The title of this piece is taken from a caption to an illustration in a book on South East Asian art. It refers to ‘Apsaras’ who are enigmatic female divinities of Indian and Khmer mythology. The ancient Khmer city of Ankor Wat is profusely decorated with beautiful bas-reliefs of these divinities. I encountered these illustrations and the caption shortly after I was invited to submit an essay for a book on the philosophy of community. They have served to coalesce my thoughts — setting up thought/image sequences reaching backward and forward — and so have guided the development and maintained the integrity of this piece.
A Community of Impostors?

I am waiting to depart for the Island. I am sitting on the top deck of the boat, on the floor, in a spot out of the sun. I am lost in thought looking out at the ocean.

“You look sad.” A woman sitting near me says.

“No, I’m just thinking.” I say.

“It’s not good to think too much.”

“I have no choice,” I joke, “it’s my job, I’m a philosophy teacher.”

I ask her about herself. She tells me her name is Candy.

She is planning to finish college where she is studying communications. She tells me that she is a poet. Her father started her along that path when she was a girl by giving her a book of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. She also writes greeting cards and has even had several greeting card companies buy her work.

I tell her that I am interested in poetry as well, that I read a lot of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin when I was studying in the university.

So for a while, out on the sea, we trade Dickinson for Hölderlin.

“So where are you going now?” I ask.

She tells me she is heading back to the island where she works as a “hunter girl.” A hunter girl is a prostitute who pursues tourists. She is distinct from a “bar girl” who works in the bars dancing up and down the runways waiting to be chosen by the customers. A hunter girl, she proudly asserts, has control over who they take as a customer, or when they work.

“But isn’t that a rough line of work” I ask.

She explains that one of the biggest dangers is “losing oneself.” Most of the girls come to the island to make a little money until they can go on and finish school or pursue a career, or marry a wealthy tourist. When they arrive they take on a “new name” to protect their old identity, but after a while they lose their way and “become the name.” But she insists that this has not happened to her. She acknowledges that she is a little bit schizophrenic but she prefers to think these alternate personas as “colors.” Eventually, she hopes to save up enough money to go back and finish school.

She has a tattoo of an angel on her shoulder with name of her three year old daughter beneath it — “Angelica.”
“My daughter is the love of my life,” she announces.

I am standing on the beach at night. The dark waves slide up the beach, and draw back, hissing into the sand. And across the cove is the sound of the discos pounding...

Venus works as a Bar Girl. She and a group of others dance up and down the stage in front of you for several songs. Then her group leaves the stage and are replaced by another group of girls. During her breaks you can buy her a drink.

She has been working here for about three months. She carries a cellular telephone which she uses to keep in touch with her children. The money she earns is sent back to them. I ask her about her job and what she feels about it. She snaps back: “Are you asking me if I like my job?”

She was once the mistress of a high ranking military man with whom she had two children. But she couldn’t handle the life of a mistress. She was in love and wanted more. With difficulty, she broke up with him and went back to school to study secretarial skills and English. She landed a job in an office, but because of her beauty, was constantly harassed by her boss, and ended up losing her job because she resisted his advances. She also once had an Italian lover, but he was constantly jealous of her and would beat her. And now she has to work on the island to support her children.

“Have you ever been married?” she asks me.

“No,” I say.

“Have you ever been in love?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I say a bit irritated, “How are you sure you are in love?”

“You cannot stop thinking about them. You want to kill yourself.”

The name of her former lover, which was once tattooed into her skin, has been burned away using rat poison. A scar is all that is left.

“I hate men. I like to hurt them whenever I get the chance.”

Now she lives in a community house with the other bar girls. During the day she plays pool with her friends. Somewhere there is a microwave tower weaving telephone signals. Venus is talking on her cell phone with her children who are somewhere across the expanse of water.
People spill out of the discos at two in the morning. They congregate at an outdoor Videoke bar. The video monitors flicker with the song lyrics and images of lonely women walking pensively along sea shores. The girls take turns singing in the arms of their customers. I see Candy. She is wistfully singing...

Memories,
of the love I left behind,
faded watercolor memories
of the way we were...

I go up to say hello to her, but she scolds me. “Can’t you see that I’m with a customer?”

