

FREUD AFTER BATAILLE:  
DEATH, DISSOLUTION, AND THE 'OCEANIC' FEELING

Rebecca Reynolds

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Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies

University of Essex

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For a *bird* and a sea star,

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## ABSTRACT

This investigation examines how the uneasy relationship between death and representation plays out across three overlapping modalities – text, body, and image. Drawing from Freud’s formulations, I trace out the paroxysmal movements of the death drive in concurrence with narcissism, masochism, and the uncanny, arguing that the theoretical indeterminacy of these concepts might be ascribed to the manner in which they interrogate, exceed, and destabilize the prevailing perception of the self as an integrated whole. As a situation of subjective/symbolic rupture, perhaps it is not “possible” to think *beyond* the limit that death poses for psychoanalytic theory. However, I propose that reconsidering Freudian metapsychology in light of Georges Bataille’s work on transgression and excess allows us to think *across* said limit. In deploying this highly dynamic approach, I elaborate on the role of death in the drive economy and, subsequently, its potential association with the ‘oceanic’ feeling that Freud acknowledges (but quickly dismisses) as a motivation for religious belief. Considering death and its corresponding drive through the ontological oscillations they provoke, I argue, expands the field that constitutes their manifestations and opens up new avenues of inquiry via potential applications in religion and aesthetics.





## INTRODUCTION

Misery of living men, disputing to the death the possibilities of  
the world of *etcetera*. Joy of the dying man, wave among waves.

— Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*

Georges Bataille's corpus reflects an aesthetic of harrowing ecstasy and wounded subjectivity among which one image stands out among the rest, a source of tragic inspiration and self-confessed obsession. The image is one of a series of photographs depicting the public dismemberment of a young Chinese man in late-Imperial China, the progression of a form of capital punishment known as *lingchi* – the torture of a hundred pieces, death by a thousand cuts.<sup>1</sup> If we follow the gaze of the spectators in the photograph, we see a body in pieces: chest flayed open, arms and legs cut off below the elbows and knees, a form only with great difficulty or discomfort recognizable. But the dying man looks elsewhere, and his is the gaze that Bataille follows. Indeed, much of Bataille's theoretical work comes down to the extrapolation of this gaze beyond the existing frame:

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<sup>1</sup> “The torture of a hundred pieces” is a translation of the French construction, *le supplice de cent morceaux*. See Georges Bataille, *Tears of Eros*, Trans. Peter Connor, (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1989).

the (im)possible extension of transgressive and excessive experience into the unchartable territory of the erotic and the mystical; a violent, paroxysmal speculation at the limit beyond which the self as perceived unity unravels into incoherence.

Yet, when this image is revisited in the interest of contextualizing Bataille's work, it is largely reduced to anecdote. In what we could interpret as display (or denial) of narcissistic vulnerability, we wish to know, name, and identify – to interpellate a subject in the most fragmented of bodies. Though persistently identified as Fou Tchou Li, a young Chinese man condemned to death by “slow slicing” for the murder of Mongolian prince Ao-Han-Ouan, historians Timothy Brook, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue argue that this is an error attributed in large part to Bataille himself, though possibly the work of his editor.<sup>2</sup> Fou Tchou Li was sentenced to execution by *lingchi*, the authors explain, but his is not the image, all too important and intimate, that is always present for Bataille, referenced repeatedly yet reproduced only (and problematically so) in the final pages of *Tears of Eros*, the last of Bataille's works published in his lifetime.<sup>3</sup> As for the man whose death played out for decades on Bataille's desk, his identity remains unknown.

If we wish to know the circumstances of the photograph, to assign a name and a crime to the man in the image, then we might criticize this misidentification as an error of historical inaccuracy.<sup>4</sup> Considered in the context of Bataille's philosophy, however, the

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Brook, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue, *Death by a Thousand Cuts*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 228-230. Brook, Bourgon, and Blue raise questions as to the authenticity of *Tears of Eros*, offering an analysis of the correspondence between Bataille and his editor Joseph Marie Lo Duca which suggests that Lo Duca significantly shaped Bataille's final work, particularly through his selection and organization of the book's many images and illustrations.

