

Drool: Liquid Fore-speech of the Fore-scene

by John Paul Ricco

For many years now I have been interested in, and written on, sleep: its erotics, its existence at the limits of perception and representation, its occurrence in various works of modern art, literature and film (e.g. Warhol's *Sleep*, Duras's *The Malady of Death*, Breillat's *Anatomy of Hell*), and more recently, through my reading of Jean-Luc Nancy and Roland Barthes—the former in his little book, *The Fall of Sleep* (2007), and the latter in one of his lectures from his course at the Collège de France on *The Neutral* (1978).¹

Where sleep and drool meet in this corpus of material is a chapter titled “Self from Absence to Self,” in an extended essay by Nancy on sleep. In it, he draws upon the image of a little saliva leaking out of a sleeper's mouth in order to analogize the withdrawal of self from I, into self. A fall into self that is not so much the enunciative “I am” of either a waking consciousness or dreaming unconsciousness, but the excessive and residual trace of the fall into self that is the fall—or what we might call *the drool*—of speech. Here is the passage:

“I am,” however, heard murmured by the unconsciousness of a dreamer, testifies less to an “I” strictly conceived than to a “self” simply withdrawn into self, out of reach of any questioning and of any representation. Murmured by unconsciousness, “I am” becomes unintelligible; it is a kind of grunt or sigh that escapes from barely parted lips. It is a preverbal stream that deposits on the pillow a barely visible trace, as if a little saliva had leaked out of that sleeping mouth.

It is apparent from this passage that Nancy is intervening in at least two related discourses—one Cartesian, the other Freudian—and because of this, my reading has necessarily led me back to several of his earliest publications, namely *Ego Sum*, his book on Descartes, and “Psyche” his one-page essay on a posthumous note of Freud's that has remained a constant point of reference for Nancy up to the present, and which in his book *Corpus* (2006) he posits as one of Freud's most crucial statements. In it, Freud writes: “Space may be the projection of the extension of the psychological apparatus. No other derivation is probable. Instead of Kant's *a priori* determinants of our psychological apparatus. Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it.”²

One of the many things about this statement that drew Nancy's attention to it, and

that bears upon our discussion of excess, is the point about space as (the projection of) extension (of the psychological apparatus), which in turn echoes, and is in tension with, Descartes' *res extensa* as opposed to the thinking human subject as *res cogitans*. Obviously, this is why the final line of Freud's posthumous note appears in the final chapter of Nancy's book on Descartes, titled “Unum Quid,” given that the latter is a meditation on the mixed union of body and soul as presented in the Sixth Meditation (around 1640), as well as in a famous letter of Descartes' to Elizabeth, from 1643, in which he broaches the topic of the union of body and soul.

In and around 1978, Roland Barthes was delivering his lectures on the Neutral, one of which featured a section on sleep that is remarkably close in its theorization to Nancy's own thinking as presented in *The Fall of Sleep*. But prior to all of this, in 1976, Sarah Kofman wrote a note she classifies as a “fragment of analysis” titled “My Life and Psychoanalysis” that was also only published posthumously, and is dedicated “To Jean-Luc”—Jean-Luc Nancy that is.³ In that note, Kofman theorizes the mouth of her body as not constricted to the domain of mastery and the self-enunciation of a logical narrative recounting of one's life. Rather, the mouth is the place and source of surprise (“I can't believe I just said that!” or, “What did you just say?!”). Drawing from the metaphor of a cave, Kofman's is a generous mouth and one that at the same time mimics the other erogenous zones of the body: the penis (“spilling its offerings of semen”); the intestines/anus (“constipated”). So we read:

What my discourse had undoubtedly also wanted to dissimulate is that the mouth, at different moments of the analysis, can mimic the other erogenous zones of the body: that it can consecutively or simul-

taneously be mouth, sexual organ, anus. And not simply in an analogical manner: I knew that if, for instance, on a given day I was constipated, I would not be able to “talk” on the couch either, that “it” would not produce anything, that nothing would pass.⁴

