

Embers of the Sublime: Sacrifice and the Sensation of Existence.

In *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (2007), Daniel Heller-Roazen traces the history of what one might call a feeling of being alive, a feeling designating an underlying unity of the senses, from its origins in a 'common sensation' (*koinē aisthēsis* or *sunaisthēsis*) linked by Aristotle to touch and the stoic Chrysippus to an untranslatable notion of *oikeiōsis*. Cognate with *oikos*, meaning hearth, *oikeiōsis* designates both self-appropriation and 'the "first impulse" common to all living things', the fire that burns in the heart of the living (2007: 37, 105-8). Overtaken by questions of consciousness and mind-body dualism, the interest in such a feeling falls out of fashion over the course of philosophical modernity, its legacy discernible only in its negation. The nineteenth century is marked by an apparent growth of 'coenaesthopathic' disorders, ranging from the documentation of body parts devoid of sensation to the *dépersonnalisation* diagnosed by Pierre Janet. Heller-Roazen suggests that what is at stake here is a crisis of sensation, which spreads from madhouses at the margins of society to become pervasive across modern industrial experience. Twentieth-century philosophy perhaps testifies to a flickering or dimming of vitality:

Are the great affects of the twentieth century, the sensible impressions discovered then and not before, not all feelings of the progressive retreat and vanishing of all feeling? The 'poverty of experience' (*Erfahrungsgarmut*) identified by Benjamin, the state of

‘being left empty’ (*Leergelassenheit*) said by Heidegger to define ‘deep boredom’ [. . .], the overwhelming insomniac impression of the bare fact that there is (*il y a*), described by Levinas as an absolute ‘experience of depersonalization’ [. . .]. Any ethics worthy of the name must confront the promise and the threat contained in the sensation that today we may no longer, or may not yet, sense anything at all. (2007: 289-90)

The general tenor of Heller-Roazen’s argument overlaps with a plethora of concerns (dating from Weber) over the disenchantment of modernity. The ambiguity of the quotation’s final sentence raises the prospect, however, of sensation’s return, as if, hitherto obscured by metaphysics, it were paradoxically only now, after the death of God, that we might know what exactly it is that we feel.

The ambiguity opens Heller-Roazen’s work onto that of Jean-Luc Nancy and, ultimately, Bernard Stiegler. Much like the other names he puts forward as analysts of modern and postmodern disaffection, these respective thinkers of post-Derridean materialism locate affective existence in the decomposition of any ontological intimacy, which is to say, in the absence of the kind of privileged subjectivity that filled the place of the inner flame, or *oikos*, in modern thought. What Nancy has called the ‘withdrawal of the gods’ exposes us to an end of sensation that also renews it, by revealing ‘sense’ – in both physiological and existential senses of the term – to consist in our sublime and joyful exposure to nothing. It is our finitude that makes us feel alive, and any lingering sense of our disenchantment can be traced to

our inability to grasp this fact. Stiegler is more pessimistic, arguing that our prevailing sense of disaffection is directly traceable to the collapse of metaphysics read by Nancy as our emancipation. The two are nonetheless in agreement that our sensory vitality finds its origin not in the self-touching intimacy of an *oikos* of the subject, but without – in an encounter with the limits of affect. The necessity of going beyond ourselves means that our existence is prosthetic, or technical, understandable only in terms of technical prostheses that serve to internalise affect, and whose very existence testifies to the absence of inner sense.

Central to Nancy and Stiegler's respective analyses of the decomposition of inner sensibility is an experience that Heller-Roazen, passing from Ancient Greece to industrial modernity without dwelling on modern aesthetics, problematically but unsurprisingly leaves aside, namely the sublime. He is not alone in this respect: recent critics have debated at length whether the sublime is still a viable concept in our contemporary aesthetic and ethical landscape (see Battersby 2007: 14-20). The problem bears, in part, on its alleged contamination by a metaphysics of the subject, which is complicated in turn by its connotations of sacrifice and terror. In its modern tradition, the sublime is not a feeling at all, but the sacrifice of the senses to reason, which translates into a redemptive, respectful awe before the terrifying monstrosity of existence. The Kantian conception arguably still retains a trace of the classical *oikeiōsis*, in the idea of an underlying (transcendental) substrate that, through the self-sacrifice of the empirical subject, allows reason to recuperate what the senses cannot grasp. Reworked by Nancy, who crucially rids it of its sacrificial structure, the

