

A comparison of the notions of the imagined community (Benedict Anderson) and the inoperative community (Jean-Luc Nancy) reveals how Anderson's and Nancy's very different projects both invest literature with the capacity to ground a form of community that differs from the national community (founded in the anonymity of the cenotaph) and the operative community (founded on myth).

Community and Literary Experience in (Between) Benedict Anderson and Jean-Luc Nancy

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Since the 1980s, *community* has become a key term in the fields of cultural and literary studies. One of the crucial reference points in the recent career of the term was the publication of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in 1983. Anderson's book asserts the imaginary nature of the sense of national belonging, and this idea soon became nearly axiomatic to contemporary academic discourse (Cheah 6); it was received as a welcome affirmation of the important role that literary and cultural objects and practices play in the construction and consolidation of collective identities. The notion of the imagined community gave literary scholars an intuitively appealing shorthand to help them situate literature in its social and historical contexts, and to remove it from the splendid isolation in which earlier and more formalist research paradigms had contained it (Culler 22). Anderson's book participated in a more general critical tendency toward historical and social contextualization. At the same time, its emphasis on the unity and the cohesiveness of communities

also went against another contemporaneous critical trend that sought to assert precisely the *fluidity* and *instability* of identities, and to pay attention to non-dominant counter-voices that an all too cohesive and stable national imaginary threatened to marginalize.

One response to such forms of collective identity that were felt to be too totalizing and too exclusionary was a radical rethinking of the notion of community. This occurred in the 1980s and early '90s at the crossroads of ontology, ethics, politics, and literary theory: we can think of Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* in 1983, Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* in 1986—to part of which Blanchot's book is a response—and Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* in 1990. While there are considerable differences between these projects, they all attempt to locate the sense of community *not* in a given substance or in a specific essence (such as race, language, or territory) shared by the members of a community, but instead, and paradoxically, in a "removal at the heart of proximity and intimacy" (Nancy, "Confronted" 32). The traditional concept of community (*Gemeinschaft*) that we find in fascism or National Socialism, and also in more everyday forms of nationalism, presents communities as closed, exclusionary entities; these critical projects, in contrast, attempt to open up these closed communities from within, in order to conceive of a more ethically attuned form of togetherness. Even if Nancy's notion of the "inoperative" community—on which I focus in this essay—shares with Anderson a resistance to notions of community that locate the sense of togetherness in a given essence,³ there is yet a considerable difference that separates the inoperative and the imagined community. While the idea of the imagined community justifiably foregrounds the undeniable but ethically problematic fact that "I feel more affinity with people who happen to inhabit the country I live in than with others" (Culler 20), Nancy's project starts out from the violence and exclusions that traditional forms of community have produced in order to conceive of more ethically aware forms of community.

Yet what if, in spite of these very real differences, there might be a *complementary* rather than oppositional relation between the notions of the imagined and the inoperative community? This would make it possible to understand the inoperative community as an ethical addition that corrects the imagined community's tendency towards exclusion and totalization. And conversely, complementation by an ethically corrected notion of the imagined community would allow the radical critique of community to translate the ethical impulse that motivates it into a particular imagining of community. As I will show, these two forms of community register their potential complementarity most clearly in the places where they reflect on the role of death and loss in the constitution of community. Death is, of course, a particularly charged

site in the construction of collectivities: the lure of heroic and sacrificial death is a crucial aspect of the operation of totalitarian forms of community, and even of more everyday forms of the nation-state. The nation-state relies on the readiness of its subjects to die for their community, and in order to promote such self-sacrifice, it forecloses the horror and sadness of dying by integrating death with an overarching framework in which it acquires public value and meaning. Nancy's notion of the inoperative community receives its critical momentum precisely by resisting that process of abstraction. Against such ideological abstractions of death, Nancy puts forward a notion of existence as "unsacrificable" (*Being* 25; "The Unsacrificable"). While the imagined community denies the irreducible singularity of death by glorifying and monumentalizing it, Nancy considers death and existence as "always inapplicable and always there, each and every time present as inimitable" (*Being* 19). As such, his work enjoins us to resist the nationalist abstraction of death, and to instead remain melancholically attached to it.

