THE GRAVITY OF THOUGHT

The two essays which make up this volume, "The Forgetting of Philosophy" and the "The Weight of a Thought" represent a meditation of the changing role of philosophy in a postmodernist context, without the reactive impulse of returning to past configurations of thought. Together these essays represent a distinctive elaboration of many of the themes which have recently occupied the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. Challenging the neomodernist projects of a "return" to Enlightenment, Nancy argues that these attempts ignore the true task of philosophy, which is not to manipulate or reactivate past significations, but to expose itself to the essential opening of meaning, to its event. This exposure reveals the finitude of thought, its "weight," to the extent that thought can only take place at the limit of significations, at the place where no full appropriation is possible.

"In *The Gravity of Thought,* Jean-Luc Nancy gives a clear and moving account of many of his leading ideas as he develops further his understanding of materiality, meaning, and limit. It is an excellent presentation of his constructive thinking, accessible to people who are not trained previously in philosophy and a significant contribution to contemporary thought. Well translated and introduced, this book engages primary philosophical issues with exceptional insight and power of expression."

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Jean-Luc Nancy is Professor of Philosophy and chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Strasbourg, France. Born in France in 1942, a student of Derrida, Nancy has written widely on the major figures of Western philosophy. Some of his analyses, particularly of Hegel's concept of Aufhebung and Kant's categorical imperative, have been influential. His work focuses on theories of meaning and its textual construction, and explores the boundaries of literature and philosophy. François Raffoul is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Gregory Recco is a graduate student in philosophy at the Pennsylvania State University.

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THE GRAVITY OF THOUGHT JEAN-LUC NANCY

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERARY THEORY

THE GRAVITY OF THOUGHT

JEAN-LUC NANCY

Translated by
François Raffoul
and Gregory Recco

Philosophy and Literary Theory

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Translator's Preface

A moment arrives when one can no longer feel anything but anger, an absolute anger, against so many discourses, so many texts that have no other care than to make a little more sense, to redo or perfect delicate works of signification.
—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*

What I am attempting to "signify" here is nothing more than this: *meaning* at the limit of signification . . .

[Logos] has the capacity to encounter itself at its own limit (in the end, perhaps I am speaking here only of this encounter), and, consequently, to encounter there that which exceeds its signification.
—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*

Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophical work (sometimes coauthored with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe)[1] has become increasingly well known on the American intellectual scene.[2] It would clearly be impossible, within the limits of this preface, to do justice to the remarkable breadth, richness, and complexity of these writings.[3] I will therefore confine my comments to the main themes developed in the two texts presented here. Written in May 1986, *The Forgetting of Philosophy* is situated squarely in the philosophical debates of the day. Nancy observes that although many publications proclaim their intention to return to or recover true philosophy (that of the Enlightenment) after nearly two centuries of allegedly deviant thought, the tasks, responsibilities, and urgency of philosophy have in fact been forgotten. Indeed, if, as Nancy claims, the task of philosophy is to think the present by exposing itself to the end or exhaustion of Western

significations and to what comes to us from such an end, the attempts to return to past significations can only amount to a forgetting of philosophy.[4] As Nancy himself admits (*Gravity*, 1), *The Forgetting of Philosophy* is a "polemical" text, which addresses the recent "reactionary" movement of thought advocating a return to past values, Ideas, and significations.

In 1985, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut published *La Pensée '68*, a highly polemical and virulent essay, whose intentions were clearly not devoid of a certain academic opportunism.[5] In this text, the authors take as their target the so-called poststructuralist or postmodern ideas, which they categorize as the Philosophy of the Sixties, a somewhat journalistic denomination that, as such, reduces these thoughts to a phenomenon (if not a "disease") that is sociologically analyzable and, in this respect, already obsolete. Their argument, or "diagnosis," can be roughly summarized as follows: post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian thoughts (as manifested in the work of such French thinkers as Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan) are essentially perverse in their results as well as in their assumptions; they are politically suspect, if not dangerous, and last but not least, morally irresponsible. In short, these thoughts would essentially be "nihilistic," this latter adjective understood as sufficient in itself to fulfill the function of a critique. Following this expeditious diagnosis, a no less brutal "solution" is proposed: a return to the very ideals and values that have come into question in the poststructuralist or the postmodern movement. Specifically, these authors advocate a return to the humanism of the Enlightenment, to the dominant values of modernity, following the example set by Jürgen Habermas and others. Their intention: to salvage what, in the modern project of the Enlightenment, is supposed to have been missed, the so-called unfinished project of modernity (in Habermas's celebrated expression).[6] Strangely, however, and despite its prevalence, nowhere in these thoughts is the notion of the *return* problematized as such. Hardly any philosophical elaboration of this motif is offered. In fact, the notion of return simply functions as an instrument in the service of a preestablished agenda: Why, for instance, this return to Kant? The question is not even posed. In this text, Nancy's strategy will not consist in debating these "neomodern" authors on specific technical points, but, rather, in identifying the assumptions that underlie the very project of return.

The Critique of the Return

According to Nancy, the thoughts of the return assume from the outset the possibility of a return of the "same," an identity of meaning unaltered by history, an ideal identity that would have been, so to speak, kept frozen but able to reemerge *intact*. In a sense, these thoughts are symptomatic of a protest

against the frustration of identity to which our time exposes us. It is not insignificant that their main targets are those thoughts that elaborate problematics of difference, differance, dissemination, displacement, errancy, and so on, and which, for that reason, have been called "philosophies of difference."[7] In order to "correct" or "rectify" what they see as deviances, neomodern authors demand the return of a meaning (the "right," or "correct" one) that must be identical to itself, that must never have been *lost*, and that would therefore still be available, or at least ready to be recaptured in its original purity. This return of the same is not equivalent to that of Nietzsche, who calls for an exposure to an infinity of meaning: it is rather the trivial return of some particular preconstituted meaning, of some established signification. Because the "thinkers of the return" do not reflect upon the exhaustion of traditional significations, on how these significations may have lost their force or meaning, because they fail, in other words, to reflect upon the limit of the very order of significations, they must settle on significations (such as "humanism") that have become commonplace and empty. These values are then treated as the lowest common denominators. They are "embraced" only minimally, if not negatively. Hence the importance (for example in Ferry and Renaut) of the Kantian notion of the regulative Idea, which, by definition, is empty of content (it cannot be "presented" in an intuition) and which is maintained on the teleological horizon of thinking as a last attempt to preserve some force in meaning. The return to an ideal meaning is thus understood as the answer to the "crisis" of meaning.

Because this ideal meaning does not seem to have been affected by the past two centuries, the return to Kant is in fact a return to an atemporal reason. After two centuries that have essentially changed and modified nothing, we return to a "healthy" past (and to a good conscience!), in short, to Kant. Here we have the profound ahistoricism of these various thoughts of "return." Appeal is always made to a transhistorical norm, to "values" that are presumed to be atemporal. A guiding or transcendent principle is called for, a principle that escapes real history. The *fact* of history is denied, as is apparent in the understanding of crisis as motivating this demand for meaning. Instead of recognizing in the crisis of meaning the moment at which the exhaustion of any *archè* (and hence, of the whole order of significations) is exposed, the crisis is all but trivialized, its symptoms traced back to contingent or accidental causes.

In fact, the crisis is understood as an aberration. *It should not have been*, and so is to be condemned. History can be denied because what has happened, for these neomoderns, has no real significance; in a sense, it hasn't really happened. History is judged to be either worthless, aberrant, or deviant. Hegel's thinking on history is qualified as "monstrous." Nietzsche and Freud (always conflated) are irrationalists. Heidegger is a quasi-mystical thinker, and so on.

In short, the thoughts of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, et al. *are not read*, but reduced to formulas, caricatures, if not mere journalistic summaries. The crisis is understood as a simple illness, a "passing disorder" (*Gravity*, 17) that can be treated bluntly with massive excisions of entire epochs of history. The "thinker of the return" is not the "physician of civilization" of whom Nietzsche spoke, that "subtle reader of symptoms," but the brutal dogmatist who "rectifies" deviances, and who claims to recover past significations. But it is not certain that history presents the return of anything whatsoever: "In history, questions do not return any more than do the faces of individuals" (ibid., 13). In fact, the very enterprise of return reveals a fundamental structure in the Western order of significations, that is, the project of a subjective appropriation of meaning into a remainderless circle or system.

This subjective enclosure is revealed in the schema of the return. As such, it is organized according to an entire system of desire and lack that constitutes meaning as the *telos* of a project, that is, as Nancy puts it, as "present-at-a-distance." This presence-at-a-distance rests upon the positing of a mythical lack or loss of meaning, which then gets posited as an object of desire, initiating the activity of the project of modernity; meaning is to be recaptured, that is, assumed by the project of signification as a project of a *total* presentation. Positing meaning as lacking betrays the paradoxical complicity of the thoughts of the return with the "negative" contemporary thoughts of lack (such as Lacan's) that they take as their targets. In both cases, the problematic of lack subtends subjectivity. In the Cartesian will, in the drive for the unconditioned in Kant, or in the determination of the essence of self-consciousness in Hegel, the subject is presented as a subject of desire, that is, as Nancy explains, "the desire to become a subject" (*Gravity*, 31): Meaning is assigned to a will, literally a "will-to-mean" or *vouloir-dire*, which presents philosophy as a purveyor of meaning, or rather of signification [since, as Nancy stresses, it is on the basis of the position of meaning as an object of desire "that the determination of meaning as signification is engendered" (ibid., 31)]. The project of meaning comes full circle. It is completed in the structure of return because the return designates the very logic of philosophy as the project of a subjective appropriation of meaning and of itself as the subject of meaning: "philosophy simultaneously repeats and reflects, develops and closes the circle of the appropriation of meaning. In its completed form, this circle is as follows: the subject of signification recognizes itself as the ultimate signified. This amounts to saying that the process or structure of signification recognizes and signifies itself as its own subject" (ibid., 43). The return is perhaps the final form taken by what Nancy calls the "logic of signification."

In this respect, the circular structure of the return, its denial of history, of its movement, and also of its errancy, is nothing but the obliteration of the *openness* of meaning. This peculiar closing off appears in the project of "return" insofar as it takes the form of a return *to*. As such, Nancy claims, the return to (to Kant, to universal reason, to the value of values, to the subject, to freedom—in short, to humanism and the progressive optimism of the Enlightenment) reveals the closure of thinking upon itself: "all that is presented in the form of the return or under the heading of the return," he explains, "is in principle closed upon itself" (*Gravity*, 13). How does this closure present itself? Clearly, the call for a return to meaning exhibits a demand *for* meaning. Against the background of a crisis—understood as a lack or loss of meaning—comes the call for a return *of* meaning. For the thoughts of the return, the return *of* meaning—which has been supposedly lost or lost sight of, which has gone astray—will occur through the return *to* meaning: the return *of* meaning is subjugated to the return *to* meaning. But Nancy insists on the distinction between the return *of* meaning and the return *to* meaning. He is thus able to argue that the return of meaning—if not predetermined, directed by a subject or "policed" by a thought—might indicate a journey, a distance, a difference.[8] This return would then include the possibility of a detour, of a drift, a non-retrievable expenditure of meaning, the indefinite deferral of a simple return, the possibility of an event; it would indicate the very movement or displacement of meaning and would ultimately reveal the *open* character of meaning itself. In the thoughts *of* the return, the return is always *to* a meaning that is already established, *presented*, namely, to a simple *signification*; the ideal of meaning commanding these thoughts is a meaning that is achieved, completed, closed, in the guise of the perfect, remainderless adequation between concepts and intuitions (as in Kant).[9] Signification takes place when "the meaning of things is presented in the meaning of words and vice versa" (*Gravity*, 22). The intention of meaning (that is, the desire for meaning) is fulfilled in a perfect presentation that repeats the most deeply rooted metaphysical desire: the completion of the "circle of the appropriation of meaning." But what becomes apparent in the difference that Nancy stresses between these two kinds of return is the open character of meaning, its "eventual" nature. This implies that meaning does not belong to a subject, because, in a sense, meaning opens up at the limits of subjectivity:

> What is one asking, henceforth, when one asks for meaning? What is it to ask for meaning? What is the meaning of this request? I would be at great pains indeed to determine the meaning of the return of the question of meaning. It is no one's exclusive province to effect this determination: it is, or will be, the effect of history, which has never ceased to give rise to the unprecedented, precisely because history itself is not someone and is not

> a subject (a *subject* is, perhaps, bound only to reproduce itself). And yet, I know—with a knowledge that is accessible to anyone who does not claim to rule over thought, or to make himself its overseer, but who intends rather to let it think, or to let it come to be—*I know that this meaning could not take any other form (if it is a "form") than that of an opening.* (*Gravity*, 10, emphasis added)

This problematic of an opening of meaning, or rather of meaning as opening, can be traced back to *Sharing Voices*, in which Nancy had emphasized the essentially open character of meaning through a radicalization and appropriation of Heidegger's thesis of the anticipatory character of understanding, of *Auslegung*, and of the motif of the hermeneutic circle. The anticipatory nature of the movement of *Auslegung* (interpretation or clarification) reveals for Nancy nothing other than the very opening of meaning; more precisely, it indicates that meaning itself opens up in the structure of understanding insofar as it consists in such an anticipation, that is, in and as such an opening. Meaning is not presupposed in the anticipation of understanding, it does not precede its being caught in the circle of *Auslegung*; nor does it maintain itself as its telos. It is the movement of anticipation itself that makes such a reference possible, a movement made possible by the withdrawal of both origin and telos. Meaning *is* its very opening. Nancy writes that "understanding is possible only by an anticipation of meaning which is or constitutes meaning itself [*qui fait le sens lui-même*]" (*SV*, 223; trans. modified). Meaning anticipates itself and lies in such an anticipation. In fact, anticipation itself is only possible if there is no meaning before the anticipatory movement of understanding. Meaning can only anticipate itself if its own origin is withdrawn. Its movement is engendered from the lack of both origin and end. The necessity of anticipation lies in the withdrawal of both origin and end, just as Dasein can only come to itself and come back to itself by stretching itself between its withdrawing ends, birth and death. This structure of anticipation defers any possibility of a "return to." Because meaning consists entirely in its opening, and is exhausted therein, there is no origin to return to. Meaning does not precede the circle in which it is always already caught (as in the classical motif of presupposition). Hence the anticipation of meaning does not open "the circular perspective of the final return to the original meaning, sublated and 'comprehended'" (*SV*, 223; trans. modified). There is nothing lost to which one ought to return. The loss in the thoughts of the return is only a simulacrum, for the so-called lost meaning can be recaptured and has therefore never been lost. Instead, the movement of "loss" or closure of meaning, like a withdrawing wave already tracing out another configuration, is that from which and by which meaning opens up. A finite thought of meaning does not set off a project of total presentation from

the imaginary lack of its completion, but rather attempts to understand the finite movement of the event of meaning as the inscription (ex-scription) of ex-propriation at the heart of appropriation. "This is why," explains Nancy, "the original representation of philosophy—*i.e.*, as a 'loss' of meaning, or of meaning as such—should be understood in two ways: as the imaginary disappearance of a previous signification, or else, as the withdrawal of meaning by which meaning happens" (*Gravity*, 70–71). In "The Decision of Existence," Nancy elaborates further this notion of an opening that opens in its very closure—a "minuscule" (*infime*) opening, as it were. There, in the context of a discussion of the belonging together of *Uneigentlichkeit* (as a mode of closure) and the opening of *Eigentlichkeit* (as a mode of disclosure), he emphasizes the essential finitude of the opening. The loss of meaning is a loss through which and by which meaning opens up: "What is lost in this must therefore be understood as the 'loss' in the 'they' by which the opening of Dasein *is* truly opened." Furthermore, "the closing-off is proportional to the opening up, and each takes place just at the other." As Nancy puts it: "To half-open [*s'entr'ouvrir*]: this is the right word" (*BP*, 90–92; trans. modified). Loss, or closure, constitutes the openness of meaning. This is why it is absurd to return to the "before" of an imagined loss.

In a sense, Nancy goes against the course taken by the thoughts of the return, for he understands the attempt to return to a previous configuration of thought to be an *inversion* of the very movement of meaning. Unlike conceptions of a meaning emerging from a project or a will (i.e., a subject), Nancy understands meaning as a *finite sending* that destines us to our "shared condition."[10] Meaning is not projected or thrown by a subject; rather, it throws or destines us. Nancy describes meaning in terms of a finite event, a material as well as singular fact, a certain "quantity of movement," an "élan, departure, or sending of a destination" which has exhausted itself, and which is becoming, "as if before our very eyes, insignificant" (*Gravity*, 48). In opposition to the return to, Nancy reminds us that our history, the history of meaning, presents itself as that singular sending, that "gigantic Western trajectory of signification that has come to rest on and expose itself to its limit" (ibid., 60). The will to return is a will to deny such an exposure to the limit. Such a will wants to deny the task of thinking on or from such a limit. Indeed, the negation of the openness of meaning through the project of a return *to* meaning is also an attempt to negate or deny the intrinsic limit or finitude of meaning, for "Being-open is nothing other than Being-finite" (ibid., 79). The thoughts of the return deny the constitutive finitude of meaning. Meaning exhausts itself, it comes to an end, not because of some weakness or incompleteness—Nancy rejects the negative problematics of lack or of a so-called weak thought—but

because its end is at once its point of exhaustion and its only resource. The end should then be reconsidered in terms of *limit* (meaning is nothing other than the limit of signification), or what Nancy calls in *Une pensée finie* an "extremity" (*PF*, 12).

In the same passage, Nancy interprets the event of reaching the "end" of meaning as an exposure to the "extremity" or "radicality" of thought, and not, therefore, as its completion. Recalling Heidegger's reappropriation of the Greek sense of limit (*peras*), defined in *Building Dwelling Thinking* as "not that at which something stops but . . . that from which something *begins its presencing* [*Wesen*]."[11] Nancy shows that a meaning's end as extremity is at the same time its beginning. The end is the point from which meaning arises and to which it returns. In that sense, the end or limit is not a moment that is reached at the "end" of a journey, but rather the secret resource of a finite or finished thought. In that case, as Nancy explains in a recent text, finitude indicates "that which carries its *end* as its own" (*SM*, 54). A finite or finished thought is not a thought of a lack, but a thought of the limit as that which is absolutely proper to existence. We "need" a finite thought, says Nancy, that is, "not a thought of limitation, which implies the limitlessness of a beyond, but a thought of the limit as that from which existence, being infinitely finite, arises and *to* which it is exposed" (*PF*, 48). This is why the closure or end of metaphysics, which Nancy also calls the order of significations, does not mean that metaphysics is closed or finished. "Rather," he explains, metaphysics "is wide open, opened by its very completion and by the power that makes the logos confront by itself its end and limit" (*Gravity*, 51). The closure or limit of the order of significations opens it to an "other" that comes to question metaphysics at its very limit. If meaning can only be an open meaning, the issue becomes not one of "managing" or manipulating significations, but of exposing oneself, on or at the limit, to this event of meaning.

THE "OTHER THOUGHT": ON THE LIMIT

In opposition to the retrograde movement of return, Nancy then does not advocate some sort of "march forward." Such a conception would still belong to the problematics of progress or progression assumed by the various projects of significations, a problematic in fact shared by the thoughts of the return: one returns in order to start again in the right direction, that is, to accomplish the "unfinished" project of modernity. Nancy does not understand the task of thought to be an "overcoming" of metaphysics at its end. When he uses the expression "another thought" (*Gravity*, 52), it is, it seems to us, a somewhat ironic reference to Heidegger's call for another beginning. In Heidegger, the theme of an overcoming (*Überwindung*) of metaphysics (which, it should be noted, appears only in a specific phase of his thought and which he eventually renounced[12]) was developed against the background of the question of nihilism and the end of philosophy. But the exhaustion of significations of which Nancy speaks cannot be "overcome," if that means simply going beyond this exhaustion, or producing new significations. It is the entire order of significations that has come to an end. It has come to an end because it enclosed itself in the subjective movement that has come full circle in its realization. "Signification becomes empty precisely because it completes [*boucle*] its subjective process" (ibid., 44). This completion does not mean that we have emerged from or "left" the order of significations. Rather, we are exposed to the limit that such an exhaustion manifests. In the order of significations, Nancy writes, we are the moment "when, and the move by which, the signifying will knows itself as such, knows itself to be insignificant, and by itself releases a new demand for 'meaning.'" (ibid., 51). In fact, meaning "has perhaps no other *meaning* than that of opening and undoing that which encloses itself in signification" (ibid., 28). That other thought, whether it be called "finite thought," thought of exposure, existence, or "sharing," will not occur beyond, or after, the metaphysical order of significations; nor will it come through a return to any "before" of metaphysics. Whatever "before" or "after" means is already assigned in the language of significations. "There is no sense," Nancy explains, "in wanting to 'go back' to before metaphysics. There is nothing 'before' the West, if the very idea of the 'before' is already caught in a network of metaphysical significations (the prior, the causal, the archaic, the primitive, the originary, the native, the repressed, the forgotten, the recalled, etc.)" (ibid., 47).

It is clear, then, that no return to past significations is possible, only an exposure to the opening of meaning. Meaning, as that which exceeds signification, does not take place before, under, beyond, or after signification, but at its *limit*, to which philosophy must expose itself. In Nancy's words, the other thought "presents itself in the very present of the exhaustion" (*Gravity*, 52). This presentation is not the advent of a new signification. In his essay "Of Being-in-Common," Nancy writes that philosophy presents itself in this exhaustion "nakedly," that is, as having to be reinvented: not reinvented in order to discover other significations, but "to be only on the limit."[13]

But what can "thinking *on* the limit" mean? It first means to think without passing beyond the limit. For indeed, there is nowhere, no place, "nothing to pass into," since "everything happens, on the contrary, *on* the limit" (*Gravity*, 70). Everything happens or takes place on the limit, because the limit *is* the place for the event of meaning, the event of transcendence itself, that is, existence. The limit reveals the movement of a transcendence, if one understands transcendence to be not a passing beyond but a passing to the limit, a touching

of the limit. Second, if there is no beyond that would be reached *after* the crossing, neither is there some place of immanence that would be overstepped *before* the stepping beyond. In a sense, there can be no separate sphere of immanence that is not already split open by a movement of transcendence. Immanence means to remain *within* oneself; it refers, as Nancy reminds us in "The Heart of Things (*BP*, 182), to that which "remains in itself [*in-manere*]"; being immanent is therefore always a being-immanent-*to*-something, to oneself for instance. In this "to" there already lies the transcendent relation to a self. Transcendence, in this sense, proves to be the truth of immanence. The "essence" of the existent, as Nancy explains in *The Experience of Freedom*, is to be from the outset "brought" to this limit where it exists as transcendence. Transcendence, then, "is nothing other than the passage to the limit. It is not the crossing over of the limit; rather, it is the being-exposed on the limit, at the limit and as limit" (*EF*, 29; trans. modified). It is not a question of the transcendence of a being, but rather, of the being of a transcendence. To think *on* the limit would therefore be to think *à même, right on* this limit of transcendence, to "accompany," as it were, the movement of overstepping. If there is indeed no place of immanence apart from the disruption of transcendence, there is nevertheless an immanence to transcendence that must be thought. This attempt to think a radical immanence to this movement of an existence (transcendence) passing to the limit is conveyed by Nancy's frequent use of the expression *à même*—which could be rendered as "at the very level of," "right at," "right on," "in the same element as," or "immanent *to*," that is, not taking place before, beneath, or beyond that to which it is related, but "at" it. This does not imply a sameness or identity but simply designates the naked fact of an exposure, the fact that everything takes place *à même*, right at, this exposure. Meaning lies in its very exposure; it does not precede this exposure, does not outlast it, but is right at it.

To think on the limit, then, means that there is no transcendent sphere beyond the limit, and no immanent sphere before the limit. It means, therefore, that thought has to be redefined in such a way that the traditional opposition between transcendence and immanence is exceeded. But this excess is just that, an excess, and it is consequently necessary that one start from this opposition in order to subvert it. Nancy's treatment of the transcendence-immanence doublet could be reconstituted in the following sequence. First, immanence is denied; there is no immanent being, by definition. An immanent being could not appear, could not relate to anything, because it would not have the space of transitivity that is constitutive of Being as such. All being is then situated *outside*, in transcendence. Second, and correlatively, transcendence cannot be said to be simple or pure exteriority. As Nancy explains in "Of

Being-in-Common," a pure or absolute outside is a contradictory notion. Transcendence, then, is not what can be located in a sphere, but simply the movement of overstepping to which we are each time exposed. This is why, third, Nancy will speak of an immanence *to* transcendence, rendering the opposition ultimately untenable. For what this immanence to a transcendence reveals is nothing other than the very movement, trembling, or oscillation of the limit as such, along our exposure to it. The emphasis will then shift from the "in" of immanence to the "ex" of exteriority, and from that "ex" to the pure preposition of transitivity as such, the "to" (*à*).[14]

This radical exposure to the limit—which is to be understood literally as the exposure of an exposure (exposure exposes *itself*)—is an *exposure* only insofar as it cannot appropriate the limit. Exposure is finitude itself. As that which is exposed to such an exposure, thought or philosophy will have to give up its pretensions to a total appropriation of meaning. Nancy shows that to think the limit or on the limit cannot mean to appropriate it. For it is not possible to "settle down on the limit," "hold on there as one could hold to a system or order of signification." Rather, the limit happens or arrives. In short, to touch the limit means that the limit arrives or happens to us, that "it always presents itself as new" (*Gravity*, 67). Finite thought welcomes this arrival at (of) the limit in *wonder*, for, "in the final analysis, wonder is nothing other than that which happens or arrives at the limit" (ibid., 67). The task of thought, once called back to its finitude, will not consist in giving or projecting significations, but in receiving, welcoming, and exposing itself to the *event* of meaning, in wonder. What is forgotten in the "forgetting of philosophy" is this sense of wonder that ever since Plato and Aristotle has been recognized as the fundamental disposition for philosophizing.[15] To remember philosophy would thus be to remember this sense of wonder, and Nancy insists at length on their indissociable relation.[16] This, in turn, implies that thought recognizes itself in its essential passivity and finitude. But this element of passivity is not the simple opposite of activity. Rather, it is to be understood as our being "capable" of meaning, or, as Nancy calls it, our being *passible* (*passible*) *to* meaning.

