

In this powerful work, Jean-Luc Nancy examines community as an idea that has dominated modern thought and traces its relation to concepts of experience, discourse, and the individual. Contrary to popular Western notions of community, Nancy shows that it is neither a project of fusion nor production. Rather, he argues, community can be defined through the political nature of its resistance against immanent power.

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The Inoperative Community

THE INOPERATIVE
COMMUNITY

Jean-Luc Nancy

Edited by Peter Connor
Foreword by Christopher Fynsk

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COMMUNITY

Theory and History of Literature

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Jean-Luc Nancy

Edited by Peter Connor

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Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney

Foreword by Christopher Fynsk

Theory and History of Literature, Volume 76

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Contents

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✓ Foreword: Experiences of Finitude <i>Christopher Fynsk</i>	vii	8. f. 94
Preface	xxxvi	
1. The Inoperative Community	1	
2. Myth Interrupted	43	
3. "Literary Communism"	71	
4. Shattered Love	82	
5. Of Divine Places	110	
Notes	151	
Index	171	

Foreword
Experiences of Finitude
Christopher Fynsk

A full introduction to Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophical work would require treatment of the *practice of reading* that he has pursued in carrying forward the task of deconstructing the history of metaphysics. Nancy has devoted extensive study to the major texts of modern philosophy, from Descartes through Nietzsche, because he follows Heidegger in assuming that any effort to think the present (the advent of a time that can no longer be thought with any teleological or fundamental schema) presupposes a lucid understanding of philosophy's closure. Heidegger argued that tracing the limit formed by the end of metaphysics entails *repeating* the movements by which philosophy exhausted its possibilities—this, in order to release what philosophy has closed upon in its effort to secure an ideal order of meaning. Nancy (with others: the community to which Jacques Derrida refers in the opening pages of "Violence and Metaphysics")¹ has recognized that this task of repetition is far from complete, that in principle it cannot be completed, and that it requires repetition in its turn. Heidegger made it clear that we cannot simply have done with philosophy: our language remains the language of metaphysics. He also showed some of the possibilities that lie in thinking the closure of metaphysics (as Nancy reminds us, a border marks an inside *and an outside*). But he restricted and even foreclosed those possibilities in his turn, as we see most dramatically in his political statements. By repeating Heidegger's task of deconstructing metaphysics in close readings of some of the major texts of the tradition, Nancy also deconstructs Heidegger and works toward a new thought of difference.

Much of Nancy's work has thus taken the form of commentary, and continues to do so (as in the case of his essay on the Hegelian monarch).² But over the past ten years, Nancy has also sought to depart from this mode and to pursue in a more independent fashion the notion of difference to which his work has pointed. He has attempted to abandon the commentator's position of relative safety and to elaborate a thought that would answer to the fact that many of the concerns to which fundamental philosophy was addressed continue to *speak* to us today in the form of imperatives (freedom, justice, community), even though the conceptual systems from which these ideas have drawn their meaning are no longer viable. Nancy has pursued aggressively the notion that the end of philosophy is not the end of thought. Indeed, in his view the end of philosophy *demand*s thought, and he is willing to retain the name of philosophy to designate the effort to answer to these obscure imperatives.

Nancy has thus returned to a set of themes that still form the mainstays of political and ethical thought but that are rarely taken up today *as questions* (and are thus largely abandoned to traditional philosophical commentary: the endless *recension* of philosophy's past positions or points of view). He has done so from the basis of a *thought* of history, a conception of the event of philosophy's end (the collapse of all foundational discourses and the advent of modernity or postmodernity) and of the "eventual" character of history itself. Proceeding from a notion of the finitude of Being—its essential difference from itself, or its historicity—Nancy has sought to rethink our *experience* of history, or what I might call the passions of historically defined existence: among them, freedom, love, community, and religion (the last three form the points of focus in this volume). He has begun to elaborate in this manner a most severe, though also liberating, thought of finitude.

My aim here will be to sketch the basic lines of this thought and some of the questions it raises, with particular reference to the essays contained in this volume. I will neglect in this manner many of Nancy's contributions to philosophical research (work that is frequently at the margins of philosophy, at its intersections with literary theory, psychoanalysis, and political discourse), trusting that the increasing availability of this material in English lessens the need for an introductory overview.³ But before approaching what Nancy describes as the "singularity" of Being—its singularity implying its multiplicity, and thus a differential structure that forms what Nancy calls the "political space," and the site of community—I would like to pursue a little further the singular character of Nancy's own work. For the *gesture* of thought that animates the work upon which I am focusing here constitutes its true novelty and even its decisive importance for contemporary critical and philosophical thought.

I have alluded to the basic traits of this gesture: it consists in returning to themes that play a crucial role in all discourses concerned with politics or the grounds of social existence but that have become abstract—the prey of ideology—by virtue of the fact that the philosophical presuppositions defining their meaning (Nancy will speak of the metaphysics of subjectivity, referring thereby to the philosophical underpinnings of humanism) have succumbed to the nihilism that inhabits them. A political imperative whose grounds are necessarily obscure nevertheless dictates that themes such as "freedom" and "community" be rethought. These themes still speak to us in some sense; even if political discourses have proven unable to give them a meaning that *holds* for a social practice devoted to sociopolitical needs, we find ourselves unable to do without them, even haunted by them in some sense. Nancy's gesture is to confront the distress generated by the haunting abstraction of such terms by pushing them toward limits he defines with his understanding of the closure of metaphysics and of what this closure reveals: the finitude of Being. He does this at an astonishing speed, as though all of the traditional themes were crowding into his thought and demanding reconsideration. And he does it untiringly—he exhausts the terms upon which he focuses and the conceptual structures in which they are embedded. There is no piety here, and nothing esoteric (however difficult the thought might be): Nancy's is a hands-on approach that constructs precarious conceptual formulas only to turn them inside out in an unremitting effort to expose their limits once more. He is a *laborer* of the concept, carrying to excess what Hegel described as the labor *of the concept*. And this means that he does not shy from risks of redundancy or even outright contradiction—he is aiming for the *chance* exposure of a limit. Grace will come in a sudden turn of the phrase at moments of inspiration or at moments of fatigue (the concept's fatigue, not his). But he does not pause to search for it; it comes frequently enough, and the imperative to which he is answering urges him on.

One should neither neglect nor give in to the tension created by this conceptual work (a tension experienced sharply by any translator of Nancy's work). There is no language for what Nancy is trying to think that does not at some point inhibit this thought, reinscribe in it the classical conceptual systems Nancy is trying to work past. The tension keeps us from seizing too easily upon the formulas with which Nancy seeks to define his notion of difference. What Nancy is pointing to can be glimpsed only in the movement of his text and the wake of his conceptual labor (which is also where we will find his signature).

From a political perspective, the gesture of *forcing* terms such as "freedom" and "community"—marking their philosophical limits and reworking them in relation to a thought of finitude—involves marking the gap *and*

the bridge between his thought of community and any existent political philosophy or program, a gap and a bridge that also define the relation between what Nancy calls in the preface to this volume “the political” (*le politique*: the site where what it means to *be* in common is open to definition) and “politics” (*la politique*: the play of forces and interests engaged in a conflict over the representation and governance of social existence).⁴ His gesture is thus to work a term like “community” in such a way that it will come to mark what Heidegger would call the difference between the ontic and the ontological and to oblige us to think from the basis of this difference. I will be approaching Nancy’s use of the term “community” in the pages that follow by focusing on several of his descriptions of the grounds of the social or political bond (a structure of “exposure” that Nancy elaborates from the basis of Heidegger’s notion of finite transcendence and his notion of *Mitsein*). But for the purpose of these initial remarks on Nancy’s philosophical practice, let it suffice to say that community names a relation that cannot be thought as a subsistent ground or common measure for a “being-in-common.” While a singular being may come to its existence as a subject only in this relation (and it is crucial, in a political perspective, to note that Nancy thus starts from the *relation* and not from the solitary subject or individual), this communitary “ground” or condition of existence is an unsublatable differential relation that “is” only in and by its multiple singular articulations (though it is always irreducible to these) and thus differs constantly from itself. It is not something that may be produced and instituted or whose essence could be expressed in a work of any kind (including a *polis* or state): it cannot be the object or the telos of a politics.

Thus anyone seeking an immediate political application of this thought of community risks frustration (and the tension to which I have alluded redoubles, for the task of pursuing a *thought* of community in the face of an unacceptable political reality—which includes an ongoing destruction of much of what we have known as community—is not an unproblematic one). Moreover, this frustration will not entirely dissipate even if one recognizes that Nancy’s engagement with the political (understood, once again, as the site where a being-in-common is at stake) proceeds from an acute sense of the contemporary sociopolitical context and is *indissociable* from a political position-taking.⁵ One does not have to read far to recognize the political character of Nancy’s thought (even when he does not thematize political issues), and it is not difficult to see where Nancy might be situated in the spectrum of political choices. But it is exceedingly difficult to define, for example, how one might move from his definition of a nonorganic, differential articulation of social existence (which he illustrates via Marx in chapter 3) to any currently existing politics. For once again, there is a point

at which this move becomes properly unthinkable in the terms of any traditional conception of the relation between theory and practice: one cannot work to institute or realize this thought of community.

One can, however, attempt to communicate what Nancy calls “community” (though we have to do here with an entirely different sense of communication from the one that is called upon in theories of consensus); one can attempt to favor such communication, and one can attempt to engage in a critique of the ideologies that dissimulate what Nancy calls the absence of community (or the fact of the impossibility of communion or immanence as it appears to us today, after the closure of metaphysics). The impossibility of immediately translating this thought into a political program does not dictate political paralysis. On the contrary, the experience of the political, as Nancy defines it, *demand*s political response—both because it provides a sharp sense of the abstraction of the reigning political ideologies and because it entails the experience of something like an imperative. It requires at the same time that we rethink the very concept of political practice, as Nancy begins to do with his notion of writing (I will turn to this later as I take up the question of language and the community’s exigency).⁶

Nancy’s gesture of thought points to and already involves another practice of writing. But we cannot anticipate any rapid resolution of the tensions to which I have referred, for our access to another thought of community and political practice is through the language of the tradition and requires the kind of work Nancy has undertaken in attempting to mark the limits of the traditional terminology (which is certainly not to say that the deconstruction of the tradition will *suffice* in a political perspective: we cannot afford to neglect questions of immediate political urgency, and the work of deconstruction must also be undertaken in relation to them). Nancy is attempting to expose what still speaks in a term like “community” when we assume the closure of the metaphysics of subjectivity—any communion of the subject with itself, any accomplished self-presence—and with it the closure of representation or signification (a signifying order assured by and for a subject). And if he persists so relentlessly with this impractical conceptual labor, it is because he is trying to work a thought of difference, or a thought of finitude, into political terms that continue to speak to us as imperatives despite their loss of philosophical meaning. The obscurity of these imperatives demands this labor, and the thought demands its communication.⁷

The Experience of Freedom

What is this thought? One of Nancy’s most forceful articulations of it comes in his essay on freedom, in which he retraces the fate of this concept

in Heidegger's work and tries to repeat Heidegger's effort to think the fact of existence, or its facticity, as its freedom. He demonstrates that the concept of freedom gradually recedes in Heidegger's thinking, until it is abandoned not long after the confrontation with Schelling (1936) and replaced with a notion of "the free" (*das Freie*). It recedes, we might say, from being a trait of existence (*the* trait of existence: its ground, or rather *Abgrund*—the abyssal foundation that is its transcendence, its "freedom to found") to a trait of Being that in its "freedom" gives a relation to what is in and by a movement of withdrawal. Heidegger will never dissociate Being's movement of advent/withdrawal, concealment/unconcealment, from a certain intervention by the human Dasein; this is why Being has a history and is nowhere other than in the history of its articulations—this is the finitude of Being. Being *needs* humankind, Heidegger will say,⁸ and in the late essays on language he will reiterate that the speaking of language (that event in which a determination of Being opens in language) can only occur insofar as it is pro-voked by an act of human speaking. But in the course of his thinking (feeling the grip of the metaphysics of subjectivity—particularly after the voluntarism of his own political engagements), Heidegger shifts the focus from the freedom that engages the human Dasein in the "accomplishment of Being" to the freedom (the Open, the "free" region) to which the human Dasein accedes in answering to the event of Being's advent. This shift of focus is not without its effects. Questions are displaced or even closed (including those that Heidegger finds most troubling: those bearing most immediately on politics); others are brought more clearly into view (it becomes impossible to mistake Heidegger's thought for an existentialism). But the shift, or the *Kehre*, as it is commonly referred to, does not alter Heidegger's basic notion of the finitude of Being and therefore does not alter Heidegger's initial understanding that Being must be thought in *its difference from itself*, and thus in its existence, understood as an always singular articulation of its withdrawal. Nancy's gesture consists in carrying this thought of the finitude of Being—its eventual, singular character—back into the questions opened in the existential analytic of *Being and Time*. He folds the later Heidegger (a Heidegger that Derrida has helped us to rethink with his elaboration of the concepts of *différance* and "writing") back into the earlier, and starts from the direction of the experience of the human Dasein—recognizing that thought begins from no other point of departure. Thus he tries to think the event wherein a determination of what it means to be comes about and beings come into their presence (*Ereignis*, Being's advent), in relation to the movement in which existence is delivered to itself in its freedom and comes to know itself in and as an exposure to an alterity that it draws out and communicates. Nancy is perfectly faithful to Heidegger's thought—to at least one, almost unbroken

line of it—in moving the focus back to the latter experience of freedom.⁹ But by pushing the notion of the singularity of Being in this direction, he is able to counter some of the most conservative tendencies of this thought—its piety, the way it gathers to itself in its inclination to stress the gathering or appropriation of Being over its co-originary disappropriation and dissemination. By emphasizing the singular nature of the event wherein Dasein opens to Being, Nancy brings forward Being's necessarily multiple, differential character: if the articulation of Being is always singular, Being cannot be One, and it cannot be thought simply as a gathering or collecting. And if that to which Dasein opens is always already articulated (it could not give itself or "communicate" itself otherwise—it is nowhere other than in its articulations) then Being must be thought as differential or relational. Once again, if we read carefully—if we read past a powerful rhetoric of "gathering"—we see that this line of argument is quite consistent with Heidegger's descriptions of the event of *Ereignis*. But by stressing the singular character of the facticity of experience (this also means its strangeness for the subject that knows itself only outside itself and in relation), Nancy undoes some of the abstractness of the Heideggerian discourse and challenges the rhetoric of piety. In large measure, this effect has to do with the fact that by returning to the existential or experiential dimension of the thought of the finitude of Being—without sacrificing anything of Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of subjectivity—Nancy opens in a new manner the question of the implications of this thought for politics or ethics. And by recognizing that the experience of freedom is indissociable from a political passion (*the* political passion, the experience of the question of political existence), further, by writing out of this recognition, he brings forth the concreteness of a deconstructive approach. He shows that the experience of freedom, and thus the experience of community, is the experience of the *real*, and while he deconstructs the notions of the individual and the subject's presence to itself, he points to the singularity of the self that knows itself as opening to alterity.¹⁰

"Freedom," then, is a name for ecstasis (as is "love," as Nancy argues in "Shattered Love"). It is the exposure of thought to the fact of Being: *that there are beings* (and not nothing, Heidegger adds).¹¹ Or to put it more precisely, it is the opening, *in thought*, to the possibility of meaning, or to the possibility of a world: thought's deliverance or abandonment to the *opening* of a time and space, and the drawing out or articulation of this opening (what Kant approached with his notion of transcendental schematism) whereby it is possible to remark the fact of being as such. To experience beings in their presence is to experience the fact of their having been given or offered to our representation. In that fleeting experience, we remark the fact of the offering itself, or the relation by which we are able

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to recognize that a thing is as this or that thing. (Though the relation is not the object of a perception; we remark no more than the fact that beings have been given to our perception—as a pure opening, the relation gives itself in its withdrawal.) Heidegger argued that the human Dasein is singular among beings for precisely the fact that this relation comes into question for it; it is the being for whom its being is at stake, and with it its relation to everything that is (including other human beings). When Dasein is surprised by the fact of being (and this surprise can take the form of an experience of the uncanny, or vertigo), it discovers the fact of its abandonment or exposure, and thus discovers that it is Dasein (the “Da” is the site of its exposure). It experiences its exposure in a kind of *originary* self-affection—originary, because it comes to its being in this experience (its being is defined there) and discovers itself as existing: it *finds itself* as having been exposed to the opening of a relation to what is, and as committed to this relation (or as refusing it).¹²

It is important to emphasize here that the human Dasein does not have freedom as one of its properties: Dasein *comes to itself* in its freedom, originally. It does not discover a pre-existent essence or potential; rather, its being is defined in this experience. The subject of freedom emerges in its freedom, and in this sense freedom (as the initial *coup d'envoi*) precedes itself as the freedom of a self. Freedom is an event, and though this event may be assumed or affirmed, and only *is* as it is assumed (exposed or drawn out in a singular “style” pitch that articulates what the German tradition has thought as a *Stimmung*), it cannot be possessed. We dispose of it only insofar as it has disposed (of) us. Because the subject *comes to itself* in its freedom, Nancy will frequently use the metaphor of birth. Or he will speak of the *syncope* in which existence is delivered to itself and will speak of rhythm as the subject’s articulation of this originary suspension. The human Dasein “delivers” itself in the sense that it draws out and communicates its being exposed. But this communication remains the communication of an exposure—Dasein can communicate its birth and its mortality, but it cannot give birth to itself (as in the metaphysical dream of self-conception), no more that it can possess its death as an object of knowledge.

Nancy consistently suggests that these two latter limits of Dasein’s existence must in fact be thought together: any experience of “birth” or “deliverance” is inseparable from a knowledge of mortality. Heidegger made this point in *Being and Time* by describing freedom as the *passage* to a free assumption of being-toward-death that is both made possible by and makes possible Dasein’s deliverance to the fact of its existence. The experience of mortality is finally indissociable in Heidegger’s text from all limit-experience, and Nancy tends to follow Heidegger in this respect in his

references to death. However, Nancy’s writing is not marked by either the celebratory, tragic pathos of *Being and Time* and Heidegger’s writings of the early thirties or by the tonality of mourning that characterizes some of Heidegger’s later work and many Heideggerian discourses. Above all, he avoids (or simply is not tempted by) the complacency of a mourning that turns to a kind of self-recovery in which the subject “communes” with its loss. He produces in this respect a most severe, rigorous thought of finitude—one that has its precedent in the severity of Hölderlin’s late thought (5.6.84) of the modern experience of mourning and that turns, as frequently in Hölderlin, to a kind of joy and to a more affirmative or more abandoned experience of dispossession (the reader will note this particularly in “Of Divine Places” and “Shattered Love.”)

Nancy also stresses a point about the experience of mortality that is hardly more than implicit in Heidegger’s text but that is brought forth powerfully by authors such as Bataille and Blanchot. This is the suggestion that the death of the other calls the subject beyond itself and thus delivers it to its freedom. Freedom is necessarily *shared* (*partagé*), and the experience of the other’s mortality constitutes something like a condition of this sharing. Like love (itself inseparable from an experience of mortality), it calls the subject out and beyond itself, exposing it to alterity and to its freedom.¹³ Before turning to Nancy’s elaboration of the communication that occurs in Dasein’s free assumption of its finitude, I would like to pause to consider Nancy’s remarks on death and love and what they indicate of the fundamental sociality of the experience of freedom.

Mortality and Love

In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy follows Bataille (citing also Freud and the notion of a primal murder, as well as Heidegger) in arguing that the individual Dasein first knows community when it experiences the impossibility of communion or immanence (the self-presence of individuals to one another in and by their community) before the dead other. Bataille writes: “If it sees its fellow-being die, a living being can only subsist *outside* itself.”¹⁴ In this ecstasis, Dasein discovers the possibility of community. Bataille again, in an essay on Nietzsche: “In the existence of a community, that which is typically religious, in the sure grip of death, has become the thing most foreign to man. No one thinks any longer that the reality of a communal life—which is to say, human existence—depends on the sharing of nocturnal terrors and on the kind of ecstatic spasms that spread death.”¹⁵ Nancy concurs (though in less heady terms) and argues that part of the devastation wrought by the technical organization of advanced capitalist

societies (state or private capitalism) lies in the isolation of the individual in its very death and thus the impoverishment of that which resists any appropriation or objectification. Death is an experience that a collectivity cannot make its *work* or its property, in the sense of something that would find its meaning in a value or cause transcending the individual. A society may well use it (in the celebrations of heroes or the sacrificial victims), but there is a point at which death exposes a radical meaninglessness that cannot be subsumed. And when death presents itself as *not ours*, the very impossibility of representing its meaning suspends or breaches the possibility of self-presentation and exposes us to our finitude. Nancy argues with Bataille (and as a *tragic* intuition this is profoundly Nietzschean)¹⁶ that this exposure is also an opening to community: outside ourselves, we first encounter the other.

The problem of death and community should be explored at much greater length and deserves a separate treatment. I would add here simply that the experience of death cannot be thought solely as the experience of the dead other, as the line I have cited from Bataille suggests. We note in Heidegger, for example, that the encounter with the dead other does not offer access to the experience that concerns him in the existential analytic and that is Dasein's experience of the possibility of its own death, its experience of its own mortality.¹⁷ This is not to say that Dasein's access to its mortality (and thus its finitude, for it is in the resolute assumption of the possibility of its death that Dasein knows true anguish and thus opens to the Nothing) does not come to it by way of the other. I believe that an attentive reading of *Being and Time* will suggest (whether Heidegger intended this or not) that Dasein comes to know its mortality precisely by way of the other's relation to its death. It is through its assumption of mortality that Dasein first encounters the other—but Dasein knows its mortality only by way of the other and what the other communicates of its mortality. The very notion of an authentic being-together belies Heidegger's important statement in paragraph 50: "If Dasein stands before itself as this possibility ["no-longer-being-able-to-be-there"], it has been *fully* assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone. This ownmost non-relational possibility is at the same time the uttermost one."¹⁸ It would seem that only the pressure of a long tradition that thinks the "authentic" individual as isolated could make it possible for Heidegger to reach such a conclusion.¹⁹ For if authentic being-toward-death is the condition of Dasein's knowing itself as existing (that is to say, as transcending, as opening to Being), then it must also be the condition of encountering the other: it is the opening of a relation at the same time that it is the tracing of a singularity. As Heidegger declares explicitly, *Mitsein* and *Dasein* are co-originary; Dasein

must be thought in its very possibility as being-together. I have pursued this argument elsewhere.²⁰ My point here is to emphasize that Dasein knows its mortality only by way of its experience of the other's relation to its death. The other's *existence* (not its death, in the sense of something that has overcome it) first seizes us and draws us beyond ourselves. Blanchot, who has also provided a most extraordinary description of our relation to the cadaver,²¹ makes this point in *The Unavowable Community*:

The "basis of communication" [Blanchot is commenting on Bataille] is not necessarily speech, or even the silence that is its foundation and punctuation, but exposure to death, no longer my own exposure, but someone else's, whose living and closest presence is already the eternal and unbearable absence, an absence that the travail of deepest mourning does not diminish. And it is in life itself that that absence of someone else has to be met. It is with that absence—its uncanny presence, always under the prior threat of disappearing—that friendship is brought into play and lost at each moment, a relation without relation, or without relation other than the incommensurable.²²

What the other *presents* to us, and particularly in moments of the greatest intimacy, is the fact of his/her existence. We encounter the other as existing, that is to say, in their finitude: as opening to us out of their own relation to alterity. And this relation is indissociable from the experience of mortality—the other's presence is marked by its mortality, even when presence appears most vital. This encounter is probably the condition of all knowledge of finitude—the other, as I said above, must *call us out*, call us to our freedom. We know our finitude by way of the other, and by way of the other's finitude. But if all knowledge of finitude has to do with mortality (and this is not an intellection but an experience of the limits of knowledge), this does not imply, once again, that the only relation to the other *as other* takes the form of mourning. Nancy's description of love, as I have suggested, answers to the same schema of encounter.

In his discussion of love in *La communauté désœuvrée* (comprising chapters 1 through 3 of this translation) and in "L'amour en éclats" ("Shattered Love"), Nancy attempts to dissociate love from any experience of communion: either as the subject's communion with itself (self-love: "*amour propre*") or with an other, between individuals, or in a community at large. He shows the limits of Bataille's thought of community in the former text by demonstrating that as Bataille loses faith in the possibility of realizing in society a modern form of community that would recover something of the commonality of experience characteristic of more primitive social forms (though without repeating the "immense failure" of prior

hieratic structures), he progressively isolates the community of lovers, separating them from society, and losing sight of the fact that their union communicates in its turn the separation that Nancy sees as (un)grounding community. Love, as Nancy defines it, is once again an experience of finite transcendence: the subject *finds itself* in love, *beyond itself*. This transcendence is not a movement from one being toward another; its transport happens (for all parties) by way of a transgression or effraction—love comes, so to speak, from the outside, and it is not the other subject that touches or exposes the subject in this manner, but what constitutes the otherness of the other. It is the singularity of the other that provokes love, provided we also understand by this term the marking of a certain strangeness or otherness (in love this can take the form of a strange beauty). The subject in love is a subject exposed—exposed (affected) by the other and opening to the other: opening further to its exposure, opening to further exposure. What it knows of love is this exposure and what Nancy calls a “trembling on the edge of being”—always a singular self coming to itself in the presence of the other, enjoying “itself” only as the exposure to an alterity and as the transport of this exposure. One is traversed by the other, and traverses in this movement the limits of one’s identity. But the love experienced in this movement cannot be possessed in any way and does not constitute a higher identity. In a delightful passage, Nancy describes it as a “coming and going.” It comes upon the self and draws the self forth, prompting the self to offer its love to the other (its being-exposed); but as further exposure this love that departs comes back to the self, only to renew its transport. It is a traversal that constantly remarks its passage *as* passage but without ever presenting itself: “It traverses itself,” Nancy writes. “It comes and comes to itself, as that by which nothing comes about other than that there is a coming about” (p. 102). An advent that withholds itself by the return of its very advent, exposing us to our exposure, and further exposure, but never secure in its very return, never returning to the self (as in the investments of narcissism), and never a possession.