Death and loss, like trauma and memory, are key terms in contemporary critical theory. By situating the surprising complementarity of the inoperative and the imagined community precisely in their relation to death and loss, this article attempts to affirm the relevance of Anderson's and Nancy's work for contemporary ethical and political debates. The resistance to the abstraction of death and existence that we find in a book like *The Inoperative Community* participates in a widespread recent reconceptualization of melancholia as an appropriate way of relating to death and loss.⁴ While melancholia was long considered to be a pathological inability to let go of a lost object, in the last quarter century different theoretical and critical perspectives have depathologized melancholia and have come to see it as a heroic—and ethically and politically commendable—*refusal* to relinquish the lost object and to integrate it in a determinate imagining of community. The melancholic refusal to overcome the singularity of the death of the other often appears as, in Eric Santner's words, "the only affective posture that can maintain fidelity to those losses that the reigning ideological formation would like to disavow" (89).

Still, there are a number of good reasons to resist such an embrace of melancholia. As Greg Forster has shown, proponents of melancholia seem to assume that a successful process of mourning that overcomes melancholia "entails *forgetting* or ceasing to care about the object" (138).⁴ Not only are these analyses "strangely out of touch with the *affect* of melancholia," which is considerably more damaging and traumatizing for the subject than these discourses are willing to allow for, they also overlook the fact that a successful process of mourning may be useful in helping us to "relinquish *real* objects by building *psychic memorials* to them" (139). A minimal monumentalization of death.

in other words, is not a morally objectionable act of betrayal, but is instead a prerequisite if our fidelity to singularity is to be given a sustainable shape. This is also why Anderson's notion of the imagined community can complement the ethical impulse that informs Nancy's book, while Nancy's insistence on "unsacrificable" existence is an indispensable ethical complement to Anderson. When read attentively, Anderson's book actively solicits such an ethical correction of the nationalist model of mourning that it analyzes. Surprisingly, perhaps, both Anderson and Nancy ascribe an enabling role to literature when they signal the possibility of a form of community based on a mourning that is not simply opposed to melancholia. In order to illustrate the role literature can play in imagining a community of mourning that is both adequately imagined and ethically acceptable, I will conclude this essay by briefly looking at Wordsworth's famous short poem of mourning "A Slumber did my spirit seal," which gives concrete shape to the claim for literature that is articulated in (between) Anderson and Nancy.

In the introduction to *Imagined Communities*, Anderson remarks that "in contrast to the immense influence that nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meagre" (3). His study proposes to fill in that gap by considering the nation as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). By calling this type of association "imagined," Anderson means that this community can *only* be imagined, that is, it cannot be perceived in a concrete shape anywhere: "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). That the national community is imagined does emphatically *not* mean that it is "false" or "fabricated" in comparison to a more authentic form of community—for Anderson, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined"; what matters is rather the "style" in which they are imagined (6). The *imagined* community is the form of togetherness that is proper to modernity, and the most familiar style in which modern community is (and has been) imagined is that of the nation. *Imagined Communities* is thus an analysis of one particular style in which community is imagined—the style we know as the nation. And while this style has been the dominant one in the modern imagining of community, it is important to underline that the category of the imagined community is broader than that of a particular—if, admittedly, massively dominant—style. This means that an ethico-political critique of the nationalist imagination need not necessarily abandon the notion of the imagined community altogether, but can instead capitalize on

the fact that this notion is broader than its nationalist instantiation alone. The non-coincidence of the imagined community and the nation leaves a space in which to imagine community *differently* than it has been in the nationalist style.

As noted above, the style that characterizes the national imagined community is that of an inherently limited and sovereign community. Anderson remarks that, while it is customary to insist on nationalism's "roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love" (141). While Anderson's insistence on the generosity of nationalism is perhaps timely in a critical climate in which nationalism is often dismissed as an unsophisticated and atavistic pathology, he is not, for all that, blind to the dangers of such "self-sacrificing love," nor to the possible ideological exploitation of such sentiments. Anderson acknowledges that it is the very style of nationalism—the fact that it imagines togetherness "as a deep, horizontal comradeship"—that explains the "colossal sacrifices" that the modern imagining of community has generated: "Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7). As I already noted, the national imagining of community, when considered as a particular style, in the final analysis consists in a particular stylization of death.

