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Kosmotheoros in Tears

Can a satellite cry? Can it be overcome or defeated by passion; can it be affected or suffer to the extent that its vision is impaired? Can a satellite, the apparatus that observes the world and confers a sense of certainty about its dimensions, character and content, tear up, whimper or weep? Can it break down? Two films released in 2013 hint at such questions. *Gravity*, Cuarón's tale of orbital disaster, provides viewers with an intimate spectacle of tragic sorrow when astronaut Ryan Stone yields to her desperate condition and concedes that she is about to die. At this moment she begins a lament that drifts unheard into the void of space ('Nobody will mourn for me. No-one will pray for my soul'¹) and, as she cries, her tears float uncannily into the air around her. Also exploring the physics of tears, during his tenure as commander of the International Space Station, Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield tests whether those who live in orbit can cry. The video of his experiment – titled 'Tears in Space (Don't Fall)' – shows him simulating the act of crying by putting water into one of his eyes. Strikingly different to the effect imagined in Cuarón's film, the result is again visually impressive for those who have not experienced zero gravity: rather than flowing downwards or away, Hadfield's surrogate tears form a liquid mass that remains attached to his eye. It is possible to produce tears, he observes, but because the force of gravity is not applied to them, crying does not really take place. 'Eyes can definitely cry in space' he observes, but 'the big difference is that tears don't fall'.² Hadfield's conclusion is, then, an equivocating and unsettling one. To the question of whether crying can occur in space, his reply is perhaps or maybe.

Hadfield's observation relates to the physical properties of tears, as though crying is an act that is defined by the movement of liquids alone. However, questioning whether it is possible to cry in space risks neglecting a more interesting question than the ones posed by fluid mechanics: why would someone in such a sublime place feel the need to cry, or become inundated by tears? Why would these heroic figures take on Heraclitus's woeful regard, weeping as they look down on

the world?³ Several answers to these questions immediately present themselves, all also in the register of perhaps or maybe. Those who soar to such a supremely privileged place might be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the place that they have come to inhabit; no longer held in place by the earth, they might feel as though they're falling into nothingness. Alternatively, perhaps there is an anticlimactic recognition of what ascendance to this unearthly place can deliver; rather than attaining an incomparable elevation or escaping to an otherworldly place, perhaps they become aware of what they take with them. Perhaps those in orbit undergo a perceptual transformation, recognizing that they picture the world below only through mediating acts of image production, rather than capturing the world in its unitary abundance. Perhaps daily routine or the minute attention to being alive makes orbital living mundane; perhaps making this place so trivial means that the heavens cease to be celestial. The anointed who ascend to this place might come to see that, as a result of their actions, the sacred has become merely technical. Or perhaps those in orbit simply miss the world. Anyone who looks up to this place can only speculate on what might trouble those who soar to such heights, but any of these comedowns is surely reason enough to produce tears.

II

The association of space with crying is not limited to the recent examples that Cuarón and Hadfield provide. In *The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe records the tear that John Glenn shed after being the first American astronaut to orbit the earth. Wolfe also documents the widespread outpouring of tears by those who celebrated Glenn's successful flight. 'What was it that moved them so deeply?', Wolfe asks:

It had to do with the presence, the aura, the radiation of *the right stuff*, the same vital force of manhood that had made millions vibrate and resonate thirty-five years before to Lindbergh – except that in this case it was heightened by Cold War patriotism, the greatest surge of patriotism since the Second World War.⁴

In Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, it is not a sense of relief or an intense patriotic fervour that produces tears at the thought of leaving the planet. As he dies, renegade replicant Roy Batty recalls his off-world combat experiences. 'All those moments will be lost in time', he laments, 'like tears in rain.'⁵ Weeping releases Glenn and his admirers from the anxious sense of danger that

accompanies orbital travel, but in *Blade Runner* it is the thought of returning to the earth that produces tears.

Weeping is also a recurrent theme in literature and theory: Aristotle, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Kant, Tennyson, Auden, Marvell, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Adorno, Ngugi, Rhys; the Homeric tradition of manly weeping, sentimental narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; *Genesis*, the *Zohar*, *Beowulf*. To this lachrymology can be added the work of Derrida and Nancy, for whom it is through tears that the world is both witnessed and recedes from sight. Following the death of his friend Jean-Marie Benoist, Derrida finds 'the world suspended by some unique tear', and he turns to John Donne's 'A Valediction: Of Weeping' to describe this feeling of loss:

A globe, yea world, by that impression grow,
Till thy tears mix'd with mine do overflow
This world; by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolvèd so.⁶

Nancy's *Corpus* includes tears among the projections and excrescences that move between bodies. Because of these exchanges, he writes, embodiment needs to be understood as a leaky, flaky, entangled and reticulated condition:

A body is an image offered to other bodies, a whole corpus of images stretched from body to body, local colours and shadows, fragments, grains, areolas, lunules, nails, hairs, tendons, skulls, ribs, pelvises, bellies, meatuses, foams, tears, teeth, droolings, slits, blocks, tongues, sweat, liquors, veils, pains, and joys, and me, and you.⁷

In *Listening*, Nancy similarly proposes that the child's first cry is an early moment in this offering of images to other bodies, although here he also associates the infant's exclamatory tears with the production of (rather than entry into) the world:

