

ON NOT LOVING EVERYONE: COMMENTS ON  
JEAN-LUC NANCY'S "L'AMOUR EN ÉCLATS  
[SHATTERED LOVE]"

Mathew Abbott

*And for what, except for you, do I feel love?*<sup>1</sup>

The essay begins with a warning and a series of questions:

The thinking of love, so ancient, so abundant and diverse in its forms and in its modulations, asks for an extreme reticence [*retenue*] as soon as it is solicited. It is a question of modesty, perhaps, but it is also a question of exhaustion: has not everything been said on the subject of love? Every excess and every exactitude? Has not the impossibility of speaking about love been as violently recognized as has been the experience of love itself as the true source of the possibility of speaking in general? We know the words of love to be inexhaustible, but as to speaking *about* love, could we perhaps be exhausted?<sup>2</sup>

Much depends on the first sentence of the next paragraph, which functions as a potential rejoinder and answer to this warning and these questions: "It might well be appropriate that a discourse on love – supposing that it still has something to say – be at the same time a communication of love, a letter, a missive" (82; 225f). The possibility of speaking about love has been placed in question by the sheer volume of texts that purport to do just that (it is a paradox worth reflecting on: the fact that something appears to be everywhere means

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," 380.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy, "Shattered Love," 82; "L'amour en éclats," 225 (citations henceforth given in the text; translations are from Garbus and Sawhney unless a footnote indicates otherwise).

it might be nowhere). Yet exhaustion can be alleviated with a change in trajectory: if one cannot speak about love, then one can still speak *in* it (for '[w]e know the words of love to be inexhaustible'). That Nancy's essay presents as a treatise on love therefore shows there is reflexivity here. This may be more than an essay on love. It may also be a declaration of it. Indeed, if it is what it presents itself as, then it has to be.

The claims are being made in the conditional ('It might well be appropriate . . .' [*Et sans doute il conviendrait . . .*]), but this is not because of modesty (rhetorical or otherwise). As Nancy writes: "[T]he words of love, as is well known, sparsely, miserably repeat their one declaration, which is always the same, always already suspected of lacking love because it declares it" (82; 226f). A declaration of love has a very particular and ambiguous epistemological status. It is perhaps more problematic even than the kinds of reports more usually associated with the skeptical threats of the problem of other minds: if it is true that when "I see someone writhing in pain with evident cause I do not think: all the same, his feelings are hidden from me,"<sup>3</sup> then in love things are complicated. Here one can be mistaken in attributing the predicate 'in love' to oneself (Romeo and Rosaline); here it is not meaningless to say, 'I know I am in love' ('How?' 'I just *know*'); here the intensity of an affective display can itself cast doubt on what we might presume (or hope) it is intended to convey (sometimes the louder you shout it, the hollower you sound). Wittgenstein again: "Love is not a feeling. Love is put to the test, pain not. One does not say: that was not true pain, or it would not have faded so quickly."<sup>4</sup> It is not that love cannot be proven save through exceptional actions (gifts, sonnets, extravagant marriage proposals, etc.), but rather that this 'being put to the test' is crucial to it, and persists with it at all times; there is no way of proving it once and for all, and so the task it sets is continual. As a thought experiment, imagine it were possible to use neuroimaging to determine the intensity of feeling a subject has for a certain person. Even if one could 'prove' scientifically that a particular man or woman arouses extreme desire and/or affection in the subject, then would this be sufficient to prove love? Are such feelings even necessary to love? Could we not, in certain circumstances, legitimately speak of it in their absence? Nancy's essay will try to

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<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §223.

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §504 (translation modified).

show that this problem – the fact that love cannot be proven or guaranteed – is actually a condition of its possibility. As Catherine Kellogg puts it in a piece on Nancy’s thought: “[I]t is the very inability to guarantee love – the very ephemerality of the experience of loving – that calls forth the promise of love in the first place.”<sup>5</sup>

Nancy’s essay turns on this epistemological particularity, which makes it rather singular. For the text does not just make a claim about love. It makes a claim about being in the light of love. The argument is transcendental. To get ahead of ourselves, it says: if there is love (and there is: I have declared it), then being is finite. Nancy’s essay declares love in order to comment on it, and demonstrates that, because there is love, being is in a certain way. Yet that declaration is epistemologically ambiguous, because love is not the kind of thing that can be definitively proven or achieved (demonstrating it – showing it, sustaining it – is an *ongoing* task). As such, Nancy’s is a singular kind of transcendental argument. It is a transcendental argument in which one of the lemmas is a *promise*. We will come back to this, for it is arguably the heart of the essay. It shows us something important about Nancy’s ontology.

Let’s return to the text as it develops. In the next paragraphs, Nancy invokes once again the reticence required for thinking love, but cautions against the idea that it stems the fact that it would be “indiscreet to deflower love” (83; 226f). It is not that to write or speak of love entails crudeness or a lack of propriety; it does not mean debasing something that should really be treated with respectful or sacred silence. For love has already been marked in art and literature by an “unrestrained and brazen exploitation” [*exploitation débridée ou éhontée*] (83; 226f); and this shamelessness, along with the resultant difficulty of moralising about or sermonising on love, are inherent to what it is: “charity and pleasure, emotion and pornography, the neighbor and the infant, the love of lovers and the love of God, fraternal love and the love of art, the kiss, passion, friendship” (83; 226 – 7f). There is no use pretending otherwise: love gets around. Nancy: “To think love would thus demand a boundless generosity toward all these possibilities, and it is this generosity that would command reticence: the generosity not to choose between loves, not to privilege, not to hierarchize, not to exclude” (83; 227f). The last thing love needs is to be arranged taxonomically and valued accordingly, such that certain of its manifestations are taken to be

