



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/14797580701362062](https://doi.org/10.1080/14797580701362062)

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ajana, B. (2007). Rethinking Community through Literature. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 11(2), 99 - 110.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14797580701362062>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Rethinking Community through Literature

Btihaj Ajana

Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* is now one of the most celebrated interventions in rethinking community beyond the traditional substantialist discourses of unity and essence. It challengingly counters contemporary articulations of both communitarianism and liberalism in order to rescue the concept of community from forms of immanentism (Nancy's term for totalitarianism) and absolute individualism. Writing and literature feature quite prominently in Nancy's thesis. They are the "voice of interruption" that destabilises the mythical articulations of community and deconstructs its immanentist figurations. They are the spaces of sharing, exposure and being-with, which according to Nancy, bring about the experience of community. This paper is, as such, an attempt to engage with Nancy's captivating approach to the concept of community and show how writing and literature provide, to some extent, the condition of possibility for interrupting the metaphysics of subjectivity and opening up an alternative space of community.

In light of the apparent fragmentation of contemporary societies and the putative erosion of nation-states through globalisation, glocalisation, and the technosociopolitical transmutations of power relations, concerns over the notion of "community" have risen again to the forefront, challenging conventional and ideological conceptualisations of what community is or what it ought to be. This renewed interest is manifested in myriad fields, such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, international relations, etc. so much so that the term community itself became too fluid, too amorphous, and too problematic. Jean-Luc Nancy's (1991) *The Inoperative Community* is one of the most important interventions *vis-à-vis* the concept of community. It offers novel ways of rethinking the political, ethical and philosophical themes orbiting around this concept.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in Nancy's influential philosophical contribution. Yet little explicit attention has been paid to the role of literature in rethinking the question of community in Nancy's work. This lack of engagement is quite surprising, especially given the fact that for Nancy, it is precisely literature that brings about the possibility of a community and inscribes "its infinite resistance to everything that would bring it to completion" (Nancy 1991,

p. 81) i.e. to an “end”. In this paper,¹ then, I discuss the ways in which literature may provide a fresh means for understanding and conceptualising the very notion of community. First though, I start by explicating some of the premises of Nancy’s alternative vision of community.

In general terms, and in the Western tradition at least, the entire edifice of community seems to have derived its foundations from the metaphysics of subjectivity in which demarcation lines are sharply traced between the dichotomies of self/other, sameness/difference, inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, presence/absence, etc. These dichotomies are inextricably linked to ways of constructing identities and creating a sense of belonging through processes of enclosure. For the subject is “fundamentally constituted through the maintenance of boundaries, both social and spatial” (Popke 2003, p. 302). As such, to critically engage with the question of community is to primarily call into question the metaphysics of subjectivity and expose the intrinsic ambivalence pervading the notion of identity. This task necessitates the unworking of these dichotomies so they can no longer function as a *defining* essence, or as a mechanism for deciding who is deemed to be placed in the inside, who should be left in the outside, and who is to be kept in-between, on the periphery of each side, occupying what Homi Bhabha (1995) calls the “third space”.

It is precisely the latter category (the inhabitants of the third space)² that exposes the conundrum of Western metaphysics for it dwells or rather *floats* uneasily amid the philosophical and political thoughts, not allowing for any kind of stability, fixity or homogeneity. In doing so, it implicates the production of self and other, of self *through* other, of “selfother” into a perpetual state of temporality in which difference and inconsistency contaminate the very basis of the formation and formulation of community. This experience of contamination³ occurs at the moment of “inclination” (Nancy 1991, p. 3). And according to Nancy, this (spontaneous) act of inclination (the *clinamen*) is what reveals the limits of sovereign individualism. For individualism is too entrenched within its own enclosure to the extent that it is incapable of “envisaging this *clinamen*” or recognising the viability of relation.

To respond to the problem of individualism, Nancy posits a teleological and dialectical argument through which he seeks to postulate that the logic of absolute separation, and thus individualism, is both impossible and self-contradictory:⁴ in order for a separation to be able to culminate into the state of “absolute”, it has to eliminate *any* contact with the outside by being performed through a closure

1. I should mention here that this paper is not intended to be in any way a critique of Nancy’s text but merely an attempt to elucidate some of his thoughts on community and literature in an accessible manner. There remain, of course, certain areas in Nancy’s text that need to be placed under scrutiny. This, however, warrants further analysis and discussion that admittedly go beyond the scope of the present paper. Occasionally, though, I raise some questions and points of reflection *vis-à-vis* particular aspects of Nancy’s arguments.

