

THE DISAVOWED COMMUNITY

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COMMONALITIES

Timothy C. Campbell, series editor

**THE DISAVOWED
COMMUNITY**

JEAN-LUC NANCY

Translated by Philip Armstrong

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PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

JEAN-LUC NANCY

If there is a “work-in-progress” in contemporary philosophy, it is undoubtedly in work on community—on the common, communism, communitarianism, being-in-common, being-with, being-together, or again in “living together,” which today designates, in a manner that is poignant and sometimes entirely naïve, the preoccupation of a society shocked by attacks that condemn it in its very being even as society simultaneously experiences itself as uncertain and anxious. I am speaking here of European society, but society in North and South America as well as other countries throughout the world seeking to be democratic are also riven with doubt. The entirety of the Western world believed that it progressed toward the possibility of common existence, of law, freedom, and equality. It believed that this word “democracy” was society’s own true foundation. It had been encouraged to think this by the fact that what called itself “communism” revealed itself to be unfounded, imposed by a will that was no less dominating than the imperialism that had already taken possession of much of the world.

Communism that was labeled “real” collapsed for having exclusively gambled on military power and the domination of a worn-out ideology. For its part, democracy was increasingly recognized as a facade behind which economic power operated, which now contained the real mechanisms of control. Politics lost its most illuminating sense.

We were still a long way from such a severe analysis in 1983. However, we were already quite uneasy by the sense of what was called “politics” and

by the meaning that it was possible to give to the entire semantic family of the “common” (leaving aside soviet communism, on the one hand, and spiritual or fascist communalism, on the other). Barely present in political, ethical, and philosophical discourse at the time, the word “community” reemerged as a sign of this unease. Community—how are we to think this as a question?

From the outset, it is not a question of thinking community as substance, as its own and autonomous entity. No more is it a question of thinking it according to a natural given (a people or nation understood as a race or lineage), or according to a work to be realized, a monument to itself as suggested by all the national palaces, forbidden cities, capitals, Kremains, and all the images of an essence of common being (*res publica*), where the representations and symbols of each “nation” seek to project its assumed identity. It is especially not a question of conceiving a totality—given the ways in which the term “totalitarianism” had come to designate the opprobrium that threatened democracy.

For some, it was equally a question of thinking democracy in ways other than under its legalistic and representative form—or under its liberal form, in the sense in which economic value largely absorbs and dissolves a former ethical value. The “end of communism” certainly did not signify the end of desires or councilist (literally, soviet) hopes, different forms of “self-management,” including anarcho-syndicalist (to employ a previous terminology). In many ways, one could say, taking up a term that is somewhat dated, that a libertarian thinking confronted the rising power of liberalism.

Thinking that sought to situate itself in a quite different space than this confrontation stemmed either from an analysis of democracy as a regulative principle, of an exercise of power that prevented both symbolic and practical appropriation (Claude Lefort), or from attempts to designate an entirely different symbolic dimension of politics, but also dedicated to its realization. It is in this way that certain people spoke at the time of an imperial model, in the sense of what exists beyond nationalities (not in the sense of Hardt and Negri’s “empire”), while others insisted in different ways on the forms or moments of “constituent power,” or again of “revolt” or “surrection” privileging the moment of uprising over that of accomplishment.

Despite himself—unless (but how to decide this?) he felt opportunely summoned—Maurice Blanchot found himself drawn into engaging and contributing to these debates. For some time he had commented on commu-

nism, in part by recognizing in this word the indisputable value of an exigency while immediately assigning it another exigency—of subtracting itself from any type of institution.

When I published a text in 1983 titled “The Unworking Community,” the use of community as a term taken in its Blanchotian sense (“escaping the work” [*échappant à l’œuvre*] and not “out of work” [*en manque d’ouvrage*]) can only have drawn attention to itself, just as recourse to the analyses of Georges Bataille was conspicuous. Blanchot responded to the essay with a book—*The Unavowable Community*—whose closing lines situated the main argument quite clearly: In order for there to be “unworking [*désœuvrement*]” there must be a work [*œuvre*]. In fact, in his thinking on literature, unworking is opened up and played out in the work, through the work, and stemming from and originating in the work [*à partir d’elle*], in all senses of the term.

What is the work to which this book thus referred? It is the work of a politics beyond any politics that is not only instituted but even institutable, the work of an ultrapolitics that the book defined as “excluding nothing.” A similar hyperbole carries politics toward a mythical or spiritual foundation, of which one could say that it is like the exact reverse of the absence of foundation that can be identified by referring to the various thinking about democracy discussed above.

To suggest a closely related way of thinking, one could say that Blanchot gestures toward an anarchic hierarchy, in giving each of these words its due weight—a sacred power stripped of the power of command. I realize today that this could essentially be a version of what Pierre Clastres had for some time been expounding under the name of a “society against the state” and related to “great speech” [*grand parler*]*—the founding or preservation of speech spoken by the group through the repetition of a foundational story [récit].*¹

In certain respects, the comparison is not so anomalous, especially as concerns the foundational story. In effect, Blanchot undertakes something comparable in appealing to a *récit* by Marguerite Duras that is extended by a Christian interpretation. However, the comparison stops at the point where Clastres speaks of “society” since Blanchot rules out society and all its institutions, laws, and organization. For Blanchot, it is a question of pursuing a thought of “community” on the side of love and more precisely a love whose pleasure [*jouissance*]² is unshareable [*impartageable*], unshared,

and “essentially escapes.” It escapes all institution, all forms of communal consistency.

Community takes places beyond or prior to itself [*au-delà ou en deçà d'elle-même*]; within an exceptional, sublime dimension whose fictional reality does not prevent us from speaking of its “political implications.” However, these implications remain completely indeterminate in the context of the book in which they are evoked.

Blanchot’s book moves between a totally inclusive politics (a totality without limits . . .) and a politics that is only designated implicitly [*en creux*] or indefinitely deferred (even if, as its tone suggests, such a politics is considered pressing). This tension can only be an extension of the book itself, of a writing that devotes itself to rewriting a récit in which the interpretation discovers the simultaneous gift and stripping away [*dérobement*] of the “unavowable”—which can only be said of *jouissance* inasmuch as it escapes, and which can only be said or instituted of a “common” that can be valued only by escaping itself.

Beyond all law, a “relation without relation” thus founds the possibility of what enables an association according to the law. In one sense—or in several senses—this is the quintessential version of a founding of politics outside itself—in the heavens, in a spirit, or in a higher destination. It can involve any figure or nonfigure as one likes—divine, mythical, of the people, or of the “neuter”—but it is necessarily about an authority [*instance*] that must be qualified as nonpolitical, hyperpolitical, or metapolitical. In other words, as (why not?) literature itself.

In fact, this is our own situation—that politics no longer knows what it is, what it can and ought to be. Consequently, nor does it know what its place is or, more seriously, what its nature is. Democracy cannot be “evaluated” (*estimée* is Blanchot’s own term) because it offers nothing that merits any assessment other than what one grants to *management*. A superior, sublime foundation, a kind of negative or mystical politology that follows the example of theology—this is what summons an evaluation that is itself superior [*supérieure*].

I have absolutely no doubt that Blanchot’s book thus bears witness to a profound fidelity to his earliest ambitions, but this is not the most important aspect. Moreover, this does not mean that it is appropriate to treat it as fascist (which is far too simplistic). The most important thing here is that he furnishes us with an especially strong image of our common situation

today—“common” in the sense of a common distress and in the sense of a common, widespread, and thoughtless use of the word “politics.”

This was all in 1983. But if for over thirty years nobody studied Blanchot’s text, it is simply because everyone always believed they knew more or less what “politics” meant, and what politics ought to and can do. Henceforth, we believe this less and less.

*

I will not say more about the circumstances in which the various texts were produced, which leads to the present book. Philip Armstrong has done this in an excellent manner in his translator’s introduction. I only add all my gratitude for his precise, thoughtful, and demanding translation—one should also say courageous in the face of a text that is rendered extremely complex, even tortuous by the fact that throughout it is commenting on another text that, itself . . .

November 30, 2015

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

PHILIP ARMSTRONG

. . . l'héritage de Blanchot. L'héritage qui ne nous laisse pourtant rien à hériter.

—JEAN-LUC NANCY

Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* lies open here like an open wound. Marked by injury and hurt, punctuated by cuts and scars and incisions, this is not a book whose argument is offered as a diagnosis to an illness or to a prior condition (elsewhere, Nancy addresses the history of philosophy's ambivalent relation to its own "medical" claims to "diagnose" a "sickness" or "crisis," a whole pathology of thought or orthopedics in which, at least since Nietzsche, philosophy also seeks to diagnose itself). For the text is a wound that never fully heals and for which there remains no possibility of a conclusive result or final cure. There is nothing here that serves to suture over the laceration, nothing that guarantees the text's immunity from infection or protection from contamination. *The Disavowed Community* is a book everywhere characterized by this sense of exposure and susceptibility, liability and vulnerability—or rather, this is a text characterized by a sense of torn intimacy. Indeed, Nancy refers both to this "sickness" (in relation to Kierkegaard) and to this very "tearing," a term with strong echoes in the writings of both Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, his closest interlocutors in the pages that follow.

At first glance, *The Disavowed Community*, first published in French in 2014, offers itself as a close reading of Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*,

a relatively slim volume first published in 1983.¹ In fact, the reading is close enough that it would be instructive for the reader to have a copy of Blanchot's book available in order to follow more closely the exchanges and cross-references between the two texts. Nancy's book thus contributes to the growing reception of Blanchot's writings, setting out a reading of one of Blanchot's texts that has received relatively little critical attention or extensive interpretation, at least when compared to other of Blanchot's writings. However, any suggestion that Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* is simply a close reading of *The Unavowable Community* must also address a much more complex background and an intricate series of references, circumstances, and "conversations" that both texts engage in in different and decisive ways. Given that this larger background informs both of these texts and shapes Nancy's reading of Blanchot—and often in a manner that is more allusive and tacit than direct—my aim in this brief introduction is to offer the reader some initial sense of this larger background, some preliminary guidelines and references for addressing the circumstances in which both texts were written.

A few months before Blanchot published *The Unavowable Community* in December 1983, Jean-Christophe Bailly had edited a volume of *Aléa*. Published by the Christian Bourgois publishing house, the fourth issue of the journal was titled "La communauté, le nombre" ("Community, Number").² In his brief preface, Bailly notes that the volume is devoted to "community" situated in light of "imaginable human numbers," and notably in an increasingly global context where "the panorama of settling accounts [*règlements de compte*] is distressing," a provocation to which the authors included had been invited to respond. Blanchot refers to the volume of *Aléa* in *The Unavowable Community*, both obliquely—he refers to the mass demonstration held in response to the assassination of protesters by the police in 1962 at the Charonne metro station precisely in terms of "number"—and overtly, since it was in this same volume that he had encountered Nancy's "La communauté désœuvrée," which had been included as the opening essay.³ A revised version of Nancy's essay forms the first chapter of *The Inoperative Community*, published three years later in 1986.⁴ Indeed, it was in relation to Nancy's essay in *Aléa* that Blanchot had undertaken, at least in part, to write *The Unavowable Community* in the first place, prompting Nancy to take note of the speed with which Blanchot responded to his

article and published his text. Nancy recalls “the feeling of bewilderment produced at the time by the fact that Blanchot, in the space of only several months, wrote a book in order to respond to a single essay, and that he published it in the same year (1983) as the article, writing as if responding to a sense of urgency.” In the pages that follow, Nancy also suggests that Blanchot’s book was written as “a response or rejoinder—in many ways, as a riposte” to his initial essay. In another context, he writes: “I was also gripped by the fact that Blanchot’s response was simultaneously an echo, an amplification and a riposte, a reservation, and, for that matter, in some ways a reproach.”⁵ Nancy’s *The Disavowed Community* is not then simply a close reading of Blanchot’s book. Given the more than thirty-year span between the publication of Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community* and Nancy’s *The Disavowed Community*—a distance that is raised with some insistence in the pages that follow—Nancy’s book is the eventual and somewhat belated response to Blanchot’s own response to Nancy’s earlier essay, for which Bailly’s title for the *Aléa* volume provides the initial motivation and provocation (Nancy writes that Bailly’s title, “with its beautiful lexical improvisation whose secret only he knows,” is “already a text, already an act of writing, increasing in number, summoning writing”).⁶

What are the circumstances that provoked this initial exchange between the two authors? With its focus on community, the argument of Nancy’s early essay and its revised version in *The Inoperative Community* is one of the most widely discussed aspects of Nancy’s writings, leading to numerous commentaries.⁷ Suffice it to remark that Nancy rethinks the opposition established by Tönnies between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* while refusing any return to an original, harmonious, or transparent community, understood in its premodern sense—those lost communities that were said to exist prior to “society,” those communities that are said to have lost “the immanence and the intimacy of a communion.”⁸ As Nancy writes, in the desire for locating community’s mythical origins:

The lost, or broken, community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways and 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.⁹

In this sense, Nancy seeks to rethink all forms of community defined, governed, or founded by an essence, substance, transcendent source, or organicist motif, which he will come to phrase in terms of an “immanentism” in which the identity of the community is understood as fully transparent and self-present to itself. Nevertheless, instead of turning to another term to replace “community,” Nancy remarks, “It is a matter rather of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still *unheard* demand, beyond communitarian models or remodelings.”¹⁰ We may say that community is what we have, but not as a utopian projection or idea: “Community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us*—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of [à partir de] society.”¹¹ In short, rather than moving beyond community, we remain “entangled” in community’s “meshes.” At the same time, writing in the early ’80s, Nancy is also responding to the collapse of communism (well before the collapse registered by the events of 1989), in other words, the “real” communism that enacts its own immanentism through its collective self-determination and through the production and self-reproduction of a people and their humanity. Instead of being founded on identity, essence, substance, and interiority, community now becomes a question of exteriority, finite ex-istence, ec-stasis, exposure. Which is also to say—and here Nancy registers his closest debts to Blanchot—a communism “which excludes (and is excluded from) any already constituted community,” a communism, in Blanchot’s own words, that thus remains “without a heritage.”¹²

If Nancy’s emphasis on community foregrounds his distance from those whose writings he is closest to (most notably, Jacques Derrida and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe), in later work this emphasis on community opens toward a wide range of related terms—the common, communism, being-in-common, being-with, being-together, living-together, we, compearance, appearance-with, co-appearing, to name a few. Nevertheless, *The Disavowed Community* should also suggest ways in which the displacements, proximities, and distances between these various terms are nowhere reducible to a linear trajectory in Nancy’s thinking, a trajectory in which community, in a sense, initiates a series of ontological and political interrogations from which it is eventually effaced or withdraws. Indeed, these terms together foreground

the increasingly complex ways in which philosophy, ontology, politics, and “the political” become increasingly displaced and intricately woven across Nancy’s writings, for which *The Inoperative Community* establishes some initial conditions and for which *The Disavowed Community* offers a recent and compelling response.

Three other aspects of Nancy’s original essay in *Aléa* are important to recall. First, Nancy situates his essay in part as the outcome of a yearlong seminar he had just taught on the writings of Bataille, where emphasis had been placed on Bataille’s “politics.”¹³ In relation to Bataille, Nancy recalls: “I had, very specifically, been looking in Bataille for new elements untouched by fascism or communism, and equally free of democratic or republican individualism.”¹⁴ Given Blanchot’s close friendship with Bataille (they had met in 1940, remaining close until Bataille’s death in 1962), a significant aspect of this initial exchange takes place around Nancy’s reading or *misreading* of Bataille (Nancy himself acknowledges “Blanchot’s resistance to the way I addressed Bataille,” suggesting “Blanchot undoubtedly disapproved of the way I had read Bataille”). This (mis)reading turns around different emphases on Bataille’s “politics” within different phases of his writings (a concern with politics that is considerably more prominent and widely discussed today than it was in the early ’80s).¹⁵ If *The Unavowable Community* reads as a forceful if somewhat oblique response to Nancy’s early essay, a significant aspect of *The Disavowed Community* is to respond to Blanchot’s own presentation of Bataille’s writings, which includes both the references to a “community of lovers” to which Nancy outlines a critical response and a response to Bataille’s references to sacrifice and sacrificial death. In this way, the exchange between Blanchot and Nancy offers the reader a compelling contribution to the growing reception of Bataille’s work, and notably around the reception of these writings in relation to different phases of Bataille’s writing, to rethinking fascism within the postwar French context, to rethinking questions of community (the opening epigraph to *The Unavowable Community* is Bataille’s affirmation of “the community of those who do not have a community”), and to rethinking a “communist exigency” shared, in ultimately different ways, by both Blanchot and Nancy (among others).¹⁶

Second, as Bailly notes in his preface to the *Aléa* volume, Nancy’s original essay coincides with the recent lectures and research undertaken at the Centre de Recherches et d’Études Philosophiques sur le Politique, the center

in Paris that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy had created in 1980 and in connection to which the second volume of texts, *Le retrait du politique*, had also just been published in 1983 (*Rejouer le politique* had been published in 1981).¹⁷ Nancy's essay in *Aléa* is part of this broader reconsideration of what he and Lacoue-Labarthe will term a "retrait" of the political (without acknowledging the center or its publications, Blanchot also refers to this same term in *The Unavowable Community*), a term that suggests at once a retreat of the political, in the sense of its withdrawal, and the necessity of re-treating the political, in the sense of retracing its contours. Nancy's essay is also part of a larger reconfiguring of the political that came out of the "Political Seminar" organized by Lacoue-Labarthe and Christopher Fynsk during the "Les fins de l'homme" conference, the conference on the work of Derrida held at Cerisy in 1980, the proceedings of which were published a year later. The center in Paris was in many ways a continuation of that earlier seminar.¹⁸ Combined with "Les fins de l'homme" conference, the center's work and publications frame both Nancy's original essay as well as Blanchot's response.

Third, and perhaps more to the point, Nancy had not only cited Blanchot in the essay for *Aléa* but also redeployed and inflected a prominent term from Blanchot's own writings, evident in Nancy's title, "La communauté désœuvrée." This reference to *désœuvrement*—variously translated as unworking or inoperativity—becomes the key term through which Nancy addresses his rethinking of the "immanentism" of community, the argument for which his book *The Inoperative Community* is perhaps most well known. A significant aspect of *The Disavowed Community* is Nancy's response to Blanchot's claim that "unworking" always demands a "work," something that Blanchot claims Nancy overlooks in his rethinking of community. Again, any reading and reception of Nancy's text will have to address the way he responds to Blanchot's rejoinder concerning the question of "work" and "unworking," and to do so in a way that touches on—or that refuses—their dialectical reconciliation. One might even argue that Nancy's entire reading of Blanchot hinges on this question of the dialectic, which includes how to translate Derrida's translation of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (elevation, lifting up, conservation, negation, abolishing, suspending, sublation) as *la relève*, a term that Nancy frequently employs in the pages that follow to characterize Blanchot's thinking of both work and unworking, as well as his articulation of politics and love. One might further argue that

any reading of Nancy's reading of Blanchot (and of Bataille's references to sacrifice) turns on how this dialectical *relève* is played out in Nancy's argument—and then how, as it were, Blanchot's own (re)reading of "Nancy"¹⁹ will also play out over precisely this same problematic (in what sense does Blanchot's text reinforce this dialectic? in what sense does it unravel and refuse it?).²⁰

Whether considered as a "response," "rejoinder," or "riposte," whether "echo," "amplification," "reservation," or "reproach" to his initial essay, Nancy's response to Blanchot in *The Disavowed Community* is informed by this larger background, these larger circumstances shaping his (mis)reading of Bataille and Blanchot.²¹ At the same time, Nancy repeatedly acknowledges in the pages that follow the unusual nature of Blanchot's text in comparison with his other writings, including the way Blanchot simply quotes and reprints a previously published review of Duras's *The Malady of Death* (where it is situated in relation to Levinas) without ever acknowledging it as a source.²² Arguably the same can be said of Nancy's own text. For if *The Disavowed Community* is not a book of essays characteristic of much of Nancy's published work, and if it is not exactly like the monographic studies of individual philosophers characteristic of many of his early publications, it tends to stand out both for his reflexive insistence on rethinking his own earlier work (a rare move within Nancy's voluminous writings) and for its conspicuous attempt to begin to articulate a reading that has clearly haunted Nancy for some time. At the same time, apart from one closely related essay, "Intellectuals under Scrutiny," also from the early '80s, *The Disavowed Community* offers a reading of Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* that does not seek to take into account other of Blanchot's writings.²³ Even though he also responds extensively in the pages that follow to Blanchot's use of Marguerite Duras's récit, *The Malady of Death* (published in 1982), Nancy does not seek to address either the generation of writers close to Blanchot (Dionys Mascolo, Robert Antelme, Jean Schuster, and Duras herself) whose collaborations and political engagements around rethinking community and communism ("la recherche d'un communisme de pensée"), the signing of the "Manifeste des 121," or the writers' committees they established collectively during May '68, together also inform Blanchot's thinking and response to Nancy in *The Unavowable Community*.²⁴ Similarly, Nancy does acknowledge in a footnote some of the secondary literature on Blanchot's text, but again he does not intend to address these

readings and interpretations in any significant way. *The Disavowed Community* is thus exclusively focused on Blanchot's initial exchange with "Nancy," and then on outlining a response to this exchange thirty years later—at once a reading, an interpretation, an engagement, an "infinite conversation," at times a settling of accounts and a critique, perhaps a "deconstruction," but above all not a "trial." How exactly to characterize Nancy's argument will no doubt become a significant measure of any reading or interpretation of his text.

In the end, in addressing this earlier exchange between Blanchot and Nancy, one might argue that *The Disavowed Community* can be usefully described as an initial mapping out of the displacements and itineraries in Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* that open toward Blanchot's writings more generally—and Nancy will insist here on the preliminary nature of his book's argument, even as he comes to quite specific conclusions and criticisms. These displacements and itineraries would include retracing what Blanchot himself describes as a "conversion" in his thinking, in other words, a "conversion" that moves between journalistic, political, and literary engagements from the 1930s on—which also includes the Blanchot who writes during "the day" and the Blanchot who writes "at night."²⁵ In this sense, *The Disavowed Community* participates in this renewed and widespread attention to Blanchot's "politics" within the prewar and postwar French context, and in ways that respond to a number of related terms—not just communism and fascism but anarchism, aristocratic anarchism, community, friendship, fraternity—all now situated within a widespread and "profound disenchantment with democracy" since the early '80s when the exchange was first initiated.²⁶ One of the most lasting and incisive contributions of *The Disavowed Community* is to rethink what exactly constitutes "politics" and "the political" in Blanchot's thinking, which not only includes the ways in which community and politics are at once "avowed" and "disavowed" but whether and in what sense "politics" and "the political" are even appropriate for thinking this avowal and disavowal in the first place. In this context, one might note that the early reception of Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* in French has already provoked, even exacerbated, this renewed attention to Blanchot's "politics."²⁷

So *The Disavowed Community* offers itself as a reading of Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*, even as Nancy is quick to point out in the open-

ing lines that “its subject takes shape in a way that far surpasses both [Blanchot’s] book itself and its author”; in other words, “it concerns our age’s preoccupation with the common character of our existence.” And as we know, it offers a reading of Blanchot’s text thirty years after Blanchot published his text. At the same time, *The Disavowed Community* appears to take place in the interstices of several exchanges, dialogues, and conversations, sometimes mutual but sometimes made up of misrecognitions and interruptions—a text composed of explicit references and identifications but also of allusions, innuendo, suggestive asides, elisions, parataxes, evoking a world of missing dates, missing names, missed encounters.

Nancy’s repeated acknowledgment of this expanse of time between Blanchot’s text and his own is both disarming and deceptive, for it is clear that the intervening years do not simply testify to Nancy’s acknowledged inability to respond to Blanchot’s book, based on intimidation, misunderstanding, or the genuine difficulties and challenge of knowing how to circumscribe Blanchot’s original argument. This is especially true for its second part, where Blanchot turns to his reading of May ’68, Duras’s récit, and rethinking Bataille’s “community of lovers.” Those intervening thirty years are not simply absent but deeply instructive, also informing and shaping Nancy’s belated response in numerous and significant ways.²⁸

Here we might begin to recall some of Nancy’s publications since 1984 that can also be read as informing the argument of *The Disavowed Community*. Again, such a schematic overview is hopefully useful to a reader unfamiliar with Nancy’s writings, especially given the ways in which references to these other texts remain largely implicit in the pages that follow. To put it in slightly different terms, rather than the result of overcoming an impasse or inability to respond to Blanchot’s own response adequately, it can be argued that Nancy has been doing nothing else over the past thirty years than preparing himself to write *The Disavowed Community* (again, this would suggest the singular place of the book within Nancy’s writings).

One of the most resonant if also symptomatic episodes comes from 1984, the year after Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community* was first published. Through the invitation of Michel Haar, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy had been asked to put together one of the prestigious *Les Cahiers de L’Herne* volumes on Blanchot. The failure of that project to be realized—a failure intimately related to the contentious nature of Blanchot’s “politics”—and the impossibility, according to the editors, of finding texts that would do

justice to Blanchot's thinking, became a significant motivation behind the subsequent reception of Blanchot's work, not just by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy but arguably by many others.²⁹ Indeed, it can be argued that the recent proliferation of interest in Blanchot's political writings stems in large measure (and several decades later) from providing a response to this failure and tracing out its critical implications. Elsewhere, Nancy has elaborated on the circumstances surrounding the failed volume, which includes an account of specific letters written to the editors—Blanchot's letter to Roger Laporte about the volume and Dionys Mascolo's letter to Lacoue-Labarthe, both from 1984 and both of which are now included in *Passion politique*, in which Nancy further elaborates on the circumstances surrounding the failed volume.³⁰ The "failure" of that early project both informs and even overdetermines Nancy's desire to address Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* in the present volume.

Second, the revision of the initial essay from *Aléa* in *The Inoperative Community* includes not just subtle revisions to the original essay but the inclusion of other chapters in the later volume, chapters that already contribute just two years later to reshaping Nancy's response to Blanchot. Specifically, the additional chapters develop references to myth and literary communism (in later editions, to love and history) that are all more or less present in the original essay for *Aléa* but now subject to further critical elaboration. Even though Nancy eventually turns away from the idea of "literary communism" (yet another modification and nuancing of his response to Blanchot), these chapters can be read not only as offering modifications and nuances to his own essay first published in *Aléa* but to Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*. Combined with later revised editions of *The Inoperative Community* in 1990, 1999, and again in 2004, as well as Nancy's prefaces to translations of the volume into several other languages, his perhaps most well known book already testifies to this continued and sustained concern to respond to Blanchot. More pertinently, in 2001 Nancy wrote "The Confronted Community," the preface to a new Italian edition of Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*, which he dedicates to Blanchot and which also allowed him to "revisit an episode entailing stakes which I had failed to accurately assess at the time."³¹

Less overtly concerned with rethinking the terms in which Blanchot had engaged his early essay, Nancy also takes up his exchange with Blanchot in more oblique ways in his later project from 1991 with Jean-Christophe

Bailly, published as *La comparution: Politique à venir*; Nancy's essay from this volume is translated as "The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence'" (one notes here that the closing word in *The Disavowed Community* is *comparutions*, referring us to the "compearances" or "co-appearances" employed in the earlier essay).³² Although Nancy's essay in the volume with Bailly is written in light of the fall of the Berlin wall and has a strong emphasis on Marx rather than on Blanchot, Nancy not only addresses communism in a way that takes up and inflects his earlier reading of Bataille and Blanchot; he also reopens the question of "community" and "number" formulated by Bailly that prompted the earlier exchange in the first place.³³

In addressing these various texts written over the last thirty years, especially for English-speaking audiences, we should also include here Nancy's involvement in the *Community at Loose Ends* volume, based on a conference organized by the Miami Theory Collective and held at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in 1988.³⁴ If the publication coincides with the increasingly marked and even overdetermined reception of Nancy's writings in English-speaking contexts around the concept of community (*The Inoperative Community* was first translated and published in 1991, three years later), Nancy's essay "Of Being-in-Common," in *Community at Loose Ends*, marks a slight shift in emphasis to a more sustained rethinking of Heidegger's *Mit-sein* (subsequently taken up in Nancy's *Being Singular Plural*), which marks a transition mentioned earlier from emphasis on community to Nancy's concerns with "being-in-common" and "being-with."³⁵ To be sure, the reference to Heidegger was already discernible in the essay in *Aléa*, notably in terms of an emphasis on exteriority, finitude, exposure, what Nancy in the pages that follow describes as "the transcription of Heidegger's *Ek-sistence* and its *aus-sein*, of being-outside, an 'outside' prior to all 'inside,' to all closure of a subjectivity according to the classical schema of being-in-itself," in other words, another way of rewriting Bataille's "ec-stasy."³⁶ In light of these different emphases, a significant aspect of *The Disavowed Community* is less a "return" to the question of community (even though references to being-with are barely discernible here) than a critical re-elaboration of the ways in which community as a term haunts Nancy's writings, for which, I suggest, the *Community at Loose Ends* volume continues to play an important role.

If the thirty-year period between Blanchot's response and Nancy's response to Blanchot is marked by texts and engagements that inform and

shape Nancy's belated response in numerous ways, readers familiar with Nancy's writings will also encounter a number of terms and concepts in *The Disavowed Community* that Nancy has elaborated at some length in other writings. To name but two, these include an extensive discussion of myth, a term he transforms from Bataille and extends toward a thought of its paradoxical "demythologization" or "interruption." Already the subject of a chapter in *The Inoperative Community* (Nancy notes there that "myth and community are defined by each other"),³⁷ and a crucial aspect of his work with Lacoue-Labarthe on "Nazi myth," the discussion of myth in *The Disavowed Community* has already led since its publication to a series of recent interviews exploring the term at further length.³⁸ Second, readers of Nancy's more recent writings on religion and the "deconstruction of Christianity" will also recognize in *The Disavowed Community* an aspect of Nancy's thinking that was considerably less apparent in the writings of the early '80s. This includes one of the most unexpected insights of Nancy's reading of *The Unavowable Community*, which seeks to understand the fuller implications of Blanchot's brief aside to the Eucharist and which culminates in what is arguably the most challenging, engaging, if also astonishing aspects of Nancy's reading—how the female figure in Duras's *The Malady of Death* opens toward Isolde, the chthonic Aphrodite, Madame Edwarda, all now culminating in the figure of . . . Christ—a reading that should be of continued interest for feminist readings of the exchange among Blanchot's, Duras's, and Nancy's respective texts.

