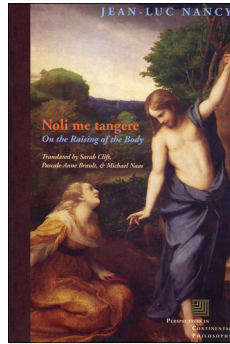


○ **REVIEW OF JEAN-LUC NANCY, *NOLI ME TANGERE: ON THE RAISING OF THE BODY***
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Noli me tangere is a book in three sections, the first two of which consider the resurrection scene in John, and in paintings inspired by the Johannine text. The third section, called ‘In Heaven and On Earth’, is the transcript of a talk Nancy gave to young children on the subject of religion.

There are interesting, even beautiful, moments in this book. They primarily revolve around the way Nancy imagines the resurrection as a kind of *kenosis* (p. 26), the perpetual absenting of divinity. Reading John 20:15, for instance, Nancy quite nicely explains the fact that Jesus appears, or seems to appear, as a gardener in this way: ‘In one sense, it is the same Christ. In another, the Messiah as arisen (that is, the disappointment of the Messiah triumphing on earth) is none other than the first gardener to have come along’ (p. 30). One notes, in passages like this, parallels with Benjamin’s messianic thought, as with literary texts such as D. H. Lawrence’s ‘The Man Who Died’ – in which Jesus goes to his grave as a messiah but is raised as an ordinary man.

But there are some serious weakness in *Noli me tangere* as well. For instance, in the first section (from which the book draws its title), Nancy discusses the function of parables, citing Matthew 13:13 (one suspects he intends Mark 4:12), and taking that text to mean that ‘the objective of the parable is first to sustain the blindness of those who do not see. It does not proceed out of a pedagogy of figuration (of allegory or illustration) but, to the contrary, out of a refusal or a denial of pedagogy’ (p. 5). So far so good, even if one might have reservations. But then Nancy has to admit that sometimes Jesus does explain, i.e., teach about, his parables, especially to the disciples. Fine, Nancy says, this is simply because parables ‘restor[e] sight or blindness’ (p. 7) – not noticing that he has suddenly shifted from a sense of the parable as passively sustaining certain receptivities to one in which parables restore, or indeed actively re-impose, former modes of comprehension. In the context of the Johannine signs, such a notion is intriguing. But Nancy doesn’t even seem aware of the fact that, according to his reading, Jesus would or could impose blindness on someone who had gained insight. What’s more, Nancy goes on to imagine Jesus

saying to befuddled auditors: 'if you do not understand, do not look for the reason in an obscurity of the text but only within yourself, in the obscurity of your heart' (p. 9), implying that the goal of the parable could never be the imposition of blindness. Just the opposite. And moreover, what is Nancy invoking here if not a kind of Socratic pedagogy despite the fact that he insists upon the non-pedagogical nature of parables?

Another, much larger problem, arises in both the first and second sections (section two is called 'Mary, Magdalene'). One gets a subtle hint of it, actually, in Nancy's reflection on parables, just discussed. There are many reasons as to why Jesus would teach in obscure parables, Nancy says, but 'the most unfortunate, narrowly religious interpretation of this thinking would be that the truth is reserved for the chosen ones who, moreover... will always be in the minority' (p. 6). The difference between this interpretation and Nancy's is that for Nancy, the parable doesn't teach anything, just as the resurrection, which he reads as a kind of parable (p. 11), is not the revelation of an appropriable truth. But, by a curious coincidence, something like this idea of a secret teaching is at the heart of the Gnostic gospel bearing Mary Magdalene's name (6:1-3; see Karen King's *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* [Polebridge Press, 2003]), and that coincidence is significant here because so much of Nancy's book is concerned with Mary. Just as he would reject the secret teaching in the Gnostic gospel of Mary, so Nancy would apparently reject any contemporary feminist reading of this woman's literary or political role.