Perhaps we should thus understand the child who is born with his first cry as himself being – his being or his subjectivity – the sudden expansion of an echo chamber, a vault where what tears him away and what summons him resound at once, setting in vibration a column of air, of flesh, which sounds at its apertures: body and soul of some *one* unique. Someone who comes to himself by hearing *himself* cry (answering the other? calling him?), or sing, always each time, beneath each word, crying or singing, *exclaiming* as he did by coming into the world.⁸

With its fledgling utterance, the child 'comes to himself', and its splitting cry also allows the world to be positioned as something that the child is not. This

tear that tears therefore performs what both Nancy and Derrida term 'spacing' ('*espacement*'): the unacknowledged, repressed or invisible act of differentiation that is required in order for identification to take place. 'Spacing' helps us to consider why the world might be missed by those who ascend to the exalted space of orbit, as well as why this sense of disconnection or loss might invoke tears.

For Derrida, spacing is the movement that effects a distinction between one entity and another. It produces the sense of proximity and distance, the perception of the autonomous identity of things, each possessing its own, equally individuated, character. Spacing is *the* primary perceptual or cognitive activity. It is the projection of what is not yet conceptualized; it is the primordial process of sifting, dividing and separating; it is the imposing of form and order onto insubstantial and undifferentiated stuff and it is the expression of time as a succession of discrete instances. Carving finitude from infinity, spacing it is the forging of subjective and social spheres; it is hominization and cosmogeny. Following Saussure, Derrida proposes that language is initiated by the acts of differentiation and separation: '*Spacing* (pause, blank, punctuation, interval in general, etc.) ... constitutes the origin of signification'.⁹ In response to Husserl, he observes that the same production of difference shapes the perception of time: '*The temporalization of sense is, from the outset, a "spacing"*',¹⁰ he concludes in *Speech and Phenomena*. This forging of categories or invention of sense does not merely deny the possibility of immanence by situating categories and sense in a manufactured order of things; for Derrida spacing also requires a perpetual act of partitioning that interrupts the self-accomplishment of any entity. According to *Speech and Phenomena*, this continual assembling and disassembling of sense is exemplified by the setting apart of space from time:

As soon as we admit spacing as both 'interval' or difference and as openness upon the outside, there can no longer be any absolute inside, for the 'outside' has insinuated itself into the movement by which the inside of the nonspatial, which is called 'time', appears, is constituted, is 'presented'. Space is 'in' time; it is time's pure leaving-itself; it is the 'outside-itself' as the self-relation of time.¹¹

Not only a constitutive force, spacing constantly folds the outside back onto what is seen as a pure interiority. This formation of unachievable identities and differences means that conceptual order is always in the process of being re-established, which is to say that projection and opening occur constantly.

In his 1997 essay 'The Technique of the Present: On On Kawara', Nancy extends this primordial operation to poetry, art and cosmology. Nancy here agrees with

Derrida that spacing remains irreducible to thought, since its operations are what both allow conceptualization to happen and prevent it from capturing an actuality. ‘So little is [spacing] “something” ... some particular thing, that not only is it in neither time nor space, it is neither time nor space,’ he writes, ‘it is the extroversion of what does not subsist in itself’.¹² But in this essay Nancy also begins to reflect on how the operation of spacing can be associated with moments of cultural and artistic production. Poetry is to be understood not as a specific literary genre that is defined by a distinctive use of language (‘verse’) or by particular compositional qualities (such as rhythmical, figurative or ambiguous language) which reside within the broader field of the aesthetic. Rather, it names artistic production in general. Poetry is ‘*Techne poietike*: productive technique’¹³ because it first emerges as a term assigned to acts of making and invention, to works of creation and procreation, that draw our gaze to the technical and artificial fabrication of what is created. ‘The word “poiesis” comes from a family that denotes ordering, arrangement, setting in position [*disposition*]’, this essay observes, ‘Poetry sets in position. Art is a setting into position ... It is technique productive of presence’.¹⁴ The significance of poem – or, indeed, of any artistic artefact – is to be found not in its formal features or what it signifies, but in the fact that it is both engaged in the formation of sense and reveals knowledge to be the apportioning of categories to the objects of perception.

Concerned in part as it is with the production of meaning, Nancy’s essay restages his efforts to rethink the passage taken by anything that acquires definition. ‘Presence’, he reminds us, is a term that does not simply borrow from *praesentia* (suggesting a condition of already being present, of something immediately to-hand), but needs also to be associated with *prae-est* (the act of bringing forth something that is before or beyond being). ‘Presence is not a quality or a property of the thing’, he writes, ‘It is the act through which the thing is brought forth: *prae-est*. It is brought forth or brought before its nature as a thing, before everything that thrusts this nature into the world of its various connections’.¹⁵ Although returning to this touchstone of Nancy’s thinking, ‘The Technique of the Present’ also describes how an awareness of *prae-est*, as bringing into presence, is provided by the work of Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara.

