

# *The Agonist*

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## The Cunning Kant

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus*. Tr. Saul Anton. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008. (Originally published 1976). \$55 hb, \$21.95 pb. 164 pp. ISBN 978-0-8047-5354-8

Reviewed by Nicholas Birns

In the summer of 1985, I, for perhaps the only time in my life, held in my hand a physical copy of the Sunday *Boston Globe*. Perusing the newspaper on the grass during a fine July day, I found the Magazine section contained a column by (I assumed) a longtime regular for the Magazine. He was a middle-aged man, the type who writes charming familiar essays about the whimsies of middle-aged men, whose ultimate point is to show life is neither too perfect nor too troubling. In this column, he described his son's first semester at college. The son, perhaps a few weeks into the semester, had written his father, bespeaking his frustrations with reading Kant in his Intro to Philosophy class. The son wrote something like this: "I was trying to analyze why I find Kant so indigestible, and I have come to this conclusion: all language requires metaphor—we cannot describe something in itself but we have to use imagery and comparison to do so. Kant's abstractions are not readable because they are not metaphoric." The father, writing in the column, commented more or less, "Aw shucks—isn't this great, this is precisely why you send your kids off to college, to get this sort of discovery. Gosh, that kid sure is thinking thoughts his old man never could."

Immediately, one saw manifold problems here. First of all, intellectual self-confidence is a good thing to instill, encourage, or solicit in the young. But for a college freshman to believe that he just blew Kant out of the water sets up a kind of hubris that is not only riding for a fall but in a sense is so complacent that it is lucky if it ever gets sufficiently

hubristic in absolute terms to even be eligible to ride for a fall. Second is the father's evident delight in this postulated "elimination" of Kant from the canon of meaningful linguistic expression. Do you send your son to college so he circumvents, through convenient and precipitous dismissal, one of the major figures of world philosophy? Third, and in a sense most urgent, is that, as I am sure the reader of this review has already discerned, the very structure of the son's dismissal of Kant is done in terms remarkably Kantian. Kant was *par excellence* not knowing the absolute in itself but only through apprehensions of the absolute; we project or postulate or (Kant's Humean legacy) infer from these apprehensions; we discern where they are going even as they fade out asymptotically on the horizon. The framework by which we know that we cannot know the absolute also constitutes the only categories in which we possibly can even have an inkling of it. Kant himself would agree that any attempt to distill the absolute truth *sans* linguistic interference is wrong.

But the son's comment, and the father's ready acceptance of it, was, in its underlying meaning, perhaps not exclusively about Kant, or even about philosophy. It was about literature, and literary language, and it explains a good deal of why people outside the academy have, for the past 30 years, rejected recent developments in literary theory. If one were to look at the various aesthetic manifestoes of the past two centuries, one would think that the bourgeoisie has a fear of the aesthetic, that the inability of what Théophile Gautier called "l'art pour l'art" to be efficient in the realm of commodity culture, to have its expenditures be credited with ready meaning, led those concerned with practicality to scorn it. This should not be underestimated. But it may well be that a certain amount of metaphor is fully tolerable by mainstream society, as long as it is conclusively walled off from other kinds of meaning. To say all language is metaphorical *seems* destabilizing, but *is* not so, as what it is saying is that the linguistic is the metaphorical and is by definition not vulnerable to or inflected by the material or the inelegant. People outside academia tend to want to hold onto an idea of literature as concerned with language and form, not with politics and materiality, because to confine literature to a metaphorical level puts it into a box, renders it unthreatening, with the additional fillip that those who praise it get the bonus of seeming to be sensitive to the presence of art and beauty.

