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My workplace’s library boasts an impeccably resourced reading room: spacious, drowned in natural light and adorned with stylish, comfortable and readily available furniture. Until quite recently, I had been harbouring the notion of incorporating regular visits towards this fine place into my effort-reward self-management regime. Alas that ship set sail during the process of my preparation for this review and I, for my part, have elected to stay on shore, thereby continuing to produce as I did before the thought of my intermittently inhabiting such an exotic sanctuary first entered my mind. Without doubt, I had witnessed a lot of fascinating things happening there: project group discussions, online forums, interactive kindle updates and technologically mediated forms of social interaction were all occurring in abundance. But reading itself, at least insofar as I have come to understand the activity, wasn’t so clearly and readily in evidence, much to my surprise. Nancy’s investigation into the nature of the book therefore seemed a particularly appropriate companion to the dawning of just such a realisation.

Seemingly oblivious, perhaps even resistant towards today’s more prominent and popular forms of social interaction, the isolated reader might be said, admittedly by way of ever so slight an exaggeration, to present itself to the contemporary reading room as something of a peculiarity, an eccentricity, an abnormality even. Modern forms of communication have changed irrevocably – the book itself cannot but be affected. And if the form of the book, of the historically quintessential opportunity for reading, has so evidentially and fundamentally changed, it logically follows that the very nature of the reader, as well as the way in which the reader becomes generally understood and or accepted/neglected, cannot help but fall in line. Nancy implicitly tackles such McLuhanisms within the ‘Electronic Supplement, Binary Reprise, Digital Counterpoint’ (p. 49-57) add-on chapter to the present volume. But it is in the core section ‘On the Commerce of Thinking’ (p. 1-47) that Nancy’s more concerted effort to think the form and content of the book *simultaneously*, is to be found. It is also here that organisational scholarship will find much by way of a potential stimulus for subsequent research.

Like many other books about books, Nancy’s can be externally understood, even before it has been read, as an attempt to make sense of itself across the entire stretch of its duration. Unlike many other books about books, however, Nancy’s takes the double sense of the word commerce as the central clue to the puzzle which it beautifully but sadly too briefly expresses. Taking his initial bearings from Montaigne, D’Alembert and Diderot, Nancy develops a notion of commerce-with-books as something which must be understood both in the socio-organisational sense of production, distribution, promotion and exchange, as well as in the literary-philosophical sense of consolation, exaltation, imagination and communication. If we want to know what a book is, in other words, then we will do well to ask the question from the perspective of commerce’s double-meaning¹. We interact with books, as consumers, and this very interaction presupposes and reinforces a certain arrangement of producers.

¹David Wills’ foreword very helpfully develops upon Nancy’s decision with regard to the originally selected French term *le commerce*.
Attempting to hold this double-meaning intact throughout, Nancy’s essay unravels an inherently precarious path – one which strives to maintain the inherent tension that has come to be accepted as existing between theories of literary production, on the one hand, and theories of literary consumption, on the other. On the side of production, Marx figures prominently. In addition to his presence adding an important dimension to Nancy’s analysis, it should be noted that Marx’s inclusion also serves as something of a comforting reassurance to those initially worried about the implicit politics of a book with such a title, a book, moreover, which had initially been conceived of as a gift for regular clients of a prominent French bookstore! It isn’t Marx’s own satirical analysis of literary commerce in circulation which interests Nancy, however, an analysis which famously takes the following form:

Only because the farmer has sold his wheat is the weaver able to sell his linen, only because the weaver has sold his linen is our rash and intemperate friend able to sell his Bible, and only because the latter already has the water of everlasting life is the distiller able to sell his eau-de-vie. And so it goes on (1976: 207-208).

Nancy rather takes from the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism something approaching a voice of conscience, a fundamental counter-point to each and every endeavour which would seek to account for the nature of the book without paying attention to its initial conditions of possibility – the fact that it can be ultimately reduced to its being the outcome of certain forms of human labour. The bare recognition of fetishism alone isn’t enough, of course (p. 34-5). This is because, for Nancy, the very opening of a book, that is to say the very act of reading, puts us into an intimate relationship with an author such as to resurrect the intimate gesture which initially brought about the book, prior to its subsequent mediation within and throughout an elaborate and dynamic mode of production.

The one with the insatiable appetite for books is not simply a glutton, therefore, precisely because reading involves the discernment of the character of a book. This very act of discernment necessarily presupposes some component which is ultimately indigestible - character doesn’t come in bite-size chunks. And so, in as much as the production of books is a dynamic process, so too is the act of their consumption. As Nancy puts it:

“Interpreting” or “deciphering” the text doesn’t mean returning the letter to its sense, but on the contrary, recomposing the cipher, all the figurings and encodings of the letter. It is not a matter of pulling meaning out of its envelope – for then it would immediately become good only for discarding – but rather of developing the enveloping as such: spreading it out, but by ceaselessly refolding upon itself whatever is deployed (p. 21)

The essence of the book, on Nancy’s reading, cannot be reduced to its immediately present, sensory, material form. The book is not the paper onto which it is written, the ink with which it is written or even the binding which marks it as something no longer being written. The book, in other words, is not simply a container of ideas, a blank slate onto which communication takes place, a vehicle through which communication passes. Equally so, the book cannot be reduced to its content – whether this be understood in the sense of a set of ideas, a message, or the arrangement of a culturally prevalent set of signs and symbols. The book is rather the meeting point for a dialogue, a form of commerce in the double sense of the term. Perhaps reading is still occurring in the reading room after all.

References