When Nancy reflects on specific works by Kawara, it is ‘July 21, 1969’ that he singles out for particular attention. This painting, from the *Today* series of almost 3,000 works (each marking a particular date, from 1964 to 2013), is one of a trilogy by Kawara which records the Apollo moon landing. Often treated as one moment in a longer, elegantly minimalist, project that memorializes

the contemporary moment as a sequence of revelatory events, this painting for Nancy takes on a far greater cosmological significance:

July 21, 1969: the date of the first moon landing. This is the date from which timekeepers, the artists of time, open its cosmic spacing. From this point on, there is no longer a sublunary world of time and a superlunary world of pure presence. The moon is no longer the mark of the shared movement of the celestial spheres but itself merely one of the points from which the space of time opens out in all directions of the universe simultaneously, another one of those innumerable points where there is somewhere.¹⁶

Nancy is careful in this passage not to treat the moment recorded by Kawara as a wholly exceptional event in the way that he perhaps suggests. There is indeed, with the first moon landing, a shift from one cosmological perspective to another. The separation of an immanent world from a transcendent celestial sphere becomes unsustainable at this point because immediacy (as both spatiality and temporality) is no longer seen to be earth-bound. But this passage cautiously notes that the first moon landing does not initiate a wholly unprecedented transition from one epoch to another. Although an inflexion point for cosmology, this moment is described as yet another instance of the repeated opening of space and time that is fundamental to conceptualization. It becomes, Nancy writes, ‘merely one of the points’ – ‘another one of those innumerable points’ – that once more orders, arranges and sets in position a finite present by detaching it from the infinity of other places.

Commemorating Apollo’s moon landing, Kawara’s painting conveys this momentous cosmological shift: what was once considered to be part of a celestial supratemporality becomes absorbed into earthly time. In this moment, it suggests, the lunar becomes worldly. But this is a presentational, as well as a representational, work: dating is both the subject of this painting and its mode of enunciation. Kawara’s painting does not convey a cosmological shift simply through an act of documentary visualization, or through an arrangement of numbers and letters on canvas that merely refers to the Apollo mission. ‘July 21, 1969’, and the series to which it belongs, exposes the spacing of time – the separation of one instant from another – as a forging of the present. Capturing this moment, Kawara’s painting is a work of artistic and poetic – technical – fabrication from which time becomes fashioned as systematic, regular and continuous.

This enactment of spacing makes Kawara’s art sacred according to ‘The Technique of the Present’, though not in the sense of religious or spiritual

painting, and this essay distinguishes Kawara's work from any latter-day expression of faith or an attempt to depict the holy. For Nancy, as for Agamben, the sacred (from *sacer*: the accursed or consecrated) signifies a placing outside or setting apart that allows order to be established and maintained. Inscribing time and conveying Apollo's cosmological displacement, Kawara's painting performs such a sacred operation of 'setting aside [*mise à part*], a setting apart [*mise à l'écart*] in so far as this act of partition [*écartement*] is the condition of relation or communication'.¹⁷ But it also, just as importantly for Nancy, reveals this sacred operation to be fundamentally uncertain. By exposing the act of setting apart – by revealing the present to be produced by technique – Kawara's sacred painting serves to remind us that immediacy is never fully accomplished or finally made concrete. It 'brings out the spacing of time as such', Nancy writes, but it 'also brings out – exposes – what, precisely, *is not as such*'.¹⁸ Brought forth by spacing, the present cannot be said to be internally creative or sufficient to itself since it always arrives freighted by something that is beyond or before the present comes to be. Whenever interiority is carved out as time and space there must always be something like an outside that thought cannot encompass (indeed, is an 'outside of the outside'¹⁹), a pre-originary exteriority that needs to be understood as an unfolding (an 'intimacy of opening'²⁰) rather than as possessing its own character, dimensions and limits.

Not only a bringing forth of the present, the work of spacing that Kawara's painting conveys therefore brings with it an anxious sense of a primordially or an elsewhere that drifts from the regular patterns that shape the thinking of time and space. Perhaps this points to one explanation for why those in orbit might cry: they recognize that perception of the world's circumscribed finitude must always be incomplete and imperfect. Although affirming a celestial perspective, these observers of the world cannot bear to look at what is sacred about it.

III

Spacing is a recurring theme in Nancy's writing, and he often considers how the practice of differentiation and ordering informs the separation of the terrestrial earth from a non-planetary realm. In 'Dialogue on the Philosophy to Come', a conversation with Roberto Esposito held in 2001, Nancy describes space as the principle that we have come to recognize as fundamental to thinking: 'What we are dealing with here is really space', he observes, 'For more than forty years we have known that we are living in the epoch of space'.²¹ This period Nancy associates

with the legacy of an Enlightenment and Industrial history that is driven by territorial domination and the effort to manufacture a globally consistent planet. From the culmination of the colonial project to the construction of global communications networks, the twentieth century has subjected the planet to an overwhelmingly technical conceptualization in the assumption that the world is a measurable and knowable *domain* in which humanity is sovereign. Following the ‘progressive saturation of terrestrial space’, there is now a belief that ‘the surface of the planet no longer has any *terrae incognitae*’.²² However, although this subjection has prompted the exploration and occupation of space beyond the earth (‘Expeditions to far-off territories have achieved their mission and now give way to a conquest of interplanetary and interstellar space’²³), departure from the world should not for Nancy be understood as the repetition of earlier efforts to capture and map the world’s unknown places. Whereas this expansionism had previously sought out other spaces, today the extension of humanity to other domains is concentrated on an introspective fascination with the idea of planetary oneness:

