

## Our Responsibility: Blanchot's Communism

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There are some for whom the activities of Maurice Blanchot demand indictment or rescue in part or as a whole, presuming to measure the writings and activities of this thinker and others against the standard of our liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup> To those who have received his writings as works of criticism, fiction and phenomenology, these indictments may seem bewildering: why, after all, would Blanchot's political journalism in the war and inter-war years seriously compromise the contribution of his post-war work? I will argue that it is only by understanding Blanchot's claim that his critical work is traversed by the attempt to attend to the "advent of communism" or the "communitarian exigence" that one might grasp how his postwar writings would permit an engagement not only with his earlier work but with the political questions to which his former nationalism was but one response.<sup>2</sup> I will offer a basis for interpreting both Blanchot's postwar interventions in French political life and his writings on literature and art as a response to the communitarian exigence in question, showing how he would unsettle existing social and political institutions and challenge the authority of politicians.<sup>3</sup> Blanchot's communism, I will suggest, expresses the deepest responsibility of his work.

My intention is to explore Blanchot's understanding of the words 'community' and 'communism' through a reading of his *The Unavowable Community*. The first part of this late text—in response to an essay by Jean-Luc Nancy—traces the itinerary of Georges Bataille.<sup>4</sup> According to Nancy, Bataille's participation in the Acéphale group betrayed a nostalgia for a form of communal life that is no longer available. In one sense, Blanchot does not disagree, but he argues that the endeavour of the Acéphale group is instructive—even in its failure it discloses the play of the communitarian exigence in a singular sense. I will show how Acéphale is emblematic of a co-implication of "work" and what Blanchot calls "worklessness"<sup>5</sup> that constitutes our being-together.

1943

Many of the writings that belong to what might be termed Blanchot's 'late period' are testimonies, in which Blanchot speaks for those who are unable to give their own testimony, or whose testimony is in doubt.<sup>6</sup> Since "witnesses to the period are becoming fewer," Blanchot writes of the war and interwar years; "I cannot remain silent while there is still time, and allow credence to be attached to claims which I know to be incontrovertibly untrue."<sup>7</sup> In "Intellectuals Under Scrutiny," Blanchot counters Boris Souvarine's vicious and unjust claim that Georges Bataille's alleged admiration of Hitler would have seen him switch allegiance to the Occupant after the final defeat of the Allies. In the same essay, Blanchot makes a testimony in his own name—a "personal confession" (a startling phrase from a writer notorious for safeguarding his privacy) in the form of a few lines he quotes from a poem by his friend René Char that, he writes, come to him almost every day:

I want never to forget that I have been forced to become—for how long?—a monster of justice and intolerance, a cooped up simplifier, an arctic individual with no interest in the fate of anyone who is not league with him to kill the hounds of hell. The round-ups of Jews, scalpings in police-stations, terrorist raids by Hitler's police on stunned villages, lift me off the ground, strike my chapped face with a red-hot slap of molten iron.<sup>8</sup>

We are told that these words were written in 1943—a date that, Blanchot writes, "hangs suspended above our heads." How can we read them? One might conclude (and here it would be necessary to reread *The Instant of My Death*) that they refer to a certain experience—a call to arms, to responsibility—that precipitated Blanchot's own participation in the Resistance.<sup>9</sup> The confession would be a way, as Jacques Derrida notices, "of saying to all the prosecutors of the world and elsewhere, of this continent and the other continents, that the people of the maquis were comrades and *his* comrades."<sup>10</sup> Blanchot would have told us that his postwar writings would attest to what he was never able to forget; his work, after 1943, would always bear witness to the same demand that drew him into the Resistance.

But the acts of testimony in Blanchot's late writings do not simply protect the honour of himself and his friends, but call for our vigilance in preventing the return of what he calls "1943." In an essay published in 1986 in Derrida's and Tlili's *For Nelson Mandela*, Blanchot recalls us to the 'hard facts' concerning apartheid in order to reawaken our responsibility: we are reminded that "we are a party to a barbarousness, the suffering, and the countless murders to the extent that we greet these facts with a certain indifference and spend our days and nights untroubled."<sup>11</sup> We are responsible—guilty—when we

do not add our voices to the denunciation of this regime, when we do not, that is, detect the return of what Blanchot calls “1943” in 1986 and today, in our midst, in other forms and in other names.<sup>12</sup>

It is the name of answering to our responsibility that Blanchot links his name to a word that has been exposed to the “grandiose miscalculations of history” as much as any other: Communism.

