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Recitative Voice: Reading Silently and Aloud, With Jean-Luc Nancy

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Writing incises the shapeless mass in which, without it, neither mouth nor ear would be opened. Every written work is a mouth/ear that exchanges with itself, calls to itself, hears itself, and replies to itself: aoidos, Thea! (2018, 148)

Abstract: This text studies the corporeality of attentive reading. It relies and builds upon philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's suggestion that there is, each time, a *recitative voice* within the heart of our advancement through a textual body. This text examines the intriguing figure of recitative voice by paying attention to two bodily variations of reading: reading aloud and reading silently. Nancy's recitative voice, as a sonorous, resonant, oral, buccal and vocal notion, can help us in explicating how our bodies condition our experiences of reading, yet ultimately he remains rather implicit on how we advance through textual bodies. This short text argues that we can explicate the bodily weight implicit to reading, if we interpreted it as a recitative act. When we read aloud, our experience of a text consists of an advancement of our conjoined gaze and voice through the letters, words and sentences making up our text; when we read silently, our closed and silent mouth is still conjoined with our advancing gaze, advancing as desirous for speech and with words already grasped, even when no words are folded in (or with) exhaled warm air.

Keywords: reading, body, writing, existence, Jean-Luc Nancy

1 Introduction

How do we read? How do texts *make sense* for us?¹ How are we, attentive readers, conditioned and limited by our absolutely corporeal existence – by “our” strange and

1 The Nancyan notion of *sense* (“*sens*”) runs through his entire philosophical corpus. It compasses not only sense understood as “meaning”, but also the sense of direction and the fractality of our bodily senses. He summarises the polysemy of *sens* in *A finite thinking* as follows: “By ‘sense’ I mean

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objecting bodies determining our being-*toward*-the-world? Which sensitive organs and which bodily processes take care of reading? This essay begins with a chapter comparing Nancy's tactile notion of *exscription* to his sonorous notion of *recitation*, which are both helpful for thinking how texts *weight* on us – how each letter, word and sentence make up their sense one following another, when and as a reader advances through them. The opening chapter is followed by two others, which study how texts make sense by analysing two variations in a recitative voice: reading aloud and reading silently.

It should be noted, however, that this short text focused on bodies and reading is limited in terms of its depictive potency: nuances between plural desires to read (to relax, evaluate, understand, fight off boredom ...) as well as between plural techniques of reading (analytic, interpretative, deconstructive, evasive, selective, ironic ... there is no single reading, as Nancy reminds us in *Expectation* (196)) cannot be tackled here. Neither can we address reading in terms of technology or technics, reflect the question of creation in writing, study to any greater extent the force of pleasure driving reading, delve into questions central to pedagogics of speech and language nor into intrinsic or external frictions hindering reading. Methodologically and conceptually, this text is an attempt to think *with* Nancy; by elucidating how an attentive reader advances through a textual body, and what exactly makes up a textual body, I intend to explore the bodily weight of reading, which I suggest is implicitly and explicitly in play in Nancy's essays on bodies, reading, writing and literature.

There is a vast corpus of philosophical discussions extending as far back as to the Heraclitean fragments on the tension between speech (language, thought, words and sentences) understood as oratorical, buccal, spoken, recited, sonorous, sensual, sensible, vocal or dictated (*lexis*) and as signifying, intelligible, significative or meaningful (*logos*), but here we cannot engage in explicating their historical paths. Also, we cannot engage with the fascinating intellectual history of reading voices (*voix, vox*) from the dawn of thinking, from the practices of Pythagorean *akousmatikoi*, through the *voces paginarum* murmured aloud for centuries in monasteries² to Augustine's admiration of Ambrose's uncommon ability to read silently,³ all the way to our fascination with the convenience of podcasts and audiobooks. The sonorous materiality of texts and speech, as opposed to reading being understood as a mostly aphonic, mute, atemporal and deaf phenomenon related solely to the rational

sense in the singular sense taken absolutely: the sense of life, of Man, of the world, the sense of existence; the sense of existence which is or which makes sense, which without sense would not exist." (2013, 3). In the context of this text on reading, any "sense" or "meaning" of texts rests on our oral or vocal advancement through letters, words and sentences that make up each textual body. 2 Ingold (2007).

3 The practice of reading aloud. Latin for "voices of the page". Cf. Augustine (2006, 97–8).

“faculty” or imagination, is obviously not something I suggest as being my original philosophical contribution; it has been touched upon and examined in detail under the notions of, e.g., *writing* (*écriture, écrire*), literature, speaking body (*corps parlant*) and voice by the likes of Derrida,⁴ Blanchot, Lacoue-Labarthe,⁵ Merleau-Ponty,⁶ Nancy and Ponge⁷ in the last century.

