**Community, Inoperativity, Singularity: The Question of Community in Post-Structuralism and Contemporary Fiction**  
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 **Introduction**  
  
*The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer (by virtue of some unknown decree or necessity, for we bear witness also to the exhaustion of thinking through History), is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community.* —Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community  
  
The word “We” is as lime poured over men, which sets and hardens to stone, and crushes all beneath it, and that which is white and that which is black are lost equally in the grey of it. It is the word by which the depraved steal the virtue of the good, by which the weak steal the might of the strong, by which the fools steal the wisdom of the sages.*  
 —Ayn Rand, *Anthem* **0.0. The Question of Community**Due to several major political catastrophes in the twentieth century, the concept of community has been strongly discredited. Appeals to a common identity, shared origin, essence, or goal have led to marginalization, oppression, and exclusion, or in the worst cases to tragedy. In the past century alone, one could name the examples of the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft,* Soviet communism, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the war between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, and the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.  
 With these cases in mind, it is perhaps surprising that the concept of community enjoyed a revival in philosophical discourse and the social sciences during the early 1980s. With the dangers of teleo-eschatological visions in mind, and in an attempt to think beyond the various strands of communitarianism that came to prominence around the same time, several post-structuralist thinkers attempted to rethink this tainted term in a non-identitarian, non-organicist manner. Especially the work of Jean-Luc Nancy has been instrumental in this upsurge. Coming to terms with the exhaustion of collective political projects such as communism, rejecting neoliberal atomism, and suspicious of communitarian appeals to solid moral foundations, Nancy attempts in his work to ontologically rethink the conditions for a form of being-in-common [*être-en-commun*][[1]](#footnote-1) that is not predicated on a shared essence, goal, or origin. His essay “The Inoperative Community” [*La communauté désoeuvrée*] (1983)[[2]](#footnote-2) formed the start of this ambitious enquiry, and culminated in the development of a “co-existential analytic” or “social ontology” in *Being Singular Plural* [*Être singulier pluriel*] (1996), inspired by Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*] (1927). Nancy’s deconstruction[[3]](#footnote-3) of the concept of community has influenced thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Maurice Blanchot, and Roberto Esposito, as well as his former teacher Jacques Derrida, who increasingly turned to ethical and political themes during the mid-1980s.[[4]](#footnote-4)  
 In the political atmosphere of the twenty-first century, Nancy’s analyses of the persistent nostalgia for an originary sociality that has been lost and his critiques of identitarian and organicist political conceptions are timely and relevant. Especially after the 9/11-attacks, appeals to fundamental and absolute values returned to prominence, frequently accompanied by critiques of postmodern and post-structuralist thought (Butler 2; Vaessens 71). The attacks prompted critics to make bold, periodizing statements, in which 9/11 allegedly spelled the end of “the Age of Irony” (Rosenblatt) or of “the Western relativism of pomo” (Rothstein). Shortly after the attacks, President George W. Bush declared a global “War on Terror,” and famously stated in Manichean terms “[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (n. pag.). The Bush administration implemented the controversial USA Patriot Act[[5]](#footnote-5) in October 2001, granting U.S. government the right to detain anyone suspected of threatening national security, and to legitimize the infringement of the privacy and constitutional right of its citizens.  
 The post-9/11 geopolitical landscape has been marked by military interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) and continuing political unrest in the Middle East. The reassertion of the U.S.’s sovereignty, as several commentators claim, is one of the primary motivations behind the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Chulov; Khedery). ISIS’s brutal military campaigns, in an attempt to establish a global Muslim community or *ummah*, have forced thousands of citizens to escape their home-country, contributing significantly to the current refugee crisis.  Although the above is merely a short sketch of the complex geopolitical predicament of today, a dissatisfaction with traditional political terminology, the ironic, relativist postmodern attitude, as well as a distrust of appeals to a shared essence, goal, or origin and transparent friend-enemy oppositions have been voiced by the aforementioned post-structuralist thinkers since at least the 1980s. In this thesis, and against this geopolitical background, I address the conspicuous resurgence of the question of community in the last three decades in relation to literature. Two timely political novels are addressed below: José Saramago’s *Seeing* [E*nsaio sobre a Lucidez,* literally *Essay on Lucidity*](2004), the sequel to *Blindness* [*Ensaio sobre a cegueira,* literally *Essay on Blindness*](1995), and Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission* [*Soumission*] (2015). In the atmosphere sketched above, Saramago and Houellebecq’s texts intervene in the political turmoil of the twenty-first century, and call traditional political terminology into question.  
 My point of departure is Nancy’s (undeveloped) concept of “literary communism” in *The Inoperative Community*, loosely described as “something that would be the sharing of community in and by its writing, its literature” (26). This concept, which has received little attention in the secondary literature on his work,[[6]](#footnote-6) suggestively aligns his deconstruction of community and development of a co-existential analytic with a rethinking of the social position of literature.[[7]](#footnote-7) For Nancy, literature is a space in which a process of sharing [*partager*] without a fusion between singular beings can be effected. In this context, *partager* means both “to share,” “to distribute,” and “to divide.” To share is not to be united by a certain essence, but to enter into a relation with other singular beings without fusing with them, a process Nancy refers to as ““communicating” by not “communing”” (25). In *The Inoperative Community*, he poses the following suggestion about the relationship between literature and the question of community:  
  
 But if we can say, or if we can at least try to say, while remaining fully conscious of its unsuitability, that being-in-common *is* literary, that is, if we can attempt to say that it has its very being in “literature” … then what “literature” will have to designate is this being itself…in itself. In other words, it would designate that singular ontological quality that *gives* being *in* common, that does not hold in reserve, before or after community, as an essence of man, of God, or of the State achieving its fulfilment in communion, but that rather makes for a being that *is* only when shared *in* *common*, or rather whose quality of being, whose nature and structure are shared (exposed). (64; original italics)  
  
As exemplified by Derrida’s work and its continuing influence on literary studies, literature occupies a privileged position within deconstruction. As Derrida stresses, literature is a relatively modern “institution,” tied to social, legal, and political practices in a specific time and place (“Strange Institution” 37; Attridge, “Introduction” 23). At the same time, the literary text is a performative act, or, as Jonathan Culler states, it “does not presume a reality given and to be represented but instead posits its own truth, … inscribes its own context, institutes its own scene, and gives us to experience that instituting” (872). By virtue of its performative character, literature is able to call the practices in which it is embedded into question and can exceed them, or, to use Nancy’s terms, “unwork” or “interrupt” them.  
 In *The Inoperative Community,* Nancy juxtaposes literature to “myth.” Myth, he writes, “communicates the common, the common-being of what it reveals or of what it recites. Consequently at the same time as each one of its revelations it also reveals community to itself and founds it” (50-1). Myth, in other words, seeks to found a shared identity, while literary communism is precisely that which interrupts and unworks myth, thereby resisting ossification into a stable essence or *logos* that precedes community. Literary texts, for Nancy, do not take a stand for a political cause, or communicate a certain message, but have the capacity to interrupt discourses that strive to lay claim to or found a stable identity. At the same time, literature is partially dependent on the social, legal, and political practices in which it is embedded. Derrida and Nancy employ the concept of “singularity” as a means of analyzing this double bind of the literary institution. Singularity, states Derek Attridge, is not the essence of a work of art, but an attempt to do justice to the “otherness” or “alterity” of the work, without treating the texts instrumentally “as a means to a predetermined end” (*Singularity* 7). Singularity and generality, stresses Attridge, are mutually interdependent: since literature does not suspend the referential nature of language, it is necessarily general, employing established genres, conventions, and styles: an absolutely singular work would be unrecognizable and inaccessible (“Introduction” 15). Thus, literary singularity is always already repeatable or predicated on “iterability,” and can be adapted in new contexts, a feature characteristic of every utterance (Miller 59).   
 Taking Nancy’s claim that being-in-common *is* literary at heart, I attempt to think the relation between literature and community as developed in contemporary post-structuralism and literary theory. I not only attempt to think through what literature can say *about* the question of community, but how it functions *as* something shared in common. Before addressing this intersection and outlining the structure and objectives of this thesis, I briefly sketch the historical background of the resurgence of the concept of community that occurred during the early 1980s, and broaden my theoretical framework.  
  
**0.1. The Resurgence of Community and the Question of the Commons: A Short History**  
Nancy’s intervention in the debate on community occurred at a conspicuous moment in history. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of “postmodernism” was widely adopted. In 1979, Jean-François Lyotard famously described the term as “an incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). As Lyotard argued, theories such as the Hegelian-Marxist conception of history as a succession of stages that would culminate in an “end of history,” or appeals to a future “emancipation of humanity” (60) could no longer serve as an epistemological basis, let alone as the fundament of political programs. On the economic level, the crises of the 1970s had laid bare the limitations of the Keynesian welfare state. Stimulated by the political victories of Deng Xiaoping (1978), Margaret Thatcher (1979), and Ronald Reagan (1980), neoliberalism became the globally dominant economic paradigm during the 1980s. In less than a decade, the Keynesian paradigm, characterized by controlled economic growth and governmental interference, was replaced by neoliberal policies such as minimal government, deregulation, and privatization. Whereas the welfare state sought to protect citizens from the harmful effects of economic competition, the neoliberal state by contrast sought to stimulate competition and to facilitate free markets (Dardot and Laval 157; Harvey 64-88).  
 At this historical juncture, the concept of community made a gradual comeback on both sides of the Atlantic, after being cast aside for approximately thirty years. In North America and the United Kingdom, the publication of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971) prompted a series of critical reactions from (moral) philosophers who were soon labelled together as “communitarians.” Operating from either a centrist, left-liberal, or conservative perspective, thinkers such as Amitai Etzioni, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor criticized Rawls’s atomistic conception of the individual, as well as his prioritization of the rights and self-interest of the citizens over the Aristotelian notions of the “common good” and the “good life.”  
 Communitarians emphasize that each individual is embedded in the practices of the community in which he is born, and in which one is bound together with others through the internalization of norms, values, and traditions. Communitarian discourse, writes Ignaas Devisch, is based on five features, namely “a communal location, a collective history and shared values, widespread political participation, collective engagement in communal questions, and a high level of moral solidarity and social interdependence” (*Wij* 26-7).[[8]](#footnote-8) Communitarians conceive of community as a teleological project, and frequently refer to pre-modern thinkers, especially to Aristotle. [[9]](#footnote-9) In their view, the (re)construction of local communities could safeguard shared norms, values, and traditions, and reduce the opacity between individuals.[[10]](#footnote-10)  
 Contrasting strongly with communitarianism, Nancy attempted in *The Inoperative Community* to deconstruct identitarian, organicist discourses on community, by engaging with the work of (among others) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Georges Bataille, and Martin Heidegger. He argues that the majority Western conceptions on community are characterized by a pervasive sense of nostalgia, in which it is claimed that an originary sociality or peaceful, authentic, and harmonious coexistence has been lost or broken in the course of time. Devisch calls these nostalgic conceptions the *Verfallsgeschichte* of community: the presupposition of a “golden age” that has been lost, an age that can only be recuperated through a collective, teleological effort (*Wij* 14).[[11]](#footnote-11) Nancy refers to such an effort as a “work” [*oeuvre*], that is to say, “the goal of achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence *as community*” (*Inoperative* 2; original italics). The work, in other words, is a teleological attempt to safeguard this shared essence from threatening influences. As Esposito notes, the community as work links an *arche* (“origin,” “beginning”) with a *telos* (“goal,” “endpoint”): only through a collective effort of all the members of a community can the (allegedly) lost *arche* be restored (*Communitas* 2).   
 Nancy borrows Blanchot’s concept of *désoeuvrement* as a counterpoint to identitarian, organicist conceptions of community.[[12]](#footnote-12) *Désoeuvrement,* as Devisch puts it, is a “praxis of resistance against the thought of community as a perfectible activity … against the concept of the human being as capable of auto-production, which presupposes an essence of the human being that could (and should) in principle be realized” (*Wij* 44-5). By developing the concept of *désoeuvrement,* states Devisch, Nancy attempts to avoid conceiving of community as “a With or a We as a Great Subject that swallows the individual up” (“Trembling” 243).   
 In his work from the late 1980s onwards, Nancy started developing a co-existential analytic or social ontology, in an attempt to rewrite Heidegger’s fundamental ontology from the perspective of the concept of “being-with” [*Mitsein*]. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that being-with primordially constituted “being-there” [*Dasein*], instead of being merely an addition to the latter (156). Nancy argues that Heidegger failed to elaborate this insight, by eventually prioritizing the question of *Dasein* over *Mitsein.* Apart from this insufficiency, Heidegger’s work is overshadowed by his affiliation with Nazism (Nancy, “The Being-With” 3). For Nancy, Heidegger’s fundamental insight demands a radicalization: *Mitsein* is constitutive of *Dasein,* and “being” is always already “singular plural.” In his work, Nancy attempts to think how one can speak of a “we” without presuming a shared essence, origin, or goal.  
 Apart from the post-structuralist rethinking of community, the notion of “the commons” has become increasingly prevalent in recent decades.[[13]](#footnote-13) The commons are shared resources that transcend the opposition between public and private property, resources that are and should be accessible to all, but at the same time are the property of none.[[14]](#footnote-14) In their recent work, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek have championed the commons as a necessary counterpoint to the threatening inconsistencies of contemporary global capitalism. In *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri describe the commons as “the common wealth of the material world—the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature’s bounty,” as well as “those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production,” namely “knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth” (viii). Thus, the commons encompass not only natural resources, but also “the languages we create, the social practices we establish, [and] the modes of sociality that define our relationships” (139). In their analysis, drawing on analyses by Autonomist Marxist thinkers, the most significant economic change in the second half of the twentieth century is the increasing hegemony of “immaterial labour,” defined as “labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication” (*Empire* 290). Contrasting with the emphasis on individual production characteristic of material labour, the sharing of linguistic and cognitive capacities is of central importance in the immaterial production process (Virno 41). For Hardt and Negri, immaterial production is directly “common”: whereas material production “created the means of social life,” immaterial production, with its emphasis on communication and co-operation, “tends to create not the means of social life but *social life itself*” (*Multitude* 146; original italics). Since the products of immaterial labour (knowledges, languages, codes, etc.) cannot be quantified, immaterial products cannot be subsumed under either “private” or “public” property, and thus form a problem for the regulation of property.  
 For Žižek, developing the notion of the commons is of fundamental importance to confront what he identifies as the four antagonisms of contemporary global capitalism, namely the ecological crisis, the regulation of intellectual property, technological and scientific developments (such as biogenetics), and income inequality (*In* *Defense* 421-3). According to him, these four threats are global problems, and can neither be solved by contemporary neoliberal economic practices, nor by national governmental policies. Although Žižek, like Hardt and Negri, remains remarkably silent on the perennial Marxist-Leninist question “what is to be done?,” he holds that developing the notion of the commons could serve as a remedy to destructive neoliberal policies such as enclosure and privatization, and that the four main threats to contemporary capitalism require international cooperation and regulation.  
 I consider the work of Nancy, Derrida, Agamben, Esposito, Hardt, Negri, and (to a lesser degree) Žižek to be indicative of a wider attempt in contemporary philosophical discourse and social thought to fundamentally rethink the possibilities of living *in* common without being subsumed under a common being. By examining the interplay between the singular and the general, between sharing and relationality, they attempt to go beyond essentialist and teleological claims.   
 For post-structuralist thinkers, being-in-common is not a shared essence, origin, or goal, but something that is “inoperative,” or “exposed” (Nancy), and constituted by the “improper” (Esposito): similarly, literature does not have an essence, and does not take a stand for a political cause, but is singular and predicated on iterability, immersed in a set of social, legal, and political practices, yet capable of going beyond them. In this sense, I think of literature as something shared in common: both singular, yet general, in principle accessible to all, yet the property of none. Irreducible to a shared essence, singularity is constituted by multiplicity. As Birgit Mara Kaiser puts it, singularity (as always already a plurality) “resists generalization, yet it is not beyond relation or … reading; it does not foreground inaccessible alterity, but otherness that requires and permits reception, translation, and response(ability)” (3). Literature, to use a term by Derrida, works in an “ex-appropriative” manner, by channelling a variety of discourses, while being capable of disrupting them without congealing into an essential quality (*Monolingualism* 17). The literary text, understood in this sense, (un)works in a similar way in which “singular plural” beings relate to each other, by resisting closure and appropriation. Moreover, the literary text unworks univocal definitions of what literature *is*, having the capacity to modestly subvert the discourses in which it is embedded. This position grants the literary text a certain privilege, the possibility of creating its own laws, while not being held accountable for the actions of its characters.  
  
 **0.2. Objectives and Structure**  
This thesis deals with the relationship between literature and the question of community, as elaborated in contemporary post-structuralism and literary theory. By combining (historical)philosophical, political, and literary sources, with a special focus on the work of Nancy and Derrida, I address the historical development of the question of community and the social position of literature.   
 The first chapter, “The Question of Community from Rousseau to Nancy,” is modelled   
after the enquiries in *The Inoperative Community*, and focuses on the work of Rousseau, Marx, Bataille, and Nancy himself. Although this list of thinkers is far from exhaustive, this trajectory, to borrow an expression by Esposito, forms as it were a “broken path” in the thinking of community in Western philosophical thought (*Communitas* 2). By engaging in a historical-conceptual analysis, I work through the shifts in the terminology employed by these thinkers. I historicize the context in which their theories on community are framed, and examine the limits and strengths of their central concepts.   
 The second chapter, “Aesthetics and Politics from Brecht and Benjamin to Derrida and Nancy,” similarly provides a historical-conceptual analysis of the way in which the social position of art has been thought from the modernist period up until contemporary post-structuralism. Engaging with the work of Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor Adorno, I analyse the opposition between either “committed” or “autonomous art” that characterizes the majority of aesthetic theories in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Whereas Brecht, Benjamin, and Sartre championed commitment, Adorno defended the experimental work of modernist artists such as Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and Arnold Schoenberg. For him, autonomous works were more capable of disrupting fundamental attitudes than tendentious and opportunistic committed art, and constituted a modest resistance to the frozen, totally administered system of the “culture industry.”  
 Derrida and Nancy, on the other hand, do not rely on the opposition between either autonomy or commitment, but on the concepts of singularity and performativity. For Derrida and Nancy, as stated above, the literary text is singular, yet always already embedded in a variety of genres. Derrida and Nancy both emphasize the singular, relational, and shared character of literature, as something that is central to the functioning of democracy and irreducible to a certain essence, message, or ideology.   
 In the third chapter, “Community, Inoperativity, and Violence: José Saramago’s *Seeing,*” I engage in a reading of Saramago’s political novel. *Seeing* is set four years after the events of *Blindness,* and is situated in the same unnamed, modern country. In *Blindness,* all the citizens, with the exception of a woman identified as “the doctor’s wife,” suddenly lose their eyesight due to a mysterious epidemic. The government seeks to prevent contagion by placing its citizens in quarantine in public buildings, but the social order quickly starts to unravel when resources become scarce. As a result, many citizens are subjected to violence and have to commit degrading acts in order to survive. Eventually, the epidemic disappears as suddenly as it came, and the citizens resume their lives as if nothing had happened.   
 In *Seeing,* another peculiar event occurs. On the day of the elections, representatives of the three main political parties are astonished when no one seems to turn up. When the voters eventually do cast their ballots in the late afternoon, the results are devastating: more than seventy percent of the electorate has cast a blank ballot. After calling for re-elections, the results of the second round are even worse: this time, eighty-three per cent has cast a blank vote.  
 Although the hysterical rhetoric of the media and government officials suggests otherwise, daily life goes on as usual. The citizens who cast a blank vote, the so-called “blankers,” do not resort to violence or behave in an anti-authoritarian manner. Traditional political terminology proves to be insufficient to explain why the citizens behave in this apathetic, peaceful way. After failing to find out who or what is responsible for this electoral debacle, the minister of defence, in a gesture reminiscent of the Patriot Act, attempts to restore “order” by declaring a state of emergency, giving the government extensive powers to intervene in the daily lives of its citizens.  
 In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* and *The Parallax View,* Slavoj Žižek compares the events of *Seeing* to Herman Melville’s short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853). The title character works in the office of the narrator, an old lawyer in Manhattan, and baffles everyone when he suddenly starts to answer every question with his formulaic utterance “I would prefer not to.” Puzzled by this phrase, the narrator is at a loss to explain the passivity of his employee. Like Melville’s clerk, the benign passivity of the citizens in *Seeing* undermines the attempts of the government to restore order. Expanding on Žižek’s comparison, Saramago and Melville’s texts are read in conjunction.  
 In the fourth chapter, “Democracy, Theocracy, and Community in Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission,*” Houellebecq’s speculative political novel is addressed. *Submission* is set in France in 2022, and is narrated by François, a middle-aged professor at the Sorbonne. François is a specialist in the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans, who is best known for his novel *Against Nature* [*À Rebours*] (1884), as well as for his return to Catholicism in his later life. François, a politically disengaged cynic, witnesses the increasing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, a political party led by the charismatic Mohammed Ben Abbes. The Muslim Brotherhood eventually manages to win the elections by forming an alliance with the mainstream parties. After this electoral victory, France becomes a theocratic state, in which sharia law is introduced and polygamy is endorsed. Apart from some hysterical objections by supporters of the National Front, the campaigns of the Muslim Brotherhood are successful, and many of France’s economic problems are quickly solved. The French tradition of *laïcité,* the separation between religion and the state as enshrined in the constitution of 1905, is quickly abolished, women are withdrawn from the workforce, and the unemployment rate drops significantly. Meanwhile, François eventually begins to contemplate whether he should convert to Islam, mirroring the spiritual trajectory of Huysmans and Des Esseintes.  
 In the final chapter, “Literature, Community, Singularity,” I address my main research questions: (1) What is the relationship between the singularity of literature and the question of community? (2) How does literature function as a space shared in common? While drawing on a variety of thinkers and disciplines, the answers to my research questions are primarily derived from post-structuralist approaches to literature and the question of community, as developed in the last three decades. Although one should not overstate literature’s effects, I attempt in this thesis to do justice both to literature’s political position, as elaborated by Nancy and Derrida, and to its status as a singular artefact. Literature, as Attridge puts it, in a statement that serves as a motto to my enquiries, “solves no problems and saves no souls,” but it is nonetheless disruptive and effective, “even if its effects are not predictable enough to serve a political or moral program” (*Singularity* 4).

