

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Community and Communication

This collection of essays is occasioned in part by the renewed interest in the thought of Georges Bataille signaled by Jean-Luc Nancy's *Inoperative Community* and Maurice Blanchot's response to that work, *The Unavowable Community*.¹ The titles that organize their exchange situate Bataille with respect to the problem of community he so radically and scandalously pursued and that he opened in ways still not exhausted. In the face of an entire set of tired contemporary invocations of "community" in the service of global capital and power—the world community, the intelligence community, the business community—Bataille's thought stands as an outrage if not a crime. But it is no less an affront to the progressive or utopian revolutionary desire for the restoration of a lost social order, one that would heroically or salvifically put an end to the ostentatious expenditures of capital. For it is not an extant community to which one belongs or from which one receives one's meaning that is invoked by Bataille; he privileges no nation, religion, or ethnicity. Rather, what is most exceptional in this thinking of community resists conceptualization as positive appropriation, and it is this that leads Nancy to speak in terms of "inoperativity" and Blanchot to intimate the "unavowable," even where these formulations falter or say too much. As these determinations attest in all their care and difficulty, Bataille's obsession with community is an attraction to what the concept of 'community' has never been able to grasp.

Not only Bataille's interest in community but the entire effort of his thought is dedicated to a presentation of the force and value of what he calls "unemployed negativity" (OC 5: 369/G 123). An undoing of the work of totalization (*l'oeuvre*), it is unemployed negativity to which Nancy's formulation ultimately gestures in the attempt to articulate a social bond not subject to

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recuperation, accumulation, or production.² Inoperativity, worklessness, idleness (*désœuvrement*)—these require a sense of community no longer concerned with achievement, the production of itself through works or ideology, or the reproduction of itself through education. And for this reason, the language of inoperativity gestures toward what it can hardly contain: “Beware not to elevate community in any way,” Nancy reminds himself in light of Blanchot’s response, “even under the designation ‘inoperative’ ” (25 below).

For his part, Blanchot emphasizes the need to understand Bataille not only in terms of inoperativity but also in terms of the unavowable, what cannot be affirmed, what must remain hidden. And this has to be taken in the still more specific sense of the shameful or clandestine, that which remains unmentionable, like an illicit affair or an illegitimate child. The unavowable is thus impossible for any community defined in terms of transparency of self and other, for any community that is in itself and for itself a whole, equally determining and determined by the presence of its members. The unavowable is impossible, not just because what is hidden cannot be appropriated and put to work, but because it carries with it a sense of transgression against the conservative forces of the established order, a taste for the inappropriate and improper, a desire not for recognition, but for expenditure, consumption, and ruin. If inoperativity designates the ontology of a social bond not subject to the work of sublation and formation, the unavowable names the dangerous movement of loss and resistance that bond carries in its attraction, obsession, and contact with what is other.

It is thus difficult to hold together the thought of community in Bataille’s work, let alone hold it open, since it constantly presses toward that which eludes appropriation and resists positive discursive articulation. Community names not so much a unified field or concept for Bataille as it does an obsession, one he pursues in multiple ways, addressing differences that can hardly be said to constitute the same phenomenon. Hence we find community articulated both externally and internally, objectively and subjectively, ontologically and politically, and each of these distinctions is itself often subject to disruption and collapse by the analyses Bataille sets forth. Schematically, though, Bataille’s work on community can be divided into three parts. There are, first of all, the explicit calls for community, which belong to Bataille’s association with Acéphale and the College of Sociology.³ Respectively, these consist of articulations of Bataille’s desire for contestatory creativity in the face of political disaster and endeavors to pursue a knowledge of the violent emotional bond that enables the organization of expenditure for the sake of war and the decimation of life. This volume contains one such call, Bataille’s previously untranslated address to Acéphale from the spring of 1937, “What We Have Undertaken” (OC 11: 559–63/189–95 below). Second, the concern with community also has a place in Bataille’s

exposition of the logic of transgression and expenditure, which articulates the ontological principle of excess in economic terms. And there is, finally, the sense of community related to what Bataille calls "inner experience," the excess that I am in my improbability, insufficiency, and communication with others. The affirmation of chance, the community of lovers, and the role of fusion all have their place here. It is also here that Jean-Luc Nancy's "Confronted Community," newly translated for this volume, hesitates to follow Bataille, emphasizing instead the need for a sense of the political alert to the philosophical difficulty of plurality.