A bar girl is sitting next to me trying to pick me up. She has slung her leg over mine and occasionally tries to pinch my nipples. All the while she is talking to an older woman sitting on the other side of me. She tells her of an episode from earlier that night. She goes with a customer to his room and when they walk in the door, his wife is there with their baby in her arms. The wife begins crying inconsolably, and the bar girl leaves. They both agree this is a very sad story and fall silent for awhile. Meanwhile someone is singing another love song.

They see one another across the bar, every night with a new man, and warmly applaud each others songs. They share their experiences and cry on each other’s shoulders. Who are these women who work as prostitutes and yet sing so passionately about love, who have lost themselves and yet form a community?

If a community is understood through the relations between its members, then this community is an interesting case. The women have a false name and identity. They carry the repressed shadows of other communities within them. They deal with false relationships, create the illusion of intimacy and are often engaged to two or three men at a time — hoping that one will return for them.

A community of impostors?

And so I catch myself thinking — reflecting upon their strange community. I’m a philosophy professor, I appreciate these strange and sad ironies. And yet as I bring them into focus, something is lost, there is something which connects them outside of my line of sight.

“What do you teach?” asks one girl I met.
"I teach philosophy," I proudly announce.
"Oh" she says, "Isn't that where people are really smart, but in the wrong way?"*

An Ideal Community?

Full of the Good is; but no one can grasp
God alone.
But where Danger is, grows
Also Rescue.
In the Gloom dwell
The Eagles, and fearlessly go
The Sons of the Alps over the Chasms
On lightly-built Bridges.
Therefore, since Clarity is piled around,
The Peaks of Time,
And the Most-loved live near, exhausted and
On separate Mountains,
So give us Guiltless Water,
O give us Wings, truest Sense
To cross over and cross back.

Hölderlin, "Patmos" later version

And so, what about me and my community — that community of people who are "smart, but in the wrong way?"

I have never considered myself to be a communal person. To the contrary, I have prided myself with being a loner, an individual, aloof from all communities. Even the factors which led me to philosophy in the first place have involved my thirst for solitude, my habit of taking long walks alone with my thoughts. Yet now, here I am, contributing this essay for the inspection of my community, trying to communicate with my community through its concepts.

I have also sung the old lament about losing touch at times with the passion and wonder that led me into philosophy. And I have been faced with what to write on my resume concerning my expertise and competence. What name or color (to use Candy's words) do I take on? —

*She must have been thinking of the Tagalog word "Pilosopo" which means a smart-ass, a smart-aleck
German Romanticism, Critical Theory, Aesthetics? Where am I in these corpuses? Who am I in relation to my community?

While preparing lectures for a mini-course in Aesthetics I gave in Phnom Penh, adjacent to the writings of Schelling and Hegel which I was using, was Fichte's 1805 lecture "On the Nature of the Scholar, and his Manifestations in the Sphere of Freedom." In it, Fichte writes about the proper task of the philosophical writer.

He must express the idea in language, in an intelligible manner and in a perfect form. The idea must therefore have become in him so clear, living and independent, that it of itself speaks out to him in words and, penetrating to the innermost spirit of his language, frames thence an embodiment for itself by its own inherent force. The idea itself must speak, not the author. His will, his individuality, his peculiar method and art, all must disappear from his page, so that only the method and art of his idea may live the highest life that it can attain in his language and in his time. (On the Nature of the Scholar, p. 112)

For Fichte, this truth is the absolute freedom of the human subject.

This also converges with Eastern philosophy where the path beyond the subject is always found through the subject. In the Maitri Upanishad we find:

When, by the suppression of the mind, he sees through self; he sees the shining self, more subtle than the subtle, then having the self through the self he becomes selfless. Because of his being selfless he is to be thought of as immeasurable, without origin. This is the mark of liberation, the highest mystery. (Upanishads, p. 332)

The Absolute I (like this Brahma self) is the Absolute as it presents itself at the core of the finite subject. It is the non-subjective in the subject, nature in the subject, or the outside as it presents itself in the inside. The goal is to identify with this eternal aspect within you and not your finite self.

In "Concerning the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy", Fichte points out that the communication of truth through writing would be through the writer's talent of inspiring an idea already lying dormant within the reader. The proper community of scholars would be a kind of higher community of individuals who each have encountered the same truth.
which is independent of that community and yet is the bond which holds it together.

Fichte also speaks of the untalented writer.