2. Here, we may also invoke Agamben’s (1998, 2005) notion of the ‘state of exception’.

3. By contamination, I am not entailing a ‘negative’ encounter with the other, but an irreducible *exposure* to alterity. See the work of Levinas and Derrida.

4. See also May (1997).

that does not only close around its exterior, but also around itself. "The absolute must be the absolute of its own absoluteness, or not be at all ... to be absolutely alone, it is not enough that I be so; I must also be alone being alone" (ibid.) But this notion, according to Nancy, is self-contradictory for a closure can only enclose what is inside. Otherwise, it becomes what is enclosed rather than the closure as such. Hence the inevitability of *exposure* and the impossibility of absolute partition and complete self-containment.

Following on from here, Nancy goes on to argue that to be-in-the-world is to unavoidably be exposed to the other, and thus, to the experience of *clinamen*. The *clinamen* takes place through the *singularity* of being whose character consists of its multiplicity and differentiability (unlike individuality). It allows the "singular being" to engage in a relationship of *sharing* inasmuch as this singular being is "always" exposed and hence constantly "open" to being-in-common regardless of its position – that is if it has a position at all. However, being-in-common does not imply *having* something in common, nor does it presume the existence of an *essence* around which singular beings could gather together to form a community. For this would entail that being-in-common and hence community itself are no more, no less than the embodiment of totalitarianism, of "immanentism" (ibid., p. 3) in which individuals are coerced (or else persuaded) into defining their "undivided" identities and formulating their "immanentist" communities in terms of strict attributes and rigid parameters (be they biological, political, cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, etc.). This is exactly where I find Agamben's (1993, pp. 1-2) assertions mostly illuminating:

The Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being such as it is. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. The intelligible, according to a beautiful expression of Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides), is neither a universal nor an individual included in a series, but rather "singularity insofar as it is whatever singularity". In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims) – and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-*such*, for belonging itself.

Insofar as singularity is "whatever singularity", insofar as singularity "takes place at the level of *clinamen*, which is unidentifiable" (Nancy 1991, pp. 6-7), and insofar as "such-and-such being" has no particular substance by which it needs to be bound to such-and-such community, singular beings are, thus, in a continuous movement of *actualisation* (Deleuze 1991), actualising themselves as well as *belonging*, and thereby moving toward their "own taking-place" (Agamben 1993, p. 2). Coexistent with this "taking place" is, indeed, a potential encounter that has no structured individualising or universalising principles, that knows no border, no substance, no limit, no point of departure, no point of arrival. It imbues itself with life – as well as death – at the dynamic moment of

crossing of ways, at the time of the *interim* and within the space of the *in-between*. It is hence singularity that has the *potentiality* to reveal the flaws inherent to the metaphysical understanding of community in which the latter is conceived as being either the organisation of “sameness” or the “sharing” of common substance. And be it through Rousseau, Hobbes, Hegel or Marx, this notion of common substance is precisely what lies at the heart of Western metaphysics, lending itself, at any rate, to the notion of immanence. As a result, the question of being-in-common remained unasked, let alone unanswered. To understand, then, this notion of immanence, it is necessary to return to Nancy’s term “immanentism”.

... human beings defined as producers (one might even add: human beings *defined* at all), and fundamentally as the producers of their own essence in the form of their labor or their work ... economic ties, technological operations, and political fusion (into a *body* or under a *leader*) represent or rather present, expose, and realize this essence necessarily in themselves. Essence is set to work in them; through them, it becomes its own work. This is what we have called “totalitarianism”, but it might be better named “immanentism”. (Nancy 1991, pp. 2-3)

Labour, economic ties, technological operations, political fusion and so on, are all forms of immanence which transforms community into communion, communion into essence and essence into work. And it is in this process of transformation that immanentism comes into being. Not that immanentism is merely the rendering of community as “a project” i.e. a work to be completed – politically, economically, socially or otherwise. But more so, it is the function by which *absolute* immanence (ibid., p. 6) is brought into play in order to achieve *absolute* enclosure and hence a community of immanence in the fullest sense of immanentism. But if the realisation of a community of immanence is possible, then so too, should absolute enclosure, insofar as for a community to be a community of immanence, as a prerequisite, it has to be *completely* and *absolutely* separated from the “exterior” so that its identity, values, ethos and so forth could only be determined from within (immanently) rather than defined from without (relationally) (Coward 1999). Put simply, a community of immanence is only possible if absolute enclosure is possible too. Nonetheless, and we may recall here Nancy’s logic, absolute enclosure is not only impossible but also self-contradictory and as such, there could never be a community of immanence *per se* for the reason we have just discussed.