**Chapter One: The Question of Community from Rousseau to Nancy**  
  
*Against every temptation to conceive of community in terms of the “authentic” or the “proper,” as the self-appropriation of one’s own essence conducted by man, or by entire peoples, community always has to do with an inauthentic or improper modality. What is the “common” if not the improper, that which does not belong to anyone but instead is general, anonymous, indeterminate; that is not determined by essence, race, or sex but instead existence exposed to the absence of meaning, foundation, and destiny?*  
 —Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political  
  
Think for a moment about the sense of words like “nation,” “people,” “sovereignty,” “right,” “beauty,” “community,” “humanity,” “life,” “death,” and so many others. It is not just a matter of the traditional complexity and difficulty of notions such as these; rather it is a question of exhaustion, a zero degree—in the “best” of cases, of an operation of complete reappropriation which we will have to undertake on the “meanings” that are ebbing away, that are leaking as out of so many cracked vessels.* —Jean-Luc Nancy, “You Ask Me What It Means Today”  
This chapter serves as a selective historical-philosophical study of the development of the concept of community in the work of Rousseau, Marx, Bataille, and Nancy, among others. For these thinkers, community takes on a variety of shapes: an attempt to come to terms with the contract-based relations characteristic of civil society while attempting to safeguard the authenticity and rights of the individual (Rousseau), a “true community” that can be established after the proletarian revolution (Marx), community as an event, established in limit-experiences (Bataille), and post-structuralist attempts to think community in a non-organicist, non-identitarian manner (Nancy, Agamben, Esposito). In *Retreating the Political,* Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe employ the term “philosophico-political figure” (120), figures that are the metaphysical foundation of the political. In this chapter, several of these recurring schemes or figures in the Western thinking on community are analyzed, in order to lay bare the commonalities and differences between the aforementioned thinkers.  
 In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy identifies Rousseau as “perhaps the first thinker of community,” as “the first to experience the question of society as an uneasiness directed toward the community, and as the (perhaps irreparable) rupture in this community” (9). Rousseau, writes Nancy, portrayed “a *society* that experienced or acknowledged the loss or degradation of a communitarian (and communicative) intimacy—a society producing … the solitary figure, but one whose desire and intention was to produce the citizen of a free sovereign community” (9; original italics). Following this statement, I commence with a discussion of Rousseau’s work, arguably the inaugural moment in the thinking of community in Western political philosophy.  
  
 **1.1. Nostalgia, Sovereignty, and Community in Rousseau**  
Following Nancy’s statement, Rousseau represents the archetypal *Verfallsgeschichte* in modern political philosophy. In opposition to Thomas Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty, Rousseau sought to move the locus of sovereign power from the monarch to the people [*le peuple*], by introducing the concept of the “general will” [*volonté générale*]. This ambiguous concept, notes Esposito, takes two shapes in Rousseau’s work: on the one hand, the general will is the decision of the people as to what constitutes the common good, and on the other the general will is an abstraction that transcends the private wills of citizens, an abstraction citizens should privilege over their own interests (*Communitas* 56). In his theory of popular sovereignty, Rousseau sought to do justice to the natural freedom and equality of the individual. At the same time, he attempted to legitimize the authority of the state, without resorting Hobbes’s repressive absolutism.  
 Like Hobbes, Rousseau invoked the principle of “the state of nature,” the (allegedly) natural condition of man that Hobbes famously defined as “the war of all against all.” Opposed to Hobbes’s negative view of man, Rousseau described the state of nature in positive terms. The state of nature, as he put it in *The Discourse on Inequality*, is “most conducive to peace and befitting to mankind,” a state in which “man’s survival least encroaches on that of others” (44). For Rousseau, individuals were born in freedom and equality, living an authentic, peaceful life with their fellow men. He famously invoked the “savage man,” an asocial, naturally virtuous being, who looks after himself, and who does not harm others. However, in the *Verfallsgeschichte* sketched in the *Discourse,* the establishment of civil society, the introduction of the division of labour, and the establishment of private property eroded the natural equality and freedom of the savage man. Instead, the rise of commerce led to the increasing interdependence of individuals, and the primacy of the private interest over the common good, replacing the natural ties of the savage man with his environment with contract-based social relations. In Rousseau’s view, the establishment of private property was primarily to blame for the loss of the savage man’s natural equality, freedom, and authenticity: “The true founder of civil society was the first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying, ‘This is mine,’ and came across people simple enough to believe him” (55).  
 While Rousseau deplored the loss of authenticity and natural freedom, he at the same time strove to come to terms with the socio-economic reality of civil society. In so doing, Rousseau anticipated the arguments developed by sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887). Tönnies, a Hobbes scholar, characterized community [*Gemeinschaft*] as “genuine, enduring life together,” where individuals were tied by blood and kinship (19). The community was organized around an “essential will” [*Wesenwille*], the intrinsic will of each to unite his or her interests with those of the community at large (95). On the other hand, “society” [*Gesellschaft*] was characterized as a “transient and superficial thing” (19), driven by an “arbitrary” or “rational will” [*Kürwille*], a calculating, contract-based relationship established between individuals to reach a certain (predominantly economic) goal (95). In *Gemeinschaft*, summarized Tönnies, individuals “stay together in spite of everything that separates them,” while in *Gesellschaft* “they remain separate in spite of everything that unites them” (52). From the rise of capitalism in the eighteenth century onwards, argued Tönnies, close-knit, traditional communities had been replaced by the atomistic framework of *Gesellschaft.*   
 From the perspective of Tönnies’s dichotomy, it can be said that Rousseau’s theory of non-representative democracy, as outlined in *The Social Contract*, sought to do justice to both dimensions. Like Hobbes, Rousseau held that the stability of the body politic was dependent on the unity of the people, but unlike Hobbes, he held that the people and not the monarch was sovereign. To protect the rights and freedom of individuals from the corrosive *Kürwille* characteristic of civil society, individuals had to alienate themselves from their natural liberty by adhering to the social contract. The social contract was a paradoxical construct, in which submission to the general will ensured the protection of the individual. As Rousseau put it, one lost one’s natural liberty, but was granted civil liberty and property rights in exchange (20-1).  
 However, Rousseau realized that every citizen might have a private will, opposed to or incommensurable with the general will. Since the people was sovereign, and since the general will constituted the sovereignty of the people, it was thus necessary for citizens to relinquish their private interests. The ambiguity of the concept of the general will lays bare the authoritarian tendencies in *The Social Contract*, as is evident in the following passage:  
  
 [The individual’s] private interest may speak with a very different voice from that of the public interest; his absolute and naturally independent existence may make him regard what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which would be less painful for others than the payment is onerous for him; and fancying that the artificial person which constitutes the state is a mere fictitious entity (since it is not a man), he might seek to enjoy the rights of a citizen without doing the duties of a subject. The growth of this kind of injustice would bring about the ruin of the body politic. (19)  
  
Anyone who did not obey the general will, stated Rousseau, “shall be constrained to do so by the whole body, which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free” (19-20). According to him, the will, like the people, should be one and indivisible, and the main task of government was to ensure the unity of the people and to be the agent of the general will: “everything that destroys social unity is worthless; and all institutions that set man at odds with himself are worthless” (160).  
 As Hannah Arendt explains in *On Revolution*, Rousseau held that this form of democracy was non-representative: since the government immediately carried out the general will, and since a divided will would threaten the stability of the body politic, there could be no such thing as a mediation between wills (66). “Sovereignty,” as Rousseau put it in *The Social Contract,*  
   
 cannot be represented, for the same reason that it cannot be alienated; its essence is the general will, and will cannot be represented—either it is the general will or it is something else; there is no intermediate possibility. Thus the people’s deputies are not, and could not be, its representatives; they are merely its agents; and they cannot decide anything finally. Any law which the people has not ratified in person is void; it is not law at all. (112)  
  
Rousseau’s discourse oscillates between a longing for a close-knit community on the one hand, and a coming-to-terms with the reality of civil society on the other. Since he held that the sovereignty of the people, as expressed by the general will, could not be represented, the social contract established an artificial community of citizens that directly acted together as one, indivisible body with consensual interests. Rousseau, to return to Tönnies’s distinction, thus strove to synthesize the natural qualities of the savage man in the state of nature with the *Kürwille* characteristic of “civil man.”   
 For the figureheads of the French Revolution, explains Arendt, the appeal of Rousseau’s theory of the general will lay in the “highly ingenious means to put a multitude into the place of a single person” (67). Thus, Rousseau departed from the Hobbesian model, but nevertheless replicated the latter’s description of the state as a fusion of individuals into a greater whole. While his work represents an important shift away from the Hobbesian paradigm, Rousseau repeats its central features: the unification of individuals into the body politic, who abstain from their private interests by engaging in the social contract, and the presupposition of the state of nature. On the other hand, Rousseau tried to salvage community, whereas Hobbes excluded every communal dimension from his theory of sovereignty (cf. Esposito, *Communitas* 20-40).   
 Rousseau, to conclude, combined a nostalgia for a lost community with an effort to re-establish a sense of community through the unification of its members, in an attempt to overcome the social alienation characteristic of civil society. This *arche-telos*-dynamic is a scheme that frequently recurs in Western conceptions of community, and also occurs (albeit in a different manner) in the work of the figure under scrutiny in the next section, Karl Marx.  
  
 **1.2. Marxism, Communism, and Community**  
Approximately a century after Rousseau, Marx’s ambivalent assessment of capitalism—as both the most productive and most inegalitarian mode of production—shifted the emphasis from the perspective of the people to that of the proletariat. As is well known, Marx predicted that the increasing antagonism between labour and capital would lead to the establishment of a communist society, in which class distinctions and economic inequality would be overcome. The proletariat, as Marx stated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* could not “timidly conjure up the spirits of the past,” or “borrow th[e] names, slogans and costumes” (146) of past revolutions, but had to overcome capitalism dialectically by working through its antagonisms.  
 Notwithstanding their influence on the left side of the political spectrum, a strategic theory explaining how exactly the transition to communism could be accomplished, and what such a society would be like, is largely absent from the writings of Marx, with or without Friedrich Engels.[[15]](#footnote-15) “Just as the Jews were traditionally forbidden to foretell the future,” quips Terry Eagleton, “so Marx the secular Jew is mostly silent on what might lie ahead. … He probably thought that socialism was inevitable, but he has strikingly little to say about what it would look like” (*Marx* 63). Similarly, the concept of community is of marginal importance to Marx and Engels, but at the same time reveals the central paradox of Marxism: the conception of a “true community,” in which man’s “human essence” or “species-being” [*Gattungswesen*] can be restored. Instead of evaluating Marx and Engels with the failure of the projects waged in their name in mind, the few proclamations on communism and community in their work are explored in this section. Before doing so, some contextualization of Marx and Engels’s analysis of capitalism is in order.  
 In their historical-materialist view of history, Marx and Engels conceived of history as a succession of socio-economic stages, or modes of production, each characterized by a specific form of property-relations and corresponding political superstructure. In their scheme, every society passed successively through primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, and capitalism, before transitioning into communism. As Marx and Engels put it in *The German Ideology*, each mode of production determined social life:   
  
 As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production. (41; original italics)  
  
In their analysis of the transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production, Marx and Engels emphasized both the emancipatory and negative effects of the revolutionary victory of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie had managed to break away from the ineffective feudal mode of production, and had revolutionized not only the means of production (the replacement of manufacture with factory work, the enclosure of common land), but also the means of social life itself. In a famous passage in *The Communist Manifesto,* Marx and Engels described the consequences of this victory:  
  
 Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all others. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (70-1)  
  
The bourgeoisie, wrote Marx and Engels, had dismantled “the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism” (71). At the same time, they replaced these illusions with the “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” of the working class (71). On the one hand, the bourgeoisie had accomplished a radical break with the ineffective feudal economy, but on the other hand they had reduced all social relations to monetary transactions. As Marshall Berman asserts in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air,* Marx and Engels were sometimes remarkably appreciative of some bourgeois accomplishments, “embrac[ing] enthusiastically the personality structure that this economy has produced” (96). By freeing man from the shackles of religious authority, feudalism, and absolutism, the bourgeoisie was the first class “whose authority [was] based not on what their ancestors were but on what they themselves actually d[id]” (93). In the capitalist “career open to talent,” continues Berman, everyone was “forced to innovate” (94), and anyone who did not do so would remain subservient to those who dominated the market. Capitalism’s only limit constituted capital itself, stimulating individuals to develop their capacities in order to survive in such a competitive environment.  
 Marx and Engels indeed did not show any nostalgia for the feudal mode of production, and affirmed the material progress brought about by the bourgeoisie. They pointed out that the demystification of religious and political abstractions had laid bare the downsides of capitalism’s limitless expansion. For Marx and Engels, the most prominent effect of the victory of the bourgeoisie was the mass exploitation of the industrial working class or proletariat. While Rousseau’s *peuple* was one and indivisible, the proletariat was placed both outside and inside society. In a central passage in “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” Marx describes the proletariat as   
  
 a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class [*Stand*] which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to no *particular right* because the wrong it suffers is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*; a sphere of society which can no longer claim to a *historical* title, but merely to a *human* one […] and finally a sphere which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from—and thereby emancipating—all the other spheres of society, which is, in a word, the *total loss* of humanity and which can therefore redeem itself only through the *total redemption of humanity*. This dissolution of society as a particular class is the *proletariat.* (256; original italics)  
  
Marx’s proletarian, as opposed to Rousseau’s citizen, stood outside the body politic, yet formed the primary expression of society’s internal contradiction between labour and capital. Eventually, society would split up into two opposing camps, that of the proletariat and bourgeoisie. The former’s victory over the latter would spell the end of class struggle, which according to Marx and Engels was the driving force of all historical development.  
 Especially in his early writings, Marx frequently employed the notions of the “human essence” or “species-being” [*Gattungswesen*] as the goal of this total redemption of humanity. For Marx, man was fundamentally a working creature, who had to sell his labour-power in order to survive. According to him, the enjoyment of one’s labour was what shaped one’s life, but the dismal working conditions in the capitalist economy made such an enjoyment impossible. In the first volume of *Capital,* Marx defined labour as  
  
 a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism [*Stoffwechsel*] between himself and nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. (283)   
  
In his early writings, Marx argued that the development of capitalism had alienated individuals from their human essence: an individual’s special talents and abilities were no longer deemed useful after the fragmentation brought about by the division of labour. As Marx specified in the “Theses on Feuerbach,” this human essence was not an “abstraction inherent in each single individual,” but rather the product of “the ensemble of social relations” (145).[[16]](#footnote-16) Closely allied to this human essence was the notion of “species-being,” defined by Dominic Pettman as “a common potentiality toward which to work, and eventually realize, an authentic existence (i.e. communism), liberated from both the exigencies of biology and the economic exploitation perpetuated by our fellow man” (31-2).   
 For Marx and Engels, the realization of man’s *Gattungswesen* was primarily established in negative terms, as an inversion of the social relations that govern capitalist society. Communism, as they claimed in the *Manifesto,* could be summarized in one sentence, namely “abolition of private property” (80). Abolishing private property, as they specified, did not mean that no one could appropriate the products of their labour. Rather, they argued that they wanted to end “the miserable character of this appropriation” (81), in which each individual merely was a cog in the machine. Communism, they claimed, “deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation” (82). However, Marx and Engels do not elaborate at length what property relations would be like in a communist society in which private property would be abolished. The *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* contain one of the few passages in whichMarx described the transition to communism. This transition, he wrote, is  
  
 the *positive* supersession of *private property* as *human self-estrangement*, and hence the true *appropriation* of the *human* essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a *social*, i.e. human, being, a restoration which has become conscious and which takes place within the entire wealth of previous periods of development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. (348; original italics)  
  
Marx’s rhetoric is characterized by a series of double negatives. The conflict between man and nature, brought about by the widespread exploitation of natural resources, could be *re*solved. After the conflict between man and man was resolved, man could be *re*stored as a social being, effectively spelling the end of a society in which individuals, to borrow a phrase by Guy Debord, are united in their separateness (22). Marx held that man had been alienated from his human essence in capitalist society, and that one could reappropriate this essence in a communist society. Elsewhere in the *Manuscripts,* he sketches what a “true community” would look like:   
  
 To say therefore that *man* is estranged from himself is identical with the statement that the *society* of this estranged man is the caricature of a *true community*, of his true species- existence, that therefore his activity is a torment to him, his own creation confronts him as an alien power, his wealth appears as poverty, the essential bond joining him to other men appears inessential, in fact separation from other men appears to be his true existence, his life appears as the sacrifice of his life, the realization of his essence appears as the de-realization of his life, his production is the production of nothing, his power over objects appears as the power of objects over him; in short, he, the lord of his creation, appears as the servant of that creation. (265-6; original italics)   
  
In Marx’s conception, control over the means of production should be restored to the producers, who had been separated from the products of their labour. Thus, production would serve a social, instead of an individual goal: in communist society, each worker could appropriate the products of his labour, but the production of each individual at the same time served the needs of all. However, Marx’s account of the transition to communism remained undeveloped, apart from the references in “Critique of the Gotha Programme” to the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the call to “expropriate[e] the expropriators” (213). Although he planned to do so in the other volumes of *Capital*, he scarcely addressed the role of the state, or how exactly the expropriation of the expropriators had to be accomplished.[[17]](#footnote-17)   
 The invocation of man’s “true community” in the *Manuscripts* and the notions of a human essence and species-being form the metaphysical core of Marx’s theory of communism. Like Rousseau, Marx portrayed man as a naturally social being, who should be granted the opportunity to develop his creative powers and to appropriate the products of his labour. The true community is portrayed as the inversion of the alienation characteristic of capitalist society. To return to Esposito’s observation, Marx’s work remains caught up in an *arche-telos*-dynamic, in which man could be reconciled with his human essence. For Nancy, the primary feature of communism in all its forms is precisely this teleological recuperation of man’s natural “humanness,” or the “production of man by man.” Every form of communism, he argues, is “profoundly subjugated to the goal of a *human* community” (*Inoperative* 2; original italics).[[18]](#footnote-18) As he argues:   
  
 It is precisely the immanence of man to man, or it is *man*, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community. A community presupposed as having to be one of *human beings* presupposes that it effect, or that it must effect, as such and integrally, its own essence, which is itself the accomplishment of humanness. (*Inoperative* 2-3; original italics)  
  
By defining man as the animal that has to work in order to survive, communism in all its forms, as a naturalism and humanism, considers the realization of this humanness as its final goal. Although a marginal feature of Marx and Engels’s work, the Marxist conception of community relies on the teleo-eschatological hope that the victory of the proletariat could restore man’s natural sociability by negating capitalist processes of alienation and exploitation. The Marxist theory of revolution thus combines progressive features (the dialectical eclipse of capitalism caused by the increasing antagonism between capital and labour) with covertly nostalgic ones (the restoration of man’s “human essence,” and the collective reproduction of that essence in the form of a communist *oeuvre*). The common in communism, to conclude, has not been rigorously analysed or addressed in canonical Marxist texts, and is predicated on a common being and project, i.e., the realization of humanness, while the means to bring that project to completion are hardly ever discussed.  
 Nancy credits Georges Bataille, whose work is discussed in the next section, as the first who did not conceive of community in either a nostalgic manner, as the accomplishment of humanness, or as a work. In Bataille’s view, community was an *event*, an exposure to what he called “the outside” [*le déhors*], in which the self-sufficiency of the subject was questioned by his contact with others (*De innerlijke ervaring* 114). He developed a series of interlocking concepts as a basis for his idiosyncratic theory of community and communication, among others “continuity,” “discontinuity,” “excess,” “self-loss,” “the limit-experience,” “the inner experience,” “transgression,” “general economy” and “expenditure.” For Bataille, employing Hegelian terms, community was an event characterized by the temporary fusion of a subject with an object. In this experience of self-loss, discontinuous beings could temporarily access continuity. Community, in Bataille’s view, was thus not based on the incorporation of a limit, or the exclusion of those who did not share the *arche* of community, but on an exposure to heterogeneity and the continuous transgression of limits.  
  