sublime comes to connote the ungroundedness of privileged subjectivity. But there is an ambiguity over what this ungrounding entails. Nancy seems to imply the prospect of increasingly coming into contact with a sublime 'évanouissement du sensible', a fading away of the sensible encountered at the limits of experience, but in saying this, he comes into contact with what Stiegler has described as a 'catastrophe du sensible' – a vitiation of affect that is anything but sublime, and which, following the mass-murderer Richard Durn, he identifies with 'the loss of the feeling of existing [*la perte du sentiment d'exister*]' (Stiegler 2010: 89). We find ourselves caught between the sublime and the crapulous, in an ambiguous zone between two ostensibly contradictory experiences of nothingness. Stiegler goes on to claim that this loss is directly attributable to a short-circuiting of the sacrificial processes of sublimation that give rise to the sublime, at the heart of our culture of excess.

Smoke without Fire

Writing in *The Muses*, Nancy asserts that there is 'no immanence of the subject [. . .], nor any ground of its luminosity' (Nancy 1996:33/60). In other words, he rejects any identification of subjectivity with a self-sensing *oikeiōsis*, an inner flame or hearth from which the rest of our sensing would be derived. In the place of an *oikos*, he posits an ontology of finite, 'ecotechnical' bodies without interiority, existing *partes extra partes* in a state of prosthetic interrelation.

The concept of ecotechnicity emerges from a working through of what Heidegger criticised as the global-technological nihilism of treating technics as an extension of the privileged subject, which seeks to immortalise itself through the use of technical instruments to subordinate the earth to presence (Heidegger 1993: 74-6). Nancy argues that technology cannot be understood as the body of instruments through which we translate our natural intimacy into the external world (Nancy 2003: 25/45). Existence itself is technical: '*l'existence en tant que techné*', as he puts it in *Corpus* (Nancy 2008: 101/89). Technics connotes what it is that comes to be in the absence of a metaphysical origin:

'Creation' is the *techné* of bodies [. . .]. Our world is the world of technics, the world whose cosmos, nature, gods, and indeed the very articulation of whose system, is exposed as technics: that is to say, the world of ecotechnics. Ecotechnics functions with technical apparatuses into which we are plugged in multiple ways. But what it *makes* is our very bodies, which it brings into the world and connects to the system. [. . .] It's in the creation of bodies that ecotechnics has the *sense* that we look for in vain in what remains of heaven and spirit. (2008: 89/78-9 [translation modified])

This account of ecotechnicity furnishes the basis of Nancy's claim that the relation of art to the body should not be understood as one of artifice to nature, prosthesis to ground. In the absence of any *oikos* or *oikeiōsis* of the subject – in the absence of an inner sense, or what Nancy calls 'a sense of

the assumption of the senses – that is, of their dissolution or sublimation’ (Nancy 1996: 13/30) – there is only the heterogeneity of multiple, discontinuous senses. Nancy reels off a list of the multiple senses found in the animal kingdom (thermoreception, electroreception, proprioception, and so on...) (Nancy 1996: 12/29). The multiple arts consist within this multiplicity not as the mimesis, or mimeses, of corporeal sense, but as distinct senses in their own right. As *techne*, the arts reveal the technicity of our ‘own’ human senses: we can no more appropriate the latter than we can claim possession of poetry, sculpture and literature. We exist outside of ourselves, through technical appendages that are appended to – nothing. Their discontinuity derives from the absence of an underlying ground: ‘technics is the obsolescence of the origin and of the end: the exposition to a lack of ground and foundation’ (Nancy 1996: 26/50).

If art nowadays appears ‘exhausted’, unable to work out what it is any more, that is because it always already was exhausted, ‘vestigial’, however much we sought to bind it to the kind of metaphysical *telos* that no longer holds sway. In the absence of an intimate *oikos*, or ‘hearth’ of subjectivity, there is only ‘fumée sans feu’, the withdrawal of any supersensible origin, which is captured in art *qua* technics: ‘Certainly, for theology, there is fire, it is the fire of God and it is only fire that truly and fully is: the rest is cinders and smoke. [. . .] Art is smoke without fire [*fumée sans feu*], vestige without God, and not presentation of the Idea’ (Nancy 1996: 95-6/154). Far from claiming to touch the suprasensible beyond, the image (much like the body) traces the limits of sensibility, the impossibility of making contact with gods.