There are all kinds of love. What characterizes it in its endless forms is nothing more than its *éclats*—and it *is* nowhere other than in these *éclats*; it has no other essence. We know it by the way it strikes us. But it is always singular: “all loves . . . are superbly singular,” Nancy writes (p. 99). Love is known always singularly, though it is the knowledge of an encounter and a relation. Even when it is shared, it is the knowledge of a differential relation, existing only singularly in the passage from the one to the other. Its singularity does not belong to a self—it is the singularity of the opening of one to another. It exposes the singularity of a being, its finitude, *in its community*—and thus the singularity of Being itself.

(It is interesting to note that for Nancy this singularity presents itself almost always with a certain sharpness and brightness—its inscription is incisive, its limit is always fine. Responding in “Shattered Love” to Levinas’s critique of Heidegger and his claim concerning the indetermination or generality of “*es gibt*” [which might be translated as “it gives” or “there is,” “*il y a*” in French], Nancy makes the crucial point that for Heidegger there is no generality of Being; what is given, he says, is the “effraction of generality, precise and hard” [p. 105]. Being is at stake in this giving, he argues: “It is bursting there, offered in dazzling multiplicity, sharp and singular.” The same characteristics appear in the descriptions of love and freedom. Nancy says little, for example, about the experience of fascination, as Blanchot explores it, or about the experiences Blanchot describes as “the death that is the impossibility of dying,” the neutral or “fatigue.”²³ Whereas Nancy speaks of limits and their transgression [a transgression that marks a limit or draws it out], Blanchot tends to focus upon the indeterminacy of this same experience of passage. Thus, in their respective understanding of the limit experience, Nancy is closer to Heidegger than to Blanchot [Heidegger, too, likes sharp, clear limits], though in his emphasis upon deliverance, he produces a much freer description of the finitude of Being. These are matters of style and of the singularity of each text. In other words, they are absolutely essential, as each recognizes in their elaboration of the “same” thought of difference.)

The Divided Logos

In this rapid presentation of Nancy’s development of the notion of finitude, I have tried to suggest what Nancy understands by “ecstasy” with his concept of freedom and have tried to bring forth aspects of the “community” dimension of this experience by focusing upon his treatment of the motifs of love and death. I would like to add now a third dimension of his thinking by introducing the problematic of language and, by way of conclusion, Nancy’s use of the concept of writing.

Nancy takes up the question of language near the end of *L’oubli de la philosophie* in the context of a discussion of Benjamin’s remark that “truth is the death of intention.”²⁴ Nancy describes the “truth” implied in this phrase as a presentation of “the existence in truth of the thing that is known”²⁵ (a truth that is not grounded in the certitude of the subject of representation). But while he designates it as “simple truth,” he argues that it must be thought in an essential correlation with language and that it thus requires that we distinguish a concept of meaning (*sens*) from what metaphysics has always thought as signification.²⁶ Nancy insists here—and this insistence goes along with his recent references to his thought as a “transcendental materialism”—that to introduce the dimension of language

is not to introduce a mediation between thought and the real (in which case we would reenter the order of signification); the meaning given in language, at the limits of signification and constitutive of its possibility, is of a reality that is “simultaneously empirical and transcendental, material and ideative, physical and spiritual—a kind of unheard-of ‘fact of reason.’”²⁷ This “fact” is what thought opens to (and what opens to thought) in its freedom—what makes freedom an *experience*. Its advent in language, Nancy says, *is* the real, or the thing (*la chose*); it is the irreducibly material condition of a relation to what is and thus the material condition of the possibility of signification or representation.

It is important, I believe, to keep in mind Nancy’s efforts to think this materiality of what he terms “meaning” and his emphasis (following a motif in Kant) on the facticity of the experience of freedom (related to his emphasis on the *force* of an existent being in its freedom).²⁸ This materialist dimension of a thought of writing or difference will have to be pursued as this thought is taken in the direction of politics. But we must bear in mind as well that meaning, in its materiality, constitutes something like the “origin” of language: what Benjamin approached with his references to a “pure language,” what Heidegger defined as “the essence of language” (I will return to this notion), and what Derrida points to with his notions of *différance* and writing. As I will argue, Nancy’s descriptions of a *communication* of force and of the difference of forces that articulates an always communitary meaning of Being require that we understand these material grounds of representation as being in some sense *of language*. Nancy is making this point, I believe, when he defines freedom as “access to the essence of the *logos*,” and even as “the *logos* in its access to its essence.”²⁹

The term *logos* is, of course, heavily charged. Nancy does not hesitate before it because he is describing thought’s access to the event wherein the possibility of representation is given, and thus any possibility of representing an order of concepts. But I would emphasize two further reasons for his recourse to the term. First, it is dictated by the “measuring” Nancy assigns to thought as it draws out the difference to which it is exposed in its freedom and remarks it. The exposure of Dasein to the withdrawal of Being (the opening of a relation to what is, difference), is indissociable from the movement in which this withdrawal is articulated (traced or inscribed: drawn out):

Freedom is the specific logic of access to self outside of self in an always singular spacing of Being. It is its *logos*: “reason,” “speech,” “division” [*partage*]. Freedom is the *logos*—not alogical, but open at the heart of the *logos* itself—of divided Being. The ontological division, or the singularity of Being, opens the space that freedom alone can properly “space” (not “fill”). “Spacing

space” means: holding it as space [*le garder en tant qu’espace*] and as the division of Being, in order to *share* [*partager*] indefinitely the division [*partage*] of singularity.³⁰

Similar statements may be found in relation to the themes of rhythm and measure, and all of them follow in their way Heidegger’s meditation on the *legein*—the laying out, gathering, collecting, even “reading”—that is the essence of the *logos*. Thought, in its freedom, opens to and articulates the *logos* as it draws out the opening of a relation to what is: the *logos* comes about (and comes to language as language, as a “saying”) only insofar as it is articulated by thought. This is not to say that thought and the *logos* are the same thing. Thought draws out the difference to which it is exposed. Its gesture of inscription brings this difference to language (as what Nancy terms “meaning”)—remarks it and articulates it as the difference that separates or divides, lays out, and (Heidegger insists) collects and gathers. But what thought thus articulates remains the *other* of thought. The *logos*, in its essence, is not human, not a human product or possession (thought’s articulation is active, it is a praxis, but it is not a production or “work” in the metaphysical sense of these terms). Nancy will make this point repeatedly in discussing the grounds of community and all communication, and though it will sometimes take a surprising and even mystifying form, the declaration means simply that thought, in its finitude, is exposed to alterity. Its opening to the withdrawal of Being (difference) allows this withdrawal to come about as the event in which a relation to what is is given. We might even say that it *provokes* the speaking that occurs in this event (the advent of the *logos*) and defines it or determines it by tracing out a site of reception. Thought thus contributes to setting a measure (always finite, always singular). But while it plays an initiatory and “provocative” role, it also consists in answering to what it lets happen—it takes its measure from the event that it allows to unfold: “The experience of freedom . . . is nothing other than the knowledge that in all thought there is an *other* thought, a thought that is no longer thought by thought, but that thinks it (that gives it, gives it prodigally, and weighs it [*peser*])—this is what thinking [*penser*] means).³¹ The “other” thought is a thought because it measures thought—but it is the *other* of thought because even while it opens only in and by thought in an always singular gesture (it is nowhere other than in its singular articulations—this is the point of a thought of finitude), it remains that to which thought *answers*: what addresses itself to thought and addresses thought to itself.

The experience of the “other” thought, Nancy says, is the experience of freedom. But we have also seen that it is the experience of language (what Heidegger would call an “experience with language”), and this brings

me to my second suggestion regarding Nancy's use of the term "logos." When Nancy defines freedom as "the logos in its access to its essence," he is defining very precisely what Heidegger attempts to describe as the "speaking" of language: the movement wherein language gives itself originally in its essence (comes into its essence, "essences," we might say, *west*), and gives thereby the possibility of signification.³² Heidegger's most extensive development of this notion (or his most lengthy attempt to engage with the movement in question) comes in his essay, "The Essence of Language." There, he attempts to think the essence of language out of what he terms the language of essence, defining essence as difference (the relation of relations that gathers the "fourfold") and as what "counters" (*gegnet*) thought and "sues" it in the always singular acts by which thought answers to (this is itself a "rejoinder," an *entgegenen*) and thus articulates its address. Essence, as difference, is the "country" (*Gegend*) or "free region" in which thought moves in those responses by which thought draws out the saying of difference—responses that always pass by way of a relation to other responses (as in the case of philosophy's relation to poetic speech). Each mode of thoughtful saying (and this includes poetry) bears a particular and unique relation to its origin in the opening of language that occurs with the saying of difference. But this always singular relation opens only in relation to other modes of saying. The interrelation of these modes, their interweaving, forms what Heidegger calls the *Geflecht*, and the essence of language—what gathers or joins these modes—cannot be thought apart from this interweaving.³³ The essence of language is *one*, Heidegger argues—it gathers the modes of saying into a harmony or a singular measure (it *is* this gathering), but it proceeds from the irreducibly multiple instances of saying that articulate it.

Nancy will concur that the *logos* is originally articulated in the irreducibly singular modes of speaking that constitute its web. But he will diverge from Heidegger by denying that this originary articulation or division (what Nancy names a *partage*) gathers in *one* speaking, the speaking of a difference that gathers all instances of speech into the single fold of a unitary *logos*. The *logos*, Nancy argues, is irreducibly divided, *partagé*; it is characterized by a radical historicity in that its always singular articulations never voice the *same* origin. Of course, as articulations, the single instances of speech must in some sense be articulations of the *same*; but Nancy wants to argue that this "same" differs radically from itself and is in a movement that does not answer to a single measure or rhythm and cannot be gathered in a single saying. There is a "voice" of the community, Nancy argues, and this voice announces a law (I will return to these points)—there is a *logos* of the community. But this voice is always divided from itself, always different. The *logos* accedes to its essence and thereby "speaks" (as the

speech of essence) in singular acts of speaking that divide it out irreducibly. To put this in the terms from which we started: the *logos* of the community exists only in its communication, in the singular acts by which Dasein sets out difference in the accomplishment of its freedom. Every free act communicates or "speaks" in that it answers to the *logos*. And insofar as Dasein *is* in and by the free acts in which it defines its being (each time, and each time differently—but always in relation), we may say that when Dasein communicates, when it "says" or articulates difference, it communicates itself. It communicates itself as an opening to alterity. This is the always singular, always different opening of the *logos*.

Nancy sketches the logic of this communication in *Le partage des voix*, and then proceeds to define community (and its communication) on its basis in *La communauté désœuvrée*. The reader will find a correction of the argument of the former text in a footnote to the latter (p. 158, n. 24). Nancy maintains here that the "exposition" of singular beings in their finitude constitutes a "communication" of Being (in its singularity) that is in some sense prior to, or more originary than, the communication he described in *Le partage des voix* as a *hermeneuein*. The exposition of a singular being, he argues, is always the exposition to another being or other beings in their singularity (another Dasein, or other Dasein). Thus when Dasein opens in its freedom to the withdrawal of Being and receives a relation to what is, it does so in relation, and the address to which it answers is always the address of an other. This address, or this "mutual interpellation" (Dasein's answer is itself an address, a response that articulates anew the alterity that speaks in the other), is "prior," Nancy argues, "to any address in language (though it gives to this latter its first condition of possibility)." In this sense, Nancy continues in his footnote, the exposure of singular beings is prior to the "division of voices" he described in *Le partage des voix*, unless "voice" is understood as prelinguistic.

Nancy would be suggesting in his footnote that the mutual interpellation of singularities is prior to what Heidegger names "discourse" (*Rede*) in *Being and Time* and prior even to what Heidegger calls in that volume the "voice of conscience" (itself prelinguistic in any strict sense of the term). But without entering into a detailed discussion of *Being and Time*, I would like to suggest that what Nancy described in *Le partage des voix* with his interpretation of Heidegger's concept of *Auslegung*³⁴ is precisely what he is describing as "communication" in *La communauté désœuvrée*. The point of *Le partage*, as I read it, was to think together the singular act of speaking that occurs in the *hermeneuein* of Dasein's self-understanding with the *hermeneuein* Heidegger describes in his dialogue with the Japanese student³⁵ as a speaking of language occurring in and by dialogue. As in his essay on freedom (and I consider this to be one of the crucial moves in his

thinking), Nancy was attempting to articulate Heidegger's earlier thought of the facticity of existence with his later meditation on the "giving" that occurs in the speaking of language. The "relay" in this argument was the word *hermeneuein*, which Nancy interpreted as an originary annunciation (*annonce*, translating *Kundgebung*) or address of meaning. In an effort to follow Heidegger and to recover a more originary sense of hermeneutics—countering the versions of hermeneutics that claim a descent from Heidegger, principally those of Gadamer and Ricoeur—Nancy argued that the *hermeneuein* of existence (which also grounds the *hermeneuein* of the existential analytic itself—Heidegger's interpretation of "existence") consists not in the interpretation of a prior meaning to which Dasein would have access, but in the opening of meaning that occurs as Dasein projects for itself a horizon of significations. He suggested further that Heidegger recalls and develops this notion of an *active reception* (both passive and active, both a reception and a kind of *performance*) when he alludes to Plato's *Ion* in the dialogue with the Japanese student, introducing thereby a mimetic dimension in the concept of communication. Finally, he suggested that Heidegger's description of this dialogue itself as a *hermeneuein* that articulates the speaking of language (*die Sprache*) should be thought together with Heidegger's earlier elaboration of this concept in such a way as to permit us to define the *logos* as a *partage des voix*. In short, he demonstrated that Heidegger takes the hermeneutic relation to proceed from a *hermeneuein* that is the speaking of language as it is originally drawn out in always singular voices that open only in relation to one another and as the differential articulation of a *partage*. The hermeneutic annunciation is (in) a difference of voices.

When Nancy qualifies his argument from *Le partage* by saying that community, as a differential relation of singular beings, is prior to what he called "the division of voices," because it is prior to *voice* in any linguistic sense, he is suggesting that the opening of the possibility of signification that is the "access of the *logos* to its essence" is something like a transcendental condition of language. The "event" of this opening is logically prior (being its condition of possibility) to any instance of speech. Heidegger, as I have noted, named the event of this opening *Ereignis*; Nancy's point would be that *Ereignis* is the *limit* of language and in itself nothing linguistic. He would be emphasizing further (though this point was clear in *Le partage des voix*) that what a singular being articulates by its exposure is a "common" space that, while existing only by these articulations, remains nevertheless the articulation of a "between" that joins them and defines them (even as they define it). Again, the otherness of the voice is the always different voice of community.

My disagreement with this qualification is a minor one, and finally only of the order of a terminological clarification. But I would like to suggest that while the limits of language cannot be understood as linguistic in a restricted sense (that is, in the sense that they might form the object of linguistic science), they cannot be understood as other than language. As soon as we have to do with articulation, as soon as we have to do with meaning, we have to do with what Heidegger called *die Sprache*. "Language," taken in this extended sense (a sense that includes what Jean-François Lyotard terms "*phrase*," and beyond this, what Derrida terms "writing"), is a threshold we cannot cross in thought (though it is a *threshold*). I speak of a threshold because we are designating a limit, and a limit, by its very nature, marks a relation to an "outside." But for thought, this outside is nothing (in a phrase that is now well known, "There is no *hors-texte*"). There "is" an other of language, but it is given to us in its alterity only insofar as it is written. And this writing occurs always in a singular voice (or "signs" with a distinctive signature). The mutual interpellation of singularities is not prior to any address in language, it is the address of language.

But Nancy is implicitly recognizing that the limits he is defining are the limits of language simply by speaking of a "mutual interpellation" and by defining this reciprocal address as a communication, and even as "literature." The imperative to which he claims to answer in asserting that *we must continue to write the community* also presupposes that community is something that can be communicated. What Nancy defines as community lies at the limits of language—it is even the "origin" of language (in a Heideggerian sense of the term), but is always *of language*. Otherwise, there would be no *need* to write and no way to write it.

The Community's Demand

There is a need to *write* it, because the communication that is community exceeds the horizon of signification. As the very possibility of signification or representation, it escapes representation and any theoretical grasp. Something other than a theoretical discourse is required to answer to the exigency of community, even if this necessity can be glimpsed only through a discourse that "labors" the concept:

Perhaps we should not seek a word or a concept for it, but rather recognize in the thought of community a theoretical excess (or more precisely, an excess in relation to the theoretical) that would oblige us to adopt another *praxis* of discourse and community. But we should at least try to say this, because "language alone

indicates, at the limit, the sovereign moment where it is no longer current." Which means here that only a discourse of community, exhausting itself, can indicate to the community the sovereignty of its sharing. . . . An ethics and a politics of discourse and writing are evidently implied here. (p. 26)

I cite these lines in part in order to recall the points from which I started concerning Nancy's own practice of exhausting his guiding concepts. As he notes in his essay "Of Being-in-Common," he will exhaust both "literature" and "communism" in *La communauté désœuvrée* (to the point of abandoning a phrase such as "literary communism," though not without having remarked with these terms the necessity of a writing practice that would constitute the other praxis of discourse and community for which he is calling).³⁶ Nancy is describing here the necessity of a theoretical discourse that would point beyond itself, just as the politics this discourse would answer to would go beyond any given "politics" of discourse. He understands this other politics initially as one that would facilitate the writing of the community ("literary communism"). Following Nancy's emphasis on the arts (in a broad sense), we might understand this as a kind of cultural politics—though it would not seek a reflection or representation of itself in the creative acts it would seek to favor. It could not answer to a cultural program or project of any kind (at some point it would have to resist all *programmatic* imperatives), since its aim would be to answer to an unforeseeable event that escapes any instituted order of meaning and constitutes the site where the question of the very meaning of political existence is reopened. It would be a politics seeking to answer to the limit of the political—a limit, as Nancy puts it, "where all politics stops and begins."

While describing this limit in "Literary Communism," and in relation to its tracing by the work of art, Nancy writes, "The work, as soon as it becomes a work, . . . must be abandoned at this limit" (p. 121). He then adds in parentheses, "I say 'must'—but this cannot be dictated by any will, to any will. It cannot be the objective either of a morality or of a politics of community. And yet, it is prescribed. And a politics, in any case, can adopt the objective that this prescription should always be able to open a free way of access." The "cultural politics" in question would seek to let the "unworking" communication of community occur, or prevent its inhibition, even by a "democratic" politics of consensus that cannot tolerate a "communication" that speaks to an experience of community as difference.³⁷ But of course such a politics of community would be *blind* if it could not read, in some sense, the prescription to which it would answer, or whose paths it would try to keep open. Thus, if it is even possible to

speak of a politics in this context, we would have to entertain the notion of a politics of *community*—a politics that would *proceed* from the imperative to which the work itself answers and that is inscribed there.³⁸ Nancy does in fact propose such a politics in *The Inoperative Community*. The first instance:

If the political is not dissolved in the sociotechnical element of forces and needs (in which, in effect, it seems to be dissolving under our eyes), it must inscribe the sharing of community. The outline of singularity would be "political"—as would be the outline of its communication and its ecstasy. "Political" would mean a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication, or destined to this unworking: a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing. To attain to such a signification of the "political" . . . implies being already engaged in community, that is to say, undergoing, in whatever manner, the experience of community as communication: it implies writing. We must not stop writing, or letting the singular outline of our being-in-common expose itself. (pp. 40–41)

Nancy is cautious to avoid speaking of *a* politics here, and aims rather at redefining the nature of the political and what would constitute the "political" moment in the self-definition of a community. In his conclusion, however, he suggests that it is possible to speak of a political activity that would answer to this essence of the political:

But it defines at least a limit, at which all politics stops and begins. The communication that takes place on this limit, and that, in truth, constitutes it, demands that way of destining ourselves in common that we call a politics, that way of opening community to itself, rather than to a destiny or to a future. "Literary communism" indicates at least the following: that community, in its infinite resistance to everything that would bring it to completion (in every sense of the word *achever*—which can also mean "finish off"), signifies an irrepressible political exigency, and that this exigency in its turn demands something of "literature," the inscription of our infinite resistance. (p. 80–81)

A politics of community is possible (though again, this could not be a program) because community *demands* it. A "prescription" occurs in the writing of the community that makes all *writing* political (it *is* writing, or what Nancy also calls "literature," to the extent that it draws out this prescription and brings it to speak as the exigency of community).³⁹ And the discourse that brings forth this exigency as such—that would engage "consciously" in the politics of community, "opening community to itself,"

must itself be conceived as a kind of writing answering to and repeating in its fashion this exigency.

Nancy does not attempt to describe the traits of such writing in *La communauté désœuvrée*, or the forms it might take (he notes, but leaves aside, the important question of Bataille's use of language). But he returns repeatedly to the "exigency" that speaks in what I have called the divided logos of the community. This demand, as yet "unheard" and "unheard of" (*inouïe*), Nancy says, manifests itself first in an expression of need, a testimony that "involves," he says, all other testimony of this time: "the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community" (p. 1). All writing of this time, he suggests, is part of this testimony: what is said in our time is the absence of community. But an answer to this largely unheard and barely articulated testimony (one that brings it to speak precisely as a *demand*) is not lament, and it is something more than protestation. Bataille answers to it, Nancy argues, in writing out of (and attempting to communicate, in the sense now almost of contagion) what Nancy calls the passion of the absence of community: the ecstatic experience of the impossibility of communion or fusion in a shared, immanent Being, and the impossibility of a "mythic" logos that would be the saying of such immanence. This passion, as we have seen, is the passion of finitude: the passion of a singular being drawn to its limits and drawing out those limits, communicating them as the limits of community itself. Every such communication interrupts, or repeats the rupture of, the mythic space of communion (recast in various forms in the West's constant recourse to myth)—it marks a break or caesura. What Nancy means by "literature" is precisely a communication that does not pass by the relays of the mythic word and thereby interrupts the scene of myth (or the scene of "Literature"—since the myth of the author and the book perpetuates the dream of communion). But in exposing this break, it exposes the singularity of Being (its essence as "*partagé*": divided and shared) and calls upon us, by exposing us to this limit that is the limit of our singular/common being. The address is always singular, but the other that demands our response is always the community. Its address bespeaks a need, but also an invitation and a perpetually renewed, perpetually deferred (or perpetually relayed) promise:

Community without community is *to come*, in the sense that it is always *coming*, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity. . . . It is no more than this: to come to the limit of compearance, to that limit to which we are in effect convoked, called, and sent. . . . The call that convokes us, as well as the one we address to one another. . . . (this call from one to the other is no doubt the same

call, and yet not the same) can be named, for want of a better term, writing, or literature. (p. 71)

Derrida describes this address with the "*viens*" he reads in Blanchot's texts (and elsewhere).⁴⁰ Heidegger, for his part, describes it as the countering word of an injunction or command that he calls a *Geheiss*: a calling that gathers all acts of calling (all speech in which the address of language itself is articulated) and that enjoins that all speech should answer to its call.⁴¹ When difference speaks, he says, it commands: its command is that all should answer to its command (all answering being the articulation of this command, which can only speak in its articulations). But if, as I have tried to suggest, Nancy is in fact describing the same exigency of language, he makes it clear that this exigency cannot be thought as an injunction that *gathers* all acts that answer to it. Rather it would enjoin further acts of speech that will articulate it differently, in always singular, always different forms. The community enjoins its own dissemination—it enjoins writing: this is the law of community.

Divine Writing

I have referred Nancy's remarks on the communicative nature of exposure (of the exposure that occurs in all forms of ecstasis) to Heidegger's understanding of the *logos* and its "communication" in order to suggest how close Nancy's thinking is to Heidegger's, but also to mark the distance that lies between them. The distance, we might say now, is one that opens precisely through Nancy's effort to rethink Heidegger's notion of a distance and proximity that is measured by the speaking of language (the distance and proximity being the nearness of the word itself as it withdraws and traces out the defining limits of what it means "to be," and thus the distance—both temporal and spatial—that marks everything that is). The distance between the two texts becomes an extreme proximity if we push Heidegger's thought of finitude in the direction of some of its most radical formulations. And yet there is a point, or a limit, where Heidegger's texts resist (rhetorically, if not conceptually): they consistently draw back before the description of the dislocation, the dispersion that Nancy tries to think with the term "writing." It is not difficult to show that Heidegger himself pursues quite consciously a thought of writing; long before he ostentatiously crosses out the word Being, he points to the necessity of the tracing and retracing of difference. What Heidegger terms the "speaking of language" is in fact the tracing of what he calls the *Riss*: the speech of language is a silent, invisible inscription. But while he recognizes, as I have suggested, that such a tracing can only occur insofar as it is drawn out in singular,

finite acts of speech, he will always attempt to think their gathering in *one* speaking. The *Ge* of terms such as *Gespräch*, *Geheiss*, *Geläut*, *Geflecht*, sounding repeatedly in his texts, signifies precisely this gathering. Heidegger's difference differentiates and spaces, but Heidegger will always emphasize the way it opens a space of the same. Nancy tries to think the same spacing (even the "same" of this spacing)—but he tries to think it as a constant dislocation.

I have stressed this point sufficiently by now. But I reemphasize it as I approach the conclusion of this foreword because I would like to suggest that Nancy's "Of Divine Places"—in many ways his most beautiful, but also his most challenging piece of writing—is articulated around it. A brief exposition of the Chapter's movement will provide a final illustration of the point, and serve, I hope, to bring forth the precariousness of both Nancy's stance *vis-à-vis* Heidegger and of this extraordinary essay itself as it explores a notion of the divine in relation to the concept of writing. To designate the articulation Nancy proposes, I am tempted by a phrase prompted by Pasolini's "divine mimesis"—though "divine writing" is really too awkward. The phrase would signify, however, a kind of divine abandon of the ontotheological tradition and a reopening of the question of a non-secular experience that would be without a Book, without a Temple, and without God, and for which even the epithet "divine" would no longer be suitable.

Nancy begins, as in his meditation on community, with the fact of an absence. In *La communauté désœuvrée*, this was the absence of community and the absence of myth. In "Of Divine Places," it is the absence of the divine, its desertion of all names and all temples, all sites where the presence of the divine was once received and celebrated. Nancy, like Heidegger, takes Hölderlin's testimony as exemplary here. "Holy names are lacking," Hölderlin wrote in "Homecoming," and when he writes "*der Gott*," it is as though he is using a common noun, signifying by its very abstraction the lack of names that would manifest the divine presence. The holy names no longer hold, they no longer give the possibility of a relation to a divine presence; and prayer, by which even the improper name "God" would invoke a singular relation to the divine ("my God") is now impossible. The divine not only withholds itself from all names, Nancy suggests; its withholding is to be thought as a cessation.