<sup>3</sup> As Brook *et al* explain, upon discovering the image of the real Fou Tchou Li in Jean-Jaques Matignon's *Dix ans au pays du dragon* (1910), Bataille wrote the following to Lo Duca: “I've found by accident – at Fontenay – another photo of the Chinese torture of a hundred pieces. Completely the same so far as torture, but it's *someone else*.” The same image also appears in Louis Carpeaux's *Pékin qui s'en va* (1910), where it is accompanied by the story of Fou Tchou Li that Lo Duca would adopt as the explanatory caption of the photograph of the torture of a man who, as Bataille had expressed, was someone other than Fou Tchou Li. Brook *et al*, *Death by a Thousand Cuts*, p. 227.

<sup>4</sup> Bataille's contemplation of this photograph is often discussed in the context of intellectual biography. See Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, Trans. Betsy Wing,

error lies elsewhere or, rather, *prior*: in the frantic but futile attempt to recover a fading subject.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this effort is the symptomatic gesticulation of an underlying resistance or repudiation, one which suggests that there is more than one subjectivity at risk.

Of the man he often referred to as his *Dionysus chinois*, Bataille writes: “he communicated the excessive nature of his pain, and it was precisely that which I was seeking, not so as to take pleasure in it, but *in order to ruin in me that which was opposed to ruin.*”<sup>6</sup> For Bataille, then, the photograph is more than a still image of the event it depicts; it is an event in itself, an encounter with an unfathomable other who in the ecstatic loss of self moves *beyond otherness*. In challenging these “stable” referents, the photograph suggests to Bataille the radical possibility of a dissolution of self that translates to a dissolution of the spatial, temporal, and symbolic realities that the self holds together and maintains on the perceived basis of intersubjective difference. If the self can only be posited from a distance created and widened by the objectifying transformations of discursive otherness, the representation of an experience at the limit collapses that distance. In other words, for Bataille the truth to be found in the photograph is one that annihilates all others: given that discursive thought cannot escape its own egoism, the loss of self as a viable point of reference marks a limit beyond which otherwise synthesizing (but ouroboric) operations are dissolved into an experience of pre-discursive disorder.

But this self-ruination – be it textual, aesthetic, or lived – is a trauma not confined

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(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, Trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, (New York: Verso, 2002); Stuart Kendall, *Georges Bataille* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); and William Pawlett, *Georges Bataille: The Sacred and Society*, (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Bataille writes, “[t]he self in no way matters. For a reader, I am any individual: name, identity, the historical doesn’t change anything. He (the reader) is any one and I (the author) am also any one. . . without name. . . without name. . . without name, just as two grains of sand are for the desert, or rather two waves losing themselves in two adjacent waves are for a sea.” In *Inner Experience*, Trans. Leslie Anne Boldt, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 120; my emphasis.

to the “victim.” Indeed, it *cannot* be, for the victim ceases to exist as separate entity. By this Nietzschean “reasoning” individual sacrifice is also a sacrifice of subjective self-certainty, the latter of which engulfs the viewer in a manner that cannot be conceptualized as a process of identification.<sup>7</sup> To do so obscures the decisive and defining destruction that makes this image (and sacrifice in general) an obsessive reference for Bataille, namely the nullification of the individual subject which elicits a corresponding dislocation in the onlooker-participant.<sup>8</sup> The absence or dispersal of the anchoring “I” – otherwise considered autonomous, stable, and durable – is that which is most intolerable to a thinking subject; it is an experience that Bataille equates to “being transported to the level of death.”<sup>9</sup>