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<sup>5</sup> Kellogg, “Love and Communism,” 345.

higher or truer instantiations of its essential principle: if we want to understand love, then it would be a mistake to attempt to distinguish between loves on the grounds of how authentic, ethical, painful, dangerous, healthy, passionate, trite, spiritual, erotic, fidelitous, sentimental, possessive, romantic, exploitative, narcissistic, or happy they are. Rather, the extreme multiplicity and “indefinite abundance” (83; 227f) that marks love *is* its essential principle.<sup>6</sup> The reticence love calls for, then, is demanded by the “boundless generosity” (83; 227f) one needs in order to think it:

Love in its singularity, when grasped absolutely, is itself perhaps nothing but the indefinite abundance of all possible loves, and an abandonment to their dissemination, indeed to the disorder of these bursts. The thinking of love should learn to yield to this abandon: to receive the prodigality, the collisions, and the contradictions of love, without submitting them to an order that they essentially defy (83; 227f).<sup>7</sup>

At this point, the reflexivity that is so crucial to this essay is pushed further. Nancy indicates that the “generous reticence” required here “would be no different from the exercise of thought itself” (83; 227f): thought, insofar as it “rejects abstraction and conceptualization,” insofar as it refuses to “produce the operators of a knowledge” (83 – 4; 227f), is a practice of openness to something that exceeds it. For Nancy, as for the later Heidegger, thought does not master its object; rather, it “undergoes an experience, and lets the experience inscribe itself” (84; 227f). This ‘letting’ [*laisse*] is important: like Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*, it links the practice of thought with acceptance and

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<sup>6</sup> Nancy writes: “[Love] is not in any one of its shatters, or it is always on the way to not being there. Its unity, or its truth as love, consists only in this proliferation, in this indefinite luxuriance of its essence – and this essence itself at once gives itself and flees itself in the crossing of this profusion. Pure love refuses orgasm, the seducer laughs at adoration – blind to the fact that they each pass through the other, even though neither stops in the other... [L]ove is not ‘polymorphous,’ and it does not take on a series of disguises. It does not withhold its identity behind its shatters: it *is* itself the eruption of their multiplicity, it *is* itself their multiplication in one single act of love, it is the trembling of emotion in a brothel, and the distress of a desire within fraternity” (102; 256f).

<sup>7</sup> Translation slightly modified.

receptivity. Yet Nancy goes perhaps further than Heidegger in asserting that thought, which “does not lay claim to a particular register of thinking” but rather “invites us to thinking as such” (84; 227f), *is* love. As he writes: “It is the love for that which reaches experience; that is to say, for that aspect of being that gives itself to be welcomed” (84; 227f). Thinking love requires generosity, receptivity, and openness to something in excess of the thinker – which is to say it requires love.

So there is a double reflexivity at work in this essay. Not only does it have to declare love in order to think it, but this thinking must itself be carried out as love. This heady confluence of practice and theory can help explain some of the formal characteristics of the piece which, if we are to believe its claims, will actually need to performatively enact them. Given its repeated insistence on the multiplicitous nature of love, then, it is appropriate that it achieves this through a variety of means: its refusal to find in any of the various figures of love that it traces a paradigmatic image of it;<sup>8</sup> its collapse in its postscript into a strange Blanchotian dialogue (which indicates once again that a text on love might also have to be a communication of it)<sup>9</sup>; its insistence, and this is inherent in the contradictory movements of the text as its argument develops, that the nature of its object is such that any full possession of it would actually represent its loss;<sup>10</sup> its reliance on quotations from and references to an eclectic range of philosophical and literary sources (a formal technique that recalls Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk*). The text is not

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy writes: “. . . love’s ultimate paradox, untenable and nevertheless inevitable, is that its law lets itself be represented simultaneously by figures like Tristan and Isolde, Don Juan, or Baucis and Philemon – and that these figures are neither the types of a genre nor the metaphors of a unique reality, but rather so many bursts [*éclats*] of love, which reflect love in its entirety each time without ever imprisoning it or holding it back” (101; 254f).

<sup>9</sup> See 108 – 9; 267-8f.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy writes: “There is not one philosophy that has escaped this double constraint. In each, love occupies place that is at once evident and dissimulated (as, in Descartes, between the theory of union and that of admiration), or embarrassed and decisive (as, in Kant, in the theory of sublime reason), or essential and subordinate (as, in Hegel, in the theory of the State). At the cost of these contradictions and evasions, love consistently finds the place that it cannot not have, but it only finds it at this cost. What we would have to understand is why this place is essential for it, and why it is essential to pay this price” (86; 230f).

only a philosophical treatise on love, but also an attempt at a kind of multiplicitous *exposure* of it; like love itself, Nancy's essay "offers finitude in its truth; it is finitude's dazzling presentation" (99; 251f). This ultra-reflexivity – which requires of the essay this intertwining of content and form, of philosophical claims and their enactment – is part of what makes it beguiling.

None of this entails that the affects we associate with love are necessarily appropriate to thought. It is not that to think in Nancy's sense of the term requires any particular feeling(s) of the thinker, whether they are taken either as a condition for, or simple epiphenomenon of, thinking. Love is not a feeling. Rather it is a simultaneous opening and obliging of the self: an opening of the self to something that exceeds it and an obliging of the self to that excess. To say that thinking is love, then, is not to expound any kind of irrationalism (such that, for instance, thinking would necessarily mean being intoxicated, giddy, exalted, etc.). As Nancy puts it: "To say that 'thinking is love' does not mean that love can be understood as a response to the question of thinking – and certainly not in the manner of a sentimental response, in the direction of a unifying, effusive, or orgiastic doctrine of thinking" (84; 228f). Instead, the obligation appropriate to love is also appropriate to thought. It is not exactly an 'ethical' obligation, at least in the mainstream philosophical sense of the term (after all, it is possible to be in love and to be 'unethical'; indeed it is possible to be in love and to be evil – and sometimes love provokes it).<sup>11</sup> It is an obligation in the etymological sense of the word, which derives from the Latin *ligāre*, meaning 'to bind' (think of our 'ligature,' or the speculative etymology of the term 'religion' as that which binds the human to the divine). Love/thought *ties* one to what one loves/thinks. As Nancy writes: "[I]t is necessary to say that 'thinking is love' is a difficult, severe thought that promises rigor rather than effusion" (84; 228f). Love/thought asks something of the lover/thinker; to engage in it is to be tested. Nancy's is not a sentimental or flabbily relativistic thinking.