### **Community, Communism**

As Linda Singer observes, “the elasticity of community is its appeal”—it can, she writes, “be offered as an object of appeasement or incitement, aspiration or accomplishment.”<sup>13</sup> For the left, community activism might permit a grassroots revival of popular support; for the right, the return of managerial responsibility to the community cynically masks the dismantling of the welfare state. For gays, blacks and feminists, the appeal of the notion of community affirms a resistance to false inclusion and to the erasure of specific differences; for politicians seeking re-election, the desire to produce a sense of collective affiliation is expressed in the appeal for all to recognize themselves as members of a general community. Singer concludes that the word community has no objective referent—“community is not a referential sign but a call or appeal”—that promotes responses and callings back in return, promoting exchanges and conversation.

Blanchot envisages just such a “calling back” when he writes of communism. Communism, for him, names the attempt to answer to call of community, the communitarian exigence. To this extent, the practice of communism outstrips any instantiation of communism since it would point to a happening that cannot be enclosed or incarnated in any determinate form. It is by attending to a certain “happening” of community that he would discover hitherto hidden potentialities within all positive political institutions and, more generally, within contemporary civilization as a whole. For this reason, communism and community always bear what he calls a “flaw in language” insofar as “we sense that they carry something completely other than what could be *common* to those who would belong to a whole, a group, a council, a collective, even where they deny belonging to it, whatever the form of that denial.”<sup>14</sup>

Communism, for Blanchot, names the practice that responds to the communitarian exigence in the affirmation of a relation to the other, to what is outside the ‘*cum*’ or ‘with’ that is held in common. Blanchot invites us to think an exigence that is as exacting now as it has ever been—to respond to a call that resounded in 1986 and in the events that happened in 1943 and even, as he shows in *The Unavowable Community*, in one of Bataille’s most notorious projects—Acéphale.

## Bataille's Itinerary

The indefatigable research of Georges Bataille attest to the paradoxes of community in a manner that is perhaps unparalleled. It was the task of rethinking the sense of being-together, of community, in the face of fascism, that informed his early discursive and polemical essays, and his co-formation with Boris Souvarine's of *La Critique Sociale*. In 1934, he co-formed the political group *Contre-Attaque*, which sought to divert the appeal of fascism for the mob from the cult of the leader and accession to the power and the authority of the state. The *Contre-Attaque* group also resisted the authority of contemporary left-wing and communist groups with equal fervour. Later in the decade, he formed the *College of Sociology* with the aim of collectively exploring the question of the sacred, drawing lessons from the modes of communal existence in various marginal groups, e.g. priestly brotherhoods, heretical and orgiastic cults, monastic and military orders and terrorist organizations, in order to address the urgent social crises of the day. It was in the same period that Bataille brought together the secret society Acéphale.<sup>15</sup>

The formation of Acéphale was not intended as an incitement of a mass movement nor as the core of an organized political party. Also giving its name to a journal, four issues of which appeared between 1936 and 1939, the Acéphale group was committed to the overturning of the "world of the civilized" as it determined the experience of its members (of whom there were never more than a handful). Of the society itself, Bataille writes, "it is difficult to speak, but it seems that some of its members at least have retained an impression of a 'voyage out of the world'," either way, the group disbanded in September 1939, when all of its members withdrew.<sup>16</sup>

In the preface to the first issue of the journal, Bataille argues that it is too late to be "reasonable and educated" in the response to the civilized world.<sup>17</sup> The world rewards 'only self-interest and the obligation to work'; this "life without appeal" instils a morbid guiltiness in those who would attempt to transform it.<sup>18</sup> Bataille's group aimed to suspend this guilt, lifting the curse of the demands of work and feelings of guilt through certain secret rites and practices. Members of the group would be able to "participate in the destruction of the world as it presently exists, with eyes open wide to the world which is yet to be."<sup>19</sup> This destruction would have done with the ordering principle that provides an ultimate ground of reasons and rationality—it is God, a Bataillean 'God,' who would die at Acéphale. The plan to sacrifice a human victim was intended to allow all the members of the group to participate in the death of 'God'.<sup>20</sup> This participation would be the opening of community (in Blanchot's terms)—a "*cum*" that is no longer determined by the demand to work or self-interest. By decapitating themselves through their exposure to a human sacrifice they would welcome the world to come—a kind of community that had never yet existed. This is not to say that this community could ever arrive once and for all; it was only an instant of freedom that was sought at Acéphale.