In this text, I explore the corporeality of attentive reading by engaging Nancy’s collection of essays on literature, which was published recently as *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature* (Nancy 2018); published in French as *Demande: philosophie, littérature*, (2015). Nancy’s thinking of listening and resonant bodies,⁸ contingency in reading,⁹ our engagement with literature,¹⁰ his tactile-ecstatic notion of *exscription*¹¹ and the hapticity of poetry¹² have all been studied with great interest in the recent years. However, the sonority and the bodily weight both implicit to reading, literature and texts, which I suggest as being operative in *Expectation* and thematised with the notion of *recitative voice*, have not yet been analysed to a great extent. This absence might even be seen as surprising, given how questions concerning the sonority of resonant voices, speech, thought and poetry are present in Nancy’s thinking all the way from his early essay “Sharing Voices” ((Nancy 1990a), published in French as *Le partage des voix* in 1982). In “Sharing Voices”, Nancy offers his readers an analysis of how speech, if understood as absolutely singular instances of resonating voices, de-centres all hermeneutic models of understanding and interpretation. He does this by beginning with his explication of the nature of the rhapsodic voice in Plato’s *Ion*,¹³ through Heidegger’s deconstruction of “hermeneutics” with the question of *Dasein*’s ecstatic (pre-)understanding in terms of its “circularity”, to his

4 Derrida (1973).

5 Lacoue-Labarthe (1998, 2000).

6 “[T]he sense of words must be ultimately be induced by the words themselves, or more precisely their conceptual signification must be formed by drawing from *gestural signification*, which itself is immanent in speech.” Merleau-Ponty (2013, 182).

7 “Not only any poem at all, but any text at all – whatever it is – carries (in the full sense of the word), carries, I say, its speaking [diction]. For my part – if I examine myself writing – I never come to write the slightest phrase without my writing being accompanied by a mental speaking and listening, and even, rather, without it being preceded by those things (although indeed just barely).” Ponge in *Le grand recueil*, 220–21, tr. Mandell in Nancy 2008b, 35.

8 For an excellent overview of Nancy on sonority, see Kane (2012); Gritten (2014); Hickmott (2015).

9 On Nancy, Derrida, Leiris and the question of hapticity of language and voice, see: Syrotinski (2013); On Nancy and Derrida on reading, see Maclachlan (2005).

10 Cf. Van Rooden (2015).

11 On Nancy’s notion of *exscription* and ecstatic bodies, see James (2006), 149–50, 204–5; Goh (2019); Ricco (2021).

12 Cf. Van Rooden (2009).

13 For an excellent presentation of Nancy and the rhapsodic voice in *Ion*, see Van Der Heiden (2020, 2021).

own interpretation of *logos* as the sharing of our singularly plural voices, which are conditioned and constituted solely in (and with) their worldly resonance. Ultimately, the most intriguing section of "Sharing Voices" in the context of reading is the last part, when Nancy explains how he understands the intricate co-dependency between the intelligibility and the sonorous or vocal sensibility of speech, language, poetry and, ultimately, thought itself. In the concluding analysis of his essay, Nancy depicts how the worldly resonance of speech determines *logos* as follows:

Logos is not *phone semantike* [signifying voice], it is not a voice endowed with signification, it is not sense, and it will not be able to be "interpreted". It is, on the other hand, the articulation before the voices, in which, nevertheless, the voices are conjoined already, and divided (separated). It is both the "anticipatory" and participating structure of the voice in general. "The" voice, always plural, is the sharing, the lot, the *theia moira* of *logos*: its fate and its destination are in the execution, in the singular interpretation of each voice. (1991, 243–4, translation edited).

As we can read, for Nancy, all sense, meaning or significance of speech and thought is absolutely spread out and abandoned. All sense of speech is divided and cut into infinitely finite instances of resonance. This means that sense "gives itself – it abandons itself" (1991, 244); sense is distributed (shared) solely among our absolutely singular voices, within finite and singular instances of articulated speech. However, what is still implicit to Nancy's thinking in his early essay concerns the corporeal resonance of these shared and resonant voices which I, in the context of how we attentively advance through texts, explicate in this short study. To that end, we can turn to Nancy's analysis of thought, mouth and speech in Nancy's *Corpus* (2008a). In the context of the enunciatively distinguished *ego cogito*, Nancy elaborates the intrinsic relation between speech, thought, voice and the figure of the mouth¹⁴ as follows:

In the Cartesian *ego's* articulation, therefore, mouth and mind are the same: it's always the body. Not the body *of* the ego, but *corpus ego*, "ego" being "ego" only when articulated, articulating itself as spacing or flexion, even the inflection of a *site*. The enunciation of "ego" doesn't just *take* place. To the contrary, it is *place*. Unless localized, it is not: *ego = here* (...).

Thus the *corpus ego's* material axiom, or absolute archi-tectonic, implies that there's no "ego" in general, only the one *time*, the occurrence and occasion for a *tone*: a tension, vibration, modulation, color, cry, or song. Always, in any case, a *voice*, and not a *vox significativa*, not a signifying order, but *the timbre of a place where a body exposes and proffers itself*. (2008a, 25–7)

In what follows, I argue that Nancy's thinking of bodies in *Corpus* – thinking of singular bodies, how "my" strange and objecting, which is never properly "me" nor

¹⁴ Nancy on the cartesian mouth, see Nancy 2016.

