

[Communism without heirs]: Love and Community in the writing of Maurice Blanchot

Thomas Isaac Collins

July 18, 2018

Copy for Defense

Advisor: Dr. Kevin Hart

Second Reader: Dr. Peter Ochs

### Abstract

In 1983, Jean-Luc Nancy published an essay called, “La communauté désœuvrée,” in the journal *Aléa*.<sup>1</sup> Only a few months later, Maurice Blanchot responded to Nancy with his book, *La communauté inavouable*.<sup>2</sup> A conversation began that would reinvigorate philosophical reflection on the ideas of community, communism, and communication. At the core of their conversation are two vastly different readings of the philosophy of Georges Bataille. By examining the disagreements between Nancy and Blanchot, I argue that the idea of love can help the scholarly community better understand the role of speech, communication, and presence in Blanchot’s philosophy. Such an examination would shift the discussion of Blanchot’s work away from a singular focus on writing and the role of literature to a consideration of physical encounter with the impossible through the lens of the “community of lovers.” A new thinking of community as embodied might help to reinvigorate Blanchot’s philosophy of the “unavowable.”

---

<sup>1</sup> The word désœuvrée is properly translated as “worklessness,” but the collection of essays published in English in 1991 is called *The Inoperative Community*.

<sup>2</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Unavowable Community*. Translated by Pierre Joris. 1st ed. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1988. Hereafter: Blanchot, UC, #.

## Introduction:

*A Crisis of Immanence*

Nancy and Blanchot begin their texts on community by lamenting a loss. Nancy writes, “The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world... is of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community.”<sup>3</sup> Blanchot echoes, “I would take up a reflection... concerning the communist exigency, the relations between that exigency and the possibility or impossibility of community at a time when even the ability to understand community seems to have been lost.”<sup>4</sup> A line is drawn between thinking of community from a philosophical standpoint and the political theory of communism, which by the 1980s in the wake of Stalinism, had left many European philosophers disillusioned. Whatever Marx intended communism to be as a political project, the idea at the heart of the theory - “human beings defined as producers of their own essence in the form of their work or labor” - betrayed the possibility of community ever existing within this framework.<sup>5</sup> Community is not possible within the self-production of the human being, Nancy argues, because the production of the Subject is a totalizing reality. If the Subject is a self-creation then it is a world unto itself without need of relation to any other entity. This is what Nancy calls ‘immanentism,’ and it is the relation of Subject to Subject as the Same to the Same.<sup>6</sup> This language of immanence, Subject, and production is steeped in the legacy of a French reading of Hegel, begun by Alexandre Kojève.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, 1st ed. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1. Hereafter Nancy, *IC*, #.

<sup>4</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Ffrench writes, “Immanence in other words presupposes absolute closure and self-sufficiency. It denies relation.” Ffrench, Patrick. *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community*. Routledge, 2017, 139. Hereafter *After Bataille*.

Kojève taught in Paris, at the *École pratique des hautes études*, between 1933 and 1939, and brought the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel to the French intellectual scene. Hegel was presented with Kojève's own particular emphasis on Hegel's philosophy of recognition.<sup>7</sup> The Kojève-ian Hegel argued that the Subject is inspired by its fear of death to use the power of negativity, or erasure, within death as a force of creation. The process of recognition was defined by the master/slave dialectic. The source of consciousness was the rational nature struggling with and killing the animal nature in the human person, creating the Subject. The Subject that goes out into the world sees difference as an object for dialectical assimilation. Intersubjective recognition is a matter of assimilating the other/object into the self-understanding of the Subject/same. Hegel imbues the State with a similar process of dialectical becoming, and each Subject is assimilated into a higher political *body* under the power of the Law to create citizens. The subject (whether it is the Idea, the work of Art, the person, or the State) creates its own reality by dialectically overcoming and assuming that which is other to itself. Any relation within the dialectic becomes (through a struggle to the death) a relationship of the Same to the Same.

Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel culminates in 'the end of history,' which he describes as the reign of:

"Absolute knowledge, that is, Wisdom, presupposes the total success of Man's Negative Action. This Knowledge is possible (1) within a *homogenous* and *universal* State where no man is *exterior* to another, where there is no social *opposition* which is not suppressed, and (2) in the midst of a Nature that has been *tamed* by the labour [sic] of Man, and which, no longer *opposing* man, ceases to be *alien* to him."<sup>8</sup>

Kojève imagined that the 'end of history' would bring about the eschatological goal of all communism, which is the equality of all persons. Yet, when the individual is defined as this self-

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on Hegel and Kojève in France see Baugh, Bruce. *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Alexandre Kojève quoted in John Gregg, *Maurice Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.

produced totality, both Nancy and Blanchot argue, what is left is not community, but a totalitarianism that is mistaken for humanism.<sup>9</sup> If understanding and recognition rely on the overcoming of difference by the same then there can only be one all-encompassing reality. Nancy argues that Kojève's immanent subject is only possible in death. "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."<sup>10</sup> The community of death, for Nancy, is exemplified in the "joint suicide or death of lovers."<sup>11</sup> In death, they would share a totally immanent communion.

The communion of dead lovers is a figure for the political relationship between citizen and Hegelian State. The "love" of citizenship is the "fact of having in another the moment of one's own subsistence."<sup>12</sup> Nancy argues that the State 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."<sup>13</sup> The death of the citizen in war is the use of death for the becoming reality of the State, its manifestation. At the heart of this suicidal becoming is the sense that sacrifice must be made so that community might be regained. The nostalgia of community justifies death as its founding work, and yet, as both philosophers argue, death as work can never found community.

Community operates on a 'suicidal logic,' which Nancy sees exemplified in Nazi Germany.<sup>14</sup> The nostalgia for a 'pure community' is an appetite without limit, and the Nazi system would have

---

<sup>9</sup> Blanchot writes, 'As Herder says, there is nothing that must not be fashioned by him, from humanity to nature (and all the way to God). Nothing is left out, in the final analysis. Here lies the seemingly healthy origin of the sickest totalitarianism.' Blanchot, UC, 2. Nancy also quotes Herder on IC, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy, IC, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy, IC, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy, IC, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> "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, or the subhuman deemed exterior to the communion of blood and soil, but also,

demanded not just the sacrifice of the other but of the entire nation. Here is the truth that both Blanchot and Nancy argue for: the prevailing logic of a communist humanism makes community impossible because death cannot be the constitutive power of community. At the limit of death, the absolute logic of community calls itself into question (or, as Blanchot might put it, at the point of death, community meets contestation).

