this analysis a “co-existential analytic”, he does use that phrase to get us to think “with” without reservation (94).

19. Let’s admit this together, it is not easy to think “with” or Being-with or “we” as the ontology or the nature of Being that we are. Certain tendencies “we” have, whether they be solitude, narcissism, the inability to communicate, or the feeling of being left out or behind, all seem to assert an affect of isolation, of secrecy, and total separation that a thinking of “Being-with” might seem to violate. Nancy is well aware of this difficulty, well aware of the importance of retaining the absolute difference of each singular orientation toward the world, and this is why *being singular plural* acts as a kind of condensed description (or sigil) of an ontology of Being-with. Being singular plural is just as difficult to conceive as “Being-with”, though this titular phrase does help prevent us from conceiving “Being-with” as a continuous essential substance that runs through or behind us all; rather, “Being-with” is a kind of co-implicated, simultaneous “world-field” of differences (singular-

4 Undoubtedly, Derrida’s entire oeuvre is an immense elaboration of the deconstructive “method”, a word I put in quotes because Derrida fundamentally dissuades us from categorizing deconstruction as a method. In any case, the distinction of “method” still remains, given the way Nancy establishes a direct lineage to Heidegger from the start of his essay.

5 J.-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 65.

6 M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 284.

ities).

20. Before we continue to think about Nancy's co-existential analytic, I want to remind us that we are trying to grasp how a reader of literature can respond so affirmatively to a secrecy that is never revealed. Already, we begin to see how Nancy might help us, because he wants us to think about how each singularity is always already co-implicated "with" others. The exact nature of this co-implication is what we are examining, while also on the lookout to observe how Nancy defines this co-implication in reference to literature, otherness, singularity, secrecy, God, and retraction. Many of Nancy's terms, being-common, "between", "being-with-one-another" [*"être-les-uns-avec-les-autre"*], being-together, being-in-common, dis-position, and spacing – all of which are meant to describe *the world*, dance around each other in a unique *co-ordination* while also receiving countless apotropaic refrains that ensure we do not interpret these terms in a classical manner. Nancy is most insistent, i.e. he brings it up quite often, that we ward off any idea that these terms describe some kind of substance (28-9). Near the end of his preface, to explain the difficulty of his neologistic language, Nancy writes:

[...] the logic of the "with" often requires heavy-handed syntax (*une syntaxe bien pesante*) in order to say "being-with-one-another". You may suffer from it as you read these pages. But perhaps it is not an accident that language does not lend itself easily to showing the "with" as such, for it is itself the address and not the addressed. (xvi)

"Not the addressed" is another way to say that "with" is not substantial. "With" is not something sitting there waiting to receive a message, nor is it something taking up space or time that we can point at or hold on to. Being-with as ontology, as essence or co-essence, is the very Being of addressing, the very Being of meaning or sense (Nancy plays with the double meaning/sense of the French *sens* throughout his essay), the manner in which something exposed ends up radiating itself elsewhere. (We must, however, be rigorous about the way we "identify" what gets radiated, and how we describe the way this radiation is received.)

21. Another way to think about Being as addressing is to think what it means that "Being absolutely does not *preexist*; nothing preexists; only what exists exists" (29). "This proposition", Nancy continues, "proposes nothing but the placement [*la position*] and dis-position of existence. It is its plural singularity". *Bien pesante* indeed; but let's try to think about how *no pre-existence* helps us think about the nature of an address or an addressing. An address, without reference to a specific addressee (who is addressed) or a specific referent (what gets addressed), is only there when it's there,

and it's being there consists entirely of what it is when it's there, and since this address is Being itself, then there is "nothing other than (*n'est alors rien que*)" (a phrase Nancy uses over and over in this essay) these addresses. To think about the address as Being (as Being itself *as* what it is) and to think about it as coming from nothing is to think meaning or sense right at (*à même*) meaning or sense ("right at" is another phrase Nancy uses repeatedly). "Nothing other than" and "right at" could, in the power of their adverbial ambiguity, delimit a sizeable portion of what this ontology is calling us to think. To think right at an address, and to think Being as nothing more than an address, is to think that Being is itself passage and sharing/dividing. *Betweening* (without an article) would be a synonym for the world.