Aesthetics as domain and as thinking of the sensible does not mean anything other than that. [. . .] The trace is not the sensible trace of an insensible [. . .]: it is, in its very sense, the sensible tracing of the sensible [*le tracement (du) sensible, en tant que son sens même*]. Atheism itself. (Nancy 1996: 97/155 [translation modified])

Touching the Sublime

Where once the senses were thought to return to the classical, fire-connoting, grounding figures of the *oikos* and Chrysippian *oikeiōsis*, Nancy relates the tracing of sensibility to the sublime – an experience traditionally identified with the negation of sensation, the stilling of the passions. In its dominant Kantian conception, the sublime pertains to a pacifying encounter with an (infinite) magnitude that exceeds the ability of the imagination to process sensory experience. Kant links it to a non-sensory experience of negative pleasure, the result of a confrontation between the subject and Nature in which the former encounters in the latter an experience of ‘reason[’s] supremacy over sensibility’ (Kant 2007: 102 [274]). In one of Kant’s more prominent, recurrent examples, the supersensible experience of touching upon reason is found in self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of all corporeal motives out of respect for universal duty toward the moral law. According to the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788):

Actions of others that are done with great sacrifice and for the sake of duty alone may indeed be praised by calling them *noble* and *sublime* deeds, but only insofar as there are traces suggesting that they were done wholly from respect for duty and not from ebullitions of feeling. (Kant 1997: 72-3 [5:85])

Reread in the light of Nancy's critique of any putative inner and unifying sense of 'the assumption of the senses', Kant's account of the sublime stages the recuperation, through reason, of the transcendental unity of subjectivity, at the point where sensory experience breaks down.

Nancy reworks the sublime in a manner that draws parallels with Jean-François Lyotard's reading of Kant. Lyotard locates the sublime in an impossibility of representation that renders it incompatible with any *sensus communis* (Lyotard 1994: 228/274). Writing in 'The Sublime Offering', in *A Finite Thinking*, Nancy similarly presents it not as the dialectical sublation of sensibility in a (non-)feeling of reason, but as the experience of the limits of sensation in the absence of any supersensible beyond. 'The offering does not offer – despite certain pompous undertones of the Kantian text, of texts devoted to the sublime and even the word 'sublime' itself – the satisfaction of a mind capable of the infinite' (Nancy 2003: 238/186). The sublime consists in an exposure to the limits of the sensible. '*It is the sensibility of the fading away of the sensible* [elle est la sensibilité de l'évanouissement du sensible]' (2003: 234/180-1). It designates the syncopation of feeling in its inability to feel, a moment of rupture where presence withdraws and the imagination touches nothing.

If *sentiment* proper is always subjective, if it is even the kernel of subjectivity in a primordial self-sensing [. . .] then the sentiment of the sublime emerges from or is affected as precisely the reversal of sentiment and subjectivity. [. . .] This sensing is not a sensing of self, and in this sense is not a sentiment at all. It is no longer a matter of sensing, but of being exposed. [. . .] The sublime offering is the limit of presentation. (2003: 236, 239/183-4, 188)

Rejecting the Kantian attempt to withdraw the sublime from the realm of sensory experience, Nancy makes another move, here, that Kant will not. For the latter, art is beautiful but only nature is sublime. For Nancy, by contrast, and in line with his rejection of a binary opposition between nature and technics, the experience of the sublime is ecotechnical, which is to say, both an experience of ourselves as technical, and one that is also created through technics, through the art that traces the limits of sensibility. 'In truth, it is in art and as art that the sublime offering takes place [. . .]. Perhaps there is no 'pure' sublime, purely distinguished from the beautiful' (2003: 240/189-90). He also affords the sublime a relation to pleasure: 'The sublime is that through which the beautiful *touches* us [. . .]. It is joy and not enjoyment [*la joie, non la jouissance*]. To experience joy is to be exposed in enjoyment, to be offered there' (2003: 240/189-90). As the moment of joy within *jouissance*, the sublime is a moment of redemption in the face of exposure to the terrifying excess of existence.

