1. The Neuter

INTRODUCTION

It is neuter. This does not mean that it has been neutered. It started neuter. It plays and works neuter and the same can be said when it is eating, drinking, or relieving itself. There is no moment that can be pinpointed as being ‘not-neuter.’ Even when it sleeps, it remains neuter. And when it wakes up, like it does now on a lazy summer afternoon, it is still neuter, even with its hard-on. It never ceases to be neuter, even when it is weak or about to die. How is one to understand this odd neuter?

The contradictions of the above paragraph need not be emphasized: an erection is not neuter; it is an enlarged and rigid biological protuberance that clearly indicates that a man is in question here. However, over and beyond (or under and beneath) this bio-anthropological determination, is there not (also) something utterly neuter about ‘it’?

Although the neuter in question here refers somewhat to the body, it does not stand for ‘the body’ as such. The neuter is not a generic physical structure comprehensible by all or a symbolic substitute for mankind in general. If this were the case, then the two (the body and the neuter) would be
confused to the point of being interchangeable. The neuter has something to do with the body, but it is not ‘the body.’

And it is not ‘the soul,’ ‘the spirit’ or ‘a monad’ either. If this were the case, then the neuter would be a transcendental referent (representing a reductive entity or a superior consciousness, for example) that, in order to exist would somehow need to be put in relation with ‘the body.’ The neuter evades both these false dichotomies and these unnecessary reductions or elevations.

Just so that there is no confusion; the neuter in question here is also not Dasein. As is well known, Heidegger understands Dasein qua Dasein as sexually neutral. He even talks of an originary and powerful asexual neutrality (Neutralität). In saying this, Heidegger’s aim is to think Dasein as a primordial structure that sustains the binary of sexes. Dasein is therefore sexually neutral because as Dasein it does not carry with it the mark of this opposition (or alternative) between the two sexes.

As will become clear, the neuter in the following text departs from this interpretation for a simple reason: it insists on using the word neuter and not neutral. The neuter specifically relates to sex and gender, while the neutral can be understood as unrelated to these terms. This simple reason allows for a re-thinking of sex and gender that is not necessarily related to what could lie out-, in-, or along-side of it: Dasein qua Dasein. Having said this, the following text still retains Heidegger’s insight that, like the neutral, the neuter is (also) what disperses the body. The question—and this is what will need to be addressed—is whether it can do this without relating to Dasein also dispersing itself positively in its facticity.

Finally, the neuter in question here is not a desire. Roland Barthes famously made this move from the neuter as a state to the desire for the neuter in order to a) avoid essentializing it, b) suspend (épochè) all forms of orders and, c) by way of

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deepening, refuse all forms of opposition (including gender). This move will not be repeated here because what concerns us above all is to expose not only the contradictory nature of the neuter (it includes oppositions and negotiates orders), but also, in a more Barthean move, its complexity, the fact that it cannot be totalized.

With these side-glances towards Heidegger and Barthes in mind, the neuter will therefore be presented most simply as a spatial and temporal quasi-bodily movement that cannot be distinguished from the advent of space and time.

Please note: once again, there will be no assumption here that the addressee of this text will identify with this neuter, saying, for example ‘Oh, yes, I identify myself in this neuter’ or ‘This neuter feels just like me.’ The reason being that the word ‘neuter’ names in fact something that can be recognized, but cannot be made generic. As such, the neuter can only offer itself as a word that always misses on the opportunity of being pinned down and therefore shared as a generic characteristic common to all.

The neuter will therefore be here idiosyncratic to the one who addresses it with all its flaws and qualities. As such, this neuter will probably amuse, occasionally annoy, or even perhaps, in some acute moments, infuriate. Unfortunately, nothing can be done to stop this. This neuter simply ‘is’—without ‘being’ exactly. The addressee—whoever he or she

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19 Although Jean-Luc Nancy does not specifically address the neuter, his understanding of the body and how it relates to the advent of space and time are crucial here. As he says, for example: “Space and time are the two names for birth; this double name is necessary so that there is a coming, weighing, or lifting of event, which is neither a point nor a present (neither space nor time), but presentation (imperfection). In this way, space is no longer spread and riddled with landmarks; time is no longer irreversible and a line of successions, but one by the other open, not just opened, but opening: the opening of a place, the taking-place of this place”: Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Naissance des seins* (Valence: École régionale des beaux-arts, 1996), 17, my translation.
is—can either put up with it or just leave it and move over to the next section.

