

§ 3 Around the Notion of Literary Communism

Introduction by Philippe Mesnard

Originally, these introductory remarks had an addressee. I drafted them with the intention of asking Jean-Luc Nancy about a few of the ideas or themes most prominent in his work. From this already substantial body of work, comprising, at the time of writing, almost twenty books, I chose to narrow the focus to two volumes. The first, *The Inoperative Community*, is a commentary on the notion of “community” taking Bataille’s work as its starting point.¹ In it, Nancy reflects upon the notion of communism while maintaining a close proximity to Heidegger (I won’t attempt to summarize this book here). The second, *Compearance*, subtitled *A Politics to Come*, includes both an essay by Jean-Christophe Bailly, “The Isthmus,” and Nancy’s own text “Compearance: From the Existence of ‘Communism’ to the Community of ‘Existence.’”²

Not only does each of these works take literature into account (and how could they possibly avoid doing so?), they also initiate an engagement between literature and philosophy, inscribing themselves within a tradition whose most distinguished representatives would be the German Romantics. From this engagement comes a properly political concern, albeit one that seems to grasp the political only in terms of what calls it into question.

I wanted to examine these notions and the vocabulary from which they arise as well as the movement of thinking that accompanies them and the grammar (philosophical? literary?) that arranges or adjusts them.

Jean-Luc Nancy, toward the end of “Compearance,” you highlight the

ambiguity inherent to what you term figuration: “in order to exclude, exclusion has to designate: it names, it identifies, it figures.”³ Immediately following this, however, you say that figuration “cannot itself simply be condemned,” and raise the following questions: “How are we to exclude without figuring? And how are we to figure without excluding?”⁴ Now, these two notions—exclusion without figuration, figuration without exclusion—are “two sides of the same limit,” and you formulate accordingly the following proposition: “If ‘politics’ is ‘management’ . . . then it is so as the management of this unmanageable limit.”⁵ Now, is not the task of modern literature to disclose this limit of which you are speaking here? Ought not literature to reveal this limit of politics as what is inaccessible to it and thereby unmanageable? In showing that politics is unable to manage this limit, does not modern literature thereby pose, at least indirectly or independently of its content, the question of the value of politics? Perhaps this is what is meant by what are almost the last words of *The Inoperative Community*’s “Literary Communism”: “‘Literary communism’ indicates at least this: that community, in its infinite resistance to everything that would complete it (in every possible sense of the term), signifies an irrepressible political necessity, and that this necessity in turn demands something of ‘literature,’ the inscription of our infinite resistance.”⁶ In showing this political limit, however, a limit that is also the limit of politics, in inscribing this resistance and in being an integral part of it, does not literature condemn itself thereby to a life wholly outside politics, to resistance or hostility to it?

How could we envisage, from a specifically political point of view, a delimitation of the space that we call literature? Is this space one of mere provocation alone? You write that “‘literary communism’ is so named in order to provoke.”⁷ Is it not rather dangerous, however, both for politics and for literature, for this to be merely a matter of provocation?

Pro-vocation: etymologically speaking, “to call out.” Literature maintains a privileged relation with what has no place, with what does not take place as such, namely the Outside. In imagining what is excluded, does literature testify *on behalf* of those who have neither political representation nor political voice? Or is literature seriously mistaken about itself when it lays claim to sovereignty or to avant-garde speech, when it is thought under or, indeed, as the sign of revolution? Does literature not have (or does it not at least *also* have) a regulative function that chimes perfectly with the question of testimony (whether the testimony in ques-

tion is that of the Horror or that of social misery), but that is no less an eminently cultural function?

—P. M.

Around the Notion of Literary Communism

Having read your questions, I want to try to respond to the broader picture that they paint, rather than to their individual formulations. In what follows, allow me the improvisational movement of a response.

What is political about literature is not its representation of society (regardless of whether or not this representation is a critical one, and regardless, too, of the fact that, in a sense, no representation can ever be deprived of critical function), but that part of it that helps cement the social bond. Indeed, a critical representation can develop in a decidedly nonliterary way, sociologically, for instance. Or in a properly political way.

