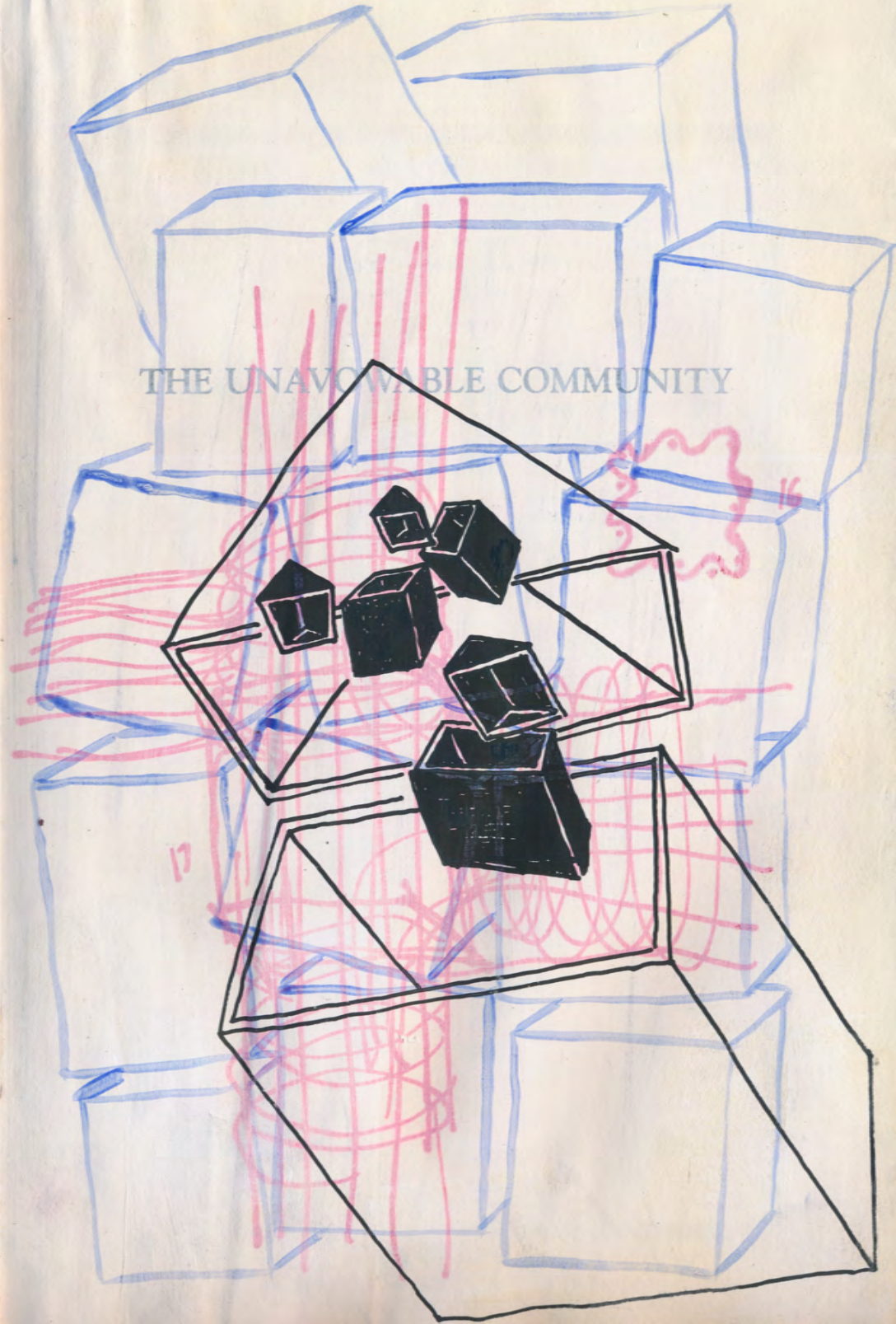
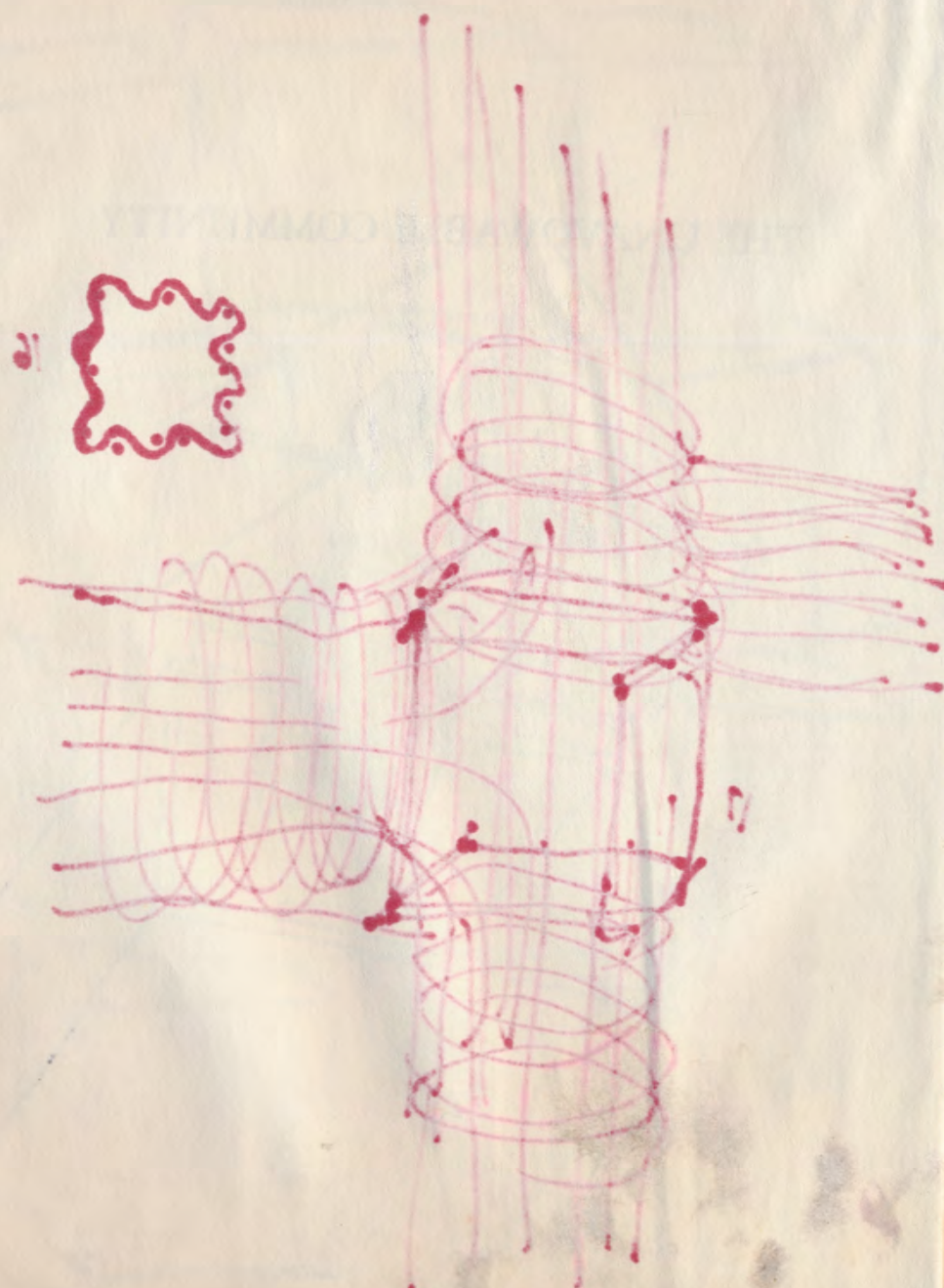