The term *passible* has the ordinary sense of "to be liable for," as in being liable for a crime, but Nancy plays on the fact that the word echoes *passivité*, thus emphasizing its contrast to the activity of the metaphysical project of giving signification. To be passible to meaning means to "suffer" or undergo the event of meaning.[17] The term is thus clearly employed in opposition to the subjectivist tradition in philosophy. Yet Nancy tries to conceive of a sense of passivity that would not simply be opposed to activity; this sense would designate the "activity" of receiving, as it were, of being affected by the event of

meaning. *Passibilité*, not unlike the Kantian notion of receptivity, which, as such, includes a certain "creativity," is then defined as the capacity of being affected. It thus includes both passivity and activity. As receptive, it denotes a passivity with respect to the givenness of what is given to it; but as a reception, it implies an "active" participation in givenness itself. Yet the "only" activity of which finite thought is capable is the activity of being passible to meaning. This conflation disrupts the logic of signification, that is, the project (will) of giving signification. Commenting upon Benjamin's phrase "Truth is the death of intention," Nancy develops the idea of a meaning that happens outside of the conditions of possibility provided for it by all the structures of intentionality and all the projects of significations. Truth is not conditioned or constituted by a subject and as such evades or escapes desire (we have seen how Nancy situates the problematics of desire within the metaphysical horizon of subjectivism).[18] Being neither a presentation based on "presentability" nor a representation or correspondence, truth does not have to be adjusted to any conditions. It is thought as the irruption, or coming into presence, of presence itself. To this extent, "it is no longer a question of calibrating an intentionality [*visée*], but of letting the thing present itself 'in truth'" (*Gravity*, 55).

The Commonality of Meaning

What we are passible to, in the final analysis, is the event of meaning, which at once reveals the commonality of a "we": "But meaning as opening does not open onto the void, any more than it infinitely tends toward its fulfillment. It opens directly *onto us*. It designates us as its element and as the place of its event or advent" (*Gravity*, 65).[19]

Nancy will always refer to the being-plural of this self. It is a we that is at issue here, not simply what Heidegger referred to as the I, or the Self, or the individual Dasein. Even if Heidegger did include in the definition of Dasein the existentiale Being-with, one could argue, as Nancy does, that he did not develop the consequences of such an inclusion radically enough.[20] It is therefore significant that Nancy derives the possibility of the singular I from the commonality of a we, indeed talks of the I *as* a we. He attempts to conceive of this we on the basis of a sheer access to meaning. Prior to any anthropological or humanistic significations, *we* are (ek-sist) in the element of meaning, a *common* element that would designate the very opening of a we, understood as an exposure to meaning. We are not the substantiality of a pregiven identity, but simply the being of an exposure; we *are* exposed, and this exposure constitutes us. This pre-egoistic, pre-subjective, and even pre-intersubjective being calls for what Nancy names an ontology "of the common." Such an ontology, yet to come, would be developed on the basis of the collapse of traditional ontologies.

"The ontology of the common and of 'sharing,'" he writes in *La comparution*, "would be nothing other than the ontology of 'Being' when radically distinguished from all ontology of substance, order and origin" (*C*, 57). In fact, this ontology of the common *is* ontology per se, and not some branch of it. Ontology itself, the science of Being as such, is to be elaborated as an ontology of the common, for Being itself is Being-in-common. Indeed, as Nancy insists, there is no Being that is not common. "What," he asks, "can be more common than to be, than being?" (*CLE*, 1). This ontology of the common is approached through Nancy's thought of *comparution*.

Comparution is a term formed on the basis of the nominal form of the verb *paraître* (to appear), *parution*, and the prefix *com-* (with). The term *comparution* is ordinarily used to refer to a "court appearance," as in "to appear [*comparaître*] before the law,"[21] and the word retains this sense here to the extent that Nancy thinks *comparution* in terms of an exposure to a present for which we have to answer and in which we are judged (in and by the *krinein* of the crisis). Yet he also seeks to give it the more literal sense of a "co-appearance" or, better, a "co-appearing." We render *comparution* by "co-appearing," rather than "co-appearance," because Nancy seeks to use the term in the active, verbal sense of a coming into presence. An appearance, as Kant noted, is a notion that necessarily refers to something that appears.[22] But for Nancy there is nothing behind the singular being that appears; this is why it is a question not of an appearance, but of appearing. There is nothing that appears, but there is appearing. Nancy is quite clear on this point: "This appearing [*apparaître*] is not an appearance [*apparence*]" (*IC*, 28).

This dimension of appearing—which, as we will see, must be taken as common, that is, as a *co*-appearing—must be approached on the basis of Nancy's thought of Being, which for him is existence itself, in the sense that Being can only be put into play each time as existence.[23] Existence, as he writes repeatedly, is without essence, it is the essence-less itself. In this respect, Being cannot take place save in its very existing, that is, in the way in which it ek-sists, each time, "out there." One might say, to paraphrase Heidegger: so much appearing, so much Being.[24] Appearing is thus related directly to the ek-static movement of an existence, that is, of a transcendence. This existential appearing of the singular being opens exteriority. To appear is to be exposed, to be thrown into the element of exteriority. Everything takes place outside (appears) precisely because it *takes place*, in a certain "spaciousness" in which everything, that is, every existence, is opened and exposed. One appears, that is, one is exposed, abandoned, delivered over, but also subjected: One appears *for*, and this "for" has the sense of a *before*: before the law, before an Other, and before oneself as an Other. The existing I presents or manifests itself to an alterity

(including its "own" alterity), it does not constitute some sphere of "ownness" or sameness that would subsequently expose itself to an exteriority. There is no place of immanence for the I, no "inside" to inhabit, no retreat to go back to, "nowhere to hide." This is why coming into the world has to be understood as an appearing that is indissociable from an exposure to others; to appear always means to co-appear. This commonality, as suggested above, should be understood in the most radical way: appearing, coming into the world, is always a coming-together into the world. To be means to be-with, constitutively: "We co-appear: we come into the world together. . . . There is no coming into the world that is not radically *common*: the 'common' itself. Coming into the world = being-in-common" (*C*, 53). The commonality of being-in-common is, however, most paradoxical, for Nancy presents it as arising from a withdrawal of commonality. As he often puts it, there is no common being, but there is being-in-common. One might go so far as to say: there is no common being, *therefore* there is Being-in-common. Nancy expresses this in his essay "On Being-in-Common" as follows: "Being, or existence, is what we share. . . . But Being is not a thing that we could possess in common. . . . We shall say then that Being is not common in the sense of a common property, but that it is in common."[25] How are we to understand this claim?

Following up to a certain point the Heideggerian thinking of *Mitsein* (and ultimately radicalizing it),[26] Nancy begins by rejecting the classical models that have governed representations of togetherness, or community. Community is above all not a community of essence, through which singularities would be absorbed in an encompassing whole. Togetherness in community cannot be understood through what Nancy calls an "immanentist" model (one of identification, substitution, "incorporation," communion, or fusion), not only because the appearing of the existing I already constitutes the disruption or transcendence of any immanence (for nothing can subsist within itself), *whether singular or collective*, but also because an immanentist model amounts to a negation of otherness and, therefore, of Being-with.[27] Nancy's community is a resolutely transcendent community, better, a community of transcendence: it is woven of and into transcendence. This is why Being-with cannot be understood on the model of that celebrated figure, Heidegger's *das Man*, in which there is a peculiar *identification* between the self and others in which "everyone is the other, and no one is himself" (*BT*, 165/128). The They, or the neutral "one," could be said to be the immanentist version of Being-with par excellence, since, in this mode of existence, the I and Others are, as it were, "one." As we know, in such an identification, the individual self has been "subjugated" to the Others. Yet one should note that in such a subjugation it is the Others themselves, and not only the individual Dasein, that vanish. Heidegger

is quite explicit on this point: "This [everyday] Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others,' *in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more*" (ibid., 164/126; emphasis added). It is therefore the dimension of otherness itself that is closed off in the so-called dictatorship of the They. But individuation, too, is closed off, for the They, as Heidegger explains, is properly "nobody" (ibid., 166/128). "Nobody" means: neither me nor you nor anyone in particular, in fact, "nothing definite" (ibid., 164/127).

Nancy retains from this Heideggerian analysis the insight that a certain tension preventing communion is essential to the possibility of community. This is the case to the extent that the sense of Being-with as communion or identification implies the very negation of alterity, of Being-with as such, and of the singularities involved in such Being-with. It is therefore necessary to preserve some sense of difference, some "resistance," in the very fabric of community, one that would prevent its collapse into the fantasy of immanence. And yet the implicit recognition of a certain interruption or disruption that lies at the basis of Being-with (the fact that Being-with excludes the possibility of being "together" in the sense of being in one another's place) does not signify that others would be simply juxtaposed, as if Being-with were a "being-alongside-one-another."[28] That would imply that the singular being could exist on its own, in an absolute or monadic separation, in short, in a Being-without-others. It would thus also represent the negation of the possibility of community. The commonality in question here *resists* community, and Nancy "situates" it in what he calls a "dis-location" (*IC*, 25),[29] which is not the same as a pure and simple dissociation. The rupture in, of, or as community, this "tearing apart," which Nancy designates by the significant metaphor of the *déchirure* (for instance, ibid., 6), would not absolutely separate the elements it sets apart. When a fabric is *déchirée*, it remains one, albeit in pieces. Those pieces still "communicate," as it were, through the holes that separate them from one another, and this "system" of communication is what makes up the whole.

What matters here is that this "interruption" of community represents the possibility of Being-with. Interruption, as Nancy states ("Myth Interrupted," *IC*, 61), is the very law of *co-appearing*. In such a logic, the interruption of an immanent Being-with becomes the very possibility of co-appearing. This is why death, or Being-toward-death—precisely because it represents the *interruption* of the relation to the Other, because it is, as Heidegger put it, "nonrelational"—should be reconsidered in its constitutive implications for Being-with. Nancy suggests just this in *The Inoperative Community* when he writes that "Dasein's 'being-toward-death' was never radically implicated in its being-with—in *Mitsein*," and that "*it is this implication that remains to be thought.*"[30] It is perhaps authentic

Being-toward-death itself—the anticipation of my death insofar as no one else can die my death for me, as well as the impossibility for me to die the death of the other (in Nancy's terms, insofar as it interrupts the immanence of community)—that is the basis for Being-with, for any community. Commentators often claim that Heidegger's thinking of death in *Being and Time* is essentially individualistic or solipsistic, and that it obliterates the dimension of the other. They often support this claim by opposing to Dasein's care, that is, to Being-for-the-sake-of-one's-self, a Being-for-the-sake-of-others,[31] and to the solipsistic dying for oneself a dying-for-others that would in some sense be more primordial, if not more "authentic." However, Nancy shows quite pertinently the insufficiency of this representation. On the one hand, there is no "ownness" of Dasein, no property of oneself that is not *partagée*, "shared out." Consequently, being for the sake of one's own being is simultaneously and indissociably a being for the sake of others. Heidegger explains in his 1928 course, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, that Dasein's Being-for-the-sake-of-oneself is the "metaphysical ground of the possibility" that Dasein be "with others, for them, and through them" (*GA* 26, p. 240). On the other hand, Dasein's authentic anticipation of its own death does not dissolve the dimension of the other; rather, what is dissolved in such a *mode* of existence—the *authentic* mode—is the possibility of substitution, that is, an *inauthentic* mode of Being-with. In other words, authentic Being-toward-death only interrupts inauthentic Being-with, thereby freeing the possibility of a community that is based on resistance, indeed, that *is* resistance.[32] This is why, paradoxically, Heidegger's notion of an "existential solipsism" turns out to constitute the possibility of being-with as such, since the affirmation of Dasein's existential solipsism does not negate the dimension of the other but simply states that, as Being-with-others, Dasein is singular. Indeed, the meaning of the expression "we share that which divides us" (*nous partageons ce qui nous partage*), which we find in many places in Nancy's texts, can only be the following: as alone, as totally alone, I am never so much with others. Heidegger explains that "Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with," which amounts to saying that "the Other can *be missing* only *in* and *for* a Being-with" (*BT*, 157/120). Nancy makes this very point in *The Experience of Freedom*: it is true, he concedes, that solitude, as such, must be total, that it is nothing if it is not the independence of a singular being cut off from everything; but it is just as true (and "irreducible"), Nancy continues, that "in solitude *and even in solipsism*—at least understood as a *sola ipsa* of singularity—ipseity is itself constituted by and as sharing" (*EF*, 70). The enigma of such an inoperative community thus comes to the fore in the following passage: "Singularities have no *common being*, but they *co-appear* each time *in* common before the withdrawal of their common being, spaced apart by the

infinity of this withdrawal—in this sense, without any relation, and therefore thrown into relation" (ibid., 68; trans. modified).

This singular logic of a relation/nonrelation is developed in Nancy's thought of *partage*. *Partage*, which we translate as "sharing out" for reasons we shall discuss shortly, already has a long history in Nancy's thought.[33] Nancy recently proposed no less than ten senses of the term: "partition, repartition, part, participation, separation, communication, discord, split, devolution, destination."[34] While it has been rightly noted that *partage* signifies both a division and a sharing, it has been most frequently translated as "sharing"; for example, *Le partage des voix* was rendered as "Sharing Voices." Although partly accurate, this translation misses the essentially distributive quality that Nancy exploits in *partage* (as well as the title's play on words: the parting of the ways [*voies*]). This is why some translators, in order to capture this latter sense, have opted to render *partage* by "partition" or "parturition." But this translation is equally inadequate in that it does not capture the commonality the word also implies. This explains why another practice has been to translate the term by using *two* terms: divide *and* share. Yet an essential feature of Nancy's thought of *partage* lies in the fact that it indicates *at once* a separation and a sharing. Indeed, common usage says something of this paradoxical indissociability; in sharing something, we necessarily also divide it. For instance, when used in the expression *notre partage*, the term indicates something like "our common lot," that is, the lot that *each* of us has in common—our share. *Partage* thus designates the paradoxical concept of a community based on the sharing of what cannot be shared, that is, the sharing of singularities. It points to the undecidability of a sharing and a separation. This is why we believe it important to render it with one locution. We thus attempt to capture this ambiguity with the expression "sharing out," and we render the verbal form, *partager*, "to share out" so that the reader may hear both the divisive and the inclusive senses in the term, unless the context clearly emphasizes one of the two senses. For example, the expression we cited earlier, *nous partageons ce qui nous partage*, cannot be rendered otherwise than by using the two terms: "we share that which divides us."

The task is thus to account for a community that paradoxically depends upon the interruption of all relations. There is a Being-in-common, a co-appearing, in the very disruption of commonality, in the gap that separates singularities and *interrupts* community. One would have to think the very possibility of a relation-to on the basis of such an interruption. As Nancy writes: "Instead of closing it in, this interruption once again exposes singularity to its limit, which is to say, to other singularities" (*IC*, 60). One would have to hold together these two theses: on the one hand, relation, the very possibility of a relation, lies in the interruption of any relation; and, on the other hand, the singularity

of the finite being lies in the relation-to-another. Being-with would then designate the paradoxical simultaneity of a *rapport sans rapport*, a relation without relation.

In a beautiful passage from *The Experience of Freedom*, Nancy elaborates this peculiar logic on the basis of a reflection on the constitutive effects of the scansion or "syncope" of an "each." Starting from Heidegger's statement in *Being and Time* that Dasein is *each time* mine (*je meines*), Nancy shows how the singularity of the existent, its "mineness," originates or is constituted from the cutting edge of this "each time." Indeed, that Dasein is *each time* mine does not mean that the I accompanies its representations each time. Rather, the I is an I because of the constitutive effects of this each time. As Heidegger claimed, Dasein's mineness must be thought on the basis of such a temporal scansion: It is not accidental that the term *Jemeinigkeit*, or "mineness," which appears prominently in *Being and Time*, was preceded by that of *Jeweiligkeit*, which can be rendered as "each particular while," as "temporal specificity," stressing its temporally distributive sense.[35] The each time of *Jemeinigkeit* or *Jeweiligkeit* interrupts any continuum; it has, says Nancy, "the structure of an interval." As Aristotle pointed out in his treatise on time, the now itself, as boundary or limit, has itself the structure of an interval, and is therefore doubled: the now as limit of the before, the now as limit of the after.[36] This is why the singularity delineated by the syncope of the each time "is immediately in [the] relation" (*EF*, 67). Because Dasein is each time its own, each time singular, each time cut and separated by the discrete scansion of this each time, it is thrown into relation with others, it is a *mit-Dasein*. The logic of the "each" constitutes the Being-with of the self: "Each time, it cuts itself off from everything, but each *time* [*fois*], as a *time* [*fois*] (the strike and cut [*coup et coupe*] of existence) opens itself as a relation to other times, to the extent that continuous relation is withdrawn from them" (ibid., 67).

The each time at once dislocates and constitutes both singularity and community. Singularity follows the dislocating effect of the relation; the "each" institutes the relation as a withdrawal of identity and institutes commonality as a withdrawal of communion. Nancy here makes explicit what compelled Heidegger to posit the co-extensiveness of Being-with and Being-one's-self. This is why the very term "relation" is ultimately inadequate to designate the *co-extensiveness* of Being-in-common and Being-one's-self. This co-extensiveness means, certainly, that Being-in-common is not a dimension added to an otherwise isolated self. But it means, above all, that the self, as such, is exhausted in the relation-to-another, in the "with" of Being-with. The self does not simply stand *in* relation, it *is* that very relation. The self *is* the "in" of Being-in-common. This is why the task is to think this relation in terms of the *between* of singularities, the relation/nonrelation indicated by the "with" of Being-with, or the "in" of

Being-in-common. In the expression "Being-in-common," *in* indicates, as Nancy explains in *The Inoperative Community*, the very between of "you *and* I (between us)" (*IC*, 29). Singularities are constituted in this "between": only in this co-appearing, or communication, "are singular beings given" (ibid., 29). This co-extensiveness defines the singular being, whose being, therefore, lies only in an exposure.

Neither an encompassing identity nor a mere exteriority that would leave the juxtaposed elements indifferent to one another, the "co" of co-appearing, the "in" of Being-in-common, the "with" of Being-with, all call for a specific logic, which Nancy calls "the very logic of singularity in general" (*CLE*, 6). Such a logic would articulate the relation/nonrelation between outside and inside, I and we, singularities and community, outside the opposition between the individual and community. It is on the basis of this logic "of the limit," which is concerned with "what is between two or several, belonging to all and to none—not belonging to itself, either" (ibid., 6), that Nancy often writes singular/common, I/we, unique/multiple, in one sequence,[37] thereby designating at once their difference and indissociability; they are all shared out, *partagés*. This logic manifests and accounts for an undecidable. In *The Forgetting of Philosophy*, Nancy speaks of "the simultaneous and *undecidable* reference to our 'singularities' and our 'community'" (*Gravity*, 64; emphasis added). This is why, concludes Nancy, when "I say 'we' . . . I designate equally and indissociably each of our singular existences, whose singularity is each time the place of such a presentation (it is 'collective' only in a secondary and derivative way) *and* the common element of meaning in which alone that which takes place in this way can take place" (ibid., 62). The I itself, *as I*, lies in a "we."[38] Co-appearing, as the exposition of the between, renders the separation of the singular from the plural undecidable. In the rupture that shares out singularities, the cutting edge of the "each" simultaneously constitutes the singular and the plural, or better, the singular as plural. Indeed, singularity can only be written in the plural, as "singularities." There is no single singularity. If Being were singular, that is, unique, it would absorb all other beings and, therefore, would not be singular. Nancy writes, "If there is *just one* time, there is never 'once'" (*EF*, 67). Rather, all there is is singularity, which means that there are only singularities. What is common lies only in this "each time." The singular is plural and the plural is singular *each time*.[39] The singularity of the each must be thought as plural, and this, *as singularity*: "One could say: the singular of 'mine' is by itself a plural. Each *time* is, as such, *another* time" (ibid., 67). In short, "the unicity of the singular consists very exactly in its multiplicity" (*SM*, 116).

It should become apparent at this point that the concept of singularity is itself transformed and radically distinguished from the traditional notion of

individuality.[40] For while Heidegger's analysis could be said to end up with a rather traditional emphasis on the individual (for example, in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, he maintains that "only from and in its resolute individuation is the Dasein authentically free and open for the thou," and that, consequently, "existence as together and with one another is founded on the genuine individuation of the individual"),[41] Nancy's, on the contrary, does not ultimately refer Being-in-common to an individualistic pole. In fact, the individual itself cannot be conceived in such a thought without its "differential" place in the *communication* (and not communion) of its being. There are not, first, singularities—already constituted identities—that would then enter into a relation with other singularities: there are singularities (not individualities or identities) *as* shared out, that is, that "are themselves constituted by sharing out," that "are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced*, by the sharing out that makes them *others*" (*IC*, 25; trans. modified). This is not to say that community precedes singularities. Community is rigorously contemporaneous with singularities, because community, as we saw, is nothing but the relation/nonrelation between singularities, or the very between of singularities. To the extent that there is no singularity outside of such a relation to other singularities, the concepts of autonomy and individuality collapse. In short, singularity is not opposed to community. This is why it is not simply another term for the individual. In contrast to individuality, singularity is constituted through communication. What we call individuality should be conceived on the basis of singularity, because, as Nancy writes, individuality is ultimately nothing but a limit or a boundary of community: "In each case, 'I' am not before this commutation and communication of the 'I.' Community and communication are constitutive of individuality, rather than the reverse, and individuality is perhaps, in the final analysis, only a *boundary* of community."[42] This is why the transcendent movement of co-appearing does not go from the I to the Other; rather, it comes from the Other (which is not in turn another identity but is Other-to-itself). Yet while coming from the Other, and while happening *to* me, it still does not stop *at* me. It continues through me, cutting through and leaving me aside, ex-centered. It does not come from me and it does not come back to me. Transcendence, like love itself, is a "coming and going" that "goes elsewhere than to me":

> What is offered by transcendence, or as transcendence, is this arrival and this departure, this incessant coming-and-going. . . . Exposed to arrival and to departure, the singular being is traversed by the alterity of the other, which does not stop or fix itself anywhere, neither in "him," nor in "me," because it is nothing other than the coming-and-going. The other comes and cuts across me, because it leaves for the other. ("Shattered Love," *IC*, 98)

Singularity, then, would be the very trace of this movement of coming-and-going, the tracing of "an intersection of limits on which there is an exposure," the sheer "point of an exposure," (*CLE*, 7), not an individual pole from which the relation to the other is projected and back to which this relation is reflected. The Being-in-common of our singular beings lies only in the transcendence of community to the extent that, as Nancy writes, "Community is the community of *others*" (*BC*, 155). Being-in-common lies in an exposure that neither unfolds out of a pregiven immanent being nor returns to one. The other is not the terminus of the transcendent exposure, nor is it sublated in some reappropriating return; rather, it pierces immanence through and through, thereby exposing it as outside, or better yet, as the limit of the outside and the inside. This ex-posure, or positing-outside (which represents for Nancy "the archi-original impossibility of Narcissus"[!], *IC*, xxxviii), affects the I through and through. The otherness to which the I is exposed alters the I itself. Nancy writes: "'To be exposed' means to be 'posed' in exteriority, according to an exteriority, having to do with an outside *in the very intimacy* of an inside" (ibid., xxxvii), and this, to such an extent that, as Nancy puts it, "We are *others*" (*BP*, 155). The I does not face another as an ego faces an alter ego; rather, the I is altered through and through, in the Other, which "itself" is other than itself; this is precisely, as Nancy puts it in "Shattered Love," what "transcends 'in me'" (*IC*, 97). Community is nothing but the exposure of singularities to each other. This co-appearing frustrates any appropriation into an essence or common identity because it takes place only in an exposure to an exteriority that is beyond appropriation. What is shared *is* the singularity of existence, that is, the absence of any common being. The common, what is in common, is the very absence or lack of any common substance; what is shared is not a common identity, not even that of our nonidentity. As Nancy puts it, "We present ourselves *to ourselves*. That is to say, at once to one another, through one another, and each one to him or herself. We *co-appear*" (*Gravity*, 62). What is shared is, as he says in "Myth Interrupted," nothing other than sharing out itself—that is, the absence of any identity. *We share sharing out*, and "consequently everyone's nonidentity, each one's nonidentity to himself and to others" (*IC*, 66). Being-in-common as such takes place as the de-propriation of the proper.

This exposure to an inappropriable is understood by Nancy in terms of materiality under the names of "weight," "heaviness," or "gravity." What *weighs* is precisely this inappropriable, the impact or shock that the event of meaning imparts to thought, the "communication" of the momentum of meaning. It is the exposure to the inappropriable limit of significations that weighs upon thought. Thought, then, will have to be redefined as that which bears the weight of

what weighs, and to that extent, as a weighing. As Nancy writes: "Thought weighs exactly the weight of meaning" (*Gravity*, 77). "Weighs" has here two senses, which we cannot choose between: the act of measuring the weight of meaning and thought's being itself weighed down by that weight.

THE MATERIALITY OF EXISTENCE

As Nancy himself reminds us in his Introductory Remarks to this volume, the theme of weight has a certain insistence (if not "weight") in his work. The short and remarkably dense essay included in this volume, "The Weight of a Thought," should be taken in the context of Nancy's attempt to articulate what he has called at times (rather enigmatically) a "transcendental" or "ontological materiality" (*EF*, 103), a "mineralogy and a meteorology of being" (*BP*, 171), a "hyletic reduction" (ibid., 159). Here, it is called a "transcendental aesthetics of gravity" (*Gravity*, 77). These expressions, near oxymorons, indicate from the outset that the thematics of weight and materiality cannot be understood from the perspective of a simple materialism, and that therefore the facticity which is here introduced will have to be redefined. The very title of the essay already suggests a distance taken with the traditional association of thought with a certain immateriality or ideality: that of meaning, ideas, representation, and so on. Yet in his emphasis on the materiality *of thought*, Nancy will also attempt to complicate the traditional oppositions between materiality and immateriality, reality and ideality. By speaking of the weight *of* thought, Nancy in fact manifests the undecidability of these oppositions. In *The Forgetting of Philosophy*, for instance, he claims that "the element of meaning is a reality that is undiscernibly and simultaneously empirical and transcendental, material and ideational, physical and spiritual," admitting that this would suggest something like "an unprecedented kind of 'fact of reason' that would manifest simultaneously the bare outline of a logic and the thickness of a flesh" (*Gravity*, 60). The very term "gravity" is itself such an undecidable; it bespeaks at once the "force of attraction" between two bodies and the "seriousness" of a situation. In the essay "The Weight of a Thought," Nancy begins by destabilizing the ideality/materiality opposition, translating the ideal categories of thinking into the vocabulary of weight, gravity, heaviness, and weighing. Is this gesture tantamount to reaffirming a materialism of meaning, or rather an intelligibility of matter? The "matter" cannot be resolved, for the measure with which one might distinguish the materiality of weighing from the immateriality of thought is struck with an irreducible undecidability. Nancy writes, "Who could say what is proper to thinking *and* to weighing, to thinking *as much as* to weighing, thus being properly neither? . . . Who could weigh, and on what scales, the 'materiality' of weighing, on the one hand, and the 'immateriality' of thought,

on the other? On what unit of weight, on what law of gravity [*pesanteur*], would such an operation be based?" (*Gravity*, 75). Precisely because these two senses cannot be absolutely disentangled, speaking of a weight of thought is in no way metaphorical. Thinking is *really*, literally, a weighing. It weighs the weight of the real *as meaning*. In fact, the issue is to think the materiality of the ideality of thought. As Nancy explains in *Le sens du monde*, "*The ideality of meaning is indissociable from its materiality*" (*SM*, 96).