Bataille’s interest, as manifested in his choice of subject matter as well as his sustained effort to maintain his writing at the level of death, is, almost exclusively, in the dissolution of the subject. But the means, mechanisms, and psychic effects of this dissolution are closely bound to the manner in which the subject is first *constituted* and subsequently *maintained*. And is this understanding not the perpetual project of psychoanalysis? Thus, to clarify how the self arrives at “the level of death,” we turn – as we consistently and necessarily do – to the “I” as the contrived yet central figure of the drama. That is, if death is that which is most alien to thought, if it resists theorization then perhaps we can approach the concept asymptotically through a consideration of the “loss”

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<sup>7</sup> See Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 11. Biles writes, “not until Bataille has actually identified with the victim, in some sense *become* the victim, does he experience the ecstasy that may (or may not) be evident in the visage of the man in the photo.” However, as we have mentioned and will revisit, the notion of “identification” is uneasily applied, implying an object-cathexis by a “stable” subject and a “stable” object with which that subject identifies.

<sup>8</sup> According to Bataille, the function of the violent spectacle is “to destroy the self-contained nature of its participators.” See *Erotism*, Trans. Mary Dalwood, (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986), p.17. In the dissolution of self that Bataille posits, “identification” would be both impossible and aimless. In its place, Bataille gives us his notion of “continuity.”

<sup>9</sup> Bataille, “The Practice of Joy in the Face of Death,” in *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, Ed. Dennis Hollier, Trans. Betsy Wing, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 325.

it entails. Doing so not only establishes a difficult dialectic between death and narcissistic self-positioning, but also clarifies, at least to some extent, the convulsiveness of thought that characterizes the momentary lived encounter with the elusive and radical otherness of death.

According to Jacques Lacan, the privileging of image over experience results in an “I” that exists only outside of itself as the idea or illusion of a “whole” – in Lacanian terms, *imaginary*. This paradigm emphasizes the tenuousness of the subject, allowing us to view the structures that animate subjective experience as indicative of both a narcissistic wish and a narcissistic wound: with each object cathexis, each symbolic interaction, the imaginary “I” rejects its fundamental incoherence in favor of the “stable” subjectivity it assumes,<sup>10</sup> the “I” which in the symbolic order has a dual function as both sign and speaking subject. The “I”, then, does not exist in and of itself, nor is it an accurate representation of the individual alone and as such. Rather, as Lacan so distinctively suggests, the “I” is built on the fictional foundation of its own coherence and all that it is, all that we understand it to be, is a product of constant negotiation, deferral, and dialectic relation. And yet, as fictive and fragile as it may be, this imaginary anchor establishes the vital relation between the individual and his reality or rather, between the individual and the symbolic existence that structures and mediates said reality.

Language, we know, is not a truth, but a system mediating the truth, a circular structure through and by which the subject is constituted and participates in his own construction. Entry into the signifying logic, therefore, has a two-fold effect: it makes of the individual a speaking, speakable entity but, in so doing, traces out his limits against those of the “external” world, rendering him, as Bataille would say, *discontinuous* or, to

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<sup>10</sup> The word “assume” here is implied with a double meaning, in the sense that one *takes on or comes to possess* his image/subjectivity but also that one *presumes or takes as given* that such an image/subjectivity is indicative of any internal reality.

use a Lacanian term, alienated. Both sense and understanding of self, then, are grounded in the moment in which the individual, confronted with his fragmented nature, responds with rejection: the first misrecognition is also the first denial of the unsettling possibility of the unrepresentable, and it is on the foundation of this first denial that the “I” stands. But what occurs when the individual is confronted with the unrepresentable truth of the fragmented self? What becomes of the reality that the “I” conveniently but tenuously holds together? These appear to be the questions that urge Bataille and draw him (in)to the image of the *Dionysus chinois*, where the perceived unity of the “I” – a composite of spectral images – shatters like the thin reflexive surface between the idealized/immortalized “I” and the fractured self. No longer intact and no longer *representable*, the “I” ceases to exist as such, its relation to the symbolic and its function as speaking subject suspended. The “I” is no longer a “thing” in the world and, as a result, its world is no longer a world of things.