The divisions between these approaches to community have often been portrayed as indicative of a shift away from the political to a more personal realm, or as an evasion of political-historical imperatives in favor of detached analyses affirming the inevitability of evil. At the same time, according to the same division, Bataille has been criticized on both counts of flirting with fascism. In light of this, it is helpful to begin with a brief account of how the work from the period of *Acéphale* and the College of Sociology prefigures the work on inner experience and general economy, attending above all to the "Programme (Relative to *Acéphale*)" from April 1936, roughly cotemporary with the first drafts of *Inner Experience* and the work on expenditure.⁴

The "Programme" begins with the call to form a community, and it casts this task in terms of contestation, indeed destruction. Item 3 of the "Programme" reads: "Assume the function of destruction and decomposition, but as accomplishment and not as the negation of being" (OC 2: 273/BR 121). Undoubtedly, what renders this destruction an accomplishment is its unwillingness to submit to the dominant order of Western life at the time, when the homogenizing forces of society were reaching a state of political and historical crisis, but for which there was no political solution. The destruction of the dominant order that dulls life and lays it to waste is thus a refusal of servility and as such can be likened to the second of Zarathustra's "Three Metamorphoses," where the lion smashes values thousands of years old and in doing so overcomes the burden of the camel. Bataille's refusal thus has no place in the established political order whose discourse is prefigured by those who already belong and already have a voice, prefigured by powerful values of inclusion and exclusion that serve productive accumulation. So Bataille insists, "When we speak to those who want to hear us, we do not essentially address their political finesse. The reactions we hope for from them are not calculations of positions, nor are they new political alliances. What we hope for is of a different nature" (OC 1: 402/VE 161).⁵ That is, at issue in the call for community is an entirely different way of being, one that is necessary lest we cease to exist altogether. Bataille calls this new way of being "universal community," and its possibility is bound up with the radical resistance he proposes at the time. Item 7 of the "Programme"

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states this in unequivocal terms: “Fight for the decomposition and exclusion of all communities, national, socialist, communist or churchly—other than universal community” (OC 2: 273/BR 121). The call for community is not a struggle against this or that oppressive social system, then, but paradoxically, a call for the destruction of community in any recognizable sense. Community is as much—indeed, more—a heterological operation as it is an end or a goal. It is anarchic rather than utopian.

Coterminous with *Acéphale*, the College of Sociology served as another forum through which Bataille pursued the question of community, although in an entirely different register. The College devoted itself to an exposition of the heterological, which *Acéphale* sought to carry out and live, and which Bataille understood as operative but co-opted in the psychological structure of fascism. Although not belonging to the College strictly speaking, “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933) also stems from the endeavor of the College, articulating as it does the necessary principle of expenditure for all living systems, bridging the gap between the work of *Acéphale* and the slightly later work on general economy. Reiterating the College’s central interest in collective states of excitement, Bataille interprets these states in terms of the nonproductive expenditure of energy, “the need to destroy and lose,” or in other words, “the constitution of a positive property of loss” (OC 1: 310/VE 122). The central concern of the College thus leads Bataille to an ontological exposition of general economy: excess as the principle of being. This most fundamental ontological fact is attested to almost everywhere (from the radiance of solar energy to torture practices) and everywhere also avoided, suppressed by the social systems that nevertheless require the prodigal expenditure of the energies they cannot productively use. Taking up just this point, David Allison’s “Transgression and the Community of the Sacred” shows how Bataille’s thinking of transgression (building upon the analysis of labor and the sacred found in sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Roger Caillois) not only disrupts the social order but also serves to sustain and strengthen it. The insight concerning the cooperation between the social order and transgression, rooted in the work on general economy, thus refers back to the contestatory call issued by the “Programme” noted above, as a way of carrying through an attack upon the forces of social homogenization through analysis of their most fundamental mechanism. It is an attempt to elevate and carry through the political concerns of the College by way of fundamental ontology, an exposition whose force Bataille took to be “the shame of a generation whose rebels are afraid of the noise of their own words” (OC 2: 273/BR 121). And it is an endeavor Bataille carried through to the very end, as Marc Froment-Meurice shows in his essay on the excesses of Gilles de Rais, whose gruesome deeds place him among those privileged examples of “war, cults, [and] the construction of

sumptuous monuments” (OC 1: 305/VE 118) already mentioned in the early essay on expenditure.

According to the classic conceptions of communal formation, from Plato and Epicurus through to social contract theory, community arises in order to meet the basic needs of human beings, the preservation of individual lives and the propagation of the species. At the basis of communal life as such lies a principle of insufficiency, one rooted in need. Freud rightly exposes the inadequacy of such an account, emphasizing the necessity of *eros* as well as *ananke* in the formation of social life, and Bataille shares that corrective when it comes to an account of community in any traditional sense. Yet he also insists beyond Freud that still another deficiency plagues the classic conception of community, and it is Bataille’s originality here that has most invigorated recent discussions of the topic. For Bataille, the insufficiency of individual life is not just that of a self-enclosed subject that seeks the assistance of others in order to preserve its being. Instead, insufficiency is an opening to the world, a surface of contact with what is other, where one’s being spills outside itself. Finitude does not consist in a limit that encircles but in the fact that I cannot be so encircled, the fact that I am not an enduring totality. To be finite is thus to be uncontained, outside of oneself in the catastrophe of utter abandon, which Bataille paradoxically calls “inner experience.” As a result, insufficiency does not name the fact that I cannot subsist on my own, the fact that I am dependent on the cooperation and self-restriction of others. No, all this is an evasion, repression, or denial of what I fundamentally am, a lacerated being, one whose limit constitutes an opening to the outside. This is the fundamental ontological fact of excess: “A being that isn’t cracked isn’t possible” (OC 5: 259/G 23).