Finally, in the trajectory in Nancy's thinking from "inoperativity" to "confronted" to "disavowed," all these various references and motifs begin to constitute a preliminary outline for rereading *The Disavowed Community* in light of other texts by Nancy written both before and since the initial exchange with Blanchot in the early '80s. Two figures also loom large in this thirty-year period, further informing any reading of Nancy's book—Lacoue-Labarthe and Derrida. Collaborative projects between Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe testify repeatedly to the importance of Blanchot—the early *Misère de la littérature* volume, in which the preface notes that Blanchot is at the origin of the various essays on writing, literature, and the book, and which included a text by Blanchot as well as essays by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy;³⁹ the role that Blanchot plays in *The Literary Absolute* as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy rethink literary fragmentation;⁴⁰ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's own mock dialogue, "*Noli me frangere*," written in

the wake of Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, in which "Lothario" and "Ludovico" discuss the limits of fragmentary writing;⁴¹ and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's collaborations around the question of myth, including their essay "The Nazi Myth" that resonates closely with Nancy's earlier discussions of myth in the *Aléa* essay and then expanded in a chapter in *The Inoperative Community*. Nancy recalls in *The Disavowed Community* that "The Nazi Myth" was first published in 1981 in *Les mécanismes du fascisme*, in other words, before the exchange with Blanchot, leaving open the possibility that Blanchot had read the essay before writing his text on Nancy's essay in *Aléa*.⁴²

It is clear in retrospect that, from the mid-1970s, Lacoue-Labarthe's engagement with the writings of Blanchot was as extensive as Nancy's (Nancy informs us of Lacoue-Labarthe's closer proximity to Blanchot through his friendship with Roger Laporte). With the posthumously published *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, perhaps it is only in retrospect that we now know the full extent of Lacoue-Labarthe's more direct engagement with Blanchot's thinking, even though Blanchot's writings clearly play a prominent role throughout Lacoue-Labarthe's career, and right from the beginning, whether in rethinking the relation between philosophy and literature or in his reading of Heidegger in *La fiction du politique: Heidegger, l'art et la politique*, published in 1988 (we recall that Lacoue-Labarthe's text is dedicated to Blanchot).⁴³ If we refer in broad strokes to Lacoue-Labarthe's extensive collaborations with Nancy addressing different aspects of Blanchot's thought or his own writings on Blanchot, it is because readers of *The Disavowed Community* alone would have little sense of this larger background. At the same time, if Lacoue-Labarthe's writings on Blanchot are never directly referenced in Nancy's book, leaving the reader to decide how much Nancy's reading of Blanchot in this volume takes up or responds to Lacoue-Labarthe's own work, it is perhaps just as curious that, given their close collaboration and willingness to cite one another, Lacoue-Labarthe never refers to the earlier exchange between Blanchot and Nancy, whether in the recent *Ending and Unending Agony* or, to my knowledge, elsewhere.⁴⁴

The second figure here is Derrida, notably the several influential essays Derrida published over the years on Blanchot, culminating in the publication of *Parages* in 1986 (the same year in which *The Inoperative Community* was first published in French, though most of the essays included in the

volume were written between 1976 and 1979).⁴⁵ Again, as in the case of Lacoue-Labarthe, Derrida's writings on Blanchot are cited briefly but never addressed in *The Disavowed Community*, just as it remains extremely curious that Derrida also never refers to the earlier exchange between Blanchot and Nancy, whether in *Parages* or, again to my knowledge, elsewhere, and even when Derrida draws up a new introduction to the *Parages* volume just three years after the publication of Nancy's essay in *Aléa* and Blanchot's response in *The Unavowable Community*. More directly, Derrida's meticulously close readings of Blanchot's texts, combined with strong emphasis on singular terms in Blanchot's work ("pas," "viens," "demeure") is a way of approaching Blanchot's texts that informs Nancy's own manner of reading Blanchot, where emphasis is also placed on a few decisive terms. Whether Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* opens another reading of Derrida's essays on Blanchot is certainly one of the intriguing aspects of Nancy's book (just as Blanchot's references to community, friendship, and fraternity shape Nancy's own differences and well-known disagreements with Derrida around these same concepts). Nancy does acknowledge that his insistence on *writing*—"the community of writing, the writing of community"⁴⁶ that is present from the early essay in *Aléa*—comes from both Derrida and Blanchot together, although again it remains to be seen in what ways this appeal to writing—in other words, to questions of sense or "absent sense"—*distinguishes* these writers rather than constitutes a concern imposed by others or that they merely share in common.⁴⁷ Any assumption that all these authors are "deconstructive" effaces the specificities and singularity of political thinking at stake in the pages that follow.

In a note added to the revised essay from *Aléa* included in *The Inoperative Community*, in which he addresses the background and circumstances surrounding his initial exchange with Blanchot a few years earlier, Nancy refers to all those involved or implicated in these exchanges as a "community," "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."⁴⁸ In one sense, any attempt to read and interpret Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* will find its initial measure—indeed, a measure of "responsibility"—

when situated in light of this community, which is to say, in “what belongs to no one and returns to everyone.” Which is also to say, this community in which the question of avowal and disavowal will not only frame the reception of Nancy’s own text but exposes us once again to “Blanchot’s legacy”—“this legacy, however, that leaves us nothing to inherit.”⁴⁹

THE DISAVOWED COMMUNITY

1

“COMMUNITY, NUMBER”

THE WORD “COMMUNISM”

This text is intended as a study of Maurice Blanchot’s work on community in *The Unavowable Community*.¹ Throughout the book’s history and the deciphering that it calls for—the impossibility, no doubt, of bringing its interpretation to a close—its subject takes shape in a way that far surpasses both the book itself and its author. It concerns our age’s preoccupation with the common character of our existence, in which we are not first and foremost distinct atoms but rather we exist in accordance with the relation, ensemble, and sharing [*partage*] in which discrete entities (individuals, persons) serve only as facets or punctuations. This very simple and very essential condition of being escapes us insofar as the evidence of what is given [*sa donnée*] is concealed with the stripping away [*dérobement*] of all the foundations and totems that could have been passed off as guarantees of a common being or rather, at the very least, as guarantees of our existence in common.

The common should be understood at once as the banal—that is, the element of a primordial equality irreducible to any effect of distinction—and, indistinguishably, as shared, in other words, that which only takes place in, through, and as relation. Consequently, the common is not resolved [*se résout*] in “being” or “unity,” or even in what can be posed as singular—“the relation”—without a simultaneous proliferation of its pluralities. To go back to an image from Freud, the “common” would be the fact of being fed from the same “maternal” milk, all the while being exposed one by one to the “paternal” absence of figural unity—the fact of being bound in this way inside an unbinding [*déliaison*], unbound along the very binding.

In our literal embodiment, how can we think this when it is no longer possible to appeal to the foundations and totems of lost worlds? By definition, this question exceeds all politics, ecclesiology, nationalism, or communitarianism, as well as all types of solidarity, mutual assistance, or collective care. This is the question that for more than two centuries the word *communism* has kept provoking, irritating, and tormenting, at the same time that it sustains an expectation and exigency.

Blanchot's book, whose reading I initiate [*entame*] here, is a remarkable witness in the history of this question.

HAPAX

Blanchot published *The Unavowable Community* in the autumn of 1983. For thirty years, this book has been frequently recalled or evoked. It has also been frequently associated with *The Inoperative Community* that I published in 1986 and with Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* published in 1990.² However, if *The Inoperative Community* and, to a lesser extent, *The Coming Community* have become the subject of quite numerous commentaries and analyses (sometimes comparing, contrasting, or connecting them), *The Unavowable Community* has been little discussed, even if widely mentioned. Quotations from the text have been infrequent even though the book itself has been highlighted or invoked for its significance in opening up a reflection that, in many different ways, has extended to today.³

To characterize it with a formula, let us say that it is not by chance that this reflection was born out of the exhaustion of what was called "real communism" and that it brought into play a way of thinking that had been disfigured by this "real." In fact, there is nothing fortuitous here, since the 1980s were the last years of the power that qualified itself as "Soviet," in other words, organized on the basis of "councils." It was not a question of renewing or developing a critique of the lies that had accumulated under terms that had long since mobilized the entire semantics of the common, the *cum*, the "with," or the "ensemble" (thus, not just "communisms" and "socialisms" but "communions" or religious "communities"). In addition to the knowledge of lies and betrayals, there is for some the vague awareness that one does not really know what had been betrayed. (At most, one might think with more or less lucidity—Engels bears testimony to this—

2 "Community, Number"

that the Christian truth of “community” had been lost, which simultaneously brought about the loss of the Christian message itself.)⁴ It did not suffice to take the measure of “real” communism by comparing its liberties, justice, and equality to those proposed by the democracy of states and “the rule of law” subjected, despite their claims to the contrary, to the mechanisms of a “production of wealth” foreign to any community of existence. It was a matter of interrogating the sense or content of a word such as “community,” which in essence suggests nothing other than “communism,” but without the political disrepute that communism has fallen into (including the difference—which is not negligible—to the doctrinal, even doctrinaire value of *-ism* as a suffix).

There was thus something original or inaugural in that moment during which the irreversible closure of historical communism demanded a new questioning on what “communism,” “community,” and “being-in common” could mean for categories of thought to which they referred (social? political? anthropological? ontological?) and for their symbolic or practical, imaginary, or affective implications.

This is why it is very surprising to observe how little Blanchot’s book has been analyzed, and specifically its second part, which is the most affirmative, but also the part that demands most clearly to be deciphered and interpreted, both in itself and in relation to the first part.⁵ Needless to say, if there have been commentaries, it does not seem (taking into account commentaries of which I remain unaware) that any of them has grasped the book’s overall construction or its specific economy.⁶ This fact is all the more remarkable given that the book is quite distinctive in the author’s body of work, which, in addition to fictional texts, is almost entirely composed of books made up of fragments and collections of essays or other texts that are fragmented formally. Books with a single focus are rare in his work and often very brief in length. In other respects, *The Unavowable Community* constitutes a hapax in Blanchot’s work if one takes into account its object, which is at once practical, political, and ontological, even if this means coming back to these qualifying terms later on.⁷ It is the only book in which literature does not appear thematically, even if it plays a role that could be called operational [*opératoire*]. In truth, this hapax is extended or played out again the following year with the publication in 1984 of “Intellectuals under Scrutiny,” a text that certainly should be considered as intimately tied to *The Unavowable Community* of 1983.⁸

GOING FURTHER

The preceding analysis enters into a double obligation. On the one hand, the content of Blanchot's book must be examined more closely. On the other, one must understand why such an examination has been deferred for such a long time.

I am the first person obligated in this matter since *The Unavowable Community* found its pretext and theme in Blanchot's desire to respond to my "The Inoperative Community" as it was published in its initial form in 1983, as an article in the journal *Aléa*.⁹ I made several allusions to this obligation without going any further than mere allusion. It happened that some were astonished by this, and I understand their astonishment. I acknowledge that, for thirty years, I have been at fault in this regard. My particular situation relates to a series of clear rationales—first of all, the feeling at the time of bewilderment [*sidération*] produced by the fact that Blanchot, in the space of just a few months, wrote a book in order to respond to a single essay, and that he published it in the same year (1983) as the article, writing as if responding to a sense of urgency.

My own astonishment stemmed from this promptness, but first from the fact that someone as prestigious as Blanchot would respond to an article written by someone who was only a young philosopher carrying little weight (thirty-three years younger than Blanchot, an age difference that includes all those years between 1920 and 1930—authority corresponds to experience). I know that initially I remained speechless, before even beginning more or less to understand that Blanchot had prohibited me—prohibited us—from remaining with the text I had published. In concluding the first part of his book, he in fact speaks of "the 'unworking community' Jean-Luc Nancy has asked us to reflect upon, though it is not permitted to us to stop there" (43/23).

I can imagine that this argument in its own way takes up the last sentence of the text I published in *Aléa*—"we can only go further"—in order to suggest that we have to extend what I had just cited from Bataille: "the feeling of community connecting me to Nietzsche."¹⁰ These words had just concluded the text's closing argument—neither communing [*communielle*], nor strictly political, the community of those and that which communicates itself in the suspension or interruption of transmissions, of continuities of

exchange—what I designated with the word “writing” according to a meaning of the word derived from Blanchot himself and Derrida.¹¹

In extending the phrase and therefore the text that it concluded, it is clear that Blanchot, through a barely dissimulated twist in the argument, introduced a quite different value—it is not permitted to stop at what Nancy says; one has to go further. The second part of the book was applied to this going further. At the time, I perceived his intention only with much confusion and malaise.

Nevertheless, “going further” did not only imply detaching oneself from Nancy’s argument. It could mean extending it just as well as abandoning it. It could mean passing beyond it [*dépasser*] in all senses one could give to this word. And in fact, Blanchot undoubtedly opens up all these possibilities in his book, possibilities that are woven together and combined with several others relative to Bataille’s work. But their intrication is such that it cannot be completely disentangled. At the very least, I am incapable of doing it, and no doubt I am not alone. Perhaps this is the main reason for the often discomfiting fascination exerted by this text, without ruling out the possibility that this discomfort might already be exerted on Blanchot himself. A perhaps insurmountable difficulty threatens the ambition to state the being of the sharing of being [*l’être du partage de l’être*], which cannot in any respect “be” other than by undoing [*défaisant*] being (substantive, subject) in its very act (verb, transitive).

THE NUMEROUS COMMON

Blanchot’s book was thus written from beginning to end as a response or rejoinder—in many ways, as a riposte—to the text I published in *Aléa*. If community is indeed the primary motif of Blanchot’s book, its motive is found in the reaction to something that he received as a call [*rappel*] (to phrase it a little crudely). One should not say “a call to order [*un rappel à l’ordre*]” but the call of an exigency to which he knew he ought to respond but perhaps without having sufficiently demonstrated it. His opening sentence reads: “In the wake of an important text by Jean-Luc Nancy, I would again take up a reflection, never in fact interrupted although surfacing only at long intervals, concerning the communist exigency” (9/1).¹²

One might be tempted to retrace the prior history of this motif in Blanchot's work with some precision, in particular throughout his relations with Dionys Mascolo and Marguerite Duras. Those with more competence will address this. I limit myself to the situation in 1983. When one brings up the subject of Blanchot's book, it is important to remember something that is easily overlooked. Not only did the book respond to my essay, but my essay responded to a question formulated by Jean-Christophe Bailly. For the fourth issue of *Aléa*, a journal he was editing and published by Christian Bourgois, he had proposed a theme that he announced as: "Community, Number [*La communauté, le nombre*]." ¹³

With its beautiful lexical improvisation whose secret only he knows, Bailly had thus identified a question—an instance, an Idea, an expectation—that I was not expecting any more than Blanchot. However, I had just devoted a yearlong series of courses to the various motifs of community in Bataille. But I had done so, as it were, under the banner of a preoccupation dominated by the word "politics."¹⁴ Besides, the article I had written clearly bears the mark of this concern. In addition, I will have to find occasion later on to return to these questions woven around "politics" (the end of Blanchot's book will lead us to them). It is one thing to be looking for a political formula or construction. It is quite another to see these two terms—community, number—suddenly appear in a kind of blinding starkness [*dépouillement*], terms which are far from being easily situated under the rubric of "politics."

Through this succinct parataxis, one could say that Bailly brings out two notions and two images, whose confrontation was seldom recalled during those years when one tended to forget both the slow decline of communist thought and the more or less muted persistence of what David Riesman in 1950 had called *The Lonely Crowd*.¹⁵ The call [*rappel*] was certainly not scathing, but it was sharp. Within the slew of people mixed together in the flux of consumerism (what one called at the time rampant capitalism), what about existence in common, something to which "communism," for its part, does little justice?

Or again, does the numerous common or the numerical common accede to this common that the word "community" evokes? The obvious response was "no." But this obviousness was immediately found to be lacking in analysis and reflection by the difficulty of giving exact consistency to "community" as a term.¹⁶ In a thematic and interrogative way, Bailly's discovery

consisted in redeploying a term—a marginal but intense term, significant in many respects—that had been fiercely debated during the preceding twenty years, whose tipping point had been '68. During the economic and geopolitical transformations of the 1980s, hippie communities, those communities imagined and attempted by the thousands in Europe and the Americas in the name of sexual liberation, zero growth, ecology, Christian, Buddhist, councilist, or socializing sensibilities, had sustained a slowly but constantly declining imaginary.

The invitation to participate in the volume of *Aléa* was indeed symptomatic of an era in terms of its value and force. It therefore also had the power of an injunction—one had to take hold of the questions embedded in the title's parataxis. In this way, I felt it compulsory to respond to this urgent task, and no doubt Blanchot himself experienced something similar in reading me. But for him, the meaning of this task extended back much further in his life—it is also this that gets played out in his book.

It is quite possible that for Blanchot the juxtaposition of “community” and “number” as terms gave a glimpse both of their contrast *and* the risk of thinking about a numerous community commensurate with the epoch shaped by number and dedicated to the complexity of relations and institutions. For Blanchot, in any case, he aimed his thinking quite decisively toward the smallest number—toward the two, itself turning into an ephemeral 1+1.

2

BEYOND THE POLITICAL

EK-SISTENCE

Communism, in the sense that Blanchot gives it—“what excludes (and excludes itself from) an already constituted community”—was already present in my essay from 1983, in this quotation drawn from one of Blanchot’s texts from 1968.¹ Communism was an essential motive in my essay, giving it an élan that reinforced the impetus that I took from this other term—unworking or inoperativity [*désœuvrement*]²—whose meaning for Blanchot designated the movement of the work which opens it beyond itself, which does not leave it to accomplish itself in the sense of completion but which opens it to the absenting of its sense or of sense in general. Unworking is that through which the work does not belong to the order of the achieved, or the unachieved; it lacks nothing while being nothing accomplished.

In relation to communism, it is true that I insinuated a slight reproach. Like others—for example, Benjamin claiming to be Marxist—Blanchot did not introduce the motif of communism beyond the literary and artistic sphere (neither “explicitly” nor “thematically,” I suggested) and thus did not truly propose “a thinking of community.”² This passage from *The Inoperative Community*—which I read again with a certain surprise³—has two implications. On the one hand, I had long observed the control that the terms and motifs of “communism” or “Marxist critique” held over many (too many to mention), for thinkers who owed little or nothing to a consideration of capitalist exploitation or class struggle (I’m thinking of Bataille, Benjamin, Bloch, among others). On the other hand, I asked—with a confidence that almost makes one smile—that community be thought according to a truth

that still remained to be thought [*en souffrance*] (and that no doubt I appeared ready to offer). In one way or another, one could say that I was attacking what had been simply accepted as the idea of “community” and what had become entrenched [*déposé*] in using the term, just as Blanchot sought an excess of “an already constituted community” under the name of “communism.”

In short, “community” should be thought in terms of a constituent community or the constitution, formation, or creation of community—thus, of that which creates the “common” as such, the impetus [*élan*] and event in which it is born.

I then tried to suggest that the common is the sharing of finitude. The latter is not opposed to infinity but provides its measure—that the infinite is opened in the passion of relation (“the communication of passions” is Bataille’s expression for naming that for which “the sacred” is “a name that is perhaps purely pedantic”).⁴ What is communicated is not a common substance but the very fact of being in relation, the “contagion” which is another name for “communication,” through which nothing is transmitted other than precisely the fact that there is transmission, passage, and sharing.

Essentially [*Au fond*], what I proposed was to expose the following: Nothing is given, whether at the beginning or end, as the substantial unity of a community but “community” names the fact of incessant sharing that does not share out anything previously given [*ne répartit rien de donné*] but becomes the condition of being-exposed. I argued that this condition was essentially the transcription of Heidegger’s *Ek-sistence* and its *aus-sein*, of being-outside, an “outside” prior to all “inside,” to all closure of a subjectivity according to the classical schema of being-in-itself.

What mattered to me in this argument was to invert the usual rational order in which community succeeds individuality and to consider ek-sistence (or to take up Bataille’s term, “ecstasy”) as the ontological condition itself, for which community can only be its corollary. I did nothing other than intensify [*redoubler*] the exclusion of “all already constituted community” that Blanchot saw in “communism.” But because of my reading of Bataille, this intensification took up a direction that must have struck Blanchot (I was hardly aware of this).⁵

POLITICS?

Blanchot undoubtedly disapproved of the way I had read Bataille. At the very least, he judged it insufficient. And he wasn't wrong since I had read Bataille by trying to find something in his work that he was unable to offer (that undoubtedly already, no one could offer anymore). I was looking for a politics, and I encountered a renunciation in search of a political community. I had encountered an opposition between the "consumer society" of lovers (and so of passion) and the society of what Bataille termed "acquisition," identified as a "State." In my text, I had neglected the Bataille of the *Contre-attaque* and the *Acéphale* years because it had seemed to me that the demand for social communion had in that case been experienced as a limit situation.⁶ Either this exigency had triggered misunderstandings that appeared in references to "sur-fascism," or it had encountered the insurmountable difficulty of conceiving of a foundational sacrifice in a world that had long abandoned sacrifice.⁷ Following Bataille's thinking in the 1950s, I was forced to take into account an abandonment of all affirmation that could have been called "communist."

If I received from Bataille the idea of community as a communication of passions, I did not accept that this be limited to lovers and that, in the end, society is condemned to the condition of what he had called "homogeneous," and so deprived of an irruption of alterity and of "a meaning beyond the individual alone" that this "late" Bataille still recognized as necessarily the prerogative of "the City."⁸ At the same time, Bataille regretted that the city was henceforth incapable of opening up this "beyond," not wanting to transfer to lovers alone what could not cease being required from the city, even if it must be renounced.

I tried to play off this late Bataille against the Bataille that had opposed lovers to the "society of acquisition." I had detected in his community of lovers a yearning for "communion."⁹ No doubt this term is not frequent in Bataille's work, where one finds instead "confusion" and "continuity," which characterize the passage to the limit, of distinct individuals whose common aim, in embracing one another, is a fusion that is nonetheless impossible (and in relation to which eroticism remains a comedy, just as sacrifice does in which the sacrificer himself does not cease to exist). I thus thought that this yearning for communion hindered Bataille in his search for a politics

just as it had previously diverted political action where politics itself would be consumed—would be consumed in consuming itself. Still hesitating to call this a “politics,” I thus tried to outline an idea of politics “ordering itself to the unworking of its communication.”¹⁰

I know today absolutely that this attempt was futile, remaining dependent on a sense of exorbitant “politics.” For that matter, I wrote: “if this word may serve to designate not the organization of society but the disposition of community as such, the destination of its sharing.”¹¹ But this hesitation barely held because I did not see how to find another term to designate what Gérard Granel would later call “the form of existence.” Granel writes: “If there is politics, it has the form of existence as its object; if there is existence, it has the polis as its form.”¹² But in this way Granel reinforces a use of the term that proves to be difficult to maintain in the face of what I designated as “the organization of society” (what Rancière in a much more brutal manner calls the “police”).¹³

It was such a meaning of “politics” (or of “the” political [*du’ politique*], in the masculine, the concept or essence of the political that was privileged at the time) that Bataille held onto when he was thinking “sense beyond the individual,” and it is within this regime of sense that I stood at the time. As we will see, Blanchot did not exactly share the same disposition regarding language and thought. This is not without consequence, and I return to it later. Let me state right away that, today, I consider this use of the term misleading [*égarant*], which renders “political” equivalent to “ontological” or “theological.” One might note that the term “political” appeared only rarely in *The Unavowable Community*, except at several notable points (as we will see), in particular at the end so as to refer to one certain order among other “consequential” orders that the book had established or proposed. One thing is at least clearer in Blanchot than in my own work: “Politics” remained distinct from “community” as such. (As we will see, this does not prevent one occurrence in his book where the word assumes an indefinite [*illimitée*] value.)

THE “IMMEDIATE-UNIVERSAL”

Whatever this argument, which is important but does not touch the most serious aspect of the disagreement, Blanchot’s resistance to the way I addressed Bataille was quite obvious. I sensed it from the first time I read his

text, and I was quite troubled because, even if I had difficulty discerning the reasons behind and the outcomes of his critique, I felt diminished [*démuni*] before this judgment that was far more authoritative than my own.

At the same time, without addressing the authority [*instance*] of the “city” or “State,” as Bataille had done, and in designating politics as a particular “sphere,” Blanchot nevertheless took up the “community of lovers” (the title of the second part of *The Unavowable Community*) in order that this community establish a position—call it fundamental—from which various consequences, political among others, could be deduced.

Opposing me, Blanchot thus sought to return to the prewar Bataille, in other words, to the Bataille who had attempted to respond to fascism in a way that was different from a purely democratic position (juridical, republican, humanist). This point is decisive. Everything gets played out from here. If I had ignored the Bataille of the '30s, it is on account of a failure that he acknowledged himself, a failure in several senses—a difficulty in sharing his viewpoints, as well as a difficulty sufficiently distinguishing them from fascist views—but a failure that stemmed far less from any personal attempt than from a symptom of an aporia that was constitutive of the period ushered in at that time, which is still our own—the absence of all profound antagonism to a civilization shaped by capitalism. The hardening of various right-wing groups that had been obsessed by various modulations of the pair “decadence/restoration” as well as the conjectures of marginal Marxisms, like Bloch, Benjamin, or Bataille, both testify to this aporia in the 1930s.

The Unavowable Community must be understood in this context. Not, of course, in the context of the 1930s (at least not directly—we will return to this) but in the context of the 1980s, which, other things being equal, was once again characterized by a profound disenchantment with democracy. If one reads carefully those sections of Blanchot’s book titled “May ’68” and “Presence of the People,” it is clear that this disenchantment is at stake. Speaking of the people, Blanchot avoids referring to the word “democracy.” He distinguishes, even opposes, a “political” characteristic that is defined by “the refusal to exclude anything”¹⁴ and the “determined political wills” (53/31)¹⁵ that belong to the register of terms that this section of the book disqualifies—“power,” “authority,” “ideology,” “command,” “formal institutions”—everything that could be lined up under the initial formula in which “May ’68” is designated as “a feast that breached the admitted and

expected social norms” (52/29). The reference to “expected” is important because it rules out not only the instituted order but all instituting, revolutionary, or reformist projection.

I share wholly in this characterization of the most fundamental and momentous spirit of ’68. However, I am not sure I am able to draw the distinction between an undetermined politics—identified by Blanchot with “the immediate-universal” (53/31)—and a determinate politics. Such a distinction assumes an amphibology or ambiguity in the term “politics,” from which our entire epoch continues to suffer. In *The Inoperative Community*, I made several uses of this term “politics” that were not always coherent or clear. It has taken me a long time to begin to extricate myself [*me dégager*] from a confusion in which we are all more or less implicated.

This observation touches on an undoubtedly essential aspect of Blanchot’s book. Referring to “the immediate-universal,” he is not speaking of politics. He knows this without exactly being able or wanting to acknowledge it. But what is he referring to and what was I referring to with the term “community”? Perhaps we were unable even to acknowledge that this question was posed. A crucial paradox lies at the heart of this matter of community (and/or communism): We respond—Bailly, Nancy, Blanchot, Agamben, everyone—to this question of “communism” that should be characterized as sur-essential, but whose sense escapes us. Suffice it to say that it still escapes us.

ULTRA

It was certainly not easy to take up the course of Bataille’s thinking against the grain, at least according to the way I had followed him while retaining his ultimate lesson: the impossibility of discerning community within the order of the “City” or “State”—in other words, the Bataille who wrote in 1949: “The great question for man today lies no doubt in the failure [*défaillance*] of direction that *dissociates* and breaks apart [*décompose*] society.”¹⁶ But another path can—ought to—lead us back to this leaflet from a “Program” written in 1936:

1. Form a community creative [*créatrice*] of values, values creative of cohesion.
[. . .]

7. Struggle to break apart and exclude all community other than this universal community, such as national, socialist, and communist communities, or Churches.
8. Affirm the reality of values, the human inequality that results from this, and recognize society's organic character.¹⁷

One imagines Blanchot's long, difficult, and painful meditation while reading this list—not in 1936 when he cannot have known of it but in 1970 when he couldn't have possibly not read it (perhaps it had even been communicated to him before its publication in 1970 in volume 2 of the *Œuvres complètes*). For Blanchot, the “communist exigency” had assumed a forcefulness (particularly through the work of Mascolo) that had entirely detached it from everything that the word “communism” had been ruthlessly [*impitoyablement*] forced to signify. Nevertheless, in the same way as all defined, determined, and named community, what Bataille rejects in 1936 as a “communist community” can only remain contested. *The Unavowable Community* in 1983 suggests this in evoking “a *communism* of a kind never experienced before and which no ideology was able to recuperate or claim as its own” (53/30).

When the same text on the same page declares a “common presence,” citing René Char (an unexpected approval), which must be credited with the “awareness that it was, as such [*telle quelle*],¹⁸ the immediate-universal, with the impossible as its only challenge” (53/30), one cannot fail to notice the proximity to Bataille's demand in 1936 for a “universal community.” This observation should be made without implicating, although not without excluding, a literal relationship between the two texts. In any case, it concerns a proximity of thought, a proximity carefully brought up to date in light of a contemporary context [*actualité*] that is no longer inflammatory as it was in 1936.

However, Blanchot intended to offer an image of the Bataille of the 1930s that allowed him to approach Bataille on the subject of community from a perspective possible only fifty years later. To this end, better situated than anyone else to characterize Bataille, he creates a mix of oblique memories and evocations of his friend's profound qualities.

