

Prologue

ON THE FREEDOM OF NON-IDENTITY

When to write is to discover the interminable, the writer who enters this region does not leave himself behind in order to approach the universal. He does not move toward a surer world, a finer or better justified world where everything would be ordered according to the clarity of the impartial. He does not discover the admirable language which speaks honorably for all. What speaks in him is the fact that, in one way or another, he is no longer himself; he isn't anyone any more.

—Maurice Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude"

The French writer Maurice Blanchot belongs to an anarchic tradition in which writing is neither the expression nor construction of anything, nor a transport to a higher (or nether) world; instead it is a kind of limit-experience in which the one who writes is turned inside out, evacuated, becoming something entirely other, without identity. Blanchot frequently figures this event as a movement from "I" to "he," which in French is a form of neutralization where the pronoun *il* is indeterminately "he/it," neither one nor the other: "The third person," he says, "is myself become no one" (*EL*, 23 / *SL*, 28).¹ Imagine being no one, without properties or attributes, inaccessible to predication.

The paradox is that, for Blanchot, this disappearance of the first person is not a merely negative event; on the contrary, the privations of subjectivity or self-identity constitute a condition of freedom from the logical (not to say social and cultural) order of concepts and rules, categories and distinctions, schemes and types—freedom above all from the polarities of sameness and difference or the one and the many. In an important essay, "The Relation of

the Third Kind (Man Without Horizon)," Blanchot writes: "Even more than Being, even more than the Same, the Rigor of the One holds thought captive."² Nor is it just thought that is confined or fixed by the One: whatever exists, its singularity, irreducibility, and strangeness, disappears beneath a concept—think of the word "Man" in this respect. Blanchot's "man without horizon" is decontextualized, no longer (to speak strictly) human. That is, the horizonless figure serves Blanchot as a way of addressing the alterity of both oneself and others, unconditioned by the conceptual frames of genus, species, or any form of denomination. Even speaking of one's *self* is for Blanchot saying too much. In *The Step Not Beyond* Blanchot writes: "The self is not a self but the same [*le même du moi-même*], not some personal, impersonal identity, sure and vacillating, but the law or rule that conventionally assures the ideal identity of terms and notations. The self is therefore an abbreviation that one could call canonical, a formula that regulates and, if you like, blesses, in the first person, the pretention of the same to primacy."³ The self is not something I possess; it is a regulatory concept that keeps the "I" in line like a number in a sequence or a slot in a hierarchy. Or, as Blanchot sometimes expresses it: "loss of self, anonymity, loss of sovereignty" is also the loss "of all subordination."⁴

Being *insubordinate* to the rule of identity or primacy of the same is likewise a major theme in Emmanuel Levinas's ethical theory.⁵ In his essay "Substitution," Levinas speaks of a "finite freedom" in contrast to the unconditional autonomy that Kant, for example, attributed to the cognitive subject, who is unconstrained in his initiatives except by the laws of reason of which he is the original legislator (supposing "he" to be the word).⁶ For Levinas, my relation to others—my responsibility for the good of the other—is on the hither (anarchic) side of any initiatives that I might undertake (or not) in their behalf; that is, it is prior to any morality or ethics that would prescribe my duties toward my fellows—and justify me in the event that I fulfill these prescriptions. As an ethical subject I am no longer at one with myself but have from the start been overtaken by the claims the other has on me—*substituted*, as Levinas likes to express it, one for the other, so that the other is closer to me

than I am to myself. "Subjectivity," Levinas says, "is structured as the other in the same [*le Autre-dans-le-Même*]" (AE, 46/OTB, 25). The paradox—which is symmetrical with Blanchot's paradox—is that substitution is not alienation but is an "anarchic liberation":

Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego [*Moi*] suffocates in itself [*en Soi*] due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement than never wears out. This liberation is not an action, a commencement, nor any vicissitude of essence and of ontology, where the equality with oneself would be established in the form of self-consciousness. An anarchic liberation, it emerges, without being assumed, without turning into a beginning, in inequality with oneself. (AE, 198/OTB, 124)