The contestation of homogenizing social forces emphasized in the earlier work is ultimately grounded in this ontology, and not in an effort or program or task. This is because, as Bataille puts it, “[T]he total improbability of my coming into the world poses, in an imperative mode, a total heterogeneity” (OC 1: 89–90/VE 130).⁶ The heterogeneous is thus a contestation that arises from, or rather as, the insufficiency of existence itself. This being dislocates itself from service to the homogeneous, restricted world of work (a world itself dedicated to the production of works) because it dislocates itself from itself, because it is utterly without foundation and origin. It is a being shot through with chance, born in the improbability of luck, risked in its very structure. Insufficiency thus names the cracked character of being as well as its being without ground or reason. And that is to say, it no longer answers—indeed, never did, never could—to the fundamental structure of meaning through justification. In the face of such demands, it is utterly unaccountable and unaccounted for, absolutely unjustified, and its lack of justification constitutes its sole authority. This is what Bataille means when

he says, "Inner experience is a movement in which man contests himself entirely," existing and persisting through and as this challenge (OC 5: 431/IE 179). The contestatory character of insufficiency, the loss of authority that now becomes authoritative, is the only thing that counts.⁷ What appears from within the requirements of justification as a loss of ground, intelligibility, and form is just inner experience, excessive finite existence in its undeniability and strange insurmountability, existence in its tendency toward the outside.

Just as the contestation of community proposed by Acéphale must appear from within the unquestioned dominant social order as a rogue element or terrorist threat, so must the excess of finite existence appear within the demands of the philosophical tradition and its requisite self-knowledge as irrational and deformed. But what is unaccountable from the point of view of knowledge is, lived from within, exhilarating and free. There are thus differences among the question belonging to the accountability of discourse, the work of critique, and the ecstasy that is the putting-into-question of everything. That is why Bataille insists, "In the end only chance has the possibility of disarming," leaving us open in all our vulnerability and nakedness (OC 6: 123/ON 103; tm). For my improbability, my insufficiency, hence my very existence is nothing more than this chance. In the insufficiency of my existence I am lucky, "a direction of being required by the eagerness of its own movement," like the fall of dice (OC 1L 90/VE 131). Of course, I know that I do not know how or why I came to be, but that is different than the astonished, "How improbable my existence is!" I know as well that I will die, but that is not the same as dying, where I say, "Take my hand, I don't want to die alone." I do not know how we came to meet, how or why I came to love you, but this alone counts: "I love you so much I can't live without you! Your happiness is my joy, your sorrow is mine." Thus, at the limit of discursive thought experience tends not only toward the outside, toward death; it also tends toward contact with another, toward community. Indeed, so much that "[t]here cannot be inner experience without a community of those who live it" (OC 5: 37/IE 24). Inner experience requires a community of chance, a community of lucky beings drawn together, bound together in their excessive movement, in their fall away from themselves. This, then, is "where" community is located: in the chance movement of insufficiency; in the openness that my being *is* in exceeding the requirements of homogenization, preservation, and justification—in the movement outside oneself, which falls in love, dies, laughs, cries, mourns, celebrates, suffers.

The metaphysics of substantial subjectivity is at once a metaphysics of the thing, of the self as thing that wills and the world as a totality of things to be used. In his essay, "The Horror of Liberty," Stuart Kendall shows how not only does the debt to this metaphysics show up in the political hegemony of capitalism, but it also grounds the project of communism and its

radical equality (shedding light on Bataille's 1948 response to the problem of communism, "The Political Lie" (OC 11: 332–38), included in this volume). Bataille's thinking proposes, by contrast, a subjectivity offered to the world rather than dominated by the principle of utility, and Kendall argues that this constitutes the basis of an ethics. Correlatively, in his essay, "Of Goods and Things," Chris Gemercak develops the question of ethics in Bataille's treatment of community in terms of the ethos attentive to the vicissitudes of the insufficiency and chance that contests the substantial self, an intimacy that reconfigures our relation to ourselves, others, and the world.

Bataille's development of the community of chance as the expression of inner experience tends in two directions, the community of lovers (or closed community) and fusion (or formless community). In both cases, the specification of the ontological principle of insufficiency is characterized by a particular mode of resistance to forces of homogenization. Lovers are exemplary, however, because of the way they give expression to the desire of chance. Only a chance being could fall in love, propelled by the anarchy of its desire. To fall in love is to be lucky, to find oneself delivered over to another being that is subject to the same excessive movement and to find one's desire and ecstasy confirmed in contact and contagion with the other. Lovers' love is the exponentially compounded inertia and expenditure of a wounded, lacerated, cracked being; it is the exposure of one life to another, the disappearance of one opening in another, the overlapping of one wound upon another, the penetration of one orifice by an other. And it is obsessive, driven beyond itself without reason, satisfied by nothing short of total possession, consumption, and loss. The rest of the world pales in comparison to the beloved who shares her pain, her joy, and her body with me, so lovers' love is sacred. They love without respect for the rest of the world, whose tasks and efforts are cheated and disregarded in favor of wasting the day in bed. Lovers express the movement toward the outside in its momentum and obsession, its luck and its pleasure. "To be with life as you are with a wife, a girlfriend, when making love, drinking, laughing, being attentive, affectionate, even a little eccentric, never purer than when 'doing it'" (OC 5: 296/G 57). Community is obsessive, desirous, and compulsive. It is the passion, violation, and possession of contact and contagion.