 **1.3. Community in the Work of Georges Bataille**   
In *The Inoperative Community,* Nancy engages at length with Bataille’s work, whom he considers to be the first who conceived of community as an event instead of as a shared essence. For Bataille, writes Nancy, community was “neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather … space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside [*le déhors*], of the outside-of-self” (19). “The crucial point of this experience,” continues Nancy, “was the exigency, reversing all nostalgia and all communal metaphysics, of a “clear consciousness” of separation … of the fact that immanence or intimacy cannot, nor are they ever to be, *regained* (19; original italics).   
 In Bataille’s view, community was an event in which separated beings temporarily gathered in a confrontation with exteriority. Employing Hegelian terminology, which he (unsuccessfully) attempted to surpass,[[19]](#footnote-19) he argued that this experience of self-insufficiency urged the subject to take leave of himself in order to connect with an object outside of him. Although his terminology constantly changed throughout his work, practically all of Bataille’s concepts describe similar processes, in which a subject puts himself at stake in order to establish such a temporary relationship. However, in his attempt to reconcile Hegelian dialectics with Nietzschean vitalism, Bataille continued to conceive of community as a fusion. Before going into this deadlock in his thought, the development of his central concepts will briefly be addressed.  
 In his essay “The Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille developed his theory of excess. Drawing on Marcel Mauss’s study of gift-economies in archaic societies, Bataille claimed that the field of economics had emphasized the notions of productivity and utility, at the expense of “non-productive expenditure,” that is to say, “activities which … have no end beyond themselves” (118). In the first volume of *The Accursed Share,* Bataille argued for a shift of perspective from this “restricted economy” to a “general economy,” stating that “the extension of economic growth itself requires the overturning of economic principles—the overturning of the ethics that grounds them” (25). Bataille considered the phenomenon of the *potlatch*, as practiced by North-American tribes, as an example of this ethical attitude in which expenditure and giving took centre stage in a community’s social practices. *Potlatch* was a ritual in which one gave away a sizeable part of one’s riches to another, in order to humiliate and challenge the other to pay back with interest. In so doing, one lost one’s fortune, but gained a certain power over the recipient. The recipient was indebted to the giver, and had to indebt him in turn by giving an even greater gift, thus releasing the hold the giver had over him. The *potlatch* was a process in which one was obliged to give and to reciprocate. By destroying one’s wealth, wrote Mauss, this form of gift-giving contrasted with “constant, icy, utilitarian calculation” (98), or what Bataille called “restrictive economy.”   
 In his work from the late 1930s and early 1940s, Bataille integrated the practices of excess and expenditure in his theory of the limit-experience or inner experience, concepts that are of fundamental importance to his understanding of community and communication. Demonstrating the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche’s thesis on the “death of God,” Bataille’s theory of community is based on the notion of an “empty space,” in which a temporary fusion between a subject and an object takes place. In §125 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche portrayed a madman in search of God, who suddenly realizes that God has died: “Is there still an up and down? Aren’t we straying as through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing at us?” (120). Although he agreed with the madman’s thesis, Bataille argued that a desire to reconnect with a primal force had remained intact.[[20]](#footnote-20) In *Eroticism,* he called such a desire the conflict between discontinuity and continuity:  
  
 We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that bind us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is. (15)  
   
This subject-object fusion and reconnection with continuity could only be temporary, reached in states of excess, or through transgressive acts. In these moments, as Bataille put it in his *Theory of Religion*, subjects and objects fused in an “immanent immensity,” a temporary state “where there are neither separations nor limits” (42). Influenced by Christian mysticism, he described the subject’s desire to merge with an object as an experience of self-loss. However, Bataille’s inner experience differed from Christian mysticism on some points. The mystical experience, as he put it, was a “methodical descent into the self,” in which the believer attempted to connect with the divine through ascesis and prayer (*Literature and Evil* 19). By contrast, the inner experience did not rely on a transcendent authority, but legitimized itself. As Bataille put it in *Eroticism*, “[m]an is in search of an object *outside* of himself,” but this object simultaneously “answers the *innerness* of the desire” (29; original italics). In the inner experience, in other words, the subject realizes his insufficiency and dependence on others, and consequently subjects himself to an ungraspable alterity that calls his very being into question or even threatens to destroy it. As Blanchot points out, Bataille’s inner experience thus   
  
 says the opposite of what it seems to say: it is a movement of contestation that, coming from the subject, devastates it, but has as a deeper origin the relationship with the other which is community itself, a community that would be nothing if it did not open the one who exposes himself to it to the infiniteness of alterity, while at the same time deciding its inexorable finitude. (16-7)  
  
Bataille called this process in which the subject enters into a relationship with an object that exceeds his understanding “communication.” For him, communication was not transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver, but a form of self-loss, in which the subject put himself at stake by opening himself up to an outside. As he put it in *On Nietzsche:* I only communicate outside of me by letting go or being pushed to this outside. Still, outside of me, I don’t exist. There’s no doubt in my mind that to let go of existence inside me and to look for it outside is to take a chance on ruining or annihilating precisely whatever it is without which the outer existence wouldn’t have appeared in the first place—the *self*—which is the precondition for there being a “mine”. … By not communicating, we’re annihilated into the emptiness of an isolated life. By communicating we likewise risk being destroyed. (24; original italics)  
  
In his theory of communication and community, Bataille did not conceive of community as a shared essence or project, but as a self-legitimizing event, in which a transcendent authority was absent. He expressed his desire to think a “community of those who do not have a community” (qtd. in Blanchot 1), a formulation that occasionally recurs in the writings of Blanchot, Derrida, and Nancy. By this expression, he meant that thinking community on the basis of the subject’s exposure to a destabilizing outside invalidated conceiving of community as an essence, shared origin, or common goal.   
 However, Bataille’s attempt to reconcile Nietzschean vitalism with Hegelian dialectics eventually formed an irresolvable deadlock. While he contested teleological or religious conceptions of community, his adherence to the Hegelian dialectic led him to conceive of community as a temporary subject-object fusion, in which individual differences were annihilated. “There is no longer subject=object,” as he put it, “but a ‘gaping breach’ between one and the other and, in the breach, subject and object are dissolved. There is a passage, but not from one to the other: *one* and the *other* have lost their distinct existence” (*De innerlijke ervaring* 89; original italics).[[21]](#footnote-21)   
 In an age marked by Nazism, fascism, and the failure of Soviet communism, Bataille’s theorization of community occupied a relatively unique position. While he initially based his research on community on the practices of archaic societies, the events of the Second World War, as well as his failed attempt to found a community with the secret society *Acéphale*, led him to isolate the experience of community in the erotic sphere, as in the “community of lovers” invoked in *Inner Experience.* Bataille, in Nancy’s reading, was arguably the first who conceived of community as a space in which separated beings temporarily gathered by being exposed to alterity, and who did not conceive of it in a nostalgic manner. Notwithstanding the uncomfortable co-existence of Hegelian and Nietzschean influences and his reliance on a fusional paradigm, his work thus contrasts with the motif of the lost or broken community.  
 The next section, building on the genealogy sketched so far, is devoted to Nancy’s intervention in the debate on community*.* For Nancy, neither communitarian appeals to norms, values, and traditions, nor a denial of the problem of community suffices. Deconstructing Bataille and Heidegger, suspicious of contractarianism, ambivalent towards Marxism,[[22]](#footnote-22) and hostile to neoliberal atomism, he places the concept of singularity at the core of his ontological enquiry.   
  
 **1.4. Jean-Luc Nancy’s Social Ontology**Nancy is indebted to the tradition of deconstruction, and in his own way prolongs Derrida’s engagement with canonical figures and concepts in the history of (Western) philosophy. Like Derrida, he does not merely seek to undermine philosophical arguments, but to exhaust and rethink overdetermined concepts—community, religion, globalization [*mondialisation*], the body, (the) art(s), freedom—in order to reconsider their ontological conditions (Van Rooden, *Literatuur* 34). In the period of the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political (1980-1984), Nancy and his frequent collaborator Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe referred to such a rethinking as “retreating the political.” In French, *retrait* means both “to withdraw” and “to treat again.” On the one hand, the retreat refers to “a certain completion of the political” (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating* 110), that it to say, the idea that traditional political concepts do not have to be critically (re-)examined anymore, since their meanings have become self-evident. On the other hand, the phrase refers to the necessity of responding to this exhaustion by *retracing* and deconstructing these concepts, precisely in order to question this self-evidence.   
 In his work, Nancy attempts to deconstruct politico-philosophical figures in order to do justice to the singular plurality that according to him is the basis of one’s being-in-the-world as such. While Bataille initially formed the centre-piece of his deconstruction of community, he increasingly turned to the work of Heidegger during the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially to *Being and Time.* Nancy works both with and against Heidegger, faulting him for eventually prioritizing the question of *Dasein* above that of *Mitsein*, and for his involvement with Nazism. In *Being Singular Plural,* Nancy states that his work is a “political rewriting” (204) of Heidegger’s existential analytic*.* For Nancy, *Dasein’*s primordial constitution by *Mitsein* forms the foundation of a *co-*existential analytic. Before engaging with Nancy’s rewriting of Heidegger, some brief contextualization of the latter’s ontological project is in order.  
 In the opening pages of *Being and Time,* Heidegger claimed that the question of Being [*Sein*] had largely been neglected in the Western philosophical tradition. Being was either thought of as “the most universal” concept (22), as something “indefinable” (23), or as a term whose meaning was “self-evident” (23). Heidegger’s existential analytic largely revolved around the contingent existence of *Dasein*, described as “[t]hat entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue (…)” (68). *Dasein*, as he put it, does not stem from a pre-existing essence but is “thrown” into the world. This “thrownness” [*Geworfenheit*] is the contingent situation of each *Dasein*, or, as Heidegger expressed it in a rhetorical question: “*Has Dasein as itself ever decided freely whether it wants to come into ‘Dasein’ or not, and will it ever be able to make such a decision?*” (271; original italics). *Dasein*, as “thrown projection” [*geworfen Entwurf*](188), lacks a foundation, hence his claim that “[*t*]*he ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence*” (67; original italics). Heidegger described *Dasein*’s thrownnessas an exposure to others with whom one engages: “As thrown, [*Dasein*] has been submitted to a ‘world’, and exists factically with Others” (435).  
 In §25 and §26, Heidegger employed the concepts of “being-with” [*Mitsein*] and “being-there-with” [*Mitdasein*]. In §26, Heidegger claimed that “Dasein in itself is essentially Being-with” (156), and that as such *Dasein* was primordially constituted by *Mitsein*: “the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of Dasein is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is *Being-with* Others. Their Being-in-themselves-within-the-world is *Dasein-with* [*Mitdasein*]” (155; original italics). For Heidegger, the “with” was not an addition to the level of *Dasein*, but constitutive of it: one is not *also* with others, but one is always already placed in a world *with* others. In so doing, Heidegger broke with dualistic schemes, in which a communal dimension is frequently superimposed over the individual. Instead, *Mitsein* is an originary plurality in which *Dasein* always already is situated. *Dasein,* in this sense, means always already being exposed to a *Mitwelt*.  
 The concepts of *Mitsein,* *Mitdasein,* and *Geworfenheit* invalidate the thought of a property that can be (re)appropriated, or an essence that pre-exists every singular existence*.* However, Heidegger devoted merely two paragraphs to the exposition of *Mitsein* and *Mitdasein.* Moreover, the *völkisch* elements in his work contradicted these insights, and reintroduced a logic of subjectivity that he attempted to avoid. In §74, Heidegger again used the concept of *Mitsein*, in the only passage in which he referred to the concept of community:  
  
 [I]f fateful Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, exists essentially in Being-with-Others, its historizing [*Geschehen*] is a co-historizing [*Mitgeschehen*] and is determinative for it as *destiny* [*Geschick*]. This is how we designate the historizing of the community, of a people. (436; original italics)  
  
The *völkisch* elements in *Being and Time* have been read as a foreshadowing of Heidegger’s later turn to Nazism.[[23]](#footnote-23) In 1933, Heidegger was elected rector of the University of Freiburg, shortly before joining the NSDAP. His inaugural address, titled “The Self-Assertion of the German University” [*Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität*],contained several controversial remarks that contrast with his attempts in *Being and Time* to destroy metaphysics and to think beyond subjectivity*.* In his rectoral address, referencing the Nazi *Blut und Boden-*doctrine, he stated that “the *spiritual* world of a people … is the power that most deeply preserves the people’s strengths, which are tied to earth and blood; and as such it is the power that most deeply moves and profoundly shakes its being (*Dasein*)” (474-5; original italics).[[24]](#footnote-24) Every German student, he continued, was bound to “the community,” “the spiritual mission,” and “the honor and destiny” (477) of the nation, bonds that together constituted “the German essence” (477).  
 While he earlier stated that *Dasein* is constituted by *Mitsein*, and that *Dasein* is thrown into the world, Heidegger reintroduced a form of originary thinking by linking *Mitsein* to the destiny of the *Volk*, and later to the *Blut und Boden* of the German nation. Against the *völkisch* elements in Heidegger’s analytic, and against his prioritization of *Dasein,* Nancy radicalizes the concept of *Mitsein*. For him, the *Seinsfrage* is always already a *Mitseinsfrage,* and being-there is always already being-with*.* In so doing, as he puts it in the preface to *Being Singular Plural,* he attempts to “red[o] the whole of “first philosophy” [ontology] by giving the “singular plural” of Being as its foundation” (xv).[[25]](#footnote-25) By taking this originary plurality as his starting point, Nancy attempts to “reverse the order of ontological exposition” (31), as a counterpoint to the persistent dualism between the individual and the social dimension that according to him characterizes the majority of the Western philosophical tradition.  
 The phrase “being singular plural” is tautological: being is always already singular, the singular is always already a plurality, being is always already singular plural. Each singular existence is from the start marked by a plurality, a plurality that is not reducible to an essence, goal, or origin. Nancy instead attempts to think what it means to coexist in the absence of metaphysical foundations of the political. To coexist, as he puts it in *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, is not being together in an overarching assemblage, but rather “that which coheres without being “one” and without being sustained by anything else” (73). Coexistence also does not mean being shaped by a shared set of norms, values, and traditions, as communitarian thinkers put it, but rather “being sustained by nothing: by the *nothing* of the *co-* that is indeed nothing but the in-between or the with of the being-together of singularities” (73; original italics).  
 The concept of singularity occupies a central position in Nancy’s thought. In *The Sense of the World,* he distinguishes three features of singularity: singularity is “unique,” “whatever,” and “exposed” (71). Firstly, singularity is unique and unsubstitutable, but at the same time plural, hetero-affectively constituted, as in the case of *Dasein’*s constitution by *Mitsein.* In this sense, singularity differs from terms such as “autonomy,” “the individual,” or “the subject.” These terms suggest that an entity can constitute itself singlehandedly (*auto-nomos*, a being that makes its own laws), has a preceding essence (*subjectum*), or is undivided, unmarked by heterogeneity (*individuum*). Singularity, by contrast, is always already placed in a network of other singularities, and cannot sustain itself single-handedly.  
 Secondly, singularity is “whatever.” Nancy borrows the concept of “whatever singularity” from Giorgio Agamben. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben traces this notion back to a term employed by scholastic thinkers, the “whatever being” [*quodlibet ens*]. The whatever being, he explains, is not “being, it does not matter which,” but rather “being such that it always matters” (1). Every being, in other words, is as singular as any other, and there is no process of singularization. The concept of whatever singularity, writes Agamben “rejects all identity and every condition of belonging” (87), and is instead characterized by an exposure to “the absolutely non-thing experience of pure exteriority” (67). On the political level, the concept of whatever singularity opens onto what he refers to as a “coming community.” This coming community does not lay claim to a unifying feature, but is characterized by “an *inessential* commonality,” by “a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence” (18-9; original italics). As Agamben claims, the “coming politics” will increasingly take the shape of an opposition between the state and a community of whatever singularities, who are not united by a common identity (*Means* 88).   
 Thirdly, singularity is “exposed.” Being exposed, writes Nancy, “does not mean putting something on view that which would have previously been hidden or shut in” (*Corpus* 35). Singularity has no essence that comes to the surface in contact with others. To be exposed is an encounter in which singularities experience the facticity of being delivered over to and affected by each other. This is also where the main difference between Bataille and Nancy lies: whereas Bataille held that the subject and object fused and in the process lost their distinct identities, Nancy frequently uses the terms “dis-position” or “spacing.” To be exposed, he writes, means to be posited together in the same space, while at the same never fusing with other singularities: “The togetherness of singulars is singularity “itself.” It assembles them insofar as it spaces them; they are “linked” insofar as they are not unified” (*Being Singular Plural* 33).   
 As already briefly touched on above, Nancy holds that the majority of the Western philosophical tradition has conceived of community as a work, a common being in which individual differences are eradicated and subordinated to the reproduction of a shared essence or origin. In *The Inoperative Community*, he calls such an operation “immanentism”: the attempt of a community to incorporate its limits and to immunize itself from threatening forces that could corrupt this essence or origin (3).[[26]](#footnote-26) Immanentist political programs, he claims, “have as their truth the truth of death”: attempts to achieve absolute immanence eventually culminate in nothing less than “the suicide of the community that is governed by it” (12). Nancy uses the attempt to create an Aryan “master race” [*Herrenvolk*] as an example of this suicidal longing for pure immanence. In their attempt to maintain the purity of the Aryan race, the Nazis not only exterminated “life unworthy of life” [*lebensunwerten Lebens*], but also had to exclude those who did not match the Nazi ideal. In so doing, their eugenic violence turned to the members of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* themselves*.*  
 Nancy loosely employs the term “communion” to describe a fusion of individuals with the essence or origin of community. Originally, communion is the Christian practice in which believers eat bread and drink wine that respectively represent the body and blood of Christ. By partaking in this ritual, believers are temporarily bound together in the symbolic presence of divine life.[[27]](#footnote-27) Nancy broadens this term to include all forms of dissolution in which individual differences are suppressed. In fact, he argues, conceiving of community as communion or as essence suspends community as such, which is predicated on the sharing [*partager*] of one’s existence *in* common. In French, as stated above, *partager* means both “to share,” “to divide,” and “to distribute,” a sharing that according to Nancy is always incomplete and resists closure (*Inoperative* 35). Pure immanence, or a pure sharing, would destroy the “in” of being-in-common: a community without differences would not be able to sustain itself, and would spell the end of community as such, as the example of the Nazi *Herrenvolk* makes clear. Understood in this sense, sharing is a transitive process between singularities, a process that undoes in advance every absorption into a common being.  
 In an analysis resembling Nancy’s, Roberto Esposito bases his reflections on community on the etymology of the word, and connects this idea of sharing with the dynamics of gift-giving. In Latin, the root of *communitas* and its dialectical counterpart *immunitas* is *munus.* Etymologically, as Esposito points out, *munus* is related to *onus* (“burden”), *officium* (literally “office,” but also “performing a function”) and *donum* (“gift”) (*Communitas* 4). The *munus* in *communitas* is always already marked by something improper that disrupts claims of a “proper” identity. The *munus* is thus two-sided, both a “gift and obligation, benefit and service rendered, joining and threat” (13). The *munus* is not a stable essence, but a transitive relation in which one exposes oneself to this impropriety. “All of the *munus,*” writes Esposito,  
  
 is projected onto the transitive act of giving. It doesn’t by any means imply the stability of a possession and even less the acquisitive dynamic of something earned, but loss, subtraction, transfer. It is a “pledge” or a “tribute” that one pays in an obligatory form. The *munus* is the obligation that is contracted with respect to the other and that invites a suitable release from the obligation. The gratitude that *demands* new donations. (5; original italics)  
  
Opposed to *communitas, immunitas* is the process in which one seeks to exempt oneself from the process of giving, or, to speak in medical terms, in which one seeks to prevent contagion from the impropriety of the *munus*.[[28]](#footnote-28) Although his analysis will not be developed at length here, for Esposito, as well as for Nancy, being-in-common is constituted by sharing, an incomplete process that is continually created in every singular instance. As such, being-in-common is a process in which singularities expose themselves to each other without being united by a shared essence. Nancy does not reject the notion of an essence per se, but states that if there is an essence of Being, this essence is a co-essence. In a central passage of *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy summarizes the core of his social ontology:  
   
 *Being singular plural* means the essence of Being is only as coessence. In turn, coessence, or *being-with* (being-with-many), designates the essence of the *co-*, or even more so, the *co-* (the *cum*) itself in the position or guise of an essence. … Coessentiality signifies the essential sharing of essentiality, sharing in the guise of assembling, as it were. This could also be put in the following way: if Being is being-with, then it is, in its being-with, the “with” that constitutes Being; the with is not simply an addition. (30; original italics)

By claiming that the essence of existence is coexistence, Nancy attempts to go beyond metaphysical or essentialist foundations. To coexist, in his view, is to share, in the three meanings of that term. Being *in* common suspends every totalization into a higher entity in advance, and every singular being is always already with others, or, as he puts it, “*ego sum = ego cum*” (31; original italics). If there is a foundation, he suggests, it is a coessentiality, a singular plurality.   
 It is instructive to compare Nancy’s work with that of the communitarian thinkers who came to prominence during the 1980s. Especially MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981), published two years before “The Inoperative Community,” contrasts with post-structuralist interventions in the debate on community. While Nancy focuses on ontology, MacIntyre’s work is preoccupied with morality. Drawing mainly on Aristotelian deontology, MacIntyre criticized liberal political philosophers for prioritizing the rights of the individual over the common good. Like Aristotle, he conceived of community as a conglomerate of politically active moral agents, engaged in a communal *telos*. Without such a *telos*, wrote MacIntyre, “our conception of certain individual virtues has to remain partial and incomplete” (188). Moreover, without a sound deontological upbringing, to use Michael Sandel’s expression in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, society would be populated by “unencumbered selves,” “person[s] wholly without character, without moral depth” (179).  
 MacIntyre’s discourse is characterized by a dualism between the individual, or “moral agent,” and the community in which he is embedded, whose norms, values, and traditions the moral agent interiorizes. As a counterpoint to liberal atomism, MacIntyre defended a “narrative conception of the self.” According to him, every moral agent is embedded in “the story of those communities from which [one] derives [one’s] unity” (221). One’s moral integrity, he suggests, is shaped by this narrative frame:  
  
 I am never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only qua individual. … It is not just that different individuals live in different social circumstances; it is also that we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. … I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity. (205)  
  
MacIntyre’s understanding of community is teleological, normative, and, as the enumeration of social practices in which the individual is embedded suggests (“my family,” “my city,” and so on), focused on what binds all moral agents together into pre-existing social practices. In an ideal communitarian society, as he put it elsewhere, all individuals would be “held together by sympathetic feeling and by coincidence of interest” (*Whose Justice?* 67). Since MacIntyre never engaged with the position of individuals who do not share the same social bonds, his discourse runs the risk of reinforcing ethnocentrism, and his proposal to construct “local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained” (245) remains problematic at best. As a consequence, he remains caught up in a nostalgic longing for the tranquillity of the Aristotelian *polis*, and in a form of originary thinking, in which each moral agent’s behaviour can be retraced to the social practices that precede him.   
 Contrasting with MacIntyre, Nancy does not conceive of a community in terms of membership, a preceding moral framework, or an assemblage of individuals. In his short polemical essay “The Insufficiency of ‘Values’ and the Necessity of ‘Sense’,” he criticizes philosophers who complain about a “crisis of values” and who demand their “restoration” (437). Such a transcendental homesickness for a harmonious community of virtuous individuals, as articulated by MacIntyre, is precisely what he seeks to deconstruct. In his texts, he employs the concept of “compearance” [*comparution*], a term that originates in legal discourse, and means “defending oneself in court,” alongside the more general meanings of a “gathering” of or “meeting” between individuals. Compearance is the way in which each singularity’s appearance into the world is always already a coming into the world that is in-common. As he explains in “La Comparution”:   
  
 We compear: we come together (in)to the world. It is not that there is a simultaneous arrival of several distinct units (as when we go to see a film “together”) but that there is not a coming (in)to the world that is not radically *common*; it is even the “common” itself. To come into the world is to be-in-common. (373-4; original italics)  
  
In MacIntyre’s conception, community is based on the various social bonds and preceding frameworks that shape the individual’s moral integrity. The individual as such contributes to the preservation of the moral unity of the community in which he is born. MacIntyre’s communitarianism is predicated on the harmony between and proximity of the members of a community, and is consistent with the motif of the community as *oeuvre*. Speaking of “membership” implies that social relations are grounded in a certain essence or origin, and that each individual contributes to the reproduction of a common being. Compearance, on the other hand, refers to the encounters between singularities in which they are exposed to heterogeneity. Contrasting with communitarianism, there is no relation that precedes singular beings. Instead, relations are forged in every singular encounter, or, as Nancy states, “contemporaneous with the singularities” (*Sense* 71). As he puts it in *The Experience of Freedom*, referencing Heidegger’s *Geworfenheit*:  
  
 Singularities have no *common being,* but they *com-pear* [*com-paraissent*] each time *in* common in the face of the withdrawal of their common being, spaced apart by the infinity of this withdrawal—in this sense, without any relation, and therefore thrown into relation. (68; original italics)  
  