Nancy makes this point with a stunning radicality in the face of the resurgence of religious experience in the West and the challenging insistence of it at the West's increasingly undefineable borders. Once again, Nancy is describing what he takes to be a historical event: religion in the West, and even beyond the West, is exhausted. The experience of the divine has emptied out as it has been charged with meaning (or gives way to meaning)

in the long history of morality described variously by Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger. Nancy *assumes* this history (as the history of Being to which the divine also belongs) and assumes its culmination in "the death of God." He denounces in the strongest terms all thought that forgets this "historical" fact and refuses the temptation to *rebaptize* the abysses or extremities revealed by thought's abandonment to an experience no longer guaranteed by God. There is nothing we can say about God (about his being or essence), or designate with the name of God, that cannot be ascribed to another term: love, community, the sublime, the other, Being. To smuggle back the name of God, or to speak of divinity in relation to these limits revealed to and by thought in its work over the past two centuries, could only inhibit its efforts to confront its history.

Nancy will pass very close to this latter temptation, but will try to avoid it by asking whether a different approach to the problem of the divine might be conceived, a different *topic* that does not go by way of the question of the divine essence. The point of fragmenting his text, he suggests, is to approach the question of divine places. He takes his clue here (section 14, after his "polemical note" against all trafficking of the supposed "return" of spirituality in the West) from Heidegger's commentary on lines from Hölderlin's "In lovely blueness. . . ." Having already suggested (section 10) that we must resist the dialectical urge to turn the signs of the withdrawal of the sacred into signs that would manifest the sacred as withdrawn (dis-simulated and held in reserve), he entertains the possibility of an entirely different understanding of divine manifestation or divine presence from that of the ontotheological tradition. Hölderlin wrote in his poem, "Is God unknown? Is he manifest like the sky? This, rather, is what I believe." Heidegger interpreted these lines to suggest that God manifests himself in the "open face" of the sky *as unknown*. Nancy qualifies Heidegger's interpretation by arguing that Hölderlin does not speak of a manifestation through the intermediary of the sky, but rather of an im-mediate manifestation like that of the sky. Such a manifestation might be conceived as taking place *against* the open aspect of the sky, on its face, so to speak—as it might occur against the face of anything as it is given to us in its simple presence (as Nancy consistently describes the ecstatic experience of phenomenal presence when beings are given in the event of *Ereignis*)—but not *by way of* this aspect. This manifestation would not take the structure of a mediation or representation. It would be *here, against* the surface of what is: an im-mediate manifestation that would not be the revelation of the divine itself, Nancy adds (still following Heidegger), but the evidency of the possibility of a relation to it as absent or unknown, the possibility of a "being-unto-God."

The structure of this “immediately against” is the structure of writing as Heidegger conceives of it: the tracing of a difference that is the *opening* of God to humankind (this is how Heidegger defines the sacred) and their respective discovery or unconcealment as being of the same domain or region, but as radically strange in their being. Heidegger will consistently describe such a differential relation as one of a “countering” (again, the preposition is *gegen*), and Nancy is essentially working through Heidegger’s terms when he describes the relation of humankind and God (or the gods) in terms of a face-to-face encounter that remains “blind” and unavowable inasmuch as gods and humans are present to one another in utter strangeness:

Men and women are men and women and the gods are the gods. . . . Living in the same world, they are always face to face with each other, on either side of a dividing—and a retreating—line. They are, together, the vis-à-vis itself, the face-to-face encounter in which the unreserved appearing [*paraître*] of one to the other engages them in an irredeemable strangeness. The gesture of the gods is to conceal themselves, on this very line, from the face of men. The gesture of men is to stand back from this line where it encounters the face of the god. (p. 142)

Elsewhere, he writes, still working with this empty signifier “gods”, “Face to face, but without seeing each other from now on, the gods and men are abandoned to writing” (p. 135).

Hölderlin described in his “Remarks on ‘Oedipus’” and his “Remarks on ‘Antigone’” a similar abandon in defining a properly modern tragic experience, though he described the separation of the human and the divine in temporal rather than spatial terms.⁴² The tragedy manifests, he wrote, indeed it articulates with its “caesura,” a veering of time by which the god and the tragic hero turn aside from each other. The “face to face” of the human being and god is a “monstrous coupling,” a “limitless becoming-one” that is “purified” (this is Hölderlin’s interpretation of catharsis) by a limitless separation: they finish back to back. Nancy describes the same immediacy (even the same forgetting—this is Nancy’s “*syncope*”) and the same separation; but whereas the god appears in Hölderlin’s account in the figure of time, it appears in Nancy’s in a spatial dispersion. In either case, however, the event of separation defines a radical impossibility of self-appropriation. For Hölderlin, the modern experience of the divine as revealed in tragedy is one of an irreversible time (“beginning and end cannot rhyme whatsoever”); for Nancy, the experience of the sacred is one of dislocation: a dispersion in multiple sites. In both cases, all self-gathering, or

all gathering of the divine itself, is impossible: “What remains of the divine henceforth . . . is an errancy” (p. 134).

Nancy makes this assertion immediately after clarifying how one must not confuse God and Being in Heidegger’s thought and before introducing the theme of writing. Though he does not take his distance explicitly from Heidegger with this term (in fact he will never signal this distance explicitly), it appears to mark in his essay the point where he separates from him. Nancy goes very far in following Heidegger’s description of a mutual event of appropriation (*Ereignis*) defining the relation of the human and the divine. In fact, he nearly goes farther than Heidegger. Of the human “being-unto-god,” and the god’s invisible revelation to humankind, Nancy remarks, “I should like to write: always, whatever happens, a god protects mortals, that is to say, exposes them to what they are; and in so doing the gods expose themselves to the eyes of everyone, withdrawn like the sky. But this is to write more than I can” (p. 126). It is to write more than he can because he asserts consistently that we can know of the divine only its abandonment—and he adds that we must not hasten to read this abandonment as the sign of the divine. He will do so in fact, but only in the mode of possibility—in a kind of *experiment* of writing.⁴³

We know of the divine only its abandon, and we know this abandon as dispersion. “This is our share [*partage*],” Nancy writes, “that the divine is no longer gathered anywhere. There is no longer any gathering.” What there is is open space:

Space is everywhere open, there is no place in which to gather either the mystery or the splendor of a god. It has been granted to us to see the limitless opening of that space, it falls to our time to know—with a knowledge more acute than even the most penetrating science, more luminous than any consciousness—how we are delivered up to that gaping naked face. It reveals only us—*neither men nor gods*. (p. 148–49)

What we are given, then, or what is revealed, is our abandon. “The only thing we might still gather for ourselves, apart from all the rest (the erotic, the political, the poetic, the philosophical, the religious) is this abandonment” (p. 149). At the start of his essay, he asked whether there might be any place for God that cannot already be designated with another term. He ends by suggesting that the only thing “apart from all the rest” is our *apart*—neither divine nor human, and “sacred” perhaps only in the etymological sense. This “apart” has the structure of writing, and as such, Nancy asserts, it is multiple and dispersed. We are exposed, in the face of an im-mediate presence, but this exposure is always singular: “The face of the divine is not a countenance (it is not the other [*autrui*]). But it is the

material, local presence—*here* or *there*, against somewhere—of the coming or non-coming of the god. Its presence is a face, it is that in the face of which we are offered, and this is inscribed in space, as so many divine places” (p. 146). “Writing” means for Nancy precisely that there is no region (*Gegend*) that would gather all face-to-face relations (by which we would stand *Gegeneinanderüber*)—there is only the *gegen*.

Merely “apart” and “against”—and this “against” is itself drawn out only in singular acts of exposure (in a gesture, in speech, in acts). Nancy makes it clear that we finally know no “face” other than the face of our exposure, which we draw out in receiving and defining a relation to what is. This is why Nancy’s relation to Heidegger on the problem of the divine remains one of “indecision” (the term appears in section 28) and a willingness to entertain the possibility of emptying Heidegger’s “being-to” (itself conceived only in the mode of possibility) of any divinity. Our “being-to,” he suggests, may be the relation to “no god” [*pas de dieu*]. “No god” designates at once an extreme experience of the death of god (“the place of God truly and broadly open, vacant, abandoned”) and, proceeding from this, an experience of im-mediate presence—a presence that would escape all schematization by a conscious subject and would thereby represent in its turn a death of subjectivity:

It would be the death that is not the *Aufhebung* of life, but its suspension: life suspended at every instant, *hic et nunc*, suspended in its exposure to things, to others, to itself, existence as the presence of no subject, but the presence to an entire world. An invisible presence everywhere offered im-mediate with being-there [*à même l'être-là*—again, im-mediate against], im-mediate with the *there* of being, irrefutable and naked like the brilliance of the sun on the sea: millions of scattered places. (p. 137)

This is the same suspension that Nancy described in his essay on freedom—the same experience of ecstasis, the same abandon. It is the experience of the world as offered, and of existence as a reception and articulation of this offering. Nancy merely adds now (again, in pure indecision, and in a kind of experiment in writing) that as the experience of what is other than humankind, and as an opening, it may be the experience of an opening to God: “The presence of no god could however carry with it the enticement, the call, the *Wink* of an *à-dieu*: a going to God or an adieu to all gods. Together, inextricably, divine presence and the absence of all gods” (p. 137). Elsewhere, writing of mortal abandon, the “supreme indecision” that constitutes the distinctive trait of humanity and by which the human being “risks itself beyond itself,” Nancy says: “There is this, there is this generosity and freedom outside of religion, and I don’t know if this abandon

would be still to gods, to another god that would come, or to no god” (p. 136). Religion, all religion, has blocked and sought to measure this abandon of humanity to what is other than itself. Nancy’s effort is to preserve the indecision. So he holds open the possibility of a being-unto-god even as he describes it as a being to no god.

It may well be that Nancy entertains the possibility of an *à-dieu* (though from what position could we refuse this possibility?) because his experience of “abandon” is essentially joyous, and because for Nancy, joy is the mark of the divine (“when what concerns us is the gods, or no god, then we are concerned with nothing else but joy” [p. 142]). The inscription of the “divine place” of exposure is the outline of a divine smile, he says.⁴⁴ Again, the tonality of Nancy’s writing as he attempts to think the death of God is anything but mourning. Or it is something in mourning that both exceeds and succeeds the *work* of mourning. Our abandonment is given to us in a measureless opening of space, in the face of which no complete gathering or collecting is possible (though we must measure ourselves against it). Nancy will speak of the gods or “no god” because he sees a smile in this naked “face”—nowhere but *here*, inscribed against this infinitely dispersed opening by which we have a relation to what is. Of course, this smile is properly invisible; but smiles, Nancy would probably hasten to say, are communicable. Our joy must be in response. This assumption, together with a desire to call into question and dismantle everything that blocks access to the communitary experience from which it proceeds, prompts Nancy to write.

Preface

Translated by Peter Connor

Where do the texts gathered here come from—and, in particular, where does the text come from that provides the title for this collection and that, as its primary text and its primary preoccupation, governs *The Inoperative Community*?¹

I do not need to speak here about the circumstances surrounding the composition of this text: these are in fact explained within the text itself, in a note at the end of chapter 1, where one can see how these circumstances, this community of circumstances, form the symptom of a unique convergence that must rightly be called *political* rather than merely anecdotal. It is this political origin that I wish to address here.

The place where these texts originate² is not one political place among others. It is not a question of a political position that I hold, or might like to hold, in accordance with a political option or ideal, or even a political ideology and program. However, it is not independent from an unchanging and definite political determination, which I would say, to be simple and direct, while not wishing to be simplistic, comes *from the left*. But as we know, the task that now befalls us is to elucidate, to review, indeed to revolutionize what the term “left” means.

In order to speak of the site that we are dealing with, I might venture the following thought: “left” means, *at the very least*, that the political, as such, is receptive to what is at stake in community. (On the other hand, “right” means, at least, that the political is merely in charge of order and administration.) In this sense, and provided we remain open to all the

reelaborations and all the theoretical and practical rethinking that might be necessary, the political is indissociable from something that the word “communism” has expressed all too poorly, even as it remains the only word to point toward it, albeit very obscurely, even confusedly.

I make no claim to dissipate this obscurity entirely. But we should begin with this much: the political is the place where community as such is brought into play. It is not, in any case, just the locus of power relations, to the extent that these relations set and upset the necessarily unstable and taut equilibrium of collectivity. I do not wish to neglect the sphere of power relations: we never stop being caught up in it, being implicated in its demands. On the contrary, I seek only to insist on the importance and gravity of the relations of force and the class and/or party struggles of the world at a moment when a kind of broadly pervasive democratic consensus seems to make us forget that “democracy,” more and more frequently, serves only to assure a play of economic and technical forces that no politics today subjects to any end other than that of its own expansion. A good part of the human community is paying the price for this. The cruelty of this game is what defines the intolerable, which will destroy “democracy” if “democracy” persists in tolerating it.

But there would be no power relations, nor would there be such a specific unleashing of power (there would merely be a mechanics of force), if the political were not the place of community—in other words, the place of a specific existence, the existence of being-in-common, which gives rise to the existence of being-self. This presupposes that we are brought into the world, each and every one of us, according to a dimension of “in-common” that is in no way “added onto” the dimension of “being-self,” but that is rather co-originary and coextensive with it. But this does not mean that the “common” is a substance uniformly laid out “under” supposed “individuals,” nor is it uniformly shared out among everyone like a particular ingredient. No: this means that the mode of existence and appropriation of a “self” (which is not necessarily, nor exclusively, an individual) is the mode of an exposition in common and to the in-common, and that this exposition exposes the self even in its “in itself,” in its “ipseity,” and in its own distinctiveness, in its isolation or in its solitude. Only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated.

“To be exposed” means to be “posed” in exteriority, according to an exteriority, having to do with an outside *in the very intimacy* of an inside. Or again: having access to what is *proper* to existence, and therefore, of course, to the proper of *one’s own* existence, only through an “expropriation” whose exemplary reality is that of “my” face always exposed to others, always turned toward an other and faced by him or her, never facing

myself. This is the archi-original impossibility of Narcissus that opens straight away onto the possibility of the political.

This is the one thing the Western tradition has always known. Aristotle says that we live in cities—this is the *political* way of life—not for reasons of need, but for a higher reason, itself without reason, namely to “live well” (*eu zein*): here “well” means neither a comfort, nor a having; it is the ownmost difference of man, which means also, for Aristotle (but for Plato as well), the sharing of a *logos*. *Logos* means many things. But one of its meanings is this: something (that one can at times determine as “language,” at times as “reason,” and in many other ways as well) whose only worth lies in being exposed (among other ways, as when a face lights up, opening), that is, in being shared.

But this same tradition, which never envisioned anything else for the political, represented by Spinoza, Rousseau, and Marx (here is the “left,” limited to a few names: as for the rest, they are not dealing with the thinking of the political but with working out a *political economy*, which is quite different)—this same tradition ended up giving us only various programs for the realization of an *essence* of community. Exposition and sharing do not make up an essence. And (Western) philosophy’s political programs have come to a close.

The acute awareness, which is our own, of the closure of these programs governs the movement of this book. We often call this “the end of ideology,” and we silently and insidiously add “the end of political options” in order to substitute the consensus of a single program that we call “democracy.” And we fail to notice that this is how one loses sight of community as such, and of the political as the place of its exposition.

How and why the tradition has folded and closed the thinking of being-in-common within the thinking of an essence of community is not something I seek to examine. But I start out from the idea that such a thinking—the thinking of community as essence—is in effect the closure of the political. Such a thinking constitutes closure because it assigns to community a *common being*, whereas community is a matter of something quite different, namely, of existence inasmuch as it is *in* common, but without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance. Being *in* common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being *in* common means, to the contrary, *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this* (narcissistic) “*lack of identity*.” This is what philosophy calls “finitude,” and the following texts are entirely and uniquely devoted to an understanding of it.

Finitude, or the infinite lack of infinite identity, if we can risk such a formulation, is what makes community. That is, community is made or is

formed by the retreat or by the subtraction of something: this something, which would be the fulfilled infinite identity of community, is what I call its “work.” All our political programs imply this work: either as the product of the working community, or else the community itself as work. But in fact it is the work that the community does *not* do and that it *is* not that forms community. In the work, the properly “common” character of community disappears, giving way to a unicity and a substantiality. (The work itself, in fact, should not be understood primarily as the exteriority of a product, but as the interiority of the subject’s operation.) The community that becomes *a single* thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader . . .) necessarily loses the *in* of being-in-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being. Community is made of what retreats from it: the hypostasis of the “common,” and its work. The retreat opens, and continues to keep open, this strange being-the-one-with-the-other to which we are exposed. (Nothing indicates more clearly what the logic of this being of togetherness can imply than the role of *Gemeinschaft*, of community, in Nazi ideology.)

If I had to attempt to state the principle guiding the analyses in these texts, I might do so by saying this: community does not consist in the transcendence (nor in the transcendental) of a being supposedly immanent to community. It consists on the contrary in the immanence of a “transcendence”—that of finite existence as such, which is to say, of its “exposition.” Exposition, precisely, is not a “being” that one can “sup-pose” (like a sub-stance) to be in community. Community is presuppositionless: this is why it is haunted by such ambiguous ideas as foundation and sovereignty, which are at once ideas of what would be completely suppositionless and ideas of what would always be presupposed. But community cannot be presupposed. It is only exposed. This is undoubtedly not easy to think. But such thinking, which is perhaps inaccessible (inaccessible without the being-in-common of thinking, without the sharing of reading, without the politics within which all writing and reading are inscribed), forms a point of essential convergence and solidarity among the studies here dedicated to community properly speaking, to myth, to love, and to the retreat of the divine.

* * *

By inverting the “principle” stated a moment ago, we get totalitarianism. By ignoring it, we condemn the political to management and to power (and to the management of power, and to the power of management). By taking it as a rule of analysis and thought, we raise the question: how can the community without essence (the community that is neither “people” nor

“nation,” neither “destiny” nor “generic humanity,” etc.) be presented as such? That is, what might a politics be that does not stem from the will to realize an essence?

I shall not venture into the possible forms of such a politics, of this politics that one might call the politics of the political, if the political can be taken as the *moment*, the *point*, or the *event* of being-in-common. This would be beyond my competence. But I do enter into the bond (not only the “social bond,” as one says today, all too readily, but the properly political bond) that binds the political, or in which the political is bound up.

When I speak, in the studies that follow, of “literature,” of a “voice of interruption,” of “shattered” love, of “coming,” of “joy,” and finally of “places” of “dislocation,” it is always of the same bond that I shall be speaking: of a bond that forms ties without attachments, or even less fusion, of a bond that unbinds by binding, that reunites through the infinite exposition of an irreducible finitude. How can we be receptive to the *meaning* of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common?

In other words, perhaps: how do we communicate? But this question can be asked seriously only if we dismiss all “theories of communication,” which begin by positing the necessity or the desire for a consensus, a continuity and a transfer of messages. It is not a question of establishing rules for communication, it is a question of understanding before all else that in “communication” what takes place is an *exposition*: finite existence exposed to finite existence, co-appearing before it and with it.

To think this point, or rather this limit that exposition “is,” is necessarily to think the point or the limit at which the moment of *revolution* presents itself. The idea of revolution has perhaps still not been understood, inasmuch as it is the idea of a new foundation or that of a reversal of sovereignty. Of course, we need gestures of foundation and reversal. But their reason lies elsewhere: it is in the incessantly present moment at which existence-in-common resists every transcendence that tries to absorb it, be it in an All or in an Individual (in a Subject in general). This moment cannot be “founded,” and no foundation, therefore, can be “reversed” in it. This moment—when the in of the “in-common” erupts, resists, and disrupts the relations of need and force—annuls collective and communal hypostases; this violent and troubling moment resists murderous violence and the turmoil of fascination and identification: the intensity of the word “revolution” names it well, a word that, undoubtedly, has been bequeathed or delegated to us by an ambiguous history, but whose meaning has perhaps still to be revolutionized.

One thing at least is clear: if we do not face up to such questions, the political will soon desert us completely, if it has not already done so. It will abandon us to political and technological economies, if it has not already done so. And this will be the end of our communities, if this has not yet come about. Being-*in*-common will nonetheless never cease to resist, but its resistance will belong decidedly to another world entirely. Our world, as far as politics is concerned, will be a desert, and we will wither away without a tomb—which is to say, without community, deprived of our finite existence.

Chapter 1

The Inoperative Community

The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer (by virtue of some unknown decree or necessity, for we bear witness also to the exhaustion of thinking through History), is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community. Communism, as Sartre said, is “the unsurpassable horizon of our time,” and it is so in many senses—political, ideological, and strategic. But not least important among these senses is the following consideration, quite foreign to Sartre’s intentions: the word “communism” stands as an emblem of the desire to discover or rediscover a place of community at once beyond social divisions and beyond subordination to technopolitical dominion, and thereby beyond such wasting away of liberty, of speech, or of simple happiness as comes about whenever these become subjugated to the exclusive order of privatization; and finally, more simply and even more decisively, a place from which to surmount the unraveling that occurs with the death of each one of us—that death that, when no longer anything more than the death of the individual, carries an unbearable burden and collapses into insignificance.

More or less consciously, more or less deliberately, and more or less politically, the word “communism” has constituted such an emblem—which no doubt amounted to something other than a concept, and even something other than the *meaning* of a word. This emblem is no longer in circulation, except in a belated way for a few; for still others, though very rare nowadays,

it is an emblem capable of inferring a fierce but impotent resistance to the visible collapse of what it promised. If it is no longer in circulation, this is not only because the States that acclaimed it have appeared, for some time now, as the agents of its betrayal. (Bataille in 1933: "The Revolution's minimal hope has been described as the decline of the State: but it is in fact the revolutionary forces that the present world is seeing perish and, at the same time, every vital force today has assumed the form of the totalitarian State.")¹ The schema of betrayal, aimed at preserving an originary communist purity of doctrine or intention, has come to be seen as less and less tenable. Not that totalitarianism was already present, as such, in Marx: this would be a crude proposition, one that remains ignorant of the strident protest against the destruction of community that in Marx continuously parallels the Hegelian attempt to bring about a totality, and that thwarts or displaces this attempt.

But the schema of betrayal is seen to be untenable in that it was the very basis of the communist ideal that ended up appearing most problematic: namely, human beings defined as producers (one might even add: human beings *defined* at all), and fundamentally as the producers of their own essence in the form of their labor or their work.

That the justice and freedom—and the equality—included in the communist idea or ideal have in effect been betrayed in so-called real communism is something at once laden with the burden of an intolerable suffering (along with other, no less intolerable forms of suffering inflicted by our liberal societies) and at the same time politically decisive (not only in that a political strategy must favor resistance to this betrayal, but because this strategy, as well as our thought in general, must reckon with the possibility that an entire society has been forged, docilely and despite more than one forum of revolt, in the mold of this betrayal—or more plainly, at the mercy of this abandonment: this would be Zinoviev's question, rather than Solzhenitsyn's). But these burdens are still perhaps only relative compared with the absolute weight that crushes or blocks all our "horizons": there is, namely, no form of communist opposition—or let us say rather "communitarian" opposition, in order to emphasize that the word should not be restricted in this context to strictly political references—that has not been or is not still profoundly subjugated to the goal of a *human* community, that is, to the goal of achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence *as community*. An absolute immanence of man to man—a humanism—and of community to community—a communism—obstinately subtends, whatever be their merits or strengths, all forms of oppositional communism, all leftist and ultraleftist models, and all models based on the workers' council.² In a sense, all ventures adopting a communitarian

opposition to "real communism" have by now run their course or been abandoned, but everything continues along its way as though, beyond these ventures, it were no longer even a question of thinking about community.

Yet it is precisely the immanence of man to man, or it is *man*, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community. A community presupposed as having to be one *of human beings* presupposes that it effect, or that it must effect, as such and integrally, its own essence, which is itself the accomplishment of the essence of humanness. ("What can be fashioned by man? Everything. Nature, human society, humanity," wrote Herder. We are stubbornly bound to this regulative idea, even when we consider that this "fashioning" is itself only a "regulative idea.") Consequently, economic ties, technological operations, and political fusion (into a *body* or under a *leader*) represent or rather present, expose, and realize this essence necessarily in themselves. Essence is set to work in them; through them, it becomes its own work. This is what we have called "totalitarianism," but it might be better named "immanentism," as long as we do not restrict the term to designating certain types of societies or regimes but rather see in it the general horizon of our time, encompassing both democracies and their fragile juridical parapets.

* * *

Is it really necessary to say something about the individual here? Some see in its invention and in the culture, if not in the cult built around the individual, Europe's incontrovertible merit of having shown the world the sole path to emancipation from tyranny, and the norm by which to measure all our collective or communitarian undertakings. But the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. By its nature—as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible—the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition. It is another, and symmetrical, figure of immanence: the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and as certainty.

But the experience through which this individual has passed, since Hegel at least, (and through which he passes, it must be confessed, with staggering opinionatedness) is simply the experience of this: that the individual can be the origin and the certainty of nothing but its own death. And once immortality has passed into its works, an *operative* immortality remains its own alienation and renders its death still more strange than the irremediable strangeness that it already "is."

Still, one cannot make a world with simple atoms. There has to be a *clinamen*. There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other. Community is at

least the *clinamen* of the “individual.” Yet there is no theory, ethics, politics, or metaphysics of the individual that is capable of envisaging this *clinamen*, this declination or decline of the individual within community. Neither “Personalism” nor Sartre ever managed to do anything more than coat the most classical individual-subject with a moral or sociological paste: they never *inclined* it, outside itself, over that edge that opens up its being-in-common.

An inconsequential atomism, individualism tends to forget that the atom is a world. This is why the question of community is so markedly absent from the metaphysics of the subject, that is to say, from the metaphysics of the absolute for-itself—be it in the form of the individual or the total State—which means also the metaphysics of the *absolute* in general, of being as absolute, as perfectly detached, distinct, and closed: being without relation. This absolute can appear in the form of the Idea, History, the Individual, the State, Science, the Work of Art, and so on. Its logic will always be the same inasmuch as it is without relation. A simple and redoubtable logic will always imply that within its very separation the absolutely separate encloses, if we can say this, more than what is simply separated. Which is to say that the separation itself must be enclosed, that the closure must not only close around a territory (while still remaining exposed, at its outer edge, to another territory, with which it thereby communicates), but also, in order to complete the absoluteness of its separation, around the enclosure itself. The absolute must be the absolute of its own absoluteness, or not be at all. In other words: to be absolutely alone, it is not enough that I be so; I must also be alone being alone—and this of course is contradictory. The logic of the absolute violates the absolute. It implicates it in a relation that it refuses and precludes by its essence. This relation tears and forces open, from within and from without at the same time, and from an outside that is nothing other than the rejection of an impossible interiority, the “without relation” from which the absolute would constitute itself.