Bonfire of Profanities

Nancy's most decisive revision of the sublime, however – and arguably the one with most import for his own philosophical project – is his rejection of any trace of its relation to sacrifice, as the self-sacrifice of sensibility to reason; the sacrifice of material self-interest to freedom. This is far clearer in the slightly amended version of 'The Sublime Offering', published in *Une Pensée finie* (1990), than in the original, 1984 version.¹ Presumably adjusted in light of discussions of sacrifice in *The Experience of Freedom* (Nancy 1993: 52/74) and 'The Unsacrificeable' (also in *Une Pensée finie*), the revised essay states quite explicitly:

This is what Kant tells us: when sacrificed (*ausgeopfert*), imagination acquires 'a greater impact and force'. But this occurs in fact *at the very limit* of economy. Sacrifice is inoperative there. Imagination is not sacrificed, it is what it is: the *opening* of the schema. (Nancy 2003: 237/185 [new translation])

The passage is in keeping with Nancy's slightly later claim, in *The Muses* (1994), that art, nowadays, is in the process of freeing itself from notions of metaphysical destiny. What is at stake in the sublime is not sacrifice – a term that Nancy repeatedly takes to be contaminated by metaphysics, inseparable from the attempt to instantiate, 'or 'transappropriate', an ontological ground (2003: 75/103). The sublime experience is of existence

‘abandoning itself’, or ‘offering itself up’, to nothing, as finite. There is no metaphysical beyond with which to enter into exchange, only our exposure – through technics, or ecotechnics – to finitude: ‘finite and unsacrificeable existence, which is offered up for sharing’ (2003: 77/105).

In saying this, Nancy makes a more radical distinction than Kant. The latter identifies sublime self-sacrifice with a sense of ‘enthusiasm’ and an ‘astonishment amounting almost to terror’, attributable to the simultaneous fear and emancipation of being torn from the material senses (Kant 2007: 99 [269]). But sacrifice and terror, insofar as linked to the sublime, are crucially distinguished from ‘fanaticism’ (*Schwärmerei*), which Kant understands as a ‘maniacal’ and piously brazen ‘*delusion* beyond all the bounds of sensibility’, an excessive belief in one’s incarnation of metaphysical truth (2007: 102 [272], 105 [275]; Kant 2011: 57 [2:251]). Understandably wary of the kind of theodic thinking that would see suffering legitimated, redeemed, by the promise of sublime ecstasy, Nancy seems to suggest that sacrifice – as distinct from its ‘deconstructed’ form of ‘finite offering’ (Nancy 2005: 140n/15n) – already falls on the side of fanaticism. Where art *qua* technics simply delimits the limits of the sensible, sacrifice is the attempt to do the opposite. The sacrificial act seeks to transgress the limit that separates the empirical from the beyond, the profane from the sacred. His favoured illustration of this is the Nazi, whose sacrifice of the Jew performatively enacts the ‘truth’ of Aryan supremacy (Nancy 2003: 70/95; Nancy 2005: 38/78). Sacrifice profanes the sacred by elevating the profane to the status of sacred, transgressing the limit of sensibility by purportedly rendering

sensible intangible metaphysical privilege. Sacrifice, in other words, performs the restitution of inner sense.

In the religious vocabulary of the sacred, this crossing [*franchissement*] of the distance [*écart*] used to constitute sacrifice or transgression: as I have already said, sacrifice is legitimated transgression. It consists in *making sacred* (or consecrating), which is to say, in doing that which, by rights, cannot be done [. . .].

But the distinction of the image is not properly speaking sacrificial, though it closely resembles sacrifice. It neither legitimates nor transgresses: it crosses at a distance from withdrawal, all the while upholding its distinctness through the mark of the image. Or rather, through the mark that it is, it simultaneously installs withdrawal and a passage that nonetheless does not pass. [. . .] Sacrifice effects an assumption, a sublation of the profane into the sacred: the image, on the contrary, gives itself in an opening that indissociably forms both its presence and its separation [*écart*]. (Nancy 2005: 3/14-15)

Rather than representation, sacrifice is ‘super-representation [*la sur-représentation*]’ (2005: 38/78). And it violates the sublime, by refusing to countenance the limit of sensation, the withdrawal of presence from touch.