I will not engage in an analysis of the text in its entirety, which would be both necessary and impossible. Necessary because of the usage of each word, each turn of phrase, and of all the details of a composition that is just

as concise as it is elusive [*dérobée*] concerning the argumentative protocols that need to be examined. But at the same time, one must let oneself be drawn toward a limit “after which there will be nothing left to say” (47/25). Perhaps one must understand that there will be nothing more to say in terms of a reflection on community since community “has to know itself by ignoring itself” (47/25), yet it will nevertheless present the occasion to find oneself displaced—“in a way that may seem arbitrary” (51/29) and which thus responds to a hidden [*dérobée*] necessity—toward another register of speech and writing, which is taken up in the second part of Blanchot’s book.

(“To know itself by ignoring itself”—how not to think here of Nicholas of Cusa’s *docta ignorantia* and thus of a way of invalidating any philosophical approach?)

Nevertheless, one must retrace the principal stages through which Blanchot’s text passes in order to accompany, solicit, and comment on Bataille’s thinking before pulling it beyond itself in leaving it to its “desperate movement” (45/25). For after all, at the risk of simplifying a little (but only a little, it seems to me), it must be said that in wanting to raise the stakes of a Bataille who is less detached from political ambitions than the Bataille Nancy had privileged, the fact remains that Blanchot comes to allude, in the proximity of friendship and even of “fraternity” (47/26),¹⁹ to an exposure and abandonment of his friend to a solitude for which community can only be considered “negative,” according to the term that Blanchot cites when he states that Bataille had used it “at least once” (45/24).²⁰ The choice of this hapax as a title for the first part of Blanchot’s text (“The Negative Community”) can lead only to the following: Something will succeed this negativity in one way or another that it will certainly not be possible to think of as a positivity but which will not escape the “negative” either—in other words, which will operate a form of sublation [*relève*] (in the same sense that Derrida translates *Aufhebung*).²¹

In order to take up and redeploy a Bataille still extended toward a “political” community, one has to ignore or neglect the fact that Bataille, starting in the ’30s, had clearly expressed a withdrawal [*retrait*] vis-à-vis politics. Thus, in 1937 he wrote:

It is not only the capacity that politics has to respond to the goals it proposes that must be questioned. Responding to needs experienced more

or less by men throughout time, these goals themselves do not represent the only means of responding to these needs. It is thus still necessary to ask (oneself) if the ambition of politics—even assuming that it is not without power—truly represents the best means to respond to these needs, to man's essential aspirations.²²

Without seeking to know if Blanchot knew this exact text or others with a similar content, one can only think that this profound dimension of Bataille, or the direction he took in these years, may be misunderstood, because it has its origin or principle in the very aims that led to *Acéphale*.²³ In 1983, based on a reading of Bataille's ideas and in “sublating” him (?) [*en le “relevant”(?)*], Blanchot certainly had strong reason to propose a political determination, for which we have already encountered the specific modulation. At the same time, no doubt this political determination only tends to confirm and reinforce the overcoming [*outrépassement*] of politics, which is indicated by Bataille himself.

Gathering up the argument, one could say that it is important for Blanchot to affirm an ultrapolitics, and this perhaps implies an extremist [*ultra*] politics—which, as a result, would be hardly a politics associated with Bataille. But this condensed argument cannot be sustained when dealing with such delicate matters.

3

THE HEART OR THE LAW

TRANSMISSION OF THE UNTRANSMITTABLE

Let us try to follow the path of Blanchot's thinking. Its point of departure is marked by an agreement with Nancy concerning the refusal to order [*ordonner*] community into its own existence, like that of a subject transcending singular existences and which would assume such existences as the very work of common being (community of a people itself understood as spiritual or natural entity as well as communism understood as the force of collective self-production). This refusal formed the premise of my own text and my choice to use *unworking* as a term.

This axiomatic and axiological agreement—which clearly draws its lesson from the convulsion that capitalist democracy alone survives, which is to say, the dissolution of the possibilities of common work (form, figure)—takes up [*recueilleit*] something with which Bataille experimented: Quoting Bataille, Blanchot writes that life in common should maintain itself “at the *height of death*” (24/11).¹ This “height” harbors the crux of the problem. For Bataille, this height demanded a continuous tension in the paradoxical access to death (a “joy”) whose sacrifice (of an other, of self, of self as other) can only be parody. Having experienced the failure of the “absurd” (29/14) sacrificial intention of Acéphale,² Blanchot immediately displaces [*détourne*] the very sense of sacrifice—not without following in this a “slippage” (see 30/15) in Bataille's argument—just as he immediately dismisses the heroic connotation of “height” as a term (see 25/11). This slippage takes place around “abandonment,” which is initiated by the introduction of the motif of “writing” as a motif of that which “exposes by exposing itself” (25/12) precisely

as an aspect of community. Exposing oneself, abandoning oneself [*S'exposer, s'abandonner*—the two terms are connected.

Blanchot specifically opposes this exposed speech [*parole*] to Bataille's "Sovereignty." This is quite surprising since Bataille never held back in his affirmation that sovereignty is "nothing," as I had recalled with some insistence. In this regard, Blanchot quite clearly turned away [*se détourner*—it was important to him to leave sovereignty on the side of the gods, heroes, and anything that necessarily draws "sovereignty" as a term back toward its specific meaning in the context of the modern State, in other words, toward a "height" that nothing in effect can exceed. Where Bataille (and myself following him) struggled to think sovereignty performing itself [*s'effectuant*] through its own negation, Blanchot wants to signify a "gift of speech" (25/12)—the communication of nothing other than a call [*appel*] exposed to not being received—to which the name of "writing" corresponds. With these words, Blanchot also takes up a theme that my text tried to introduce as that of the unworking at work in and of the community. Evidently, the terms and theme of writing as exposition of speech (of sense and communication) had themselves been given to me by Blanchot (together with Derrida), thereby creating a kind of recovery [*recouvrement*] of debt and reappropriation. This gesture was twofold:

1. On the one hand, the motif of writing had been taken up from Nancy according to a movement that is gradually revealed as a call [*rappel*] to the exigency of the work that implies its own unworking. This revelation will be made especially in the second part of Blanchot's book, but he proposes his own writing from the earlier pages that we are following here with a quotation from *The Step Not Beyond*.³

2. On the other hand, "writing" according to Blanchot takes up or sublates [*relève*] Bataille's writing, in a way that is more clandestine [*souterraine*], more obscure, but no less decisive. It is in *Madame Edwarda* that he will discover the substitution of abandonment for sacrifice (see 30/15)—in other words, speech that "offers and withdraws itself"⁴ (31/15) in place of a putting to death that takes away [*retranche*] and atones (32/15).⁵ It is in *Inner Experience* that Bataille, "in the paradoxical form of the book" (34/17), plays out what had been attempted by *Acéphale*. Bataille's writing is thus the very site of sharing an "ecstasy" (that of being mortal, sharing mortality) which can only communicate itself and whose communication is the truth of community—in other words, the truth of what cannot be "limited

to a single individual” (35/17). For Bataille, that sense is essentially common and not isolated is more than a theme; it is an obsession, a fixation. Community and writing are born entwined together.

The subtlest movement of Blanchot’s thinking is undertaken here. Where, for Bataille, writing remains torn [*déchirée*] in its tension toward an inaccessible transmission (communication, fusion),⁶ for Blanchot, “the transmission of the untransmittable” proves to be possible in spite of everything, be it in the “accord of two singular beings, breaking with few words the impossibility of Saying” (35/18).⁷ The transmission of the untransmittable—one could say, the working of unworking—constitutes the fundamental resource [*ressort*] of Blanchot’s argument and no doubt the general tenor [*teneur*] of the “unavowable” inasmuch as it avows itself as such.

If I qualify this movement of thought as “subtle,” it is in two senses. First, it is about refining the sense of “communication” (and thus community) in Bataille by tearing open a passage or access, however slim and fragile, and without suturing it (fragility, in short, opening up this access). Second, one discerns a dialectical mobilization—the incommunicable communicates itself and a tragedy is overcome. Where Bataille “turns back his nails,” Blanchot offers us his book to read.

ABANDONMENT

It only remains to complete the movement that must at once lead and transport [*emporter*] (replay, raise up, move, transform) Bataille (as relayed by Nancy) toward this possibility—even necessity—of communicating [in] the impossibility of (speaking/writing about) community.

If this concerns an “ecstasy,” according to another of Bataille’s obsessive terms⁸—in other words, in Heideggerian terms, of being-outside-oneself—Blanchot emphasizes a “decisive aspect”: “that the one who experiences it is no longer there when he experiences it” (37/19). If ecstasy can be recalled—and so spoken or written—it is only through “remembrance of a past which has never been lived in the present (and thus a stranger to all *Erlebnis*)” (37/19). One can only note here that such a past is raised up [*relève*] from what myth usually designates, an observation to which we will have occasion to return.

In consequence, and as its counterpart, the sharing of community as unworking can take place only “in the only communication which

henceforth suits it and which passes through literary indecency [*inconvenance*]” (38/20).⁹ This nonsuitability as unsuitability refers back to Bataille’s erotic récits and to a “nocturnal communication, that communication which does not avow itself” (39/20)—an expression in which the first indication of the “unavowable” is given while the motif of the secret without secret of the community has just been emphasized.

I had spoken of Bataille’s “renunciation” of how exactly [*proprement*] to think through the sharing of community. It seemed to me that he had renounced this because of the impossible situation in which he found himself of accepting the “bloody secret,”¹⁰ be it the sacrifice devoted [*voué*] to the aporia of putting the sacrificer to death. For this reason, if the sacrifice can only turn into parody, writing can only turn into “nocturnal communication” shared by the “silent reading” of several friends. Yet for Blanchot, friendship proves to offer “the very form of the ‘unworking community’ Jean-Luc Nancy has asked us to reflect upon, though it is not permitted to us to stop there” (43/23). Friendship exposes the possibility of sharing the nonsecret (which is as such unshareable). “We cannot stop at Nancy” because he himself has concluded by writing: “We can only go further” (thus obeying Bataille’s exertion and call), and then because neither Nancy nor Bataille end up reaching the stranger possibility, lodged in the very heart of the impossible, of transmitting the untransmittable or of a gift of—and in—abandonment. Bataille’s movement of thought remains “desperate” (45/25) and tied to a feeling of abandonment in the sense of finding himself abandoned “by his friends” (47/25). According to Blanchot, for Bataille this feeling accompanied the exposure of his solitude by the community itself, by “the heart or the law” of the fraternity that “discovers the unknown we ourselves are” (46/25).

Here again we are permitted to evoke a dialectic. Bataille was abandoned in the very movement of his communication. Blanchot raises up [*relève*] this abandonment not only by retracing his friend’s experience but also by himself communicating as the one who guards and knows “the heart or the law” of friendship and community.

BETWEEN ETHICS AND WRITING

To write “the heart or the law” as a final punctuation to the closing pages of the first part of the text is hardly insignificant. The equivalence that is thus posed suggests a heart having the value of the law or a law of the heart.

This law of the heart is that of friendship or fraternity which alone reveals (to me) my solitary exposure, which also forms my shared community. A law of the heart could also be what lets itself be written—and read by friends—as the literary impropriety or indecency [*inconvenance*] where communication of the secret without secret may take place.

To be sure, there is no greater friend of Bataille's than Blanchot. He is not one of those people who, “especially before the war” (47/25), could have given him the impression of having abandoned him—those who backed away before the sacrificial absurdity. But Blanchot is no doubt the only true friend—in a sense that is not far from Laure's pages on “The Sacred” that Blanchot mentions a few pages earlier (39/20);¹¹ on the contrary, Blanchot does not refuse the task of going further in penetrating the deepest and most hidden sense of abandonment's truth, this truth that sacrifice had long dissimulated (dis-simulated).

In turn, a friend can offer a writing of abandonment to be read—a writing that abandons itself, delivering the abandonment of the act of writing [*écrivaint*] while creating the récit (if récit there is) of this abandonment through which is communicated that which is in no way communicable but which we nevertheless share. In this scheme [*dessein*], refusing the notion of a project, this friend may offer another writing, a writing which, in order to rise [*relever*] to the law from the heart while ruining itself [*en s'abîmant*] at the heart of the law—of the common law and the law above all law—would be like a woman's writing, like Laure's. This woman would herself be the friend of the friend. In this way, surreptitiously, we would be in the process of broaching the second part of Blanchot's book. For Bataille there was Laure, and for Blanchot there was Marguerite [Duras]. In passing from one to the other, one will pass from one communication to the other, from “the sharing of the secret” (37/19)—the title of one of the book's sections—operating “clandestinely” (39/20) to yet another, where the unavowable will be exposed and communicated.

*

In this same passage from the book, we should point out another way of understanding what for Blanchot corresponds to this equivalence between “the heart or the law.” Understood as an alternative—which cannot be excluded since it is already implicated in the gesture that thus divides what was initially named in one word by the “heart”—the same formula opens up a dilemma or conflict, a tension between “two severities [*gravités*]” felt

by Blanchot as “unbearable”¹²—that of a politics that seeks a fulfillment [*accomplissement*] and that which is neither a fulfillment nor power but which abandons itself to “a revolution that does not need to succeed or achieve a fixed goal.”¹³ In “Intellectuals under Scrutiny,” a text from 1984 (where, following on from *The Unavowable Community* from 1983, one finds a recollection of May ’68 as an “exception” that “gives an idea” of such a “revolution”), this unbearable tension takes the yet more painful form of a “perhaps irreparable damage” that is endured by the writer (here the true figure of the intellectual) when he “absents himself from the only task that matters to him”—“to utter the unexpected [*inattendue*].”¹⁴ Speech is “unexpected” when it does not respond to a project, when it is not constrained by the urgent necessity of justice (in this text, this is the word that occupies the place of “the law”) and stems from [*relève de*] an abandonment to “the sanctity of emptiness.”¹⁵ It is with this “sanctity” that the same text opens itself to an evocation of the tomb deserted by Christ, connected to the necessity that “there is worklessness [*désœuvrement*] . . . only in the endless pursuit of works”¹⁶—a connection, as we will see, that itself links up to the end of *The Unavowable Community*, as if it were a matter of extending the book in some way.

“The heart or the law” can just as well imply a law of the heart—to which the unleashed [*déchaînée*] passion of abandonment alone ought to obey—as well as the mutual exclusion between this passion and that other passion that the urgencies “of justice and liberty” foreshadow, which, in order to be urgent, are no less “obscure” since they are designated by “vague words, and powerful, unclear assertions.”¹⁷ As Blanchot declares in a tone that recalls Heidegger’s analysis of the “one,” this obscurity is none other than that of a “democracy . . . that had lost its radiance” and which had been reduced to “day-to-day mediocrity.”¹⁸ For this enshadowed [*assombrie*] democracy (having lost the radiance [*éclat*] of the Enlightenment)¹⁹ is that which, in the context of fascism, believed itself able to “open itself to myths,”²⁰ misrecognizing at what point there was a relentless attempt in the extermination of the Jews to incite hostility against “a rejection of myths, a forswearing of idols, the recognition of an ethical order manifesting itself in respect for the Law.”²¹

The tension reaches its limit here since it extends between nothing other than ethics and writing, between Judaism and something that, without being myth,²² would nevertheless demand to be opened there, between

the friendship with Levinas and with Bataille, between one Blanchot and another, between a passion to execute [*accomplir*] the law and a passion to open the heart. The essay “Intellectuals under Scrutiny,” which was initially published in the journal *Le Débat* in 1984, presents an idiosyncrasy that is quite singular since the “intellectuals” are placed “under scrutiny” in their “creative solitude,”²³ by a moral exigency that constrains them to become, according to the closing citation from René Char (once again a timely assurance), “a monster of justice and intolerance, a cooped-up simplifier.”²⁴

Beyond a doubt, *The Unavowable Community* intends to illuminate a manner of thinking community that avoids just as much the simplification of upholding a cause and serving the law as the despair of having to limit the communication of unleashed (abandoned) passion to the private sphere. I had pointed out the need to avoid this double pitfall, but, according to Blanchot, I had not perceived the ultimate exigency, or I had detected it only confusedly—how to raise up together [*relever*] law and passion, politics and writing, solitude and communication. (That is, of course, how to bring them together without making them into a third place of synthesis [*une tierce instance de synthèse*], which would be philosophy. In relation to Nancy’s philosophical discourse, what is also played out here is a writing capable of the unavowable.)

Within the same movement, Blanchot’s book intends to open up an unexplored and sinuous path that would lead from Levinas (to gain access to the other) to Bataille (to gain access to passion), finally culminating with Blanchot himself in order to write *the heart or the law*.

The heart or the law—if the law can ever become heart, the heart on the other hand can become the law beyond all law. Perhaps this is the unavowable.

4

THE CONSUMED COMMUNITY

WITHOUT A WAY OUT

This movement of thought appears under the banner of a new quotation from Nancy, but which is not taken from *The Inoperative Community*. It comes from an earlier text titled “Abandoned Being,” where it is announced: “The only law of abandonment, like that of love, is to be without return and without recourse.”¹

The use of this phrase has multiple implications. On the one hand, Blanchot finds the intersection of two words whose importance we have recognized in his text—law and abandonment, joined in a formula that, through the unicity of the law in question and thus its exceptional character, comes close to a “law of the heart.” On the other hand, this singular law prescribes a condition—“without return and without recourse”—that does not deny the absencing [*absentement*] of the subject as it has been defined as its true relation to the experience of communication (ecstasy or relation in general). In this sense, Blanchot pits one Nancy against another, an “against” which at the same time can conform to “entirely against” and “reluctantly [*contre-cœur*],” a paradoxical conjunction from which it appears that Nancy at once fails to really understand himself while misunderstanding Bataille, and that Blanchot himself understands both of them better than they understand each other.

In a decisive manner, this better (or superior?) understanding will occur through recourse to a literary work. This gesture signifies a deliberate shelving of everything that I had proposed on the subject of literature in *The Inoperative Community*—Blanchot no doubt judging the argument too far

removed from the necessity of the work proper [*l'œuvre proprement dit*]—just as, in a general manner, he intended to remind me of the work's necessity.²

In any case, nothing will have prepared us in any visible manner for the leap that is accomplished from the first to the second part of Blanchot's book, perhaps analogous to the "lethal jump" that will be invoked farther on as much in reference to "Tristan's prodigious bound onto Isolde's bed" as to that which, "according to Kierkegaard, is necessary to elevate oneself to the ethical and, above all, religious level" (74/44). Blanchot does not say that he bounds or jumps, but without any transition other than the epigraph cited above, he announces: "I introduce here, in a way, that may seem arbitrary, some pages written with no other thought than to accompany the reading of a relatively recent *récit* . . . by Marguerite Duras" (51/29).

This declaration is sufficiently clear in allowing us to understand that the arbitrary is only apparent and that its necessity will be discovered, all the while suggesting to us that it is only about reading a *récit* for itself, and a *récit*, he states, "sufficient in itself, which is to say perfect, which is to say without a way out [*sans issue*]" (51/29). We are thereby warned that a perfection [*une perfection*] (an accomplished work) will appear as perfectly aporetic—not coming to completion, not resolving itself, and yet as such it "leads" Blanchot to the thought of community.

(In two cases, at the beginning of each of the book's two sections, it is a matter of "taking up [*reprendre*]" and being "led back [*reconduit*]" to the question of community, as if a reminder [*rappel*] or an effort were always necessary in order to return to something that one may have wanted to abandon [*délaisser*]. Something, perhaps, that would touch on a delicate avowal.)

The author of the *récit* announced here—*The Malady of Death*—is a woman. Blanchot knows her very well and has for a long time. In an interview, Marguerite Duras states: "Blanchot, who knew me very well."³ Asked about a passage from Blanchot's commentary that we will interrogate further, she states, "That's exactly right."⁴ Even ignoring subsequent remarks by Duras, we can only imagine that this *récit* intervenes in Blanchot's book from an exceptional position—that of "accompanying" a reading that is also a companionship [*compagnonnage*], among other circumstances, that is hardly removed from the events of May '68, which will also be addressed in the book.

The preceding reference to friendly readings [*lectures amies*] (such as that of Laure) and to the reader as a “companion who abandons him or herself to abandonment [*s’abandonne à l’abandon*]” (43/23) can only encourage the hypothesis according to which Duras is found here to have written for two, while her reader, Blanchot, writes and addresses his friendly reading—loving? in any case, willing to share [*partageuse*]—to a friend who had died and toward whom he turns somewhat like a woman (perhaps a community that is less avowable than any other since in fact foreign to an avowed [*avérée*] homosexuality, friendship between men which would be that through which heterogeneity—abandonment—is opened to homogeneity).⁵

COMPLEX COMPOSITION

If Blanchot clearly indicates that he introduces pages initially written without the intention of taking up the question of community, he does not inform us that they have already been published, or that their publication is quite recent. In truth, recourse to these earlier pages proceeds from a fairly singular weaving of circumstances and dates that Blanchot prefers to ignore and not to hide, presumably since there is no need to hide what could be easily observed at the end of 1983 or beginning of 1984 by a reader familiar with the intellectual or publishing milieu of the time. Of course, over time these circumstances have been forgotten. It is appropriate to recall them, not because of the meticulous desire of an archivist but because together they contribute to the sense or multiple senses of Blanchot’s book, no less than they do to his silence regarding these same circumstances.

That it is appropriate to resituate the origin of the pages that will constitute the structure of the book’s second part—and, dare I say, its lesson on community—this is what Blanchot himself invites us to understand by indicating that these pages have been written “to accompany the reading of a relatively recent *récit* (but the date doesn’t matter) by Marguerite Duras” (51/29). A footnote cites the reference to *The Malady of Death* and mentions the publisher, Éditions de Minuit, but, against custom, does not provide a date.⁶ The expression “relatively recent” is surprising. One might even think that “relatively” is inserted in order to avoid the awkwardness of writing “recent *récit*” as a phrase. However, there are other ways of avoiding this awkwardness, and Blanchot chooses a curious wording that seems to bring the dates as closely together as possible, as if “recent” referred to an immedi-

ate proximity. In effect, I can imagine that it was important to him to affirm a sort of immediacy, a continuous linking, or even a slippage between texts, friendships, identities—in short, an abandonment “without return and without recourse,” even if the form of all of this is given and held together under the name of Maurice Blanchot.

Each of the two parts of the book, and thus the whole book itself, opens with an “I” and finishes with a “We.” The former becomes the latter, which is itself at once composed and assembled in such a way as to become “this little book” that “entrusts to others” (92/56) a certain number of questions—less a book on the subject of community than a book that is itself the subject of a community that the book summons and only summons (“Come!”) inasmuch as the book itself already writes the words or perhaps, even more, the music.⁷

This sense of the book that is announced with the récit’s perfection “without a way out” is no less indebted to specific facts and dates. *The Malady of Death* by Duras was published in 1982. In the spring of 1983, Blanchot published an article titled “The Malady of Death (*ethics and love*)” in issue 55 of *Nouveau Commerce*.⁸ The title and subtitle provide the argument’s framework—a reading of Duras’s récit leads us to ask if the dissymmetry or irreciprocity (two terms present in the text) of the relation staged by Duras are identical to those that characterize the ethical relation according to Levinas. In essence, he responds that there is more at stake than just an identity; the heterogeneity of the amorous relation (sexual, passionate) at once imitates and exceeds ethical law (Bizet’s aria resonates in the text—“love . . . has never known the law”).⁹ In this excessiveness [*démesure*], like unworking [*le désœuvrement*], death is played out in “pages that are so dense, so violent” of Duras’s text.¹⁰

At this point, the reader—by this I mean the male or female reader of the present text, here and now—has perhaps already recognized phrases from *The Unavowable Community*. In fact, the text from *Nouveau Commerce* is reproduced in its entirety over the course of the second part of the book, preceded and followed by pages that take it up in the perspective of community. Blanchot took up this earlier text and in a certain manner readdressed or reoriented it [*re-destiné*]¹¹—practically without changes, with the exception of an important reworking of the introductory paragraphs, the insertion of pages that precede and follow it, and finally the division into sections with subheads that create continuity with the first part of the text.¹¹

This is not all. Two supplementary circumstances allow us to finish recomposing the argument.

On the one hand, the text of the earlier article had already come to evoke the “community of lovers,” although without naming Bataille. More precisely, Blanchot writes: “a silent injunction addressed to the ‘community’ of lovers,” where, in the book, he puts the entire phrase “community of lovers” in quotes (which, we recall, becomes the title of the second part of the book). This displacement is important because the first lesson comes down to distancing or relativizing the justice of “community” as a term whereas the second, as it were, tackles Bataille’s expression head on, which, relayed by Nancy, leads to the nerve point of Blanchot’s thinking.

Now, the names Bataille and Nancy appear as it happens in the last footnote, where the call figures after the last word of the text in the earlier article (after the quotation from Marina Tsvetaeva on page 77/46 in the book version). This footnote (which of course does not appear in the book version) should be cited, pointing out that it comes at the end of this closing phrase: “the always yet to come words of the unworking [*la parole toujours à venir du désœuvrement*].”

I return here to the text published by J-L Nancy on the “inoperative” community (in *Aléa* 4), a text that should be recognized as marking a significant milestone in approaches to Georges Bataille’s thought, who is still largely unknown in spite of or because of his reputation.¹²

This reference can only have been added at the last minute—the issue of *Aléa* (also published in spring 1983 as the issue of *Nouveau Commerce*) must have reached Blanchot as he was finishing his text, or more likely as he was correcting the proofs. Struck by the encounter between what he had just written and the theme as well as the specific title of my essay, he wanted to take account of it right away. Between the spring and autumn of 1983, he immediately set to work writing *The Unavowable Community*. One can imagine him already guided by the idea of renewing (rather than simply “introducing”) his thinking strongly influenced [*aimantée*] by Levinas’s work on ethics, leading it more decisively in the direction of the community of lovers (with all the variations in quotations marks and parentheses that can be projected onto the phrase), all the while returning or diverting [*détournant*] the argument toward Bataille. If he states that

Bataille remains “still largely unknown,” this could mean that, while recognizing Nancy’s essay, a misunderstanding remained that he was ready to rectify.

This whole, complex operation has two remarkable characteristics. First, the encounter between his and my text was contingent, but this contingency drew some of its necessity from what I recalled above concerning Bailly’s invitation to work on “community, number”—a sign of the contemporary exigency that Blanchot knew immediately needed the following response since he himself had just touched on [*effleurer*] the motif of community. Next, this exigency—which he called “communist” at the beginning of the book—suddenly emerged under the banner of Bataille. Twenty-one years after his friend’s death, this brought him back to all of their past exchanges, starting with an encounter whose circumstances (1940) had subjected them to intense and difficult concerns, based on what both of them (together and separately) believed or desired in the ’30s.

Right away (one guesses), Blanchot knew that the occasion made it possible to “recapture [*repandre*]” (as he writes on the first page) a path of thinking—perhaps an orientation if one considers what he wrote on the subject of Bataille’s “apparently confused notes” (45/24)—that had always existed in his work, if in a concealed way, a part of which had surfaced in the article on the *récit* by Duras.

It certainly wasn’t community’s topicality as a motif that provoked him. On the contrary, in the exordium of the second part of the book, he works to separate out “the communities that survive [*subsistent*]” and which are even “multiplying,” while “the ‘communitarian’ exigency . . . perhaps haunts them, but . . . almost certainly renounces itself in them” (51/29). It is important to note that my initial essay was framed—through a dedication to a long series of names¹³—by a communal life that I was then living, of which Blanchot was informed.¹⁴ I wouldn’t rule out that the somewhat scathing lines concerning communities “that survive” was aimed at me personally (along with Lacoue-Labarthe)—one should remember that this was the moment that came close after the hippie years. Blanchot may have been informing me that these experiences (to which I do not believe he was reducing my text) hardly attained the exigency to which I sought to bear witness.¹⁵

“DOING NOTHING”

Having introduced Duras’s récit, Blanchot abruptly turns the page. Rather than coming to the récit as promised, he somewhat unexpectedly opens up a section titled “May ’68.” Most readers have no way of knowing that Blanchot is not writing about Duras as his introduction suggests. He seems to take pleasure in confusing the reader. The reading of Duras should be preceded by the memory of the “fortuitous meeting” (52/29) made possible by May ’68.

Fortuitous meeting, perfect récit: The synchronicity of the two events is not expressed, yet it emerges forcefully for consideration. Moreover, nothing stops us from imagining such and such a relation—hidden from us—between the text of Duras and the memories of May ’68 (Blanchot’s, Duras’s, and others’). The beginning of the récit that Blanchot cites on page 60/35 seems to respond to “the opening that gave permission to everyone . . . to mix with the first comer” (52/30). One could go so far as to imagine that a secret is sheltered in this weaving of texts, a lived history known by a few who identify with what is written there. This story [*histoire*] responds to communities that are “multiplying” (51/29) in plain sight.

Just as he briefly referred to Bataille’s life, it is quite possible that Blanchot wants us to understand that this is just as much an experience as a matter of thinking, an experience that must be one of thought in order for it to be thought, in other words, for it to speak in extending to the extremity of speech. He writes: “It is in life itself that absence of someone else has to be met. It is with that absence—its uncanny presence, always under the prior threat of a disappearance—that friendship is brought into play and lost at each moment, a relation without relation” (46/25). The “without relation” of the relation forms precisely that which cannot be derived from speech and which is experienced in its suspension.

It is therefore not a question of appealing to “lived experience” (no *Erlebnis*, we might recall), and yet it is “in life itself” that the truth of its outside presents itself in disappearing. The immemorial can also open itself in memory, like the heart of the “event,” of which one can ask: “Had it taken place?” (54/31).

One can also try to enter into the memory of May ’68 as a memory capable of opening itself to the immemorial, to that, as we have said, which takes place in its withdrawing into presence [*se déroband à la présence*]. One

can create out of this moment in history a testimonial that is ultimately no more attestable than a literary récit (in short, a myth, a term to which we will return).¹⁶

May '68 is offered as an “instantly realized utopia,” in other words, as the outside [*hors-lieu*] at the heart of what takes place, opening “time to a beyond of its usual determinations” (54/31). May '68 also offers the presence and power of a people “who, in order not to limit itself, accepts *doing nothing*” (55/32). Taking up inoperativity or work of unworking [*Relève de l'inopération ou œuvre du désœuvrement*]*—*such is the book's major characteristic, regulating the book's thought inasmuch as this thought attempts to respond and reply to the formula of an “inoperative community.”