Excluded by the logic of the absolute-subject of metaphysics (Self, Will, Life, Spirit, etc.), community comes perforce *to cut into* this subject by virtue of this same logic. The logic of the absolute *sets it in relation*: but this, obviously, cannot make for a relation between two or several absolutes, no more than it can make an absolute of the relation. It undoes the absoluteness of the absolute. The relation (the community) is, if it *is*, nothing other than what undoes, in its very principle—and at its closure or on its limit—the autarchy of absolute immanence.

Bataille constantly experienced this violent logic of being-separated. For example:

But if the ensemble of men—or more simply their integral existence—was INCARNATED in a single being—obviously just as solitary and as abandoned as the ensemble—the head of the INCARNATED one would be the place of an unappeasable combat—and one so violent that sooner or later it would shatter into pieces. For it is difficult to see what degree of storming and unleashing the visions of the one incarnated would attain since it ought to see God but in the same instant kill him, then become God himself but only to rush straightway into nothingness: what would come about then would be a man just as deprived of meaning as the first passerby, but deprived of all possibility of rest. (*O.C.* 1:547)

Such an incarnation of humanity, aggregating its absolute being beyond relation and community, depicts the destiny willed by modern thought. We shall never escape the “unappeasable combat” as long as we remain unable to protect community from this destiny.

Carrying this logic into the sphere of knowledge, Bataille, in another text, asserts:

If I “mimic” absolute knowledge, I am at once, of necessity, God myself (in the system, there can be no knowledge, not even in God, which goes beyond absolute knowledge). The thought of this self—of *ipse*—could only make itself absolute by becoming everything. *The Phenomenology of Spirit* comprises two essential movements completing a circle: it is the completion by degrees of the consciousness of the self (of human *ipse*) and the becoming everything (the becoming God) of this *ipse* completing knowledge (and by this means destroying the particularity within it, thus completing the negation of oneself, becoming absolute knowledge). But if in this way, as if by contagion and by mime, I accomplish in myself Hegel’s circular movement, I define—beyond the limits attained—no longer an unknown, but an unknowable. Unknowable not on account of the insufficiency of reason, but by its nature (and even, for Hegel, one could only have concern for this beyond for lack of possessing absolute knowledge . . .). Supposing then that I were to be God, that I were to have in the world the assurance of Hegel (suppressing shadow and doubt)—knowing everything and even why fulfilled knowledge required that man, the innumerable particularities of *selves*, and history produce themselves—at precisely that moment, the question is formulated which allows human, divine existence to enter . . . the deepest foray into darkness without return; why must there be *what I know*? Why is it a necessity? In this question is hidden—it doesn’t appear at first—an extreme rupture, so deep that only the silence of ecstasy answers it.³

The rupture (*déchirure*) hidden in the question is occasioned by the question itself, which breaks up the totality of things that are—considered in terms of the absolute, that is to say, separate from every other “thing”—and *Being* (which is not a “thing”), through which or in the name of which these things, in their totality, are. This rupture (analogous, if not identical, to Heidegger’s distinction between the ontical and the ontological) defines a *relation* to the absolute, imposing on the absolute a relation *to* its own Being instead of making this Being immanent to the absolute totality of beings. And so, Being “itself” comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, and, if you will—in any case this is what I am trying to argue—as *community*.

Ecstasy answers—if it is properly speaking an “answer”—to the impossibility of the absoluteness of the absolute, or to the “absolute” impossibility of complete immanence. Ecstasy, if we understand it according to a rigorous strain of thinking that would pass, were we to trace its philosophical history before Bataille and during his time, by way of Schelling and Heidegger, implies no effusion, and even less some form of effervescent illumination. Strictly speaking, it defines the impossibility, both ontological and gnoseological, of absolute immanence (or of the absolute, and therefore of immanence) and consequently the impossibility either of an individuality, in the precise sense of the term, or of a pure collective totality. The theme of the individual and that of communism are closely bound up with (and bound together in) the general problematic of immanence.⁴ They are bound together in their denial of ecstasy. And for us the question of the community is henceforth inseparable from a question of ecstasy—which is to say, as we are beginning to understand, from the question of Being considered as something other than the absoluteness of the totality of beings.

Community, or the being-ecstatic of Being itself? That would be the question.

* * *

I would like to introduce a qualification, to which I will return later: behind the theme of the individual, but beyond it, lurks the question of singularity. What is *a* body, *a* face, *a* voice, *a* death, *a* writing—not indivisible, but singular? What is their singular necessity in the sharing that divides and that puts in communication bodies, voices, and writings in general and in totality? In sum, this question would be exactly the reverse of the question of the absolute. In this respect, it is constitutive of the question of community, and it is in this context that it will have to be taken into account later on. But singularity never has the nature or the structure of individuality. Singularity never takes place at the level of atoms, those identifiable if not identical identities; rather it takes place at the level of the *clinamen*,

which is unidentifiable. It is linked to ecstasy: one could not properly say that the singular being is the subject of ecstasy, for ecstasy has no “subject”—but one must say that ecstasy (community) happens *to* the singular being.

* * *

The solidarity of the individual with communism at the heart of a thinking of immanence, while neglecting ecstasy, does not however entail a simple symmetry. Communism—as, for example, in the generous exuberance that will not let Marx conclude without pointing to a reign of freedom, one beyond the collective regulation of necessity, in which surplus work would no longer be an exploitive *work*, but rather art and invention—communicates with an extremity of play, of sovereignty, even of ecstasy from which the individual as such remains definitively removed. But this link has remained distant, secret, and most often unknown to communism itself (let us say, to lend concreteness, unknown to Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky), except in the fulgurating bursts of poetry, painting, and cinema at the very beginning of the Soviet revolution, or the motifs that Benjamin allowed as reasons for calling oneself a Marxist, or what Blanchot tried to bring across or propose (rather than signify) with the word “communism” (“Communism: that which excludes [and excludes itself from] every community already constituted”).⁵ But again even this proposal in the final analysis went unrecognized, not only by “real” communism, but also, on close inspection, by those singular “communists” themselves, who were perhaps never able to recognize (until now at least) either where the metaphor (or the hyperbole) began and ended in the usage they made of the word, or, especially, what other trope—supposing it were necessary to change words—or what effacement of tropes might have been appropriate to reveal what haunted their use of the word “communism.”

By the usage to which this word was put, they were able to communicate with a thinking of art, of literature, and of thought itself—other figures or other exigencies of ecstasy—but they were not truly able to communicate, explicitly and thematically (even if “explicit” and “thematic” are only very fragile categories here), with a thinking of community. Or rather, their communication with such a thinking has remained secret, or suspended.

The ethics, the politics, the philosophies of community, when there were any (and there always are, even if they are reduced to chatter about fraternity or to laborious constructions around “intersubjectivity”), have pursued their paths or their humanist deadends without suspecting for an instant that these singular voices were speaking about community and were perhaps speaking about nothing else, without suspecting that what was taken for a “literary” or “aesthetic” experience was entrenched *in* the ordeal of

community, was at grips with it. (Do we need to be reminded, to take a further example, what Barthes's first writings were about, and some of the later ones as well?)

Subsequently, these same voices that were unable to communicate what, perhaps without knowing it, they were saying, were exploited—and covered up again—by clamorous declarations brandishing the flag of the “cultural revolutions” and by all kinds of “communist writing” or “proletarian inscriptions.” The professionals of society saw in them (and not without reason, even if their view was shortsighted) nothing more than a bourgeois Parisian (or Berliner) form of *Proletkult*, or else merely the unconscious return of a “republic of artists,” the concept of which had been inaugurated two hundred years earlier by the Jena romantics. In one way or another, it was a matter of a simple, classical, and dogmatic system of truth: an art (or a thought) adequate to politics (to the form or the description of community), a politics adequate to art. The basic presupposition remained that of a community effectuating itself in the absolute of the work, or effectuating itself as work. For this reason, and whatever it may have claimed for itself, this “modernity” remained in its principle a humanism.

We will have to return to the question of what brought about—albeit at the cost of a certain naiveté or misconception—the exigency of a literary⁶ experience of community or communism. This is even, in a sense, the only question. But the terms of this question all need to be transformed, to be put back into play in a space that would be distributed quite differently from one composed of all-too-facile relations (for example, solitude of the writer/collectivity, or culture/society, or elite/masses—whether these relations be proposed as oppositions, or, in the spirit of the “cultural revolutions,” as equations). And for this to happen, the question of community must first of all be put back into play, for the necessary redistribution of space depends upon it. Before getting to this, and without rescinding any of the resistant generosity or the active restlessness of the word “communism” and without denying anything of the excesses to which it can lead, but also without forgetting either the burdensome mortgage that comes along with it or the usury it has (not accidentally) suffered, we must allow that *communism* can no longer be the unsurpassable horizon of our time. And if in fact it no longer is such a horizon, this is not because we have passed beyond any horizon. Rather, everything is inflected by resignation, as if the new unsurpassable horizon took form around the disappearance, the impossibility, or the condemnation of communism. Such reversals are customary; they have never altered anything. It is the *horizons* themselves that must be challenged. The ultimate limit of community, or the limit that is formed by community, as such, traces an entirely different line. This is why, even as we establish that communism is no longer our unsurpassable

horizon, we must also establish, just as forcefully, that a communist exigency or demand communicates with the gesture by means of which we must go farther than all possible horizons.

* * *

The first task in understanding what is at stake here consists in focusing on the horizon *behind* us. This means questioning the breakdown in community that supposedly engendered the modern era. The consciousness of this ordeal belongs to Rousseau, who figured a *society* that experienced or acknowledged the loss or degradation of a communitarian (and communicative) intimacy—a society producing, of necessity, the solitary figure, but one whose desire and intention was to produce the citizen of a free sovereign community. Whereas political theoreticians preceding him had thought mainly in terms of the institution of a State, or the regulation of a society, Rousseau, although he borrowed a great deal from them, was perhaps the first thinker of community, or more exactly, the first to experience the question of society as an uneasiness directed toward the community, and as the consciousness of a (perhaps irreparable) rupture in this community. This consciousness would subsequently be inherited by the Romantics, and by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: the last figure of spirit, before the assumption of all the figures and of history into absolute knowledge, is that which cleaves community (which for Hegel figures the split in religion). Until this day history has been thought on the basis of a lost community—one to be regained or reconstituted.

The lost, or broken, community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, by all kinds of paradigms: the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods—always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy. Distinct from society (which is a simple association and division of forces and needs) and opposed to emprise (which dissolves community by submitting its peoples to its arms and to its glory), community is not only intimate communication between its members, but also its organic communion with its own essence. It is constituted not only by a fair distribution of tasks and goods, or by a happy equilibrium of forces and authorities: it is made up principally of the sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community. In the motto of the Republic, *fraternity* designates community: the model of the family and of love.

But it is here that we should become suspicious of the retrospective consciousness of the lost community and its identity (whether this consciousness conceives of itself as effectively retrospective or whether, disregarding the realities of the past, it constructs images of this past for the sake of an ideal or a prospective vision). We should be suspicious of this consciousness first of all because it seems to have accompanied the Western world from its very beginnings: at every moment in its history, the Occident has given itself over to the nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared, and to deploring a loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality. Our history begins with the departure of Ulysses and with the onset of rivalry, dissension, and conspiracy in his palace. Around Penelope, who reweaves the fabric of intimacy without ever managing to complete it, pretenders set up the warring and political scene of society—pure exteriority.

But the true consciousness of the loss of community is Christian: the community desired or pined for by Rousseau, Schlegel, Hegel, then Bakouine, Marx, Wagner, or Mallarmé is understood as communion, and communion takes place, in its principle as in its ends, at the heart of the mystical body of Christ. At the same time as it is the most ancient myth of the Western world, community might well be the altogether modern thought of humanity's partaking of divine life: the thought of a human being penetrating into pure immanence. (Christianity has had only two dimensions, antinomial to one another: that of the *deus absconditus*, in which the Western disappearance of the divine is still engulfed, and that of the god-man, *deus communis*, brother of humankind, invention of a familial immanence of humanity, then of history as the immanence of salvation.)

Thus, the thought of community or the desire for it might well be nothing other than a belated invention that tried to respond to the harsh reality of modern experience: namely, that divinity was withdrawing infinitely from immanence, that the god-brother was at bottom *himself* the *deus absconditus* (this was Hölderlin's insight), and that the divine essence of community—or community as the existence of a divine essence—was the impossible itself. One name for this has been the death of God: this expression remains pregnant with the possibility if not the necessity of a resurrection that restores both man and God to a common immanence. (Not only Hegel, but also Nietzsche himself, at least in part, bear witness to this.) The discourse of the “death of God” also misses the point that the “divine” is what it is (if it “is”) only inasmuch as it is removed from immanence, or withdrawn from it—within it, one might say, yet withdrawn from it. And this, moreover, occurs in the very precise sense that it is not because there is a “divine” that its share would be subtracted from immanence, but on the contrary, it is only to the extent that immanence itself,

here or there (but is it localizable? Is it not rather this that localizes, that spaces?), is subtracted from immanence that there can be something like the “divine.” (And perhaps, in the end, it will no longer be necessary to speak of the “divine.” Perhaps we will come to see that community, death, love, freedom, singularity are names for the “divine” not just because they substitute for it—and neither sublate nor resuscitate it under another form—but equally because this substitution is in no way anthropomorphic or anthropocentric and gives way to no becoming-human of the “divine.” Community henceforth constitutes the limit of the human as well as of the divine. Through God or the gods communion—as substance and act, the act of communicated immanent substance—has been definitively withdrawn from community.)⁷

The modern, humanist Christian consciousness of the loss of community therefore gives every appearance of recuperating the transcendental illusion of reason when reason exceeds the bounds of all possible experience, which is basically the experience of concealed immanence. *Community has not taken place*, or rather, if it is indeed certain that humanity has known (or still knows, outside of the industrial world) social ties quite different from those familiar to us, community has never taken place along the lines of our projections of it according to these different social forms. It did not take place for the Guayaqui Indians, it did not take place in an age of huts; nor did it take place in the Hegelian “spirit of a people” or in the Christian agape. No *Gesellschaft* has come along to help the State, industry, and capital dissolve a prior *Gemeinschaft*. It would undoubtedly be more accurate to say, bypassing all the twists and turns taken by ethnological interpretation and all the mirages of an origin or of “bygone days,” that *Gesellschaft*—“society,” the dissociating association of forces, needs, and signs—has taken the place of something for which we have no name or concept, something that issued at once from a much more extensive communication than that of a mere social bond (a communication with the gods, the cosmos, animals, the dead, the unknown) and from much more piercing and dispersed segmentation of this same bond, often involving much harsher effects (solitude, rejection, admonition, helplessness) than what we expect from a communitarian minimum in the social bond. *Society* was not built on the ruins of a *community*. It emerged from the disappearance or the conservation of something—tribes or empires—perhaps just as unrelated to what we call “community” as to what we call “society.” So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us*—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society.

Nothing, therefore, has been lost, and for this reason nothing is lost. We alone are lost, we upon whom the “social bond” (relations, communication), our own invention, now descends heavily like the net of an

economic, technical, political, and cultural snare. Entangled in its meshes, we have wrung for ourselves the phantasms of the lost community.

* * *

What this community has “lost”—the immanence and the intimacy of a communion—is lost only in the sense that such a “loss” is constitutive of “community” itself.

It is not a loss: on the contrary, immanence, if it were to come about, would instantly suppress community, or communication, as such. Death is not only the example of this, it is its truth. In death, at least if one considers in it what brings about immanence (decomposition leading back to nature—“everything returns to the ground and becomes part of the cycle”—or else the paradisaic versions of the same “cycle”) and if one forgets what makes it always irreducibly *singular*, there is no longer any community or communication: there is only the continuous identity of atoms.

This is why political or collective enterprises dominated by a will to absolute immanence have as their truth the truth of death. Immanence, communal fusion, contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it. Thus the logic of Nazi Germany was not only that of the extermination of the other, of the subhuman deemed exterior to the communion of blood and soil, but also, effectively, the logic of sacrifice aimed at all those in the “Aryan” community who did not satisfy the criteria of *pure* immanence, so much so that—it being obviously impossible to set a limit on such criteria—the suicide of the German nation itself might have represented a plausible extrapolation of the process: moreover, it would not be false to say that this really took place, with regard to certain aspects of the spiritual reality of this nation.

The joint suicide or death of lovers is one of the mythico-literary figures of this logic of communion in immanence. Faced with this figure, one cannot tell which—the communion or the love—serves as a model for the other in death. In reality, with the immanence of the two lovers, death accomplishes the infinite reciprocity of two agencies: impassioned love conceived on the basis of Christian communion, and community thought according to the principle of love. The Hegelian State in its turn bears witness to this, for although it certainly is not established on the basis of love—for it belongs to the sphere of so-called objective spirit—it nonetheless has as its *principle* the reality of love, that is to say the fact “of having in another the moment of one’s own subsistence.” In this State, each member has his truth in the other, which is the State itself, whose reality is never more present than when its members give their lives in a war that the monarch—the effective presence-to-self of the Subject-State—has alone and freely decided to wage.⁸

Doubtless such immolation for the sake of community—and by it, therefore—could and can be full of meaning, on the condition that this “meaning” be that of a community, and on the further condition that this community not be a ‘community of death’ (as has been the case since at least the First World War, thereby justifying all refusals to “die for one’s country”). Now the community of human immanence, man made equal to himself or to God, to nature, and to his own works, is one such community of death—or of the dead. The fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person. In other words, death, in such a community, is not the unmasterable excess of finitude, but the infinite fulfillment of an immanent life: it is death itself consigned to immanence; it is in the end that resorption of death that the Christian civilization, as though devouring its own transcendence, has come to minister to itself in the guise of a supreme work. Since Leibnitz there has been no death in our universe: in one way or another an absolute circulation of meaning (of values, of ends, of History) fills or reabsorbs all finite negativity, draws from each finite singular destiny a surplus value of humanity or an infinite superhumanity. But this presupposes, precisely, the death of each and all in the life of the infinite.

Generations of citizens and militants, of workers and servants of the States have imagined their death reabsorbed or sublated in a community, yet to come, that would attain immanence. But by now we have nothing more than the bitter consciousness of the increasing remoteness of such a community, be it the people, the nation, or the society of producers. However, this consciousness, like that of the “loss” of community, is superficial. In truth, death is not sublated. The communion to come does not grow distant, it is not deferred: it was never to come; it would be incapable of coming about or forming a future. What forms a future, and consequently what truly comes about, is always the singular death—which does not mean that death does not come about in the community: on the contrary, I shall come to this. But communion is not what comes of death, no more than death is the simple perpetual past of community.

Millions of deaths, of course, are *justified* by the revolt of those who die: they are justified as a rejoinder to the intolerable, as insurrections against social, political, technical, military, religious oppression. But these deaths are not *sublated*: no dialectic, no salvation leads these deaths to any other immanence than that of . . . death (cessation, or decomposition, which forms only the parody or reverse of immanence). Yet the modern age has conceived the justification of death only in the guise of salvation or the dialectical sublation of history. The modern age has struggled to *close the circle* of the time of men and their communities in an immortal communion

in which death, finally, loses the senseless meaning that it ought to have—and that it has, obstinately.

We are condemned, or rather reduced, to search for this meaning beyond meaning of death elsewhere than in community. But the enterprise is absurd (it is the absurdity of a thought derived from the individual). Death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself—and reciprocally. It is not by chance that this motif of a reciprocal revelation has preoccupied thought informed by ethnology as well as the thinking of Freud and Heidegger, and at the same time Bataille, that is to say in the time leading from the First to the Second World War.

The motif of the revelation, through death, of being-together or being-with, and of the crystallization of the community around the death of its members, *that is to say around the "loss" (the impossibility) of their immanence* and not around their fusional assumption in some collective hypostasis, leads to a space of thinking incommensurable with the problematics of sociality or intersubjectivity (including the Husserlian problematic of the alter ego) within which philosophy, despite its resistance, has remained captive. Death irremediably exceeds the resources of a metaphysics of the subject. The phantasm of this metaphysics, the phantasm that Descartes (almost) did not dare have but that was already proposed in Christian theology, is the phantasm of a dead man who says, like Villiers' Monsieur Waldemar, "I am dead"—*ego sum . . . mortuus*. If the *I* cannot say that it is dead, if the *I* disappears in effect in *its* death, in that death that is precisely what is most proper to it and most inalienably its own, it is because the *I* is something other than a subject. All of Heidegger's research into "being-for (or toward)-death" was nothing other than an attempt to state this: *I* is not—*am* not—a subject. (Although, when it came to the question of community as such, the same Heidegger also went astray with his vision of a people and a destiny conceived at least in part as a subject,⁹ which proves no doubt that Dasein's "being-toward-death" was never radically implicated in its being-with—in *Mitsein*—and that it is this implication that remains to be thought.)

That which is not a subject opens up and opens onto a community whose conception, in turn, exceeds the resources of a metaphysics of the subject. Community does not weave a superior, immortal, or transmortal life between subjects (no more than it is itself woven of the inferior bonds of a consubstantiality of blood or of an association of needs), but it is constitutively, to the extent that it is a matter of a "constitution" here, calibrated on the death of those whom we call, perhaps wrongly, its "members" (inasmuch as it is not a question of an organism). But it does not make a work of this calibration. Community no more makes a work out of death than it is itself a work. The death upon which community is calibrated

does not *operate* the dead being's passage into some communal intimacy, nor does community, for its part, *operate* the transfiguration of its dead into some substance or subject—be these homeland, native soil or blood, nation, a delivered or fulfilled humanity, absolute phalanstery, family, or mystical body. Community is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to *make a work* (other than a work of death, as soon as one tries to make a work of it). Community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly—for there is neither function nor finality here—the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribed and acknowledged as "community."

Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others. It is not the space of the *egos*—subjects and substances that are at bottom immortal—but of the *I's*, who are always *others* (or else are nothing). If community is revealed in the death of others it is because death itself is the true community of *I's* that are not *egos*. It is not a communion that fuses the *egos* into an *Ego* or a higher *We*. It is the community of *others*. The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion. Community therefore occupies a singular place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject. In a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes—this is its peculiar gesture—the impossibility of community. A community is not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project—nor is it a *project* at all (once again, this is its radical difference from "the spirit of a people," which from Hegel to Heidegger has figured the collectivity as project, and figured the project, reciprocally, as collective—which does not mean that we can ignore the question of the singularity of a "people").

A community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth (which amounts to saying that there is no community of immortal beings: one can imagine either a society or a communion of immortal beings, but not a community). It is the presentation of the finitude and the irredeemable excess that make up finite being: its death, but also its birth, and only the community can present me my birth, and along with it the impossibility of my reliving it, as well as the impossibility of my crossing over into my death.

If it sees its fellow-being die, a living being can subsist only *outside itself*. . . .

Each one of us is then driven out of the confines of his person and loses himself as much as possible in the community of his fellow creatures. It is for this reason that it is necessary for communal life to maintain itself at a level *equal to death*. The lot

of a great number of private lives is pettiness. But a community cannot last except at the level of intensity of death—it decomposes as soon as it falls shy of danger's peculiar grandeur. It must take upon it what is "unappeasable" and "unappeased," and maintain a need that thirsts for glory. A man among thousands can have an intensity of life that is practically zero throughout the day: he behaves as though death did not exist and holds himself, without harm, beneath its level. (*O.C.* 7:245-46)

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No doubt Bataille has gone farthest into the crucial experience of the modern destiny of community. Whatever the interest accorded his thought (and this remains, despite everything, a meagre and all too often frivolous interest), what has not yet been sufficiently remarked¹⁰ is the extent to which his thinking emerged out of a political exigency and uneasiness—or from an exigency and an uneasiness concerning the political that was itself guided by the thought of community.

Bataille first of all went through the ordeal of seeing communism "betrayed." He discovered later that this betrayal was not to be corrected or made up for, but that communism, having taken man as its end, meaning the production of man and man as producer, was linked in its principle to a negation of the sovereignty of man, that is to say to a negation of what in man is irreducible to human immanence, or to a negation of the sovereign excess of finitude:

For a Marxist, value beyond the useful is conceivable, even inevitable; but it is immanent to man, or else it does not exist. What transcends man (living man, of course, here-below), or in the same way what goes beyond common humanity (humanity without privilege) is without question inadmissible. The sovereign value is man: production is not the only value, it is merely the means of responding to man's needs—it serves him, man does not serve it. . . .

But it remains to be determined whether man, to whom communism refers as the producer, has not taken on this sovereign value on one primary condition: namely, having renounced for himself everything that is truly sovereign. . . . For the irreducible desire that man is, *passionately* and *capriciously*, communism has substituted those needs that can be brought into harmony with a life entirely devoted to producing. (*O.C.* 8:352-53)

Meanwhile, in the thirties, two directions had converged in Bataille's thought: a revolutionary impulse that sought to give back to the revolt the incandescence that the Bolshevik State had stolen from it and a fascination

with fascism inasmuch as it seemed to indicate the direction, if not the reality, of an intense community, devoted to excess. (This fascination is not to be taken lightly, no more in Bataille's case than in the case of several others. Ignoble fascism, and fascism as one of the recourses of capitalism, this despicable fascism was *also* an attempt to respond—despicably and ignobly—to the already established, already stifling reign of society. Fascism was the grotesque or abject resurgence of an obsession with communion; it crystallized the motif of its supposed loss and the nostalgia for its images of fusion. In this respect, it was the convulsion of Christianity, and it ended up fascinating modern Christianity in its entirety. No political-moral critique of this fascination holds good if the critic is not at the same time capable of deconstructing the system of communion.)¹¹

But aside from the scorn immediately aroused in him by the foulness of the fascist ringleaders and their methods, Bataille went through the experience of realizing that the nostalgia for a communal being was at the same time the desire for a work of death. He was haunted, as we know, by the idea that a human sacrifice should seal the destiny of the secret community of *Acéphale*. He no doubt understood at the time, as he was later to write,¹² that the truth of sacrifice required in the last analysis the suicide of the sacrificer. In dying, the latter would be able to rejoin the being of the victim plunged into the bloody secret of common life. And thus he understood that this properly divine truth—the operative and resurrectional truth of death—was not the truth of the community of finite beings but that, on the contrary, it rushed headlong into the infinity of immanence. This is not merely horror, it is beyond horror, it is the total absurdity—or disastrous puerility, so to speak—of the death work, of death considered as the work of common life. And it is this absurdity, which is at bottom an excess of *meaning*, an absolute concentration of the will to meaning, that must have dictated Bataille's withdrawal from communitarian enterprises.