The criticism that this aspect of Nancy’s work is undeconstructive has been made at length elsewhere (Moore 2011: 176; Moore 2012), and this is not the place to rehearse the criticism. One might nonetheless wonder why

Nancy, habitually concerned to rehabilitate contaminated concepts like representation, ontology and community, seems so keen to scapegoat sacrifice. In a turn of phrase that hints at a suspicion of residual haptocentrism in Nancy, Derrida has termed this methodological rehabilitation of concepts Nancy's 'sort of absolute, irredentist, and post-deconstructive realism', according to which 'the Thing touches itself, is touched [*la Chose se touche*] even there where one touches Nothing' (Derrida 2005: 46/60). Where Nancy locates the sublime in a touching of the limits of sensibility – a limit that sacrifice supposedly refuses to acknowledge –, Derrida's point is that touch is also deferred, subject to *différance*. We cannot know that what we are touching is the limit, because there can be no neat delimitation of the sensible from the insensible, the sublime from the sublatory. The limit does not exist, except in representation, where its absence is sacrificed.

If the sublime, as Nancy posits, is 'perhaps' not pure, then one might wonder whether sacrifice isn't constitutive of its impurity. Would the redemptive moment of joy within the terror of *jouissance* not mark the sacrifice of *jouissance*, the sacrificial (self-)recovery of the subject from the brink of its destitution?

Pharmacology of Fire

An uncanny doubling of Nancy's sublime 'évanouissement du sensible' is found in the work of Bernard Stiegler, who identifies contemporary

experience with a 'catastrophe du sensible' that coincides with the apparent destitution of sublimity (Stiegler 2005). It's perhaps not entirely clear that a fading away and a catastrophe of the sensible would differ from one another, except in degree of intensity. The one designates the experience of existing outside of oneself as pure ecotechnicity, multiple senses without interiority, in a sublime ecstasy that falls just short of death. The other is not so much a touching of nothingness as its perceived and vitiating omnipresence. In Stieglerian terms, the 'catastrophe' of sensory experience refers to a '*déficit de sensibilité*' – a disenfranchising anaesthesia, rather than an emancipatory encounter with the limits of sensation (Stiegler 2005: 75). Stiegler characterises it variously in terms of a 'decomposition of reasons for living' and a 'terrifying reign of despair' (Stiegler 2006a: 92). He has also repeatedly remarked upon its striking correspondance with 'la perte du sentiment d'exister', a loss of the feeling of being alive, an apparent nostalgia for which is exemplified in Richard Durn's explanation for the mass murder he perpetrated in Nantes, back in March 2002 (Stiegler 2010: 16). This experience of affectlessness, Stiegler suggests, pertains not to the sublime, but to desublimation, or the short-circuiting of the processes of sublimation through which we encounter the sublime. As he writes in *De la Mystagogie* (as yet unpublished): 'In its essential negativity, the structure of the Kantian sublime already contains within it the Freudian question of sublimation.' Desire is created through a process of sublimation in which the object of desire is constantly deferred, kept just out of reach of the subject. The creation of desire, and of affect, is thus bound up with the Derridean concept of *différance*, which is always a '*différance du plaisir*', a 'deferral

[*diffèremenf*] of satisfaction' (Stiegler 2006a: 84). The sublime is experienced in proportion to the *différance*, or deferral, of *jouissance*.

The loss of the feeling of existence is thus bound up with the collapse of the deferral that gives rise to the sublime. Stiegler repeatedly links this collapse to technologies of consumerism, whose relentless and exploitative saturation of the senses leaves us affectively exhausted (Stiegler 2010: 29). Our addiction to heightened, short-term stimulation works to the detriment of deferred satisfaction, by short-circuiting the *différance du plaisir*. More problematically for Nancy, Stiegler also argues that the collapse of the sublime is bound up with the debasement of the concept of sacrifice, which he valorises positively as the originary technics of *différance*, the sacrifice of immediacy for the sake of constituting a longer-term horizon of expectation.