Anderson discusses nationalism's imagining of death in his crucial chapter on nationalism's cultural roots. The power of nationalism is here explained by considering it in relation *not* with rivaling, non-nationalist political ideologies, but instead with "the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being" (12). These two systemic frames of reference are the religious community and the dynastic realm—the idea that society is ordered according to a divinely sanctioned hierarchy. It is religion's capacity to formulate an "imaginative response to the overwhelming burden of human suffering" that accounts for its remarkable longevity; when this capacity lost its currency in the eighteenth century, this loss fostered the need for "a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning" (11). Nationalism catered to this need "to turn chance into destiny" (12); it managed to forge a community by giving meaning to the brute facts of contingency and mortality in a transindividual frame of reference that successfully replaced the defunct consolations of religious modes of thought.

So what does nationalism's particular stylization of death look like? How does it inscribe death in a consoling affective economy? The "Cultural Roots" chapter of *Imagined Communities* opens by drawing attention to a particular kind of communal tombstone, one that occasions a scene of mourning that is emblematic of the culture of nationalism.

No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely *because* they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has no true precedents in earlier times. To feel the force of this modernity one has only to imagine the general reaction to the busy-body who “discovered” the Unknown Soldier’s name or insisted on filling the cenotaph with some real bones. Sacrilege of a strange, contemporary kind! Yet void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings. (This is why so many different nations have such tombs without feeling any need to specify the nationality of their absent occupants. What else could they be *but* Germans, Americans, Argentinians ...?) (9)

The cenotaph functions as a national technology, and this illustrates Anderson’s argument that national community can *only* be imagined, because community as such remains intangible, even imperceptible. The monument does not *embody* the nation, it is merely haunted by “ghostly” imaginings; nor does it *represent* the national community, nor is it a signifier that points to a stable signified. The cenotaph operates by serving as the occasion for a scene of mourning, for a display of “public ceremonial reverence” that does not so much allow the citizen to consciously infer the existence of the imagined community as impresses her with the inevitability of the reality of such a community (“what else could they be ...?”). As this passage makes clear, the cenotaph can instill a sense of community because it presents the death of the Unknown Soldier as an anonymous death; the cenotaph successfully abstracts the deaths of those who have perished in wars and battles from absolute singularity and irreparability, in order to allow the nation to claim these deaths as elements of its history and as constituent parts of its identity. Indeed, Anderson remarks that the busy-body who would recall the citizens to the names or the real bones of those particular deaths would profane the monument and neutralize its operation.

Nationalism’s stylization of death—what Marc Redfield has called its “aesthetics of mourning”—consists in the construction of an affective economy of death that thrives on a “peculiarly absolute *abstraction* of death” (68).⁵ In the cenotaph, death is figured as “aestheticized anonymity” (68), and the power of this figuration is such that it renders death available as an experience that can be shared by all citizens; death becomes a potentially generalizable experience, and the citizen is constituted as a *national* subject precisely by her sharing in this experience. By surrendering the singularity of death, the cenotaph provides the occasion for the citizen’s identification with “the nation as formalized anonymity” (69). It presents the citizen with the prospect that her own death, when it comes, will be “instantly assimilated into the common death for the sake of the collective.” This illustrates that, as Dorota Glowacka

has noted, “community reveals itself through death, whereby the death of its members must be transformed into works, into operative community that perpetuates the life of the community” (Glowacka).

The cenotaph is the central technology in the nationalist stylization of death; its operation consists in a process of total abstraction, in the complete erasure of the inassimilable singularity of finitude and loss. Its work of monumentalization must fence off “death’s resistance to its own universalizability” (Redfield 68). Still, Anderson’s description also indicates a place where the ideological recuperation of death can be interrupted: it shows that the cenotaph’s operation is threatened by the always imminent possibility that the real bones of the dead can still be gathered, or that their names can still be recalled, and that it will become clear that the dead have *not* disappeared into the anonymity of aesthetic figuration after all. Nationalism’s aesthetics of mourning, that is, is always in danger of being interrupted by the return of a death that can still be named and exposed, and that can no longer be enlisted for a collective experience of belonging.