Thus he came to understand the ridiculous nature of all nostalgia for communion, he who for a long time—in a kind of exacerbated consciousness of the "loss" of community, which he shared with a whole epoch—had represented archaic societies, their sacred structures, the glory of military and royal societies, the nobility of feudalism, as bygone and fascinating forms of a successful intimacy of being-in-common with itself.

In opposition to this modern, feverish kind of "Rousseauism" (which, nonetheless, he perhaps never completely overcame—I shall come back to this), Bataille made two observations: on the one hand, sacrifice, glory, and expenditure remain simulations as long as they stop short of the work of death, so nonsimulation is the impossible itself; but, on the other hand, in the simulation itself (that is to say, in the simulation of immanent being),

the work of death is nevertheless still accomplished, at least to a relative degree, in the form of the domination, oppression, extermination, and exploitation to which all socio-political systems finally lead, all those in which the excess of a transcendence is, as such, willed, presented (simulated) and instituted in immanence. It was not only the Sun King who mixed the enslavement of the State with radiant bursts of sacred glory; this is true of all royalty that has always already distorted the sovereignty it exhibits into a means of domination and extortion:

The truth is that we can suffer from something we lack, but even if we have a paradoxical nostalgia for it, we cannot, except by some aberration, long for the religious and royal edifice of the past. The effort to which this edifice corresponded was nothing but an immense failure, and if it is true that something essential is missing from the world in which it collapsed, then we can only go farther ahead, without imagining even for a moment the possibility of turning back. (*O.C.* 8:275)

The reversal of the nostalgia for a lost community into the consciousness of an "immense failure" of the history of communities was linked for Bataille to the "inner experience," whose content, truth, or ultimate lesson is articulated thus: "Sovereignty is NOTHING." Which is to say that sovereignty is the sovereign exposure to an excess (to a transcendence) that does not present itself and does not let itself be appropriated (or simulated), that does not even *give* itself—but rather to which being is abandoned. The excess to which sovereignty is exposed and exposes us *is* not, in a sense quite close to the sense in which Heideggerian Being "*is* not," that is, in the sense in which the Being of the finite being is less what makes it be than what leaves it abandoned to such an ex-position. The Being of the finite being exposes it to the end of Being.

Thus, exposure to the NOTHING of sovereignty is the opposite of the movement of a subject who would reach the limit of nothingness (and this constitutes, at bottom, the permanent movement of the Subject, indefinitely devouring *in itself* the nothingness represented by everything that is not *for itself*; in the end, this is the autophagy of truth). "In" the "NOTHING" or in nothing—in sovereignty—being is "*outside itself*"; it is in an exteriority that is impossible to recapture, or perhaps we should say that it is *of* this exteriority, that it is of an outside that it cannot relate to *itself*, but with which it entertains an essential and incommensurable relation. This relation prescribes the place of the singular being. This is why the "inner experience" of which Bataille speaks is in no way "interior" or "subjective," but is indissociable from the experience of this relation to an incommensurable outside. Only community furnishes this relation its spacing, its rhythm.

In this sense, Bataille is without doubt the one who experienced first, or most acutely, the modern experience of community as neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather as space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-of-self. The crucial point of this experience was the exigency, reversing all nostalgia and all communal metaphysics, of a "clear consciousness" of separation—that is to say of a "clear consciousness" (in fact the Hegelian *self-consciousness* itself, but *suspended* on the limit of its access to *self*) of the fact that immanence or intimacy cannot, nor are they ever to be, *regained*.

For this very reason, however, the exigency of "clear consciousness" is everything but that abandonment of community that would favor, for example, a reversion to the positions of the individual. The individual as such is only a thing,¹³ and the *thing*, for Bataille, can be defined as the being without communication and without community. Clear consciousness of the communal *night*—this consciousness at the extremity of consciousness that is also the suspension of Hegelian desire (of consciousness's desire for recognition), the finite interruption of infinite desire, and the infinite syncope of finite desire (sovereignty itself: desire outside desire and mastery outside itself)—this "clear" consciousness, then, cannot take place elsewhere than in community, or rather it can only take place as the communication of community: both as what communicates within community, and as what community communicates.¹⁴

This consciousness—or this communication—is ecstasy: which is to say that such a consciousness is never *mine*, but to the contrary, I only have it in and through the community. This resembles, almost to the point that one might confuse it with, what in other contexts one might call a "collective unconscious"—a consciousness that perhaps more closely resembles what can be located throughout Freud as the ultimately collective essence of what he calls the unconscious. But it is not an unconscious—that is to say it is not the reverse side of a subject, nor its splitting. It has nothing to do with the subject's structure as *self*: it is clear consciousness at the extremity of its clarity, where consciousness *of* self turns out to be outside the self of consciousness.

Community, which is not a subject, and even less a subject (conscious or unconscious) greater than "myself," does not *have* or possess this consciousness: community *is* the ecstatic consciousness of the night of immanence, insofar as such a consciousness is the interruption of self-consciousness.

* * *

Bataille knew better than anyone—he alone pioneered the pathways of such a knowledge—what exceeds the formation of a simple connection between

ecstasy and community, what makes each one the locus of the other, or again, according to an atypical topology, why the circumscription of a community, or better its *areality* (its nature as area, as formed space), is not a territory, but the areality of an ecstasy,¹⁵ just as, reciprocally, the form of an ecstasy is that of a community.

However, Bataille himself remained suspended, so to speak, between the two poles of ecstasy and community. The reciprocity of these two poles consists in the fact that, even as they give rise to one another—by arealizing one another—each limits the other, and this produces another “arealization,” a suspension of the immanence that their connection nonetheless implies. This double arealization institutes the resistance to fusion, to the work of death, and this resistance is the fact of being-in-common as such: without this resistance, we would never be in common very long, we would very quickly be “realized” in a unique and total being. For Bataille the pole of ecstasy remained linked to the fascist orgy, however, or at least to the festival (whose element of ambiguous nostalgia returned, after him, in 1968) to the extent that it represented ecstasy in terms of the group and the political order.

The pole of community was, for Bataille, bound up with the idea of communism. This included, in spite of everything, themes of justice and equality; without these themes, regardless of the way one chooses to transcribe them, the communitarian enterprise can only be a farce. In this respect at least, communism remained an unsurpassable exigency, or, as Bataille wrote, “In our times the moral effect of communism is predominant” (*O.C.* 8:367). Nor did he ever stop saying, even as he was analyzing communism’s negating relation to sovereignty, “It is without doubt desirable that differences be effaced; it is desirable that a genuine equality, a genuine indifferenciation be established,” and he added right away, “But if it is possible that in the future men will be less and less interested in their difference from others, this does not mean that they will stop being interested in what is sovereign” (*O.C.* 8:323).

Now, other than by way of a clause of this kind, it was impossible for him to link the forms of sovereignty—or ecstasy—to the egalitarian community, indeed to community in general. These forms—essentially the sovereignty of lovers and that of the artist, the one and the other and the one *in* the other set apart from the orgiastics of fascism, but also from communist equality—could not but appear to him as ecstasies, and if not properly speaking “private” (what could such a thing mean?), then at least isolated, without any hold—any noticeable or articulable hold in any case—on the community into which they nonetheless had to be woven, arealized, or inscribed, lest they lose, fundamentally, their sovereign value.

Community refusing itself ecstasy, ecstasy withdrawing from community, and both in the very gesture through which each effects its own communication: one might suppose that this decisive difficulty explains the fact that *La Souveraineté* remained unfinished and that *The Theory of Religion* went unpublished. In both cases, the enterprise ended up falling short of the ecstatic community it had set out to think. Of course, to not *reach an end* was one of the exigencies of Bataille’s endeavor, and this went hand in hand with the refusal of *project* to which a thinking of community seems inexorably linked. But he himself knew that there is no pure nonproject (“One cannot say outright: this is play, this is a project, but only: the play, the project dominates in a given activity” [*O.C.* 7:220]). And in *La Souveraineté*, even if play strives for dominance, Bataille indeed sets himself a project, one that never gets formulated as such. As for the share of play, it tends inevitably away from the project and in general from the very thinking of community. Although the latter was Bataille’s sole concern, in accordance with his experience (with that terminal experience of the modern age, which marks its limit, and which might be summarized as follows: outside of community, there is no experience), he was in the end, in the face of the “immense failure” of political, religious, and military history, able to oppose only a *subjective* sovereignty of lovers and of the artist—and with this, also the exception of darting “heterogenous” flashes cleanly split from the “homogenous” order of society, with which they do not communicate. In parallel fashion, without wanting to and without thematizing it, he arrived at an almost pure opposition between “desirable” *equality* and an imperious and capricious *freedom* quite like sovereignty, with which in fact it could be confused.¹⁶ It could never really be a question, for example, of freedom desiring desirable equality. That is, it was not a question of a community that would open up, in and of itself, at the heart of being-in-common, the areality of an ecstasy.

Bataille had nonetheless written, much earlier (before 1945 in any case):

I can imagine a community with as loose a form as you will—even formless: the only condition is that an experience of moral freedom be shared in common, and not reduced to the flat, self-cancelling, self-denying meaning of particular freedom. (*O.C.* 6:252)

He also wrote:

There can be no knowledge without a community of researchers, nor any inner experience without the community of those who live it. . . . Communication is a fact that is not in any way added onto human reality, but rather constitutes it. (*O.C.* 5:37)

(These lines follow a quotation from Heidegger, and the term "human reality" repeats Corbin's translation of *Dasein* as "*réalité humaine*.")

And yet, in a paradoxical but apparently ineluctable way, the theme of community grows indistinct in his writings from the period of *La Souveraineté*. At a profound level, the problematic no doubt remains the same as in the earlier texts. But it is as though the communication of each being with NOTHING were beginning to prevail over the communication between beings, or as if it were necessary to give up trying to show that in both cases it was a question of *the same thing*.

It is as though Bataille, despite the constancy of his concern and intentions, was led nonetheless to endure the extremity of the distressed world in which he lived—this world at war, torn apart by an atrocious negation of community and a mortal conflagration of ecstasy. In this severe affliction he no longer saw any face, any schema, or even any simple point of reference for community, now that the figures of religious or mystical communities belonged to the past and the too human face of communism had crumbled.

In a certain way, this world is still our world, and the hasty variations, often rough drafts, always heavily humanistic, that have been sketched out around the theme of community since the war have not changed the essential givens, and may in fact have aggravated them. The emergence and our increasing consciousness of decolonized communities has not profoundly modified this state of affairs, nor has today's growth of unprecedented forms of being-in-common—through channels of information as well as through what is called the "multiracial society"—triggered any genuine renewal of the question of community.

But if this world, even though it has changed (and Bataille, among others, was no stranger to the change), proposes no new figure of community, perhaps this in itself teaches us something. We stand perhaps to learn from this that it can no longer be a matter of figuring or modeling a communitarian essence in order to present it to ourselves and to celebrate it, but that it is a matter rather of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still *unheard* demand, beyond communitarian models or remodelings.

Moreover, this world no longer even refers back to the closure of communist humanism that Bataille was analyzing. It refers to a "totalitarianism" that Bataille could never have suspected as such, limited as he was by the conditions of the cold war and haunted as he was by the obscure but persistent idea that in spite of everything the promise of community lay in the direction of communism. But for us, by now beyond even the "totalitarianism" that was to be the monstrous realization of this promise,

there remains only the play of imperialisms against the background of still another empire, or another techno-economical imperative, and the social forms that such an imperative creates. It is no longer even a question of community. But this is also because the techno-economical organization or "making operational" of our world has taken over, even inherited, the plans for a communitarian organization. It is still essentially a matter of work, of operation or operativity.

It is in this sense that the exigency of community is still unheard and remains to be discovered and thought. We know at least that the very terms of the promise of communitarian work already, in themselves, missed the unheard "meaning" of "community,"¹⁷ and that in sum *the communitarian project as such participates in the "immense failure."*

We know this in part thanks to Bataille—but we must henceforth also know it in part against him. But this time it is not a question of measuring our experience against the different experience of Bataille's time, but rather against a limit we must ultimately acknowledge, a limit that prescribed the difficulty and the paradox at which his thinking came to a halt. This limit is itself the paradox: namely, the paradox of a thinking magnetically attracted toward community and yet governed by the theme of the sovereignty of a *subject*. For Bataille, as for us all, a thinking of the subject thwarts a thinking of community.

Of course, the word "subject" in Bataille's text might be no more than a word. And, no doubt, the concept he had of it was neither the ordinary notion of "subjectivity" nor the metaphysical concept of a self-presence as the *subjectum* of representation. In *Inner Experience*, indeed, he defines it thus: "Oneself is not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of the subject and the object" (*O.C.* 5:21). This will not prevent him, in *La Souveraineté*, from speaking, for example, of "that instantaneous *jouissance* from which proceeds the subject's presence of itself" (*O.C.* 8:395). The first of these sentences does not suffice to correct or complicate the second in a way that is commensurate with what is at stake. The "place of communication" can in the last analysis still be determined as presence-to-self: for example, as the presence-to-self of communication itself, something that would find an echo in certain ideologies of communication. What is more, the equivalence between this place and a "fusion of the subject and the object"—as if there were never communication between subject and object—leads Bataille back to the core of a constant thematic in speculative idealism. With "object" and "fusion," with "the object of consciousness" becoming "the object of self consciousness, that is to say an object also suppressed as object, as concept,"¹⁸ what disappears, or rather *what cannot appear* is both the *other* and *communication*. For the other of a communication becomes the object of a

subject—even and perhaps especially as “suppressed object or concept”—as in the Hegelian relation between consciousnesses (unless one undertakes, with Bataille and beyond him, a reading that strains the text). This other is no longer an other, but an object of a subject’s representation (or, in a more complicated way, the representative object of another subject for the subject’s representation). Communication and the alterity that is its condition can, in principle, have only an instrumental and not an ontological role and status in a thinking that views the subject as the negative but specular identity of the object, that is, as an exteriority without alterity. The subject cannot be outside itself: this is even what ultimately defines it—that its outside and all its “alienations” or “extraneousness” should in the end be suppressed by and *sublated* in it. It is altogether different with the being of communication. The being-communicating (and not the subject-representing), or if one wants to risk saying it, communication as the predicament of being, as “transcendental,” is above all *being-outside-itself*.

The “Hegelianism without reserve” that Derrida finds in Bataille¹⁹ cannot not be subject, in the end, to the Hegelian law of a reserve always more powerful than any abandonment of reserve; a reserve that is in fact the *sublation* of the Subject reappropriating itself in presence—this is its *jouissance*, and its *instant*—until it attains to sovereignty, NOTHING, and community.

Properly speaking, Bataille had no *concept* of the subject. But, at least up to a certain point, he allowed the communication exceeding the subject to relate back to a subject, or to institute *itself* as subject (for example—at least this is a hypothesis that will have to be examined as contradicting the one that I will treat later in regard to Bataille’s writing—as subject of the literary production and communication of Bataille’s own texts).

The historical and the theoretical limits are intertwined. It is not surprising that *at this limit* the only thing to respond to the communal obsession was an accursed isolation of lovers and of the artist. The sole answer, in a tragic mode, to the haunting experience of a communality that had just proven to lead directly to works of death. Bataille’s lovers are also, at the limit, a subject and an object—where the subject, moreover, is always the man, and the object always the woman, due no doubt to a very classical manipulation of sexual difference into an appropriation of self by self. (However, on another register and in another reading of Bataille’s text, it is not certain that love and *jouissance* do not pertain essentially to the woman—and to the woman in man. To discuss this it would be necessary to consider Bataille’s writing [*écriture*]²⁰, something I cannot do here, inasmuch as I am for the moment considering only its “themes.”) Community could only obey an analogous model, and consequently, albeit simplifying a little, though barely, either a fascist or a communist model. Bataille must

have sensed this, and having sensed it he secretly, discretely, and even without knowing it himself, gave up the task of thinking community in the proper sense.

That is to say he gave up thinking the *sharing* [*partage*] of community and the sovereignty in the sharing or *shared sovereignty*, shared *between Daseins*, between singular existences that are not subjects and whose relation—the sharing itself—is not a communion, nor the appropriation of an object, nor a self-recognition, nor even a communication as this is understood to exist between subjects. But these singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced*, by the sharing that makes them *others*: other for one another, and other, infinitely other for the Subject of their fusion, which is engulfed in the sharing, in the ecstasy of the sharing: “communicating” by not “communing.” These “places of communication” are no longer places of fusion, even though in them one *passes* from one to the other; they are defined and exposed by their dislocation. Thus, the communication of sharing would be this very dis-location.

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In what would appear to be a dialectical move, I might say the following: Bataille thought nothing else but this very thing he gave up thinking. Which would mean that in the end he thought it *to the limit*—at and to its limit, and at the limit of his thought (and one never thinks anywhere else). And what he thus had to think at his limit is what he leaves for us to think in our turn.

In reality, my observations constitute neither a critique of nor a reservation about Bataille, but an attempt to communicate with his experience rather than simply draw from the stock of his knowledge or from his theses. This involved simply moving along a limit that is our own: his, mine, that of our time, that of our community. At the place where Bataille assigned the subject, at this place of the subject—or on its reverse side—in place of communication and in the “place of communication,” *there is* indeed something, and not nothing: our limit lies in not really having a name for this “something” or for this “someone.” Is it even a question of having a true name for this singular being? This is a matter that can be raised only much later on. For the moment, let us say that in lieu of a name it is necessary to mobilize words, so as to set the limit of our thinking back in motion. What “there is” in place of communication is neither the subject nor communal being, but community and sharing.

But this still says nothing. Perhaps, in truth, there is nothing *to say*. Perhaps we should not seek a word or a concept for it, but rather recognize in the thought of community a theoretical excess (or more precisely, an

excess in relation to the theoretical) that would oblige us to adopt another *praxis* of discourse and community. But we should at least try to say this, because “language alone indicates, at the limit, the sovereign moment where it is no longer current.”²¹ Which means here that only a discourse of community, exhausting itself, can indicate to the community the sovereignty of its sharing (that is to say *neither present* to it nor *signify* to it its *communion*). An ethics and a politics of discourse and writing are evidently implied here. What such a discourse should or can be, how and by whom in society it should and can be held, indeed what holding such a discourse would call for in terms of the transformation, revolution, or resolution of that society (for example, who is writing here? where? for whom? a “philosopher,” a “book,” a “publishing house,” “readers”—are these suited, as such, to communication?): this is what we will have occasion to look into. This is nothing other than the question of *literary communism*, or at least of what I am trying to designate with this clumsy expression: something that would be the sharing of community in and by its writing, its literature. I shall come to this in the second part of the book.

From here on, our aim will be to approach this question with Bataille, because of Bataille—as well as others; but as you will have understood, it is not a question of producing a commentary on Bataille, nor a commentary on anyone: for community has still not been thought. Nor am I claiming, on the contrary, to forge alone the new discourse of community. Neither discourse nor isolation is what is at stake here. I am trying to indicate, at its limit, an experience—not, perhaps, an experience that we have, *but an experience that makes us be*. To say that community has not yet been thought is to say that it tries our thinking, and that it is not an object for it. And perhaps it does not have to become one.

In any case, what resists commentary in Bataille’s thought is what exceeded his thought and exceeds ours—and what for this reason demands our thought: the sharing of community, the mortal truth that we share and that shares us. Thus, what Bataille wrote of our relation to “the religious and royal edifice of the past” is valid of our relation to Bataille himself: “We can only go farther.”²² Nothing has yet been said: we must expose ourselves to what has gone unheard in community.

* * *

Sharing comes down to this: what community reveals to me, in presenting to me my birth and my death, is my existence outside myself. Which does not mean my existence reinvested in or by community, as if community were another subject that would sublate me, in a dialectical or communal mode. *Community does not sublate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition.* It is the community of finite

beings, and as such it is itself a *finite* community. In other words, not a limited community as opposed to an infinite or absolute community, but a community of finitude, because finitude “is” communitarian, and because finitude alone is communitarian.

Being-in-common does not mean a higher form of substance or subject taking charge of the limits of separate individualities. As an individual, I am closed off from all community, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the individual—if an absolutely individual being could ever exist—is infinite. The limit of the individual, fundamentally, does not concern it, it simply surrounds it (and escapes the logic of the limit I was describing above: but since one cannot escape this logic, because it resists and because it makes community resist, there is no individual).

However, the *singular being*, which is not the individual, is the finite being. What the thematic of individuation lacked, as it passed from a certain Romanticism to Schopenhauer and to Nietzsche,²³ was a consideration of singularity, to which it nonetheless came quite close. Individuation detaches closed off entities from a formless ground—whereas only communication, contagion, or communion constitute the being of individuals. But singularity does not proceed from such a detaching of clear forms or figures (nor from what is linked to this operation: the scene of form and ground, appearing [*l’apparaître*] linked to appearance [*l’apparence*] and the slippage of appearance into the aesthetizing nihilism in which individualism always culminates). Singularity perhaps does not *proceed* from anything. It is not a work resulting from an operation. There is no process of “singularization,” and singularity is neither extracted, nor produced, nor derived. Its birth does not take place *from out of* or as an *effect of*: on the contrary, it provides the measure according to which *birth*, as such, is neither a production nor a self-positioning, the measure according to which the infinite birth of finitude is not a process that emerges from a ground (*fond*) or from a fund (*fonds*) of some kind. The “ground” is itself, through itself and as such, *already* the finitude of singularities.

It is a groundless “ground,” less in the sense that it opens up the gaping chasm of an abyss than that it is made up only of the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities: *Ungrund* rather than *Abgrund*, but no less vertiginous. There is nothing *behind* singularity—but there is, outside it and in it, the immaterial *and* material space that distributes it and shares it out as singularity, distributes and shares the confines of other singularities, or even more exactly distributes and shares the confines of singularity—which is to say of alterity—between it and itself.

A singular being does not emerge or rise up against the background of a chaotic, undifferentiated identity of beings, or against the background of their unitary assumption, or that of a becoming, or that of a will. A

singular being *appears*, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, at the confines of the *same* singularity that is, as such, always *other*, always shared, always exposed. This appearing (*apparaître*) is not an appearance (*apparence*); it is on the contrary the at once glorious and destitute appearing (*paraître*) of being-finite itself. (The “ground” is the finitude of Being: it is what Bataille was not entirely in a position to understand in Heidegger—and it is why Heidegger, with or without a reading of Bataille, was never quite in a position to be troubled by “communication.”) The essence of Being as being-finite is inscribed by finitude a priori as the sharing of singularities.

Community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is, therefore, what might be called, in a rather inappropriate idiom, an originary or ontological “sociality” that in its principle extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social being (the *zoon politikon* is secondary to this community). For, on the one hand, it is not obvious that the community of singularities is limited to “man” and excludes, for example, the “animal” (even in the case of “man” it is not a fortiori certain that this community concerns only “man” and not also the “inhuman” or the “superhuman,” or, for example, if I may say so with and without a certain *Witz*, “woman”: after all, the difference between the sexes is itself a singularity in the difference of singularities). On the other hand, if social being is always posited as a predicate of man, community would signify on the contrary the basis for thinking only something like “man.” But this thinking would at the same time remain dependent upon a principal determination of community, namely, that there is no communion of singularities in a totality superior to them and immanent to their common being.

In place of such a communion, there is communication. Which is to say, in very precise terms, that finitude itself *is* nothing; it is neither a ground, nor an essence, nor a substance. But it appears, it presents itself, it exposes itself, and thus it *exists* as communication. In order to designate this singular mode of appearing, this specific phenomenality, which is no doubt more originary than any other (for it could be that the world appears to the community, not to the individual), we would need to be able to say that finitude *co-appears* or *compears* (*com-parait*) and can only *compear*: in this formulation we would need to hear that finite being always presents itself “together,” hence severally; for finitude always presents itself in being-in-common and as this being itself, and it always presents itself at a *hearing* and before the judgment of the law of community, or, more originarily, before the judgment of community as law.

Communication consists before all else in this sharing and in this compearance (*com-parution*) of finitude: that is, in the dislocation and in the interpellation that reveal themselves to be constitutive of being-in-common—precisely inasmuch as being-in-common is not a common being. The finite-being exists first of all according to a division of sites, according to an extension—*partes extra partes*—such that each singularity is extended (in the sense that Freud says: “The psyche is extended”). It is not enclosed in a form—although its whole being touches against its singular limit—but it is what it is, singular being (singularity of being), only through its extension, through the areality that above all extroverts it in its very being—whatever the degree or the desire of its “egoism”—and that makes it exist only by *exposing it to an outside*. This outside is in its turn nothing other than the exposition of another areality, of another singularity—the same other. This exposure, or this exposing-sharing, gives rise, from the outset, to a mutual interpellation of singularities prior to any address in language (though it gives to this latter its first condition of possibility).²⁴ Finitude compears, that is to say it is exposed: such is the essence of community.

Under these conditions, communication is not a bond. The metaphor of the “social bond” unhappily superimposes upon “subjects” (that is to say, objects) a hypothetical reality (that of the “bond”) upon which some have attempted to confer a dubious “intersubjective” nature that would have the virtue of attaching these objects to one another. This would be the economic link or the bond of recognition. But compearance is of a more originary order than that of the bond. It does not set itself up, it does not establish itself, it does not emerge among already given subjects (objects). It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us)—a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition. What is exposed in compearance is the following, and we must learn to read it in all its possible combinations: “you (are/and/is) (entirely other than) I” (“*toi [e(s)] [tout autre que] moi*”). Or again, more simply: *you shares me* (“*toi partage moi*”).

