

Jean-Luc Nancy on Sovereignty and the Retreat of the Christian God

Jean-Luc Nancy sobre la soberanía y la retirada del Dios cristiano

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between sovereignty and the death of God in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. By connecting Nancy's comments on sovereignty to his project on the Deconstruction of Christianity, it explores how the metaphysical assumption of the sovereign, in the form of God, king, or law, can never subsume the excess of sovereignty. By situating Nancy's work in relation to Carl Schmitt and Georges Bataille, it argues that sovereignty evades the grasp of any sovereign proclamation. Additionally, the analysis shows how Nancy's interpretation of sovereignty appeals neither to a mythos, nor to nothingness, as a foundation. For Nancy, sovereignty is not a foundation but a mark, or trace, of the nothingness that unseats every sovereign foundation. What is therefore offered in this paper, is a reading of sovereignty as passage and trace, in which negation is not a foundation but an opening that makes way for each singular gesture of creation.

Keywords: Nancy, sovereignty, deconstruction, christianity, God, Bataille, Schmitt.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la relación entre la soberanía y la muerte de Dios en la obra de Jean-Luc Nancy. Considerando los comentarios de Nancy sobre la soberanía junto con su proyecto de la deconstrucción del cristianismo, se explora cómo el supuesto metafísico del soberano, en la forma de Dios, rey, o la ley, no puede jamás subsumir el exceso de la soberanía. Situando el trabajo de Nancy en relación con los escritos de Carl Schmitt y de Georges Bataille, se argumenta que la soberanía evade la com-

prensión de cualquier proclamación soberana. Además, el presente análisis muestra cómo la interpretación de Nancy de la soberanía no apela ni a un mito, ni a la nada, como un fundamento. Para Nancy, la soberanía no es un fundamento, sino una marca, o huella, de la nada que derroca toda fundación soberana. Por lo tanto, lo que se ofrece en este artículo es una lectura de la soberanía como pasaje y huella, en la cual la negación no es un fundamento, sino una apertura que da paso a cada gesto singular de creación.

Palabras clave: Nancy, soberanía, deconstrucción, cristianismo, Dios, Bataille, Schmitt.

As in Hesiod's *Theogony*, creation always begins with a gap, an opening.¹ This gap is the nothing of sovereignty. The creation of the world always emerges from this space that is opened up by the retreat of the gods. In the West, this recognition is made possible by the death of the Christian God, which discloses the spatial infinity of sovereignty. What the death of God discloses is that sovereignty stands in juxtaposition to any particular sovereign image. Sovereignty, as the gap of creation, exceeds any sovereign enclosure proclaimed by God, king, or law. The death of God reveals that the foundation of foundations, the ground of all creation, is nothing more than the retreat of being. As Bataille often wrote, sovereignty is NOTHING; the highest of highs is not a thing, not a substance, but a movement, a tension, that is not in control of its own excess.

Jean-Luc Nancy explores the relationship between sovereignty and the retreat of the gods in *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. In "Ex Nihilo Summum (Of Sovereignty)," Nancy makes a distinction between the suzerain and sovereignty, and suggests that the rule of the sovereign is destabilized by the excess of sovereignty. Moreover, in "Of Creation" he connects this movement of sovereignty with the open space of meaning that is disclosed with the retreat of the Christian God. When Nancy's work in *The Creation of the World or Globalization* is considered alongside his work in *The Inoperative Community* and *Dis-Enclosure*, an argument regarding the specific relationship between sovereignty and the retreat of the gods becomes apparent. It becomes clear, namely, that the space opened up by the death of the Christian God is nothing more than a mark, or a trace, of the openness that makes creation possible. By explicating Nancy's work on sovereignty, and con-

¹ Hesiod writes, "First of all Chaos came into being" (Hesiod, *The Theogony of Hesiod*, trans. by Richard S. Caldwell, Newburyport, MA, Focus Publishing, 1987, p. 33). The Greek word *chaos*, related to the verb *chasko*, does not signify disorder and nothingness but rather an opening or gap, an infinite space of unformed matter. The etymology suggests an impenetrable darkness that is reminiscent of the formless void of Genesis and watery waste called *nun* in Egyptian cosmology (*ibidem*, p. 33, n. 116).