In saying this, I am also claiming that there is, from the outset, a properly political gesture that ought not to be confused with its literary counterpart. The political gesture aims at the redistribution of power, at breaking with a dominant order. Its condition of possibility is both a bond and the shattering of that bond. It assumes thus that there *is* a social bond and so a fundamental universal equality. Its goal, however, is not the establishment of such a bond (its fastening, let us say), but the exercise of equal power or of equality as power. What I am calling “the fastening of the bond [*le nouage du lien*]” is not a continuation of the political but something that falls on either side of it. It is not the principle or end of politics—or, if it is, then only in the paradoxical manner that implies a discontinuity and a difference in level between principles and ends on the one hand and power on the other. Politics happens wherever that bond is lacking as a principle or as an end. It happens in separation, therefore; indeed, one might say that it happens *as* separation and so happens in the name of displacing and overcoming an altogether different sort of separation: that of domination. Politics as nonseparation would be the idealistic projection common to an entire tradition (Rousseau, Marx, and so on, perhaps even Aristotle; or, more accurately, *a certain* Rousseau, *a certain* Marx, and so on). Here, the bond is thought as a subject-process able to

complete itself by appropriating every sphere of existence and every actor on its stage.

As such, our modern tradition has exploited and projected away the grand image of the Athenian theater assumed both by politics and by literature (the assembled city gazing enrapt at its own myths in the various spectacles orchestrated by the city itself and its constitution, etc.). Without wanting to establish a historical truth contrary to this projection, I should note that the theater in Athens was wholly distinct from the assembly, from the institutions and play of political forces. The manner in which the Athenian people were the “people of the theater” was not immediately and identically that in which they were the “people of the city.” It is certainly rather odd that so many still cling to a nostalgic celebration of this supposed communion of community in a supposed communion of politics and art. Yet this persistent belief has some significance for the reciprocal implication of this communitarian or communal ideal—this *communitarian* ideal, we could say—and the ideal of a reciprocal relation between politics and literature.

Now, the bond in question, far from being a communion, is one that fastens but does not complete (one that accomplishes nothing but a knot that preserves separation—and that also contains the possibility of inequality and domination). Incompletion [*inaccomplissement*] is the very condition of politics. Fastening is the very condition of literature. The two imply one another without ever infusing or transcending one another. If, on the contrary, we were to project a completion of this bond, we would end up with the Romantic projection of a “poetic republic” or with the Rousseauian projection of a subjectivization of community (and it is hardly by chance that the latter excludes literature and art from community, itself a superior “art”—witness the idea of the “civic festival,” for example).

All of which does not prevent the two orders from implicating one another or prevent the fastening as such—literature in its modern (non-mythical) sense—from being strictly contemporary with modern (non-theological) politics. Nonetheless, the manner in which the two orders implicate one another is a curiously disjunctive or differential one.

Such considerations are still programmatic, of course. They require a rigorous distinction between “fastening” and “completion”; that is, they

require a prior examination of what I have tried to term the “in-common” in order to distinguish it from “community” as the projection of completion. If there were community (as principle and end), there would be neither politics nor literature (for either one would absorb everything, the subject in the citizen or the citizen in the subject). Such is the idea of community as *work* and as its own work (community in the sense, then, of communism, fascism, National Socialism, and national aestheticism), to which I have tried to oppose a concept of an “inoperative” or “unworking” community, that is, community as essentially incomplete. “Politics” and “literature,” therefore, would be the flip sides of the “inoperative” or the “unworkable,” two sides necessarily disjointed or differential since neither one would complete itself in or through the other. At the same time, however, these two sides face one another, each one referring to the other as a limit rather than as a principle-and-end. Here, there is doubtless something essential for democracy, something that, as a negative symbolism, leaves behind the symbolism of the completed bond (as proposed by Claude Lefort under a more Lacanian schema) and suggests, rather, what Jacques Rancière terms “an in-constant community, suspended on the contingency and resolution of its act.”⁸

With this, I am looking to displace something that, in a few of my published texts, might well give the impression of the deducibility or continuous derivation of a politics from the fastening of the bond. In a sense, there is politics because of this fastening. This fastening, however, is unequal in itself, the “fundamental” equality that it reveals being essentially unequal, able to constitute neither a “ground” nor an “end.” Moreover, this equality is open to domination, that is, to unjustified, unsubsumed inequality (inequality drawn back to the theological register). The modern, nontheological condition is the disclosure of the “in-common” as a tension and differentiation between the fastening of the bond and the equality of the subjects of that bond. Now, these subjects happen only through the fastening of the bond and so according to an inequality that contradicts the bond itself. This contradiction is in no way a dialectical one; it is irresolvable in terms of a subject-process. It requires political intervention. Politics has to sever the inequality of this knot, just as literature cannot cease fastening it. Literature is political, then, in a paradoxical sense that both conjoins and separates in the same space. (And again, I think it is important to point out that this modern space is one in which neither “literature” nor “politics” is an accidental “invention,” contempo-

rary and connected; rather, this double modality of the in-common is sustained in all onto-theo-logical communities.)