But God did not die in the forest where the members of the group met; a willing victim could be found, but not a willing executioner.

### **The Work of Death**

In the article that prompted Blanchot's long discussion of Bataille in *The Unavowable Community*, Nancy charges the Acéphale group with a certain *nostalgia*:

aside from the scorn immediately aroused in him by the foulness of the fascist ringleaders and their methods, Bataille went through the experience of realizing that the nostalgia for a communal being was at the same time the desire for a work of death.<sup>21</sup>

For Nancy, Acéphale led Bataille to realize that it is not through a project that the project as such—'God'—can be destroyed. Bataille sought to revive a "modern, feverish kind of 'Rousseauism'" in which sacrificial death allows absence—nothingness *par excellence*—to be reintegrated into the life of a community.<sup>22</sup> In the experience of Acéphale, Nancy discovers a vivid awareness of the dangers of the appeal to community—Bataille resists the dream of a collective 'essence' that would allow the group to constitute itself as an organic unity through the submergence of difference and the affirmation of a shared essence (one that would transcend the particularity of the members). But Nancy also implies that this dream haunted the formation of Acéphale—that it might be the experience of Acéphale that would have allowed Bataille to learn what was particularly invidious about fascism. In this sense, Acéphale occupies a liminal position in Bataille's exploration of community. Its members sought to address the crisis of community that permitted the emergence of fascism, but did so by revealing a nostalgia for a notion of being-together that depends upon a certain *putting to work* or *mobilization* of death.

The phrase "work of death," points towards discussions of death in Hegel of which, as a pupil of Alexandre Kojève, Bataille was eminently aware. As Hegel writes, death is "non-actuality" (*Unwirklichkeit*); the life of Spirit "is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures and maintains itself in it."<sup>23</sup> The vitality of Spirit, which allows it to progress, depends, for Hegel, on death—upon "looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it." To negate something is therefore, in this context, also to *kill* it. The progress of the dialectic depends upon the capacity of consciousness to distinguish itself from what is immediately at hand, but at the same time to appropriate the immediate in the name of the Concept—a capacity that sets subject apart from object by means of the work of

death. In this sense, the confrontation and overcoming of death can be said to render the movement of the Hegelian dialectic possible. It is, for Hegel, through the sublation of death that the other can be experienced as the other.

Lecturing on what Bataille calls the “philosophy of death” in the 1930s, Kojève was confident that the completion of the work of death—the actualization of the Hegelian system as the inevitable, univocal culmination of the historical process in the community of satisfied, free subjects—was at hand. In a letter to Kojève of 1937, Bataille asks what there is to do at the end of history, where, as it seems, there is no longer any need to “do” anything:

If action (“doing”) is (as Hegel says) negativity, then there is still the problem of knowing whether the negativity of someone who “doesn’t have anything more to do” disappears or remains in a state of “unemployed negativity.” As for me, I can only decide in one way, since I am exactly this “unemployed negativity.”...I think of my life—or better yet, its abortive condition, the open wound that my life is—as itself constituting a refutation of a closed System.<sup>24</sup>

What can we make of Bataille’s claim, when, as we have seen, the end of history already presumes a *negation of negation*? Unemployed negativity is not simply a forgotten or left over piece of nature—a pocket of heterogeneity that had somehow escaped its integration into the system through the work of death. Bataille’s life would attest to an excessiveness of death over the possibility of its mobilization—it would remain a workless, idle leftover, unaccounted for in the totalizing onroll of the dialectic. But Nancy argues that the members of *Acéphale* sought to mobilize death in a manner analogous to Hegel. Bataille would, on Nancy’s account, come to learn from *Acéphale* that it is in terms of unemployed negativity that the call of or from community should be thought—that his own life, or, for that matter, the life, the existence of anyone escapes the work of death.