Death, however, is the only realm where absolute immanence, and thus, a community of immanence could be realised. It is in death that a complete enclosure, a total separation from the outside is achieved. We can even say that a community of immanence is a community of death. “... political or collective enterprises dominated by a will to absolute immanence have as their truth the truth of death” (Nancy 1991, p. 12). The fact that the notion of absolute immanence is built upon the notion of common substance is in itself suggestive of the suicidal seeds that every will to a community of immanence carries within it. For

if death is the only means of reaching complete immanence (absolute separation), then the work of community becomes that which takes as its project the task to die – and in some extreme cases to “annihilate” too (the Nazi movement for example). As Nancy (1991, p. 12) postulates: “Immanence, communal fusion, contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it”. As such, every *work* that seeks to build a community around a common substance is bound to fall into the abyss of immanentism/totalitarianism, plunging into its own death.

Nonetheless, one has no *access* to one’s death. The experience of death itself could only come about through the death of the “other”, and even then, this experience is unexperienced (Blanchot 1995). The reason is that it is not *one’s* death that is experienced, but the other’s death – which is in a way a rehearsal of *everybody’s* death. It is experienced not in the sense that one has contact with it existentially. Instead, what the death of the other does, in the Heideggerian sense, is to expose us to the truth of one’s mortality, the truth of one’s finitude. And it is this very exposure to finitude (of self or other) that opens one to the other, that stretches the *clinamen* to its plenitude (for example, this can be seen in the rituals of mourning and remembrance). That is why death is so central to the notion of community, and that is why also community is so central to the notion of death: “Death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself – and reciprocally” (ibid., p. 14). Or again, as Blanchot (1988, p. 9) puts it:

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

But between death and community is a peculiar affair, peculiar inasmuch as it is death that reveals the impossibility of immanence – since one has no access to one’s death nor could one *fully* experience the other’s death. Hence the impossibility to make a work (ibid., p. 15); a work of community or community as work, except that which becomes a work of death, a community of death, or more precisely, a community of *dead others* in which communion is impossible, immanence is impossible and *community* itself is impossible. This community of impossible community is, in effect, what acquaints us with finitude, with being-toward-death, making it a “community of finitude” (ibid., p. 27).

Therefore, being-in-common is, above and beyond all, being inescapably exposed to singular beings, to singular beings as finitude, to the finitude of singularities where communion is overridden by *communication*. In fact, it is communication rather than the (impossible or unworking) communion that endows finitude with “existence” to the extent that community itself is communication rather than communion. Communication in the Nancyan way, however, is not the “connection” between singular beings, nor is it the “means” of their connection.

Instead, it is the “between” itself where “sharing”⁵ and “exposure” occur, where being-in-common finds its place and where work is unworked. Such a community is, indeed, an incomplete community for, as we have seen hitherto, death marks its ontological limit, making it impossible to compete the sharing of singularities. “Sharing is always incomplete” (ibid., p. 35). Yet, incompleteness, in this context, does not necessarily bear negative connotations. It is rather the “principle” by which community resists being completed i.e. being brought to an end. For complete completion always entails the arrival at a finishing point. As Nancy (1991, p. 35) puts it: “a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared”. In light of this, community emerges as transcendence (ibid.), transcending immanence, transcending communion, transcending “work” (institutionalisation, organisation, collectivisation, categorisation, etc.). And since community resists and transcends, it never disappears.

However, entailed within this notion of community as transcendence is a dialectic insofar as, at another level, community as transcendence is not that which resists its own completion. On the contrary, it is the striving toward the culmination into a complete, absolute and homogenous principle, manifested through the “invention”, “recital” and “transmission” of “myth” (ibid., p. 44). It is myth that constitutes the “common” through naturalisation. It is myth that infuses the utopia of fusion. It is through and around myth that the “gathering” takes place, that the genealogy of community is established and articulated. In this sense, the creation of myth itself is transcendence; an “immanent” transcendence in that myth is “experienced” within and by community, assuming the role of “origin” and the founder of pre-communal time (ibid., p. 50). In doing so, myth lends itself to the illusive dream of completion, to the immanent utopia of absolute enclosure. As such, Nancy (1991, p. 57) asserts that community is founded by myth. And since myth has no (substantial) foundation except that of fiction, community itself is nothing, then, but a myth.