necting it to his writing on Christianity, my hope is to expose the relationship between sovereignty and the deconstruction of Christianity, and to clarify Nancy's critique of Carl Schmitt and Georges Bataille. As I will argue, the death of God, king, or law –the space opened up by the retreat of the gods– is the sovereign gap of creation. I begin this paper by discussing Nancy's distinction between sovereignty and the sovereign, and then argue that the Christian death of God is an example of how sovereignty exempts the sovereign. Following Schmitt, Nancy argues that the question of sovereignty is indeed a question of the exception; however, what is important for Nancy is thinking this exception, not the decision as such. It is not simply a matter of thinking what is "outside of right," but of that which is in retreat from itself. As Nancy notes, what is important is the way in which sovereignty eludes the sovereign. As I argue below, this is also where Nancy differs from Bataille. For Nancy, that which withdraws from decision and decapitates the sovereign does not provide access to an improved sense of communication, but reveals the inoperativity of all community. This is why Christianity plays a central role in Nancy's work, because the death of the Christian God offers an example of this inoperativity.

In his work on sovereignty, like in his work on Christianity, Nancy argues that we must move beyond nihilistic discourse by coming to grips with this inoperative aspect of the death of God. The death of God, both in Christian scripture and in philosophy, does not signify a foundation in nothingness, but an open relation with the finite. Though Schmitt rightly described the movement from the medieval to the modern period as the vacating of divine order, and the opening of a space of decision that is exempt from the law, this does not mean that the truth of the world lies in nothingness, as if the negative itself was a foundation that replaced God. What the emptying of the divine demonstrates is not nothingness as ground, but the singular gesture of creation made possible by the passing of the last God (the plural sharing of existence). The historical transition from the theological political order occupied by the medieval suzerain, who was grounded in a mythos, to the temporal sovereignty of the early modern period, which is atheological, is not simply a movement from myth to nihilism, but shows how creation itself is none other than the exposure of being to its own absent foundation.

Nancy begins his argument in "Ex Nihilo Summum (Of Sovereignty)," by etymologically situating and defining the term sovereignty. As he notes, "sovereignty designates, first, the summit."² It descends from the thirteenth century word *soverain*,

² J.-L. Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. by Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew, Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2007, p. 96; *La création du monde ou la mondialisation*, Paris, Galilée, 2002, p. 145.

which is derived from *superanus* in the *Vetus Latina* (Old Latin Bible), meaning “chief, principal, above” and associated with *reign*. It also has a monarchical connotation through the Italian *sovrano*, the synonym of which is *monarcha*.³ *Superanus* implies height and domination, which demonstrates the linguistic connection between *summus* and *supremus*. The nature of the sovereign is to reign from a summit—from the monarch (the “arch-position” that is by definition singular).

Just as the “principle” or “chief” implies warlike domination (standing above others), so the word sovereign designates separation, and rising above earthly contingency. As Nancy argues, the word sovereign designates height because “height separates the top from the bottom and frees the former from the humility of the latter—from humus, from the ‘back-bent working of the earth,’ from laying down in sleep, from malady or death, and from extended things in general.”⁴ Since the summit is distinguished by height, it does not have a quality or materiality that makes it superior; rather, its position at the pinnacle determines its substance. The sovereign, in this manner, rises above the body. The chief has a physical body; but the sovereign is more than a body even though he occupies a physical form. In Roman Triumphs, this dual stress on physicality and transcendence was enacted by the slave who stood behind the general during the victory procession. The slave held the crown of Jupiter over the general’s head while whispering into his ear, “remember, you are a man.”⁵

From the Caesars of Ancient Rome to the Holy Roman Emperors of the Middle Ages, “the emblem of the sovereign was the eagle and the sun,” which signify the sovereign because of the height that makes the summit distinct.⁶ This separation creates distinction and differentiation and thereby the sacred character of commandment. As the highest, the sovereign gathers within himself/herself a distance which separates him or her from the means of exchange. This is why Nancy writes, “The sovereign is separated from this dependence and this endless exchange of means and ends.” As distinct, the sovereign does not belong to the horizontal trajectory: “The sovereign does not only tower over: it is transversal.”⁷ The sovereign, as height itself, occupies the emptiness of height—it is an “absolute superlative.”⁸

In contrast to the traditional theologico-political suzerain grounded in a mythos, the atheological sovereign has no foundation. This is how sovereignty unseats the theologico-political sovereign. The medieval suzerain, like the God of Aquinas and

³ Will Grimshaw, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, Philadelphia, Grigg, Elliot, and Company, 1848, p. 238.