The location of the cenotaph passage at the beginning of Anderson’s crucial chapter on the cultural roots of nationalism not only singles it out as a particularly powerful ideological medium in its own right, but also underlines, through this prominent placement, that the functioning of the cenotaph is representative of the way other media construct imagined communities—that is, by offering people an experience through which they can recognize themselves as members of the community of all those who share this experience. Still, the imagined community is not imagined through the cenotaph alone, and other media do not necessarily deal with death and loss in exactly the same way. Anderson emphasizes the enabling role of the newspaper and the novel as powerful technologies that have, since the shift from sacred communities to national imaginings in the eighteenth century, given shape to a fundamentally different way of apprehending the world. Whereas, in a divinely sanctioned world order, all earthly events were considered as simultaneous episodes in God’s providential scheme, historical happenings in modernity are connected only “horizontally,” because they happen to take place at the same time or are reported on the same newspaper page. Modern events take place in a “homogeneous, empty time” (Walter Benjamin’s phrase, borrowed by Anderson) that can be measured by clock and calendar (22–26). This mere coincidence without divine sanction also characterizes the imagined community: while the members of the imagined community will never even know the name of most of the other members of their community, they yet have “complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” (26). The newspaper, like the cenotaph, affords the citizen an experience that, for all

its privacy, she knows to be replicated simultaneously by anonymous others whom she, because she knows that they share this experience, confidently accepts as members of the community to which she also belongs. The simultaneous consumption of the newspaper thus becomes a "mass ceremony," a ritual that offers the citizen the visible assurance that the imagined community has taken roots in everyday reality (35–36). Anderson remarks that poetry and songs, such as national anthems sung on national holidays, equally "provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community" (145).

It initially seems that the novel, for Anderson, functions very much like the newspaper, which he considers as "a form of book," as "one-day best-sellers" (35). The novel is a technology for "re-presenting" the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (25). The classical novel conjures up in the readers' mind a bounded totality of juxtaposed events that are related only through their simultaneity; the novel is thus, in one of Anderson's more felicitous phrases, "a complex gloss upon the word 'meanwhile'" (25). As Jonathan Culler has shown, Anderson's argument here pertains to the implications and consequences of the *genre* of the novel, and does not pretend to make any "claims about particular sorts of plots and thematic representations" (37). For Anderson, the novel genre is "the condition of possibility of imagining a nation" (25); it provides a space where a particular apprehension of time can be exercised, an apprehension that is analogous to the constitution of the imagined community. What Anderson is here emphatically *not* claiming is that the novel offers a specific and convincing representation of a particular society or nation. What is vital is that the genre of the novel offers the means to figure "the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation." This distinction has often been distorted by readers who invoke Anderson's authority in order to legitimize their own claims about the ideological work done by particular novels or particular formal features. On these readings of Anderson, certain formal or thematic literary devices are supposed to inculcate upon the citizen a clear division between friend and foe, between the inside and the outside of her community, and to enlist the citizen for the national community that these devices represent. As Culler makes clear, Anderson's claims are in fact more general than that; for Anderson, there is an important distinction between imagining the kind of community that the nation is and formulating a *determinate* nationalist ideology. This is not to deny that particular novels *can* take on such a straightforward ideological role, but rather to underline that the genre of the novel is not automatically restricted to doing only that; the genre of the novel can not only formulate a particular social vision, it can also communicate a particular kind of community.

If we return to Anderson's central example, we can say that the novel can function in the same compulsive way as the cenotaph does—that is, as an occasion to constitute citizens as subjects of a particular nation. Yet, because it also opens a space where a particular form of imagined community can be envisioned, different literary devices and forms can make literature a space where *different* forms of community can be imagined. Although Anderson does not explicitly connect his discussion of literature to the crucial importance of "style" in the imagining of community, there is a clear connection between these two issues. I noted before that Anderson's notion of the imagined community is broader than that of the dominant style in which modern community has been imagined (nationalism), and that the idea of the imagined community could therefore still be retained after the critique of nationalism. In a similar way, the formal capacities of literature exceed its ability to formulate an ideological affirmation of the nation; rather, literature also offers a space where a *different*, non-national form of community can be imagined.

Literature has the power to initiate the imagining of a non-national form of community. This possibility is not foregrounded by Anderson, mainly because his discussion of the novel is strictly paired with that of the newspaper as two technologies for imagining simultaneity. Anderson's argument that both the newspaper and the novel present the simultaneity of events that they invite us to imagine together is a plausible one. Nevertheless, there are obvious differences between the newspaper and the novel that lend further support to the possibility of a link between literature and non-national forms of community. One difference is surely that the newspaper's reliance on "calendrical coincidence" (35) binds it to the present in a way that simply does not apply to the novel, or to literature more generally. While "the date at the top of the newspaper [...] provides the essential connection [between the events reported on its pages]—the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time" (35), no such strict adherence to the present holds for literature. While the newspaper can only present the simultaneity of *today's* events, literature can present the simultaneity of any day's events, which also means that it can present the simultaneity of things that are non-simultaneous; it can, in other words, figure a "noncontemporaneous contemporaneity," a present that has not simply overcome the losses of the past but that remains marked and interrupted by them (Harootyanian 475).