Ability [Talent], where it is present, sees its object only, and never sees itself, as the healthy eye fixes itself upon something beyond it but never looks round upon its own brightness. But if the idea does indeed not belong to [the untalented philosopher], then what is it that animates him and moves him to those eager and restless efforts which we behold? It is mere pride and self-conceit, and the desperate ambition, in spite of natural disqualification, to assume a character which does not belong to him; these inspire, impel and spur him on, and stand for him in place of genius. And what is it that he produces, and that appears to the common eye as if it were the idea? - though the common eye is itself neither clear nor pure, and is in particular incapable of appreciating the sole criteria of all true ideals: clarity, freedom, self-possession, artistic form - what is it, I say? Either something he has thought up himself, or something which has accidentally occurred to him; which he does not, indeed, understand, but which he nevertheless hopes may appear new, frappant, paradoxical, and therefore blaze forth far and wide. With this he commits himself to the wheel of fortune, trusting that in the aftermath he himself or someone else may discover a meaning therein. (On the Nature of the Scholar, p. 110)

I think this applies to me.

I cannot completely disappear into my work. It seems to reach no moment where it allows a glimpse into anything as stable as a truth. There is still an “I” left over, a place marker rolling through time and space, a knot of habits, desires, anger, hatred, passions and confusion.

I do trust the creative process to the wheel of fortune. I do not always know what my ideas mean or where they come from, and as a result, I am attracted to the paradoxical, the accidental, the novel, the particular.

And yet, in my confusion and lack of lucidity, I have become fascinated with a dimension prior to the pure work of art or work of philosophy. The way in which ideas come and go, move, taper off, the secret ways in which they communicate beyond my line of sight, the way they serve me and fail me, not the way they stand side by side in the illusion of unity and integrity.
The work of philosophy does not, like Minerva, spring from the brow fully grown. It emerges in a mysterious process of encounters, with people, with books, with places.

And so here is the less perfect temporal dimension, which someone in my position can feel competent to gesture towards.

A Celestial Hierarchy (slightly crooked)

I Felt a Cleaving in my Mind —
As if my Brain had split —
I tried to match it — Seam by Seam —
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before —
But Sequence raveled out of Sound
Like Balls — upon a Floor.

Emily Dickinson

I pace the room trying to conduct my thoughts, my books sit patiently on their shelves and watch. Spirits of the dead: Spinoza-Kant-Schelling-Hegel-Nietzsche-Heidegger-et.al.

Chance gives rise to thoughts, and chance removes them; no art can keep or acquire them. A thought has escaped me. I wanted to write it down. I write instead that it has escaped me. (Pascal, Pensees, #370)

I am in Phnom Penh in front of Wat Lanka, talking to a group of Buddhist monks dressed in their bright saffron robes, and a man dressed in street clothes walks up to speak to me.

“What do you do for a living,” he asks.

“I’m teaching philosophy over at the university.”

Against which he announces, “Philosophy has ruined my mind!”

He explains that he had lived in France for fifteen years during which he studied political philosophy, but it was too difficult for him. Now he hears voices and feels that he is constantly being watched. He tells me
that to escape this state of suffering, he needs a job working with his hands and not with his head. He needs to escape from his thoughts.

This reminds me of how the clinically insane ‘Art Brut’ artist — Augustin Lesage — explained his paintings. He, however, learned to follow his voices.

Never before painting a canvas, have I had an overall vision of a picture at any point in the course of its execution. A picture comes into existence detail by detail, and nothing about it enters my mind beforehand. My guides have told me: ‘Do not try to find out what you are doing.’ I surrender to their prompting ... I know it sounds unbelievable, but that’s the way it is. I follow my guides like a child. (Art Brut, p. 185)

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When I was preparing to leave South Africa, a community of nuns, the Little Sisters of Jesus of Edendale, gave me a going-away gift. It was a small reproduction of an Russian Icon of Saint John the Evangelist. St. John is sitting with an open book. An angel is speaking into his ear. I had politely thanked them for it. But as I was not very devoted to Christianity, the gift didn’t mean much at the time. But the picture has continued to grow on me. St. John represents me, John, the teacher. His mouth is closed because he is merely the scribe for the divine word. He is in touch with both the spiritual and corporeal worlds and the depiction of his body reflects this — somewhere between the corporeal and the incorporeal. The Byzantine poet Manuel Philes who devoted much of his work to the description of icons, wrote in a poem called “On his Anthropomorphic Symbol”:

Since you do not possess the fleshless nature of angels
you bear the form of a fleshly evangelist,
not because the angels have something higher,
but because you write for us the incarnate Word.
(Icons of their Bodies, p. 85)
I now realize that the nuns were reminding me of my deep responsibility as a teacher. Something which makes demands upon my own life and body. And who is this angel speaking into John’s ear? The Angels of Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas are messengers, announcers, mediators between divine and human ideas. They are pure intelligence. There are no wasted motions, but complete efficiency of thought. The idea of the existence of angels follows from the neoplatonic idea of a hierarchy. Pseudo-Dionysius writes:

In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine. And it is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments divinely given to it. (*Celestial Heirarchy* p. 153)

Heavenly Ideas are disjointed from empirical concepts. This gap suggests a dimension of intellectual power which has a life of its own and is able to cross this gap. A power through which we achieve enlightenment animated by the divine order of the cosmos.

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My cereal (*Cowhead: instant nutritious cereal*) comes with a free notebook upon which is a quote from Shakespeare:

Knowledge, the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.

(2 Henry VI VI, 7).

Ananda Coomeraswamy writes with reference to the *Upanishads*:

Insofar as man employs and understands angelic means of communication, the “language of birds,” he is of the angelic kind (“Intellect is the swiftest of birds,”) insofar as his communications and understanding are limited to “matters of fact,” he is not merely “a little” but a great deal “lower than the angels.” (*Paroksa*, p.138)

The true artist or writer is always in service to a truth which surpasses their individuality and earthly life. The work is not an expression of the artist’s individuality. It is a window which opens up on a truth already present. Through the discipline of the artist and the discipline of the viewer, one is lifted to this higher consciousness. This discipline also allows one to participate in “heavenly ideas,” to fly with the angels.

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At Wat Lanka, the monks try to teach me a bit of Buddhist meditation. They sit me in a lotus position and explain that the task is to detach oneself from one’s desires by placing all your concentration upon one “object” — the rising and falling of your abdomen as you breathe. This also involves detaching oneself from one’s thoughts. Not that they disappear, but they parade through your head and you do not “pass judgment upon them.” But I lose my concentration, I open my eyes and look around me. A large golden Buddha looms above me gazing out into the infinite. Along the walls on ground level are beautiful murals depicting the life of the Buddha. And above toward the ceiling are more abstract representations of heaven, complete with flying Apsaras. These ideal states — to either fly with the angels, or to detach my mind completely from their flight and exist completely in the moment — are not open to me, I can only sit and watch in amazement from the ground.

Is it just me? Or have these ideals become more inaccessible to everyone? I have thought long and hard about this, and I still don’t know. But I am attracted to some past approaches to this question.

The problem, as Hölderlin understood it, is that nature in its pure sense has been conditioned and obscured by the activity of human history. Our condition of freedom is in one respect a fallen state, reflecting our distance from the necessity of nature and the divine. We have created the realities of our distorted sense of time.

Even the activity of thinking, of philosophy, is con-founded because the object of philosophy is no longer pure, our activities have become a part of our environment and have been forgotten. Our ideas and distinctions are created, the silt of time covers them over, and they are unearthed in our pursuit of a philosophical ground. It is no longer the simple opposition of earth and world, now fragments of world are mixed with the earth. We are confronted by old forgotten artifacts. They have now become a part of nature and direct our destinies. They appear to us as the book we encountered in the bookstore, through which the voices of the living and the dead speak to us. They are the images lurking like fish in the depths of our computer screens. They are, as Benjamin understood it, imprinted in the objects we use and consume. They accost us like the voices of strangers on the street. Our concentration is
often rewarded not by purity but by distraction. We are overwhelmed by the voices encoded in our artefacts and digital memories.

And if the work of philosophy, like the work of art, is a kind of process where the material elements — words, concepts, ideas — lose themselves in the work, perhaps the problem today is that these material elements take on the character of prefabricated representations, reifications, each with its own story to tell, each based on its own distinctions and histories. The material elements increasingly resist unification and ordering within the limits of the work.

This same trend seems to also disjoint the philosophical community. Our individualism resists our communalism. Today, the mega-bookstore and the internet cater to our individualistic consumption of ideas. And the subject as a locus for the consumption and expression of these commodified ideas, becomes increasingly powerful at the same time we are announcing its death in the intellectual sphere.