Curiously, the photograph was given to Bataille during the course of his psychoanalysis with Adrien Borel.<sup>11</sup> However, as the reflections thus far suggest, we are less concerned here with the image itself as a particular visual artifact and more so with the various threads tied together by Bataille’s lifelong contemplation of it. These include but are not limited to: the avowal of sacrificial violence as constitutive of the erotic, mystical, and anti-textual; the possibility of a de(con)structive aesthetic that doubles as a mode of communication; and an intractable form of speculation that decenters the self-possessed “I” in favor of an all-consuming contingency. Refusing positivist egocentrism and visible or rational coherence as that which dissects and diminishes experience,

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<sup>11</sup> See Benjamin Noys, *Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 12, 25-6. For more on Bataille’s relationship with Adrien Borel, refer to Elizabeth Roudinesco, “Bataille entre Freud et Lacan: une expérience cachée,” in *Georges Bataille après tout*, Ed. Denis Hollier, (Paris: Belin, 1995), pp. 191-212.

Bataille privileges the base and unassimilable. However, he does so without elevating or altering its content, that is, without the aim of synthesis or (logical) comprehension. The result is a highly-mobile and at times deleterious rigor that emphasizes the permeability, insufficiency, and impossibility of any seemingly “closed” system(s) – a violence of thought expressed through its convulsive doublings and re-doublings.

Initially this may seem at odds with psychoanalytic thought, which reads for the unconscious in its manifestations and seeks to establish a basis for legibility. However, there is a field of psychoanalytic concepts characterized by extreme ambivalence and/or a violent alternation of affects: the structure of masochism which poses an “economic problem,” the sinister yet strangely familiar Freudian uncanny and its semiotic reformulation in Kristeva’s notion of the abject, and the pleasure-pain of *jouissance* – to name but a few. Here an application of Bataille’s ‘general economy,’ arguably a precursor to libidinal materialism, might help to account for and indeed defend the inherence of paradoxical contradiction. Such an approach allows us to establish crucial links between these uneasy, unstable concepts, not by formal logic but rather through a close consideration of their shared convulsiveness. In this way, theoretical indeterminacy presents itself not as a conceptual problem to be neutralized or surmounted, but as an indicator of ontological crisis. This crisis, I argue, results from a proximity to death, that which is most other to individual thought or self-positing and yet resides at the core of being as a fundamental source of anxiety as well as desire.

Unlike the gestalted form, Bataille’s *Dionysus chinois* represents a self that is not-one, an experience of (ego-)death that anticipates the biological one. More than the inevitable mortality of the organism, the notion of death that appears in and is evoked by Bataille’s writing corresponds to a condition of or desire for the symbolic or representational liminality that is achieved through the destruction of the “thing” within

the thing, the annihilation of the self as demarcated by symbolic limits. I mention representation here for, though in his writings Bataille emphasizes the textual character of death, his nearly life-long contemplation of the *Dionysus chinoides* and his general choice of (base) subject matter suggests that there is an aspect of death which resists or eludes discourse, an element which is fundamentally visual and visceral, and which challenges the signifying logic from a place of exclusion. This element demands precisely what is necessarily obscured or excluded in symbolic processes: overflowing excess, ambiguity, formlessness. It is the desire to annihilate all, including desire itself. Arguably, then this force is other than and *prior to* desire. This force must be a *drive*.