Literature, unlike the newspaper or the cenotaph, can present the uncanny persistence of specific losses from the past; it has the capacity to let the empty present be disturbed by the "real bones" and the names of *yesterday's* dead. Of course, newspapers routinely provide a space for obituary sections. Still, the dead remembered there will only ever be today's dead, which the newspaper, as a technology of simultaneity, is

bound to have forgotten by tomorrow, when it will make room for tomorrow's dead. The possibility of imagining community *differently*, which *Imagined Communities* leaves implicit, relies on literature's capacity to resist nationalism's homogenizing and anonymizing operations. Literature has the power to insert "real bones" into the nation's cenotaph in order to remind us that community need not be founded on the neutralization of the singular memories of the dead. It holds out the possibility of a different form of community, one that remembers specific deaths and losses.

As I already noted, the stakes of Anderson's book are fundamentally different from those of Nancy's work on the inoperative community. Yet, although Nancy's work is, first of all, inspired by an attempt to resist the violence and exclusions of traditional forms of community, his discussion of literature makes it possible to see how that resistance can be complemented by the imagining of a different kind of community. Nancy opposes the ways in which what he calls "immanent" forms of community neutralize the irreducible singularity of death. Nationalism's anonymization of death precludes its members' confrontation with, and therefore their being affected by, the death of the other. Moreover, the nation teaches its citizens to anticipate their death as meaningful and valuable; through the cenotaph, it effects the collectivization of death as a communal work *and* its valorization as an inherently meaningful part of an individual life-project (Fynsk, "Self" 193). Nationalism, in other words, forecloses the possibility that death is ever experienced in its irremediable singularity, that it is encountered as an event exceeding every frame that attempts to impose a meaning on it. Imagining community differently, then, also means finding another way to relate to the death of the other. The exposure to the death of the other can bring about what Dorota Glowacka has called "the interruption of the myth of communal death by death."

Nancy's notion of the inoperative community was explicitly coined in response to the work of Georges Bataille (Nancy, "Confronted" 29–30) and originated in the same intellectual climate as Maurice Blanchot's notions of the "inavowable" and the "literary" community. For our purposes, it is vital to focus on the way in which *The Inoperative Community* rethinks togetherness on the basis of our experience of the death of the other.⁶ This notion of community is explicitly opposed to so-called "immanent" forms of community, which for Nancy constitute nothing less than "the general horizon of our time" (*Inoperative* 3). What is typical of such exclusionary communities is that they effect themselves as their own work; they actualize themselves as the development and the accomplishment of their own given essence. The essence of immanent communities merely develops itself without being affected by anything external to itself (*Inoperative* 3; see Luszczynska 170–72). The "work" of such

a community is founded and perpetuated by a structuring power that Nancy calls "myth." Myth is a form or structure of thought that gives the community its purpose and legitimacy, and that thus brings different individuals together in a collective body (James 340). "Operative" communities are constituted in an "act of *mythiation*" (*Inoperative* 51), which is "the autofiguration—or the autoimagination—of nature as humanity and of humanity as nature" (54). The operative community constitutes itself by imagining itself as the human development of a natural essence, and myth is the particular "style" (to use Anderson's term) in which this community is imagined.