If you are familiar with Nancy’s book on Descartes, you know that in its final chapter he locates the extension of exteriorized exposure that the body-soul union is, right at and on the mouth, or *bouche*, of the body. For Nancy (and for Sara Guyer and Peggy Kamuf, both of whom have written beautifully on this topic in Nancy), the mouth is the place of the subject in its exorbitance, which is to say, as that which at once exceeds and exists prior to enunciation (for instance). At once prior to, and in excess of speech (and phenomenon), this spacing, as Nancy has repeatedly pointed out, exceeds analysis, including the one dedicated to psyche, who, as you recall, Freud tells us lies outstretched and extended and knows nothing of this spaced-out exposure to what, drawing from Bataille, we can only call “non-knowledge” or, “the knowing which begins by articulating itself on the basis of its own abyss,” as Nancy put it in his essay on Badiou.⁵

Of course, this notion of the exteriority of the exorbitant subject being at once outside of and prior to the self is something that we also encounter in Derrida’s book on Husserl—*Speech and Phenomenon* (1968)—which Nancy considers to be Derrida’s most interesting, and one that he has drawn from for many of his own principal notions and terms. Buried at the end of a long footnote in the chapter “The Voice that Keeps Silence,” Derrida writes in a formulation that is by now utterly familiar to us: “This being outside itself proper to time is its spacing: it is a proto-stage [*archi-scene*].”⁶ In other words, this *anterior-outside-spacing* is what I am calling the *fore-scene*, its own proto-stage or *archi-scene*, as the place and “origin of sense,”⁷ of which drool is the liquid *fore-speech*, the trace of this opening and retreat, irreducible to substance and to any of the various topologies of substance (structure, history, fiction, imaginary, symbolic, etc.).

Drool is the evidence of this exorbitance, and in a recent short piece in honour of Roland Barthes and a chapter of his *A Lover’s Discourse* on “fulfillment” (*comblement*),

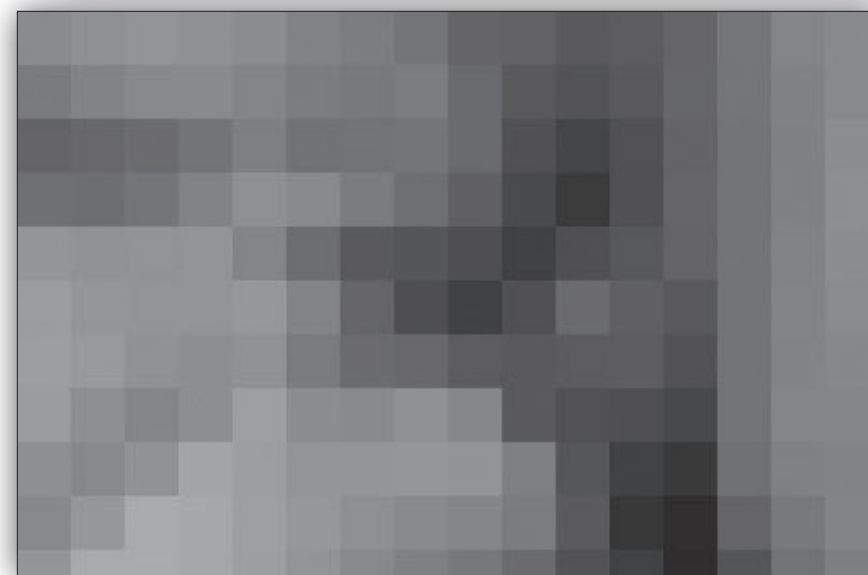
Nancy speaks in terms of an overflowing fulfillment and once again resorts to images of the mouth. This is where a more complete and queer reading of bodily fluids properly begins...