Nancy’s social ontology, to conclude, contrasts with the communitarian lament of the lost community and incautious, often nostalgic appeals to unity and teleology. He deconstructs the remnants of subjectivity in Bataille and Heidegger’s work, and has placed the political stakes of deconstruction on the forefront. Recalling Heidegger’s distinction between the ontological and the ontic, Nancy does not seek to think a common being, but cautiously explores the possibilities for being-in-common. Instead of denying the problem of being-in-common, for instance by invoking an “end of history” in which liberal-democratic capitalism has become the final form of government, or lamenting the failures of leftist political projects, he attempts to think through the exhaustion of traditional political figures. In fact, as he suggests in *The Inoperative Community,* this exhaustion should be affirmed: “it is a matter … of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still *unheard* demand, beyond communitarian models or remodelings” (22; original italics).  In this chapter, I have worked through several shifts in the thinking of community in Western (political) philosophy and social thought in order to identify several recurring schemes.   
Rousseau represents the archetypal *Verfallsgeschichte* of community, in which an originary sociality is lost and can only be recuperated through the submission of each to the social contract. The common in Marx’s view of communism slightly differs from this position, and posits a collective human essence and negative freedom (from exploitation and alienation) as the outcomes of the social transformations that the victory of the proletariat would bring about. Bataille broke with contractarianism, essentialism, and nostalgia by describing community as an experience, as an encounter between singular beings and a continuous transgression of limits. By breaking with the idea of community as a common identity or as collective ownership, Bataille’s work is perhaps the first theory of community predicated on exteriority, although his reliance on dialectical terms eventually reintroduced a logic of subjectivity. Nancy, Agamben, and Esposito conceive of community as a singular plurality or coessence, instead of as a communitarian dimension superimposed over the individual. The common or being-in-common, writes Esposito, is what suspends closure or sublation into a higher being, and instead consists of that which is shared, of “what is *not* one’s own, or what is unable to be appropriated by someone. It is what belongs to all or at least to many, and it therefore refers not to the same but to the other” (*Terms* 48; original italics). Being-in-common is thus radically opposed to the idea of community as an essence or shared origin, and is instead predicated on sharing, exposure, and a plurality that always already constitutes singularity.   
 Like the first chapter, the second chapter is a historical-conceptual overview, engaging with the work of Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno, Sartre, Derrida, and Nancy. In this chapter, building on Nancy’s statements on the similarities between his deconstruction of community and his statement that perhaps being-in-common is literary, I address my second topic of interest: the changing social position of literature in twentieth and twenty-first century aesthetics. Of interest is the persistent dualism between autonomous and committed art during the modernist period, and later conceptualizations of art as performative and singular artefacts that attempt to go beyond this dichotomy. In the next chapter, two questions function as guidelines: What are the strengths and limits of these aesthetic theories, and in what historical context are they framed?  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
 **Chapter Two: Aesthetics and Politics from Brecht and Benjamin to Derrida and Nancy**  
  
*If we are asked to believe that all literature is “ideology,” in the crude sense that its dominant intention (and then our only response) is the communication or imposition of “social” or “political” meanings and values, we can only, in the end, turn away. If we are asked to believe that all literature is “aesthetic,” in the crude sense that its dominant intention (and then our only response) is the beauty of language or form, we may stay a little longer but will in the end turn away.* —Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature  
  
Singularity is never one-off* [ponctuelle], *never closed off like a point or a fist* [poing]. *It is a mark* [trait], *a differential mark, and different from itself: different with itself. Singularity differs from itself, it is deferred* [se diffère] *so as to be what it is and to be repeated in its very singularity. There would be no reading of the work—nor any writing to start with—without this iterability.* —Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature”  
In this chapter, several debates on the social position of art from the early twentieth century until the present day are addressed, starting in the interbellum. In this period, the threats of fascism, National Socialism, and Soviet communism increasingly became apparent, and the relationship between aesthetics and politics was fiercely debated. Shortly after the First World War, the historical avant-gardes[[29]](#footnote-29) started to contest the separation between the spheres of art and life, as formulated by bourgeois aestheticians. Appreciative of the destructive practices of the avant-gardes, intellectuals like Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht sought to develop a political aesthetic suited to what the latter referred to as “the children of the scientific age” (113). While the NSDAP in their native Germany banned the “degenerate art” [*entartete Kunst*] of modernist artists, the Soviets adopted socialist-realism as their main cultural policy. In the midst of these developments, Brecht and Benjamin held that modern technological and scientific developments paved the way for a political aesthetic committed to the cause of the proletariat. As a result of these developments, they argued that the distance between the audience and the work of art could be reduced, and that the audience could play a more active role in the reception of the work of art. Emphasizing the notions of commitment and technique, Brecht and Benjamin denied that autonomous works of art could serve a progressive goal (Buck-Morss 148). For Benjamin, the artist had to realize that he, like the proletarian, was working *within* the production process, and not outside of it. However, solely committing oneself to the struggle of the proletariat was not enough: the correct political stance, as Benjamin put it in “The Author as Producer,” had to be matched by a correct artistic tendency, in which the artist strove to transform existing artistic techniques in order to shock his audience (86).   
 For Benjamin, the advent of techniques of mechanical reproduction had destroyed the originality and unique presence in space and time of the artwork, or its “aura.” For him, the loss of the aura was an ambivalent development. His work, as Fredric Jameson puts it, “seems … to be marked by a painful straining toward a psychic wholeness or unity of experience which the historical situation threatens to shatter at every turn” (*Marxism and Form* 61). At the same time, his programmatic essays in the 1930s contain a more affirmative dimension, in which the loss of the aura is seen as instrumental in the development of a communist “politicization of aesthetics,” as a counterpoint to a fascist “aestheticization of politics.” Benjamin viewed Brecht’s theatrical practice as the most prominent example of this political aesthetic, and drew inspiration from it for his own aesthetic and political views. The next section addresses the commonalities and differences between their views. After describing their views on art, I address the debate on the social position of literature between Sartre and Adorno, whose notions of committed and autonomous art strongly contrast with each other. The chapter ends with a discussion of Derrida and Nancy, in order to show how they attempt to circumvent the impasse between autonomy and commitment by stressing singularity and performativity. **2.1. Politics, Aesthetics, and Commitment: Brecht and Benjamin**  
As committed Marxist intellectuals, Brecht and Benjamin sought to formulate a political aesthetic in a time marked by state-administered cultural production on the one hand, and the radicalism of the historical avant-gardes on the other. The historical avant-gardes questioned the distance between art and life, and were especially critical of art’s autonomization from social reality, a development that started at the end of the eighteenth century. Art’s autonomization, writes Peter Bürger, was the idea that “among the members of those classes which, at least at times, are free from the pressures of survival, a sensuousness could evolve that was not part of any means-ends relationship” (46). While autonomization initially had an emancipatory function, by the beginning of the twentieth century it had created the illusion that the work of art was a dehistoricized, organic artefact (46). Against this tendency, the historical avant-gardes attempted to bridge the spheres of art and life. In Bürger’s view, the avant-gardes sought to attack the “institution art,” by fundamentally rethinking the social function of art:  
  
 What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardists demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the content of the works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content. (49)  
  
Through shock-techniques, such as the insertion of extra-artistic materials into art (newspaper clippings, “readymade” objects), the avant-gardes questioned the notions of the “organic” and “authentic” work of art. A fundamental aspect of these shock-techniques was the integration of new technological developments. These developments, writes Andreas Huyssen, “not only fuelled the artists’ imagination … but penetrated to the core of the work itself” (9). By integrating technology into art, the historical avant-gardes “undermined both bourgeois notions of technology as progress and art as “natural,” “autonomous,” and “organic” (11). Thus, the avant-gardes questioned what Huyssen terms “the Great Divide,” that is to say, “the categorical distinction between art and mass culture” (viii).   
 Brecht sought to implement avant-gardist techniques in his politically committed epic theatre. The goal of Brecht’s didactic plays [*Lehrstücke*] was “functional transformation” [*Umfunktionierung*], described by Benjamin as “the transformation of forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia—an intelligentsia interested in liberating the means of production and hence active in the class struggle” (“Author” 93). Brecht’s theatrical practice departed from the Aristotelian tradition, with its emphasis on the unity of time, place, and action, and on *katharsis*, the collective cleansing of the emotions of the spectators. Rejecting *katharsis,* Brecht developed the concept of the “estrangement-effect”[*Verfremdungseffekt*]. The goal of the didactic play was to estrange the audience from the events depicted on stage thought these *V-Effekte*: the use of dramatic lighting-effects, the insertion of satirical songs into the action of the play, actors who play multiple roles and speak directly to the audience, and so on. Rejecting Aristotelian *mimesis* and *katharsis*, which merely lulled the audience into passive acceptance, Brecht sought to prevent the spectator’s immersion into the events depicted on stage, and to avoid empathic identification with the actors. The use of *V-Effekte* estranged the actors and the audience alike, and thereby stimulated critical reflection and debate.  
 Aristotelian theatrical practice, argued Brecht, was inadequate as a model for political action. As he put it in “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” epic theatre’s goal was nothing less than “turning society upside down” by developing a detached, unsentimental attitude while siding with the cause of the proletariat (114). To become politically effective, wrote Brecht, “the theatre has to engage itself in reality,” by creating “effective representations of reality” (115). In “What is Epic Theater?,” Benjamin described the aim of the epic play as “producing astonishment rather than empathy” (150). Instead of identifying with the actors, “the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function” (150). The main effect of the epic play was to urge the spectators and the actors to take up a position—to commit themselves—by engaging with the events of the play. The main force of Brecht’s theatre, concluded Benjamin, lay in “the opportunity to expose the present” through the representation of social contradictions on stage (“Author” 100).   
 In “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin drew on Brecht’s theatrical practice as a model for a committed political aesthetic. In this essay, he aligned the task of the artist with that of the proletarian. While the proletarian’s revolutionary goal was to take control over and “functionally transform” the means of production, the committed artist similarly had to transform his raw materials, i.e., the artistic techniques at his disposal. “[T]he correct political tendency of a work,” claimed Benjamin, “extends also to its literary quality: because a political tendency which is correct comprises a literary tendency which is correct” (86).  
 In his essays in the 1930s, Benjamin, uncomfortably wedged between Brecht and Adorno, described the impact of modern techniques of reproduction, the decay of the aura, the destruction of “experience” [*Erfahrung*], and the loss of the ritual function of art. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he analyzed the impact of the rise of new media, such as photography and the film, and the increasing integration of technology into art. Benjamin situated the advent of this age of mechanical reproduction around the turn of the twentieth century. Because works of art could be reproduced, the notion of the organicity and authenticity of the work of art was invalidated. Benjamin called the unique presence in time and space of the work of art its “aura.” He praised the attacks on the bourgeois establishment by the historical avant-gardes,[[30]](#footnote-30) viewing them as instrumental in the transition from a ritualistic conception of art to a political one.  
 Before the advent of the age of mechanical reproduction, wrote Benjamin in the reproduction-essay, “the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura” was based on its ritual function (243-4). Traditionally, art was a collective experience, and formed an important part of a community’s social practices. However, as Benjamin put it in “The Storyteller,” the ritual function of art started to disappear during the beginning of the twentieth century. Especially the rise of the novel had rendered the collective experience of listening to a storyteller obsolete: “The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others” (87). By contrast, the storyteller, who came from a remote region to tell his tales, possessed a certain authority. His didactic function lay in imparting a useful moral or maxim to his audience. Each listener could interpret his story on his own, and subsequently spread it to others in an altered form. Benjamin called this process “epic remembrance” (98), a process that was of fundamental importance to the historical consciousness of a community,[[31]](#footnote-31) and bound its members together.  
 While listening to the storyteller was a collective and didactic experience, the ritual function and aura of artistic objects had been destroyed due to the rise of the novel and the development of reproductive techniques. As a consequence, stated Benjamin, the collective, ritual *Erfahrung* of the work of art had given way to *Erlebnis*, something one merely lived through (“Work of Art” 223-4). In “The Storyteller,” he described these developments as the replacement of epic remembrance by the dissemination of “information”:   
  
 [I]t is no longer intelligence which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing. The intelligence that came from afar … possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear “understandable in itself.” (89)  
  
Whereas information had to be immediately verifiable, the collective experience of storytelling depended on the individual’s capacity to reinterpret and repeat the story to others. The destruction of the aura broke with this insistence on the authority, originality, and presence of the work of art and the artist. As Eagleton notes, Benjamin held that the destruction of the aura was a positive, emancipatory development: “Mechanical reproduction destroys the authority of origins, but in doing so writes large a plurality that was there all along. It signifies the invasion of multiplicity into the object (…)” (*Walter Benjamin* 33). The destruction of the criterion of authenticity, claimed Benjamin, had created a historically unprecedented situation, in which art   
would be based on politics instead of on ritual (“Work of Art” 224). Art’s mechanical reproducibility, as well as the rise of mass movements in the interbellum, had produced a fundamental change in the mode of participation of the audience. Benjamin described this development as the transition from a “contemplative” to a “concentrated” attitude. Whereas the individual viewer was “absorbed” by the work of art, the “distracted” masses, by contrast, “absorb[ed] the work of art” (239). Media such as photography and the film reduced the distance between the artist and the public: everyone who watched a film, claimed Benjamin, considered himself to be an “expert” (231). As a consequence of the increasing possibility of participation on the part of the viewer, he predicted that “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. … At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (231).  
 The political aesthetic developed in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” culminated in an opposition between a communist “politicization of aesthetics” and a fascist “aestheticization of politics.” The goal of fascist aesthetics was to rehabilitate the ritual function and the aura of the work of art, instead of stimulating the critical potential of the audience. Instead of mobilizing the masses for a progressive cause, the goal of art under fascism was to keep social divisions in place:  
  
 Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of social values. (241)  
  
By restoring the notion of authenticity and by recuperating technology in the service of the personality cult, fascism, to borrow a phrase by Adorno, sought to “conserve[e] the decaying aura as a foggy mist” (“Culture Industry” 102). While the audience operated under the illusion that they were participating in the work of art, the fascist aestheticization of politics in fact re-established the distance between the artist and the spectator. On the other hand, the communist politicization of aesthetics, stated Benjamin,  
  
 is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and receptive attitudes of the public coincide. (234)  
  
Benjamin took his own life in 1940, while the events of the Second World War eventually cast suspicion on speaking of either a politicization of aesthetics or an aestheticization of politics (Van Rooden, *Literatuur* 114). Moreover, it is doubtful whether the political aesthetic elaborated in his essays was as unusable for the purposes of fascism as he thought. Brecht and Benjamin, to conclude, both held that the artist needed to commit himself to the cause of the proletariat, while at the same time attempting to functionally transform artistic techniques. Brecht did not emphasize the subversive effects of modern techniques of reproduction as much as Benjamin, while Benjamin on his part did not adhere to Brecht’s belief in the *Verfremdungseffekt* and the emancipatory potential of reason (Huyssen 14). Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* sought to estrange the audience and actors alike, while Benjamin argued that the viewer’s distracted attitude allowed each individual to fashion himself as somewhat of an expert, reducing the gap between the artist and the audience in the process.  
 In his defence of artistic autonomy, Adorno functions as a counterpoint to Benjamin and Brecht’s political aesthetic. Like Benjamin, Adorno was suspicious of Brecht’s belief in the capacity of reason and critique of ideology, but, like Brecht, he did not share Benjamin’s belief in the emancipatory potential of techniques of mechanical reproduction. According to him, these techniques merely served as tools to perpetuate the domination and manipulation of individuals by the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer’s pessimistic conception of this closed system complicates the assumptions of Brecht and Benjamin’s political aesthetics and their faith in the critical capacity of the audience.   
  
 **2.2. Autonomy, Commitment, and Mass Culture: The Case of Adorno**  
In *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Adorno and Horkheimer developed the notion of the culture industry in order to show how the artistic sphere had been increasingly exposed to commodification and standardization. In the culture industry, they argued, “[c]ultural entities … are no longer *also* commodities, [but] commodities through and through” (100; original italics). They developed the concept of the culture industry as an alternative to the term “mass culture.” Mass culture, wrote Adorno, implies that “something like a culture … arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art” (“Culture Industry” 100). By contrast, the culture industry is a totally administered system that excludes such spontaneity, as well as novelty and originality. Every work of art, wrote Adorno and Horkheimer, perpetuates the status quo, and “serves mainly as another rule to increase the power of the conventions when any single effect threatens to slip through the net” (128). They characterized the manipulation of individuals by the culture industry as “instrumental rationality,” which they considered to be representative of the Enlightenment project. Instead of critically reflecting on the capacity of reason,   
  
 [t]hinking objectifies itself to become an automatic, self-activating process; an impersonation of the machine that produces itself so that ultimately the machine can replace it. Enlightenment has put aside the classic requirement of thinking about thought. … In spite of the axiomatic self-restriction, it establishes itself as necessary and objective: it turns thought into a thing, which is its own term for it. (25)  
  
The liquidation of critical thinking under the tyranny of the culture industry, concluded Adorno, had led to a situation in which “conformity ha[d] replaced consciousness” (“Culture Industry” 104). Because of the inescapable stranglehold of the culture industry, Adorno rejected representative and political art, and praised the experimental, autonomous works of modernist artists. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he argued that the work of art had a dual nature:  
  
 The double character of art—something that severs itself from empirical reality and thereby from society’s functional context—is directly apparent in the aesthetic phenomena, which are both aesthetic and *faits sociaux.* They require a double observation that is no more to be posited as an unalloyed whole than aesthetic autonomy and art can be conflated as something strictly social. (252)  
  
Adorno’s notion of autonomy departs from traditional conceptions. His conception of autonomy, writes Huyssen, is characterized by two diverging factors, namely “aestheticism’s insistence on the autonomy of the art work and its double-layered separateness from everyday life … and … the avant-garde’s break with precisely that tradition of art’s autonomy” (32). Autonomous works of art, argued Adorno, managed to divorce themselves from and negate empirical reality, while nonetheless being social facts, created in a certain time and place. Opposed to the notion of a political aesthetic, Adorno held that only modernist art surpassed the dichotomy between committed art and *l’art pour l’art* (“Position” 26).   
 In his essay “Commitment,” Adorno criticized the political aesthetics of Brecht and Sartre. Brecht and Sartre conceived of art as something that could bring about social transformation. Committed art, wrote Adorno, “is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions … but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes” (180). In *What is Literature?*, Sartre developed his conception of committed literature [*littérature engagée*].Sartre claimed that authors should communicate a (politically) meaningful message: “Are we not in the habit of putting this basic question to young people who are thinking of writing: ‘Do you have anything to say?’ Which means: something which is worth the trouble of being communicated” (36). Sartre distinguished between the poet, who worked *against* language, and the prose writer, who *uses* language: “the writer deals with meanings. … The empire of signs is prose; poetry is on the side of painting, sculpture, and music” (28). Only prose, in other words, could be politically effective, since it uses language in order to convey a message, whereas poets seek to destroy language. For Sartre, the prose-writer was an activist, whom he described as “a *speaker:* he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates” (34-5; original italics). “The committed writer,” he argued, “knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change” (37). He called the writer’s operation “action by disclosure” (37): in his conception, literature’s effect was similar to his existentialism, namely appealing to the freedom of every reader (54).  
 In “Commitment,” Adorno criticized Brecht and Sartre’s positions, who held that the discussion of political ideas in art could stimulate the individual’s critical reflection or freedom of choice. The very notion of a “message” in art, wrote Adorno, “already contains an accommodation to the world” (193). Adorno’s conception of successful art, on the other hand, was aporetic: “A successful work is not one which resolves contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure” (“Cultural Criticism” 32). The negative character of successful art was expressed at the level of form, not of content. For Adorno, the function of art was not “to spotlight alternatives,” but “to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads. In fact, as soon as works of art do instigate decisions at their own level, the decisions themselves become interchangeable” (“Commitment” 180).  
 Adorno criticized Sartre for prioritizing a political message over formal innovation, and for his instrumentalization of art in the service of his own philosophy, sneering that the phrase “Hell is other people” might as well have been a quotation from *Being and Nothingness* instead of *Huis Clos* (182). Brecht, on his turn, was criticized for his satirical representation of Nazism. In *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui,* he portrayed Adolf Hitler as the titular manipulative cauliflower-racketeer. According to Adorno, Brecht trivialized political reality for the sake of commitment (184-5; cf. *Minima Moralia* 143-5). Committed artists created the illusion that an escape from either the horrors of Nazism or from existentialist anxiety was possible. By contrast, Adorno held that the function of autonomous art was to negate the negative reality of the culture industry, without posing such hypocritical, consoling alternatives:  
  
 The uncalculating autonomy of works which avoid popularization and adaptation to the market, involuntarily becomes an attack on them. The attack is not abstract, not a fixed attitude of all works of art to the world which will not forgive them for not bending totally to it. The distance these works maintain from empirical reality is in itself partly mediated by that reality. The imagination of the artist is not a creation *ex nihilo*; only dilettanti and aesthetes believe it to be so. (190)  
   
In modernist works, the horrors of modern life were mediated in a negative way through the form of the work of art. Such formal innovation, wrote Adorno, “constitutes the true relation of art to reality, whose elements are regrouped by its formal laws” (190). He portrayed Kafka and Beckett as artists whose works disrupted the fundamental attitudes of individuals, claiming that they “arouse the fear existentialism merely talks about,” (191) and that “the inescapability of their works” (191) forced the reader or spectator to change his attitude, whereas committed art only claimed to do so.  
 However, even autonomous works, standing outside empirical reality while at the same time being social facts, could become susceptible to the machinery of the culture industry. The culture industry, claimed Adorno and Horkheimer, had contaminated practically every aesthetic object, forming a “circle of manipulation and retroactive need” (128). Because of the ubiquity of the culture industry, writes Jameson, they held that “the greatest modern art, even the most apparently un-or anti-political, in reality h[eld] up a mirror to the ‘total system’ of late capitalism” (“Reflections” 209). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, successful modernist works achieved “auto-negation.” These works, they wrote, criticized the horrors of modern life by “us[ing] style as a way of hardening themselves against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth” (130). Contrasting with Sartre’s hermeneutic aggression (‘Do you have anything to say?’), the modernist work of art, wrote Adorno in *Philosophy of Modern Music,*   
  
 insists on its own ossification without concession to that would-be humanitarianism which it sees through, in all its attractive and alluring guises, as the work of inhumanity. Its truth appears guaranteed more by its denial of any meaning in organized society of which it will have no part—accompanied by its own organized vacuity—than by any capability of positive meaning within itself. Under the present circumstances it is restricted to definitive negation. (20)  
  
In his opposition to Brecht, Benjamin, and Sartre, Adorno was suspicious of any attempt to overstate art’s political effects. Committed artists, by holding that art was capable of transforming one’s attitudes, relegated it to a subsidiary position, in which the work of art merely reacted to reality. He excluded popular and political art, and was convinced that any attempt to overturn artistic or social values was already anticipated by the totally administered apparatus of the culture industry.   
 However, the structural transformation of the capitalist system of which he was such a perspicuous commentator laid bare the limits of Adorno’s modernist position. This post-war transition is described by Jameson as the transition from modernism to postmodernism, or from the “monopoly stage” of capitalism to its “late” stage. The rising standards of wealth in the decades after the Second World War, writes Jameson, caused “an enormous expansion in culture proper—its old semi-autonomy lost, its isolation a thing of the past” (*Jameson on Jameson* 19; cf. *Postmodernism* 48-50). Due to the dissemination of mass-produced products, the divide between mass and high culture upon which Adorno’s aesthetics depended was called into question. Moreover, the formerly shocking works of modernist artists he championed were canonized and institutionalized, and in this way deprived of their critical potential. “Those formerly subversive and embattled styles,” as Jameson put it, were, “for the generation which arrive[d] at the gates in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy—dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one ha[d] to destroy to do anything new” (*The Cultural Turn* 2). According to him, the increasing integration of aesthetic production with commodity production caused a break with the function of art in the modernist period. “Modernism,” wrote Jameson, “constitute[d], above all, the feeling that the aesthetic [could] only be fully realized and embodied where it [was] something more than the merely aesthetic” (101). Postmodernism, by contrast, effaced the contrast between high and low forms of culture by integrating them in the same context. Whereas modernism depended on parody, a *de haut en bas* form of irony, postmodern art employed pastiche, described by Jameson as “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” (*Postmodernism* 17). Pastiche, as a form of “blank parody” (17), differs from modernist parody, since is a neutral appropriation of a variety of styles that lacks a critical component.  
 In the next section, moving on from the dichotomy between committed and autonomous art, I engage with the relationship between literature and deconstruction in the work of Derrida and Nancy. Foregrounding the concepts of performativity and singularity, Derrida’s reflections on literature are inextricably bound up with his understanding of democracy. Nancy’s conception of literature revolves around the concepts of myth and literary communism, that is to say, the attempt to ground a substantial identity in a work on the one hand, and the singularity of the literary text on the other.  
  