And so I find myself wandering — limping — in a landscape somewhere between heaven and earth, encountering the ironies of how ideas and objects clash and interweave. But somewhere, somehow, something is operating seamlessly, unconsciously, gracefully. I imagine this to be truth. So I still attempt to achieve continuity, coherence, completeness and beauty in my thinking and writing. There still exists some hierarchy that draws my desire as a philosopher. Pseudo-Dionysius again:

For those lacking in reason, [desire] is a limitless appetite for the material, a thrust originating in that chronic urge to dwell with the ephemeral, that living mastering longing to remain with whatever is applauded by the senses. Now when we apply dissimilar similarities to intelligent beings, we say of them that they experience desire, but this has to be interpreted as a divine yearning for that immaterial reality which is beyond all reason and all intelligence. (Celestial Hierarchy, p. 151)

That is, we see a vertical dimension of transcendence as well as horizontal dimension of differences and territories. We are drawn beyond the heterogeneity of the world toward its unity, what Spinoza called “the intellectual love of God” or what Kant called “the intellectual interest in the beauty of nature.” This vertical dimension need not de-value nature, change, difference, and the particular. It is simply the recognition
of a transcendent beauty shining through particularity. What has always been regarded as the sacred. And I suppose the recognition of this is what draws me on. It makes me struggle to transcend the parade of objects, desires and events around me. It makes me strain to listen to the angels speaking into my ear. It makes me continue to take seriously my community and my place within it. It is what leads me to strive to be receptive to the beauty around me.

And so as a member of this philosophical community I am caught in an irresolvable tension which I cannot overcome, between my life and the truth. As a professor, I know that I profess a level of knowledge and action I cannot attain. And I am haunted by the voices of philosophy past and present. Am I speaking for most of us — we lovers of truth — we community of impostors?

**Looking a gift-horse in the mouth**

Now let me remark on one more encounter. I was invited by members of my academic community to submit an essay for a book. They asked me for an essay on community. I knew that one of the most important writers in this field is Jean-Luc Nancy. So, after my own ideas had coalesced, I looked into Nancy. I read with some trepidation. Will he have already said in a better way what I am saying now (my vanity)? Will I agree with him or disagree with him, and what would that mean?

I discover that we share many of the same interests. Nancy also appreciates the manner in which ideas are woven through time and the importance of not looking at them head on. Like me, he is interested in Hölderlin, and he also recognizes the irremediable polarities of Hölderlin’s writings. Yet, much in the manner of Adorno, he prioritizes this tension between the poles.

The divine is always the dissonance of unity and of separation. The divine is thus the dissonance of the divine and the human. (*Birth to Presence*, p. 73)

Hölderlin said the all dissonance is a part of a higher harmony. He does not absolutize dissonance. But Nancy, lamenting the failed promise of the absolute, wants to prioritize dissonance, so as to be done with absolutes. This leads him to embrace Hölderlin’s concept of “dissolution”.

BUDHI 2 & 3 ～ 2000
Beauty turns into the passage of beauty. “The poet” is the — categorical — singularity of this turning. It is thus that Hölderlin thinks beauty starting out from the One without a concept - starting out from Kant. He thinks the very disappearance of the One, whose presence Kant, despite everything, still wanted to preserve. (Birth to Presence, p. 77)

This reading of Hölderlin signals a shift from the One to the Inbetween as the locus of beauty and truth — the inbetween of identities, dualisms, representations, histories. The purpose of this shift or turning is to free us from the tyranny of identity and representation into a space of freedom, creative possibility and ephemeral beauty. Nancy aligns himself with Heidegger and Derrida.

The logic of Ereignis is what Derrida expressed as the logic of “differance,” which is the logic of what in itself differs from itself. I would add that this is the logic of existence and (as) community, not as they exist or are “given,” but as they are offered. (Birth to Presence, p. 164)

In his essay “Finite History,” he extends this to the relation between community and history. Here he wishes to show how community must be thought in relation to life, and re-conceives representation and ideas from within this “happening”.