Unfortunately, those who can bravely ignore flaws and qualities and are able to stick with this neuter will face a rather abstract exposure. Although occasional glimpses towards more figurative horizons will be made in the aim of relieving the dryness of the abstraction, entertainment, in this first chapter, cannot be guaranteed. Unfortunately, this neuter suffers from being unable to sit long enough for it to be figured or represented and therefore pinned down for judgement... but I let you judge.

REFERENCE

Going against its well-known etymological origin, this neuter will not be understood here as what is ‘neither this nor that,’ ‘neither one nor the other.’ To refer to this etymological origin assumes the following question: if it is ‘neither this nor that,’ then ‘what is it’? The reference therefore assumes the possibility of a third option: a flaw or a relief from the proposed alternative: this or that. But, as will be shown, this neuter is not a third option or an impersonal ‘one’ and it cannot be understood as the question that leads to the third.

Foreign to this familiar etymology, this neuter therefore has to be accepted as an event, whether it is this or that and even if it is neither this nor that. The problem with an event is that it can never be totalised; it cannot be part of a calculus or a reasoning system. The neuter simply escapes all forms of totalisation. Inversely, this neuter cannot be hollowed out of all contents; it cannot be emptied or made into a vacuum. The neuter in question here is effectively that which always lends itself to be totalised or hollowed out, but never manages to accomplish either of these states. This is the first alienating aspect of this neuter, the hallmark of any event (that of being this ‘man,’ for example).

However much it is alienating and evasive, one thing is certain: Contrary to popular opinion, this neuter is not an
inanimate thing and it is not something inert or passive. The neuter in question here is both, curiously, animate and inanimate, active and passive, inert and dynamic. It strangely has all these characteristics. The most annoying aspect of this state of affairs is that neither its animate nor its inanimate aspects, for example, can be identified independently from the other. They ‘cohabit’ making up this neuter as it manifests itself.

IT, ALWAYS

As such, this neuter is not very seductive. There is no fantasy of neutrality, impartiality, or unbiased positioning hiding here under the non-nomination ‘neuter.’ As celebrities tirelessly remind us, only what marks itself as different or exceptional (within or outside of the neither/nor scheme) manages to seduce. The neuter in question here is far too complex to be truly seductive. It attracts and repels at the same time even when it gently awakes as it does right now.

This lack of seductiveness makes it perversely equivocal. This equivocality prevents anyone from identifying it as a subject with any certainty. In other words, it never comes across as a speaking person or a thinking and feeling entity. This neuter is effectively always already open to interpretation, questioning, probing, never finished or completed. This equivocal ‘nature’ never allows it to be anchored as something determinable that would be a part or a structure of subjectivity, for example—even if this subjectivity is understood as always performing or simply to-come.

Paradoxically, this lack of seductiveness also prevents it from being treated as an object, let alone a ‘proper’ object of study. In other words, it simply can never be objectified as such. Although it is the topic of this first chapter, the convoluted ways of describing it—avoiding at all cost ‘neither-nor’ sentences and therefore third options—shows that it can never be understood as a solid mass or an ethereal matter that can be scrutinised by either objective sciences or subjective narration.
But, and however contradictory this sounds, it nonetheless allows itself to be recognizable both as some ‘one’ who deserves attention (someone who deserves a kiss or a slap in the face, for example) and as a mere ‘thing’ that deserves to be indexed, identified, dissected, analysed, and then (inevitably) discarded. While the ontic sciences (physics when it comes to the neuter as object or psychoanalysis when it comes to the neuter as subject, for example) congratulate themselves in their attempts to master it, the question always remains: which of the two (some ‘one’ or a mere ‘thing’) will you choose? In other words, what is it: an object or a subject?

Unfortunately, this neuter cannot help you decide. It will remain always already both equivocally subject and object. As such, this neuter can therefore never be a pure ‘I’ or ‘you’ and it can never be a ‘He’ or a ‘She’ either. It remains irritatingly ‘it,’ not quite substantive, not quite being, maybe the very work of being an ‘I’ or a ‘you,’ a ‘she’ or a ‘he.’ ‘Maybe’ only, for it is impossible to assume a clear and distinctive relation between this neuter and either of these pronouns.

A-BODY

All this might lead one to think that the neuter is a non-body, a Stoic or Deleuzian incorporeal, or some impersonal lack of distinction that unites or characterizes us all under the sun, for example. This couldn’t be further from this neuter. This neuter is corporeal; it is a body with organs, hairy, bulky, smelly. It has bodily functions. It pisses and it cries. In doing so, it soils and leaves marks of difference.