Reframed in terms of symbolic function, the death-drive ceases to be an instinct or inclination of the organism that wishes to restore a condition of non-existence, and becomes the abstract and fractal desire of a speaking subject who (by fascination or nostalgia) is compelled to go beyond the compartmentalizing logic of the sign, to go *before* his entry into the symbolic order as a coherent but alienated “I.” The reading of death as a peculiar form of discursivity corresponds to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic as a pre- and proto-symbolic condition of undifferentiated affect and instinct. In this distinction, death is both the disruption of symbolic significance and its antecedent: it corresponds to an engulfing situation of pre-discursive anarchism, a return to the polymorphous fullness that precedes oedipal ambivalence.<sup>12</sup> Thus, to view the photograph as Bataille does is to seek in it a deliberate destruction, acknowledging that there is one “stable” object that reveals the structural instability of all others: “death” as the

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<sup>12</sup> Though not exclusively, I am referring here to Kristeva’s elaboration of the pre-discursive (i.e. semiotic) *chora* as a “rhythmic” and “non-expressive totality” (pp. 93-4) that both undergirds and disrupts cultural and linguistic structures. See Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), and Elizabeth Grosz’s critique in “The Body of Significance” in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, Ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 80-103.



undifferentiated unity from which discontinuous existence is distilled and which it seeks to re-find.

However, what renders death as such a persistent object is precisely that which precludes death from being an object at all – a fundamental resistance to representation. Death, then, belongs to the domain of the *abject*. Kristeva not only describes the abject, but submerges us in its implications:

The abject shatters the wall of representation and its judgements. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away – it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death-drive into a start of life, of new significance.<sup>13</sup>

Neither of the “I” nor of the other, neither subject nor object, the abject lays bare the instability of the object relations that structure symbolic and intersubjective existence. Considered alongside Lacan’s formulation of *jouissance* as “the path towards death,”<sup>14</sup> we might conclude that in our deep ambivalence to the abject, the death drive is at play, operating as the force that draws us beyond the limits of self and subjectivity, “to the place where meaning collapses.”<sup>15</sup> There is something morbid, murderous, and unbearable in the rupture of the integrity and integrality of form. According to Bataille, it brings us face to face with that which cannot be known, only experienced in and as a “paradoxical combination of extreme affects”: a deep anguish at the loss of self and yet, a loss that cannot be mourned, only celebrated as the ecstatic escape from a limited existence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, Trans. Leon Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Lacan, Trans. Russel Grigg, *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, (New York/London: W. W. Norton and Co., 2008), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, p. 4. Here Biles considers the extreme emotion(s) evoked by the wounding of the closed form in terms of “religious sensibility,” reading the contradiction and confusion evoked by the sacrifice of form as a modern means of approaching the sacred.

Where seemingly contradictory terms – e.g. attraction/repulsion, desire/fear, pleasure/pain – meet and mutilate one another we might discern the “impossibility” of an endpoint that manifests as violent ambivalence. In approaching that which cannot be thought, thought itself twists itself into strange shapes.

Here we begin to discern what might be considered the aesthetic of the death drive.<sup>17</sup> Following Bataille, such an aesthetic is not necessarily or exclusively destructive. Instead, it affirms the insufficiency or incompleteness implied by the narcissistic wound, suggesting the openness of a lacerated being as that which makes possible a lived experience of death in the form of wordless, intimate transmission. This death is not abstract negativity, but a non-discursive mode of communication that occurs through the undifferentiated medium of pre-ambivalent fullness. “Erotism,” Bataille writes, “jerks us out of our tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being.”<sup>18</sup> The same can be said of death, which furnishes eroticism with its aim and characterizes its pursuit. In Bataille’s understanding, death operates beyond nihilistic destruction: like eroticism, it presents an end to or momentary escape from the isolation of limited, self-contained existence. That is, by challenging the self-contained, self-possessed form and function of the individual being, death brings about a sense of *continuity* with other ruptured beings – communication through wordless transmission. It is this death-as-dissolution that Bataille seeks and (re)finds in his “Dionysus chinosis.” In the willful confrontation with the excessive violence of the image, the self is engulfed in a totality that language, structured as it is by alterity and lack, renders unthinkable, a totality in

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<sup>17</sup> See Robert Rowland Smith, *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). In a series of essays, Smith considers Freud’s metapsychology in relation to the philosophy, literature, and contemporary art, attempting to redefine death in an aesthetic (and rhetorical) sense, as “a matter of promise or persuasion in the absence of a secure referent or signified,” p. xiii. This is also a key facet of Leo Bersani’s work, particularly *The Freudian Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), to be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>18</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 16.

which the self as contained and coherent unit is fundamentally untenable.