Inequality with oneself: whereas Blanchot thinks of writing as a movement toward the neutral third person (*il*: he/it), Levinas thinks of the ethical relation (or, as he sometimes prefers, "election") as a movement from "I" to "me." He writes: "Consciousness, knowing of oneself by oneself, is not all there is to subjectivity. It already rests on a 'subjective condition,' an identity that one calls ego or I. It is true that, when asking about the meaning of this identity, we have the habit either of denouncing in it a reified substance, or of finding in it once again the for-itself [*pour soi*] of consciousness. In the traditional teaching of idealism, subject and consciousness are equivalent concepts. The *who* or the *me* [*le qui ou l'un*] are not even suspected" (AE, 162/OTB, 102–3).⁷

What is it to be a *who* or a *me* or, even more radically, a *no one*: without identity, that is, no longer able to say "I"? One answer, says Jean-Luc Nancy, is to be found (of all places) in *sleep*, where consciousness and subjectivity become empty concepts. In *The Fall of Sleep* he writes: "I sleep and this *I* that sleeps can no more say it sleeps than that it could say that it is dead. So it is another who sleeps in my place. . . . It is that entire other who I am as soon as I am removed from all aspects of me and from all my functions except the function of sleeping, which is perhaps not a function, or else functions only to suspend

all functioning.”⁶ Wisely Nancy does not try to give sleep a definition, nor is his account a phenomenological analysis, because sleep is not phenomenal, nor is the one who sleeps the subject of an experience, since subjectivity, self, and identity are precisely what sleep puts to rest:

The sleeping *self* [*soi*] does not appear: it is not phenomenalized. . . . Sleep does not authorize the analysis of any form of appearance whatsoever, since it shows itself to itself as this appearance that appears only as non-appearing, as returning all appearing on itself and in itself, allowing the waking phenomenologist approaching the bed to perceive nothing but the appearance of its disappearance, the attestation of its retreat. (*TS*, 30/*FS*, 13)

Of course, the sleeper dreams, but not the way the *cogito* thinks: “‘I am,’ murmured by the unconsciousness of a dreamer, testifies less to an ‘I’ strictly conceived than to a ‘self’ simply withdrawn into itself, out of reach of any questioning and of any representation. Murmured by unconsciousness, ‘I am’ becomes unintelligible” (*TS*, 31–32/*FS*, 14). One might as well say, *no one sleeps*—“The man or woman whose mouth thus mumbles a confused attestation of existence is no longer ‘I’ and is not truly ‘self’: but beyond the two, or simply set apart, indifferent to any kind of ipseity [*ipseity*: individual identity]” (*TS*, 32/*FS*, 14).

Yet for all of that, sleep is not a confinement but freedom from, among other things, insomnia, which is a condition of exposure to the night:

Ambulances tear through the night, and cannons, and rocket launchings, children crying, tanks rumbling, rending pains in the chest, in the bellies of the cancerous or the wounded, harsh light of lamps that one cannot or will not turn off, obsessive thoughts, torments, remorse, feverish anticipations, fears—fears more than anything else, fears of everything. (*TS*, 71/*FS*, 37)

Or perhaps it is exposure to the day’s (or the world’s) invasion:

The figures that the day arranges for recognition rise up again from the darkness disguised in evil masks, the thoughts we know how to manage carefully burst into anxieties, suffocations, aporias that close over onto themselves as long as day has not dissolved them. Night engenders terror, obsession, ravage,

and panic. It is not a matter of an insomnia that wanders from sleep itself, its transformation into a wakefulness deprived of day, into a glowing night-light whose gleam maintains the agitation of the soul with a clear awareness of sleep usurped, split open, transformed into its twofold awakening. On the contrary, it is a matter of the world in which it is impossible to sleep, of the world in which it is forbidden to sleep because of a process of torture whose effectiveness is not in doubt. (*TS*, 71–72/*FS*, 38)

Nancy wonders whether this is not what our world has come to—he imagines a dystopia (looking for all the world like the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries), in which sleepers are “harassed, always on the alert, less fallen asleep than thrown into sleep, precipitated by numbness from short hours broken by knocking sounds in the head, knocks on the door, blows or gunshots. Sleepers not so much sleeping as knocked out, conquered at night as they were during in the day, piled into camps or lying in ditches, in trucks or in skiffs, hunted, chased from their hurried repose” (*TS*, 73/*FS*, 38–39).