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<sup>11</sup> Nancy writes: "(It is perhaps that – a hypothesis that I leave open here – in love and in hate, but according to a regime other than that of Freudian ambivalence, there would not be a reversal from hate to love, but in hate I would be traversed by the love of another whom I deny in his alterity. Ultimately, I would be traversed by this negation. This would be the limit of love, but still its black glimmer. Perverse acts of violence, or the cold rage to annihilate, are not hate)" (102; 255 – 6f).

Implicit in this Heideggerian turn toward the category of ‘thought’ is a claim about philosophy. It is not quite that philosophy is opposed to thought. It is that it is possible to carry on something that resembles philosophy in the absence of thought; that philosophy can be (and has been) tempted to forgo thinking. It does so to the extent that it is an expression of the will to mastery. Philosophy doesn’t think when it refuses the receptivity and risk inherent in thought, when it fails to maintain itself in relation to an excess, when it tries to reduce everything to knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Yet philosophy is not always or essentially the will to mastery. Indeed philosophy’s name points to this ambiguity: if it is the *love* of wisdom, it is not the arrival at wisdom, nor is it the knowledge of it. Nancy: “The intimate connivance between love and thinking is present in our very origins: the word ‘philosophy’ betrays it. Whatever its legendary inventor might have meant by it, ‘philosophy,’ in spite of everything – and perhaps in spite of all philosophies – means this: love of thinking, since thinking is love” (84; 227-8f). The double aspect of philosophy invoked here is crucial: philosophy is love, but only perhaps in spite of philosophies. If the practice of philosophy results in a ‘worldview,’ or a reasoned commitment to a set of theses (about mind, meaning, metaphysics, morals, or whatever), then philosophy doesn’t think; if however philosophy admits its obligation toward what exceeds knowledge, then perhaps it can be worthy of what we call it. Love/thought is foundational for, yet always in danger of being denied by, philosophy.

The *Symposium* is paradigmatic here. On the one hand, the work “signifies first that for Plato the exposition of philosophy . . . is not possible without the presentation of philosophic love” (85; 229f). Generously welcoming “all the different kinds of love,” the work presents the Eros proper to philosophy not “with the mastery of a triumphant doctrine” but rather “in a state of deprivation and

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<sup>12</sup> Descartes provides an image of this: “[O]pening the thorax of a young live rabbit and displacing the ribs so that the heart and trunk of the aorta are exposed, I then tied the aorta with a thread at a certain distance from the heart, and separated it from everything adhering to it, so that there could be no suspicion that any blood or spirit could flow into it from anywhere but the heart; then with a scalpel I made an incision between the heart and the ligature, and I saw with the greatest clarity [*manifestissime*] blood leaving in a spurt through the incision when the heart was extending, while, when it was contracted, the blood did not flow” (quoted in Grene, “The Heart and Blood,” 328).

weakness, which allows the experience of the limit, where thought takes place, to be recognized” (85; 229-30f); in this text, Plato “touches the limits” and presents his thought with a “reticence [*retenue*] not always present elsewhere” (85; 230f).<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, however, “the *Symposium* also exercises a mastery over love” (85; 229f): it introduces “choices of philosophical knowledge” and a “truth regarding love” that “assigns its experience and hierarchizes its moments” (85; 230f). So the work takes away with one hand what it gives with the other; it deigns to open its discourse to the multiplicity of love, but recoils from that multiplicity, “substituting the impatience and *conatus* of desire for its joyous abandon” (85-6; 230f): “[I]n Plato, thinking will have said and will have failed to say that it is love – or to explain what this means” (86; 230f). This ambivalence, here displayed in one of philosophy’s foundational texts, marks the tradition’s inheritance of love. Philosophy needs it, but fails again and again to display the generous reticence it demands. As Nancy writes: “If thinking is love, that would mean (insofar as thinking is confused with philosophy) that thinking misses its own essence – that it misses by essence its own essence” (91; 237f).

This immanent critique of the tradition of philosophy, in which the discourse appears as engaged in a flirtation with mastery and security that would, if consummated, represent the denial of its own condition of possibility, places Nancy’s essay firmly in the post-Heideggerian tradition of the critique of metaphysics. Nancy, we might say, here reads the Heideggerian history of (the forgetting of) being in terms of a “missed rendezvous” (91; 238f) between philosophy and love. As Linnell Secomb points out, it reminds in particular of Levinas, whose own work can be understood as an attempt at opening philosophy to an experience of difference and exposure that had been haunting it all along. “Nancy’s loving philosophy,” Secomb writes, “is indebted in part, and perhaps most of all, to Levinas – a debt, a gift, a legacy that Nancy lovingly announces through an exposition of Levinas and an exposure of his own thought to that of Levinas.”<sup>14</sup> But of course, Levinas’s own relation to Heidegger was nothing if not ambivalent, and Nancy’s own post-Heideggerian reception of Levinas returns the ambivalent favour. First we should note that Nancy’s evocation of Levinas in this essay (which takes place in an extended parenthetical remark) itself begins

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<sup>13</sup> Translations modified.