It is in this way that May '68 is presented under the sign of a “*communism*” (53/30), written in italics in order to underline its unclassifiable character, beyond the hold of any ideology, and in this way irreducible to all “determined political wills” (53/31) or “particular political decisions” (54/31).¹⁷ Defined by a general nonexclusion as discussed earlier, it is here that this “politics” fleetingly appears.¹⁸ Nonexclusion, “absence of reaction” (54/31), “impossibility . . . of taking into account a particular form of adversity” (54/31), “actionless action” (55/32)—all make up so many insistent variations on the theme of negation of negation that is proposed or imposed in the political taking of sides. To determine oneself politically is to enter into (or found) a group in order to take action in the relation of forces, interests, and stakes of social and institutional space, which supposes choices, confrontations, exclusions. To exclude nothing, to hold oneself in withdrawal [*en retrait*] is to be faithful to the “relation without relations.”¹⁹

The stakes are extensive and no doubt intersect with what, since May '68, ceaselessly oscillates in and around us, a vertigo surrounding politics and protests [*contestation*], which includes a contestation *of* politics—insurrection, revolution, and even “demonstration” (56/32) find their “true” character in the instantaneous denouement and unbinding [*dénouement*] of a present of which one is unable to know if or how it has taken place without doubting in any way its truth in excess of all identification and memory. The point is that it is not a question of building a future or in any way making work [*faire œuvre*].

Suffice it to say that politics finds itself simultaneously affirmed (at least through its name) and sucked up into a passing beyond [*un outrepassement*] all determination and specificity where it sublimates itself into a pure sense

of nonsolitary existence (its only truth). No doubt this corresponds to at least one of the forces that produces and has long supported the words “communism” and “democracy” (more specifically, the expression “popular democracy” if we refer to what Blanchot says about the people here). At the same time, that one might gather up [*exhausser*] all these words together in a “politics” of unlimited nonexclusion or undifferentiated relation (“camaraderie without preliminaries” [55/32]) is not possible without rendering the word “politics” problematic.

Indeed, this is exactly the case. Politics is absent from the rest of the text before appearing again right at the very end, in an appeal to an “exacting political meaning” (93/56) awaiting future developments (we will come back to this, but perhaps they are given in his essay “Intellectuals under Scrutiny”). One could say that Blanchot’s text holds itself here suspended in an infinitely delicate equilibrium, in truth untenable—unsustainable like the tension between the “two gravities” and because it responds to this tension, sustaining it while exceeding it, escaping it by “not letting [itself] be grasped” (56/33) in order to go (to flee, to jump, to throw itself?) toward an entirely different possibility. This unstable equilibrium—the very instability of the instant (“It must not last, it must have no part in any kind of duration” [56/32])—can be identified as maintained or desired between and beyond two postulations relative to politics: on the one hand, a postulation of which Hannah Arendt will have been a prominent interpreter, politics as the true space of common life of human beings who put their faculties of judging and acting to work (a taking up and expansion of *zoon politikon*), and, on the other, the struggle to establish and reestablish justice trampled down [*bafouée*] by inequality, exclusion, and domination. On both sides, a principle of equality or homogeneity is, in different modes, operative, as well as a principle of possible revolution (taking power, successful insurrection, councils, and thus coming together [*mise en commun*]). For Blanchot, another perspective escapes this dual principle, which must drive apart [*écarter*] just as much “society in person, with its functions, its laws, its determinations” (57/33) as “combat” (56/32).²⁰

It is not a matter of rushing toward a judgment over what this absenting or disappearance of politics represents, which moreover is not specific to Blanchot and which translates a growing sentiment at that time in a rather discerning way, a sentiment which, thirty years later, we are still not clear about. First of all, it is a matter of situating the stakes clearly. In short,

expanding without limits a certain value of politics in order to subtract it from all determination, Blanchot necessarily passes beyond this term and must reach an exceeding or transcending register in relation to which “political sense” (93/56) can be only secondary and derived.

“ANTISOCIAL SOCIETY”

In a logical manner, this exceeding-transcending register proves to be no different from a regime of origin or foundation. The two sections of the text relative to May '68 conclude by considering the “people,” people who, as “presence and absence, if not merged, at least exchange themselves virtually” (56/33), in other words, people or community as authority [*instance*] or subject owing its being only to its ungraspability or to the incessant beating of its gathering/dispersion [*désassemblément*] (“integrality surpassing any whole” [55/32], which shows to what extent Blanchot was distrustful of relation). We should note that an “innumerable” character should be added to this, the repetition of which (at least three times in this section) could pass as a sort of confirmation of Bailly’s formula—“community, number”—a confirmation that is simultaneously displaced in the way in which it rules out the possibility of a community that is “countable” in one way or another, in other words, determinable, circumscribed “in person” (57/33), according to this singular formula that seems to evoke what one calls the “moral person” and thus “society” in a strictly legal sense.

It is precisely the law that is brought into play in terms of foundations. Blanchot writes that “the people” is “as much the dissolution of the social fact as the stubborn obstinacy to reinvent the latter in a sovereignty the law cannot circumscribe, as it challenges it while maintaining itself as a foundation” (56/33). The people remain or operate from within a compulsion to dissolve/reinvent the bond (of the law). Dissolution opens onto the infinity and absenting to oneself [*à soi-même*]. But reinvention is not a simple, determinate identification since sovereignty exceeds the law that it disqualifies [*réfuse*] while founding it (“the Law which always precedes the Law” (73/60n13), as Blanchot notes in a footnote). On this point, Carl Schmitt’s and Bataille’s concepts of sovereignty join up—the power to decide on the exception to the law touches on the Nothing where dissolution can rise up again.

In any event, there is founding [*fondement*]. The motif of foundation can be found toward the end of the text, where it is confirmed in its solidarity

with an inaccessible point of excess. The sense of this excess is found much less in the intellectual impossibility of referring to a foundation than in an ontological (or transcendental) constitution of an ungrounded and unfounded foundation—without ground [*fond*]. In the end, Blanchot's text offers itself as a meditation on the great motif of the *Ungrund* (unground), and as such, it also cannot fail to gesture toward the *Urgrund* (urground)—the originary ground.²¹ We should remember this when encountering the motifs of the chthonic Aphrodite and the Eucharistic body later on.

In fact, two operations are intertwined: that of a political foundation and that of an ontological foundation. This intertwining is not avoidable if politics is thought in conformity with being, in other words, not if being is thought as being-in-common but only if the common is identified or recognized as political—which precisely forms the heart and the knot (if not also the law) of the problem.²² In a sense, Blanchot cuts the Gordian knot. He removes politics (ultimately, it is difficult to see how politics could not be “determinate”), and he reserves, in the most profound way, a “community” in and of itself withdrawn from all determination, only binding itself through its own unbinding. In another sense, perhaps, he tightens the knot even further if “politics” must nevertheless be related to “community.” Yet, as we will see, Blanchot will ultimately separate out a “political sense,” however obscure (on a formal level?), from his overall reading of Duras.

For the moment, we arrive at the decisive point where community is redefined according to prior considerations and consequently according to the overcoming [*outrépassement*] of a political community and/or a society “in person.” Community is identified with “the true world of lovers” (58/34), according to one of Bataille's expressions quoted by Blanchot. Once again, we touch upon the truth.

The displacement—substitution or conversion—is of importance. It is this displacement that brings about the reversal of Bataille and Nancy's perspectives as well as their lifting up [*relève*] or assumption in a superior thinking.

The movement has been prepared in advance through the motif of the people's “impotent power” (57/33). The word “impotent” has been privileged in order to designate the “instinctive refusal to accept any power” (54/31) shown by the people of May '68.²³ As a refusal of power, this impotence is not a failure but rather “accepts *doing nothing*” (55/32). In naming this “refusal” and “acceptation” of “impotence,” Blanchot slips into the sphere

of sexuality but in a manner that still remains implicit. Before making it explicit, he takes the precaution of affirming that there is an “abyss” between the register of the people and that of that “antisocial society or association, always ready to dissolve itself, formed by *friends* and *couples*” (57/33). This abyss cannot be “removed” by any “rhetorical deceit” (57/33). The particular weight of these words leaves one to think: Why bring up the possibility of deceit unless it is because one knows that it is highly probable that the reader wants to uncover a deceit or because one knows that one is already implicated in one?

In fact, we move here from the people to lovers. Blanchot makes this move (into the abyss?) by writing: “Certain traits however distinguish them while bringing them together” (57/33). Here is exactly what must be called a sleight of hand, and Blanchot knows it. Knowing it, he tries hard to make us admit that what cannot assume any other form than the paradox of a conjunction of opposites (presence/absence, gathering/dispersion)²⁴ is not at all illusory and, on the contrary, refers to the most profound necessity—in fact, the thesis (if one can call it thus) of the community of lovers as truth of community in general forms the very heart of the book, or its law. Lovers are the heart or the law of the people—at the very least, the law of a people that should be thought as a beating heart rather than as an association.

One should pause here a while over this movement of thought and its philosophical procedure, which are not designated as such and yet are quite obvious. I have introduced the motif of the “relève” deliberately, in the sense of “lifting up” or “sublation”²⁵—indeed, it seems that Blanchot, both here and elsewhere, mostly proceeds by a negation of negation (for which the “neuter” becomes the form?) that has the traits of the dialectical *Aufhebung* while subtracting the moment of “synthesis” (to refer to Hegelian doxa to which Hegel’s own text cannot be reduced). If the first negation is found in separation (solitude), the second is found in reunion (whether this is separation of or with [*d’avec*] self or from the other, since both terms are themselves produced through separation). Where Hegel constantly seems to propose a third moment, the unity of the two in the third (say, the child or the State, in any case, society, or with Hegel “ethical idea in action”), Blanchot steps back [*se tient en retrait*] by proposing “neither separation nor reunion.” However, this neither-nor is not simply positing a nothing between the two. Rather, it is the movement of their simultaneous conjunction and disjunction—*coincidentia oppositorum* (another trace of romantic-idealism).

Bataille envisaged that, in attaining the totality of absolute knowledge, Hegel would see the extravagant [*excédante*] and dramatically ludicrous question emerging concerning the finality and finitude of knowledge.²⁶ In contrast, Blanchot suspends the dialectic onto itself in place of dedicating it to tragic futility. Bataille came up against the “comedy” as much of sacrifice as of eroticism, which an inaccessible communion always evades [*se dérobe*]. Blanchot joins the two together in order to think the abandonment through which two beings join up together in an “oblivion of the world” (58/34), where at the same time, and because outside the world, they can only separate.

Although for Hegel the passage from one into another produces a third term, and although for Bataille the impossibility of the passage opens as the night into which one must enter, Blanchot desires that the passage itself passes and takes place only in its effacement. He desires to pass beyond suture and tearing apart, beyond identity and difference, without ending up either with identity or with the difference between the two. Why this desire? We must return to this question, without perhaps knowing how to respond.

“EMPTY INTIMACY”

The common trait between people, friends, and couples—the last two abruptly and unexpectedly associated here in such a way as to confirm the hypothesis regarding Blanchot becoming feminine [*se féminisant*] for Bataille—is the mark of “the always imminent dispersal of a presence . . . without a place (utopia), a kind of messianism announcing nothing but its autonomy and *unworking*” (57/33). “Unworking” here borrows two figures with which it is rarely associated—the rather political figure of utopia and the religious figure of the messianic (the latter, in truth, politico-religious in origin). Connected to the exhaustion of Marxism’s most visible forms, the question concerning the value and role of utopias had been recurrent since the sixties. However, the messianic held very little place outside of Jewish and Christian religions. It was only much later that one is reminded of it through its echo in Benjamin’s work while Derrida, followed by several others, reworked the motif. It is a little surprising to see these two terms raised here—the first of which, dare I say, seems too limited for what is at

stake (too sociopolitical or pragmatic), whereas the second seems almost incongruous, in any case quite unexpected.

A messianism that “announces nothing but its autonomy” announces a sacred coming (the Messiah is God’s anointed) that is valued in itself and without any finality. It is important to recall that, at the moment of leaving his disciples, Christ refuses that they wait for his return in order to restore the Kingdom (this is the Messiah’s political role). In short, he renders his own messianicity autonomous. We should keep this reference in mind since we will come across a Christology later in the text.

For the moment, let us pause for a moment on Judaism. Without warning, Blanchot compares the people of May ’68 left to themselves [*le peuple laissé à lui-même*] (who do not associate with one another) to “the gathering of the children of Israel in view of the Exodus if they had gathered while at the same time forgetting to leave” (57/33)—a people, therefore, who would not unite in order to become a nation, not to mention a state. In short, Blanchot imagines an Israel that would have been a diaspora from the beginning and from which something different than the Kingdom and the law could have emerged. Beyond a plausible but secondary political meaning relative to Israel, one should discern here the evocation of a fantasmatic (an originary [*ultra-primitif*]) Christianity prior to Judaism.

Suffice it to recall in this context an episode that took place earlier in the text, an episode that is just as fleeting as it is incongruous. Blanchot compares the “literary community” to the meeting of “the hasty participants at a Seder [*Pâque juive*]” (40/21) (who, as one knows, must share the meal standing and in travel clothes). This Seder forms precisely “the gathering . . . in view of the Exodus” (57/33), and it is also this that Christ transforms into what is called the Last Supper, which will be evoked toward the end of the book.

The book is thus traversed by a discreet but insistent motif that, from the Messiah to Christ, tends to identify community according to a sacred or mythical configuration. Of course, it remains for us to better understand the nature and role of a fiction (the imagination of the people forgetting to leave) that clearly becomes the primary reference. Blanchot states that “mankind’s people” can be considered “the bastardized imitation of God’s people” (57/33). The weight of the expression (a little like the expression “rhetorical deceit”) puts us on alert: If the people are merely human and

lack a legitimate father and so a divine nature, one should probably understand that it is through his illegitimacy [*bâtardise*] that he must risk the perversion of his inoperativity into a “system of force,” in other words, into a society that is coherent and at work [*consistante et œuvrante*]. More or less manifestly, the true community (the “true world of lovers” that will be named a few lines later) must not be separated from a divine or mythical dimension (divine in the sense of mythical). The people of God relate to a foundation without law, but not without ordinary speech. As we will see, such speech is proposed in order to echo the Last Supper—“here is my body.”

However, the relation between lovers is not a relation of love. Love “is not necessary for it” (34/58). What is there to say? This point is undoubtedly one of the most enigmatic, even more because, through a permanent slippage, this absence of necessity will succeed what is to be called “passion” (58/34). We must delve further into the meaning of this word. For the moment, we should say that love—which can “tak[e] on the form of the impossibility of loving” (58/34)—seems to arise [*relever*] from what is “felt” (note the reference to “feeling” a few pages later), but no doubt (this lack of doubt is not clarified) remains as such within the narrow sphere of subjectivity, of a self-relation of that which, or he who, does not move outside the self [*rapport à soi de ce(lui) qui ne sort pas de soi*]. Love is not yet abandonment, and lovers (friends, couples) know how to abandon love itself. This assumes that love—love that is not impossible—arises [*relève*] from the possibility of exchange, sharing, and communication, whereas passion surrenders to the abandonment of this possibility in order to open the impossibility of absolute alterity.

Let us introduce a new philosophical incision here. If, for Hegel, the in-itself must alienate itself in order to be for-itself, and if, for Bataille, “self” only ever exists as “I” that is exposed (wounded or in joy), Blanchot proposes a solitude that cannot be the site of self-affection—all affection self-affects—but must be “apathy,” or as it will be said, “impassibility . . . and impotence” (81/49). This apathy does not “prevent relationships between beings, but lead[s] those relationships towards crime which is the ultimate . . . form of insensibility” (81/49)—Blanchot states this in reference to Sade in order to better assert at the same time “an excess even Sade is unaware of” (82/49). This excess is that through which lovers scorn death itself and abandon themselves to “the attempt to love—but for Nothing . . .

and [that] exposes them to nothing else than to touching each other in vain” and “a solitary *jouissance*, solitary tears, the pressure of an implacable Superego” (82/49).²⁷

This love is protected from “playing the comedy of a ‘fusional or communal’ understanding” (82/49).²⁸ Protected from comedy (Bataille’s term), these couples (lovers, friends) “expose themselves totally to each other . . . so that their common solitude may appear not in front of their own eyes but in front of ours” (83/50).

On the one hand, community is not *formed* in the fullest sense of the word (Is it founded? This question remains to be examined), and it does not exceed an “empty intimacy” (82/49). On the other hand, the couple is exposed to us, not to itself. Let us take these two aspects up one by one because their articulation is also that in which the earlier version of the text passes into the later version, which is also the passage from ethics to politics (assuming such terms are relevant here).

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As a parenthesis, let me note that I abbreviate and even avoid considerations that are more strictly relevant to a commentary on—or re-citation of—Duras’s récit, for the complexity of registers, times, and perspectives is already quite significant, and besides, it is deliberately elaborated to lead the reader further into a confusion [*égarement*] that must belong to what is primarily at stake here. From the récit as such, one must especially remember that “the text is mysterious only because it is irreducible” (61/36) and that there is “no end . . . and yet an end” (70/42) with the woman’s disappearance.²⁹ These characteristics are identical with those in Blanchot’s text that we are reading; irreducible, it does not allow us to grasp a thought (concept, idea) of community nor in consequence to come to a conclusion since, as we will see, the “unavowable” invites other words to come. The relation to Duras’s récit is the relation to Marguerite Duras herself who is “necessarily” “implicate[d] herself” (80/48)—a singular evaluation that leaves us to suggest the implication of Blanchot “himself” into this text where Duras and Bataille (and secondarily Nancy as well) mix together and appropriate one another [*s’entrapproprient*]. Above all, the text that recites the récit adopts “statements” that are “difficult to fit into a simple doctrine” (90/55), namely, the impossibility of truly deciding on the incapacity of loving, of the sense of disappearance, and finally of the “indefinable power” of the “feminine (91/55). A “simple doctrine” indicates a “doctrine” tout court, a teaching,

a discourse with premises and conclusions. The “simple” here is less the opposite of complex than unaccomplished [*inabouti*]*—*the unavowable community is not accomplished, any more than the text must be accomplished that exposes it in exposing itself to the unavowable community; it does this only in exposing itself to/as the récit of a woman to whom, through whom, and as whom he who signs “Maurice Blanchot” is exposed.

“I KNOW WHO YOU ARE”

In a way, then, community does not form itself. It exists only in the infinite, unfigurable tension of one toward the other. Love is the attempt to love—“impossible love” that alone provides the measure, as Levinas formulates it, of “an infinite attention to the other” (72/43). We are following here the principal development of the earlier version of the text published in *Nouveau Commerce*, where the concern is to show that the “obligation towards the Other . . . does not come from the Law” (92–93/43) but also, and if not even more, from passion, the tension toward the other that we are unable to reach. This can also be formulated in saying: “The other [*Autrui*] is always closer to God than I am (whatever sense one gives that name that names the unnamable)” (67–8/40). This new mention of God makes it possible to give God the sense that can be attributed to God, but not to refuse God all sense. On the horizon—a far horizon, perhaps, but not necessarily—there could be for Blanchot a question about “God.” If “God” names the unnamable, Blanchot does in fact name it, and this (un)designation [*in nomination*] signals a hyperbolic vanishing point, in infinite excess [*excédence*], according to which the encounter with the other [*autrui*] cannot take place without escaping further. A kind of ultratheology triumphs over all possibility of relation (but would there be a relation with “God”?).

Whatever this may be, a correction or displacement immediately intervenes in a direction that is no longer “theological” except in a marginal way. “Love may be a stumbling block for ethics. . . . The same as the distribution of the human between male and female creates problems in the various versions of the Bible” (68/40). This should be understood as saying that perhaps ethics does not consider the alterity of the other—its divinity—neither according to the full extension nor from the intensity distinguished by the perspective of passion. And this implies taking into account the sexes, whose distribution [*partage*] causes the Bible to stumble—thus, the Law of

the God of Israel (of Levinas), but perhaps not the Law “that always precedes the Law” and perhaps not a God more unnamable than “God” as such. Blanchot alludes to the divergence between the version where man and woman are created distinctly and the version where woman is derived from man. He wants to retain the former, which ignores the primacy of the masculine. As a result, it is the former that passes under or beyond the law (Bizet), leading toward a “wilderness,” toward Hölderlin’s “aorgic” and toward “the original, precreational chaos” (68/40)—before God’s *work*—or toward the Greek Chaos.

Originarity [*L’initialité*] cannot consist in a productivist [*productrice*] operation but in the sudden emergence [*surgissement*] of “the heterogeneous . . . which any relationship signifies: no relationship” (69/41). Thus, the “clandestine meeting” takes place that touches “the beyond of what is requested” and an “outrage of life” that, “interrupting the pretension of always preserving in being, opens to the strangeness of an interminable dying” (69/41). Although stigmatizing it as pretentious, the allusion to Spinoza’s “persevering in being” takes aim at a thinking for which there is no death *sub specie aeternitatis*, a thinking of the self-immanence of a *Deus sive natura*.³⁰ For Blanchot, on the contrary, there is only dying—not “death” but the infinite approach of the death that comes to us more than we move toward it. However, forming the heart or the law of “being,” dying in its origin hollows out an absolute dissymmetry—that of the two sexes.

Duality here is not a simple double count. It returns us to the unnamable, or it opens onto it. The text allows us to examine this spontaneous multiplication of the couple—friends, lovers, the same and the other—according to an extension and intensification that silently projects the possibility of thinking the double movement of love “that forms society” and love “that cannot abide any name—neither love nor desire—but that attracts beings in order to throw them towards each other (two by two or more, collectively)” (79/47).

The “excess [*outrance*] of life” or the “aorgic”—register of the originary [*initial*], the archaic, the unnamable (of the divine)—opens the distancing [*écart*] that throws beings toward each other—couples or collectivities—but fails to bring them together because this distancing is hollowed out according to a dissymmetry that highlights the contrast, precisely, between “society” and “unsociability [*sauvagerie*],” homosexuality and the impossible coupling of man and woman.

As one again sees through this alternative and/or equivalence between the “two” and a “collective,” the passage of lovers to people (without “deception [*supercherie*]”) is found at the center of the argument, at its point of equilibrium. Is this point unstable? It is, and Blanchot knows it, but this instability is nothing other than that of relation in general. (One can add the following: In the sentence I am commenting on, the alternative-equivalence is itself double. On the one hand, it is given between lovers and the people; on the other, it is played out between the erotic and politics, as if it were a matter of creating an entire people out of two or making love in large numbers. But whatever their [in]consistency, these hypotheses are obviously excluded, distanced by the movement of the ensemble that seeks the truth of “number” in “two.”)

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At this point we have already gone beyond the limit of the earlier version of the text in order to address its extension, which delves into community itself. Let us pause before this threshold.

The earlier text offered a reflection on Levinas in which passion is presented with identical characteristics as those of the ethical obligation toward the other, but in such a manner that this identity becomes complicated and is exceeded in passion’s “excess” (76/45). This excess proceeds from the fact that passion’s “movement” arises [*relève*] less from an “obligation” than from what “outbids” the “spontaneity” of the “*conatus*” (76/45). From there passionate love is addressed less to the other as other than to the “unique [other] that eclipses and annuls all the others” (76/45).³¹ This trait of exclusivity joins up with the trait of “excess” in the possession that can extend up to “the wish . . . to kill a lover . . . in defiance of every law, every moral authority” (76/45), as Blanchot says, citing—assuming the voice of—Duras.

At this moment—at the conclusion of the earlier text—the interpretation of *The Malady of Death* takes a sudden and singular turn. Blanchot declares: “I know who you are” (76/45), returning the “You” toward the character of the woman that makes the récit a “declarative text” (35/59). He thus penetrates this text, mixing and echoing its declaration with his own as the effect of a leap similar to the one that has just been evoked, the “lethal leap” (74/44) of love (Tristan) but through which as well one “elevate[s] oneself to the . . . religious level” (74/44).³²

Blanchot at once leaps [*bondit*] into the interpellation and comprehension of Duras’s text; elevating himself to knowledge, if not to the religion of

the récit, he simultaneously raises [*élève*] the woman that he apostrophizes to mythical dignity.

On the one hand, the unnamable is named: chthonic Aphrodite, infinitely more obscure and withdrawn than Aphrodite Urania and Pandemos—archaic goddess or divine nature of the *arché*, of the origin and foundation, or of unbounding, of the abyss of an “empty intimacy.” On the other hand, the second of the two aspects that we have distinguished has been satisfied, in which the lovers are exposed to us, not to themselves (90–91/55).

BLACK NIGHT

Lovers are not exposed to themselves since, as the text now says, they “expose themselves and one for the other to death’s dispersal” (77/46). Suffice it to say that they do not truly expose *themselves* [*s’exposent*] without disappearing. This disappearance finds its equivalent only in that which “inscribes itself in writing, when the work which is its drifting [*la dérive*] is from the onset the renunciation of *creating a work*” (77/46).

That itself is exposed to us, just as much when we are reading the work—its writing—as when through the work—like the work—we are exposed to the lovers exposing themselves to death. Which means that the gesture of the lovers—their gesture or their work [*œuvre*], this will be confirmed for us later—can be exposed only by writing and by a récit (insofar, at least, that it is “without a way out” [51/29]). Yet this gesture that amounts to “expos[ing] themselves and one for the other to death’s dispersal” (77/46) is equivalent to sacrifice. Ultimately, each one sacrifices himself or herself for the other, letting themselves disperse (disappear) so that the other receives the very sense of access to this disappearance. We will see that the woman truly assumes this sacrificial role, through a sacrifice that corresponds to the sacrifice of Christ, who annuls and sublimates the exteriority of bloody sacrifices within himself. The woman does not immolate any victim; she gives herself and, in giving herself, disappears. (How the man in turn joins her in this “for the other” is less clear, and remains undecided to the end.)

This is exposed to us; it takes place insofar as it is precisely a writing that exposes us. This writing is thus the site of the sacrificial gesture; it alone can reveal the disappearance. It can expose—in the sense of make appear [*faire paraître*—the exposition, in the sense of a limitless endangerment. In order to understand the stakes of this exposition *to us* (readers, intimate

companions), this way of placing “death’s dispersion” right in front of us, a detour is needed.

We are at that point of Blanchot’s text that corresponds to the end of the earlier version published in *Nouveau Commerce*. Three female figures are suddenly assembled—first, the mythical “chthonic Aphrodite,” who provides the true identity for the woman in the récit; second, the philosopher Sarah Kofman, referred to in a note added to the second version of the text (77/60n14);³³ and finally, Marina Tsvetaeva, from whom a quotation closes the earlier version of the text. The quotation reads:

Through the venom of immortality
women’s passion comes to completion. (77/46)

According to the context, the immortality named here can be assimilated to the unworking of the work, “indicating only the space in which resounds . . . the always yet to come words of the unworking” (77/46).³⁴ Immortality of death or of the dying of lovers, no less than the immortality of the Greek gods, Blanchot introduces Aphrodite by “coming back yet again to the Greeks” (76/45), which refers back to citations from Plato on the preceding page. Underlining this appeal to the Greeks is not without implication for the Jews, in other words, for Levinas. Levinas has just been distinguished from “certain of his commentators” (73/43) so that Blanchot can draw him into a quite delicate, if not laborious, account where the surpassing [*dépassement*] of the law by the law itself, “connected to the unnamed name of God” (73n1/59n13) (taking caution against possible “idolatry” of the law itself), attempts to join together ethical obligation and a “responsibility” (one of Levinas’s keywords) “that exceeds itself without exhausting itself” and which “cannot be announced in any already formulated language” (73/43). Working through this singular configuration, one can discern in the appeal to excess an allusion to the language (an unformulated language that is close to the unnamed name) as well as to the concept of sovereignty proposed by Carl Schmitt (the word “exception” doubling or standing in for the “extra-ordinariness” of this language)—thus, an approach to the unworking of the work with its “words always to come.”

The reference to the Greeks carries a little further this attempt to surpass [*effort de dépassement*], at once internal and external, Levinasian Judaism. The chthonic Aphrodite survives through the force of a leap. With the two

other women—the philosopher and poet—and taking over the role of other mythical and literary figures mentioned earlier (Eve, Lilith [the latter drawn from Duras], Albertine, Isolde, Alceste, Diotima), Aphrodite confers a mythical presence on this woman who is created, as Blanchot writes (quoting Duras), “as if by God” (62/37), whose beautiful naked body has been compared, according to Levinas, to the “invisible evidence” of the face.

Greek visibility takes shape over Jewish invisibility. A myth figures words of originary speech, so insistently that it furnishes the figure [*figure*] that speaks these words. The chthonic Aphrodite figures at once “the sea from which she is born,”³⁵ “the night which signifies perpetual sleep,” and “the silent injunction” (77/46) of the exposure to death. Chthonic, philosophical, and poetic, this goddess incarnates the gaping mouth [*bouche d'ombre*] from which the community of lovers announces itself to itself, announces itself and renounces itself.