What distinguishes the community of lovers is thus not just its closed and elective character, its exclusion from the world of production and preservation, but the intensity of contact. For Bataille, the orgasm, laughter, and tears serve as privileged moments of that intensity. The community of lovers passes into the territory of a more general community, indeed, general almost to the point of utter nondistinction. With the sudden bursting forth (*jaillissement*) of chance, exposure and penetration pass indiscernibly into one another. "Each isolated existence," writes Bataille, "emerges from itself in a

sort of easy flash: it opens itself at the same time to the contagion of a wave which rebounds, for those who laugh together become like the waves of the sea” (OC 5: 113/IE 95). Elsewhere, Bataille develops this image in terms of water in water, thus, neither distinguishable nor indistinguishable, both fused and diffused. Here, then, fusion cannot mean identification, nor can it signify a self-evident field of unity. Undoing the identity of unity and the unity of any identity, fusion and diffusion are indistinguishable without being the same. All of this is to say, the movement to the outside tends toward a contact and contagion that is uncontainable, finite without limit: “They are no more separate than are two waves, but their unity is as *undefined*, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters” (OC 5: 113/IE 95–96; em). This community is formless.

It is no doubt in this respect that the following summative statement must also be understood: “What fusion brings into me is *another* existence” (OC 5: 391/G 141). Fusion is neither the result of appropriation nor an expropriation of oneself into identity with the world. In laughter we do not identify with others, but we are suspended together without distinction, I in you, you in me, carried beyond ourselves. In tears we embrace one another, emptying ourselves in an expenditure that exceeds our identity or difference. In orgasm we come together. This is what Bataille means when he insists, “In experience there is no longer limited existence. There a man is not distinguishable in any way from others: in him what is torrential is lost within others” (OC 5: 40/IE 27). My chance, my passion is not even really mine but delivers me over to what is other, another that ignites my passion, intensifies it, but in no way sublates it and puts it to work. If today the theme of community has any importance in the face of the expansion of global capital and processes of homogenization, in the face of tepid and insipid invocations of community by power or those seeking power, it is because community names the obsessive and passionate desire for the outside, the desire for contact with what is other, and the desire to be other than that which the social order makes us. It is because the obsession with community communicates the danger, attraction, and hope of a new way of being.



In the preface to *Inner Experience*, Bataille speaks of how the various instances of expenditure he traces throughout the book “defined of themselves a law of communication regulating the play of the isolation and the dissolution of beings,” and it is indeed isolation and dissolution that establish the parameters of Bataille’s thinking of communication (OC 5: 11/IE xxxiii). But this does not mean there are substantial isolated beings in existence prior to a communication that would then dissolve the distance between them. Rather

these beings are already given over to the vicissitudes of communication as evidenced by the nakedness of their appearing in the world. Existence is exposed and as such always already communicative, always already reachable and addressable, always already reaching out. Consequently, communication does not name for Bataille a transmission passed between the two poles of sender and recipient, each of which would precede the communication. Rather, "*existence is communication*" as it finds itself overstepping its own bounds, transgressing itself, reaching toward the other: "everything in me gives itself to others!" (OC 5: 115, 151/IE 98, 130).⁸

The dispossession of self intrinsic to communication likewise prevents communication from becoming a matter of knowledge or an issue in epistemology as typically understood. According to such a view, to know is to possess knowledge of something. But once the known is possessed and internalized, the relation to what lies beyond the self is severed and our contact with the outside regulated and neutralized. Through knowledge we do indeed come to possess the thing but at the expense of no longer finding ourselves possessed and arrested by it. We cling to a relic and our ecstasy gives way to stasis. Thus, for Bataille there is an irreconcilable difference between "the desire to appropriate unto oneself and the opposite desire to communicate" (OC 5: 165/IE 142). From communication as a relation that eschews the appropriation of knowledge, from communication as an ontological rather than epistemological concern, it follows that, strictly speaking, I will not know what is communicated. I will not be able to, for the finitude of the subject in this case does not consist in the self-enclosure requisite for the possession of knowledge, but in exposure and opening to the outside. Communication in the most fundamental sense is thus a matter of nonknowledge, an expropriation of the self without the security or certainty or regularity of knowledge. "I give myself to non-knowledge (this is communication)," says Bataille (OC 5: 65/IE 51). In his essay, "Contact and Communication," Alphonso Lingis takes his point of departure from this insight, exploring the ways in which contact with beings unlike ourselves constitutes a fundamental communication that both violates the integrity of our bodies and makes possible rational discourse, which is so often mistaken for the basis rather than the consequence of communication.