22. It thus follows, since Nancy thinks "with" as the address itself, that literature is exemplary of being singular plural. A work of literature is, by all accounts, an addressing (90), and it is also something unique, something singular, which has the power or capacity to reach others – to space or stretch the between-other-singularities. In what is probably Nancy's most casual thought, he emphasizes that something can only be unique if it is essentially there "with" many others. If there is no singularity without others, without the plural, a singularity must be fundamentally co-essentialized "with" others.
23. Nancy helps us think about this co-essential "with" by pluralizing the classical trope of the origin. For Nancy, "the alterity of the other is its being-origin" (11), which means that each singularity *presents* as singular because it is each time by way of its own origin. Nancy compares our fascination with literature to the way we scrutinize a newborn's face (14). In both instances, we face, or touch up against (only by experiencing a distancing), the very singular origin that constitutes our own sense of singularity. What a baby's face and literature expose to us is that "the 'ordinary' is always exceptional" (10): which is to say that every encounter – every presence – can only ever take place by being *original* each and every time. Given the way that each singular origin addresses, spaces, and distances by seeming to come from nothing, access to this origin only occurs by way of a unique type of concealment. The trace of the origin is there in the opening or presencing of each singularity, but the origin itself remains mute or hardly traceable again and again. Again and again is putting it mildly, if every presence (every ex-position) is original, the singular origin must be infinite. We can touch each singularity as a singularity (we can read books) because our own singularity is the very same repeated original access "with" others.

What else are ['literature' and the 'arts'] but the exposition of an access concealed in its own opening,

an access that is, then, 'inimitable,' untransportable, untranslatable because it forms, each time, an absolute point of translation, transmission, or transition of the origin *into origin*.⁷ (14)

24. Reference to concealment and untranslatability brings us close to Derrida's sense of the secret. We can, at the very least, affirm that Abraham's scene of forgiveness is a transmission of a secret that conceals access (keeps secret) *in* its own opening (or *in* its ex-position, e.g. its mark). Nancy himself introduces the term *secret* along the path of his ontology, and though he is initially careful about using the term – fearing that it might misconstrue the concealment of every singularity's origin as a substantialized alterity beyond the present encounter (13), at the end of the essay, he provides two ways to think affirmatively about the secret. He writes, placing his tentative affirmation of secrecy in quotations, "an exposed 'unpresentability' [...] is nothing other than the very presentation of our co-appearing, of 'us' co-appearing, and whose 'secret' exposes itself and exposes us to ourselves without our ever beginning to penetrate it". And a few paragraphs later he adds: "'to speak with' is the conversation (and sustaining) and *conatus* of a being-exposed, which exposes only the secret of its own exposition" (92-3). These two quotations taken together elicit the thought: *all exposure is secrecy*. In the fundamental experience of Being as Being-with, the exposition and meaning (*sens*) of everything firstly arrives "with" an impenetrable secret. Exposure only and always to secrecy demands that we rethink meaning/sense (*sens*) as well. What we touch, i.e. sense, what we encounter ex-posed, is the secrecy of the origin, is the immeasurable, meaningless, senseless, etc. Here, Derrida and Nancy are extraordinarily close, touching even: for both men, secrecy is always kept secret, never heralds a substance waiting to be unveiled, and for both the secrecy is as such because of its senselessness (i.e. its inability to transmit itself into a rational code). Nancy, in addition, helps us think about how the transmission of this senseless secret becomes exactly what "we" are always touching and encountering. To be exposed to or to access the other's senseless secret is the very feel of our *own* senseless secrecy. Literature then would be something like an affirmative ex-position of this secrecy, one that fascinates because it calls us to remark our own co-essence with the same singular plural origin. By reading the secret "with" another, we gain access to it as something *crucial* about/to ourselves and its Being-with. Merging Nancy's access with the unconditional finitude of choice in Derrida: to read the *senseless* irreversibility of what was chosen over something else is to note how our life gets detailed by senseless irreversibles as well – the choice of which remains secret even to ourselves.

7 Derrida will often say something that is quite close to this point – though he never attributes to it the ontological originariness we find in Nancy. Derrida argues that the untranslatableness of a singularity generates the fervor for its translation. Cf. J. Derrida, "Shibboleth", 69n.

Ontological Forgiveness?