Only in this communication are singular beings given—without a bond *and* without communion, equally distant from any notion of connection or joining from the outside and from any notion of a common and fusional interiority. Communication is the constitutive fact of an exposition to the outside that defines singularity. In its being, as its very being, singularity is exposed to the outside. By virtue of this position or this primordial structure, it is at once detached, distinguished, and communitarian. Community is the presentation of the detachment (or retrenchment) of this distinction that is not individuation, but finitude compearing.

(Rousseau was the first to conceive of this: in his thinking, society comes about as the bond *and* as the separation between those who, in “the state

of nature," being without any bond, are nonetheless not separated or isolated. The "societal" state exposes them to separation, but this is how it exposes "man," and how it exposes him to the judgment of his fellows. Rousseau is indeed in every sense the thinker par excellence of compearance: it may be that a paranoiac obsession is merely the reverse side—morbidity because detained in subjectivity—of the communitarian assignation.)

What makes singularities communicate is not to be confused with what Bataille calls their lacerations. True, what tears apart is the presentation of finitude in and by community—the presentation of the triple mourning I must go through: that of the death of the other, that of my birth, and that of my death. Community is the carrying out of this triple mourning (I would not go so far as to say that it is the "work" of this triple mourning, or in any case it is not simply this: there is something broader and less productive to the carrying through of mourning). What is lacerated in this way is not the singular being: on the contrary, this is where the singular being compears. Rather, it is the communal fabric, it is immanence that is lacerated. And yet this laceration does not happen *to* anything, for this fabric does not exist. There is no tissue, no flesh, no subject or substance of common being, and consequently there is no laceration of this being. But there *is* sharing out.

Properly speaking, there is no laceration of the singular being: there is no open cut in which the inside would get lost in the outside (which would presuppose an initial "inside," an interiority). The laceration that, for Bataille, is exemplary, the woman's "breach," is ultimately not a laceration. It remains, obstinately, and in its most intimate folds, the surface exposed to the outside. (While the obsession with the breach in Bataille's text indeed indicates something of the unbearable extremity at which communication comes into play, it also betrays an involuntarily metaphysical reference to an order of interiority and immanence, and to a condition involving the passage of one being into another, rather than the passage of one through the exposed limit of the other.)

"Laceration" consists only in exposure: the entire "inside" of the singular being is exposed to the "outside" (and it is thus that the woman serves as an example, or limit—which is the same thing here—of community). There is laceration of nothing, with nothing; there is rather compearance before NOTHING (and, before NOTHING, one can only compear). Once again, neither being nor community is lacerated: the being of community *is* the exposure of singularities.

The open mouth is not a laceration either. It exposes to the "outside" an "inside" that, without this exposition, would not exist. Words do not "come out" of the throat (nor from the "mind" "in" the head): they are formed in the mouth's articulation. This is why speech—including silence—

is not a *means* of communication but communication itself, an exposure (similar to the way the Inuit Eskimos sing by making their own cries resonate in the open mouth of a partner). The speaking mouth does not transmit, does not inform, does not effect any bond; it is—perhaps, though taken *at its limit*, as with the kiss—the beating of a singular site against other singular sites: "I speak, and from then on I am—the being in me is—outside myself and in myself." (O.C. 8:197)

No doubt the Hegelian desire for recognition is already operative here. Nevertheless, before recognition, there is knowing: knowing without knowledge, and without "consciousness," that *I* am first of all exposed to the other, and exposed to the exposure of the other. *Ego sum expositus*: on closer inspection one might discern here a paradox, namely that behind Cartesian *évidence*—that *évidence* so certain that the subject cannot not have it and that it need not be proven in any way—there must lie not some nocturnal bedazzlement of the *ego*, not some existential immanence of a self-affection, but solely community—the community about which Descartes seems to know so little, or nothing at all. In this respect the Cartesian subject would form the inverse figure of the experience of community and of singularity. The Cartesian subject knows himself to be exposed, and he knows himself because he is exposed (does not Descartes present himself as his own portrait?).²⁵

* * *

This is why community cannot arise from the domain of *work*. One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude. Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects). Products derived from operations of this kind, however grandiose they might seek to be and sometimes manage to be, have no more communitarian existence than the plaster busts of Marianne.

Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called "unworking," referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension. Community is made of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings *are*. Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works, just as communication is not a work or even an operation of singular beings, for community is simply their being—their being suspended upon its limit. Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional.²⁶

The unworking of community takes place around what Bataille for a very long time called the sacred. Yet he came around to saying, "What I earlier called the sacred, a name that is perhaps purely pedantic . . . is fundamentally nothing other than the unleashing of passions" (*O.C.* 7:371).

If this "unleashing of passions" is only partially represented by the violent and unbridled movement of a free subjectivity disposed toward the sovereign destruction of all *things* as toward its consumption in NOTHING, and even though as a characterization of the sacred it fails to illuminate the community through which passion is unleashed, it nevertheless remains the direction always privileged by Bataille. It furnishes, as *Erotism* puts it, the "awful sign" by which our impossible truth might be recognized, at least from afar. But it is not at all sure that this privilege is not itself submitted to an ultimate reserve (or sublation) of the Subject: the sovereignly subjective annihilation of subjectivity itself. A kind of incandescent nihilism carries the subject to its point of fusion. This still recalls Hegel, and yet it is no longer Hegel. It is no longer the State, but it is still a work of death. Bataille sees its fascinating aspect in Sade, who proposed community as the republic of crime. But the republic of crime must also be the republic of the suicide of criminals, and down to the last among them—the sacrifice of the sacrificers unleashed in passion. Thus, even though Bataille very often affirmed a community founded in sacred separation, separation representing the rupture of passion, he was nonetheless led (because he felt all too strongly the at once liberating and overwhelming exigency of communication) to recognize in community, to the contrary, Sade's limit: the phrase "I speak, and from then on I am . . . outside myself and in myself" is the phrase that decides irrevocably and fundamentally Bataille's refutation of Sade's "crude error," which he states as follows: "The world is not, as Sade ultimately represented it, composed of himself and things" (*O.C.* 8:297).

Hence, if the inoperative community is to be found in the vicinity of the "sacred," it is only inasmuch as the "unleashing of passions" is not the free doing of a subjectivity and freedom is not self-sufficiency. (Up to a certain point, Bataille failed to recognize to what extent a very classical and very subjective concept of freedom weighed on his thought.) But the "unleashing of passions" is of the order of what Bataille himself often designated as "*contagion*," another name for "communication." What is communicated, what is contagious, and what, in this manner—and only in this manner—is "unleashed," is the *passion* of singularity as such. The singular being, because it is singular, is in the passion—the passivity, the suffering, and the excess—of sharing its singularity. The presence of the other does not constitute a boundary that would limit the unleashing of "my" passions: on the contrary, only exposition to the other unleashes my

passions. Whereas the individual can know another individual, juxtaposed to him both as identical to him and as a thing—as the identity of a thing—the singular being does not know, but rather experiences his *like* (*son semblable*): "Being is never me alone, it is always *me and those like me*" (*O.C.* 8:297). This is its passion. Singularity is the passion of being.

The like-being bears the revelation of sharing: he or she does not resemble me as a portrait resembles an original. It was this type of resemblance that constituted the initial given of the classic and tortuous problematic (or *impasse*) of the "recognition of the other" (supposedly opposed to the "knowledge of the thing"). And one has to ask whether, above and beyond the Husserlian alter ego, one might not still pick up traces of this problematic and this *impasse* in Freud, Heidegger, and Bataille, restraining thought, as it were, at the threshold of community, in a certain specularly of the recognition of the other through death. However, it is in the death of the other, as I have said, that community enjoins me to its ownmost register, but this does not occur through the mediation of specular recognition. For *I* do not recognize *myself* in the death of the other—whose limit nonetheless exposes me irreversibly.

Heidegger leads us farthest here: "The dying of Others is not something that we experience in an authentic sense; at most we are always just "there-alongside." . . . By its very essence, death is in every case mine."²⁷ Here, the specular arrangement (of recognition of the self in the other, which presupposes the recognition of the other in oneself, and, consequently, the agency of the subject) is—if I may say so—turned inside out like a glove: I recognize that in the death of the other there is nothing recognizable. And this is how sharing—and finitude—can be inscribed: "The ending implied in death does not signify a *Dasein's* Being-at-an-end, but a *Being-toward-the-end* of this entity."²⁸ The similitude of the like-being is made in the encounter of "beings toward the end" that this end, *their* end, in each case "mine" (or "yours"), *assimilates and separates in the same limit*, at which or on which they compear.

A like-being resembles me in that I myself "resemble" him: we "resemble" together, if you will. That is to say, there is no original or origin of identity. What holds the place of an "origin" is the sharing of singularities. This means that this "origin"—the origin of community or the originary community—is nothing other than the limit: the origin is the tracing of the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed. We are alike because each one of us is exposed to the outside that *we are for ourselves*. The like is not the same (*le semblable n'est pas le pareil*). I do not rediscover *myself*, nor do I recognize *myself* in the other: I experience the other's alterity, or I experience alterity in the other together with the alteration that "in me" sets my singularity outside me and infinitely delimits

it. Community is that singular ontological order in which the other and the same are alike (*sont le semblable*): that is to say, in the sharing of identity.

The passion that is unleashed is nothing other than the passion of and for community, and this passion emerges as the desubjectivization of the passion for death—that is, as its reversal: for it does not seek *jouissance*, being neither the Hegelian desire for recognition, nor the calculated operation of mastery.²⁹ It does not seek the self-appropriation of subjective immanence. Rather, it is what is designated by the doublet of the word “*jouissance*,” namely joy (*joie*). The practice of “joy before death” that Bataille tried to describe is a ravishing of the singular being that does not cross over into death (it is not the joy of resurrection, which is the subject’s most inward mediation; it is not a triumph; it is a splendor—this is the etymological meaning of the word “joy”—though it is a nocturnal splendor), but rather attains, to the point of touching but without appropriating it to itself, the extreme point of its singularity, the end of its finitude; that is to say the confines upon which compearance with and before the other occurs, without respite. Joy is possible, it has meaning and existence, only through community and as its communication.

* * *

What is currently in the air—if one is speaking of collective existence—is the poorest thing one can imagine, and no representation can be more disconcerting than one that presents death as the fundamental object of the *communal* activity of men, death and not food or the production of the means of production. . . . What is tragically religious in the existence of a community, in formal embrace with death, has become the thing the most alien to man. No one thinks any longer that the reality of a common life—which is to say, human existence—depends on the sharing of nocturnal terrors and the kind of ecstatic spasms that are spread by death. . . .

THE EMOTIONAL ELEMENT WHICH GIVES AN OBSESSIVE VALUE TO COMMUNAL EXISTENCE IS DEATH.³⁰

* * *

Yet just as we must not think that community is “lost”—just as Bataille himself had to tear himself away from this mode of thinking—so it would be foolish to comment upon and to deplore the “loss” of the sacred only then to advocate its return as a remedy for the evils of our society (something Bataille never did, following in this Nietzsche’s most profound exigency—nor did Benjamin, nor Heidegger nor Blanchot, in spite of certain appearances to the contrary here and there). What has disappeared from the

sacred—and this means finally *all* of the sacred, engulfed in the “immense failure”—reveals rather that community itself now occupies the place of the sacred. Community is the sacred, if you will: but the sacred stripped of the sacred. For the sacred—the separated, the set apart—no longer proves to be the haunting idea of an unattainable communion, but is rather made up of nothing other than the sharing of community. There is neither an entity nor a sacred hypostasis of community—there is the “unleashing of passions,” the sharing of singular beings, and the communication of finitude. In passing to its limit, finitude passes “from” the one “to” the other: this passage makes up the sharing.

Moreover, there is no entity or hypostasis of community because this sharing, this passage cannot be completed. Incompletion is its “principle,” taking the term “incompletion” in an active sense, however, as designating not insufficiency or lack, but the activity of sharing, the dynamic, if you will, of an uninterrupted passage through singular ruptures. That is to say, once again, a workless and inoperative activity. It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a community; nor is it a matter of venerating or fearing within it a sacred power—it is a matter of incompleting its sharing. Sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompletion. For a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared.

Community is given to us with being and as being, well in advance of all our projects, desires, and undertakings. At bottom, it is impossible for us to lose community. A society may be as little communitarian as possible; it could not happen that in the social desert there would not be, however slight, even inaccessible, some community. We cannot not compear. Only the fascist masses tend to annihilate community in the delirium of an incarnated communion. Symmetrically, the concentration camp—and the extermination camp, the camp of exterminating concentration—is in essence the will to destroy community. But even in the camp itself, undoubtedly, community never entirely ceases to resist this will. Community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence. Consequently, community is transcendence: but “transcendence,” which no longer has any “sacred” meaning, signifying precisely a resistance to immanence (resistance to the communion of everyone or to the exclusive passion of one or several: to all the forms and all the violences of subjectivity).³¹

Community is given to us—or we are given and abandoned to the community: a gift to be renewed and communicated, it is not a work to be done or produced. But it is a task, which is different—an infinite task at the heart of finitude.³² (A task and a struggle, one that Marx grasped and Bataille understood. The imperative of the struggle, not to be confused with a “communist” teleology, intervenes at the level of communication, as when Lyotard, for example, speaks of the “absolute wrong” done to

the one who is exploited and who does not even have the language to express the wrong done to him,³³ but also—and fundamentally the stakes are no doubt the same—the imperative emerges at the level of the incommensurable “literary” communication of which I will be speaking.)

* * *

For Bataille, community was first and finally the community of lovers.³⁴ Joy is the joy of lovers. This conclusion, if it is one, is ambiguous. As I have already said, in the face of society, Bataille’s lovers present in many respects the figure of a communion, or of a subject that, if not precisely Sadian, nonetheless ends up being engulfed alone in its own ecstasy. To this extent, Bataille’s celebration of lovers, or what one might call his passion for lovers, reveals the inaccessible character both of their own community and of another community, one shared not by one couple, but by all couples and all the love in a society. As either one of these figures, lovers in Bataille thus represent, aside from themselves and their joy, the despair of “the” community and of the political.³⁵ Ultimately, it is possible that these lovers remain trapped in the opposition of the “private” and the “public”—in principle so foreign to Bataille, and yet perhaps insidiously recurrent in his texts precisely insofar as love seems to expose, in the end, the whole truth of community, but only by opposing it to every other plural, social, or collective relation—unless, and this comes down to the same thing, love is opposed fundamentally to itself, its own communion being inaccessible to it (according to a tragic dialectic of love conceived on the ground of immanence and visibly connected to the thinking of the political that works from the same ground). Thus, love would seem to expose what “real” communism renounced, and that for the sake of which this communism had to be renounced, but it would thereby leave social community with only the exteriority of things, of production, and of exploitation.

In spite of Bataille, and yet with him, we should try to say the following: love does not expose the entire community, it does not capture or effect its essence purely and simply—not even as the impossible itself (this model would still be Christian and Hegelian, although minus the assumption of love into the objectivity of the State). The kiss, in spite of everything, is not speech. Of course, lovers speak. But their speech is ultimately impotent, excessive in that it is excessively poor, a speech in which love is already mired: “Lovers speak, and their overwhelmed words deflate and inflate at the same time the sentiment that moves them. For they transfer into duration something whose truth holds for the instant of a flash” (*O.C.* 8:500). In the City, on the other hand, men do not embrace. The religious or political symbolism of the kiss of peace and of the accolade indeed indicates some-

thing, but merely a limit, and most often a comical one. (Nevertheless, social speech—cultural, political, and the like—seems as impoverished as that of lovers. It is at this point that we should revive the question of “literature.”)

Lovers form neither a society, nor its negative, nor its assumption, and it is indeed in their distance from society in general that Bataille conceives them: “I can conceive of man as open since the most ancient times to the possibility of individual love. I need only imagine the subtle relaxing of the social bond” (*O.C.* 8:496). Nevertheless, he also represented them as a society, as another society, one that harbors the impossible and communal truth that simple society despairs of attaining: “Love unites lovers only in order to expend, to go from pleasure to pleasure, from delight to delight: their society is one of consumption, the inverse of the State’s, which is one of acquisition” (*O.C.* 8:140). The word “society” here is not—not only, in any case—a metaphor. It sounds a belated echo (1951), as if stifled or resigned, of the motif of a society of festival, of expenditure, one of sacrifice and glory. As if the lovers had preserved this motif, rescuing it in extremis from the immense failure of the politico-religious, and thus offering love as a refuge or substitute for lost community.

Now, just as community is not “lost,” so there is doubtless no “society of consumption.” There are not two societies, nor is there a more or less sacred ideal of society in community. *In* society, on the other hand, in every society and at every moment, “community” is in fact nothing other than a consumption of the social bond or fabric—but a consumption that occurs in this bond, and in accordance with the sharing of the finitude of singular beings. Thus lovers are neither a society, nor *the* community effected through fusional communion. If lovers harbor a truth of the social relation, it is neither at a distance from nor above society, but rather in that, as lovers, they are exposed in the community. They are not the communion that is refused to or purloined from society; on the contrary, they expose the fact that communication is not communion.

And yet in the Batailleian representation of lovers, indebted as it is in this respect to a long tradition—perhaps the entire Western tradition of amorous passion, but since Romanticism at least clearly in confrontation with and opposition to the collapse of the politico-religious—communion remains a muted but obsessive theme. The sovereignty of lovers is no doubt nothing other than the ecstasy of the instant; it does not *produce a union*, it is *NOTHING*—but this nothing itself is also, in its “consummation,” a communion.

Bataille knew, however, the limit of love—opposing it, at least at certain moments, and by a paradoxical reversal, to the sovereign capacity of the City:

The mortal individual is nothing and the paradox of love would keep him limited to the lie that the individual is. For us, only the State (the City) assumes by right a meaning beyond the individual, it alone holds the sovereign truth that neither death nor the error of private interest can alter. (*O.C.* 8:497)

But immediately after this, Bataille comes back to the impotence in which the State nonetheless finds itself (today, at least, he says in a still nostalgic logic) when it comes to giving “the *totality* of the world,” which must therefore finally be considered as accessible only in love. Lost totality, or totality accomplished in the lie of the individual: there is no way out of the circle of disenchantment.

It should be possible to think otherwise. Not in terms merely of an ultimately successful access to this “totality” (which serves here as another name for immanence or the Subject), but according to another articulation both of love and of community.

The death of lovers, indeed, exposes them, both between themselves as well as outside of themselves, to community. The acknowledged limit of love is not an external limit—it is not, as Bataille seems to think, the limit of the “private” and deceitful insufficiency of the “individual”: it is rather the sharing of community precisely inasmuch as the individual also passes through love, and precisely because he exposes himself to it. Love does not *complete* community (neither against the City, nor outside of it, nor on its fringes): in that case it would be its work, or it would put it to work. On the contrary, love, provided it is not itself conceived on the basis of the politico-subjective model of communion in one, exposes the unworking and therefore the incessant *incompletion* of community. It exposes community *at its limit*.

Lovers form the extreme though not external limit of community. They are poised at the extremity of sharing (and the extremity of sharing is perhaps lodged in its midst rather than at its outer edge, which moreover does not exist). The “unleashing of passions” confronts lovers with community not because it would place them at a simple remove from community (there is occasionally in Bataille something of this facile view: accursed lovers, censored passion . . .), but rather because lovers expose to the community, in its midst, and in sum even unto it, the extremity of compearance. For their singularities share and split them, or share and split each other, in the instant of their coupling. Lovers expose, at the limit, the exposition of singular beings to one another and the pulse of this exposition: the compearance, the passage, and the divide of sharing. In them, or between them—this is exactly the same thing—ecstasy, joy *touches* its limit. Lovers touch each other, unlike fellow citizens (unless, once again, in the delirium

of a fanaticized mass or in the piling up of exterminated bodies—wherever it is a matter of a work). This banal and fairly ridiculous truth means that touching—immanence not attained but close, as though promised (no longer speech, nor gaze)—is the limit.

Touching the limit—which is the possibility of touch itself—the lovers, however, defer it: except in the case of a common suicide, an old myth and an old desire that abolishes limit and touch at the same time. Joy self-defers. Lovers know joy in drowning in the instant of intimacy, but because this foundering is also their sharing and dividing since it is neither death nor communion—but joy—even *this in its turn is a singularity that exposes itself to the outside*. In the instant, the lovers are shared, their singular beings—which constitute neither an identity nor an individual, which effect nothing—share each other, and the singularity of their love is exposed to community. Community in turn compears: for example in literary communication.

But this is not an example: “literature” does not designate here what this word ordinarily indicates. What is in fact involved is the following: that there is an *inscription* of the communitarian exposition, and that this exposition, as such, can *only* be inscribed, or can be offered only by way of an inscription.

It is not only, or even primarily, a matter of amorous or “literary” literature here, but solely of the unworking of literature—all unworked “communication,” literary as well as philosophical, scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and political. This communication would be the inverse of lovers’ discourse such as Bataille presents it, and in this respect, at least, one would have to call it, if not “literature,” then “writing.” While lovers’ speech seeks a duration for their joy that joy eludes, “writing,” in this sense, would on the contrary *inscribe* the collective and social duration of time in the instant of communication, in the sharing. “Literary communism” would be the sharing of the sovereignty that lovers, in their passion, expose to the outside rather than produce: they expose it first of all to themselves, to their singular beings, but as singular beings these beings already, as soon as the lovers embrace, compear in and before an entire community. Be it for them or for the community, in love or in writing, this does not occur without anguish—nor without joy. But ecstasy comes at a price: at the risk of being nothing more than an erotic or fascist work of death, ecstasy passes through the inscription of finitude and its communication. Which is to say that it also presupposes, necessarily, *works* (literary, political, etc.). But what is inscribed, and what passes to the limit in inscribing itself, exposes and communicates itself (instead of trying to accomplish a meaning, like speech): what is shared is the unworking of works.

Lovers expose above all the unworking of community. Unworking is what they show in their communal aspect and intimacy. But they expose it *to* the community, which already *shares their intimacy*. For the community, lovers are on its limit, they are outside and inside, and at this limit they have no meaning without the community and without the communication of writing: this is where they assume their senseless meaning. Reciprocally, it is the community that presents to them, in their very love, their singularities, their births, and their deaths. Their births and their deaths escape them, although their joy touches these for an instant. In the same way, the birth of their child, should it take place, escapes them: this birth occurs as a sharing of another singularity, which does not amount to the production of a work. The child might well be a love child, but it is not love's work, it is not, as Hegel would have it, "a seed of immortality, a seed of what develops and produces itself from out of itself," "suppressing (sublating) all distinction between the lovers." When the infant appears, it has already compeared. It does not complete the love, it shares it again, making it pass again into communication and exposing it again to community.³⁶

This does not mean that, beyond or above the lovers, there would be a City or a State in possession of their truth: there is nothing to possess here, and what communication writes, what writing communicates, is in no way a truth possessed, appropriated or transmitted—even though it is, absolutely, the truth of being-in-common.

There is community, there is sharing, and there is the exposition of this limit. Community does not lie beyond the lovers, it does not form a larger circle within which they are contained: it traverses them, in a tremor of "writing" wherein the literary work mingles with the most simple public exchange of speech. Without such a trait traversing the kiss, sharing it, the kiss is itself as despairing as community is abolished.

* * *

The political, if this word may serve to designate not the organization of society but the disposition of community as such, the destination of its sharing, must not be the assumption or the work of love or of death. It need neither find, nor regain, nor effect a communion taken to be lost or still to come. If the political is not dissolved in the sociotechnical element of forces and needs (in which, in effect, it seems to be dissolving under our eyes), it must inscribe the sharing of community. The outline of singularity would be "political"—as would be the outline of its communication and its ecstasy. "Political" would mean a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication, or destined to this unworking: a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing. To attain such a signification of the "political" does not depend, or in any case not simply,

on what is called a "political will." It implies being already engaged in the community, that is to say, undergoing, in whatever manner, the experience of community as communication: it implies writing. We must not stop writing, or letting the singular outline of our being-in-common expose itself.

Not only will this have been written after Bataille, but also to him, just as he wrote to us—because one always writes *to*—communicating to us the anguish of community, writing from a solitude prior to any isolation, invoking a community that no society contains or precedes, even though every society is implied in it:

The reasons for writing a book can be brought back to the desire to modify the existing relations between a man and his fellow beings. These relations are judged unacceptable and are perceived as an atrocious misery. (O.C. 2:143)

Or else, it is community itself—though it *is* nothing, *it* is not a collective subject—that never stops, in writing, sharing itself.

The anguish which you do not *communicate* to your fellow being is in some way scorned and mistreated. It has only to the weakest extent the power to reflect the glory that comes from the depth of the heavens. (O.C. 5:444)

In *My Mother*, Hélène, the mother, writes to her son:

I admire myself for writing to you like this, and I marvel to think that my letter is worthy of you. (O.C. 4:260)

But this hand that writes is *dying*, and through this death promised to it, it escapes accepted limits by writing. (O.C. 3:12)

I would say, rather: it exposes these limits, it never passes beyond them, nor passes beyond community. But at every instant singular beings share their limits, share each other on their limits. They escape the relationships of society ("mother" and "son," "author" and "reader," "public figure" and "private figure," "producer" and "consumer"), but they are in community, and are unworked.

I have spoken of a community as existing: Nietzsche brought his affirmations to this, but remained alone. . . . The desire to communicate is born in me out of a feeling of community binding me to Nietzsche, and not out of an isolated originality. (O.C. 5:39)

We can only go farther.

Note: A first version of "La communauté désœuvrée" was published in the spring of 1983 in issue number 4 of *Aléa*, which editor Jean-Christophe Bailly had devoted to the theme of community. Preceding my text was

Bailly's minimal text, stating the title for the issue: "the community, the number." Already a text, already an act of writing, increasing in number, summoning writing.

At the end of the same year Maurice Blanchot's *La communauté inavouable* appeared. The first part of this book engaged "La communauté désoeuvrée," in order to "take up a reflection never in fact interrupted concerning the communist exigency" and "the flaw in language such words as *communism* or *community* seem to contain, if we sense that they carry something completely other than what could be *common* to those who would belong to a whole, to a group."

Nothing is more *common* to the members of a community, in principle, than a myth, or a group of myths. Myth and community are defined by each other, at least in part—but perhaps in totality—and this motivates a reflection on community according to myth.

A little later, from Berlin, Werner Hamacher asked me to contribute to a series of works devoted to the question of myth. This resulted in the first version of "Myth Interrupted." It soon became evident that this was simply another way of returning to Bataille's "communitarian" exigency, and of further prolonging Blanchot's "uninterrupted reflection."