⁴ J.-L. Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, p. 96; *La création du monde*, p. 146.

⁵ Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 82.

⁶ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, p. 97; *La création du monde*, p. 147.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 97; p. 148.

Dante, was connected to a lineage that included all creation, whereas the sovereign of the early modern state, as theorized for instance in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, is of a different order of being than his subjects.⁹ The sovereign personifies God as the source and union of all things, while simultaneously being separate from them. The sovereign gives rise to the modern atheological state because as a position in the order of being it has no relation or measure of equivalence to anything.

The medieval suzerain has a vassal and "occupies a certain height within an ordered system."¹⁰ This system is bound by oath, allegiance, and fidelity. It enacts fidelity through a fief, which is a pledge of loyalty between vassal and suzerain. The right of the suzerain is ancestral, and it is not the absolute height occupied by the sovereign. This is why there are several designations of lordship—duke, marquis, knight, or baron—together revealing the manifold of bonds that found *fiefs*. For the sovereign, in contrast, the bond is not a fief but a matter of absolute authority. The sovereign founds and precedes the laws. In the medieval system, the only principle that escaped the subordination of the fief was the Lord All-mighty. In modern politics, the sovereign is the one who has power independent of property or inheritance and who founds laws independent of any system of loyalty. This is true not only for monarchy but also for democracy. This is why Nancy notes that the "sovereign people possess nothing less and nothing more than the absolute monarch: namely, the very exercise of sovereignty."¹¹

The question of sovereignty is therefore primarily a question of the summit. How does the summit relate to the base? Is the summit like the top of a pyramid that signifies the pinnacle of being? Or is the summit a transcendent space beyond all categories of substance? Similar to Bataille, Nancy argues that sovereignty is "altitude in itself"—a detached summit.¹² This altitude of sovereignty is not an outside according to "a logic of divorce," but "according to that of an opening that belongs to the world, as the mouth belongs to the body."¹³ The summit does not signify the pinnacle of being—as if the sovereign had a greater share of being than those beings at the base of the pyramid—but a quality distinct from all being, having no contact with the base. The summit is outside of structure itself and can neither penetrate into the structure of the world nor can it be penetrated by any element of the world. This is why sovereignty is nothing—it is a hole at the top of a circle. It is the unfillable gap at the heart of creation.

⁹ Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 243.

¹⁰ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, p. 98; *La création du monde*, p. 149.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 99; p. 151.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 102; p. 158. As I discuss below, this is also where Nancy differs slightly from Bataille.

¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration, The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. by John McKeane, New York, Fordham University Press, 2012, p. 28; *L'Adoration, Déconstruction du christianisme 2*, Paris, Galilée, 2010, p. 43.

The nothing (*rien*) of sovereignty is still something. In fact, the nothing of sovereignty is the thing itself (*res*). Hence, though it is nothing, it is still *something*. Like the space in the empty cup, it is the formative principle of structure and it is this nothing that defines the function of materiality. As Nancy notes, “that which is nothing is what subsists this side of or beyond subsistence, of substance and of subject.” Like Heidegger’s *Dasein*, nothingness is constitutive of “being the ‘there,’ being that ‘there,’ which is the very point where the entity itself opens being.”¹⁴ Nothing is what realizes itself in its contact as existence.¹⁵