We have mentioned before that community does not disappear. In this sense, to speak of the absence/loss of community is somewhat misleading and will only sustain the illusion that myth could be “contained”.⁶ That is why it is crucial to be wary of the discourses embedded within the notion of the “lost community” and to seek an alternative understanding of what the absence of community/myth entails. According to Nancy (1991, p. 60):

Absence of community represents that which does not fulfil community [...] neither the work of community, nor the community as work, nor communism can fulfil itself; rather the passion of and for community propagates itself, unworked, appealing, demanding to pass beyond every limit and every fulfillment enclosed in the form of an individual. It is thus not an absence, but a movement [...] it is [...] the communication of community itself that propagates itself or communicates its contagion *by its very interruption*.

5. Sharing/dividing/sharing-dividing/sharing-without-dividing (these are the variations of the French word *partager* [to share]).

6. Contra to George Bataille who famously embarked on a quest of recuperating a sense of the ‘lost community’.

Here, Nancy is invoking his logic regarding the singularity and the “unworkingness” of community (as explained above). He is foregrounding the saliency of “interrupting” community and hence myth (since community is a myth) instead of assuming their absence. In fact, for Nancy, it is the act of interruption that disrupts the continuity of mythical configurations of nature and natural configurations of myth through the staging of myth itself. This interruption of myth as well as nature occurs primarily at the moment of completion, at the moment when myth lays bare its “mythness” by articulating itself as a myth i.e. at the moment when “we know that it is all a myth” (ibid., p. 52). As such, to interrupt myth is to suspend communion, to expose singularity and with it the finitude of singular beings, to create the platform for *clinamen*, to tell the “old story” once again and, above all, to make the “voice” of the interrupted community heard. This voice of interruption is, indeed, literature (ibid., p. 63).

Nonetheless, Nancy argues that literature as interruption is not to be understood as that which reveals “something” about community or that which reveals a “completion”. For by virtue of being an interruption, literature instead reveals the limit of community. This limit is engendered by the finitude of singular beings and by the porous space of community where sharing and hence being-in-common takes place. So literature is an interruption of myth in that it “communicates” precisely this limit, making singular beings (writers and readers) incline toward one another, while exposing them to their shared finitude, the finitude of their limit. What this communication reveals, in this respect, is the ephemeral character of being, presented through the writer’s experience as a finite singular being whose work “outlives” him/her only to reaffirm the truth of death (Cathcart and O’Shea 2003, p. 4). As Machosky (2004, p. 112) explains: “The privilege of the writer arises not from his individuality but from his experience as a mortal being and from his ability to make this experience the experience of another”.

In this sense, the work of literature “recounts an unfinished story” (Nancy 1991, p. 65). It is unfinished to the extent it is shared, to the extent it shares the myth, it stages it, it distributes, and in so doing, it interrupts it at the very limit between singular beings. That is to say, within the space of their shared singularities, their shared sharing. In fact, the demand for literature stems first and foremost from this need to inscribe being-in-common; from the need to continually reintroduce death into the realm of sharing, into community itself. For it is death that “interrupts our communication and our communion” (ibid., p. 67). It is death that exposes beings to the unworking.

So contrary to what Sartre (1978) asserts, writing does not (have to) convey a message *per se*. Instead, what is solely required from writing is to expose the limit, to expose beings to their finitude, leaving behind the trace of interruption, the echo of myth, and offering a work that must be “abandoned on [this] common limit” (ibid., p. 73). By being abandoned on this limit, the work does not become a limit, nor does it become a common substance, an anchor of essence. Rather, writing becomes an autonomous work constituting a myth of its own, a myth about the interrupted myth, but one that interrupts itself as well to recount history (that is not linear, but discontinuous and fractured) and offer a coming

community, a community without origin nor an end, a community of placeless limit. Yet, this work does not provide any “common” understanding of community, nor does it represent a knowledge by which being-in-common could be mastered (ibid., p. 69). For it refuses to be completed and refuses to complete the sharing, reasserting the logic of finitude, the reality of the unworking and the bleak truth of death. In so doing, the work of literature exposes the limits of “subjectivity”, the limits of individuality, negating the possibility of any authorial authority or communal fusion. It is, hence, in the act of writing that the offering of community is possible, that the myth is interrupted.⁷