But does *Acéphale*—like any project, any attempt to make death work—already attest to the play of unemployed negativity? To argue that death exceeds its deployment is to point to a dissension that inhabits death, permitting its mobilization and its resistance to mobilization. Likewise, to conceive community in terms of its withdrawal from any positive determination of being in common is to disclose a heterogeneity or dissension in the ordinary conception of community. The question as to the reserve or withdrawal to which *Acéphale* would attest is one that Blanchot takes up in the wake of Nancy’s reflections, reflecting, as part of his more general concern with the research of Bataille, upon the paradoxes of the communitarian exigence as they revealed themselves at *Acéphale*.

In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot organizes his reading of Bataille’s reflections around a certain “principle of insufficiency” which is to be understood

in terms of a susceptibility, vulnerability or passivity. It would be this insufficiency, understood as existence itself, that would drive the human being to breach its integrity or self-sufficiency. “The sufficiency of each being,” Bataille writes, “is endlessly contested by every other.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike Hegel, for whom it is ultimately possible to overcome insufficiency—to negate the distance between subject and object and thereby to do away with alterity once and for all, Bataille’s account of the encounter with the other human being indicates how a dissension inhabits negation such that no negation of negation is possible. Bataille reminds us that the other cannot be re-integrated into the same—that it is always through a desire *to be contested* that the “I” is driven towards the other.

At *Acéphale*, however, this desire to be contested, as Nancy avers, is harnessed and put to work in the attempt to sacrifice a willing victim. To expose the group to the murder of one of their members is an attempt to have done with “God,” understood as the principle of what Bataille calls “the civilized world.” However, this exposure remains, insofar as it is projected and prepared for, implicated in the world from which the members of *Acéphale* would attempt to escape.

Blanchot anticipates Nancy’s argument in an essay written on the occasion of Bataille’s death in 1961 (later republished in *The Infinite Conversation*) claiming that the *Acéphale* group were trapped within the logic of the “civilized world” from which its participants tried to escape. As Blanchot acknowledges, the “act of supreme negation” that its members sought to accomplish did not permit the decapitation that they sought; *Acéphale* remains a project, albeit one that would undertake to overcome projection. The sacrifice would be simply a manifestation of the same power by which the human being is able to negate nature and negate itself, labouring to produce a world, and, in so doing, produce itself as the master of the world. As such, the fundamental project of *Acéphale* is governed, like any project, by the paradoxical demand to negate with the ultimate object of negating negation itself away. The projected sacrifice belongs to the more general project of the “civilized world” and for that reason would continue to forestall the moment when the human being—any of us—would run up against “the decisive contestation.”<sup>26</sup> It does not give vent to the excess of negativity to which I have referred, i.e., to a reserve of death that fails to be exhausted in action and will not permit itself to be transformed into power. *Acéphale* fails in its central aspiration because there is a dying simultaneously heterogeneous to and co-implicated with the work of death.

## **The Death of the Other**

*Acéphale*, it is clear, fails in its own terms as well as those who would measure

success in terms of an outcome; but Blanchot would draw a lesson from its “failure,” showing how the attempt to make death work conceals a simultaneous and unanticipated worklessness—that is, the play of unemployed negativity that falls outside any avowed project. Acéphale is emblematic not only because the project to complete a sacrifice is a figure for the work of death, for the negativity that bestows the possibility of any positive social institution, but because, Blanchot argues, the call of or from community reveals itself in “my presence for another who absents himself by dying.”<sup>27</sup> It is the experience of the dying other as an experience of unemployed negativity upon which Blanchot focuses in his essay on Bataille.<sup>28</sup> As he continues:

to remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community.<sup>29</sup>

It is when I am ‘proximate’ to the other as that person dies, when I “take on” the other’s death, concerning myself with it before and rather than anyone else’s death, *including my own*, that I am questioned most profoundly. In my ‘proximity’ to this dying other, I am contested in such a way that I am exposed to what Blanchot calls the “Openness” of a community. I do not voluntarily *seek* this proximity; I do not *choose* to open myself to this encounter, but am, instead, exposed to it, and, in this exposure, Opened to what Blanchot calls a community. Upstream of my volition, my intentionality or my will, I am “put beside myself” through my exposure to the dying other. The death of the other overwhelms me, and, in its excessiveness, forces me to take it on, that is, to receive or assume it before my concern for my own mortality or for the mortality of those who are close to me.

