Literary Communism: Blanchot's Conversations with Levinas and Bataille

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We underestimate the audacity and strangeness of the ethical turn that Levinas accomplishes if we assume that it is a turn *within* philosophy. *L'éthique* (ethics, the ethical) is, for him, no longer a branch of philosophy but recalls the original site of thinking in and as the response to the Other; the turn to the ethical accomplishes philosophy as metaphysics while breaking with the entirety of philosophical history, which is directed toward the unfolding of one question—the question of the one.[1] Philosophy, for Levinas, would respond to a response that would allow it to assume responsibility not only for itself but for all humankind.

Blanchot pays generous tribute to the gravity and originality of Levinas' reflections, even as, in the conversations (*entretiens*) he writes to welcome *Totality and Infinity*, he allows his interlocutors to present some discreet misgivings. He does so in a volume that bears the marks of an ethical turn in his own thought—one that has hardly been explored in its own right. Blanchot is known as a writer and critic of literature, yet he emphatically links his writings to questions of ethics and politics. His itinerary as a political activist is well-known[2]; is it not pressing to ask how his writings can be understood in this way—to take him seriously not just as a thinker who bears the influence of Levinas, but as a thinker of equal rank who likewise and in his own name calls for a turning of thought?

Blanchot's literary practice may seem an obstacle in presenting him as a thinker in his own right. His theoretical books collect work published first in literary and philosophical journals; Blanchot remains, for a large part, an *essayist*, and each essay he composes is typically concerned with the work of a particular author, book, or event. In *The Infinite Conversation*, the conversations on Levinas sit alongside lengthy essays on literature and philosophy. One of the ways to approach *The Infinite Conversation*—to understand its unity and its contribution—is in terms of a reading of the conversations on Levinas. It is by indicating their relation to other texts in this volume with respect to the question of *language* that I shall explore the turn to which, Blanchot claims, we must respond. For it is precisely the question of language, insofar as it touches upon broader questions concerning community, to which Blanchot's conversationalists are drawn.

Levinas is adamant: the Other cannot be made the object of a theme; rather than speak of the Other, I *address* the Other. He presents the dissymmetrical relation between the "I" and the Other as a relation of language. It is only by attending to language that it is possible to bear witness to the Other. But is this witnessing not compromised as soon as one attempts to write of the infinite distance to which this speech responds? With Levinas' claim that the original scene of language is an address *to* the Other, the question of relating this speaking or saying to the order of discourse, the said (*le dit*), moves to the heart of his thought. He confronts anew the ancient difficulty that faces the philosopher who has to

express him- or herself in a natural language: for how can the philosopher become a writer when to write is to betray the "object" of discourse? In the order of the said, we are contemporaries of the Other—we belong to the same order of space and time and our relation is culturally determined; we are consumers or sellers, allies or enemies. In saying (*le dire*), by contrast, this order is interrupted and simultaneity is no longer possible—a lapse of time marks itself and the "I" and the "Other" do not inhabit the same plane. Nothing allows the "I" and the "Other" equality or reciprocity; the face of the Other is not that of anyone I know; it is irreducible to a collection of features. It *expresses* itself, and thereby resists any cultural determination. It is Levinas' task to attest to this inequality, that is, to reinvent philosophical language as it would answer to saying.

Blanchot's conversationalists express several reservations about the work of Levinas, finding the name God "too imposing," (Blanchot, 1993, 50) and expressing certain general reservations about his vocabulary. They prefer, for example, the word *l'Étranger* to *Autrui*, (Blanchot, 1993, p. 52) *interruption* to *distance*, (Blanchot, 1993, 68) and reject the word *l'éthique* entirely. (Blanchot, 1993, 55) Blanchot invokes in what we must take to be his "own" voice a practice of writing that "leads us to sense a relation entirely other." (Blanchot, 1993, 73) He then proceeds to write of a "relation without relation" linked both to "the 'literary' act: the very fact of writing" *and* to the doubly dissymmetrical relation to the Other. (Blanchot, 1993, 73) It is this link that is my concern here, insofar as it attests to a possibility Levinas would reject: of a practice of literary writing that would bear ethical stakes to the same degree as *Totality and Infinity* or *Otherwise Than Being*.

In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot shows how literature attests to a certain *non-developed* and *interruptive thinking*. For example, writing of Sarraute's *Tropisms*, Blanchot invokes "the speech of thoughts that are not developed" which nonetheless permit the interruption "of the interminable that comes to be heard beneath all literature." (Blanchot, 1993, 343, 344) He discovers an "unqualifiable murmur" in Beckett's *How it is* and an "impossible voice" in *Texts For Nothing* that continues to murmur when everything else has been said. (Blanchot, 1993, 331) Literary writing, according to Blanchot, also exerts an ethical and political demand. Thinking is no longer understood as a detached contemplation for Blanchot, but bears ethical and political stakes.