Literature is, therefore, the space *par excellence* where the singular is brought to the fore, where the myth is (re)interrupted, where work is unworked, where essence is dissolved, and where singularity is shared between even “those who have nothing in common [... between] the Aztec, the nomad, the guerrilla, the enemy” (Lingis, in Diprose 2002, p. 168). That is to say, literature is the space of *heterogeneity*. In being so, literature resists common substance. It resists generality. It resists being turned into a commercial product, the product of capital in that it is capital that “negates community because it places above it the identity of the generality of production and products” (Nancy 1991, p. 75). So in breaking away from the immanent, the individual, the common, the general, and by suspending the work of community (i.e. the end of community in its completion), literature saves singularity from immanentist politics, offering a dialogue that is based upon the act of sharing itself rather than *what* is being shared. It is precisely in this mode of “non-organic”⁸ articulation that a community of literature can be “articulated” as subversion of subjectivity, materiality, commonality, and the onto-epistemological brutality of politics.

In speaking of “community of literature”, however, we are bound to return to the notion of death and finitude in that this community is only articulated in relation to the limit inflicted by death. Without this shared limit, there would be no community. Without community, there would be no literature and no exigency

7. Nevertheless, settling on this statement, for the moment, by no means amounts to a ‘final’ conclusion. For if we accept that literature does indeed ‘interrupt’ the myth of origin and communal essence, we should *also* bear in mind the possibility that literature may as well ‘perpetuate’ and ‘enhance’ the myth (or at least contribute to such a process) – for instance, the myth of national identity and its accompanying ideologies (this is particularly true of ‘postcolonial literature’ which often aligns itself with the political enterprise of polity building and the resurgence/continuation of forms of nationalism. Also relevant is the Anglo-American literary tradition where traditional literary canons continue to function as prominent founders of cultural heritage – Shakespeare’s work being a valid example). As such, it may be that the limitation of Nancy’s (as well as Blanchot’s) approach towards the role of literature in interrupting the myth of substantialist community lies in its all too generic nature which overlooks the ‘particularity’ of literary contexts and their embedded institutional and ideological functions. Therefore, a challenging task (which certainly deserves an independent paper in its own right) would be to attend to those contextual instances whereby literature does not necessarily interrupt anything by endlessly retelling the story, but only provides the fuel for various myths – including its own.

8. Again, we should not ignore the subtle and somewhat ‘uncanny’ relationship between Nancy’s ‘non-organic’ inoperative literary community and forms of ‘organic’ literary community – found, for instance, in the case of Shakespeare’s Globe theatre through which a sense of mythical Englishness is recycled and sustained.

of “literary communism” (ibid., p. 80). And without literature, there would be no interruption of myth and hence no inscription of the sharing of this limit and no inscription of our infinite struggle against completion. Death is the only *truth* of literature. That is why, as Blanchot (1995) asserts, literature is founded on death.

It is the way in which “literature is bound to language” (Blanchot 1995, p. 322) that death speaks through writing (Cathcart and O’Shea 2003, p. 4). For where there is language, there is death through negation, the negation of the real through idealisation, and the death of the “thing itself” from which meaning is uttered. In this sense, Blanchot (1995) contends that language is a murderous enterprise in that it deprives the thing from its being and obliterates its particularity by naming it and thus rendering it as a general abstract idea. Yet, this murderous function of language is only possible insofar as it relies on mortality, on the possibility of death. Otherwise, the “ideal negation”, i.e. the replacement of the real with the idea, would not be accomplished: “if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life [...] I would not be able to carry out the ideal negation” (ibid., p. 323). Language is thus inextricably linked to death. And if language to Heidegger (1971, p. 132) is “the house of Being”, then one might go the extent to say that language to Blanchot is “the house of Death”. But despite the apparent divergence of the two statements – the former presenting a positive approach to language, whereas the latter is underlined by a negating conception *vis-à-vis* signification – they are not mutually exclusive. Instead, each statement is concurrently relying on the other to imbue itself with understanding, an understanding that is made both possible and impossible by means of language just as life is made both possible and impossible by means of death.