Blanchot’s argument can be contrasted to Heidegger’s claim in *Being and Time* that the fact that I will die can impress itself with a special urgency. Heidegger argues that by comporting myself in the right way towards the fact that I will die and indeed, the fact that I could die at any time, I can assume my own existence in a specific sense. For Heidegger, for example, the confrontation with the fact that I will die can allow me to “take over” my existence for myself. True, I cannot change what Heidegger calls my “thrownness”—the fact that I am heir to the choices I selected in the past, and even to the sheer and naked fact that I exist—but I can, according to him, alter my relation to that thrownness. The possibility of seizing my own existence as my existence, allows Heidegger to write in *The History of the Concept of Time* that “I myself am in that I will die.”<sup>30</sup>

By contrast, what Blanchot asks us to consider is a relation to the death of the other that debars me from the possibility of taking over my own death and thereby assuming myself as myself. To be before the Other as that other dies is to be affected by that death

in such a way that my own self-relation is transgressed. But I am not merely distracted from my own affairs when I confront the dying other, nor does his plight move me to the extent that I take it upon myself to do all that is in my powers to alleviate his suffering. Rather, to be affected by his dying concerns—*implicates*—me before I might have the chance to assume an authenticating relation to my death. Indeed, since the possibility of being exposed to the death of the other—who is any other not just someone who is close to me—the possibility of “proximity,” “separation,” and “Openness” to a community means that I can never take over my existence once and for all. I cannot make of my impending death the principle that would allow me to take hold of my existence because such a “taking hold” remains provisional while I might be made to “take on” the death of the other. I am always old enough to die, but I am also always old enough to be proximate to the dying other, which means my relation to my own death is never primordial. I can never reclaim my existence as my existence in the world into which I am thrown; my ownmost sphere of existence—what Heidegger calls my “mineness”—is not originary.<sup>31</sup>

It is the “*cum*” of community as it reveals itself in certain kinds of relation to the other human being (of which the relation to the dying other is one kind) that first permits the “I” to exist.

### **Bataille’s Impatience**

Blanchot writes of Acéphale:

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 absoluteness 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 the other absolutes that exclude all relation.<sup>32</sup>

The phrase “totality of beings” refers to human society as such, bound together in the life that falls short of preserving its relation to the communitarian exigence. This failure arises from a tendency that is equally at work in constituting the integrity of society and the integrity of the individuals who ostensibly make up such a society. Each member of Acéphale is bound both by this tendency and by a movement or lability towards what Blanchot calls a “nothingness.” The pre-voluntary movement towards integrity and identity and the movement towards nothingness are co-implicated; the human being *ek-sists* in such a way that it would expose the individual to the

communitarian exigence. This tension can also be found organizing the so-called “totality of beings,” that is, the civilized world as such and in general. Each member of the Acéphale group can be said to incarnate the same exigencies that govern the social body as a whole. Certain “paradoxical” and even “senseless” relations to others endanger the integrity and cohesion of “human society”; a certain violence, explosion and powerlessness happens as the Openness to community.

The participants in Acéphale were dedicated to a destruction of a certain kind, that is, to a rekindling of the desire that was excluded from the guilt, self-interest and work of the civilized world. To grant this desire its full, destructive force would, for Bataille, detach the body of the world from the ‘head’, thereby decapitating ‘God’ through the sacrifice of a willing victim. The participants hoped, through this sacrifice, to temporarily overthrow the demands that structure the civilized world. It would circumvent the feelings of guilt, as well as the self-interest and devotion to work on the part of the participants, allowing them to break from whole of the civilized world and its societies and ultimately from the primacy of reason. Locally, temporarily, the sacrifice would destroy what symbolically holds reason in place—i.e., God, understood as the ‘head’ who caps and thereby guarantees the social order and assigns us our place within it. Bataille’s “God” binds us to our labours, and directs us towards a common good, submitting civilized life to the general project of deploying death in order to overcome death, to have done with negation through negation.