### *Community and Finitude*

The immanent Subject is a totalitarian reality. The dialectics of recognition that produce the Subject do not leave any room for the existence of the other, or alterity of any kind. The result, for Blanchot, is the “great refusal” of the truth about death.<sup>15</sup> We try to turn death “into a means of living and a power of thought,” by telling ourselves that we can harness it to create our own essence.<sup>16</sup> In Blanchot’s words, this is a “subterfuge” that masks the truth about death and humanity.<sup>17</sup> At the heart of humanity is a “principle of incompleteness.”<sup>18</sup> It is here that Georges Bataille enters the discussion for both Nancy and Blanchot. Bataille writes, “There exists a principle of insufficiency at the root of each being.”<sup>19</sup> For Blanchot, it is human insufficiency that calls us into community. Yet, the insufficiency does not seek out community in order to be filled to completion.

---

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.” *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> This is a reference to Dante’s *Inferno*, canto III. Dante sees Pope Celestine V, who abdicated the papacy after four months, allowing Boniface VIII, Dante’s enemy to take power. Celestine’s refusal lands him in a place for souls that have not been saved or damned, where they are eternally tormented for living a life without conviction. Blanchot, Maurice Blanchot, “The Great Refusal,” in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 34. Hereafter, Blanchot, *EI*, #.

<sup>16</sup> Blanchot, *EI*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

We seek community because we put ourselves into question, the question of our existence, which “question needs the other or another to be enacted.”<sup>20</sup>

The questioning of the other is not a matter of recognition, as it is in the Hegelian dialectic, but a matter of contestation. Blanchot writes, “In order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it, so as to start being only in the privation that makes it conscious of the impossibility of being itself.”<sup>21</sup> Were the Hegelian Subject left to its own devices, Blanchot argues the being “closes itself, falls asleep, and calms down.”<sup>22</sup> The being will feel itself as present and active only in the contestation that comes from having its illusion of being a Subject shattered continually by the presence of difference. Blanchot continues, “This way it will perhaps exist... as an existence shattered through and through, composing itself only as it decomposes itself constantly, violently and in silence.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, finite being summons others into community that they might each be put into question by the presence of others and exist. This is the play of life.

If contestation and questioning are part of the “play” of being, as Blanchot claims, then what, he asks, “calls me into question most radically?”<sup>24</sup> Nothing other than presence for “another who absents himself by dying.”<sup>25</sup> Being present for a dying person is to be present in the sharing of an experience that cannot be shared. It is a “relation without relation”<sup>26</sup> since the one who watches the person die cannot share the experience, and the one who dies is completely dispossessed of its experience, as well. This is a relationship that takes both the one who is present and the dying one outside of their own experience. Bataille writes, “A man alive, who sees a fellow man die, can

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> “Relation without relation” is a loaded phrase in Blanchot’s work. On Blanchot, *UC*, 25, he uses the phrase to define “friendship.”

survive only *beside himself*.”<sup>27</sup> This experience is the founding of community through its unworking. Death unworks both the one who lives on and the one who dies. There is not transcendent fusion or communion accomplished through the death. The community does not ensure some sort of “non-mortality” for the dead to go on participating in.<sup>28</sup>

Blanchot draws two “essential traits” from this conclusion: first, “the community is not the restricted form of a society, no more than it tends toward a communitarian fusion;” second, “it differs from a social cell in that it does not allow itself to create a work and has no production value as its aim.”<sup>29</sup> The community is a place defined by impossibility. It is impossible to put death to work. It is impossible to possess or share the experience of dying. Yet, within that place, community is created by the experience of finitude that reminds the being of the principle of insufficiency that is “a prior exteriority” to its consciousness. This is the experience of the absence of community because there is no immanent presence within the experience. This is the inner experience of Bataille, where our experience of being “beside-ourselves (the outside)” is “abyss and ecstasy without ceasing to be a singular relationship.”<sup>30</sup>

It is here that we see a definition of communication through ecstasy. The communication of what exactly? The communication of the presence of an absence. The presence of a being for another in their dying is part of the mortal substitution that Bataille argues sustains community at the “height of death.” This is the concept of friendship for Blanchot. It is a form of communication that “discovers the unknown we ourselves are, and the meeting of our own solitude which, precisely, we cannot be alone to experience.” Inner experience requires the presence of others for its

---

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Blanchot, *UC*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 17.



communication, and this is the contestation which brings “the community of those who have no community” into existence in the experience of ecstasy.<sup>31</sup>

After this focus on death and community in Blanchot, I must return to Nancy because the discussion of Bataille’s theory of inner experience takes us to the first place of contention between the two texts. Like Blanchot, Nancy also believes that finitude and death found community. “Death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself.”<sup>32</sup> But Nancy has a very different gloss of what the experience of community is and does. The experience of community does not help a being constitute its existence, like it does in Blanchot’s theory. For Nancy, the experience of the death of the other is an act of deconstruction. He writes:

“Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to 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 the community of *others*.”<sup>33</sup>

This is Nancy’s reading of Bataille’s conception of ‘inner experience,’ and it is not constitutive of the subject in any way. A different way of putting it might be that for Nancy, the ecstatic experience of community is not epistemologically available to the subject as it seems to be for Blanchot and Bataille. What ecstasy exposes consciousness to is not subjective or interior, but rather a “space” that is an “experience of the outside, the outside-of-the-self.”<sup>34</sup> Consciousness, then, is not the property of a subject, but because it is ecstatic, in a very literal reading, Nancy claims that community is consciousness. “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.”<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 19

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

The consciousness of community is not a space available to the subject, and so Nancy prefers to use the term “singularity” as an appropriate description of the one who undergoes an experience of ecstasy.<sup>36</sup> The singular being is the finite being placed in a spatial relationship to other finite beings. The singularity is always the other in the relationship of space to some other singularity, and the experience of community creates a community of I’s without egos because no particular singularity may claim possession of the ecstatic experience of consciousness. Nancy names an experience of community then a “sharing [*partage*],” and “sharing comes down to this: what community reveals to me, in presenting to me my birth and my death, is my existence outside myself.”<sup>37</sup> This is Bataille’s concept of communication changed to Nancy’s *partage*.

Nancy acknowledges that Bataille “knew better than anyone” that there was a space, or areality, that connected ecstasy and community.<sup>38</sup> But, Bataille remained suspended between the two concepts like two poles because of his commitment to communism and his fascination with fascism and fusional communion. Within Bataille’s logic of sovereignty, there was a reciprocal relationship between ecstasy and community, and the opening of the space of one would give rise to the other. Yet, the two spaces never joined. The joining of ecstasy and community with Bataille’s subject language would have brought back the problem of immanence. Thus, as “they give rise to one another - each limits the other, and this produces another ‘arealization,’ a suspension of the immanence that their connection nonetheless implies.”<sup>39</sup> Nancy argued that Bataille’s failure to

---

<sup>36</sup> “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 the individuality... 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.” Nancy, *IC*, 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

consider ecstasy and community outside of the “horizon of Communism” was a constant danger to overwhelm the balance and arealization between the two poles.