At this point, I want to turn to what, under these conditions and with all of these caveats, situates literature *within the limits* of politics.

What properly *fastens*, whether by way of representation or not, is writing. This word, however, need not be charged with negative, needlessly sophisticated resonances, nor with the esoteric allure that has become oh so fashionable in certain circles. (This trend, moreover, always amounts to an abusive essentialization of writing, to giving writing the value of what does not fasten but completes, giving it thereby an immediately political import and stability: writing is supposed to be “politically active” in and of itself, just as politics is supposed to be an “inscription,” all on the basis of a stable, fusional, or organic community—another version, then, of the myth of Athenian theater). Instead, then, this word “writing” needs to be brought back to its simple and necessary truth—an origin that can be sought directly in the work of Benjamin, Adorno, Bataille, Blanchot, Derrida, and Foucault. This body of work arises from reflections that were and are indissociably political *and* literary (and it is hardly by chance that its background is the problematic of what is usually termed *littérature engagée*). These thinkers, along with various others, have tried to think under the idea of “writing” the movement of saying that exceeds every sense, a movement without which sense itself would be neither *engagé* nor advanced.

Such a thinking is entirely necessary and thus cardinal for an epoch characterized by the seemingly endless multiplication of significations and of indifference toward them (which is also to say an epoch characterized by the end of the theologico-political). It offers precisely the reverse of nihilism: to the insignificance on which nihilism ruminates, it opposes *signification* as such. That is to say, it discloses not a sense but the birth of sense, the birth to sense, both within and beyond signification. The opposition here is not an external one. Nihilism—the end of metaphysics—is not “opposed” or “denounced” but shot through, significance drawing itself thus from out of insignificance itself in much the same way as that “layer of unrefined sense” to which Merleau-Ponty refers in relation to art (and the emergence of literature can be understood only within the context of the modern emergence of art).⁹

The first mark of significance is its singularity. There is no such thing as significance in general; or, more accurately, general significance, the absolute generality of the element of "making sense" in which and *as* which we are in the world (or in which and as which the world itself *is*), lies in its infinite singularity. Significance is *the singular* event of the emergence of sense. A general generality is always a signification, a constituted representation. The generality here, however, is the generative character of sense, its generosity: the gap, the opening, the step or the being-to that constitutes in itself a making or taking sense. This happens only as a singular event—and, reciprocally, that aspect of an event that constitutes the truth of the event (its "event-hood," its happening) is the opening of and to sense. "Writing" in its modern sense designates the event of sense and sense as event.

In a more aesthetic context, we might call this "style." In yet another context, a more psychological and moral one, we might call this "voice." Writing is merely the most austere and necessary name for the same thing—divested of aesthetic pleasure and the mysteries of interiority. Writing is style without ornament and voice without resonance, if I may put it like that. It exposes only the movement of clearing in each: a difficult and uncertain clearing, a movement that begins continually anew (a movement, that is, both continually rebeginning and continually withdrawing), clearing a path of sense through the jungle of nonsense.

Or, rather—and this is really what ought to concern us here—the only sense proper to writing's movement is that of the *address* of sense. In this address, sense is extended from one to the other or, more accurately, from one to all others, extended, put forth, or exposed to the fastened knot of a "communication." If the signification being communicated to me is not communicated by, in, and *as* the movement through which it makes sense for someone, then it is not communicated to me. It makes no bond; at best, it delivers information. And yet, it is always delivered *to* singular sense. The bond is reciprocal; sense, however, taken absolutely, is necessarily reciprocal or it is nothing at all. It does not comprise, for example, a sheaf of theological, moral, and political statements as contained in, say, *The Divine Comedy*. In this respect, such a poem has no "great message." Dante's *writing*, however—his voice, his style—exposes this collection of significations as a concern for sense. And this is why, perhaps, the open-

ing of the poem draws attention to "the difficulty of saying." And with this in mind, we might risk the following formulation: sense does not entail that something be signified; rather, it entails the difficulty of saying.

The communication of sense, or the sense of sense, its sense as what binds, can be only the communication of a worry and a difficulty. This situation is not necessarily a dramatic one; rather, it means that sense has sense only as an act of communication or sharing that is precisely *not* the transfer of information. In fact, the only true transfer of information is the one between computer memory banks. Between ourselves, the merest passage of information is itself an act of sharing; at the very least, such information has the *sense* of coming from one to another and so of becoming, beyond any signification that it might contain, the movement of both in or toward sense, the sense of each and of their "being in common" (where the "in" designates the dimension of sense and not the substantiality of a community).