Or rather, more certainly, its renouncement is announced to us, because lovers are exposed to us more than they are exposed in disappearing. Briefly highlighted for us, this conversion toward our gaze only now makes sense. There is nothing to see between the lovers, but this nothing is exposed to us by a récit, as a récit, or rather, as a declarative text, in turn taken over by a text that tries at once to bring the truth to light and conform to the “mystery” of the text being “irreducible” (62/36). Blanchot’s text turns toward us, an “us” that embraces author and readers in a community that is just as much universal (“for all and for each” [77/46]) as reserved to those men and women who will know how to decipher a book in which, as I have already indicated, its author is necessarily implicated, just as Marguerite Duras is implicated in her own book.³⁶ In addition, right from the moment the page is turned and a new subhead introduced (78/46)³⁷—in other words, right from the moment Blanchot continues beyond his earlier text—a reflection is pursued in the first person on the title of the second part of the book: “‘The Community of Lovers.’ This romantic title that I have given those pages, in which there is neither a shared relationship nor definite lovers, is it not paradoxical?” (78/46). This question is posed in order to render the formula “community of lovers” ambiguous, an ambiguity that plays out between the possibility of a “social agreement, be it the most permissive” (79/47) and the (im)possibility of abandonment “to the first comer” (80/48) to which Madame Edwarda gives herself over (another figure of the underground goddess). The tolerated debauchery remains social, but a similar

abandonment “symbolizes sacrifice” and thus remains “in touch with what is most divine or with the absolute that rejects any assimilation” (80/48).

As Edwarda exposes her divine sex, the “scenario” “imagined” (80/48) by Duras (two words that evoke literature, its artifices, its inventions) and through which “two beings shown us” (80–81/48) allows us to see—“here is the room” (82/49), the text remarks later—that which cannot see itself: the avoidance of all “communional” “comedy” by those who are reduced to “touching each other in vain” (82/48) and to a “pleasure” that the man “does not share” (81/48).³⁸ That which cannot see itself, or rather, that in which we see the night is here the slit of the woman that is given as spectacle to the man as Edwarda gives it to “the first comer”—it is night or death, and it is always that which can only be received “maybe only and partially by the reader” (86/52).

By “us,” then, as well as by Blanchot reading Duras—saying “you” to her “you”—readers-spectators-actors and, thus, “companions” of a scene where it is a matter of seeing, “to see her as she is,” all the while knowing that “he [the man] (and thus each of us) does not see her” (86/52).³⁹ It will be said that she “let[s] all of herself be seen” (88/53), which means up to “the black night discovered by the vertiginous emptiness ‘of the spread legs’” (70/41), according to this point of the text where, in short, Blanchot brings together Duras with Bataille, stating: “How not to think here of Madame Edwarda?” (70/41).

What unfolds here must be shown, must be shown to us like the vision of the invisible—not rendered visible but exposed as exposition of and to “that *excess* that comes with the feminine” (87/53).

“The female body: *there* existence itself resides [*là est l’existence même*]” (85/51): life, death—the birth of the world [*la mise au monde*] as disappearance. This “fortuitous woman” represents “all women, their magnificence, their mystery, their realm” (86/52). But this representation or figuration is not made by “the writer’s arbitrary decision”: Literature only responds to a necessity that leads this woman toward “the truth of her mythic body” (86/52).

EUCCHARIST

The female body is mythic—“admirable body” (88/53), much like the perfection of the récit that is offered [*offert*] to us, a body given [*donné*], abandoned in such a way that this gift only manifests itself as myth (a writing

that is not “arbitrary” [86/52]), at the same time “going beyond [*dépasse*] the mythic and the metaphysical” (86/52).

What does this paradox mean of a myth going beyond the mythic? The mythic associated with the metaphysical can signify the order of the “back-world [*arrière-monde*]” of fictions, to speak like Nietzsche’s *Hinterwelt*, and thus myth in the usual sense of fable.⁴⁰ But “the truth of her mythic body” (86/52) is of another order. It is even so different that it is necessary to renounce the “symbolism” of “pagan Aphrodite,” which is “too facile” (88/54). This epithet gives us an indication of the direction that this mythic, extramythical, and spiritual ascension follows. In an unexpected and even more remarkable manner, it will culminate in the figure of Christ.

The admirable body of the woman is abandoned “to the point where she could instantly cease to be . . . depend[ent] only on her desire” (88/53–54). On a whim, she can desire to disappear, a desire that conforms to “the fragility of the infinitely beautiful, the infinitely real” (88/54) (how not to think here of traditional Catholic expressions calling God infinitely large, good, and powerful?). The same infinity renders identifications with mythic figures too “perfunctory [*désinvoltés*],” figures that have been named. “In any event . . . she belongs to the *community*” (89/54). Returning to this highlighted term as a theme is followed by the motif of foundation: She “mak[es] felt, through her fragility, her inaccessibility and magnificence, that the strangeness of what could not be common is what founds the community” (89/54).

At this decisive, decisively ultradialectic point and prior to arriving at the woman’s ultimate identification or (trans)figuration, a final variation is devoted to the man. Blanchot recalls that the man is the one who places himself “outside the circle of love” (90/55), and thus the one for whom the feminine abyss represents at once attraction, threat, and loss. However, Blanchot explains that the *récit* does not stop at these “abrupt statements” and that the man, in spite of everything, enters into a “surprising relationship . . . which shows the indefinable power of the feminine over what wants to, or believes it can, stay foreign to it” (91/55). I will not pause as I did earlier over what affects the man since his role is circumscribed by what has just been said—he is the homogeneous that is exposed [*se dérobe*] to the heterogeneous, yet becomes anxious over it, and finally, relates to it in spite of himself, “changed . . . more radically than he knows” (91/56). His sickness is not

simply a “lack of love” (61/36) but “foments itself also (at first) in her who is present” (65/39) and in and through which life (“existence itself” [85/51]) opens itself to its own abyss.⁴¹

In other words, it is at least death that will be communicated from one to the other, and in both directions—the woman’s excessive death, the man’s sickly death, perhaps passing from one into another, a double form of incommunication, in excess and in default of love; death or dying, in reality or in the imagination, as we will see.

At the point where this “surprising relationship” is affirmed, the woman’s “separate existence” is affirmed, this existence which has “something of the sacred,” and this “without there being any trace of profanation” (91/55): not any more than there is a rape, not any more than it concerns sacrifice. This “sacred”—whose excess nevertheless does not demand transgression and whose access is made through abandonment (a consent in which even the idea of a victim disappears)—this “sacred” is that in which the sacrifice is overcome or elevated [*relevé*] into a gift of the self. Blanchot writes: “She offers her body, just as the Eucharistic body was offered in an absolute, immemorial gift” (91/55).

This is a comparison, but this comparison is going to be spun out in such a way that it becomes equal to an assimilation or identification. If Blanchot separates himself from formal identifications beneath mythic names, it is in order to distance himself from what bears the danger of idolatry. No doubt he also works to keep a name like “Jesus Christ” at a distance. But at the same time, he makes an even more audacious kind of comparison, for the offering [*offrande*] of the “eucharistic body” is not here an image. It is neither a representation nor a symbol—this body “was offered.” This is written in the indicative; it is a reality. Undoubtedly not the reality that Christians (more precisely, Catholics) recognize in the story of the Last Supper (which is nothing other than the resumption or elevation [*relève*] of the Passover Seder that has already been twice evoked), but the “immemorial” real that we know is that of “a rapture that overflows and unsettles the very possibility of remembering” (37/19).⁴² Not lived experience (*Erlebnis*, psychology, sociology [see 86/52]) but experience that the same text allows to be called “mystical”—this term that is discussed in relation to Bataille and by Bataille himself also comes from the expression “mystical body” through which theology indicates the gathering of everyone, the community in Christ,

in other words, the entire disposition [*déploiement*] for which the Eucharist is the founding gesture.

In choosing the word “Eucharist”—which means “joyful gratitude” in Greek—Blanchot expresses himself in the most proper sacramental language, at the same time that he avoids using the word “communion,” the more usual Catholic term. We know that this word had been set aside early on for reasons taken up by Nancy—its proximity to a fusion similar to that of a “single individual, locked in his immanence” (17/7). Yet with the Eucharist and the Last Supper, we return toward communion, but, as it were, by virtue of another theology or spirituality—that of a mystical body that is not a superior individual but a plurality in the mysterious unity of a body that is essentially offered, opened, dispersed. One could say: Jesus Christ as woman, which also implies the woman in Jesus Christ—woman remaining woman in this assumption that is transcendent, saintly, and “solemn” (91/55). One might say: a transubstantiated woman, referring to the Catholic theology of the Eucharist. This sensate [*sensible*] body that is offered possesses the mysterious reality and sur-essential femininity of a subject absent both from itself and the other in, and as, its gift, its communication.

The Christian scene does not stop there. It is completed by two other episodes thanks to which the trajectory of what is called Christ’s *passion* is reconstituted in front of us. The first concerns a single word: Returning to Duras’s récit, Blanchot cites the woman’s words that echo the Evangelists’ “take, eat . . .” —“*take me, so it may have been done.*” The text follows: “After which, everything having been consummated, she is no longer there” (91/55).

Consummatum est: Once again this is one of Christ’s words, the last that he pronounces on the cross. The Latin word translates the Greek *tetelestai*—it arrives at the end, at the goal; it is accomplished. Life is coming to its end, its *telos*; God’s design is realized.

Finally, the last episode comes in support of the “memory of a love lost” (91/56) that one can assume is revealed in humankind. “Similarly, for the disciples of Emmaus: They convince themselves of the divine presence only when it has left them” (91–92/56). The complete cycle of the Passion is followed—Last Supper, death, resurrection, and the departure from the world. In this way, the work of God’s salvation is accomplished, a God who abandons himself to human existence. The woman also “has done her

work” and “changed” the man “more radically than he knows” (91/56) (in creating man anew, in accordance with the Christian expression).⁴³

The comparison [*équivalence*] with Christianity—which we phrase with caution before the temptation to use “identification” or “assimilation” as terms—is developed with a breadth and precision that leaves no doubt as to its importance. The ensemble of motifs with religious or spiritual resonance presented throughout the text comes to perfection in this comparison. A mythic and mystical force is fully operative in the comparison, a force whose form is very recognizable even if the determination of the figure (which is bestowed on Aphrodite) is withdrawn, along with the name. But the absence of name rightly belongs to the God of Jesus Christ, inheritor of the biblical god, or rather, as we have understood, raising him up [*relevant*] or even preceding him according to the logic of the immemorial. (Several times in other texts, Blanchot comes back to the unnamable name of God.) At the same time, the common name of the *passion* will have discreetly but certainly guided the pervasive [*insinuante*] intrusion of the evangelical récit into the récit by Duras, their conjunction forming Blanchot’s text.

5

“ESSENTIALLY THAT WHICH ESCAPES”

THE EVASIVE COMMUNITY

At the same time, the culminating point of this singular, spiritual progression still does not form the conclusion. Like the *récit*, it must go beyond “any way out” (51/29).¹ After the revelation of “divine presence” through disappearance—this presence that presents itself by withdrawing—and without anything leading us back, with the disciples of Emmaus, to the community of the first Christians (to which Engels also made reference), Blanchot’s text continues: “Or else, and that is the unavowable, uniting with her according to her will, he has also given her that death she awaited . . . and which also fulfills his earthly fate” (92/56). The last two words preserve and even reinforce the Christian content of the statement, or at the least its Christian phrasing: Earthly fate necessarily leads to heavenly fate. What follows does not contradict this spiritual view by affirming that it matters little whether this death is real or imaginary; a Christian knows full well that it is primarily about *mending one’s ways* [*faire mourir le vieil homme en lui*]. Only the following phrase, which concludes the text before a sort of supplementary *coda*, displaces this emphasis by declaring that this death “consecrates *the always uncertain end* inscribed in the destiny of the community” (92/56).

The unavowable is that death—its “sickness”²—is transmitted [*se communiquer*] without one being able to decide whether this communication shall take place or not, or what is communicated (fiction or reality, presence

of an absence or absence of a presence). Perhaps it is also the case that all these differing hypotheses amount to the same thing in the end.

The “uncertain end” offers a formula that is itself uncertain. One does not know if the end is going to occur (how? when?), and it is never certain whether it might happen or whether it has happened already. It is indeed this unavowable that lies in the impossibility of designating the effectiveness of the community as much as its dissolution. This is the extremity—the excess—of the double negation expressed in the “neither . . . nor”: neither an assembled community nor an achieved disunity. The general principle of disappearance or unbinding, of its imminence, is resolved in indecision [*se résout en irrésolution*]. The “evasive manner,” a surprising expression, which evokes an intention to “unavow,” suggests evasion, resistance, or refusal before the question of the subject of community (its being, its nature, its determination, its possibility).

The community must remain evasive, uncertain in its essence, eluded in its question. Its exigency entails its “proper-improper *abandonment* (which is not a simple negation)” (10/2). What had been inscribed as its premise becomes its conclusion—it is necessary to avoid community, to escape “the unsurpassable horizon of our time”³ as well as the attraction of “the magnetized circle representing . . . the romantic union of lovers” (81/48). What remains undecided as the heart or law of the community is nothing other than the relation without relation, the impossibility of deciding if there is a relation, or else of giving sense to this inevitable word (and in this way, similar to the name of God).

The text writes that this is the unavowable. But an irritating question immediately imposes itself. Does this mean: “Would it have been better to have remained silent?” (92/56). No, because “one has to speak in order to remain silent.” The question thus becomes: “With what kinds of words?” and this is the question “this little book entrusts to others” (92/56). From the moment a book claims to be little—whether it is weighty or slim like Blanchot’s—one must think that it certainly “entrusts” an important message to its slim size. In fact, the message is already in this communication—confidence and secrecy—that it makes of itself here. It thus opens itself to some form of community, or at least to some communication of thought.

A communication of thought is far from creating a community of thought. And yet it is inevitably toward a possible common thinking that the announcement of “an exacting political meaning” is offered, about

which nothing more is said other than that this “exacting political meaning” is at stake in “the present time . . . opening unknown spaces of freedom,” which makes us “responsible for new relationships” (93/56). But these relationships are not those that we were expecting. They do not play out between us, between one another, but “between what we call work, *œuvre*, and what we call unworking, *desœuvrement*” (93/56). The surprise contained in the book’s closing phrase lasts only until we recall for the last time that it responds to a text that had designated unworking as what is proper to community, in opposition to the representation of the community as work (the production and self-production of the totality of existence), and singularly to the representation of the possibility or project (sacrificial in one way or another) of putting death to work.⁴ Blanchot reminds us (me) that unworking is necessarily derived from the work.

Consequently, if the evasive community takes place only through its own unbinding [*déliaison*], it is nevertheless from a work that this must take place. Nancy only conceived of removing institutional, constitutional, architectural, and hierarchical works. But another type of work comes to be revealed—that of a woman, this woman whose mythical figure (real in its fiction) has been imagined by a woman writer and taken up, contemplated, and in a certain way consecrated by passing into the words of a male writer whose own work unworks the former, or rather (which amounts to the same thing) unworks itself in her [*se désœuvrer en elle*]. Man or woman, a man-woman, a writer, and perhaps also similar to the Christian Messiah who one day wrote in the sand, avoiding questions about an adulterous woman. In one way or another, the book is the work where unworking is born, a communication “always menaced, always hoped for.”

But finally, what is the “exacting political meaning” in whose name these closing lines are written? And why does it remain “entrusted to others” to decipher it? It is our responsibility to try to respond to these obviously inseparable questions. For thirty years, this is what Blanchot’s “slim book” has been waiting for.

THE AVOWAL

In order to respond, or to sketch out the gesture of a response, I take a new and final point of departure.

However incomplete and imperfect it remains, a close reading of the text has drawn out several strands from which I now retrace the argument of Blanchot's book. The argument's dissimulation is obvious. Moreover, it leads to a curious complexity thanks to its wealth of intertwined or layered registers (Bataille, Nancy, Duras, Levinas, politics, philosophy, literature, mythology), allusions, ellipses, and intended signs of silence or a surplus of sense left open to the imagination. For example, in suddenly engaging the matter of Bataille's personal solitude and his feeling of being abandoned by his friends, "especially before the war," Blanchot leads his readers through an awkward series of questions concerning the reasons for his remarks, the fact that Blanchot himself was not a friend of Bataille's before the war, and finally the exact role that friendship should play in the present discussion. Without further instructions, the reader must discover or imagine a scenario or intrigue for which one hardly knows if it plays out on a psychological level or in a symbolic order.

Another example, which one might call minimalist. Blanchot writes: "That is what I read in this *récit* devoid of anecdote where impossible love . . . can be translated by an analogy with the first words of an ethics" (71/43). And how are we to understand this "devoid of anecdote"? Does he mean without minor incidents, without frivolous distraction—but is that all? Is there a literary *récit* worthy of this name that includes anecdotes, in the sense that they could be separated from the "true" *récit* or even ignored? (Of course, this is a tautology, for it is precisely a question of knowing what "literature" means.) Since he has just referred to *Tristan and Isolde*, is Blanchot suggesting that the *récit* by Duras is more exempt from anecdotes than other versions of the legend? And since he immediately suggests an analogy with the writings of Levinas, is he suggesting that the Duras text is a sort of treatise? Or again, what relation does this "devoid of anecdote" have with the fact (as Blanchot observes two pages earlier, citing himself) that this *récit* "also says in its own way: no more *récit*" (70/42), or with this other fact that "it is a declarative text and not a *récit*, even though it appears as such"? (59/35). And also, how do all these remarks develop the initial affirmation according to which "this *récit* [is] sufficient in itself, which is to say perfect, which is to say without a way out"? (30/51). Finally, and perhaps above all: Why must all these questions be concealed in a "devoid of anecdote" aside but clearly addressed to our attention as reader (as companion)?

These readings do not stem from interpretation in the usual sense of the term, where the author's intentions can be evaluated in an occasional and secondary way. What is proposed here—and perhaps sometimes what is also prohibited—is to enter into an intrigue, strategy, or dramatization at the interior of which the author (this author who in places and since the beginning of the text expresses himself in the first person) suggests clues, keys, and stakes. Everything happens as if we were being asked—and to reiterate, sometimes also refused or discouraged (perhaps not without irony)—to enter into a confidence or even a secret, and in any case to share thoughts that are not to be communicated directly to any reader. In other words, one must have the knowledge or ability to enter into complicity, into a sharing, and finally into a certain community, even into friendship, in this “*friendship for the exigency of writing*” (44/24) that is underlined in the middle of an especially labyrinthine discussion on Bataille and the relation to “the one for whom I write,” this one who is necessarily “unknown” (44/24) or “no one” [*personne*] (45/24). With us readers, readers who are unknown, “a communication that cannot be shared” (45/24–25) is evoked and even fundamentally invoked, and which itself can communicate only with the unknown, with that which “exposes me to death or finitude” (44/24).

In reading the text in this way, I should also admit that what is written withdraws in offering itself, the writing misleading me [*m'égare*] and dragging me along [*m'entraînant*] with it. No doubt this is the same consent that numerous readers will have given to this book, entering into its community according to the dissolution and disappearance of the bond that forms a community. Right from the beginning, its title—*The Unavowable Community*—has firmly established an adherence to something to which it is impossible to adhere other than through a kind of respectful or stunned, speechless [*interdit*], intimidated silence.

I admit it, and I admit having been such a reader myself, in short, the first reader addressed in the book. However, I know that over time neither respect nor stupor stopped me from finding a way to respond, even if Blanchot at the end of the book asks expressly less for a response than a prolongation (a curious stance when one thinks of it, which addresses a disciple more than an interlocutor, but a natural stance in a community of insiders [*initiés*]).

For the book's principal argument—what it proposes, its exposition—is found in the word “unavowable,” which should shape the manner of

responding or “prolonging” the argument. Whoever announces and publishes on the unavowable already avows that there is the unavowable. To which one should add that the unavowable could not even exist (or be named) if the avowal of the unavowable wasn’t in fact possible. The unavowable is not the unnamable, and the avowal is not a name. A name does or does not exist; it is or is not pronounceable. An avowal depends only on a force, a motive that pushes one to make it or to keep it quiet. I repeat—to name the unavowable already initiates an avowal.

The sudden appearance of the word at the end of the text reinforces this view. From the title to the closing page, the word will have defied all explanation, all recourse even to the word itself. Here it appears even when it is clearly not used according to its usual sense. Curiously, Blanchot states what the unavowable “is,” but why would the unavowable be this gift of death (real or imaginary) from the man to the woman? And if it is, if in effect what it designates is this, Thanatos’s inoculation of Eros, why not say more about this? What is changed or not changed in the disappearance of the woman and the “immemorial body”? If these questions are important, it is because the “unavowable” raises them through its very avowal. Right from the moment the unavowable is designated or designates itself, it should no longer remain properly unavowable but lead to clarification and specificity. But the opposite is the case; the text states clearly to us that it remains nebulous.

Why this “evasive manner” (92/56) that eludes or shields [*dérobe*] all other consideration of the “end” of community? In general, one usually qualifies an argument as “evasive,” not an action. One can respond in an evasive manner. One can scarcely “consecrate in an evasive manner” as death does here, real or imaginary. Or rather, one must hear this consecration as speech, which would not be unfounded but on the contrary would accentuate the strangeness of the situation—how to imagine an officiant who would consecrate anything at all in “an evasive manner.”

It is not impossible—it is even desirable—to assume that Blanchot wants to make understood here that speech consecrates, and in an evasive manner—his own speech, his writing, his own reading-rewriting of the Duras récit. It consecrates by virtue of a kind of ceremony in which an “immemorial” and “mythical body” is given to us under the (holy?) forms of this book whose thinking is evasive in order to better reveal the “unavowable” that it exposes while keeping it secret.

THE DISAVOWAL

The lines that follow in Blanchot's text illuminate nothing, and in fact treat the unavowable more or less as if it were a form of the unsayable [*indicible*]. The dimension specific to the avowal remains absent, even though it is precisely this dimension that is indicated with the word "unavowable." To which one should add this obvious conclusion—Blanchot knows exactly what he is placing before us.

One must assist Blanchot in his avowal. By definition, what is avowed or unavowable is an error [*faute*]. Blanchot's error is his political error before the war. He already recognized it, and his text makes several remarks about his unwavering refusal concerning anything that might be interpreted as sympathy for fascism or anti-Semitism. Taking up this word again, the "consecration" of May '68 at the center of the book can be made only by someone on the left (for which, incidentally, there are several indisputable examples [*attestations*], notably the "Manifesto of 121" in 1960).⁵ However, let us recall that all "determinate" politics is set aside in favor of a sense of "politics" defined by a counterdefinition of politics as "without limits" and "without exclusion." "Left" and "right," however, imply exclusion, and Blanchot removes himself from it as much as he attempts elsewhere to situate himself within it.

In fact, "politics" here is equivalent to "common presence" (a quotation from René Char). The exemplarity of '68 depends on the real but instantaneous, fleeting nature of this presence, in other words, to the unbinding of community in its own event, in the same way as the lovers expose in it an immemorial escape. The communication of absence (real or imaginary) makes truth [*fait la vérité*] of this co-presence. This extrapolitical truth founds the community out of a foundation that cannot have the constitution of a society "in person" (instituted, not even instituting). This founding derives [*relève*] from myth.

Before examining this mythical motif more closely, let us note the following. Defining "left" or democracy *a minima* by refusing to legitimate, in whatever possible way, an identification or figuration (a work) of the common, of the people (and therefore sovereign), and thus by refusing all types of presentation (symbol, image, instance) of a place that must remain empty or absent—this refusal arises from "right-wing" thinking from the moment that one offers recourse to a figure, symbol, or myth.

It is indeed this, but on the condition, at least, of thinking the “right” less in terms of order, power, and domination, all of which we today have forgotten how to take into account, than of a spiritual assumption, an aristocratic elevation, and finally, a disdain for society and its functions, the state, and laws. One could speak of a right-wing anarchism, seeing in it an echo of Bataille’s *Acéphale*, to which Blanchot intended to make reference.

By “unavowable,” Blanchot declares that prior or beyond what he understands and refuses as his error (an error, I imagine, he discovers through Bataille, then through Mascolo, Antelme, and Duras), he persists in thinking necessary a return [*renvoi*] to an other, spiritual, even mystical dimension, in any case, resolutely irreducible to a homogenous society. Such is the “exacting political meaning”—whatever democrats have been (I return again here to the texts cited earlier on double passion, double seriousness, and the irreducible separation between the writer and the democracy that the writer is not able to “hold in esteem,” even if he defends it), those who open themselves to the absolute must be obliged to think as both democrats, in accordance with justice, the law, equality, and as aristocrats, in accordance with an unassimilable heterogeneity. In this regard, something in the Blanchot of the 1930s obstinately resists democracy being simply equal to itself in 1983. He makes an unavowed avowal out of this unassailable conviction.

To the extent that “community” remains for Blanchot (and perhaps for everyone, for “common sense”) inevitably attached to what has been named a “constituted community” and thus to “society,” even if in a concealed way [*sourdement*], and thus to the extent that it is at least very difficult to think the “common” without outlining a form, not to say a figure, where one cannot maintain this risk at a distance without holding the “community” “itself” at a distance, Blanchot’s unavowable avowal comes down to disavowing the community.

Disavowing is not the opposite of avowing. It means to refuse or withdraw one’s approval or consent. Perhaps like everyone else, or in any case like many others (and so in a fairly “common” way), Blanchot experienced a profound exigency not to consent without conditions to “communism” or “socialism,” whose imprecise but unquestioned value hovered endlessly over our modernity. It is into this value that Jean-Christophe Bailly’s call for papers for the volume of *Aléa* in 1983 sought to inquire. Blanchot did not fail to perceive the stakes, nor to seize the opportunity to make heard (to

whoever wanted, to whoever was able) the secret and complex disavowal that he felt obligated to oppose to a kind of general injunction.

I am not looking to develop the possible implications of all this or to extrapolate, whether according to a viewpoint that one might imagine specific to Blanchot, or from other perspectives (anarchist, direct democracy called into question at every instant, the paradoxical but essential heterogeneity of politics and community). This would be to enter into a quite different series of reflections. My concern will only have allowed us to highlight Blanchot's tenacious resistance, avowal, and unavowed disavowal. What I see here is the laborious, problematic testimony of a difficulty that is just as much ours today as it was for Blanchot, if not more so. "Politics" for us has become a much more ungraspable term and motif than we have been led to believe.

One of the characteristics of Blanchot's book is to present early on an extreme distension between an unlimited meaning of "politics" as a term (a lack of limits that is widespread today in many of its uses) and a meaning that is in principle determined ("political will" and the "institutions, functions, laws" of society). The book nevertheless concludes by announcing "an exacting political sense," for which it remains extremely difficult to know how this should be understood. If one understands politics from an unlimited perspective, this signifies that all consideration of common existence is suspended (exacted) from the thought of community in itself abandoned, evasive, and finally disavowed. One then does not know which deduction to draw from within the order of a determinate politics. However, if it is to be understood as a "determinate" politics, one assumes that Blanchot envisages some form of regime, public law, and institution that satisfies the way he thinks about community—a form of monarchy, individual or collegial presidency, or aristocratic oligarchy where the sovereign figure would carry symbolic force and disappearance of the common as a single characteristic. Should the sovereign be the writer? This is an unlikely conjecture because, if one understands the tradition of the philosopher-king, one also understands that its implementation can only do away with literature (perhaps even philosophical literature), in other words, the work offered to unworking.

It remains astonishing that Blanchot seems here almost to ignore that of which he must be aware, and that he remains persistent in his essentially philosophical will to bring into existence something like a sovereignty, at

once passionate and learned (having knowledge of its passion, or the mystical body of the woman and her *jouissance*), raised above society though refusing to reign over it.

This renunciation of authority lets the truth be said, sovereignly, about society—the truth of its subordinate character because it is too ordered (toward goals and laws), and the subordinate character of all relation that is not undone and not carried away into the mystery called “woman” or “myth.” All relation, all community, everything that is common thus finds itself disavowed, in other words, deprived of *avowal*, in the primary sense of the word: the recognition of the suzerain by a vassal. That the community is deprived of avowal removes it from all domination but also from all consistency and from the acknowledgment that the suzerain owes to his vassal. The only community that is accepted is that which unbinds itself and which, unbinding itself from all submission, also unbinds itself from itself. Unusually ambiguous, what remains is the noncommon—the perfect un-subordinated without avowal and which writes sovereignly.

*

Blanchot will have had two politics—one democratic, rebellious in the name of a law of justice beyond all law, the other aristocratic and anarchic, tied to the secret community of a lawless passion and a sharing of unsharable solitudes.

This was the case for Blanchot, but how many of us are in fact traversed by this more or less conscious, more or less denied, more or less avowed duality?

In any case, one can verify to what extent Maurice Blanchot was intimately divided, caught between avowal and disavowal, by comparing his political texts (in the “determinate” sense) since 1950 with *The Unavowable Community* and the essay “Intellectuals under Scrutiny.”⁶ In the specifically political texts that were destined to participate in an action, a will is affirmed that extends up to the point of speaking of a “community of destiny,” a political phrasing that is quite traditional and marked as more right-wing.⁷

In 1968, he wrote (addressing the Party, all parties): “Communism is what excludes (and excludes itself from) any already constituted community.”⁸ As we have seen, in 1983 he defines a politics that refuses all exclusion. The two statements join up in the following way—the common must not *consist*. It must not or cannot even exist as such. Escaping all exclusion,

excluding the exclusive, it becomes a pure exception, unavowable but this time unavowable in the sense of unobtainable.

The common of the community cannot be found like “something,” but perhaps it is shareable as experience, indeed as always already shared. In one sense, this is what is suggested. At the same time, in making sharing and politics converge according to the asymptote of an impossible (unavowable) oxymoron of exclusion/inexclusion, constituted/unconstituted, common/incommunicable, one vows to remain stuck in a contradiction whose sublation [*la relève*] one strives to imitate even as one avows that it is insurmountable. No—“society” and “relation” cannot be identified without remainder. No—“institution” and “writing” cannot be confounded. And yet can they accept excluding one another? Blanchot sought to raise himself above a tension that was “indefensible [*insoutenable*]” for him.⁹ Indeed, he affirmed: “One cannot impartially renounce one or the other, anymore than one can renounce the search without measure that demands of men their necessity and the necessity to unite the incompatible.”

“To unite the incompatible”—doesn’t this highly romantic or meta-Hegelian statement stem from a desire that will have informed just as much the modern State as its Revolution, just as much the guardian figure of the Republic as the grandiose image of Communism—in other words, the desire to accomplish and present transcendence?¹⁰ We have seen what role the motif of the “*immediate-universal*” plays in *The Unavowable Community*. It implies a request or an avowal that could come from a child, the anticipation of the beyond that is here and now [*l’au-delà ici-bas*]. Strangely, there is nothing compatible here with the “absent sense” that we will turn to later. He affirms this “*immediate-universal*,” and yet he can only disavow its naïveté, not to mention its stupidity.