Overflow is the source and fulfillment of a body’s sense. Not only of a body’s sense of fulfillment (as we might say), but also of fulfillment as the sense of sense—the overflowing that sense is. There are bodies and there is sense, and together, in the overflowing of their inextricable mutuality—of bodies overflowing sense and of sense filling up bodies—is fluidly traced the archi-spacing of existence right at, along, and just over the openings and gapes, holes, slits, and orifices of bodies. Thereby existence’s bodily sense is fulfilled.

Neither inner nor outer edge nor outline, this archi-spacing of existence is simply the edge and line of what “can simply, imperceptibly, surpass the brim, as water completely filling up a cup forms a slight bulge, a thin convergent meniscus that rises higher than the edge of the glass. The filling up trembles, it is fragile.”⁸ In this quotation, from a short essay originally written in homage to Roland Barthes in 2009 and included in his recent book *Adoration* in a section titled “Everyone/Fulfillment (*le comble*),”⁹ Nancy uses the word “convergent” to describe the meniscus or crescent moon-shaped curved upper surface of the water as it “simply, imperceptibly, surpass[es] the brim” of the glass.¹⁰ It is a curious, and I would argue important, choice, which in its possible explanation will provide us with a further understanding of the sense and spacing of existence and bodies not in terms of lack and perhaps not even so much in terms of excess, but rather as fulfilled in their overflowing, and overflowing in their fulfillment.

Like pretty much any curved surface, there are two forms that the crescent shape of a meniscus can take: concave (in which the edges of the water touching the sides of its container rise higher than the middle) and convex (in which the middle of the water’s surface rises higher the edges of the water touching the sides of the vessel). Technically speaking, therefore, there is no such thing as a “convergent meniscus.” However, I want to suggest that in describing what is clearly understood to be a convex meniscus formed at the very brim of a glass as “convergent,” Nancy is positing,

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at once, an overflowing of the perceptible and measurable difference and division between interior and exterior—their convergence or touching—and the convergence of the rising upward or the caving downward of the surface tensions of the convex and concave menisci, respectively. Which is to say, the indistinguishable convergence of inner and outer pressures on the surface and shape of the water as it is contained by and fills up the glass or cup.

I want to suggest that it is in this way

that Nancy provides us with an image—by way of analogy—of existence as *fulfilling*, to the precise extent that its sense is overflowing. Such that existence is understood as precipitously fragile as the meniscus of a liquid formed by a filling up to and imperceptibly surpassing the line or edge of existence—its brim.

Nancy’s reading of and response to a chapter of Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* devoted to the word *comblement* (fulfillment),¹¹ while part of his theorization of

“adoration” as a relational exposure to the outside and the open, is also one of the most recent occasions in which he provides us with a language for theorizing that which is at once anterior to, and the retreat and withdrawal of, the temporal-spatial punctuation of the phenomenological, philosophical, and psychoanalytic “I,” ego, subject, and identity, through a vocabulary of the mouth as the very place of the overflowing of sense in its opening, gaping, and—as I will discuss below—drooling fulfillment. So, for instance, in the opening lines of Nancy’s text we read:

A condition of adoration: anteriority to “I”...to “I” itself and to its punctual location, which remains a position nonetheless, though fleeting and without dimension. This takes place further upstream: the opening opens behind me, before I open my mouth. “I” could happen in this opening, but does not yet appear, not for the moment; there is only the circle or ellipsis of the mouth, which has not yet been spoken, which precedes not only the sound of words but silent intention too.¹²

I theorize drool as that bodily fluid which in the fleeting and dimensionless surpassing of the brim of the mouth—specifically during sleep and in leaving a trace (perhaps imperceptible) on the pillow—outlines an “ellipsis of the mouth” as the extended periodicity (not punctuation) and spacing of sense and existence as that which “takes place further upstream,” prior to the opening of orality or enunciation, speech or even “silent intention.” It is in this way that I theorize drool as the liquid fore-speech of the fore-scene.