Nothing in the world is more wholly shared than sense, which consists, quite precisely, of its sharing alone. But this sharing is not an equal distribution among the various individual positions of an already established setup. Rather it is sharing's proper difference in the repetition of its transmission.

Not so very long ago, there was a tendency on the part of a certain structuralism to say (or for us to *want* a certain structuralism to say) that sense is an illusion exhausted, with no real consequence, in the combination of significations. What this fails to recognize, however, is that this "with no real consequence" is not itself consequence but constitutes the *significance* of all possible significations, of all making sense as such, and that this is itself possible only if sense is involved as *address* and as *fastening*, within, through, and beyond any signifying event.

It is no accident that one major and continuous experience of the modern world is the experience that "everything has already been said, and it is too late to change that now" (La Bruyère). Yet while this experience would appear to be challenged or suppressed by a thinking of originality, it is nonetheless intimately bound up with it. Elias Canetti grasped something of this, writing, "It is important to repeat all great thinking by ignoring the fact that it has already been done."¹⁰ What is central here is the fact that the repetition is able to be a repetition—and not, say, a repro-

duction—only by virtue of the difference introduced by the singular act of making sense, a difference that itself gives rise to this act of making sense and so to its writing and its address. As such, then, what is repeated where “great thinking” is concerned is not its signification but what is precisely *not* signified in it (or, put differently, “what still remains unthought”).

This difference, however, is external neither to “great thinking” nor to signification. The repeated utterance of a sense involves no extrinsic variation in tone or situation. Rather, what is each time at stake is the total reengagement of sense, of what exceeds signification, and of this excess itself as address (addressed to the other, which probably goes without saying, but in a very precise sense: it is, in me, the other of the address who makes me come to sense; it is as its addressee, in other words, and not as its putative producer that I am the “subject” of sense—precisely what is meant by writing).

Furthermore, we should not put our faith in a finite stock of significations from which a variety of statements might be constructed. In a way, it is doubtless possible to say that the order of signification is finite. In saying this, however, we are not speaking of the end of an explorative process; rather, the order of signification *is* this process itself and has been so from the very beginning of this world of sense that we call the “West” and about which it would be no exaggeration to say that the celebrated second chorus of the *Antigone* already “says everything.” What this chorus speaks of, however, over and above the marvels and evils of *techne*, over and above the uncertainty of our destinies, is the *deinotaton*, the “most troubling,” the “most extraordinary” that man is. It speaks, that is, of the infinite peculiarity of sense. Literature is the repetition of this nomination and, in this sense, begins with the Greeks; indeed, it begins with the interruption of myth and as the voice of this interruption.

Literature says that we are sense and does so unreservedly since there is no longer any sense that could be given (and trotted out), merely the gift of making sense (of addressing) (the desire to or the gift of the desire to make sense). The West anticipated an aspect of this in the invention of hermeneutics, that is, in the treatment of sacred texts as inexhaustible reservoirs of sense. Yet hermeneutics is still in thrall to and under the

watchful eye of an unassailable core of pure, already-given sense, however “mysterious” this may be. Christianity, however, as the interpretation of mystery itself as *logos*, draws hermeneutics irreversibly beyond itself: the ever-renewed reservoir of significations is converted into infinite insignificance.

Likewise, there was a time when politics, as the interpretation and articulation of the various senses of the “good life,” appeared bound up with a number of different significations. Politics *itself* was literature in that it implied the latter’s narration(s), its gestures, its song, its staging.

(This succession of “times” or “eras” and the historical method presupposed by it is somewhat deceptive, far too straightforward a representation. It is always possible that, in every regime of representation—mythic, religious, etc.—the true praxis of sense, that is, the most original *ethics*, will always consist in distinguishing sense (matters of gesture, conduct, style) from signification (objects of belief, of commitment). It is far less certain, however, that we could ever divide history into an age of belief and an age of nonbelief. The scope of this question, though, is far too broad to be addressed here.)