Nancy ascribes a different meaning to the term *community* than that of a shared identity or essence. Instead, community "names a relation that cannot be thought as a subsistent ground or common measure" (Fynsk, "Experiences" xiv); it refers to an existence "in common" that resists "fusion into a body" (*Inoperative* xxxviii) and "every transcendence that tries to absorb it" (xl). This relation reveals itself in our exposure to the death of the other. Nancy writes that, while millions of deaths may be *justified* "as insurrections against social, political, technical, military, religious oppression," these deaths are not therefore successfully *sublated* (*Inoperative* 13). While operative communities attempt to consider death as "the infinite fulfillment of an immanent life" and to make the dead productive for their immanent (self-)development, "the unmasterable excess of finitude" that is revealed in death always exposes the community to its outside. The singularity of death obstinately insists on death's "senseless meaning," a meaning that cannot make sense *within* the terms of an established community and that always exceeds these terms (*Inoperative* 13–14). Death and loss, for Nancy, are *not* reabsorbed in the immanence of an imagined community, but rather make possible "the crystallization of the community around the death of its members, *that is to say around the 'loss' (the impossibility) of their immanence*" (14). A different relation becomes possible by insistently refusing to "operate the transfiguration of [the] dead into some substance or subject" (15); in this sense, for Nancy, community is the "carrying out" of mourning (30). This "carrying out" of mourning is, Nancy notes, "less productive" than an all too successful "work of mourning," that is, a seamless neutralization of the singularity of death by its inclusion in the imagining of a particular collectivity (31). In this sense, Nancy's inoperative community is grounded in a *melancholic* refusal to hide from the irreducible singularity of the death of the other—a refusal to all too successfully overcome grief and recuperate death for the imagining of commonality.

Does this emphasis on the refusal of mourning mean that Nancy believes we must resist each and every attempt to imagine community? Does it call for a categorical refusal to make a "work"—any work—out of loss and death? To be sure, there is

a lot in Nancy's work that seems to support such an interpretation (Fynsk, "Experiences" xxvi). However, if we take into account some of Nancy's later texts that cover the same ground as *The Inoperative Community*, it becomes clear that he himself is aware of the insufficiency of such an uncompromising refusal of the imagination. In his book *Being Singular Plural*, much of which is prefigured in *The Inoperative Community* (James 333), Nancy restates the radical message of the latter when he refers to "the retreat of every space, form, or screen into which or onto which a figure of community could be projected," and adds that "the question has to be posed as to whether being-together can do without a figure and, as a result, without an identification" (47). In an essay that comments explicitly on *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy answers this question: "I do not think that we should strive to maintain a pure and simple absence of figure [...] we must reinvent, through and through, what a 'figure' is (figure of a 'people,' or 'people' as 'figure')" (Multiple 32). In another essay, Nancy remarks that he understood Blanchot's response to *The Inoperative Community* as a plea "not to settle for the negation of communal community, and to think further ahead," and admits that he has failed to take up Blanchot's suggestion ("Confronted" 31). This makes clear that, while Nancy's work on the inoperative community does not explicitly develop the imagining of a *different* kind of community, Nancy himself recognizes that it could—perhaps should—be developed in this direction.

So how can we think a different imagining of community that does not abstract from the singularity of the other? In the second and third chapters of *The Inoperative Community*, which are entitled "Myth Interrupted" and "Literary Communism," Nancy turns to an elaborate discussion of literature. He develops his idea that the immanent community engenders itself by figuring itself through myth—and especially through the myth of autofiguration, the myth that it has indeed engendered itself. What is called for, then, is "the interruption of myth" (61). Importantly, this interruption does not itself constitute a new myth, but rather "a movement," what Nancy calls "the propagation, even the contagion, or again the communication of community itself that propagates itself or communicates its contagion by its very interruption" (60). The name that "has been given to this voice of interruption," for Nancy, is literature (63). Literature, that is, is a singular, punctual, interruptive event that explodes the immanence of the community. In literature, "the passion of and for community propagates itself, unworked, appealing, demanding to pass beyond every limit and every fulfillment" (60).

Literature is not itself a new myth (*Inoperative* 64). Yet this does not mean that literature is a merely destructive force that is opposed to every imagining of community. Just as literature, in the work of Anderson, had the capacity to imagine

community differently than is customary in the national style, Nancy allows us to envision the possibility of a non-mythic imagining of community. For Nancy, it is not "its representation of society" that makes literature important, but rather "that part of it that helps cement the social bond" (*Multiple* 24). This does emphatically not mean that there is no representational moment in literature, only that the relation that this representation establishes is never "the representation of something that is real"; indeed, "the relation is, and is nothing other than, what is real in the representation—its effectiveness and its efficacy" (*Being* 58). In spite of its radical difference from myth, literature yet communicates a particular imagining of community. The difference is that "literature's revelation, unlike myths, does not reveal a completed reality, nor the reality of a completion"; instead, it reveals that it "is itself, as a work [*en tant qu'oeuvre*] that reveals and gives access to a vision and to the communion of a vision, essentially interrupted" (*Inoperative* 63). The reason that literature has the capacity to propagate the passion for community is that it is "a work that reveals and gives access to a vision"; only because it has the formal and the generic means to communicate a vision can it interrupt this revelation, and reveal that it is itself interrupted. Literature's ability to interrupt myth, in other words, goes together with its ability to communicate the imagining of a different community. Nancy's remarks on the relation between literature and community point to a notion of literature as the carrier of an imagining of community that is always conditioned by its acknowledgement of the "interrupted" nature of that imagining. As such, literature is, paradoxically, able to recall the community to the singular deaths that a mythic imagining of togetherness tends to neutralize.