To speak of the self is, therefore, to undo it, to be separated from it through language, and hence to experience it as being the other to oneself in the Kristevan way. So in writing, the instance “I” becomes nothing but an attestation to the impossibility of saying “I” (Cathcart and O’Shea 2003, p. 6) and hence the impossibility of sustaining or even establishing an authorial existence. It is precisely from the vantage point of Blanchot’s conception of language as negation that Barthes (1977) declares the death of the author through the very act of writing. This notion of the “death of the author” makes it deeply problematic to speak of the writer as an individual, an “author-ity” since death pervades every corner of language⁹ – just as it is equally problematic to speak of individual death since “I” in writing/dying does not refer to a particular individual but to anyone and everyone, *offering* a community where “I” becomes a *plural* I (Nancy

9. However, it might be argued here, following on from Foucault’s (1977) ‘What is an Author?’, that this notion of ‘the death of the author’ does not necessarily dismantle the ‘author-function’, nor does it take into consideration the ways in which this function remains inextricably linked to various power relations and systems of dependencies (legal, institutional, cultural, etc.). For even when the author is toppled, other authorities are erected instead – or at least the ghostly presence of the author (his/her name for instance) keeps haunting the text forever.

2000): "This 'I' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost)" (Barthes 1974, p. 10).¹⁰

In this respect, and as we have discussed earlier, the writer can only be presented through writing as a finite mortal being so that negation could be carried out, so that the sharing of singularities and the exposure to alterity (to others or to self as other) could take place. Writing in such a context is by no means completed nor fulfilled. Writing remains constantly and *absolutely* suspended in the space of the in-between: between life and death, between before and after, between absence and presence, between withdrawal and revelation. This suspension is mainly induced by the linguistic assassination from which literature cannot escape. Yet, literature is adamant about returning to the crime scene in order to recuperate what language left behind even if what is left is a cadaver. In doing so, literature *interrupts* the abstract side of language (the idea), negating the negation and transforming it into creativity through the "word". The word keeps invoking the concrete "thing" itself by "abandoning the sense, the meaning" (Blanchot 1995, p. 327). It embraces the physicality and materiality of language i.e. the "rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book" (ibid.) so that the murdered materiality of the thing is reincarnated into the materiality of the word. It is in this refusal of meaning that literature becomes "an inability to reveal anything" (ibid., p. 328). It is in this renunciation of the negative operation of naming that literature culminates into a selfless consciousness, a workless work, a meaningless meaning, giving way to the moment of signification through which it keeps oscillating between what Blanchot (1995, p. 330) terms the "two slopes" of literature. This movement brings about the singular being as well as the possibility of infinite interpretation through the dissolution of the subject and the deferral of meaning.

The first slope of literature (prose) is exactly that destructive negation by which the real thing is abolished and replaced by the concept in order to create a meaningful prose. Whereas the second slope of literature (poetry) is that yearning to reveal, to return to what lies before the fatal act of negation. It is the return to the reality of the thing that is negated. It is the rejection of meaning and comprehension. In this sense, one might think of the second slope as being the return to life, to the living thing before it was murdered by language. Instead, literature merely returns to the decomposing corpse. It returns to death since the vehicle of its return is only that of words, words that are themselves a construction of language despite the material reality to which they allude. The persistence of the "wordness" of words is what undermines literature's pursuit of reality and its effort to discover the "before". For even when literature refuses meaning, it has to "signify" this refusal, which is in itself a *meaning* of refused meaning:

10. Here Barthes is referring, particularly, to the inherently 'intertextual' and hence 'collaborative' nature of writing which, in our context, opens up the possibility of literary community.

The metamorphosis [language turning into matter] has taken place. But beyond the change that has solidified, petrified, and stupefied words two things reappear in this metamorphosis: the *meaning* of this metamorphosis, which illuminates the words, and the *meaning* the words contain by virtue of their apparition as things [my italics]. (Blanchot 1995, p. 331)