<sup>14</sup> Secomb, “Amorous Politics,” 452.



with a sort of warning: “I will be even less explicit with Levinas than with Heidegger” (104; 260f). Secomb takes this as a kind of discretion (“in a Derridean ethical manner he does not return the gift – through eulogy, or dutiful discipleship, for example – and instead disseminates the gift of Levinasian ethics”)<sup>15</sup>, arguing that Nancy’s engagement with Levinas is “both a critique and a further elaboration.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the critique runs deeper than Secomb seems to acknowledge – and the ‘elaboration,’ if it is that, is one that calls into question a crucial aspect of Levinas’s philosophy. As Secomb recognises, what Nancy finds problematic in Levinas is the tendency toward teleology on display in his works in relation to love, which allows him to hierarchise loves according to the kind of taxonomic procedure Nancy wants to criticise (Nancy speaks of the “the oriented sequence” that Levinas, “in a rather classical manner,” sets up between “fecundity, filiation, and fraternity” (105; 260f)). What we need to recognise, however, is that the teleology at work in Levinas (or at least, in the Levinas of the early works, up to and including *Totality and Infinity*), is the flipside to his sequential phenomenology, which traces the experience of the self as it moves from the clutches of the pure *fact* of being, understood as a totality without content (the anonymous *il y a*),<sup>17</sup> toward the other. For Levinas, subjectivity begins in the impersonal and *moves toward* ethical experience. As he says at the outset of *Time and the Other*, “it is *toward* a pluralism that does not merge into unity that I should like to *make my way* and, if this can be dared, break with Parmenides.”<sup>18</sup> Or

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<sup>15</sup> Secomb, “Amorous Politics,” 452.

<sup>16</sup> Secomb, “Amorous Politics,” 452.

<sup>17</sup> Toward the beginning of *Time and the Other*, Levinas provides a useful thought experiment to explain the concept of the *il y a* [there is]: “Let us imagine all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness. What remains after this imaginary destruction of everything is not something, but the fact that there is [*il y a*]. The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence. There is, after this destruction of things and beings, the impersonal ‘field of forces’ of existing. There is something that is neither subject nor substantive. The fact of existing imposes itself when there is no longer anything. And it is anonymous: there is neither anyone nor anything that takes this existence upon itself. It is impersonal like ‘it is raining’ or ‘it is hot.’ Existing returns no matter with what negation one dismisses it. There is, as the irremissibility of pure existing” (Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 46-47).

<sup>18</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 42 (my emphasis).

as he puts it in *Totality and Infinity*: “[W]e can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself.”<sup>19</sup> Crucially, the whole analysis is predicated upon an equation between being *as such* and an impersonal, anonymous force that must be *evaded* for the sake of the other. And this is precisely what Nancy will challenge in Levinas, both in his rather subtle parenthetical note, and implicitly but consistently in the essay at large:

[I]n the *es gibt* (“it gives [itself]”) of Being, one can see everything except “generality.” *There* is the “each time,” anarchic . . . occurrence of a singular existing. *There is no* existing without existents, and *there is no* “existing” by itself, no concept – it does not *give itself* – but there is always being, precise and hard, the theft of generality. Being is at stake there, it is in shatters [*en éclats*], offered dazzling, multiplied, shrill and singular, hard and cut across: its being is there . . . This takes place before the face and signification. Or rather, this takes place on another level: *at the heart* of being (105; 261f).<sup>20</sup>

Nancy is alluding here to Levinas’s essay *Existence and Existents*; the argument is intended to call its foundational concept – that of the *il y a*, or the pure fact of being without beings – into question. Nancy’s ontology is geared from the outset toward a thinking (loving?) of being in which this image of a radically impersonal being-in-general is undermined in its very ground. Levinas’s teleology of love is problematic not just because it misses the essentially multiplicitous nature of its object, then, but also because missing this multiplicity means missing what love has to show about being. Love shows us that what takes place before ‘the face and signification’ is not the brute totality of a *there is* (which Levinas will figure in terms of a “condemnation to being”),<sup>21</sup> but rather a *there is* that is always already plural: “[B]eing-with takes place only according to the occurrence of being, or its posing into shatters [*éclats*]. And the crossing – the coming-and-going, the comings-and-goings of love – is constitutive of that occurrence” (105; 261f). The multiplicity proper to love is

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<sup>19</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>21</sup> Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 24.

nothing other than the multiplicity of being itself. As it is exposed, love exposes being as shattered.

It would be wrong to take this talk of ‘shattering’ (a necessarily imperfect rendering of the French *éclater*, which possesses further connotations of bursting, brilliance, shining, and sparking) to imply that being is whole before being broken in the experience of love, that love’s shattering shatters a totality. Rather, this shattering has to be understood as originary: being is always already shattered; to put it a little awkwardly, we might say that the shard *precedes* the break. This is how Nancy avoids the Levinasian problematic of phenomenologically demonstrating how multiplicity enters into a self-contained, irremissibly monolithic being (and thus also the basic problem associated with this: that the multiplicity he establishes remains haunted by that monolith).<sup>22</sup> In another work, Nancy writes: “That which, for itself, depends on nothing is an *absolute*. That which nothing completes in itself is a *fragment*. Being or existence is an absolute fragment.”<sup>23</sup> The fragments or shards in play here are not pieces of some larger puzzle; rather they are *absolutely* fragmentary, and do not refer back to some prior whole. Being’s multiplicity is not the result of its *lacking* unity; it is absolute in its plurality, *completely* incomplete. Existence is ‘infinitely finite.’<sup>24</sup> Nancy wants to undermine the idea of pure presence that runs through the early Levinas; he invokes love in order to show (or rather, to promise) that being is never a brute totality.

