

On Jean-Luc Nancy and Painting in the Grotto

Andrea Gyenge

Abstract: In his meditation on hand paintings in caves, *Painting in the Grotto*, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy locates the foundation of man and subjectivity in touching and the gesture rather than sight. He resists the kind of writing that places the eye and seeing as the origin of man as conceived by the Enlightenment. For example, Sigmund Freud often wrote texts that began with 'imagine if you will,' that I call 'writing to the eye.' Instead, Nancy begins his work with 'man began', which I note as Nancy's own textual gesture of inaugurating a meditation on origins. Nancy's audacious opening sentence also pulls his text away from a historical or anthropological reading of the cave paintings that treats the paintings as objects. The text is also unusual in that it reveals at the end that touching, which is blind, is the beginning of sight. In this way, Nancy's text resists a linear reading. Finally, I discuss Nancy's unique move of placing an image of his writing next to the printed text of his book to show that writing is also a blind touching and a gesture.

What kind of statement is this "man began?"¹ Is it even a statement? It seems almost anachronistic, a statement that seems foolish and naïve, the most clichéd of sentences. How tired we are of hearing how man began. And then it became illegal to even say anything about how man began, always accused of eradicating plurality in the face of a universal truth claim. How we became terrified of how man began. But these two words are uttered as a cut away from the ordinary, both deceiving and revealing in their simplicity. It is a kind of laughing remark that is simultaneously a play, but speaks as Nancy's own serious gesture. It is also a peculiar paradox that suggests that it is only man who can speak of beginnings, that to speak of beginnings is to be already pierced by the strangeness, by the unique and only status. Man is beginning, the only one who began. And so the inauguratory statement of "man began"² in order to call attention to the order of origins, the foundational order with his own originary gesture, his gesture of origins. Nancy is beginning at the very place, or placing himself at the very beginning, at the very statement, which marks our singularity to him, of the moment of language where the impossible looms up from the inside of language, and turns it inside out. Nancy is not unaware of the confrontation in the heterogeneous act of writing of this origin of man from the gesture. He places the image of his writing next to the textual page as the touching of text and image. It is both literally and conceptually making a margin, making a dividing flow, bringing attention to the stuttering and seismic space. It is Nancy locating himself precisely at the opening and thereby making the opening at the mouth of the cave, marking himself not as an outsider as there is no outside, but rather at the centre of the dizzy space as the one who will be the speaker of beginnings, who will begin the beginnings.

It is also a cut away from chronological or anthropological history that can only reduce the hand on the wall to a mystical distance, to a revered historical object. "Man began"³ is cut away from any idea of a start or a point-zero. It disarms a history that is too close to itself in every object studied; at once it leaves this history and reveals it for what it is. This history is always a turning

away from. In the Historical, man is already posited as formed, as a closed linear progression that has no opening or future. We only look back from now to place man at the beginning, a kind of wrapping around, a binding circle. Man is not a surprise, but a destiny of the world. The world birthed man. We are our own object as deciphered and decipherable. Our emergence corresponds to the complete and total closed horizon of time. Man is already, man is the path-maker, the driving force forward. It is man whose singularity is effaced by the making of his presence as a totality in the world. It is a discourse that does not see the paradox in 'man began.' This discourse is asking if man is capable of metamorphosis, if man needs a metamorphosis. It cannot speak to Nancy's text which says that man is metamorphosis and that metamorphosis is not man's change from some earlier form, but the word of his birth.

Nancy also resists any desire to make his text linear. He creates a responsive text where he starts at the beginning, but also starts at the end. The second surprise comes rising up at the end. The first surprise is that the foundation of man lies in the touch and the second surprise is that presentation, painting, the eye and the gaze began by this blind touch, but that this was secondary to the beginning of man. The birth of man, man as birth was the initial gesture of the hand touching the wall. The recognition of self on the wall, the presence on the wall, constantly emanating here and now, present as presence through absence. It is there because he is not. It is the sudden dividing, making of two, self and other. I become self by dividing. Before this, man was nothing. But this is a sentence that is without ground or meaning. There is no before man, there is only man began through the touch. We are strange because we are two and we showed that we knew that we showed. It is the awful strangeness of this hand on the wall so absolutely same as me, but radically other. It is coming from me, but yet it is without me. A most sharp and precise cut. We could use another word instead of strange, we could say uncanny. Man is the uncanny because the similar is always the uncanny. To say uncannily similar is also to make a joke. But it is the same moment where Freud walks down the train corridor and sees himself as other and remarks at the uncanny. It is the uncanny from the animal in front of us; a kind of diluted reminder, that uncanniness is our being and our becoming. Instead of our singularity eluding

1 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Painting in the Grotto," in *The Muses* (California: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 69.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

them, our consciousness as their lack, it is the sharp carving out of our space through the impossibly porous animal in front of us, the “troubling familiarity”⁴ close enough to touch and yet it is as if our hands pass through it. Through the gesture, man exited, was the fold in the flow, the demarcation. It is the marking of the inside and the outside. The gesture is his birth. The making of man as separate from animal, animal from man, to distinguish and to extinguish.