This is made clear in his remarks in the preface to *The Infinite Conversation*, in which the practice of writing is linked to a certain "advent of communism." (Blanchot, 1993, xi) How might this claim be understood? It does not name an allegiance to the French communist party, nor indeed any conventional determination of a particular politics. Indeed, in the essays published anonymously in 1968, Blanchot, paraphrasing Marx, presents communism in terms of the call of or from a certain exteriority: "the end of alienation can only begin if man agrees to go out from himself (from everything that constitutes him as interiority): out from religion, the family and the State." (Blanchot, 1993, 202) Blanchot seems to consider this

exodus, this communism, in terms of a response to the Other. Just after the invocation of the dissymmetry, the discontinuity, of the relation to the Other in the *entretiens*, one of the conversationalists introduces the notion of *community*: "[I]f the question 'Who is *autrui*?' has no direct meaning, it is because it must be replaced by another: 'What of the human "community," when it must respond to this relation of strangeness between man and man—a relation without common measure, an exorbitant relation—that the experience of language leads one to sense?'" (Blanchot, 1993, 71) Why does the conversationalist insist on the replacement of Levinas' question with the question concerning community? It is, as I shall suggest, in order to link it with a certain practice of writing that Blanchot announces in the preface to *The Infinite Conversation*. There, he writes of "a radical change of epoch: interruption, death itself," which is attested to in "the lapses, the turns and detours whose trace the texts here brought together bear." (Blanchot, 1993, xi) The essays collected in this volume are claimed to affirm a communism insofar as they are called upon "to undo the discourse in which, however unhappy we believe ourselves to be, who have it at our disposal remain conformably installed." (Blanchot, 1993, xii) They witness what in their "object" disturbs and awakens us.

In what follows, I explore the "turn" to which Blanchot claims his *The Infinite Conversation* responds. I argue that the turn in question is something to which Blanchot already responds in his writings on literary language. It is not a turn in his work brought about by his encounter with Levinas (or, indeed, any particular author); rather, it occurs with the conception of language and community to which a certain literature attests. I also discuss Blanchot's reflections on his conversations with Bataille, whose work also has the special significance of addressing itself to the question of or from community. Indeed, the introduction of the question concerning community into the conversations on Levinas might be read as *Bataille's* question—the question or call to which Bataille responds in various ways in his researches.[3] But it is Blanchot who shows how this call resonates in Bataille's tale *Madame Edwarda*, in so doing joining the words literature and communism to produce a new way of reading, of thinking, and of responding to thought.[4]

Interrupted Thought

It is to a *murmur* to which Blanchot's massive *The Infinite Conversation* would bear witness.[5] The murmur, Blanchot tells us in a programmatic essay, issues in a cry—a "cry of needs and protest, cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry—or, if need be, the written cry, graffiti on the walls." (Blanchot, 1993, 262) Blanchot does not direct us to a single cry, but to the singularity of the cry of those who are in need. He discovers a cry inscribed on the walls during the Events of May 1968; but he also discovers a written cry borne by literary and philosophical

works. We can hear this murmuring cry, if we have ears for it, if we allow ourselves to listen, in the most ordinary conversation. The conversations, fragmentary writings and extended meditations on various themes that comprise *The Infinite Conversation*, as well as the tale (*récit*) that opens this volume,[6] are all attempts to respond to the murmurs that refuse to be subsumed as particulars under some concept—to the *plurality* of cries that, as I shall explain, bear ethical and political stakes.

To respond to the cry one must alter the very notion of response. To attend to it, indeed to think it and to think *from* it as Blanchot does in *The Infinite Conversation*, demands that we refuse to grant an absolute priority to the prevailing conception of the proper development of thinking. The variety of discursive modes and genres in this text would attest to the alteration of notions of language, thinking, and responsibility in response to a murmuring cry. It is to this response as it reveals itself in the tale that opens *The Infinite Conversation* to which I shall attempt to respond in turn.

The task of thinking, Blanchot tells us, is to allow all discourse to answer to the non-continuous experience that occurs as thought. He allows a conversationalist to affirm Alain's claim that "true thoughts are not developed"; the art of thinking would not depend on proof, reasoning, or logical sequence since these simply reflect the way in which things are here and now, in a particular culture or society. (Blanchot, 1993, 339) To learn not to develop thought is therefore "to unmask the cultural and social constraint that is expressed in an indirect yet authoritarian manner through the rules of discursive development: the art of thinking is an art of refusal of the way in which thinking is assumed to operate—a refusal, therefore, of the political, legal and economic order that imposes itself like a second nature." (Blanchot, 1993, 339–340) To think, to have "true thoughts," is not to propose a simple antiintellectualism since all spontaneous thinking would still be determined by habits that themselves have to be resisted; our "second nature" would continue to hold sway. (Blanchot, 1993, 340) Non-developed thought must allow itself to answer to a certain *demand*.