THE UNAVOIDABLE COMMUNITY





THE  
UNAVOWABLE  
COMMUNITY

Maurice Blanchot

*translated by Pierre Joris*

Station Hill Press

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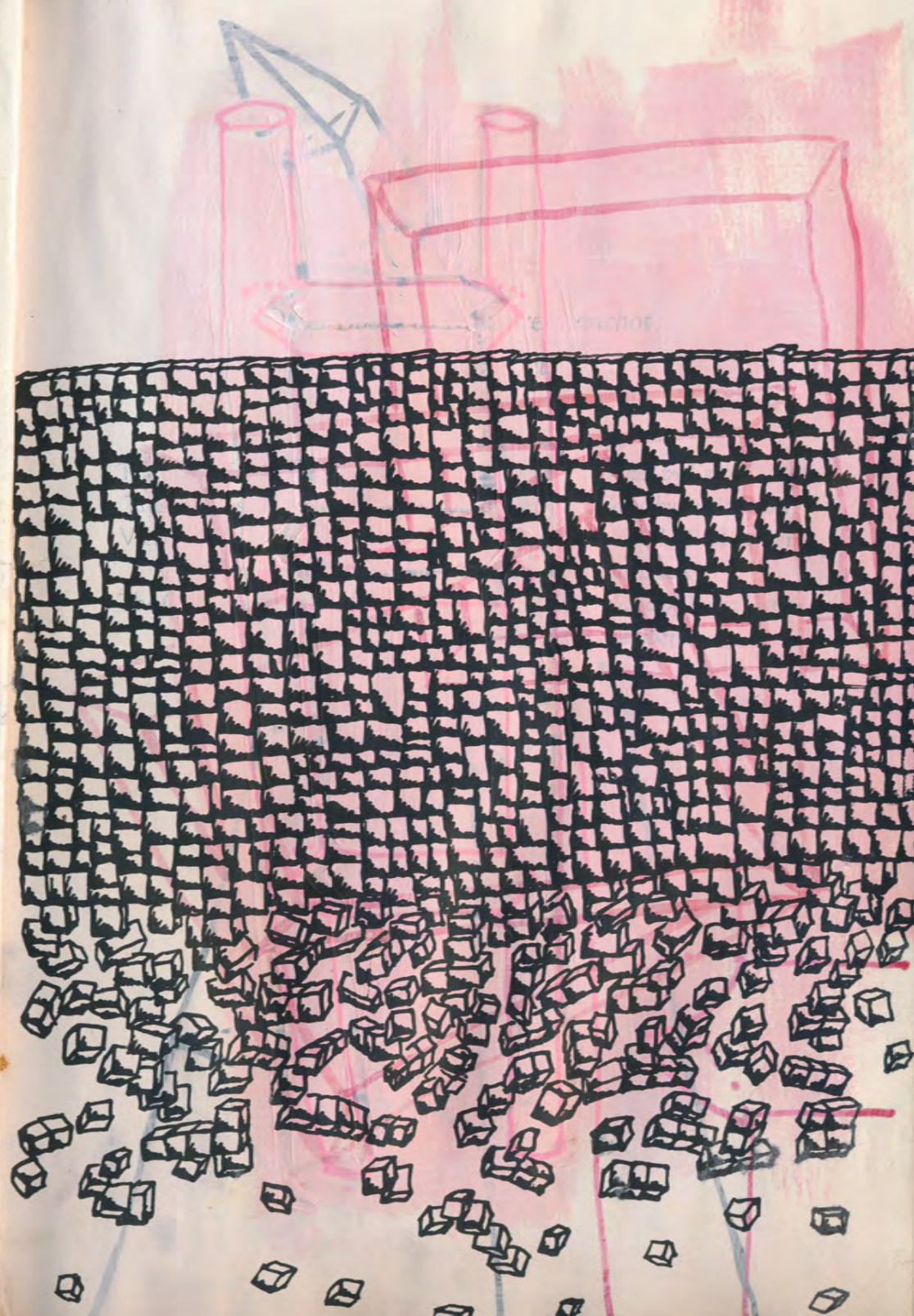
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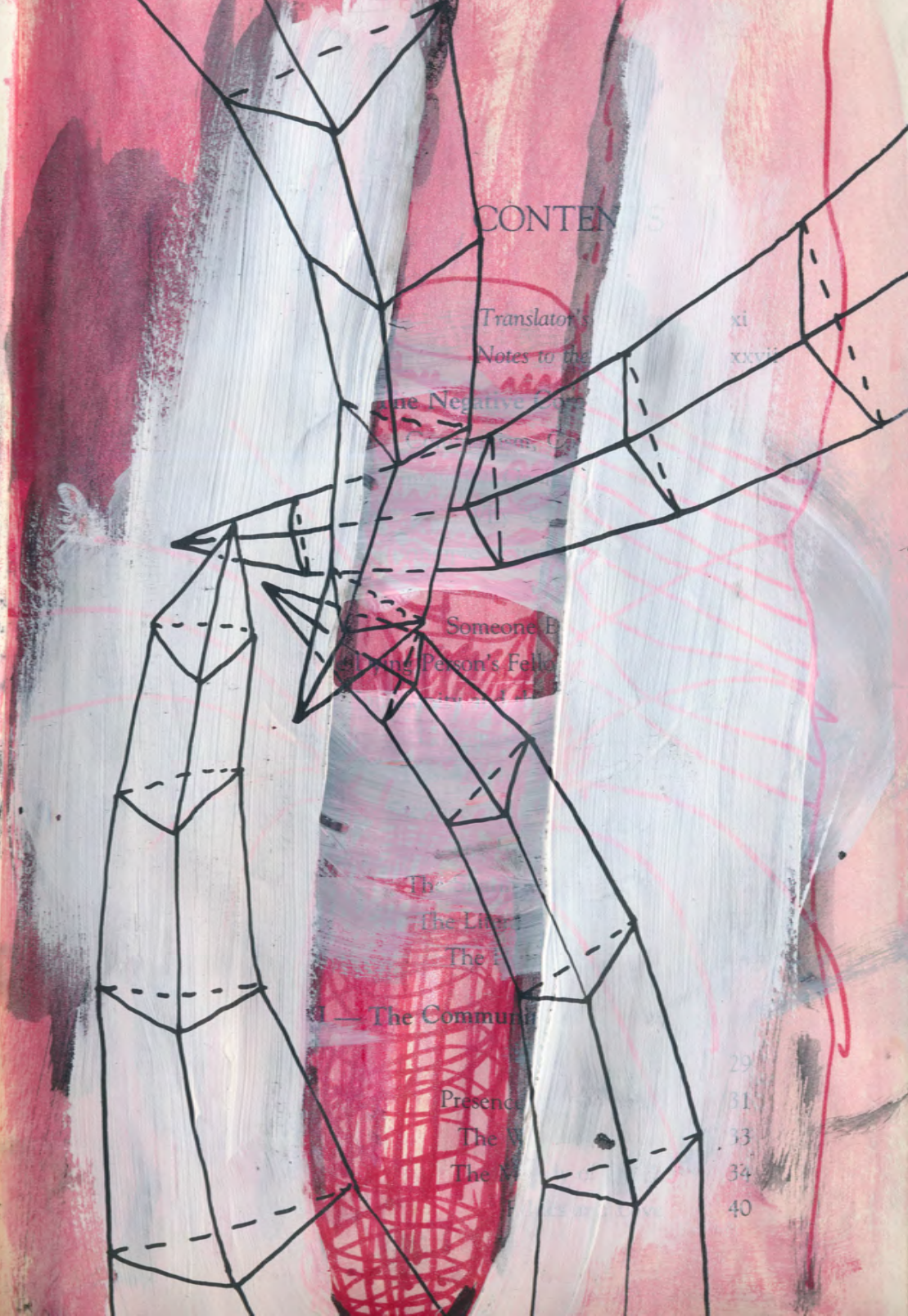
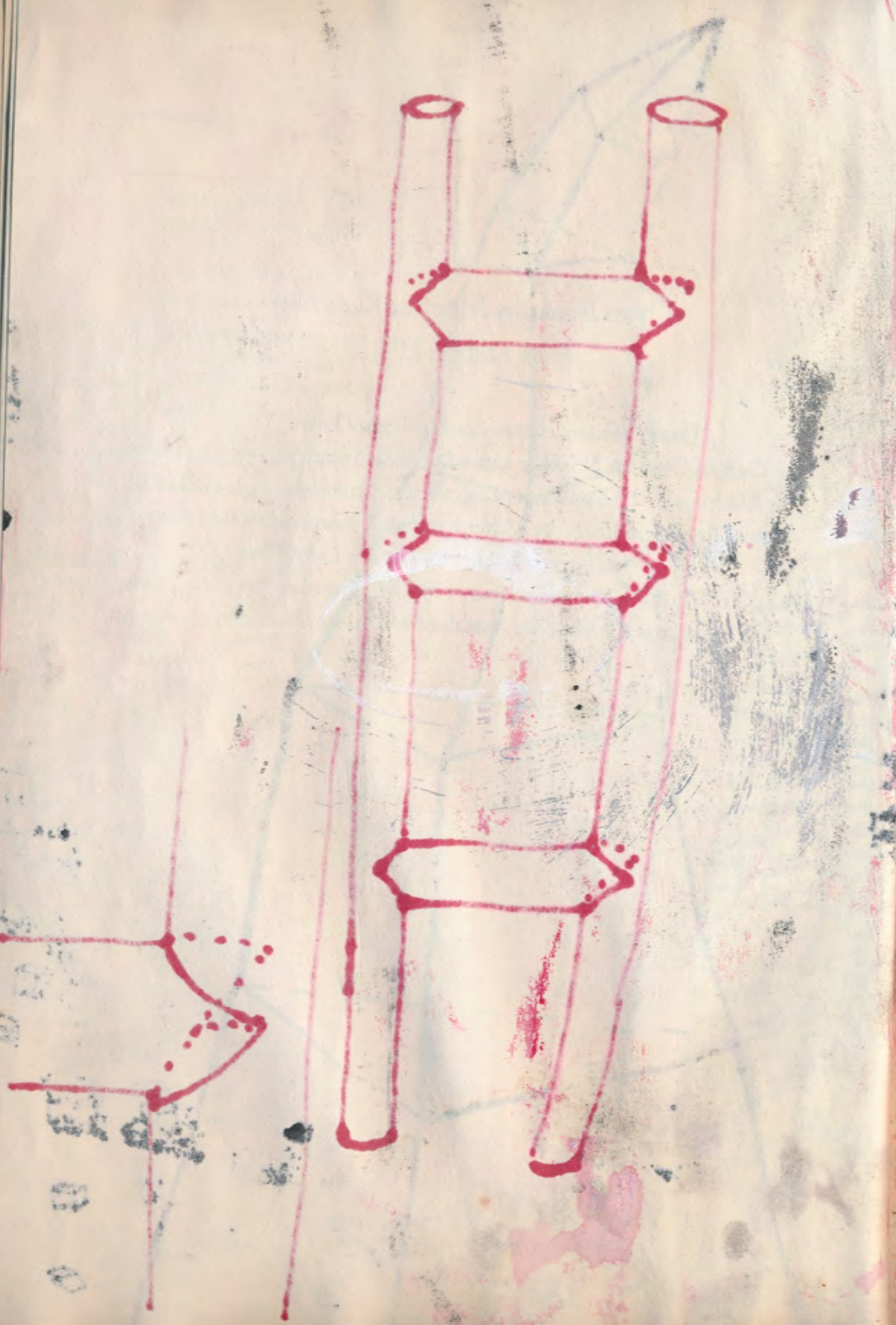
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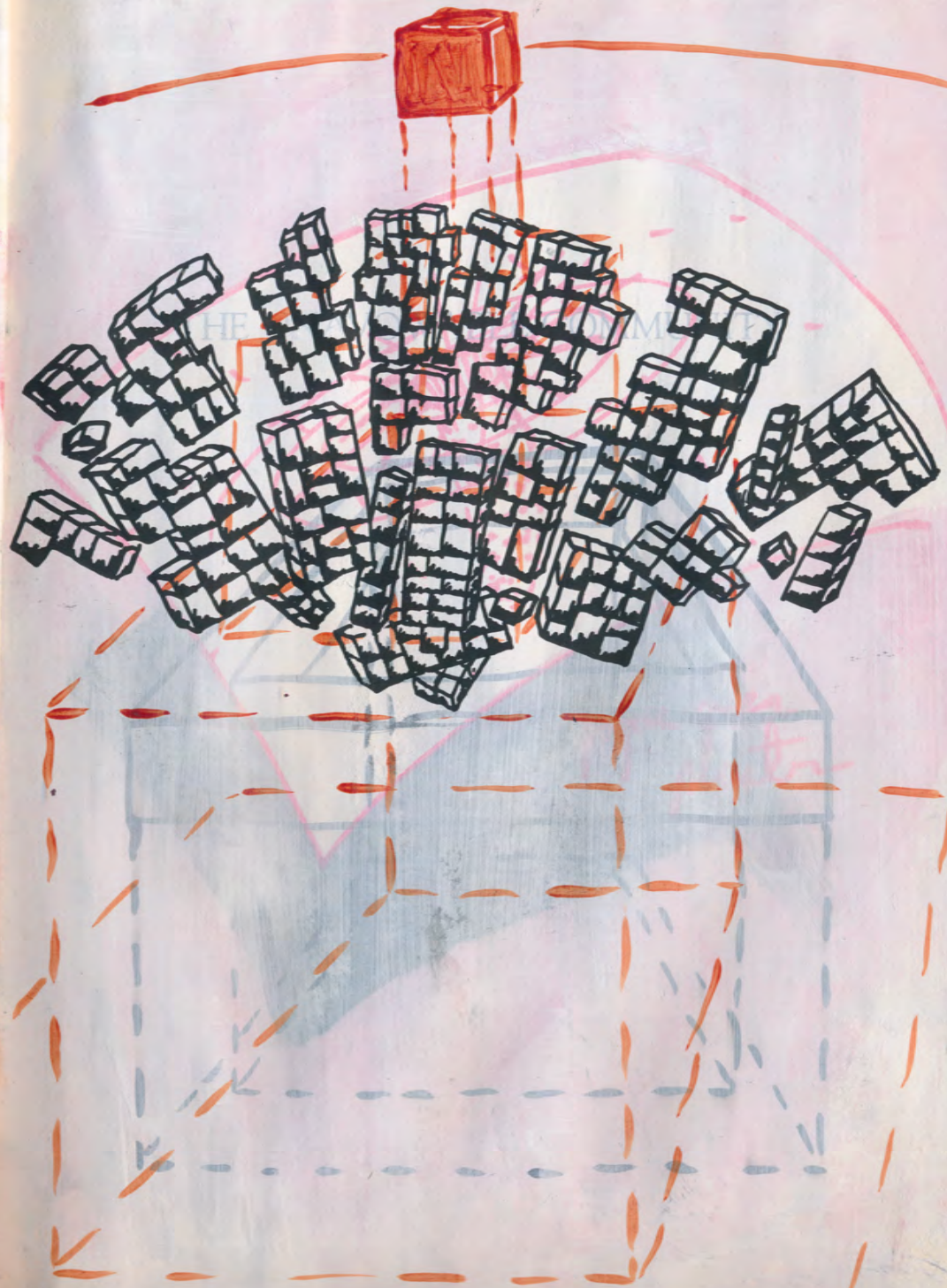
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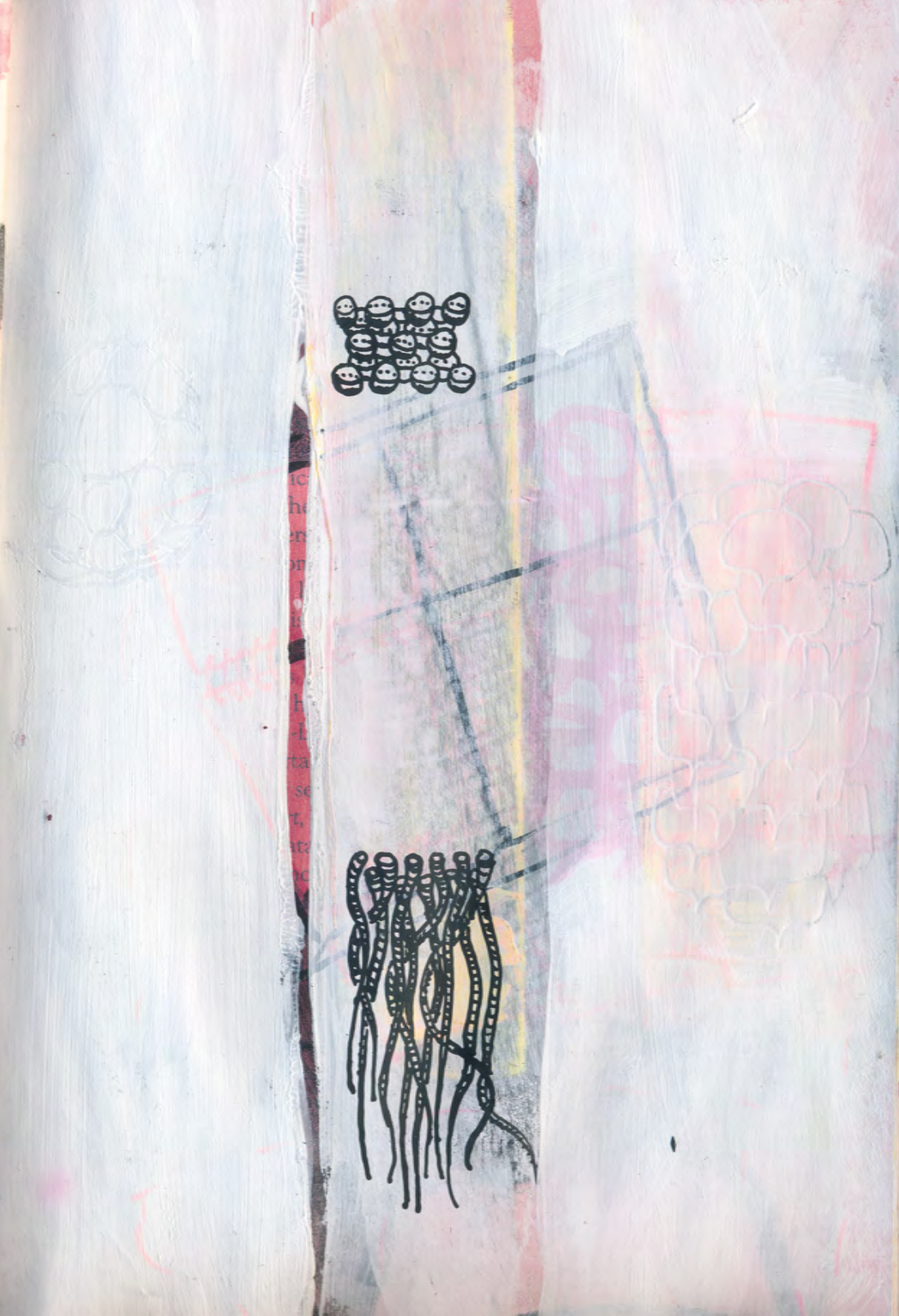
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Michel Leiris, Jean Fautrier, André Masson, André Malraux and Jean Wahl). In that essay, she calls Bataille's work, "a writing against language," going on to say that "he invents how not to write while writing." Duras' sense of the *récit*, especially the one under consideration here, although written in 1982, owes much to Bataille's writing and thinking, as Blanchot saw immediately (and as she herself would probably acknowledge). Moreover, Blanchot's own sense of the *récit*, or more exactly, of the *narrative voice*, as defined in the 1964 essay of that title (included in the *The Gaze of Orpheus*<sup>3</sup>), draws on Duras' writing, as the following quote from that essay, subtitled "the 'he,' the neuter," makes clear:

[The narrative voice] is a voice that has no place in the work but does not hang over it either, far from falling out of some sky under the guarantee of some superior Transcendence: that "he" is not the "encompassing" of Jaspers, but rather a kind of void in the work — the absence-word that Marguerite Duras describes in one of her tales (*récits*): "a hole-word, hollowed out in its center by a hole, by the hole in which all the other words, should have been buried," and it goes on: "One could not have spoken it, but one could have made it resound — immense, endless, an empty gong . . ." It is the narrative voice, a neuter voice that speaks the work from that place-less place in which the work is silent.

That Blanchot should come back to Duras in the context of a book like *The Unavowable Community* is not surprising: much of Duras' best writing — especially the *récits* — is not only close to Blanchot's sense of literature, but also often poses, at least implicitly, the question of the possibility of community. However her own sense of "community" probably has its deepest roots in her actual experience of the "secret community" of the Resistance during World War II (cf., for example, her 1986 interviews with François



"The Negative Community," the essay dealing with Nancy's text, presents a number of more or less arduous reading and translation problems. It is probably one of Blanchot's most complex pieces, concatenating as it does philosophy, sociology, literary history, politics, and personal (not to say private) reflections. By no stretch of the imagination could any of Blanchot's writings be described as easy to read, a fact that has led at least one supercilious critic to pun on the title of his first book and refer to him as "Blanchot l'Obscur." But Blanchot is never obscure for the sake of obscurity. Rather, he is true to the nature of difficult, nearly *unspeakable* questions, of literally *unthinkable* concerns such as *absence* and *silence*. The unavoidable difficulty of his text presents special problems to the translator, by no means limited to, the choice of the right words in English (though this problem is considerable). In the present text, even more than elsewhere, the processual nature of his writing and thinking makes for writing that is syntactically dense even as it quickly shifts levels of discourse, aiming to carry forward Blanchot's many-layered concerns.<sup>6</sup>

However a more immediate difficulty for the American reader might be the number of shorthand references to French literary, philosophical and political history of the past fifty years. Rather than encumbering an already dense text with editorial notes, it has seemed more advisable to provide some of the necessary context in this preface. Nancy's essay essentially consists in an analysis of a sense of loss of community reflected in Georges Bataille's essays on that subject. Bataille and Blanchot first met in 1941 (i.e., after Bataille's "communitarian" involvements described below) and, writes Bataille, there was "immediate admiration and agreement" between the two men. Bataille's thought has clearly exercised an abiding influence on Blanchot over the years — if, in a writer so profoundly original, one can speak of influence at all. Relatively little of Bataille's writing was published during his own lifetime, and after his death in 1962 his work passed through a kind of

... in 1970 ... and began publishing his ... Works. Although he ... as one of the ... French thinkers of the century, ... will only partially ... Of his large output — the ... edition of his ... selected works consists so far of nine volumes ... 600 pages ... with the final three volumes ... later this ... no more than four or five books ... available in ... for reading Blanchot's ... Bataille is

... in the 1930s that Bataille deals ... concept of community, both in his writings and in life. During this period he founded or was active in at least three groups, each very different in conception and aim, though each in its way an attempt to counter the threat of both fascism and bureaucratic Stalinism. The first of these groups was Contre-Attaque, which strangely enough he cofounded in 1935 with his old enemy André Breton (a truce between the two men that did not last long) and which coincided "with the greatest period of political effervescence in France since the Paris Commune of 1871" (Stoekl), culminating in the Popular Front government, an antifascist alliance of Socialists and Communists led by Léon Blum. In 1934 the fascist paramilitary organizations had taken to the streets in an attempt to overthrow parliamentary democracy. The CGT (the Communist Union) fought back by creating a Vigilance Committee and by calling for a general strike. Contre-Attaque, "the revolutionary intellectuals' combat union," was born from this upheaval a year later when Breton, who had just broken with the French Communist Party, and several of his friends (Eluard, Pastoureau, Peret) joined forces with Boris Souvarine and Georges Bataille. A manifesto, published on October 7, 1935, castigates both capitalism and Léon Blum's Popular Front for its attempt "to avoid the revolution," and states that, given that fascism has used the political weapons created by the workers' movement, the only

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possible issue is a "completely and totally aggressive revolution." At the point in his essay when he deals with *Contre-Attaque*, Blanchot uses the term "sur-philosophie" to denote the thought process that led Heidegger to get involved with National Socialism and to differentiate that process from what he calls Bataille's "insurrection of thought." The term plays off Breton's attack on Bataille's *Contre-Attaque* *sur* *le*, in which Breton accused Bataille of "surfascism." In 1929 or 1930 Bataille had written an essay called "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix 'Sur'" which criticized that prefix in the word "Surrealism." The essay was meant for publication in the magazine *Bifur*. The latter, however, folded before the piece could appear, and it was finally first published in *Tel Quel* 34 (Summer 1968). (I do not know if Breton had seen the piece at the time of *Contre-Attaque*.)