Breaching the self-possession of Cartesian subjectivity and its prized self-certainty, insufficiency, rupture, and wound open us to a world beyond our grasp or control. Communication is thus risky through and through: "'Communication' cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*" (OC 6: 44/ON 19). With life at stake in communication ("*All communication participates in suicide*"; OC 6: 49/ON 26), it is surely an easy step to the dialectic of master and slave, but here Bataille is interested instead

in a sovereignty without mastery. He is indefatigably alert to the “project” character of the Hegelian dialectic, that it seeks its own completion in absolute knowing. Bataille does not merely reverse the Hegelian reversal of lordship and bondage but contests its fundamental principles: productivity and recuperation of self. In contrast to Hegel’s treatment of the dialectic of “the master (the law, the sovereign) and the slave (the man enslaved by work),” Bataille writes in *Literature and Evil*, “Sovereignty . . . is the object which eludes us all, which nobody has seized and which nobody can seize for this reason: we cannot possess it, like an object, but we are doomed to seek it” (OC 9: 305/LE 193–94). Hence, “sovereignty must inhabit the realm of failure” (OC 9: 306/LE 194). Where Hegel celebrates the slave as the true sovereign, he does so on the basis of the slave’s accession to absolute knowing, which is always self-knowledge, even if merely implicit. By contrast, the true sovereign does not need the security of this certain knowledge, which carries the possibility of a recuperation of oneself in the self-possession of a knower who would know itself knowing itself, but embraces the risks of communication and self-abandon all the more unrestrictedly.

Precisely because communication is risk, sovereignty is not an established state of being, nor something arrived at by holding oneself back. Communication does not risk a being that would otherwise be complete or finished but completes the insufficiency of the one who communicates by ensuring its contamination and contact with what is other. Since communication is not a possession, but a relation of exposure and abandon, sovereignty, too, is nothing that might be appropriated and achieved: “Never can we *be* sovereign. But we distinguish between the moments when fortune lets us glimpse the furtive lights of communication and those moments of disgrace when the mere thought of sovereignty commits us to seizing for it like a positive benefit” (OC 9: 306/LE 194). To seize at sovereignty is to forego communication in order to appropriate. Communication is a giving, a giving oneself over to what is other, what attracts and beckons one, such that “[t]here is no difference between this powerful communication and what I call sovereignty” (OC 9: 313/LE 201). Simply put, “Sovereignty is NOTHING” (OC 8: 300/AS 3: 256).

While communication undoes any purported isolation of the subject, it runs the risk of leading to a complete dissolution of the self. Indeed, Bataille’s emphasis on the fusion of subject and object—“‘Oneself’ is not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of the subject and the object” (OC 5: 21/IE 9)—or on the indistinguishability of self and other—“there is no longer a limited existence. There a man is not distinguished in any way from others” (OC 5: 40/IE 27)—might seem to suggest that he thinks communication is a form of identificatory union between opposed parties. We have indicated above how such a reading mistakes

nondetermination for identity, but it is also the case that communication as fusion requires difference. In an appendix to *Guilty*, for example, treating of the relation between communication and laughter, Bataille speaks directly to the point: “these [communicative] contacts are *heterogeneous*. What fusion brings into me is *another* existence (it brings this other into me as *mine* but at the same time as *other*); and insofar as it’s a transition (the contrary of a state) and in order to be actually produced, fusion requires heterogeneity” (OC 5: 391/G 141).⁹ Bataille’s conception of ‘fusion,’ then, is not the result of either an appropriation of the other or an expropriation of oneself into identity with the world but the introduction of something other at the core of the self. Fusion is not something that communication must avoid but is instead synonymous with it. Cast in terms of fusion, communication comes to name the indigestibility of the other, the persistence of the foreign at the heart of the same. If fusion brings the other “into me,” it must always be remembered that this “me” is always already outside of itself. Bataille thus takes existence for “the movement of painful communication which it is, which goes no less from within to without, than from without to within,” that is to say, as a permeability of self and other, of subject and object (OC 5: 138/IE 118). If the outside is on the inside, and what is inside is on the outside, then the very idea of the self as a simple enclave distinct from the world must be abandoned. Fusion does not entail a homogeneous field merging together self and world, but to the extent that it emphasizes the ineradicable rupture of the foreign that cracks open identity, it names the inappropriable porousness of contact. Karmen MacKendrick addresses just this heterogeneous fusion in her essay, “Sharing God’s Wounds,” on communication with God as an infinite other, a communication that shows itself in the excess of a wound (stigmata).

