

ABANDONMENT: GIVING VOICE IN THE DESERT

Ron Broglio

Stage Directions: *“As the scene opens, a dog is barking in the distance, alone in the silence a cow is lowing. The dog will bark again two or three times during the course of this piece. Another animal, a donkey, for example, will perhaps wander across the stage.”*¹

Every voice cries out in the desert, like the voice of the prophet. And it’s in the desert of deserted existence, prey both to lack *and* to absence, that voice first makes itself heard.²

Nancy’s essay “Vox Clamans in Deserto” is a disputation on the ecstatic nature of being in the world. Or more correctly, it is not a disputation but a performance: it is a matter of style and comportment in which its way of presenting a state of affairs is itself a model for the state of affairs. So, here at the outset we are set upon by several problems: what is this ecstatic nature of being in the world and why is Nancy writing a work as if it were to be a play performed by voices? Following these problems come others—how is this a mystical text and why in such a text do animals walk across its stage?

This text- or voice-play is centered around and encircles the Biblical passage in which John the Baptist is a voice crying out in the desert.³ For Nancy we are all voices in the desert of deserted existence. In other words, our very existence, our being-in-the world is comportment in a desert. Such an environment is sparse

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Vox Clamans in Deserto,” *Multiple Arts: The Muse II* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 38. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Nancy are from this text.

² Nancy, 41.

³ See John 1:23 and Isaiah 40:3.

and unforgiving. There is enough here to sustain, but no lush overabundance of life. Much like the dark night of the soul, the desert gives little comfort, almost nothing. There is a scarcity which just barely supports life. This almost nothing is also just enough, a desert which will sustain and transform life upon it. It is in this sense that John of the Cross can say that the mystic arrives at “a remarkably deep and vast wilderness unattainable by any human creature, into an immense unbounded desert, the more delightful, savourous, and loving, the deeper, vaster, and more solitary it is.”⁴ The desert weans us from corporeal joys and points us beyond ourselves to a “dark night” in which a beyond holds little hope of providing any light, insight, or revelation. “Deserted existence” is an existence abandoned, deserted, left with a promised companionship which will not come. It is a place where one is “prey both to lack *and* to absence.” To be deserted is not to be alone but to be alone with the thought that it could be otherwise. It is this otherwise that will be an impetus for voicing, for calling out—to which I will return. Deserted and in an environment that feels inhuman, scarcity provides a lack, and absence by which we feel vulnerable and exposed.

Welcome to the vale of tears. Here we find what Heidegger called *eksistence*—the state of alienated self-awareness of our thrownness in the world. In short, we find ourselves eccentric as if the spinning axis of our self were off center. We are the center of our world but feel decentered and out of place or as if standing outside ourselves:

. . . the human being has a reflective attitude towards its experiences and towards itself. This is why human beings are eccentric, because they live beyond the limits set for them by nature by taking up a distance from their immediate experience. In living outside itself in its reflective activity, the human being achieves a break with nature.⁵

Heidegger re-centers humans through the task of worlding which aligns building, dwelling, and thinking into a whole or unity which

⁴ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), II 17:6

⁵ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (New York: Verso, 2008), 86.

will be the Way for a People (*Volk*). This is a grand History of a historically fashioned people whose narrative led to a wreckage. We live in the wake of this wreck. In this wake, Simon Critchley sees a fundamental divide in the human that cannot be smoothed over by building or dwelling or thinking. For him, there is no authentic dwelling. All dwelling is a bit off kilter. In the desert, we are never quite at home and there is no orientation by which to point elsewhere in order to find, to make or “to return” home. The desert provides the figure for Deleuze and Guattari’s smooth space, the space of the nomad whose home is a homelessness. “Deserted existence” is also desert-ed existence, one whose very way of life is that of a desert. And yet, we have not yet given voice; we have not yet opened unto the desert. So far, we have dealt with the preliminaries, with a foundational (dis)placement that exercises what it means to be human.

[I live in Tempe, Arizona and only a few miles from deep and isolating deserts. The Superstition Mountains overlook this Valley of the Sun and in those desert mountains tens of people die each year from sun and heat exposure and lack of water. You are invited to come visit me in the desert. This is a formal invitation—a voice crying out to readers, perhaps—and while I can offer hospitality, it is an inhospitable region where living is at its limits.]