Ecstasy is associated with the “fascist orgy, or at least the festival (ambiguous nostalgia returned, after him, in 1968) to the extent that it represented ecstasy in terms of the group and the political order.”<sup>40</sup> The association with fascism then requires Bataille, in Nancy’s argument, to remove his theory of ecstasy from the public order of the political to avoid the nostalgia that drives fascism. Thus, the “private” sovereignty of lovers becomes Bataille’s example of ecstasy, and it is not possible to use ecstasy as a path to an experience of communal consciousness. On the other pole of community, Bataille’s association of the work of the Artist with community, especially the community of writing, poses a challenge to the demands for equality within communism. Nancy does not see a conception of the artist outside of the Hegelian language of immanentism. Bataille’s example of community then is also just a private ecstasy that resists assimilation into communist equality. The result is, Nancy argues, “Community refusing itself ecstasy, ecstasy withdrawing from community, and both in the very gesture through which each affects its own communication.”<sup>41</sup> Bataille’s work brings modern thought to the limit of communism as horizon, but cannot transgress that limit. His thinking of community is ultimately a paradox: a philosophy of community that is “governed by the theme of the sovereignty of the *subject*.”<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 23. Of course, Nancy acknowledges that he could be completely misreading Bataille’s understanding of the subject. He writes, ““Of course, the word ‘subject’ in Bataille’s text might be no more than a word... 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.” *Ibid.*

Unsurprisingly, Blanchot does not agree with Nancy's characterization of Bataille's politics or his use of sovereignty. In the next section of the thesis, I will examine the discussion of lovers in Nancy, Bataille, and Blanchot in order to clarify the contested ground of politics in community. I argue that Nancy fundamentally misunderstands Bataille's philosophy of community and the role that ecstatic lovers play in it. This is not an original point. It is exactly the argument that Blanchot makes in the second half of *The Unavowable Community*. Through a reading of Bataille's *récit*, *Madame Edwarda*, and Blanchot's gloss of Marguerite Duras's *La Maladie de la mort*, I will discuss the politics of transgression that enables community and communication. At the same time, a detailed reading of these stories will demonstrate the weaknesses in Nancy's ontological sociality that has been briefly sketched here.

*Nancy, Bataille, and Blanchot on love*

“I can conceive of man as open since the most ancient times to the possibility of individual love. I need only imagine the sly loosening of the social bond.”<sup>43</sup>

At the center of the debate between Blanchot, Nancy, and Bataille stands “*le monde vrai des amants*” [the community of lovers]. Nancy takes ecstatic lovers to be emblematic of the failure of thinking community in Bataille's philosophy, and a symbol for the limitations of communism as a political philosophy. The horizon of communism, for Nancy, is inseparable from nostalgia for a lost communion that is present, he argues, in both fascism and Christian communion. In *La Communauté inavouable*, Blanchot contests this reading of the ecstasy of lovers through a reading of Marguerite Duras's *récit*, *La Maladie de la mort*. In order to discuss the differences between the arguments I want to center this section of the thesis around three sets of lovers: in Bataille, The narrator and Madame Edwarda; in Nancy, the lovers who *compear* in touch; and in Blanchot, via Duras, ‘you’ and ‘she.’ The fundamental question is the role of love in community. While Nancy argues for an ontological

---

<sup>43</sup> Bataille, *O.C.* 8:496. Translation by Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille*, 176.

sociality where lovers are not foundational of community, but rather exposed and present within it. Their touch takes community to its limit where love “exposes the unworking and therefore the incessant *incompletion* of community.”<sup>44</sup> Blanchot, reading Bataille, counters that love is prior to all relation of community in the truth of absolute difference. Therefore, love does not occur within community, but stands prior to the possibility of any relationship as the impossible.

*Abandon and the Void*

In the introduction, I outlined Nancy’s argument that Bataille’s sovereign subject is trapped between the poles of ecstasy and community. Yet, to avoid the dangers of fascism on one hand, and the erasure of communist humanism on the other, Nancy argues that Bataille retreats from the political by placing lovers at the heart of his account. Nancy writes:

“Lovers in Bataille thus represent, aside from themselves and their job, the despair of ‘the’ community and of the political... Thus, love would seem to expose what ‘real’ communism renounced, but it would thereby leave social community with only the exteriority of things, of production, and of exploitation.”<sup>45</sup>

The despair of the political is that Bataille, according to Nancy, think that community can only be found at the limit of the Subject’s dissolution. The Subject must be sacrificed, transgressed, exposed, etc. so that a laceration can be made in the fabric of society that opens the Subject to an impossible community. Nancy is quick to accuse Bataille of retaining the Hegelian work of death in his theory of sacrifice. What’s more, the move away from society by lovers is an apolitical move that is motivated by nostalgia for the failed ancient religious cults that existed prior to modern society.<sup>46</sup>

The operation of sacrifice requires the presence of an object that lacerates the Subject. Nancy accuses Bataille of using women as objects of sacrifice in his stories for the sake of Hegelian fusion.

---

<sup>44</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Nancy writes, “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.” Nancy, *IC*, 40.

He writes, “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 approbation of self by self.”<sup>47</sup> It is in this fusion that community is revealed, far away from society and the political in an act of penetration, laceration, and wounding.

It is here that I turn to the narrative of Bataille’s *récit*, *Madame Edwarda*. I want to specifically answer two critiques that Nancy levels against the text. First, that the focus on lovers is a move away from the political. Second, that Bataille sees the ecstasy of lovers as a communal fusion and work of death. Earlier in *La Communauté désœuvrée*, Nancy discusses the suicide pair of lovers as the ultimate work of death, and the examples throughout literature of those lovers are numerous. Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, etc. My first two examples are inauspicious for Nancy because in both cases, the joining of the lovers is political. Yet, surely, a claim could be made that their eventual suicide is the result of a despair about the political realities that drive them to their end. The first point to make is that these loves are examples of a romantic relationship. There may be an argument that such a bond is not political. I will return to this point, but for the sake of contrast with *Edwarda*, I will temporarily grant it. If lovers are a-political, the joining between the narrator and *Madame Edwarda*, a Parisian prostitute, is at its basis a political relationship.