In this dystopia (where one’s papers are never in order) the deprivation of sleep and the deprivation of freedom are of a piece, joined at the hip. But freedom here is perhaps freedom of a kind for which we lack a theory—the lack of which, moreover, might well teach us something about freedom.

Earlier, in a particularly recondite essay entitled “Identity and Trembling,” Nancy wrote: “Sleep, perhaps, has never been philosophical.”⁹ The reason is that philosophy, at least since Hegel, has always conceived human subjectivity in terms of self-consciousness or the self-identity of the spirit.¹⁰ But subjectivity in this sense is the product of negation: “No more than it can die—nor more than it can ‘seriously’ die, if we can say that with a straight face—can the subject be born, or can it sleep. Immortal, unengendered, insomniac: this is the triple negation over which the life of the spirit rises, imperturbably adult and awake” (*BP*, 12). For Nancy self-conscious spirit, if it is anything at all, is not all there is. There is also that which is capable of being affected—capable of feeling and, among other things, capable of sleep. And in defiance of Hegel (and of most philosophers one can think of) Nancy does not hesitate to call this the “soul.” The soul is simply you and me, each in our

own singularity, falling (as we doze off) beneath the threshold of philosophical description.

For Hegel, to be human is to be in a position of avid surveillance from which nothing can hide—which is why, as Nancy says, Hegel was so troubled by the pathology of hypnosis (“magnetic somnambulism”), in which the spirit is, to all appearances, awake but no longer self-identical—and, above all, no longer free. As Nancy says:

The freedom that speculative spirit grasps is self-determined, and so sublates all determination. Yet determination *itself* is first grasped not in autonomy but in heteronomy. Could freedom, like magnetic sleep, be given by another? Speculative spirit prefers not to think so, cannot think so. It designates heteronomy as pathology. But in pathology, an insurmountable—and perhaps constitutive—affection of its own freedom stymies it, fascinates it.

Not that hypnotism should be thought of as a liberating force. . . . But this means that philosophical speculation about “pathology,” and the general determination of affected being as “pathology,” both depend directly on thinking of freedom as the pure self-positing and pure self-production of waking consciousness. Ultimately, the soul’s sleep would require another thinking of freedom. (*BP*, 21)

All by itself, the sense of the question, “Could freedom . . . be given by another?” is far from clear, but “another thinking of freedom”—a *finite* thinking that no longer depends on concepts of consciousness or the self-possessed spirit, or indeed that no longer depends on concepts at all—is what Nancy pursues in *The Experience of Freedom*.¹¹ Freedom here is not the property of a subject but rather belongs to existence at the level of its singularity, irreducibility, and irrepressibility. Nancy calls it “the free determination of existence”:

This free determination (whose formulation might well be only a tautology) is not the diffraction of a principle, nor the multiple effect of a cause, but is the an-archy—the origin removed from every logic of origin, from every archeology—of a singular and thus in essence plural arising whose being *as being* is

neither ground, nor element, nor reason, but truth, which would amount to saying, under the circumstances, freedom. (*ExL*, 16–17/*EF*, 13)¹²

Note the phrase: “the an-archy . . . of the singular.”¹³ Freedom is, in effect, the excess of things with respect to any determination, their anarchy with respect to any principle or rule. Nancy speaks of freedom in terms of “generosity” and “prodigality”; freedom bears, he says, “the values of impulse, chance, luck, the unforeseen. . . . Also laughter, tears, scream, word, rapture, chill, shock, energy, sweetness” (*ExL*, 79/*EF*, 56):