**2.3. Singularity, Community, and Literary Communism: Literature and Deconstruction**  
Derrida once claimed in an interview that deconstruction was first and foremost a “coming-to-terms with literature” (“Deconstruction” 9). As stated above, Derrida holds that a literary text is performative, capable of creating its own rules. At the same time, the literary text is embedded in social, legal, and political practices that protect it from censorship. This double bind of the literary institution, as Derrida put it in an interview with Derek Attridge, grants literature a specific political privilege, central to the idea of democracy:  
  
 The institution of literature in the West,[[32]](#footnote-32) in its relatively modern form, is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy. Not that it depends on a democracy in the first place, but it seems inseparable from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy. (“Strange Institution” 27)   
  
Derrida holds that literature and democracy are interdependent: “No democracy without literature, no literature without democracy” (*On the Name* 28).[[33]](#footnote-33) In democratic societies, literature is protected from censorship. In this way, literature has the capacity to be irresponsible, having the right to say anything while not being held accountable for it. Following Derrida, J. Hillis Miller characterizes the democratic position of literature as its “secret.” Instead of disseminating “information,” in Benjamin’s sense of the term, “the freedom to say everything in literature means the right not to respond, a right to absolute non-response, to keep secret” (66; cf. Derrida, “Literature in Secret”). If this right to secrecy is not respected, if an author is pressed to state what he *actually* means, literature’s special, privileged position is abolished.[[34]](#footnote-34)  
 Derrida names the irreducible status of the literary text its “singularity.” As Attridge elucidates, the concept of singularity, as developed in literary criticism, is not coterminous with “autonomy,” “particularity,” “identity,” “contingency,” “specificity,” “essence,” or “uniqueness,” and not identical to the “individual” or the “subject” (*Singularity* 64). Singularity is always already a plurality, “constitutively impure, always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and reconceptualization” (63). Singularity and generality, as stated above, are mutually interdependent. If a work were absolutely singular, it would not be recognizable: “its readability, its possession of ‘meaning,’ however subject across the particular instances of reading and interpretation, implies a repetition, a law, an ideality of some type” (Attridge, “Introduction” 15).  
 Responding to the singularity of literary texts entails doing justice to what Attridge calls “inventiveness” and “otherness.” Reading responsibly is opposed to instrumental reading, characterized by Derrida as the reduction to “thematism, sociologism, historicism, [or] psychologism” (*Positions* 70). A successful, creative reading, states Attridge, does justice to that which exceeds one’s “idioculture”, i.e., the cultural codes an individual is shaped by (*Singularity* 22). A literary work, he states, is   
  
 an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read. (59)   
  
The notion of singularity, always already a plurality, problematizes a univocal definition of literature. As Derrida argues, literature cannot be defined and has no essence, but is characterized by its openness to different contexts. A literary text can channel a variety of discourses, without being reduced to them:  
  
 No exposition, no discursive form is intrinsically or essentially *literary* before and outside of the function it is assigned by a right, that is, a specific intentionality inscribed directly on the social body. … Even where it seems to *reside* [demeurer], literature remains an unstable function, and it depends on a precarious juridical status. Its passion consists in this—that it receives its determination from something other than itself. (*Demeure* 28; original italics)  
  
Defining the essence of literature is impossible, since literature constantly appropriates materials for its own sake. Instead, argues Derrida, “literature can say anything, accept anything, receive anything, suffer anything, and simulate everything” (29). In “Before the Law,” his analysis of the eponymous fable by Kafka, he links the democratic status of the literary text to the institution of the law. The authority of the law is dependent on its universal applicability: it has to be valid under all circumstances. In order to function, states Derrida, “the law must be without history, genesis, or any possible derivation” (191). He refers to this appeal to the legitimacy of the law as “the law of the law” (191). By contrast, the literary text is performative: it formulates its own rules, while it is at the same time democratically protected from censorship. Derrida calls literature’s capacity to formulate its own laws while at the same time being part of the legal framework its “subversive juridicity”:  
  
 This subversive juridicity requires that self-identity never be assured, nor reassuring; and it supposes also a power to produce performatively the statements of the law, of the law that literature can be, and not just of the law to which literature submits. Thus literature itself makes law, emerging in that place where the law is made. Therefore, under certain determined conditions, it can exercise the legislative power of linguistic performativity to sidestep existing laws from which, however, it derives protection and receives its conditions of emergence. … Under these conditions literature can *play the law*, repeating it while diverting it, or circumventing it. (216; original italics)  
  
The double bind of the literary institution grants it a political-critical potential, although Derrida and Attridge cautiously avoid overemphasizing its political effects. Like Derrida, Nancy attributes to literature a certain political potential. As discussed above, he asserts that being-in-common is literary. To be in-common means that appeals to foundations are suspended and unworked. In a passage in *The Inoperative Community,* he connects his social ontology with the social position of literature, using the concept of singularity as a mediator: “A singular being … has the precise structure and nature of a being of writing, of a ‘literary’ being: it resides only in the communication … of its advance and retreat. It offers itself, it holds itself in suspense” (78).[[35]](#footnote-35) Although he does not reflect at length on this claim, Nancy suggests that rethinking being-in-common amounts to rethinking the social position of literature as well.  
 In *The Sense of the World,* Nancy juxtaposes his conception of literature to Sartrean *littérature engagée* on the one hand, and Benjamin’s opposition between a communist politicization of aesthetics and a fascist aestheticization of politics on the other. He claims that writing is “political “in its essence,”” since it constitutes “the tracing out [*frayage*] of the essencelessness of relation” (119). Instead of intervening in a historical situation and appealing to the freedom of every individual (Sartre), and instead of allying aesthetics with a left-wing political stance (Benjamin, Brecht), he conceives of the act-event of writing as the exposure of singularities to each other. For Nancy, as Aukje van Rooden explains, “literature itself is a relational being. … [His] point of departure is not that a world pre-exists literature, but that literature is a world-forming relation itself” (“Zoiets” 81). Nancy distinguishes between this world-forming operation of literature and the figure of myth, which is both a foundational discourse and a fiction. Myth, as he puts it in *Being Singular Plural,* is ahistorical and self-positing: “it is brandished about or springs forth purely, without habituation, without a history. Not only does myth identify, it identifies itself above all: it is the infinite presupposition of its own identity and authenticity” (157-8). Myth, in other words, provides a group of individuals with a shared origin and identity. In a passage reminiscent of Benjamin, Nancy invokes the figure of the storyteller to describe the function of myth:  
  
 He [the storyteller] recounts to [the people] their history, or his own, a story that they all know, but that he alone has the gift, the right, or the duty to tell. It is the story of their origin, of where they come from, or of how they come from the Origin itself. … And so at the same time it is also the story of the beginning of the world, of the beginning of their assembling together, or of the beginning of the narrative itself (…). (*Inoperative* 43-4)  
  
For Nancy, myth is a story, but it is not *literary*, in the specific sense he attributes to the term. As Van Rooden explains, Nancy understands myth as both a fiction and a foundational discourse, as “both a presentation and a foundation of a communal essence” (“Zoiets” 83). The act of writing, on the other hand, lays bare the absence of such foundations. Myth, to borrow from Roland Barthes, is a preceding *logos* that “transforms history into nature” (154), whereas the singularity of literature suspends such a univocal authority. In *The Inoperative Community,* Nancy employs the term literary communism to juxtapose the operations of myth and literature. In a passage worth quoting at length, he elaborates on this term:  
  
 Each work, each writer inaugurates a community. There is therefore an unimpeachable and irrepressible literary communism, to which belongs anyone who writes (or reads), or tries to write (or read) by exposing himself—not by imposing himself … But the communism here is inaugural, not final. It is not finished; on the contrary, it is made up of the interruption of mythic communion and communal myth. … The communism of being-in-common and of writing (of the writing of being-in-common) is neither an idea nor an image, neither a message nor a fable, neither a foundation nor a fiction. It consists, in its entirety—it is total in this respect, not totalitarian—in the inaugural act that each work takes up and that each text retraces: in coming to the limit, in letting the limit appear as such, in interrupting the myth. (68)  
  
Whereas in the mythical paradigm phenomena are retraced to an origin that is both fictional and foundational, literature opens onto a plurality. Whereas myth recuperates phenomena, literature is an encounter that is singular in each instance, described by Nancy as “the common exposure of singular beings, their compearance” (66). Nancy occasionally places the term “literature” between quotation marks in order to problematize claims that it can be defined or has an essence. “[T]he text, or the writing,” he argues,  
  
 stems only from the singular relationship between singular beings. … The text stems from, or *is this relationship;* it renders its ontological vein: being as being *in* common is (the) being (of) literature. This does not imply a being of literature: it is neither a narrative nor a theoretical fiction. (66; original italics)  
  
The notion of literary communism entails that, apart from interrupting substantialist, mythical claims, univocal definitions of literature are interrupted as well. In this sense, although he does not develop the concept at length, Nancy attempts to rethink the social position of literature, by keeping his distance from appeals to either autonomy or commitment, and by emphasizing the concepts of singularity, sharing, and being-in-common. While being-in-common resists closure, literature is capable of playing the law while being dependent on a set of laws that allow it to be irresponsible. As such, literary texts resist being reduced to either the personal statement of an author, a message, or underlying ideology. To do justice to literature as literature, states Derrida, means instead   
  
 *giving oneself up* to the most idiomatic aspects of the work while also *taking account* of the historical context, of what is *shared* (in the sense of both participation and division, of continuity and the cut of separation), of what belongs to genre and type (…). And any work is singular in that it speaks singularly of both singularity and generality. Of iterability and the law of iterability. (“Strange Institution” 68; original italics)   
  
Derrida and Nancy, to conclude, attempt to think the social and political position of literature on the basis of the concepts of singularity and generality. For Derrida, literature’s capacity to be irresponsible grants it a certain critical potential. Nancy, on his part, links his conception of singularity(-plurality) to literature’s shared nature and its capacity to suspend closure. Like Brecht, Benjamin, Sartre, and Adorno, Derrida and Nancy are attentive to literature’s embeddedness in its socio-historical and economic environment. Unlike them, their views of literature are not based on the opposition between autonomy or commitment, but on singularity and performativity, and they refrain from restrictive aesthetic conceptions or substantialist claims.   
 Having addressed the development of the concept of community and debates on the social position of literature in the first and second chapter, the next two chapters are devoted to readings of José Saramago’s *Seeing* and Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission.* These texts share several plot features—the electoral process, the dismantling of democracy from within, the appeal to political myths—but differ in their outcomes. Building on the arguments developed in the previous two chapters, Saramago and Houellebecq’s texts constitute two different takes on the political situation of the twenty-first century. While the citizens in *Seeing* dismantle the political order precisely by not responding to the provocations of the government, *Submission* culminates in a radically different situation. Like the government in *Seeing,* the theocratic Muslim Brotherhood exploits the democratic system to implement anti-democratic measures. Contrasting with *Seeing*’s Bartlebyesque population*,* the citizens in *Submission* accept the measures taken by the Muslim Brotherhood without protest, and are more than willing to give in to Ben Abbes’s attempt to form a new *ummah*.   
 In the next chapter, I engage with Saramago’s *Seeing.* A timely political text, Saramago’s novel satirically problematizes appeals to a common political identity. Although the novel is set in an unidentified country, the situation in *Seeing* eerily resembles the geopolitical predicament of the early twenty-first century, as sketched in the introduction.   
 **Chapter Three: Community, Inoperativity, and Violence: José Saramago’s *Seeing***   
  
*What the state cannot tolerate in any way … is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable definition of belonging (even in the form of a simple presupposition).*  
 —Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*[*S*]*ometimes a polite smile can be more violent than a brutal outburst.* —Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections*In the opening scene of José Saramago’s *Seeing,* representatives of the ruling party of the right (p.o.t.r.), the party in the middle (p.i.t.m.), and the marginalized party of the left (p.o.t.l.) anxiously await the appearance of the first voters at the polling stations on election day. On this exceptionally rainy day, the tension between the representatives in the capital rises, when it seems as if no one bothers to turn up. The voters, suggests one of them, are “probably waiting for the rain to let up” (5). A secretary suggests to contact other polling stations to ask whether the same thing is happening elsewhere in the country. This suggestion causes a member of the party of the right to lose his temper:  
  
 The representative of the p.o.t.r. sprang indignantly to his feet, I demand that it be set down in the minutes that, as representative of the p.o.t.r., I strongly object to this disrespectful manner and the unacceptably mocking tone in which the secretary has just referred to the voters, who are the supreme defenders of democracy, and without whom tyranny, any of the many tyrannies that exist in the world, would long ago have overwhelmed the nation that bore us. (6)   
  
Shortly after this outburst, all of a sudden citizens flock the streets to cast their votes. However, the outcome of the elections proves to be devastating: over seventy percent of the electorate has cast a blank ballot. After this bizarre event, chaos and censorship ensues. The word “blank” is avoided in public discourse, those who cast blank votes are pejoratively referred to as “blankers,” and the minister of defence bombastically describes the situation as “a depth charge launched against the system” (31). The mass casting of blank votes, states a government official in a similar manner, “seem[s] to be posing a grave threat to the stability to the regime, but, even more seriously, of the system itself” (15).  
 Daily life, meanwhile, goes on as usual: “there isn’t a single shout, a single long live or down with, not a single slogan saying what it is the people want, just this threatening silence that sends shivers down your spine” (128). The government orders spies to infiltrate the population, in order to pinpoint the sources of the “blank plague” (136), as one of the government functionaries calls it, alluding to the blindness epidemic that struck the country four years earlier. However, when asked by these infiltrators whom they voted for, citizens irritably reply that no one can be forced to reveal his vote in a democratic society (25).   
 The second round of elections only aggravates the situation: this time, eighty-three per cent casts a blank vote. At a loss to explain this situation, one of the politicians reasons that this refusal to vote for one of the three parties “could only be the brainchild of some machiavellian mastermind, someone who remains hidden behind the curtain and makes the puppets do exactly what he wants” (154). The government decides to take drastic measures, and declares a state of emergency. These repressive measures prove to be ineffective as well, and elicit no reaction from the voters, to the frustration of the government. “What we are trying to tell them,” says the minister of defence, “and let’s hope they finally get the message, is that, having shown to be unworthy of trust, they will be treated accordingly” (51). “[K]now that the nation’s government is on your side,” threatens the prime minister during a public speech, adding “it is up to you now to decide whether you are for or against us” (147).  
 *Seeing* is based on the radical intrusion of a bizarre event that brings the daily lives of individuals and the political system to a standstill, a recurring feature in Saramago’s fiction.[[36]](#footnote-36) As in *Blindness,* characters lack names, and are only identified by their profession or a specific characteristic (“the doctor,” “the doctor’s wife,” “the superintendent,” “the boy with the squint,” “the prime minister”). As in the majority of Saramago’s texts, *Seeing* only features commas and periods as punctuation. As David Frier notes, the absence of conventional punctuation produces a “seamless mingling of successive voices in one continual flow of language,” and “creates some confusion as to the correct attribution in a given context of any particular words to specific characters, or even to the ever-shifting figure of the narrator” (4-5).[[37]](#footnote-37) The ironic, omniscient narrator, another characteristic of Saramago’s fiction, occasionally interrupts the events of the narrative, as in the following passage in *Seeing*:   
  It will not have gone unnoticed, by particularly exacting readers and listeners, that the narrator of this fable has paid scant, not to say non-existent, attention to the place in which the action described, albeit in a leisurely fashion, is taking place. Apart from the first chapter, in which there were a few careful brush-strokes applied to the area of the polling station, although, even then, these were applied only to doors, windows and tables, and with the exception of the polygraph, that machine for catching liars, everything else, which is quite a lot, has passed as if the characters in the story inhabited an entirely unsubstantial world, were indifferent to the comfort or discomfort of the places in which they found themselves, and did nothing but talk. (100)  
  
Although situated in this “insubstantial world,” the events depicted in *Seeing* are all too recognizable to the present-day reader, and channel several geopolitical developments that have occurred since the late 1990s. The prime minister’s threat to the citizens, for instance, corresponds almost verbatim to Bush’s statements after the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, the government’s declaration of the state of emergency or “state of exception”[[38]](#footnote-38) is predicated on the same legal structure as the USA Patriot Act. The government’s decision to implement the state of exception stems from its failure to grasp the enigmatic refusal of the blankers. While this collective lays no claim to a substantial identity, and does not voice its political demands at all, the government seeks to straight-jacket the citizens into traditional political figures, either through manipulation of mass media, the resurrection of nationalist tropes, or by engaging in smear campaigns in order to construct a public enemy.   
 In this chapter, I analyze the relationship between the law, sovereignty, and violence in *Seeing.* As a speculative counterpart to the post-9/11 geopolitical predicament, the Bartlebyesque collective unworks the attempts on the part of the government to rehabilitate political figures, and is eventually confronted with what happens when the frustration on the part of the government becomes intolerable. Žižek’s comparison between *Seeing* and “Bartleby” is developed in order to describe the peculiar apathy of the citizens, who disrupt the political establishment precisely by abstaining from action.  
   
 **3.1. Sovereignty and the State of Exception**  
In their geopolitical analyses, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Saskia Sassen observe a few significant changes in the constitution of the sovereignty of the nation-state after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Hardt and Negri especially emphasize the changing role of the U.S. in global politics. According to them, the post-war hegemony of the U.S. began to wane during the 1990s. In *Empire* and its sequels *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*, they analyse the consequences of what according to them is the most significant event of the new millennium, namely what “may be the definitive failure of unilateralism” (*Commonwealth* 203). Furthermore, they observe a conspicuous resurgence of “just war” theories after 9/11, as well as a return to the concept of sovereignty and to political theology among legal scholars and political philosophers, who use the work of Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt as primary points of reference (4).  
 In *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization,* Sassen claims that the sovereignty of the nation-state was challenged by four developments at the end of the second millennium. Firstly, the implementation of neoliberal policies in former communist countries allowed firms to cross borders more easily, paying little attention to territorial constraints. Secondly, the growing power of multinationals required the construction of new legal regimes to properly regulate economic transactions. Thirdly, due to computerization and the rise of the Internet, these transactions began to take place in digital environments, and started to transcended “all existing territorial jurisdiction” (6). Fourthly, increasing digitalization caused a crisis of control, and threatened to eclipse “the capacities of both the state and the institutional apparatus of the economy” (6).  
 As the implementation of the Patriot Act by the Bush administration and the political turmoil in *Seeing* show, the juridico-political figure of the state of exception constitutes one of the most extreme measures to safeguard the sovereignty of the nation-state. One of the most prominent analysts of this figure was Carl Schmitt, who discussed it at length in his *Political Theology* (1922). Schmitt called the state of exception [*Ausnahmezustand*] a “borderline concept” [*Grenzbegriff*] (5), situated on the threshold between politics and the law. The state of exception is a lacuna at the heart of the law that allows the sovereign to (either temporarily or indefinitely) suspend the entire juridical order, while the law nonetheless remains in force (12).   
 Schmitt famously defined the sovereign as “he who decides on the exception” (5). Only the sovereign had the right to decide what constituted a threat to the political stability of the state. The sovereign thus stood both inside and outside the legal order, as the only one who had the right to suspend the constitution. The exception, wrote Schmitt, is “a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state (…)” (6). By declaring the state of exception, the sovereign gains unlimited power, and suspends the entire juridical order. In such situations, wrote Schmitt, “the state remains, whereas law recedes” (12).  
 The figure of the state of exception has received increasing attention in the last decades, especially in the work of Agamben, who claims that it constitutes “the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (*State of Exception* 2; cf. *Homo Sacer* 20). Building on the work of Schmitt, Agamben similarly conceives of the state of exception as a juridical lacuna that serves to implement anti-democratic measures by abolishing “the distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers” (7). The state of exception is a lawless space in which the law nonetheless remains in force: the law is disconnected from its legitimacy, i.e., that which makes the law the law. This ambiguous position of the state of exception, observes Agamben, poses a problem for legal scholars, since “what must be inscribed within the law is something that is essentially exterior to it, that is, nothing less than the suspension of the juridical order itself” (33). In this way, the state of exception  
  
 appears as the opening of a fictitious lacuna in the order for the purpose of safeguarding the existence of the norm and its applicability to the normal situation. The lacuna is not within the law [*la legge*], but concerns its relation to reality, the very possibility of its application. It is as if the juridical order [*il diritto*] contained an essential fracture between the position of the norm and its application, which, in extreme situations, can be filled only by means of the state of exception, that is, by creating a zone in which application is suspended, but the law [*la legge*], as such, remains in force. (31)  
  
While associated with totalitarianism, Agamben points out that the figure of the state of exception actually stems from the democratic tradition. The best-known example is the constitution of the Weimar Republic, which was drafted in 1919. According to article 48 of the constitution, the President of the Republic could enforce measures without asking the Reichstag for permission in the case of political emergencies. After the arson attack on the Reichstag on 27 February 1933, Chancellor Adolf Hitler convinced President Paul von Hindenburg to sign the Reichstag Fire Decree on the basis of article 48, in order to suppress communist aggression. This emergency decree granted the government the right to censor public opinion, the freedom of the press, and to violate the privacy of its citizens, among other constitutional rights. After successfully neutralizing the Communist Party, and after the establishment of the one-party dictatorship of the Nazis, article 48 remained in force during the twelve years of the Third Reich. As Agamben shows, the Patriot Act is predicated on the same juridico-political structure as the measures taken by the Nazis during the interbellum. The Patriot Act, as he puts it, “radically erases any legal status of the individual,” and “produce[s] a legally unnameable and unclassifiable being” (3). Through these measures, a new political space is created, in which democratic rights are suspended through democratic means, in order to safeguard the functioning of the state.   
 In the first half of *Seeing*, the mass casting of blank votes forms the primary motivation behind the implementation of the state of exception. The implementation of emergency decrees, states the prime minister “allow[s] the government to assume the relevant powers and to suspend at a stroke all constitutional guarantees” (35). All the attempts to provoke the blankers by pitting them against the seventeen percent who did vote for one of the three parties fail. The prime minister even orders a bomb attack in order to incriminate the blankers. After this attack, the media are certain that “some terrorist group with links to the blankers” (117) is responsible, but the blankers merely organize a peaceful procession to mourn the victims.  
 Eventually, the government, unable to deal with the increasingly farcical political predicament, decides to leave the capital and to evacuate the seventeen percent, dubbing this undertaking “operation xenophon” (129), named after the author of the *Anabasis*. Shortly before the evacuation, the prime minister trenchantly criticizes the blankers’ unpatriotic behaviour, in a passage worth quoting at length:  
  