It is in this way that the nothing of sovereignty eludes the sovereign, for sovereignty is the very thing that the sovereign is excluded from. As Nancy argues, the sovereign is the one “who depends on nothing,” and, as such, is given to “no finality, no order of production or subjection, whether it concerns the agent or the patient or the cause or the effect.”¹⁶ Sovereignty is the nothing of creation that exceeds that grasp of the sovereign and simultaneously permits it; without this excess, neither God, king, or law would be possible. Nancy writes provocatively, “If sovereignty did not elude it, the sovereign would in no way (*en rien*) be sovereign.”¹⁷

It is also in this manner that Nancy’s writing on sovereignty is similar to the work of Carl Schmitt. As Schmitt argues in *Political Theology*, in modernity the exercise of the sovereign only occurs under the suspension of law because sovereignty is prior to or in excess of any law.¹⁸ For Schmitt, the sovereign act suspends the law because it must be all-powerful in order to be sovereign. Schmitt argues that, by necessity, the sovereign act must extend beyond all foundation and precedence. In order to actualize absolute authority, the sovereign must free itself from any limit or responsibility that obfuscates its own self-authorization.

Where Nancy differs from Schmitt is that he argues that this non-substantial source of the sovereign is the thing itself that needs to be thought: the space of *creatio ex nihilo* from which sense emerges. Nancy understands this space of sovereignty not as something that needs to be decided upon, but as decision itself.¹⁹ The question of sovereignty is related to the death of God (or King) in exactly this manner: only

¹⁴ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, p. 103; *La création du monde*, pp. 159-160.

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of Heidegger’s complex relation to negativity and nihilism, and Nancy’s critique of Being and Time, see T. Zartaloudis, “Without Negative Origins and Absolute ends: A Jurisprudence of the Singular,” in *Law and Critique*, 13, 2002, pp. 197-230.

¹⁶ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, p. 103; *La création du monde*, p. 160.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 19.

¹⁹ For more on this see “The Decision of Existence,” in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. by Brian Homes, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993, pp. 82-109. Nancy writes: “undecidability itself makes the decision” (p. 104).

in the recognition that the sovereign is in a state of exception (whether, monarch, people, or singularity) can sovereignty—as a nonsubstantial place of emergence—be thought. This is why it is only through the loss of transcendence ascribed to the theologico-political that the nature of sovereignty can be addressed.²⁰

In contrast to Schmitt, therefore, Nancy argues that the loss of the theologico-political is a good thing. Undecidability—the nothing that exceeds the rule of the sovereign—is what displaces the theological and opens the sense of the world to new horizons. The gap of creation that is left in the wake of the displacement of the gods is not a disaster or crisis that needs to be filled by the sovereign, but an opportunity to recognize the nothingness of sovereignty in the opening of sense. The deconstruction of the theological political does not give rise to a nihilism that needs to be filled by a decider, but reveals that negation itself is the singular gesture of creation that cannot be totalized.

For Nancy, it is only with the disintegration of Sense (the death of God, king, or law) that we can catch a glimpse of sense in its passing-by (a glimpse of the gap of creation). Only with the disintegration of the assumed subject, in favor of a non-substantive relation between subjects, is the birth of sovereignty possible. Sovereignty, therefore, is a process of withdrawal whereby an atheological assumption comes to occupy the place of the mythos. This is what Nancy calls “negative sovereignty,” “antisovereignty,” or a “sovereignty without sovereignty.”²¹ It is the recognition that sovereignty always eludes the sovereign and that decision resides in the being-together of creation.²² This loss of the theologico-political is not nihilistic but reveals the opening of sense—the opening up within time to that which is beyond time. Exiting from the theologico-political is not simply a matter of emptying out all metaphysical terms and images but of finding the opening of deconstruction within the very terms and images we share. The end of the political and the birth of sovereignty—like the end of art—is the dissolution of sense from all sovereign enclosure. For Nancy, this dissolution is itself the space of *creation ex nihilo*.

This is why Nancy suggests that it is possible to find meaning in the decline that destabilizes the summit. Sovereignty is not a totalized whole that can be seized, but a subtraction—a gap—in the midst of the world. This subtraction is only ever expe-

²⁰ See also Jean-Luc Nancy, “Politics I,” in *The Sense of the World*, trans. by Jeffrey S. Librett, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 88-93.