Bataille, as a reader of Marx, would have certainly seen *Edwarda* as a worker. There is an exchange of goods for services in the encounter between the narrator and the prostitute. Thus, the reader is witnessing the completion of a contract within the story. This arrangement does not undermine society. It takes place within the legal framework of that society. There is a politics present because *Edwarda* is a sex worker, and so the contract is not a withdrawal from society.

Blanchot writes:

---

<sup>47</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 24.

“The so-called ‘*maison closes*’ (‘closed houses,’ brothels) or their surrogates do not, anymore than Sade’s chateaux, constitute a marginality able to undermine society. On the contrary – and because such specialized places remain and all the more so if they are forbidden.”<sup>48</sup>

The brothel is firmly planted within the limits of society. The second charge is that through the sexual act, Bataille’s system creates the rupturing of society. Here let me quote a famous passage from *Edwarda* at some length:

“Sitting down, she held her leg up and apart: the better to open her slit [*la fente*], she managed to hold her skin apart with both hands. Thus Edwarda’s ‘rags’ [*guenilles*] looked at me, hairy and pink, full of life like a repulsive squid. I mumbled softly:

Why are you doing that?

You see, she said, I am God

I’m mad...

No, you must look, Look!

Her hoarse voice softened, she became almost childlike when, exhaustedly, she said with the infinite smile of abandon: How I’ve come!<sup>49</sup>

Just a few lines later, Edwarda orders the narrator to perform oral sex on her, and he hesitates, asking her, “Do you mean,” I protested, “in front of all these people?”<sup>50</sup> There is no rupturing of society here through the exposure of her sex, or the act that the narrator performs.<sup>51</sup> Edwarda’s flight into the streets in the second part of the story continues the political, societal, and communal implications of the story. Yet, in the long quotation above, Edwarda does experience abandon for the first time in the story. What is the source of that abandonment? Blanchot argues that it is not Edwarda’s “rather banal” exhibition of her genitals that “she breaks with our world or with any world...”<sup>52</sup> The abandon comes “because that exhibition conceals her by handing her over to an ungraspable singularity (one can literally no longer grasp her) and that thus... she *abandons herself*.”<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Translated by Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille*, 155.

<sup>50</sup> Georges Bataille, “Madame Edwarda,” in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 229.

<sup>51</sup> Leslie Hill points out that the cunnilingus is a “diabolical parody of the Last Supper.” Leslie Hill, Nancy, Blanchot: A Serious Controversy: Community, Writing, Religion, Politics (Rowman Littlefield, Unpublished Manuscript), 69.

<sup>52</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 47-8.

“You see, she said, I am God.” The abandonment comes here in Edwarda’s association with the divine. Allan Stoekl points out that her presentation of her rags is a metonymy, the name God becoming a stand-in for her genitalia.<sup>54</sup> The association of the divine with the genitalia of a prostitute is just another political act amongst the broader politics of *Madame Edwarda*. Nancy’s refusal of the political implications of Bataille’s eroticism is deeply misguided. Now I will turn to the question of fusion within the erotic.

The question of fusion here is partially refuted through the politics of the *récit*, but we need to also address the issue of relation within the text. I mentioned above that Nancy argues that the ecstasy of lovers maintains a subject-object relationship between man and woman. Nancy writes:

“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, an exteriority without alterity.”<sup>55</sup>

This is a crucial allegation for Nancy’s ontological sociality. There is a spatial relationship to another person, and finitude compares in the presence of the other. Yet, the woman is reduced to her bodily presentation by the gaze of the subject. There is an exteriority without alterity, so community is incapable of comparing. If the woman is just the target for the subject’s representation then there is a sort of pornographic barrier to community. The relationship is entirely constituted through the Subject’s titillation at the presence of the other lover. Notice, as well, that touching is not mentioned

---

<sup>54</sup> Stoekl, Alan. "Recognition in Madame Edwarda." In *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, edited by Carolyn Bailey Gill, 77-90. London: Routledge, 1995. "In this case the divinity of the genitals, through a metonymy, comes to be associated with the person who displays them (just as the faithful are often elevated in sanctity metonymically through the display of divine wounds—St Francis’s stigmata, etc.)” pg 82. In addition, see Karmen MacKendrick’s fascinating article about the stigmata and Blanchot’s *Unavowable Community*. MacKendrick, Karmen. "Sharing God's Wounds: Laceration, Communication, and Stigmata." In *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, 133-46. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 24.



in this formulation. The subject is never taken outside of itself, and so even the tactile relationship to the object is defined as a type of vision.

The question becomes, is this present in *Madame Edwarda*? It certainly is the intention of the narrator as he walks the empty streets to the brothel. “The night was naked in these empty streets and I wanted to make myself naked like the night: I took off my trousers which I folded over my arm: I felt myself enlarge. I held my erect sex in my hand.”<sup>56</sup> He comes to fulfill a contract with Edwarda through fusion. Yet at multiple turns, Bataille frustrates and problematizes the process of Hegelian recognition and sublimation of the other in the Subject. The abandonment that Edwarda experiences by exposing the narrator to her divine ‘rags,’ directly challenges Nancy’s speculative accusation. The setup is perfect. The narrator is going to gaze at Edwarda’s nudity for the purpose of erotic pleasure. Yet, instead of a pornographic experience, when Edwarda reveals her genitals, she abandons herself through the evacuation of speech. In the preface to the *récit*, Bataille writes, “God is nothing if He [sic] is not, in every sense, the surpassing of God: We cannot with impunity incorporate the very word into our speech which surpasses words, the word *God*; this word... explodes past its defining, restrictive limits.”<sup>57</sup> Edwarda’s abandon goes far beyond the signifier of the divine into an absence. She is radically unavailable to the sublimation of the narrator’s subjecthood. Her presence through absence contests the being of the narrator, who says, “I’m mad.” Something about the sight of Edwarda places his sovereignty in question. It is Edwarda who commands the scene, ordering him to look despite his madness, until she achieves orgasm.

As author, Bataille frustrates the author’s attempts at recognition throughout the story. Before Edwarda reveals herself to the narrator, he has his own moment of isolation.

---

<sup>56</sup> Translation by Patrick Ffrench in *After Bataille*, 174. Ffrench points out that there is a tight parallel to the opening phrase of Duras’s *La Maladie de la mort*, “You should not know her, have found her everywhere at once, in a hotel, in a street... left to the chance of your sex erect in the night...”

<sup>57</sup> Bataille, *Bataille Reader*, 226.