“mine”, determines *each time* “I” exist toward anything – and his suggestion of how each “once” of reading of takes place as a *recitative act*, allows us to explicate how a *reader* (self-)experiences “herself” by advancing through letters with “her” eyes and ears, exposed skin and “her” closed or open mouth. A reading voice, therefore, always belongs to *someone* who reads; it belongs to a *reader* advancing through a textual body, which is made of impenetrable and weighty letters, words and sentences, as will be studied below.¹⁵

Nancy’s engagement with sonorous corporeality can be understood as a radicalisation of (and as a reaction towards) Derrida’s analysis of the auto-affective vacuity found at the heart of the “phenomenological voice” (1973, 76); by showing how we read, recite, dictate and advance our way through various skins, screens and surfaces carrying textual bodies made of letters, we can explicate how each reader constitutes “herself”, *each time*, when she advances through any text. In *Listening*, Nancy explicates the sonority of her voice, both as a speaking and as a reading voice, as follows:

To say is not always, or only, to speak, or else to speak is not only to signify, but it is also, always, to dictate, *dictare*, that is, at once to give saying its *tone*, or its *style* (its tonality, its color, its allure) and for that or in that, in that operation or in that *tenseness* of saying, *reciting* it, reciting it *to oneself* or letting itself recite *itself* (make itself sonorous, de-claim itself or ex-claim itself, and cite itself (set itself in motion, call itself, according to the first meaning of the word, incite itself), send back to its own echo and, by doing so, make itself. Writing is also, very literally and even in the sense of an *archi-écriture*, a voice that resounds. (2008b, 36).

Thus, an analysis of reading ought not only be concerned with the significance of words, sentences and language, but also with bodily masses allowing and conditioning each voice and each someone reading a text, be that aloud or in silence.

2 Reading: Exscription and Recitation

How can we get close to the corporeality of attentive reading? Before we examine Nancy’s *recitative voice* in terms of its corporeality, let us turn to Nancy’s passages from his essay *Corpus*, where he desires to touch on the activity of reading. Nancy describes how each text (and, indirectly, each writer of each text) touches upon a reader, her gaze and her fingers. Nancy writes:

¹⁵ There is also an intriguing difference between reading and speech: reading differs from “free” speech in the sense that a reader cannot decide *for* their text. A text needs to be followed “to the letter”, if a reader wishes to read her text. Every reader is free to stop at any letter or any point, but ultimately reading requires the reader’s submission.

[H]ere, on the read and written page. Bodies, for good or ill, are touching each other upon this page, or more precisely, the page itself is a touching (of my hand while it writes, and your hands while they hold the book). This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred – machines, vehicles, photocopies, eyes, still other hands are all interposed – but it continues as a slight, resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued. In the end, here and now, your own gaze touches the same traces of characters as mine, and you read me, and I write you. *Somewhere*, this takes place. [...] “somewhere” is technique – our discrete, potent, and disseminated *contact*. (2008a, 51).

As we can read, there is a *con-tact* between a text and a reader – just as there is one between Nancy and his readers. There is the spacing determined as “somewhere”: a *place* where Nancy (indirectly) touches his reader and where his reader touches him by advancing through his text – a place for a “breakthrough” (2008a, 25) of words read out loud or in silence. Reading, thus, is not anterior or posterior, exterior or interior to each text made of letters incised on a surface: it consists of an advancement of a reader alongside and through each word and sentence made of letters. An intriguing notion used by Nancy to further describe the bodily contact in reading is *exscription* (*excription*). With Nancy’s *exscription*, we can describe how a textual body, to put it plainly or crudely, both¹⁶ *touches* and *leaves in-tact* each reader it weighs, presses and touches upon.¹⁷ Nancy writes:

Writing: touching upon extremity. [...] Writing isn’t signifying. We ask: how are we to touch upon the body? Perhaps we can’t answer this “How?” as we’d answer upon a technical question. But, finally, it has to be said that touching upon the body, touching the body, *touching* – happens in writing all the time.

Maybe it doesn’t happen exactly *in* writing, if writing in fact has an “inside.” But along the border, at the limit, the tip, the furthest edge of writing nothing *but* that happens. Now, writing takes its place at the limit. So if anything happens to writing, nothing happens to it but *touch*. More precisely: touching the body (or some singular body) *with the incorporeality* of “sense”. And consequently, *to make the incorporeal touching*, to make of *sense* a touch. [...] Writing touches upon bodies *along the absolute limit* separating the sense of the one from the skin and nerves of the other. (2008a, 9–11, translation edited).

16 Here I follow an interpretation of *exscription* provided by Ian James: “[S]ense in Nancy is always embodied, that is, is always in a relation of touch/separation to a material, concrete existence (or ek-sistence), any act of speaking or writing (and indeed drawing, painting, composing, and so on) can (and must) have a relation, itself one of touch/separation, to that embodied existence which is or makes sense.” (2006, 205).