Jean-Luc Nancy, in this, for a ‘poststructuralist’ approach, surprisingly early (1976) book on Kant, confronts the allegedly non-metaphorical, inelegant nature of Kant’s language, its ‘will to being a discourse, by definition, *without* style” (146). Nancy does this not to dismiss it but to affirm its value as a mode of exposition. In doing this, Nancy almost passively refutes the contention that Kant does not employ metaphor; not that he employs metaphor the same way as everyone else, but that his non-employment of metaphor constitutes a particularly crafty—Daedalian!—employment of metaphor, a labyrinth of phrasing whose rigor is at once an irremovable wall and a tantalizing tease. It is to Nancy’s great credit that this book, appearing in Stanford’s prodigious Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics series under the supervision of Werner Hamacher, situates its assertions about the ‘renunciation’ (38) ‘disappointment’ (39), and ‘undecideability’ (59) of Kant’s language specifically within the site of Kant’s textuality itself. This is, by implication, a book about philosophy and language as such. But more specifically it is thoroughly, albeit playfully, a book about Kant. Indeed, at times Nancy strips the philosopher’s name of its capital letter, partially to signify that ‘kant’ in German is a past participle of the verb *kennen*, to know, perhaps to signify a certain irreverence towards the monument of Kant with a capital K, which has tended to forestall explicit questionings of time-honored premises about Kant and language.

The preface by translator Saul Anton meditates lengthily on the un-translatability of ‘*tenir un discours*’: “to make a speech: but also ‘to hold a position’’: there is a sense both of exposition and sustenance. Anton variously translates *tenu* as ‘spoken’ and ‘held up.’ Anton is right to not project any single English equivalent, yet there is one that comes close to—yet very far from—being appropriate. Surely “to hold forth upon” is idiomatic in English, and keeps the tactile, prehensile aspect of *tenir*. Yet the English phrase implies precisely a non-philosophical discourse, what the blowhard at the next table at the restaurant bloviates about; ‘holding forth’ is apodictically short of the philosophical, especially the Kantian-philosophical. I am not suggesting Anton should have used ‘to hold forth,’ merely observing that it is in the possible field of linguistic reference here and that its narrow-miss inappropriateness says something about the entire problem of

translating this sort of text into English.

There is also the related verbal motif of ‘tenacity,’ of holding on to something in a kind of dogged effort, and ‘tenacity’ and ‘eloquence’ tend to be registered in inverse variation. Anton’s point about *tenir un discours* being untranslatable into English gains heft when one considers how dissociated tenacity is from any idea of intellectual brilliance—would one ever describe Einstein (as suggested by Roland Barthes’ piece on his brain in *Mythologies*), Riemann, or for that matter Nancy as ‘tenacious’?—and indeed that the word is at times applied with a certain condescension. ‘Tenir’ in French also has a temporal element; we have only to realize that *maintenant*, the French word for ‘now,’ refers to the hand being held out, as if to signify a discrete moment of presence but also to suggest the passage of time, which makes every ‘now’ also a gesture. And tenacity is just that which persists through time, despite challenges. Often when one considers questions of translation one is supposed to meditate on the original language and how it poses unsolvable enigmas, but here it is what the enigmas tell us about English that is perhaps most intriguing. Anton should, incidentally, have been credited on the cover page with the translation. Anton did a thorough and creditable job on a hybrid, shape-shifting text, made even more difficult, as Nancy implies in his own 2006 preface, by an awareness of the later course of the author’s thought, difficult to exclude when translating such an early text. Stanford University Press should make sure to credit him more prominently in the second edition.

Anton, incidentally, refers to this work as *Logodaedalus*, even though the publisher gives *The Discourse of the Syncope* upper-case treatment and gives the subtitle only in inconspicuous lower case. This book is indeed only the first part of a two-part project, but the other part, *Kosmotheoros*, was never completed. This structure—of course in itself mirroring the Kantian trope of the observable as a graspable instantiation of an absent whole—employs both the idea of the microcosm and the macrocosm—*Logodaedalus* pertains to verbal artifices and the slippages of its putative absence, *Kosmotheoros* would have, if ever written, pertained to the regulative, ‘geometric,’ categorical side of Kant and of the discourse ancillary to or epiphenomenal of Kant. This division into diptych is