It is a bursting [*éclat*] or a singularity of existence, which means existence deprived of essence and delivered to this inessentiality, to its own surprise as well as to its own decision, to its own indecision as well as to its own generosity. But this “own” of freedom is nothing subjective; it is the inappropriable burst from which the very existence of the subject comes to the subject, with no support in existence, and even without a relation to it, being “itself” more singularly than any ipseity, “itself” in the burst of a “there exists” that nothing founds or necessitates, that happens unexpectedly and only surprises, vertiginous to the point that it is no longer even a question of assigning an “abyss” to its vertigo: this very vertigo, its existence and its thought are the vertigo of the prodigality that makes it exist *without allotting it any essence* and that is therefore not an essence, but rather the free burst of being. (*ExL*, 81/*EF*, 57–58)

One cannot help noticing the decorum here between the prodigality of freedom and Nancy’s prodigal, prodigious prose, which elaborates and embellishes its theme without ever really defining it (bursting the seams of the propositional style of philosophical thinking). Indeed, earlier in his book Nancy asks whether in fact philosophy is free to speak about freedom at all, and his answer is *no*, it is not: the philosopher cannot speak of “freedom as such—he can only associate a motif, but not assemble a concept or an Idea (or he can renounce freedom by taking refuge in the ineffable . . .)” (*ExL*, 43/*EP*3).

Neither can philosophy speak about whatever it is that enjoys freedom—modern art, poetry, and music come to mind (“The aim of every artistic utopia today,” Theodor Adorno writes, “is to make things in ignorance of what

they are").¹⁴ Nancy prefers more mundane things—laughter being another example besides sleep. In his essay "Laughter, Presence," Nancy writes:

Laughter always bursts—and loses itself in its peals. As soon as it bursts out, it is lost to all appropriation, to all presentation. This loss is neither funny nor sad; it is not serious, and it is not a joke. We always *make* too much of laughter, we overload it with meaning or nonsense, we take it to the point of tears or to the revelation of nothingness. But laughter bursts—laughter, which is never *one*, never an essence of laughter, nor the laughter of an essence. (*BP*, 168)

As it happens, the laughter that prompted Nancy to speak about laughter is the laughter of a prostitute in a poem by Baudelaire ("Le désir de peindre" [The Desire to Paint]), and it is this "aesthetic" context that prompts Nancy to speak of "the arts" with the same reserve or finitude that he brings to sleep and freedom (as well as to that hoary old philosophical term, "presence"):

The arts cannot be represented one by way of another—and they never cease to pass into each other, to present themselves in place of one another. For none of them represents anything. Each of the arts is merely the coming into presence of *some* presence, which thereby models itself. Not of presence in general, nor of the essence of presence. Presence is without essence: this might be what, for want of being said, is laughed by the poem. Some presence, some presences: multiple singularities, which are only present for being singular, and thus multiple, which don't come from any empyrean of presence. Presence "itself" only takes place in the difference of its presences—and each of them only stems from a singular *coming* into presence, a passage through which presence disappears in offering itself. (*BP*, 389)

"Presence is without essence": it does not belong to the order of representation or conceptual clarification. Instead Nancy speaks of "some presence, some presences: multiple singularities."

For Nancy, "multiple singularities" make up all there is. It is what he tries to capture in the oxymoronic phrase "being singular plural," which is (in so many words) how we are with one another—supposing we know "who we

are," which is, once more, supposing too much. In one of his texts Nancy puts it plainly: "'We,' now, is non-identical. We no longer have centers. We no longer address one another by way of substance or subject."¹⁵ So how are "we" with one another? In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy takes Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein*, being-with, in a number of different directions, one of which addresses the question of the relation, not between "myself" and "another," but between singularities—between the multiple "someones" (and also, as it happens, the "somethings") that make up the world.¹⁶ "A single being," Nancy says, "is a contradiction in terms" (*ESP*, 30/*BSP*, 12). There is only "the sharing of a world" (*ESP*, 49/*BSP*, 29), a "being-together" of singularities—except that this "being-together" does not take the form of a composition or unity. Being-together is contiguous rather than continuous; it is a spacing or a "between" rather than a Heideggerian gathering into a holistic community. As Nancy says, "the question has to be posed as to whether being-together can do without a figure and, as a result, without identification, if the whole of its 'substance' consists solely of its spacing" (*ESP*, 67/*BSP*, 47):