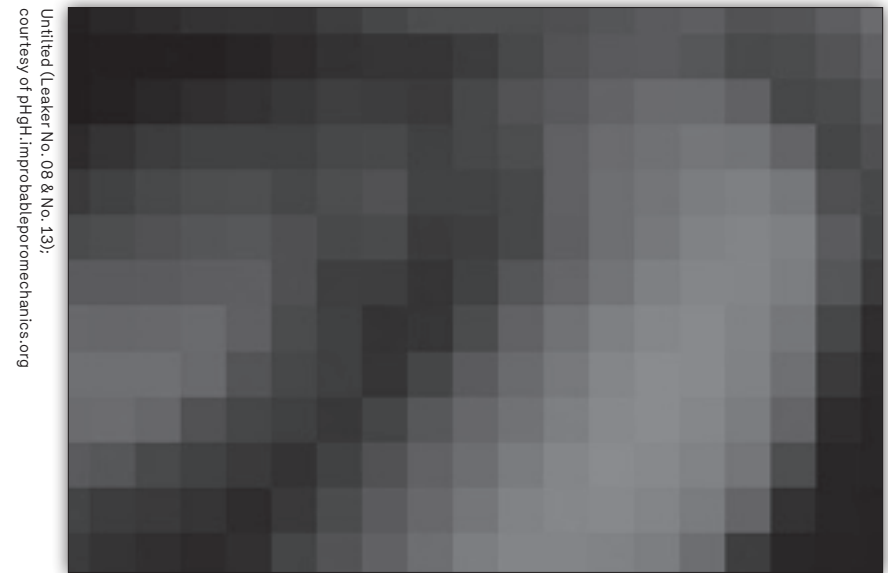
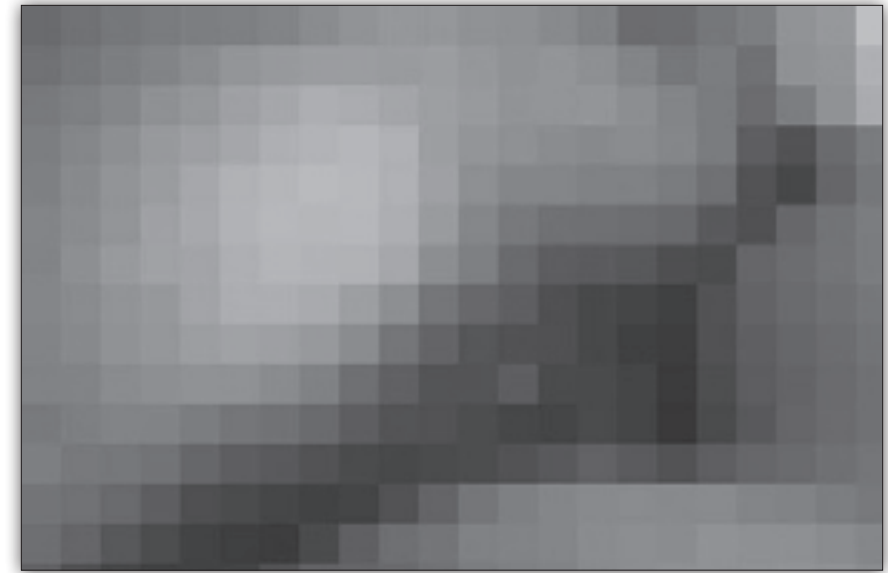
In doing so, I also think of the line or path of drool as tracing the incommensurably shared space of ego/psyche/soul/body’s extension and exposure,¹³ to which Nancy’s thinking has been devoted to now for over 30 years, since at least the late-1970s and his writing on Descartes and Freud, and with which he remains occupied up to the present.¹⁴

So while Nancy only explicitly refers to drool or drooling on a couple of occasions, nonetheless, there are many instances in which this particular bodily fluid can come to name that “something” that he has enabled us to think is irreducible to substance; that is pre-enunciative or pre-verbal and

therefore of buccality rather than orality; that might be said to stage a scene of writing in sleeping that is neither the inscription of the dream nor its transcription as dream-work, and hence defies or resists analysis and is the exposure to non-knowledge. In turn, as neither metonymy nor metaphor, drool is not of the figure or the face, but is without-figure and (self-)effacing; and in the elliptical or extended periodicity of its trace, can be thought of in terms of the spacing of the “with.” Drool is a pre-verbal stream that traces a path that flows towards nothing except consenting to the overflowing sense of bodies (“everyone”) and the inappropriability of their finitude, which is simply to say, the sovereignty of their fulfillment (in love, thinking, adoration).