However, the co-implication of the movement towards nothingness with the movement to realize projects, that is, to work, means that the Acéphale group is caught up immediately in the general project that “God” implicitly sanctions. As Blanchot acknowledges in *The Unavowable Community* (reconfirming his earlier account of Acéphale in *The Infinite Conversation* and the arguments in Nancy’s book), “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.”<sup>33</sup> The project of Acéphale remains a project; the attempt to perform a human sacrifice is still a work of death. Blanchot continues:

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.<sup>34</sup>

The Acéphale group attempted to bring about an event that, in turn, would Open each of them what Blanchot in the happening of community—the communitarian exigence. But whilst there is no doubt that Bataille intended the sacrifice to occur, Blanchot argues that this attempt to make death work is contended by the paradoxes that attend upon this “working.” No member of the group could kill a co-member since they would not be

able to accomplish this sacrifice in the same way as they might complete other “works” in the world. The intention to carry out a sacrifice, to make death work, whether or not the group actually realized their ambition dooms their project to failure. The group is unable to reaffirm its mastery over death in the sacrifice that is supposed to accomplish the liberation of its members from “God.” The intention to cut the throat of the victim in order to actualize the “work” or the “project” of the group is subject to an alteration even as the ostensible executioner brings the knife to the would be victim’s throat. The intended action is suspended indefinitely—“until the end of time”—since it suspends the freedom or initiative upon which the ordinary experience of time is predicated.

Thus, for Blanchot, the failure of Acéphale is instructive, since it shows in a particularly striking and even lurid way the happening of community in the suspension of the ordinary course of time in which volition and will are possible. The community opens as the suspension of time in which death *fails to happen*. This is why, indeed, Blanchot writes of “the sacrifice that founds the community by undoing it, by handing it over to time the dispenser, time that does not allow the community nor those who give themselves to it any form of presence.”<sup>35</sup> The community “happens” through a prevoluntary “taking on” of the death of the other that, contesting the subjectivity or will of any of its members, happens as the interruption of the order of time. Each member of the group is caught up in the disjunction of time that prevents the decapitation of God. The exposure to the death of the other in this context does not occur so as to allow it to be reclaimed—or, as Blanchot puts it, “exalted”—through the negation of negation. Death cannot be “taken on” by the members of Acéphale because at the very moment when they would “make good” upon that death (and, thereby, upon the principle of insufficiency—their finitude) there is no longer anyone “there” to be resolute. In organizing Acéphale around the (impossible) project of a sacrificial death, its members make death into something that “works,” ironically indicating its affinity with the civilized world from which the group would separate itself.

On this reading, Bataille would not be patient enough: by interrupting the exposure that opens as the “happening” of community (and thereby interrupting interruption itself by suspending the suspension of time, by refusing to heed the communitarian exigence) he would attempt to break with the exigencies that structure and restrict the civilized world in a manner that is analogous to other works or projects. Bataille fails to open the community that precedes, founds and renders provisional all positive social forms, Acéphale included.

### **Bataille’s Failure**

Thus, in *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot expands on his account of Acéphale

in *The Infinite Conversation* (and Nancy's in *The Inoperative Community*) showing, as is his more general aim in that book, how the communitarian exigence affirms itself as the interruption of the work that would homogenize the social body. This exigence reveals itself in the play of working and worklessness that determines and constitutes the social space since, Blanchot argues, the "cum" of community, the distance between human beings that cannot be captured by any notion of "being in common" nor obviated by appealing to an originary "mineness." Community never happens once and for all, hypostatizing itself into a positive, fully present institution, but it is, paradoxically, the exposure of any determination of being-together to a unilateral and dissymmetrical experience of the other.

No doubt, as Nancy argues, Bataille had to pass through this experience in order to reflect on community so profoundly in *The Atheological Summa*.<sup>36</sup> But Blanchot shows how Acéphale already bears witness to the communitarian exigence, insofar as it is always at play in any social formation. The project of Acéphale is contested by an alterity that the group can be said to harbour *despite itself*. Yes, Acéphale fails—all work, all identification over time, including the project of human sacrifice, risks hypostasis by realizing and thereby absolutizing itself as a positive and self-present achievement. Since Bataille does not grasp the irresolvable tension between work and worklessness that structures every possible social ensemble, he fails to attend to a worklessness that divides working against itself—to the communitarian exigence as it affirms itself at Acéphale just as it does *here and now*. But, as Blanchot shows, Acéphale attests to the worklessness that is at play in the positive labour of identification that binds any social institution to an insufficiency it cannot control.