And yet, this neuter cannot be reduced to a body strictly speaking. The reason being that this neuter never lets itself be recognized as an entity that can be identified: a body in need of relief or medication, for example. This neuter sweats, but it is never ‘that which sweats’: a ‘sweator,’ for example. The same goes for ejaculations, defecations, tears, and bad breaths. No

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particular bodily function can identify it because it comes with the process of identification, with the recognition that it is an ‘I who sweats,’ a ‘he who suffers from hyperhidrosis,’ a ‘we who ejaculate, defecate, or stink.’ This neuter is therefore clearly not quite a body as such.

In this way, this neuter—i.e. this odd body/non body—can only make sense when it becomes manifest, that is, when it encounters other bodies, other things, other objects—someone’s anus or the porcelain of a urinal, for example. Without these other bodies, without these other things, there would be no neuter, for they are what allows it to become manifest, not as if an alter-ego or hostage-taker,21 not as if a receptacle or an undetermined background, but as the condition that allows friction between things and beings in general.

This does not mean that there is ‘a friction’ called ‘the neuter’ that would exist between bodies or non-bodies, not even when there is evidence: a rash or a slash, for example. The neuter becomes manifest but never turns into a manifestation in its own right. It is ‘the other’—as un/defined in the Introduction—that or who presupposes and determines—but not exclusively—this neuter that knows no proper bodily or ethereal referent.

21 This references Levinas’s argument that the other holds me ‘hostage.’ To say the opposite is not a way of contradicting or going against Levinas, it is simply an attempt to think the situation in which the other indeed holds us ‘hostage’ and yet paradoxically we are (also) the hostage-takers, a ‘condition’ of friction that puts less emphasis on the necessarily overwhelming interference of the radically other ‘in me.’ I develop this argument in After ‘Rwanda’ (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013). Here is an example of how Levinas describes the situation of always already being a hostage of the other: “We are always someone else’s hostage, but not so that we can go and complain about it”: Emmanuel Levinas and Michaël de Saint Cheron, Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas, 1983-1994 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 37.
The End of Man

This odd animate/inanimate, body/non-body status does not mean that it is unreal. The neuter looses no grip on (or a sense of) reality. In the same way that it only becomes manifest when encountering ‘the other,’ it is also affected by others (bodies or things) and this friction of affects gives it its reality. The problem is that, unfortunately, the reality in question here can never be totalised. Indefinite, the neuter can terrify as it relaxes; it can calm as it becomes exasperated: contradictory states that can take place simultaneously.

In doing so, the neuter therefore exposes both reality’s distinctiveness (its recognizable sharp and urgent features, for example), but also its strangeness (what makes it remain always incomprehensible, for example). In other words, the neuter fuses with reality without disappearing altogether and in the process reveals reality as well as its (own) contradictions.

In this way and to follow Roland Barthes’ well-known line of thought, this neuter is “the complex;” 22 it consists of many different parts that annoyingly can never be made one because they fuse with other realities. As such, the neuter can never be a neat juxtaposition of body and soul or a complex network of flesh, blood, and organs—not even when it slowly turns into a corpse. It just consists of many different parts, each of which come and go logically, but also, paradoxically, without any proper logic or rationale.

As such, the neuter is what is unbearable to doxa, withstands received opinion, and annoys the middle classes and their numbing (virtual) chitchat. But this does not mean that it is a vague or a fuzzy concept, like ‘the androgyne’ or ‘consciousness,’ for example. Real biographical organizations (such as this neuter lying here in the sun) do not exclude concreteness. The neuter is ‘here’ embodying a sleeping man, and as such it is necessarily and eminently concrete. The problem is simply that thought is unable to catch and freeze-frame it in order to discard it and immediately move over to

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22 See Barthes, The Neutral, 190.
another opinion. Doxa simply hates the neuter, but the feeling is mutual.

Some say that this neuter is therefore useless because it always already comes with the oppositions that make language comprehensible. Its complexity prevents it from being politically ‘useful,’ for example. The problem really is that the neuter remains both borne by the whole language (and therefore describable and useful as such) and that which, amidst oppositions, never enters language properly (and therefore remains always difficult to describe or use as such). The neuter is therefore both useful and useless. The political is doxa’s sister and therefore harbours more or less the same feelings towards the neuter.