As such, literature's attempt to return to the real is by no means a negation of its first slope. Literature only reduces the "thing" to a ghostly presence in which the corpse is made present in its absence, existent in its death, oscillating between materiality (second slope) and ideality (first slope) to the point where it loses its own death, it loses the very possibility of dying. Writing is, therefore, not the attempt to surmount death. Rather, writing is the demand to inscribe the "dread" inflicted by the loss of this possibility of dying in that "language is the life that endures death and maintains itself in it" (ibid., p. 336) and literature is that never-ending movement between the two slopes. What comes part and parcel of this vacillating movement is, in fact, the ambiguity to which literature is summoned. The instability that exposes one to the malleable zone where every possibility is pregnant with its own impossibility, where no prose is entirely meaningful, where no poetry is completely loyal to the "before", where no process, no work, no project, could be accomplished once and for all. It is this crossing of thresholds that allows singular beings to open to one another and create the site of *clinamen*. It is within this space of the in-between that myths are interrupted, that monolithic narratives are subverted, that hegemonic cultures are decentred. Literature's *raison d'être* lies indeed in inscribing the encounter, the contamination and the cross-pollination that hinge on the notion of *autrui*, and for which literature becomes a question.¹¹ "Literature becomes a question [...] because a 'touch' of some kind has occurred" (Fynsk 1996, p. 88). To inscribe this touch is to expose singular beings to the possibility of touching and being touched. In short, to the possibility of a community that is unburdened by the work of supra-individual subjectivities, and freed of any essentialist predicate of commonality. Such a community is the community of that which is in perpetual *be-coming*, the community where the *clinamen* reaches the poor, the homeless, the marginalised, the queer, the migrant, the subaltern, the excluded, *et al.*¹² It is the community in which the experience of being-in-common is not reduced to common substance or stable collective identity. Only in being exposed to these singularities that one could go beyond the violent political and philosophical *figurations* of community. Only in recognising the potential of otherness regardless of its "suchness" that one could witness the "coming" of a community that is, as

11. For Blanchot, the act of writing is above all a 'question' insofar as it implies an ontological doubt *vis-à-vis* not only its own status but also its own external reference, that is to say, its 'origin'. So instead of being perceived as a peculiar testimony of existence (the existence of the author), writing, according to Blanchot, lays bare the non-solidity, the un-sustainability of this existence, revealing itself while obscuring and ultimately concealing this very existence.

12. Although we must 'interrupt' and remind ourselves that there are those who cannot easily be 'reached' and 'touched' by the Nancyan and Blanchotian literary community i.e. the 'unprivileged' who cannot read and write!

Deleuze, Agamben, Blanchot and Nancy would have it, real without necessarily being actual, viable without necessarily being working.

Acknowledgment

I am very thankful to the referee for the extremely insightful, critical and inspiring comments, which gave me the urge to almost rewrite the paper, were it not for the constraint of time.

References

- Agamben, G. (1993) *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Agamben, G. (2005) *State of Exception*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Barthes, R. (1977) *Image, Music, Text*, Fontana, London.
- Barthes, R. (1974) *S/Z*, Basil Blackwell, London, p. 10.
- Bhabha, H. (1995) *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, New York, p. 39.
- Blanchot, M. (1995) *The Work of Fire*, Stanford University Press, California.
- Blanchot, M. (1988) *The Unavowable Community*, Station Hill Press, New York, p. 9.
- Cathcart, A. & O'Shea, A. (2003) *Writing (the) Impossible*, <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/ejrot/cmsconference/2003/abstracts/organization/oshea.pdf>, pp. 4, 6.
- Coward, M. (1999) *Unworking the Fictions of Citizenship: The Post-national Democratic Community*, <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/mpc20/pubs/unworking.doc>.
- Deleuze, G. (1991) *Bergsonism*, Zone Books, New York.
- Diprose, R. (2002) *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*, State University of New York press, New York, pp. 168-9.
- Foucault, M. (1977) 'What is an Author?' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. D. F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, New York.
- Fynsk, C. (1996) 'Crossing the Threshold: On 'Literature and the Right to Death' in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. C. B. Gill, Routledge, London, p. 88.
- Heidegger, M. (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper and Row, London, p. 132.
- Machosky, B. (2004) *A Poetics at the Limit of the Subject: Nancy's Philosophy of Singular Being in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer"*, http://www.up.univ-mrs.fr/e-rea/2_2/2_2_PDF/14_Machosky.pdf.
- May, T. (1997) *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania.
- Nancy, J.-L. (1991) *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Nancy, J.-L. (2000) *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Popke, J. (2003). 'Poststructuralist Ethics: Subjectivity, Responsibility and the Space of Community', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 27, no. 3, p. 302.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1978) *What is Literature?*, Methuen, London.