At the same time, Blanchot disavows community and affirms the most simplistic and immediate representation—suspended in its instantaneous dissolution. He disavows community at the same time as he avows a desire for community that, in uniting the incompatible, can be considered mystical or mythical.

(Here as elsewhere, the question is thus: How are we to think differently? How to abandon [*délaisser*] completion without turning to the interminable? How to disavow transcendence without devoting oneself [*se vouer*] to opaque immanence?)

MYTH

The avowal of the unavowable is avowal of the recourse to myth, in other words, for Blanchot, to an element or motif that has played a significant role in his thinking on literature up to a particular time. I will not undertake an analysis of the texts in question. Here it is a matter of showing how, in this “political” book that we are trying to read, a more or less declared (un-avowed) recourse to this mythical element is outlined, this element that everything can be designated as related if not necessarily to fascism—we are still far from fascism—then certainly to right-wing thinking.

This recourse also means that Blanchot’s thinking on literature and community are more than just narrowly intertwined. Perhaps they are essentially the same if there is literary communication only within a mythical register (be it “indecent [*inconvenante*]” or expressly for the sake of impropriety) and if precisely there is no thought of the common (community, sharing) that resorts to the same register.

We should now broach another difficulty that is deliberately imposed on the reader. It concerns a passage in which the text focuses on its relation to myth. Writing that “the community . . . is the most astounding and yet the most evident, going beyond the mythic and the metaphysical” (86/52), Blanchot creates several obstacles instead of communicating his thinking. No doubt this circumvented argument should be understood in direct relation to “the truth of her mythic body” that is mentioned a few lines earlier. “The metaphysical” must thus be understood as a kind of predicate of the mythical, which would oppose its second occurrence to the first—that of the mythical body whose physical character would prevent the myth from getting lost in vague speculation.

Two regimes or two accepted meanings of myth must be thought. In the first, the “metaphysical” evokes a foundational and explanatory myth, exposing principles, an origin, and unveiling of the sovereign heavens. The “physical” exposes (and exposes to “the physical sight that strikes one like lightning” [87/52]) a presence whose “magnificence” (89/54) can be equated with representation of the unknown.¹¹ Although such a myth would neither explain nor unveil an origin, it would not lack the virtue of “founding” (89/54) or of being at the ground [*d’être au fond*]. The second myth would be like the abandonment of the former—a thought of “myth of the absence of myth” opened up by Bataille¹²—but an abandonment that protects and

carries with it the heart (or law) of myth, a communication of the immemorial and the efficacy of a fiction.

What can be called mythical is that for which one cannot know if the event is produced, but for which the appearance of a figure (Aphrodite, for example, or Christ) communicates an actual meaning. Myth is the speech whose subject is none other than itself, configuring itself in speaking of itself—*sua sponte* [of its own free accord] and *de seipsa* [of its own ipseity].

This means the “sacred” and “literature” as one. Sacred because reserved, kept in irreducible heterogeneity, literary because addressed from no one to no one [*personne à personne*] (hence *personne* in both senses of the word—no one and someone—open to chiasmic exchange). The conjunction of these two senses is what separates as much the “anecdote” (72/43) as the “writer’s arbitrary decision” (86/52), circumscribing literature between these exclusions. Neither narrative episode nor subjective inclination, neither “*récit*” nor “doctrine,” myth names the necessity of literature as exposure of the immemorial—that which cannot be spoken but which speaks of a self whose “self” is originary at each instant.

The mythical nature of the literary text thus stems from the way in which it does not allow the “real” to be separate from the “imaginary,” as one says in conclusion of the death by which the man “fulfills the earthly fate” (92/56) of the woman—inaugurating a heavenly fate in which its truth as woman and mythical or mystical body is clearly played out. The comparison of this perfect *récit* with the history of Christ’s passion engages two registers simultaneously—on the one hand, the linking of two sequences (the body’s gift—disappearance—subsequent recognition), but on the other hand, belief (to which an allusion is made via Kierkegaard), because it is belief that informs the religious sense of the evangelical *récit*. A certain belief is thus also at stake with regard to the literary *récit*. Blanchot’s commentary is analogous to the (particularly Catholic) theological elucidation of the evangelical text. He will have told us the spiritual truth of Duras’s *récit* just as another evangelist tells us of love or of a sacrifice whose victim is its own subject [*le propre sujet*].

It is not that Blanchot invites religious faith. It is rather that such faith offers a kind of model or analogue for one’s relation to the fable. One adheres to the real of a represented event as exceeding the representation (one believes in the unbelievable, one accesses the immemorial). In relation to Duras’s text, this is what Blanchot qualifies as “mysterious only because it

is irreducible” (62/36). Right from the moment he introduces the récit, it has been said that it is “without a way out” (51/29) (its perfection resides here). There is no “way out” because nothing can resolve (realize, manifest) the real specific to the excessive event into the everyday real—and precisely from this fictive fact, from a true fiction.

The lack of distinction between “real” and “imaginary” characterizes the récit’s “evasive” denouement. It confirms (“consecrates”) the necessarily ephemeral, fugitive destiny of the community, whose condition [*modalité*] nevertheless remains impossible to determine. In other terms, the reality of the community (or of love) is the reality of a faith that is received from—and gives itself over to—the “indefinable power of the feminine” (91/55). This faith remains “uncertain” because it consists precisely in entrusting itself to what essentially disappears—the woman, pleasure, which is “essentially that which escapes” (87/52). The “evasive manner” (the text also uses the word “aleatory”) is the literary or mythical mode inasmuch as it relates to an inexhaustible absencing (and therefore its récit is no more than a récit at the limit, more like a declarative mystery—just as it is a declaration that accepts the truth of the Eucharist, Blanchot affirming in the indicative that “it was given to us”).

If we want to distinguish it from a determinate mythology (politics), this evasive mythography or mythopoesis is certainly complex and singular. It nevertheless retains the nature of myth, in other words a truth (or a foundation) that is offered beyond all possible verification but which verifies itself.¹³ It possesses nothing less than the mythical or literary truthfulness of communication reserved for “the community through writing” (44/24). Turning back to Christian myth, Blanchot is certainly not subjecting literature to dogma. Rather, he confers a sacred (one might say, sacramental) mark on literature, on the unworking of the work and its evasive suspension beyond all knowledge and reverence [*obédience*].

In soliciting the Christian récit of the Passion, Blanchot pushes the movement of the argument toward Judaism—or Levinas’s Jewish figure—to an extremity, to which the first version of the text responded (in which the Christian episode did not appear). We have highlighted the characteristics of this argument: The law is the properly Jewish factor, and if Levinas is credited with a thinking capable of coming before [*en amont de*] the law, it finds itself in turn surpassed by the Christian figure of the gift and passionate abandonment.¹⁴

It is not a matter of suspecting the persistence of a predictable [*mécanique*] anti-Semitism, of which Blanchot showed signs in the 1930s. It concerns something else. Having understood the issues concerning justice inherent in anti-Semitism through his political “conversion,” in particular as it was revealed in the Dreyfus affair,¹⁵ Blanchot nevertheless maintained a profoundly Paulinian disposition toward what he assembled in the name of “the law” (to put it in other terms: the true law is that of the heart). Christianity reinforced his aristocratic anarchism, which in turn subsumed his Christianity.

Without doubt, this is the profound reason for the renewed use that he wanted to make of his text on *The Malady of Death*. The initial article aimed at introducing amorous passion as equal to and rivaling ethical responsibility. When the theme of community came to be recalled by happenstance, at the moment this essay was going to appear, one imagines without difficulty how the plan to prolong the argument further arose, passing from ethics to politics, reviving [*relevant*] Bataille’s Acéphale, and soliciting the Eucharist in accordance with the “mythical body” in order to affirm an “infinite passion” (80/48) without reservation, and which knows no law, moral, or politics.

Evasive in that it fixes neither the concept nor the figure of a communal entity, the community in this way remains at once eluded in its inavowal-disavowal and yet “consummated [*consommée*],” accomplished like a gift without return, an abandon which extends to consumption but which leads at the same time to the communication of a speech “entrusted to others,” those who will have been able to decipher and share the unavowed avowal, the myth hidden in its very appearance. Rather than a community, those reader-companions will form the informal and formless communion of an *avowal* understood as allegiance to “writing without link, always already outside itself.”¹⁶

WITHOUT SHARING

A sharing is thus offered, that of an unknown community, a community to come without guarantee, of readers, both men and women, who each will have known how to become “a companion who gives himself or herself over to abandonment, who is lost and who at the same time remains by the wayside the better to disentangle what is happening and which therefore

escapes him or her" (43/23). A true community thus consummates itself [*se consomme*], a community that originates from "a revolution that does not need to succeed or achieve a fixed goal, since, whether it endures or does not endure, it is sufficient unto itself, and since the failure that eventually rewards it is none of its concern"¹⁷—the avowal of a principled disavowal [*un désaveu principiel*] of everything that would give any consistency to relation, to the encounter, to the prefix *co-* or the *with* in general.

Nothing is instituted here, neither society nor partners, the revolution of a sharing that is fleeting in essence and similar to these words from '68: "anonymous words [that] never declared themselves the words of an author, being of all and for all, in their contradictory formulation."¹⁸ The fact remains that the event of this revolution finds itself inscribed in both *The Unavowable Community* and "Intellectuals under Scrutiny," written by an author who signs his name and expresses himself in the first person. The name Blanchot may appear destined in advance to efface itself with an undeniable pallor. It nevertheless remains that it is inscribed and presented in an imposing manner and that a book that emphasizes several proper names as structurally related (through their *conjunction*)—Bataille, Duras, Levinas, Nancy—does not refer to the name of the author without force. And this author excludes himself from any individual community with each of the other names, instituting himself rather as the interpreter of all others but also as the one who takes their texts further, in the process of a "reflection, never in fact interrupted" (9/1), for which it must be understood that this reflection has preceded—and will be pursued in—an irreducible singularity. The "others" to which this book also confides its future—and for which at the same time it outlines certain characteristics—these others are at once very uncertain and "constrained" in advance to share the unshareable, the heart without law of a passion in which "Maurice Blanchot" at once vanishes and (like Duras) "implicates himself" in an irreducibly solitary manner.

Alone, avowing, disavowing, without avowal—owing nothing to anyone other than to that very thing [*cela*] which allows avowing and disavowing, and to speech, this primordial necessity according to which "one has to speak in order to remain silent" (92/56).¹⁹ In order to unavow, one must avow, be it by disavowing what could pass as the object or theme of the argument—namely, community. However, in order to speak, one must be in the element of speech, and this element precedes all possibility of determining the nature or properties of the "common" since the principle of

speech establishes the common. Its sharing is prior to all possibility of distinguishing between relation and the negation of relation, between communication and solitude. Blanchot is well aware of this, ceaselessly recalling for us the relation of readers to the author and readers between themselves. Even more, this ceaselessly brings us back to this relation as to the place of a common avowal of our allegiance to . . . speech itself. He thus wants to remind us of what precedes and makes possible the common, communication.

However, is there a precedence here? In speech, is it not the common that precedes itself rather than being preceded by anything else? For the moment, this is the question that must be posed here.

For Blanchot, nothing can be said, as it were, that does not succeed the saying. This is why avowal is never far away but must remain unavowable in order not to risk becoming law and consistency there where, it seems, only the unbinding of an act of speech (“take . . .”) and the secret desistance of the heart can and ought to be produced.

*

I will finish this reading by pausing for a moment over the principal motivation [*ressort*] of this solitary and lawless heart. From all appearances, it is situated in the exposure to the radical, inappropriable alterity of the feminine. Sexual difference is conceived of as its mythical dimension. Figural, even transfigural, the “feminine” as we have seen can be just as much the truth of a man (Blanchot) as of a god (Christ), or of writing and its unworking, of that which, in conceptual terms, is called “passivity,” “abandon,” “inaccessibility,” or “inscrutable mystery” (67/40), tied to a strictly irreducible alterity (and for this reason, without law).

One is irreducibly separated from the other by pushing its irreducibility to the extreme. If love represents a bond (an “attachment”), then the absolute of alterity challenges and ultimately always unbinds love, except to carry lovers toward death where, by definition, they are only together separately. This is why dying becomes what is in play in their sharing, but it is also why they share nothing. One could also say that they share “nothing,” and this is one of the directions my text, *The Inoperative Community*, sketches out, even if this is not taken up by Blanchot who, no doubt for the same reason, does not speak of the “nothing” of sovereignty. Ultimately, it seems that nothing is to be shared [*que rien ne soit à partager*].

As I have noted, the text’s basso continuo exists in refusing a “perseverance] in being” in favor of “an interminable dying” (69/41). But

this dying is itself traversed by a radical dissymmetry between the masculine and feminine. The former dies through an incapacity for abandonment, the second dies abandoned (when all is said and done [*au demeurant*], we must say of this death only that it is as real as it is imaginary).²⁰ It is possible—and this is stated—that these values tend to be shared (to be shared in abandon), but the dissymmetry does not lessen [*n'en demeure pas moins*], like a dissymmetry between “being abandoned” and “abandoning oneself.” Its essential, if not exclusive, mark is given in *jouissance*: The woman comes [*jouit*]*—*in Duras, one moves imperceptibly from an unexpected orgasm to another that is experienced, described, and seen at length—while the man does not come (“a chance woman to whom he gives a pleasure [*jouissance*] he does not share” [81/48]). Everything happens as if the man only “took” the woman in penetrating her (or in caressing her) but not in coming, at least in the purely physical sense of the term (but is it possible to speak of a “purely physical” sense?).

Everything also unfolds as if the man were able to “procure” (some) pleasure [*“procurer” [de] la jouissance*]²¹ for the woman without at the same time being able to give it, nor in consequence abandoning himself in giving it [*s’abandonner en la donnant*]. For what is *jouissance* if not abandon? And isn’t abandon what the woman will have abandoned to the man, having “done her work” as a woman, and having thus “changed [the man] more radically than he knows”? (91/56). However, it is only in remembering lost love—of *jouissance* not experienced together—that this work delivers [*livre*] he who is separated from her and from “what makes it contemporary to a past which it has never been possible to live” (92/56).²²

The man himself has also worked [*œuvré*], but differently: “He . . . is always coming or going, always in action [*à l’œuvre*] in front of this body” (66/39), laborious work [*ouvrage*], interminable sexual labor [*besogne*], and without unworking. The man is not contemporaneous with his *jouissance*. He returns to an inexorable solitude. In the end, is this to say that *jouissance* does not take place and never in men’s lives (humans from both sexes), and only at a distance from the myth and/or the mystical authority [*instance*] called “woman” (Aphrodite-Christ)? Lacan is mentioned once in the text (71/42). In his own way, one might think that Blanchot shares and adapts a logic of constitutive lack (split subject, castration).

Such a logic rests on what I would willingly call a negative theology of *jouissance*, which assumes a divine property, in the sense of a plenitude

of being or essence, even a sur-essence (to use a theological term). It is on this point that I separate myself most clearly from Blanchot, which does not lead to dissension anymore than it implies consent. We do not argue in order to be right. Each of us decides to approach that which is without reason, and each of us does it according to what drives or motivates us. Isn't this what exposes us to the most hidden in each and every one of us?

For Blanchot, *jouissance* is clearly not shared. There is a masculine principle that remains foreign to *jouissance*. However, if *jouissance* is abandon, if it only takes place where its subject is not found, isn't it necessary that it only takes place as communication? And to "procure" pleasure, isn't it also the *giving* of *jouissance* and the *self-giving* that comes with it—giving oneself while receiving the gift of one's abandon?

In a sense, this is also what unavowed myth says, and yet this is what it opens up [*écarte*] at the same time. The essential and emphasized passage in the text from the theme of the collective to that of the lovers through the motif of impotence invites us to think of a sexual encounter between impotence and *jouissance*. But impotence is not necessarily different from the pleasure that one can "procure" for the other. Sexual truth is far from being so simple [*sommaire*]. Rather, *jouissance* is always an "upheaval [*bouleversement*]" which does not take place for one person alone, male or female, anymore than it takes place in the determinate mode of orgasm.²³ More precisely, there are different modalities and values for what is badly designated by the simplified notions of "impotence" and "orgasm." Ultimately, the sexual scene so imagined by Duras and as put back into perspective by Blanchot is a scene submitted in advance to the conditions of myth—the woman's supreme pleasure [*toute-jouissance*] and the man's supreme impotence (or again, supreme homosexuality, impotence toward the woman).

This mythical conditioning risks forgetting a fundamental given concerning sexuality—namely, that each individual is shared out as masculine and feminine, whether shaped as a man or woman. There is a bisexuality that redivides sexual division. Freud knew this, but so did all the speeches, declarations, and exclamations of sensual excitement before him. At the end of the day, what this concerns is a *jouissance* that in itself can only be shared or communicated, but not without at the same time escaping itself, as if withdrawing completely in itself, and even if this "in itself" does not belong in the subject. This is exactly what Blanchot affirms, even if I draw the opposite conclusion.

Jouissance can be understood in its juridical sense as complete possession (is it this that leads to the sense of “taking” someone?). But this meaning offers the other side of what “coming” brings into play or to work (in flesh as in spirit)—an unworking, certainly, in other words, a nonaccomplishment, a taking place without place, a communication with an unidentifiable alterity. There is no solitary coming, and Blanchot incidentally does not say that the woman would be alone in her *jouissance*. Being sharing through and through [*étant partage de part en part*], she cannot be alone.

To say that man is excluded from this sharing supposes an isolated virility, withdrawn in itself as in a closed being, only open like a gaze on “the black night discovered by the vertiginous emptiness ‘of her spread legs’” (70/41). This night, this “abyss,” is what “inhibited [*empêché*] love” as much as “the pure movement of loving” turns toward or, as Blanchot specifies, that to which it opens up. But inhibited love remains in front, while the movement of loving comes beforehand. Is it necessary to solidify the opposition? Is the gaze condemned to be voyeuristic (or blind) while movement ends up remaining turned in on itself?

Rather, should we not be surprised by what has all the allure of an arbitrary axiom—inexorable solitude—even though everything leads us to believe that the relation (even if “without relation,” incommensurable, which it certainly is) will have preceded every isolated position, all determination of being? On the contrary, being or, more exactly, “to be” belongs a priori to relation, which comes prior to solitude. This initial fact does not at all imply that relation leads to fusion. It precedes and exceeds the opposition between fusion and isolation. In a sense, Blanchot seeks nothing else, and yet he has to bring out a contrast in such a way that he might seem to reconstitute the opposition.

It is true that “maybe insensibility opens the man who believes that he does not go beyond it to a pleasure one cannot name” (87/52), a hypothesis that is followed by this comment: “pleasure is essentially that which escapes” (87/52). But what does “to escape” mean here? Does it mean to be lost, or else to leave for somewhere better [*ailleurs*]? Something persists in affirming a loss or an impossibility rather than a communication with the impossible and of the impossible, a communication that, however, summons everything and that the woman incarnates or symbolizes without it being possible that anything appears, even for an instant. But how can “insensibility” “open the man” if it makes perceptible [*sensible*] what, from out of

the perceptible, exceeds absent sense?²⁴ How can the man desire the woman or even only want to represent this desire to himself if she wasn't already in him, already open in him outside of himself?

(In him outside of himself—without being able to dwell on this further, one has to come back to the sexual difference present in the biological gender of each person [whether activating or rendering passive]. One might imagine that Blanchot has this in mind and that the entire scene between the man and woman is played out in a single person, she-him, Aphrodite-Christ, and Duras-Blanchot. But if this is the case, why not reveal it? Why not disperse the appearance of simple identification between the characters [man and woman] and valences [imperceptible/perceptible, present/absent, etc.]?)

Pleasure's momentary escape is pleasure itself—not completion, not satisfaction or its opposite, but renewed desire. Isn't there a pleasure of being together, prior to or separated from sex and/or the love that the hyperbole offers? Isn't it this pleasure that '68 was all about? And wouldn't this book itself secretly be the renewal of this pleasure and its desire? But in spite of everything, one must think the book is carried away by distrust toward the common and community, distrust toward the vulgar, the herd instinct, and the normative that makes one fear “what could be *common* to those who would belong to a whole, a group, a council, a collective” (9/1).²⁵ The italics are explicit: The common is necessarily suspect. One returns here to the aristocratic distinction, as well as to the writer's separation (as “author” or “intellectual”).

However, the common is not reducible to the vulgar or the banal, or to the party [*appareil*] or the organization. There is a common, if not a community, that precedes all solitude and all exception, all sexual differences or people, a common without which no isolation or separation would take place—a common which has nothing unified or is single, which displaces itself [*s'écarte*] within itself, dividing and diffracting itself, a common which pleases and displeases itself to itself, having perhaps only little “self.” The common is less discernible than any determinate form and collective work, surely as hidden and unavowable as the secrets of lovers or those who are solitary. But in the end, there is no work that does not stem from it or speak of it, no work that is not inoperative in the common.

No doubt it only takes place in an instant. But this is the point of the disagreement [*différend*] with Blanchot: Either the instant is identified with

its own disappearance and so never takes place, or it takes place as the infinitesimal suspension of time where gazes—voices, silence—are exchanged and bodies touch. In this suspension, something appears—one might say, a world—and doesn't disappear.²⁶ Isn't time itself—its heart, its law—the infinitesimal suspension of time, its beat [*battement*]?

WORK, BOND, CLINAMEN

In order to think this beat, this time where duration is confounded with scansion, presence with distinction [*le départ*], law with heart, the masculine with the feminine—this ephemeral but persistent point at which it is not possible to differentiate between society and community, communication and solitude, real and impossible, the very same point that Blanchot only envisages as eluded [*en échappée*], without recognizing in its opening the encounter (if not the relation) as well as evasion—in order to think this beat, one has to practice the art of the fugue, that is, the alliance of coincidence and distance [*écart*], touching and withdrawal, genitals with genitals, alliance which only joins together in continuity and to infinity, an alliance itself that is actual infinite of the virtual infinite, the innumerable of the countable, work of the unworking.

The Inoperative Community sought to dissociate the idea of “community” from all projection into a work that is made or to be made—a State, a Nation, a People, or The People understood as figures that are suitably fashioned [*ouvrages*] and erected before the public. It is true that this perspective led me to neglect what Blanchot recalls in the last line of his book—that there is only unworking from out of a work. He thus presented the work of relation without relation, the work of an instantaneous unworking through which he could at once justify the distrust of a politics or an ethical politics of the work (institution, law, hierarchy, architectonic) and suggest in a distant, evasive manner a political work in such a way that it was able to elevate itself beyond the opposition between the order of accomplishment and the register of what is eluded—in other words, such that political passion and the passion of infinite sense were able to come together in agreement. But this agreement or harmony [*accord*] is precisely not an art of the fugue, at least not in the manner that I have suggested, because it highlights “an exacting political sense” (93/56) about which we know nothing more than its exacting character—rigorous, authoritarian, making us “responsible for

new relationships” (93/56) between the work and unworking. Nothing determines these relationships to come except that they must respond to “unknown spaces of freedom” (93/56).²⁷ What are these spaces other than those opened in '68 but considered this time from the perspective of social transformation and politics rather from the perspective of an ephemeral “people”? In a remarkable return to Levinas’s term, we are summoned to the responsibility of an unforeseen [*imprévue*] democracy whose unknown condition no doubt demands that we do not stop at the little esteem that the text repeatedly reserves for the “society in person” (57/33). Beyond any doubt, it concerns another politics, assuredly not antidemocratic but finding beyond democracy the principle of a hierarchical relation (in the strict sense of the term) to an overcoming [*dépassement*] or infinite founding in “the indefinable power of the feminine” itself understood as a form of sacredness.

There can be no doubt that Blanchot thus aspires to something that in many ways numerous others have aspired to—an archipolitics to use Gérard Granel’s term,²⁸ or again different ways of naming a politics that is noninstituted, nonpoliced, nonsocial but instituting, originary, hyperpolitical, revolutionary in a way that does not at all exclude the strictest obligation [*l’astreinte*]. In my own text from 1983, the initial version of “The Inoperative Community,” and later still, the meaning of “politics” was loosely determined, sometimes confused with “community.”

In one sense, Blanchot distinguished himself from everyone else in referring to an avowal, and this avowal consists of an effectively unavowable aspect for all the *political correctness* of the time.²⁹ This political correctness is also our own, except that today we openly question democracy. But Blanchot does not ask the same question; he disavowed and he avowed this disavowal. His courage is undeniable. A certain blindness is no less undeniable, a blindness the reason for which is found in an irrepressible desire to bring together political passion and the passion of infinite sense, and in order to do this, to conceive of a founding work. At the same time, this founding concerns less the relations between us than the relation of each individual to the beyond, to an unworking called—simultaneously, alternatively, reciprocally—“pleasure” and “death.” The relation of each and all, but not the relations of ones to others [*des uns aux autres*].

It is one thing [*c’est une chose*] to find ourselves in an essential (i.e., existential) opening to a beyond that is not an otherworldliness [*ailleurs*] than

right here, and that this *here* affects us in an infinite sense, in other words, it is whole and never accomplished, not being completed. But this does not imply that this infinite sense is identifiable as a politics; the polis is no longer for us the place of an entire rethinking [*mise en jeu*] of sense as it was when it served as the civil religion of free men in the very differentiated Athenian social organization.

Civil religion is never far away when myth, worship, and a kind of sublimated sacrifice in abandoned *jouissance* is evoked. Blanchot certainly did not imagine himself as pontiff of a new Rome (although this image and its schema never stopped haunting Europe). But he entrusts to the literary work—to this perfect récit that exceeds the story [*récit*] by ceaselessly interrupting itself over the woman's withdrawal [*départ*] and her *jouissance*—the care of making an utterance [*porter une parole*] of which we sense that indecency or impropriety [*inconvenance*] is better suited to the secret and superlative celebration of speech that is always unheard [*inouïe*].

This speech is distinguishable in that, ultimately, it comes down to naming death—"real death, imaginary death," Christ's death, death to which the "Christian Aphrodite" belongs. What distinguishes this death is less an opposition to life than an inscription—an incision—of separation within life. Death here amounts above all to what separates one from the other more than what separates self from self. For self separated from self is precisely the subject of mystical experience. It is the woman who leaves with and in her *jouissance*. This subject separated from self subsists in the fragile but persistent subsistence of literary writing, which thus becomes the paradoxical foundation of a vanishing community. Work less unworked than devoted to its unworking—this makes a big difference.

If death is understood as separation from others rather than from self, the "impossible" is understood as that which excludes itself and excludes everyone from all relation (sometimes transforming exclusion into general exclusion); the impossible can be understood in a quite different way, as that which, being absolutely certain, does not linger but in an instant opens itself absolutely to the absolute (to use a Kierkegaardian formula)—in other words, to pure unbinding. But the unbound is not the separated. It is that which relates itself with ease to new possibilities of binding and unbinding.

And so the pleasure that escapes—escaping each and everyone—escapes me in that it happens to the other and escapes him or her in turn. There is something common to us in its escaping. It is neither communion nor per-

haps even communication that fills up “empty intimacy.” But this intimacy finds its sense of intimacy there (here as elsewhere and always *interior intimo*), that is, in the resonance of silence and speech that withholds itself. Resonance gives proximity (another superlative) to that—to those—which are neither unified nor separated, but bound in such a way that at this moment the binding is prioritized over what is bound. The binding unbinds itself within this priority. More than attachment, it appears as an autonomous escape, a pleasure that forgets its subjects.

These subjects can certainly find themselves abandoned, or like the woman in Duras, “gone during the night” (91/55). This can happen to them by virtue of the ties that bound and unbound them. For the binding does not happen to but is part of the separated being (to the individual, if one wants to use this name, or to the gendered being). Relation precedes, constitutes, and accompanies singularities. Gender and speech confirm this idea in the first place. A community is not instituted without the risk of “compromise . . . with the collectivity” (79/47); “conjugal love,” Blanchot explains, which, as he recognizes, risks being “too simple,” to which one could add common conversation as the evasion of “infinite conversation.” But to distinguish or separate too well, yet again one risks missing the always already present and operative anteriority of the relation without which there would be no “individuals” (“subjects,” sexes, existants of all kind). Or according to another scheme, there would be no oblique impetus of the clinamen without which each and every atom would fall isolated into the groundless void.³⁰

Whether one likes it or not, the common is what always precedes—and consequently what creates—the most immemorial event, or at least the *cum* from which the *contra* and *comes*³¹ also derive, and which by far precedes all preoccupation with community and even copulation, conjunction, or conversation.

Any ontology is too limited [*court*] that cannot be traced back to relation prior to being. And all politics that seeks to found itself ontologically is too much [*longue*].

CODA

In an issue of *Critique* from 1990 that paid homage to Samuel Beckett, and in reference to the French version of *How It Is*, Blanchot's text concludes with this note:

These closing words—*Temps et peine et soi soi-disant*, as Beckett's French has them—need to be read with care; *soi soi-disant* is not a final stammer or hiccup, but the fact that *soi*, the self, cannot affirm itself alone; if it is self, it is still the speaking self, the self who speaks and calls itself that, and thus (humor, terminal sarcasm) the so-called, the self-styled, would-be self, a simple *soi-disant*.¹

Thus—to take up this term's strong, emphatic mark of consequence—Blanchot underscores how much the self that speaks also denounces in the end the illusion of its own consistence, in other words, the fact that the self “cannot affirm itself alone.” This affirmation can be understood in several ways. One can reinforce the (transcendental, existential) antecedence of relation over all isolation (individuation, subjectivation). But Blanchot adds a tone here that he himself designates as “sarcasm”—there is derision in the avowal of the “self”'s illusory character. Why this sarcasm? Why this dark humor if not out of sorrowful regret [*déploration*]? After all, the inexorable disappearance of “self” is indeed lamented. However, this disappearance only makes one pole of speech disappear, while speech continues to circulate between other poles, of disappeared “selves” taken up again, revived, listened to again, repeated.