**Sexed and Gendered**

However strange this might seem, especially if one considers this afternoon’s hard-on, this neuter is what carries no mark of opposition (against the female sex or women, for example). The issue here is that in common language, the very word ‘neuter’ usually implies, as seen above, a reference to a binary opposition: neuter versus masculine and feminine, for example. The problem is that this neuter cannot be submitted to or positioned against such binary poles. It remains with both at all times and yet never belongs properly to one or the other. The neuter is improper, but even that is not its property.

However, this neuter should not therefore be understood as a paradoxical prototype for the human, a type of sexlessness or a ‘genderless thing.’ It is not an ‘us,’ an indifferent ‘nobody and everybody,’ or an a-phallic and a-cephallic generic state somewhat mysteriously recognizable across the bumpy plurality of bodies. The neuter is the primordial complex positivity that takes place before sexuality and gender. In other words, this neuter is a decisive positivity that comes before the specification of sex and gender as binaries. 23

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23 The idea of a primordial positivity is inspired by, but departs significantly from, Heidegger’s interpretation of Dasein’s neutrality.
Primordial? Before? Uh?

This neuter must indeed be understood as preceding any form of dichotomies or bi-polar (a)symmetries. This precedence is due to the fact that the neuter cancels the one and outnumbers the two and as such precedes both the one and the two (neither/nor, masculine/feminine, male/female, etc.). In other words, it precedes because it is a positivity that knows no different. It is that which comes ‘before’ binaries.

However, the ‘before’ in question here is a curious one. However much, it appears to indicate a period of time that precedes another, however much it gives the impression that there is an order of priority, this ‘before’ must be understood, following Jacques Derrida, in a situation that knows no literal, chronological, historical, or logical meaning. The ‘before’ in question here simply means what disperses sexual difference and the difference of sexes and genders as bi-polar (a)symmetries.

In this way, this neuter is not a rejection of sex or gender, the negation of the feminine and the masculine, for example. It is the positive dispersion of sex and gender. This neuter disperses its own sex, which here, for example, happens to be male. In this way, this neuter disperses this morning’s

The reasons for departing in such a way from Heidegger’s original formulation is simple: the argument about the neuter is neither attached to nor dependent on Dasein, that is, to an understanding of man as a being for which its own proper mode of being is not indifferent. The neuter is here analysed precisely as a characteristic of what is not neutral, that is, of what is always already contaminated by the other. The neuter concerns a ‘with’ (cum) that knows no unicity or directionality. For Heidegger’s argument on the neutrality of Dasein, see: Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. M. Heim (Indiana University Press, 1984), 136–40.

hardness, the needy weightiness of its scrotum, or any other erogenous or non-erogenous part of this very body. Preceding binary sex and gender, this neuter therefore ‘positives’ itself and in the process leaves hallucinatory projections and desires that postulates it as this or that (masculine or feminine, for example) to the economy of binary sex.

Such a weird precedence shows that the neuter is the event that baffles paradigms, and first amongst many, the sexual paradigm. It baffles because it is a positivity that never manages to fall back, yet again, into anatomical, biological or anthropological determinations. It is what invents (sexual and gender) determinations and hence can only leave the one that disperses them baffled, bewildered or perplexed as to why he is so determined.

All this has a terribly annoying consequence: the neuter and the masculine can no longer be seen as synonymous. This neuter does not stand for a specific sex or gender. It is not a secret substitute for men or a stable referent and its positivity is not a power or a violation of the other. No women are subjected here under a parody of (male) universality. On the contrary, this neuter is the start of sexes and genders even though it can never be identified as a starting point or an origin as such.

**Dispersion**

While it lounges there in the afternoon sun slowly rousing from sleep, with its 22 pairs of chromosomes and its two extra set: X and Y; this neuter thus positively disperses itself. This is a pre-differential dispersion, a pre-sexual dispersion, or to be more precise, the primordial positive dispersion of the body ‘before’ its sexual and gendered determination in concrete form. This does not mean that, as dispersion, it is recognizable as a unitary, homogeneous, or undifferentiated proto-event: ‘an in-born or in-herent neutral dispersal,’ for example.
Coinciding with the advent of space and time, this neuter positively spaces (and) temporizes itself in its dispersion. This dispersing therefore starts not here or there, but from the fact of being with others. It disperses itself as it sheds skin, its nails grow, its skin sags and as ‘all this’ comes in contact with others in the great dusty, sweaty, clammy maelstrom of humanity. The neuter is the slow dispersal ‘towards’ the other and the night—and this, even when the sun is still high.