Nancy knows full well that the traditional portrait of Mary as a repentant prostitute is based upon the conflation of various passages regarding the Magdalene and other, unnamed women – indeed he even refers to such conflation as a 'violent act of interpretation' (p. 115). Still, he is entirely unabashed in his use of this image of her throughout the book. For Nancy, Mary Magdalene does not indicate anything about the significance of women in earliest Christianity. Rather she stands within a very traditional typology of the feminine. It is no exaggeration to say that Nancy's reflections on Mary could easily have been borrowed from any patriarchal interpreter, from late antiquity on.

According to the logic of a set of interrelated binaries, for example, Mary 'joins caress and homage like life and death, like man and woman (except in the French Nancy says 'comme la femme et l'homme' [Bayard Editions, 2003, 72]), like lightness and gravity, like here and there' (p. 42). Mary may be the site of this joining, but as a woman she is also, in these pairings: caress, life, lightness, here. That is, she is sexual desire, biology, triviality, and unreflective mundanity. Prior to her encounter with Jesus she was just a prostitute, selling to men 'the voluptuousness of a brief shudder in the place of a shattering or overwhelming. But [we are told, despite this those men were] . . . still moved by what they [took] surreptitiously from beneath her dress' (p. 58). After Jesus' *noli me tangere*, though, Mary changes. She now has sex with every passing man but, and here's the difference, she doesn't charge them for it (p. 60). How wonderful! And why this change? Maybe it is because Mary now recognizes that love is nothing other than unrelenting abandonment (p. 43), and that consequently she can fulfill her 'office' not when seeking something in this life, not when acting prophetically in the face of her encounter with the resurrected, say, but only when she 'crouches down and curls up; [when] she brings her humility into contact with the earth, with the humus' (p. 64). We don't need to remark every instance of this kind of patriarchal, misogynistic reading in the book, only to acknowledge that Nancy, incredibly, seems to want to sort the New Testament's women to the two basic types of 'the virgin and the tramp' (ibid.). Now, one doesn't necessarily expect Nancy to produce a work of feminist biblical

scholarship or atheology of course; but neither should one find such wild and unsavory expansions upon later legends about Mary Magdalene.

There are a couple of occasions in the book when Nancy seems ready to challenge the all-too-easy gender politics of the Fathers. At one point he seems on the verge even of queering the beloved disciple insofar as ‘Mary Magdalene’s sensuality corresponds to that of John himself, the author of this account’ (p. 51). Indeed, he very nearly suggests that John’s depiction of Mary, or maybe of himself, arises out of erotic tension, jealousy: ‘a competition or conjunction of love’ (p. 52). But John, as the beloved disciple, can apparently sublimate his passion (to his pen) while Mary can only be amorous. At another point, Nancy seems to make prostitution an analogy for human desire ‘without [divine] love’; before the love of the gospel, he suggests, we can only seek ‘to procure the simulacrum of love’ (p. 58). Even if he is channeling Augustine here, Nancy’s suggestion that all desiring subjects – male *and* female – are Mary Magdalenes, are essentially prostitutes, is interestingly provocative. Or it would be if that’s what he meant. Unfortunately, Nancy’s focus is entirely on the figure of Mary, not any individual whatsoever, and Mary is nothing other than an abandoned whore who will keep loving precisely because she has been abandoned. After all this, one cannot help but agree with Jane Schaberg that Mary has become ‘an object of legitimized voyeurism... her eroticism... express[ing] pious emotionalism, or pious pornography, or secular pornography’ as the case may be (*The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha and the Christian Testament* [Continuum, 2002, 107]).

In a blurb on the back cover of *Noli me tangere*, Ian Balfour writes that Nancy’s work on John 20 constitutes ‘a particularly bold and searching reading, far more engaged than is the case with most biblical interpretation by those who profess themselves attentive to scripture’. It’s difficult to imagine what kind of biblical interpretation Balfour has in mind, really, since Nancy’s work is, at some level, exceedingly traditional and, as such, disappointing.

The final section of the book, however, is moderately interesting, especially insofar as it gives us a glimpse of Nancy’s willingness to serve as a public intellectual of sorts, speaking to a group of children about questions of religious significance. The content is less important than Nancy’s sensitivity to the concerns, and religious affiliations, of the young people with whom he interacts.