The extension has ceased to be expansive and has now, if anything, become intensive: forces conjoined, powers [*potenze*] condensed, compressed and concentrated in small particles or fibers; billions of bytes of energy and information conveyed in a space-time that is practically nothing [*nullo*] ... space, folded in on itself, has lost its own propensity to spaciousness and opening. It no longer appears as a place of unfolding and traversing, of passage, of paths ... the earth is reduced to a point, to a point without dimensions.²⁴

If Nancy here describes a shift towards a fixation on the punctual present, then the final chapter of his 2005 *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* again reaffirms the inherently fractured character of such a narcissistic regard. Motivated by the assumption that immanence inheres in the nature of things and is knowable, the idea that we move outside of the world in order to understand ourselves and the world better is nevertheless an ecstatic vision. For the world’s intrinsic character to be definable in this manner, a threshold or external limit that circumscribes this body must be established; this boundary must also touch on something (‘non-being’) that is beyond the body within. *Dis-Enclosure*, like ‘The Technique of the Present’, finds this split and equivocating constitution of interiority in the perception of non-terrestrial space:

Probes and telescopes accompany the expansion of the universe as far as the nonlocalizable, where stars have been dead for immemorial light-years. The end of worlds comes back to us in the launching of our own – the end or absolute

mastery of spacing itself, according to which there is a 'world', from that dis-enclosure that is preceded by no enclosure of being, but by which non-being is disclosed. Thus there is in the world something other than a unique point without dimensions, plunged deep into its own nullity.²⁵

Leaving the planet has therefore not only presented us with the image and idea of world that can be captured by the eye or in thought. Enclosure necessitates that something is not within. This act of containment must therefore take us beyond the interior space of the world; it must also be an act of dis-enclosure. In other words, leaving the planet means that we are not only able to look down at the earth. We must also turn our gaze outwards, beyond the world that is defined by orbital circumnavigation. Nancy finds such a conjunction of enclosure and dis-enclosure confirmed in *Ariane*, the European Space Agency's launch vehicle that is named for the mythological figure who, he writes, 'makes possible the escape from the sinister enclosure and the return voyage on the vessel bucking the bitter waves full sail toward the open sea.'²⁶

Two chapters of *The Sense of the World* – 'Space: Confines' and 'Space: Constellations' – extend the discussion of Nancy's proposition that the world is initiated by the arrival of an exterior space – a '*cosmic* opening'²⁷ – that encroaches on and contaminates the categorical thinking that regards the planet as whole and complete. That this opening cannot be encompassed by thought or language is conveyed by the recursive style and molten images that characterize Nancy's description of the ecstatic encounter with space:

This constellation of constellations, this mass or mosaic comprising myriads of celestial bodies, their galaxies, their whirling systems, deflagrations and conflagrations that propagate themselves with the sluggishness of lightning, the almost impossible speed of movements that do not so much traverse space as open it and space it out with their motives and motions, a universe in expansion and/or implosion, a network of attractors and negative masses, a spatial texture of spaces that are fleeing, curved back, invaginated, or exogastrulated, fractal catastrophes, signals with neither message nor destination, a universe of which the unity is nothing but a unicity [*unicité*] open, distended, distanced, diffracted, slowed down, differed, and deferred within itself.²⁸

Nancy describes here a combination of forces, movements, temporalities and assemblages that appear to us as the non-terrestrial universe, a singularity or 'unicity' that takes on a specific character through its separation from the world. But this passage is also notable because Nancy seems to struggle to describe precisely what it is that comes from elsewhere (a '*cosmic* opening') to interrupt

efforts to arrive at the idea of an ordered and uniform world. This passage suggests that the images or descriptions that it provides are somehow insufficient or inappropriate: the infinity that they strive to signify cannot be contained by prosaic references to things or qualities.

IV

Efforts to comprehend what is beyond the worldly must therefore be unsatisfactory; 'We do not yet have any cosmology adequate to this noncosmos',²⁹ Nancy writes. In place of the assumption that a more rigorous thinking would disclose the universe in its full actuality, we need an 'acosmic cosmology'³⁰ for which the 'constellation of constellations' cannot be captured. 'We need to disengag[e] from the remains of the old cosmo-theo-ontology', Nancy proposes, and he looks to Kant's rarely considered figure of the *kosmotheoros* as the starting point for a possible retreat from efforts to render the universe intelligible.

The *kosmotheoros* appears briefly in Kant's *Opus Postumum*, where he struggles to describe the relationship between matter and the experience or perception of this material substratum. Not only can the actuality of matter be presupposed, he concludes, it must be presupposed because the idea of empty space – of a nothingness or void – is contrary to thought. Kant's conclusion is based upon a basic phenomenological assertion: to think empty space is to imbue it with content, project a character onto it and render it recognizable. Space that does not submit to knowledge cannot be treated as somehow wholly independent of thought or signification, he notes; it 'does not *exist* as an *object*' but 'is merely a mode of representation, pertaining to the *subject* for it to represent itself as an outer object in a certain form (of pure outer intuition, not thought) – not as it is, but as it necessarily appears to the subject, and is thus given as *a priori*, insofar as the latter is affected by the object'.³¹