One might assume that it is the admirable activity of the intellectual who would speak for all of us in combating the ills of society and decrying the prevailing cultural and social constraints that is the model of Blanchotian thinking. The Blanchotian intellectual does not hold onto speech in order to keep the right of uttering a word beyond the last word, one that would contest the prevailing political, legal, and economic order. The word beyond the last one, powerful as it is, is still a *last* word; it still accedes to a monologue from which Blanchot would break. "True thoughts question, and to question is to think by interrupting oneself," one of his conversationalists affirms. The ruses of the intellectual to master language, to use it against those who are enfranchised to maintain the social and cultural order and even to turn it upon them is still not to refuse. (Blanchot, 1993, 340) To interrupt oneself would mean more than maintaining a vigilance over the

language one uses in order to resist the ways of thinking that are encoded in language, although such vigilance is also necessary. Indeed, one would not so much interrupt oneself as *allow oneself to be interrupted*, that is, to renounce having the last word and, indeed, the very possibility of having last words. To think of or from what cannot be developed is to be surprised, opening oneself or rather *being opened* to an experience that cannot be anticipated. To think, to speak, is to be surprised by thought or speech, to respond to what is extraordinary in the very operation of thinking and speaking, that is, to reaffirm an event that refuses to allow itself to be thought in terms of the prevailing determinations of our second nature.

The Blanchotian thinker would remember that he or she has *already* responded and assume a responsibility in maintaining the singularity of that to which he or she would respond. In this sense, Blanchot advocates a certain *pluralism*, questioning the finality or definitiveness of our second nature as it confirms a certain regime of discourse. It is the burden of *The Infinite Conversation* to argue that developed thought will henceforward answer to a non-developed thought that is the original scene of thinking. Theory would no longer have the last word and the logic of developed argumentation would reveal its ultimately political sanction. The intellectual who aims to debunk theories by offering theories in turn, who would contest the views of those who govern and would advocate the rights of the oppressed and the excluded in view of a political theory, risks confirming the order of discourse so long as he or she fails to attend to thought as discontinuity.

This does not mean Blanchot would advocate a kind of *mutism*—an apoliticism or atheoreticism that would manifest itself by opting out of speech or society. Not to speak would be to confirm, albeit in silence, the predominance of a monological discourse that cannot interrupt itself and refuses interruption, determining what mutism is and can be, tolerating it without allowing it to alter speech and the social and cultural conditions to which it answers. *One has to speak*; this is why the eyewitness journalist is admirable, why documentaries are essential—it is why those who are denied a voice should be given one, why speech is a need, even a *right* and we have to listen for other voices and assume the responsibility of speaking for others who cannot speak, to write on local and specific issues, to engage in discussion in view of particular injustices. One has to speak, but the "has to" of this prescription, as I shall show, should be located upstream of a normative rule.

Blanchot teaches us that speech itself, developed thought, is already linked to a meta-prescription insofar as it responds to a prior and conditioning event. This is the responsibility of thought that no longer recalls an internal or external demand, that would direct us toward responsible action. (Blanchot, 1986, 25) Each of us, Blanchot tells us, is *originarily* responsive; I have always already given way; I am responsible when the other is revealed "*in place* of me," that is, in place of myself as a subject who can resolve to act. (Blanchot, 1986, 25) I am responsible

in the Blanchotian sense to the extent that I attend to the response that occurs as a function of our *structural* receptivity, our passivity or susceptibility to certain experiences.

It is from this perspective that Blanchot tells us that speech always implies a betrayal or irresponsibility; speaking is shameful or irresponsible through and through insofar as each of us speaks without acknowledging the response that has already taken place in our place. (Blanchot, 1993, 212) It is to address this shame and recall language to its responsibility that Blanchot would attempt to answer to exigence of non-developed thought.

One might locate a turn in Blanchot's thought in *The Infinite Conversation*, where he emphasizes the way in which continuous speech passes over the relation between human beings in the singularity of each situation in which human beings encounter one another. Levinas' work allows Blanchot to rethink the notions of responsibility, thought, and language that reveals itself as the interruption of developed thought and continuous speech. (Blanchot, 1993, 71)

To think by interrupting oneself: Blanchot asks us to attend to this experience in his writings on Levinas insofar as it attests to a suspension of the freedom, agency, sovereignty, and independence we might attribute to the solitary individual. To think *from* the experience of language would be to respond to the situation in which the Other is revealed in my place, that is, to allow a decision to occur that it is never in my power to assume as my own.[7] The decision in question is taken, as it were, in my place by dint of the passivity or affectivity that compels me, in advance, to have had received the Other. It is as though the Other, the singular Other, had hollowed out a place in me in advance; as if my encounter with the Other had inscribed itself in me before it happened. All languages attest to a structural receptivity, an opening that renders me vulnerable to the Other.