The group started publishing a magazine, *Cahiers de Contre-Attaque*, which never got beyond its first issue. Here is how Stoekl sums up Bataille's dilemma at this point in time:

It must be recalled when reading Bataille's writings from 1935 to 1940 that there is an assumption that democracy in the West is doomed; the choice is between some form of communism and fascism. In this light, Bataille's espousal of a revolution through sexuality and myth takes on added force: faced with a choice between the clear tyranny of fascism and the tendency of bureaucratic Communists to desiccate life—and with democracy not a viable alternative—the only option was to affirm Revolution, while attempting to situate it in relation to values that all 'official' parties refused to consider seriously. Bataille then had two alternatives: either to work somehow in conjunction with the Communists, as a Marxist, a course of action he advocates in "Popular Front in the Street," or to refuse the mode of struggle of the Stalinist Communist party entirely (thereby refusing to be a Communist), while not refusing the

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published between June 1936 and June 1939. André Masson's drawings of acephalic — headless — man illustrate the issues, setting "the proper cosmological-orgiastic tone" (Stoekl). Among contributors were Georges Ambrosino, Pierre Klossowski, Jean Wahl, and Jules Monnerot, although it was Bataille himself who wrote many of the pieces and nearly everything in the last issue. *Acéphale* marks both the rupture with direct political involvement as represented by the "Contre-Attaque" group and a return to the political via the most burning question of that period: the question of fascism. As Dominique Lecoq writes in a recent issue of *Le Magazine Littéraire*: "It is via Nietzsche's work that [Bataille] engages the fight against fascism and against nationalism — all nationalisms. That choice is not fortuitous: it represents Bataille's mark on the magazine and his conviction that a reading of the German philosopher was 'decisive . . .'. From that point of view *Acéphale* constitutes the accidental surfacing — linked to historical circumstances — of the secret and permanent dialogue that links Bataille's thought to Nietzsche's."

The other facet was a secret community, reflecting Bataille's fascination with marginal groups such as gnostic and other heterodox Christian sects, and his quest at that moment for communitarian forms that would avoid the two-pronged trap described above. As Blanchot points out, little is known of the actual activities of the *Acéphale* secret society, and those still around who could talk about it tend not to want to do so. Writes Stoekl: "Its main goals were the rebirth of myth and the touching off in society of an explosion of the primitive communal drives leading to sacrifice. Myth, as Bataille states . . . is the way open to man after the failure of art, science (and scientific notions of causation), and politics to reach these lower — and more 'essential' — human drives, and after their failure as well to lead to a paradoxically rent but 'true' existence." As far back as 1922, Bataille, after first reading Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, had written: "Why even consider



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and Michel Leiris in 1937, and the first public meeting took place in November of that year. Speerl writes: "Its activities centered around biweekly lectures given either by the founding members or by invited speakers, such as Alexandre Kojève, Anatole Lewitsky, Pierre Klossowski, and others. The effort here was to redefine a 'science of the sacred,' replacing a narrow Durkheimianist sociology with one that would recognize the importance of the various forms of 'expenditure' not only for 'primitive' societies but for modern societies as well. Thus the Collège was formed to study the tendencies of man that the Acéphale group failed somehow to spark." Among those who came to listen to the lectures were such figures as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre and Walter Benjamin, with the latter even scheduled to give a series of lectures in 1939-40. The war that broke out in September 1939, however, put an end to the Collège.<sup>9</sup>

To complete our sketch of the background to Blanchot's text, there remains for us to define a few special terms. When Blanchot talks of "May" or "May 68" he refers to the student rebellion of that year, which although a world-wide event, took on a truly revolutionary character in France only when the workers came out on the side of the students and staged the largest general strike since the Popular Front. For a few days there was a real chance for an overthrow of the repressive Gaullist government, as De Gaulle actually fled the country and to a large extent the French troops stationed in Germany, leaving France without an effective government, i.e., in an "acephalic" state. If the revolution aborted it was, yet again, due mainly to the French Communist Party which controlled the workers' movement and at the decisive moment made a deal with De Gaulle behind the backs of both students and workers.

"Charonne" refers to a moment during the Algerian war, when police attacked demonstrators marching in support of an independent Algeria, and nine people were killed on and around the steps of the entrance to the Charonne subway station.



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How are you going to translate that, *récit* for example? Not as *nouvelle*, "novella," nor as "short story." Perhaps it will be better to leave the "French" word *récit*. It is already hard enough to understand, in Blanchot's text, in French.

For a further discussion of this term I refer the reader to P. Adams Sitney's afterword to Blanchot's selected essays, *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Drawing mainly on Blanchot's essay, "Song of the Sirens," Sitney suggests that, like the novel, the *récit* is a "movement toward an unknown point. But, unlike it, it does not elaborate itself in diversion, in the textured network of interlocked digressions. That which the *récit* approaches is the *récit* itself . . . . It is, then, in Mallarmé's terms, an allegory of itself." He goes on to quote Blanchot: "The tale (*récit*) is not the narration of an event, but that event itself, the approach to that event, the place where that event is made to happen — an event which is yet to come and through whose power of attraction the tale (*récit*) can hope to come into being too." The notion of the *récit* is clearly linked to Blanchot's sense of "narrative voice," and his suppressed foregrounding of the latter in *After the Fact*11 pays tribute to the primacy he attributes to these two concepts in relation to the very act of writing:

But, before all distinctions between form and content, between signifier and signified, even before the division between utterance and the uttered, there is the inalienable Saying, the glory of a "narrative voice" that speaks clearly, without ever being obscured by the opacity of the enigma or the terrible horror of what it communicates.

The term that has caused the greatest problems is without a doubt *desœuvrement*, and its derivative, *desœuvré*, which appears in the title of Nancy's essay, but is very much a Blanchot word. The word has at its core the concept of the "œuvre" (work, body of work, artistic work, etc.) and implies a range of meanings:



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it produces itself through the work and throughout the work. Writing as worklessness (in the active sense of the word) is the insane game, the indeterminacy that lies between reason and unreason.

What happens to the book "game," in which worklessness is set loose during the operation of writing? The book: the passage of an infinite movement, a movement that goes from writing as an operation to writing as worklessness; a passage that immediately impedes. Writing passes through the book, but the book is not that to which it is destined (its destiny). Writing passes through the book, completing itself there even as it disappears in the book; and yet, we do not write for the book. The book: a ruse by which writing goes towards the absence of the book.

It is exactly that little parenthesis (in the active sense of the word), that is problematic in the translation of the term *désœuvrement* with the passive "worklessness." (There may be a radical cultural difference at work here: the puritan impulses of Anglo-American culture blocking the very possibility of a positive, active connotation to be attached to the notion of an absence of work?)

All of Nancy's essay builds up to a point, two-thirds of the way through, where the word "*désœuvrée*," announced in the title in relation to community, finally gets stated. It comes after a critique of the Cartesian immanentist subject, seen by Nancy as "the inverted figure of the experience of community":

That is why the community cannot come within the province of the work [*l'oeuvre*]. One does not produce it, one experiences it as the experience of finitude (or: its experience makes us). The community as work, or the community through works, would presuppose that the common being, as such, is objectifiable and producible (in places, persons, edifices, discourses, institutions, symbols; in short, in subjects). The products of operations of that



## NOTES TO THE PREFACE

<sup>1</sup> Nancy's essay first appeared in issue #4 of the magazine *Aléa*, and was later gathered in a book *Le Partage du Vivant* and related essays and published in Paris by Christian Bourin in 1993. An English translation of this essay is presented in this volume. I am indebted to the University of

Chicago for its support in the translation of this work. I am also indebted to the University of Chicago Press for its support in the translation of this work.

<sup>2</sup> *De la Partage du Vivant*, trans. Nancy, ed. Nancy, Paris: Christian Bourin, 1993. I am indebted to the University of Chicago Press for its support in the translation of this work.

<sup>3</sup> *De la Partage du Vivant*, trans. Nancy, ed. Nancy, Paris: Christian Bourin, 1993. I am indebted to the University of Chicago Press for its support in the translation of this work.

<sup>4</sup> *De la Partage du Vivant*, trans. Nancy, ed. Nancy, Paris: Christian Bourin, 1993. I am indebted to the University of Chicago Press for its support in the translation of this work.

<sup>5</sup> *De la Partage du Vivant*, trans. Nancy, ed. Nancy, Paris: Christian Bourin, 1993. I am indebted to the University of Chicago Press for its support in the translation of this work.

<sup>6</sup> There is no "mother tongue" in any of the languages that seem to inhabit the edge of an incommensurable language. As one could claim that every language is always already a second language, his own original is already a translation, the translation of a translation. As someone supposedly equally at home in both languages, my work as a translator in relation to this book could best be described as a dialogue between "my own" languages. I use quotation marks advisedly, for the actual act of writing or translating reaches that this someone "equally at home" translates as someone at a distance from both languages, i.e., at a loss in any one language, and thus from that single and fictional "mother-tongue," the "native" language. No one who writes, and *a fortiori*

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no one who translates, is ever "at home" in a language, for all languages are, finally, foreign languages.

<sup>7</sup> Edited, with an introduction, by Allan Stoekl (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> On Blanchot's articles in the right-wing press during the late thirties, see also "Blanchot at *Combat*: Of Literature and Terror" in Jeffrey Mehlman's *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> For more details on the Collège and transcripts of lectures given by Bataille and others, see Denis Hollier's *Le Collège de Sociologie* (Gallimard: Paris, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> This essay was first published in an English translation by James Hulbert in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (Seabury Press, 1979) and has now been included in *Parages*, Derrida's volume of essays on Blanchot (Galilée: 1986); a bilingual version of the essay can be found in *Glyph 7* (Johns Hopkins: Baltimore, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> In *Vicious Circles: Two Fictions and "After the Fact,"* translated by Paul Auster (Station Hill Press: Barrytown, 1985).

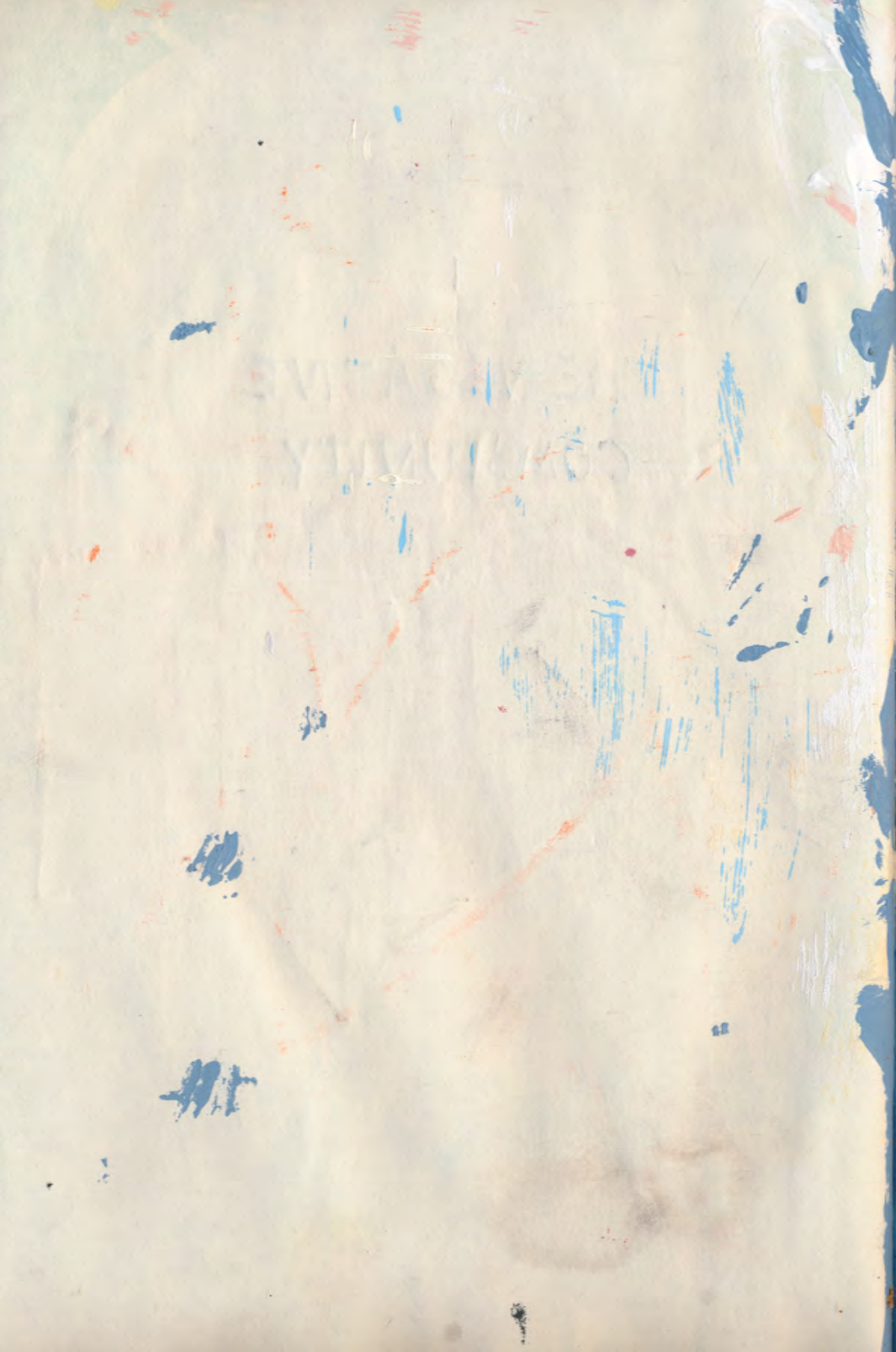
<sup>12</sup> (Gallimard; Paris, 1953); to be published shortly by Station Hill Press in a translation by Lydia Davis under the title *The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me*. The occurrence of *désœuvrement* I am referring to can be found on page 70 of the French edition. Translating *désœuvrement* with the literary/philosophical term "the unworking" may not work as well in a narrative context. The translation here is mine.

<sup>13</sup> Again, in French the word *désœuvrement* as used in the last sentence implies an active sense the English "worklessness" does not convey. Another Blanchot translator, Ann Smock, uses the word "uneventfulness" to translate *désœuvrement*. In a footnote to her translation of *L'Écriture du Désastre* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1986), she writes:

"The uneventfulness of the neutral wherein the lines not traced retreat" is my elaboration upon Blanchot's expression "*le désœuvre-*







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ate" without their proper-improper *abandonment* (which is not simple negation) — these do not permit us to calmly refuse or refute them. No matter what we want, we are linked to them precisely because of their defection. As I write this, I am reading the following lines by Edgar Morin which many of us could make our own: "Communism is the major question and the principal experience of my life. I have never stopped recognizing myself in the aspirations it expresses and I still believe in the possibility of another society and another humanity."<sup>2</sup>

This simple statement may sound naive, but, in its straightforwardness, it expresses exactly what we cannot escape: Why? What about this possibility which, one way or another, is always caught in its own impossibility?

Communism, by saying that equality is its foundation and that there can be no community until the needs of all men are *equally* fulfilled (this in itself but a minimal requirement), presupposes not a perfect society but the principle of a transparent humanity essentially produced by itself alone, an "immanent" humanity (says Jean-Luc Nancy). This immanence of man to man also points to man as the absolutely immanent being because he is or has to become such that he might entirely be a work, his work, and, in the end, the work of *everything*. 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.

Now, this exigency of an absolute immanence implies the dissolution of everything that would prevent man (given that he is his own equality and determination) from positing himself as pure individual reality, a reality all the more closed as it is open to all. The individual affirms himself with his inalienable rights, his refusal to have any other origin than himself, his indifference towards any theoretical dependency in relation to another who



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not to belong to my absence of community." (Citations from the journal *Contre l'Attente*). Let us at least keep in mind the paradox introduced here by the possessive adjective "my": how could the absence of community remain mine, unless it be "mine," as my death would insist on being a death which can only ruin any belonging to anybody as well as the possibility of an appropriation that is always mine?