Space which defies comprehension is, then, not only (in a limited sense) within the orbit of thought but also ineluctably comes (or is given) to the subject; it arrives unactualized and uncontrollably as an affective externality that always touches upon knowledge. It is replete with a matter that is everywhere, all-encompassing, and produces everything. This archaic, unifying and dynamic force Kant names 'ether', the existence of which 'can be proved ... only *indirectly*: on the basis of the subjective principle of the *possibility* of experience, instead of the objective principle of experience itself'.³² The *kosmotheoros*, or world

observer, is the one who grasps this concept of an undifferentiated foundation that only hypothetical thinking can determine:

This principle is subjective, for the world-observer (*cosmotheoros*); a *basis* in an idea for all the unified forces which set the matter of the whole of cosmic space in motion. [I]t does not prove the existence of such a material, however ... [it] is a hypothetical material. The idea of this material, however, is what first represents (albeit indirectly) space itself as something perceptible and as an unconditional whole ... this matter is, hence, to be assumed as the prime mover (*primum mobile et movens*), subjectively – as the basis for the theory of the primary moving forces of matter, for the sake of a system of experience.³³

If science and religion have shared a predisposition for the idea that the true order of things can be fully disclosed, then *Opus Postumum* is an affront to both modes of thinking about the world and its place in the universe. The materiality of nature and the character of a celestial maker both retreat from knowledge, Kant proposes. And yet, the idea of both a primordial actuality and a transcendental maker of things is rehabilitated in the *Opus Postumum*. Neither entity is fully dismissed by Kant, only problematized as objects of cognition; they withdraw from the drama that is witnessed by human reason to become the clandestine source of all that is known. The figure that comes to take centre stage, between nature and the celestial, is, for Kant, ‘man’ who both dwells in and can visualize the world: ‘A *cosmotheoros* who creates the elements of knowledge of the world himself, *a priori*, from which he, as, at the same time, an inhabitant of the world, constructs a world-vision [*Weltbeschauung*] in the idea.’³⁴

Of the world but also creating the elements of knowledge that allow it to be perceived, above the ground but below the heavenly, the *kosmotheoros* is, therefore, a figure of orbital vision who makes the world recognizable. Those of us who remain on the ground are world observers according to this account. But for Kant those who travel to the elevated space of orbit do not witness the world unconditionally, and neither do they come to acquire a higher understanding of the ethereal stuff of the cosmos. Even in such a sublime place occupied by the *kosmotheoros*, Kant reasons, the world is made in and by perception. Furthermore, it is not just the astronaut in orbit that today represents the ascent of the *kosmotheoros*. The satellite is now the bearer of a heightened human vision, which means that it too cannot innocently capture the planet that it regards. When it delivers images to those on the ground, this machine reproduces an earthly privileging of the ocular; when these images are viewed on the ground, they are invested with perceptual value and significance. Rather than a tool that finally shows us the world (and, indeed, the universe) as it is – rather than a

technical device that is detached from the human – the satellite as *kosmotheoros* needs to be understood as tethered to a human eye that attaches meaning to whatever it observes.

In 1976, Nancy announced that he would write a book to accompany *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus*. The title of this book was to have been *Kosmotheoros*. Although this book was not written,³⁵ Nancy does briefly pick up the concept of the *kosmotheoros* in *The Sense of the World*. Here, he finds in it a reaffirmation of the conviction that the world is somehow knowable, despite Kant's efforts to establish the contingency of this knowledge. The *kosmotheoros* is yet another attempt to conceive the sublimity of a domain that extends beyond earthly thought, Nancy proposes, but also to entrench the world as a place that can be held immovably within thought. The 'acosmic cosmology' for which *The Sense of the World* calls would, more radically than the cosmology of Kant's *Opus Postumum*, move away from the idea that the world is securely framed by the gaze of an observer who can reliably see the world's formation by perception. This acosmic vision of the universe would 'no longer be caught by the look of a *kosmotheoros*, of that panoptic subject of the knowledge of the world.'³⁶ Detaching itself from the idea that the world can be known as a complete planetary entity, or that a mysterious and different space can be assumed to reside beyond the earth's terrestrial boundedness, this non-cosmology would instead be attentive to what takes place at the edge of the world. It is, in other words, a thinking of the limit, or what Nancy describes as 'a philosophy of confines':

We are at the confines of the multidirectional, plurilocal, reticulated, spacious space in which we take place. We do not occupy the originary point of a perspective, or the overhanging point of an axonometry, but we touch our limits on all sides, our gaze touches its limits on all sides. That is, it touches also – indistinctly and undecidably – the finitude of the universe thereby exposed and the infinite intangibility of the external border of the limit. It is henceforth a matter of the *vision* of the limit, that is, vision at the limit – according to the logic of the limit in general: to touch it is to pass it, to pass it is never to touch the other border.³⁷