Discursive communication utilizes language as a means for the achievement of some ulterior goal, and communication in the strictest sense is no such utilitarian project. The irreconcilable difference noted above, between the desire to appropriate and the desire to communicate, can also be put in terms of the difference between weak and powerful communication, profound and discursive communication: “What I wanted: profound communication between beings to the exclusion of the links necessary to projects, which discourse forms” (OC 5: 109/IE 92).¹⁰ To be sure, discursive communication renders us understandable to one another, but that is also to say ever more assimilable to one another (in an assimilation to sameness that should not be mistaken for the sovereign moment of fusion so attractive to Bataille). By contrast, profound communication occurs precisely when these attempts at creating banal commonalities fail: “Communication in my sense of the word, is never stronger than when communication, in the weak sense, the sense of profane language or, as Sartre says, of prose which makes us and

the others appear penetrable, fails and becomes the equivalent of darkness” (OC 9: 311/LE 199). It is precisely when the transparency of utilitarian language or discursive thought fails, then, that real communication takes place. Or more precisely, through this darkness that interrupts identification, “powerful” communication opens onto the impenetrable: “there is a fundamental distinction between *feeble communication*, the basis of profane society (of active society—in the sense in which activity merges with productivity) and *powerful communication* which abandons the consciousnesses that reflect each other, to that impenetrability which they ‘ultimately’ are” (OC 9: 312/LE 200). This impenetrable is nothing simply or immediately given; it stands to be gained in the risk run by sovereignty. To reach what is impenetrable, the self must expose itself to violation. Penetrated by the other, its being is no longer in tact in such a way that it could be transparent to itself. And instead of being present to itself with the clarity and distinctness of self-knowledge, it runs up against what is utterly foreign to it. At its very core, the impenetrable wells up within it, as if granted by its exposure to the outside. And yet, I myself do not even know what is impenetrable in me. This density of the impenetrable is the counterpart of exposure: I offer myself wholly to the other in sovereign abandon, and the other fails to seize me as something to be possessed and known. As such, we make contact outside the demands of recognition and acknowledgment. We come to share out a strangeness or alterity that is nothing possessed, but that resides between us, with us in the world. Existence is “shared between the impenetrability of ourselves and that of the world” (OC 9: 311/LE 199; tm). In “Bataille: Discerning Edges in the Art of Lascaux,” a meditation upon Bataille’s treatment of the caves of Lascaux, Edward S. Casey brings together reflections upon the nature of edge and line as fundamental to art with the way in which the artwork calls forth a community, not only among people, but among humans and the earth as well. Communication is nothing other than such a shared experience.

In *Literature and Evil* (1957)—a work that itself could stand as a treatise on communication¹¹—Bataille repeatedly casts this exposition before the other as explicitly and ineluctably moral. Bataille’s treatment of the (sovereign) morality of communication also explains why language, despite all his reservations concerning its limitations, is nonetheless able to communicate the incommunicable. The morality of communication follows from the fact that feeble communication, in the attempts to accommodate ourselves to the world and the world to ourselves, belies a deeper accord: “This incessant effort to situate ourselves in the world with clarity and distinction would be apparently impossible if we were not first bound to one another by the feeling of *common subjectivity*, impenetrable in itself, and for which the world of distinct objects is impenetrable” (OC 9: 311/LE 199). Such a feeling of common subjectivity is possible only in tandem with the persistence of our

differences from each other and never as a bridging of the gap between us. As Bataille notes in *Erotism*, "This gulf exists, for instance, between you, listening to me, and me, speaking to you. We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference" (OC 10: 18–19/E 12). The separation itself allows for common experience: "It is a deep gulf, and I do not see how it can be done away with. None the less, *we can experience its dizziness together*" (OC 10: 19/E 13; em). Such a feeling is not the possession of any single individual but accessed only through the sovereign refusal to objectify or to sever the radiant excesses of another.

Sovereign self-limitation is the focal point of Bataille's reading of Genet (the closing chapter of *Literature and Evil*, which is equally a reading of Sartre's reading of Genet and thus a reading of philosophy's attempts to read literature), where it is expressly cast as moral: "The Evil required by sovereignty is necessarily limited. Sovereignty itself limits it. It sets itself in opposition to all that enslaves it in as far as it [sovereignty] is communication. It opposes itself with that sovereign instinct which expresses a sacred aspect of morality" (OC 9: 315/LE 203). This self-limiting characteristic of sovereignty is perhaps what is most at odds with the popular caricature of Bataille as excremental hedonist. Sovereignty cannot be reduced to a formula of maximized satisfaction or maximized destruction through evil, for in that case (the case of Genet), "Evil becomes a duty, just as Good does" (OC 9: 300/LE 187). Such a stance would remain paradoxically utilitarian even in its quest for destruction, whereas "Only a morality of communication—and loyalty based on communication—goes beyond utilitarian morality" (OC 9: 309 n./LE 207, n. 44). Loyalty names at once the fact that existence is never isolated, that there are always others, that these others are under no necessarily binding obligation to me, and that I offer myself wholly to them nonetheless. Loyalty means opening oneself to betrayal, in the language of Genet. But Genet's mistake is to make a project of betrayal as a way of demonstrating his superiority to and independence from all others. He seeks a sovereignty that would only be for himself: "he has not seen that sovereignty involves the heart, it requires loyalty and, above all, communication" (OC 9: 304/LE 192). Genet consequently suffers from what *Inner Experience* diagnoses as egotism, "the indifference to communication" (OC 5: 50/IE 38). Genet remains isolated, "He never yielded completely to the irrational impulses which unite beings, but which unite them on the condition that they shed the suspicions and diffidence bred in the difference between each being" (OC 9: 315/LE 203). The morality of communication thus opposes the diffidence and indifference of the isolated ego with a groundless and limitless loyalty. Morality as loyalty demands the promise *to not be oneself*, but to remain true to the heterogeneous other within and without. "Communication requires loyalty" (OC 9: 171/LE ix).