Yet it is not only the ideality of thought that must be reformulated, but materiality itself. It is here understood as the materiality of a factual, corporeal, worldly existence, an existence that has its place *in media rei*. This sense of materiality, not entirely distinct from the mere factuality of the thing,[43] has to be referred back to Nancy's thought of existence, for materiality is an existentiale of the existent, a law of Being. The very conception of existence as essence-less necessitates a thematic of weight and gravity. If existence is without essence, if it is not free-floating but occurs right in the midst of things, if it exists only as exposed, then it cannot but take place as a fact, one that demands to be thought as the materiality or weight of one's own presence. Being, as we have seen, is a singular event that, each time, is indissociable from the occurence of a this, a there, the fact or Being-there of a thing. "To exist is a here-and-now of Being, it is *to be* a here-and-now of Being" (*SM*, 36). This thinking of a here-and-now of Being itself collapses the opposition between the "who" and the "what" (the Da of human Dasein and the place of things) into the singular/plural "there is" of Being itself, which is always a material, factual "here." Existence, Nancy writes, "is the essence whose essence it is to exist, *actually and in fact, 'hic et nunc.'* . . . Every 'what' that exists is a 'who,' if 'who' means: *that* actual, existent 'what,' as it exists, *a factual (even material) punctuation of Being*" (*WCAS*, 6–7, emphasis added). This actuality, or factuality, is inseparable from the event of presence, that is, from freedom. Yet the fact of freedom is that we are delivered over to what is never a simple fact but to what remains always "to be done," that is, to the pure obligation of Being. In this respect, what weighs is the responsibility of having to exercise this freedom.

It is no accident that the theme of weight appears in Heidegger's *Being and Time* whenever it is a question of Dasein's facticity, the fact of being-thrown. Existence is *felt* as a weight or burden insofar as I am thrown into it; being thrown in the midst of things manifests the essential passivity and materiality of existence. Yet I am not thrown, as Sartre believed, into an inert materiality (the "in-itself"). Materiality is not here the absolute opacity of the stone, but, as we alluded above, a "transcendental," "ontological," even "differential" materiality that qualifies the singularity of the finite being. As Nancy explains in *Le sens du monde*, "Matter is not first an immanent thickness absolutely closed in itself,

but, quite to the contrary, the very difference by which some *thing* is possible" (*SM*, 95). In other words, matter is not the pure identity of the thing, but the "reality of difference . . . by which alone *there is (are) some thing(s)*" (ibid., 96). Materiality is ultimately the materiality of the "there is (something)." This is why facticity or factuality does not pertain strictly to some inert matter that existence as a "for-itself" would face and negate, at once fascinated and repulsed, but is rather a trait of the existent itself and its very freedom. I am therefore thrown into a possibility, a sheer freedom, in the sense that I am delivered over to an existence that, because it has no ground, puts me in the situation of having to appropriate this absence of ground. This is what weighs: existence itself, as I have to assume it, here, now, each time. More precisely, existence is felt as a weight because I am thrown into it as *having* to be it. I am therefore thrown into the obligation of my being, into Being as obligation. Obligation is the very form of Being, for Being means having-to-be. Ontological materiality is here tantamount to the possibility of responsibility, the possibility of an archi-original ethics. As Levinas reminds us in *Time and the Other*, materiality itself is not what bodies lend to an otherwise weightless existence, but is that which is brought by responsibility, that is, by the fact of being-thrown into existence and having to make it one's own.[44]

Yet I can never appropriate this "own-ness," I can never leap behind myself, as it were, to recapture the ground of my being. To this extent, I am, as Heidegger explains, essentially responsible or guilty, I am *schuldig* (hence the expressions "to carry a responsibility on one's shoulder," to "shoulder a burden"). This guilt manifests the very inappropriability that inhabits all "my" projects. It opens the question of finitude: the weight of thought, Nancy explains, "is what is also called, in another vocabulary, *finitude*" (*Gravity*, 78). The weight of existence lies in the fact that there is something that remains inappropriable for it. Therein lies the possibility of responsibility (thought traditionally in terms of guilt, debt, lack, fault, etc.), and the necessity of obligation; such is the finitude of existence. Nancy writes, "Finitude consists in that existence 'understands' that 'being' does not consist in resting upon the basis of an essence, but strictly in *answering to* and *for* the fact that there is 'being,' that is, in answering *to* and *for* oneself as the existing of existence. *Finitude is the responsibility of meaning*, absolutely" (*PF*, 26–27). To remember philosophy is to remember this weight, that is, the responsibility of answering for the inappropriable of existence. This inappropriable should not be understood in the negative sense, however, as if existence were coming up against limits that prevented its completion, as if existence's absence of ground were a mere lack. Existence, Nancy often stresses, *lacks nothing*. It is not for all that complete or absolutely realized; rather, it lacks *nothing*, positively, and is therefore "absolutely," or wholly, finite. "Lacking nothing, yet still lacking: that is existing" (ibid., 26). Existence may be deprived of its essence, but "this privation is the privation of nothing" (*SM*, 54). The absence of ground that is existence in its freedom is the lack of nothing: there is nothing that it lacks precisely because there is no ground for it to lack. This in fact is the very definition of freedom for Nancy: the withdrawal of the cause, principle, basis, *ratio*—in short, the ground—into the thing. Existence is supported neither by a ground nor by a lack of ground. This is why the absence of ground is the absolute positing, *Setzung*, or "hecceity" of finite existence, Being-there. *The finitude of existence is the absoluteness of finitude.* A finite thought is therefore "not a thought of relativity, which implies the Absolute, but a thought of *absolute finitude*: absolutely detached from all completion, from all infinite senseless closure" (*PF*, 48). Finitude is not the privation of the infinite, as an entire theological and philosophical tradition had believed. Nancy rejects the sense of the finite as that which is not-infinite, as "the *badly*-finished and the *not*-finished in the sense of the incomplete, the aborted, the failed" (*Gravity*, 81), and points instead toward a "positive" or "proper" sense of finitude.[45] Finitude has to do with the event of presence, not the privation of Being; it is the "essence" of existence, or existence itself, the pure existing of the singular existent. There is no negativity or negation, in short, no negative thought of finitude. Existence, writes Nancy, "*is* the appropriation of the inappropriable" (ibid., 80). What remains "inappropriated *in* its appropriation" (ibid., 81) is what weighs. In the end, finitude lies in the exposure that existence is, one that, because it does not close or complete, lets the thing weigh with its weight. Remaining inappropriable and excessive, the thing weighs for thought. "The weight of thought is then the weight of the thing insofar as that thing weighs *outside* of thought" (ibid., 79). Thought is passible to this outside.

We have already alluded to the implication of the theme of weight in Nancy's attempt to approach thought in terms of "passibility," that is, in opposition to the activity of the so-called thoughts of giving significations. Indeed, if thought is no longer understood as spontaneity (according to Kant's definition of the understanding), then it is affected by an otherness that exceeds the simple appropriation of thought. Because existence is ex-posed to an alterity, the very possibility of appropriation is put into question. Weight would thus be the "resistance" of what remains inappropriable. The fact that thought receives the shock of meaning, or registers the "shock of the thing," and, to that extent, requires "strength, work, effort and rigor" (*Gravity*, 70)—in a word, "activity"—does not prevent it from remaining "passive" through and through. This passibility makes itself felt as a weight; its "activity" is one of weighing, if it is understood that weighing does not mean here the act of measuring and giving

significations but, more radically, the "act" of "*letting* what weighs *weigh*" (ibid., 67). This is ultimately what weighs: the fact of being exposed to what thought receives, to what remains inappropriable for it. This reception has the sense of inscribing or registering a reality foreign to the order of signification without making it homogeneous to that order. In this sense, that inscription should be written, as Nancy suggests, as "ex-scription,"[46] thereby preserving a certain excess or inappropriability in the very gesture of writing. Nancy names this peculiar exposure of thought to the inappropriability of meaning "figure":

> On this account, a figure would be the entire weight of a thought: its way, not of "thinking" meaning (of elaborating its signification) but of letting it weigh, just as it comes, just as it passes away, heavy or light, and always at the same time heavy and light. Are we (we who keep saying to ourselves that we arrive so late, so much at the *end*), in the end, going to let ourselves be presented with this constantly renewed gravity? Are we—with difficulty and serenity—going to let ourselves simply exist? (*Gravity*, 82)

François Raffoul

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Gravity: Introductory Remarks

Why publish these two texts together, *The Forgetting of Philosophy* and "The Weight of a Thought"? The first was a short book written in particular circumstances: I wanted to protest against a kind of simplistic dismissal, in the name of a "return" to the Enlightenment and humanism, of the most pointed demands of contemporary thought. The second was a preface to a collection of texts whose concerns were rather *unzeitgemäss* (heedless of the spirit of the times). The five years that separate these two texts do not in themselves constitute a significant distance. But I had not, in my recollection, put them on the same level. Reading them again, I realize that the first ended in large part with the theme of the *weight* of thought. I had forgotten this. (I generally forget most of what I write. I always feel that I am being carried off once again by a new urgency, which would somehow owe nothing to the previous one. In fact, I have to admit that I am always retracing my steps, as do we all.)

As for the polemical aspect of the first text, it is hardly necessary to press it further; it has to a large extent lost its raison d'être. Those who once believed they could dismiss a whole mode of thought that some called "poststructuralist," and others "postmodern," have become much more discreet. They are obliged to recognize that the situation is more serious [*grave*] or more joyous (it is the same thing) than they cared to admit. It has turned out that the old formulas were, quite simply, old. And that, as a result, one must think with one's times, and not as if we were in 1775 or in 1820. I will not dwell on this any further: everyone can determine what is past and what is not, as well as what remains to come.

What intrigued me was the theme of *weight*. Why does this theme persist, in these two texts, but also elsewhere? Why does it function for me as an "obsessive metaphor"? In fact, I have to admit it, there is something in it that

obsesses me—I might just as well say: something that *weighs* on me.

This means at once: something that weighs me down, that pushes me toward the earth, that bends me, tires me, and something that troubles me, that concerns me. To think, or to want to think, is heavy.[1] As one says in French, it is *lourd de conséquences*.[2] One speaks as well of a "weighty silence."

There is no pathos here: I certainly do not say that the condition of the "thinker" is a heavy one, certainly not! And this for the simple reason that there is no "condition of the thinker." On the contrary, thinking is the condition of everyone, the *human condition* (assuming that we know anything about other conditions). This said, we all carry this weight. Or, rather, we do not carry it: we *are* this weight.

What, then, is this weight? In general, weight consists in being outside of oneself, in having one's being or essence outside of oneself, in having one's landing point or place of presence, one's earth, ground, or void, one's belonging or abyss, outside of oneself. Weight means to fall outside of oneself.

Thinking is presumably nothing other than the sensation of a "self" that falls outside of itself *even before* having been a self. And what is then felt is neither a dizziness nor an intoxication but, indeed, a violent shock (no grandiloquence or melodrama here: a good shot that hits hard, that is all, yet that is quite enough). It is a calm and opaque *hardness*. Patrice Loraux has said this beautifully: "Hard things . . . are mute, yet they call you to a *logos* that does not gather, but to a logos that maintains the heterogeneous and discreetly guarantees that these things reveal no secret but that of being there" (*Le Tempo de la pensée*, Paris: Seuil, 1993, p. 377).

Now, all there remains to be thought is this: hard things are there. Or else "thinking" means: the "hardness" of things insofar as they are "there," and also: the Being-there of things insofar as they are hard. Insofar as they are *grave*.

This means: *insofar as they resist thought*; this is how they make it think . . .

What we call "thought"—or "to think" (the English language makes perceptible the gap between the substantive *thought* and the verb *to think*, the latter being itself divided between *to think of* and *to think* or *thinking*, absolutely)—is nothing other than that *against which an infinite resistance is opposed* and whose *very object* (or very subject) is this infinite resistance.

(One might say, with good reason, "thinking" is masochism par excellence, the only difference being that the masochist has a precise representation of what or whose hardness hurts him, and he draws his perverse pleasure from this representation. But there is nothing perverse in "thinking." Thinking enjoys [*jouit*] and suffers without any representation, and in a single movement divided in two.)

Thought: the infinite return into itself of an exteriority that has been originarily

torn from itself, and to such an extent that it was preceded by no self.

This is intolerable, unbearable (one bends, collapses under the weight of what is to be thought, that is, of what just *is*), and yet this has no heaviness, it is lightness itself (one can think whatever one wishes). This is grave, the existence of the world is grave, but this gravity has the lightness of that which exists without any other justification than existing. As is also said in French: *ça tombe sous le sens*.[3] Thought is such a meaning.

An infinite return into itself: it therefore does not return but falls back upon itself without falling anywhere. "Self" is a place of gravity without bottom or center. It endlessly falls into it, hence it also does not fall into it. "To fall" no longer has any meaning. "The weight of thought" means the end of any "original fall." There is nothing any more, no more height from which one might fall. The height is equal to the fall, as is obvious that each time there is a fall. But the height, here, proves null: nothing exceeds the measure of the world. The weight of thought means that the world is *grave* enough by itself, without any other consideration. Which also means: joyous enough. This equation is the very weight of weightiness: its impalpable lightness. This is what cannot be forgotten.

Part One

THE FORGETTING OF PHILOSOPHY

1

Prefatory Note

We are told from various sides that our era has forgotten true philosophy, its authentic tasks and the soundness of its reflection. In fact, this call to order most often testifies to a forgetting of what philosophy is, of what it has become and of what one should do with it or in its name. It seemed desirable, even urgent, to show what has indeed been forgotten, to show at least the basic elements of what constitutes the current states and tasks of philosophy.

No discoveries are offered here in these pages. In one sense, this is simply a taking stock of the situation, often stating nothing more than what is doubtless already known. However, it would be useful, at least for once, if it were not presupposed to be known, since such a presupposition often proves quite fallacious (listening to what is said and reading what is written). What follows will be somewhat didactic, for not only have I tried to write for those who are well versed neither in the history nor in the techniques of philosophy, but I also thought it a good idea to clarify for myself some things that are easily "taken for granted" or are left to the penumbra of one's personal inclinations.

Consequently, I will appeal to many works, to many thoughts operative in our recent history and at the present time, but I will not name them. On the one hand, of course, I wanted to distance myself from polemical interests and rigidities engendered by proper names (without being so naive, however, as to believe they would be completely eliminated). On the other hand, I will try to restrict myself to what, at least to a certain extent, belongs to everyone and yet can be claimed by no one. With regard to the first point, this is no irenic declaration; thinking today is clearly embroiled in a state of struggle, and those who have taken up arms in order to foment the forgetting of philosophy are well aware of this. But this is not a quarrel between individuals or groups (no more than it is a mere conflict between ancients and moderns). For in this battle it is truth that is at stake. With regard to the second point, I do not wish to claim that thoughts that have their own particular styles, and whose differences (if not differends), deserve reflection, could be gathered into an

anonymous synthesis. But I hold that in this division of thoughts, and thanks to it, there is something common to all of them, something that bears the mark of history, something that is *ours* in the sense that I will try to give to that word. (In the process, I grant something to those—diverse also, and yet similar—who make an amalgamated "modernity" the target of their attacks. I do not grant them the amalgam, only the existence of turning points and limits in history to which they are the belated and reactive witnesses.) In another sense, it will become clear that I am advancing only a single proposition, one for which I alone am responsible. This is inevitable. Thus, two distinct levels can be read here.

2

Introduction

> That which might rightfully lay claim to the name of meaning dwells in what is open and not in what is closed upon itself.
>
> —Adorno, Negative Dialectic

More or less quietly, more or less clamorously, the question of meaning once again troubles the aging West, which believed itself to have overcome it. One should not be too quick to say that this agitation is in vain. There is necessarily at least one sense [*sens*] to the question of meaning [*sens*] being posed.[1] And this sense is not only negative—as when one claims, with good reason, that the meaning of history, of the *polis*, of war, or of communication, has been interrupted. (This could also be stated, with all the ambiguity of the expression: we no longer *have* a sense of history, of community or of truth—or, more bluntly, we no longer have *the* sense of history, of destiny, of mystery, of existence, etc.) There is a positive sense to the question of meaning being posed anew, but the mode or the nature of this "positivity" is difficult to determine. In order that it not be empty or illusory, this positivity must have nothing to do with any of the determinations of meaning that our distant or recent past might offer us. Furthermore, it must have nothing to do with the idea of "overcoming" the question of meaning, an idea that is not only positive but positivist. The idea of an "overcoming" stems from [*relève de*] a simple dialectic of meaning: when structuralism declared that people no longer had anything to say, but that what was interesting was the way in which they said it, it situated meaning (having then become a combinatory network) in the impeccable mastery of its own sublation [*relève*]. It attempted to put forth meaning no longer as message but as functionality, which itself then became the message.

Yet our recent history surely cannot be assimilated to the fate of structuralism and its avatars alone, contrary to what certain people believe, and to what

others feign to believe. It is not certain that, once reduced to functions of language, we would no longer have anything to say. Nonetheless, it is not certain that we can say this as if language were once again simply at our disposal. Something has been suspended in the reciprocal availability of meaning and of the speaking function. And if there is a question of meaning for us, it is dependent upon this suspension in such a precise and rigorous manner that the very meaning of the *question* as such is, from the outset, left in suspense. What is one asking, henceforth, when one asks for meaning? What is it to ask for meaning? What is the meaning of this request?

I would be at great pains indeed to determine the meaning of the return of the question of meaning. It is no one's exclusive province to effect this determination: it is, or will be, the effect of history, which has never ceased to give rise to the unprecedented, precisely because history itself is not someone and is not a subject (a *subject* is, perhaps, bound only to reproduce itself). And yet, I know—with a knowledge that is accessible to anyone who does not claim to rule over thought, or to make himself its overseer, but who intends rather to let it think, or to let it come to be—I know that this meaning could not take any other form (if it is a "form") than that of an *opening* (to use Adorno's term).

What does this mean? These pages have no other purpose than to attempt to spell out what such an "opening" consists of, or at least how it first opens up. If meaning depends on thought, insofar as it is thought that welcomes meaning [*l'accueille*] (but does not produce it), then the meaning that "dwells in what is open" depends on thought itself as opening [*ouverture*]. This is not an openness [*ouverture*] *of* thought, as one might say of liberal or conciliatory intellectual attitudes (for such accommodating postures point instead to the forgetting of thought).[2] It is, rather, thought *as* the opening to which and through which what belongs to meaning is able to happen, precisely because it *happens*—with all the force of its declaration, call, or demand. (At the risk of repeating myself, I will say that philosophy is not, perhaps is never, *that* which happens; but the wonder before the fact that it happens bears the name and form of the philosophical for the West.) The dimension of the open, then, is the one according to which nothing (nothing essential) is established or settled; it is the one according to which everything essential *comes to be*. It is therefore also that dimension according to which thought has nothing—neither things, nor ideas, nor words—that would simply be at the disposal of its (supposed) mastery. Consequently, it is also the dimension according to which "meaning" is far from being identical to "signification." For signification is located meaning, while meaning resides perhaps only in the coming of a possible signification. One should at least attempt to think in this direction.

But we must first clear the horizon of the problem. That is, we must discern

the reasons why the current return of the question of meaning most often takes place under the heading of the "closure upon itself." At least this is how things are presented in the conventional wisdom, and by those who, in the name of such a "return," have demanded it the most vehemently in these last years. Such a discernment is indispensable if we are to move toward what happens to us and toward that which will call upon us in the order of meaning. It is probably even through the process of discerning the themes and structures of the "closed upon itself" that one may begin to make oneself available to the "open," to what comes—to that which, since it comes and since its essence lies in coming, in the yet-to-come,[3] has no "self" upon which to close itself.

3

The Schema of the Return

Indeed, all that is presented in the form of the return or under the heading of the return is in principle closed upon itself. If I have spoken of "return," it is out of mere convenience and in order initially to make use of a somewhat stereotypical phrase: "the return of the question of meaning." But in history, questions do not return any more than do the faces of individuals. History is Leibnizian in that it obeys the principle of the impossibility of indiscernables. Undoubtedly, the twenty-eight or so centuries of our Western history seem punctuated by the periodic repetition of crises during which a configuration of meaning comes undone, a philosophical, political, or spiritual order decays, and, in the general vacillation of certainties and reference points, one is alarmed at the meaning lost—one tries to retrieve it, or else tries to invent a new meaning. We have thus seen—at the very least—a crisis of the ancient Greek world, a crisis of the classical Greek world, a crisis of the Roman world, a crisis of the Christian world, and now (this is the whole history of the twentieth century) a crisis of the modern world. But it is not at all certain that the succession of these critical episodes signifies the "return" of anything at all (perhaps only the return of a certain representation of "crisis"). More precisely, it is not certain that an interpretation in terms of "return" (which is most often found in solidarity with the representation in terms of "crisis") is sufficient, provided that thought is not too lazy.

The point of view of the "return" conceives of each crisis in an identical manner and as the reproduction of the same episode. However varied the discourses that stem from this point of view may be, their fundamental typology can be reduced to a single model: in times of crisis, meaning is lost sight of, but when the crisis ends, when the dust has settled and the vagrancies and extravagances of the crisis have run their course, the demand for meaning reemerges: intact and unmistakable. The *return* thus first means that nothing had truly been lost and that neither the length of the crisis nor the abundance and intensity of its manifestations could have *fundamentally* altered a certain

Idea (a schema, a paradigm, sometimes a norm) of Meaning. "Now all disciplines are restituted"—this line of Rabelais emblematizes all the thoughts of return: rebirth, restitution, restoration, rediscovery. . . .

This is how, for some time now, and from various places, one has hastened to bracket nothing less than the two centuries that separate us from Kant, in order to proclaim the return of a certain Reason—at once critical, ethical, juridical, regulative and humanistic—whose purity and necessity are purported to have gone practically unaffected by the thoughts of the dialectic, of history or economy, by those of anxiety, the letter, the body, and, especially, by this thought of self (reflection, calling into question, radicalization, genealogy, overcoming, destruction, deconstruction, etc.) that philosophy has undertaken (that is to say, we are told, where it had gone astray) since Kant. Others propose yet more extensive operations: they would have both the crisis and the slow, silent process of the immaculate Return begin with Descartes, or the Counter-Reformation, or even the Church Fathers. There is also a less historicizing version, as one might expect, according to which what returns, or what must return, is a certain common sense, an obvious rationality, verifiable by all in the accuracy of its measure and in the limit of its pretensions: it is ageless, it is the Solon of thought.[4] From its very beginnings (and I will return to this), our Western world alternately awaits or announces the return of Solon, who would once again have to police the *polis*, its community, its customs and its thoughts.

This schema is, of course, rarely presented today with such simplicity, since it is hardly possible nowadays to propose without further ado the neutralization of a whole segment of history. If only cautiously to comply with a kind of elementary rule of modern consciousness (one no longer openly allows oneself all the violence of untimely meditations), it is hardly possible today to act as though nothing has happened that would have to be taken into account. So, now and then, one admits that there was some partial necessity to some particular aspect of the crisis. One could not, clearly, simply remain with classical metaphysics any more than with the Enlightenment. In philosophy as in politics—though, obviously, all this is but a matter of philosophical politics and of political philosophy—hardline reactions are not in vogue nowadays. Yet for all this, they may be all the more insidiously and profoundly reactive. This is why, if it is admitted that one must live with one's times, one in fact refuses to admit that one must *think these times through*. It is here that the schema regains all the force of its overwhelming simplicity. One must think against the times, or despite the times, since it is still the time of the crisis. Against the times, and in order to put an end to them, one must think the scansion of the return and, on the basis of this, beyond these times, one must think reform and renewal.

This refusal or avoidance before a thinking of the present day already and by itself testifies to the forgetting of philosophy. Indeed, of all the inaugural propositions of the philosophy of the contemporary era, none is more forgotten or misunderstood than Hegel's famous line: "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk." What this line means is unambiguously established by its context:

> Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age. . . . If his theory really goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in his opinions, an unsubstantial element where anything you please may, in fancy, be built.[5]

The "falling of dusk" would thus be a certain fulfillment, the event and advent of a "present day"—that is, of the real; philosophy is that which thinks the present reality (the only one there is . . .) by thinking the present, the presence and presentation of reality. When one selects from the provenance of this present that which is, on the one hand, to be taken into account and, on the other hand, that which is to be classified under the rubric of "the delirium of the crisis," one has already de-realized the real. One has "overleapt one's age" backward so as to be better able to leap ahead toward the restorative return. By picking and choosing from history, one has already denied oneself the possibility of thinking through the real movement that is carried out in the real present, or the movement of the day that the night brings to a close and presents—and that brings us to the eve of another real day. Not that it is a matter of taking all the givens of our past at once, so as to try to swallow the whole mass indiscriminately. . . . By thinking through the provenance of the present, the philosopher thinks history through; he orders it into a new apprehension (that is, he not only writes another history but thinks the very idea of history in another way). But the philosopher does not refit in advance a history that would conform to the norm of the return of what preceded this history. Deliriums, excesses, errors, and crimes also demand to be understood by thought; this is not to accede to madness, stupidity, or the will to evil, but it is to accede to the reality that permitted them, gave rise to them, or was marked by them. Merely to advocate a return to the law that was violated is not to think through the crime—it is to avoid thinking it through without avoiding (quite to the contrary) its possible repetition.

4

The Will to Meaning

The schema of the return, thus traced back to the simplicity of its calculated distraction, or of its denial, with regard to the reality of history (this is the schema's way of inverting the ruse of reason that so scandalizes it; the schema ruses with reason itself), carries with it two major implications. On the one hand, the crisis is deemed merely superficial, and, on the other hand, the return of some deep meaning must be understood as the return of the identical.