25. As mentioned in the introduction, I want to emphasize and “optimize” a certain tension between Derrida and Nancy’s remarks on literature, and to do that I am looking for phrases that appear synonymous while ultimately maintaining their uniqueness through the singular context (“origin”) of their usage. It is in this manner that I introduce two *angles of approach* Nancy provides, in his ontology of “Being-with”, for thinking about secrecy, God’s retraction, and forgiveness. First off, he connects the non-pre-existence of the address with the death of God; and secondly, he appeals to us to follow his ontology by way of what he calls the “retreat of the political”. I take us along these paths hoping to observe what thoughts can be transmitted from Derrida to Nancy and vice versa, letting (though this would be inevitable) what remains singular about each keep its distance.
26. With respect to the death of God, Nancy explains that throughout the history of metaphysics the concept of the “creation of the world” has been at odds with the concept of the “author” [of the world] (15). According to Nancy, none of the “great metaphysicians” (he lists: Aquinas, Spinoza, Malebranche, Leibniz, Descartes and Augustine) include an image of God as merely a producer. Rather, all these men treat the “creation of the world” as an originary production, so that God is always in some way produced along with the world. The problem, as Nancy sees it, is that if the “creation of the world” identifies an essential inception that brings (or spaces) all of us together, the world is already transcendent in a way that renders God’s transcendence redundant and unnecessary. It is this “motif of creation [...] that leads directly to the death of God understood as author”, where God recedes into the very creation he is purported to have produced. According to Nancy, to think creation *ex nihilo* is to turn God into *nihil*: there is no “from which (*d’où*)” that such creation would come. At this point in his essay, Nancy makes an assertion that seems to refute a claim made by Derrida above: he says, “with respect to the question of the origin, this is surely the precise point at which the link is forged that makes us unfailingly Jew-Greek in every respect” (16).⁸ Jew-Greek in *every* respect includes our literature, and thus counters Derrida’s Abrahamic attribution of the literary. Nancy’s point here is that something like a retraction of God does seem to take place even in Greek cosmogony (16, 197n), and even in the God of ontotheology. I don’t want to conflate these ideas too much, but if we remember that God’s retraction in the Abraham story implicated God with finitude, we can see that the “creation of the world”, as Nancy understands it, forces God to lose

8 Jew-Greek is a phrase from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* that Derrida references in the essay “Violence and Metaphysics”. It is beyond the purview of this essay to discuss the reason why Derrida emphasizes the Abrahamic element of literature twenty years after affirming the Jew-Greek legacy of Western metaphysics.

something of his omnipotence as well: he too becomes something singularly, and thus finitudinally, exposed in the origin of everything.

27. Rather than belabouring which of these men is correct, perhaps this disjuncture is the best chance to ask, right where Nancy also seems to affirm something finite about God, whether we can also translate something of Derrida into Nancy's ontology: specifically, can we say that every origin of the singular is a scene of forgiveness? Otherwise put: is there something like a primordial guilt of Being-with?⁹ Does each ex-position, at its congenitally perjuring heart, beg forgiveness for being singular and "with" at the very same time? I believe that one way we can answer "yes" to this question – and do so only by remembering that Derrida will speak of the perjuring heart ("the congenial perjury at the heart of justice") as an hauntology and not an ontology – is by reminding ourselves that Nancy is repeating the existential analytic from *Being and Time* (with an added emphasis on *Mitsein*), and that Heidegger develops there, along with the co-essentiality of *Mitsein*, the existential (and thus primordial) Being-guilty of *Dasein*.

28. *Dasein* is, Heidegger takes no prisoners here (and betrays Nietzsche almost entirely), essentially guilty and constantly guilty (*BT* 353). Primordial and constant, this existential guilt is revealed "in authentic Being-towards-death", which, I note, is exactly where the co-essentiality of *Mitsein* seems to vanish. Heidegger explains that the ownmost "*non-relational*" possibility of Being-guilty means that primordial guilt cannot be reduced to its "average everyday" instances, which include "owing something to someone", "being responsible for something", and conventional conceptions of morality and evil (354). Rather, for Heidegger, Being-guilty is primordial for *Dasein* because *Dasein* is the basis [*Grund*] of itself as thrown. "It has been released *from* its basis, not *through* itself but *to* itself, so as to be *as this basis*" (330). *Dasein* is not the basis in the sense of arising from its own projection, rather it is the very experience or Being of projection, and it is in this experience that *Dasein* is a *nullity* of itself (330). "*Dasein* understands itself in terms of possibilities [...] but this implies that in having-a-potentiality of Being it always stands in one possibility or another: it constantly is *not* other possibilities" (331). That is to say, primordial guilt is the state-of-mind [*Befindlichkeit*] of always Being the choice between one possibility or another, of Being-thrown as a finitude that seals off certain possibilities entirely. By linking guilt to what is "*non-relational*" in death, Heidegger, with his usual "intrepidity", conceives of a guilt that does not arrive in relation to