I will not take up J.L. Nancy's study at the point where he shows Bataille as the one "who has without a doubt gone furthest in the crucial experience of the community's modern destiny." Any repetition here would oversimplify and thus weaken a thought process which textual citations might modify or even reverse. One must however not lose sight of the fact that one cannot be true to such a thought if one does not take into account Bataille's own infidelity, the necessary mutation which forced him to be unceasingly an other while remaining himself and to develop other exigencies which resisted becoming united either because they responded to the changes of history or to experiences, which, not wanting to repeat themselves, had... that (approximate) between... community" imposed its... more than during the following periods, even if the publication of *La Part Maudite* and, later, of *L'Erotisme* (which gives precedence to a certain form of communication) prolongs nearly analogous themes which however cannot be subordinated to what came before (there would be others as well: the unfinished text of *La Souveraineté*, the unfinished text on the *Théorie de la Religion*). One can say that the political exigency was never absent from his thought, though it took on different shapes depending on the interior or exterior urgency. The opening lines of *Le Coupable* speak to this clearly. To write under the pressure of war is not to write about the war but to write inside its horizon and as if it were the companion with whom one shares one's bed (assuming that it leaves us room, a margin of freedom).



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contested without respite by every other being. Even the look that expresses love and admiration attaches itself to me like a doubt touching upon reality." "What I am thinking I have not thought all alone." What we have here is an interweaving of dissimilar motifs which would warrant an analysis, but whose strength resides in the pell-mell of associated differences. It is as if thoughts that can only be thought together crowded around a turnstile, their very multiplicity making any passage impossible. A being does not want to be recognized, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it, so as to start being only in that privation that makes it conscious (here lies the origin of its consciousness) of the impossibility of being itself, of subsisting as its *ipse* or, if you will, as itself as a separate individual: this way it will perhaps exist, experiencing itself as an always prior exteriority, or as an existence shattered through and through, composing itself only as it decomposes itself constantly, violently and in silence.

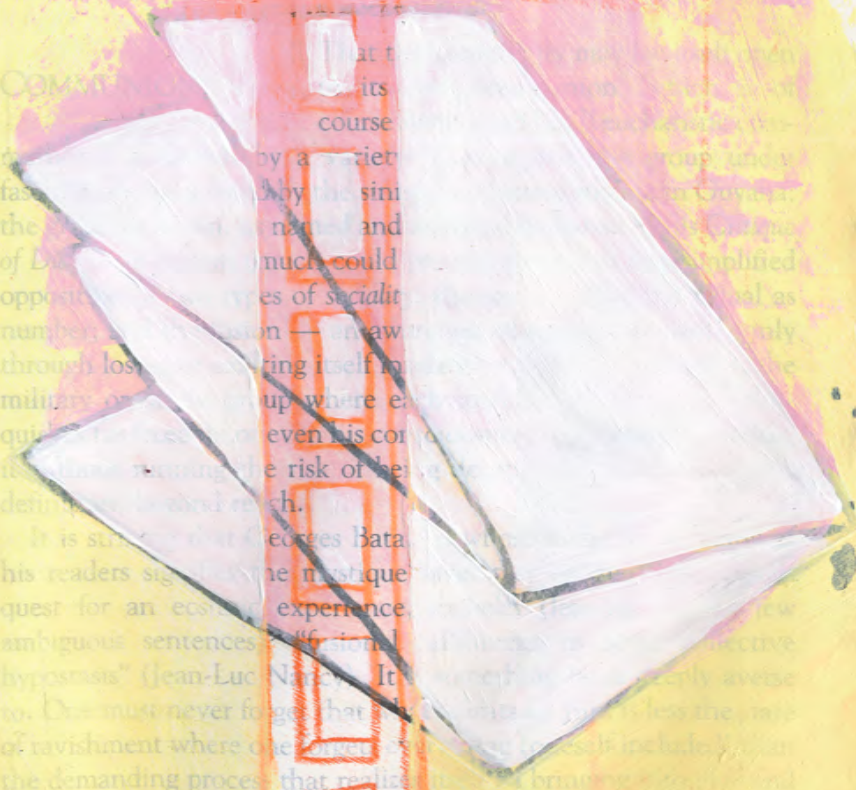
The existence of every being thus summons the other or a plurality of others. (This summoning resembles a chain reaction which needs a certain number of elements to be triggered, though it would risk losing itself in the infinite if that number were not determined, just as the universe composes itself only by unlimiting itself in an infinity of universes.) It therefore summons a community, a finite community, for it in turn has its principle in the *finitude* of the beings which form it and which would not tolerate that it (the community) forget to carry the *finitude* constituting those beings to a higher degree of tension.

We are grappling here with difficulties not easily mastered. The community, be it numerous or not (but theoretically and historically there are only communities of small numbers — the community of monks, the Hassidic community [and the kibbutzim], the community of scholars, the community with a view of forming "a community," or the community of lovers), seems to propose itself

as a teacher... that is to say  
an effort... give rise to a  
unity... itself to the same  
object... of the single  
mily...

COMMIT... its  
course...  
by a...  
fasc... by the sin...  
the... and  
of... much could  
opposite... of socialit...  
number... on — in aw...  
through los... ing itself to...  
military or... up where e...  
qu... even his cor...  
it... the risk of be...  
def... ch.

It is... Georges Bata...  
his readers sig... ne musique...  
quest for an ec... experience...  
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hypostasis" (Jean-Luc... It...  
to... must never fo... that...  
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the demanding proces... that realiz...  
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cannot renounce that insufficiency...  
nence as well as the usual forms...  
this subject I refer the reader to the...  
Infra...



## THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY

Therefore (too hasty a "therefore," I admit), the community should not entrance itself, nor should it dissolve its constituent members into a heightened unity which would suppress itself at the same time that it would annul itself as community. It does not follow, however, that the community is the simple putting in common, inside the limits it would propose for itself, of a shared will to be several, albeit to do nothing, that is to say, to do nothing else than maintain the sharing of "something" which, precisely, seems always already to have eluded the possibility of being considered as part of a sharing: speech, silence.

When Georges Bataille evokes a principle of insufficiency, we believe we understand without difficulty what he is saying. It is however not as easy as all that to understand. An insufficiency in regard to what? An insufficiency to subsist? That, clearly, is not the point. Egoistic or generous mutual aid — as can also be seen at work in animal societies — is not even *sufficient* to found the thought of simple gregarious coexistence. The life of the herd may be hierarchical, but that submission of one to another remains a uniformity that never individualizes. Insufficiency cannot be derived from a model of sufficiency. It is not looking for what may put an end to it, but for the excess of a lack that grows ever deeper even as it fills itself up. No doubt insufficiency wants to be contested, but that contention, even if it arose from me alone, is always exposure to some other (or to the other) who is alone able — because of his very *position* — to bring me into play. If human existence is an existence that puts itself radically and constantly into question, it cannot of itself alone have that possibility which always goes beyond it, for then the question would always be lacking a question (self-criticism being clearly only the refusal of criticism by the other, a way to be self-sufficient while reserving for oneself the right to insufficiency, a self-abasement that is a self-heightening).<sup>4</sup>

## THE NEGATIVE COMMUNITY

### SOMEONE ELSE'S DEATH

What, then, calls me into question most radically? Not my relation to myself as *being* or as the consciousness of being *being* a death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying. To remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another's death, that concerns me: this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open up, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community. Georges Bataille: "A man alive, who sees a fellow-man die, can survive only *beside* himself." The music of conversation which, holding the hand of "another who dies," "I" keep up with him, I don't keep up simply to help him die, but to share the solitude of the event which is the possibility that is mine, his own and which I create, possession — that I dispose of him, finally, to put it to rest (by what truth?), you dying, except that dying, you not only remove yourself, you are also *present* for here you grant me that dying like a gift that surpasses all suffering, and here I tremble softly in what tears, losing speech even as you die, dying with you without you, letting myself die in your place, receiving that which is *you and me*? To which there is the answer: "It is the illusion that makes you live while I am dying." To which there is this answer: "In the illusion which makes you die while you die." (*Le Pas Au-délà*)

### THE DYING PERSON'S FELLOW CREATURE

That is what founds community. There could not be a community without the sharing of the first and last event which in everyone ceases to be able to be just that (birth, death). What does the community pretend to in its suspension of "you and me" such relations of asymmetry that suspend the *tutoyement* [the



COMMUNITY  
AND WRITING

The community is not the place of Sovereignty. It is what exposes by exposing itself. It includes the exteriority of being that excludes it — an exteriority that thought does not master, even by giving it various names: death, the relation to the other, or speech when the latter is not folded up in ways of speaking and hence does not permit any relation (of identity or alterity) with itself. Inasmuch as the community on behalf of everyone rules (for me and for itself) over a beside-oneself (its absence) that is its fate, it gives rise to an unshared though necessarily multiple speech in a way that does not let it develop itself in words: always already lost, it has no use, creates no work and does not glorify itself in that loss. Thus the gift of speech, a gift of "pure" loss that cannot make sure of ever being received by the other, even though the other is the only one to make possible, if not speech, then at least the supplication to speak which carries with it the risk of being rejected or lost or not received.

Hence the foreboding that the community, in its very failure, is linked to a certain kind of writing, a writing that has nothing else to search for than the last words: "Come, come, you for whom the injunction, the prayer, the expectation is not appropriate."<sup>5</sup> [In the original: "Viens, viens, venez, vous ou toi auquel ne saurait convenir l'injonction, la prière, l'attente."]

If it were permitted — it is not; what I want to say is I lack the means — to follow the windings of Georges Bataille's thought in this evocation of the community, we would discern the following stages: 1) the search for a community, should it exist as a group (in which case its acceptance is bound to an equivalent refusal or rejection): the Surrealist group, nearly all of whose individualities "displease," remains a remarkable attempt in its insufficiency: to belong to it means nearly immediately to form a counter-group, to renounce it violently. 2) "Contre-Attaque" is another group

worth studying in detail for what makes its urgency of such a nature that it could subsist only through struggle rather than through its non-active existence. It exists, in any way, only in the streets (a prefiguration of what happened in May '68); that is, outside. It affirms itself through facts that blow right away, leaving no trace. It permits political "programs" to obliterate themselves, though what founds it is rather an insurrection of thought, the tacit and implicit answer to the Sur-philosophy that leads Heidegger (momentarily) to not refuse himself to National Socialism and to see in it the confirmation of the hope that Germany will know how to succeed Greece in its predominant philosophical destiny. 3) "Céphale." It is, I believe, the group that founded for Georges Bataille and which he kept in mind, over the years, as an extreme possibility. "The College of Sociology," as imperfect as it was, was in no way its exoteric manifestation: the College called for a fragile knowledge, engaging its members, as well as its audience, only in a work of reflection, on, and knowledge of, themes partially neglected by the official institutions — themes that were not incompatible with the particularity since the masters of those institutions had been, under various guises, its initiators.

"Céphale" is still bound to its mystery. THE ACÉPHALE. Those who participated in it are not COMMUNITY. They had a part in it. They have not spoken, or else the inheritors of their words are tied to a still firmly maintained reserve. The texts published under that title do not reveal its scope, except for a few sentences which much later still stun those who wrote them. Each member of the community is not only the whole community, but the violent, disparate, exploded, powerless incarnation of the totality of beings who, tending to exist integrally, have as corollary the nothingness they have already, and in advance, fallen into. Each member makes a group only through the absolute loss of the

separation that needs to affirm itself in order to break off so as to become relation, a paradoxical, even senseless relation, if it is an absolute relation with other absolutes that exclude all relation. Finally, the "secret" — which signifies this separation — is not to be looked for directly in the forest where the sacrifice of a consenting victim should have occurred, a victim ready to receive death from the one who could give it to him only by dying. It is too easy to evoke *The Possessed* and the dramatic vicissitudes during which, in order to cement the group of conspirators, the responsibility for a murder committed by one person was destined to enchain one to another all of those who kept their egos in the pursuit of a common revolutionary aim that indeed should have merged them all into one. What we are left with is the mere parody of a sacrifice set up not to destroy a certain oppressive order but to carry destruction into another order of oppression.

The Acéphale community, insofar as each member of the group was no longer only responsible for the group but for the total existence of humanity, could not accomplish itself in only two of its members, given that all had in it an equal and total share and felt obliged, as at Massada, to throw themselves into the nothingness that was no less incarnated by the community. Was it absurd? Yes, but not only absurd, for it meant breaking with the law of the group, the law that had constituted it by exposing it to that which transcended it without that transcendence being other than the group's, i.e., to the outside which was the intimacy of the group's singularity. In other words, the community, by organizing and by giving itself as project the execution of a sacrificial death, would have renounced its renunciation of creating a work, be it a work of death, or even the simulation of death. The impossibility of death in its most naked possibility (the knife meant to cut the victim's throat and which, with the same movement, would cut off the head of the "executioner"), suspended until the end of time the illicit action in which the exaltation of the most passive passivity would have been affirmed.

SACRIFICE AND  
ABANDONMENT

Sacrifice: an obsessive notion for Georges Bataille, but whose meaning would be deceptive if it did not glide continuously from the historical and religious interpretation to the infinite exigency it exposes itself to in what opens it to the others and separates it violently from itself. Sacrifice traverses Madame Edwarda, but does not express itself there. In *Théorie de la Religion*, it is stated: "to sacrifice is not to kill, but to abandon and to give." To link oneself with Acéphale is to abandon and to give oneself: to give oneself wholly, to oneself also dominant. That is the sacrifice that founders the community by undividing by handing it over to another, the one that does not allow the community nor one to give themselves to in any form of *gestalt*, thereby sending them back to a solitude which, far from protecting them, disperses them or dissipates itself without their finding themselves again or together. The gift or the abandonment is such that, ultimately, there is nothing to give or to give to and that time itself is only one of the ways in which this nothing give offers and withdraws itself like the wind of the atomite which goes out of itself by giving off something other than itself, the shape of an absence. An absence which, in a limited way, applies to the community whose only clearly ungraspable secret it would be: the absence of community is not the failure of community; absence belongs to community as its extreme moment or as the moral that exposes it to its necessary disappearance. Acéphale was the shared experience of that which could not be shared, nor kept as one's own, nor kept back, nor an ulterior abandonment. The monks divest themselves of what they have, and indeed of themselves, to impart it to the community, which in turn makes them again the owners of everything with God as guarantor; the same applies to the kibbutz, as well as to actual or utopic forms of communism. The Acéphale community could not exist as such, but only as imminence and withdrawal: imminence of a death closer than any proximity; prior withdrawal of that which

did not permit one to withdraw from it. Privation of the Head thus did exclude not only the primacy of what the head symbolized, the leader, reasonable reason, reckoning, measure and power, including the power of the symbolic, but exclusion itself understood as a deliberate and sovereign act which would have restored the primacy under the form of its downfall. The beheading, which should have made possible the "endless (lawless) unfettering of the passions," could be accomplished only through passions already unfettered, the passions affirming themselves in the unavowable community that its own dissolution sanctioned.<sup>7</sup>

THE INNER EXPERIENCE

Acéphale, before coming into being and in the impossibility of ever being, thus belonged to a disaster that not only exceeded it and exceeded the universe

it was meant to represent, but transcended anything one could name transcendence. It may certainly seem puerile to call upon the "unfettered passions," as if they were, in advance, available and given (abstractly) to whoever offered himself up to them. The only "emotional element" capable of being shared, while escaping any sharing, remains the obsessive value of mortal imminence, that is to say, of time which explodes existence and liberates it ecstatically from everything in it that would remain servile. The illusion of Acéphale is therefore the illusion of abandonment lived communally, the abandonment of and to the ultimate fear which gives ecstasy. Death, the death of the other, like friendship or love, clears the space of intimacy or interiority which is never (for Georges Bataille) the space of a subject, but a gliding beyond limits. "The Inner Experience" says the opposite of what it seems to say: it is a movement of contestation that, coming from the subject, devastates it, but has as a deeper origin the relationship with the other which is community itself, a community that would be nothing if it did not open the one who exposes himself to it to the