 [W]hat you will never be able to say is that it is the fault of those to whom the popular will, freely expressed in successive, peaceful, honest, democratic contests, entrusted the fate of the nation so that we could defend it from all dangers, internal and external.  
 You are to blame, yes, you are the ones who have ignominiously rejected national concord in favour of the tortuous road of subversion and indiscipline and in favour of the most perverse and diabolical challenge to the legitimate power of the state ever known in the history of nations. Do not find fault with us, find fault rather with your selves. … You have betrayed the memory of your ancestors, that is the harsh truth that will for ever torment your consciences, yes, stone upon stone, they built that altar of the nation, and, shame on you, you chose to tear it down. … With all my soul, I want to believe that your madness will prove a transitory one, that it will not last, I want to think that tomorrow, a tomorrow which I pray to heaven will not be long in coming, that tomorrow remorse will seep gently into your hearts and you will become reconciled with legality and with that root of roots, the national community, returning, like the prodigal son, to the paternal home. (84-5)  
  
After the populist indignation of the right-wing politician quoted above, this speech constitutes one of the many instances in which the government attempts to straight-jacket its population into a stable political figure. In his speech, tinged with religious terms, the prime minister appeals to nationalist sentiments by employing double negatives: the stability of the body politic has been threatened, and can only be restored if the blankers repent for their sins. The appeal to “concord” and to the “root of roots,” the “national community” are central tropes in early modern conceptions of sovereignty, for instance in the work of Hobbes and Rousseau, for whom the indivisibility of the people was the foundation of the unity of the nation.   
 It is this identification of people with their nation that Benedict Anderson’s calls the “imagined community” of the nation, a community that is “imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). According to Anderson, every community is imagined since “the members of even the smallest nation never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). The nation is a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (7), in which its members share one or several languages and a territorial unit. Anderson identifies three main developments that contributed to the rise of nationalism during the eighteenth century: the loss of the authority of script-languages and the spread of vernaculars (36), the declining importance of divine or hereditary monarchy (36), and a new conception of temporality which he (borrowing from Benjamin) calls “homogenous, empty time” (23). The rise of print-capitalism especially contributed to this temporal experience: the dissemination of newspapers, for instance, created a mass audience of individuals who could read about the same events at the same time.   
 In his speech, the prime minister invokes mythical elements, in Nancy’s sense of the term:   
by invoking an originary sociality, “the altar of the nation,” he attempts to heal the fracture in the body politic. However, his provocations elicit no reaction. Meanwhile, operation xenophon proves to be a disaster, after the government forgets to instruct the military troops that surround the capital to let the evacuees through. After the evacuation results in traffic jams and chaos, the government aborts operation xenophon, after which the citizens return to the capital. To the frustration of government officials, the blankers politely assist in unloading the belongings of the seventeen percent.   
 The government in *Seeing* describes the political situation alternately as an “insurrection” (117), “terrorism, pure and unadulterated” (32), a “vile assault on the very foundations of representative democracy” (31), or simply as a “conspiracy” (205), devised by the blankers. The government mobilizes an array of myths in order to safeguard the national community and to provoke those whom it seeks to exclude from the political order, although in so doing it ironically excludes the majority of the population. These myths, to borrow an expression by Gilles Deleuze in his reading of “Bartleby,” rely on a “logic of presuppositions” (73) according to which a rightful citizens is to obey in a democratic society. However, the hysterical and futile appeals to a common identity testify to an exhaustion of traditional political terminology: none of the existing political figures—the appeal to patriotism, the populist defence of “the supreme defenders of democracy,” the Hobbesian notion of the “concord” of the body politic, and the imagined community of the nation—serve as adequate descriptions of the non-response of eighty-three percent of the population. It is precisely this odd peculiar non-response that has yielded comparisons to Melville’s inscrutable clerk Bartleby, the topic of the next section.   
  
 **3.2. Preferring Not To: *Seeing* and “Bartleby-Politics”**  
The narrator of “Bartleby,” who describes himself as a “rather elderly man” (1), is urged to hire another employee after some recent financial successes. The narrator’s personnel consists of Turkey, an old man whose productivity decreases dramatically as the day progresses, Nippers, an ambitious, young man who on the contrary cannot motivate himself to work in the morning, and Ginger Nut, a little boy whose nickname stems from bringing Turkey and Nippers ginger cakes. When Bartleby shows up at his doorstep, the narrator immediately hires him. In his first two days, Bartleby produces a great amount of work. On the third day, when the narrator asks him to proofread a legal document, Bartleby gives him a curious answer:  
  
 In this very attitude did I sit when I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, ‘I would prefer not to.’ (13)   
  
After this incident, Bartleby answers every question with this formula, or derivations thereof, to the confusion of his employer and colleagues. Bartleby’s statement has provoked extensive philosophical debate,[[39]](#footnote-39) and has on several occasions been likened to the events of *Seeing*. Žižek, for instance, considers Saramago’s novel as “a mental experiment in Bartlebian politics” (*Violence* 214). Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” dismantles every attempt on the part of the narrator and his employees to inspire Bartleby to act. His utterance, states Žižek, is not passive-aggressive, but “aggressive-passive”: Bartleby’s formulation is much more effective and distressing than a simple act of rebellion, since he does not refuse, but voices his preference for the non-preferred (*The Parallax View* 342). When the narrator for instance asks him “*Why* do you refuse?,” Bartleby again states “I would prefer not to” (Melville 14; original italics). Against what he calls political “pseudo-activity,” Žižek affirms Bartleby’s attitude as “the first necessary step which, as it were, clears the ground, opens up the place, for true activity, for an act that will actually change the coordinates of the constellation” (*The Parallax View* 342). Adopting such an attitude, according to him, is the way to move “from the politics of “resistance” or “protestation,” which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation” (381-2; original italics). In a similar way, the casting of the blank votes is not an openly hostile act, but calls the very functioning of democracy into question, thereby going beyond a simple division between hegemony and counter-hegemony.[[40]](#footnote-40) Thus, writes Žižek, “[t]he voters’ abstention goes further than intra-political negation, the vote of no confidence: it rejects the very frame of decision” (182).   
 In “Bartleby: or, The Formula,” Gilles Deleuze analyzes the peculiar construction of Bartleby’s statement, noting that the usual formula is “I had rather not” (68). Although “I would prefer not to” is syntactically and grammatically correct, Bartleby’s formula “leaves what it rejects undetermined, confers upon it the character of a radical, a kind of limit-function” (68). The formula, states Deleuze, is “neither an affirmation nor a negation” (70):  
  
 The formula is devastating because it eliminates the preferable just as mercilessly as any nonpreferred. It not only abolishes the term it refers to, and that it rejects, but also abolishes the other term it seemed to preserve, and that becomes impossible. In fact, it renders them indistinct: it hollows out an ever expanding zone of indiscernibility or indetermination between some nonpreferred activities and a preferable activity. All particularity, all reference is abolished. (71)  
  
The narrator of “Bartleby,” intrigued by his employee, goes out of his way to break through Bartleby’s passivity. Eventually, his employee’s strange behaviour forces him to fire him, but Bartleby refuses to leave. The narrator decides to move out, and abandons Bartleby while being plagued by a sense of guilt. When the new owners of the building complain to him about the strange figure who sits on the doorsteps all day, he claims that he is not responsible for Bartleby. Eventually, the new occupants order the police to arrest Bartleby, who is sent to prison. The narrator pays Bartleby a last visit, but cannot get through to him. After a while, his former clerk dies of starvation, with the narrator exclaiming “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” (46).  
 Like Melville’s clerk, the blankers neither accept the measures of the government, nor do they ever express what they do prefer. In so doing, the blankers’ passivity creates a zone of indetermination in the body politic, and destabilizes the democratic process. Notwithstanding the terms used by the government to describe them (“terrorists,” “insurrectionists”), the blankers’ act is neither a negation of the political order, nor a resistance to or refusal of the authority of the government, but a wholesale rejection of the presuppositions of the democratic process. As Deleuze suggests, if Bartleby had refused, he would merely be a “rebel” or “insurrectionary” (73). However, continues Deleuze, Bartleby’s formula “stymies all speech acts” and thus “makes Bartleby a pure outsider [*exclu*] to whom no social position can be attributed” (73).  
 Both the narrator of “Bartleby” and the government officials in *Seeing* are confronted with a phenomenon that they cannot explain by resorting to traditional political figures. The narrator and the politicians both seek to pinpoint the *meaning* behind the behaviour of Bartleby and the blankers, but in the end realize that they have failed in doing so. The despair on the part of the government—what is the meaning of the mass casting of blank ballots?—urges them to implement a measure, the state of exception, that precisely divorces the law from its legitimacy, i.e., that which grants the law its meaning. By implementing the state of exception, writes Agamben, like Deleuze employing linguistic terms, “a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference” (*State of Exception* 40). Through the state of exception, as stated above, the government inaugurates a political space in which the legal status of its citizens is erased, and the use of coercive measures is justified, a justification which, however, has no reference to the juridical order. Whereas the government’s violence does not have any reference to the juridico-political order, the unmotivated and unexplained passive attitudes of Bartleby and the blankers are irreducible to the presuppositions of the elderly man and the government respectively: to repeat Žižek, they reject the very frame of decision itself.  
 While the first half of *Seeing* lacks a protagonist, the plot is set in motion after a second intrusion by the narrator, who confesses that “he had never been quite sure how to bring to a successful conclusion this extraordinary tale (…)” (170). After this confession, the president of the republic receives a letter from a man who offers an explanation for the casting of blank ballots and the epidemic that had devastated the country four years earlier. “What I am suggesting, your excellency,” writes the man, “is that the first blindness might perhaps help to explain this blindness now, and that both might be explained by the existence, and possibly by the actions, of one person” (171-2). The man reveals that he was part of a group led by a certain woman—“the doctor’s wife,” the protagonist in *Blindness*—who was the only one who did not lose her sight during the epidemic, and suggests that she may be behind the conspiracy of the blankers. After this suggestion, the government sets a superintendent on the case, aided by a sergeant and an inspector. The superintendent, however, quickly realizes the absurdity of the investigation. During an interview with the doctor and the doctor’s wife, he briefly contemplates asking the doctor’s wife whether she is behind the casting of blank ballots, but refrains from doing so (217). He starts to sympathize with the couple, and becomes disillusioned with his work, rejecting the possibility that the doctor’s wife is the “machiavellian mastermind” the government has been searching for. After a private conversation with the interior minister, he rejects this idea definitively:  
  
 Even he [the interior minister] does not believe it, [the superintendent] thought, he just wants a target to aim at, if this one fails, he’ll find another, and another, and another, as many as it takes until he finally gets it right, or until, by dint of sheer repetition, the people he is trying to persuade of his merits grow indifferent to the methods and processes he adopts. In either case, the party will have won. (239-40)  
  
After the appeal to nationalist sentiments by the prime minister, the public condemnation of the blankers by the media, and the increasing use of coercive methods, the government is more than willing to follow up on the anonymous man’s monocausal suggestion. The idea that the doctor’s wife may have been pulling the strings all along allows the government to localize the source of the “resistance,” “rebellion,” or “conspiracy.” The idea that a distinction between “friend” and “enemy” was the primary way to ensure the political stability of the state was posed by Schmitt in *The Concept of the Political*. The distinction between friend and enemy, wrote Schmitt,  
  
 denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation. … The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. (26-7)  
  
For Schmitt, the identification and localization of an outside threat by the state was necessary to ensure the homogeneity of the people. “The enemy,” he argued “exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity” (28). For him, the enemy was always already a public enemy (28). In keeping with his definition of the sovereign as the one who decides on the exception, Schmitt held that the sovereignty of the nation-state was predicated on the ability to decide on the distinction between friend and enemy.   
 In *Specters of Marx,* Derrida coins the term “ontopology” (102) to designate the attempt on the part of the state to control its territory by regulating who are present in or absent from the political order. Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction can be seen as an example of ontopology, but his description of the figure of the enemy destabilizes his discourse. For Schmitt, as Derrida notes, the enemy is at the same time a “*reality*,” a “*possibility*,” and a “*presence*” (*Politics* 131; original italics). As a consequence, argues Derrida, “[t]he practical identification of self—and from one self to other—seem to be sometimes conditions, sometimes consequences, of the identification of friend and enemy” (116). In his attempt to rigorously distinguish between friend and enemy, Schmitt eventually failed to develop a conceptual framework through which the state could identify and localize threats to the body politic.  
 In *Seeing*, the prime minister and the president quickly realize that such a transparent identification of the public enemy is impossible: “Let’s hope your aim is true, All I need is to have the enemy in my sights. But that is precisely the problem, we don’t know where the enemy is, we don’t even know who they are” (77). The superintendent tracks down the man who sent the letter in which it was suggested that the doctor’s wife could be behind the political turmoil of the last four years. The man remembers that he still has a photograph of the group led by the doctor’s wife in *Blindness.* The day before the photograph is published in newspapers and shown on television, the superintendent calls the doctor’s wife to inform her that the government is trying to frame her as the public enemy. “As I’ve learned in this job,” he remarks, “not only are the people in government never put off by what we judge to be absurd, they make use of absurdities to dull consciences and to destroy reason” (270). The next day, the photograph is published, with the newspapers running headlines such as “Revealed At Last-The Face Behind The Conspiracy, Four Years Ago This Woman Escaped Blindness, Mystery Of The Blank Ballot Papers Solved, Police Investigation Yields First Results” (271).   
 Whereas *Blindness* starts out as a tragedy that ends on a hopeful note, *Seeing* begins as a farce but descends into tragedy. After the publication of the photograph, the doctor’s wife is demonized as the public enemy. The superintendent, considered a liability to the government’s authority, is assassinated on the orders of the prime minister. In a public speech, the interior minister once again blames the blankers for the brutal killing of this esteemed government official. The interior minister does not know that the prime minister is responsible for the murder of the superintendent, and is fired after his speech. The prime minister decides to take over his position as well, laconically remarking “I’m your successor, after all, why shouldn’t the prime-minister-cum-justice-minister also be the interior minister, that way we can keep it all in the family, so don’t you worry, I’ll take care of everything” (304). After having successfully localized the public enemy, and after the prime minister has taken up the mantle of the absolute sovereign, the lines between democracy and totalitarianism are definitively blurred in the epilogue of *Seeing*. After being framed as the alleged mastermind behind the blankers, the doctor’s wife is shot twice by an assassin. A third shot silences her howling dog Constant, the “dog of tears” from *Blindness*. In the last lines of *Seeing*, it is suggested that another, familiar plague has once again struck the country: “Then a blind man asked, Did you hear something, Three shots, replied another blind man. But there was a dog howling too. It’s stopped now, that must have been the third shot. Good, I hate to hear dogs howl” (307).   
   
 **3.3. *Seeing* as Political Fable**  
In one of his intrusions in the narrative, the narrator of *Seeing* characterizes the story he is telling as a “fable” (100). Traditionally, the fable, a short tale featuring anthropomorphized animals, was concluded by a moral lesson. Although one would be hard put to identify didactic elements, the events of *Seeing* are recognizable to the reader of the present day, and form a speculative variation on the post-9/11 geopolitical predicament. *Seeing*’s “political animals,” to employ Aristotle’s famous formula, like Melville’s clerk, disrupt all the attempts to incite them to action. In so doing, traditional political figures—the unity of the people, the indivisibility of the general will, the imagined community of the nation, and so on—are invalidated. The blankers resists any attempt at identification, and do not lay claim to an essence that unites them, recalling Agamben’s coming community and whatever singularity. Like in Melville’s short story, the central enigma of Saramago’s novel is never solved, while the aggression on the part of the government eventually culminates in the implementation of anti-democratic measures in order to “save” the democratic system. Instead of an appeal to the reader, in Sartre’s sense of the term, or educating the reader à la Aesop or Jean de La Fontaine, *Seeing*’s narrator suspends signification, and presents a community that disrupts pseudo-theological models of sovereignty and attempts to furnish a mythical grounding of the political.   
 Houellebecq’s *Submission,* the subject of the next chapter, although also a dark speculative political satire, is based on a slightly different premise. Whereas *Seeing* explores what could happen when the foundations of democracy are undercut by a passive population, *Submission* portrays what could happen when citizens passively accept the appeals to a common identity and the reconstruction of traditional notions.

**Chapter Four: Democracy and Theocracy in Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission****It is interesting to note that the ‘sexual revolution’ is usually portrayed as a communist utopia, whereas in fact it was simply another stage in the rise of the individual. As the lovely phrase ‘hearth and home’ suggests, the couple and the family were to be the last bastion of primitive communism in a liberal society. The sexual revolution was to destroy the last unit separating the individual from the market. The destruction continues to this day.*  
 —Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*  
*Well, it’s all over now. Like a tide-race, the waves of human mediocrity are rising to the heavens and will engulf this refuge, for I am opening the flood-gates myself, against my will. Ah! but my courage fails me, and my heart is sick within me!—Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who would fain believe, on the galley-slave of life who puts out to sea alone, in the night, beneath a firmament no longer lit by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope!* —Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*  
Due to his controversial novels and media appearances, Michel Houellebecq has been labelled as a pornographer, racist, eugenicist, fascist, misogynist, reactionary, and Islamophobe. Because of his refusal to speak about himself, and because of the presence of several characters named Michel, critics have examined the parallels between his personal life and views and those of his characters (cf. Demonpion). Houellebecq has only added to the confusion whether his or his characters’ statements should be taken at face value or not, by engaging in self-parody and by blurring the lines between his life and work. His penultimate novel *The Map and the Territory* [*La carte et la térritoire*] (2010) for instance features a certain Michel Houellebecq, a reclusive, alcoholic writer who is eventually brutally murdered. In 2014, he starred in the comical semi-fictional documentary *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq* [*L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq*], in which he is kidnapped, and strikes up a bizarre friendship with his dim-witted hostage-takers. In his correspondence with Bernard-Henri Lévy, Houellebecq downplays his status as one of France’s best-known novelists, by ironically describing himself as “an unremarkable author without style,” who has only managed “to achieve literary fame as the result of an uncharacteristic failure of judgment on the part of a handful of confused critics” (7).   
 Houellebecq has polarized critics, who either praise his work as “a modern pendant of Balzac’s *Comédie humaine*” (de Haan 24), engage in *ad hominem* attacks, or equate the actions and ideas of his characters with those of the author.[[41]](#footnote-41) It is precisely this tension between his public persona and the provocative statements of his characters that Houellebecq employs for critical and satirical purposes, as he suggests in an interview:   
  
 What is important to me is the mechanism of being able to make assertions itself. I love exaggerations and bold statements. … I love the effect of irrefutability. In a certain sense, modest authors do not interest me; I am not modest myself. (qtd. in de Haan 24)  
  
Houellebecq’s novels are told from the perspective of middle-aged men who live financially comfortable, yet monotonous and depressing lives. His novels revolve around several themes: sexuality, religiosity, the sexual and social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of individualism, the legacy of post-structuralist thought and especially the generation of May ’68. A characteristic feature of his novels is their pessimistic, declinist outlook on the Western world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, a period described by the narrator of *Atomised* [*Les particules élémentaires*] (1998) as the ongoing “suicide of the West” (284). Houellebecq’s novels are narratives of decline—or, to use the term employed earlier, *Verfallsgeschichten*—as he acknowledges in a letter to Lévy. If there is one common element in his novels, he writes,  
  
 it is the *absolute irreversibility of all processes of decay* once they have begun. Whether this decline concerns a friendship, a family, a larger social group, or a whole society, in my novels, there is no forgiveness, no way back, no second chance: everything that is lost is absolutely lost and for all time. (125; original italics)   
  
In Houellebecq’s début *Whatever* [*L’extension du domaine de la lutte,* literally *Extension of the Area of Struggle*] (1994), the nameless narrator criticizes the effects of the sexual and social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s in Western Europe and North-America. As he argues, phenomena such as free love, drug use, the rise of a youth culture, the legalization of contraception and abortion, and the increasing availability of pornography have greatly increased the individual’s personal freedom. However, these developments have also paved the way for a merciless form of individualism. Instead of liberating individuals, libidinal mass-consumption has only increased social alienation, and has dissolved the barriers between the individual and the market. The narrator calls this process in which market mechanisms have invaded the sexual sphere “sexual liberalism”:  
  
 Just as unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperization*. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their life, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It’s what’s known as ‘the law of the market’. In an economic system where unfair dismissal is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their place. In a sexual system where adultery is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their bed mate. … Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. (99; original italics)  
  