The crisis is superficial because it only consists, at best, in extravagant formations, or because it can be reduced to deviations that arose from a sound inspiration. For example—to take the obviously exemplary case of history itself—the Hegelian conception of history is but a monstrosity (*de Marxo, silemus!*), and the speculative tendencies in Kant's philosophy of history are only an unfortunate slippage, quickly corrected by the vigilance of orthodox Kantianism. But the crisis is also superficial in the causes of its aberrations: it was Germany's unfortunate incapacity to forge a political unity that engendered speculative thought (one might almost be tempted to draw on the resources of a kind of sub-Marxism: but since, as a rule, no one is a Marxist, at least not anymore, one does not even use such a tool or say what kind of causality is being used). Then it was the seductions of irrationality, the hunger for glamour or power, morbid or hermetic tendencies (this time sub-Nietzscheanism or sub-Freudianism plays the role of sub-Marxism), and, finally, the idling talents or the vainglory of the salons (*parisianisme* is an old accusation, dear to certain Parisians) that accounted for an impressive succession of errors and weaknesses. Never does one ask oneself: why this weakness, why these hungers or tendencies—and certainly not: why such spectacular causal links, or relations of mutual expression, between a few collective or individual pathologies and phenomena of thought that are not completely inconsistent, incommunicable and ephemeral? These questions are not asked because the crisis is treated as a mere sickness—a term that is itself understood in the most superficial manner possible, as a passing disorder, due to contingent causes, that in no way alters what is essential.

If philosophy always puts itself in a more or less medical posture, treating the soul or the understanding, the philosophers of the return are the most expeditious of doctors: they diagnose only either minor colds or gangrenous infections that require massive and immediate excisions. For them, the "crisis" is no longer what its name meant to Greek physicians and to philosophy: the moment of judgment (*krisis*), of the discernment of the true nature of the sickness by way of its "critical" manifestations. Thus, even supposing that the whole of romantic and speculative idealism after Kant were nothing more than a "crisis," it would still be appropriate to diagnose what this philosophical body (in which runs the blood of Kant, Leibniz, Spinoza, Rousseau, etc.) was suffering from, and consequently, how this body was constituted. Even supposing that all contemporary thought stemming from Heidegger and Nietzsche (or Marx, or Freud) were nothing more than a "crisis," it would still be necessary to discern what a so widely and durably infected philosophical corpus is suffering from and how it functions. For a whole philosophical constitution is no doubt at stake, and perhaps even the entire philosophical constitution in general. Undoubtedly, there is a great physiology of thought, with a complex circulatory system that runs, for example, from Marx and Nietzsche to Heidegger, Benjamin and Wittgenstein by way of Kierkegaard, Husserl, the "human sciences," logical positivism, Bergson, Bataille, structuralism, and so on—but also by way of the modern experience and consciousness of the social bond and of struggle, of the partitions of the world, of the putting to the test of art, literature, and language. And it would no doubt be possible to apply to this constitution of humors, reflexes, and metabolisms the same kind of diagnosis that Nietzsche himself initiated within philosophy on philosophy itself. . . .

Unless we should find that the medical paradigm, along with the orthopedic or hygienic models it entails, themselves belong to the most traditional philosophical constitution and cannot be used, despite Nietzsche or thanks to him, without philosophical naiveté. But then one would have to undertake other operations on philosophy, other modes of questioning and judging it, in which it would no longer be a question of crisis or diagnosis. These would be the various modes by which contemporary thought has had to investigate a certain completion (which Heidegger also called an "end") of philosophy as such, and the new relation to itself or out of itself that is thus opened. If one does not want to undertake such an investigation, one has already confined oneself to a philosophy that is forgetful of itself and its history—one that is thus *twice "finished."*[6] If, on the contrary, one recognizes that philosophical seriousness and rigor cannot be demanded at a low cost, one must admit that one of the prices to be paid (in fact, the lowest price) is the relinquishing of the themes of crisis and return.

To the superficial character of the crisis corresponds the deep and immutable character of meaning in its insistent return. This return is the return of a meaning that is identical to itself beneath the swell of change. But it should be noted that this has nothing to do with Nietzsche's "eternal return of the same." Nietzsche conceives the now in its exposure to an eternity of meaning, or, rather, to an eternity understood as an infinite opening of meaning where its signification collapses. The other return merely designates the preservation of a signification shielded from history by a strange intellectual freeze.

For nearly two centuries now (and this length of time alone should make us wonder . . .), the slightest irruption, the slightest stirring or innovation of thought, is regularly followed by a call back to the same values—that is, to *value* itself: *man*, the *subject*, *communication*, *rationality*, and so on—and by a call back to the same philosophical virtues necessary to enact these values in a humanity finally re-valorized: *clarity*, *responsibility*, *communicability*, and so on. There are several consequences of this.

The first consequence—or rather corollary—is that the set of notions or themes that constitute the overall *meaning* that is alleged to return consists in nothing other than the complete collection of those received ideas that were taken as ideals or demands ever since modern thought became for itself an obvious fact or a foregone conclusion. Who today would not be quick to agree upon the values of freedom, rationality, communication, responsibility, dignity, and the right of men to share these same values—as long as it is a matter of facile declarations and not philosophical work? This agreement is the veritable *commonplace* in which, if not all thoughts, at least all declarations made in the name of the thoughts of the contemporary world, can coexist. (Certain enterprises, more playful or seemingly more anxious to distinguish themselves from humanism, appear to keep themselves at a distance from this commonplace; these may range from a new hedonism to various forms of what could be called general symbolic analysis. But since, in these cases, the question of meaning is simply no longer raised, or, rather, since it is foreclosed, the commonplace remains, a silent and ghostly presence.) Yet this commonplace can only be agreed upon on the condition that one neglect, in this supposed concord of thoughts, certain notable exceptions: *at the very least*, and despite everything, since unfortunately it seems that it must be said *despite everything*, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and a sixth, for which the names Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Picasso, and Joyce might be combined or substituted. . . . One can come to this agreement only on the condition of retaining in each thought only a few terms (for example, "freedom") that are to be taken in the limited context of a few general statements of intent. But in order to preserve access to the commonplace, one must be wary of too closely examining

the exact construction of the concepts and the stakes of the systematics or problematics in which these concepts are produced. The philosophical commonplace that is offered to us as the return of *the* philosophy, this commonplace that we must agree, and once again *despite everything*, to call by the name humanism (in a sense that would hardly be recognizable to historic humanism, which produced a rupture in thought and for which "man" was a thought of rupture, not consensus), can hardly be characterized (*despite everything . . .*) as anything but an ideology, that is, a thought that does not critique or think through its own provenance and its own relation to reality.

Undoubtedly, it will still be easy for quite some time to come to an agreement concerning the ideology of a "meaning of man." But this somnambulistic agreement refuses to realize that it is arrived at before a humanity that has long despaired or been disgusted by the appeals made to its own "meaning," a humanity that feels that it inhabits the least human of all possible worlds. For two-thirds of this humanity, "man" is, in sum, a denial; he is barely allowed to survive. For the other third, it is the modern name of a Narcissus who is at a loss before the disappearance of his own image. Certainly, the discourse on the rights of man does not fail to fulfill necessary functions from time to time in the name of political or moral demands. That is no reason to ignore what we already know; the man whose rights are respected is given over to a freedom and to a community that, he is told, is his meaning but that has for him neither meaning nor flesh. And the reason for this perhaps lies precisely in the fact that freedom, community, and so on, are foreclosed in philosophical humanism. It is one thing to denounce the ignominy of slavery; it is quite another to think sovereignty, which is not simply the cessation or the opposite of slavery, and which brings another essence—or another meaning—into play. This does not mean that we are through with "man," "freedom," or "community," as we are with the steam train. It means that there is nothing essential or true to be done with these Ideas as long as the system of their closure has not been entirely brought to light, thereby releasing possibilities of meaning that necessarily exceed the significations of humanism.

The second consequence is that the return that is announced or called for, to the extent that it is the return of the identical, ultimately consists less in a return *of* than in a return *to*. One might still suppose that the return *of* meaning would be similar to that of Ulysses, who does not come back just as he left—who comes back, for example, under the name of Bloom, and who undoes his own legend by repeating it ("undoing one's own legend" means saying that there is something more to be said). But this would require a specific reflection on return, on repetition. It would require a precise elaboration of the *nostos* and of the difference or drift that entails it. Joyce's gesture is one

version of such an elaboration. It was clearly not by chance that it occurred in an era in which (since romanticism and since Nietzsche) a more or less direct investigation into the essence of the return had become a philosophical preoccupation. But this preoccupation, and consequently any elaboration of the problematic of return (and perhaps of the West and philosophy themselves as return), are foreign to those who, in the end, are demanding a return *to*: to values, to reason, to God, to Kant, or to God knows what else.

The *return to* seems to assume a strange way of proceeding. It proposes retreating in order to advance (unless it is in order to leap better . . . over its time). I will not oppose to this, however, the image of a pure and simple forward march, which would fall in with the too obviously dated models of discovery or progress. Christopher Columbus, Descartes, Condorcet, and Kant (*despite everything*) are no longer of our age; undoubtedly, "taking a step forward" could not easily be analyzed by philosophy nowadays in terms of a resolute march or a guided path. But it is the *return to*, in fact, that obeys the logic of the forward march, on the condition that one accept the possibility of having gone astray. One goes back to the place where one took a wrong turn or wandered from the path, and then sets off in the right direction. Nothing has happened; the return is a neutral or null move, and is, in fact, only momentary. Historically speaking, it amounts to nothing; it simply puts history back on the right track. All that is required is that one be suddenly alerted to the fact that thought has been wandering since about 1795 (or 1580, or 402), and that one decide to return to the point of departure. This move is entirely positive. There is no retreat; it is not a retrograde move. It is, rather, a retroactive one; one can annul the interim and, in 1985, get the good start that was missed in 1785. The two dates are therefore essentially identical, and what distinguishes them is nothing—nothing but the negligible time of crisis and wandering. Ultimately, the intermediary dates are but false dates in history—or else, simply the dates of errors or lies, instructive if taken as indications of the wrong way to go.

But under these conditions, where in history can a true date and a true starting point be found? Let us assume that it lay in Kant (since he is the one we hear about most, as if, moreover, we had been waiting for the call to return in order to read and reread Kant). Following this assumption, Kant would be the moment of a rupture and an inauguration. But what law of history would limit the inauguration to Kant? What conception of history would authorize such a law? For lack of a response to these questions, which, moreover, are not even raised, one proceeds as if Kant at once inaugurated and was himself nothing more than the return of and to an Idea whose provenance is here left undetermined. The logic of the return is caught in a history that it at once

denies and affirms, at once corrects and submits to. This is confirmed by the fact that no one advocates a return to pre-Christian Antiquity (although, from time to time, someone makes a move in this direction, regarding law, morality, or happiness . . .): the gap is too great, and one would find that something was lacking; for some, it would be God, for others, the subject, for everyone, it would be freedom and man's vocation. This is to acknowledge that the return has limits, and that "somewhere" there is a past that has passed, a past in relation to which something has happened [*arrivé*], a past in relation to which, in the end, *we* have arrived. But we are never told exactly how or when the past stopped passing—in order to let the crisis pass before getting the return under way. As for the past of the crisis itself, which was posterior to the once again present present of the good start, it has not properly passed; it has not settled in the alluvium of history, nor, consequently, has it been inscribed in its fecundity. It is overcome [*dépassé*], that is all. For some time now, one has, while shaking off the yoke of historical thought, undertaken to teach us that there is some past *that quite simply did not take place* [*ne s'est pas passé*]: Hegel, the death of God, the proletariat, or Auschwitz, respectively or all at once.

Third consequence: that to which it is a matter of returning is not so much a determined meaning as *meaning* itself, or else the category of meaning in general. (More precisely, one would have to say that the determined meaning of humanist ideology is presented as immediately subsumed under the category of meaning in general, whose task and stakes it assumes.)

Meaning in general is meaning understood as signification. Signification itself, that is, *meaning in the sense of "signification"* (which is the most ordinary sense of the word "meaning" in our language and in philosophy) is not exactly, or not simply, "meaning"; it is the presentation of meaning. Signification consists in the establishment or assignment of the presence of a factual (or sensible) reality in the ideal (or intelligible) mode (which is what one calls "meaning"); or else, and reciprocally, it consists in the assignment of the presence of an intelligible determination in the sensible mode (a particular reality and/or the materiality of the sign itself). From Plato to Saussure, signification is, properly speaking, the conjunction of a sensible and an intelligible, conjoined in such a way that each presents the other. The meaning of meaning as "signification" is taught (signified) by the most elementary and most constant lesson of philosophy; if we assume the division between sensible and intelligible, then signification would be the dialectical resolution of this division. Its succint formulation might be: the meaning of things is presented in the meaning of words and vice versa, or else, even more laconically: *logology* (discourse, science, and calculation of the reasons of the real).

In Kantian terms—since these are the most appropriate here and since it is indeed our relation to Kant that is at stake—signification is properly speaking that through which concepts are no longer empty and intuitions no longer blind. In other words, signification realizes the one in the other and the two together. It relates each one to the other as to that which confers upon it its true property: the concept thinks and the intuition sees; the concept thinks what the intuition sees and the intuition sees what the concept thinks. *Signification is thus the very model of a structure or system that is closed upon itself*, or better yet, *as closure upon itself*. This is the signification of humanism: the reality of man presents itself *right in* the ideality called "man." And this is the humanism of signification: the ideality of man presents itself *right in*[7] his sensible reality, that of his works and/or signs.

Before the terrifying or maddening abyss that is opened between the possibility that thought is empty and the correlative possibility that reality is chaos (this does not date back to Kant, but in his work it takes on its modern and perfectly *human* form), signification is the assurance that closes the gaping void by rendering its two sides homogeneous. Reality has an order to it, and reason orders the real. The *self* [*soi*], the self*same* [*soi-même*][8] "upon" which this system closes itself (and which it in fact constitutes by this very closure) is the locus or agency of this homogeneity, its support and substance; it is the *subject*, capable of presenting the concept and the intuition together, that is, the one through the other.

That is why, in Kant, signification or meaning designates that which takes place as *presentation*. The force or "sleight of hand" (*Handgriff*)[9] that constitutes this presentation are declared by Kant to be forever ungraspable, the "hidden art" of what he baptized the "schematism." It suffices to leave this ungraspable to its obscurity. It suffices not to wonder whether this obscurity might demand not simply a supplementary clarification but perhaps a whole other approach to the question; it suffices to ignore that which nonetheless is thereby revealed, namely, that *signification in no way yields the "meaning" of its own production* or of its own advent (which cannot itself be a signification, but the act or movement in which the possibility of meaning arises—which has sometimes been called "*signifiance*").[10] All this suffices to make the whole of philosophy into a general enterprise of signification and presentation. One could even say that the open and shut enigma of the schematism was necessary in order to engage modern philosophy in the explicit will to, and systematic project of, total presentation: sensible, moral, logical, aesthetic, political, metaphysical. Even though Kantian thought in its most acute tension never forgot the *question* of the schematism, this project nonetheless began in Kant's work itself. Signification there takes on different modes, ranging from the ostensive mode of mathematics to the analogical, symbolic, and even "negative" modes of morality, aesthetics,

and history—but it is still essentially signification, it is still the demand and the logic of its closure (Kant speaks of the "satisfaction" of reason) that are at stake. From Kant to Husserl, the great philosophical lineage has done nothing but modulate the will to presentation in various ways.

(Undoubtedly, this great modulation has constantly come to touch on the limit[11] of signification and put it into question; it has constantly raised the question of the meaning of the provenance of meaning, the question of the opening of meaning, and of an other "meaning" of meaning. In fact, it has raised this question as such. It is thus philosophy itself that brought to light the question of its own closure, of its own edge on the outskirts of meaning. I will return to this later on, for it is through this obstinacy about the limit of signifying presentation that philosophy properly carries out the act of philosophical thought. The forgetting of philosophy is the forgetting of this obstinacy.)

The will to presentation constantly makes meaning return—that is, the *meaningful* essence of meaning [*l'essence* sensée *du sens*], or signification—in knowledge, history, work, the State, the community, law, ethics, and even in art and faith, because this will is the presupposition of meaning: there *must* be signification, that is, Ideas *must* not be empty, and experience must not be chaos. (The limit of this unconditioned demand is found in the Idea of the presentation of the unconditioned itself; this is the Kantian sublime. The sublime—indissociably aesthetic, moral, political and philosophical—makes another opening of "meaning" rise up against the background of signification out of which it emerges. This sublime, as such, is perhaps already no longer a sufficient resource for us. It still adheres, albeit negatively, to the logic of presentation and risks preserving a maximum of signification. It should be noted, however, that the partisans of the return do not refer to the Kant of the sublime nor to his heirs.)

The return is thus each time a return to this will to meaning. If one agrees, along with Kant and as it is no doubt necessary to do since Montaigne and Pascal, that man does not have or is not himself a signification that is already produced and available, then he has or is at the very least the signification of this will, and thus has or is the signification of the subject of signification or presentation. This is how contemporary humanism defines itself: as the self-presentation of the will to meaning, or more exactly, as the self-presentation of the meaning of the will to meaning. That which governs the process and project of signification is the following: "man" signifies this project—and this project signifies man.

Thus we can see how the thoughts of the return keep returning to this commonplace made up of "freedom," the "subject," "communication," and so on; these categories or regulative Ideas are in sum the transcendentals, in the scholastic sense of the term, of signification. They are its fundamental predicates; signification, or presentation, must be produced by the subject, which presents itself (therein lies its "freedom") and thus communicates, and communicates itself all by itself. Humanism is the complete system of the autodonation of meaning. As for "value," a theme that never fails to punctuate the demands for return, it is nothing other than signification *as willed*; "value" is meaning that is not yet realized but whose (postulated) meaning regulates the gait and direction of our every step. Humanism is the postulation of the meaning of man and confers perhaps no other meaning upon man than that of his infinite postulation. In a sense, humanism deliberately (willfully) goes no further than man's will. The inhumanity of his world is not terribly surprising.

5

The Displacement of Meaning

I will try to explain how all of philosophy, from its inception, has corresponded *in one sense* to this thought. But one must first determine the extent to which, in philosophy (in the West), no age before ours (if it is still *ours* and that is the whole problem) has been defined, structured, or magnetized by this will as much as it has. This is proven by the constancy and the reactive demands of the thoughts of the return; we cannot stand ourselves without a project of signification, or without the signification of a project. The feeling of this necessity, with its ardent demand, did not become general and permanent until the end of the eighteenth century. This was not the result of progress, for the thought of progress—which is in sum the matrix of the thoughts of the return, being as it is the thought of a fruition of presupposed meaning—only constituted itself at that moment and according to that movement. Rather, it was the result of a protective reaction against the distress and wandering in which modern man—let us say, the man of the second "humanism," who could no longer live on the model of the ancients, hence, modern man—experienced himself: Montaigne, Shakespeare, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Sterne, Diderot, Lichtenberg, Rousseau. . . . The thought of progress (sometimes in the works of these same authors) reacts via the project of signification.

The thoughts of the return repeat this reaction. This does not justify them. On the contrary, it condemns them. It condemns them without appeal (and without there being any need to introduce the slightest bias into this condemnation; this is all so clear, so overwhelming—hardly a question of preference . . .). It condemns them because the time that has passed, the event, the work of history and the uncompromising suspicion of philosophy itself have all brought this to light: the will to signification is but a "human, all too human" reaction to the unprecedented experiment[12] that the West undertook (or at least, that it thought it was undertaking at that time, but in which it may have been involved

from the start, and by which it defines itself). This was not the experience of a "loss of meaning," as a thought of crisis or return would say, since such a formulation is founded upon the reconstitution after the fact or the retrospective illusion (so tenacious and so deep-seated in the West) according to which, "before," there was some established, shared signification available that the crisis would come to muddle or conceal. But the experiment or experience of the West, since it invents signification, and since in its modern form it gives rise to the will to signification, does not in fact proceed from lost signification to rediscovered or restored signification. It is rather the experience of an entry into the order of signification from out of a different order. This different order perhaps never *was*; for the historian, in any case, the five hundred years that preceded the birth of the West are, in Braudel's words, "the night," which means that one must not try to give a signification to this moment (when "the eastern Mediterranean was at history's degree zero, or nearly so"), not even a "nocturnal" signification. There was *another* day, then, upon which we cannot confer the meaning of any of our days or nights. The question of an order exterior to signification cannot be posed under the conditions or in the terms of signification (thus all our conceptions of "myth" have never made us accede to a "life in myth,"[13] if this expression means anything; or else, on another level, all our thoughts of *mimesis* set themselves the task of thinking the fact that it is impossible to signify what the West's first models were, or, more radically, whether there was or is a model for the logic of *mimesis*). Even if there was once an order exterior to signification, and even if it is still present somewhere among us, or in us, we would not be able to name it or describe it in our discourse; we would not be able to give it meaning within the logic of signification.

One can only try to say that in this order thoughts could not be empty and reality could not be chaos, because the division thus presupposed between "thought" and "reality" would have no currency. This amounts to saying that "thought" would not be the representational-significative activity of a subject, and that "reality" would not be this thing that is signified and presented by and to this subject. One could also say that, in this different order, chaos would itself be a thought, and the conceptual void would itself be a reality. . . . But, once again, it is not here a matter of trying to signify this order; this would be the will to signification's supreme and most tenacious illusion. (To speak of an "order" is already to say too much.) It has perhaps no other *meaning* than that of opening and undoing that which encloses itself in signification. By experiencing an "entry" into signification, the West experienced an exit from something that it could not signify, and consequently, the impossibility of signifying either its own advent or the establishment of the order of signification.

Thus, we have never forgotten, lost, muddled, or masked signification in such a way that we would have to retrieve or reconstitute it. We are always

already in it; we have always only just entered it—and the modern age has been the access to signification as will to produce signification, while the ancient age entered signification as the ordering [*disposition*] of the world. Each time, we have given this access the signification of a process [*procès*] or a progress. We were emerging from a loss or blurring of signification, from a moment of stammering, of lies or delirium, from chaos or fate, from an animal or divine condition, from a cruel or happy absence of laws, and so on. At that moment, the subject represents itself as alone; or rather, at that moment, "solitude," the "subject" and its disarray emerge all at once; at that moment, a *disorientation* (which is the Occident itself) occurs that demands signification to the very degree to which it signifies itself from the outset as a deprivation of signification. Thus the enterprise of meaning always begins by signifying the anterior or transcendent presence of a *meaning* that has been lost, forgotten, or altered, one that is, by definition, to be recovered, restored, or revived.

The fact that the prior and provisional loss of meaning is a represented loss in no way prevents the reality of its effects, which are as powerful as those of any fantasy. It does not prevent the distress and wandering of the disoriented man and thus does not spare our being concerned about this distress. What matters is to know whether the way to free oneself of the effects of the fantasy is by means of the fantasy itself. Now the fact that the (always provisional) loss or the (always curable) crisis of meaning are representations that are concurrent, indeed consubstantial with the establishment of the order of signification, confronts us with what might be called the fantasy of signification. These representations indeed *signify* (such is their function and the reason for their necessity) that signification is always already given or present, that it was always already available (whether it be in the guise of a "regulative idea," a "value," or sometimes even a "premonition"; one need only think of the way in which Christianity represented itself as already potentially present in Antiquity, just as Plato represented himself as already present in Hesiod or in the priests of Egypt). Now, this obligatory antecedence governs the very structure or operation of signification; meaning, or the signified, is present, by definition and in whatever mode, and signification consists in recapturing this presence and presenting it by signifying it. The signifier presents as signified the meaning that was silently signifying itself beforehand. This movement of the return of meaning, *which constitutes meaning itself* in signification, reveals itself by being reduplicated in the representation of the loss or obliteration of the meaning whose crisis precedes and provokes the demand for its return. The thoughts of the return conceive of meaning as something whose essence has a structure of return, and as the re-orientation promised to the Occident.

Such a structure thus implies that the loss of meaning is also essential for the return of meaning. And yet, at the same time, the crisis of the loss must

appear only as a superficial accident, otherwise one might no longer know how to return to meaning. A fundamental ambiguity of all thoughts of signification and return is thus revealed; meaning must be present, available, visible, immovable, and, at the same time, it must be absent, nearly inaccessible, far behind words and/or things, remote in some heaven of Ideas, or projected by the aim of a will. This ambiguity is indispensable to its structure of return. But the return endlessly brings back the ambiguity; hardly have we entered into meaning, hardly have we come near it, when it has to move away again, into the heavens, into history, or into the depths of the signified. Meaning is affected by this constant *displacement*—which is also its *dissimulation* (*Verstellung*)—which Hegel criticized in Kant's moral law (and this moral law, at least when considered strictly according to the philosophical economy of meaning, is indeed a prime example of signification; it prescribes *meaning* itself, which is thus present, but since the meaning of that meaning can only be prescribed, it remains infinitely distant). The meaning of signification, or meaning in terms of signification, essentially consists in this infinite displacement or flight. For example, the meaning of appearances lies precisely in the reality they veil, the meaning of becoming lies precisely in the permanence it masks, the meaning of language lies precisely in the meaning that it keeps at a signified's distance . . . Or else, and symmetrically, the meaning of appearances, becoming, or language always consists, in the final analysis, in their virtual vanishing for the benefit of the presentation of meaning.

In the last few years, some have taken pleasure in identifying what they considered to be constitutive features of contemporary thought, which they understand as a crisis, a pathology, even as a perversion of thought: a privilege accorded to absence over presence, to the empty over the full, to lack over satisfaction, to the elsewhere over the here. But in reality, it is a thought that claims for itself the health or normality that keeps slipping absence under its presences, that keeps hollowing out a void at the heart of its plenitudes. The *meaning* that thought invokes is always elsewhere, always displaced, always on the move [*en déplacement*]; or more exactly, the presence of meaning immediately opens the indefinite or infinite perspective of its projection into an elsewhere. This does not mean, however, that one should side with absence. Certain theoretical attitudes that have valorized an order of the "signifier" and have projected the order of the "signified" onto an infinitely vanishing line [*ligne de fuite*] have remained, at least in part, caught in the logic of signification to the very extent that they have maintained its vocabulary and concepts. They have nevertheless played their role, in calling our attention to and in precipitating the crisis. But they have remained, at a certain level, in complicity with that thought that today seeks to discredit them. This complicity lies in the thought of *signification as the desire for meaning.*

6

The Project of the Subject

In jest, one might say that in the *desire for meaning* the problem is not meaning but, rather, desire. In other words, if the desire for meaning characterizes that which is completely enclosed in the thought of signification, that which keeps it in the metaphysical *Verstellung*, it is not because this thought concerns itself with *meaning* (this is said without the expectation of being able to say more about "meaning" to those who believe or feign to believe that current thought is only concerned with nonmeaning, nonsense, or trivialities foreign to meaning) but because it posits meaning as an object of desire (and in the end it is on the basis of that position that the determination of meaning as signification is engendered).