emblematic of the two major senses of syncope, in French and even *mutatis mutandis* in English. Syncope is the odd word best known for either its medical or musical pertinence. In medicine, syncope refers to a pause in a normal biological process, most principally a loss of consciousness. Anton helpfully adds that *avoir un syncope* is colloquial French for ‘have a heart attack,’ presumably in the colloquial, largely figurative sense in which one would say “I had a heart attack when I saw the prices on the menu” and so on. Syncopation in music is an emphasis (or lack of emphasis) where none is expected. It is a disruption of the normal beat. In music, syncopation is essentially something you want to happen; it adds friction and interest to the beat. In medicine, syncope is something you emphatically do not want to happen. The syncope is not a lacuna or a caesura. It is not, at least in the most pedantic use of the term, a negation. Nancy even goes so far as to say the syncope is a sort of synthesis—we might say it is a bump on the road to synthesis that is irremovably on that road yet prevents its course from ever amounting to conclusive synthesis in the way we usually think of the term.

The Kantian trope of the veil as a limit to knowledge means that exposition and beauty cannot be subsumed into one totality. What is interesting is that the term is familiar in both medical and, even more so (at least in English) musical discourses, yet its meaning in each has not necessarily infiltrated the other—lending heft to the integrity of the *Logodaedalus-Kosmotheoros* dyad, in other words, grounding it lexically and not in any a priori distinction between the natural and social sciences. Even more striking is that the syncope, though certainly an effect of linguistic disruption, is a different sort than an aporia or a fissure. The syncope is a bump, not a gap. Its spatial corollary is not absence, but spin. And it is not the generalized effect of linguistic instability *an sich*, but a phenomenon specific to Kant’s discourse—a sort of literariness that comes from the effort to deny literariness, that is, nonetheless, and *pace* our father-son duo, literary, but is rendered by the rigor of Kant’s style and the internal struggle of his parergal discourse with that rigor’s specific *kind* of literariness. Nancy speaks of the “undecidable inscription of absence” (158) as meta-mathematical and not ‘dubious’ (8), which is a move reminiscent of the later work of Alain Badiou.

This conceptualized undecideability underlies the association of the syncope with the extreme craftsmanship of logodaedalism and even the *Witz* or *bon mot*, a favorite subject of Nancy's, whose contradictions are given further pressure by the containment of epigrammatic poise, which is yet disruptive to presumptions of uncomplicated exposition. The *Witz*, in nearly a Freudian sense, offered embarrassment or exposure as well as simply being witty in the more presentable sense; in other words it represents both the ultimate in conscious formulation of language and the limits or self-undoing of that conscious formulation. What Nancy extrapolates from Kant's mode of linguistic self-awareness that was not merely Romantic expressiveness or its modern update in the psychic automatism of the Surrealists. Another way of theorizing linguistic instability without fetishizing or sentimentalizing it must be found: and Nietzsche, Bataille, Leiris, Heidegger (for all his political problems), Sartre (for all *his* political problems), Derrida, Foucault, Nancy, Nancy's late collaborator Lacoue-Labarthe, all made efforts—Derrida of course most famously in *Glas*, published the same year as the French original of Nancy's Kant book—to pursue this line of thinking. The important point here, as Anton indicates in a different way in his prologue, is that all this was not simply a result of May 1968 or a certain impasse in mid-1960s structuralism but had its basis in an intermittently subterranean channel (rhizome?) of thought that extends much further back.

One hallmark of this thought-strand is not to enforce artificial distinctions between expository and imaginative language of the sort that ultimately are able to subtend the Sunday familiar essays of the world. Kant's era saw a merging of philosophy and poetry—most obviously in Schiller and, as Nancy (with Lacoue-Labarthe) has shown in *The Literary Absolute*, the 'Jena Romantics.' Though far removed from 'normal' Romantic expressivism, Kant was not entirely *not* of it. Nancy asserts that exposition is not just unfettered discourse or rendered speech, but a linguistic mode that has its own pitfalls. Presentation (*Darstellung*) is indeed not the same as *Dichtung* (poetry). Kant's prose, Nancy suggests, is 'beautiful' in the way that a Mondrian painting or a Breuer chair is beautiful; the beauty is in the uninflected nature of the exposition that does not foreground the visible presence of beauty. But wait: this exposition, for Nancy, is not wholly successful; in attempting to hide beauty as a product in favor of the beauty of the

process (itself a paradox), a new, stranger kind of beauty is revealed. In transparently parading the product, there is a gap, a bump—a syncopation—by which the non-present beauty is insistently, surreptitiously, manifested. The syncope is that which rhetoric takes in, hides, and, virtually ‘behind closed doors,’ discloses.