He argues something similar of the self. In love, the self finds itself to be broken, shattered, and intruded into. If I return to myself in the experience of love (and importantly, Nancy does not deny that love involves a kind of self-return or self-appropriation),<sup>25</sup> then “I return broken: I come back to myself, or I come out of it, broken [*brisé*]” (96; 247f). If I am in love, then I lose my self (I lose my self possession); if I am in love, then I find myself, but I find myself to be mortal, finite, and exposed to something that exceeds me. In love I

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<sup>22</sup> See Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, 89 – 93.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> See Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 29 – 33.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy writes: “Love frustrates the simple opposition between economy and noneconomy. Love is precisely – when it is, when it is the act of a singular being, of a body, of a heart, of a thinking – that which brings an end to the dichotomy between the love in which I lose myself without reserve and the love in which I recuperate myself, to the opposition between gift and property” (96; 246f).

find myself to have lost myself. As Kellogg puts it, “What the other (who we love) presents to us, Nancy argues, is the fact of her existence, which is to say, a being whose mortality and finiteness, calls us to know our own.”<sup>26</sup> Love is only possible (if it is possible – this is only a promise, after all) between finite, mortal creatures. This is to say that *immortals could not love each other* (this is perhaps part of what our literary, cinematic, and popular cultural traditions evoke with their images of the vampire: all desire, no love – and condemned to the continual torture of that).<sup>27</sup> We could say that lovers share their finitude, as long as this ‘sharing’ is understood in an appropriately rigorous way: not as the ‘sharing’ of feelings or experiences, as certain debased contemporary discourses would have it, but the sharing of an exposure to something excessive, absolutely inappropriable (and of course, as lovers know, there is pain in this). Some of the most beautiful passages of Nancy’s essay are dedicated to a description of how love exposes the self’s finitude to itself, and to the other:

[T]he break is a break in his self-possession as subject; it is, essentially, an interruption of the process of relating oneself to oneself outside of oneself. From then on, *I is constituted broken*. As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts

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<sup>26</sup> Kellogg, “Love and Communism,” 344.

<sup>27</sup> This pits Nancy against Alain Badiou, who analyses love in terms of the Subject’s (or rather Subjects’) fidelity to the event of love; a move that, as he makes clear in his *Ethics*, renders the loving Subject *immortal* in a certain important sense. As Badiou writes: “The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters Man’s identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him. And we know that every human being is *capable* of being this immortal - unpredictably, be it in circumstances great or small, for truths important or secondary. In each case, subjectivation is immortal, and makes Man. Beyond this there is only a biological species, a ‘biped without feathers’, whose charms are not obvious” (Badiou, *Ethics*, 12). While the ethic of fidelity that Badiou constructs displays certain similarities with Nancy’s idea of love as kind of ongoing promise without guarantee, the distinction here is clear: Badiou’s ‘Subject’ is marked by its having been able to rise above the everyday, ordinary, finite world of mortals. For Nancy, on the other hand, love can only happen to a finite self, and only exists because being as such is finite.

across and that disconnects the elements of the subject-proper – the fibers of its heart. One hour of love is enough, one kiss alone, provided that it is out of love – and can there, in truth, be any other kind? Can one do it without love, without being broken into, even if only slightly? (96; 247f)

The temporal progression implied here, however, is something of an analytical fiction. Just as with being, it is not that love breaks the unity of the self, or shatters it, or intrudes upon it: rather, it reveals the self as always already broken, multiplicitious, shattered. As Nancy acknowledges (a few paragraphs later, in parentheses): “[T]he heart is not broken, in the sense that it does not exist before the break . . . it is the break itself that makes the heart” (99; 250f). What I love is the other’s impropriety, the fact that it does not have a hold on itself. But it is not as though my love renders the other finite in this way. Rather, it reveals it as such. Or still more accurately, it reveals me as such as it reveals the other as such, and one for the other in a kind of mutual astonishment.

Nancy unifies these two claims – the claim about being, and the claim about the heart of the self – via a striking image/metaphor, the precise status of which is rather enigmatic:

Again it is necessary that being have a heart, or still more rigorously, that being *be* a heart. “The heart of being” means nothing but the being of being, that by virtue of which it is being. To suppose that “the being of being,” or “the essence of being,” is an expression endowed with meaning, it would be necessary to suppose that the essence of being is something like a heart – that is to say: that which alone is capable of love (88; 234f).<sup>28</sup>

How are we to take the claim that it is necessary that being *be* a heart? It would be uncharitable to simply regard this as a poetic flourish on Nancy’s part, as a ‘literary’ device, affectation, or simple attempt at

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<sup>28</sup> How striking that this comes from a philosopher who, five years after the publication of the essay, would have his own heart transplanted. What an uncanny confirmation of the lack of self-possession that Nancy posits as essential to (the heart of) being!

ornamentation: if this is a metaphor, then it should be more than 'just' a metaphor. We need to take it seriously; but how? Here it is worth acknowledging that Nancy's statement here is made in the subjunctive [*que l'être soit un coeur* – his emphasis]. It indicates that we are returning to the theme of the promise.