“I became unhappy and felt painfully forsaken, as one is when in the presence of God. It was worse and more of a letdown than too much to drink. And right away I was filled with unbearable sadness to think that this very grandeur descending upon me was withering away the pleasure I hoped to have with Edwarda.”<sup>58</sup>

Edwarda is already radically unavailable to the narrator before she has revealed herself. He realizes immediately that the experience that he is after, the sublimation of the other, will not be his. The *jouissance* in the narrative will belong entirely to Edwarda. In the second part of the narrative, the impossibility of relation between the two continues. Putting on clothes and running into the street, the narrator says, “Brought to a halt by the abrupt darkness of the street, I was startled to discover Edwarda rushing away, swathed in black. She ran, eluded me, was off... Edwarda, something alien; above our heads, a starry sky, mad and void.”<sup>59</sup> Edwarda waits for the narrator under the archway at the Port St. Denis. The arch serves as a gateway to a “time of death-agony [*un temps d’agonie*],” and the narrator’s sight of Edwarda under the arch represents the change that takes place within this time. In the brothel, she was beautiful and vivacious. Under the arch, “she was entirely and simply black, as anguish-provoking as a hole: I understood that... even, precisely, under the clothes that veiled her, she was now absent. I knew then... that she had not lied, that she was God.”<sup>60</sup>

Edwarda’s absence is complete, and yet the narrator is obsessed with receiving knowledge from her. “I knew, I wanted to know, avid for her secret, without doubting for an instant that death reigned in her.”<sup>61</sup> Yet, his contract is never fulfilled. In the final part of the story, Edwarda has sex with a taxi driver in the back of his cab; as the narrator watches next to them. Once again, Edwarda reaches climax through abandonment, her presence unavailable to the narrator. “Her body, her face swept in ecstasy were abandoned to the unspeakable coursing and ebbing, in her sweetness there

---

<sup>58</sup> Bataille, *Bataille Reader*, 229.

<sup>59</sup> Bataille, *Bataille Reader*, 231.

<sup>60</sup> Translated by Stoekl in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, 83.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

hovered a crooked smile: she saw me to the bottom of my dryness.”<sup>62</sup> The communication of ecstasy is an impossible communication. Edwarda is otherness itself for the narrator. This is the first intimation of a definition of the unavowable. I will return to this in the consideration of Blanchot and Duras.

It should be quite clear by now that Bataille is not as captive to Hegelian recognition as Nancy thinks that he is. Yet, does this examination of Bataille suggest any definition of the concept of love? What does Edwarda tell us about the community of love. Love, whatever it may mean, is a recognition of an incommensurability that interrupts any intersubjective relationship. Edwarda is God, and the narrator worships her throughout the third part of the *récit*. He pursues her even into the void, and this pursuit proves to be his own contestation. The text ends with his declaration of madness.

Where does this leave community? First, there is no reason to assume that Bataille’s attention to the erotic is a move away from the political or community. What *Edwarda* begins to suggest is that the erotic, in Bataille, reveals something prior to community. Edwarda is not object in this story, but the radically other which cannot be sublimated into the man. Blanchot will help to continue this thinking of alterity, but the initial step is to say that Bataille sees something prior to relation that is a foundation of community.

#### *Touch and Community’s Limit*

The return to Nancy is both jarring in comparison to the Batailleian excess in the last section, and because Nancy brings the focus into a very different community. The idea that there is something prior to community is fundamentally at odds with Nancy’s philosophy of community. The existence of something prior to community threatens the unworking that allows community to compear in Nancy’s thought. He writes, “Love does not *complete* community (neither against the City,

---

<sup>62</sup> Bataille, *Bataille Reader*, 235

nor outside of it, not on its fringes): in that case it would be its work, or it would put it to work.”<sup>63</sup>

Love does not found the community, but rather it “exposes the unworking and therefore the incessant incompleteness of community. It exposes community at *its limit*.”<sup>64</sup>

Thus, lovers are never outside of community. The community of lovers is simply the community that compears through finitude. Lovers are exposed within the community of singularities, and their compearance pushes the idea to the extreme. “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.”<sup>65</sup> The words that Nancy uses in this sentence are difficult to parse. For their singularities share and split them? There is a joining that is then split, or a split within the joining. It is helpful to recall here that Nancy defines community as sharing (*Partage*). He writes, “What is exposed in compearance is the following: ‘you(are/and/is)(entirely other than)I. Or again, more simply: *you shares me (toi partage moi)*.”<sup>66</sup> The benefit here is that this sharing avoids fusion because it is an exposure to the outside.

In the community of lovers, then, there is only the outside and sharing, even in penetrative sexual acts. “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 and initial ‘inside,’ an interiority).”<sup>67</sup> The “woman’s breach” is not, for Nancy, an interiority, but a “surface exposed to the outside.”<sup>68</sup> The sharing and joining of the sexual act then is not a process of bringing what is inside into contact with the outside. Rather, it is a doubling down of the experience of the outside that delineates finitude through touch. The singularities that touch are touching their finitude, they are

---

<sup>63</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 38.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 29.

<sup>67</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

touching the limits of their bodies. These bodies are the limits of community, and yet they do not transgress that limit. They defer it because there is no penetration of the inside; there is no need for sacrifice. “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.”<sup>69</sup> Nancy takes every precaution to keep from making a work out of love. In fact, love-making may be too strong of a word for Nancy. “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...”<sup>70</sup> An infant does not communicate the love of the parents (or complete it!). It simply shares the love that is present in being.

The fear of turning love into a work, even in the case of producing a child, highlights Nancy’s commitment to *désœuvrée*. Nothing can be in service of the production of anything else. The community of touch that Nancy founds, in distinction from Bataille, is one that reduces everything to a homogeneity of *désœuvrée*. No action can take place. The political stance of such a community is one that is aware of compearing and *partage*. The move to make the subject an impossibility means that the only identity available is the “I without the ego.” Exteriority defines everything about the person. The exterior becomes the basis of our identity, and yet, because the outside is shared, there is no difference in exteriority. The community of touch is a fusion in that it can give no account of alterity at all. It trades the relationship of interiority to alterity, for an immanent otherness that constitutes otherness as common reality. Nancy’s community would be a community of strangers without an ethics.

---

<sup>69</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 39.

<sup>70</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 40.

The challenge to Nancy's community of touch comes from Blanchot. In response to the idea of *désœuvrée*, Blanchot responds with *inavouable*. Blanchot's unavowable challenges the possibility of *partage* or sharing. The problem for Nancy is that community is just existence, or *Dasein*, as such. Nothing founds it. Finitude is nothing, as Nancy says repeatedly. It's clear that it is possible for singularities to not realize that their existence is compearance. The recognition of finitude is after all the political goal of Nancy's community. Yet, as I have already stated, once there is consciousness of participation in the finite community, singularity falls into a space of the Same. Can homogeneity truly establish community? At the beginning of this essay, the definition of immanentism featured a relationship between the same with the same. How is Nancy's ontological sociality any different from this immanence? Nancy would likely push back by saying that there is no Subject to recognize being as its project, work, or possession. Therefore, the homogeneity isn't subject to the identification with an ego, so no category of similarity. This is true, but nothing about that precludes a singularity having an identity. What the homogeneity of Nancy's community boils down to is just that: identity politics of the basest kind. He writes, "We are alike because each one of us is exposed to the outside that .... we are for ourselves... 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."<sup>71</sup> Nancy ultimately falls back into the trap of immanence that he so desperately tries to escape.