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Communication communicates the incommunicable (there is nothing else to communicate). This impenetrable incommunicable is nothing that I retain as a private possession. Communication is not a mutual recognition that the impenetrable cannot be communicated, a recognition that could rest secure in the knowledge that we each possess what the other cannot have. Such a view still bases itself on the enclosed subject. Instead, our “private” experience is shared from the outset and thus inherently moral. This is what Bataille’s “theory” of communication struggles to articulate, and it is what distinguishes Bataille’s views from those of philosophy’s arch representative in literary matters, Jean-Paul Sartre: “Only a morality of communication—and loyalty based on communication—goes beyond utilitarian morality. But for Sartre, communication is not a basis; if he sees its possibilities it is through the opacity which beings present to each other. For him, it is the isolated being that is fundamental, not the multiplicity of beings in *communication*” (OC 9: 309 n./LE 207 n. 44).

Genet and Sartre alike show the extent to which literature all too easily serves the homogeneous order of isolated beings, even in its apparent resistance to everyday banality and its discursive order. And as with literature, so too with poetry: “It has almost always been at the service of the great systems of appropriation,” Bataille says, tending toward “any one of a number of aesthetic homogeneities” (OC 2: 62/VE 97). If literature or poetry is to amount to something more than advertisement, their communication must be born of contestation. Undoubtedly, it is this insight that leads Bataille to title as *The Hatred of Poetry* (1947) what is later published as *The Impossible* (1962). The earlier title failed in that it appeared to make poetry the object of hatred, while it intended to insist that poetry, at its best, is the product of hatred, born in the refusal to submit to the social and discursive homogeneity that deadens communication of the impossible. If discourse neglects the ungraspable or impenetrable part of existence, as Bataille claims it does—“Although words drain almost all life from within us . . . there subsists in us a silent, elusive, ungraspable part. In the region of words, of discourse, this part is neglected” (OC 5: 27/IE 14)—this still does not mean some other mode of expression would be able to seize it. It means, rather, that expression must work otherwise, establish a different relation between itself and its object, writer and reader. Given the limits of discourse as Bataille diagnoses them, then, this alone explains why he bothers to write at all. His own communication is situated at the point where the demand for loyalty meets imperative revolt.

With respect to poetry, Bataille clarifies the matter saying, “Poetry had no powerful meaning except in the violence of revolt” (OC 3: 101/I 10). For this reason, it falls to poetry, but also to literature, to approach this elusive unknown through an interruption of discursive language, through a resistance to the homogeneous order that effects profound communication

and the dissolution of isolated existence.¹² The poet sacrifices the word in its utilitarian function: "Of poetry, I will now say that it is, I believe, the sacrifice in which words are victims. Words—we use them, we make of them the instruments of useful acts. We would in no way have anything of the human about us if language had to be entirely servile within us. Neither can we do without the efficacious relations which words introduce between men and things. But we tear words from these links in a delirium" (OC 5: 156/IE 135).

Thus, when the poetic word is "detached from interested concerns" (OC 5: 157/IE 135), it too is opened beyond itself and released from servility to egoistic demands or imposed duties. In poetic language, the impenetrable ungraspable is no longer neglected, but neither is it objectified or possessed. Instead, the poetic attempt at articulation hews the word from silence, letting it be shaped by the silence of profound communication. No rules can be given for how the poet proceeds here, for it is precisely a matter of overstepping the rules in an exposure of self, of creating oneself as author in this negotiation with the silent other. This means that "poetry is, necessarily, no less silence than language," where the poet surrenders the word to this silence as what lies beyond the word's own spoken or written expression (OC 5: 41/IE 29). Even poetic language cannot hope to seize or adequately evoke the ungraspable. Sovereignty is failure, as we have seen, and the anguished attempt to let the heterogeneous shape the word, if only via the word's relation to silence, is doomed to a failure that discourse avoids. But therein lies the profound communicability of poetic language, as failure communicates what the smooth functioning of feeble communication cannot: sovereignty. "Literature is communication: a sovereign author addresses sovereign humanity, beyond the servitude of the isolated reader" (OC 9: 300/LE 188). Reader and writer both suppress their isolated being in order to join in communication: "However this may be, even if an apparent absurdity results from this process, the author was there to suppress himself in his work, and he addressed the reader, who read in order to suppress himself—or, if we prefer, to render himself sovereign through the suppression of his isolated being" (OC 9: 301/LE 188–89). Speaking to this point and linking the concern for communication with that of community, this volume includes in its appendix Bataille's "Silence and Literature" (OC 12: 173–78), a review of Blanchot's *récit*, *When the Time Comes*, developing the problem of writing and sovereignty in relation to silence.¹³

At different times discursive, literary, poetic, confessional, the totality of Bataille's work is surely best described by what Kalliopi Nikolopoulou calls, following *Inner Experience*, "dramatization." If words fail to capture the ungraspable, heterogeneous, impenetrable, this is not to say that in such a failed attempt communication would no longer be at play. It is only to

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say experience is not reducible to conceptual determination, to discursive linguistic articulation, that it requires above all another direction of expression. Dramatization thus responds to the experience that changes those it puts in play. And it is in this light that we must in part understand Bataille's communication of his own thought and those who read him. "Thus we are nothing, neither you nor I," writes Bataille, "beside burning words which could pass from me to you, imprinted on a page: they are addressed to you, you will live from having had the strength to hear them" (OC 5: 111–12/IE 94). The aim of this volume is to remain loyal to that thought, in all its heterogeneity, all its impossibility.

