

## Foreword

The first version of this essay was written in 1992. Peggy Kamuf translated it into English, and her translation was published the following year in *Paragraph*, which had dedicated a special issue to Jean-Luc Nancy at the time.<sup>1</sup> This international tribute clearly showed once again that the measure of an idea is often taken, first and last, “abroad,” in “foreign” countries.

What I wrote then stands as a modest, partial, and provisional introduction to Nancy’s work. It was my intention to develop it or pursue it elsewhere when the right time came. I have certainly not given up on that; many new developments are the mark of this. But I must admit that I have had to follow the motifs, at least, of my first attempts, as far as the topical heart of the matter is concerned.

While the choice of the guiding thread, and especially of the original title—*Le toucher*—seemed to impose itself, it never ceased to worry me. In the grammatical form of the French phrase and its indecision—between the noun *toucher* and verb *toucher*, the definite article *le* and personal pronoun *le*—it is easy to recognize two indissociable gestures: if one analyzed the way in which a great philosopher treated touch, how he handled this profound question of the sense that is apparently the most superficial, the question of the very surface itself, touching, was it not necessary also to touch *him*, and thus touch someone, address oneself to him *singularly*, touch someone *in him*, a stranger perhaps? Never to this degree have I felt how enigmatic, how troubling idioms are in their necessity, in expressions such as “touch to the heart,” “touch the heart,” whether their value is properly literal or figurative, or sometimes both, beyond all decidability.

However, by thus privileging one perspective, let us even say one *sense*,

one of the senses, don't we undertake to choose, to unfairly leave in the shadows everything excluded by that one sense, indeed, by the senses in general, in and of themselves? Don't we risk losing sight of the measure of the work we are claiming to open up?

The risk is all the greater in that this topical vein, barely visible at first, perhaps hidden until then, has since been Nancy's to mine; and he has ceaselessly been expanding the reach of its influence, increasing the wealth of its stratifications, and thus confirming its resources—at the risk (to me) of venturing with this toward the unpredictable, or losing it there. Nancy's *Le sens du monde* (*The Sense of the World*), for example, first published shortly afterward during the same year, 1992, already bore witness to that, and "Toucher" ("Touching") became the title of one of its chapters. No lucky vein, then: what I had proposed risked appearing not only dated (it undeniably and purposely is) but also increasingly deficient, faltering, or obsolete.

Unable today to transform the central topic of this essay and make it less unworthy of Nancy's thought, and particularly of the powerful books he has published during the past few years,<sup>2</sup> I have contented myself here with changes in the form of the text, interpolated passages—some of them admittedly long ones—and notes added retrospectively.

The age of this text is thus multifold. It sometimes skips several years from one sentence to the next. And so, together with the reader, I could have played at coloring in the strata of an archive.

To admit these risks and accept them without shame is not enough, of course, to contain them.

In spite of all these shortcomings, if this attempt at interpretation, among so many other possible ones, at least persuades others to read one of the immense philosophic works of our time, this publication will not have been altogether unjustified.

Jacques Derrida