Giving voice, crying out in the desert, is a rupture and event. Nancy characterizes the phenomenology of this event using Kristeva’s voice which wanders onto the stage of his work. Here is Kristeva as written or “vocalized” by Nancy:

The voice responds to the missing breast . . . The vocal cords stretch and vibrate in order to fill the emptiness of the mouth and the digestive track (a response to hunger) . . . The voice will take over the void . . . Muscular, gastric, and sphincter contractions reject, sometimes at the same time, air, food, waste. The voice springs from this rejection of air and nutritive or excremental matter; so as to be vocal, the first sonorous emissions not only have their origins in the glottis but are the audible mark of a complex phenomenon of muscular and rhythmic

contractions that is a rejection implicating the whole body.⁶

Voice begins with a dissatisfaction. Either we do not have that which would satisfy (“the missing breast”) or we reject “air and nutritive” matter as not sufficient. The mystic in the desert is completely filled with a restlessness. One reads in mystic texts time and again a variant of the oft-repeated phrase: my heart is restless until it rests in Thee and as supplement, the Thee has receded, has disappeared, has abandoned the mystic in the desert.

For Nancy and Kristeva mystic restlessness is perpetual and the very site for human opening—“the first sonorous emissions not only have their origins in the glottis but are the audible mark of a complex phenomenon of muscular and rhythmic contractions.” Being abandoned and abandoning the world (as not enough) puts us in a state of abandon. Only at such a moment would one risk exposure, vulnerability, and openness. In other words, only in abandon would one open the body and expose it to the inhuman desert. Such an opening is so violent to the body that it produces “a complex phenomenon of muscular and rhythmic contractions that is a rejection implicating the whole body.”

[To survive in the desert if caught with limited water, abandoned or disoriented and unsure how to get home, breathe through the nose. Do not open your mouth. Survival experts note that by breathing through the mouth you lose over twice as much water as breathing through the nose. Opening one’s mouth in the desert is to expose oneself.]⁷

This, then, is voice: abandonment in a desert. With such abandon we produce an audible mark of opening the body onto the world. Voice is a mark of the body—the opening of the mouth and glottis and the push of air by the diaphragm and through the lungs. Yet the voice is not body but that which is made possible by the body opening onto the world. It is the echo of the hollow center of the body. Like a fingerprint, each voice is unique: “Did you know that

⁶ Nancy, 41.

⁷ Take my word for this or consult desert survival guides: http://crisistimes.com/desert_water.php

vocal sounds are just about as singular as it gets, even more impossible to confuse than fingerprints, which are themselves unique?” Furthermore “it’s not just we all have our own voices, but that all of us have several possible voices.”⁸ Voice embodies being singular-plural in which we are never an “interiority” but also already an outside onto the world. Voice gives voice to our eccentric nature of being both ourselves and beside ourselves.

Voice is a need and a gift. It is a need in as much as no object will satisfy nor make us feel complete. It is a gift in that while feeling incomplete and abandoned we do not turn inward but rather become even more vulnerable; we perform our vulnerability by opening outward, by giving voice—giving it like a gift from the very depths of our bodies. We give voice because although alone we somehow believe that it could be otherwise. Voice is the attempt to communicate, the desire to be other than abandoned. It is a utopic venture—the attempt to not be alone but rather to imagine community through communication. Far in the desert there is no guarantee of being heard nor if heard being understood.

[‘What is called thinking’ is a call from elsewhere; it is the thought manifest in corporeal frictions, interlacings, and mixings.⁹]

Voice carries over a distance, across spaces. The flesh of the world makes possible the vibration of voice in the air. Distance which keeps us apart from one another and prevents contact is the very medium by which connection through voice is possible. Oh happy fault, this distance between us that brings an opening of the body and a guttural articulation across space. Nancy leverages this opening of the space between us:

Voice wouldn’t respond to the void . . . but would expose it, turn it toward the outside. Voice would be less the rejection than the ejection or the throw of an infinitely open void at the heart of singular being, at the heart of this abandoned being. What it would expose would be not a lack per se but a failure on the part of plenitude or presence that isn’t actually a failing, since

⁸ Nancy, 40.

⁹ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 179.

it's what constitutes what's proper to existence, what opens an always already open existence to what lies outside it.¹⁰

“What is proper to existence” is a spacing, a flesh of space where voice can resonate. In the desert we live an “always already open existence” which in voice opens to “what lies outside it.”