The so-called [*soi-disant*] dead and living form the eternal return of sense. Blanchot knows this. In “The Song of the Sirens,” he writes: “Not the

event of the encounter become present, but the opening of this infinite movement that is the encounter itself.”² And yet when he attempts to think the encounter and the people together, the infinite movement becomes movement of the instant dissociation of a community that must only scarcely give space to the encounter, the mythical image of which is the impossibility for a man to reunite with the gift of a woman.

Everything happens as if, with the illusion and/or impossibility of love, a “self” is given that ought to be the subject of love and is unable to be so, since love exceeds all possible presence to both the other and the self, and must diminish or sublimate itself in its own infinity. But the infinite—and it is precisely this that distances me from Blanchot—does not simply consist in escape [*fuite*] and vanishing. It is all this in a much more present and concrete [*actuelle*] manner—in the efficacy of relation, proximity, contact. This efficacy certainly does not have the character of a presence to one’s self or to you, or to those to whom one attributes an intimacy—at least as long as one represents presence and intimacy as substantive modes of being. But these representations always stem [*relèvent*] from fairly heavy vulgates.³ In truth, with the density and sufficiency that the most classical metaphysics supposes, substances themselves consist as well in what is based on nothing, being under everything. In this “underneath,” these substances float above the void, creating comings and goings, encounters and compearances [*comparutions*].⁴

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NOTES

PREFACE

1. Nancy is referring to Pierre Clastres, *Le grand parler: Mythes et chants sacrés des Indiens Guarani* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).—Trans.

2. *Jouissance* is discussed extensively in chapter 5, where the term is left untranslated. The term is also taken up at length in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Coming*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).—Trans.

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION / PHILIP ARMSTRONG

1. Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), trans. Pierre Joris as *The Unavowable Community* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988).

2. See "La communauté, le nombre," *Aléa* 4 (February 1983).

3. See Jean-Luc Nancy, "La communauté désœuvrée," *Aléa* 4 (February 1983): 11–49. Other essays published in the issue include texts by Jean-Luc Parant, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Marie Gibbal, Henri-Alexis Baatsch, and Michel Deutsch. The volume also included several reproductions (photographs by Piotr Kowalski, Roger-Viollet, and Weegee). The cover to the volume was a detail of Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo's *Mondo Novo* (1791). My thanks to Jean-Christophe Bailly for pointing out the significance of the images included in the volume.

4. See Jean-Luc Nancy, "La communauté désœuvrée," in *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986), 11–105, trans. Peter Connor as "The Inoperative Community," in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–42. Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* is a response to the earlier version of Nancy's essay in *Aléa*, not to the revised version in *The Inoperative Community*. Given that the English translation of Blanchot's

The Unavowable Community was published three years prior to the translation of Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* and so for many readers encountered before knowing the text by Nancy to which Blanchot was responding, the sense early on of who exactly was responding to whom might have come across in English as somewhat confusing.

5. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Confronted Community," trans. Amanda Macdonald, *Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 30. If Nancy focuses almost exclusively on the ways Blanchot's book is a response to his essay in *Aléa*, it should also be recalled that the book also addresses Jacques Derrida's essay "On a Recently Adopted Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy," which was first given at the "Les fins de l'homme" conference in 1980, even if Blanchot addresses Derrida's text (which cites Blanchot) in a manner that is more implicit than explicit. For a comprehensive introduction to the circumstances in which Blanchot's text was written, including its relation to both Derrida and Nancy, see Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 195–209; Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 173–93; Ian James, "Naming the Nothing: Nancy and Blanchot on Community," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 51, no. 2 (2010): 171–87; and Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London: Continuum, 2012), 247–53.

6. The second quotation is from Nancy in a note added to the end of "The Inoperative Community," in *Inoperative Community*, 42. In "The Confronted Community," Nancy writes: "Bailly's formulation could thus be read as a dazzling abbreviation of the problem that we had inherited as the problem of 'totalitarianism(s)'—no longer posed directly in political terms (as if it were a problem of 'good government'), but in terms that needed to be understood as ontological: what, then, is community if number becomes the unique phenomenon by which it is known—even the thing in itself—and if there remains no 'communism' or 'socialism' of any kind, either national or international, underpinning the least figure of community nor even the least form, the slightest identifiable schema of community? And what, then, is number if its multiplicity no longer counts as a mass awaiting its *mise en forme* (formation, conformation, information), but rather counts, all in all, for its own sake, within a dispersal we wouldn't know whether to name dissemination (seminal exuberance) or crumbling (sterile pulverisation)?" (28).

7. For comprehensive commentaries on Nancy's writings on community, see Ian James, "Community," in *Fragmentary Demand*, 152–201; Marie-Eve Morin, "Community," in *Jean-Luc Nancy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 72–95; Ignaas Devisch, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Jason Smith, "Community," in *The Nancy Dictionary*, ed. Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 49–52.

See also Jean-Luc Nancy's "Postscriptum," in Rémi Astruc, *Nous? L'aspiration à la communauté et les arts* (Paris: RKI Press, 2015).

8. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 12.

9. *Ibid.*, 9.

10. *Ibid.*, 22.

11. *Ibid.*, 11.

12. Maurice Blanchot, "Communism without a Heritage," trans. Michael Holland, in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 203.

13. The first volume of Bataille's *Œuvres complètes* had been published by Gallimard in 1970 (prefaced by Michel Foucault). By 1983, nine of the eventual twelve volumes had been published.

14. Nancy, "Confronted Community," 28.

15. For example, the earlier version of Michel Surya's seminal *Georges Bataille: La mort à l'œuvre* did not appear until 1987, although in *The Inoperative Community* Nancy does reference Dennis Hollier's equally seminal *La prise de la Concorde: Essais sur Georges Bataille* from 1974, and Francis Marmande's *Georges Bataille politique* from 1985. For a more recent commentary on Nancy's exchange with Blanchot in light of the reception of Bataille, see Patrick French, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (London: Legenda, 2007), and Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree, eds., *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009). The volume includes several essays pertinent to the exchanges among Bataille, Blanchot, and Nancy, as well as another translation of Nancy's "The Confronted Community," the preface to a new Italian edition of Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*.

16. Bataille's reference to "the community of those who do not have a community" gestures toward a related rethinking of community in the writings of Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Alphonso Lingis, and Roberto Esposito, among others (one notes that the latter's *Communitas*, for example, opens and closes with references to Bataille, Blanchot, and Nancy). Likewise, reference to a "communist exigency" points toward a proliferation of interest in rethinking communism in the late 2000s, including such volumes as Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010), in which Nancy also participated, though by this stage Blanchot has been largely effaced from the conversation. See also Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Communism: Art, Philosophy and the Political* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

17. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds., *Rejouer le politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1991) and *Le retrait du politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1983). For English versions of the center's texts, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997). Jean-François Lyotard is the one other figure that had participated in the center's lectures and

publications as well as the volume of *Aléa* edited by Bailly. In this context, we recall Lyotard's own rethinking of community in terms of a "sensus communis."

18. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds., *Les fins de l'homme: À partir du travail de Jacques Derrida: Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), which includes the "Séminaire 'politique'" and the ensuing discussion. The seminar has been translated by Simon Sparks in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, 87–104.

19. The reader should note that, throughout *The Disavowed Community*, Nancy refers frequently to himself in the third person singular, addressing himself as the author of the texts that Blanchot addresses in *The Unavowable Community*.

20. Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* frequently employs various terms related to Derrida's translation of Hegel's *Aufhebung* as *la relève*—at once to lift up, to relay, to relieve, at once substitution and difference (*différance*). In the following pages, it has been translated in various ways, depending on the context, including on occasion the use of "sublation" (deeply problematic in itself, but whose use is symptomatic of the difficulty at stake here).

21. Nancy's willingness or not to (re)read himself in light of his reading of Blanchot has been raised by Christopher Fynsk in *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot's Exilic Writings* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 144–45 and 279–81n20. Arguably one of the decisive factors in the reception of Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* will also be a question of (mis)reading. This question of reading is taken up at length in Isabelle Ullern and Pierre Gisel, eds., *Penser en commun? Un "rapport sans rapport": Jean-Luc Nancy et Sarah Kofman lecteurs de Blanchot* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2015).

22. See Maurice Blanchot, "La maladie de la mort (*éthique et amour*)," *Le Nouveau Commerce* 55 (Spring 1983): 30–46. More curiously, the concluding footnote to the review refers very abruptly to Nancy's essay in *Aléa*, a reference whose implications Nancy also explores at some length in the pages that follow.

23. This would begin to distinguish Nancy's book from other readers of Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*. For example, referring to the exchange between Blanchot and Nancy, Christopher Fynsk and Leslie Hill both read the text in light of Blanchot's *The Step Not Beyond*. See Christopher Fynsk *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot's Exilic Writings*, 125–223 and Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch*, 247–53.

24. As John Paul Ricco reminds me, the absence of Foucault is instructive here, not only because he referred to Blanchot with some insistence in his early writings, often acknowledging his importance (as in his essay "The Thought from Outside"), but also because Blanchot's essay, "Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him," was written in 1984, the year Foucault died and just one year after *The Unavowable Community* was published. See Michel Foucault/Maurice Blanchot, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside" and "Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him"

(New York: Zone, 1989). As Ricco suggests, the opening scene evoked in Blanchot's text—a possible missed encounter between Foucault and Blanchot right after May '68—can be read as exactly the kind of unavowable political community that Blanchot seeks to theorize at the time. One might also note here that all these figures close to Blanchot are working, as it were, behind Sartre's back, whose writings on communism and community ("group-in-fusion," etc.) are conspicuously absent from all these texts, including both Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* and Nancy's *The Disavowed Community*. Even when Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* opens with a quotation from Sartre, the reference becomes a means to establish a distance from Sartre's profound influence on shaping the reception of communism in the postwar period.

25. See Michel Surya, *L'autre Blanchot: L'écriture de jour, l'écriture de nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015). See also the radio interview with Surya and Nancy, "Politiques de Maurice Blanchot," broadcast on *France Culture* on May 23, 2015, available at <http://www.franceculture.fr/player/reecouter?play=4994923>, where Nancy also explores further the argument concerning this "conversion," as well as the critical pertinence of "democracy" in Blanchot's politics, a term also briefly raised in *The Disavowed Community*. See also Étienne Balibar, "D'un extrême l'autre: par quelle 'conversion'?" and "Discussion entre Étienne Balibar et Jean-Luc Nancy," *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* 3 (2014) 9–28.

26. Emphasis on the political reception of Blanchot's thinking was in part initiated just prior to the *Aléa* volume and Blanchot's *The Unavowed Community*, notably through the writings of Jeffrey Mehlman. His *Legs de l'anti-sémitisme en France* was published in French in 1984, parts of which had been published a few years earlier in *Tel Quel*. Further reading includes Maurice Blanchot, *Écrits politiques 1958–1993* (Paris: Lignes and Éditions Léo Scheer, 2003) and Éric Hoppenot, ed., *Écrits politiques 1958–1993* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008). Recent commentaries include the volume of *Lignes* 43 (March 2014), "Les Politiques de Maurice Blanchot 1930–1993," reviewed by Michael Holland in "N'en déplaise (Pour une pensée conséquente), *Sur Lignes* no. 43 mars 2014; 'Les Politiques de Maurice Blanchot 1930–1993,'" *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* 3 (Fall 2014): 149–62; as well as Christophe Bident's magisterial intellectual biography, *Maurice Blanchot, partenaire invisible: Essai biographique* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 1998). In English, see Michael Holland, ed., *The Blanchot Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), and Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), which includes Paul's "Introduction: 'Affirming the Rupture,'" which offers a useful overview of Blanchot's political writings.

27. See the essays collected in "Questions ouvertes à Jean-Luc Nancy: Autour de *La communauté désavouée*," *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* 4 (November 2015), as well as Leslie Hill's forthcoming *Community Revisited: Or, the Dispute between Nancy and Blanchot (Politics, Literature, Religion)*. The volume of *Cahiers Maurice*

Blanchot 3 (Fall 2014) also includes several essays pertinent to the reception of Nancy's book, including essays in the section titled "Journée d'études: Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe parlent de Blanchot." While not focused on Nancy's most recent book on Blanchot, of critical relevance here is Michael Holland's "Triangulations au sujet de Blanchot et l'anti-sémitisme: En lisant Jean-Luc Nancy," in *Avant dire: Essais sur Blanchot* (Paris: Hermann, 2015), 179–220. One of Nancy's most extensive discussions of his own book can be found in his interview with Jérôme Lebre. See Lebre's "Entretien avec Jean-Luc Nancy sur *La Communauté désavouée*," *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* 4 (November 2015): 91–104. In addition to this reception of Nancy's book, it would also be necessary to take into account the widespread reception of these debates concerning Blanchot's "politics" in contemporary French media, which for the most part includes crude and reductive discussions of his complex role within the contexts of prewar and postwar fascism, antisemitism, and nationalism. The reception by contemporary journalists of Blanchot's journalistic writings would be instructive in its own right.

28. I focus here on writings published since the early essay in *Aléa*. But given the ways in which this essay and its revised version in *The Inoperative Community* are often located as a starting point in Nancy's career, it would also be necessary to trace out the ways these texts from the early '80s reformulate earlier writings and reconfigure earlier arguments.

29. The volume was eventually published in 2014. See Éric Hoppenot and Dominique Rabaté, eds., *Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 2014).

30. See "Lettre de Maurice Blanchot à Roger Laporte du 22 décembre 1984" and "Lettre de Dionys Mascolo à Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe du 27 juillet 1984," in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Maurice Blanchot: Passion politique* (Paris: Galilée, 2011). The project to put together the volume on Blanchot is also addressed by Aristide Bianchi and Leonid Kharlamov in their useful introduction to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Hannes Opelz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 1–26.

31. Nancy, "Confronted Community," 27.

32. See Jean-Christophe Bailly and Jean-Luc Nancy, *La comparution: Politique à venir* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991). Nancy's text is translated by Tracy B. Strong as "The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence,'" *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (1992): 371–98.

33. Nancy writes: "We have made our history that of stripping the community bare: not the revelation of its essence but a stripping down of the 'common' in all of its forms (the 'in-common' and the 'banal'), reduced to itself, despoiled of transcendence or assumption, despoiled as well of immanence. We have in fact exposed a pure space, an areality (area, surface) of points or movements which simultaneously define the exteriority and its common division. In particular, it is thus that number (under many forms: crowds, multitudes, populations, generations,

distances, speeds, statistics, numbering beyond the numerable) has come to impose itself on all thought of the 'common.' The emptiness or the opening of this space—its very spatiality or its many spacings [*espacements*]: it is the place of our comparance." See Nancy, "Compearance," 373. The question of number is also raised again in Nancy, "Confronted Community."

34. Miami Theory Collective, ed., *Community at Loose Ends* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

35. Accidents of publication suggest, then, that the English reception of Nancy's work in the *Community at Loose Ends* volume encounters this displacement in his thinking prior to the reception of his work on community in *The Inoperative Community*, published a few years later. Christopher Fynsk notes that Blanchot himself also turns to rethinking Heidegger's *Mitsein* around 1984. See Christopher Fynsk, *Last Steps*, 282n25.

36. This reading of Nancy in light of Heidegger was an important aspect of Christopher Fynsk's foreword to the translation of *The Inoperative Community*. See Christopher Fynsk, "Foreword: Experiences of Finitude," in *The Inoperative Community*, vii–xxxv, which offers one of the most sustained early readings of Nancy in English that already situates Nancy in relation to Blanchot.

37. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 42.

38. See Mathilde Girard and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Proprement dit: Entretien sur le mythe* (Paris: Éditions Lignes, 2015), where the exchanges touch frequently on the writings of Blanchot.

39. See Maurice Blanchot, Michel Deutsch, et al., eds., *Misère de la littérature* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1978).

40. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

41. See Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Noli Me Frangere," trans. Brian Holmes, in Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993), 266–278.

42. "The Nazi Myth" was first published in 1981 in *Les mécanismes du fascisme* (Strasbourg: Bibliothèque de prêt du Haut-Rhin, Comité sur l'Holocauste, 1981).

43. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, and *La fiction du politique: Heidegger, l'art et la politique* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1987), trans. Chris Turner as *Heidegger, Art, and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Earlier published versions of Lacoue-Labarthe's text prior to 1987 also include this dedication to Blanchot.

44. This seems all the more unusual given that (as Aristide Bianchi reminds me) one of the primary motifs in the exchange between Blanchot and Lacoue-Labarthe between 1976 and 1981 is precisely the motif of "avowal." In the wake of a retranslation in 1983 of Blanchot's "Le nom de Berlin" back into French by Nancy

and Hélène Jelen, it should also be mentioned (as Nancy himself recalls in the pages that follow) that the collaboration between Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy always fascinated and perplexed Blanchot.

45. See Jacques Derrida, *Parages*, ed. John Leavey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

46. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 42.

47. These distinctions would also open toward different ways of reading and inheriting the writings of Levinas and, more distantly, Heidegger. While this relation to Levinas and Heidegger is not a prominent part of Nancy's argument in *The Disavowed Community*, suffice it to remark that Nancy's book is also an oblique way of rethinking the role that Levinas and Heidegger play in Blanchot's thinking. For an incisive introduction to this reading, see Daniele Rugo, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Thinking of Otherness: Philosophy and Powers of Existence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). On Blanchot and Levinas, see also Hill's commentary in *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, 200–201; James, *Fragmentary Demand*, 188–92; and Éric Hoppenot and Alain Milon, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot: Penser la différence* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2007).

48. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 42.

49. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Fin du colloque," in *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques*, ed. Christophe Bident and Pierre Vilar (Tours: Éditions Farrago and Éditions Léo Scheer, 2003), 627.

1. "COMMUNITY, NUMBER"

1. See Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983); *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1988). Given the central importance of this text to Nancy's argument and the frequency with which the text is cited, we have given page numbers to both the French and the English editions. The translation has been occasionally modified.—Trans.

2. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986); *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); and Giorgio Agamben, *La comunità che viene* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1990); *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).—Trans.

3. In the summer of 2013, as I write these lines, there is a literary festival connected to the Verdier publishing house that is called "The Unavowable Community"—a questioning of being-together, an "occasion," it states, "to render homage to Maurice Blanchot." The official program does not propose any "questioning" of Blanchot's book, nor even a simple commentary. However, it is in a rather literary essay that a passage can be found that could be directly

inspired by Blanchot (even if it is a chance encounter). In *Hymne*, her book on Jimi Hendrix, Lydie Salvayre writes: “In playing *The Star-Spangled Banner* on this morning of August 18, 1969, at Woodstock, Hendrix re-created a feeling of fraternity for those who were lacking it, giving life to that extremely rare thing we call (I hardly dare to write it) a community, a community formed in the moment, a precarious community, happily precarious . . . a community of solitary individuals, each person completely absorbed in the music, each person finding themselves at home there, but at everyone’s rhythm.” See Lydie Salvayre, *Hymne* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2011), 191. One could also refer to Blanchot and Marguerite Duras’s récit *The Malady of Death* in relation to the artist Haegue Yang, who speaks of a “community of absence” (see the article by Éric Loiret, “Haegue Yang, compliment d’objets,” *Libération*, August 22, 2013, http://next.liberation.fr/arts/2013/08/22/haegue-yang-compliment-d-objets_926401). One could also mention the theater company called The Unavowable Community. No doubt there are many other references to this title, testifying to the tutelary yet perfectly vague presence of a text that in reality is barely known.

4. See Friedrich Engels, “On the History of Early Christianity,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1894–95 [1990]), 445–69.

5. Part 1 of *The Unavowable Community* is titled “The Negative Community.” Part 2, which turns on a reading of *The Malady of Death*, the récit by Duras, is titled “The Community of Lovers.”—Trans.

6. It suffices to recall at least the names of Christophe Bident, Philippe Mesnard, and Leslie Hill, apologizing to those whom I forget to mention or whose texts I do not know. Aukje van Rooden, Cristina Rodriguez-Marciel, Hannes Opelz, Jérémie Majorel, Éric Hoppenot, Sylvain Santi, Arthur Cools, Idoia Quintana Domínguez have each devoted an unpublished text to the argument of Blanchot’s book. Michel Surya and Leslie Hill have both published texts taking up the relation among Blanchot, Bataille, and Nancy within the singular configuration of *The Unavowable Community*. All these authors have shared these texts with me; I find all of them remarkable. While coming from different perspectives, these texts have in common an awareness of an enigma that should be illuminated while recognizing that it escapes us [*se dérobe*] by moving to the fore, even as it withdraws [*se dérobant*] in its very evidence (all evidence withdraws into itself). That there is a certain synchronous awareness of and curiosity toward this enigma is not surprising; it requires a period of time for gestation and for dispelling the effects of intimidation (Michel Surya speaks of the “power of intimidation” of Blanchot’s book in his *Sainteté de Bataille* [Paris: L’Éclat, 2012], a work which is eminently important for any reading of *The Unavowable Community*, even if and thanks to a significantly different, if not necessarily opposed perspective than my own). In this context, I do not propose to enter into the complex web of these

studies that are contemporary though often unaware of one another. This is why, in order not to digress, I do not refer to what each of them offers. I deliver my own reading such as it slowly imposed itself on me, as I outlined in *La communauté affrontée* (Paris: Galilée, 2001) [trans. Amanda Macdonald as “The Confronted Community,” *Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 23–36], and in *Maurice Blanchot, Passion Politique* (Paris: Galilée, 2011). Above all, the text is a reading of my work, to which, as I will show, Blanchot addressed a response, a rejoinder, and a kind of caution [*avertissement*]. Besides, I intend to read this one book by Blanchot, without seeking to examine the relation it clearly maintains with the rest of his work.

Let me add a word about intimidation. It is not impossible that, in addition to intimidation, the book also creates a sense of discomfort and reserve among those who were able to discern its stakes but who did not want to address them while Blanchot was alive nor right after his death. I include myself here, but if I have waited ten years after his death, it is not through any reserve but the very real difficulty of understanding. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the recent volume of the journal *Lignes*, a special issue with the title “Les politiques de Maurice Blanchot 1930–1993” (*Lignes* 43)—which came out at the same time as this book in 2014—no doubt provides a very enriching context for my reading, notably the text by Michel Surya, “L’autre Blanchot,” included in the volume. I am grateful to Surya for sending me the text, which reassures me in many ways. [Surya’s text forms the first chapter of his *L’autre Blanchot: L’écriture de jour, l’écriture de nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).—Trans.]. The same could be said of the text by Mathilde Girard included in the same volume [see Mathilde Girard, “Jamais quitte,” *Lignes* 43 (2014): 177–95. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, “Reste inavouable: Entretien avec Mathilde Girard,” also included in the same volume of *Lignes* 43, 155–76. The interviews have been republished in Jean-Luc Nancy and Mathilde Girard, *Proprement dit: Entretien sur le mythe* (Paris: Lignes, 2015).—Trans.].

7. The reference to hapax, an abbreviation of *hapax legomenon*—something “said” only “once”—is used primarily in linguistic and literary studies, as well as biblical commentary. A word or word form which is recorded only once in a text, in the work of a particular author, or in a body of literature, Nancy extends the term to *The Unavowable Community* as a singular book within Blanchot’s *œuvre*.—Trans.

8. See Maurice Blanchot, *Les intellectuels en question: Ébauche d’une réflexion* (Paris: Fourbis, 1996) (first published in *Le Débat* 29 (1984): 3–28), trans. Michael Holland as “Intellectuals under Scrutiny: An Outline for Thought,” in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 206–27.

9. Jean-Luc Nancy, “La communauté désœuvrée,” *Aléa* 4 (1983): 11–49. With some modifications, the essay became the first chapter of *The Inoperative*

Community when it was published in 1986 (revised and expanded editions of the book appeared in 1990, 1999, and 2004). [In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot responds to the earlier version of Nancy's essay published in *Aléa*.—Trans.]

10. See Nancy, "La communauté désœuvrée," 49.

11. Both Blanchot and Derrida were drawn to this value of the word through paths that had been opened up for some time—one recalls Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* from 1953—whose history remains to be written. The displacement from the world of the "author," "style," and the "œuvre" (indeed, the "message") toward a space of "writing" and "text" (of the "adventure of writing," according to Jean Ricardou in *Problèmes du Nouveau Roman* [Paris: Le Seuil, 1967], 111) was a response to a mutation in the perception and the conditions of meaning [*sens*], in other words, of that which creates a bond or relation. The "common" is entirely implicated here if "writing" comes to name a communication whose poles of emission and reception [*destination*] are not present, or are absent either temporarily or permanently.

12. In *The Inoperative Community*, I wrote: "A communist exigency or demand communicates with the gesture by means of which we must go farther than all possible horizons" (9). The surpassing of the "horizon" was destined, with Sartre's communism as "the indispensable horizon of our time," to move away from the very idea of "horizon" in its double sense—on the one hand, as project or intention, and on the other in its phenomenological sense.

13. See Jean-Christophe Bailly ed., *Aléa* 4 (1983), special issue titled "La communauté, le nombre."—Trans.

14. At the time, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and I were organizing a Research Group on the Political [*Groupe de recherches sur le politique*] at the École normale supérieure on the rue d'Ulm in Paris. In this context, it was hardly a question of "community" even though this motif imposed itself in the background of what we called "the retreat of the political [*le retrait du politique*]," at once withdrawal and retracing of political form within the general condition of the world. Already in 1983, the center disappointed us, drifting toward a consensus around the separation of "civil society" and the state that seemed far from what was demanded by a new thinking of politics. [See the essays by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997).] In "Intellectuals under Scrutiny," first published in 1984, Blanchot makes clear allusion to "the retreat of the political" (207). [The English translation refers at this point to "standing back from politics (*en retrait du politique*)" even as Blanchot "does not withdraw from it (*s'en retire*)."—Trans.].

15. See David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).—Trans.

16. In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot alludes to the motif of number in stating “theoretically and historically there are only communities of small number” (17/6).

2. BEYOND THE POLITICAL

1. See Maurice Blanchot, “Communism without heirs,” in *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 93.

2. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 7.

3. It must be said that I am left with only a vague image of this book today. I will not attempt to reconstitute its argument with any precision because I would be led either to update parts of the argument that remained implicit, latent, and badly conceived at the time of its writing, or I would be led to be too critical, correcting if necessary what no doubt remains defective or insufficient. My argument here is not to reread myself but to reread Blanchot.

4. See Georges Bataille, “Le mal dans le platonisme et dans le sadisme,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 7:371, a conference given in May 1947. The phrase is quoted in Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 32.

5. At any rate, in writing the initial essay, I should recognize that I had no way of knowing that Blanchot would read me, even if my title signposted a reference to his work. Perhaps it was a youthful gesture, but it seems to me, in general, that it is rare to write with the thought of addressing specific readers. If that happens, writing finds itself paralyzed or slightly led astray, corrupted into a sign of recognition. There is something of relation or communication that precedes all determinate speech and all relation between subjectivities. This is why it is important that I do not give the impression of reducing Blanchot’s book to a response or reaction (which it also clearly is). It no more responds to me than it responds with or in spite of me to the same contemporary *exigency* to which Bailly had invited us to respond at that time and to which long before the word “communism” was tasked with responding. We are not spared this exigency and this is the reason that pushes me to understand more fully what took place in this period within the configuration I am addressing—what happened without belonging simply to the past.

6. *Contre-attaque* was the short-lived revolutionary movement created by Bataille and André Breton. Their manifesto, *Contre-attaque: Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires*, was published in 1935. *Acéphale* is the name of a “secret society” formed by Bataille in 1936. It is also the name of the journal he created in the same year, of which five issues were published between 1936 and 1939.—Trans.

7. In *The Inoperative Community*, I had only evoked “a belated echo (1951), as if stifled or resigned, of the motif of a society of festival, of expenditure, one of sacrifice and glory” (37).

8. Cited in Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 38. Bataille’s phrase is taken from a posthumous fragment, “L’amour d’un être mortel,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 8:497.

9. In the version of my text that Blanchot read, the word “communion” appears twice.

10. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 40.

11. *Ibid.*

12. See Gérard Granel, “Apolis,” in *Apolis* (Mauvezin: TER, 2009), 5. I have chosen this phrase for the especially lucid precision that it offers to a thinking of politics or “the political,” a thinking on which many of us have been dependent, and for some time.

13. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).—Trans.

14. In truth, the grammar of this phrase is not open to misinterpretation. It is clear that Blanchot means “the refusal to exclude whomever or whatever [*qui ou quoi que ce soit*].” But in a specific context overloaded with negations (refusal, exclude . . .), it would be more consistent in terms of classical uses of language to write: “the refusal of excluding nothing [*de rien exclure*].” That such a subtle writer commits a slight lapsus with respect to an extremely complex subject seems important to point out without laboring the point.

15. The page numbers refer to the French edition and the English edition of Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983); *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1988).—Trans.

16. See Georges Bataille, “Caprice et machinerie d’État à Stalingrad,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 11:497 (first published in *Critique* 36 (1949): 447–54). Tied to the context of his analysis of fascisms, Bataille’s phrase does adopt all the political “directions” that we might imagine pertaining to 1949 as those, a fortiori, pertaining to 2014.

17. See Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 2:273. This separate, posthumous text is titled “Program” by the editors and forms part of the section titled “Margins of Acéphale.”

18. Is this an allusion, and with what aim? In the previous year, *Tel Quel* had published Jeffrey Mehlman’s essay, “Blanchot à combat, littérature et terreur,” *Tel Quel* 92 (Summer 1982): 48–65. [The essay was reprinted two years later in Jeffrey Mehlman, *Legs de l’anti-sémitisme en France* (Paris: Denoël, 1984), 21–44, having appeared a year earlier in English in *Legacies of Anti-semitism in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 6–22.—Trans.]. The essay addressed Blanchot’s prewar political positions.

19. I note once and for all that it will be difficult to read the pages that follow without referring to Blanchot's text, which I am following in as precise a manner as possible without offering a line by line commentary.