Finite history is the happening of the time of existence, or of existence as time, spacing time, spacing the presence and the present of time. It does not have its essence in itself, nor anywhere else (for there is no “anywhere else”). It is then “essentially” exposed, infinitely exposed to its own finite happening as such. Finite history is the occurrence of existence, in common, for it is the “togetherness of otherness.” This means that it is the occurrence of the freedom and decision to exist. (Birth to Presence, p. 157)

And so Nancy, like Derrida, will use this recognition of this “happening” to deconstruct the priority of the idea over history and the priority of representation over community, and to reconceive temporality in general. He wishes to open up a space of pure freedom, uncontaminated by the historical representations and dominating ideologies.

Simple enough, but we can rely on Hölderlin to set things crooked again. From a draft connected to his famous poem “Mnemosyne”:
Ripe is the Fruit, dipped in Fire, cooked
And tested on the Earth and it is a Law
That all things pass on, Snake-like,
Prophetic, dreaming on
The Hills of Heaven. And much
Like a burden of Failures
Upon the Shoulders is there
To keep. But evil are
The Paths. Namely astray
Like Horses, go the captured
Elements, and the ancient
Laws of the Earth. And
Into the Unbounded goes a Longing. But much is
To keep. And in Crisis, our Faithfulness.
Forwards however and Backwards we
Don’t want to look, left to rock
Like a swaying Boat in the Sea.

Notice the rocking back and forth between the desire to reach toward the One and the recognition of its futility. At the end this rocking motion is the only thing left. But this rocking is not a pure happening. The pulling back and forth is animated by the poles and is a symptom of our freedom. Our power of “free choice” already reflects a lack of direction. The crisis of freedom is the knowledge that anything chosen is going to lead us down the evil paths and further from the pure source. But Nancy, in rejecting the purity of the One, needs a new pure ungrund, out of which history is offered to our decision. Offered as a gift. He announces:

This is not a theory, for it does not belong to a discourse about (or above) history and community. But this is - these words, concepts, or signals are — the way history offers itself, as happening, to a way of thinking that can no longer be the thinking of “History.” To offer is to present or to propose — not to impose the present, like a gift. In the offer, the gift is not given. To offer implies the future of a gift, and/or the not-yet-given gift of a future. With respect to the offer, we have something to do, which is: to accept it or not. We have to decide, without knowing what is offered, because it is not given (it is not a concept, it is not a theory). The historicity of the truth lies in the fact that it offers itself to our decision and is never given. (Birth to Presence, p. 165)
Strangely, we are very close to the secure absolutizing of Fichte’s philosophy of freedom.

So I am reading this in my gray hardcover book, *The Birth to Presence*, which I check out of the library and which has irritating red underlining. Is this book (and its “words, concepts and signals”) offered as a gift? Do I have an open decision on how to respond to it?

I suspect not. My ideas have already been shaped by a kind of process of ideas and life and the way they interact. Anything previously decided has been hardened into a destiny. People and things confront me, and as much as I strive to remain open and flexible, my response is animated by the way my character has been shaped and my reflexes have been conditioned. My confrontations impose themselves upon me, planting a seed in my head that sprouts only gradually, and then as an idea. Ideas impose themselves on me, like the fellow in Phnom Penh, they speak to me and through me. Like the icon, they were given, forgotten, and re-collected. Like the girls I met, I oscillate between various names. I carry histories within me which are sometime repressed. There is no history beyond representation. There are many histories which impose themselves upon me and I am often haunted by them. As Hölderlin points out in a letter to his friend Neuffer:

> The pure can only be depicted in the impure... because the noble itself as it comes towards expression bears the color of the destinies under which it originated. (*Werke* II p. 783, letter #167)

There is no pure emergence or reception since everything has been conditioned by what has come before. Even this essay was a process. One initiated by confrontations, gifts, and impositions. One occurring both between communities and within communities. And as it progressed, it developed its own life, until at the end, all that was left was for me to struggle to fine tune it to itself.

Nancy recognizes these difficulties, I think, but he (like Heidegger and Derrida) does not want to be an impostor. He is like a romantic ironist without the irony.

How ironic!

In recognizing the failure to realize absolutes, he absolutizes the non-absolute. To retreat from the pull of linear histories, he embraces the freedom of happening, but in this retreat he ignores the reality of the
pull. He ignores that freedom is itself a pole in another conflict which
can never be resolved. In a way, he seems to be taking back the impor-
tant gifts he is offering us.
Am I being fair?