Today, when thinking moves too quickly, when it is fearful and reactionary, it declares that the most commonly recognized forms of identification are indispensable and claim that the destinies proper to them are used up or perverted, whether it be: "people," "nation," "church," or "culture," not to be mention the confused "ethnicity" or the tortuous "roots." There is a whole panorama of membership and property, here, whose political and philosophical history has yet to be written: it is the history of the representation-of-self as the determining element of an originary concept of society. (*ESP*, 67–68/*BSP*, 47)

It is "the history of the representation-of-self as the determining element of an originary concept of society" that Nancy had earlier tried to put behind him in *The Inoperative Community*, where he proposes that there is "nothing to say" about community: "we should not seek a word or a concept for it, but rather recognize in the thought of community a theoretical excess (or, more precisely, an excess in relation to the theoretical) that would oblige us to adopt another *praxis* of discourse and community" (*CD*, 66/*InC*, 25–26). Accordingly, and

characteristically, he took recourse to a *via negativa*; for example, a community is *not* any sort of edifice or construction: "Community cannot arise from the domain of *work*. . . . Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called 'unworking' [*désœuvrement*], referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do with either the production or the completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension" (*CD*, 78–79/*InC*, 31). Community, Nancy wrote, is a sharing (*partage*), not of something held in common like a set of beliefs or a national identity, but of something passed from one hand to another like a greeting or the opportunity to speak—or a touch. There is "no entity or hypostasis of community because this sharing, this passage, cannot be completed. Incompletion is its 'principle,' taking the term 'incompletion' in an active sense, however, as designating not insufficiency or lack, but the activity of sharing, the dynamic, if you will, of an uninterrupted passage through singular ruptures" (*CD*, 87/*InC*, 35). Sharing is, in this respect, anarchic precisely because it resists the reduction of human relations to the immanent communion of a coherent body or intersubjective relationship. ("Only the fascist masses tend to annihilate community in the delirium of incarnated communion" [*CD*, 87/*InC*, 35].) Community, Nancy says, "is resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence . . . to all the forms and all the violences of subjectivity" (*CD*, 88/*InC*, 35). So community must be understood in terms of events and movements rather than in terms of structures and meanings. Concepts of a cause or a struggle have greater application to the *partage* of community than do concepts of law, contracts, beliefs, ideals, or national spirit. It is easier to share a pleasure—a laugh or a meal—than a space, frame, or category.

Just so, we may imagine community as a circle that cannot be closed and from which nothing can be excluded, in which case it is uncertain as to how or whether one can any longer speak of a *human* community: "It is not obvious that the community of singularities is limited to 'man' and excludes, for example, the 'animal' (even in the case of 'man' it is not a fortiori certain that this community concerns only 'man' and not also the 'inhuman' or the 'superman,' or, for example, if I may say so with and without a certain *Witz*,

'woman': after all, the difference between sexes is itself a singularity in the difference of singularities)" (*CD*, 71/*InC*, 28). On the contrary, the point is to free the concept of community—or, more exactly, to free you and me—from any denomination, including that of the epithet "human": "in the true movement of community, in the inflection (in the conjugation, in the diction) that articulates it, what is at stake is never humanity, but always *the end of humanity* [*de la fin de l'homme*]. The end of humanity does not mean its goal or culmination. It means something quite different, namely, the limit that man alone can reach, and in reaching it, where he can stop being human, all too human [*d'être simplement humain, trop humain*]" (*CD*, 190/*InC*, 77).