20. I admit my embarrassment in ignoring the reference that Bataille doesn't provide in any explicit way, even though he does specify in an intriguing manner: "at least once."

21. See Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," trans. Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 251–77.—Trans.

22. See Georges Bataille, "Ce que j'ai à dire," in *L'apprenti sorcier: Ce que j'ai à dire* (1937; Paris: La Différence, 1999), 326. The text was read at a meeting held February 7, 1937.

23. We should recall that "Acéphale" designated the representation of a community lacking a *chef*, in the sense of both the "head" (*akephalos* means "headless") and leader.

3. THE HEART OR THE LAW

1. Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983); *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1988). The page numbers are to the French edition and then the English edition.

2. It is well known that Bataille, whether as a real or imaginary hypothesis, had envisaged a human sacrifice that would have sealed the community of Acéphale. We will see that Blanchot's book leads both toward an overcoming [*dépassement*] and a mythical or mystical realization of the sacrifice of the community, in the most ambiguous sense of the term.

3. The quotation from *The Step Not Beyond* [see Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992)] is accompanied by a reference to Jacques Derrida and his use of Blanchot's *Viens* (Come)—another reappropriation. [See Jacques Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," trans. John P. Leavey, *Oxford Literary Review* 6, no. 2 (1984): 3–37; and "Pace Not(s)," trans. John P. Leavey, in *Parages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 9–101]. In designating it as a reappropriation, as in Derrida's case, I would like to underline that I am not conducting a trial. I am trying to describe an extremely complex process as precisely as possible, a process whose legitimacy is not in question.

4. One might remark that in 1983—a little before the article in *Nouveau Commerce* to which we will turn later—Blanchot had also published *Après-Coup* [see Maurice Blanchot, "After the Fact," trans. Paul Auster, in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1995), 487–95]. In this text, he speaks of "the absolute nature of *Madame Edwarda*," that no "commentary"

would be able to “undermine” it, and that one can refer only to “the nakedness of the word ‘writing,’ a word no less powerful than the feverish revelation [of Bataille’s character]” (“After the Fact,” 490). It is an open question knowing how far *The Unavowable Community* comments on this “absolute nature,” and to the contrary, how far its writing gives itself over to “feverish revelation.”

5. No doubt there is an allusion in Blanchot’s footnote (32/58) to the writings of René Girard (in the mention of “scapegoats”), a reference that should be kept in mind when we return later to the discussion of Christianity [see René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986)]. The sacrifice of Christ for Girard is the one that marks the end of sacrifice in general. Not wanting to identify himself entirely with Christian thinking, Blanchot limits himself to a brief allusion—with phrases such as “gift and abandonment, the infinite of abandonment,” coupled with the “endless unfettering of the passions” and “disaster” (32/58), he sketches out a much more sinuous and hidden [*dérobée*] path that he intends to open up.

6. “To write? to turn back one’s nails, to hope, utterly in vain, for the moment of deliverance?” See Georges Bataille, *The Impossible*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), 25.

7. The allusion this time is to Levinas, which here anticipates the further references to Levinas in the second part of the book. “Saying” is taken up and played out in the passionate sayings [*parole-passion*] of lovers.

8. Before reinvesting it, Blanchot nevertheless assumes a careful distance in relation to this obsession, which no doubt explains both the ambiguities of the Sartrean expression “new mysticism” that was attached to Bataille, as well as my own way of taking up—in however a distanced manner as well—the motif of ecstasy in his work.

9. In another context, one can also note the Heideggerian allusion to the question of *Erlebnis*, which reinforces, as it happens, the formula on the following page concerning “the unfinishedness or incompleteness of existence” (38/20). This proximity to Heidegger—which was also the case for Bataille—can be discerned in a context where it was necessarily a matter of acknowledging Heidegger’s political errors [*fourvoisement*] (27/13). This is a way of acknowledging the exigency of responding to the “Sur-philosophy” (27/13) of the *Volksgemeinschaft* without abandoning the (political) terrain to it, while on the contrary reinvesting this terrain in the very name of a thought of existence—itsself transposed onto the register of writing.

10. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 17.

11. See Laure [Colette Laure Lucienne Peignot], “The Sacred,” trans. Jeanine Herman, in *Laure: Collected Writings* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), 37–94.—Trans.

12. Blanchot makes this remark in a letter to Bataille from 1962 that was brought to my attention by Fernanda Bernardo [see Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres 1917–1962*, ed. Michel Surya (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 595–96]. I have briefly commented on this letter in an interview with Danielle Cohen-Levinas (see “Passion de la communauté: Entretien de Danielle Cohen-Levinas avec Jean-Luc Nancy,” *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* 2 [2013–14]: 43–47), and then again in an interview with Mathilde Girard (see “Reste inavouable: Entretien avec Mathilde Girard” in *Lignes* 43 [2014]: 155–76, republished in Jean-Luc Nancy and Mathilde Girard, *Proprement dit: Entretien sur le mythe* [Paris: Lignes, 2015]), where Girard takes up the relation between Blanchot’s letter and his text, “Intellectuals under Scrutiny: An Outline for Thought,” in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995),

13. As Blanchot phrases it in “Intellectuals under Scrutiny,” 224.

14. *Ibid.*, 217.

15. *Ibid.*, 206.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 223.

18. *Ibid.*, 221.

19. See *ibid.*, 209, where it should be noticed that this radiance is qualified as perhaps or most certainly “illusory.”

20. *Ibid.*, 220.

21. *Ibid.*, 221.

22. On the subject of myth—a motif that was not fully addressed in my initial text in 1983—I recall that the “The Nazi Myth,” which I wrote with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, was first published in 1981 in “Les mécanismes du fascisme” [The Mechanisms of Fascism], a somewhat private publication of the Committee on the Holocaust in Strasbourg. It is not possible to know if Blanchot was aware of this text (it was published as a book only in 1991). [See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le mythe nazi* (Paris: Éditions de l’Aube, 1991), trans. Brian Holmes as “The Nazi Myth,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990): 291–312.] On the other hand, we also published another essay in 1981, “Le peuple juif ne rêve pas,” in *La psychanalyse est-elle une histoire juive*, ed. A. Rassial and J.-J. Rassial (Paris: Seuil, 1981), 57–92, trans. Brian Holmes as “The Jewish People Do Not Dream” (Part One), *Stanford Literary Review* 6, no. 2 (1989): 191–209, and “The Jewish People Do Not Dream,” *Stanford Literary Review* 8, no. 1–2 (1991): 39–55. This text was first read at a colloquium held in Montpellier at which, among other participants, Levinas was also present. With its title subsuming myth under “dreams,” one might therefore conjecture that this text may have been known by Blanchot.

23. Blanchot, “Intellectuals under Scrutiny,” 223.

24. *Ibid.*, 225.

4. THE CONSUMED COMMUNITY

1. See Jean-Luc Nancy, “L’être abandonné,” in *L’impératif catégorique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 53, trans. Brian Holmes as “Abandoned Being,” in *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 47. The essay was originally published in *Argiles* 23–24 (1981) and is cited as an epigraph by Blanchot in *The Unavowable Community* (51/29). [Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983); *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1988). The page numbers are to the French edition and then the English edition.] Contemporary with readings of Bataille, the essay was written without any correlation (at least conscious) to Blanchot.

2. Without seeking to justify myself too much, I would nevertheless say that I was certainly thinking of literary works but that I was more concerned with communicating their force and forms to everyone than the work of the writer where these forces and forms are created. In more than one respect, no doubt, Blanchot was saying to me: “You are not a writer, you are a philosopher.” He also makes heard: “Bataille was desperate as a writer and philosopher,” and “Duras and I, one through the other and one in the other, we are writing the unavowable.”

3. See Marguerite Duras, *La passion suspendue: Entretiens avec Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2013), 40 (the book first appeared in Italian in 1989). The statement is made in relation to May ’68.

4. Duras, *La passion suspendue*, 62.

5. One should interrogate Blanchot’s insistence in these pages on masculine homosexuality, which is related back to homogeneous society in Bataille’s sense (and once even to the Nazi SA [see 69–70n1/59n12], or again to “the love . . . of boys” reserved for the sole Uranian Aphrodite along with the love of the “souls” [76/45]) and tied to the “malady of death” as restricted to a masculine sphere and the impossibility of reaching the other (see the allusion to Proust on page 65/38), despite at the same time a quick reference doing justice [*faisant droit*] to love and thus abandonment to the other in its homosexual form (84/51). The way of proceeding [*démarche*] is so complex and subtle that it is not a question here of broaching it in a more exact manner. One would have to ask what exactly “masculine” and “feminine” might indicate over and beyond sexualities that are supposedly determined. One would also have to be able to speak with impartiality [*justesse*] about the role of significant friendships in both Blanchot’s life and texts (how to recognize them?). I would only add that if the remarks on homosexuality might seem embarrassing [*gênantes*], they have to be situated in the context of a time where *political correctness* was not the same as it is today. In addition, no doubt only a woman would be able to discern in Blanchot a feminine impulse toward Bataille, inspiring in me the hypothesis—she is called Hélène; she already

appeared at the end of *The Inoperative Community*. [Nancy is referring to the quotation at the end of “The Inoperative Community” essay that was included in the *Aléa* volume in 1983 and then reprinted as the first chapter in *The Inoperative Community*. Toward the end of the text, just prior to the closing statement “We can only go further,” Nancy quotes from Bataille’s *My Mother*, where Hélène writes to her son. See *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 41.—Trans.]

6. We know that Blanchot always ostensibly distances himself from the protocols of academic references, whether works or citations. But it is only more remarkable to see him clarifying here that “the date doesn’t matter,” as if he really did want to call attention to dates. Nevertheless, in regard to dates, one could refer to discussions that raise the question of dating in Blanchot’s *The Instant of My Death*. See Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, and Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Ending and Unending Agony: On Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Hannes Opelz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); and Ginette Michaud, *Tenir au secret* (Paris: Galilée, 2006).

7. We recall that the reference to “Viens” or “Come” in Blanchot is taken up by Jacques Derrida in “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” trans. John P. Leavey, *Oxford Literary Review* 6, no. 2 (1984): 3–37, and “Pace Not(s),” trans. John P. Leavey, in *Parages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 11–101.—Trans.

8. See Maurice Blanchot, “La maladie de la mort (*éthique et amour*),” *Nouveau Commerce* 55 (Spring 1983): 29–46.—Trans.

9. The reference is to Georges Bizet’s “Habanera,” an aria from *Carmen*—love “n’a jamais, jamais connu de loi”—love “has never, never known the law.”—Trans.

10. Blanchot, “La maladie de la mort (*éthique et amour*),” 46.—Trans.

11. It would be interesting yet too cumbersome to present a synopsis of the two versions of the text. I point out only that on page 58/34 of the book, one can refer to page 31 of the article, following the text from that point to page 77/46 of the book, which corresponds to the end of the article. On page 58/34 of the book, before taking up the earlier text, Blanchot provides a justification for taking up the inserted text, which nevertheless remains indiscernible to the reader who would not have read the article and even renders the verb “to take up” barely understandable. He writes that, no more than on the initial reading, he does not know what Duras means by the “malady of death,” and “that gives me the permission to take up again, as if for the first time, the reading and its commentary” (58/34). This authorization is itself authorized or required by the desire to take everything up in the name of community in responding to Nancy and elevating [relevant] Bataille, all the while still defying [*défiant*] Levinas.

12. Blanchot, “La maladie de la mort (*éthique et amour*),” 46.—Trans.

13. The dedication to the essay published in *Aléa* reads: “For Anne, Claire, Emmanuel, Francine, Geneviève, Lucrèce, Mathieu, Philippe, Sappho.” See Jean-Luc Nancy, “La communauté désœuvrée,” *Aléa* 4 (1983): 11.—Trans.

14. Blanchot knew this in particular through the intermediary of Jacqueline and Roger Laporte, friends in common.

15. In a sense, if my hypothesis is founded, Blanchot wasn’t wrong, since the communal experience in question was just at that moment in the process of coming apart, which does not mean—far from it—that it was limited to “renouncing” a communist or communal exigency. At the heart of the experience in question—community, clan, the complex association or intrication of the lives of two couples and four children—there was the community of work between Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and myself. Blanchot was aware of this and was curious. He even happened to make us aware of his astonishment—how were we able to be associated in the way we were (in order to write) without intimidating each other? More generally, isn’t everyone thrown back [*renvoyé*] to their solitude? (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and I addressed these questions, but this is not the place to explore this. I touched on the subject in “Un commencement,” a postface to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’Allégorie* [Paris: Galilée, 2006], 123–66, and I will come back to it more extensively elsewhere.) In relation to these episodes, it is clearly possible to offer all manner of sociopsychanalytic commentaries, but they escape me by definition. For the issues that concern us here, there remains an obvious contrast between Blanchot’s withdrawal [*retrait*] and the exposure of our “community”—the former, for that matter, often betrayed by himself or by others, the latter more secret, less avowed than it appeared. I am trying to be clear: It is not a question of confusing thinking and life, but it has to be said—this is undeniable—that the texts that concern us here are all traversed and worked through by experiences, expectations, and wanderings [*errances*] in search of inscription. There has also never been a thought of relation that does not bring actual relations into play. Nor, moreover, thought that is not experience (except that which remains idle gossip).

16. A “life in myth,” to take up Thomas Mann’s expression, in other words, living through myth, life living itself as myth, in other words, living itself (experiencing itself and announcing itself) as its own origin and end. [Nancy discusses the phrase at further length in *The Inoperative Community*, 160n6.—Trans.]

17. In relation to Duras’s text, the value of italics for Blanchot is indicated in a footnote, where it signals that whose “origin escapes us” (60/59n11)—in short, a life living itself, nothing other than itself, or rather (to speak like Schelling), the “tautegory” of life, in other words, its myth, how it says itself to itself [*se dit elle-même à elle-même*], the origin which escapes it but which states itself in

escaping itself [*son échappée*]. [Nancy refers to “tautegory” in Schelling in the chapter “Myth Interrupted” in *The Inoperative Community*, 53.—Trans.]

18. See above, chap. 2, note 14 above.

19. I should point out that what Lacoue-Labarthe and I had called at the time “the retreat of the political” [*le retrait du politique*] had a sense quite different from Blanchot’s “withdrawal” [*retrait*]. It concerned *seeing* the political configuration *withdrawing* [*voir se retirer*] (broadly speaking, that of representative democracy) in order to allow another political configuration to *retrace itself* [*s’en retracer*]. See the essays by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997).

20. On the same page, Blanchot rejects “those nostalgic sequels that alter the true determination by pretending to carry on as combat groups” (56/32–33). This allusion to phenomena that are indeed often paltry in relation to what follows insurrectional moments (May ’68 and others) is the second time “combat” appears in the text, already separated from thought of “the enemy” or “adversity” (54/31).

21. Translations of *Ungrund* and *Urgrund* are the same as those given in Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), one of the sources from which Nancy is drawing these terms.—Trans.

22. To be more precise—it should be clear that “being” does not represent a substantive or a substance for Blanchot, Bataille, and myself, but only a verb, an act. As substantive, it would not be written as “being” in a determinate manner but only as “a” (male or female) “being” or “beings.” Extrapolated from Heidegger, this double proposition is necessary in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

23. Some people might be astonished with this characterization of May ’68 when there existed various violent or reformist forms of taking power. It is no less true (this is my own experience) that the most novel spirit [*esprit*] of this time was situated elsewhere, in an action that refused to act in even the slightest possible way from within the existing structures [*dispositifs*] of governance and management. In ’68 we had understood that all (known) revolutions acted inside the system itself. It should also be recalled that May ’68 inherited a motif emerging from the struggles against colonial and decolonizing wars—“make love, not war,” which was further extrapolated into “take joy without hindrances” [*Jouissez sans entraves*—the phrase that was taken from Raul Vaneigem’s *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* [*The Revolution of Everyday Life*] (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), which can also imply having an orgasm without holding back.—Trans.].

24. This para-dialectical motif is present in German Romanticism in the form of the *Witz*. [For further exploration of this motif, see Jean-Luc Nancy, “En guise de prologue—Menstruum universale: La dissolution littéraire,” in *Demande*:

Philosophie, littérature (Paris: Galilée, 2014), 15–33, translation forthcoming from Fordham University Press.—Trans.]

25. As we noted in our introduction, *la relève* is Derrida's translation of Hegel's dialectical *Aufhebung*, the latter sometimes translated into English as "sublation" or "supersession." *Aufhebung* suggests a "lifting up" in which both conservation and negation are implied, at once a raising or picking up and a replacing. However, *relèver* in French also means to relieve, to relay, to remove, to replace, as well as to rebuild and revive, among other connotations suggested in Derrida's translation. Significant for this context, Derrida draws this reading of Hegel in part from Bataille. See Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," trans. Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 317–50. Nancy employs the term with some frequency throughout his reading of Blanchot.—Trans.

26. In *The Inoperative Community*, I cited a passage of Bataille's discussion of Hegel from *Inner Experience*. See Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 108–9, cited in *The Inoperative Community*, 5.

27. According to Blanchot, the "superego" would thus be the authority [*instance*] that forbids all relation—whereas for Freud it forbids only certain relations—and that appears situated less above the "ego" than constituted by the dominance [*surpuissance*] of an "ego" that is strictly solitary.

28. The quotation in Blanchot's text is taken from Jean-Luc Nancy, "La communauté désœuvrée."

29. In passing, we note that Blanchot cites his own "no more *récit*" or "no stories" (from the end of *Madness of the Day*, trans. Lydia Davis in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha [Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1999], 199), a phrase whose importance we know for Blanchot in general. In this context, one should refer to the analysis proposed by Uri Eisenzweig in *Naissance littéraire du fascisme* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2013), in which the central motif consists in showing "the decisive role [in the literary birth of fascism] played by this double heritage of symbolism and *fin de siècle* anarchism in rejecting the *récit* as privileged form of the truth" (7–8). This book does not refer to Blanchot but speaks about an age, in particular that of Maurice Barrès, in which Blanchot's thought was molded. One can also refer this motif of refusing the *récit* back to the displacements, variations, and wanderings that it suggests, Blanchot's invention of a Jewish people "forgetting to leave."

30. *Mutatis mutandis*, Spinoza can always be linked to Hegel, in other words by introducing the question of movement. At the same time, further on in the text, *conatus* will characterize the movement whose "passion" provokes an "outbidding [*surenchère*]" (76/45) through a sort of revised Spinozism. I do not make this remark for the pleasure of simply making insignificant references.

Blanchot weighs each of these terms, and besides his mistrust of an absence of transcendence, his brief allusions to Spinoza indicate his preoccupation with a form of immanence—that is, in a sense, with community—where passion would be more on the side of pleasure [*jouissance*] and death than joy and life. Or again, an immanence whose inner transcendence is called excess and abandonment rather than virtue and beatitude. But it is precisely in a Spinozian dehiscence that one would find the best indication of what is obscurely sought here, and this would not be foreign either in the overcoming [*outrépassement*] of the ego toward a subject without self, or in the complex movement toward Judaism that we have begun to discern. Spinoza's is also this other "ethics," in other words, I mean other than both Levinas's and Heidegger's ethics (the latter in his "Letter on Humanism," where Spinoza, as it happens, haunts the margins).

31. Mathilde Girard has brought my attention to a text by Marguerite Duras from 1987 (which mentions *The Malady of Death* and Blanchot) in which the exclusivity of feminine desire for the unique lover is affirmed in a way that recalls certain aspects of Blanchot's text. See Marguerite Duras, "Men," in *Practicalities: Marguerite Duras Speaks to Jérôme Beaujour*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 33–41.

32. A few lines further on, Blanchot evokes "the oblique path love opens as a dialectical means to journey by leaps and bounds all the way to the highest spirituality" (75/44). This phrase is extraordinarily convoluted. If the path is oblique, it is because it does not pass directly (in a single leap) from ethics to religion, as it does with Kierkegaard. This is, therefore, also why the "leaps and bounds" are multiplied without us knowing exactly how: several loves, several moments of the same love, several stages of desire up to the desire for death (for the other, for self)?

33. The note does not appear in the earlier version. The book by Kofman to which Blanchot makes an undeveloped reference was published at the beginning of 1983. It would be interesting to locate what in the book retained his attention, but this is not the place. I note only that Sarah Kofman refers at one point to Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day*, from which she takes a lengthy quotation about men's and women's different relation to death. See Sarah Kofman, "Beyond Aporia?" trans. David Macey, in *Post-Structuralist Classics*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1988), 7–44.

34. It is exactly at this point in the version of the essay published in *Nouveau Commerce* that Blanchot refers to my text in a footnote.

35. "As one sees here" (77/46), the text states, referring to Duras's récit where the sea is heard in the night. See Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, 7, where it is first cited, and then elsewhere in the text.

36. See the "Parenthesis" include at the end of the section titled "Empty Intimacy" above.

37. The subtitle reads “Traditional Community, Elective Community”; in its difference from the earlier essay, the subtitle shows clearly how the book must transpose the question of relation onto a collective register and not only onto that of an inter-individual one.

38. Without explanation, Blanchot does not refer here to the casual and “distracted” pleasure that Duras first mentions but to the pleasure that is quite deliberately and carefully described that the man’s caress gives to the woman at least three nights before the last (if not the last three nights).

39. “Anti-Beatrice,” Blanchot adds, explaining that she is “wholly in the vision that one has of her” and describing the absolute of this vision as “God, and the *theos*, theory, the ultimate of what can be seen” (87/52), from which one must conclude that the absolute invisibility of the woman is the exact reverse of Dante’s luminous God—obscure and “mysterious” (88/53) divinity like the woman (as Blanchot indicates, following the *récit* itself). In addition, a little further on, Beatrice appears once again in a position that is now clearly less opposed to the woman.

40. Even though it is not a question of stopping at the common meaning of the term in its most charged sense (fairy tale, story), one should also remember that the fictional character of Duras’s *récit*, like those of Bataille, is not secondary. In a context in which May ’68 could have been called a live, “lived” *récit*, the recourse to fiction could not be more eloquent.

41. In reference to sickness—Blanchot indicates that the word “com[es] perhaps from Kierkegaard” (58/34), which is in fact fairly likely, and points to another mention of his name by Blanchot in relation to “the lethal leap.” (Kierkegaard wrote *Sickness unto Death* in the sense of “what leads to death,” borrowed from John 11:4, “When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.”)

42. No doubt this real is also that of the “real presence” in the transubstantiation of the species.

43. How not to think that Blanchot retained from childhood catechism the expression that used to be well known, “the work of the flesh [*l’œuvre de chair*],” in order to designate the sexual relation.

5. “ESSENTIALLY THAT WHICH ESCAPES”

1. Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983); *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1988). The page numbers are to the French edition and then the English edition.

2. One might pause at some length over this word. It cannot fail to have had a strange resonance for Blanchot, who quite literally suffered from a lifelong illness.

Considered as a sickness, death is opposed to the “dying” through which sense (of a life, of speech) essentially absents itself. (In an analogous way, Kierkegaard’s “*sickness unto death*” [see chap. 4, n. 41 above] refers both to a spiritual sickness and spiritual death—despair, as opposed to Christian hope, to which we might compare Blanchot’s “dying.”) But this sickness is also what the woman in *The Malady of Death* will have communicated to the man (or perhaps so, as the text remarks), and in this case, it makes itself identical to dying.

3. We recall that this was Sartre’s expression, which was placed at the beginning of *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1.

4. For example, see *ibid.*, 14–15.

5. Published in 1960, and seeking to recognize struggles for independence during the Algerian War, “The Manifesto of the 121” (subtitled “Declaration on the Right of Insubordination in the Algerian War”) was an open letter signed by 121 intellectuals addressed to the French government. The manifesto was drafted by Blanchot, Mascolo, and Schuster. See “Dossier de la ‘Revue internationale,’” *Lignes* 11 (1990).—Trans.

6. For his political texts, see Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

7. See *ibid.*, 25.

8. See *ibid.*, 93.

9. Maurice Blanchot, letter to Georges Bataille from 1962. See Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres, 1917–1962*, ed. Michel Surya (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 595–96. The following quotation is from the same letter.

10. In using this term, I am thinking of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s text, “Transcendence Ends in Politics,” trans. Peter Caws in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 267–300.

11. Blanchot writes: “the unknown [women] represent” (86/52).

12. Isn’t it significant that Blanchot does not refer to this myth as absence of myth? Perhaps he forgot the texts in question (which I had used in the second chapter of my own text, *The Inoperative Community*, which was published later in 1986, a book, in this context, that responded to Blanchot in a quite precise if [if memory serves] involuntary manner).

13. This verification exists, contrary to what Christian doctrine thinks, whether it appeals to a well-argued theology or an illumination by grace, or even takes up a mystical experience. Blanchot certainly remains Christian according to one of these alternatives, and even just simply Christian. Christianity is more for him a cultural reference than a personal support, spiritual in a nonreligious sense, which makes it more suitable to a mythical role than Blanchot suggests. Christ becomes the abandoned par excellence, disappearing from “earthly” life but also disappearing

from religion in order to reappear in literature in the unfigurable figure of the woman who abandons herself and disappears, her work consumed.

14. As for Blanchot's relation to Judaism, a more expansive analysis is given in Michel Surya, *L'autre Blanchot: L'écriture de jour, l'écriture de nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015). The actual relation between Levinas and Christianity demands a quite different elaboration, but this is not the occasion to pursue this further.

15. On this point, see Maurice Blanchot, "Intellectuals under Scrutiny: An Outline for Thought," in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995),

16. Maurice Blanchot, "The Last to Speak," in *A Voice from Elsewhere*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 59.

17. Blanchot, "Intellectuals under Scrutiny," 224. This phrase concludes a new reflection on May '68 as a moment of "exception," in which an "author" is able to blend into the "anonymous words" that are sometimes "elaborated in common." In general, as a true political engagement with *The Unavowable Community*, a reading of this text ought to be engaged here. I refer to the interview with Mathilde Girard in Jean-Luc Nancy, "Reste inavouable (Entretien avec Mathilde Girard)" in *Lignes* 43 (2014): 155–176. [The interview has been republished in Jean-Luc Nancy and Mathilde Girard, *Proprement dit: Entretien sur le mythe* (Paris: Lignes, 2015).—Trans.]

18. Blanchot, "Intellectuals under Scrutiny," 224.

19. This remark concerning Wittgenstein can already be found in Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 10–11, which reveals Blanchot's perseverance; nothing can simply be kept quiet nor named in silence, because silence itself must be spoken (written) and the unavowable avowed, be it as always unavowed or disavowed.

20. The reference to *demeure* here and in the next line recalls Derrida's reading of Blanchot in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).—Trans.

21. The distinction implied here is between giving some enjoyment [*de la jouissance*] and provoking an orgasm, coming itself, absolutely. *Jouissance* in the section that follows is left untranslated.—Trans.

22. However, not everything is clear here. As we understood earlier, an unlived past is a mystical event where its true subject is absented. Does the man pass through this absenteeism? Or does it pass him by? Being passed by, does he retain some sense of the immemorial? But how? Blanchot shows some hesitation on the subject. And perhaps he also shows a discomfort that betrays an indiscretion [*faux pas*] or lapsus in the phrase we are discussing here.

23. Blanchot must be thinking about this reference when citing Hölderlin's "aorgic" (see 68/40) [see Friedrich Hölderlin, "Ground for Empedocles," in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York

Press, 1987), 50–61.—Trans]. To which we will add: No less than autoeroticism, it is necessarily excluded by what is in question here. I will return to this elsewhere.

24. “Absent sense” is one of Blanchot’s own most significant expressions. I take the liberty of referring back to a text I wrote to “celebrate” his name, commissioned by the Archives de France: <http://www.archivesdefrance.culture.gouv.fr/action-culturelle/celebrations-nationales/2007/litterature-et-sciences-humaines/maurice-blanchot>.

25. This series of terms should be carefully noted. It leaves nothing to chance.

26. I will not rush to draw the political consequences of this disagreement, consequences (exacting or not) that are at once quite meager and quite profound, since doubtlessly one cannot do this without first of all examining what is understood by the word “political.” At least one can discern what must be decided here: Either “political” has an unlimited and indeterminate meaning, or the word has a determinate meaning. In more or less passing surreptitiously from the former to the latter, Blanchot has posed and eluded the problem in the same gesture. But it is clear that politics is opened in advance of the sphere where one is able or should speak of “politics.” Whether one calls this sphere “ontological,” “metaphysical,” or “transcendental,” in any case it concerns the “covert judgments of common reason” that Kant refers to, and these judgments do not necessarily coincide with each other. See Immanuel Kant, “Reflexion 436,” in “Reflexionen zur Anthropologie,” in *Kants gessamelte Schriften, Akademie Ausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1923), 15:180.

27. It could be suggested that a misprint appears in Blanchot’s text because it is inconsistent to write “inconnus” in the masculine after “libertés” in the plural. The expression makes more sense if one writes “libertés inconnues” (with the feminine agreement and liberty in the plural) or rather “espaces de liberté inconnus” (with liberty in the singular). The first hypothesis is better suited both to the grammar and the thinking that is implied here.

28. This reference would suggest a very different commentary than the one that provokes Blanchot. [For further discussion, see Gérard Granel, *Écrits logiques et politiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1990).—Trans.]

29. The phrase “political correctness” is in English in the original.—Trans.

30. The reference is to Lucretius and the “swerve” of atoms, a reference taken up widely in recent French thought (in the writings of Michel Serres, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, and Alain Badiou, among others).—Trans.

31. *Comes* is he who walks with, the companion.

CODA

1. Maurice Blanchot, “Oh All to End,” trans. Leslie Hill in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 300.

2. See Maurice Blanchot, “The Song of the Sirens,” in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9.

3. Vulgate refers to texts that are written for use by common people, and so to common and colloquial speech.—Trans.

4. “Compearance” is explored at further length in Jean-Luc Nancy, “*La Comparution* / The Compearance: From the Existence of ‘Communism’ to the Community of ‘Existence,’” trans. Tracy B. Strong in *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (1992): 371–98.—Trans.

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