²¹ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, p. 107; *La création du monde*, p. 167.

²² Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 91. As Nancy notes, what needs to be discovered is how we can *be-together* without isolating sense according to some sovereign proclamation or negative theology: “This is, at least, the sense whose sense we still have to discover. The political task and responsibility are to understand ‘democracy’ in some way other than through a negative theology of the political (as the unnamable, ungroundable instances of justice and law).”

rienced as a passing fragment—as a finite infinite. Following Schmitt, therefore, Nancy argues that the question of sovereignty is indeed a question of the exception; however, what is important for Nancy is thinking this exception, not decision, in the Schmittian sense. It is not simply a matter of thinking what is “outside of right,” or “outside of institution,” but of that which is in retreat from itself; what is important is the way in which “exemption exempts itself.”²³

Nancy’s work on sovereignty also resonates with the work of George Bataille. In Bataille’s lexicon, summit and sovereignty are comparable terms because both imply excess and headlessness. Like *différance* for Derrida, summit and sovereignty stand at the limit of meaning for Bataille because they both sustain and exhaust signification. For Bataille, the summit exists beyond good and evil and beyond sense. As he writes, “Definition betrays desire. Its aim is the inaccessible summit. But the summit eludes any attempt to think about it. It’s what is. Never what should be.”²⁴ Paradoxically, the summit is both inaccessible and what is. It is the ground of being yet it remains untouchable. It is the foundation of authority yet it is entirely unstable. Bataille writes, “To speak of the summit is to put ourselves in a position of instability.”²⁵

The death of the sovereign leads to a disorientation and vertigo that destabilizes all perspective. The reaching of a summit is equally the reaching of decline because the summit produces a vertigo that arrests all horizons. It is in this manner that the empty space of sovereignty disrupts the very notion of summit and base.²⁶ When Bataille argues that “Sovereignty is NOTHING” he is referring to this instability and vertigo.²⁷ For him, sovereignty is the impossible experience of the summit that is equally a decline. Sovereignty is thereby erased as an object or a category that can be contained by a subject or sovereign Lord. A sovereign substance cannot control the deleterious flow of time and is decapitated by the freedom that runs through it. As Bataille notes, “The sovereign, epitomising the subject, is the one by whom and for the moment, the miraculous moment, is the ocean into which the stream of labour disappear.”²⁸ The subject cannot contain this ocean and is displaced by it. Sovereignty refuses to settle anywhere. Basically, Bataille states, “Sovereignty... is the object which eludes us all, which nobody has seized and which nobody can seize for this rea-

²³ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, p. 109; *La création du monde*, p. 168.

²⁴ Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. by B. Boone and intro. S. Lotringer, London, Paragon House, 2004, p. 89.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

²⁶ For more on this, see Carolyn Bailey Gill, ‘Bataille and the Question of Presence’, in *parallax*, 4, February 1997, p. 95.

²⁷ George Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vols. 2 and 3*, trans. by R. Hurley, New York, Zone Books, 1991, p. 256.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 241.

son: we cannot possess it, like an object, but we are doomed to seek it.”²⁹ Sovereignty is nothing but it is still something. It displaces the subject and opens the way for being in the world outside of the world.

It is precisely in this sense that we must understand Nancy’s work on Christianity and the death of God. For Nancy, Christianity is the instantiation of sovereignty in religious form because it is a rapport within time, with what is outside of time. Christianity proclaims that the exit—the space of dispersal—is the *thing itself*. The death and retreat of Christ is to be distinguished from the theologico-political—whereby sense circulates without discontinuity from top to bottom—because it fractures the circulation upon which it depends. It is in this sense that “the spirit of Christianity” (to quote Hegel) is the “spirit of the West” (to quote Nancy). The West, Nancy argues, “is a mode of being in the world in such a way that the sense of the world opens up as a distancing within the world itself and in relation to it.”³⁰ Christianity contains the resources to dis-enclose the logic of myth and nihilism because it is a contemplation of the chasm opened by the crucifixion of the sovereign.