The confines that surround the world do not, then, enclose it as a place that is able to look decisively at itself. What confines the world – its boundary, edge or circumference; the threshold between it and everything else – needs to be understood as the site of an uncertain connection rather than dissociation, of an exchange and a passage between rather than a rupture that separates disparate places or entities. Perhaps this is why those who leave the planet sometimes give in to tears. These exalted figures neither observe nor make the world; for Nancy,

they are ‘neither *kosmotheoroi* nor *kosmopoietes* but cosmonauts, or better still ... *spationauts*’.³⁸ Because they are of the world, these figures are always burdened by a vision that makes sense of what it regards. They do not create the elements of knowledge in the way that Kant proposes and, as a result, do not acquire an ‘originary point of a perspective’. For Kant, something of the world is revealed to the *kosmotheoros* because this figure is able to cross the threshold to the sublime beyond, even while remaining tethered to the world. Of the world but standing apart from it, more than or outside of the human, this figure is able to understand the nature of things because it can make thought anew. For Nancy, however, we do not receive such a revelation at the boundary, edge or external limit of the world. This place confirms to us that there must be an elsewhere, but it is not where this elsewhere becomes recognizable to us. The ‘spationaut’ might be able to perceive the threshold of the world, but this is not the *kosmotheoretical* vision that, for Kant, would provide us with some sort of access to the essential nature of the beyond.

V

The question of how to conceptualize the threshold between the inside and the beyond dominates *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida’s study of how finitude and infinity provocatively and problematically feature in Nancy’s thought. As is often noted, Derrida’s misgivings about Nancy’s formulation of this uncertain zone mostly centre on two related questions: whether this zone is in any sense thinkable or nameable and whether ‘touch’ (the principal motif in Nancy’s work) can indeed point to an encounter with the illimitable. Despite Nancy’s efforts reflexively to make the infinite something ghostly or ungraspable – despite his admission that any term for this unavowable exteriority must be rhetorical or figurative – Derrida nevertheless finds a process of rehabilitation at work in this impossible thinking of the limit and its beyond. Something of Kant persists in Nancy’s thinking, according to *On Touching*.

Derrida finds in Nancy’s work the continuation of a ‘tactilist’ or ‘haptocentric’ tradition that ‘accords an absolute privilege to touch and does not let itself be encroached upon by the possibility ... of any vicariousness of the senses’.³⁹ According to *On Touching*, this tradition is not fully acknowledged by Nancy in his ontology of touch as a heteroffective non-relation with the untouchable. When elaborating on the anthropological dimensions of this haptocentric tradition, Derrida briefly refers to Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to establish how

other senses contribute to perception. 'The tradition becomes complicated, with the risk of being interrupted, in Merleau-Ponty's work because,' Derrida writes, he 'seems to reinstate a symmetry that Husserl challenges between the touching-touchable and the seeing-visible.'⁴⁰ *On Touching* later returns to Merleau-Ponty: 'Nancy did not cite him often,' Derrida remarks, 'but their implicit affinities seem undeniable.'⁴¹ One of these affinities is a shared nervousness about both the authority conferred upon particular senses and the anthropological treatment of sensory experience in phenomenological thinking. Merleau-Ponty departs from Husserl's treatment of touch as the primary sensory instrument, and he seeks to re-establish what Françoise Dastur terms the non-congruent or non-substitutable 'parallelism between seeing and touching that Husserl contested.'⁴² This description of a non-primordial vision that develops alongside other senses allows Merleau-Ponty to engage in a 'much richer problematic of the eye, seeing and visibility' which 'take[s] into account apartness, distance, tele-vision, and even the invisible, the invisible right in [*à même*] the visible.'⁴³ The invisible as an immanent feature of the visible, the inability to see as inherently part of perception: this is the insight that Derrida finds in Merleau-Ponty's refusal to replace touch with vision. *On Touching* finds evidence of this refusal in Merleau-Ponty's reference to Kant's figure of the world observer. For Derrida, 'The eye's authority is questioned, or called into question, in the eye of the world, precisely'⁴⁴ when, in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty asks 'But am I *kosmotheoros*? More exactly, is being *kosmotheoros* my ultimate reality?'⁴⁵

Merleau-Ponty would seem, then, to be sceptical about the association of vision with the revelation of an ultimate reality and, as Derrida remarks in *Memoirs of the Blind*, 'skepsis has to do with the eyes.'⁴⁶ Not merely a general system of radical doubt, scepticism more precisely points to a reflexive questioning of how things are regarded: it looks at how perception unfolds. Derrida takes up this sceptical approach to the sovereignty that has been granted to sight; 'point of view will be my theme',⁴⁷ he remarks. *Memoirs of the Blind* is principally concerned with the representation of drawing, and specifically with a tradition of self-portraiture that takes blindness as its central theme. This tradition, Derrida concludes, reveals blindness to be an intrinsic feature of both representation and sight. It makes the inability to see the condition of the image that it provides because it draws attention to the act of image-making and suggests that the artist is authorized to see and draw. Painting and drawing in these moments reveal themselves as the products of a failure to see (they are initiated by a blindness that is observed), but they also situate those who paint or draw as capable of seeing. This formative tension – this imagination or invention

of sight – for Derrida is the underlying condition of representation. ‘Every time a draftsman lets himself be fascinated by the blind,’ he writes, ‘every time he makes the blind a *theme* of his drawing, he projects, dreams, or hallucinates a figure of a draftsman, or sometimes, more precisely, a draftswoman. Or more precisely still, he begins to *represent* a drawing potency [*puissance*] at work, the very act of drawing. He invents drawing.’⁴⁸