No doubt Bataille transformed his own understanding of community by passing through the failure of Acéphale, coming to understand that his life (and any life, any existence at all) insofar as it was bound to the lives of others and therefore to a prior and constituting happening of community, was already the refutation of all closed systems. What is important in view of Blanchot's call for us, each of us, to assume our responsibility is the way in which Acéphale would open up the *aporias* of community in order to show how any positive social institution already harbors the unemployed negativity that, as it were, undoes any collectivity or group from within. Blanchot would have us watch out for those 'unknown spaces of freedom', those relationships that are "always threatened, always hoped for, between what we call work and what we call worklessness."<sup>37</sup> Our responsibility is to keep memory of the worst, of "1943" in the knowledge that it cannot eradicate the worklessness of our lives, each of us, insofar as we are singly insufficient, wounded, and bound to others in default of the communitarian exigence, in lieu of the "cum" of a community that will never arrive.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Stephen Ungar, *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France Since 1930*, and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Legacies: Of Anti-Semitism in France*.
2. “The advent of communism”: Blanchot uses this expression in an untitled foreword to his monumental *The Infinite Conversation*. A certain writing, he tells us, “passes through the advent of communism, recognised as the ultimate affirmation—communism being still always beyond communism.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993) xii. This word can be read as his response to the question “what would be at stake in the fact that something like art or literature exists?” This question, Blanchot tells us, has been concealed by a certain aestheticism that his own critical practice in *The Space of Literature*, *Le Livre à venir* and “Literature and the Right to Death,” claimed to contest. I will open up the question of Blanchot’s communism by focusing on his discussion of the “communitarian exigence” in *The Unavowable Community*.
3. I refer to his co-drafting of a manifesto supporting those who participated in the struggle for Algerian independence that led to his arrest and interrogation in 1960 and his participation in the *événements* of May 1968 and his membership of the ‘Students and Workers Action Committee’. I do not refer, however, to his early writings as a political journalist; nor do I intend to discuss those readings that, as Leslie Hill claims “mythologize” Blanchot’s writings of the 1930s. See Leslie Hill, *Blanchot—Extreme Contemporary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 230. Doubtless, as Hill argues, *The Unavowable Community* sees Blanchot sidestep his own pre-war nationalism by using the phrase “our history” to refer to “the parallel lives followed during the 1930s by Bataille and himself” (Hill, *Blanchot—Extreme Contemporary* 230-31). But it can never be enough to account for Blanchot’s post-war writings in terms of the aftereffect (See Ungar, *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France Since 1930*) or as allegories of his own political involvement (Mehlman, *Legacies: Of Anti-Semitism in France*). To take Blanchot’s post-war writings seriously, as I will attempt to do here, is to prepare for the possibility of rereading the early work in a manner analogous to his account of Bataille’s participation at Acéphale. Blanchot’s early journalistic writings would, I aver, reveal the call of or from community just as it is discernible at Acéphale.
4. This essay was later republished in Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*.
5. *Désœuvrement* refers to idleness, inertia, finding oneself with nothing to do, lack of work (*oeuvre*). Following Leslie Hill, I will translate it as “worklessness.”
6. The writings of Blanchot’s “late period” would include amongst others: *L’Après Coup précédé par Le ressassement éternel* (1983), *La Communauté Inavouable* (1983), *Michel Foucault, tel que je l’imagine* (1986), “N’oubliez pas!” (1986), “Notre responsabilité” (1986), and *L’instant de ma mort* (1994).
7. Maurice Blanchot, “Intellectuals under Scrutiny,” trans. Michael Holland, *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 226.
8. Blanchot, “Intellectuals Under Scrutiny” 225. Blanchot is quoting some lines of Char’s poem “Billets à Francis Currel II,” *Oeuvres Complètes* 633.
9. Char, too, was a member of the *Résistance*.
10. Jacques Derrida, “Demeure. Fiction and Testimony,” trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000) 71
11. Maurice Blanchot, “Our Responsibility,” *For Nelson Mandela*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Mustafa Tlili (New York: Seaver Books, 1987) 250.
12. Blanchot does not suggest that the events of 1943 have any absolute priority; rather, since

his is a personal confession, we are to assume that the date in question is the date where he assumed his responsibility.