How, then, does the experience of language reveal itself? Recalling his conversations with Bataille, Blanchot argues that they were able to address the shame implicit in continuous speech not because they were free of this feeling, but because they were able "to offer it another direction." (Blanchot, 1993, 212)[8] It is "through a decision each time renewed" that Bataille and Blanchot were able to maintain the opening that exposes the play of language as such. (Blanchot, 1993, 212) This experience of speech has eluded thinkers until now because they have never attended to the way in which the "decision" in question affirms itself; they have "decided," in a way I shall clarify, against this act of attention insofar as they resort to "the violence of reason that wants to give proof and be right" or "the violence of the possessive self that wants to extend itself and prevail." (Blanchot, 1993, 212) But how might one affirm the "decision" that Blanchot argues is taken as soon as the Other, the first comer, is on the scene? Is conversation the model of the speech that would escape the violence of reason as it belongs to the violence of the self as possessor? In addressing these questions I shall explore the relation between the passive, originarily affected decision and Blanchot's notion of language.

Weary Truth

Blanchot reminds us time and again that language has always already negated the given in order to speak about it, identifying difference, classifying and subsuming the singular under the universality of a word. "We speak in names," Hegel writes, "we understand the name lion without requiring the actual vision of the animal, not its image even"; "the name alone, if we understand it, is the simple and unimaged representation." (Hegel, 1981, § 462) Language has already, so to speak, interiorized the world. Its sense is predicated upon the negation of things in their empiricity and immediacy—upon a transcendence of the facticity of the world, and likewise of the factic particularity of the speaker.

To name the real, the forgettable, the corruptible is to lift it out of corruption, preserving, in the eternal present, the mark and seal of its being; yet it is also to lose what is named in its singularity, its vulnerability, recalling not its object but a simulacrum. Rewriting the famous scene in Plato's *Sophist*, Blanchot imagines an assemblage of sages gathered around the decomposing corpse of Lazarus, squabbling over the question of what death is in its truth. In one sense, death gives us the world again as language: it is "the gift forever courageous" that would permit us to comprehend what we name, calling "Lazarus venture forth" in order to make death do our bidding.[9] But Blanchot allows another voice to complain that a rotten Lazarus remains in his tomb, untouched by the call. This Lazarus is the figure for the death that cannot be comprehended and thereby deprived of itself; it refuses to become pure negation or to affirm itself "as a power of being"—as that through which "everything is determined" and "everything unfolds as a possibility." (Blanchot, 1993, 36)

Language seems to promise to give us everything, to grant us infinite power over what we would name, but it also entails the loss of that which I would speak. This is "the eternal torment of our language," in which the words I would speak in the first person are turned away from what I would say, in which the now itself, *this* now, has disappeared as soon as I say the word "now," granting me instead the generality of a "now" that makes a particular of the unique and thereby dissolves it in its uniqueness. (Blanchot, 1993, 34) "There cannot be an immediate grasp of the immediate," Blanchot reminds us. To speak is to mediate, to exercise force (*puissance*), which means language presupposes a violence, an unmobilizable reserve, figured in the Lazarus who refuses to rise from the dead. (Blanchot, 1993, 38) Language is always violent, but it keeps this violence hidden, permitting those who use it to dream of releasing a discourse without violence. It is the *ruse* of language to offer itself up as a transparent medium of communication, to function

and order, pretending to lend itself in its entirety to the power of the "I" when the "I" is itself an effect of language.

Hegel remarks: it is the "I" that unifies language as "a multiplicity of names" with "multiple connections among them"; the "'I' is their universal being, their power, their connection." (Hegel, 1981, § 463) Blanchot argues, however, that it is language that grants the existence of the "I" who believes language is in his or her power. Language would attest in advance to a prior dispersal of the enunciator. The figure for this resistance, for language as it reserves itself in order to allow us to speak in the first person, is the Lazarus who refuses to heed the command "Lazarus come forth" that would bring him back to life. This Lazarus, rotten and corrupted, is a figure for what is lost when language is understood simply as a medium of expression. This Lazarus is not like his pure and uncorrupted double who has returned *from* the dead because he is alive *in* his death and, as such, is the figure for a reserve implicit to language, for the death or violence that does not do away with itself in order to grant us the illusion that language is ours.

By reading these remarks on death one might understand the way in which Blanchot is able to respond to Levinas in *The Infinite Conversation*. Implicit in his account of language is another staging of the relationship between speaking individuals and, in particular, the dissymmetrical, unilateral relation to the Other. This is what allows Blanchot to bring together reflections on Hölder-lin's declamations from his window, (see Blanchot, 1993, 258) the suffering of Artaud represented in his *Correspondence* with Jacques Rivère (see Blanchot, 1993, 294) and the "hole word" of Duras (see Blanchot, 1993, 462) with his lengthy conversations on Levinas. It is by reading and reflecting upon the opening *récit* of *The Infinite Conversation* that I shall show why Blanchot invokes a practice of writing that would attest to, and take responsibility for, a certain happening of community.

