

Intermezzo

Whereas Part III deals with how the self-deconstruction of monotheism and Christianity entails a poetic mode of language and sense, this part examines how this self-deconstructive moment plays out in art and the image. Nancy suggests that art does not merely illustrate religion. Instead, the two are involved in the same self-deconstructive movement or in a process of a mutual dis-enclosure. Whereas art provides the sensible articulation of the internal destabilization of the religious mode, the unstable core in religion—an origin in its displacement—forms an integral part of the condition of art.

Nancy proposes that monotheism cannot be considered to be an evolutionary outcome of polytheism; instead, it is a rearticulation of the religious mode, equal to its gradual abandonment. The mythical mode of polytheism is associated with the effective presence of gods in a world structured according to the relationships between them, as set out in a myth that has the foundational value of an origin. For Nancy, the “mono” of monotheism signifies not only the fact that there is a transcendent God who is inaccessible yet still determines the state of being of the world but also the destabilization or the displacement of such an originary point.

This movement of demythologization implies a fundamental change in the status of representation—not only of religious representation or the religious image but, as Nancy argues, representation in a more general

sense. While polytheism is associated with mythological representation—in other words, with the visibility of the gods—and its art “provides a vision of the gods” (*M2* 240/66), in monotheism myth, or the positive representation of the actions of gods, transforms into negative formulas signifying the absent presence of God. In a monotheistic context, the religious representation or the image must figure the displacement of the origin or the effacement of the model, and its proper subject matter becomes the invisibility of the unique God.

Within the complex texture of monotheism, especially in its Jewish and Christian form, the idea of creation *ex nihilo* provides, according to Nancy, a figure of the simultaneous invention and displacement or even erasure of the agency of God as an origin or model. Creation *ex nihilo* does not mean that the world is created or miraculously appears out of nothing. Rather, it is the opposite of fabrication or production according to a preexisting model. Nancy insists that the *nihil* in this motif signifies the absence of origin or, for that matter, of an agent-creator. Through this motif, monotheism maintains a possible interpretation that the world is without a model, but also without a producer. The kenotic aspect of creation *ex nihilo*, the fact that God is considered to empty himself into creation, signifies that God and the world are indistinguishable and are, finally, the being of the world as such, without reason and without model.

According to Nancy, the idea of the incarnation forms a central self-deconstructive aspect of Christian monotheism. As he points out, the term *incarnation* cannot be understood as “representation” (*D* 81/125), where the body is defined as a sensible manifestation of an invisible spirit. By contrast, incarnation—in the theological sense of the term—refers to the idea that God *becomes* flesh (*D* 81/126). This kenotic aspect of the incarnation defines the Christian body not as a material exteriority enveloping a soul but as the taking place of the withdrawal of God (*D* 83/127). In other words, incarnation is not a representation or imitation that supposes resemblance and a model. The body is the place of the alienation of God from himself; it is the material presentation of this alienation.

This displacement of the model or origin in the motifs of creation *ex nihilo* and incarnation can be traced in the condition of art and the status of the image. Nancy maintains that religious art, and specifically Christian art, is not an illustration of the biblical story (*V* 122/44) and, in a more general sense, even within the context of religion art is not religious (*M1* 99/157). In other words, religion does not provide a model, a truth, a story that the artistic image illustrates or represents. Instead, the image is itself without a model and shares the moment of the withdrawal of origin that characterizes monotheism. Art, then, does not have representational

value; it is a presentation of an open absence. The illustrative mode becomes a presentational one: the image does not illustrate an invisible truth; it does not preach a univocal message. On the contrary, it is a presentation of the thing that appears, a presentation of itself, in other words, an address or a visitation. Art is engaged in a self-deconstructive movement like that of Christianity.

The first contribution, by Ian James, explores the initial ambiguity of the theological motif of the incarnation and emphasizes that, in Nancy's interpretation, it should be understood not as affirming a metaphysics of presence but as a presentation of an open sense. Boyan Manchev demonstrates that the body, viewed in the context of such a deconstructive reading of the incarnation, becomes the site of a constant creation or modalization and, as such, the central element in the discussion of Nancy's onto-aesthetic. In her contribution, Alena Alexandrova further discusses how art and the image exceed the illustrative mode with regard to religion and become places of presentation of the absence of model or origin. Finally, Federico Ferrari demonstrates how contemporary art echoes the dis-enclosure of religion to the extent that it identifies itself as a practice founded on nothing and constantly revives the absence of origin.

—*Alena Alexandrova*