In Anderson, the novel functions as a technology for imagining a certain apprehension of time (simultaneity) that is constitutive of a particular style of community (nationalism). Yet, when we consider Anderson's book more carefully, literature turns out to be capable of marking difference and loss *within* its presentation of simultaneity. Its affirmation of a particular imagining of community takes place within a form that signals what we can call, with Nancy, the interruption of the homogeneity of that vision. In spite of the undeniable differences between Anderson's and Nancy's projects, Nancy arrives at a remarkably similar conception of literature: while literature is, for Nancy, in the first place an irruptive experience that signals the interruption of myth, this (self-)irruptive potential goes hand in hand with its capacity to imagine a particular community. Both Nancy's and Anderson's work allow us to conceive of literature as a crucial medium for the imagining of a different community—a community that, unlike nationalism, does not rely on the abstraction and anonymization

of death. Literature, that is, can mediate loss in such a way that the singularity of death is *neither* simply foreclosed by nationalist ideology *nor* fastened on to in a way that makes a determinate imagining of community impossible. While one can object that Anderson's book offers too sympathetic an account of nationalism, and that Nancy is generally too uncompromisingly critical of all forms of *Gemeinschaft*, the place of literature in their work indicates the possibility of transcending these limitations and of imagining community differently.

Yet how are we to understand the claim, articulated in (between) Anderson and Nancy, that literature can mediate loss in a way that can help us imagine community differently? Literature, if it wants to operate differently than myth or cenotaph, must resist the anonymization of the dead and thus insert "real bones" or names, in its practice of remembrance. At the same time, it has to construct a monument to the dead that allows their singular losses to become the occasion for a shared experience of mourning—otherwise, we are left with a melancholic impasse rather than a particular imagining of community. Literature, moreover, has to inscribe singularity in its monumentalizing operation in such a way that this singularity interrupts the fullness and the homogeneity of the shared experience that grounds community—otherwise, the threat of anonymization resurfaces. It has, in other words, to preserve the "real bones" of the dead by imagining a definite form for them that nevertheless withdraws from full determination; it has to present the dead while marking their withdrawal from full representation and their refusal of the mandatory simultaneity of nationalist representation.

In order to make literature's particular style of mediating loss more specific, I want to conclude this essay by looking briefly at a short and probably all-too-familiar poem by William Wordsworth. "A Slumber did my spirit seal" is one of Wordsworth's so-called Lucy poems, which collectively mourn the death of a girl called Lucy in a way that comes very close to representing her in her withdrawal from an experience that the reader is invited to share. This is the paradoxical capacity that, I have argued, can make literature a vital medium in the imagining of a different form of community.

A Slumber did my spirit seal,

I had no human fears:

She seem'd a thing that could not feel

The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;

She neither hears nor sees;

Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course

With rocks, and trees, and trees (Wordsworth, 164)

One of the remarkable achievements of this poem is the particular way in which it manages the transition from the past (in the first stanza) to the present (the second) (Hartman, *Saving* 148–49). While it introduces Lucy as "a thing" untouched by mortality, withdrawn from fatality and contingency, the second stanza presents her in her withdrawal, not this time from death, but from the world of motion and force, of seeing and hearing, while she yet remains part of the earth. The second stanza does not, as one could expect in a two-stanza poem, demystify the illusions held up by the first, but rather *perpetuates* the withdrawal of Lucy from the experience that the poem records. In the words of Geoffrey Hartman, the relation between the "inward, unconscious power of idealization that deludes the poet into thinking Lucy is immortal" in the first stanza, and the consciousness of death in the second, is "more like image to afterimage than illusion to the shock of disillusion" (*Unremarkable* 27). The fantasy of immortality is not violently disturbed, but is rather preserved "within the elegiac form" (*Unremarkable* 189). The poem continues Lucy's withdrawal from the grasp of time and of poet and reader, and as such prevents the reader from melancholically fastening on to her loss; it "removes an object of love by moving it beyond touch" (*Easy* 147). The poem thus instantiates a form of literary representation in which "the absent one remains absent" (*Unremarkable* 29). The death of Lucy is not presented as an experience we can share; the only experience the poem invites the reader to share is that of a continued removal from that event. "Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course," Lucy remains a part of nature, but a part that remains forever withdrawn from us. To return to the terms of Nancy, it is in this sense that literature presents not just an available reality, but rather an "interrupted" vision of nature and mortality, and that it also presents itself *as* interrupted, as it does not pretend to have a privileged access to the event from which it carefully distances its readers.