This syncopation does not make Kant metaphorical in a way that the *Globe* columnist’s son wanted him to be, but it does mean that within the dryness of Kant’s *Darstellung* there are deposits of covert *Dichtung*, “the rest of literature,” both potential treasure and potential waste. And yet *Dichtung*, the kernel of creative expression, is not strictly identical to writing, or the production of that expression; the *Schriftsteller*, the author, is on the other side of *Darstellung* from *Dichtung*, and that would apply not just in the first place to the philosopher but to any kind of actual literary work, which need to be propelled by the trace of their production if the inner mystery of their *Dichtung* is to be displayed.

Nancy makes a simple yet very important assertion, far more declarative than most of what he says in *Logodaedalus*: that Kant wrote philosophy in German in *a day when* (155) “German [wa]s a language not very much written”; in other words, when scholarly writing by Germans was done in French or Latin. Kant in a sense is rendering the philosophical equivalent of Luther’s Bible, putting philosophy into language for really the first time. Thus the hesitancy of the prose is a part of this; in a way we should compare Kant’s German more to say the English of Hobbes or perhaps even Hoccleve than of Hume. Given the engrafted, virtually adaptive relationship between *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and Luther’s Bible, recently demonstrated by Graham Parkes in his Oxford translation, perhaps we can see Luther, Kant, and Nietzsche as three major non-demonstrative as Nancy might say, automonstrative, instances of the difficulty of even writing in German, and the rare and dangerous insights won through this difficulty. Nancy cryptically announces that “Logodaedalus is also Zarathustra” (159).

This makes Kant more prophetic, Zarathustra, or his programmer, more cunning. Perhaps we can see Luther, Kant, and Nietzsche as three major non-literary (in the first

instance) excavators of a space that a belated German literary language could fill. As a longtime professor in the liminal region of Strasbourg, Nancy knows well the complicated relationship between French and German languages, territorial and otherwise, and the dangers of any too-totalizing a solution of them. This once more puts him in the tradition of Nietzsche and Bataille, whose only solution of the endemic problems here may be a hyperaware self-consciousness of them. There is, by the way, a special aspect of Kant's name which treads particularly 'wittily' across the Franco-German fold, K is a letter that is virtually nonexistent in French and its rare appearance in the language accrues comic overtones. Nancy quotes Kafka's *Trial* in such a way as to make it seem K stands for Kant, and in turn one wonders whether the incongruity of K in Romance languages is part of what Kafka was gesturing at in his metafictional use of his own initial letter. This is just one extrapolation afforded by the self-conscious weft of Nancy's exposition.

Nancy's book knows itself as a production in another way as well. The book is not just a treatise on Kant, but what the medieval would have called a '*cento*' or patchwork of quotations about Kant—jokes, imprecations, tributes, citations from various hands—in fact the book, for all its density, is about two steps away from being, in one direction, a coffee-table book (if accompanied by pictures of Kant and the people who contribute the quotes about him) or in another a "How Kant Can Change Your Life" pop-manual. In the right context, this potential popularizing can be a disruptive move. It is so here, as Nancy takes us past the monumental Kant of our accustomed reception-history and shows us a Kant who was popular in his own day and who astonished younger foreign visitors such as Thomas de Quincey (21) by talking of essentially popular matters. Of course, to say Kant is 'mainly' popular is the same as saying he is 'mainly' metaphorical—impossible.