The recognition of the death in life—the decline in the summit—is the gospel proclaimed by Christianity. However, according to Bataille and Nancy, the death of God in the Christian tradition signals the beyond within life, not the beyond that is beyond the world. The death of Christ makes death the very resource of the divine other and thereby upsets the hierarchical distinction between high and low, father and son, good and evil. Moreover, Christian revelation interrupts myth because it makes myth into the most terrifying of all contemplations—the death of God (the revelation of the summit as decline). This interruption of myth is cotemporaneous with the history of the West, and it is what Nancy means by the phrase ‘the deconstruction of Christianity.’ Christian revelation is the explosion of the sovereign into the nothingness of sovereignty, and as such it is the deconstruction of its own revelation.

What Christianity affirms is that the sense of the world was dislocated through the incarnation/retreat of the supreme being; it affirms that the name of God only ever signifies withdrawal and absence. ‘God,’ like the word ‘sovereignty,’ is the name for the absencing of sense that exceeds the grasp of any sovereign lord. As Nancy writes,

“This proper name, *God*, insists, as if it should be the name that remains in the vacancy left by that individual being, in the vacant heart of sovereignty—and in this sense, as “the last god.” But that expression would then mean that “god” is always the last, the name of the last extremity of all names and all senses.”³¹

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 311.

³⁰ Nancy, *Adoration*, p. 24; *L’Adoration*, p. 38.

³¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. by Bettino Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Micheal B. Smith, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 115; *La décloison, Déconstruction du Christianisme I*, Paris, Galilée, 2005, p. 170.

The relationship between sovereignty and the Christian God is that the name “God” only ever signifies this passing and passage. As Heidegger knew well, the name god only ever signifies the coming of “the last god.” This is why “God” is a name for the “present/absent” at the heart of every name, because God names the unappropriable excess at the heart of creation. When the absolute appears, it does so only as an excess that exceeds the common because it reveals that the *thing itself* is nothing more than a passing wink. Nancy writes, “The name god names the divergence and the step across the gap between nothing and nothing –let us call it the *res ipsa*, the thing itself.”³²

It is in this sense that the Christian “outside,” just like the “outside” of sovereignty, is not an outside according to “a logic of divorce,” but “according to that of an opening that belongs to the world, as the mouth belongs to the body.”³³ The outside is a part of the Christian life just as the dead are a part of the Christian church: the exposure of the soul is the exposure of the soul to death. The synoptic gospels tell us that when Jesus cried out from the summit of the cross and breathed his last breath, the temple curtain was torn in two: “Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mark 15:37-38). The high and low do not become indistinct through this act, but make up the two dimensions of the world that form the dislocated experience of existence (being and beings). This is what “not belonging to the world” (John 17:14-18) implies for Nancy; it implies recognizing the infinite opening that fractures substance into its irreducible plurality. This infinite is not beyond being, but is rather a ‘this’ here (the meaning of *Dasein*) that is irreducible to any one meaning.

This disruption is not the end of the history nor the arrival of the absolute Idea (in the Hegelian sense); rather, it is the demonstration that divine sovereignty is itself constituted by withdrawal and obliteration. The kenosis of the sovereign lord of the Old Testament, through Jesus, is the disruption of the summit because it opens height to the base, evil to good, and space to time. Through the descent of the summit, the base is now open to the grace of the summit, but in an ironic turn this summit is itself revealed as wounded fracturing and distancing. As Nancy writes in *The Inoperative Community*,

“In the death of God –inasmuch as “*we have killed him*”– something of the divine is announced, or rather called upon, as Nietzsche knew. It is not “the death of death,” it is not the dialectic of the God of triumphant subjectivity. Of course the gods are immortal, they all rise again: Osiris, Dionysus, Christ. But resurrection is not what Hegel would like it to be. It is not the end of the process, nor is it the final appropriation of

³² *Ibidem*, p. 118; p. 174.