Notes

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986); *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983); *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1988).

2. In fact, Nancy credits Blanchot with the formulation of inoperativity, noting at the same time the proximity to Bataille, almost as if from Bataille, as he puts it ("The Confronted Community," 22 below).

3. Both a journal and a group, *Acéphale* was organized by Bataille following a break with Breton and surrealism. The journal lasted from June 1936 through 1937 (with an anonymous issue published in June 1939). Contributors included Pierre Klossowski, Jean Wahl, and André Masson (who illustrated the publication), among others. Literally meaning "headless," *Acéphale* was interested in harnessing the vital forces of human life, their violence and their contagion, in opposition to those modes of life that subordinate the human to its rational capacities. In the "Programme" published in the journal, *Acéphale* advocated the destruction of community in any traditional sense and aimed at a more universal articulation and experience human life. Little is known about the group *Acéphale*, since its members were sworn to secrecy. Still, it was centered around rituals, secret meetings, and the prospect of human sacrifice. For an account of the significance of this, see Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 13–15.

In 1937, the journal *Acéphale* published the declaration of the College of Sociology. The College was to pursue an ontological and sociological knowledge of the radical energies the secret group aimed to harness and to do so in opposition to the political monopolization of life. Membership in the two groups was not simply overlapping, however. The College included the active participation of Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris, Pierre Klossowski, and Alexandre Kojève. Other notable attendees included Sartre, Walter Benjamin, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. See also Stuart Kendall, "Editor's Introduction," to Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xi–xliv, xiii–xiv; and Denis Holier, "Forward: Collage,"

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The College of Sociology, ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), viii–xxix.

4. Georges Bataille, "Programme (Relative to *Acéphale*)," OC 2: 273/BR 121.

5. Georges Bataille, "Popular Front in the Street," OC 1: 402–12/VE 161–68.

6. Georges Bataille, "Sacrifices," OC 1: 89–96/VE 130–36.

7. "The paradox in the authority of experience: based on challenge, it is the challenging of authority; positive challenge, man's authority defined as the challenging of himself" (OC 5: 19 n./IE 7 n.).

8. Expressed in a Heideggerian register, "communication is a phenomenon which is in no way added on to Dasein, but constitutes it" (OC 5: 37/IE 24).

9. It is no coincidence that Bataille employs a language of mediation and transmission, of waves and undulation, in considering human existence. In a recurrent motif of *Inner Experience*, Bataille thinks this communicative identity as analogous to the tenuous and shifting identity of waves in the ocean: "[T]hey are no more separate than are two waves, but their unity is as undefined, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters" (OC 5: 113/IE 95–96). The idea that our difference would be a formal difference amidst the same material is announced at the outset of the section 'Communication' in *Inner Experience* and prefigures the biological explorations of later works like *Erotism*. The opening of the section is worth quoting at length: "From one single particle to another, there is no difference in nature, neither is there any difference between this one and that one. There is *some of this* which is produced here or there, each time in the form of unity, but this unity does not persevere in itself. Waves, undulations, single particles are perhaps only the multiple movements of a homogeneous element; they only possess fleeting unity and do not break the homogeneity of the whole." The groups constituted from numerous single particles alone possess this heterogeneous character which differentiates me from you and isolates our differences in the rest of the universe (OC 5: 110/IE 93).

10. Since communication is not the transmission of a verbal message for Bataille, he emphasizes the role of silence in communication, "Profound communication demands silence" (OC 5: 109/IE 92), as well as the use of disciplinary techniques for achieving such silence, signal among them, yoga (see OC 5: 28–31/IE 15–18). The recently translated "Method of Meditation" develops these ideas further, where Bataille states his desire to interrupt the easy flow of language, "I want to find that which reintroduces—in a point—the sovereign silence that interrupts articulated language" (OC 5: 210/US 90).

11. Understanding the "evil" of the title to refer to the need for sovereign existence to overstep the external and artificial constraints imposed upon it by society, it is nonetheless *Literature and Evil* where Bataille most strongly emphasizes the inherently moral aspect of sovereignty.

12. On the identification of poetry and literature, see *Literature and Evil*, "Literary communication—which is such in so far as it is poetic—is the *sovereign process* which allows *communication* to exist, like a solidified instant, or a series of instants, detached both from the work and from the reading of the work" (OC 9: 300–01/LE 188).

13. Maurice Blanchot, *Au moment voulu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951); *When the Time Comes*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1985).