That Nancy parades the popular Kant also cajoles us to accept Kant's essential unpopularity. What Nancy is trying to do is leaven Kant's staid transmitted persona with just enough of the popular and metaphorical elements that are there, even as minority strains, in order to show us the plural, distended performance—the syncopation—of Kant's language. But the quotes embedded by Nancy in his own *Darstellung* also show

us why Kant, after his death, has been at once so inescapable and so continually *unpopular*. Several of the sampled authors—people as different as Michelet and Artaud—imply Kant lacks masculinity, that he is, in Artaud’s words (xxiv) ‘a little girl.’ There is, among Nancy’s sampled texts, a persistent will to envision Kant as sexually incongruous, preposterous, or nonfunctional. The lengthiest and funniest example of this in Nancy’s book is an excerpt from Louis Guilloux’s 1935 novel *Le Sang Noir*. In the novel, a misbehaving student in a high school class is called out by Professor Cripure; the student asks derisively if Kant was a virgin, but not before calling Kant the author of the “*Cripure of Pure Reason*.”

The ‘Cripure’ parapraxis, like the opening scene of *Madame Bovary*, illustrates the endless fun to be had with proper names by children, a fun which improvises upon an inherent syncopation between name and referent. In calling Kant the author of the ‘*Cripure of Pure Reason*’ the child is substituting a personal name for a philosophical term, someone known to him in person of someone known to him only in a book, the medium of intellectual instruction (his teacher) for the substance of the instruction (his book). But even as the student embarrasses himself with this confusion, his question about Kant’s virginity actually, like the later pedagogic response of the *Globe* columnist’s son, represents an aspiration towards the conventional. With our knowledge that Kant was a lifelong bachelor, the reader seeks his sexual affect—in a way, part of Kant’s proclaimed difficulty to the ‘general reader’ is less intellectual than excited by the peculiarity of his apparent asexuality, whether known from his biography or merely ‘inferred’ from the ‘dryness’ of his prose. There is the sense that there is a certain connection between the seeming desiccation or abstraction of Kant’s prose and a lack of sexual fruition. There is a double bind here: The great philosopher must be sexless, both out of a mystique of the purity of the intellect. Yet this is set off by a resentment that Kant is already smarter, invincibly systematic, and, to boot, more ‘logodaedalic’ than us—that in fact our only advantage is the postulated likelihood of having more achieved sex lives. To believe that Kant was a sexual being as well as an intellectual one would rob us of the one bit of *Schadenfreude* we can muster with respect to him. But there is also a worry about the asexual thinker, cognate with the earlier mentioned worry that the artist

is economically unproductive, that the expenditure of art is inherently wasted. In this way, we want the thinker to have a ‘fulfilled’ sex life because we can see him or her enrolled in a libidinal economy. This will constrain one kind of pleasure—the aesthetic—in the name of another—the sexual. Thus the key point in the Guilloux text that the student is trying to make a point about Kant’s asexuality that he thinks will ingratiate himself with his teacher, which the verbal matrix reveals by the unintentional use of the teacher’s name. Kant’s pure *Critique* is unpurified by association with the prosaic pedagogue Cripure.

“Shouldn’t the philosopher be virile?” (164) But would we be happy if he really were? We do not want Kant to have any sort of discernible sex life for the same reason that the columnist father was pleased at his son ‘discovering’ Kant was disqualified from being meaningful by not using metaphor. We exclude Kant from a safe circle composed of those who possess a quality that we think we hold. Kant becomes the outsider. The man who, as imagined by Musil’s all-too-normatively educated Young Törless, has “solved the problems of philosophy once and for all” (142) becomes, through that very aspiration to the normative, rejected by the norm. He is seen as the outcast, the vagabond, the scapegoat. The imperturbable sage of Königsberg is expelled by ‘exposés’ (in both the English and French senses of the word), such as that by the columnist’s son, and is rendered abject: the unsexed, the unmetaphorical. But this may not be the final move. Kant’s logodaedalic determination can, Nancy implies, through “curious acrobatics” (126), shake this impasse: syncopate it through almost invisibly subtle but nonetheless tangibly present linguistic “play of alternation” (35).

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