And, as Nancy states in the short piece on Barthes we have been quoting from, fulfillment is neither satisfaction nor saturation, either in the form of ferment or disgorging. Which, in the context of our discussion, we can take to mean that drool, as one of the fluids by which the body is fulfilled precisely to the extent that it remains inassimilable (non-fermented) and non-projected/expressed (disgorged), must be distinguished from both saliva and spit. If we were to resort to a language of measure, we might say that drool is at once “more” than saliva, given that it is the very overflow of the latter, and “less” than spit, given that it is not a violently expelled expression. In this way it is the “evidence” of extension and exteriority due to fulfillment rather than lack (the mouth’s filling up and overflowing of saliva), yet an exposure to the outside that is at the same time withdrawal and retreat (unlike the projectile of spit). No wonder then, that while saliva and most especially spit/spittle have found a place in various theoretical, artistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural discourses of bodily fluids, abjection, performance, obscenity, and subjectivity, drool has rarely entered into the intellectual landscape.

So, not only is this *not* an ontologizing of the void, either as ground or unfulfilled end, it is also *not* about the empty; it is rather of emptying (*kenosis*) right at the overflowing (excessive, supplementing) edge and line—the retracing of this retreating, that requires us to de-ontologize existence and to speak less in terms of either being or becoming, but of existence as *un-*



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becoming. In other words: for the exposure that existence is, there is no schema, and this outside spacing borders not on the empty but can instead be said to be simply supported by nothing—no sufficient reason or principle of existence. Just as we have learned to question each figure of ontology and onto-typology, we must also continue to question every onto-topology, including each topology of substance.

Substance has no extension, but is a dimensionless point. As extended liquid/saliva of the body, drool is that *sub-ex* of substance that affirms that a body is irreducible to substance.¹⁵ The nearly imperceptible stream of drool traces the extended periodicity of existence and the body’s infinite finitude—its *exposure* (ontologically speaking). This is existence’s elliptical—and hence overflowing—spacing and sense.

This is beyond any “discourse” (philosophical or otherwise) of bodily fluids, but instead lies at the fore-scene of fore-speech, a preverbal opening or gaping of the mouth (*béance*), and thus an outside anterior to any intentional enunciation.

Drool is the soul of the body, of the body as always already outside itself (*ex corpore*), as something other than mass and pure substance. Nancy: “[I]n expelling, the body gives itself form” infinitely,¹⁶ and senses and feels it is a (finite and self-separated) body. Another name for this sensing of the body is “soul,” and this mixture, tension, and union of body and soul, is the tensing, sensing, and spacing of existence—the outline, trace of its being there—this body, here, now, in retreat. In a variation on Nancy: If I drool, it is a drooling soul.¹⁷

Drool is the liquidation of “substance,” and the “substantiality of an accident,”¹⁸ in which life is defined as a happy accident and surviving or living on as a happy surprise. It is in terms of this ontological insubstantiality that life is further understood to be neither an “event” nor a “gift.” Sleep: what we share in common in the sense of “the ontological impossibility of a common substance” (and principle).¹⁹ As liquidation of common substance, drool is the trace of this ontological impossibility—its elliptical sense. The body is the intruder, and drool, like every other bodily fluid, is an index of this intrusion.