17 In Nancy’s *Sexistence* the tact of language and writing changes, when he ponders how words penetrate impenetrable bodies: “[Language] expresses – presses outside – the ideality of sense as sonorous materiality [...] Language penetrates the thing’s obscurity to itself, bringing it to be signified, that is, transported outside its concrete effectiveness, repeatable as idea.” (60).

The incorporeality of sensed “sense”, a “literary sense” of a text read out, weights upon a reader when she traverses through each letter, word and sentence. Later on, Nancy continues by describing how each text touches upon the masses of a reader: her eyes, mouth, lips, lungs, throat and ears. Nancy writes:

[W]e have to see reading as something that’s not deciphering: touching, rather, and being touched, involved with the body’s masses. Writing, reading, a matter of tact. But still – and this, too, has to be clear – under the condition that tact isn’t concentrated, doesn’t claim – as does Cartesian touch – the privilege of an immediacy that would fuse all senses and “sense.” Touching, to begin with, is also local, modal, fractal. (2008a, 87).

Reading a text, for Nancy in *Corpus*, is therefore not a conversion, translation or interpretation from worldly, material or bodily to internal, transcendental, cognitive, mental or spiritual. Reading does not fuse letters and words into something that would take its place beyond speech and outside resonant voices. Rather, reading consists of a weighty advancement through a textual body. A reader advances with her sensitive and sensual reading organs – with her “body’s masses” – alongside and through each word and sentence that makes up her text. However, if we choose to turn from Nancy’s *Corpus* to his *Expectation*, then we can extend our analysis beyond the figures of *touch* and *tact* that are prominent in the former. In fact, I suggest that Nancy’s figure of *recitative voice* put forth in *Expectation* helps us in explicating, in detail, *how* reading is involved with the “body’s masses,” because it allows us to pay attention to how each reader advances through each word making up her text of and how her advancement depends on “her” bodily masses. Let us continue by turning to Nancy’s *recitative voice*.

In *Expectation*, Nancy describes how any text, be it allo- or autographic, advances and announces itself as a sonorous, vocal and resonant *voice*. He depicts the arrival and the advancement of this voice in his essay “Narrative, Narration, Recitative” as follows:

There is always a “once upon a time” that conceals or is concealed by, that reveals or is revealed by a particular time, be it imaginary [...]. In this sense, recitation demands its subject, its narrator, its voice. In that “once” there resonates – musically, I’ll return to this – a vocal pronouncement or articulation [...].

What we refer to as *writing*, as the word is understood today, is merely the form in which is exemplified, while expanding – through the material inscription by which the movement, the path of pro-nouncement and pro-duction is retained and exposed – the facilitation of sense as it strives to escape. (2018, 44–6, translation edited).

As we can read, Nancy suggests that reading confines the advancement through each and every text to a recitative voice. In other words, all texts and all material forms of inscription – books, skins, hides, pages, tattoos, walls or screens – make (“produce”) their sense as sensible and sensed speech and that they do so *each time* they are

read through. In this text, I intend to explicate to what extent Nancy's *recitative voice*, if we do agree to interpret it as a vocal, sonorous, articulative, corporeal and resonant enunciation of a text, is a voice that resonates according to the weighty masses of attentive readers and "their" bodies – mouths, lungs, tongues, fingers, eyes and ears, which all, conjoined together, give each reading its singular tone, colour, intensity, tension, timbre and rhythm.

As we can read from our quote above, each "once" of each reading takes place just once. This means that each experience of reading takes place exactly *when* a text introduces itself as articulated, meaningful, sensed and sensible speech and exactly *as* that text is advanced through as letters, words and sentences that follow one another. Further on, Nancy clarifies how each text makes its sense as sensed, and as sensible, as follows:

[R]ecitation is not "saying" in terms of uttering, expressing or recounting events that have taken place. It makes them happen, it makes them *come to pass*. [...] This thrust is the work of speech. Speech is not a tool, it is itself – in its phonation, as in its phrasing, its syntax, its prosody – the thrust or drive of "sense". Sense is not added to or assumed by the facts, it is their *arrival*, it is their *coming*. In short, it is the fact of the fact, the thrust and the pulsation that *bring into the world* and that thereby *make* a "world," which is to say, a space for the circulation of sense. (2018, 51–2, translation edited).