Derrida’s comments here offer an implicit rejoinder to Kant’s figure of the *kosmotheoros*. Although Kant does not associate this figure with the immediacy of complete vision, he nevertheless confers upon it the ability to see in some sense, and to see beyond its participation in the making of knowledge. This figure forges the world as an entity that is constituted in and by observation, and this visual enclosure of the world as a finitude also allows us to determine the presence of cosmic matter that is not within our sphere of vision. When *Memoirs of the Blind* questions such an association of seeing and knowing, it also contests the idea that those in orbit are uniquely or faithfully able to observe the world. Every time that those in orbit make the world a theme of their observations, they project, dream or hallucinate a figure of the world observer; or, more precisely, they begin to represent world observation at work. Certainly, the images and films that are made in orbit are often about the technical dimensions of capturing the earth from above, such as the technologies that are used to produce, transfer and distribute images, or (as with Hadfield’s video) the effects of orbit on perception. But, again, for Derrida the observation of the world should not be understood merely in terms of the techniques that allow representation to occur. Rather, in the moment that these orbiting observers discern the world, they undertake a spacing or separation that effects the world and world observer as distinct entities. They produce the idea of the planet as a complete space, but they also produce the idea either of a figure that can see more completely or of a position from which things can be seen more completely.

Just as with blindness and image-making, however, this production of immanence is possible only because of a fundamental impossibility. If the world can be fully observed only from above then being on the ground must allow only an imperfect perspective – in other words, a blindness to the world in its full actuality. And yet, this incomplete and contaminated perspective must be carried into orbit if the world is to be seen at all; what images from above demonstrate is that the worldly work of spacing and image production continues to direct the gaze of those who have left the planet. Although orbital representation is invented through the disavowal of blindness, this blindness must nevertheless be transmitted to the place of supreme vision.

This association of blindness with the ascent of vision takes on greater prominence in two further moments in *Memoirs of the Blind*. First, in a lengthy footnote, Derrida recalls one of Rilke's dreams in which 'an astral or ocular allegory as old of the sky itself'⁴⁹ is inverted. Instead of being the eyes of God or angels, stars in this dream become the uprooted eyes of those who dwell on the ground. 'The stars are the eyes of human beings which rise out of their closed lids and become bright and regain their strength', Rilke writes, 'that is why all the stars are above the countryside where everyone is sleeping, and over the town there are only a few, because there are so many restless people there, weeping and reading, laughing and watching, who keep their eyes.'⁵⁰ Looking down from above, this displaced secular gaze leaves those on the ground unable to see. Again, then, blindness is a precondition for sight, although the vision that descends also requires those observed to be unaware, in their unconscious state, that they are being watched. Moreover, those who 'keep their eyes' are not necessarily able to see clearly. Instead, they are distracted and agitated by the troubling stuff of urban living; as much as this stuff allows 'reading, laughing and watching' it also brings vision-obscuring tears.

Second, in *Sacred Allegory*, a work by the sixteenth-century Flemish painter Jan Provost, Derrida finds a similar association of tears with a visionary and ascendant blindness. Steeped in the symbolism of late-medieval mysticism, Provost's painting depicts a celestial and panoptic eye, metonym of the *visio Dei*, above the seated figures of Jesus and Mary, between whom there is the *globus cruciger*, symbol of Christ's authority over the dominion of the world. On the lower plane of the painting is another, partly closed, eye that gazes upwards from the world below. For Derrida, this is not simply an allegory that contrasts a boundless and beneficent divine vision with the limitations of human sight since this painting more fundamentally allegorizes its own production. 'Whatever its symbolic overdetermination', Derrida writes, this painting 'must always be able to be contemplated as the representation or reflection of its own possibility. It puts on the scene, it stages, the opening scene of sacred painting, an allegorical self-representation of this "order of the gaze" to which any Christian drawing must submit.'⁵¹ Such a reflexive staging of the ocular – this looking at how looking perceives sight – is, then, both productive and catastrophic: in its positioning of the heavenly and the sub-celestial, this painting simultaneously creates and erases what it depicts. This process is, for Derrida, 'at once order and ruin', and this impossible conjunction makes vision break down. Order and ruin – in Provost's painting:

These weep for one another. Deploring and imploring veil a gaze at the very moment that they unveil it. By praying on the verge of tears, the sacred allegory *does [fait]* something. It makes something happen or come, makes something come to the eyes, makes something well up in them.⁵²

Weeping is a common theme in Rilke's dream and Provost's allegory, and it leads Derrida to a lengthier consideration of the crying that Saint Augustine documents in *Confessions*. Augustine's tears flow or almost flow for numerous reasons. Often, they rise up because of the grief that he feels following others' deaths (including, most famously, that of his mother), although they also flow as a result from feelings of wretchedness ('a profound self-examination had dredged up a heap of misery ... That precipitated a vast storm bearing a massive downpour of tears'⁵³) and when he experiences overwhelming feelings of religious adoration: 'During those days I found an insatiable and amazing delight in considering the profundity of your purpose for the salvation of the human race,' Augustine cries out to God,

How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your Church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart. This caused the feelings of devotion to overflow. Tears ran, and it was good for me to have that experience.⁵⁴