As the liquid fore-speech of the fore-scene, we might say that drool is the pre-cum²⁰ of a buccal murmur and groan, and imagine that with the lightest of touches, as though with the tap of a finger, this fluid is stretched out and extended, and in its *extension* (*ex-posure* without *in-tention*)²¹ traces the tenuous and fragile yet remarkably resilient tensile line of the “with” of our shared existence, body to body. As though at that sleeping mouth a non-salvific path was opened up by drooling, and in that fall of sleep that is at the same time the fall of speech, one hears the “with” of being-with or being-together. As *exgested* substance, or more properly, as *sub-ex*, drool is a *menstruum universal* or “universal solvent” of sleeping together as being-together—everyone, fulfilled *co-somnum*—beyond the double-binding violence of the subjective-collective. I drool therefore I am. ✕

Endnotes

- 1 This is a version of a paper presented at the American Comparative Literature Association conference, April 2013, Toronto. It preserves some of the rhetorical form and references of that particular presentation. A much longer version of this essay is forthcoming in a special issue of the journal of queer studies *inter/Alia*, on “Bodily Fluids,” edited by Michael O’Rourke, Karin Sellberg, and Kamillea Aghtan.
- 2 From 22 August 1938 and published posthumously. Freud died on 23 September 1939.
- 3 Sarah Kofman, *Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Albrecht, Georgia Albert and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 250.
- 5 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Philosophy without Conditions,” in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (New York & London: Continuum, 2004), 49.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon*, trans. David B. Allison (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 84.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 8 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. J. D. Caputo, ed. J. McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 86.
- 9 This according to a footnote stating: “The first version of this passage was written for a day of homage to Roland Barthes organized by Julia Kristeva in 2009, whose proceedings are to be published” (*ibid.*).
- 10 “Meniscus,” from the Greek *mēniskos* (crescent), and diminutive of *mēnē* (moon), is the word that names and describes the crescent moon-shaped curved upper surface of a liquid in a tube, cup, glass, or other such container.

Bios

John Paul Ricco is the author of *The Logic of the Lure* (University of Chicago, 2003) and the forthcoming, *The Decision Between Us: Art & Ethics in the Time of Scenes* (University of Chicago, 2013). He is currently completing a third book titled, *Non-consensual Futures: Pornographic Faith and the Economy of the Eve*. He is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art, Media Theory and Criticism, and Graduate Professor in Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto.

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- 11 Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 54–56.
- 12 Nancy, *Adoration*, 84.
- 13 As we shall see, all of this along with his thinking and writing on: corpus, enunciation, sleep, touch and non-knowledge.
- 14 See, in particular, *Ego Sum* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979); *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); *Corpus*, trans. John D. Caputo, ed. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); and, with Antonia Birnbaum, *L’Extension de l’âme: Descartes = “Exister, c’est sortir du point”*, *Carnets* (Strasbourg: Le Portique, 2003).
- 15 *Sub-ex* is Nancy’s term for the deconstruction of the relation between enunciation and substance that structures the Cartesian figuration of the subject.
- 16 Nancy, “On the Soul,” in *Corpus*, 127.
- 17 Nancy and Birnbaum, *L’Extension*, 141.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Nancy, *Corpus*; see especially the 30th index for a statement on the intruder, but also the 41st on the questions of indices, *per se*.
- 20 In describing drool as the pre-cum of buccality, the outside and futurity (spatial and temporal opening) are understood as the provenance of speech and enunciation, and drool once again is more than simply metaphorically conceptualized. For, given that the Latin root of the word provenance (its provenance) translates as forth (*pro*) + come (*venire*), drool as pre-cum can be said to trace a forth-coming futurity and fore-coming outside, neither of which are either initial or destined, but a forth and a fore anterior to any origin or end, including even to any “pre-coming.” Such is the anarchic and a-telic scene opened up by drool and pre-cum.
- 21 Here we take Nancy’s notion of a “tension without intention” to mean both non-phenomenological, as well as absent of desire, predicated upon a notion of “lack” (value calculated as “not enough”).