As we can read, reading is an activity which allows or *makes* a reader experience each particular text: word after word and each sentence following after another. Recitation of each sentence allows for each event, emotion, idea and thought written down to be grasped by someone advancing through that very text. Recitation, therefore, brings into the world a *place* for the arrival of each "once" of reading. Each recitative act resonates *in* someone¹⁸ (or in "us"¹⁹). Recitation is experienced by somebody *for* or *in* whom a sensed sense of a text arrives, resonates and departs. In short: a recitative voice brings forth a reader who experiences "herself" *in* reading *with* the words she reads through. Nancy describes this constitutive relation between the act of recitation and the experience named as reading, as follows:

Citare is to set on motion, to bring to the self (the Latin verb is related to the Greek *kinein*: there is cinema in every story). *Ex-citare*, is to awaken, *sus-citare*, to be raised (and *re-sus-citare* is not far), *in-citare*, to throw forward. All these motions and emotions are found in recitation, which excites, brings about, and incites a "saying", which is not just any saying but the saying that says an arrival and a departure, which says the tension of the fact that something is happening and that this something is, necessarily, a some "one" or becomes or calls ["for", "in", "as" – JPP] someone. (2018, 51, translation edited).

18 Cf. Chapter "Someone" in Nancy (1997, 67–78); also see analysis of *ipse* and *ipseity* in chapter "World" in Nancy (1997, 154–60).

19 As a community of readers. Cf. "Literary communism" in Nancy (1990b, 71–81).

Textual experiences, as and when they make sense for readers advancing through the words of which they consist, do not transcend or depart beyond this world, where speech resonates and voices are shared. This means that texts are concerned with bodies, their situations, emotions, ideas and thoughts, with all kinds of things that make up the world. In other words, formulated in most general terms: texts are concerned with the world itself, which is made of bodies. Texts can tell (or “depict”) anything about anything, which means that texts are not limited by the particularities of the world: texts can be scientific, poetic, fictional, irrational, peer-reviewed, rejected, unethical, nonsensical, etc.²⁰ The significance of sensible, sensed, worldly things, of which the world consists, gives texts their “referentiality”, “meaning” or “significance” – their sense. An analysis of the recitative voice allows us to ponder questions such as the following: how should we understand the bodily weight implicit in the “sensible recitation of [literary] sense” (*le récit sensible du sens*) (2018, 52, translation edited), if every recitation arrives as articulated or silent speech? And what about other masses, e.g. eyes, fingers, ears, which are also very profoundly involved in each “once” of reading?

3 Reading Aloud

Does a reader need a mouth, lips and a tongue to read? She does, if she desires to read her text aloud. Nancy ponders reading aloud in his short essay titled “The Only Reading” (in *Expectation*), which comprises only a handful of sentences. Nancy begins by quickly advancing through multiple themes that are elemental to reading: there is no single sense of reading, because there is a plurality of desires and motivations to read, just as there is a plurality of techniques of reading. However, what is of greatest interest for our study of the recitative voice happens in the last paragraphs, when Nancy depicts how reading aloud takes place and what distinguishes it from reading silently. He writes:

[Reading aloud] keeps at a distance information, and identification, and interpretation. It confines the text to our lips, our throat, and our tongue: these take over from the head. Our voice takes over from the letter, that is, sense finds it pushed over aside, not suppressed but distracted, pushed to the margin, postponed until later, maybe never. Or sense becomes sensitive, sensual, which is one way of not ending up as intelligible sense. Reading aloud – not too loud, we need to carefully adjust the volume – is the only kind that directs the text from mouth to ear, even if it’s my own ear. The ear opens upon an interminable resonance, within me and without, from within me to without, from you to me. Nothing is closer to the essence of language: the echo of the murmur of things. (2018, 197).

²⁰ This trait of literature has been coined as “de-realization of the real”. This discussion falls beyond the scope of my short text on the corporeality of the recitative voice. Cf. Van Rooden (2015, 61).

As we can read, Nancy describes reading aloud as the most sensual and sensitive²¹ kind of reading. When one reads aloud, the sonorous materiality²² of her recitative voice, conjoined with her gaze advancing through letters making up her text, nearly overwhelms our reader. Her text opens up an “interminable resonance” between her ears and her mouth. Her advancement through a textual corpus, which consists of hard and distinct letters and words, takes place in the interminable resonance between her lips, throat, tongue and ears. Nancy goes on to depict how the timbre of her voice hinders or delays her from hearing (*entendre*) what her text depicts, means or describes. However, as he also quickly notes, this trait of literary sense as “meaning” (the “intelligible sense” of the text, as Nancy puts it above) is merely sidelined and not entirely suppressed, because texts that are read aloud commonly do make sense, as meaningful words and as sentences that speak of things, for readers themselves and for their listeners gathered around. And finally, the gaze of our reader, her eyes advancing alongside each word her text consist of, is conspicuously absent in Nancy’s description. I suggest that we expand on Nancy’s short analysis. I intend to do this by placing an emphasis how the body of our reader both conditions and limits the advancement of her recitative voice through a textual body.

When a text is read aloud, I suggest that there is a plurality of distinct and fractal, yet conjoined movements taking place. These movements, which are all bodily movements of our reader, offer a place and occasion for her text to *make* (to “produce”) its sense as a sensed, sensible and meaningful. These movements trace their paths together, which means that they advance together as conjoined. They do not become fused into one “common” sensing or common sense: advancement of a gaze, fingers and voice are distinct, modal and fractal. Yet, they dependent on (and weight onto)²³ one another, when our reader reads aloud, because they advance along singular letters and words particular to the text one reads.