9 Here we must respect Derrida's insistence that God's retraction should not immediately be conflated with repentance (*GD* 125). Heidegger's primordial Guilt, I believe, provides the same respect, insofar as it too distinguishes itself from its synonyms, which, for Heidegger, would be something like usage by *das Man* ("they") of the homonym "guilt".

an or the other. Primordial guilt solely concerns itself with what we make of our own selves. And yet, this notion of one choice over another as an experience of finitude fits almost perfectly with certain elements of Derrida's *le tout autre est tout autre* – so long as we restrict otherness solely to our ownmost potentiality. Because we can't and because we won't, we can think or assert a kind of chimera of these three thinkers' thoughts, where the exposition of a singularity ex-poses primordially its own guilt in Being singular by touching up against everything it is not with an address that asks forgiveness not as a way to absolve itself but to reach out towards or greet the other singularities whose possibility is essential to us while remaining, like us, irreducibly cut off *in* the finitude of secrecy. It is in this "sense", by bringing Heidegger's guilt near to Derrida's forgiveness,¹⁰ that we could interpret Nancy's ontology of Being-with as an ontology of forgiveness as well. Literature would thus be something like the ex-scription of guilt in the very presence of existing once again – the mark(s) of survival-guilt. Additionally, it's important not to forget that if literature is an appeal for forgiveness in response to survival, it must be received or read as such. Forgiveness has to occur as "being-with". This implies, in a general sense, that what might seem to some as literary can fail to be heard by another who can't revive or countersign particular inscriptions of survival. Which is another way to say that taste remains pertinent in the face of violence and the inability to *share*; under the co-ordinates of the tension tran-scribed above, the literary would be something like a taste or touch for survival.

Tain of Capital

29. As mentioned, we can also think about Derrida's finitude of God by analysing Nancy's phrase the "retreat (*retrait*) of the political". I hear in this phrase something akin to "retraction of God" both because of how decisively Western history has always metonymized God's divinity as the very signature of political authority and because we can read Nancy's ontology as a kind of final refusal of the indecision between creation and creator – that is, as a decisive affirmation of the death of God or God's permanent retraction.

30. Perhaps most importantly though, the retreat of the political asks us to think about being sin-

10 In *Le Parjure et le Pardon : Volume I*, still to be translated into English, Derrida directly connects his reading of forgiveness to Heidegger's primordial guilt, though he does so only on the grounds that such guilt arrive inextricably linked to what he calls "absolute innocence". Derrida's point in this rich passage is that wherever the affect of guilt coincides with a longing or demand for forgiveness, there must always already be an affirmation of that guilt's absence – a time of grace, whether past or future, where that guilt has been absolved. No desire for forgiveness would exist without the promise of this absolute innocence. J. Derrida, *Le Parjure et le Pardon : Volume I*, 179.

gular plural and thus literature as modes or means to resist the universal claims of globalization or capital. In a similar way to how Heidegger notes the possibility of a saving grace in the great danger of technological expansion, Nancy reads the very chance or possibility of thinking Being-common as that which arrives alongside – or perhaps behind (as a tain, as a backside that is also an opening up to elsewhere) – the overwhelming capture capital has on humanity and its globe. “The task is to understand how history – as a singular, Western accident – ‘became’ what one might call ‘global’ or ‘planetary’ without, at the same time, engendering itself as ‘universal’” (BSP 22). In this sense – and here I am also turning to the collection of essays and discussions by Nancy and Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe published under the title *Retreating the Political*, with specific reference to the helpful Introduction to this work by Simon Sparks – capitalism is the name for the entire political force of globalization, what Nancy calls, a couple times, “empire”. Nancy describes the political as that which endows singularities with predetermined meanings and identities, and he identifies capitalism as active wherever our scattered “Being-with” finds “it-self” represented. The retreat of the political is thus a retreat from capitalism, it is “a drawing back of any specificity that could be ascribed to the political”, a “withdrawal of meaning” that occurs by “recogni[z]ing [...] the essential finitude of the political”¹¹. Tautological, this withdrawal of meaning is accomplished as the retreat of the political itself: “the uncovering, the ontological laying bare of being-with” (BSP 37). In other words, everything that we already introduced about Being-with occurred along the terrain of this retreat of the political, and in that sense, was already a response to the seeming universality of capitalism. *Seeming* because it is, like every exposure, only a singular growth; *seeming* because its identifications inhibit access to (or thought of) Being-with; *seeming* because if Nancy’s ontology is correct, and there is only singular plural – only infinite repetitions of the *original*, the universal is an impossibility.