The desire for meaning marks in every way the modern subject's access to itself; and this "desire for meaning" is surely not a particular kind of desire but rather qualifies desire as such. From Montaigne or Descartes to Rousseau and Proust, everything begins with a situation of loss or of being lost in which or out of which is born the desire either to recover what has been lost (a desire cast respectively or simultaneously as want, will, need, nostalgia, . . .) or to find what was never present (respectively or simultaneously an identity, a direction, a history, a proximity, a memory). But at the same time, this system of loss and desire reveals, from the outset and by itself, a decisive feature of this meaning: its absence or distance. So much so that desire offers the first meaning of this meaning: it is at a distance, its very presence presents itself in the distance, and that which first *has meaning* is the *tension* toward it. The subject defines itself as the subject of its desire, and this desire is the desire to become a subject (such is the law of the *Verstellung*). In other words, desire is at once the appetite for the signifying fulfillment and the *sign* of the distance of meaning, or, more precisely, the sign of its presence-at-a-distance. The subject enters into the order of signification by beginning to decipher itself and its own desire (or else: itself as desire) as the sign or symptom of its own presence-at-a-distance. In Hegelian terms, the unhappiness of consciousness presents

the meaning of consciousness, and presents it as conscious. (But was is not this logic that, already in Kant, governed the critique of reason on the basis of the absence of an intellectual intuition in human reason?) *Desire*—which becomes with Hegel the ontological qualification of the access to the Self—*is the empty signifier of the distant signified*, or of the distance of meaning. This is how desire orders the reign of signification.

On the one hand, desire is the law of signification. Signification itself is desire; it is the tension of the signifier toward the signified, or else of the sign toward reality. The West in its entirety is preoccupied with the thought of the sign's finality, a thought that is exacerbated in the modern age. The goal of the sign, its *direction* [*sens*], is to lead to or to present meaning, and the goal of the signifier is to present the signified. But the sign, or the signifier in it, is by nature inadequate to its own end; either languages are poorly made (from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries there has perdured the will to construct a "well-made language"), or else language is fraught with metaphoricity. The instrument of signifying adequation or imitation is by definition only capable of an *approximation*; that is, it can only maintain a distance, and keep meaning at a distance. The teleology of signifying presentation is thus bound to the ineffable. The ineffable itself has its signifiers, which are consequently only the signifiers of its distance, and which might be, depending on the case, Science, History, the State, Freedom, Value, Man, or Meaning itself. It is hardly surprising that in these signifiers the meaning of the signifier "god" comes to completion, that is, comes to die.

On the other hand—but on the whole, this is the same operation—desire is itself organized into a system, or at least into a series of signifying practices: the literary enterprise, experimental procedures, historical action, political constitution, artistic invention, psychoanalytic verbalization, logico-mathematical formalization, technological self-management, humanistic valorization, the hermeneutic approach, semiological analysis, and, finally, the philosophical worldview are all, or are all presented as, so many aspects of the same general function of signification. These various aspects may come into conflict and may even contradict one another, they may fail to signify one another (which is certainly not "insignificant" . . .), and yet this does not prevent them from all obeying the same logic: that of significatively *referring back* to the subject that is in the process of signifying itself, that is, to the desiring subject, which, in the end, constitutes the *meaning* of art, of the *polis*, of philosophy, and so on. And still this subject is *present-at-a-distance*, whether because it is posited in the Idea or in Value (Man, Freedom, Science, or Philosophy) or because it is given as the end of a (historical, poetic, or pedagogical) process—a process that by definition "we'll never see the end of," or perhaps even because, in the final analysis, and as if to make sure that we will not see the end of it, this subject is identified with the movement of the process itself (whether it be literary, logico-mathematical, theoretical, technological, psychoanalytical, philosophical, or humanitarian, etc.).

Throughout this gigantic operation, this unique and polymorphic *implementation of meaning*, the marks of desire and the features of signification are infinitely homologous or substitutable. They can be classified under the two general rubrics of lack and project.

Meaning is lacking, and this lack unleashes all the forms or figures of desire: Cartesian impatience and will, Humian frustration, Kantian dissatisfaction, Fichtian activism, Hegelian unhappiness, Nietzschean fever, Kierkegaardian angst, Marxian history, Bergsonian élan, Husserlian intention, et cetera. (This *et cetera* calls for clarification, for the desire for meaning does not simply end with Husserl. But its various figures undoubtedly can no longer produce anything new. On the other hand, and as I will be led to investigate later, something had already begun to suspend this desire, or call it into question, before Husserl, though it would only come to light in another era, briefly designated by the names Benjamin, Heidegger, or Wittgenstein. Hence I allow myself a periodization, which, though not inexact, remains summary.)

In each of these figures, desire is at work with its own power, which is the power of the negative: the division of the subject from itself, the ensuing revelation that its truth, value, and end lie elsewhere, though it *is* itself this elsewhere, one that consequently never ceases to reopen in the subject a gaping hole full of fever and disorder—the fever and disorder of an identification that is condemned in advance to an infinite exhaustion. Montaigne established once and for all, at the threshold of the era of desire, the *exemplum* of this endless task—and this is also why he assigns to philosophy the goal of "teaching us how to die," that is, for him, teaching us to accept the infinite distance between us and our signification (or even better, teaching us that the final signification is the end [*arrêt*] of signification). (The fascinating exception that Spinoza, in many respects, represents in modern thought ultimately and essentially lies in his rejection of Montaigne's formula. According to Spinoza, philosophy is a meditation on life, not death. In a way, Spinoza sought nothing other than a thought of meaning without distance. Hegel, too, in his own way. With them, metaphysics was already touching on the limit of signification). With Montaigne, the goal became *the end*—the end of meaning in the sense of its cessation—which one must learn to will as such. Even though Montaigne had also established the exemplum or matrix of that by which this mortal task is remunerated—the work (the written one, in particular) as a substitute for the meaning and subject that are lacking—this fact would still not prevent, on the

contrary, the widening of the gap between the substitute for presentation and genuine presentation; nor would it prevent the infinite, interminable Work (from romanticism to Mallarmé and Joyce) from eventually drowning in the sea of its own desire. (It was a single movement, no doubt, that exhausted both the work as signification *and* signification as work; we will return to this exhaustion.)

The lack initiates the project; the subject throws itself ahead in the direction of the absent meaning, or more exactly, since that absence prevents a priori a direction from being given, it is the very gesture of throwing oneself ahead that provides the direction, as if by a kind of spontaneity that is an anticipation of meaning. Descartes says so explicitly; the traveler lost in the forest must go straight ahead without trying to choose a direction [*sens*]. Under these conditions, the direction or orientation essentially consists in the pro-tension of desire itself. Desire orients, but it orients above all insofar as it is a desire for orientation. This is why its orientation is, on the one hand, always the same—the accomplishment of signification, the realization of "man"—and, on the other, infinitely varied: it gave rise to all kinds of "meanings of history," as well as all kinds of "aims" at ahistorical, if not antihistorical, values.

In each case, what is at stake is the very meaning [*valeur*] of *orientation*: that which can rule, direct, or even be the norm for the movement of the Occident toward what it has, by essence, lost: daybreak, the light of the true, of the beautiful, of the good, the dawn of meaning. Even if this light must once and for all be declared chiaroscura, fraught with inevitable shadows (this would be the version of a reasonable humanism, brave in the face of disenchantment), its dim Orient is still worthy to lead our steps, rather than abandoning us to darkness. Orientation, along with the thought that considers itself to be both oriented and orienting, proceeds from the void hollowed out by the flight of meaning. This is also why orientation does not always claim to signify and present the object of its aim. It can be content with designating it analogically or metaphorically, indirectly, or provisionally, by means of a sketch that is constantly being reworked. The goal can remain figurative—whether it be called "paradise," "the West Indies," or "the reign of justice and freedom." What matters is not so much that the aim properly signifies the goal, but, rather, that it signifies itself; it signifies the project, and the project as such signifies the truth of the subject. Curiously, the man of humanism can never be where he is, but only in his project and as project. He has to *become* what he is, through education, intention, effort, transformation, progression, anamnesis. This becoming may be accomplished through the succession of generations, or through the individual act of the project and the aim, but never in the present of existence. For the man of humanism, his present and his presentation (his

meaning) cannot coincide. On the contrary, in the project, the subject appropriates the presence-at-a-distance of meaning in the mode of *projection*. Ideas, values, even the idea and value of the subject itself, can only be projected onto the screen of representation since their status or nature is of the order of signification. On this screen, ideals, fantasies, ideas, theories, thoughts, values, and meanings communicate, or perhaps commune, in the essence of projection: *visions* (or *conceptions*) of the World, of Man, of Community, of Right, and so on. Projection is thus the true order of signified meaning, that is, meaning put at a distance by signification and by the desire for it. It is precisely because the subject has a project and projection for its truth that the lack of meaning—or its presence-at-a-distance—is dialectically converted into an abundance of signification (this, moreover, is what defines dialectic: the conversion of meaning's loss into a surplus-value of signification by means of a primitive accumulation in the form of the will to signify). Project and projection are thus by nature inexhaustible.

This is an additional and final confirmation of the thought of the return; the return itself, which refers back to the project and projection, already *signifies* the true because the true is found within the scope of the project. At the risk of shocking, at the risk, even, of seeming to provide ammunition to those who claim to see totalitarian tendencies in the thoughts of crisis (whereas what one calls "totalitarianism" no doubt represents the height of orienting and signifying thought), I will give but one example: since its inauguration, the philosophy of democracy has always represented its Idea as project and projection in a hundred different ways, ranging from Rousseau to Che Guevera, from Kant to Bakounin or to Pannekoek, from Tocqueville to Gandhi or to Arendt. In a hundred different ways, this philosophy has contributed to restoring dignities, to sharing out responsibilities, to reducing violence and to limiting ambitions. But in a hundred different ways, too, the desire for democracy has constantly run up against the infinitude of its own project ("Good for a godlike people," as Rousseau used to say), or constantly indulged itself in the inexhaustible repetition of its projection. Fascism, nazism, and Stalinism, each in its own way, found in the use of this repetition a resource for precipitating their own projections, fantasies of immediacy opposed to indefinite mediation. But their ultimate failure (if it is indeed a failure, and if it is indeed ultimate) did not change the nature of democratic thought. The project of rights and freedom is always content with being a project—and a return of the project—since that is its essence. It is, however, becoming less and less certain everyday—and this, to the very extent that this projection is repeated—that its essence as project, or that its signification, is not becoming more and more harshly confronted by protests arising from the most glaring injustices (wherever poverty

flies in the face of the most modest sense of the term "democracy") as well as by the most concerned or most disillusioned interrogations of the very *meaning* of the political. There is no doubt that all other current political forms stem from more fantastical and dangerous games of signification, and yet this does not allow one to be content with a "democracy" that is imperturbably *signified*. What is the *meaning* of the political when all political significations touch on their own insignificance? This is what one should try to think.

7

Meaning Signified

The thought of signification determines philosophy as the discourse that sustains projection and announces the project; it is the "visionary" discourse par excellence. In this regard, philosophy is what gives meaning by elaborating and presenting significations. A few years ago one could read in the newspaper that we were lacking a great philosopher, one who would be able to impart to us a vision of the world, to sketch out for us its signification and, consequently, to inspire us with the spirit and energy of his project. The lack of a "great philosopher" symbolized the lack of philosophy as that which gives meaning. Insofar as it can be given by an operation of signification, meaning is as present-at-a-distance. Lamenting the absence of a great philosopher amounts to lamenting the absence of a figure (for there must be a major figure, a signifying projection of the will to signification) who would give us back meaning at a distance, re-orient us and cast us toward it again even while making us once again wait for, desire, and project it. (In another sense, lamenting this absence amounted to insinuating that we did not have a thinker worthy of the name, when precisely it has been the work of a certain number of philosophers for the last fifty years to investigate what *thinking* means when signification is exhausted [*à bout*]. They are of various styles and calibers, but what they have in common is that they do not forget philosophy—neither its demands nor what it has exhausted.)

The representation of philosophy as "provider of meaning" is moreover not restricted to philosophies—or to those so-called philosophies—that seek to communicate a full and positive "meaning." It is also suitable for discourses that, in a pessimistic, skeptical, prudent, or lax mode, conclude that meaning is incomplete, weak, relative, or nonsensical. Indeed, even the impossibility of completing a signification, or of completing signification *as such*, even this impossibility that seems to dominate contemporary ideology to the point that it presumably affects it through and through (though in various ways) can quite easily be represented—and in fact does present itself—as a signification,

since, ultimately, incompletion is the law of signification. Resigning oneself to the absence of meaning, or rejoicing before that absence, are "philosophical" or "semiotic" lessons that are as old as the promise or the undertaking of total and definitive meaning. In fact, *all* "philosophical lessons" are as old as the West: optimism and pessimism, skepticism and dogmatism, doubt and certainty, resignation and will, playfulness and seriousness, wisdom and madness, separation and communion, relativism and unanimism, and so on (and everything that might be called a philosophical macro-signification), as well as all their possible combinations or distributions, whether contradictory or insipid. From the perspective of the "lesson," that is, of the proposition (and sometimes, the imposition . . .) of a signification given to existence (and/or to the universe, to history, etc.), the rules of the game along with their variations are so contemporaneous with the beginnings of our culture, and so intimately woven in a network of "ideas," "mentalities" or "attitudes," that it is at once not surprising, and yet disconcerting, to be endlessly told to return to those same teachings (each one, in fact, having had at a given moment its raison d'être and its function). When one is disenchanted with empires and history, one must relearn the meaning of values or of mistrust; when, in turn, one is weary of ideals or suspicion, one must return to one's own projects and vital energy. On this level of our culture, everything takes place as if the contents of those lessons mattered less than the mere fact of hearing them at all, or rather, of hearing them again, of being endlessly "schooled" in and ever "attentive" to any proclamation of signification.

This presentation of philosophy as a discourse that announces, teaches, advises, indeed, even leads by example, is not only dependent on the thought of signification. It itself constitutes a signification conferred upon philosophy—that of being the place where significations are invented and communicated (and, in this sense, a "philosophy" can take on many different forms: religious, moral, political, existential . . .). And, as expected, the signification of philosophy obeys the general rule of signification; the signified is present-at-a-distance, and *philosophy* is never found where one expects it. It is not in the philosopher's book, but neither is it in the ideal, or in life, or in the concept: it is always incomplete, always impossible to complete, always promising both its essence and its existence, so that it finally becomes that very promise, that is, becomes its own incompletion. It is no longer simply a matter here of a "philosophy of value," because philosophy itself is a value and therefore subject to the permanent *Verstellung* of value. This is why there is a constant oscillation between the demand for philosophy and the mistrust or disdain for philosophy, just as there is a constant oscillation between the choice of a "philosophical orientation" and the eclecticism that takes the history of philosophy for a self-service counter for all different kinds of ideas; and this is why there is also a constant oscillation between the choice of a "philosophical orientation" and the call to "great philosophy," it being understood that it is only "philosophy" to the extent that it is "great," and that it is "great" to the extent that it projects the *meaning* of its teachings very far or very high.

Such a signification of philosophy seems to us to have been established for a long time now, for as long in fact as there has been philosophy. One thinks in the philosophical vulgate, or one says in the philosophical *koiné*, that such is indeed the meaning of the word "philosophy" itself. History and legend—the history of a legend, or the legendary history of philosophy—would have this word mean what it in fact meant in Greek (that is, if one does not inquire further into the meaning of the significations that we attribute to the Greek of the seventh century B.C., nor into our possibility of transcribing, that is, of signifying, the semantics at work when our Western semantics was emerging), namely, "the love of wisdom." And the love of wisdom means the distance of wisdom, the desire to tend toward it in the intellectual and moral consciousness of the impossibility of reaching and realizing it *hic et nunc*.

This signification of philosophy has certainly always accompanied philosophy itself. It has certainly always been at least a part of the understanding of philosophy, and of its self-understanding; philosophy, too, has elaborated its own significative legend. (On the other hand, philosophical thought—and I will return to this internal division [*partage*] of philosophy—always rejects the intimidation of legends. In this sense, it does not believe that "love" and "wisdom" exhaust—and *in what sense*?—the *meaning* of "philosophy.") However, the signification in question has only formally emerged as *the* signification of philosophy at a certain moment of philosophical rupture within the history of philosophy. It represents philosophy in the sense of what one might call, with Nietzsche (and with those who, Heidegger being the first, borrowed this usage from him, something that in itself clearly raises philosophical problems), "metaphysics." By freely appealing to this technical term, Nietzsche did not make it designate anything other than the general idea of presence-at-a-distance, the idea of meaning placed in another world (heaven, future, value—but also, the depth of meaning beneath the sign), and, finally, the very idea of signification and the will to signification.

In this respect, "metaphysics" does not designate the effective history of philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche (despite all appearances to the contrary, Nietzsche himself knew this full well). It does not designate the reality of the event or meaning that constituted the questions, works, and struggles of philosophers. Rather, it designates the way in which, from a certain point onward, this history came to understand itself, the way in which philosophy in its history—

that is, in the history of the world as well—was led to make of its own discourse, existence, and signification the object of a new philosophical question. (To forget philosophy is first to forget *this*: at a certain point philosophy put its signification into question; it put itself into question *as* signification, and this putting into question, which should be understood in the strongest sense of "making itself a question," was a necessary stage in its history and not a capricious variation or a pathological crisis.)

In this sense, "metaphysics" is by essence doomed to the unhappiness of desire, that is, to the distance of projection and to the permanent return of the project. It is even twice doomed to this unhappiness.

It is doomed a first time by virtue of the very structure of signification. Meaning is there present-at-a-distance, and if metaphysics claims to be a representation of the world[14] (a representation from which are drawn promises, advice, and donations of meaning), everything occurs a priori according to a disjunction of the "world" and its "representation" or "view." A world of which a view must be given is a world that is not present by itself, that does not give itself of itself, or even, that is not the place of our existence. Indeed, the "world" of metaphysics is opaque, chaotic, or illusory. It takes on form and meaning in the subject's representation. But, as such, the subject of representation (the subject of meaning-the-world [*vouloir-dire-le-monde*]) is not *of* this world, and neither is its representation. The *subject* signifies the autonomous, self-subsisting, and self-relating activity *of representation insofar as it is not the world*, and insofar as it signifies at a distance. In this way, the world of a worldview is always a *viewed* world: the object of a certain vision, referred back to the latter's optic system, to its orientation, and to the distance at which the subject stands in order to see the object. Neither the spiritual elevation of this vision, nor its power of comprehension or explication, nor its ethical demands, nor its aesthetic preoccupation, can change anything in this metaphysical economy of representation.

Thus, when we are asked to return some humane, rational, or reasonable conception of the world—notwithstanding that this implies a conception of man, of reason, and, consequently, an infinite series of conceptions—we are asked to do nothing other than to change our *perspective* [*optique*]. Returns are always returns of optical systems, and of the objects or the perspectives on objects that they bring to view, projected on their screens—but never the return, which would no longer be a return, of the thing itself. That such is nevertheless the problem, at least in a preliminary and simple formulation, is attested to by Nietzsche's laughter as well as by Marx's anger or Husserl's impatience in his injunction "Back to the things themselves!" If each has remained in his own way dependent on the metaphysics of representation, each has nevertheless indicated the moment at which, so to speak, it came up against itself. On the contrary, the thoughts of the return to "meaning" are always thoughts of vision, adaptation, correction, or clarification; they are thoughts of the signification of meaning, never thoughts of the meaning of signification, although it is precisely *this* meaning that is at stake when it is a matter of "things," of their "existence," and our "experience" of them. Above all, they are never thoughts of this: that the will to vision, conception, and signification has been an epoch in the Western experience of the world, an epoch as necessary as any other, though this epoch, in a way no less necessary, has come to a close in its own desire for vision.

"Metaphysics" is doomed a second time to the unhappiness of desire in that its signifying message can reach practically none of its addressees. To the distance of meaning corresponds the distance of those who are supposed to receive or recognize it. The philosopher speaks for man, for the human community, not only by virtue of a pedagogical, therapeutic, moral, or political demand, but also in accordance with the principle of signification itself; the signified must be signifiable for anyone who has the signifier at his (at least virtual) disposal, lest it not *make sense* (but metaphysics defines man through this availability, that is, as the speaking animal). And yet nothing has been as well known since the very beginning of philosophy (and not only for the last 50 or 150 years, as those who think in terms of "crisis" like to claim) as the incomprehensibility of philosophical discourse, its esotericism, indeed its hermeticism, or even its "elitism" (to denounce this, the thoughts of the return surround themselves with "social sciences" that dissect the psycho-sociological determinations of the thoughts of crisis, or in crisis, with their morbid or snobbish taste for the sacred obscurity of discourse, etc.). Consequently, the question is inevitable: if philosophy gives meaning, to whom does it give it?

As long as it gives it only to philosophers capable of reading philosophy books, it is a lost cause (and doubly lost, for it is well known that philosophers compete among each other more than they learn from one another . . .). In order for philosophy, on the contrary, to be able to communicate that meaning to all men, it would have two options: it would have to reform its entire discourse, "popularize" it (as was said in Kant's time, and as Kant himself feigned to wish for, while at the same time declaring himself incapable of it), to translate it into ordinary language. This would suppose a complete homology of signification—in meaning and structure—between the two languages. If "translation" inevitably "impoverishes" the philosopher's thought—as metaphysics has always claimed—it is because this homology does not exist. But if it does not exist, it is because something other than signification (if only the possibility of putting it into question) is at stake in philosophical discourse—and metaphysics

is silent about this. Or else, it remains for the philosopher to declare that it is necessary to *aim* at the communication of meaning over a relatively long period of time. This communication itself thus becomes a *value* or an *Idea*, the Idea of the communication of the Idea. . . . One may nonetheless wish to realize this Idea (thereby opening the era of the realization of all Ideas). It then becomes necessary to indicate and effectuate the necessary practical mediations: the reform or revolution of the *polis*, of customs or of language. But if these mediations take effect only little by little, they deprive of meaning all the generations that have not yet reached the historical, or transhistorical moment of communication. If, on the contrary, they take effect instantaneously, offering in one fell swoop the completed presence of Meaning, this is called the Terror. In each case, signified meaning remains present at a metaphysical distance, and the addressees of its message remain inaccessible to it.

For these reasons, sometimes unavowed, sometimes half-recognized as inevitable inconveniences of the ideal character of meaning (of its signified or "*meaningful*" character), the thoughts of the return most often settle for a middle course. They practice a weakened philosophical discourse, make compromises with the accessible languages of advice or exhortation, and divert philosophical texts from their complexities and difficulties—which is to say, by keeping them from being thought through, they *make them signify* by any means (I here ignore the cases in which they are simply dishonest). Finally, they practice the *Verstellung* of discourse as much as that of its object.

8

The Exhaustion of Signification

Now, "metaphysics" does not exhaust the *meaning* of philosophy. That is, to suggest a first approximation of another meaning of the word "meaning," it does not exhaust philosophy's destination.

(It is difficult to be completely satisfied with this term, which Kant used philosophically. In Kant's work and beyond, this term remains at least partly bound to a systematics of signification. But it also indicates, in Kant's work, the movement of what is sent, thrown in a direction or into a meaning whose signification cannot be produced, and for which, perhaps, *there is no signification to be produced.* For Kant and beyond, it is man's and philosophy's privilege to have, indeed to *be*, a destination. I will not attempt here a further elaboration of the theme of destination as such. It will function as a simple index.)

Metaphysics does not exhaust the meaning of philosophy, but it does exhaust its signification (or, more precisely, "metaphysics" has designated the exhaustion of signification). It represents the total accomplishment of what one might call the signification of signification, or the presentation—that is, the representation—of meaning present-at-a-distance. This is indeed an accomplishment, a fulfillment in plenitude. From Plato to Hegel—and then, though in a different way, insistently right up to us and undoubtedly even beyond—philosophy simultaneously repeats and reflects, develops and closes the circle of the appropriation of meaning. In its completed form, this circle is as follows: the subject of signification recognizes itself as the ultimate signified. This amounts to saying that the process or structure of signification recognizes and signifies itself as its own subject. Thus, the *meaning* of the *subject* (and this is the only one there is) is situated *at once* in a constant and infinite presence-at-a-distance *and* in a perfect ontological identity with the subject whose meaning it constitutes; the uniformly evasive presence of meaning constitutes its substantiality and subjectivity. This might be called, by way of a metaphor drawn from

mechanics, the *inertia of signification*. It may bear the names: History, Consciousness, the State or Value, Right, Force, Will, Work, Freedom, Art, Man. . . ; like the dead incarnate God in the mad Nietzsche, it bears "all the names in history" because it accomplishes all significations in the infinite subjectivity and inertia of signification.

This is why the accomplishment of metaphysics constitutes as a result its exhaustion, which is designated by the death of God. The death of God—about which it must be repeated that it has taken place, or that it is still taking place today, and that anything "human" or "divine," if there is still any *meaning* in speaking this way, can only open up beyond that death, which is, like death itself, without resurrection—the death of God is the advent and the event of metaphysics in its completion, that is, in its exhaustion. Signification becomes empty precisely because it completes [*boucle*] its subjective process; its only *meaning* is itself, in its inertia, that is, at once its own desire, its own projection, its own representational distance, and its own representation of distance, insofar as this distance constitutes its essential property: the ideality, transcendence, or future of meaning.

Nietzsche knew, to the point of madness (and perhaps Hegel before him), about the despondency and aberration that takes hold of a reflection that, in all its projections (Truth, Goodness, Value, Humanity . . .), reflects only the empty glimmer of projection itself. This is an event from which it is not possible to return without an upheaval so deep that it prevents all return to what preceded it. Nietzsche's age is the age when all the projects of Humanity come to recognize themselves under the heading of "nihilism," that is, as doomed from the outset and by essence to the exhaustion of their signification.

The fact that this event has happened, and that it is still under way (which does not mean that it is alone on this path . . .), the fact that *history*, whose "meaning" has itself been suppressed, has at least this deep scansion, this caesura or syncope of signification—and that this inevitably delivers us over to *another history* which opens up before us beyond signification, a history whose meaning could never consist in a return of "meaning" (no more than Plato could make the meaning of Egypt return, or Christianity could make the meaning of Socratism return, or industrial society could make the meaning of the Christian community return), the fact that this happened to our time as its destination—this is what the thoughts of the return make themselves incapable of recognizing. Without such a recognition, it is strictly impossible to try to think one's time, or for one's time. For the reality of this time lies entirely in the caesura that everywhere inscribes the open rift of signification: in world war, extermination, exploitation, hunger, technology, art, literature, philosophy. . . .