21 As Nancy points out, there is an element of care, tact or tactfulness in reading. An analysis of this trace of *tact* in reading would open up a whole spectrum of questions concerning the *ethics* of reading, but in the context of this short essay on recitative bodies, I will only remark that a pleasant and audible volume are only two things (out of many) a reader needs to take care of. For an in-depth analysis of Nancy as a thinker of touch and tact, see Derrida (2005).

22 On the resonance of listening bodies, see Nancy (2008b).

23 In Nancy’s *Corpus*, bodily senses do not touch one another: “senses *don’t touch each other*, there’s no ‘common sense,’ no sensing ‘in itself’: Aristotle knows it, saying that each sense senses *and* senses itself sensing, each on its own with no overarching control, each one withdrawn, as sight, as hearing, as taste, smell, touch, each delighted and knowing that it delights in the absolute apartness of its delight; all theory of art issues from this starting point.” 2008a, 119, translation edited. In *The Muses* he re-iterates the tension between the senses: “Each sensing touches on the rest of sensing as that which it cannot sense. Sight does not see sound and does not hear it, even though it is also in itself, or *right at* itself, that it touches on this nonseeing and is touched by it” (1996, 17).

Firstly, yet in no particular order, our reader advances through her text with her exhalation, her breath, larynx, throat, tongue, teeth, lips and her mouth. She advances through her text by enunciating, dictating, or pronouncing the words that her text is made of. Secondly, and simultaneously, she advances through drawn, scribbled, incised or printed shapes that she grasps and recognises as letters, words and lines with her gaze²⁴ or with the tips of her fingers if she reads in Braille. (Now your eyes are advancing along this sentence, made of exactly these 31 words, which I have written down on the 11th of February for you to read, my dear reader.) And thirdly, when our reader reads aloud, she advances along her text with her ears. In other words, our reader reads by “enacting the letter” (2018, 73) or, as is described by Nancy above, by confining the text to her lips, throat and tongue. All in all, when a text is read aloud, she is also a speaking, gazing, hearing, touching and a listening body. These distinct, yet conjoined, movements of tending to the letters, words and sentences and enunciating those words make for her recitative voice, which allows her reader to experience the text she advances through. Recitation, therefore, creates something sensed and sensible:

[E]very recitative creates a new *muthos*: not that it fabricates more or less powerful, seductive, and credible figures, but that it opens speech itself to its own drive and pulsation. Speech, the voice, the sensible recitation of sense. (2018, 42, translation edited).

But what kind of a thing is her *recitative* in sensuous terms? What sort of features or traits does a recitative have? And how do body’s masses condition each reading – each sensible recitation of sense?

When a text is read aloud, it is confined to (or “involved with”, as Nancy puts it in *Corpus* (87)) the bodily masses of our reader. This means that from the opening of a reading mouth, recited words are carried out as “effluvia, emanations, weightless folds in the air escaping the lungs and warmed by the body” (*Corpus*, 151). Such folds of warm air can make sense for a listening body who might, or might not, be reciting her text for herself. Occasionally, such folds of air might be incomprehensible words formulated in an unknown, forgotten, or unheard of or yet-to-come language. Or they might merely be letters spoken in a nonsensical order. Nevertheless, such warm and humid aerial folds, words and sentences, are something a reader can *listen* to (*écoute*) and *understand* (*entendre*),²⁵ given the language is familiar to her in its phonetic, lingual, syntactic and semantic sense. Warm folds of air, warmed by her body and shaped by her reading mouth; make sense as words and sentences, one following another. These words and sentences might, or might not, make meaningful sense as

²⁴ I am well aware of the empirical research done on movement of the eyes while reading, but questions concerning its “saccadic” nature fall beyond the scope of this text. Cf. Drieghe et al. (2020).

²⁵ On Nancy’s ontology of resonant and sonorous bodies, see 2008b.

words that speak of bodies, ideas, situations and events, depending on whether she speaks the language in which they are written and hears them properly. But what makes up this proper? In order to see, hear, and be able to grasp recited words properly, parts of recited words, words themselves, and sentences made of those words must follow one another *partes extra partes* or, as Nancy formulates it in *Corpus* (57), as “*verba extra verba*, compact words impenetrable to one another and to things.” This means that words (and “visceral” parts of those words – letters and phonemes) cannot penetrate, overlap or run over one another, if they are to make sense as sensual, sensible and meaningful words. Recitation, therefore, advances each letter, vowel, consonant, phoneme, word, line, expression and sentence, one following another in a *rhythmic*²⁶ arrangement, by spanning over each “once” of reading. This means that each “once” of reading advances in its absolutely singular pace that is particular to that occasion of reading and to that reader.

In *Listening*, Nancy depicts how a reading mouth advances as follows:

In speaking [*diction*], starting with the speaking of a text, it is a question of two things together – and once again, of the unity and distinction of these two things: rhythm and timbre. (2008b, 36).