For Nancy, 'I love you' is the most authentic name for love itself. It is not simply a constative statement, in that it doesn't just pick out a fact about the world (say the presence in me of certain strong feelings). Rather it also does something: it is itself an event, not just a description of one. But neither (to continue in this Austinian register) is it a standard performative. While saying 'I pronounce you man and wife' is clearly an action – namely, the act of pronouncing – the status of 'I love you' is more ambiguous. Does saying it mean doing it in this case? What, besides sincerity, are the felicity conditions of this performative? At issue is the nature of the 'act' in question – is it really something that happens once, like the pronouncement of marriage? If I say 'I pronounce you man and wife,' and the power really is invested in me, then you become man and wife; if I say 'I love you,' then do I really love you? Even if I am sincere, I can still be wrong. There are other ways of loving besides saying 'I love you,' yet one cannot pronounce except by pronouncing. 'I love you,' then, is a singular kind of statement, one that seems to exist in a zone of indistinction between the constative and the performative. For Nancy, it is a sort of *promise*, and one of a particular sort. It is a promise on which I am, in a certain fundamental sense, unable to fully make good (for what would constitute its having been kept?). "The promise," Nancy writes, "neither describes nor prescribes nor performs. It does nothing and thus is always in vain. But it lets a law appear, the law of the given word: that this must be" (100; 253f). A lack of guarantee thus marks the promise of love: "The promise must be kept, and nonetheless love is not the promise *plus* the keeping of the promise. It cannot be subjected in this way to verification, to justification, and to accumulation . . . Perhaps unlike all other promises, one must keep only the promise itself: not its 'contents' ('love'), but its utterance ('I love you')" (100; 253f).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Nancy has returned to this in *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, where he reads the promise without guarantee essential to love in terms of the "Christian category of faith" (152): "What I am saying here would be perfectly suitable to our modern definition of faithfulness in love. It is precisely that, for us – faithfulness in love, if we conceive of faithfulness as distinct

This can explain why Nancy turns to the subjunctive in his claim about being: to say that it is necessary that being *be* a heart is not the same as saying that it necessarily *is* a heart. It's not that being is a heart, but that it *has to be*. To say that it is necessary that being *be* a heart is to *promise* that being is singular and exposed, that it is not the brute generality that horrifies Levinas, but rather a plurality that exceeds our attempts at mastering it. If being is a heart, then it is because of a groundlessness at its heart, the fact that it exposes itself as depending on no law, no foundation. The lack of guarantee that defines love is essential to being *as such*. Nancy:

What appears in [the light of love], at once excessive and impeccable, what is offered like a belly, like a kissed mouth, is the singular being insofar as it is this 'self' that is neither a subject nor an individual nor a communal being, but *that* – she or he – which cuts across, that which arrives and departs. The singular being affirms even better its absolute singularity, which it offers only in passing, which it brings about immediately in the crossing. What is offered through the singular being – through you or me, across this relation that is only cut across – is the singularity of being, which is to say: that being itself, 'being' taken absolutely, is absolutely singular (108; 265f).

The claim that it is necessary that being *be* a heart folds Nancy's claim about being into his claim about the self. Both are thus posited as simultaneously singular and plural, the '*that it is*' of each cutting across the other. Astonishment at my lover, and astonishment with her; astonishment at being, and astonishment with it – and all these astonishments bound up together, impossible to tell apart. This positing of the self/being as a heart is a promising, and its lack of

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from the simple observation of conjugal law or of a moral or ethical law outside the conjugal institution. This is even, perhaps, what we mean more profoundly by love, if love is primarily related to faithfulness, and if it is not that which overcomes its own failings but rather that which *entrusts itself to* what appears to it as insufficiency... This is why the true correlate of Christian faith is not an object but a word... our amorous faith is entirely Christian, since, as faithfulness, it entrusts itself to the word of other, to the word that says 'I love you,' or doesn't even say it" (153).

guarantee is essential (one can't be *astomished* by the appearance of a link a causal chain).

What love shows – if it exists – is that there is something in being that is more than being. It exposes excess at and as the heart of it. And there is no demonstrating it outside of a love/thought whose condition of possibility is this very lack of epistemic assurance, this impossibility of definitive demonstration. If love exists, then it is because being is (infinitely) finite, but we cannot show or be finally justified in our (true) belief that it exists. To love/think is to testify to the existence of something withdrawn from knowledge, to maintain oneself in relation to an excess that, from the perspective of certain discourses, is properly invisible. Indeed to Nancy's list – "sexology, marriage counseling, newsstand novels, and moral edification" (102; 257f) – we might add evolutionary psychology, and perhaps 'romance' reality television: the first unsentimentally refusing the distinction between love and desire, reading love as the simple expression of desires inherited as the result of adaptive processes; the second sentimentalising them both, reading them as the expression of some private, unique, confessing, entertaining self. Both miss love, because both reduce it to the existence or non-existence of a certain state of affairs. They miss the groundlessness that is essential to it, and because of it.

Missing love in this way, these discourses miss the only possible site of community. This is not because love is the principle or ground of community (such that our being-together would necessarily be a kind of loving). It is because love and community share a condition of possibility in the groundlessness of being. In "The Inoperative Community," which is the title essay from the collection of English translations in which "Shattered Love" also appears, Nancy uses the concept of *désœuvrement* [inoperativity] to get at this groundlessness. It is useful to understand it as a response to Bataille, who is Nancy's key interlocutor in this essay because of his lifelong obsession with tracing a mode of exposure that would be irreducible to intersubjectivity, relations of exchange, and every form of sociality; Nancy finds in Bataille an ally in the struggle to locate "a place of community at once beyond social divisions and beyond subordination to technopolitical dominion, and thereby beyond such wasting away of liberty, of speech, or of simple happiness as comes about whenever these become subjugated to the exclusive order of privatization."<sup>30</sup> At the

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<sup>30</sup> "The Inoperative Community," 1.