In the narrator’s rather monocausal analysis, the decline of traditions, norms, and values in the second half of the twentieth century has confronted individuals with the downsides of increased personal freedom. Previously, traditional marriage and the central position of the nuclear family provided a sense of community in which individuals were sheltered from exploitation, and everyone could (allegedly) find a suitable partner, but during the 1960s these moral foundations and social practices were quickly destroyed.   
 In *Atomised,* the narrator’s idiosyncratic analysis and critique of liberalization is further explored. The lives of half-brothers Bruno Clément and Michel Djerzinski are examples of the side-effects of the social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s. Abandoned at birth by their libertine mother, Michel is raised by his grandmother, while Bruno is sent to boarding schools where he is (sexually) abused. The half-brothers eventually meet for the first time in their teenage years, and strike up an unusual friendship. Bruno spends his whole life in pursuit of sexual pleasure, but is in most cases rejected by women. Michel, on the other hand, becomes a brilliant, yet emotionally repressed molecular biologist. Shortly after completing several experiments in a remote research facility in Ireland, he commits suicide by walking into the sea. After his death, several of his manuscripts are found, containing plans to replace mankind by a new species, free from pain and physical decay.  
 *Atomised* is framed as a science-fiction narrative, told from the perspective of an unnamed narrator in the year 2079, decades after Djerzinski’s plans have been implemented. This posthumanity, writes the narrator, has “left behind a world of division” (9), and lives in a world in which individualism no longer exists. Shortly before the replacement of mankind by this posthumanity in the early twenty-first century, he writes, “there had been an acceptance of the idea that a fundamental shift was indispensable if society was to survive—a shift which would credibly restore a sense of community, of permanence and the sacred” (376). This shift, he adds, has compensated for “the global ridicule inspired by the works of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze” (376).  
 As his provocative statements in the media and the idiosyncratic social criticism of *Whatever* and *Atomised* illustrate, Houellebecq and his characters occupy an ambiguous position, irreconcilable with either post-structuralism, Marxist critiques of liberalism, or the anti-Marxist perspective embodied by *nouveaux philosophes* such as Lévy. As Jerry Andrew Varsava puts it, Houellebecq and his characters offer “a pastiche of communitarian views, at once indebted to the Old Left on matters economic, to catholico-Gaullist patriarchy on gender relations, and to the xenophobia given public expression by Jean-Marie Le Pen and the National Front” (162). Notwithstanding the latter allegation, this characterization aptly captures the political ambiguity of Houellebecq’s (fictional and non-fictional) work. In the term employed by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, the pessimistic social criticism in Houellebecq’s novels can be viewed as a reaction to the exhaustion of politico-philosophical figures, yet one that contrasts strongly with the attempts to explore a new social ontology by post-structuralist thinkers. Instead of thinking through this exhaustion, Houellebecq and his characters occasionally long for the (re)construction of a social system in which the alienation between individuals could be overcome.[[42]](#footnote-42) *Submission* is the first explicitly political novel by Houellebecq, as well as the first text that deals explicitly with religion. In France in 2022, the Muslim Brotherhood, led by Mohammed Ben Abbes, proposes to rehabilitate traditional gender roles and the nuclear family, and to integrate religion with politics. Like in *Seeing*, the transition to a new anti-democratic form of government is accomplished through democratic means. However, while the citizens in *Seeing* unwork all the figures that are imposed on them, *Submission* portrays the decline of French society and a successful reconstruction of traditional values that the majority of the political establishment and electorate is willing to accept, having no other feasible alternative apart from the far-right National Front.  
 In this chapter, I examine the incommensurabilities between theocracy and democracy by drawing on Derrida’s concepts of “democracy to come” and “autoimmunity.” In *Rogues,* Derrida points out that only theocratic Muslim governments do not consider themselves as democratic (28). According to Derrida, a democratic system has to expose itself to anti-democratic elements in order to function; if it were to suppress these elements, it would no longer be a democracy. The tension between theocracy and democracy is ingeniously resolved by Ben Abbes, by synthesizing traditional features of Islam with democratic ones. François, the protagonist of *Submission*, although politically disengaged, is eventually forced to confront the changing political situation in France and the Islamic community created by the Muslim Brotherhood. François’s narrative mirrors the spiritual trajectory of his favoured object of study, Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans’s pessimistic account of the political predicament in the *fin de siècle*, as well as his return to Catholicism in his later life, are frequently referenced throughout *Submission*. While Melville’s “Bartleby” functioned as an analogy to *Seeing*, Huysmans and his character Des Esseintes fulfil that position in the reading of *Submission.* **4.1. Theocracy, Democracy, and Autoimmunity**In the autumn of 2014, Houellebecq revealed that his new novel would be situated in France in 2022, in which a Muslim party wins the elections. *Submission* was highly anticipated, especially because of Houellebecq’s charged relationship to Islam. His novel *Platform* [*Plateforme: Au milieu du monde*] (2001) generated controversy because it featured a terrorist attack by Muslim extremists on a resort in Thailand, as well as several Islamophobic remarks by its main characters. In an interview about *Platform* in the magazine *Lire*, Houellebecq called Islam “the stupidest religion” (qtd. in Sweeney 9), and was subsequently charged with inciting religious and racial hatred. He was eventually acquitted of his charges in a widely publicized trial.  
 A week before the release of *Submission* on Wednesday 7 January 2015, a caricature of Houellebecq was featured on the cover of the magazine Charlie Hebdo, bearing the text “In 2015, I lose my teeth” and “In 2022, I do Ramadan.” Laurent Joffrin, referencing Houellebecq’s Islamophobic statements, went so far as to state that Wednesday 7 January “will mark the day in history when the ideas of the far-right made a grand return to serious French literature” (qtd. in Makouezi). Due to a bizarre coincidence, *Submission* was released on the day when al-Qaeda affiliates attacked the office of Charlie Hebdo, taking twelve lives in the process. Out of respect for the victims, Houellebecq decided to cancel his promotional tour, while *Submission* quickly became a best-seller.   
 François, the forty-four year old narrator of *Submission*, works at the Sorbonne, and has no qualms in engaging in relationships with his students that generally last as long as the academic year. In the academic community, he is a well-respected authority on Huysmans, but has published very little in recent years. In 2022, the French political landscape is undergoing some drastic changes. The National Front, led by Marine Le Pen, is destined to become the biggest party of France in the upcoming presidential elections, to the dismay of prime minister Manuel Valls and his Socialist Party. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood, a relatively new party, is making headway in the polls. The party is led by the charismatic, intelligent Mohammed Ben Abbes, and has built a loyal following over the years. In his public speeches, Ben Abbes repeatedly emphasizes his debt to the French republican tradition. He distances himself from Muslim fundamentalism, the extremities of political Islam, and anti-Semitism, while maintaining good relations with the Catholic community.  
 François, by his own admission “about as political as a bath towel” (39), initially does not take note of the tense atmosphere in France. An informal meeting with his colleagues of the faculty of letters is disrupted when gunshot-sounds are heard a few blocks away. He hears rumours about civil unrest in the suburbs of Paris, although it is not explicitly stated who are responsible for the turmoil. François also notices that several of his female Muslim students are suddenly accompanied to class by their brothers. Although it is clear that tensions are running high in the country, he expresses his lack of interest in the upcoming elections:  
  
 A centre-left candidate would be elected, serve either one or two terms, depending on how charismatic he was, then for obscure reasons he would fail to complete a third. When people got tired of that candidate, and the centre-left in general, we’d witness the phenomenon of *democratic change*, and the voters would install a candidate of the centre- right, also for one or two terms, depending on his personal appeal. Western nations took a strange pride in this system, though it amounted to little more than a power-sharing deal between rival gangs, and they would even go to war to impose it on other nations that failed to share their enthusiasm. (40; original italics)  
  
With its mixture of theocratic and democratic elements, the Muslim Brotherhood is an anomaly in the French political landscape, which is dominated by the Socialist Party, the National Front, and a shady identitarian organization called “the nativist movement” that mainly operates underground. While Ben Abbes’s appeals to tradition resemble those of the National Front and the nativists, they reject his religious background. Parties on the left, on the other hand, are hesitant to back a Muslim candidate, and are suspicious of such appeals. Although generally pragmatic, many of the program points of the Muslim Brotherhood are fundamentally opposed to the republican and democratic tradition. The party proposes to introduce sharia law, endorses polygamy, and wishes to abolish gender equality and laicism*.* Openly patriarchal and traditional, one of the party’s aims is “to restore the centrality, the dignity, of the family as the building block of society” (165).   
 In his later writings, Derrida employs the concepts of democracy to come and autoimmunity in order to account for the singular position of democracy in comparison to other forms of government and the potential destruction of democracy from within, as is the case in *Submission*. For Derrida, democracy is predicated on the tension between singularity and equality. On the one hand, the democratic system strives to do justice to the singularity of each citizen, but on the other hand, as he puts it in *The Politics of Friendship*, “there is no democracy without … the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, representable subjects, all equal” (22). The aporetic tension between incommensurable singularity on the one hand and calculable equality on the other is inherent to democracy as such, and can never be overcome. In *Rogues*, Derrida describes this aporia as the democratic desire to do justice to both “incalculable singularity *and* calculable equality, commensurability *and* incommensurability, heteronomy *and* autonomy (…)” (87; original italics).   
 In *The Other Heading,* one of the first texts in which the term democracy to come appears, Derrida described it as “a democracy that must have the structure of a promise—*and thus the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now*” (78; original italics). Democracy to come means that a perfect democracy will never be realized, and that its aim to do justice to both incommensurable singularity and calculable equality will not and cannot ever be fulfilled, since this aporia cannot be overcome. Democracy to come breaks with teleological conceptions of the political, but at the same time remains tied to a certain emancipatory promise. In *Specters of Marx,* Derrida describes this promise as “a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism” (74), that is to say, an openness to singularity or alterity. This messianic attitude, described as “a waiting without horizon or expectation” (211), is opposed to religious conceptions of messianism such as the Second Coming, that are based on the assumption that one day a redeeming figure will arrive.  
 Derrida claims that democracy is the only system that accommodates elements that can undermine it from within. Democracy, in other words, has to expose itself to elements that can be anti-democratic, a process he describes as “the autoimmune pervertibility of democracy” (*Rogues* 34). “Democracy,” he claims,  
  
 is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name. Including the idea of the constitutional paradigm and the absolute authority of law. It is thus the only paradigm that is universalizable, whence its chance and its fragility. (87)  
  
In his later texts, Derrida develops the concept of autoimmunity in order to analyze this fragility of democracy.[[43]](#footnote-43) “An autoimmunitary process,” he states “is the strange behaviour where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, “itself” works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its “own” immunity” (“Autoimmunity” 94; original italics). While the body generates antibodies that work against itself precisely in order to keep functioning, democracy is similarly threatened because it attempts to do justice to the singularity and equality of every citizen, including of those citizens who are hostile to democracy as such. This autoimmunitary logic includes the possibility that democracy may malfunction and can be destroyed from within, incapable of controlling its antibodies.   
 In *Rogues*, Derrida compares democracy with Muslim theocracy. Democracy, he writes, is characterized by a certain “semantic vacancy or indetermination” (34), and will never arrive as such, since one cannot ever fully do justice to singularity and equality at the same time. This semantic vacancy opens up the idea of democracy to other contexts, or, to put it differently, democracy is predicated on iterability. Muslim theocracy, on the other hand, is based on an appeal to a divine *logos*. As Derrida suggests “the only and very few regimes … that *do not present themselves* as democratic are those with a theocratic Muslim government” (28; original italics).   
 The tensions between Muslim theocracy and democracy are described by political philosopher Abu Ala al-Mawdudi in his essay “Political Theory of Islam,” in which he explains the foundations of political Islam. Islam, he states “is not ruled by any particular religious class but by the whole community [*ummah*] of Muslims including the rank and file” (263). Like democracy, political Islam is universalizable, albeit in a radically different way:  
  
 Islam does not recognize any geographical, linguistic or colour bars (…). … It puts forward its code of guidance and the scheme of its reform before all men. Whoever accepts this programme, no matter to what race, nation or country he may belong, can join the community that runs the Islamic state. (267)  
  
The universalization of this *ummah* is opposed to the possible universalization of democracy. While democracy opens itself to its own historicity and has no essence, Mawdudi claims that Islam “has no trace of Western democracy” (263). Islam, he continues “altogether repudiates the philosophy of popular sovereignty and rears its polity on the foundation of the sovereignty of God and the vicegerency (*khalifa*) of man” (263). Anyone can join Mawdudi’s Muslim community, as long as one accepts the principles of Islam.  
 By combining theocratic with democratic elements, the Muslim Brotherhood lays bare the autoimmunitary logic of democracy, and forms an attractive option for the French electorate in *Submission*, especially because of Ben Abbes’s charismatic personality and after François Hollande’s administration has proven to be a failure. Before the first round of elections, political tensions are rising, and François decides to leave Paris, heading to the south of France. “The idea that political history could play any part in my own life,” he reflects,  
  
 was still disconcerting, and slightly repellent. All the same, I realised—I’d known for years—that the widening gap, now a chasm, between the people and those who claimed to speak for them, the politicians and journalists, would necessarily lead to something chaotic, violent and unpredictable. For a long time France, like all the other countries of Western Europe, had been drifting towards civil war. That much was obvious. But until a few days before, I was still convinced that the vast majority of French people would always be resigned and apathetic—no doubt because I was more or less resigned and apathetic myself. I’d been wrong. (94)  
  
While driving on the highway shortly after the first round of elections, François notices that there is very little traffic: “Something was happening in France, I knew it (…)” (105). Eventually, he learns that several polling stations throughout France have been attacked. Prime minister Valls announces that the stations will be protected by the military during the second round of the elections. The results are surprising: the Muslim Brotherhood has surpassed the National Front, and Ben Abbes becomes the new president of France. Shortly after its victory, the Muslim Brotherhood forms a coalition with the centre-right and the Socialist Party in order to sideline the National Front.  
 Apart from a few hysterical objections by supporters of Le Pen, civil unrest quickly subsides, and the Muslim Brotherhood starts to implement its measures. Women are withdrawn from the workforce, and citizens are encouraged to convert to Islam in order to increase their chances on the labour-market. France is transformed almost overnight into a male chauvinist paradise: men are permitted to take several wives, and women submit to male authority and start wearing veils. The programmes of the Muslim Brotherhood prove to be a success: the crime rate is reduced by ninety percent, and France’s unemployment problem is solved. The education system is drastically transformed by the party. Mandatory education ends at age twelve, higher education is privatized, and many universities, including the Sorbonne, are transformed into state-funded Islamic institutions, marginalizing secular schools in the process. The new president of the Sorbonne, a former nativist called Robert Rediger who has converted to Islam and who is the author of the bestselling *Ten Questions of Islam,* pressures his employees either to convert or to take up a teaching post at a secular university. Across Europe, Islamic political organizations gain influence, and Belgium becomes the second country with a Muslim government. Eventually, Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia become members of the European Union.  
 The darkly satirical political situation in *Submission* goes against the grain of practically everything that the *soixante-huitards* rebelled against and that post-structuralist thinkers subjected to critique: the subjection of women, the integration of religion with state affairs, the central position of the nuclear family, increasing privatization, and appeals to metaphysical concepts. The gradual transformation of France into an Islamic state is portrayed as an irreversible process that works surprisingly well, from an economic and male chauvinist point of view at least.   
 After returning home from his trip to the south of France, François finds several letters from the university, and is informed that he is no longer permitted to teach, since he has not converted to Islam. It is at this point that the similarities between his own position and Huysmans’s predicament in the *fin de siècle* become evident, similarities to which I shall now turn.  
  
 **4.2. “Longing for Faith”: *Submisson,* Religion, and Decadence**Throughout *Submission*, François frequently refers to Huysmans. As one critic puts it, “Huysmans’s work … sits palimpsest-like behind *Submission*” (Preston), especially *Against Nature* and his later Durtal-cycle, an autobiographical series of novels portraying the main character’s conversion to Catholicism. Until the mid-1880s, Huysmans was associated with Émile Zola’s circle, a group of artists who adhered to the principles of Naturalism. He soon felt constrained by the dogmas of the movement, and definitively broke with it after the publication of *Against Nature* in 1884. *Against Nature* is focused on a single character, the sickly aristocrat Des Esseintes, who retreats to a villa out of disgust with French society. He decides to dedicate his life to sensory and intellectual pleasures, such as smelling perfumes and flowers, reading books, and examining his art collection.   
 A conspicuous feature of *Against Nature* is Des Esseintes’s occasional sympathy for Catholicism, leading Huysmans to conclude in the preface to the 1903 edition that the novel in fact “marked the beginning of all my Catholic work” (“Preface” 213). On one occasion in *Against Nature*, Des Esseintes likens his secluded life to that of monks, like them being “overwhelmed by an immense weariness, a longing for peace and quiet, by a desire to have no further contact with the heathen, who in his eyes comprised all utilitarians and fools” (63). During his deliriums, Des Esseintes mentions his admiration for the grandeur of the Catholic church, although his appreciation does not seem to extend beyond the aesthetic, admitting that he could never be a true Christian: “For a brief moment, he would believe, and turn instinctively to religion; then, after a moment’s thought, his longing for faith would vanish, though he remained perplexed and uneasy” (72). After Huysmans published *Against Nature*, he gradually returned to Catholicism, the religion he had abandoned in his childhood. In 1892, when he was forty-four years old—the same age as François—he retreated to an abbey at Ligugé, and became a practising Catholic a few weeks later.  
 After being fired from the Sorbonne, now renamed “the Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne,” François lapses into a depression, and after a period of illness decides to travel to Ligugé to visit the place where Huysmans once took his vows. François’s stay is a farcical repetition of Huysmans’s journey, and it soon turns out that he is unable to adjust to monastic life. Like Des Esseintes, his fascination for religion remains superficial at best. In the fifth and final part of *Submission,* upon returning to Paris, François is asked to edit the collected works of Huysmans by Bastien Lacoue, editor-in-chief at Éditions de Pleiade. After some hesitation, François agrees, and is subsequently introduced to Rediger, an acquaintance of Lacoue’s.  
 Rediger, a former nativist, tries to convince François to teach at the Sorbonne, and clarifies his reasons for turning from the nativist movement to Islam, stating that the differences between the two are negligible. After naming the advantages of converting to Islam—an agreeable salary and pension, being able to marry several wives—Rediger stresses that atheistic humanism and the increasing individualism since the 1960s have run their course, and that only a return to religion can provide social cohesion and restore a sense of community:  
  
 All I’m saying is that the universe obviously bears the hallmarks of intelligent design, that it’s clearly the manifestation of some gigantic mind. Sooner or later, that simple idea is going to come around. I’ve always known this, ever since I was young. All intellectual debate of the twentieth century can be summed up as a battle between communism—that is, “hard” humanism—and liberal democracy, the soft version. But what a reductive debate. Since I was fifteen, I’ve known that what they now call the return of religion was unavoidable. (212)  
  
After his first meeting with Rediger, François reads the latter’s *Ten Questions on Islam,* considers the advantages conversion can offer him, and thinks about Rediger’s analysis, who argues that, after the failures of Christianity and atheist humanism, Islam is destined to become the new paradigm of community. In a later meeting during a reception at the university, François casually asks how many wives he can have according to sharia law, and enquires about the advantages of Islamic dress (244). The grotesque, satirical situation sketched in *Submission*, with a conspicuous lack of resistance from the French people—“where is the National Front when you need it?” quips Martin de Haan (113)—culminates in François preparing himself for a possible conversion to Islam. As he observes, paraphrasing an article of Rediger’s: “The facts were plain: Europe had reached a point of such putrid decomposition that it could no longer save itself (…)” (230-1). For Europeans in the third decade of the twenty-first century, it seems as if the political nihilism and tensions of the new millennium can only be resolved by once again submitting themselves to a common being in which individuals are bound together. In the final chapter, written in the proleptic tense, François imagines what his conversion ceremony would be like. “I’d be given another chance,” he reflects, “and it would be the chance at a second life, with very little connection to the old one. I would have nothing to mourn” (250). Contrasted with Des Esseintes’s hysteria at the end of *Against Nature,* quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, François’s tone is resigned and defeatist. While Huysmans’s return to religion was caused by his spiritual despair, François’s motivations for conversion are mainly pragmatic. A conversion could not only increase his standing in the academic community, but also give him the opportunity to spend the rest of his live in the company of several loving wives.   
 The political and spiritual exhaustion of the French political establishment and people in *Submission* and, to use Derrida’s terms, the immunitary process gone awry, are consistent with the metaphysical homesickness and critique of individualism that characterizes the majority of Houellebecq’s work*.* The alternately benign and grotesque provocations of Houellebecq’s texts have often led to rash equations between his characters and his own opinions, and to several *ad hominem* repudiations. Such reactions fail to account for *Submission*’s status as a literarytext, a performative act capable of creating its own laws. As established above, an author does not have to be held responsible, and as such has an authorization to say anything. The literary text, writes Derrida, is characterized by this “right to absolute nonresponse” (*On the Name* 29), a right that grants literature the capacity to provoke, question, and criticize everything. Refusing to read literary texts *as* literature suspends their singular position. Ayatollah Khomeini’s notorious decision to issue a fatwa after the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 and Laurent Joffrin’s allegation quoted above are examples of such a refusal to engage in a literary reading.  
 *Submission* shares several features with *Seeing*, most notably a passive electorate, and attempts to furnish a mythical foundation of the political. Whereas in the latter text the failure to create such a foundation eventually leads to a centralization of power and the government’s enforcement of the right to subject its citizens to violence, the political tensions in *Submission* never fully materialize. Ben Abbes’s theocratic government proves to be able to reconstruct social bonds, to solve the problem of what the narrator of *Whatever* referred to as “sexual liberalism,” and to bring to a halt “the suicide of the West” as signalled by the narrator in *Atomised.* Houellebecq’s speculative text, situated in a similar post-9/11 geopolitical atmosphere as Saramago’s, contrasts with the farcical situation of *Seeing* in that it ends with the main character and the entire country’s passive acceptance of the radical measures taken by the government. Whereas in *Seeing* the undermining of a common being eventually results in the forceful imposition of such a common being, in *Submission* such an acceptance, true to the “absolute irreversibility of all processes of decay” that characterizes Houellebecq’s work, proves to be the only remedy to resolve social alienation.

**Conclusion: Literature, Community, Singularity**  
*Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community; nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms.*   
 —Roberto Esposito, *Communitas  
  
Only literature could reveal the process of breaking the law—without which the law would have no end—*independently of the necessity to create order. *Literature cannot assume the task of regulating collective necessity.*  
—Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*In this thesis, I have analyzed several recurring schemes in the debates on community and the social position of literature. Two research questions served as guidelines throughout: (1) What is the relationship between the singularity of literature and the question of community? (2) How does literature function as a space shared in common? In order to answer these questions, I have mainly drawn on post-structuralist approaches to the question of community and the social position of literature, devoting special attention to the work of Nancy and Derrida.  
 The question of community and the commons came to prominence during the early 1980s and 1990s respectively. Post-structuralist approaches to these topics attempt to go beyond several persistent dualisms in philosophical discourse and social thought, such as the dichotomy between the individual and the totality, the private and the public, and the moral agent and the community. Instead of these dualisms, post-structuralist thinkers emphasize the notions of singularity and generality, sharing and commonality. Rejecting appeals to a shared essence, origin, or goal of the political, debates on community and the commons revolve around what being-in-common means when such appeals have been discredited. A frequently recurring theme in these debates is the question of property, encompassing terms such as appropriation, expropriation, ownership, authenticity, inauthenticity, exposure, the proper, and the improper. The aforementioned dualisms are predicated on a distinction between the proper and improper, the authentic and the inauthentic, or, to use Esposito’s terms, *communitas* and *immunitas.* By contrast, post-structuralist thinkers and proponents of the commons attempt to do justice to a form of property that is always already a form of expropriation, or, to speak with Derrida, an ex-appropriation. Understood in this sense, community, as Esposito puts it, is not linked to the notions of “belonging, identity and ownership,” but rather to their opposites, the exposure to heterogeneity, an originary plurality that unworks the attempts to solidify collective identities (*Terms* 48).   
 To coexist—being singular plural—resists closure and totalization, and does not mean being subsumed under a common being. The common, writes Nancy, “is not made from a single substance, but to the contrary the from lack of substance which essentially apportions the lack of essence” (“La Comparution” 374). In Nancy’s terms, every singular being’s appearance in the world is always already an appearance in a world shared in common, or “compearance.” As he puts it in *The Inoperative Community:*   
  
 What is exposed in compearance is the following, and we must learn to read it in all its possible combinations: “you (are/and/is) (entirely other than) I”(*toi [e(s)t] [tout autre que] moi”*). Or again, more simply: *you shares me* (“*toi partage moi*”) (29; original italics).   
  