We can, therefore, suggest that there is a *span*²⁷ – a spacing, an *extra*, an expanse, a differing, *différance*, a gap, *l'écart*, between those elements (the letters, phonemes, words, sentences . . .) that makes up a recitation in terms of its *timbre*, just as there are these elements (folds of warm air making up phonemes, words and sentences and sections) which have their distinct span between them. Recited words are, therefore, hard and impenetrable (recitative) bodies of sense.²⁸ Their singular arrangement – the rhythm in which they are read out loud – *is or makes up* their (sensed) sense; words or letters arranged, recited, read out in a random order most often would make no sense (or in other words “nonsense”), but such arrangements of letters could still be recited *and* grasped *as* nonsensical speech.

Written words make sense as word bodies, as textual bodies made of singular letters written one after one another, which are construed as incised, printed, scribbled or drawn on different kinds of surfaces and skins. Recited words make sense as hard and distinct letters and phonemes, which a tongue shapes up and ears listen to. All of our reading organs – our eyes, fingers and mouths and ears – advance conjoined together through textual bodies we desire to engage with. When our reader reads out loud, she advances a word after another, as *verba extra verba*.

²⁶ For an intricate analysis of rhythm and the antecedence of the rhythmized “subject”, see Lacoue-Labarthe (1998).

²⁷ Cf. “Spanne” in Nancy (1997, 64–7).

²⁸ Cf. Nancy (2008a, 57).

Neither her gaze, her ears, her fingers, nor her voice can advance through, and make sense of, multiple words or sentences simultaneously. Not a single reader can recite, listen, grasp, gaze or read through a whole section of sentences instantly, because reading eyes, ears, fingers and mouth each have their own weight. Her reading organs condition her pace of advancing through texts. Their weight conditions her (infinitely) finite pace and her rhythm. Reading organs, with their weight and their finite speed, give recitation its bodily weight and shared worldly resonance. When a text is read aloud, the bodily weight implicit in, and constitutive for, reading is audible in the rhythmic advancement of the recitative voice articulating each word. In other words, and to conclude this section, the bodily weight of literature is audible when readers read texts aloud, because all speech is abandoned and divided among singular and bodily voices.

4 Silent Recitative

How does silent reading differ from reading aloud?²⁹ How do we, as readers no longer limited by the technique of *voces paginarum*, read silently or in silence? A textual body is obviously the same, whether or not it is pronounced when it is advanced through. What changes in reading, when one changes her technique from that of enunciative to silent? In this section, I explore the corporeal traits determining our experiences of silent reading by continuing to engage Nancy's elaboration of the recitative voice, literature, writing (*écriture*) and reading in a number of his essays in *Expectation*. Then, I proceed to explore and develop Nancy's position further by elaborating the bodily weight implicit to silent reading. I do this by thinking of our *desire* to advance along a text and by thinking how words read out in silence make their sense.

In a lot of ways, silent reading is similar to reading aloud: an experience of silent reading still has a finite pace, singular direction and a rhythm. And not only does the activity of silent reading take up our time, but our literary experience still owns its structure to the rhythmicity and the pace of our advancement through our text. Words and sentences we advance through still make sense by taking up their own places: one after another – *verba extra verba*. We advance through our body of letters with our gaze, but what about our mouth and ears? Our mouth stays closed and silent. Our voice withholds from pronouncing the words that we read by staying silent from the first letter to the last dot. Our ears do not open into a worldly

²⁹ There is intriguing empirical research done in neurosciences on the activity of (silent) reading, which suggest that certain vocal-associated neural structures are active when we read silently, cf. Perrone-Bertolotti et al. (2012).

resonance of our text and our “somewhere” is filled with silence. Words we reads might coincide and collide with other things we might be thinking of, which might (or might not) be inspired by our text. Other things often disturb us when we try to read, but we cannot delve into frictions internal or external to reading in this text. How does a silently read text make its sense, then?

As was demonstrated above, Nancy describes how reading takes place, and how texts make their sense, as recitative speech in multiple passages in *Expectation*. However, he remains rather implicit on how literally (how “corporeally”) we should understand the sonority of the recitative voice in said passages, especially if our reader decides to read silently. Let us visit some intriguing sections dealing with the orality of the recitative voice. Nancy’s essay “To Open the Book”, begins by describing silent reading metaphorically as “softly chanting the text somewhere in back of the *camera obscura* that films the text” (2018, 72). This “evocative” power of letters and words has to do with speech and our shared voices. He continues:

[L]iterature isn’t so called for nothing: it enacts the letter. The letter is articulation, the heart of speech and language. That is to say, not only the two articulations – semantic and phonetic – inherent to language but the pronunciation, emission, modulation, tone, style and what we have ended up calling writing.

[...] Literature is gestural to the extent that it is speech. But it is essentially oral, as Lacoue-Labarthe liked to remind us. This means addressed, sent, and discovering or providing its sense only when sent. (2018, 73, translation edited).