Let us return, at this point, to the earlier theme of fire and the *oikeiōsis*, or inner flame of subjectivity. Although in agreement with Nancy that sense is encountered through the technics that stand in for an *oikos* of the subject, Stiegler is reluctant to renounce the thinking of interiority. He argues that the human is nothing more than an internalisation of our technical ek-sistence. 'There has *never* been interiority – if we understand by that an original source unsullied by any affection. Interiority is constituted *through the internalisation* of a *transitional* externality that pre-cedes it' (Stiegler 2010: 41). Drawing on classical mythology (the myth of Epimetheus), he moreover argues that sacrifice, understood in terms of the domestication (or internalisation) of fire, was the originary technics through which we arrive at inner sense, with sacrificial offerings to the gods being the means through which we reach beyond and thereby acknowledge our

mortality, placing ourselves between the animal and divine realms (Stiegler 1998: 190/198). If sacrifice gives rise to the sublime, it does so not by seeking to collapse the sacred into the present, but by acknowledging its withdrawal in a gesture that also sublimates desire, by renouncing the prospect of enjoying the offering.

It would be wrong to think Stiegler immune to the concerns that lead Nancy to insulate ecotechnical offering from the kind of metaphysical contamination he deems inherent to sacrifice. His point is that sacrifice, much like fire and, indeed, technics in general, is 'pharmacological', meaning both cure *and* poison, 'both remedy *and* poison but also poison *and* remedy' (Stiegler 2006b: 115), irreducibly susceptible to the drift into fundamentalism of which Nancy is so suspicious, but also the only to avoid such a drift. Channelled in the right way, sacrifice presents itself as the solution to a culture addicted to immediate gratification. The problem, according to Stiegler, is that 'youths need to sacrifice themselves' for something (Stiegler 2006a: 92). And if denied the chance to 'participer pour sentir' – to partake in the kind of construction of symbolic order that would enable them to escape disaffection (Stiegler 2005: 55-7) – then they will seek to attach themselves to alternative causes, alternative possibilities of sublimation. Nancy decouples the sublime from any connotation of fundamentalism, or terrorism, by distinguishing it from sacrifice. Stiegler, however, moves in the opposite direction, diagnosing contemporary fanaticism as a mere 'fantasy of sacrifice', the result of desublimation giving rise to a 'symbolic misery' that is precisely 'without *sacrifice*' (Stiegler 2006a: 169, 87). *Pace* Nancy, fanatical fundamentalists do not simply profane the sacred through the

pretention to incarnate metaphysical truth (as Nancy claims of the Aryan). Such figures of martyrdom rather embody an 'energy of despair' that '*tends to rationalise their destructive drives* by projecting into them the return of the sublime' to a world from which it has vanished:

The energies of despair are not just a fact of lone terrorists, but of all forms of suicide undertaken, accomplished and not merely 'attempted'. They tend to be sublimated (and to compensate for the process of desublimation) at the cost of staging all kinds of massacres – they are liberations of the death drive in the pure form that results from the unbinding of drives, which stems from the limitless and destructive exploitation of libidinal energy by hyperindustrial capitalism. (Stiegler 2006a: 80-1)

This is disenchantment at its most virulent, where the feeling of not existing becomes endemic and the affectively disenfranchised find themselves driven to perform a sublime they can no longer feel.

Conclusion: Two Senses of Nothingness

In the absence of any inner flame, or *oikos*, we are left, between Nancy and Stiegler, with two feelings of nothingness: the sublime *rien* of Nancy and, in Stiegler, the nothingness that lives on in the wake of the sublime, the feeling of not existing. Nancy affirms the withdrawal of the gods and the end of the

age of sacrifice, shifting twentieth-century disenchantment onto the persistence of the latter – onto the residual contamination of smoke by fire, of representation by the sacrificial. For Stiegler, by contrast, disenchantment does not stop with the emancipation of an ecotechnical sublime, but rather culminates in its liquidation. Where Nancy affirms the decoupling of technics, or representation, from sacrifice, Stiegler laments it. We create the sublime by sublimating and deferring desire, by way of sacrifice.

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