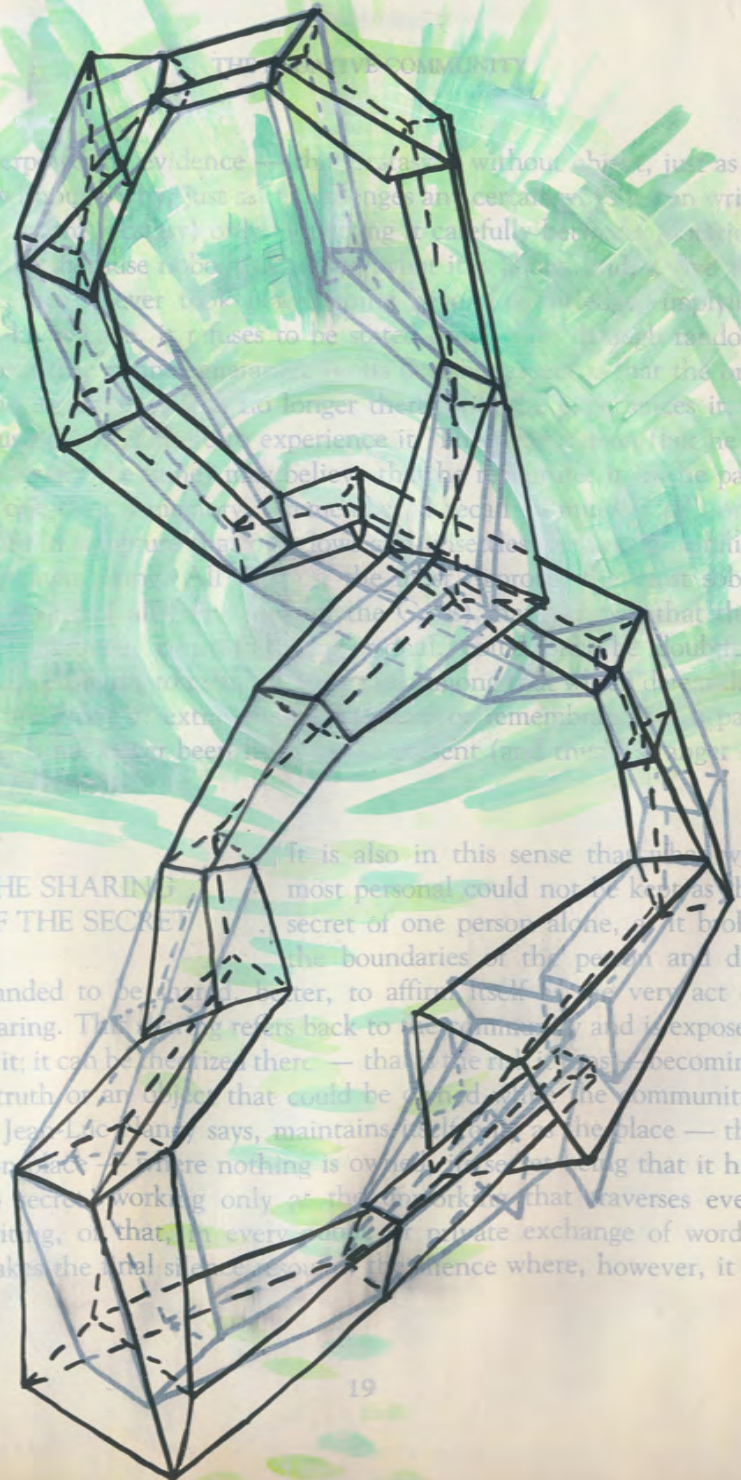
infinite of a law, while at the same time deciding its inexorable finitude. The community, the community of equals, which puts its members to the test of an unknown inequality, is such that it does not subordinate them to the other, but makes them accessible to each other in this new relationship of responsibility (of responsibility?). Every form of community excludes the immediate sharing of anything by anyone in the vanishing of a community. It imposes the knowledge (the experience) of that which cannot be known, that "beside-ourselves" (the abyss and ecstasy without ceasing to be a single person).

Clearly it would be useless and fallacious to search through L'Expérience Intérieure for a substitution or prolongation of what had not been able to take place, even as an attempt in the Acéphale community. It is what was to play demanded to be taken up again in the paradoxical form of a body. In a way, the instability of the illumination needed to be able to be transmitted, to expose itself to others, not in order to reach in them a certain "experience" (which would have featured it immediately) but to reflect itself there by sharing itself and letting itself be contested (i.e., enjoyed differently, or even denounced in accordance with the violation it carried in itself). Thus the exigency for a community did remain. By itself, ecstasy was nothing if it did not communicate itself and, first, did not give itself as the groundless ground of communication. Georges Bataille has always maintained that the Inner Experience could not take place if it was limited to a single individual who could have suffered from the event, its disgrace and glory: the inner experience accomplishes itself, while at the same time persevering in incompleteness when it is shared and, in that sharing, exposes its limits, exposes itself inside the limits it proposes to transgress as if to bring out, through that transgression, the illusion or affirmation of a law that escapes anybody who would pretend to transgress it alone. A law which

does presuppose a community (an understanding or a common accord, be it the momentary accord of two singular beings, breaking with few words the impossibility of Saying which the unique trait of experience seems to contain; its sole content: to be untransmittable, which can be completed thus: the only thing worthwhile is the transmission of the untransmittable).

In other words: there is no simple experience. One needs moreover to have available the conditions without which it would not be possible (in its very impossibility), and this is where a community is necessary (the project of the "Socratic College" which could only fail and which was projected only as the last gasp of a communitarian experience incapable of realizing itself). Furthermore, "ecstasy" itself is communication, the negation of the isolated being who, at the same time as it disappears in that violent rupture, pretends to exalt or to "enrich" itself with what breaks its isolation by going as far as opening itself up to the unlimited — which statements, in truth, seem to be stated only to be contested: the isolated being is the individual, and the individual is only an abstraction, existence as it is represented by the weak minded conception of everyday liberalism. Maybe it is not necessary to have recourse to a phenomenon as difficult to define as "ecstasy" to extricate men from a praxis and a theory that mutilate them by separating them. There is political action, there is a task one may call philosophical, there is an ethical quest (the demand for a morality did not haunt Georges Bataille any less than it haunted Sartre, the difference being that for Bataille that demand had priority, while for Sartre, weighed down by the load of "Being and Nothingness," it could only be second-best, a hand-maiden, and thus, in advance, submissive).

Still, when we read (in the posthumous notes): "The object of ecstasy is the negation of the isolated being," we know that the imperfection of that answer is linked to the very form of a question put by a friend (Jean Bruno). On the contrary, there is evidence —



THE SHARING  
OF THE SECRET

It is also in this sense that... was most personal could not be kept as the secret of one person alone, it broke the boundaries of the person and demanded to be shared. To affirm itself by the very act of sharing. This... refers back to... and is exposed in it; it can be shared there — that... becoming a truth of an... that could be... the community, as... says, maintains... the place — the... nothing is over... that it has no... working only of the... that traverses even writing, or that... private exchange of words, makes the... where, however, it is

## THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY

never certain that everything comes, finally, to an end. No end there where finitude reigns.

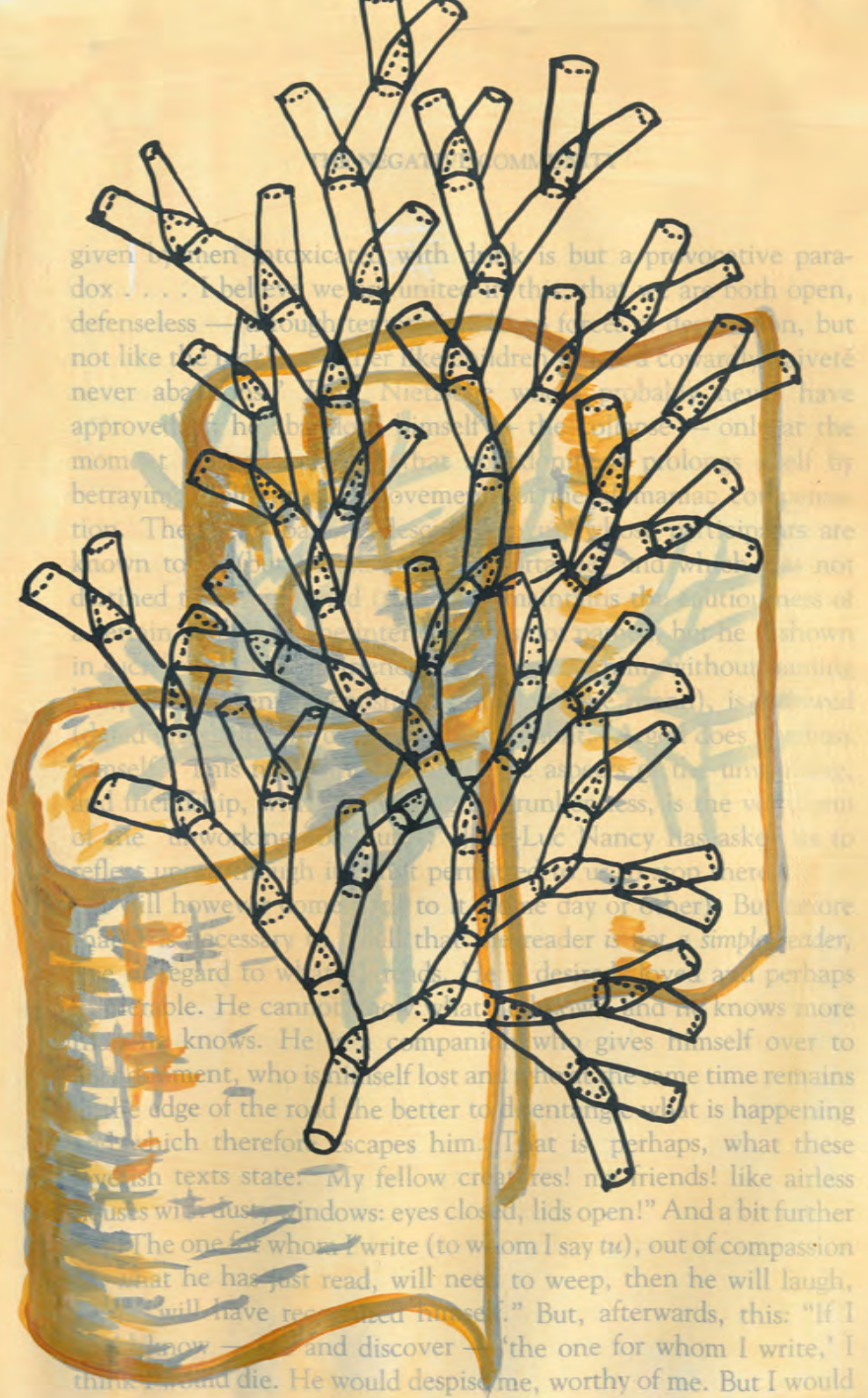
If, as the principle of community, we had the unfinishedness or incompleteness of existence, now as the mark of that which raises it up so high it risks disappearance in "ecstasy," we have the accomplishment of community in that which, precisely, limits it, we have sovereignty in that which makes it absent and null, its prolongation in the only communication which henceforth suits it and which passes through literary unsuitability, when the latter inscribes itself in works only to affirm the unworking that haunts them, even if they cannot not reach it. The absence of community puts an end to the hopes of the groups; the absence of a work which, on the contrary, needs and presupposes works so as to let them write themselves under the charm of unworking, is the turning point which, corresponding to the devastation of the war, will close an era. Georges Bataille will claim at times that, excepting *L'Histoire de L'Oeil* and *L'Essai Sur La Dépense*, everything he had written before — though he may have remembered it only partially — was but the aborted prelude of the exigency of writing. It is diurnal communication: it doubles as nocturnal communication (*Madame Edwarda*, *Le Petit...*) or the notes of a tormented Journal (which is being written without any view towards publication), unless nocturnal communication, that communication which does not avow itself, which antedates itself and takes its authority only from a non-existing author, opens up upon another form of community, when a small number of friends, each one singular, and with no forced relationships between them, form it in secret through the silent reading they share, becoming conscious of the exceptional event they are confronted with or dedicated to. Nothing can be said that would be equal to it. No commentary could accompany it: at best a code word (as are, by the way, Laure's pages on the Sacred, published and transmitted clandestinely) that, communicated to each as if he were the only one, does not recreate



THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY

my life to have meaning for myself, it must have meaning for someone else." Or: "I may not, even for a single moment, stoop to provoking myself to the extreme and cannot differentiate between myself and those among the others with whom I desire to communicate." Which implies a certain confusion: sometimes, and at the same time, the experience ("going to the extreme") can be such only if it remains communicable, and it is communicable only because, in its essence, it is an opening to the outside and an opening to others, a movement which provokes a violent dissymmetry between myself and the other: the fissure and the communication.

The two moments can thus be analyzed as distinct, though they presuppose each other by destroying each other. Bataille says for example: "The community I am talking about is the one that existed virtually because of the existence of Nietzsche (who is its exigency) and which each of Nietzsche's readers undoes by slipping away — that is to say, by not resolving the stated enigma (by not reading it)." But there was a great difference between Bataille and Nietzsche. Nietzsche had the ardent desire to be heard, but also at times the proud certainty of carrying within himself a truth too dangerous or too superior to be welcomed. For Bataille, friendship is a part of "the sovereign operation"; it is not by some whim that *Le Coupable* has as its first subtitle *L'Amitié*; friendship, it is true, is difficult to define: friendship for oneself all the way to dissolution; friendship of the one for the other, as passage and as affirmation of a continuity that takes off from the necessary discontinuity. But reading — the unworking labor of the work — is not absent from it, though it belongs at times to the vertigo of drunkenness: "... I had already imbibed much wine. I asked X to read a passage from the book I was carrying around with me and he read it aloud (nobody, to my knowledge, reads with a more hard-edged simplicity, with a more passionate grandeur than he). I was too drunk and no longer remember the exact passage. He himself had drunk as much as I had. It would be a mistake to think that such a reading



not die from his contempt: survival needs gravity."<sup>8</sup> These movements are contradictory only in appearance: "The one for whom I write" is the one whom one cannot know, he is the unknown, and the relationship with the unknown, even in writing, exposes me to death or finitude, that death which does not have it in it to appease death. What then about friendship? *Friendship: Friendship for the unknown without friends*. Or, moreover, if friendship calls upon the community through writing, it can only except itself (*friendship for the exigency of writing which excludes all friendship*). But why this "contempt"? "Worthy of me" he who, if we admit that he is a living singularity, will have to stoop to the extremes of lowness, that is to say to the experience of the only unworthiness that will make him worthy of me: in a way this would be the sovereignty of evil or the dethroned sovereignty that can no longer be shared and that, expressing itself through contempt, will attain to that depreciation which lets live or survive. "Hypocrite! To write, to be sincere and naked, nobody can do that. I don't want to do it" (*Le Coupable*). And at the same time, in the opening pages of the same book: "These notes link me like Ariadne's thread to my fellow creatures and the rest seems vanity to me. However I cannot give them to any of my friends to read." For that would mean personal reading by personal friends. Thus the anonymity of the book which does not address anybody and which, through its relationship with the unknown, initiates what Georges Bataille (at least once) will call "the negative community: the community of those who have no community."