Sea and Stars

But of the Divine we received
Still much. The Flame
Was handed to us, and Shore and Ocean tide,
Much more, than in a Human Way
Are they, the foreign Powers, intimate with us.
And you are taught by the Stars, that
Are before your Eyes, still never can you be like them.

Hölderlin, “Celebration of Peace”

I gesture toward these dimensions to show that we are faced with a
condition of both infinite separation, and infinite connection. We
struggle in the infinite separation between our thoughts and their ide-
als. Yet we are embedded in the infinite connection, and are already
enervated by ideas, distinctions, histories, habits and temporalities. They
live on, at the very heart of the origin and cannot be chased down and
abrogated. The wounds of never completely heal. A scar always remains.

And the recognition of this cannot lead to passivity — if we still want
to call ourselves thinkers, philosophers. If today we struggle deeper
within this labyrinth, it is not because the True, the Pure, the One, has
somehow become false. They were always, as Pseudo-Dionysius real-
ized, merely Divine Names. But they point to a place where we as think-
ers always desire to fly. To fly with the angels always requires discipline.
If we lack discipline, we cannot simply rationalize our own impotence
by making chaos into something absolute. We have to accept the ten-
sion in which we stand. As Hölderlin says: “In Crisis our Faithfulness.”

These are irresolvable tensions, yet — ironically — they are respon-
sible for the very possibility of thinking. As Schiller says, the “antago-
nism of powers is the great instrument of culture.” Philosophy begins
well within a maze it can never escape, since escape would mean death.
It is something living. So like Lessing, the search after truth is to be
desired over the truth itself. And like Novalis, striving is to be valued over rest.

Can I speak for most of us and say, that as a community of scholars, as lovers of truth, we have no choice but to struggle in these tensions: between our lives and our professional identities, between our thinking and the ideals of thought? And we have no choice but to struggle to overcome our failures: the violence of action, the coldness of voyeurism, the blindness of confusion, the struggle of writing. And we must struggle to remain faithful to the mysteries in the heart of teaching.

And so perhaps, here is the dilemma of us philosophers, we cannot be anything other than impostors.

And yet, there is the ocean, and the afternoon sun. After some time, I did not believe Candy, about her poetry and her daughter — Angelica. But one day she showed her writings to me. They were very beautiful, very intense and personal. They filled many volumes of notebooks and after each poem was the date of its composition, and — Candy’s real name — first and last. The name was repeated over and over, ringing like a bell at the bottom of each page, like a child writing her name over and over, marveling at it, trying to step into it.

One afternoon I am walking along the shore of the ocean’s sublime expanse, and suddenly there they are, mother and daughter walking along the beach. The mother folds her evening dress into a pocket into which the daughter deposits tiny sea shells. She is a sweet tranquil little girl and holds a colorful shell in her hand, a tiny intricately sculpted mollusk shell, with the sound of the ocean echoing somewhere inside.

And I have the great fortune of being asked to join them.

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch -
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

Emily Dickinson
Time-line-bibliography

July 1993 Receive a reproduction of an Icon from *The Little Sisters of Jesus* of Edendale upon my departure from South Africa as a gift.

Nov 1995 Defend dissertation on Hölderlin whose Ideas have haunted my thinking ever since.

Oct 1998 Trip to the Island. Meet the girls. Reminded of the poetry of:

March 3 Invitation to contribute an essay on community by my community. Remember the island girls.

March? While reading a book entitled *The Art of South East Asia* I encounter the title of the essay.

April - June Teaching assignment in Phnom Penh. Review sources for my Aesthetics course, including:

May 21 Visit to Wat Lanka. Meet the failed philosopher.

June 10 Buy Cowhead Cereal and encounter Shakespeare quote.

July Read Nancy

Aug 15 Finish first draft

Jan 2000 Reworking of “A Celestial Hierarchy” section (initially called “Voices”) jettisoning quotes by Kliest and Chuang tzu and now incorporating ideas of:
Recollection of the Icon-gift. Use of poem from the book:
Lesage quote taken from:

May 2000 Rejection of paper for publication in book on community.
Oct 2000 Minor reworking of gift-horse chapter to prepare it for publication in *Budhi.*

Word puzzle given to me by a group of bar girls after finding out that I was a *Pilosopo:*

What is the half middle of the square,
and what is the first place of the land?
What is the two centers of the moon,
and what is the Roman numeral of the number 5?
What is the center of the sea, and of the sun?