31. I do want to point out that because Derrida describes the “retraction of God” by way of a narrative, it seems to play a different kind of role in the work of literature than Nancy’s retreat of politics. Following Derrida’s narrative closely, we could be forgiven for thinking that a secret, and its relation to a decision, develops prior to the retraction of God. For a few moments (or the couple days that it takes Abraham to ascend Mount Moriah), there seems to be a manner of existence that holds the secret without having to beg forgiveness for holding it – that is, an existence that has yet to encounter the finitude of God. The separation of these moments is especially peculiar since Derrida relentlessly educates us on the *originarily* supplemental structure of all existence, a “concept” of de-

11 S. Sparks, *Retreating the Political*, xxvi.

rivation that would require that God's retraction and the ensuing compulsion to mark the secret, to expose it to a witness but only as a trace, is always already the experience of the secret. On this view, we don't make a choice and then later beg for forgiveness in the marks we make: the marks we make are the very supplements by which we choose. The peculiarity of this apparent time gap is perhaps most readily apparent in the words Abraham says directly before God retracts: "I am here". Clearly, Derrida and *différance* do not wait¹² for God's retraction to deconstruct this presence: speech itself, in the sense of generalized writing (i.e. the death of presence in every mark), is always already such a deconstruction of the meaning of Abraham's sentence. Which is to say, and Derrida doesn't ever say this directly (in "Literature in Secret" or "Gift of Death"), the "retraction of God" has always already taken place. Holding onto the senseless secret that is the choice of a singularity is always already an experience of supplementation and the deferral of presence. One could say that it is the fact of supplementation that immediately signs the choice's unforgivable senselessness – as if a carving into stone or paper or screen is the choice and the choice's scene of forgiveness all at once. There is never a moment of pure secrecy between the singular and Other, there is always a witness, and, as Nancy would have us think, always a plurality of them.

32. I mention this because if Nancy speaks of the simultaneity of origins that *are* being singular plural, such simultaneity is immediately the retreat of the political, immediately a confrontation with finitude, and immediately an ex-position in the sense of a marking or supplement. Or, as Nancy puts it, "The world has no supplement. It is supplemented in itself and, as such, is indefinitely supplemented by the origin" (*BSP* 11). One can also describe this edge as the undecidability between an ontology of touching others and the original supplementation of every ex-position. In this way, we can read the retreat of the political and the retraction of God as designating that which registers the non-existence or finitude of God's authority at the very same time that it exposes the finitude of political authority (which Nancy calls capitalism). The retraction of God marks the excess over and beyond authority or domination in the "withness" of each singularity. This would help explain why Derrida connects literature's ability to say and hide everything to *the* promise of a democracy-to-come (156). With no time to adequately distinguish a democracy-to-come from the retreat of the political, I will note that the former describes the aporetic double bind between incalculable singularity and calculable equality¹³, which places an emphasis elsewhere than Nancy's being singular plural, while still challenging us to think "common", equality, in the event of each singularity.

12 In fact, Derrida calls *différance* that which is without delay. Cf. J. Derrida, *Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, 229-30.