This event is so hard to ignore that many feel obliged to admit that something has indeed happened in our recent history, something that they have proclaimed "the end of ideologies" (in defiance, we should note in passing, of the whole history of the philosophical significations of this word). One would thus have oneself believe that our era has buried a certain number of intellectual excrescences, of gratuitous or maniacal speculations, or simply of philosophical deviations or fixations that arose because of a kind of temporary derangement of good sense and an obscuring of its lights (that nineteenth century that it is fashionable to regard with disdain . . .). At times one may claim to regret—though only a bit—the loss of a certain generosity that sometimes gave color to these "ideologies," but on the whole one gladly notes the exhaustion of the fantasies of thought. In truth, this recognition is only a hypocritical half-recognition; one thereby avoids recognizing that the entire structure of our philosophical discourse has come to measure itself against its own exhaustion: the will to signify finds itself confronted with the bare projection of signification. The "end of ideologies" is an underhanded notion by means of which one tries to select from what history has judged—that is, from that which has reached the maturity and gained the power necessary to judge itself—in order to leave itself a way out for a return of what would not have been "ideological." In this regard, the idea of the "end of ideologies" is an ideological idea par excellence, in the sense that it wants to know nothing of its presuppositions. But at the same time, it represents a kind of admission, the embarrassed, roundabout admission that something has happened.

9

The West at Its Ends

What actually happened [*arrivé*] did not happen in a day.[15] And just as this occurrence [*arrivée*] is not yet over, so it did not begin in 1789 or 1830. It began with the beginning of metaphysics, the slow and difficult recognition of which was revealed to us by Nietzsche, Marx, Kierkegaard, Husserl, Freud, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Benjamin, and Heidegger; the West was destined to designate its destiny as "metaphysics."

"Metaphysics" is not a deviant part of philosophy (as suggested when one concedes that it is probably necessary to criticize certain aspects of metaphysical "dogmatism," "idealism" or "rationalism"). Insofar as metaphysics is that which philosophy reveals itself as in its completion, it is indeed philosophy *itself.* Philosophy, that is, the occidental mode of thought, or else its disoriented—and for that reason *signifying*—mode, was initiated from the outset as metaphysics, while initiating by this very gesture the possibility and potential of manifesting itself as different from metaphysics, or manifesting an essential difference within metaphysics itself: the difference in meaning, or the difference *of meaning*, which is, in fact, the sole object of what I am attempting to explain here.

There is no sense—neither direction nor signification—in wanting to "go back" to before metaphysics. There is nothing "before" the West, if the very idea of the "before" is already caught in a network of metaphysical significations (the prior, the causal, the archaic, the primitive, the originary, the native, the repressed, the forgotten, the recalled, etc.). And yet, the West has taken place; it has happened and there was not nothing when and where it happened; but its occurrence consisted in signifying that the "before" was lost, that it was this lost meaning (Egypt, the gods, Homer, Solon . . .) and that the process of signification was initiated on the basis of this loss (or else, which amounts to the same thing, that meaning remained mute, unarticulated, not yet signified and presented). What has happened is the will to give (back) meaning, or some kind of meaning: *logos*, the "*-logy*" in general.

This occurrence [*arrivée*] has reached [*arrivée*] its ends. To reach its ends or

to be capable of coming to its own end is perhaps the most distinctive feature of *logos*, the surprising mark of its own power. It has the capacity to encounter itself at its own limit (in the end, perhaps I am speaking here only of this encounter), and, consequently, to encounter there that which exceeds its signification. The *logos* that has reached its ends has enclosed the general space of signification by completing the history of nihilism. Yet this very accomplishment is itself in no way nihilistic. Nihilism means that signification infinitely escapes itself, but the accomplishment as such accomplishes the meaning of signification, the entire signifiable meaning of *logos*. Without this accomplishment, the Occident would not have taken place, and the Occident is not an unfortunate accident—even though we are not in a position to understand its "necessity" because our idea of necessity, just like our idea of freedom, is bound to signification. If we seek to grasp the signification of the West, we run up against the exhaustion of signification accomplished by the West. We can, however, encounter at an unsignifiable limit of signification something that appears as the reality and necessity of this accomplishment (without having the metaphysical sense of the real or the necessary); we can encounter *the fact that* this happens to us, and we can gather or welcome *the fact that*, in the impact, it imparts to us not a signification but a quantity of movement: the élan, departure, or sending of a destination. And this destination presents itself in at least the following way: the West in its accomplishment asks us neither to revive its significations nor to resign ourselves to their annulment, but rather to understand that *from now on the demand for meaning has to go through the exhaustion of significations.*

This exhaustion does not imply that all significations will have been null and void. They had their *meaning*; they cleared the way for this destination that leads beyond them without itself, perhaps, leading toward some other signification. Christianity and empiricism have led us to ourselves, they have destined us, just as democracy, axiomatics, the critique of reason, human rights, art for art's sake, and the total man, and so on have. But in the end, the system and history of signification have come to signify their own annulment, turning upon themselves only to reveal the infinite withdrawal [*éloignement*] of signified meaning, that is, of a meaning that is immobile, inaccessible, or else infinitely evasive, thus slowly becoming, as if before our very eyes, insignificant.

There was this end—or at least, this end began to happen—because the will to signification arose against the background of a loss of meaning that had always already happened, and because the sighting [*visée*] or fore-sight [*prévision*] of the final meaning was none other than the replica of this infinite devouring. When Kant declared that "the philosopher is to be found nowhere, while the idea of his legislation is to be found everywhere in all of human reason"—which, in the final analysis, says about the philosopher nothing essentially different from what Plato was saying—he did not make a resigned observation (despite a tone of resignation at the impossibility of meeting the Master of Meaning . . .); rather, he exposed the very law of this metaphysical "legislation": namely, that its proper and ultimate signification only ever presents itself from a distance. This law is so because the idea of philosophy that is here implied is precisely the idea of willing signification (the "philosopher" need no longer desire it). It is the Idea of philosophy as a search for meaning, which it always reaches in fragments and symbols, which it communicates without being able to go beyond discussion, and which, consequently, it must always still seek and discuss anew (we recognize here the most commonly accepted image of "philosophy," the reasonable image that is also proposed by the thoughts of the return). It is the end-lessness of the will-to-signify (or present or realize) *the* philosopher *man* that constitutes the *end*, in all senses of the word, of philosophy as metaphysics. Humanism is henceforth that which makes man flee. In the end, he finds himself dumbfounded, faltering before the violent bedazzlement or the naked horror of impossible Meaning—and real man is sacrificed to the superhumanity or to the inhumanity of the Subject of this ultimate signification, which can take on all sorts of guises: the Philosopher, the People, the Race, Science, Technology, the Church, History, Art. . . .

The negligence or thoughtlessness of the thoughts of the return consist in wanting to distinguish and select within metaphysics what, on the one hand, was supposed to have been an excessive and dogmatic imposition of a totalitarian signification (Hegel is most often taken as the model for this, even though it is precisely in his work that the passage to the limit of the system decidedly opens onto the end of signification) and what, on the other hand, would be a critical demand for the distance one should keep with regard to the absolute; Kant is then the model and the panacea, which means that his thought is reduced to this: "one must signify, *but not too much.*". . . . This paltry lesson is a return to Candide rather than to Kant. But above all, its pitiful content alters nothing; in the will to signification, the presence of Meaning and its distance fall back on one another, endlessly exchanging their properties, and if the Subject wants to gain a Meaning, Meaning wants to feed on the desire of a subject. This is a double will that closes metaphysics upon itself, and that it is important to recognize as such. That is, it is important to recognize our destination through all that the West has signified and brought about, through the worst as well as through the best; it is not that there is nothing to be chosen, on the contrary (and this is precisely what allows one to decide between the "worse" and the "better"), but it must be understood how the worst was and remains possible in the name of Meaning, and how the best remains hanging on the fleeing of Meaning, in the same metaphysical closure.

10

Being Exposed to the Limit

Need we specify that this "closure" does not mean that metaphysics is closed like an abandoned building? Rather, it is wide open, opened by its very completion and by the power that makes the logos confront by itself its end and limit. Metaphysics in every way calls for interrogation, inquiry, and doubt, in order to bring to light the play [*jeu*] and the stakes [*enjeu*] of the destination to which it has destined us. We have not gotten out of philosophy; we are in it the moment when, and the move by which, the signifying will knows itself as such, knows itself to be insignificant, and by itself releases a new demand for "meaning."

This demand is new precisely insofar as it now frees itself from signification, insofar as it expressly "signifies" the limit of signification, and consequently, already imposes, within the discourse of signification, the indeterminate but constant task of passing to the limit of this discourse, of diverting, laying bare, or forcing its possibilities (such are today the broadest stakes of all that exposes philosophy to its limits: non-Western realities, the autonomy of techno-structures, arts and literatures that break down the use of signs, but also, and still, philosophy itself turned back on its limit, sometimes to the point of unrecognition . . .). But this demand, right up to and including the most visibly modern or "postmodern" consequences, is not as unprecedented as one might believe. It has arisen and emerged from within philosophy for as long as there has been philosophy. Since that time, and throughout the history of the West, the system of signification comes together and comes to a completion *and*, just as necessarily, just as inevitably, comes apart and exceeds itself. This copula, this *and*—which functions at the same time as a caesura—contains the most proper articulation, decision, and power of philosophy: its exposure to the limit of meaning. Neither Plato, nor Descartes, nor Kant ever proposed a "worldview" without at the same time attempting to indicate the limit of all worldviews. Their discourses in one way or another always take the responsibility for a closure of signification, for the payment of an infinite debt to

Meaning, *and* for the opening of a breach or an excess, the abandonment of the debt and its economy. For that matter, it is in this, and in this alone, that one recognizes "great" philosophies; *they are never simply worldviews*, they are never simply signifying messages. And it is also to this that we owe their aporias or enigmas, and along with them, the real, effective *history* of philosophy: Plato's Good or Love, Descartes's evidence, Spinoza's joy, Kant's schematism, Hegel's logic, Marx's praxis, and so on.

In one sense, we find here a constant renewal, but this is precisely why it is futile to call for the "return." The West always returns within the West, it always returns to its limit. But this is how it accomplishes itself and how, by bringing to light the limit as such, by manifesting its repetition, it achieves its ends. The planetary, and now interplanetary, reality exposes this to us every day. Every day it exposes to us the fact that we are a little more exposed to the limit. To philosophize is not to reactivate the signs and significations that are in the process of being consumed in this exposure; it is, rather, to think the exposure itself.

Philosophy has no doubt *defined* itself from its inception as the desire or the will to signify, but it has also *determined* itself from its inception according to the demand of a meaning that is in excess of signification. It destines itself, and it destines us, to encounter this demand that we expose ourselves to it. By acomplishing and exhausting the system of signification, it accomplishes itself, exhausts itself, *and* destines itself always more rigorously to this encounter. To ignore this is to forget philosophy.

Of course, this means that when this accomplishment will have completed its history (if there is any sense in speaking this way: it is perhaps not a matter of history and of the future—and yet it happens . . .), when we "are" at the end of exhaustion—to the point of no longer being able to recognize it as such, for we then "will be" elsewhere, and we will not know it anymore than the first Westerners knew that they had already initiated the West (this is why it may well be that we are already elsewhere, it may well be that it does not cease to happen), then, at that moment, "the demand for another meaning" and "another demand for meaning" *themselves no longer have any meaning.* This is indeed why we do not have to signify a "future," but, rather, have to make ourselves available for the thought of our time—and, to this extent, we are not going toward a future whose meaning we would project but are instead making ourselves present to what never fails to happen, to what is always to come and does not come from signification. This task is always a philosophical one. It does not exceed the present time of philosophy, even when it seems to divide philosophy from itself and to call for "another" thought. The other thought presents itself in the very present of the exhaustion; it recalls this time to itself.

11

The Simple Truth

The reality of our time, the actuality and necessity of our present, is to present the limit as such. It is, as it were, to bring signification to its limit. *Representation* has *presented* itself as such. It is not another presence, be it immediate, practical, or living, that has presented itself in opposition to representation or in its place, for when such a presentation has been attempted (one might give the example of Feuerbach, or of a certain modern idea of Myth, or else of some invocation of Existence), it is merely one more signification claiming to replace another that is reputed to be illusory, impotent, or obsolete. Yet it is not immaterial that a hundred different ways of reclaiming immediacy, life, existence, practice, the world, experience, the truth of appearances, of the body, of the work of art, of the event, as well as discontinuity, the now, obscurity, and heterogeneity have all converged upon the coming of a moment that is all the more *historic* for having punctuated our history by suspending its signification. These claims could have themselves, in turn, joined in the game of signification—and not without a certain risk—by opposing countervalues to values, and yet they nonetheless tended, as toward their own end, toward a presentation of representation as such.

(A lot has been said about a moment in this history—May 1968—when there was, at least in part, a sort of fleeting *acting out*[16] of this moment or movement. Much fun has been made of this, for one often makes fun of what one is incapable of understanding. But its truth was simply this: one presented—sometimes candidly—representation [political, social, academic, spectacular, artistic]; one demonstrated its closure; one said—sometimes naively—one's goodbyes to signification. For a moment, the joyous cry of "let imagination rule," despite its postromantic pathos, had the meaning, the fragment or spark of meaning, of a passage to the limit of signification.)

What was a *happening*[17] in 1968 is still happening to us, contrary to what the doctors or guardians of the (in)significant order believe, who see in this a mere crisis that has already passed. Rarely, no doubt, since the end of Rome,

has a civilization or a culture experienced to such an extent the *inclinatio* toward the last resources of its significations, as much in the relation of the West to itself as in its relations with the "Third World" and the "Fourth World." It is indeed a *crisis* (of which the thoughts of the return are a symptom)—it is *our* crisis, the crisis of our actual history, in that it determines and judges the accomplishment of metaphysics as the will-to-signify.

In and by the crisis, philosophy is judged, and therefore led to determine itself. (In this sense, there is indeed a repetition of something like the Kantian *critique*, but the givens are different; the task is not to clarify the schematism but to bring it to light as the limit, which it represents, of the thought of signification). This determination does not call for a recovery of a good and healthy philosophy (one that would be nondogmatic, critical, relative, etc.) against a bad and morbid philosophy. But philosophy is led before that which divides it from itself: Meaning's presence-at-a-distance. This point of division is thus the point of its identity. It is defined by the intersection, if you will, of presence and distance. One can always think of the dialectical sublation [*relève*] of the point; its null identity can engender the infinite, hyperbolic function of an asymptotic approximation of signification. But it is the very meaning of such a function that philosophy henceforth determines as its nihilism: a movement toward presence through distance, *and* the engendering of distance as the truth of presence. We must then open up, for this point, the possibility of another movement whose style [*allure*] might perhaps be similar to the preceding one, but which, instead of mediating presence and distance by way of one another, would sweep away the entire system of this mediation, severing it from its aim and allowing another function or figure of philosophy to be traced out.

This is what takes place. In the crisis, signification is swept away. In our most recent history, perhaps three names are the principal witnesses to what has happened: Benjamin, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein (I understand that these names could serve both as the thoughts that they sign and as a kind of signal for the entire network of names they entail: Nietzsche and Marx, Bataille and Proust, Hölderlin and Baudelaire, Apollinaire and Joyce, Frege and Einstein, Malevitch and Weber, and many others). I do not intend to examine these three thinkers, nor their differences—sometimes great—nor the relations between their ways of thinking. I simply wish to indicate their essential and common testimony, which neither suppresses nor transcends their sharply contrasted singularities, which inscribes them in one and the same historical necessity, and inscribes us in turn in the necessity to follow. The most direct expression of this testimony might be found in this saying of Benjamin's: "*truth is the death of intention.*"

Truth is not of the order of intention, of the aim that seeks to uncover,

reconstitute, or constitute a signification. It is not of the order of the project, of desire or of the will to meaning. On the contrary, it puts an end to them. It puts an end to presence-at-a-distance, and to the reign of its presentation. But as a result, it makes another meaning of presentation, or at least of presence, emerge. It is no longer a question of calibrating an intentionality [*visée*] but of letting the thing present itself "in truth." In a sense, this truth is nothing other than what metaphysical truth *wants* to be, but without this very will.[18] As we saw, for philosophy represented as metaphysics, truth *wants (itself) to be* presentable, and this will already constitutes the essence of its presentation—which is its signification. In this logic, "presentability" precedes and, in short, governs presentation. Truth—true *meaning*—requires its own conditions of possibility and production. The appropriation and implementation of these conditions define the subjectivity, whether transcendent or operative, by and for which there is signification. What, on the contrary, Benjamin's saying testifies to is, in sum, the fact that truth is freed from these conditions; the sovereignty of what was desired—the splendor of the true, its necessity, its generosity—rises beyond this desire, having no further relations with it. That which is true is not a correspondance between the presentable and its presentation, which will always keep what is presented at a representational distance; rather, it is the bursting forth of a presence. This presence is thus no longer defined as a (re)presentation of the presentable, no more than of the unpresentable (and we know that for metaphysics both are ultimately presentable in signification, and that the unpresentability of Truth in itself even constitutes in the end the condition of possibility of its presentation—at a distance). It is defined as the coming into presence of a presence; something, which by itself is neither presentable nor unpresentable, which neither offers itself to nor evades signs, comes to presence, that is to say, comes to itself and to us in the same movement. One might say that truth is a *simple* presentation, and the simple welcoming of this presence. Whether the latter be what Benjamin in his idiom calls "ideas," or whether it consists, as in Heidegger, in the unconcealment of being as it conceals itself, or whether it offers the Wittgensteinian multiplicity of language games, what is important here—and this is what *makes history*, what *presents* our history to us—is that it be presence before being signification.

Of course, it is not a question of putting the thing in place of the sign (an old obsessive fear of metaphysics, which is but another side of its desire). For each of these witnesses, and here again, despite their extreme differences, presentation is thought in an essential correlation with language. This correlation is not signification, for the latter, precisely insofar as it signifies, keeps presence at a distance. To think this correlation, or perhaps better yet, this co-belonging of language and presence, that is, in the end, to think another meaning of

meaning, demands that one put back into question an entire understanding of language. This is the historical necessity of the exhaustion of signification that raised the question of language as an unprecedented and fundamental question. The thoughts of the return would not mind going back to before this question, in which they see only the rhetorical rash of a reflection that is just as much divorced from reality as it is from values. They don't want to know anything about the fact that the problems of language could appear minor or secondary—at least if one simplifies matters by forgetting the actual place they occupied from the very dawn of philosophy . . .—only as long as language was understood as a tool of signification. When this is no longer the case, language offers itself in a co-belonging with presence that sets thought a new task. It is not a matter of claiming that it itself becomes the sole reality; this would still be to posit it in terms of signification, as the exclusive referent of the signifying functioning. (Isn't it ultimately metaphysics that always ends up, through a muted and constant nominalism, positing language in this way? Even the Nameless is but a name, one that allows the completion of the whole of signification by leaving all things at a meaning's distance.) But it is a matter now of inquiring what presentation of the thing would not be an *end* of language, and what linguistic presentation would not be an instrument for the signification of things (or of language itself). It is a matter of questioning truth as something of the thing in language, and as something of language in the thing—that is, also, something that withdraws from the thing, and something that withdraws from language. But this withdrawal does not put anything at a distance, it lets presentation be [*laisse faire*]. When something presents itself, nothing disappears; it is rather presence that withdraws into itself.

When you introduce yourself [*te présentes*], when you name yourself, this has no signification; it is not a concept joined to an intuition; there is neither distance nor intimacy; it is not a representation, nor is it sheer indetermination, since you stand out from both the world and significations. What happens there, in a sense, does not take place as long as it is not repeated and does not enter into an ensemble of significative relations. It does not take place because it is first of all the presentation of a place: that of your presence and your nomination. It is a very simple truth, even a very humble one. It in no way replaces all other "truths," but these truths are worth no more than their significations if there is not this simple truth. Our era is a testimony to the fact that this truth—which for the moment probably does not *mean* much—demands to be thought.

12

We Are Meaning

Since I am speaking the discourse of signification—for there is no other, and it is not a question of replacing it but of exposing oneself to its limits—I will be asked: what, however, does presentation signify? I will not elude the question by answering that presentation has no meaning—and this has never been the answer of those whose testimony I use. "Presentation": I employ this word here (whose every signification undoubtedly conceals a trap or an impasse for the use I make of it) in order to go elsewhere, toward other words. If I choose it this time because of certain philosophical privileges it has or had, it is not in order to give it a new meaning, *at least not in this sense*; it is, rather, in order to write it here in a way that would be not simply the communication of a meaning but the exposition of a thing, and a kind of call, or wink, a sort of erasure or musical notation, like a sketch or a discharge of energy; there is nothing precise signified here (though one can, of course, reduce it all to perfectly clear translations), and all this signifies that which borders the meaning of significations in all discourse, and which is perhaps a "presentation" of discourse and of words, of you to me, of one to another, that is irreducible to "meaning" and yet is always present on its borders. I might attempt to say that this *meaning* takes place *between us* and not between signifier, signified, and referent. But this "between us" would not be exhausted by the codes of "*signifiance*," by those of the pragmatics of enunciation, or the psychosociology of communication; rather, it would be a question—but here again, how is this word to be understood?—of a *politics* of philosophy, of the choices and decisions that do or do not engage us (in certain ways) in the exchange or in the sharing out of these words and discourses, whose stakes are by nature public, communitarian, indeed, civic. One might also say—and this time, it would instead resemble a *pathetics*, or "logic of emotions"—that out of the word "presentation" itself, or else out of the word "truth," something must come to present itself that traces the limit of all its meanings, and yet still makes you hear *something* else. For you [*toi*], for all of you [*vous*], it will present itself perhaps

only in other texts, with other words: it is a matter of style or tone, of the communication of idioms, of rules that either are or are not common, that are already established or that are to be invented; it is a matter of how the words touch us with the edges of their meanings. Whether it be political or pathetic or both, philosophical work is not a combinatory network of significations; it builds concepts and links reasons only in order to make possible the movement that carries itself or lets itself be carried away to the limits of signification, where there occurs, always unpredictable and free, always new like history itself, that "existence in truth of the thing known" which Plato considered the last degree of knowledge. What I am attempting to "signify" here is nothing more than this: *meaning* at the limit of signification.

This would first mean, at least, that such a *meaning* does not consist in a new interpretation of the system of signification. Nor does it consist in an interpretation of signification itself as interpretation, for *interpretation* belongs entirely to the system. Ultimately, interpretation is even the most advanced name of signification. This name clearly and openly designates the irreducible distance of meaning in the metaphysical order. Interpretation is the master-word of the West—and it is also the master-word of its disenchantment and exhaustion. The reactive thoughts do not miss an opportunity to take issue with the Nietzschean theme so much in fashion some time ago (which has an earlier origin in Montaigne): "there are only interpretations of interpretations." But this is to refuse to understand that this phrase, in the final analysis, does not mean that there are no realities or facts other than those of interpretation. It means that the signified "reality" or the signified "fact" is caught in the circle and the distance of signification, so long as meaning is thought according to the order of signification. Specifically, it means that appealing to "facts" as opposed to "interpretations" is already caught in interpretation, so long as one has not thought the presentation of a fact at the limit of signification. For Nietzsche, there were indeed *facts*, and one of these was the fact that the metaphysics of language is condemned to an infinite chain of interpretations.

Hermeneutics is the name of a general thought of interpretation (more widespread in the Anglo-Saxon countries than in France) that constitutes, on the one hand, a recognition of the closure of signification, and, on the other, despite everything, the denial of it (forming a kind of variant, often more generous and acute, of the thoughts of value and humanism). To consider meaning as a historical process, and this process in turn as a continual deciphering (always renewed and revived) of always unstable or incomplete significations, is, in sum, already to signify a kind of asymptotic exhaustion of signification and to indicate that *meaning* (the meaning of the process itself, and the meaning of the hermeneutical move) lies elsewhere. But it is also to hold this meaning—

the infinite source or renewal of meaning—at a distance that is itself always renewed; and it is also to propose, in the logic of this distance, a view of the world, of history, and of the subject of meaning. The deep structure of signification is preserved.

There is, however, at the finest point, as it were, of hermeneutical thought—a point so fine that this very thought often forgets it, even though it leads to it and even arrives at it—something that challenges or pierces interpretation from within. This is revealed particularly in the "interpretation" of the "signification" of the Greek word *hermeneuein* proposed by Heidegger, who, offering its oldest meaning as its newest, understood it as the meaning of the transmission of a message, of the announcement of news and of its forwarding by a carrier. The messenger is not the signification of the message, nor is he its interpreter; he does not give it any meaning and he does not give its meaning—although, in another *sense*, the messenger's bearing, his style and his own relation to the content of the message (which he may not know, or understand) may come to accompany, even contaminate, its signification, affecting the signified on its borders, as it were, by the modalities of its presentation. Such would be the first meaning [*valeur*] of "presentation": philosophy does not make meaning and does not confer significations (or at least this is not an activity that is more proper to it than to other discourses); rather, it presents meaning, and it presents it because the *meaning of meaning*, before all signification, is, first of all, to be presented, to present itself. The "message"—a term that has long connoted the idea of a signification so rich with reasons and projects that the entire modern interrogation of the literary function has relied upon it—is a signification *with an address*, that is, a destination and a presentation.

(This limit of hermeneutics drawn out by Heidegger certainly has something essential in common with the Benjaminian idea of translation as well as with the Wittgensteinian theme of showing as opposed to explaining.)

This first of all means that *meaning*—understood as presentation or as coming into presence—preexists signification and exceeds it. The truth, that truth with which we are unavoidably confronted and that our history presents to us, is not that meaning takes place within signification and through it, but that *meaning is on the contrary the element in which there can be* significations, interpretations, representations. It is not language, nor the *logos* in general, that makes meaning, but the opposite. Meaning in this sense is not *a* meaning; it is not a signification, whether determinate or indeterminate, completed or still in progress, already present or yet to be won. Meaning is the possibility of significations; it is the system of their presentation and the limit of their meanings. It is with *this*, today, that thought finds itself inevitably confronted—and it is to *this*, precisely, that one cannot return; for bygone history contains for

us only significations. That which, on the other hand, is of the order of meaning is the fact that history took place [*se soit passée*] and that it has passed [*soit passée*]; this means, for instance, that it presents itself to us as this gigantic Western trajectory of signification that has come to rest on and expose itself to its limit.

The semiotician, by speaking for example of *signifiance* or "semiogenesis," agrees with the philosopher at least in this: the element of meaning is given to us; we are posited, placed, or thrown into it as into our ownmost possibility, one that distinguishes the idea of a significant world *and the fact* of this world from any other, since, in this case, such a fact is strictly contemporaneous with that idea, that is, since the element of meaning is a reality that is undiscernibly and simultaneously empirical and transcendental, material and ideational, physical and spiritual—an unprecedented kind of "fact of reason" that would manifest simultaneously the bare outline of a logic and the thickness of a flesh. A significant world is a world offered to understanding, explanation, or interpretation before having any signification. Ours is a world that is presented as a world of meaning before and beyond any constituted meaning—and, for example, before and beyond the meanings of the word "world" as well as the word "man." This presentation of its meaning, or in meaning, this *elementarity of meaning*, occupies, as it were, the place of the schematism. But, as opposed to the schematism, it does not constitute an operation, nor a "hidden art"; it is not the condition of the possibility or of the production of significations. If it is our ownmost possibility, it is in the sense that we are "capable of meaning"—and capable of it unconditionally. The elementarity of meaning is thus not a primitive origin of signification. It is not made up of primitive elements of signification, just as signifying words, as Plato already noted, are not made up of signifying phonemes. There is no meaningful provenance of meaning—nor is there a meaningless provenance, for this would still presuppose meaning. Quite simply, *there is no provenance of meaning*: it presents itself, and that is all. This is why, if meaning is an element more deeply buried than any logic of elements could assign, it is also something perfectly uncovered, offered at the very level of our existence.

