
The Inoperative Community

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Chapter 1

The Inoperative Community

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He also wrote:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We can only go farther.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Translated by Peter Connor