13 J. Derrida, *Rogues*, 86.

Who, We

33. I want to end with a few speculative “generalized” responses to these thoughts. First off, I want to make sure that we note how the different (con)figurations by which each author describes the senseless, the secret, and literature, generates decisively singular pictures of what’s at stake. For Nancy, the way that he describes every instance of presence within the idea Being-with, and all its “co-essential names”, and then speaks about literature as the exemplary instance of this Being-with, not to mention the way each singularity is an ex-position, makes it difficult not to deduce that all existence is literary. The way literature sparks access to an origin is not unique to literature, a baby’s face can also spark this access, as can – we would have to admit – a philosophical sensibility that touches the everyday as if it is this infinite originality at every moment. But, perhaps more pertinent, if every singularity ex-poses just like literature, in other words, if a rock ex-poses, and so does the individual atoms of a rock, then literature would seem to have a chance to be the address of something that isn’t human at all.
34. Though Derrida does not directly attempt to de-humanize the source of literature (at least in the essay we’re reading), Derrida does have us picture the enigmatic phrase “Pardon for not meaning to say...” [*pardon de ne pas vouloir dire...*] appearing like a meteorite, like a rainbow, coming from nowhere, with no discernable author, and ending up somewhere unknown: we don’t know what to make of it, we don’t know its full context – specifically, it bears a secret in its very presence. For Derrida, it is exactly the undecidability of this meteoric phrase that renders it something literary, which is to say that wherever the origin and the sense of a mark remain untraceable, such untraceability (untranslatability) makes a literary reading possible – keeps secret what’s exposed. One could argue that this untraceability must still be traced back to a human source, but when Derrida tells us that this meteor can turn up “written on a board, readable on a wall, inscribed in stone, on the surface of a sheet of paper or saved, in reserve, on a computer disk” (*GD* 120), we can at the very least confirm that a definitive unknowability of the source of literature must extend beyond humanity. As Derrida says in the Interview, “This Strange Institution called Literature”, “absolute singularity is never given as a fact, an object, or existing thing (*étant*) in itself”.¹⁴ This “paradoxical experience”, this secrecy, thus can never reduce itself to some ontology of the human or human being.
35. For Nancy, the question of the human is answered in a much different way. Keeping near to

14 Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature”, 68.

Heidegger, Nancy designates humanity as something significant or unique: the human “speaks existence”, “existence is exposed as such by humans” (BSP 17), though “it is not so much the world of humanity as it is the world of the nonhuman to which humanity is exposed and which humanity, in turn, exposes” (18). By preserving something human in the singularity of literature, Nancy says something like: literature signs the sense of something inhuman, but only the human can enact such signing.

36. Without daring to resolve the tension between Nancy and Derrida here, there seems to me a third or simply an other way to reject the direct link between the singularity and a particular human being while still keeping something of the human in reserve. One can say that literature can be, has been, and will be written by more than one. Homer – often considered the first when it comes to literature – has already become, for many, a name of this authorial plurality. Nancy himself gives us a certain affirmation of this possibility when he enjoins, “By definition and in essence, the above ‘first philosophy’ needs ‘to be made by all, not by one’ [...]” (26). A singularity is a unique angle of approach, a unique context, and one that cannot be replicated or adequately represented. That doesn’t ensure that it is solely the product of a single human in isolation. In fact, if we can take anything concrete from Nancy, it is that the isolated human subject is the dream of a metaphysics that will never come to fruition (BSP 29). Can we ever definitively say that what ends up on our screens, titillating us, is the product of one subject *alone*?

37. One of Nancy’s many challenging demands is to say, write, hear, or read “we” in a way that affirms singularity. In concert with this demand, he insists that to affirm a singularity, we must simultaneously say, write, hear, or read “we”. This double demand says so much; it speaks of literature, of history, of our current politics, and of new possibilities. It speaks of those who are marginalized, those who are not included in “we”, and it also speaks of the way “we” can be so imprecise as to universalize or represent what must always be singular. For Nancy, to think “right at” “we” and “nothing other than” “we” is essential to confronting the horrors of capital. This is why Nancy begins “Being Singular Plural” with a long list of the wars, violences, and refugee crises to which this thinking of “Being-with” via literature must respond. He writes, “This is the ‘earth’ we are supposed to ‘inhabit’ today, the earth for which the name Sarajevo will become the martyr-name, the testimonial-name: this is us, we who are supposed to say we as if we know what we are saying and *who* we are talking about. This earth is anything but a sharing of humanity” (p. xiii). Nancy would have it so that an *exacting* saying of we, one that thinks “Being-common”, would finally know *who* we are talking about. The *who-we* of a singularity.

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