In "The Infinite Conversation," the tale that opens the book of the same name, Blanchot tells of an encounter between two weary men, a host and a guest, who are frustrated in their apparent desire to learn something from this weariness.[10] Both men, Blanchot tells us, are *weary (fatigué)*—and yet "the weariness common to both of them does not bring them together [*ne les rapproche pas*]." (Blanchot, 1993, xiii) It is, one of them says, as if "weariness were to hold up to us the pre-eminent form of truth, the one we have pursued without pause all our lives, but that we necessarily miss on the day it offers itself, precisely because we are too weary." (Blanchot, 1993, xiii) Weariness would seem to promise something to those who are weary together, that is, a certain exposition of the truth of weariness that would happen as the result of their encounter, but the conversationalists are prevented from grasping what has been opened to them. As the host admits, "I even took the liberty of calling you ... because of this weariness, because it seemed to me that it would facilitate the conversation." (Blanchot, 1993, xiv) But the ambition of coming together in order to explore what their common weariness would reveal is

frustrated: "I had not realised that what weariness makes possible, weariness makes difficult." (Blanchot, 1993, xiv) Weariness opens a space, but prevents this very opening from revealing any truth about weariness.

The conversationalists ask each other what they might have said if they were not quite as weary as they were: if, that is, they were just weary enough to grasp the truth of weariness but not weary enough to grasp hold of this truth, to seize it. It is weariness in its twists and turns ("I believe we know them all. It keeps us alive," one of them says; but is weariness not another name for life, for survival itself?) that brings them together, giving them life and permitting them to speak. (Blanchot, 1993, xv) But it does so without ever revealing itself as such since it is not something that happens to me as to an intact "I." Weariness, one conversationalist tells the other, is "nothing that has happened to me": nothing, that is, that has happened to him *in the first person.* (Blanchot, 1993, xv) Even as the conversationalists attempt to think from and allow their thought to answer to weariness, as they continue their fragmentary conversation full of hesitation, they are said to hear a "background" behind words, that is, the re-echoing of a murmuring that interrupts the words they use to express themselves. (Blanchot, 1993, xvi) It is their weariness that permits this other, plural speech to occur insofar as it precedes the words that are enunciated in the first person.

To what does Blanchot refer? The words that would permit the conversationalists to express their thoughts or feelings are interrupted as each speaker in turn is affected by the Other. To speak, for Blanchot, is always to respond to the Other who comes into our world. It is because I cannot help but respond to the Other, because there is a passivity or receptivity that precedes me, that I am linked essentially to him or her.

It is in terms of this passivity that we should understand the difficulty that faces the conversationalists in discussing their weariness. "I do not reflect, I simulate reflection, and perhaps this matter of dissimulating belongs to weariness"; this statement, which seems to refer to a thought of one of the conversationalists, reaffirms the paradox that weariness is both *revelatory* and *dissimulatory*—the former because it discloses what is at stake in the relation to the Other that obtains as conversation, and the latter because the relation in question is never simply available *as* an experience. (Blanchot, 1993, xx) To be weary is to be *interrupted*, that is, to be brought into a condition such that the originary responsiveness to the Other reveals itself in its primacy and its apriroicity. It is to be receptive to an experience that repeats the originary co-implication of "I" with the Other, confirming the susceptibility that is part of the very structure of the human being.

When I respond to the Other it is not the content of my speech, that is, *what I say*, that is important. As one of the conversationalists notices: "I do not really speak, I repeat"; Blanchot does not seek a new way in which weariness might be called to account, yielding up its secrets. (Blanchot, 1993, xx) In writing of "a wearing away of every beginning," he indicates the murmur that never as it were

has time to form itself into a word, that is, to the simple experience that always returns as a refusal of the *subjectivization* of language, its subordination to the power of the "I." He would have us attend to "an inconsequential murmur" and no more, to the gap or pause as it refuses to permit language to be reduced simply into a means of expression. (Blanchot, 1993, xxi) The conversationalist cannot express the truth of weariness that arises out of weariness itself, however what he does bring to expression is a certain interruption that happens *as* weariness.

Blanchot writes of this conversationalist: "he believes now and then that he has gained the power to express himself intermittently, and even the power to give expression to intermittence." (Blanchot, 1993, xxi) This speech of intermittence can only be affirmed *through* continual, universal discourse, but it interrupts discourse insofar as the last word is deprived to reason, to the order of continuous speech. These intermittences are not simply contingent interruptions of discourse, but expose its very condition, that is, the enrootedness of discourse in the vulnerability or the susceptibility to the Other. This is why he refers to "a certain obligatory character" that interposes itself as an intermittence he would preserve in order to deny the last word to reason: the gap, that is, that permits reason to constitute itself *as* reason through a transcendence of its original situation. (Blanchot, 1993, xxii) Language always refers back to a scene of exposition. The conversation of the weary men recalls us to this intermittence insofar as weariness is a figure for the vulnerability, the *finitude*, that language always recalls.

In this sense Blanchot teaches us the *truth of weariness*, arguing that the neuter, understood as the "I" that yields its place to the "he," "*il*," in the response to the Other, reveals itself in the experience of weariness. As he has one of his conversationalists say: "It is weariness that makes me speak; it is, at the very most, the truth of weariness. The truth of weariness, a weary truth." (Blanchot, 1993, xvii) Weariness shows us as truth what is involved in being with others, that is, in the experience of language as conversation. The experience of weariness permits Blanchot to discern a difference in language, showing how every pause in the course of the give and take of what one ordinarily calls a conversation is a figure of a more abysmal intermittency.