As remarked above, this dispersion curiously knows no language and yet it forms and is formed by language. This neuter, this spacing (and) temporizing, indeed disperses at the moment when, as language, this ‘origin’ submits to its law. In other words, this neuter spaces (and) temporizes itself just when language imposes the weighty rule that makes it comprehensible as a neuter. In this way, although it is a ‘start,’ this neuter never escapes the laws of language, hence the fact that it can still be (more or less) articulated.

But, and this will annoy even more, there is therefore no way of understanding this dispersion as if it were a ‘work,’ like the work of the negative, for example. There is no labour, operation, or performance here, and there is no negation or opposition. This neuter positively disperses and always displaces itself out of its dispersal, thus making it impossible to ascribe it a proper ground, course, centre or reversal as such.

But how is one, finally and to finish, to make sense of this odd ‘positivity’ that does not even have the politeness

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25 As I have done in my previous books, On Futurity and After ‘Rwanda’, and following the observation adhered to in the Introduction, I make a distinction between space and time and spacing (and) temporizing, with the latter’s conjunction always bracketed. The former refers to measurable space and time and therefore to things that lend themselves to mathematical calculations and historical interpretation. The latter refers to the radical unhinging of space and time, as far as language permits us to hear it. For the words ‘spacing’ and ‘temporizing’ in Derrida’s work, see: Jacques Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, trans. D.B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1979), 143. For a commentary on this topic, see Françoise Dastur, Telling Time, Sketch of a Phenomenological Chronology, trans. E. Bullard (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 13 and 105 nn. 43 and 44.
of remaining constant and therefore recognizable by all as something lovely and positive?

As its etymology clearly states: ‘positivity’ means what is placed or what occupies place (ponere) and yet this ‘occupancy’ takes place without a clear indication of placement, location, or position. It capriciously posits itself without adopting a final position, let alone a final disposition. In this way, this neuter positively places itself as it de-places itself. This does not mean that it is just a frustrating protean ghost. This simply means that in order to ‘be,’ the neuter almost never ceases to visibly show itself in order to remain at the cusp of visibility. Even the negation of the neuter exscribes26 itself in the process; hence the fact that it is a positivity that isn’t a power or a powerlessness, a potency or an impotence.27

This neuter is therefore not ‘what exists’ here and now. Complex, the neuter is messy and messes around; it misses a step and yet still manages to step in time. As such, it can never be reduced to a single signifying and reductive term (‘life,’ for example), copula (‘be,’ for example) or, as we have

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26 I use again here Jean-Luc Nancy’s famous word in order to emphasize how this positivity works. However, the use of such a word is always made with Nancy’s careful warning: “‘Exscribe’ is not a word in our language, and one cannot invent it (as I have done here) and remain unscathed by its barbarism. The word ‘exscribed’ exscribes nothing and writes nothing; it makes a clumsy gesture to indicate what can only be written, in the always uncertain thought of language”: Nancy, The Birth to Presence, 339.

27 Again, the difficulty here is to think a positive dispersal that is not pitched against a negative one. The use of the word ‘positivity’ therefore necessitates a situation in which the antagonisms (sex, gender, etc.) are already in play. Positivity thus becomes what sustains the antagonisms or oppositions as if the very condition of their existence. As such, the neuter’s positivity is that which constitutes the divides positive/negative, masculine/feminine, etc., but without the possibility of ‘a backwards glance’ because it is an unpredictable surge that knows no tide, earth, or moon. For an analysis of these problems, see Peggy Kamuf, “Derrida and Gender: the Other Sexual Difference,” in Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially 100–4.
seen, a standard operational device for existence (‘Dasein,’ for example); one that would give meaning or direction to the economy of subjects and objects, me, you, it, they. This neuter maddeningly smudges and disarranges copulas, correlations, and clever devices mercurially remaining at their cusp.

In this way, even in its own complex disarray, this neuter still evokes a movement, but this movement is not as straightforward as it seems. Because it coincides with the ‘origin’ of space and time, because it fuses itself with a concrete sexed and gendered bodily reality, this neuter is really—however odd this sounds—the positive ‘not yet’ of factual dispersion. This ‘not yet’ is not what can be recognized as coming but isn’t here yet. This ‘not yet’ is also not a pregnancy, potentiality, or futurity and however odd this sounds, the ‘not’ in this positive ‘not yet’ relates to no negativity or radicality. It simply marks the way the body goes about to positively disperse itself—we will come back to this. For the moment, let us simply say that the neuter as the positive ‘not yet’ of factual dispersion is really a complex bestrewal without surface. There would be no man (and more generally no body) lying there in the sun without it.