13. Linda Singer, "Recalling a Community at Loose Ends," *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. The Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis and Oxford: U of Minnesota P, 1991) 125.

14. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 198) 1.

15. See Allan Stoekl's chapters on Bataille in *Agonies of the Intellectual* and his introduction in his edition of *Visions of Excess* for an account of Bataille's activities in these years.

16. Georges Bataille. "Autobiographical Note," trans. Betsy Wing, *The College of Sociology 1937-1939*, ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 387.

17. Georges Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," trans. Allan Stoekl, in *Visions of Excess*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985) 181.

18. Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy" 181.

19. Georges Bataille, "Programme dated 4/4/36," partially trans. Alastair Brotchie, *Encyclopaedia Acéphalica*, ed. Georges Bataille et. al. (London: Atlas Press, 1995) 14-15.

20. The interlocutors in one of the essays written in conversation form in *The Infinite Conversation* suggest another, Levinasian way of reflecting on God: "All true discourse, Levinas says solemnly, is discourse with God, not a conversation held between equals.—How are we to understand this? —In the strongest sense, as one always must. And in remembering, perhaps, what is said in Exodus of God speaking: one man to another." (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* 56). Blanchot, who no doubt passes for an atheist, allows his interlocutors to respond to the word God in a manner that demands careful analysis. The pages of *The Infinite Conversation* entitled "Atheism and Writing" (246-263) caution us against any simple understanding of atheism.

21. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et. al. (Minneapolis and Oxford: U of Minnesota P, 1991) 17.

22. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 17.

23. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) §32, 19.

24. Georges Bataille, "Letter to X," *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988) 123.

25. Georges Bataille, "Labyrinth," trans. Allan Stoekl, *Visions of Excess*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985) 5.

26. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* 205.

27. Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* 9.

28 This is not to say that this is the only way in which the communitarian exigence would reveal itself. I have explored Blanchot's notion of communitarian exigence as it unfolds in friendship in my "Born With the Dead" (Lars Iyer, "Born With the Dead. Blanchot, Friendship, Community," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 5.3 (December 2000), and as love in "The Impossibility of Loving" (Lars Iyer, "The Impossibility of Loving. Blanchot, Community and Sexual Difference," *Diacritics* [forthcoming]).

29. Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* 9.

30. Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 317.

31. It is perhaps here that Blanchot diverges most strongly from Nancy. For the latter, it is through a re-negotiation of the existential analysis of *Being and Time*—a rethinking of mineness—that would permit us to rethink community. As he avers, "the themes of being-with and co-originality need to be renewed and need to 'reinitialise' the existential analytic, exactly because these are meant to respond to the question of the meaning of Being, or to Being as meaning." Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Bryne (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000) 27. Blanchot, as Leslie Hill notices, rephrases Nancy's argument in Levinasian

terms, discreetly expressing a degree of reservation about Nancy's attempt to rethink community (see Hill, *Blanchot—Extreme Contemporary* 201).

32. Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* 13-14.

33. Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* 14.

34. Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* 14.

35. Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* 15.

36. I refer to the three books *Inner Experience*, *Guilty* and *On Nietzsche*, originally published in 1943, 1944 and 1945, that were supposed to make up a trilogy. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to explore Blanchot's reading of the notion of "inner experience" in Bataille. See my "Born With the Dead" for an account of Blanchot's reading of Bataille's *Guilty* in *The Unavowable Community* alongside a more general reading of the essays Blanchot wrote on the occasion of Bataille's death. See also my "Cave Paintings and Wall Writings" (Lars Iyer, "Cave Paintings and Wall Writings. Blanchot's Signature," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 6.3 (December 2001) for an exploration of transgression and prohibition in the work of Bataille and Blanchot.

37. Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* 57.

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