This passage contains some contentious theological and philosophical ideas. Attunement with the divine arises from the ecstasy of mystical experience, rather than through rational contemplation, Augustine suggests here. Encountering the divine occurs as an overflowing and multisensory *aisthesis*, with the body's boundaries traversed and an infusion of the inexpressible at the heart of being. Being is, in other words, a condition of being affected. Significantly, weeping is also intrinsic to this transformative epiphany, and it is such an association of tears with illumination, vision and revelation that preoccupies Derrida at the culmination of *Memoirs of the Blind*. Augustine's tears are not so much an expression of grief, misery or adoration as they are the manifestation of what is fundamental to the eye: a vision that is most lucid when clouded up and covered over. In the *Confessions*, Derrida writes:

At each step, on each page ... Augustine describes his experience of tears, those that inundate him, those in which he takes a surprising joy, asking God why tears are sweet to those in misery ... Now if tears *come to the eyes*, if they *well up in them*, and if they can also veil sight, perhaps they reveal, in the very course of this experience, in this coursing of water, an essence of the eye, of man's eye, in any case, the eye understood in the anthropo-theological space of the sacred

allegory. Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep. For at the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye ... the truth of the eyes, whose ultimate destination they would thereby reveal: to have imploration rather than vision in sight, to address prayer, love, joy, or sadness rather than a look or gaze. Even before it illuminates, revelation is the moment of the 'tears of joy'.⁵⁵

'Perhaps', then, tears reveal 'an essence of the eye ... understood in the anthropo-theological space of the sacred allegory'. Or, put otherwise, perhaps tears reveal the character of a vision that is both human and celestial; perhaps they reveal what is intrinsic to the orbital gaze. This gaze can look but cannot see; more than this, like the staging of sight in Provost's *Sacred Allegory*, it finds itself engrossed by looking at how it sees. In this 'perhaps' we find a possible answer to why those who ascend to the heights of orbit find themselves breaking down and giving in to tears. These flawed *kosmotheoroi* cry not because of a loss of grounded certainty or a desperate sense of solitude, not because they are interested in the mechanics of fluids in space. They give in to tears because the essence of the eye – to miss the world – is realized in this place.

Notes

- 1 Cuarón, *Gravity*.
- 2 Chris Hadfield, 'Tears in Space (Don't Fall)', *YouTube* video, 1:24, posted 5 April 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P36xhtpw0Lg>.
- 3 For depictions of Heraclitus's tearful vision of the world see, for example, Rubens's 1603 *Heraclitus and Democritus*, John Smith's c.1683–1729 *Heraclitus and Democritus* or Egbert van Heemskerck's 1695 *Heraclitus and Democritus*.
- 4 Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (London: Vintage, 2005), 348.
- 5 Ridley Scott, dir., *Blade Runner*, film (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 1982).
- 6 John Donne, 'A Valediction: of Weeping', cited in Derrida, 'The Taste of Tears', in *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brualt and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 107.
- 7 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 121.
- 8 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 18.
- 9 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 68.

- 10 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 86.
- 11 Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 86.
- 12 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present: On On Kawara', in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, trans. Simon Sparks (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 199.
- 13 Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present', 191.
- 14 Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present', 191.
- 15 Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present', 191.
- 16 Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present', 195.
- 17 Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present', 196.
- 18 Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present', 199.
- 19 Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present', 199.
- 20 Nancy, 'The Technique of the Present', 199.
- 21 Roberto Esposito and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Dialogue on the Philosophy to Come', trans. Timothy Campbell, *Minnesota Review* 75 (2010): 72.
- 22 Esposito and Nancy, 'Dialogue', 73.
- 23 Esposito and Nancy, 'Dialogue', 73.
- 24 Esposito and Nancy, 'Dialogue', 73–4.
- 25 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 161.
- 26 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 161.
- 27 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 37.
- 28 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 37.
- 29 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 38.
- 30 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 38.
- 31 Immanuel Kant, *Opus Postumum*, ed. Eckhart Förster, trans. Eckhart Förster and Michael Rosen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 80.
- 32 Kant, *Opus Postumum*, 79.
- 33 Kant, *Opus Postumum*, 82.
- 34 Kant, *Opus Postumum*, 235.
- 35 Saul Anton, translator of *The Discourse of the Syncope* notes, however, that 'readers familiar with the broader arc of Nancy's work might well recognize the motif of the cosmological submerged underneath the notions of space, spacing, and world that figure so prominently in his later writings, especially in *The Sense of the World* and *The Creation of the World: Or Globalisation*'. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus*, trans. Saul Anton (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 144, note 4.

- 36 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 38.
- 37 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 40.
- 38 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 40.
- 39 Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 41.
- 40 Derrida, *On Touching*, 41.
- 41 Derrida, *On Touching*, 184.
- 42 François Dastur, 'World, Flesh, Vision', cited in Derrida, *On Touching*, 203.
- 43 Derrida, *On Touching*, 200.
- 44 Derrida, *On Touching*, 207.
- 45 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, cited in Derrida, *On Touching*, 207.
- 46 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pasale-Anne Brualt and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.
- 47 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 2.
- 48 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 2.
- 49 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 40, n. 42.
- 50 Rainer Maria Rilke, 'The Seventh Dream', cited in Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 40, n. 42.
- 51 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 121.
- 52 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 122.
- 53 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 152.
- 54 Augustine, *Confessions*, 164.
- 55 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 126.