#### THE HEART OR THE LAW

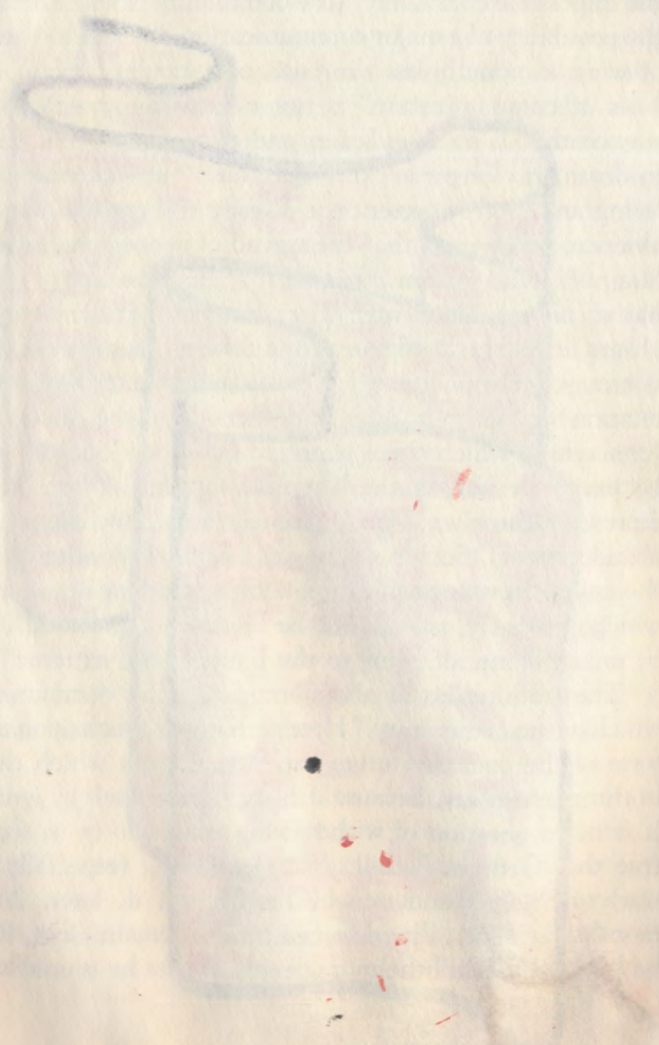
One can say that what designates itself — denounces itself — in these apparently confused notes, are the boundaries of thought without boundaries that needs the "I" to break itself sovereignly and that needs the exclusion of that sovereignty to open itself to a communication that cannot be

shared because it involves the very suppression of the community. There is here a desperate movement to sovereignly deny sovereignty (always sullied by the emphasis that is spoken or lived by a single man in whom all the others are "incarnate") and to gain, through the impossible community (the community of/with the impossible), the possibility of a major communication, "linked to the suspension of what is nonetheless the basis of communication." Now, "the basis of communication" is not necessarily speech, or even the silence that is its foundation and punctuation, but the exposure to death, no longer my own exposure, but someone else's, whose living and closest presence is already the eternal and unbearable absence, an absence that the travail of deepest mourning does not diminish. And it is in this absence — its infinity presence, always under the guise of a disappearance — that friendship is brought to its limit: each moment, a relation without relation of without rather than the incommensurable (concerning which the question is to ask oneself if one has to be sincere or not, if one has to be finite or not, even that it represents the always of the infinite or the finiteness of abandonment). Such a friendship is the friendship that discovers the unknown we are and the meeting of our own solitude which, precisely, we cannot be alone to experience ("incapable, by myself alone, of going to the limits of the extreme").

"The infiniteness of abandonment," the community of those who have no community." Here perhaps we touch upon the ultimate form of the communitarian experience, after which there will be nothing left to say, because it has to know itself by ignoring itself. It is not a question of withdrawing in secret or in secret. If it is true that Georges Bataille had the feeling (especially before the war) of being abandoned by his friends, if, later, during a few months (*Le Peur*), illness forced him to remain aloof, if, in a way, he lives solitude all the more deeply in that he is unable to bear it,

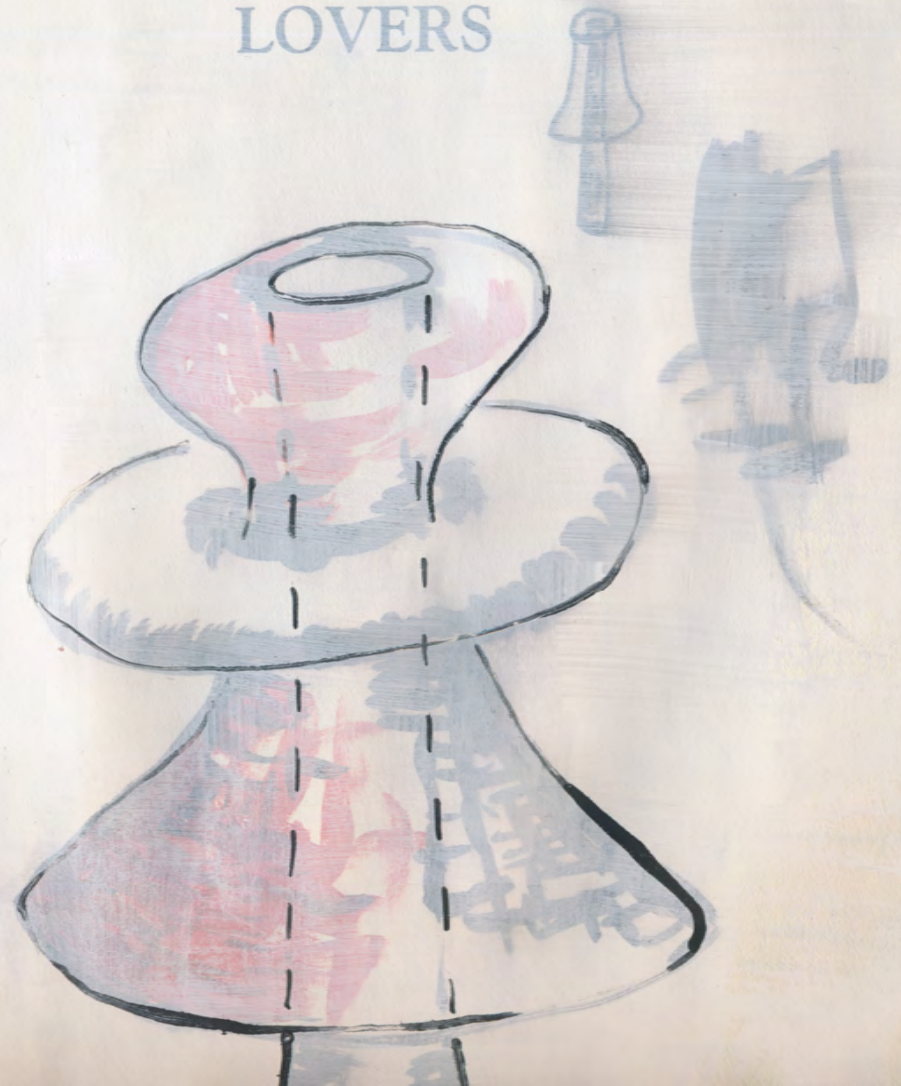
THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY

he knows all the better that the community is not destined to heal or protect him from it, but that it is the way in which it exposes him to it, not by chance, but as the heart of fraternity: the heart or the law.

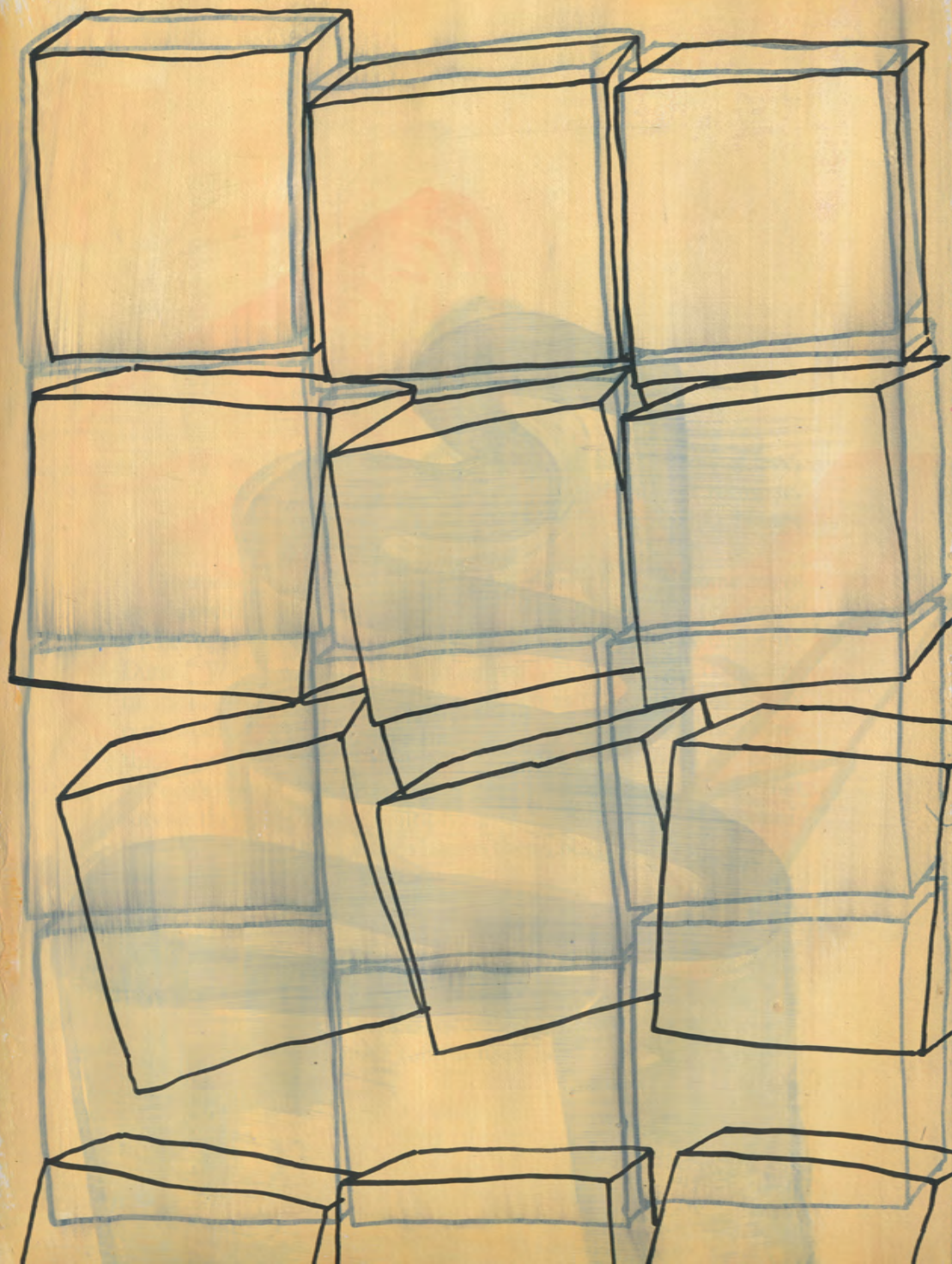


II

THE COMMUNITY OF  
LOVERS



THE COMMUNITY OF  
LOVERS



## THE UNFAVORABLE COMMUNITY

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.

"Without project": that was the characteristic, all at once distressing and fortunate, of an incomparable form of society that remained elusive, that was not meant to survive, to set itself up, not even via the multiple "committees" simulating a disordered-order, an imprecise specialization. Contrary to "traditional revolutions," it was not a question of simply taking power to replace it with some other power, nor of taking the Bastille or the Winter Palace, or the Elysée or the National Assembly, all objectives of no importance. It was not even a question of overthrowing an old world; what mattered was to let a possibility manifest itself, the possibility — beyond any utilitarian gain — of a *being-together* that gave back to all the right to equality in fraternity through a freedom of speech that elated everyone. Everybody had something to say, and, at times, to write (on the walls); what exactly, mattered little. Saying it was more important than what was said. Poetry was an everyday affair. "Spontaneous" communication, in the sense that it seemed to hold back nothing, was nothing else than communication communicating with its transparent, immediate self, in spite of the fights, the debates, the controversies, where calculating intelligence expressed itself less than a nearly pure effervescence (at any rate an effervescence without contempt, neither highbrow nor lowbrow). 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. No serious attempts at reforms, but an innocent presence (supremely uncanny because of that) which, in the eyes of the men of power and eluding their analyses, could only be put down with typical sociological phrases such as *chienlit*, ragtag, mess, etc. from



themselves from the "anonymous and innumerable crowd, from the people spontaneously demonstrating" (Georges Préli).<sup>10</sup> Thus the actionless action-committees' difficulty of being, or that of the circles of friends who disavowed their previous friendship in order to call upon *friendship* (camaraderie without preliminaries) vehiculated by the requirement of being there, not as a person or subject, but as the demonstrators of a movement fraternally anonymous and impersonal.

Presence of the "people" in their limitless power which, in order not to limit itself, accepts *doing nothing*: I believe that in the still contemporary period there has not been a clearer example than the one that affirmed itself with sovereign amplitude when, to walk in procession for the dead of Charonne, an immobile, silent crowd gathered, whose number there was no reason to count because there was nothing to be added, nothing to be subtracted: it was there as a whole, not to be counted, not to be numbered, not even as a closed totality, but as an integrality surpassing any whole, imposing itself calmly beyond itself. 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 (those assassinated at Charonne): the infinite answering the call of the finitude and prolonging it while opposing it. 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. It must not last, it must have no part in any kind of duration. That was understood on that exceptional day: nobody had to give the order to disband. Dispersal happened out of the same necessity that had gathered the innumerable. Separation was instantaneous, without any remainder, without any of those nostalgic sequels that alter the true demonstration by pretending to carry on as combat



what justifies the comparison with what Georges Bataille has called "the true world of lovers," sensitive as he was to the antagonism between ordinary society and "the sly loosening of the social bond" implied by such a world that is, precisely, the oblivion of the world: the affirmation of a relationship so singular between beings that love itself is not necessary for it, as love, which by the way is never a certainty, may impose its requirements on a circle where its obsessions can go so far as taking on the form of the impossibility of loving: be it the unfelt, uncertain torment of those who, having lost "the intelligence of love" (Dante), however still want to tend towards the only beings whom they cannot approach by any living passion.

#### THE MALADY OF DEATH

Is it this torment which Marguerite Duras has called "the malady of death"? When I set out to read her book, attracted by this enigmatic title, I did

not know the answer and luckily I can say that I still do not know it. That gives me the permission to take up again, as if for the first time, the reading and its commentary, both illuminating and obscuring each other. To begin with, what about that title, *The Malady of Death*, which, coming perhaps from Kierkegaard, seems to hold or guard its secret all by itself? Once pronounced, everything has been said without one's knowing what there is to be said as it is not measurable on the scales of knowledge. Diagnosis or verdict? There is something outrageous in its sobriety. It is the outrage of evil. Evil (moral or physical) is always excessive. It is the unbearable which does not permit itself to be questioned. Evil, in its excessiveness, evil as "the malady of death," cannot be limited to a conscious or unconscious "I"; it concerns first of all the other, and the other — someone else — is the innocent, the child, the sick person, whose complaint echoes as the "unheard of" scandal, because it exceeds understanding, while pledging me to respond to it without my having the power to do so.

These remarks do not make us stray from the text proposed, or rather imposed — for it is a declarative text and not a question, even though it appears as such. Everything is decided by an individual "you" that is more than authoritarian, that summons and determines what is going to happen or what could happen to the one who has fallen into the trap of an inexorable fate. For convenience, let us say that it is the "you" of the director giving instructions to the actor who has to pull the fleeting figure he will imagine out of nothing. So be it. But then it has to be understood as coming from the supreme director: the biblical "You" that comes from on high and prophetically traces the rough outline of the part we move through, without our knowing what he is really prescribed for us.

"You wouldn't know her, you would have seen her everywhere at once, in a hotel, in a street, in a room, in a bar, in a book, in a film, in yourself..." The "You" never addresses her, it has no power over her who is indeterminate, unknown, unreal, ungraspable in her passivity, about to be slipping and slumbering and finally fleeting presence.