The *récit* discloses what Blanchot allows a conversationalist to call in another essay "a tangling of relations," a "redoubling of irreciprocity," a double "distortion," "discontinuity" or "dissymmetry." (Blanchot, 1993, 71) The weariness of the conversationalists is a sign of their receptivity or passivity before the experience of the other person as the Other, but since either of them can be the Other for the other, an exchange of places is always possible, in which both could be exposed in their selfhood in the unilateral experience of the Other. The interrelation is complex: the Other is, for himself, never a self, just as I am, for him, never a sovereign and identifiable "I." When I am the Other for him, he likewise never remains himself; he meets the Other, the Other I have become for him, in an experience that he never undergoes as an intact "I." This is why Blanchot does not

content himself with retaining the model of dialogue which would remain, for him, a *conversation of equals*; what is important is not the reciprocity or mutuality of speaking "I"s or the give and take of what we usually call conversation, but a relation that is dissymmetrical on both sides.

Writing of his conversations with Bataille and, more broadly, reflecting on conversation as such, Blanchot avers, "one could say of these two speaking men that one of them is necessarily the obscure 'Other' that is *Autrui*"; but who, he asks, is *Autrui*? (Blanchot, 1993, 215) The answer comes: "the one who, in the greatest human simplicity, is always close to that which cannot be close to 'me': close to death, close to the night"—the one, that is, to whom I am bound in an experience of language that is always shared, that takes place in and indeed *as* a *community*, so long as our understanding of sharing and community itself is transformed along with the ordinary notion of language. (Blanchot, 1993, 215)

When Bataille and Blanchot speak, the "other" Lazarus also affirms his presence and his demand. The conversationalists are never bound to one other as two intact, unaltered individuals who share a conversation, but are co-implicated by its movement. Blanchot tells us such conversations allow an essential "accord" that sets him and Bataille apart and which cannot be reduced to something held in common by two individuals. (Blanchot, 1993, 213) Rather, a certain experience of language is affirmed in such a way that neither conversationalist was present to himself as an intact and sovereign "I." The encounter with the Other takes place in the continuity of the world by interrupting this continuity, introducing an essential discordance between the "I" and the Other as they come face to face. The experience of language that surprises and turns me aside in the encounter with the Other withdraws itself even as it seems to promise itself. Addressing the Other, the "I" has already been turned from itself by the curious depth of strangeness, of inertia, irregularity and worklessness to which Blanchot refers.[11] *One cannot but respond*—but one does so in the neutral, not, that is, as an agent, a sovereign "I," but as "no one," as an "*il*" without personal attributes. The "I" responds to a murmuring cry.

However, the fact that the relation to the Other is unilateral and dissymmetrical means that there can never be any guarantee that this relation is reciprocated. A double dissymmetry happens only by happy chance; it can never be programmed in advance. Blanchot is aware of this, associating the conversations he shared with Bataille with a *game of thought* whose partners play by letting a decision affirm itself on their behalf. The identity, the biography or personality of the participants is not at issue; each player is staked in his or her identity and the relationship between them can no longer be determined according to any ordinary category of social relation. Upstream of their will, of their conscious intentions, each player is affirmed (which is to say an affirmation opens *in their place*) in their relation to the unknown, which is their response to the Other. In this sense, the conversationalist is not free to decide whether to play or not to play. Blanchotian

conversation is an open-ended gaming with no aim other than playing; it is not the outcome of a fixed will, of a program, and hence can no longer be conceived as a decision that can be voluntarily undertaken. *It happens*, and it has always happened. All determinations of sociality, of what is held in common, *come too late* to attend to the stirring of a relation that cuts across all other relations.

But how, if this is the case, might one understand *writing* as the advent of *communism*? This question is important because the affirmations of "plural speech" in *The Infinite Conversation* accompany essays on literary writing and art of the kind for which Blanchot is well known. Moreover, Blanchot explicitly links the affirmation of community with his writings from "Literature and the Right to Death" onwards in the preface to this volume. Once again, Bataille's practice in this respect is exemplary: his works exhibit what Blanchot calls "literary communism."