This reflection cannot be interrupted—indeed, in this it is unlike myth. Reflection is the resistance and the insistence of community. Many other names should be added to those just mentioned. Their presence must be inferred, or rather what has been written under their names, intercalated here—a community *unavowable* because too *numerous* but also because it does not even know itself, and does not need to know itself—intercalated, alternating, shared texts, like all texts, offering what belongs to no one and returns to everyone: the community of writing, the writing of community.

Including—one day I will try to articulate this, I must—those who neither write nor read and those who have nothing in common. For in reality, there is no such person.

Translated by Peter Connor

Chapter 2 Myth Interrupted

We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story. We do not yet know whether these people gathered together form an assembly, if they are a horde or a tribe. But we call them brothers and sisters because they are gathered together and because they are listening to the same story.

We do not yet know whether the one speaking is from among them or if he is an outsider. We say that he is one of them, but different from them because he has the gift, or simply the right—or else it is his duty—to tell the story.

They were not assembled like this before the story; the recitation has gathered them together. Before, they were dispersed (at least this is what the story tells us at times), shoulder to shoulder, working with and confronting one another without recognizing one another. But one day, one of them stood still, or perhaps he turned up, as though returning from a long absence or a mysterious exile. He stopped at a particular place, to the side of but in view of the others, on a hillock or by a tree that had been struck by lightning, and he started the narrative that brought together the others.

He recounts to them their history, or his own, a story that they all know, but that he alone has the gift, the right, or the duty to tell. It is the story of their origin, of where they come from, or of how they come from the Origin itself—them, or their mates, or their names, or the authority figure among them. And so at the same time it is also the story of the beginning

of the world, of the beginning of their assembling together, or of the beginning of the narrative itself (and the narrative also recounts, on occasion, who taught the story to the teller, and how he came to have the gift, the right, or the duty to tell it).

He speaks, he recites, sometimes he sings, or he mimes. He is his own hero, and they, by turns, are the heroes of the tale and the ones who have the right to hear it and the duty to learn it. In the speech of the narrator, their language for the first time serves no other purpose than that of presenting the narrative and of keeping it going. It is no longer the language of their exchanges, but of their reunion—the sacred language of a foundation and an oath. The teller shares it with them and among them.

* * *

It is an ancient, immemorial scene, and it does not take place just once, but repeats itself indefinitely, with regularity, at every gathering of the hordes, who come to learn of their tribal origins, of their origins in brotherhoods, in peoples, or in cities—gathered around fires burning everywhere in the mists of time. And we do not yet know if the fires are lit to warm the people, to keep away wild beasts, to cook food, or to light up the face of the narrator so that he can be seen as he speaks, sings, or mimes the story (perhaps wearing a mask), or else to burn a sacrifice (perhaps with his own flesh) in honor of the ancestors, gods, beasts, or men and women celebrated in the story.

The story often seems confused; it is not always coherent; it speaks of strange powers and numerous metamorphoses; it is also cruel, savage, and pitiless, but at times it also provokes laughter. It names things unknown, beings never seen. But those who have gathered together understand everything, in listening they understand themselves and the world, and they understand why it was necessary for them to come together, and why it was necessary that this be recounted to them.

* * *

We know this scene well. More than one storyteller has told it to us,¹ having gathered us together in learned fraternities intent on knowing what our origins were. Our societies, they have told us, derive from these assemblies themselves, and our beliefs, our knowledge, our discourses, and our poems derive from these narratives.

They have called these narratives *myths*. The scene that we know so well is the scene of myth, the scene of its invention, of its recital and its transmission.

It is not just any scene: it is perhaps the essential scene of all scenes, of all scenography or all staging; it is perhaps the stage upon which we

represent everything to ourselves or whereupon we make appear all our representations, if myth, as Lévi-Strauss would have it, is primarily defined as that with which or in which time turns into space.² With myth, the passing of time takes shape, its ceaseless passing is fixed in an exemplary place of showing and revealing.

* * *

And so we also know that this scene is itself mythic.

And much more evidently so, it seems, when it is the scene of the very birth of myth, for this birth is identical with nothing less than the origin of human consciousness and speech—Freud himself, whom one might single out as the last inventor, or rather the last dramatist of this scene, declares it to be mythic.³ But the scene is equally mythic when it is simply the apparently less speculative, more positive scene of the transmission of myth, or when it is what one might call the ethnologico-metaphysical scene of a humanity structured in relation to its myths: for what is in question is always, definitively, the original or principal function of myth. Myth is of and from the origin, it relates back to a mythic foundation, and through this relation it finds itself (a consciousness, a people, a narrative).

It is this foundation that we know to be mythic. We now know that not only is any “reconstitution” of the initial surging forth of mythic power itself “a myth,” but also that mythology is our invention, and that myth as such is an “unlocatable genre.”⁴ We know—at least up to a certain point—what the contents of the myths are, but what we do not know is what the following might mean: *that they are myths*. Or rather, we know that although we did not invent the stories (here again, up to a certain point), we did on the other hand invent the function of the myths that these stories recount. Humanity represented on the stage of myth, humanity being born to itself in producing myth—a truly *mything* humanity becoming truly human in this *mythation*: this forms a scene just as fantastical as any primal scene. All myths are primal scenes, all primal scenes are myths (it is still Freud playing the role of inventor here). And we also know that the idea of a “*new mythology*,” the idea of moving on to a new, poetico-religious foundation, is contemporaneous with the invention or the modern reinvention of mythology in the romantic epoch. Romanticism itself could be defined as the invention of the scene of the founding myth, as the simultaneous awareness of the loss of the power of this myth, and as the desire or the will to regain this living power of the origin and, at the same time, the origin of this power. For Nietzsche, who is at least in part heir to this romantic desire for a “*new mythology*,” the freely creative power he likes to credit to the Greeks more than to anyone else stems from the “*mythic feeling of lying freely*”:⁵ the desire for myth is expressly directed

toward the mythic (fictive) nature of (creative) myth—romanticism, or the will to (the) power of myth.

This formulation in fact defines, beyond romanticism and even beyond romanticism in its Nietzschean form, a whole modernity: the whole of that very broad modernity embracing, in a strange, grimacing alliance, both the poetico-ethnological nostalgia for an initial *mything* humanity and the wish to regenerate the old European humanity by resurrecting its most ancient myths, including the relentless *staging* of these myths: I am referring, of course, to Nazi myth.⁶

We know all this: it is a knowledge that takes our breath away, leaving us speechless, as we always are when faced with humanity at such a point of extremity. We shall never return to the mythic humanity of the primal scene, no more than we shall ever recover what was signified by the word “humanity” before the fire of the Aryan myth. We know, moreover, that these two extremities are bound up with one another, that the invention of myth is bound up with the use of its power. This does not mean that from the nineteenth century onward thinkers of myth are responsible for Nazism, but it means that the thinking of myth, of mythic scenography, belongs with the staging and setting to work (*mise en oeuvre*) of a “Volk” and of a “Reich,” in the sense that Nazism gave to these terms. Myth, in fact, is always “popular” and “millenary”—at least according to our version, according to the version that our mythic thought gives of the thing called “myth” (for it may be that for others, for “primitives,” for example, this same thing is quite aristocratic and ephemeral).

In this sense, we no longer have anything to do with myth. I would be tempted to say we no longer even have the right to speak about it, to be interested in it. Comprised within the very idea of myth is what one might call the entire hallucination, or the entire imposture, of the self-consciousness of a modern world that has exhausted itself in the fabulous representation of its own power. Concentrated within the idea of myth is perhaps the entire pretension on the part of the West to appropriate its own origin, or to take away its secret, so that it can at last identify itself, absolutely, around its own pronouncement and its own birth. The idea of myth alone perhaps presents the very Idea of the West, with its perpetual representation of the compulsion to return to its own sources in order to re-engage itself from them as the very destiny of humanity. In this sense, I repeat, we no longer have anything to do with myth.

* * *

Unless this is, as often happens, the surest way to let that which we wanted to be done with proliferate and become even more threatening. It is perhaps not enough to know that myth is mythic. This knowledge is perhaps too

scant, and is perhaps even—this will have to be verified—strictly speaking already contained in myth. Perhaps this logic of myth still needs to be demonstrated in order to understand how it can lead to that extremity of myth’s knowledge of itself and in order to try to conceive what we might still have to do not with myth, but rather with the end to which myth inexorably seems to lead. For whether one laments that mythic power is exhausted or that the will to this power ends in crimes against humanity, everything leads us to a world in which mythic resources are profoundly lacking. To think our world in terms of this “lack” might well be an indispensable task.

Bataille named this state, to which we are doomed, *the absence of myth*. For reasons that I shall explain later, I will substitute for this the expression *the interruption* of myth. It is nonetheless true that “the absence of myth” (the “interruption” of which will designate rather its provenance and its modality) defines what it is we have arrived at, and what we are confronted with. But what is at stake in this confrontation is not simply an alternative between the absence of myth and its presence. If we suppose that “myth” designates, beyond the myths themselves, even beyond myth, something that cannot simply disappear, the stakes would then consist in myth’s passage to a limit and onto a limit where myth itself would be not so much suppressed as suspended or interrupted. This hypothesis perhaps says nothing more than what Bataille had in mind when he proposed considering the absence of myth itself as a myth. Before examining this statement more closely, one might say at least that it defines, on a formal level, an extremity, an interrupted myth, or a myth in the process of being interrupted.

* * *

We must try to proceed to the outermost bounds of this extremity; henceforth, we must try to perceive this interruption of myth. Once we have touched the blinding spot—*Blut und Boden, Nacht und Nebel*—of myth set to work (*mis en oeuvre*), all that remains is to move on to the interruption of myth. This is not the same thing as what has been called “demythologizing,” an activity that distinguishes between “myth” and “faith” and that depends, moreover, on the possibility of positing something like “faith,” while leaving untouched the essence of myth itself.⁷ The notion of interruption proceeds quite differently.

But before getting to this notion, and in order to get to it, we must first map out the terrain that leads to the extremity at which it is interrupted. What needs to be asked, then, is not what myth is (and who knows the answer to this question? Mythologists discuss it endlessly),⁸ but rather what is involved in what we have been calling “myth” and in what we have invested, with or without the support of positive, historical, philological,

or ethnological mythologies, in what must be called, once again, a myth of myth, in whatever sense we take the word. (Moreover, the formation of an abyssal myth—myth of myth, myth of its absence, and so on—is no doubt inevitable and inherent in myth itself in that myth, as we have come to think of it, perhaps *says nothing*, but says that it says this: myth says that it says, and says that this is what it says, and in this way organizes and distributes the world of humanity with its speech.)

We might begin with what myth ended up becoming. After being stripped simultaneously of its mystery and its absurdity, of its magic and its savagery, by means of a formidable structural synthesis—which cannot be said to have “emptied myth of its meaning” unless we add straight away that this “emptiness of meaning” surely belongs to myth itself—the totality of the mythic system of humanity then instantly regained, through a kind of paradoxical reinstatement in the form of a systematic, organizational, combinative, and articulative totality, a position or a function that one could rightfully call “of mythic status.” No doubt the language of this system of myths is of another order (as is the language of each myth inasmuch as a myth is “the totality of its versions”),⁹ but it is still a primordial language: the element of an inaugural communication in which exchange and sharing in general are founded or inscribed.¹⁰

It may be that we have not yet grasped the full extent of the extremity to which this structural myth of myth has brought us: in the manifold ambiguity of this appellation lurks at least the suggestion of an ultimate stage where myth touches its limit and can do away with itself. But if we have not grasped this it is because the event has remained in some way hidden within itself, disguised by the “mythic status” that the structural myth persisted in giving to myth (or else to structure).

What is “mythic status?” What privileges has a tradition of thinking about myth attached to myth—privileges that the structural analyses of myth reintroduced, intact or pretty nearly so?

Myth is above all full, original speech, at times revealing, at times founding the intimate being of a community. The Greek *muthos*—Homer’s *muthos*, that is, speech, spoken expression—becomes “myth” when it takes on a whole series of values that amplify, fill, and ennoble this speech, giving it the dimensions of a narrative of origins and an explanation of destinies (in the post-Homeric, and then modern, definition of “myth,” it matters little whether one believes in the myth or not, whether one views it distrustfully or not). This speech is not a discourse that would come in response to the inquisitive mind: it comes in response to a waiting rather than to a question, and to a waiting on the part of the world itself. In myth the world makes itself known, and it makes itself known through declaration or through a complete and decisive revelation.

The greatness of the Greeks—according to the modern age of mythology—is to have lived in intimacy with such speech and to have founded their *logos* in it: they are the ones for whom *muthos* and *logos* are “the same.”¹¹ This sameness is the revelation, the hatching or blossoming of the world, of the thing, of being, of man in speech. Such speech presupposes *panta plērē thēōn*, “all things filled with gods,” as Thales is supposed to have said. It presupposes an uninterrupted world of presences or an uninterrupted world of truths, or else, for this is already saying too much, it presupposes neither “presence” nor “truth,” nor at times even “gods,” but rather a way of binding the world and attaching oneself to it, a *religio* whose utterances would be “great speech” (*grand parler*).¹²

The enunciation of this mythic “great speech”—the “anonymous great voice”—belongs in turn to a space in which “exchange, the symbolic function . . . play the part of a second nature.”¹³ There may be no better way of defining myth in brief than by saying that it constitutes *the second nature of a great speech*. As Schelling put it, myth is “*tautegorical*” (borrowing the word from Coleridge) and not “allegorical”: that is, it says nothing other than itself and is produced in consciousness by the same process that, in nature, produces the forces that myth represents. Thus, it does not need to be interpreted, since it explains itself: “*die sich selbst erklärende Mythologie*,”¹⁴ the mythology that explains or interprets itself. Myth is nature communicating itself to man, both immediately—because it communicates *itself*—and in a mediated way—because it communicates (it speaks). It is, in sum, the opposite of a dialectic, or rather its completion; it is beyond the dialectic element. Dialectics, in general, is a process that arises from some given. The same could be said of its twin, dialogics. And the given is always in some way the *logos* or a *logos* (a logic, a language, any kind of structure). But myth, being immediate and mediated, is itself the rendition of the *logos* that it mediates, it is the emergence of its own organization. One might even say—thereby doing justice to the structural analysis of myth—that from its birth (whether one locates this birth in Plato, in Vico, in Schlegel, or elsewhere) myth has been the name for *logos structuring itself*, or, and this comes down to the same thing, the name for the *cosmos structuring itself in logos*.

Even before entering into narrative, myth is made up of an emergence, it is inaugural. “It is,” wrote Maurice Leenhardt, “the speech, the figure, the act that circumscribes the event at the heart of man, emotive like an infant, before it is a fixed narrative.”¹⁵ Thus its initial act (but myth is always initial, always about the initial) is to represent or rather to present the *living heart* of *logos*. Mythology, understood as the invention and the recitation of myths (though the recitation cannot be distinguished from its invention), is “*lived and living*”; in it “are heard words springing from the

mouth of a humanity present to the world.”¹⁶ It is speech live from the origin, live because it is original and original because it is live. In its first declamation there arises the dawn, simultaneously, of the world, of gods, and of men. Myth is therefore much more than a kind of first culture. Because it is the “original culture,” it is infinitely more than a culture: it is transcendence (of gods, of man, of speech, of the cosmos, and so on) presented immediately, immediately immanent to the very thing it transcends and that it illuminates or consigns to its destiny. Myth is the opening of a mouth immediately adequate to the closure of a universe.

Thus myth is not composed of just any speech, and it does not speak just any language. It is the speech and the language of the very things that manifest themselves, it is the communication of these things: it does not speak of the appearance or the aspect of things; rather, in myth, their rhythm speaks and their music sounds. It has been written that “myth and *Sprachgesang* (the song of language) are fundamentally one and the same thing.”¹⁷ Myth is very precisely the *incantation* that gives rise to a world and brings forth a language, that gives rise to a world in the advent of a language. It is therefore indissociable from a rite or a cult. Indeed, its enunciation or recital is itself already a ritual. Mythic ritual is the communitarian articulation of mythic speech.

* * *

This articulation is not something added on to myth: mythic speech is communitarian in its essence. A private myth is as rare as a strictly idiomatic language. Myth arises only from a community and for it: they engender one another, infinitely and immediately.¹⁸ Nothing is more common, nothing is more absolutely common than myth. Dialogics can only occur between those who are situated in the space of exchange or the symbolic function or both. It is myth that arranges the spaces, and/or symbolizes. Myth works out the shares and divisions that distribute a community and distinguish it for itself, articulating it within itself. Neither dialogue nor monologue, myth is the unique speech of the many, who come thereby to recognize one another, who communicate and commune in myth.

This is because myth necessarily contains a pact, namely, the pact of its own recognition: in a single gesture, in a single sentence, in sum, myth says what is and says that we agree to say that this is (it also says, therefore, what saying is). It does not communicate a knowledge that can be verified from elsewhere: it is self-communicating (in this respect it is again *tautegorical*). In other words, along with knowledge, about whatever object it might be, it communicates also the communication of this knowledge.

Myth communicates the common, the *being-common* of what it reveals or what it recites. Consequently, at the same time as each one of its reve-

lations, it also reveals the community to itself and founds it. Myth is always the myth of community, that is to say, it is always the myth of a communion—the unique voice of the many—capable of inventing and sharing the myth. There is no myth that does not at least presuppose (when it does not in fact state it) the myth of the communitarian (or popular) revelation of myths.

The community of myth is thus properly speaking *mything* humanity, humanity acceding to itself. The myth of communion, like communism—“as the real appropriation of human essence by man and for man, man’s total return to himself as social man”¹⁹—is myth, absolutely and rigorously, in a total reciprocity of myth and community at the heart of mythic thought or the mythic world.

(This does not contradict, indeed the contrary is the case, the fact that myths are at the same time most often about an isolated hero. In one way or another, this hero makes the community commune—and ultimately he always makes it commune in the communication that he himself effects between existence and meaning, between the individual and the people: “The canonical form of mythic life is precisely that of the hero. In it the pragmatic is at the same time symbolic.”)²⁰

Thus there can be no humanity that does not incessantly renew its act of *mythation*. The notion of a “new mythology,” which appeared in Jena around 1798,²¹ contains both the idea of a necessary innovation in order to create a new human world on the ground of the finished world of ancient mythology, and at the same time the idea that mythology is always the obligatory form—and perhaps the essence—of innovation. A new humanity must arise from/in its new myth, and this myth itself must be (according to Schlegel) nothing less than the totalization of modern literature and philosophy, as well as ancient mythology, revived and united with the mythologies of the other peoples of the world. The totalization of myths goes hand in hand with the myth of totalization, and the “new” mythology essentially consists in the production of a speech that would unite, totalize, and thereby put (back) into the world the totality of the words, discourses, and songs of a humanity in the process of reaching its fulfillment (or reaching its end).

* * *

It can therefore be said that romanticism, communism, and structuralism, through their secret but very precise community, constitute the last tradition of myth, the last way for myth to invent itself and to transmit itself (which, for myth, is one and the same thing). This is the tradition of the *mythation* of myth itself: myth becomes (wants to become, through the will to its own power) its own enunciation, its own *tautegory*, equivalent to its own

truth and its own realization, its own suppression and entirely new inauguration, and hence the final inauguration of the inaugural itself that myth has always been. Myth realizes itself dialectically; it exceeds all its "mythic" figures to announce the pure mytho-logy of an absolutely foundational, symbolizing, or distributive speech.²²

* * *

It is here that things are interrupted.

The tradition is suspended at the very moment it fulfills itself. It is interrupted at that precise and familiar point where we know that it is all a myth.

It is true that we do not know very much about what mythic truth was or is for men living in the midst of what we call "myths." But we know that we—our community, if it is one, our modern and postmodern humanity—have no relation to the myth of which we are speaking, even as we fulfill it or try to fulfill it. In a sense, for us all that remains of myth is its fulfillment or its will. We no longer live in mythic life, nor in a time of mythic invention or speech. When we speak of "myth" or of "mythology" we mean the negation of something at least as much as the affirmation of something. This is why our scene of myth, our discourse of myth, and all our mythological thinking make up a myth: to speak of myth has only ever been to speak of its absence. And the word "myth" itself designates the absence of what it names.

This is what constitutes the interruption: "*myth*" is cut off from its own meaning, on its own meaning, by its own meaning. If it even still has a proper meaning.

In order to say that myth is a myth (that myth is *a myth*, or that "myth" is a myth), it has been necessary to play on two quite distinct and opposite meanings of the word "myth." The phrase "myth is a myth" means in effect that myth, as inauguration or as foundation, is a myth, in other words, a fiction, a simple invention. This disparity between the possible meanings of "myth" is in a sense as ancient as Plato and Aristotle. However, it is not by chance that its modern usage in this phrase that underlies our knowledge of myth—that myth is a myth—produces, in a play on words, the structure of the abyss. For this sentence contains, as well as two heterogeneous meanings for a single vocable, one mythic reality, one single idea of myth whose two meanings and whose infinitely ironic relation are engendered by a kind of internal disunion. This is the same myth that the tradition of myth conceived as foundation and as fiction. The phrase that plays on the disunion puts to work the resources of a former union, a secret and profound union at the heart of myth itself.

Mythic thought—operating in a certain way through the dialectical sublation of the two meanings of myth²³—is in effect nothing other than *the thought of a founding fiction, or a foundation by fiction*. Far from being in opposition to one another, the two concepts are conjoined in the mythic thought of myth. When Schlegel calls for a "new mythology," he appeals expressly to art, to poetry, and to the creative imagination. It is the imagination, in fact, that holds the secret of an original force of nature, alone capable of genuine inauguration. Poetic fiction is the true—if not truthful—origin of a world. And when Schelling takes objection, in a sense, to Schlegel and everyone he reproaches for considering mythology as a fiction, when he declares that the forces at work in myth "were not simply imaginary forces, but were the true theogonic powers themselves,"²⁴ his critique nonetheless tends to privilege what one would have to call an autoimagining or an autofictioning of nature.

Schelling's analysis of mythology is undoubtedly the most powerful to be produced before structural analysis. One might even think that these constitute two versions—the "idealist" and the "positivist"—of the same myth of mythology, and of the same mythology of myth.²⁵

According to this myth, or according to this logic, mythology cannot be denounced as a fiction, for *the fiction that it is is an operation*: an operation of engenderment for Schelling, of distribution and exchange for the structuralists. Myth is not "a myth" if it has, qua myth, this operative power and if this operative power is fundamentally not heterogeneous but homogeneous with the different but similar operations realized, for Schelling by consciousness, for the structuralists by science. In this sense, myth is not susceptible to analysis on the basis of a truth other than its own, and consequently above all not in terms of "fiction." Rather, it must be analyzed according to the truth that its fiction confers upon it, or more precisely according to the truth that *mything* fictioning confers upon *mythic* tales and narratives. This is what Schelling demands with his "tautegory." Myth signifies itself, and thereby converts its own fiction into foundation or into the inauguration of *meaning* itself.

Myth is therefore not only made up of a proper truth, *sui generis*, but it perhaps tends to become truth itself, that truth that for Spinoza, as well as for essential philosophical thought in general, *se ipsam patefacit*. But again it is this "patefaction" of myth, and precisely this, that confers upon myth its fictive character—in an auto-fictioning. As Schelling admits, "It is true in a certain way" that "the expressions of mythology are figurative": but "for the mythological consciousness" this is the same thing as the impropriety of the majority of our "figurative expressions." Which is to say that, just as this figuration is appropriate in language, so within mythology impropriety is quite proper, appropriate to the truth and the fiction of

myth. *Mythology is therefore figuration proper*. Such is its secret, and the secret of its myth—of its truth—for the whole of Western consciousness.²⁶

To be figuration proper, to be the proper figuration of the proper, is to realize properly—improperly-properly, as a supplement of propriety²⁷—the proper itself. Nature with all its “powers” would never attain to its truth without the *double* process of natural *and* figurative “theogony,” effective *and* represented in consciousness, presenting itself, uttering itself in its *mythos*.

For Schelling this is not a matter of a secondary representation, of an interpretation of nature by a primitive consciousness. It concerns rather much more the fact that nature, in its origin, engenders the gods by affecting immediate consciousness (which becomes thereby, and only thereby, true consciousness). It affects it from the outside, it strikes it with *stupor*, as Schelling says (*stupefacta quasi et attonita*).²⁸ It is in this stupor, which is anterior to all representation, that *representation* itself is born. It marks the representative rupture itself, the “initial break effected by mythic thought” of which Lévi-Strauss speaks, and more exactly the rupture brought about by “the primary schematism of mythic thought.”²⁹

Here, as in Kant, “schematism” designates the essential operation of transcendental imagination, which in Kant produces the “non-sensible images” that furnish a “rule for the production of empirical images,” whereas for Lévi-Strauss, in an inverse but symmetrical movement, myth “subsumes individualities under the paradigm, enlarging and at the same time impoverishing the concrete givens by forcing them one after the other to cross over the discontinuous thresholds that separate the empirical order from the symbolic order, from the imaginary order, and finally from schematism.” Myth, in short, is the transcendental autfiguration of nature and of humanity, or more exactly the autfiguration—or the autoimagination—of nature as humanity and of humanity as nature. Mythic speech thus performs the humanization of nature (and/or its divinization) and the naturalization of man (and/or his divinization). Fundamentally, *mythos* is the *act of language* par excellence, the performing of the paradigm, as the *logos* fictions this paradigm to itself in order to project upon it the essence and the power it believes to be its own.

In this respect, the romantic goal of a new mythology, one that would be fictioning, imaginary, playful, poetic, and performative, merely brings to light the thinking from which the myth of myth arises: it consists in the thought of a poetico-fictioning ontology, an ontology presented in the figure of an ontogony where being engenders itself *by figuring itself*, by giving itself the proper image of its own essence and the self-representation of its presence and its present. *Die sich selbst erklärende Mythologie* is the correlative of an essentially *mything* being or of a *mything* essence of being.

And the myth of myth, its truth, is that fiction is in effect, in this ontogony, inaugural. In sum, fictioning is the subject of being. *Mimesis* is the *poesis* of the world as true world of gods, of men, and of nature. The myth of myth is in no way an ontological fiction; it is nothing other than an ontology of fiction or representation: it is therefore a particularly fulfilled and fulfilling form of the ontology of subjectivity in general.