same time, however, Nancy discovers a certain limit to Bataille's thinking here, a certain tendency to oppose to society an immanentist figure of communal fusion thought in terms of the attainment or production of common being. For Nancy, Bataille was tempted by a nostalgic image of community – understood according to an image of ecstatic union, an orgiastic being-together – as something that we have *lost* in modernity (thus he remains stuck opposing *Gesellschaft* with *Gemeinschaft* – something that Nancy, despite his commitment to thinking community, obstinately refuses).<sup>31</sup> This would be the source of his “fascination with fascism” (which is itself a “grotesque or abject resurgence of an obsession with communion”).<sup>32</sup> And because of the link between the project of communal fusion and death (“political or collective enterprises dominated by a will to absolute immanence,” writes Nancy, “have as their truth the truth of death”),<sup>33</sup> it would also be the source of his being “haunted . . . by the idea that a human sacrifice should seal the destiny of the secret community of *Acéphale*.”<sup>34</sup> The difference between community and communion is fundamental here; for Nancy, the latter is a violent and dangerous parody of the former. But of course Bataille, the thinker who “for a long time . . . had represented archaic societies, their sacred structures, the glory of military and royal societies, the nobility of feudalism, as bygone and fascinating forms of a successful intimacy of being-in-common with itself,” eventually “came to understand the

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<sup>31</sup> For Nancy, it is not that in capitalist modernity relations of exchange and domination uprooted and destroyed a previously existing community. What existed before the rise of capital was something else entirely, something for which “have no name or concept” (11). Nancy writes: “*Community has not taken place*, or rather, if it is indeed certain that humanity has known (or still knows, outside of the industrial world) social ties quite different from those familiar to us, community has never taken place along the lines of our projects of it according to these different social forms. It did not take place for the Guayaqui Indians, it did not take place in an age of huts; nor did it take place in the Hegelian “spirit of a people” or in the Christian agape. No *Gesellschaft* has come along to help the State, industry, and capital dissolve a prior *Gemeinschaft*... community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us* – question, waiting, event, imperative – *in the wake of society*” (11).

<sup>32</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 12.

<sup>34</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 16-17.

ridiculous nature of all nostalgia for communion.”<sup>35</sup> It is this ambivalence that interests Nancy, the way Bataille wavered on the edge of a concept of community that would resist *both* the “problematics of sociality or intersubjectivity”<sup>36</sup> and the image of community as fusion, community understood as a “work of death.”<sup>37</sup> This is what Nancy means when he writes that “what he thus had to think at his limit is what he leaves for us to think in our turn.”<sup>38</sup> Bataille’s thinking is crucial for Nancy because it splits on the very distinction that he wants to clarify; despite its nostalgic tendencies, it testifies to “the dissolution, the dislocation . . . the unsurpassable conflagration of community”<sup>39</sup> that marks our time. This, then, is the significance of the concept of *désœuvrement*. The capitalist spectacle, we might say, refuses the worklessness at the heart of community (and indeed, sets us to work as it does so), *privatising* the experience of finitude such that it simply collapses into senselessness. On the other hand, the nostalgic, orgiastic reduction of community that tempted Bataille is meant above all to make a *work* of death, to make death “the work of common life” and grant it a *total* sense. Nancy goes on: “And it is this absurdity, which is at bottom an excess of *meaning*, an absolute concentration of the will to meaning, that must have dictated Bataille’s withdrawal from communitarian enterprises.”<sup>40</sup> Thus for Nancy Bataille’s eventual renunciation of the nostalgia that marked his obsession with community must have stemmed from the acknowledgment that community is *workless* in an essential sense; that community is precisely that which *resists* all our attempts at setting life and death to work in the constitution of shared meaning. This follows from Nancy’s decision to think from out of a proper confrontation with the finitude of being: it is in the openness of being, its lack of grounding in any substantial or metaphysical principle, that we experience the mutual exposure that is community. If the spectacle is blind to this openness, obscuring it behind the ideological metaphysics of the private individual, then fascism rages to close it.

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<sup>35</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 17.

<sup>36</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 14

<sup>37</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 17.

<sup>38</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 25.

<sup>39</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 1.

<sup>40</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 17.

Crucial for us is how the image of communion that haunted Bataille was entwined with an image of love. And of course, Bataille thought love in terms of absolute loss and expenditure, as a limit experience that lacerates the self and exposes it to an outside that it cannot accommodate. Thus community emerges in his thought as dependent “on the sharing of nocturnal terrors and the kind of ecstatic spasms that are spread by death.”<sup>41</sup> As he put it in his final address to the Collège de Sociologie in July 1939:

The sacrificial laceration that opens the festival is a liberating laceration. The individual who participates in loss is obscurely aware that this loss engenders the community that supports him. But a desirable woman is necessary to he who makes love, and it is not always easy to know if he makes love in order to be united with her, or if he uses her because of his need to make love. In the same way, it is difficult to know to what extent the community is but the favorable occasion for a festival and a sacrifice, or to what extent the festival and the sacrifice bear witness to the love individuals give to the community.<sup>42</sup>

Thinking community according to the image of lovers means subjecting them both to a logic of sacrifice. Love becomes a work of death, taking death as its very paradigm (“love,” Bataille writes, “expresses a need for sacrifice: each unity much lose itself in some other, which exceeds it”),<sup>43</sup> and community appears as constituted on the basis of a sacrificial laceration that bears more than a passing resemblance to “sexual laceration.”<sup>44</sup> Bataille effects a collapse of the

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<sup>41</sup> Bataille, “Nietzschean Chronicle” 208; Nancy quotes this passage without comment in “The Inoperative Community” (34).

<sup>42</sup> Bataille, “The College of Sociology,” 251.

<sup>43</sup> Bataille, “The College of Sociology,” 250.