*Sickness and the Secret*

What is the fate of the community of touch when neither compearance or sharing is possible? A different way to word the question might be: what happens to the community of lovers if one of the singularities is incapable of love? The inability to love is what Duras names, 'La maladie de la mort.' It takes the form of a man, referred to merely as 'you' in the  *récit*, who meets a woman, 'she,' and asks her if she will live with him so that he might try loving her. The man has never

---

<sup>71</sup> Nancy, *IC*, 33-34.

known a woman, but he is drawn to her. It is not out of a sense of love. He is incapable of that. Rather, the man is “still want to tend towards the only beings whom [he] cannot approach by any living passion.”<sup>72</sup> It’s clear to the woman from the beginning that he will not be capable of loving because he sees love as an act of will. They enter into a contract for her to spend several nights with him (although she is not a prostitute). Yet, the experiment of loving her through sexual intercourse fails. The man is impotent, not because of any sexual dysfunction, but because of his malady, “nothing in him corresponds to these excessive movements, they seem unbecoming to him, he represses them.”<sup>73</sup> At one point, the woman cries out in pleasure, and he tells her to be silent. Blanchot argues that the nature of their contract precludes the man from experiencing love or community with the woman. “Power relationships in which it is the one who pays or supports who is dominated, frustrated by his very power which measures only his impotence.”<sup>74</sup> The impotence of the act comes from the fact that he cannot receive the love-making as knowledge.

In a similar vein to *Madame Edwarda*, the woman in the *récit* frustrates the man’s pursuit of knowledge because she absents herself. Naked the entire length of their contract, she is nothing but an exposed surface to the man. His impotence is reciprocated by her absence, which is a reminder of his malady, death. She offers herself in total weakness, even, for Duras, inviting murder:

“You look at the malady of your life, the malady of death. It’s on her, on her sleeping body, that you look at it... You bring your body close to the object that is her body. It’s warm, moist. She’s still alive. While she lives she invites murder. You wonder how to kill her and who will... Suddenly you see the difference between the grace of the bodies of the dead and this grace here, this royalty, made of utmost weakness, which could be crushed by the merest gesture.”<sup>75</sup>

We see the woman objectified here. She is open to his gaze, to his touch. She is a palate for his murderous imagination. Yet, he cannot do anything but project onto her. The contract gives him use

---

<sup>72</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 34.

<sup>73</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 45-6.

of her body, but he cannot love her. He cannot know her. Her weakness, her absence confers on her the power of royalty because he cannot overcome it. He becomes the fawning subject of this goddess of love, what Blanchot calls the ‘chthonic Aphrodite’

Blanchot points to the other factor of her absence: the fact that she spends most of the story sleeping. She even frequently speaks to the man *while she is sleeping!* Her passivity is taken to an extreme, and yet, in this passivity is the secret of her life, her ability to love. The man in contrast, for Blanchot, is “a constant doing.” He is ‘always in action in front of this body he looks upon in unhappiness, because he cannot see all of it, its impossible totality, all its aspects.’<sup>76</sup> The man is frustrated in his searching for an entry point. “Though she be a ‘closed form’ only in as much as she escapes the summons, she escapes what would turn her into a graspable whole, a sum that would integrate the infinite and thus reduce it to an integratable finite.”<sup>77</sup> His inability to know her leads him to tears. If she spends most of her time sleeping, he spends an equal amount of time crying. She commands him to stop. “Don’t cry, it’s pointless, give up the habit of weeping for yourself... You think you weep because you can’t love. You weep because you can’t impose death.”<sup>78</sup> There is a fundamental gap between the two characters, but what is the nature of that distance? Here is where Blanchot’s response to Nancy starts to reveal itself.

The two people touch, they have intercourse, they speak, they expose themselves to the other. Yet, there is no fusion. There is certainly no sharing or compearance. They do not exist within the limit of community that Nancy thinks is inscribed in finitude. The man is never brought outside of himself in ecstasy, so he never experiences sharing with the woman. The two isolate themselves from society to the point that the story is a refusal of linear narrative. Duras gives no indication how

---

<sup>76</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 39.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*



much time passes in the course of the story. The defining trait of the encounter is impotence. Why?

There is something incommensurable about the two people. Blanchot writes:

“One of which pursues a love refused to him while the other, through grace, is made for love, knows everything about love, judges and condemns those who fail in their attempt to love, but herself only offers herself to be loved (under contract) without ever giving any sign of her ability to go from passivity to limitless passion...”<sup>79</sup>

What the inability/ability to love expresses is a complete dissymmetry between the two lovers. For Blanchot, following Levinas, the ethical relationship between the two people places the woman in a God-like position in comparison to the man. “The other is always closer to God than I am (whatever meaning one gives that name that names the unnameable)”<sup>80</sup> This symmetry places the man and woman into incommensurate realms. The man is the subject that lives within the dialectical push and pull of the possible. This is why he hopes to be able to attain knowledge of her through sexual contract. He uses the realm of the possible relation within society to approach her. But, the woman is the present-absence of the impossible. Her passivity is part of her impossibility because the place of impossibility is the site of *désœuvrée*. She has no work to perform. Yet, she does communicate from within her passivity. There is a constant murmur that flows from the void that is her absence to possibility. She names that possibility the malady of death. She judges it as a boundary to love. Love cannot be an act, and it cannot be an ethics. “Love may be a stumbling block for ethics, unless love simply puts ethics into question by imitating it.” All of this she speaks from the “original, precreational chaos, the night without end, the outside, the fundamental unhinging” of her absence.<sup>81</sup>

The impotence of the relation is the product of this dissymmetry between the possible and the impossible that the man and woman represent. Here Blanchot points to his fundamental claim