Producing significations has all sorts of functions: practical, technical, moral, social, political, and philosophical as well. There is some meaning in initiating all these functions, but they do not constitute it: they are caught up in it and testify to it. In this way, meaning is first of all that by which, or rather that in which, or even that *as* which, there is a being [*être*] of meaning or an entity [*existant*] whose existence is by itself, from the outset, in the element of meaning, before all signification. One might call this being man—but one would have to be able to separate this word from its significations (has not this separation been on the horizon ever since Kant declared that one could not answer the question, What is man? and ever since Marx, by declaring that "man is the supreme essence of man," brought the signification of this essence—as well as the signification of the word "essence" in general—to the limit? But at the same time, in each case, the movement to the limit falls back into the logic of signification and humanism, for what is ultimately said in each context is that "man" is for himself his own signification: ultimately, it is *from this* that one would have to be able to separate the meaning of "man"). One might also try to name this being otherwise, as Heidegger did with Dasein, and the entire production of analyses that this makes possible does not prevent the reappearance of problems of signification (specifically, it does not prevent the fundamental question indicated by the word Dasein from being the question of a signification at the limit, though this question remains hidden as long as one merely uses it as a *word*; I do not here want to dwell further on this question). Finally, one might give up, at least for a time, trying to name this being, and even refrain from signifying it as "a being," by simply saying that *we* are in the element of meaning. As we know, as a linguistic "shifter," *we* has no signification. Here, for now, *we* does not signify any community, not even the signified "community" in general. It is, rather, the common belonging to meaning that enunciates itself, that "shifts itself," as it were; *meaning* can only be *common*, and that which is *common* takes place only in the element of meaning (otherwise, outside of meaning or in the order of signification, one would be dealing, for example, with something "molar" or "collective"). *We*: the community of meaning sets itself in motion as community, which still means nothing other than the possibility that this community elaborates some particular signification, as well as the possibility for this community to confer upon itself some particular signification. *We* consists, if you will, in the subject of enunciation of what is not yet even a statement (with its signification), but which would be something like the general communication (one might also say: the general performativity, or the general pragmatics . . .) that is inherent in the element of meaning as such. In the final analysis, it would not even be a subject of enunciation, but the word "we" would be—or *we would be*—the meaning of meaning, the very opening of meaning, and meaning as opening. Only in this opening, that is, "in us" or "between us" (which here means the same thing), would there be the possibility of saying *we*—and even, and above all, the possibility of saying *I*. One could in fact show that, at the point where the Cartesian *ego* is still suspended just before all signification, before *sum* (if this is a signification), and before *cogito*, the *ego* is caught in the element of *we*; Descartes himself is not far from saying this when he ascribes the evidence of his proposition to the fact—which is, here again, inextricably empirical and

transcendental—that *we all* experience our existence, and that it is this certainty alone, which we all already share, that can impart to us the evidence of its philosopheme.

We are meaning. Before all produced or disclosed meaning, and before all exchanges of meaning, our existence presents itself to us as meaning—and when I say "we" in this sentence, I designate equally and indissociably each of our singular existences, whose singularity is each time the place of such a presentation (it is "collective" only in a secondary and derivative way) *and* the common element of meaning in which only that which takes place in this way can take place. Our existence presents itself as meaning (which can just as soon present itself as nonmeaning, as meaning that is weak or powerful, eternal or ignoble, etc.—it does not matter for now), and simultaneously, we present ourselves *to ourselves*. That is to say, at once to one another, through one another, and each one to him or herself. We *co-appear* [*comparaissons*], and this appearing [*parution*] is meaning.

This *we* of meaning, which is meaning, this meaning that is the being of the *we* before all anthropology, all humanism, and all antihumanism, calls for an ontology that is yet to come, which does not mean that it will come, but that it is perhaps, in itself, as thought, ordered according to the dimension of a "coming" or a "coming to pass": that of our co-appearing, of our presentation in the element of meaning. This presentation itself has no signification; it only takes place, unceasingly, through innumerable significations. It does not proceed as the recognition or the identification of those—*we*—who are presented. It proceeds as an exposure; we *are* exposed, that is our being—or the meaning of being.

This means nothing other, at least for the moment, than this: here and now, at each moment, for each of us, this exposure takes place. Without this, we would not exist. It is, as they say, as necessary to us as the air we breathe. It takes place before all signification, before all ideality or all finality that we might signify to ourselves. Clearly, it is not that it constitutes another signification, more powerful or more primordial. Rather, it is that without this exposure *no signification would have any meaning*; for any signification would be a mere indication or a mere denotation of things, which would no more put their meaning at issue than would a numeration (for, in fact, numeration would no more put meaning at issue than denotation would). There is, therefore, some sense in signifying, there is some sense in initiating projections and projects of meaning—or at least, there has been and there will be as long as we are the West—just as there is now some meaning in signifying the exhaustion of the thought that places meaning in signification, and in signifying that we are led, without possibility of return, to new tasks. But this meaning is not to be sought

in significations, which, on the contrary, find their possibility of meaning in it.

There is some sense, so to speak, in the meaning of the five senses through which we are in the world, feeling pleasure and pain, without this having any signification. Or else, in the sense in which there is some sense in presenting to ourselves what is called "art," a name that is perhaps nothing more than an immense question about signification in general. Or else, in the sense in which we ward off, in vain, or else contemplate, blindly, that end of signification called death. Or else, love. Or else, in the fact that the only thing we understand about the signification marked "political" is an excess or a lack of signification. Or, in the fact that no signification of the "good" or the "just" can prevent us from being exposed, or from exposing ourselves, to the most ignoble, wretched or atrocious evil. That there is meaning in this sense explains or justifies nothing, but it does *hold back* our significations, and it must from now on hold us back from taking refuge in a return to what these significations may have signified. For example—but this is a prime example—it does not in the least invite us to give meaning to evil by converting it, in one way or the other, into "good," but neither does it invite us to set it aside under the category of the senseless, which can constitute another kind of signification. The fact that evil arises in the element of meaning—in us and between us—does not give it *a* meaning, but forbids one from classifying it under a restorative or exorcising signification, and requires one to open the question of evil anew, contrary to what the theodicies, then the dialectics, used to do, and to what the thoughts of the return to "law" and "values" would like to do today.

The fact that meaning in this sense infinitely exceeds signification, and that it neither has nor gives signification, makes it neither nonmeaning nor fate nor some dull necessity. It is made up of a permanent stake, that of being exposed; it is *us* as exposed, to a space and to ourselves as a space, to a time and to ourselves as a time, to language, to ourselves [*nous-mêmes*], that is, to us others [*nous autres*],[19] to evil, to good, to choice, to decision, to choices and decisions, in the event of our significations. Through this exposure, which presents us to meaning and which presents meaning to us, we are spared being caught in the presence that results from signification. For insofar as it holds that presence at a distance, signification holds us back before it, immobile. But the meaning offered at the limit of signification takes us into the movement of a presentation *to* . . . which is a rupture of presence itself: not only a rupture of evidences, certainties, and assurances (there can also be a full assurance in the arising of meaning), but, more deeply, a rupture of signification itself and its order. That is why this presentation at the limit is an exposure; presence withdraws from it as surely as the present of a time that comes and goes, as surely as the presence of a signification in the poetic or philosophical inauguration of

a language. This presence is thus not deferred as if it were postponed to a later date and to another place (this, on the contrary, is what signifying thought endlessly proposes); it presents itself, instead, in the difference with itself, because *meaning* is nothing other than this infinite hollowing out of presence, which is the possibility and even the most proper nature of its *coming*, that by which we are exposed to it—by which we *are*.

All the modern problematics of difference attract the protestations of the thinkers of the return, who see in them a destruction or frustration of identity, of the possibility of identifying anything. The return is always proposed as a return to the *one* (even when, in politics, it invokes La Boétie's *Counter-One*);[20] what is demanded is an identification of man, right, good, or meaning, and also, in the continuing variations upon the requisite plurality, *one* pluralism, a weak sense of diversity, which demands its moral recognition but cares little about thinking it as such—or else thinks it only as a relative deficit against the background of *one* humanity present-at-a-distance. This is to ignore that difference is not the opposite of identity; for difference is what makes identity possible, and by inscribing this possibility at the heart of identity, it exposes it to this: that its meaning cannot be identical to it. We are our identity, and *we* designates—once again, in the simultaneous and undecidable reference to our "singularities" and our "community"—an identity that is necessarily shared out, in us and between us. Difference takes place in this sharing out, at once a distribution of meaning into all significations and a withdrawal of meaning from all signification—a withdrawal that each signification indicates, at the limit.

13

On Wonder

When the metaphysics of signification comes to know itself as its own limit, it exposes itself. It exposes itself to no longer being able to return to any signification, and to reopening the entire question of meaning, right up to the point, perhaps, of thinking and practicing signification itself in another way.

This amounts to saying that we are exposed to the risk of no longer being able to understand or interpret ourselves—but also, that we are thereby exposed once again to ourselves, and once again to one another, to our language and to our world. Once again, *our* existence demands its meaning and its rights. We can no longer allow ourselves to be presented at a Heaven's, Idea's, or History's distance, nor in general at a signification's distance. We must exist in the meaning that we are. There is today an imperious, strident demand to stop surrendering meaning, without further ado, to signification. This demand lies in the condition that is imposed on us by our world, one that is often called "senseless" in its economic, technological, and political severity; it lies in poverty, in exploitation, in being condemned to hunger or to helplessness; it lies in the theft of our moments and of our death by the powers that be, by promises, values, or projects; it lies in the distress or the hypocrisy of discourses that signify without any longer having meaning; it lies in that which throws language into crisis, or into availability; and it lies also in this reality that is, after all, astonishing: that *we* exist in such a worn and miserable state, that we exist destitute, lacking, and lost, that is, that *we* or *meaning* resists, and beyond all possible representation, the accumulation of significations as much as their exhaustion.

The meaning that resists is "open" meaning, the opening of meaning or the opening to meaning, that is, that which does not allow itself to be imprisoned in a signifying finality and enclosure. But meaning as opening does not open onto the void, any more than it infinitely tends toward its fulfillment. It opens directly *onto us*. It designates us as its element and as the place of its event or advent. But we are not a signification: neither a "humanity," nor a *polis*, nor a "project." We are the plural that does not multiply a singular—as if we were

the collective figure of a sole reality (all the materialist critiques of idealism went no further than this)—but that, on the contrary, singularizes a common dispersion, this time irreducibly material *and* absolutely spiritual. We are the community of meaning, and this community has no signification; it does not subsume under a Meaning the exteriority of its parts, nor the succession of its moments, since, it is the element of meaning only insofar as it is exposed by and to this exteriority and succession.

This means very precisely that it is a community *by* not having a signification and *because* it has no signification. It is our exposure to meaning that constitutes our Being-in-common, and not the communication of significations. The idea of "communism" has represented in our history both the desire to fill this community with signification *and* our access to the bare moment when we have to think ourselves without signification: that moment when one must think the burgeoning and indigent enigma of the *we* as the very faint light where meaning itself rises.

I seem to suppose something like a secret or a mystery: a self-evasion. Yet this is neither dissimulated like a secret nor waiting to be revealed like a mystery. It is manifest. It is as manifest as the face-to-face or the between-us that indefinitely constitutes us. This manifestation is without secret because it is without signification. But this is also why it is not the appearance *of* something: it is itself the thing in itself. *We* are the thing—meaning's thing or meaning as thing; which also amounts to saying that we ourselves are "the open," and that the open is the thing, the *real* itself. What constitutes us is the open, or, if you will, the uncovered that puts us face to face. This uncovered is the space of meaning—it is the spacing in which and as which there is meaning, a meaning that precedes all signification and that succeeds it too. That space, that thing, *we*, might be identified with the agency of language, with the agency of the political or of passion (love and hate, terror and pity), or with a combination of the three. But it is withdrawn from all these identifications, of which it is, in old-fashioned parlance, the "transcendental condition," or—if you want to use another parlance—the space, element, flesh, and difference. There is no such thing as *the* we, as there may be "*the* political," "language," or "passion." *There is only us*, that is, the thing out in the open [*à découvert*], being without subjectivity, finite man, and the unsignifiable provenance of meaning.

Ever since its foundation, wonder has been philosophy's virtue. To wonder today is nothing other than to wonder before this resistance and insistence of our strange community in meaning, in the exposure to meaning. This certainly does not define "a philosophy"—that is, if "a philosophy" is still what is to be sought. But it does define the philosophical attitude and act (that are forgotten

when one seeks to return to a signification of the world): to welcome the wonder before that which presents itself. Thought is this very welcoming. It does not give us meaning, but undergoes [*éprouve*] the demand for meaning, it tests *us* [nous *éprouve*]; it lets this demand speak and lets us speak. If "thinking" [*penser*] means "weighing" [*peser*], it is first of all in the sense of *letting* what weighs *weigh*, of feeling [*éprouver*] today the weight of the West reaching its destination, of letting it weigh with all the weight of its exhaustion and its venture of meaning.

The exhaustion and the opening indicate only one thing: that there is meaning to our existence, meaning in withdrawal from, or in excess of, all signification, a meaning to each of our existences—as much for the fleeting time of each individual existence as for the scansions of history, for our projects and our struggles—as soon as existence or the project itself opens itself [*s'expose*] to undoing the subjugation to the distance of signification. The exhaustion and the opening indicate that there is, here and now, a sovereign eternity of meaning (in Rimbaud's sense). The work of thought, its discipline and its rigor, do not consist in mastering this sovereignty—that is, in signifying or representing it—but in experiencing it as sovereign, and in remaining exposed to it, in remaining exposed, today, to the limit of "man," the "West," "history" and "philosophy." In no way is this a blissful contemplation, but, rather, a difficult, complex, and delicate set of decisions, acts, positions and gestures of thought and writing. This is what makes one feel the weight; it has nothing to do with the recombination of—and the more or less uncertain commentary on—significations, but has everything to do with what keeps signification—either willingly or reluctantly—oscillating dangerously on its limit. No bravado here, no philosophical heroism in the tradition of the philosopher martyred for (= signifier of) truth. It is simply true; one cannot settle down on the limit, one cannot hold on there as one could hold to a system or order of signification. One must always let the limit present itself anew, and it always presents itself as new. In the final analysis, wonder is nothing other than that which happens or arrives at the limit. Wonder itself is a kind of sign without signification, and the sign—the index or signal—that signification is verging upon its limit, and that meaning is laid bare.

There will certainly be other significations, other tasks of signification, and other tasks than signification. But to discover them we must first make ourselves capable of wondering about this: that *signification* has had a *history*, that this history has been *completed*, that this completion is an *event*, and that we are already, whether we know it or not, whether we want it or not, engaged by meaning and in the meaning of what happens to us in this way.

14

On Passivity

That it happens to us and that there is cause to wonder: this implies passivity. Passivity is not well regarded by the thoughts of signification, for signification is, by nature, an activity: it stamps meaning, prints it in intelligible characters, but it does not receive it (what does receive it—that infinitely malleable element of wax, that lawless and formless matter—philosophy has never been able to say).

But the passivity that is at issue here cannot be determined in opposition to activity. It does not consist in being "passive," but in being, if we can put it this way, *passible* to meaning, that is, capable of receiving or welcoming it. Thought is not a discourse, but the disposition and the activity that are passible to the event of meaning; it lets this event come—which means that it makes it happen as such, or that it inscribes it. It is thus a "doing," and yet it is not a production. (Similarly, it is a "repetition" of meaning, and yet it is not a representation.) To inscribe is not to produce, nor is it to transcribe. One might say that it is something like "to register": to enter into an order of marks a reality that is heterogeneous to that order and does not then become homogeneous to it. "Thinking" inscribes the limit of signification in language. The inscription is the gesture by which language passes to the limit of signification. At this limit, language does not verge on the absurd or on nonsense, which are themselves only forms of signification. This outside does not have to be signified, and that is why language does not penetrate it; there is nothing to penetrate, no depth of the real that would await another signification or a signification from beyond. But this outside—the real, the *thing* itself, the thing in itself—happens (*we* happen). It happens constantly, and its happening at once calls for and opens up the entire possibility and passibility of meaning, that is, it puts back into play, step by step, the entire order of significations. For such is indeed the definition of the real: it is not what is to be signified, but what runs up against or violates signification—the opening of meaning, or its being laid bare.

The nakedness of meaning no doubt retains something of the traditional nakedness of Truth. However, signified truth presented (at a distance) a body that was desirable to the subject ("in truth," the imaged body of its own desire). The truth of meaning does not offer its nakedness as a body, nor, in general, as something. It presents itself much more as the very gesture of laying bare; to bare oneself is not to give something but is to offer this very gesture of baring oneself. What there is to be grasped of meaning, its truth, is not "something" (nor "all things"), but the fact that it offers its nakedness more than any naked identity. It offers the action of its "passivity"; it offers the very *act* of meaning: to make oneself passible to its event.

Passing to the limit of signification, language registers the shock of the thing. The hollow or crack disjoins the signifying order. The inscription is the outline of this disjunction. This outline has no recognizable profile, it has no face; it is neither "logical," nor "poetic," nor "philosophical," in the sense that these words are now exhausting their significations. Nor is it simply "practical." It is the quite singular outline of a passage to the limit, which is also, by definition, the limit of the outline or outlining. This is why the letter of the inscription is less signifying than transformational: transformations, variations, constant displacements of the passage itself. Because it *passes* in this way, the "passivity" of language or thought is an act; it forms an active power that requires strength, work, effort and rigor. But because it does not pass over the limit, since there is nothing to pass into, and since everything happens, on the contrary, *on* the limit, on this edge without an outside, which is nothing but the minuscule opening of meaning—because it only passes right at the limit, this power retains within itself all the passivity that consists in being passible to meaning.

This does not mean being capable of meaning, in the sense of inventing or fabricating new truths. (For truth is never new; it is always *the same anew*, identical to what comes to border on, overflow and disrupt signification.) Rather, it means being capable of receiving the shock of meaning. This capacity cannot be produced by way of significations. It cannot constitute what one would have formerly called a "message," nor what one commonly calls a "philosophy" (when in fact one has forgotten everything, or nearly so, about philosophy). This capacity—let us call it, despite everything, *philosophy*, since one needs a name, and since this one has a few credentials to claim for itself—must have preceded itself; one needs to have undergone the event and the upheaval of meaning in order to be passible to it. The use of the signifying system, the manipulation of discourse, must already, always-already, have been breached, tormented, and threatened by the limit of signification. This is why the original representation of philosophy—that is, as a 'loss' of meaning, or of meaning as such—should be understood in two ways: as the imaginary disappearance of

a previous signification, or else, as the withdrawal of meaning by which meaning happens. In this sense, it is necessary that meaning abandon us so that we may be opened with the entire opening of meaning. And this, from now on, cannot be forgotten; this abandonment is what makes our history.

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Part Two

THE WEIGHT OF A THOUGHT

The Weight of a Thought

Etymology relates thinking [*pensée*] to weighing [*pesée*].

Pensare means to weigh, to appraise, to evaluate (and also to com-pensate, to counterbalance, to replace or exchange). It is an intensive form of *pendo*: to weigh up, to make or let the pans of a balance hang [*pendre*], to weigh, to appraise, to pay, and, in an intransitive mode, to hang, to be weighty. *La pensée*, thinking—the *pens*, the "*pensing*"—came later.

Etymological relations are of limited worth: their weight is only the rather light weight of the contingency of derivations (not to mention the uncertainty of conjectures concerning them, even if this is not the case here, or so it seems). Nonetheless, they have also a way of letting this suspicion—which we know to be more, much more, than just a suspicion—weigh, a suspicion according to which thinking occurs at the very level of languages, without us, without the thinking-subject-reeds who only come into the world, and to themselves, as carried and weighed by this thought.

Lightness and gravity, approximation and certainty, such is the poorly balanced condition of the thought of proper meaning, of the proper meaning of "thought," and of the proper provenance of meaning in general. Who could say what is proper to thinking *and* to weighing, to thinking *as much as* to weighing, thus being properly neither? Who can think how one *counterbalances* the other [*se font* pendant], or at what *inclination* [pente] one slides into the other? And why should "weighing," as a material act or state, be the proper and primary degree from which or on which "thought," as the second degree, as an immaterial act or state, would *depend*—a dependency that itself would entail some loss or *expenditure* [*dépense*] of meaning in the passage from one word to the other? Who could weigh, and on what scales, the "materiality" of weighing, on the one hand, and the "immateriality" of thought on the other? On what unit of weight, on what law of gravity [*pesanteur*], would such an operation be based?

Let us confess, instead, what everyone knows full well: thinking can never

grasp weighing; it can offer a measure for it, but it cannot itself weigh up the weight. Nor can weighing touch thinking; it may indicate a few ounces of muscle and neuron, but it cannot register the infinite leap of which they would supposedly be the place, support, or inscription. (And what is a leap, if thought is indeed a leap? What sort of escape from gravity? What counterweight?) Against these obvious truths, the etymologist's desire would be to give us access, at least as a trace inscribed in language, to a weighty/weighing property of thought, which would be identical to a thinking property of the weighty thing . . .

We certainly do experience the weight of thought. Sometimes the heaviness, sometimes the gravity of a "thought" ("idea," "image," "judgment," "volition," "representation," etc.) affects us with a perceptible pressure or inclination, a palpable curve—and even, with the impact of a fall (if only the falling of one's head into one's hands). But this experience remains a *limit-experience*, like any experience worthy of the name. It does take place, but not as the appropriation of what it represents; this is why I also have no access to the weight of thought, nor to the thought of weight.

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This is not to say that the intimate co-appropriation of thinking and weighing is a mere figure of speech, or the fantasm of a somewhat alchemical materialism. On the contrary, this appropriation is certain and absolute. The act of thinking *is* an actual weighing; it is the very weighing of the world, of things, of the *real* as *meaning*.

There is no doubt that *meaning* is incorporated (if only as a "leap") into the reality of the real (into its matter, and thus into its weight)—just as there is no doubt that the real *makes* sense (it is an ideality, and therefore is without gravity). No skeptic's extravagant hypothesis could weaken this point; outside of this appropriation, there could be no *existence*. But there is existence, and the co-appropriation of meaning and the real is precisely that by which existence always precedes itself, as itself, that is to say, insofar as it is without essence—insofar as it *is* the without-essence.

This absolutely indubitable point of the reciprocal and archi-originary appropriation of weighing and thinking (which is truly the creation of the world) is equally, identically, the absolute point of inappropriability: we have no more access to the weight of meaning than (consequently) to the meaning of weight.

And it is not having such an access that makes us thinking as well as weighty beings, and that attunes within us, as our*selves*, this dissonance of weight and thought that constitutes the whole weight of a thought.

(This does not mean that such an access would be available for other beings: the coappropriation of weighing and thinking, just as it is reached in etymology only through a metaphorical reversal [*bascule*] that always precedes itself, is in and of itself inaccessible, and definitively so; its terms define it in this way, just as they command it to occupy its inaccessible place.)

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There is therefore no pure space or time. (General relativity curves both according to masses.) There are only places, which are simultaneously locations and extensions of bodies. Bodies are heavy. The weight of a localized body is the true purely sensible a priori condition of the activity of reason: a transcendental aesthetics of gravity [*pesanteur*].

In this transcendental aesthetics, the concept of an a priori "form" of sensibility becomes insufficient. Gravity is not simply a "form," for along with it "matter" is given, the very materiality of reason. Along with it is given this hard grain, this sharp point of dense ore that a thought pushes, presses heavily into the head and into the belly, throughout the whole body, with the force of a fall or a tearing. This weighing [*pesée*] organizes a priori the entire "logic" of a reason whose principle and end lie in the experience of this pressure [*pesée*] on the ground, loading it down to the point of hollowing it out, cracking it open, disarticulating its limbs and substances, casting it outside of itself.

But "outside of itself" is not another kind of "pure" system or order. Weighing (down) is not the pure outside-of-itself; rather, it is an exile, an errancy, a balancing oscillation *from oneself to oneself*. Thought weighs at the point where reason, being (present) *to* itself [*étant* à *soi*], distances itself *from* itself and does so with the whole distance of this *to*. Now this distance, the distance of the presence-*to*-itself of an existence whose existing means precisely this presence-*to*—a *to* of being (presence) itself, the *to* of a sending, of a sending back, of a throw, a projection, a rejection, the *to* of a yet-to-come, of an expectation, an attention, a call—this distance is nothing other than *meaning*, absolutely.

Thought weighs exactly the weight of meaning. It is the weight of an extremity on which an irresistible force is being applied at the place of a possible eruption of meaning (that is to say, in every place), causing at once shattering and compaction, concentration and explosion, pain and joy, meaning and absencing of meaning.

With this absolute tip, which is the first and last property of a thought—angle, spike, stylus, signature—we are repeatedly taught that there is no sense in trying to totalize meaning (even if by a minor or temporary totalization), in trying to adjust to a completed knowledge the event of an existence that, precisely,

exists only in the disjunction of the presence-*to*, in unconnected tremors, and in the halting quality of its events. Meaning is an event, not an ending [*finition*]. Or, rather: its ending is itself endless [*sans fin*].

The place, the weighty and pointed *hic et nunc*, cannot be dislodged or delocalized into an ether of "full meaning" (of meaningful meaning . . .). But the place constitutes meaning in remaining the place, at once weighty and pointed—pressed upon and pierced through. Meaning always has the sense of the noncompleted, the nonfinished, of the yet-to-come, and in general of the *to*.

Meaning does not have the sense of an answer, and not even of a question; in this sense, it has no meaning. But it is the event of an opening. It brings no salvation, but greets (calls) the to-come and the end-less. It does not gather community or bring about intimacy, but relentlessly exposes a common exteriority, a spacing, a coappearance of strangers. (This is why there is no primary or final place, no capital, no Rome, Athens, Mecca, or Jerusalem. There is only the gap between places, which constitutes place, and the weight of each place, of each landing or meeting place.)

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The weight of a thought—its local, pointed, stretched, multiple, disappropriated, open weight—is what is also called, in another vocabulary, *finitude*.