The concept of singularity has the advantage of emphasizing such a sharing, while it at the same time does justice to the irreducibility and irreplaceability of beings. In Nancy’s tautological phrase, being singular plural underscores the interdependence of irreducibility and multiplicity, singularity and generality, being and being-with.  In the first chapter, in an engagement with the “epochal knot” identified by Esposito, several recurring schemes in the debate on community in the modern age have been analyzed. Based on the thinkers discussed in this chapter, one can conclude that in Western philosophy and social thought community has been thought of as (1) an originary sociality that has been corrupted and that can be restored collectively (Rousseau, and to a lesser extent Marx), (2) a collectively produced *humanitas* (Marx), (3) an immanentist dialectic of *arche* and *telos*, realized in a work (the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft,* Soviet communism), (4) an communal dimension added to or superimposed over the “self,” “individual,” “subject,” or “moral agent” (communitarianism), or (5) a singular plurality or coessence (Nancy, Agamben, Esposito). The prevailing tone of debates on community has been that of nostalgia for a golden age or vanished totality, a desire for solid (moral) foundations, and a suppression of singular beings under a common being. In their work, Nancy’s main influences Bataille and Heidegger broke with the first four schemes, but eventually remained caught up in a logic of subjectivity, by respectively insisting on dialectics and by reterritorializing the concept of *Mitsein* by invoking the destiny of the people. As Nancy states, building on their work, the absence of a first cause of the political, the invalidation of teleo-eschatological historicism, and the failure of collective social experiments necessitate thinking community in a singular-plural manner. The very term community, he suggests, “tries our thinking, and … [perhaps] is not an object for it” (*Inoperative* 22). What he referred to in the early 1980s as the (then still “unheard”) demand of community entails conceptualizing the term as a singular plurality and coessence, instead of as a social figure that has to be constructed, remodelled, or absolutized.   
 In *Retreating the Political*, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe already alluded to the growing importance of “the question of relation” (117). Instead of grounding the political in an origin, essence, or goal, post-structuralist thinkers attempt to think beyond dualistic conceptions, and beyond forms of nostalgia that reinforce essentialist and exclusionary political schemes. For Esposito, Nancy, and Agamben, singular(-plural) beings are not, to employ Agamben’s striking phrase, united in an essence, “*but scatter*[*ed*] … *in existence*” (*Coming Community* 19; original italics). The question, in other words, is to think what being-in-common might mean, instead of postulating a common being. Post-structuralist interventions in the debate on community attempt to think through the terms being-in-common and community in a non-identitarian, non-organicist manner. By breaking with political *Verfallsgeschichten* and with the connotations of proximity, homogeneity, and harmony, as embodied for instance by Tönnies’s notion of *Gemeinschaft,* their theories of community emphasize exteriority, sharing, and singularity.  
 Moving from the deconstruction of the community as work to the operation of the literary text, the second chapter addressed the changing social position of literature in twentieth and twenty-first century aesthetics. Debates on the social position of literature and art in general have frequently been based on the opposition between commitment and autonomy. As proponents of committed art, Benjamin, Brecht, and Sartre urged artists to take up a position in (left-wing) political affairs. Although their positions differ from each other, they all attributed an emancipatory potential to art, and emphasized either the increasing capacity of the audience to contribute to the reception and creation of the work of art, or stressed the artist’s role as an activist. In Adorno’s view, defenders of a committed aesthetics not only overstated art’s social impact, but relegated it by conceiving of art as a reaction to reality, instead of an intervention in it. On the other hand, his restrictive view of artistic autonomy—works of art stand outside of reality, while they are at the same time *faits sociaux*—led him to reject the majority of art forms as mass-produced artefacts that merely served to perpetuate the hegemony of the culture industry.  
 In deconstructive approaches to literature, the emphasis shifts from the terms commitment and autonomy to singularity, performativity, and generality. In Derrida’s view, literature occupies a privileged position: protected from censorship, literature is a space in which one is (nominally) allowed to say anything, while not being held accountable for it. The literary text’s “subversive juridicity” lies in the possibility to create its own laws within the social, legal, and political practices in which it is always already embedded, although one should not exaggerate literature’s potential effects. As Derrida and Attridge stress, the literary text is a singular act-event that cannot be separated from the historical circumstances in which it was written and in which it is read, and is capable of exceeding the practices that shield it from censorship. As such, the literary text is not a commentary on the world, or “information,” in Benjamin’s sense. Instead, the literary texts is a thing that, as Derrida suggests, “cannot be identified with any other discourse” and that “will never be scientific, philosophical, conversational” (“Strange Institution” 47).  
 The point of departure for this thesis were Nancy’s remarks in his early work that being-in-common *is* literary, and that a singular being is structured like a literary being. The concept of singularity, as developed in philosophical discourse and literary criticism, serves as a mediator in this alignment of the questioning of community and the social position of literature. According to Nancy, to return to the two main research questions, the relationship between the question of community and literature is that literature expresses sharing as such, one’s singular-plural existence in-common. For Nancy, explains Van Rooden, this sharing “cannot be captured by a specific word or a specific theory, but becomes apparent in a *practice* of speaking or writing, a *praxis* that is only focused on sharing itself and not on the transmission of a message: literature” (*Literatuur* 87; original italics). As Van Rooden continues, Nancy’s perhaps puzzling statement that being-in-common is literary is based on the position of the literary text, as an artefact that does not illustrate “the communication of a message or an ideal, but communication itself” (87). Literature, understood in this sense, constitutes a space shared in-common, a space in which such a sharing can take place, while these forms of sharing do not necessarily have to communicate something. The notion that what is central to the operation of literature is communication itself is perhaps best exemplified by Houellebecq’s argument that literature allows him to make bold statements that are not necessarily referential.  
 To use Derrida’s terms, the literary text’s “secret” and “right to non-response” allow an author to make statements while not being held accountable for them, or having to explain what is *actually* being meant. Like Bartleby, writes J. Hillis Miller, literature does not have to respond, but “says “I should prefer not to,” when we say “Answer me! Stand and unfold!”” (65). Doing justice to the singularity of the literary text entails not reducing it to the intention or politics of its author (Saramago’s communist sympathies, Houellebecq’s alleged far-right or reactionary views), to a reaction to reality, or to instrumentalism. In the readings of Saramago’s *Seeing* and Houellebecq’s *Submission*, an attempt has been made to do justice to the singularity of the texts by devoting attention to the historical situation of the text, its formal characteristics, intertextuality, and their problematization of political and philosophical concepts, as well as to the place these texts occupy within the work of their authors. The the two novels engage in imaginative ways with the political atmosphere of the twenty-first century, featuring on the one hand the radical dismantling of various communitarianisms and mythical discourses, and on the other hand the allure of appeals to social stability and moral reconstruction.   
 With Nancy and Derrida, the question is not what literature is, but what it does, and how it forms a relation between readers, writers, and the various discourses channelled in the literary text to which it is never reducible. Drawing mainly on their work, the rethinking of the social position of literature and the questioning of the concepts of community, being-in-common, and being-with has been undertaken in an aporetical manner, in an attempt to resist restrictive, essentialist, or teleological conceptions, and to avoid annulling singularity by submerging it under a common being. The figure of the aporia, as Derrida strikingly puts it, is not “an absence of path, a paralysis before roadblocks, the immobilization of thinking,” but rather a challenge to thought, the promise of “the thinking of the path” (*Memoires* 132).   
  
  
  
  
  
  
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1. In his work, Nancy employs several nearly synonymous concepts to describe this form of sharing that is not based on a shared identity: “being-in-common” [*être-en-commun*],“being-social” [*être-social*], “being-together” [*être-ensemble*], “being-with” [*être-avec*], “being-with-one-another” [*être-les-uns-avec-les-autres*] and “community” [*communauté*]. In this thesis, I will mainly use the terms “community,” “being-in-common,” and “being-with.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nancy’s essay was expanded into a book bearing the same name in 1986. This expanded version was translated into English in 1991 as *The Inoperative Community,* the version I refer to throughout this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Since the term deconstruction is (ab)used in a variety of contexts, it is worth recalling Derrida’s initial understanding of the term. Deconstruction, as Derrida stresses in *The Ear of the Other,* is a compound of *Destruktion* and *Abbau,* terms derived from the work of Heidegger (85). In *Being and Time,* Heidegger stressed that the *Destruktion* of ancient ontological concepts did not amount to merely “a vicious relativizing of ontological standpoints” (44), but also had an affirmative, future-oriented dimension:   
     
    [Destruction] does not relate itself towards the past; its criticism is aimed at ‘today’ and at the prevalent way of treating the history of ontology. … [T]o bury the past in nullity [*Nichtigkeit*] is not the purpose of this destruction, its aim is positive” (44; original italics).   
     
   Arguably the most characteristic gesture of deconstruction, as Derrida states in *Memoires for Paul de Man,* is searching for the “defective cornerstone” of an argument, a cornerstone that “threatens the coherence and the internal order of the construction” (72), but that is nonetheless central to that argument. Deconstruction thus means simultaneously destroying and building on (philosophical) arguments and concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although his influence on Nancy is substantial, Derrida is the odd man out in this list, since he has rarely engaged at length with the question of community, except for a reference to a “community of the question” (“Violence” 98), a call for a “New International” in *Specters of Marx* (105-7), and some reflections in “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone.” In *On the Name*, Derrida describes community as “a word I never much liked, because of its connotations of participation, indeed fusion, identification: I see in it as many threats as promise (…)” (46). In *The Politics of Friendship,* in a reflection on Blanchot, he seems to be aware of his avoidance of the word community:   
     
    I was wondering why the word ‘community’ (avowable or unavowable, inoperative or not)—why I have never been able to write it, on my own initiative and in my name, as it were. Why? Whence my reticence? And is it not fundamentally the essential part of the disquiet which inspires this book? (304-5)  
     
   In his text dedicated to Nancy’s work, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida never engages at length with the question of community, apart from indicating that the “*cum*” and the “with” have to be thought otherwise (198), or suggesting that the term community is perhaps too overdetermined (241). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The full title of the act is “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For the few instances in which the concept is discussed, see James 197-201; Hutchens 15-19; Van Rooden, “Zoiets” 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Whereas Nancy frequently employed the term “literature” in the 1980s, he has used the more general term “the arts” since the 1990s, most prominently in *The Muses.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. All the translations from Dutch sources are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In *The Politics,* Aristotle asserted that “[m]en have a natural desire in society, even when they have no need to see each other’s help. Nevertheless common interest is a factor in bringing them together, since the interest of all contributes to the good life of each” (114). Aristotle’s virtue ethics underlies communitarian approaches to community: the individual is dependent on others to achieve his own happiness, and the community is the *summum bonum* of the individual’s life. See also the brief discussion of MacIntyre in section 1.4. below. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For the most prominent texts by thinkers associated with communitarianism, see especially Etzioni; MacIntyre; Sandel; and Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* and *Sources of the Self.* For a comprehensive overview and critique of communitarianism, see especially Gutmann. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This *Verfallsgeschichte* of community has taken many forms, and essentially comes down to metaphysical or fictional constructs that seek to anchor community in a stable essence or origin. These fictions abound in Western religion, mythology, philosophy, and history, and encompass examples as diverse as the Christian fall from grace, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “savage man,” and the National Socialist *Blut und Boden-*doctrine. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Désoeuvrement* is commonly translated as “inoperative,” or the slightly more awkward term “out-of-work-ness,” and is related to “unemployment,” “idleness,” and “workless.” Following the English translation of *The Inoperative Community*, I will use the terms “inoperative” or “unworking.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Instrumental in this upsurge, apart from the fall of communism and the concomitant search for a new global emancipatory project, were the alter-globalist resistance movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Traditionally, the commons referred to the land owned collectively by small peasants during the feudal and early modern period. During the eighteenth century, in a process known as “enclosure,” peasants were legally deprived of their land. In *Capital, Volume One,* Marx considered the expropriation of the common(er)s to be an important step in the transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production. The process of enclosure is what Marx referred to as “primitive accumulation,” “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (875) by turning common land into state enterprises. For Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation, see *Capital, Volume One,* 873-904. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Arguably Vladimir Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1902) and *State and Revolution* (1917) are the first major elaborations on strategy and tactics from a Marxist point of view. Lenin respectively theorized the need of a “vanguard” political party to foster class consciousness, and the gradual “withering away of the state” after the expected communist take-over. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See also Étienne Balibar’s excellent discussion of this passage in *The Philosophy of Marx* (27-33). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Occasionally, due to their inability to theorize the transition, Marx and Engels sound embarrassingly utopian when they speak of communism, as in *The German Ideology*:   
      
     In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do any thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have in mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (55) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Although I will not go into this direction, it is worth noting that this anthropocentric conception has been increasingly contested in recent decades by thinkers working in the tradition of deconstruction (Derrida, *The Animal; The Beast*), biopolitics (Agamben, *The Open*), and animal studies (Wolfe), as part of a wider (bio)political questioning as to what does or does not count as a (political) life. Thinkers such as Rousseau and Marx, as well as the communitarian thinkers briefly discussed in the introduction, all rely on an anthropocentric frame, in which notions such as a human essence or originary sociality form the cornerstone of their political philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On the relationship between Hegel and Bataille, see especially Derrida’s “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In “A New Mysticism,” his critique of *Inner Experience*, Jean-Paul Sartre described Bataille as “the inconsolable widower” of God (qtd. in ten Kate 527). Although Sartre’s statement was derogatory, it illustrates the main preoccupation of Bataille, namely the possibility of transcendence in the absence of the divine. Raised in an atheistic household, Bataille converted to Catholicism in his teenage years, and wanted to become a priest. After the horrors of the First World War, he abandoned his faith, but would remain fascinated by religious motifs. Apart from his most ambitious (and hysterical) attempt to found a sacrificial community with the secret society *Acéphale*, Bataille co-founded the short-lived *Collège de sociologie,* in which he and his colleagues attempted to conceptualize a post-theological mysticism or “sacred sociology.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Another questionable aspect of Bataille’s thought is his phallocentrism. Bataille repeatedly states that the man has an active role as a subject, and the woman a passive one as an object (cf. *Eroticism* 17). In *Eroticism,* he claims that some women cannot achieve climax without fantasizing about rape (!) (107), and in *On Nietzsche,* in a passage in which he analyses temptation, he drily concludes: “The long and the short of it is, we all get h— for the same reasons” (24). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Although rejecting communist and humanist conceptions of community based on the work of Marx, Nancy occasionally expresses his appreciation for Marxism, stating that “the truth of our time can only be expressed in Marxist or post-Marxist terms” (*Being Singular Plural* 64). As he states in *Corpus,* in a section entitled “Work, Capital”*:* “Above all, don’t try to pretend that this discourse [Marxism] is archaic” (109). On the relationship between deconstruction and Marxism, see especially Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* and “Marx & Sons.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Against commentators who attempt to divorce Heidegger’s politics from his thought, Žižek for instance claims in *The Ticklish Subject* that “Heidegger did not engage in the Nazi political project ‘in spite of’ his ontological approach, but *because of it*” (14; emphasis in original). In *Heidegger, Art and Politics,* Lacoue-Labarthe similarly states that “practically all [of Heidegger’s] teaching from the so-called ‘turn’ [*Kehre*] up until 1944 was devoted to a ‘settling of accounts with’ National Socialism” (19). For discussions of Heidegger’s affiliation to Nazism, see Lacoue-Labarthe, and Safranski 303-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Derrida studies Heidegger’s use of the words *Geist, geistig,* and *geistlich*. As Derrida points out, these words appear in Heidegger’s work in explicitly political contexts, for instance in the rectoral address. In §10 of *Being and Time,* Heidegger had expressly stated that the concept of *Geist* and variations of the term had to be avoided. He placed these terms between quotations marks when he did occasionally use them. As Derrida remarks, Heidegger removes these quotation marks during his most compromising political moments, moving from a “deconstruction” to a “celebration of spirit” (65), employing the metaphysical concepts he attempted to avoid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. By engaging in a deconstruction of *Being and Time*, Nancy attempts to go beyond ethical criticisms of Heidegger’s ontological method, voiced by thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity,* Levinas asserted that Heidegger neglected the ethical relation to the Other in his thought. According to him, ontology had dangerous (political) consequences:  
      
     A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice. … Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny. (46-7)   
      
    Levinas held that the Other is someone whose existence is ungraspable and irreducible, instead of a mere “shock negating the I” (150). He described the ethical relationship to the Other as the relationship with the “infinite” or the “absolutely other” (49) who transcends the I, and as such disrupts any attempt at understanding and totalization. By contrast, instead of postulating a quasi-divine Other who is situated beyond Being, Nancy seeks to think ethics within existence itself, an operation he occasionally refers to as “transimmanence” (*Sense* 55). For studies of the ethical dimension of Heidegger’s work, see Nancy, “Originary Ethics,” and Olafson. For the differences between Nancy and Levinas, see Devisch, *Wij* 168-71, and Critchley. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy suggests that immanentism is nearly synonymous with totalitarianism. He states that totalitarianism could also be named “immanentism,” adding “as long as we do not restrict the term to designating certain types of societies or regimes but rather see in it the general horizon of our time, encompassing both democracies and their fragile juridical parapets” (5). For his analysis of totalitarianism, see also “The Nazi Myth,” co-authored with Lacoue-Labarthe. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Religion has been a longstanding interest of Nancy’s, although his engagement with religion will not be addressed here. See *The Inoperative Community* 110-50, and especially *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles,* Derrida draws attention to the etymology of the word “gift,” that stems from the word “poison” (121), in order to deconstruct the dichotomy between giving and taking and appropriation and expropriation. His analysis resembles Esposito’s *munus,* who in *Communitas* refers to the “poisonous fruits” (14) of the *munus,* and draws on Derrida’s concept of the *pharmakon* in *Immunitas* to illustrate the working of the immune system (127).For Derrida’s treatment of the dynamics of gift-giving, see especially *Given Time 1: Counterfeit Money* and *The Gift of Death.* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I borrow the term “historical avant-garde” from Peter Bürger, who introduced it in order to avoid conflating the avant-gardes with modernism as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In “The Author as Producer,” for instance, Benjamin stated that “[t]he revolutionary strength of Dadaism lay in testing art for its authenticity” (94). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “In the epic world view,” as Mikhail Bakhtin put it in a similar vein in his essay “Epic and the Novel,” “‘beginning,’ ‘first,’ ‘founder,’ ‘ancestor,’ ‘that which occurred earlier’ and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorised* temporal categories, and valorised to an extreme degree” (15; original italics). Whereas the fate of the epic hero was determined by his national past, the novelistic hero by contrast was alienated from his past, and searched for his own identity, a state once characterized by Georg Lukács as “an expression of … transcendental homelessness” (41). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In his texts, Derrida problematizes Western conceptions of literature by coining the term “globalatinization” [*mondialatinisation*] (“Faith and Knowledge” 50). While literature has the capacity to appropriate various materials for its own sake, he stresses that the term remains connected to its Latin roots, a lineage that should be carefully deconstructed:  
      
     There is no thought, no experience, no history of literature as such and under this, nor world literature, if such a thing is or remains to come … there is no passion of literature that must not first inherit what this latinity assumes and thereby shows itself capable of receiving it and, as I would say in French, of suffering it, which is to accept, receive, to capacitate, to invite, to translate into itself, to assimilate, but also to contain, to keep thus within its boundaries. (*Demeure* 21)  
      
    Against critics who argue that deconstruction is ahistorical, J. Hillis Miller states: “Here is an exigent historicizing if there ever was one. It is a historicizing of literature that would make big problems with current (and much older) attempts to universalize the Western concept of literature” (64). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. In *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida makes a similar statement regarding the political stakes of deconstruction: “no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction” (105). On the relationship between deconstruction and politics, see especially Beardsworth, Bennington, and Naas. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. In *A Taste for the Secret,* Derrida even states in an interview with Maurizio Ferraris that if this right to secrecy is not respected “we live in a totalitarian space” (58). Although he focuses on the novel, and not on literature in general, Milan Kundera develops a similar argument in his *The Art of the Novel,* in which he characterizes life in a totalitarian society as “*life without secrets* (110; original italics). The novel, he states, “is incompatible with the totalitarian universe,” since “Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning (…)” (14), features that according to him are characteristic of the novel-form. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. As the formulation “a being of writing, of a ‘literary’ being” suggests, Nancy occasionally uses the terms “literature” and “writing” interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In *The Stone Raft* (1986) for example, the Iberian peninsula all of a sudden breaks off from the European continent and floats across the Atlantic Ocean. In *Death with Interruptions* (2005), death, a woman, decides to stop doing her work, and as a consequence no one dies anymore, an event that is at first celebrated by the citizens. After a while, demographic and financial tensions arise, while death herself falls in love with a reclusive cellist. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. In an interview, Saramago explained the motivations behind this technique:  
      
     All the characteristics of my current narrative technique (I would prefer to say my style) derive from one basic principle, according to which everything that is said is intended to be heard. By this I mean that I see myself as an oral narrator when I write, and that I write those words to be read as if they were being heard. Oral narrators do not use punctuation, they speak as if they were composing music, and they use the same materials as musicians: sounds and pauses, high notes and low notes, others shorter or longer. (qtd. in Frier 7) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Following Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, I use “state of exception” instead of “state of emergency” or “state of siege.” Schmitt and Agamben prefer the term state of exception, since it emphasizes the division between those who are included and those who are excluded from the political order. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Apart from Deleuze and Žižek, Melville’s short story has been analyzed or referenced by Giorgio Agamben, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Rancière. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. In his review in *The New York Times,* Terence Rafferty also likens *Seeing* to “Bartleby,” but simplifies the citizens’ attitude by describing it as a negation of the political order: “It’s a fairly witty conceit: a city full of Bartlebys, politely preferring not to do what is expected of them and generating, *through simple negation*, absolute panic in the corridors of power” (para 4; emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The tone of Jerry Andrew Varsava’s “Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq’s *The Elementary Particles* and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism” is symptomatic in this case. Varsava analyzes Houellebecq’s novels as *romans à these* that illustrate the authors’ philosophical views, instead of reading them as literary texts. Thus, Varsava engages in statements such as “*Houellebecq* offers an inchoate communitarianism in *Whatever* (1994), his first novel, but his position is largely implicit. … In *The Elementary Particles*, he moves through proscription and rebuke to prescription and paradigm” (147-8; emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island,* this social system is a peculiar blend of new-age inspired holism and science, while in *Submission* religion eventually forms the main social bond between individuals (*religare,* “to bind together”). In an interview in *The Paris Review*, Houellebecq stated: “I remain in many ways a Comtean, and I don’t believe that a society can survive without religion” (qtd. in Bourmeau). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For an excellent genealogy of this concept in Derrida’s later writings, see Naas. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)