The event of modernity (to speak in a historical idiom) is the exposure of making sense as such, an exposure divested of representations, as political as it is literary. In this sense, we might well chance our arm and say that the French Revolution and then Marx’s exploits tended toward the reduction of all representation, a tendency that would culminate in the address of a making-sense-in-common delivered over to itself as end without end. Doubtless this is one sense of the word “people,” its most difficult sense and the one that most exceeds signification, the one that sums up the novelty and the aporia of modern politics (or even one that comprises the true sense of the slogan “Liberty Equality Fraternity”). Yet what comes to be disclosed in this modern event and in this sense of “people” is the dehiscence and differentiation of politician and literature, the differentiation to the point of rupture between sense as what admits of representation and sense as fastening and as address.

As such it is entirely possible that, facing one another from opposite sides of the “people,” we have, in this excess of sense, simultaneously discovered and abandoned a bloodless literature and an equally bloodless

politics: a literature apparently bloodless because of its commitment to representing an infinite fastening that is unable to provide any completed figure of the people; a politics apparently bloodless because of its commitment to managing a domination whose subversion is unable to establish any figure of the people. And this is why both appear locked in the perpetual exchange of one and the same reproach, the inability to furnish a figure. I say that this is how the situation *appears* to us because we do not yet know how to decipher it properly. We do not know how to decipher what discloses the limit across which this literature and this politics ought never to move (one cannot become the fiction of the other—a formulation that, recalling Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *The Fiction of the Political*, is quite possibly that of fascism or totalitarianism.)¹¹ At this limit, we feel the modern need for an absence of figure, that is, an absence of the completion of the bond. And we need to acknowledge accordingly an irreducible heterogeneity between the sort of fastening that does not complete and the separation that is the space of domination and subversion. We need to grasp the two together without conflating them (precisely what is invited by the sirens of mythology, fundamentalism and essentialism, by the religious and/or populist politics which are, not surprisingly, in full swing today). I realize that this wholly negative need actually proposes nothing, indicates no literary or political positivity. And yet, I do not think that we should strive to maintain a pure and simple absence of figure, which would be the mere reversal of a presence and in this way a negative theology (which is still a theology). This means that we must reinvent, through and through, what a "figure" is (figure of a "people," or "people" as "figure"); and in order to do this we must first ponder this: there are at least two functions, that of fastening (which does not complete) and that of separation (which also does not complete). That these functions would be turned toward each other does not mean that they have a common end—a common figure or fiction whereby the gap between literature and politics, between sense and equality, would be overcome. Henceforth, we know that the closure of this gap is identically the closure of sense and of equality in a work of death. But inversely, the gap does not suppress the face to face.

I am well aware of the difficulty—indeed, the opacity—of my attempted response or of my preludes to a real response. I have wanted to say here, above all else, that the project I have sketched (in *The Inoperative Community* and in one section of "Compearance") in order to indicate in "literature" the truth of "politics" now appears to me to require serious revision and amendment. This does not seem to me to invalidate my initial analyses concerning the "essence" of being-in-common. Nevertheless, this project does approach something that must be denounced: the renewal of a myth of community (a renewal contrary to my intended theme, being-in-common).

What I have tried to say is this: there is, or there has been, a double project or fiction of politics in literature and of literature in politics. This double projection has been taken as the truth of both, of the one by way of the other and of the one in the other. This is, in a way, a truth (illusion) common to Romanticism and communism—basically, fascism, if we want to see in this apotropaic term an irresistible temptation toward the completion of community as signification (and thus, a refusal to confront being-in-common as the element of unachievable sense). "Fascism" names the politicization of literature and the literization of politics, leading both of them, together, toward the figural effectuation of the "people" (the theological-political purely and simply "secularized" or "immanentized"). "Democracy" comes to name not a "good" effectuation of the same "people" under the "legal State," but the tension maintained by the "people" at its proper figural effectuation. And this tension draws along with it the tension maintained, at the limit, between "literature" and "politics."

But our awareness of this double projection's fascist impasse does not mean that the two orders, literature and politics, are purely foreign and closed to one another. On the contrary, and in conformity with the absolutely contemporary character of these two orders (whether we take them from the birth of the West, or from the explanation that gives to these two words their irreversible modern senses; which is also to say, and not by chance, senses that are impossible to fix and are *approached only indefinitely*), this awareness brings to light a heterogeneity of the functions of being-in-common: the function of fastening and the function of separating and subverting. The function of sense and the function of equality. Heterogeneous *and* indexed to one another. Freedom is in some way their chiasmus. And perhaps fraternity names the illusion that this chiasmus is

being resolved—either that or it indicates something, the one to the other. Freedom is in a way the chiasma of the one and the other. (Fraternity perhaps names the illusory resolution of this chiasma—or perhaps it indicates something still unsuspected). But this still remains to be thought.

Translated by James Gilbert-Walsh