Finitude is not the privation of the infinite, in the sense that the infinite itself would be the appropriation and the total resorption of meaning as relation-to-itself: the appropriation and resorption of the *to*, of the gap and of the *not*, of the not-yet and the yet-to-come, the appropriation and reduction of the opening "to," of the coming of the other, in itself, as "self," to the self, the appropriation and absorption of birth and death, and existence finally transfigured into a pure essence. This—this Hegelian "good infinite"—would indeed presuppose the negation of its own negation (the negation of the limit, of the gap, of alterity, and of the open), that is, the negation of *finiteness* in its traditional sense. According to this concept of finiteness, the essence and destination of the finite consist in this self-negation: lack and relativity are by definition subsumed under the realization in plenitude and absoluteness, under an endless ending.

But the modern sense of finitude—that is, *our* sense of finitude, the one that is to be made ours, to be appropriated, and thus, that is yet *to* come—forms, on the contrary, the *absoluteness of the finite*. The finite no longer constitutes the negation of the infinite, which the infinite would have to negate. It constitutes, rather, a mode of ending (of completion of meaning) that does not *end*, that does not complete or totalize and, in this exact sense, does not "infinitize."

It is that which lies in the availability of the singular, of the nontotalizable, the uncompleted, the open, or of the granular, fractal, or dispersed totalities, and in the necessity of contingency, in the harshness of errancy, and, finally, in the exposure of that Being-exposed that we call "existence." *In the end*, it is still existence that is at issue.

In finitude, therefore, a thought does not complete the meaning (of what) it thinks, and thus lets this "object"—the *thing* itself—have the *weight* that carries it away from completed, presentified, or signified meaning. The weight of thought is then the weight of the thing insofar as that thing weighs *outside* of thought, insofar as it punctures and overflows the thought that it is, but that it can be only by being open *to* the thing, and to its heaviness. The "opening" does not carry here those dubious values of dynamism and generosity that are attributed to it by a weak modern convention. Being-open is nothing other than Being-finite, and the "open"—just like the *closure* of the finite—is nothing other than the *to*, the heaviness of the *to* by which meaning, in order to be meaning, exceeds and exceeds itself.

The watchword of all modern thought is: "to the things themselves!" But in this "to" one must discern all the heaviness, the whole heavy fall of thought that is necessary in order to make that which exceeds meaning weigh in meaning, that which opens meaning *to* the thing *to* which it is a matter of giving its meaning, or, in truth, of letting its meaning be given or delivered: that which constitutes meaning by exceeding all meaning. The existence of the slightest pebble already overflows; however light it may be, it already weighs this excessive weight.

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Certain habits that some claim to be "Cartesian" (this is, in fact, mere ideological senility) lead one to believe that ideas must be "clear," it being understood that "clarity" is something of the order of pure transparency, perhaps even of the void. But who wants an empty thought?

Meaning needs a thickness, a density, a mass, and thus an opacity, a darkness by means of which it leaves itself open and lets itself be touched *as meaning* right there where it becomes absent as discourse. Now, this "there" is a material point, a weighty point: the flesh of a lip, the point of a pen or of a stylus, any writing insofar as it traces out the interior and exterior edges of language. It is the point where all writing *is ex-scribed*, where it comes to rest outside of the meaning it inscribes, in the things whose inscription this meaning is supposed to form. This *ex-scription* is the ultimate truth of inscription. Made absent as discourse, meaning comes into presence within this absence,

like a concretion, a thickening, an ossification, an induration of meaning itself; like a becoming heavy or weighty, a sudden, destabilizing weight of thought. Who would not want a thought that blocks all passage through it, that does not let itself be breached? Who would not want an impenetrable meaning, a meaning that has consistency and resistance? For it is the communication of this resistance that makes me "endowed with meaning"—even when this communication represents the noncommunication of a "meaning" (the nondelivery of a message).

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"Finitude" designates nothing other than the meaning of existence insofar as this meaning itself actually *exists*, insofar as it is given at the very level of the singular existent, at the very level of the "open" of that existent, and insofar as this meaning does not subsume existence under an essence. It is the existence of meaning rather than the meaning of existence.

Existence does not *have* a meaning, in the sense of a property that could be assigned, determined or stated in the language of significations. But meaning *does exist*, or again: existence is itself meaning, it is the absolute *signifiance* (the *signifiance* of *Being*) by and *in* the very fact that it exists. This is why there is meaning (there is meaning *as such*) even in the existence of a child who lives only for a day. Rather than repeating the proverb that says "As soon as a child is born, it is old enough to die," it would be better to give its true meaning: as soon as an existence comes into the world, it bears the whole of meaning, the absolute of meaning.

In existing, existence presupposes itself and calls itself infinitely as meaning—as the entirety of meaning, absolutely. But, at the same time, in existing, existence denies that it has meaning as a property, since it *is* meaning. It therefore has to appropriate the inappropriability of the meaning that it *is*. This is what, in other, somewhat unfortunate terms, has been called the Being-in-lack, the Being-in-debt or even the Being-guilty of the existent. Existence *is* the appropriation of the inappropriable.

The weight of a thought is exactly this inappropriability of appropriation, or the impropriety of the proper (proper to the proper itself, absolutely).

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Nowadays, the vocabulary of finitude is commonly used. One speaks in magazines or on television of our world as a "finite" world, of our history as a "finite" history. One understands by this that humanity seems to touch on, to

come up against, some limits, and so now has to conceive of itself and manage itself under the constraints of these limits. From the ancient and pre-Western space of a world "closed" around its landmarks and in its order, we moved to the "infinite universe" of an exponential expansion of humanity, of its history, knowledge, and power: in both cases, albeit in different ways, Meaning was assured of its Ending. Now, on the contrary, one would have to resign oneself to the humble certainty (with as little bitterness as possible) of being bound to the limited area of our little circumscribed space where no Ending can ever take place.

This thought claims to be "positive," it wants to approve of this human, all too human condition, it wants to assume it, and it comforts itself above all with the idea that any completeness of meaning harbors a dogmatic and totalitarian threat. But it remains precisely a thought of the negativity of incompleteness, a thought of lack, of relativity and weakness. This is, in fact, what makes the whole vocabulary of finitude fragile and suspect: the *finite* obstinately remains the name of the non-infinite, that is, of the *badly*-finished and the *not*-finished in the sense of the incomplete, the aborted, the failed, in the sense of missed or truncated signification.

This thought thus misses its own weight: the weight of what is completed in incompletion, the weight of what unsolders and unseals the bottom [*fond*], hurling things deeper, and scattering them further than any bottom of things. Hurling them into existence, from the height of existence itself, in a fall that staves in [*défonce*] the ground. Letting existence resist—that is, endeavoring to let it, working toward a *letting*, toward a letting-fall and a letting-weigh that thought catches sight of, weighs up, as the most proper meaning, but proper on the condition of remaining inappropriable, and of remaining inappropriated *in* its appropriation. Of being both eventful and disruptive even as it inscribes itself in the order of meaning. Of *ex-scribing* this inscription—such that the ex-scription be the Being-inscribed, or rather the true Being-inscribing of inscription itself. Of having *weight* at the heart of and in spite of thought: of being the breast, the belly, the guts of thought. A burden of meaning in excess of meaning itself.

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The weight of meaning, its excess with respect to all "meaningful" appropriability, this reversal, this staving in—tears and joy, trembling, impatience, and the letting-come of existence—all this does not collapse into an abyss. The abyss is only a version of the infinite in its negation of finite negation, "a dreadful black sun from which the night shines," but a sun all the

same. It is a question here of a meaning that neither dominates nor shines down like a sun, that does not rise to the zenith, or set to the nadir, but that weighs insofar as it alights and sinks in [*s'enfonce*], and even settles, each time existing here-and-now, in a singular here-and-now, and always singular anew, plurally, absolutely, as impossible to resorb as to complete.

This means that inappropriable meaning presents itself in as many figures as there are existences (but not according to the solar, circular, sacrificial ultra-figure). It is this figuration that we would like to address here and in other texts. All these texts speak of the appropriation of the inappropriable in figures, or in a figurability that is at once general and fragmented. But what they are speaking of—or wished to speak of—does not take place in the order of a "figuration" that "represents" something, that is, that *stands for* something other than the figure itself, and for "something other," or some essential feature of it, that the figure *reproduces*.

No. It is here a question of the figures that inappropriable meaning forms insofar as it appropriates itself. The inappropriable is not represented: it presents itself, it presents the absentification that happens in the coming of presence. One will find here—it is an example and more than an example (I would like this book to be entirely a picture book)—a photograph of someone.[1] This image does not count as the representative of the real person photographed, nor as his portrait, made in his image. Instead, it counts as the image that it is, as this configuration and this event. It counts as this some*one* in *this* photograph, with *this* pose—with this weight, with this thought; but this image exhausts itself in showing what these demonstrative pronouns show, and yet it leaves it inappropriable, fragmentary, fractured, a fractal object of meaning, definitely heavier or lighter than anything one might grasp of it.

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What we are attempting to grasp in the term *figure* would be an exposition (or the sketching of an *art*) of the inappropriable gravity of meaning. An image, a writing, a gesture, in order to stress or let weigh the heavy or light features of a presence in the endless process of coming.

On this account, a figure would be the entire weight of a thought: its way, not of "thinking" meaning (of elaborating its signification) but of letting it weigh, just as it comes, just as it passes away, heavy or light, and always at the same time heavy and light. Are we (we who keep saying to ourselves that we arrive so late, so much at the *end*), in the end, going to let ourselves be presented with this constantly renewed gravity? Are we—with difficulty and serenity—going to let ourselves simply exist?

The simplicity of existence: its turbulence, its turmoil, its sorrow and its joy, its thickness, its density, its extended thing, its halting, disjointed time, its undiscipline, its stammering, its visceral unconsciousness, and its lucidity, which is just as much attached to the body . . .

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This is the limit of an era, which was the era of the representation of a meaning. It gives way to the weighing of these countless figures that places, bodies, things, fragments of meaning are—that *we* are.

We will not go so far as to say that we have "finally" found meaning. Certainly not. We have exhausted the schemas of progress and of the progressive unveiling of truth. In this sense, History is indeed finished, or finite, and "finitude" opens another history.

We will say instead that the conditions of meaning are always the same (we will see, however, that this is not an antihistorical proposition): they are always woven into the opacity of meaning, into its consistency and into its resistance to the breakthroughs of "spirit." The *psyche* is first psyche by its *extension*, *partes extra partes*, and by the opacity to itself in which it remains with respect to this exteriority-in-itself, or with respect to the *to*-itself that constitutes it.

("The psyche is extended, and does not know it": this is Freud's great saying.)

The conditions of meaning are always the same, and if we want to imagine what access to meaning was had by the inhabitants of a world that seems to us to have been immersed in the transparency of meaning (the Christian, Greek, Jewish, Nambikwara, or Zen world, etc.), we must above all understand that this "transparency" is only the interpretation that *we* offer to ourselves of what was also their opacity. Never did a Christian, a Greek, a Jew, a Nambikwara, or a Buddhist, accede to the kingdom of meaning in a procession or ascension of luminous certainties. Nor did a Plato or a Descartes. On the contrary, meaning always made itself known by its obstinate consistence, its resistance to the enslavements of intelligence, its opaque apodicticity. But—and this is history—its figures transform themselves, for example from "Jew" into "Greek" and from "Greek" into "Arab" and from "Arab" into "Christian"—and this transformation itself, this twisting and incessant multiplication of figures, of exposures of meaning, are a part, and not the smallest, of its opacity and resistance.

This is also why these figures are not successive figurations of the same identical meaning—as are the figure-moments of the Hegelian process: they are the shattering of the exposed identity of meaning, and the dispersion of its "meaning."

Our time is the time that, as it were, exposes exposure itself: the time for which all identifiable figures have become inconsistent (the gods, the *logoi*, the

wise, knowledge), and which therefore works toward (or which gives itself over to) the coming of a figure of the unidentifiable, the figures of opacity and of resistant consistency *as such*. "Man" thus becomes opaque to himself, he grows thick and heavy with the weight of an excessive thought of its humanity: eight billion bodies in an ecotechnical whirlwind that no longer has any other end than the infinity of an inappropriable meaning.

How are we to let it be *seen* that meaning exposes itself as impenetrable, and exposes us to this density? With what figure? By de-finition—that is, by the absencing of the ending [*finition*]—there will not be only one. By right, any figure is already such an exposure. This is why "art" can no longer suffice for us, if "art" signifies a privileging of chosen, sublated, sublime, exquisite figures. For meaning has, on the contrary, no chosen or privileged ones, no heroes or saints, and it is rather a formidable density of *common destiny* that is brought to light, to our light, the entire weight of a community of equals that does not come from a measure, but from the incommensurable opacity of meaning, which is the meaning of all and of each (and of no one). We need an art—if it is an "art"—of thickness, of gravity. We need figures that weigh upon the bottom rather than extracting themselves from it. That stave it in and expose it. We need a thought that would be like a mass out of true, the fall and the creation of a world.

Notes

TRANSLATORS' PREFACE

1. For instance: *The Literary Absolute*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); their work on Lacan, *The Title of the Letter*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York, 1992); or the more recent "The Nazi Myth," trans. B. Holmes, *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 291–312.
2. They cover a broad and impressive range of topics and themes, touching on issues of interpretation ("Sharing Voices," in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990], hereafter cited as *SV*); of community (*The Inoperative Community* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991], hereafter cited as *IC*); of the political (*La comparution* [*Politique à venir*], with Christophe Bailly (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991), hereafter cited as *C*); of freedom and finitude (*The Experience of Freedom* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993], hereafter cited as *EF*); *Une Pensée Finie* [Paris: Galilée, 1990], hereafter cited as *PF*, and *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993) hereafter cited as *BP*. Also recently: *Le sens du monde* ([Paris: Galilée, 1994], hereafter cited as *SM*) and *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996). For a good bibliography of Jean-Luc Nancy's work, see *Paragraph*, 16, no. 2 (June 1993).
3. For this, one might read Christopher Finsk's excellent introduction to *The Inoperative Community*, as well as *Paragraph* 16, no. 2 (June 1993).
4. "Philosophy is that which thinks the present reality (the only one there is . . .) by thinking the present, the presence and presentation of reality." *Jean-Luc Nancy, The Gravity of Thought* 15. Hereafter references to the present volume will be cited as *Gravity*.
5. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, trans. Mary Schnackenberg Cattani (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).
6. What Habermas characterized as the attempt to "hold on to the *intentions* of the Enlightenment." In "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique*, 22 (1981): 9.
7. For example: François Laruelle, *Les philosophies de la différence* (Paris: PUF, 1986).
8. The theme of a "policing" of thought can already be found explicitly in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press 1965), Bxxv, p. 27, in the context of a definition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a "discipline of Reason." In this discussion, however, Nancy's remarks presumably refer to an article published by Jean-François Lyotard and Jacob Rogozinsky, entitled *La police de la pensée*, which was aimed at Ferry and Renaut's essay.

9. Nancy opposes to a system of *signification*, which represents meaning's closure upon itself, the opening and excess of *meaning* to which the closure of significations exposes us. More generally, meaning is said to be the element or the possibility for the production of significations, and is therefore a notion that is close to the concept of *signifiance*, which points toward the condition of possibility of significations. He writes, "Signification is located meaning, while meaning resides perhaps only in the coming of a possible signification" (*Gravity*, 10). This crucial distinction in Nancy's work can be traced back to Emmanuel Lévinas, in particular to his essay "Meaning and signification," in *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier, France: Fata Morgana, 1972). In a footnote in *SM* (21–22 n. 1) Nancy returns to and clarifies this distinction.
10. Nancy writes, for instance, "Christianity and empiricism have led us to ourselves, they have destined us, just as democracy, axiomatics, the critique of reason, human rights, art for art's sake, and the total man, etc. have" (*Gravity*, 48).
11. In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 154.
12. On this question, we refer the reader to Dominique Janicaud and François Mattéi's text, *La métaphysique à la limite* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983).
13. In *The Community at Loose Ends* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 5. Hereafter cited as *CLE*.
14. On this "to," see *Gravity*, 77.
15. For instance: Plato, *Theatetus*, English trans., F. M. Cornford, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 860 and Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, English trans. Richard Hope (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 7.
16. Among others, let us single out these passages: "The wonder before the fact that it happens bears the name and form of the philosophical for the West" (*Gravity*, 10) or "Ever since its foundation, wonder has been philosophy's virtue. . . . This certainly does not define 'a philosophy'—that is, if 'a philosophy' is still what is to be sought. But it does define the philosophical attitude and act (that are forgotten when one seeks to return to a signification of the world): to welcome the wonder before that which presents itself. Thought is this very welcoming" (*Gravity*, 67).
17. In what follows and in our translation of Nancy, we will risk here the neologisms, "passibility," and "to be passible to," because of their proximity to "passivity" and "ability."
18. For instance, *IC*, 98.
19. In *PF*, 14–16, Nancy develops the notion of a kind of self-reflexivity (without appropriation) of meaning by which the opening of meaning is at once an opening-to-self.
20. On this point, see *Gravity*, xxvi.
21. For a discussion of this judicial sense, see *C*, 50 ff.
22. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxvii, p. 27.
23. "Being is in no way different from existence, which is singular each time" (*CLE*, 1).
24. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 60/36. Hereafter cited as *BT*, with English pagination preceding German.
25. *CLE*, 1. Also, a few pages later, Nancy states: "There is no common being, but there is being *in* common" (*CLE*, 4). On this point, see *EF*, 69–70.

26. For instance, in the essay "Of Being-in-Common" (*CLE*, 2), he explains that Heidegger's *Mitsein*, or *Mit-da-sein*, "is not thought out *as radically or as decisively as it should be*" (emphasis added); also in *IC*, 3, 14, and in a more critical mode, *IC*, 103–4.
27. As he explains, "Immanence, if it were to come about, would instantly suppress community, or communication, as such" (*IC*, 12).
28. In paragraph 26 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger similarly rejected the conception of Being-with as the "summative result of the occurrence of several subjects" (*BT*, 163/125), that is, rejected the "categorial" understanding of others in terms of a juxtaposition of singular items that could be reckoned with or counted as numerals.
29. A term that already appears in Nancy's *L'impératif catégorique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 59, in the context of a discussion of origin, of its withdrawal and "non-simplicity."
30. *IC*, 14 (emphasis added). "Death," he also explains, is "indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself" (*IC*, 14).
31. But precisely by counting Being-with as an existentiale, Heidegger had already rendered this opposition untenable. He writes, for instance, "According to the analysis which we have now completed, Being with Others belongs to the Being of Dasein, which is an issue for Dasein in its very Being. Thus as Being-with, Dasein 'is' essentially for the sake of others. This must be understood as an existential statement as to its essence" (*BT*, 160/123).
32. "The community resists: in a sense, as I have said, it is resistance itself" *IC*, 58.
33. In a long footnote in *C* (55–56 n. 2), Nancy gives a "history" of his use of the term, as well as a list of works that have contributed to this "thought of *partage*."
34. *C*, 54–55. In "De l'être-en-commun" (a passage from the original text that is not available in English), Nancy offers the following senses of *partage*: "partition and repartition, dialogue, dialectic, difference of the identical." In *La communauté désoeuvrée*, 2d ed. (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1990), 211.
35. For a discussion of this term, see William McNeill's explanatory note in his translation of Heidegger's 1924 lecture *Der Begriff der Zeit*; *The Concept of Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 24–25 n. 8. Also: Theodore Kisiel, "On the Way to *Being and Time*," in *Research in Phenomenology* 15 (1985): 193–226 (and now in *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993]).
36. Aristotle, *The Physics*, English trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed., Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 292.
37. For instance, in *EF*, 72–73.
38. "The pronoun 'we' manifests such an undecidable: '*We*': *first-person plural*: let us try to imagine the difficulty of this simple designation," writes Nancy in "Of Being-in-Common" (*CLE*, 6; trans. modified).
39. On this point, see Nancy's introduction to *Who Comes After the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 8. Hereafter cited as *WCAS*.
40. In *Le sens du monde*, Nancy formulates the question of the "singular" being—the "some one"—in terms of the three thematics of the unique, the whatever (*le quelconque*), and the exposed. *SM*, 111–21.
41. *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 288/408.

42. "Finite History," in *BP*, 154. It is therefore not a matter of individuation, but of a finite coappearing (on Nancy's critique of the motif of individuation, see *IC*, 27). The necessity for the radicalization of Heidegger's thought of *Mitsein*, as Nancy explains in "Of Being-in-Common" (*CLE*, 3), lies in the former's failure to sufficiently extricate his thought from an individualistic perspective. Nancy's summary of his interpretation of Heidegger in "Shattered Love" (*IC*, 104) can be reconstructed as follows: on the one hand, he recognizes that Heidegger determined the essence of Dasein as a being-exposed-to-others, that is, in a nonsubjectivistic way; but, on the other hand, he maintains that Heidegger also kept his thinking of Dasein, to a certain extent, within an individualistic framework. Nancy goes as far as saying that, in *Being and Time*, the analytic of Being-with is only a "moment" and "is not returned to thematically" (*IC*, 103). The latter statement might be a little forced. First, Being-with is not a "moment" that could be negated in the movement of appropriation of Dasein, but an existentiale. As such, it is an essential item of Dasein's ontological constitution, an irreducible dimension of its existence. Furthermore, Being-with is in fact returned to in the second division of *Being and Time*, and described in its "authentic" modality (for example, *BT*, 344/298). The severity of this judgment is probably due to Nancy's attempt to radicalize what Heidegger had perhaps insufficiently posited, namely the co-extensiveness of Being-with and Being-oneself.
43. Nancy seeks to complicate Heidegger's famous distinction between the facticity (*Faktizität*) of existence and the factuality (*Tatsächlichkeit*) of things that are simply "present-at-hand." On this question, see "The Decision of Existence," in *BP*, 82–109; *EF*, 157–58; and *SM*, 94 ff.
44. *Le Temps et l'autre* (Paris: PUF, Editions Quadrige, 1983), 37.
45. This sense of finitude can be understood against the background of Heidegger's reinterpretation of finitude, for instance in the lecture "On Time and Being," where finitude was rethought in relation to the event of appropriation, *Ereignis*, and no longer in reference to the infinite. We read for example, "The finitude of appropriation, of Being . . . is no longer thought in terms of the relation to infinity, but rather as finitude in itself: finitude, end, limit, one's own. . . . The new concept of finitude is thought in this manner—that is, in terms of Appropriation itself, in terms of the concept of one's own." "Summary of a Seminar on the Lecture 'Time and Being,'" in *On Time and Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 54.
46. On this "concept," see "Exscription," in *BP*, in particular, pp. 337–39.

GRAVITY

(The following are all notes from the translators.)

1. *Lourd*, in French, also has the sense of something difficult, hard to bear. In the passage that follows, the reader should hear both senses.
2. Literally, "heavy with consequences." This means that which has many serious consequences.
3. Literally, "it falls under meaning," and has the sense of that which is obvious.

PART ONE THE FORGETTING OF PHILOSOPHY

1. *Sens*—Nancy plays often on the different senses of this term: "meaning," "sense," "direction," and "perceptual faculty." "Meaning" and "sense" will suffice in most cases and will serve to translate no other words unless indicated.
2. Nancy plays here on the polysemy of the word *ouverture*, which usually signifies "opening" but is also used in the moral sense of being "open-minded," as in the expression *ouverture d'esprit*. On this distinction, see *PF*, 16–17.
3. *L'à venir*, literally, "what is yet to come," is also a homonym of *l'avenir*, "the future."
4. Solon: Athenian archon whose name is associated with a particularly legalistic style of administration.
5. *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. with notes by T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 11.
6. *Finie*: in both senses of the term, that is, either a philosophy that has reached its "end" (*fin*), is "finished," or is finite.
7. *À même*—on this expression, see the translator's preface.
8. *Même* is usually just an intensifier. *Le soi-même*, though it could be translated literally as something like "the self itself," has come to designate simply "the self." However, Nancy here seems to be calling attention to the literal meaning of *même*—"same."
9. Even though, in ordinary German usage, the term *Handgriff* means a "manipulation" and has been rendered in the various French translations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as either *mécanisme*, or *fonctionnement*, Nancy here attempts a more literal translation of it (*coup de main*), one that would preserve the reference to the hand. We have therefore not resorted to Smith's rendering as "modes of activity" and have followed Nancy's retranslation.
10. Nancy refers here to the untranslatable neologism coined by Jacques Lacan (in "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," in *Ecrits*) in order to render the *Deutung* of *Bedeutung* (signification). On this point, we refer the reader to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's *Title of the Letter*, 61–78.
11. On the concept of "touch" in Nancy's work, see Jacques Derrida, "*Le Toucher* (Touch/to touch him)," in *Paragraph*, 122–57.
12. In the passage that follows, Nancy draws upon the double meaning of the word *expérience* (experiment/experience), which we have rendered accordingly as the context demands.
13. An expression which Nancy borrows from Thomas Mann, as he reminds us in a footnote to his essay "Myth Interrupted," in *The Inoperative Community*, 160 n. 6.
14. "*Représentation/conception/vision du monde*" all mean "worldview." Nancy plays on these different forms in the passages that follow.
15. "The West at Its Ends": *L'Occident arrivé à ses fins*. There is a play on words in the title of this chapter; the idiom *arriver à ses fins* means "to get what one wants," though it literally means "to reach or arrive at one's ends." Throughout this chapter, Nancy plays on the double sense of *arriver*: both "to arrive" and "to happen."
16. In English in the original.
17. In English in the original.
18. Nancy plays here on the verb *vouloir*, which is generally used in the sense of "to want" but which, when substantified as *le vouloir*, signifies "will."

19. Untranslatable play on "same" (*Gravity*, pp. 23; 89, note 8) and "other." *Nous autres* (literally, we others) ordinarily designates an "us" that has the more inclusive sense of "all of us," as in *nous autres artistes* (we artists). Yet Nancy is here emphasizing the fact that this "we" exists only as exposed and is therefore in some sense "other." For instance, Nancy writes in "Finite History": "The otherness of existence consists in its non-presence to itself, which comes from its birth and death. We are *others*—each one for the other and each for him/herself." In *BP*, 155.
20. This expression is borrowed from the full title of La Boëtie's (1530–1563) celebrated critique of tyranny as the rule of the one, *De La Servitude Volontaire ou Contr'un* (Geneva: Droz, 1987), translated as *Slaves by Choice* (Egham Hill: Runnymede, 1988).

PART TWO THE WEIGHT OF A THOUGHT

1. The book from which this essay is drawn (*Le poids d'une pensée* [Sainte-Foy, Québec: Le Griffon d'argile, 1991], 113–24) contains a series of photographs (not reproduced here) depicting someone named Georges with captions by Nancy.

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