A first reading will yield this simple explanation: a man, who has never known anybody but those like him, that is to say only other men who are nothing but the reflection of himself, a man thus, and a young woman bound to him by a paid contract for a few nights, for a whole life, who has fed hasty critics to talk about a prostitute though she herself makes clear that she is not, although there is a contract — a relationship that is purely contractual (marriage, money) — because she has felt from the beginning, without knowing clearly, that, incapable of loving, he can only approach her conditionally, after concluding a transaction, just as she apparently abandons herself entirely while abandoning only that part of her that is under contract, preserving or reserving the freedom she does not alienate. From this one could conclude that the exclusiveness of the relationship has been inverted from the onset and that, in a mercantile society, there is indeed commerce between beings but never a veritable "commu-



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perhaps, of Henry James's short story, "The Beast in the Jungle," translated and staged some time ago by Marguerite Duras: "He had been the man to whom nothing was to happen.")

"And she, in the room, sleeps on. Sleeps, and you (the implacable 'you' that either establishes or holds the man it addresses within an obligation prior to all law) don't wake her. As her sleep goes on, sorrow grows in the room . . . . She goes on sleeping, evenly . . . ." A mysterious sleep that has to be deciphered, just as it has to be respected, that is her way of life and prevents one from knowing anything about her, except for her presence-absence which is not unrelated to the wind, to the closeness of the sea the man describes to her and whose whiteness is indistinguishable from that of the huge bed which is the unlimited space of her life, her domain and momentary eternity. To be sure, at times one thinks of Proust's Albertine to whom the narrator — scrutinizing her slumber — was closest when she was asleep, because then the distance preserving her from the lies and vulgarity of life, permitted an ideal communication — only ideal, it is true, and thus reduced to the vain beauty, the pointless purity of the idea.

But unlike Albertine, and yet perhaps also like her, if one thinks of Proust's not unveiled fate, this young woman is forever separate because of the suspect closeness with which she offers herself, her difference which is that of another species, of another type, or that of the absolutely other. ("All you know is the grace of the bodies of the dead, the grace of those like yourself. 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. You realize it's here, in her, that the malady of death is fomenting, that it's this shape stretched out before you that decrees the malady of death.") A strange passage, leading us almost abruptly to another version, another reading: "the malady of death" is no longer the sole responsibility of the one — the man — who ignores the





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TRISTAN  
AND ISOLDE

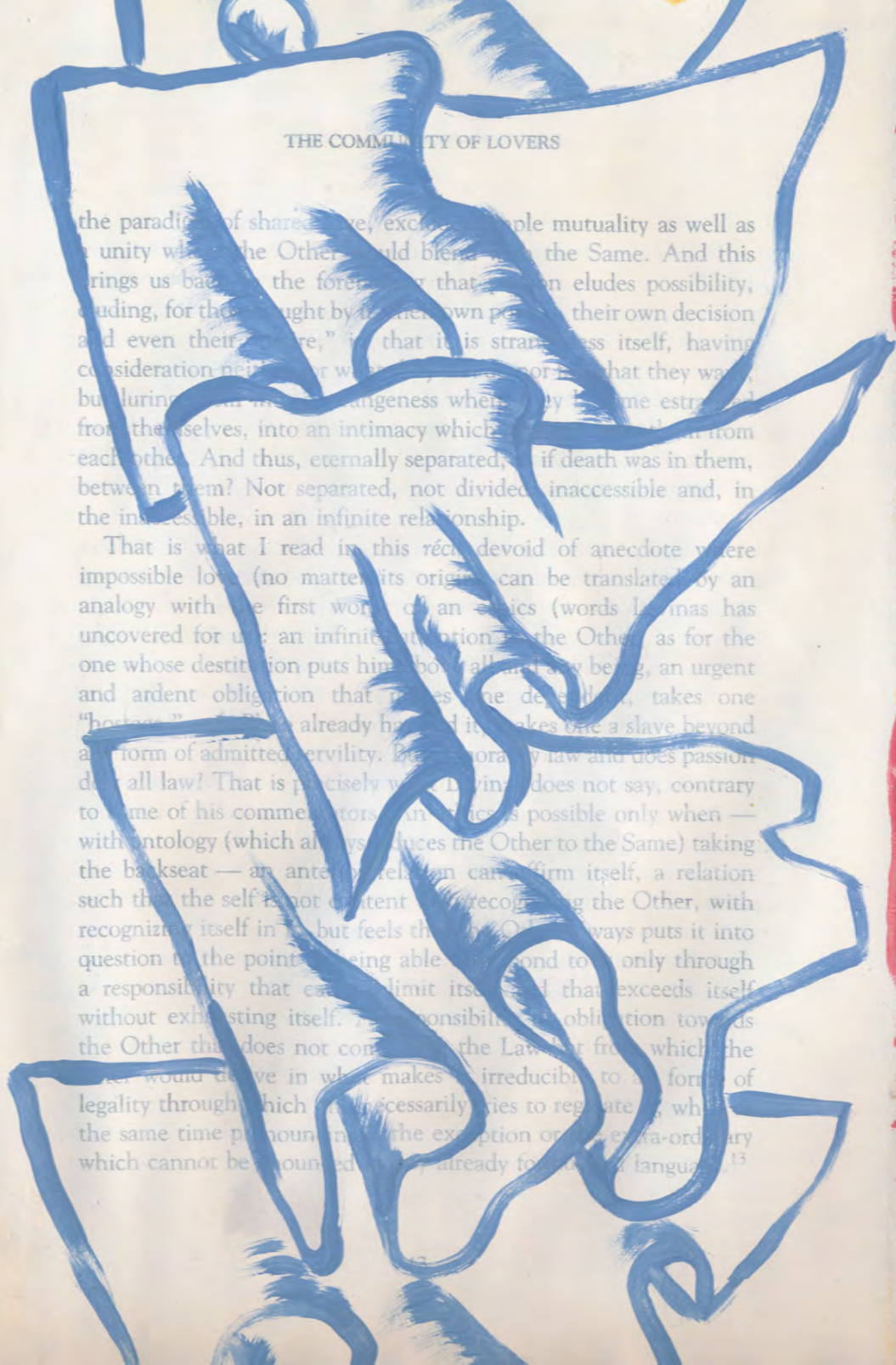
No end, then, to a *récit* that also says in its own way: no more *récit*, and yet an end, perhaps a remission, perhaps a final condemnation. For it so happens

that one day the young woman is no longer there. A disappearance that cannot surprise, as it is but the exhaustion of an appearance that gave itself only in sleep. She is no longer there, but so discreetly, so absolutely, that her absence suppresses her absence, so that to look for her is pointless, just as it would be impossible to recognize her and that to join her, be it only in the thought that she has existed only through the imagination, cannot interrupt the solitude where the testamentary word is murmured endlessly: the malady of death. And here are the last words (are they the last?): *"Soon you give up, don't look for her anymore, either in the town or at night or in the daytime: Even so you have managed to live that love in the only way possible for you. Losing it before it happened."* A conclusion which in its admirable density may state, not the failure of love in a singular case, but the fulfillment of all veritable love which would consist in realizing itself exclusively according to the mode of loss, that is to say realizing itself by losing not what has belonged to you but what one has never had, for the "I" and the "other" do not live in the same time, are never together (synchronously), can therefore not be contemporary, but separated (even when united) by a "not yet" which goes hand in hand with an "already no longer." Isn't it Lacan who said (maybe an inaccurate quotation): to desire means to give what one does not have to someone who does not want it? Which does not mean that love can be lived only according to a mode of expectation or nostalgia, terms too easily reducible to a psychological register, while the relationship that is at stake here is not *mundane*, given that it presupposes the disappearance, even the collapse, of the world. Let us remember Isolde's words: "We have lost the world, and the world, us." And let us also remember that even the reciprocity of the love relationship, as Tristan and Isolde's story represents it,

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the paradigm of shared love, exclusive mutuality as well as a unity where the Other could blend into the Same. And this brings us back to the fore: for that which eludes possibility, eluding, for the thought by its own power, their own decision and even their desire, is that it is strangeness itself, having consideration neither for what they are nor for what they want, but plunging into the strangeness which they become estranged from themselves, into an intimacy which is not shared from each other. And thus, eternally separated, if death was in them, between them? Not separated, not divided, inaccessible and, in the inaccessible, in an infinite relationship.

That is what I read in this *récit* devoid of anecdote where impossible love (no matter its origin) can be translated by an analogy with the first word of an ethics (words Lacan has uncovered for us: an infinite obligation to the Other, as for the one whose destitution puts him below all and any being, an urgent and ardent obligation that makes one despicable, takes one "hostage," and which already has made one a slave beyond a form of admitted servility. The temporary law and does passion do all law? That is precisely what Levinas does not say, contrary to some of his commentators, 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 a responsibility that exceeds itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself. This responsibility of obligation towards the Other that does not conform to the Law, but from which the law would derive in what makes it irreducible to a form of legality through which it necessarily tries to regulate it, which at the same time pronounces the exception or the extra-ordinary which cannot be pronounced or already found in language.<sup>13</sup>



THE LETHAL  
LEAP

Thus: an obligation which is not an agreement in the name of the Law, but is as if anterior to being and to freedom, where the latter is indistinguishable from spontaneity. "I" am not free towards the other if I am always free to decline the exigency that sets me off from myself and excludes me at the limit of myself. But doesn't that apply to passion? The latter pledges us fatally and, as if in spite of ourselves, to another who attracts us all the more in that he seems beyond the possibility of ever being rejoined, being so far beyond everything that matters to us.

This leap that is affirmed by love — symbolized by Tristan's prodigious bound onto Isolde's bed such that no earthly trace of their coming together remains — evokes the "lethal leap" which, according to Kierkegaard, is necessary to elevate oneself to the ethical and, above all, religious level. A lethal leap that will take shape in the following question: "Does a man have the right to let himself be put to death in the name of truth?" In the name of truth? This creates a problem: what if it is for someone else, for helping someone else? The answer is already given in Plato, with the strength of simplicity, when Phaedrus says: "There is no doubt, to die for someone else is something only those who love consent to." And then quotes the example of Alcestis who through sheer tenderness took the place of her husband (it really is the "substitution" of "the one for the other") to save him from the death penalty. Now it is true that Diotima (who, as a woman and foreigner, has the supreme knowledge of Love) will immediately rejoin that Alcestis has in no way asked to die *for* her husband but to acquire, through a sublime act, the renown that will make her immortal in her very death. Not that she did not love, but love has no other object than immortality. Which puts us on the oblique path love opens as a dialectical means to journey by leaps and bounds all the way to the highest spirituality.



THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY

inseparable: the Chthonic or underground Aphrodite who belongs to death<sup>14</sup> towards which she leads those she chooses or who let themselves be chosen, uniting, as one sees here, the sea from which she is born (and does not stop being born), the night which signifies perpetual sleep and the silent injunction addressed to the "community of lovers," so that she later, responding to the impossible exigency, expose themselves and on for the other to death's dispersal. A death, by definition, without glory, without consolation, without recourse, which no other disappearance can equal, except perhaps for that disappearance that inscribes itself in writing, when the work which is its drifting is from the onset the renunciation of *creating a work*, indicating only the space in which resounds, for all and for each, and thus for nobody, the always yet to come words of the unworking.

Through the venom of immortality  
women's passion comes to completion.

(Marina Tsetaieva, *Eurydice to Orpheus*)

TRADITIONAL  
COMMUNITY,  
ELECTIVE  
COMMUNITY

*The community of lovers.* This romantic title that I have given those pages, in which there is neither a shared relationship nor definite lovers, is it not paradoxical? Certainly. But this paradox confirms perhaps the extravagance of what one seeks to designate by the name of *community*? At the onset there is need to distinguish — with whatever difficulty — between traditional community and elective community. (The first is imposed on us without our having the liberty of choice in the matter; it is *de facto* sociality, or the glorification of the earth, of blood, or even of race. But what about the other? One calls it elective in the sense that it exists only through a decision that gathers its members around a choice without which it could not

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with the complicity of the man who loves her momentarily with an infinite passion, she *abandons herself* — it is in this that she symbolizes sacrifice — to the first comer (the chauffeur) who does not know, who will never know that he is in touch with what is most divine or with the absolute that rejects any assimilation.

### THE DESTRUCTION OF SOCIETY, APATHY

The community of lovers — no matter if the lovers want it or not, enjoy it or not, be they linked by chance, by "*l'amour fou*," by the passion of death (Kleist) — has as its ultimate goal the destruction of society. There where an episodic community takes shape between two beings who are made or who are not made for each other, a war machine is set up or, to say it more clearly, the possibility of a disaster carrying within itself, be it in infinitesimal doses, the menace of universal annihilation. This is the level at which one has to consider the "scenario" that imposed itself on Marguerite Duras and which of necessity implicates her, given that she has imagined it. The two beings shown us represent, without joy, without happiness, and as separate as they seem to be, the hope of singularity which they can share with no one else, not only because they are locked up, but also because in their common indifference, they are locked up together with death which the one reveals to the other as that which he incarnates and as the blow she would like to receive from him, as sign of the passion she expects in vain from him. By creating this character who is forever separated from the feminine, even when he couples with a chance woman to whom he gives a pleasure he does not share, Marguerite Duras has, in a way, sensed that it was necessary to go beyond the magnetized circle representing with too much complacency the romantic union of lovers, even if the latter's blind motivation comes more from the need for losing themselves than from any



## THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY

attraction of "inexpressible life, the only one you accept in the end to be united with" (René Char). 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 — so that their common solitude may appear not in front of their own eyes but in front of ours, yes, how not to look there and how not to rediscover "the negative community, the community of those who have no community"?

### THE ABSOLUTELY FEMININE

In a certain way it should be clear that I no longer speak exactly as I should of Marguerite Duras's text. If I force myself to betray it less, I happen again upon the strangeness of the young woman who is always there, as if eternally, in her fragility, ready to welcome everything that may be asked of her. But having written that, I immediately realize the need to express more subtle nuances: she is also refusal, she refuses for instance to call him by his name, i.e., to make him exist nominally; just as she does not accept his tears of which she gives only a restrictive interpretation: she ignores them, protected as she is, cluttering up the whole world without leaving him the slightest space; just as, finally, she refuses to listen to his story of the child, of his childhood, through which he would like no doubt to justify — having loved his mother too much — not being able to love the latter again incestuously in her — a story that is unique for him, banal for her ("she's heard and read it too often, everywhere, in a number of books"). And this means that she is not able to limit herself to being a mother, a substitute for the mother, for she is beyond any specificity characterizing her as such and such. She is thus also the absolutely feminine, and yet remains *this* woman alive to the point of being close to death if he were capable of giving it

## THE COMMUNITY OF FEMINES

to her. This she accepts even though she does not cease to look him in his male closure, looking at him with tuberous eyes, something she then is to distinguish him from her as one of the signs of that malady which she has not.

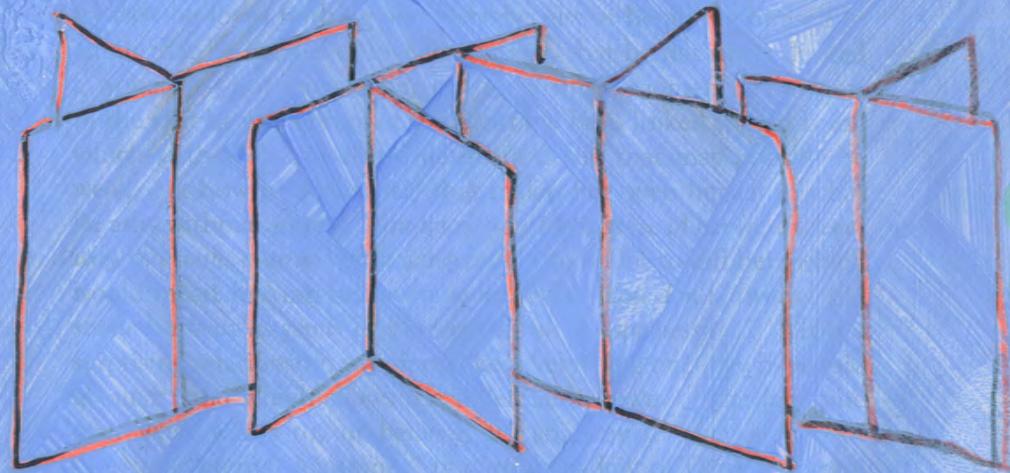
(Heterosexuality, to come to that, is not a disease or pronounced, is not "the malady of death," it is only that it appears in a slightly artificial way, as if it were a disease, with all the nuances of sentiment, (from desire, from passion, from love, from things, be they alike or unequal), his refusal. The malady of death. It is mysterious: refusal of a cure because the young woman had the foreboding that her husband by it would die. She was stricken by a single, it was perhaps to refuse that she accepted the contract, i.e., accepted locking her fate to his. She was that she knew as soon as he spoke, but that she knew without knowing, without having been able to say it: "I'm the first few days I couldn't but a name to me." This is what she says. But the answers she gives concerning such a lethal illness, concerning how precise they are — and which amount to saying: he dies or not having died, he dies without his death being done for any life (he thus does not die or his death deprives him of a name which he will never know) — such answers have no doubt a value, they are what it is he, the one without life, who has invented the strategy to search for life in the knowledge of that he will die, that his existence itself resides in the knowledge of that he will die, of "a... identity system that she and the other woman, and in the risk of a name, of a name capable of putting her in the world (which means that she is also the mother of a name, that is not especially important to her). That is what he wants to try, to try for "several days... even for your whole life." That is what he asks, and he clarifies his demand when answering the question: "Try what?" "Loving me a little." Such an answer may sound naive and touching, but it is proportionate to his ignorance, as if love could be born from a wish to love, to remember.



## THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY

her desire (the fragility of the infinitely beautiful, the infinitely real, which, even under contract, remains without guarantee): who is she? It is too easy to get rid of her, as I have done somewhat offhandedly, by identifying her with pagan Aphrodite or with Eve and Lilith. That kind of symbolism is too facile. In any event, during the nights they spend together (it is quite true that she is essentially nocturnal) she belongs to the *community*, she is born from the community, while making felt, through her fragility, her inaccessibility and magnificence, that the strangeness of what could not be common is what founds that community, eternally temporary and always already deserted. There is no happiness here (even if she says: what joy); "*As her sleep goes on, sorrow grows in the room.*" But to the extent that the man gets a measure of glory from it, believing himself to be the king of unhappiness, he destroys its truth or authenticity, insofar as that unhappiness becomes his property, his fortune, his privilege, that over which he is entitled to weep.

However, it is not that he does not bring something to her also. He tells her the world, he tells her the sea, he tells her the time that passes and the dawn that paces her sleep. It is also he who asks the question. She is the oracle, but the oracle is an answer only through the impossibility of questioning. "*She says: Ask questions then, I can't do it on my own.*" There is, in truth, but one question, and it is the only possible question, asked in the name of all by the one who, in his solitude, does not know that he is asking in the name of all: "*You ask if she thinks anyone could love you. She says no, not possibly.*" An answer so categorical that it cannot come from an ordinary mouth, but only from very high and from very far, a superior jurisdiction that also expresses itself in him in a modicum of partial truths: "*You say that love has always struck you as out of place, you've never understood, you've always avoided loving . . .*" — remarks that turn the first question upside down and reduce it to a psychological simplification (he has voluntarily



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begun; or else she has done her work, she has changed him more radically than he knows, leaving him the memory of a love lost before it could have come to pass. (Similarly, the disciples of Emmaus: they convince themselves of the divine presence only when it has left them.) Or else, and that is the unavowable, uniting with her according to her will, he has also given her that death she awaited, of which he was until then not capable, and which also fulfills his earthly fate — actual death or imaginary death, it does not matter. It evasively consecrates *the always uncertain end* inscribed in the destiny of the community.

*The unavowable community*: does that mean that it does not acknowledge itself or that it is such that no avowal may reveal it, given that each time we have talked about its way of being, one has had the feeling that one grasped only what makes it exist by default? So, would it have been better to have remained silent? Would it be better, without extolling its paradoxical traits, to live it in what makes it contemporary to a past which it has never been possible to live? Wittgenstein's all too famous and all too often repeated precept, "Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent" — given that by enunciating it he has not been able to impose silence on himself — does indicate that in the final analysis one has to talk in order to remain silent. But with what kinds of words? That is one of the questions this little book entrusts to others, not that they may answer it, rather that they may choose to carry it with them, and, perhaps, extend it. 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, always threatened, always hoped for, between what we call work, *oeuvre*, and what we call unworking, *désœuvrement*.

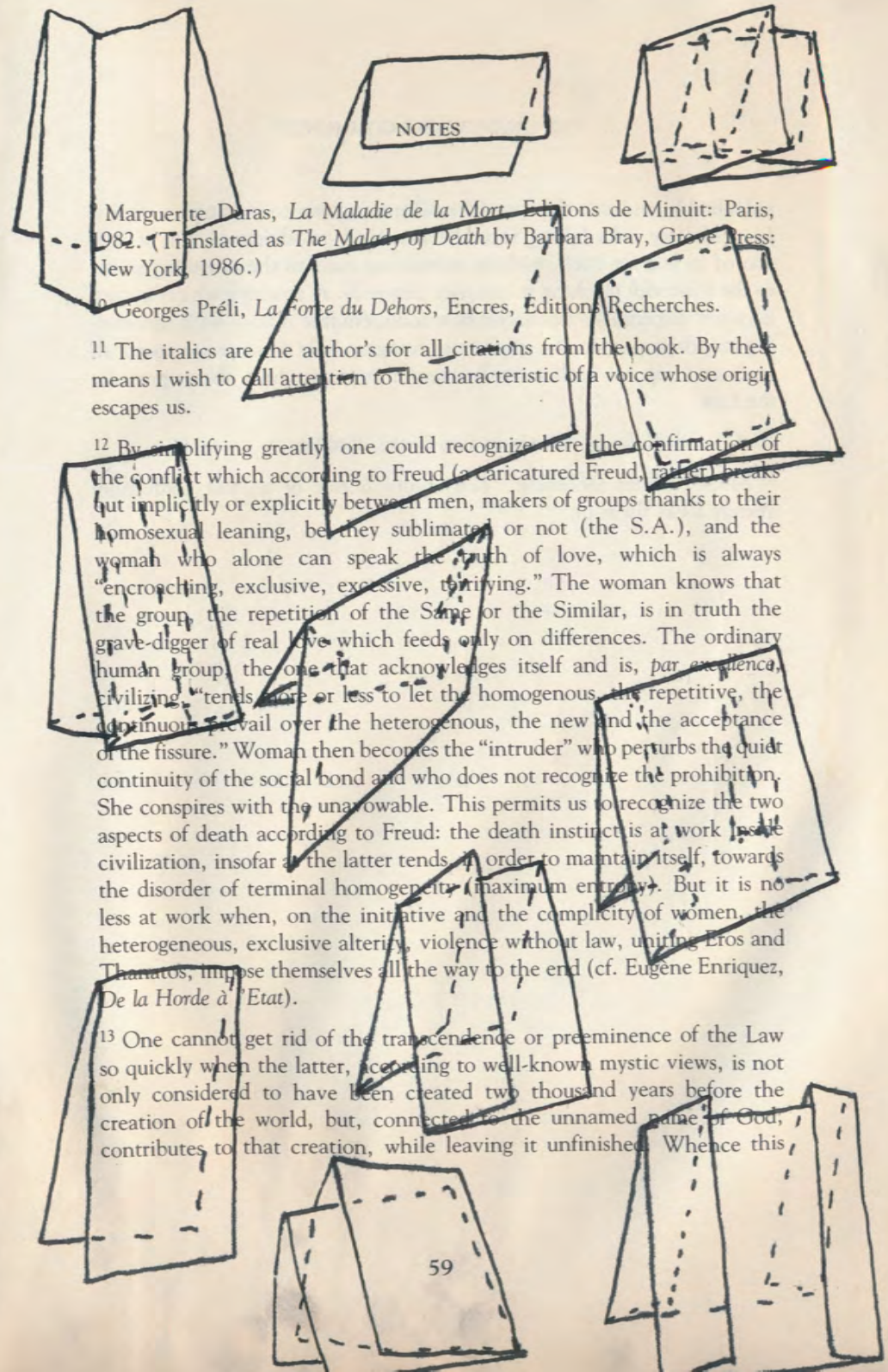


## THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY

any safeguard even for his own giving being: thus the exigency of the infinite that resides in the silence of abandonment.

<sup>7</sup> Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed*, or *The Demons*, originates, as we know, in a minor political event, though highly significant in other respects. We also know that Freud's reflection on the origin of society makes him look into a *crime* (dreamed or fulfilled — but for Freud, of necessity, real, realized) for the passage from the horde to the regulated and ordered community. The murder of the leader of the horde turns the latter into a father, the horde into a group and its members into sons and brothers. "Crime presides over the birth of the group, of history, of language" (Eugène Enriquez, *De la Horde à l'Etat*, Gallimard). One would commit a fundamental error (so it seems at least to me) if one did not discern what separates Freud's reverie from the exigency of Acéphale: (1) Death is indeed present in Acéphale, but murder eludes it, even under its sacrificial form. To begin with, the victim is consenting, a consent that is not enough, as the only one who can give death is the one who, giving it, would die at the same time, that is, could substitute himself for the voluntary victim. (2) The community cannot found itself on the bloody sacrifice of two of its members alone, called upon (scapegoats of a sort) to expiate for all. Each person should have to die for all, and it is in the death of all that each person would determine the community's destiny. (3) But to give oneself, as a project, the execution of a sacrificial death means to break the law of the group whose first requirement is to renounce creating a *work* (even though it be the work of death) and whose essential project excludes all projects. (4) From this follows the passage to a completely different kind of sacrifice, a sacrifice that would no longer be the murder of one person or of all persons, but gift and abandonment, the infinite of abandonment. The beheading, the privation of the Head does not touch the leader or the father, does not institute the others as brothers, but brings them into play by handing them over to the "endless unfettering of the passions." Which links Acéphale to the presentiment of a disaster that would transcend all forms of transcendence.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 5, p. 447, Gallimard.



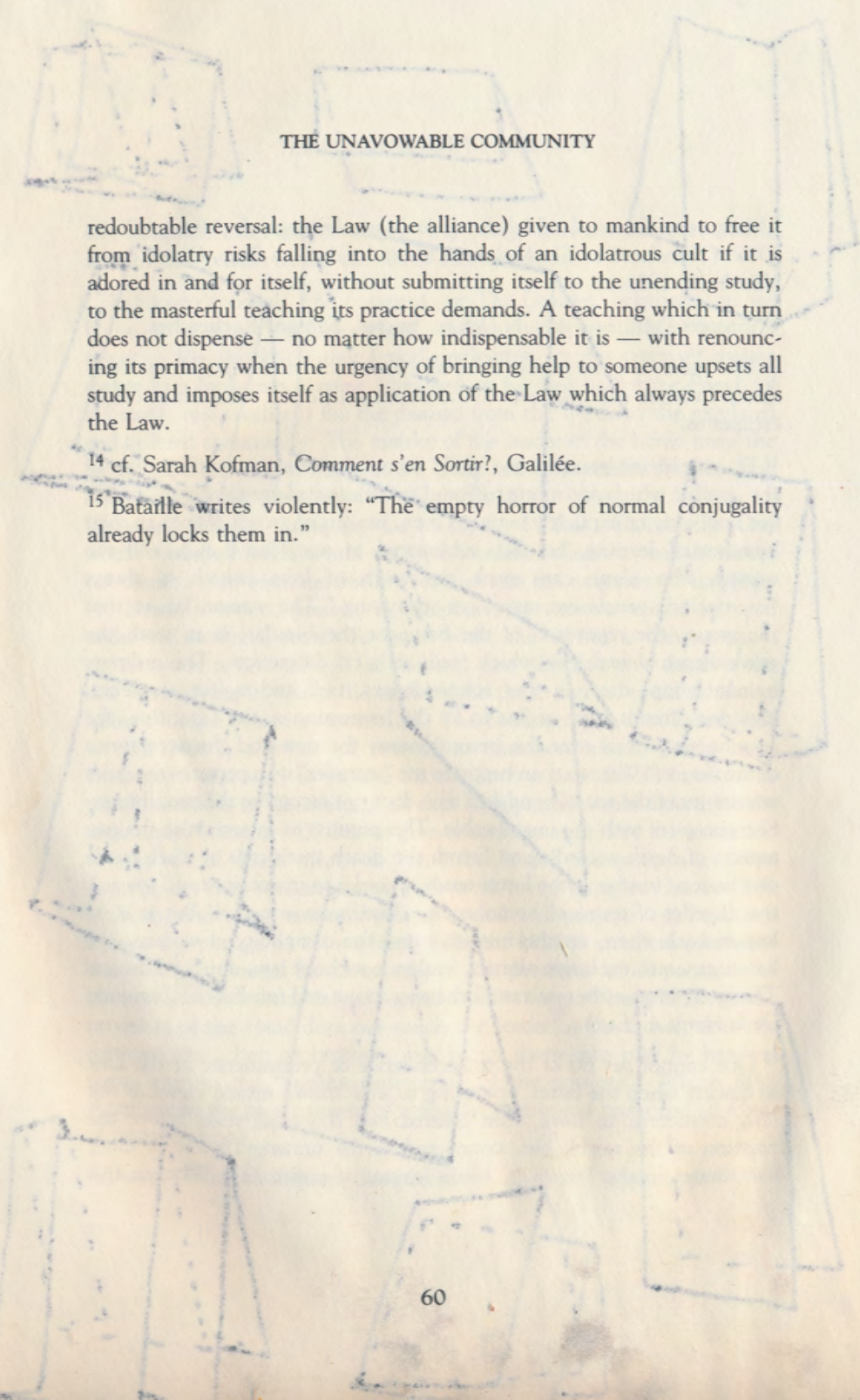
Marguerite Daras, *La Maladie de la Mort*. Editions de Minuit: Paris, 1982. (Translated as *The Malady of Death* by Barbara Bray, Grove Press: New York, 1986.)

<sup>9</sup> Georges Préli, *La Force du Dehors*, Encres, Editions Recherches.

<sup>11</sup> The italics are the author's for all citations from the book. By these means I wish to call attention to the characteristic of a voice whose origin escapes us.

<sup>12</sup> By simplifying greatly, one could recognize here the confirmation of the conflict which according to Freud (a caricatured Freud, rather) breaks out implicitly or explicitly between men, makers of groups thanks to their homosexual leaning, be they sublimated or not (the S.A.), and the woman who alone can speak the truth of love, which is always "encroaching, exclusive, excessive, terrifying." The woman knows that the group, the repetition of the Same or the Similar, is in truth the grave-digger of real love which feeds only on differences. The ordinary human group, the one that acknowledges itself and is, *par excellence*, civilizing, "tends more or less to let the homogenous, the repetitive, the continuous prevail over the heterogenous, the new and the acceptance of the fissure." Woman then becomes the "intruder" who perturbs the quiet continuity of the social bond and who does not recognize the prohibition. She conspires with the unavowable. This permits us to recognize the two aspects of death according to Freud: the death instinct is at work inside civilization, insofar as the latter tends in order to maintain itself, towards the disorder of terminal homogeneity (maximum entropy). But it is no less at work when, on the initiative and the complicity of women, the heterogeneous, exclusive alterity, violence without law, uniting Eros and Thanatos, impose themselves all the way to the end (cf. Eugène Enriquez, *De la Horde à l'Etat*).

<sup>13</sup> One cannot get rid of the transcendence or preeminence of the Law so quickly when the latter, according to well-known mystic views, is not only considered to have been created two thousand years before the creation of the world, but, connected to the unnamed name of God, contributes to that creation, while leaving it unfinished. Whence this



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redoubtable reversal: the Law (the alliance) given to mankind to free it from idolatry risks falling into the hands of an idolatrous cult if it is adored in and for itself, without submitting itself to the unending study, to the masterful teaching its practice demands. A teaching which in turn does not dispense — no matter how indispensable it is — with renouncing its primacy when the urgency of bringing help to someone upsets all study and imposes itself as application of the Law which always precedes the Law.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Sarah Kofman, *Comment s'en Sortir?*, Galilée.

<sup>15</sup> Bataille writes violently: "The empty horror of normal conjugality already locks them in."