Literary Communism

In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot discusses Bataille's response to the communitarian exigence as manifested in his experiences in various groups (Acéphale, the College of Sociology), but more especially in a certain practice of *writing*. Invoking the notion of a "literary communism," in order to characterize Bataille's affirmation of this writing as an attempt to answer from the call of community, Blanchot writes:

> [I]t is necessary to recall that the reader *is not a simple reader*, free in regard to what he reads. He is desired, loved, and perhaps intolerable. He cannot know what he knows, and he knows more than he knows. He is a companion who gives himself over to abandonment, who is himself lost and who at the same time remains at the edge of the road the better to disentangle what is happening and which therefore escapes him. (Blanchot, 1988, 23)

This passage recalls the discussion of reading in *The Space of Literature*, activating the latent reflection on the political in the affirmation of the community of readers in that text. Blanchot argues that the literary work is structurally open insofar as it is exposed, as a mesh of text, to an infinitude of possible readings. Bataille's attitude to his writing is singular since he would bear what is so difficult for the writer to bear, that is, his estrangement from the work as soon as it is written.[12] In works like *On Nietzsche*, Bataille would allow his work to be exposed to a community of unknown readers whom he desires or loves *because* they would alter his work by reading it, granting it a new direction.[13]

In an admirable essay, Clark sets up a contrast between Ingarden and Blanchot. The former argues that in coming across a phrase, for example, "the head of the firm," the reader renders it concrete by relating it to his own experience. For Blanchot, by contrast, a phrase of this kind can never be so concretized; it plays itself out of the hands of any particular reader, including its writer.[14] It is the possibility of being read that allows the work of art to exist, to complete itself, but it is the structural impossibility of determining the text through this reading that prevents this completion.

In a foreword to two republished tales written in the same year as the publication of *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot recalls his horror in learning that Bataille was to republish his own tale *Madame Edwarda*, which had at that time been published in a limited edition under a pseudonym, with a sequel. "I blurted out: 'It's impossible. I beg of you, don't touch it.'" (Blanchot, 1998a, 490) Bataille did not prevent himself from publishing a preface to the tale. However, he always embraced the incompletability of his work, dreaming of the "impossible community" that would exist between him and any possible reader. (Blanchot, 1988, 23).The advent of communism happens in a writing that tears itself away from any tradition of reception, that shares nothing with the institution we call literature even as it must, in accordance with its structure, permit itself to be welcomed *as* literature. This is why, according to Blanchot, when Bataille added a preface under his own name to introduce *Madame Edwarda*, he did not compromise the "absolute nature" of this text. It remains a text that refuses admiration, reflection, or comparison with other works. It refuses itself to "literature" understood as an institution in which writing is made to bear a certain cultural weight. What remains, according to Blanchot, "is the nakedness of the word 'writing,' a word no less powerful than the feverish revelation of what for one night, and forever after that, was *Madame Edwarda*." (Blanchot, 1998a, 490)

These remarks can also be applied to the tale that opens *The Infinite Conversation* since no amount of commentary can absolutely determine its sense. The equivocal revelation of truth as weariness, of weary truth in Blanchot's own tale, is a figure of the reader's encounter with this tale in its enigmatic self-giving and self-withdrawal. This tale is not to be read as an allegory about what Blanchot calls conversation since it happens *just as* conversation; it affirms a certain communism in and of its own fictionality as well as staging a happening of community that has served as a figure of the doubly dissymmetrical relation to the Other as I have set it out. In this sense, it both lends and withdraws itself from my reading, escaping any commentator. It is his *awareness* of the resistance of the artwork to reading that distinguishes Blanchot's critical practice and allows him to recognize an echo of this practice in Bataille's writing. This resistance is figured by its subject matter; the story about weariness itself incites weariness. The distance between the conversationalists is a figure of the distance of the tale to us,

its readers. (Blanchot suggests the same figuration is at work in *Madame Edwarda.*)

Of course, unlike the experience of the Other, reading is a voluntary act. However, once taken on, it answers to a kind of receptivity analogous to that which prepares us, as it were, to be affected by the Other. The struggle between reader and work repeats the double gesture of welcome and abandonment that characterizes the encounter of the "I" with the Other. Just as one can read and relate what one reads to a pre-existing object, one can relate to the Other by classifying him or her, for example, as an untouchable, a master, a Black, or a Jew. But the structural lability inherent in both the receptivity of the reader to the work and the receptivity of the "I" to the Other runs up against the alterity of the work and the Other. The relation to this alterity is at stake in both kinds of experience.

As Blanchot shows, it is only in certain works of literature and, more broadly, certain happenings that this double gesture reveals itself. The difference between a certain event that happens in the literary work and the institution of literature itself is an analogue of the difference between the participants in the May 1968 movement, who refused to couch their refusal of the established means of politics as a reaction against those enfranchised to act as men of power and that power and that enfranchisement itself.[15] Both would pass through an affirmation of difference—that is, between the literary and its institutionalization as literature, and between the political and its institutionalization as politics—testifying, in their own way, to the event of communism, to conversation *as it divides itself.*

If there is a "turn" in Blanchot's writings, it is adumbrated in the analogy that he permits to be drawn between the reading of a certain literary writing and the experience of the Other. There is no question that *The Infinite Conversation* bears a distinctively Levinasian stamp, but this is simply because the reading of *Totality and Infinity* activates an implicit reflection on communism already at work in Blanchot's reflections on literary language. It does so in terms of the notion of the experience of language not because the difference Blanchot reveals in language is deeper or more important than other differences, but precisely because he does not privilege any particular way in which the experience in question, as it were, *attests to itself.* In showing that the experience of language is at stake in reading literature *and* the experience of the Other, he breaks from Levinas. Blanchot appears to follow Levinas to the extent that he tells us not what we *ought* to do but *what has already happened as* the experience in question, indicating a prescriptivity implicit in language itself, that is, an accusation to which the "I" has already responded. Unlike Levinas, however, he does not determine the experience in which this call reveals itself as a relation to the Other. The experience of the other (*l'autre*) does not need to be an appeal of the Other (*autrui*) in order for it to call for responsibility.