The hands in the cave are before Time, outside of comprehensible time. How could we ever have a face for that first man? We are even before Freud’s ‘imagine if you will’ story of the primal horde. The theatricality is lost, displaced; we are not in the order of imagining, of the spectator role. This is not a story where we are asked to be the viewers, stretching our eyes over and above to watch. This is not the theatre of the past. ‘Imagine if you will’ in a text is always an invocation of the eye because we are asked both to watch the theatre and to be illuminated by it. Nancy has left behind this writing to the eye. “Man began”⁵ is his own touching gesture, gesture of touching, not a sudden and stunning glare, but a grazing, making a text with texture, not a light, but a form. And yet, there is a secret of this text. That it is the story of the eye and it is telling us that “the eye, which up until then had done nothing but perceive things, discovers itself seeing. It sees this: that it sees.”⁶ This text is a cutting through from the back and from the front. As we read it is filled with turns, but at the end, it is itself revealed.

It is necessary to further consider this work against the Enlightenment as the enlightening, of man coming to be through light, light cutting the darkness, the eye as the foundation of man. It is here the absolute reversal and irony, that touch was blind and so without darkness. Blindness is not the absence of sight, but its birth. We have understood blindness always as a consequence of the eye’s transgression, the sign of its weakness, its mortality and inevitable destiny. Instead, it is blindness that brought seeing into seeing’s momentous emergence. Blindness illuminated the eye. And then there was lightness and darkness. But we can also think of how we have known this because it was transformed into a prohibition. Touching became the true other of the eye, its greatest threat. In a single gesture, we touched and ceased to touch at once. You shall not touch; you shall not touch the painting. The touches of the painter are marked as final. The last caress before the glossing over and the shimmering surface begins to mark the severe distance of the eye. The prohibition is revealed to us through the gesture of the hand on the wall.

We are also approaching another turn in this text that the place of self par excellence, the mirror, was there before there was the eye to see it. The mirror was also a blind space. The gesture of the hand was making-mirror, the carving out of the mirror. It was also the surprise of this mirror-making and not yet the mesmerizing, not yet the hypnosis. Nancy calls it the “first self portrait”.⁷ This move against enlightenment from the eye is also a move against the face, the face as man, the self-portrait as the face with the eyes that gaze back. The first self-portrait was instead the hand, the blind and faceless hand. Or the hand that became face and then man laughed in the face of his hand.

By Nancy placing his pen on the page, he makes another move to show that he must somehow bring writing to the grotto; find the writer alongside the painter. It is the same grotto which had both

hands and symbols, scratched together side by side, but yet with a yawning chasm between them, just like the margins between his writing-image and his text. It is also another gesture, the finger against the wall, the finger as the first pen. Writing as another presencing and absencing. But it is even more traumatizing because of the voice and clamour of the text that has no silence or insignification. It has no beautiful at once presence and is seemingly its other, weighed down by signification and leaving behind a string of meanings. But his writing-image on the page is bringing writing to this scene, that before writing meant, it showed, before it was deciphered, it was nothing. He finds something of the writer in the painter and something of the painter in the writer. He must make the page and the words present before he recognizes it as the locus of meaning, as the signifier. It is a kind of writing that does not flee before the hand and the image, but finds in it something like a brother, coupled in the familial of the monstrously similar and of presence and absence. What else does ‘man began’ show to us? It reminds us of the consequent closing of writing. In writing, the “I” is a substitution for an absence. I am absent from writing and is replaced with “I.” If painting is the surprise of presentation, then writing is the haunted space where the violent insertion of “I” is always a corrosive one. Writing is not calm and nor is it silent. It is doubled over into itself. The incessant substitution and making-symbol of writing is the marker of the grief of our singularity. Writing is this shattering of man because a surprise is always a coming of knowledge. In Nancy’s first knowledge must come our first realization. The laughter of the birth of man always has the cry contained with it. It is the piercing through of laughter and the laughter is piercing us. Nancy’s text then is echoing this piercing, traversing us with its gestures, as the first gesture traversed and traverses man.

Work Cited

Nancy, Jean-Luc. “Painting in the Grotto.” *The Muses*. California: Stanford University Press. 1994.

4 Ibid

5 Ibid

6 Ibid.,79

7 Ibid, 72