<sup>44</sup> Bataille, “The College of Sociology,” 251. Nancy identifies a similar logic at work in the figure of suiciding lovers: “The joint suicide is one of the mythico-literary figures of this logic of communion in immanence. Faced with this figure, one cannot tell which – the communion or the love – serves as a model for the other in death. In reality, with the immanence of the two lovers, death accomplishes the infinite reciprocity of two agencies: impassioned love conceived on the basis of Christian communion, and community thought according to the principle of love” (“The Inoperative Community,” 12).

conceptual distinctions between love/community and death/sacrifice; all are fused together in the orgiastic image of communion. Compare this with the following from Nancy:

Properly speaking, there is no laceration of the singular being: there is no open cut in which the inside would get lost in the outside (which would presuppose an initial “inside,” an interiority). The laceration that, for Bataille, is exemplary, the woman’s “breach,” is ultimately not a laceration to the outside. (While the obsession with the breach in Bataille’s text indeed indicates something of the unbearable extremity at which communication comes into play, it also betrays an involuntarily metaphysical reference to an order of interiority and immanence, and to a condition involving the passage of one being into an other, rather than the passage of one through the exposed limit of the other.)<sup>45</sup>

The difference is subtle but absolutely essential. For Nancy, Bataille was (involuntarily) metaphysical to the extent that he was wedded to the opposition between interiority and exteriority (such that, for instance, lovers would be engaged in an absolute desire to sacrifice the former for the latter). This is the significance of the breach, the laceration, and the wound in Bataille’s thinking: for him, these are points of entry and openness, points at which the *integrity* of the self is threatened with the dissolution that fascinated him. For Nancy, on the other hand, *exteriority goes all the way down*:<sup>46</sup> as we saw, it is not that love breaks into the self, violating its integrity; rather it reveals it as always already broken. Nancy’s thought of love retains from

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<sup>45</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 30.

<sup>46</sup> As Nancy writes in an essay included in the artist’s book released with Phillip Warnell’s film *Outlandish*: “The body doesn’t contain anything, neither a spirit that couldn’t be contained nor an interiority specific to the body, since the body itself is nothing but the multiply folded surface of the ex-position or ek-sistence that it is . . . All the way down to its guts, in its muscle fiber and through its irrigation channels, the body exposes itself, it exposes to the outside the inside that keeps escaping always farther away, farther down the abyss that it is” (Nancy’s “Strange Foreign Bodies,” 18). Perhaps this is the significance of the central image of Warnell’s film: a live octopus in a tank of water positioned at the stern of a boat in choppy seas.

Bataille the sense that it exposes a certain ‘unbearable extremity,’ but jettisons his sacrificial metaphysics of the void. This is what he means when he writes: “[t]here is nothing *behind* singularity.”<sup>47</sup> Nancy thus refuses the idea, still at work in Bataille, that lovers are “lost in a convulsion that binds them together,”<sup>48</sup> that in the act of love there is a dissolution and reconstitution, an overcoming of a prior separation. As he writes: “In love, there is melee without assimilation or laceration. There is body one in each other and one to each other without incorporation or decorporation. Love is the melee of two bodies that would avoid all the traps of one.”<sup>49</sup> Retrieving love from the sacrificial register in this way, Nancy is able to extract it from the paradigm of death. This, in turn, allows for a thought of community that would not therefore be reducible to the metaphysics of communion. Love is not the principle of community; it is another modality of the exposure of the finitude that is shared in community. And what is shared is not the void but groundlessness: the pure gratuity of a world without principle.

Given Bataille’s fierce atheism, it is perhaps ironic that Nancy links the project of communal fusion that tempted him with Christianity, arguing that the fascist project represented a “convulsion of Christianity,”<sup>50</sup> and claiming that “the true consciousness of the loss of community is Christian . . . communion takes place, in its principle as in its ends, at the heart of the mystical body of Christ.”<sup>51</sup> But of course, this should not surprise us, because the Eucharist is obviously the exemplary model for understanding community according to a logic of love that would always already be a logic of sacrifice: community as incorporation, as participation in a single body. In that sense, Nancy’s project can be understood as intervening into the metaphysics of Christianity so as to release something from it (which is to say that he was engaged in the deconstruction of Christianity well before *Dis-Enclosure*). This will underline the significance of the thought of love available in “L’amour en éclats,” which turns more than once to the philosophical question raised by the Christian equation between God and love (Nancy argues, for

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<sup>47</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 27.

<sup>48</sup> “College of Sociology,” 250.

<sup>49</sup> “Strange Foreign Bodies, 17-18 (translation modified).

<sup>50</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 17.

<sup>51</sup> “The Inoperative Community,” 10.

instance, that “God is love” provides the model for “thinking is love” (86; 228f). If it is true that I can only love that which is finite, then it follows that the very idea of a universal love for ‘everyone’ is incoherent. If there is any sense in the command to love one’s neighbor, then, it will consist in the fact that the neighbor resists becoming a representative of abstract ‘humanity.’<sup>52</sup> Similarly, if there is a love for being, it will be because there is no such thing as ‘everything,’ because being does not exist except *here* and *here*.<sup>53</sup> In the terms of Nancy’s essay, it will be because the essence of being is “something like a heart – that is to say: that which alone is capable of love” (88; 234f).

Love’s uncertain light shows being not as a brute totality, but exposes it as singular and plural, completely incomplete. I cannot love being in general, and I cannot love everyone. But perhaps – there is no guaranteeing it – I can love this being, *this* one.

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<sup>52</sup> Slavoj Žižek argues that the realisation of universal love is plagued by exceptions for this very reason (see “Neighbors and Other Monsters,” 182-3).

<sup>53</sup> This finitude arguably also forms the (erotic) condition of the possibility of commentary. Commentary is a mode (or shard) of love because it exposes the finitude of a text in exposing the real infinity of the task that it sets for itself: the fact that one can never completely fill the margin. The text always, as Zarathustra proclaims of all great loves, *wants more*. Of course, that there is always more to say means not only that one can never say enough (as the pseudo-poet proclaims when he bemoans the inadequacy of language in the face of his beloved), but also that one cannot say everything: just as I can only love because I can’t love everyone, I can only write because I can’t write everything.

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