"A Slumber" gives a shape to Lucy, "if only in this tomb or crypt of words" (Hartman, *Unremarkable* 190). To return to Hartman's words one last time, poetry here functions as "the equivalent in words to communal tombstones" (*Longest* 31) that yet remains "penetrated by contingency"—by the contingent name of Lucy that it carefully preserves—because it removes the dead from the grasp of ideological anonymization and recuperation (34). The poem offers up the death of Lucy as an occasion for a scene of mourning in such a way that this scene avoids the twin dangers of abstraction and unaccommodating melancholia. The reader cannot imagine the death recorded here as her own, because Lucy is represented as withdrawn from our, and every, claim upon her, both when she was alive and now that she is dead. At the same time, the reader cannot remain melancholically attached to the singularity of Lucy's death, because the poem shows that this "thing" could never be grasped in

the first place. The poem locates Lucy in nature while at the same time showing that she remains irrevocably removed from our experience. In this way, it places a moment of removal at the very heart of its imagining of community. The experience of literature is then *not* an experience of simultaneity and homogeneity, but rather of an interruption of self-presence. This illustrates literature's paradoxical capacity to give a definite shape to our removal from the finitude of the other. That this power is intuited in (between) Anderson's and Nancy's very different projects suggests that literature can still serve as an indispensable tool in literary and cultural studies' continued and urgent work of imagining different forms of togetherness.

NOTES

- 1/ Perhaps less familiar are Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) and Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: Origine et destino de la communauté* (Trans. Nadine Le Lirzin. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000). For my purposes, it is less important to have an exhaustive list of such projects than to recognize that Anderson's book is notably different from them.
- 2/ I will return to the notion of a "community effecting itself as its own work" (Nancy, "Confronted" 30) in my discussion of Nancy. As Nancy himself indicates, his reflections on this form of community intersect with those of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. See for this Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political* (Trans. Chris Turner. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Nazi Myth" (Trans. Brian Holmes. *Critical Inquiry* 16.2 [1990]: 291-312), also the first chapter of Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), as well as Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005).
- 3/ For examples of texts that use Nancy's "inoperative" community in a way that I describe here as melancholic, see Kate Jenckes, "The Work of Literature and the Unworking of Community or Writing in Elit's *Lumpérica*" (*New Centennial Review* 3.1 [2003]: 67-80), and Celia Britton, "Common Being and Organic Community in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*" (*Research in African Literatures* 37.2 [2006]: 164-75). To my best knowledge, Nancy himself does not relate his work on community to melancholia.
- 4/ Throughout this essay, all emphases in quotations are as in the original.
- 5/ My description of the logic of the operation of the cenotaph is indebted to Marc Redfield's discussion of this passage in "Imagi-Nation." Redfield's powerful discussion of the gendering of the aesthetics of mourning also informs my decision to refer to the citizen by feminine pronouns throughout this essay.
- 6/ Of course, the question of being together and of what Nancy terms *compearance* holds a central and complex place throughout his extensive oeuvre. I here focus mainly on the first three chapters in *The Inoperative Community* (the fourth and fifth chapters were not part of the original French publication), the book that has clearly been most influential in literary and cultural studies, although I also draw on other texts, especially *Being Singular Plural*. For more encompassing discussions of the issue of community in Nancy, see Ignas Devisch, "The Sense of Being(-)With Jean-Luc Nancy" (*Culture Machine* 8 [2006]. Special Issue on "Community," 10 April 2009. <<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/36/44>>) and the fourth chapter in Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2006). Christopher Fynsk's introduction to the English translation of *The Inoperative Community*, "Experiences of Finitude," does an excellent job of sketching the Heideggerian problematic from which Nancy's discussion of community takes off.

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