This willingness to give oneself over to an outside through voice is part of Nancy's project to think “being-with” or *Mitsein*. As Ignaas Devisch explains: “What still has to be thought—and this is the reason the French philosopher wants to reopen Heidegger's crucial work—is the essentially plural structure of every *Dasein* or of every singularity.”¹¹ Abandoned and in a state of abandon, *Dasein* for Nancy is necessarily a being-with. It is not a being-with that founds or grounds a homeland, a *Volk*. Rather it is a being-with that comes from exposure and vulnerability and that takes place in the distance or spacing of space.

While Heidegger introduces being-with, it remained secondary to a *Dasein* in its singularity and as part of a destiny of a people: “the same Heidegger also went astray with his vision of a people and a destiny conceived at least in part as a subject, which proves no doubt that *Dasein*'s ‘being-toward-death’ was never radically implicated in its being-with—in *Mitsein*—and it is this implication that remains to be thought.”¹² Giving voice—as gift—is the role of the prophet in the desert, the one who calls out for a future “to come.” Such a future is in the infinitive which is to say that it is in no particular temporal space of the past, present, nor future. It is a virtual space—an imagined community—that *authorizes* the voice as a calling out. We give voice because we imagine there is one who can hear. And it is the opening of oneself (who lives an “always already open existence”) that *enables* voice. This community is at a distance—the spacing which allows a resonance

¹⁰ Nancy, 42.

¹¹ Ignaas Devisch, “A Trembling Voice in the Desert: Jean-Luc Nancy's Rethinking of the Political Space,” presented at Deconstruction Reading Politics conference University of Staffordshire, UK, 1999. http://ugent.academia.edu/IgnaasDevisch/Papers/258370/A_Trembling_Voice_In_the_Desert_Jean-Luc_Nancys_Rethinking_of_the_Space_of_the_Political

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), 14.

of voice—for all those who cry out in the desert of deserted existence.

This desert (and its imagined communities) has many sorts of voices. Voice is never a unity and each voice is already plural with its echoes and resonances and its eccentric qualities (as the voice is both within and outside the self).¹³ But perhaps most radical in this multiplicity is Nancy's inclusion of nonhuman voices to the community of the desert. The text opens with stage directions worth ruminating upon:

a dog is barking in the distance, alone in the silence a cow is lowing. The dog will bark again two or three times during the course of this piece. Another animal, a donkey, for example, will perhaps wander across the stage.

These stage directions are not the voices of the animals themselves but rather an invitation that we hear the others or the voices of the others. There is much at work in this moment. We may or may not see the other, but we hear its voice. We do not hear the other—as if there were a path to transparent communication—but rather we hear the voice of the other. To hear the voice includes hearing the corporeal opening of the body as sound resonates across it. These are bodies like or, in some instances, rather unlike our own and so produce inhuman voice.¹⁴ Hearing the voice includes the capacities and dissonance of the spacing across distance, traversing distance, according to the capacity for projection.

[“Cows have regional accents like humans, language specialists have suggested. They decided to examine the issue after dairy farmers noticed their cows had slightly different moos, depending on which herd they came from. John Wells, Professor of Phonetics at the

¹³ Nancy, 44.

¹⁴ I use the term “nonhuman” as a neutral description of animals other than humans. The term “inhuman” carries a different weight and potency as that which challenges the human. Voices emanating from nonhumans viscerally challenge humans: by dominating airwaves and marking space as other than human space, by troubling human intelligibility of the voice of the other, and by a sounds that humans strain to make or are unattainable by our bodies.

University of London, said regional twangs had been seen before in birds.”]¹⁵

While Nancy includes voices of many theorists—human theorists—throughout the text, the animals’ voices are present only by directions rather than by textual transmission of voice by speech and language. The reader is given the note that animals are giving voice but the voices are not present. It may well be that language breaks down here. There is no human system of language capable of transmitting the voice of the animal. Nancy can gesture to animal voices but cannot provide the voices of the animals. As Nancy notes, voice proceeds language; voice is not of language but makes language possible. Between humans and animals there is not a common system of language but there is voice. As Wittgenstein famously said: “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.”¹⁶ The lion problem is an issue of speech and meaning which is related to voice but different. In the lion problem the concern is social community, the discourse community in which language is fashioned to human (or nonhuman) experience of being-in-the-world or as Wittgenstein says “To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.” A lion’s sense of being is different; so, its words, the meaning of the words, and its use of language would be different—even, as Wittgenstein says—unintelligible, baffling.