---

<sup>79</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 40.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

about difference. Here we see the revelation of the unavowable begin to present itself in the absolute alterity of sexual difference. The secret is that “in the homogeneity – the affirmation of the Same – understanding demands that the heterogeneous appear suddenly, i.e., the absolute Other in terms of which any relationship signifies: no relationship, the impossibility that willing and perhaps even desire ever cross the uncrossable...”<sup>82</sup> The man/the possible in seeking after knowledge of the Same meets the revelation of the impossible, and the revelation is more than the Subject can handle. “An overbidding, an outrage of life that cannot be contained within life which thus, interrupting the pretension of always persevering in being, opens to the strangeness of an interminable dying or of an endless error.”<sup>83</sup> The principle of the insufficiency of being comes back into the picture here. The man cannot love because he is an immanent Subject, a totality. Yet, he still desires, because of the insufficiency of being, to move toward others. He longs to call forth community through approach. But, in that approach, he meets the Other as contestation that puts himself radically into question. The gift of the presence of the other is radically more than he bargained for, and it presents to him the reality of his death. He cannot struggle with the absolutely Other, the woman, in order to recreate himself within her, thus extending his life. He cannot kill her because the presence of the impossible (the Levinas-ian ethical dissymmetry) leaves him awestruck before the throne of a goddess. Blanchot sees a “duplicity” in “the word death, of that malady of death which at times would designate love prevented and at other times the pure movement of loving, both calling to the abyss...”<sup>84</sup> Whether or not loving is possible is not the product of an act of will, but the result of a “mistake” or “error.” Duras writes:

“She says: Look. She parts her legs, and in the hollow between you see the dark night at last. You say: It was there, the dark night. It’s there. She says: Come. You do. Having entered her, you go on weeping. She says: Don’t cry anymore. She says: Take me, so it may have been

---

<sup>82</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 41.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

done. You do so, you take her. It is done. She goes back to sleep. One day she isn't there anymore."<sup>85</sup>

As Blanchot points out, how could the reader not think of *Madame Edwarda* in this moment? The man sees the void of impossibility. He is drawn towards it, and this is the movement of love. The man cannot make sense of the experience. He weeps during their act of intercourse. His weeping always associated with his impotence in the face of the excessive gift that is the impossible difference of the woman. Then the other disappears. She vanishes, leaving the man alone with the memory of "certain words that she said in her sleep, the ones that tell you what's wrong with you: the malady of death."<sup>86</sup> This murmur, this primordial curse whispered prior to relation, is the knowledge that the man receives. It is a knowledge of his inability to know the Other as a power for himself. Rather, this constant murmur will be (invoking Levinas again) "an infinite attention to the Other."<sup>87</sup> For Duras, this is still an accomplishment for the man. The final sentence of the *récit* says, "Even so you have managed to live that love in the only way possible for you. Losing it before it happened."<sup>88</sup> This is not the "failure of love" Blanchot argues, but "the fulfillment of all veritable love which would consist in realizing itself exclusively according to the mode of loss..."<sup>89</sup> The knowledge of the Other is a knowledge of a dissymmetry and an insufficiency. It contests the subject, and thus the man loses his completeness. He can no longer be whole now that he has stared into the abyss of absolute difference.

The question now becomes, is this a form of community? It modifies and challenges both Nancy and Bataille in several ways. Blanchot is emphatic that the community of lovers does destroy society. The anti-social move of lovers that Nancy flagged as a danger to community, is a benefit

---

<sup>85</sup> Duras, 63-64.

<sup>86</sup> Duras, 68.

<sup>87</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 43.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

and necessity for Blanchot. He sees a difference between the “traditional community,” that constitutes society, and the “elective” community of lovers.<sup>90</sup> The move away from traditional community, also associated with the realm of the possible, gives us the possibility of entering into “an infinite relation” to the impossible.<sup>91</sup> The realm of ethics in the traditional community is the Law. But, for Blanchot, the law represents the work of death in service of the State. The community of touching, in Nancy, cannot have an ethics because the Law is manifested in the bodies of the members of the State. Finitude may other a singularity from itself, but the State puts that to work for its own consummation. Ethics is not possible in the traditional community, and so Blanchot argues that:

“An ethics is possible only when – with ontology (which always reduces the Other to the Same) taking the backseat – an anterior relation can affirm itself, a relation such that the self is not content with recognizing the Other, with recognizing itself in it, but feels that the Other always puts it into question to the point of being able to respond to it only through ha responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself.”<sup>92</sup>

Blanchot is arguing for a relation that exists prior to the Law, and would establish the grounds for community as something prior to traditional society. The foundation of community, which is a community of difference and also one of indifference. Here is where Blanchot pushes back against Bataille. The passion of Edwarda’s abandon is a powerful force that communicates a “love that is stronger than death.” The strength of love is that it “oversteps the limit death represents and thus renders it powerless in regard to helping someone else (that infinite movement that carries towards him and, in that tension, leaves no time to come back and worry about ‘oneself’).”<sup>93</sup> Here I am thinking about the narrator in *Edwarda* picking up her lifeless body and carrying it to the taxi stand, and him holding her after her consummation in the cab. Passion, orgasm, climax creates an ethical

---

<sup>90</sup> Blanchot borrows these words from Bataille’s lectures on ‘sacred sociology.’ Georges Bataille, *The College of Sociology* (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>91</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 43.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 45.

relationship between the two, even if it is an impossible one. Yet, Blanchot sees an alternative to the ethics of passion in Duras's *récit*.

The question of passion raises its head in *La Maladie de la mort*. The two people in the room (which Blanchot calls a “prison community”<sup>94</sup>) move beyond passion into a common space of indifference. The specter of death raises itself in the room. It is present there, and the man contemplates killing the woman. Blanchot writes, “Apathy, impassibility, the non-event of feelings and all forms of impotence, not only do not prevent relationships with beings, but lead those relationships towards crime which is the ultimate and incandescent form of insensibility.”<sup>95</sup> Yet, this is precisely what *does not happen!* The impotence of the union, the lack of passion, prevents the room from becoming a Sade-ian torture chamber. Yet, is community possible without the passion of sacrifice and abandon that Blanchot sees in Bataille?

Yes, community is possible in that space because its lack of passion. The couple is there under no pressure to do anything except to be with one another. This is community that they have elected to participate in, and their choice somehow not only creates a community between the possible and the impossible. The community that is created neutralizes death and opens up a space of infinite relation. Blanchot writes, “How not to search that space where, for a time span lasting from dusk to dawn, two beings have no other reason to exist than to expose themselves totally to each other – totally, integrally, absolutely...”<sup>96</sup> This is the community “of those who have no community...”<sup>97</sup> How is this community created?

The principle of insufficiency returns again here to aid the thinking of the community without relation. The man's desire creates the community each night through his own insufficiency.