Is the model of a doubly dissymmetrical interhuman relationship the only model for Blanchotian conversation or communism? Perhaps the "*cum*" or "with" of community cannot ultimately be determined as an inter*human* relationship.

Indeed, it would be in the name of the call to which conversation responds that one might be obliged to interpret the primacy Levinas attributes to the relation to the Other as a "decision" against other possible experiences of the other, that is, as a refusal of the call to which Blanchotian responsibility would respond. Blanchotian responsibility, in this sense, no longer belongs to Levinasian ethics. The latter is a delimitation of a more general response to alterity; Blanchotian responsibility does not necessarily belong to ethics. Likewise, while there are certain political interventions that respond to the call of the other, Blanchotian responsibility is not conventionally political. No doubt, Blanchot invites a reframing of the ethical and the political as the response to the call, but neither term could be granted an absolute primacy *as* a response.

The Infinite Conversation would expose us, each of us, to literary communism, a demand that resounds in our epoch in terms Jean-Luc Nancy has set out: "it defines neither *a* politics, nor *a* writing, for it refers, on the contrary, to that which resists any definition or programme, be these political, aesthetic or philosophical." (Nancy, 1991, 81) *One has to speak*; as Blanchot writes, "in the final analysis one has to talk in order to remain silent." (Blanchot, 1988, 56) But what does this mean with respect to the question of or from community? With what words might we meet it? Blanchot entrusts this question to us. To converse with *The Infinite Conversation* in turn would mean to maintain and prolong the demand to which its pages bear witness: to write and talk, yes, but to do so by keeping memory of the responsibility that interrupts thought.

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Notes

1. I have followed the convention of capitalizing "Other" to translate *autrui* and using an uncapitalized "other" for *l'autre*.

2. See Bident (1998), Stoekl (1992), Ungar (1995), and Watts (1998).

3. See Blanchot (1988) for an account of Bataille's researches. See also Iyer (2000) and (2001a) for readings of communism in Bataille and Blanchot.

4. See Nancy (1991) for an account of "literary communism" in Bataille and Blanchot.

5. *L'Entretien infini*, published in 1969, was the first new collection of essays by Blanchot for ten years and at 640 pages by far his longest. It compiles essays and other texts from 1956 onwards.

6. The *récit* names a literary form of which Blanchot (1998b) is an example: a short, novella- or novelette-length fiction that is focused upon some central occurrence. On Blanchot's notion of the *récit*, see Derrida (1979) and Clark (1992).

7. The notion of decision clearly undergoes an extraordinary transformation in the work of Blanchot. As such, he is the inheritor of Heidegger, for whom *entscheiden*, decision, is of central importance at all stages of development of his work. See Nancy (1993).

8. On the relationship between Bataille and Blanchot, see Libertson (1982) and Shaviro (1990). See also Iyer (2000) and Iyer (2001a) in which I argue that Bataille and Blanchot make a vitally important contribution to discussions of friendship, community, and the political.

9. The discussion from the *Sophist* is also, of course, quoted at the outset of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, hinting at a polemical engagement with Heidegger's thought continued elsewhere in *The Infinite Conversation.* For a discussion of Blanchot's relation to Heidegger, see Libertson (1982).

10. This section of *The Infinite Conversation* was originally published as a stand alone tale (Blanchot [1966]).

11. *Désoeuvrement* means literally the lack of work (*oeuvre*) as well as "idleness, inertia, finding oneself with nothing to do," etc. Following Leslie Hill (1997), I shall translate it as "worklessness."

12. See Blanchot (1982), 191–197 for an account of the relationship between the literary author and the work.

13. See, for example, the following passages: "If I ever have occasion to write out my last words in blood, I'll write this: 'Everything *I lived*, said, or wrote—everything I loved—I considered *communication.* How could I live my life otherwise? Living this recluses' life, speaking in a desert of isolated readers, accepting the buoyant touch of *writing*! My accomplishment, its sum total, is to have taken risks and to have my sentences fall like the victims of war now lying in the fields'"; "Nothing human necessitates a community of those desiring humanness. Anything taking us down that road will require combined efforts—or at least continuity from one person to the next—not limiting ourselves to the possibilities of a single person. To cut my ties with what surrounds me makes this solitude of mine a mistake. A life is only a link in the chain. I want other people to continue the experience begun by those before me *and dedicate themselves* like me and the others before me to this—*to go to the furthest reaches of the possible.*" (Bataille, 1992, 7)

14. See Clark (1995).

15. See Blanchot (1988), 29–32.