[“The cries of a dog or of other animals aren’t just noise. Every animal has a recognizable voice all its own.”]¹⁷

“Crickets in the meadows and cicadas in the trees, coyotes in the night hills, frogs in the ponds and whales in the oceans, birds in the skies make our planet continually resound with chant. Humans do not begin to sing, and do not sing, in dead silence. Our voices begin

¹⁵ BBC News 23 August 2006 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5277090.stm>

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York, Macmillan, 1968. Pt. II, p. 223. See Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 44.

¹⁷ Nancy, 38.

to purr, hum, and crescendo in the concerto and cacophony of nature and machines.”]¹⁸

Voice precedes speech and enables it. You might hear a familiar voice before you know what the person is saying. You identify the person by voice even before understanding the speech. As Nancy notes, humans are not alone in having voice: “Yes, there’s no speech without voice, but there is such a thing as voice without speech. And not just for animals, but for us as well.”¹⁹ Nancy is trying to imagine a community that is larger than those who share a similar language. He is trying to imagine a community of humans and lions and yes, even aliens. Joining him in this experiment, let’s ask: can we use the capacity of voice as a shared difference to address an alien/animal/other in an address that, admittedly, would be outside of a discourse community and outside of language? It would be an odd address, indeed, and Nancy hints at it throughout his essay where voices resonate and call out from one to an/other. Voice cannot hear but can voice; Voice can throw itself and articulates what it means to be bodily thrown into the world, to be a being who is situated in a world. Hearing voice transports the listener, possesses and intoxicates the listener who may well give voice in response.

Particularly odd in this stage direction is the absence of desert animals—the coyote, the quail, the gopher, the javelina. There is a dog, a cow, and “a donkey, for example” who wanders across the stage. All of them are domesticated animals. But can we not also imagine the nondomesticated—those that are farther afield in the alien space of the desert? Is the “for example” simply to say the list could go on further? And recall as well that “*The dog will bark again two or three times during the course of this piece.*”²⁰ The animal interrupts the human discourse to remind us there are others out there. Nancy does not write in these voices. The reader must imagine these (dis)placed voices. Nancy does not provide the interruptions—since to do so would be to schedule them and space them to his convenience. Rather, the interruption, to be an actual displacement, hovers over the text or haunts the text from within

¹⁸ Alphonso Lingis, “Bestiality,” *sympløke* 6.1 (1998), 56-71, 59.

¹⁹ Nancy, 38.

²⁰ Nancy, 38.

as the radical nature of voice which proceeds language and the noise of inhuman voice that disrupts the system of language.

[“we’ are always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being—not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality (which we share with other animals), our mammalian existence, of course, but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity.”]²¹

Even within us, voice feels both ours and alien—it is air from the outside and from within. It is sound within us but pushed beyond the boundary of our bodies. The technicity of voice—vocal chords, larynx, mouth—is our “own” but determined for us biologically prior to our arrival on the scene. In addressing voice, Nancy is concerned with a technicity prior to language. Animals give voice and each in its own way with unique vibration registering the breath moving across the opening of the body. Each eating and breathing body is equipped with the capacity for voice. The technicity is not a universal but rather is manifest and is utilized differently for each and all. Voice is a particular technicity we (as a community at a distance or a community to come) hold in common differently.

If Nancy’s project is to imagine a *Mitsein*, a being-with, that radically defines *Dasein*, then the community of nonhumans remains a challenge to the prophetic voices in the desert. In the inhuman world of the desert, the desert of deserted existence, can we be with the voices that are not human? And what would such a radical being-with look like?

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li! Is the haunting sound of alien voices in H. P. Lovecraft’s masterwork *At the Mountains of Madness*.²² In this novella, Antarctic explorers at the farthest reaches of extreme environment find a mountain-sized alien city built millions of years

²¹ Cary Wolfe, “Exposures,” S. Cavell, C. Diamond, J. McDowell, I. Hacking and C. Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 1-41, 27.