---

<sup>94</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 49.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 50.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

He does not know how to love, and yet, he wants to try. This is enough to bring the absolutely other into his presence. She is born out of community then. The man's desire taps into a primordial relation that he elects to enter into. It is a set apart place and Blanchot does not shy away from calling it sacred. "But without there being any trace of profanation, there remains her separate existence retaining something of the sacred, particularly, when at the end she offers her body, just as the Eucharistic body was offered in an absolute, immemorial gift."<sup>98</sup> The revelation of the absolutely Other in Blanchot's community does not require the profanity of Bataille's divinization of the prostitute Edwarda. The unavowable secret of community then becomes a question of the infinite relation that has no agenda. It is not the release of passion. It is not the transgression of the law. It is not achieved within the finitude of compearance. The secret is that the community of lovers is an elective community that calls persons into a community prior to all other relations. The question of love appears now in new terms that are strictly Blanchot-ian, unavowable:

"Or is it a movement that cannot abide any name – neither love nor desire – but that attracts the beings in order to throw them towards each other (two by two or more collectively), according to their body or according to their heart and thought, by tearing them from ordinary society?"<sup>99</sup>

In that place, the self is radically called into question, and death's power is negated.

---

<sup>98</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 55.

<sup>99</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 47.

## Conclusion

“You had to disperse the crowd, chase the people away, create a void: no one has the right to be present at your ceremonies, and yet they’re carried out for everyone. It’s strange, but it’s there that the profundity of the law appears; everyone must withdraw, one mustn’t be there in person, but in general, in an invisible way, like in a movie theater.”<sup>100</sup>

At the end of *La Communauté inavouable*, Blanchot asks if it would have been better to remain silent about the philosophy of community? Perhaps, an unavowable philosophy betrays itself through discussion. This is an echo of the beginning of the text, where Blanchot says that he wants to continue a reflection on community “never in fact interrupted” in his work as a whole. Fifty years into his career, he confesses that community has been the unavowable focus of his entire *œuvre*. Has he just betrayed the community by bringing attention to it? Blanchot quotes Wittgenstein’s edict “Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent.”<sup>101</sup> Of course, by speaking this demand for silence, Wittgenstein transgresses his own interdiction. Blanchot asks, “Does [Wittgenstein’s transgression] indicate that in the final analysis one has to *talk* in order to remain silent? (emphasis mine)”<sup>102</sup> The question is deferred by another question: what words might be appropriate to silence, secret, and the unavowable? Blanchot claims not to know, but that his “little book” entrusts the charge to find those words to others. “Thus one will discover that it also carries an exacting political meaning and that it does not permit us to lose interest in the present time which, by opening unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible for new relationships.”<sup>103</sup> I want to very briefly suggest where this language might be found and what it would sound like.

---

<sup>100</sup> The words of Henri Sorges. Maurice Blanchot, *The Most High = Le Très-Haut*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Lincoln (US): University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 65.

<sup>101</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 56.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

Blanchot begins the second part of *La Communauté inavouable* with a section on the Student Uprisings in Paris in May of 1968. In the streets of Paris an:

“explosive communication could affirm itself (affirm itself beyond the usual forms of affirmation) as the opening that gave permission to everyone without distinction of class, age, sex, or culture, to mix with the first comer as if with an already loved-being, precisely because he was the unknown-familiar.”<sup>104</sup>

The explosion of communication with the unknown-familiar is the impossible speech of the unavowable community. This is the political edge of Blanchot’s discussion of the “negative community: the community of those who have no community” in Duras’s *récit*. In those nights, the man and woman had no agenda except to expose themselves to each other completely. In the uprisings, there was an atypical quality to the revolution: it was “without project.”<sup>105</sup> Unlike the French Revolution, when the peasants stormed the Bastille, the movement to the streets of Paris was not about taking power of a space. The point was “to let a possibility manifest itself, the possibility – beyond any utilitarian gain – of *being-together* that gave back to all the right to equality in fraternity through a freedom of speech that elated everyone.”<sup>106</sup> This is the extreme communication. The point wasn’t to convey a meaning or to come to a conclusion, but just to speak, to communicate the reality of one’s existence. Thus, the communication was spontaneous and it was not impeded by cultural difference. “Because of that one could have the presentiment that with authority overthrown or, rather, neglected, a sort of *communism* declared itself, a communism of a kind never experienced before and which no ideology was able to recuperate or claim as its own.”<sup>107</sup>

Blanchot names this experience: “an innocent presence, a ‘common presence’ (René Char), ignoring its limits, political because of its refusal, to exclude anything and its awareness that it was, as

---

<sup>104</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 30.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*



such, the immediate-universal, with the impossible as its only challenge...”<sup>108</sup> In this atmosphere, “it was impossible to recognize an enemy.” This phenomenon, this presence is a mirroring of the negating of death in Duras’s *récit*. It comes through an encounter with the impossible, where violence is forgotten in a “declaration of impotence.”<sup>109</sup> The “presence of the People” in the streets of Paris was a refusal to align with any type of power, and a refusal to accomplish any political project. Finally, it was a refusal to put death to work.

Blanchot also sees a similar presence of the people at work in the funerals for the victims of the assassination at Charonne in 1962. The crowd that gathered had a “power supreme because it included, without feeling diminished, its virtual and absolute powerlessness, symbolized accurately by the fact that it was there as an extension of those who could no longer be there...”<sup>110</sup> There was the “infinite answering the call of the finitude and prolonging it while opposing it.” This is as good a summary of the unavowable community of lovers as Blanchot provides, and it is couched here in the language of revolution and protest. He continues:

“I believe that a form of community happened then, different from the one whose character we had thought to have defined, one of those moments when communism and community meet up and ignore that they have realized themselves by losing themselves immediately.”<sup>111</sup>

Blanchot argues that what the idea of communism provides is a political force of refusal that responds to the call of the impossible. I will try to connect the language of the unavowable to the language of the demonstration. The principle of insufficiency that leads the subject to desire community is the “movement of refusal” that the students of Paris felt in May 1968. There was a relation prior to the law that called them to create a rupture within the current system. This is the collision of love that moves humanity toward the abyss. When refusal finds itself, the politics of

---

<sup>108</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 31.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Blanchot, *UC*, 32.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

community come into play through the impossible. Impotence is declared and existence is free from project. The communication of the unknown-familiar explodes on the streets. Yet, since there is no project, the exposure of “communism cannot be an heir. We must be convinced of this: it is not even the heir of itself and is always called upon to allow the loss.”<sup>112</sup> There is a fundamental sorrow, then, at the heart of this communist exigency. Yet, the murmur of the streets, like the words of the impossible woman in Duras’s *récit* murmur after the presence of the people has rescinded. This is the secret of the unavowable community.

---

<sup>112</sup> Zakir Paul, trans., "Communism without Heirs," ed. Zakir Paul, in Maurice Blanchot: Political Writings, 1953-1993 (Fordham University Press).