Here Nancy suggests that reading is a vocal advancement through the letters texts are made of: texts make sense when words they consist of are sent, cited, recited, enacted, addressed or pronounced. A few pages later, Nancy depicts the relation between reading and the vocality of literature even more explicitly, when he explicates how each text *resonates* as it is advanced through:

[L]iterature is oral: it opens up in a resonance that has no beginning and no end, in a glossolalia of presence without which everything would simply be absent.

But that is why it is written: the resonance has to return, has to be repeated, become an echo so that it might be heard and repeated. Literature is written in its very orality: it is recited, learned by heart, it is form and cadence [or it is timbre and rhythm – JPP]. (2018, 74, translation edited).

Here Nancy suggests that the resonance of speech conditions all of our literary experiences. Texts are, and make sense, as speech that has been written down. Texts make sense only when they are advanced through, recited, voiced out and repeated by somebody. Later on in *Expectation*, in his essay, “Responding for Sense”, Nancy echoes his preceding analyses by depicting the sonority of reading as follows:

[W]riting is the very resonance of the voice or the voice as resonance, to the extent that it is self-reference, through the distance of a “self” to the “sameness” that enables it to identify itself: absolutely singular each time for an indefinite number of encounters that are singular on every occasion. Writing “fixes,” as we say, the flow of speech (*verba volant, scripta manent*); this fixation is nothing other than recording, storage, or the residence of the capacity for resonance. (2018, 145.)

As we can read, for Nancy in *Expectation*, each single experience of reading takes place (is “identified”) in a distance between a reader and her text, which is a distance consisting of distinct words and sentences. But exactly how does a reader experience or “identify” words that she recites silently? How do they fill up this distance, this “somewhere” as it was described in *Corpus*, in-between a reader and her text? In other words, if the *timbre* of recitation is silent, then what kind of speech fills up the “glossolalia of presence” for our reader? In a silent reading, words are not shaped by a mouth in exhalation, yet read words make sense as sensible speech in the sense that our reader still advances through words that make sense for her. But exactly how?

Let us remain close to Nancy’s essay “Responding for Sense” for a little longer. In said essay, Nancy elucidates the sensuality of reading and helps in making sense of the silence of the recitative voice. He describes how texts make their sense as follows: “What happens to sense at each point or singular moment – in each writing [...] is the singular itself as the scansion of truth as sense” (2018, 149). Further on, he continues by clarifying how each singular arriving and passing moment of sense, each “scansion of truth” or, just plainly, each word, each sentence, each scene, each conversation or idea written down as a text, which provides its sense *in* reading, provides it *for* and *from* a reader and her mouth, as speech yet-to-come and as speech already voice out:

Truth arises from language already lost or yet to come. It comes from the voice that desires itself and seeks itself behind the voice – at the bottom of the throat, where the incision exposes an initial separation, which rises to the lips but which the lips have not yet known. (2018, 150).

In a silent reading, our reader is driven by her *desire*³⁰ to read. She desires to advance through and devour the letters and words her text consists of. As Nancy puts it in *Sexistence*: when she reads, she finds pleasure in “the passage from one word into another, from one phrase to the other, escaping itself and trembling to meet itself” (2021, 32). She desires to advance through words she does not know yet and she knows “herself”, as a reader, with words she has already read through, which might (or might not) surprise or delight her. She advances with her eyes and with her silent

³⁰ For Nancy’s analysis of bodies, desire existence and drive, see Nancy (2021). Also, on drive and desire, see Bernet (2020).

throat – with her closed mouth and un-parted lips. She experiences herself, as a reader; with meaningful words one following another. Silent reading makes its sense as a “silent recitative”, if it is understood as a desire to advance and as speech already grasped, already devoured, already gone, already making sense and undone. In terms of sensual reading organs, a text read in silence is confined to an advancing gaze and a closed and silent mouth.

Thus, a silently read text is experienced as desire for words-still-to-come and as words already read, known and experienced. In *Expectation*, Nancy depicting these traits of *recitation* as follows:

[R]ecitative forms an *ethos*: a comportment, a behavior for language. Behavior that initially recognises in it a “before” and an “after,” which knows that it comes from further away and will go further than its linguistic constitution and phonetic utterance. The recitative awakens and maintains in language the *voice* that expresses it [...]. In this way, a story is told all of whose intrigue or adventure cannot be bound together without undoing, from moment to moment, its progress in a cadence, nor without bearing away its signification in a pulsation that incessantly questions the birth of speech: the disturbance of the echo through which a subject knows and feels itself – here, it’s the same thing – preceded and followed by itself in an infinite, eternal alterity. (56).

A reader experiences herself with unsaid words she desires to devour and with words she has already passed through. She begins by opening her book and keeping it open. She advances by reciting words one after another in her own cadence and rhythm, which are conditioned by her gaze and her mouth. When she reads aloud, her reading consists of an advancement of her conjoined gaze, sensitive fingers and articulative voice; when she reads silently, her silent mouth is still conjoined with her gaze as desirous for words still unread and as words she already read and grasped.

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