³³ Nancy, *Adoration*, p. 28; *L'Adoration*, p. 43.

the Living Concept. Resurrection is the manifestation of the god inasmuch as he comes in his own withdrawal, leaves his mark in his own obliteration, is revealed in his own invisibility (it is not a “resurrection,” it is not a return). The god is invisibly manifest and manifestly invisible: this is like a dialectic, but it is not one. However, the fact that it is not one *can only be revealed by the god...*³⁴

The nothingness of sovereignty and the decline that defines the summit—both of these truths are enacted through Christian revelation. The deconstruction of Christianity reveals that the death of God is not the final revelation but the invitation for all to stand at the limit of death in the *spacing-out* of the world. This is what Christianity reveals: that sovereignty is nothing other than the retreat of the sovereign God, and that only in the exposure of the sovereign image to the gap that is opened up by the retreat of the gods can *sense* be seen for what it is—an endless spilling-out of being beyond all origin. The death and resurrection of the sovereign lord discloses the dead, free and creative movement of creation, in its always singular retreat from itself.

Bataille also uses Christ as an example of the summit/decline impossibility. The summit, he asserts, has to do with excess and the plurality of forces that bring about intensity, violation, and tragedy. He argues that the summit is closer to evil than to good insofar as it is associated with the potential for destruction. The decline, on the other hand, corresponds to exhaustion and fatigue, and concerns the preservation and the enriching of the individual. He argues that the summit expressed by Christ on the cross is an “equivocal expression of evil” because it injures God.³⁵ However, Bataille asserts that this summit event also destabilizes its designation as tragedy and as evil, because it permits creator and creation to bleed together. This co-bleeding is the opening of communication because “creatures couldn’t communicate with their Creator except through a wound that lacerates integrity.” Hence, Bataille argues that through the evil act of murdering God a wound is opened in creation at the limits of all shame and self-preservation. This communication that is opened is not pure, not immediate divine access or communication, but rather contaminates the divine with the evil and sin of humanity, a broken unity: “Thus ‘communication’, without which nothing exists for us, is guaranteed by crime. ‘Communication’ is love, and love taints those whom it unites.”³⁶

Through the summit, therefore, guilt and exhaustion infect communication and reveal language as broken exchange. Through the tragedy of the summit (perhaps even the inaccessibility of this tragedy), communication is realized as the death within life.

³⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. by Peter Connor, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 125; *Des lieux divins*, Mauvezin, T.E.R., 1987, p. 19.

³⁵ Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 17.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

This is perhaps the highest Christian truth –all must accept the cross of Christ, must risk being subjected to extreme evil. In order to communicate as Christians, each Christian must be open to this wounding: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow” (Luke 9:23). To be like Christ, the Christian must be placed at the limit of death and nothingness. The moment of summit is also a moment of disorientation. Bataille writes,

“‘Communication’ cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is risked, placed at the limit of death and nothingness; the moral summit is the moment of risk taking, it is a being suspended in the beyond of oneself, at the limit of nothingness.”³⁷

What the death of the sovereign reveals is that ‘communication’ is not a matter of full speech, but of being exposed to the future promise of absence that haunts all relationality. Whenever we communicate we are exposed to the finitude of others. This awareness, and the absence it attests, opens the possibility/impossibility of community. The communication that is opened by the ‘deleterious flow of time’ is not made possible by the command of speech but by the death it proclaims. This is how death awakens, within the community, an awareness of the finite relationality and the singularity of all sharing.

It is in this emphasis on *retreat* that Nancy differs from Bataille. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy argues that the experience of the common is not to be sought because it offers a more *complete* vision of community. For Nancy, it is not a matter of death exposing the community to the limits of subjectivity and thereby awakening a true form of relationality. Rather, it is a matter of death exposing the inoperativity of all community and communication as the break within time. The value of death is that it awakens us to the divided nature of the common –what he calls “the incessant *incompletion* of the community.”³⁸ In is in this manner that sovereignty and Christianity mirror each other in the nothing they offer. Christianity, as the enacting of the disorientation that dis-members any distinction between high and low, is the contemplation of the fracture that exceeds any ‘symbolics of blood.’ The death of God or King is not a loss but the arrival of an undecidability that gives creation back to itself. For Nancy, what needs to be thought is this loss as opening, not as *nihil*.³⁹ This is why understanding sovereignty in the West is a matter of understanding Christi-

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 38; *La communauté désœuvrée*, p. 95.

³⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, ed. by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 92. Nancy writes that “The *nihil negativum* is the *quid positivum* as singular plural, where no *quid*, no being, is posed *without with*.” In this manner, the negative signifies a positive relation (the *without* is equally a *with*).

anity. This is why Nancy asserts, “Christianity is the thing itself that is to be thought,” and, “The only Christianity that can be actual is one that contemplates the present possibility of its negation.”⁴⁰ Christianity is an incessant contemplation of the decline that infects and destabilises the summit occupied by the sovereign, an as such, it continually opens beyond any logic of closure, whether mythic or nihilistic.

Nancy’s writing on sovereignty and the death of the Christian God, therefore, shows how sovereignty is salvaged from the state of exception. It is possible, he asserts, to discover freedom in the decline that destabilizes the summit. Additionally, he suggests that the summit “is necessarily detached as extremity and as point that is incommensurable to a base and to an edifice.”⁴¹ Sovereignty is not a totalized whole that can be seized but a gap in the midst of the world—it is only ever experienced as a spacing. Following Schmitt, he argues that the question of sovereignty is indeed a question of the exception; however, what is thinking this exception, not the decision as such. It is not simply a matter of thinking what is “outside of right,” or “outside of institution,” but of that which is in retreat from itself. As Nancy writes, what is important is the way in which “exemption exempts itself.”⁴² Nancy differs slightly from Bataille on this issue because he claims that the decapitation of the sovereign does not provide access to an improved sense of communication, but only exposes the inoperativity of community.

To summarize, the metaphysical assumption of sovereignty in the form of God, king, or law, can never subsume the excess of sovereignty in its movement and play; sovereignty evades the grasp of any sovereign proclamation. Moreover, sovereignty is not an ought that can be captured by a mythos or *nihil* that grounds existence. For Nancy, what the death of God reveals is that the recoiling of being is proper to existence as such, and that freedom is constituted by retreat. In other words, it reveals that the absence of foundation is what makes existence possible. The interpretation of sovereignty offered by Nancy is therefore a sovereignty of passage in which even the sovereign is unseated by sovereignty and the exception is exempted.

This is why the death of God is not nihilistic; the sovereign retreat of God does not reveal the *nihil* as supreme but as exposed in the movement of the world. Moreover, the Kenotic emptying of the divine opens the common to the nothing at the heart of communication and being, while simultaneously making being possible. For Nancy, the retreat of God allows us to turn towards the space of the common, recognizing that the difference between the summit and the base is undecidable.

⁴⁰ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, p. 140; *La décloison*, p. 204. The second quote is from Luigi Pareyson, Umberto Eco’s teacher, whom Nancy is citing.

⁴¹ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, p. 108; *La création du monde*, p. 178.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 109; p. 172.

In a provocative fragment, Nancy writes that sovereignty is “the revolt of the people.”⁴³ The explorations above allow us to add that the essence of Christianity is this revolt. Christianity is the opening of the inner sanctum of the temple; it is the tearing of the veil and the fracturing of the divine other into the world of difference. From the death of Christ to the French Revolution, the question of the sovereign and sovereignty has been radicalized by this fractured opening. As Hesiod affirmed, creation always begins with a gap; sovereignty is cotemporaneous with the retreat of the gods. The retreat of the gods traces an opening of sovereign excess, and the creation of the world arises from this opening of nothing onto itself. Creation is the tracing of this nothing in its retreat from its own self-presence, and is made possible by an absenting, a flight, that only inscribes itself in its passing as gesture. The West began with this flight, and the death of God that founded Christianity was from its inception merely a marking, a trace, of this sovereign departure.

The instability that we call ‘the history of the West,’ from the advent of Christianity to the death of Louis XVI, is this tension between sovereignty and itself. All of our revolutions, theological and political, arise from this space of difference that is constitutive of space in general—the incessant incompleteness of the common. Christianity, as the enacting of a disorientation that dis-members any distinction between high and low, is the contemplation of this fracture that exceeds any sovereign enclosure. As Nancy argues, the death of God or King is not a loss but the arrival of an undecidability that gives creation back to itself.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*