But this is also what provokes the interruption. From Schelling to Lévi-Strauss, from the first to the last version of mythic thought, we pass from one interruption to another. In the beginning, the power of myth strikes consciousness with stupor and puts it “outside of itself” (that is, it makes it conscious). In the end, this consciousness become consciousness of self and of the totality qua myth suspends itself on (or as) the consciousness of the mythic (or subjective) essence of the “self” of all things. Lévi-Strauss in fact writes:

My analysis . . . has brought out the mythic character of objects: the universe, nature and man which, over thousands, millions or billions of years, will, when all is said and done, have simply demonstrated the resources of their combinatory systems, in the manner of some great mythology, before collapsing in on themselves and vanishing, through the self-evidence of their own decay.³⁰

Or again:

Wisdom consists for man in seeing himself live his provisional historical internality, while at the same time knowing (but on a different register) that what he lives so completely and intensely is a myth—and which will appear as such to men of a future century.³¹

The disunion of the meanings of “myth” is therefore once again at work at the heart of the very thinking meant to dismiss any denunciation of myth on the basis of its being fiction, at the heart of a thinking of the communion of foundation and fiction (of foundation by fiction). In fact, the same Lévi-Strauss, in a tone all in all very close to Schelling’s, contended that myths, “far from being the works of man’s ‘myth-making faculty’ turning its back on reality,” preserve “modes of observation and reflection” whose results “were secured ten thousand years” before those of the modern sciences, and which “still remain at the basis of our civilization.”³²

The phrase “myth is a myth” harbors *simultaneously* and *in the same thought* a disabused irony (“foundation is a fiction”) and an onto-poetico-logical affirmation (“fiction is a foundation”).

This is why myth is interrupted. It is interrupted by its myth.

This is why the idea of a "new mythology" is not only dangerous, it is futile, for a new mythology would presuppose, as its condition of possibility, a myth of myth that would not be subject to the rigorous logic whose course extends from Schelling to Lévi-Strauss³³—or else, from Plato to us—and that is composed essentially of this nihilist or annihilating logic (or this *mythics*): the being that myth engenders implodes in its own fiction.

* * *

The power of myth has spanned two interruptions: the interruption of pure nature and the interruption of myth itself. The appeal to the power of myth (whether this appeal be poetical or political, and it can only be, necessarily, both at the same time: this is what myth is, it is the poeticality of the political and the politicality of the poetic—foundation and fiction—inasmuch as the poetical and the political are included in the space of myth's thinking), this appeal, then, or this desire for the power of myth, has sustained itself through these two interruptions—between the nature opened up by an autofiguration of its natural power and the culture closed by an auto-resolution of its illusory figures.

Essentially, myth's will to power was totalitarian. It may perhaps even define totalitarianism (or what I have called immanentism), which is therefore strictly speaking also interrupted.

Using a rather poor distinction for the sake of clarity, one might say that myth's will (to power) is doubly totalitarian or immanentist: in its form and in its content.

In its form, because myth's will, which is manifest more exactly as the will to mythation, is perhaps nothing other than the will to will.³⁴ We must turn to Kant for the definition of will: will, which is nothing but the faculty of desiring determined according to reason, is the faculty enabling the cause of representations to coincide with the reality of these same representations. Schelling's *mything* nature is a will: it is even, anticipating Schopenhauer, the will of the world and the world as will. Myth is not simple representation, it is representation at work, producing itself—in an autopoetic mimesis—as effect: it is fiction that founds. And what it founds is not a fictive world (which is what Schelling and Lévi-Strauss challenged), but fictioning as the fashioning of a world, or the becoming-world of fictioning. In other words, the fashioning of a world for the subject, the becoming-world of subjectivity.

As theogony, cosmogony, mythogony, and mythology, myth's will is myth's will to will. As I have already said, essentially, myth communicates itself, and not something else. Communicating itself, it brings into being what it says, it founds its fiction. This efficacious self-communication is

will—and will is subjectivity presented (representing itself) as a remainderless totality.

Mythic will is totalitarian in its content, for its content is always a communion, or rather all communions: of man with nature, of man with God, of man with himself, of men among themselves. Myth communicates itself necessarily as a myth belonging to the community, and it communicates a myth of community: communion, communism, communitarianism, communication, community itself taken simply and absolutely, absolute community. For Pierre Clastres, the community of the Guarani Indians provides an exemplary figure (or myth) of this:

Their great god Namandu emerged from the darkness and invented the world. He first of all made Speech come, the substance common to divinities and humans. . . . Society is the enjoyment of the common good that is Speech. Instituted as *equal* by divine decision—by nature!—society gathered itself together into a single, that is, undivided whole. . . . The men of this society are *all one*.³⁵

Absolute community—myth—is not so much the total fusion of individuals, but the *will* of community: the desire to operate, through the power of myth, the communion that myth represents and that it represents as a communion or communication of wills. Fusion ensues: myth represents multiple existences as immanent to its own unique fiction, which gathers them together and gives them their common figure in its speech and as this speech.

This does not mean only that community is a myth, that communitarian communion is a myth. It means that myth and myth's force and foundation are essential to community and that there can be, therefore, no community outside of myth. Wherever there has been myth, assuming there has been something of the sort and that we can know what this means, there has been, necessarily, community, and vice versa. The interruption of myth is therefore also, necessarily, the interruption of community.

* * *

Just as there is no new mythology, so there is no new community either, nor will there be. If myth is a myth, community is reabsorbed into this abyss along with it or is dissolved in this irony. This is why lamenting the "loss of community" is usually accompanied by lamenting the "loss" of the power of myths.

And yet the pure and simple effacement of community, without remainder, is a misfortune. Not a sentimental misfortune, not even an ethical one, but an ontological misfortune—or disaster. For beings who are essentially, and more than essentially, beings *in* common, it is a privation of being.

Being *in* common means that singular beings are, present themselves, and appear only to the extent that they compare (*comparaissent*), to the extent that they are exposed, presented, or offered to one another. This compearance (*comparution*) is not something added on to their being; rather, their being comes into being in it.

Hence community does not disappear. It never disappears. The community resists: in a sense, as I have said, it is resistance itself. Without the compearance of being—or of singular beings—there would be nothing, or rather nothing but being appearing to itself, not even *in common* with itself, just immanent Being immersed in a dense pearance (*parence*). The community resists this infinite immanence. The compearance of singular beings—or of the singularity of being—keeps open a space, a spacing within immanence.

Is there a myth for this community of compearance? If myth is always a myth of the reunion and the communion of community, there is not. On the contrary, it is the interruption of myth that reveals the disjunctive or hidden nature of community. In myth, community was proclaimed: in the interrupted myth, community turns out to be what Blanchot has named “*the unavowable community*.”

Does the unavowable have a myth? By definition, it does not. The absence of avowal produces neither speech nor narrative. But if community is inseparable from myth, must there not be, according to a paradoxical law, a myth of the unavowable community? But this is impossible. Let me repeat: the unavowable community, the withdrawal of communion or communitarian ecstasy, are revealed in the interruption of myth. And the interruption is not a myth: “It is impossible to contest the absence of myth,” wrote Bataille.

We are thus abandoned to this “absence of myth.” Bataille defined it thus:

If we say quite simply and in all lucidity that present day man is defined by his avidity for myth, and if we add that he is also defined by the awareness of not being able to accede to the possibility of creating a veritable myth, we have defined a kind of myth that is the *absence of myth*.³⁶

Bataille arrived at this definition after having considered the proposal, which came from surrealism (that is, from an avatar of romanticism), to create new myths. He goes on to say that “neither these myths nor these rituals will be true myths or rituals since they will not receive the endorsement of the community.” This endorsement cannot be obtained if the myth does not already exist in the community—be it in the mouth of a sole being who lends it his singular voice. The very idea of inventing a myth, in this

sense, is a contradiction in terms. Neither the community nor, consequently, the individual (the poet, the priest, or one of their listeners) invents the myth: to the contrary, it is they who are invented or who invent themselves in the myth. And it is to the extent that he defines himself through the loss of community that modern man defines himself through the absence of myth.

At the same time, Bataille defines the absence of myth as “a kind of myth” in itself. He explains this as follows:

If we define ourselves as incapable of arriving at myth and as though awaiting its delivery, we define the ground of present-day humanity as an absence of myth. And he finds himself before this absence of myth as one who lives it, and lives it, let us understand, with the passion that in former times animated those who wanted to live not in tern reality but in mythic reality [Bataille therefore also defines myth as a *myth*]; this absence of myth before him can be infinitely more exalting than had been, in former times, those myths linked to everyday life.

What makes the absence of myth a myth is no longer, or not directly, in any case, its communitarian character. On the contrary, the mythic relation to the “absence of myth” is here presented, in appearance, as an individual relation. If the absence of myth marks the common condition of present-day man, this condition, rather than constituting the community, undoes it. What assures the functioning of a life led according to myth, here, is the passion and the exaltation with which the content of myth—here the “absence of myth”—can be shared. What Bataille understands by “passion” is nothing other than a movement that carries to the limit—to the limit of being. If being is defined in the singularity of beings (this is at bottom the way Bataille, consciously or not, transcribes the Heideggerian thought of the finitude of being), that is to say if being is not Being communing in itself with itself, if it is not its own immanence, but if it *is* the singular aspect of beings (this is how I would transcribe Heidegger and Bataille, one by the other), if it shares the singularities and is itself shared out by them, then passion carries to the limit of singularity: logically, this limit is the place of community.

This place, or point, might be one of fusion, of consumption and communion in an immanence regained, willed anew, staged once more: it might be a new myth, that is to say the renewal of the old myth, still identical to itself. But at this point—at the point of community—there is, precisely, no community: nor, therefore, is there any myth. The absence of myth is accompanied, as Bataille says a moment later, by the absence of community. The passion for the absence of myth touches upon the absence of com-

munity. And it is in this respect that it can be a passion (something other than a will to power).

This point is not the inverse or negative image of a community gathered together in and by its myth, for what Bataille calls the absence of community is not the pure and simple dissolution of community. The absence of community appears with the recognition of the fact that no community, in the fusion that it is essentially seeking, for example in "the ancient festival," can fail "to create a new individual, that one might call the collective individual." The fusion of community, instead of propagating its movement, reconstitutes its separation: community against community. Thus the fulfillment of community is its suppression. To attain to immanence is to be cut off from another immanence: to attain immanence is to cut off immanence itself.

Absence of community represents that which does not fulfill community, or community itself inasmuch as it cannot be fulfilled or engendered as a new individual. In this sense, "the appurtenance of every possible community to what I call . . . absence of community must be the ground of any possible community." In the absence of community neither the work of community, nor the community as work, nor communism can fulfill itself; rather, the passion of and for community propagates itself, unworked, appealing, demanding to pass beyond every limit and every fulfillment enclosed in the form of an individual. It is thus not an absence, but a movement, it is unworking in its singular "activity," it is the propagation, even the contagion, or again the communication of community itself that propagates itself or communicates its contagion *by its very interruption*.

This contagion interrupts fusion and suspends communion, and this arrest or rupture once again leads back to the communication of community. Instead of closing it in, this interruption once again exposes singularity to its limit, which is to say, to other singularities. Instead of fulfilling itself in a work of death and in the immanence of a subject, community communicates itself through the repetition and the contagion of births: each birth exposes another singularity, a supplementary limit, and therefore another communication. This is not the opposite of death, for the death of this singular being who has just been born is also inscribed and communicated by its limit. It is already exposed to its death, and it exposes us to it as well. Which means, essentially, that this death as well as this birth are removed from us, are neither our work nor the work of the collectivity.

On all sides the interruption turns community toward the outside instead of gathering it in toward a center—or its center is the geographical locus of an indefinitely multiple exposition. Singular beings compear: their compearance constitutes their being, puts them in communication with one

another. But the interruption of community, the interruption of the totality that would fulfill it, is the very law of compearance. The singular being appears to other singular beings; it is communicated to them in the singular. It is a contact, it is a contagion: a touching, the transmission of a trembling at the edge of being, the communication of a passion that makes us fellows, or the communication of the passion to be fellows, to be *in* common.

The interrupted community does not flee from itself: but it does not belong to itself, it does not congregate, it communicates itself from one singular place to another. "The basis of communication," writes Blanchot, "is not necessarily speech, nor even the silence that is its foundation and punctuation, but exposure to death, and no longer my death, but someone else's, whose living and closest presence is already an eternal and unbearable absence."³⁷

Thus "the myth of the absence of myth"—which corresponds to the interrupted community—is itself neither another myth, nor a negative myth (nor the negative of a myth), but is a myth only inasmuch as it consists in the interruption of myth. It is not a myth: there is no myth of the interruption of myth. But the interruption of myth defines the possibility of a "passion" equal to mythic passion—and yet unleashed by the suspension of mythic passion: a "conscious," "lucid" passion, as Bataille calls it, a passion opened up by compearance and for it. It is not the passion for dissolution, but the passion to be exposed, and to know that *community itself does not limit community*, that community is always beyond, that is, on the outside, offered outside of each singularity, and on this account always interrupted on the edge of the least one of these singularities.

Interruption occurs at the edge, or rather it constitutes the edge where beings touch each other, expose themselves to each other and separate from one another, thus communicating and propagating their community. On this edge, destined to this edge and called forth by it, born of interruption, there is a passion. This is, if you will, what remains of myth, or rather, it is *itself the interruption* of myth.

* * *

The interruption of myth—and the interruption of myth as the passion of and for community—disjoins myth from itself, or withdraws it from itself. It is not enough to say, "Myth is a myth," since the formula for irony, as I have already said, is fundamentally the same as the formula for the identity of myth (and for its mythic identity).

In the interruption there is no longer anything to be done with myth, inasmuch as myth is always a completion, a fulfillment. But the interruption is not a silence—which itself can have a myth, or can be myth itself in one of its fulfillments. In the interruption of myth something makes itself

heard, namely, what remains of myth when it is interrupted—and which is nothing if not the very voice of interruption, if we can say this.

This voice is the voice of community, or of the community's passion. If it must be affirmed that myth is essential to community—but only in the sense that it completes it and gives it the closure and the destiny of an individual, of a completed totality—it is equally necessary to affirm that in the interruption of myth is heard the voice of the interrupted community, the voice of the incomplete, exposed community speaking as myth without being in any respect mythic speech.

This voice seems to play back the declarations of myth, for in the interruption there is nothing new to be heard, there is no new myth breaking through; it is the old story one seems to hear. When a voice, or music, is suddenly interrupted, one hears just at that instant something else, a mixture of various silences and noises that had been covered over by the sound, but in this something else one hears again the voice or the music that has become in a way the voice or the music of its own interruption: a kind of echo, but one that does not repeat that of which it is the reverberation.

In itself, in its presence and in its fulfillment, the voice or the music is played out, it has dissolved. The mythological prestation is ended, it no longer holds good and no longer works (if it ever worked in the way we thought it was supposed to work, in our functional, structural and communal mythology). But in some way the interrupted voice or music imprints the schema of its retreat in the murmur or the rustling to which the interruption gives rise. It is no longer the sermon—or the performance, as the linguists or artists say—though it is neither without voice nor without music. The interruption has a voice, and its schema imprints itself in the rustling of the community exposed to its own dispersion. When myth stops playing, the community that resists completion and fusion, the community that propagates and exposes itself, makes itself heard in a certain way. It does not speak, of course, nor does it make music. As I have said, it is itself the interruption, for it is upon this exposure of singular beings that myth is interrupted. But the interruption itself has a singular voice, a voice or a retiring music that is taken up, held, and at the same time exposed in an echo that is not a repetition—it is the voice of community, which in its way perhaps avows, without saying it, the unavowable, or states without declaring it the secret of community, or more precisely presents, without enunciating it, the mythless truth of endless being-in-common, of this being *in* common that is not a “common being” and that the community itself therefore does not limit and that myth is incapable of founding or containing. There is a voice of community articulated in the interruption, and even out of the interruption itself.

A name has been given to this voice of interruption: literature (or writing, if we adopt the acceptance of this word that coincides with literature). This name is no doubt unsuitable. But no name is suitable here. The place or the moment of interruption is without suitability. As Blanchot puts it, “The only communication that henceforth suits it [the community] . . . passes through literary unsuitability.”³⁸ What is unsuitable about literature is that it is not suited to the myth of community, nor to the community of myth. It is suited neither to communion nor to communication.

And yet, if the name “literature” is always in a state of not being suited to “literary unsuitability” itself, is this not because literature is so closely related to myth? Is not myth the origin of literature, the origin of all literature and perhaps in a sense its sole content, its sole narrative, or else its sole posture (that of the recitalist, who is his own hero)? Is there any literary scene not taken from the mythological scene? (And is not this true also, in this respect, of the philosophic scene or scenes, which, in one way or another, belong to the “genre” of literature?)

Not only is literature the beneficiary (or the echo) of myth, literature has itself in a sense been thought and no doubt should be thought as myth—as the myth of the myth of mythless society.³⁹ In an early text by Blanchot, one even reads that in literature “everything should end in a mythic invention: only where the source of revealing images opens up is there a work.”⁴⁰ It is not certain that Blanchot would settle for such a sentence today. Certainly, there is a work only if there is “revelation” (you might interrupt me here: What are we to make of this word “revelation”? Does it not go along with “myth,” as it does moreover with “image”? But this is the space of absolute unsuitability: each one of these words also bespeaks its own interruption). But literature's revelation, unlike myth's, does not reveal a completed reality, nor the reality of a completion. It does not reveal, in a general way, *some thing*—it reveals rather the unrevealable: namely, that it is itself, as a work that reveals and gives access to a vision and to the communion of a vision, essentially interrupted.

In the work, there is a share of myth and a share of literature or writing. The latter interrupts the former, it “reveals” precisely through its interruption of the myth (through the incompleteness of the story or the narrative)—and what literature or writing reveals is above all else its interruption, and it is in this respect that it can be called, if it still can be—and it no longer can be—a “mythic invention.”

But the share of myth and the share of literature are not two separable and opposable parts at the heart of the work. Rather, they are shares in the sense that community divides up or shares out works in different ways: now by way of myth, now by way of literature. The second is the interruption of the first. “Literature” (or “writing”) is what, in literature—in

the sharing or the communication of works—interrupts myth by giving voice to being-in-common, which has no myth and cannot have one. Or, since being-in-common *is* nowhere, and does not subsist in a mythic space that could be revealed to us, literature does not give it a voice: rather, it is being *in* common that *is* literary (or scriptuary).

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What does this mean? Does it mean anything? I have said that the sole question is the question of “literary communism,” or of a “literary experience of community.” Blanchot has insisted that “community, in its very failure, remains linked in some way to writing,” and has referred to the “ideal community of literary communication.”⁴¹ This can always make for one more myth, a new myth, and one not even as new as some would believe: the myth of the literary community was outlined for the first time (although in reality it was perhaps not the first time) by the Jena romantics, and it has filtered down to us in various different ways through everything resembling the idea of a “republic of artists” or, again, the idea of communism (of a certain kind of Maoism, for example) and revolution inherent, *tels quels*, in writing itself.

But because the interruption of myth does not make up a myth, the being-in-common of which I am speaking—and that many of us are trying to speak about, that is to say, to write—has nothing to do with the myth of communion through literature, nor with the myth of literary creation by the community. But if we can say, or if we can at least try to say, while remaining fully conscious of its unsuitability, that being-in-common *is* literary, that is, if we can attempt to say that it has its very being in “literature” (in writing, in a certain voice, in a singular music, but also in a painting, in a dance, and in the exercise of thought), then what “literature” will have to designate is this being itself . . . in itself. In other words, it would designate that singular ontological quality that *gives* being *in* common, that does not hold it in reserve, before or after community, as an essence of man, of God, or of the State achieving its fulfillment in communion, but that rather makes for a being that *is* only when shared *in common*, or rather whose quality of being, whose nature and structure are shared (or exposed).

It is as difficult to describe the structure of sharing as it is to assign an essence to it. Sharing divides and shares itself: this is what it is to be in common. One cannot tell its story, nor determine its essence: there is no myth of it, nor is there a philosophy of it. But it is “literature” that does the sharing. It does it, or is it, precisely to the extent that it interrupts myth. Myth is interrupted by literature precisely to the extent that literature does not come to an end.

If literature does not come to an end, this is not in the mythic sense of an “infinite poetry,” such as the romantics desired. Nor is it in the sense in which, for Blanchot, “unworking” would be attained and presented by works,⁴² nor in the sense that this “unworking” would be purely exterior to the work. Literature does not come to an end at the very place where it comes to an end: on its border, right on the dividing line—a line sometimes straight (the edge, the border of the book), sometimes incredibly twisted and broken (the writing, reading). It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes from an author to a reader, and from this reader to another reader or to another author. It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes on to another work by the same author or at the place where it passes into other works of other authors. It does not come to an end where its narrative passes into other narratives, its poem into other poems, its thought into other thoughts, or into the inevitable suspension of the thought or the poem. It is unended and unending—in the active sense—in that it is literature. And it is literature if it is speech (a language, an idiom, a writing)—whatever kind of speech it may be, written or not, fictive or discursive, literature or not—that puts into play nothing other than being *in* common.

“Literature,” thought as the interruption of myth, merely communicates—in the sense that what it puts into play, sets to work, and destines to unworking, is nothing but communication itself, the passage from one to another, the sharing of one by the other. What is at stake in literature is not just literature: in this, it is unlike myth, which communicates only itself, communicating its communion. It is true that the profound texture of the literary work seems at times similar in its intention: it is indeed true that the text represents nothing other than itself and that its story is always its own story, its discourse the discourse of itself. And it is precisely to this extent that there can be a myth of the text.⁴³

But the text that recounts its own story recounts an unfinished story; it recounts it interrupted and it essentially interrupts its own recitation. The text interrupts itself at the point where it shares itself out—at every moment, to you, from him or her to you, to me, to them. In a sense, it is the sharing of myth. It is community exchanging and distributing its myth. Nothing could resemble more closely our myth of the foundation and communion of a tribe, or a people, indeed of humanity. And yet, this is not what it is. It is not the original scene of our communion. This does not mean that there is no theater—as though there could be literature without theater. But theater, here, no longer means the scene of representation: it means the extreme edge of this scene, the dividing line where singular beings are exposed to one another.

What is shared on this extreme and difficult limit is not communion, not the completed identity of all in one, nor any kind of completed identity. What is shared therefore is not the annulment of sharing, but sharing itself, and consequently everyone's nonidentity, each one's nonidentity to himself and to others, and the nonidentity of the work to itself, and finally the nonidentity of literature to literature itself.

Thus, when the text recounts its own story, when it recounts it unfinished, and when it interrupts itself—and when it goes on to recount this interruption, but in the end interrupts itself again—it is because it has a stake, an end, and a principle beyond itself. In one sense, literature only ever comes from literature, and returns to it. But in another sense—which continually interferes with the first in such a way that, with each interference, it is myth that is interrupted—the text, or the writing, stems only from the singular relationship between singular beings (they are called, or we have called them up to this point, men, gods, and also animals; but once again these are mythological names). The text stems from, or *is this relationship*; it renders its ontological vein: being as being *in common* is (the) being (of) literature. This does not imply a being of literature: it is neither a narrative nor a theoretical fiction. On the contrary, what this means is that literature, at least from the moment we understand this word as the interruption of myth, has as being (as essence, if you will, or again, as transcendental constitution) the common exposure of singular beings, their compearance. The most solitary of writers writes only for the other. (Anyone who writes for the same, for himself, or for the anonymity of the crowd is not a writer.)

It is not because there is literature that there is community. One could even say, no doubt, that it is because there is literature that there is the myth of communion and by extension the myth of literary communion. In this respect, the literature corresponding to the great modern interruption of myth immediately engendered its own myth. But now this myth in turn is interrupting itself. And the interruption reveals that it is because there is community that there is literature: literature inscribes being-in-common, being for others and through others.⁴⁴ It inscribes us as exposed to one another and to our respective deaths in which we reach one another—in passing to the limit—mutually. To reach one another—in passing to the limit—is not to commune, which is to accede to another total body where everyone melts together. But to reach one another, to touch one another, is to touch the limit where being itself, where being-in-common conceals us one from the other, and, in concealing us, in withdrawing us from the other before the other, exposes us to him or her.

It is a birth: we never stop being born into community. It is death—but if one is permitted to say so, it is not a tragic death, or else, if it is more accurate to say it this way, it is not mythic death, or death followed

by a resurrection, or the death that plunges into a pure abyss: it is death as sharing and as exposure. It is not murder—it is not death as extermination—and it is not death as work, no more than it is the nay-saying embellishment of death; rather, it is death as the unworking that unites us because it interrupts our communication and our communion.

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It is because there is this, this unworking that shares out our being-in-common, that there is "literature." That is to say, the indefinitely repeated and indefinitely suspended gesture of touching the limit, of indicating it and inscribing it, but without crossing it, without abolishing it in the fiction of a common body. To write for others means in reality to write because of others. The writer neither gives nor addresses anything to the others; he does not envisage his project as one that involves communicating something to them, be it a message or himself. Of course, there are always messages, and there are always persons, and it is important that both of these—if I may for a moment treat them as identical—be communicated. But writing is the act that obeys the sole necessity of exposing the limit: not the limit of communication, *but the limit upon which communication takes place.*

Communication, in truth, is without limits, and the being that is in common communicates itself to the infinity of singularities. Instead of getting upset over the gigantic (or so they say) growth in our means of communication, and fearing through this the weakening of the message, we should rather rejoice over it, serenely: communication "itself" is infinite between finite beings. Provided these beings do not try to communicate to one another myths about their own infinity, for in such a case they instantly disconnect the communication. But communication takes place on the limit, or on the common limits where we are exposed and where it exposes us.

What takes place on this limit requires the interruption of myth. It requires that it no longer be said that a word, a discourse, or a fable gathers us together beyond (or on the near side) of the limit. But it requires equally that the interruption itself make itself heard, with its singular voice. This voice is like the cut or the imprint, left by the interruption, of the voice of myth.

It is each time the voice of one alone, and to the side, who speaks, who recites, who sometimes sings. He speaks of an origin and an end—the end of the origin, in truth—he stages them and puts himself on stage along with them. But he comes to the edge of the stage, to its outer edge, and he speaks at the softest limit of his voice. Or rather, it is we who stand at the furthest extreme and who barely hear him from this limit. Everything is a matter of one's practical, ethical, political—and why not add