²² H. P. Lovecraft, *At The Mountains of Madness* (New York: Random House, 2005), 93.

ago. While exploring the labyrinth ruins, the humans encounter a variety of alien life and then try to escape with their lives. From the depths of the inhuman world, the shape-shifting alien things cry “*Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*”²³ Lovecraft borrowed the sound from Edgar Allan Poe’s rambling tale of sea adventures *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, where “Tekeli-li!” is the sound of a strange white bird, and “Tekeli-li” is the sound made by the natives who see anything white brought on their island, which itself is devoid of whiteness excepting the birds.²⁴ Tekeli-li becomes a figure for what cannot be understood and has no proper place within the culture. It is a vocalization, a voice of this otherness.

Lovecraft’s aliens and Poe’s birds offer alien voice—they give a voice of otherness. John Cunningham Lilly found in dolphins “genuine alien intelligences with which humans can interact in strange and mysterious ways.”²⁵ Lilly’s breakthrough moment in hearing the voice of the dolphin—actually hearing with ears that can hear (as the Bible dictates)—was when he had a dolphin on an operating table and while experimenting on its body the animal gave voice in what according to Lilly was the dolphin desperately trying to echo the voices of humans in the operating room. It wanted to communicate its own plight and could only penetrate the thick anthropocentrism of Lilly and his fellow scientists by throwing its voice in a modulation like that of the human. At this moment, Lilly realized the power of voice and its primacy beyond language. Lilly changed all his research to establish communication with dolphins. His work was in part funded by NASA and his former student Diana Reiss funded some of her PhD research in the 1980s through SETI (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence). As Reiss and Lilly explain: if you want to understand what it is like to communicate with aliens, dolphins are the place to start. Animals and aliens offer us voices crying in the desert and remind us that *Mitsein* is a state of being(with) beyond the human. In doing so, these voices too are prophetic.

²³ In conversation Nicola Masciandaro has mentioned to me that such voices are doubly alien in that the cry of Shoggoth mimick with “no voice save the imitated accents of their bygone masters,” so rather than alien voice it is also really the alienness of a voicelessness.

²⁴ China Miéville, “Introduction” to H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (New York: Random House, 2005), xvii.

²⁵ Francis Jeffrey and John Cunningham Lilly. *John Lilly So far . . .* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1990), 239.

Language has been used as a uniquely marker of humans; language works to immunize us from our own animality. It marks the distinction between the humans and the nonhuman animals. But voice is not the property of humans alone. As nonhumans give voice, they mark a space which we cannot enter by language—a space that is not intelligible to us and yet as animals we participate in by hearing and giving voice in return. Voice and Nancy's essay on voice cannot function without this necessary supplement of animals. It is by them that the marker of not-language-but-voice is possible. Nancy turns his essay toward its conclusion by explaining that with voice

the other is summoned at the point where there is neither subject nor signification. That is what I want to call the desert of *jouissance* or of joy. Arid, maybe, but never desolate. Neither desolate nor consoled, beyond either laughter or tears.

Voice does not give us the scaffolding for subject-object relations, “neither subject nor signification.” Voice is an ephemeral event; it is a scarcity that cannot be grasped, nor seen, nor made to signify within the hermeneutic circle of language. It is the very little, almost nothing of bodies opened unto the desert. This is *Mitsein* which Heidegger could not think but has been the ongoing task for Nancy.

And so we return to the animals . . . they have not stopped walking across the stage and “interrupting” intelligible discourse with howling and barking. They have haunted the scene of Nancy's performance since its beginnings. Karl Steel in his reflection on animal voices in the apocalyptic end of days explains that “we attend to the incomprehensibility of animal speech, not as a lacuna in the tradition's explanatory capability, but rather as a gap deliberately left open, a space that has not been stuffed with human meaning.”²⁶ Voice is outside of time or at least a human time as there are voices before and after us. As such, voice bears witness to a nonhuman time and the time of the inhuman. If the Desert

26 Karl Steel, “Woofing and weeping with animals in the last days.” *Postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* (2010) 1, 187–193. <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pmed/journal/v1/n1/full/pmed201024a.html>

Fathers bear witness to animal voices, it is only because they are attuned to the nonhuman time and the radical elsewhere from which the these voices call. St. Anthony must share the desert with the wild animals who do not heed human dominion. He does not live in a human domain, a striated space, but rather the smooth and open terrain open to human and nonhumans alike. Unlike the cultural hermeneutic circle in which we might ask for whom the bell tolls, we would do well to ask for whom the voices call. They come from elsewhere and point us to a beyond “that has not been stuffed with human meaning” yet nevertheless these voices reside among us.

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