Still, a situation without speaking subjects, without difference cannot be contained in logos. How then to express the impossible? According to Bataille, the only “possible” way is to experience how it *expresses itself* as a momentary extinction or loss of self-positioning, in the ontological trembling aroused by a transgression. And this self-canceling paradigm shift, I suggest, is particularly useful in accounting for the limits of (Freudian) psychoanalysis. Perhaps the Bataillan approach neither alters nor clarifies those limits. It does, however, substantiate the impossibilities that seem to demarcate the psychoanalytic subject and, through their tension with the possible, propel psychic life. For instance, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud quickly dismisses the application of the death drive in regard to aesthetics. But considering death and its corresponding drive through the ontological oscillations they provoke significantly expands the field that constitutes their manifestations, giving us cause to revisit the avenues of inquiry and potential applications originally abandoned by Freud. I am referring here to aesthetics but also to the sphere of religious belief of which Freud was notoriously and trenchantly suspicious.

Interpreting death as a situation of unboundedness allows us, for instance, to explore its possible affinity with the ‘oceanic’ feeling that Freud identifies as the source of religious sentiment. Underlying both appears to be a desire to return, but Freud, ever the skeptic, frames the former as a biological inclination and the latter as a regressive fantasy. However, by drawing death out of its dichotomous positioning as the end of life, we can offer a reading of this drive not as the tendency towards non-existence, but as the speaking subject’s primordial desire to return to a condition of *non-differentiation* reminiscent of that which precedes the individuation of the ego. Doing so will allow us to explore a possible correlation first between the death-drive and primary narcissism, whose effects

this reformulated death drive appears to dialectically oppose, and subsequently, between the death drive and the ‘oceanic’ feeling, which much like Bataille’s notion of “continuity,” is presented as an experience of dissolution wherein the boundary between the ego and the external world is lost, blurred, or distorted. Beyond this, the juxtaposition of Freudian metapsychology with Bataille’s theoretical transgressiveness gives us an opportunity to consider death (both in principle and as drive) as the precursor to erotic and sacred activity and, via its multifarious sublimations, the very motor of psychic life.

A strictly secular reading of Bataille is likely to render his writing irrational or indigestible, a glorification of suffering interspersed with bouts of Dionysian delirium. And yet, as Andrew Hussey notes, only a handful of contemporary accounts of Bataille’s thought have engaged with those aspects of his thinking influenced by his interest in mysticism, a mode of speculation beyond any moderation which favors the exigencies of medieval Christianity to any form of philosophical dualism.<sup>19</sup> In the mystico-eroticism<sup>20</sup> of his work, he attempts to translate the experience of transgression into a language that subverts the stable referents of philosophy, conjuring the violent and transgressive to destabilize, to dissolve, to create in the reader a simultaneous experience of discomfort and desire in the face of his own destruction, always-already immanent. It is this aspect of his work, I believe, that is of distinct relevance to psychoanalysis and semiotics.

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 2. In recent decades, more work on this theme has been published, including Peter Connor’s *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), Alexander Irwin’s *Saints of the Impossible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), and Amy Hollywood’s comprehensive expositions on the figure of the mystic in 20<sup>th</sup> century French thought, most notably in *Sensible Ecstasy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> These concepts are often elided, however for Bataille, there is a crucial difference between the two. Eroticism, of which Bataille gives examples such as ritual sacrifice or orgy, is defined by a liminal experience that creates community or “continuity” between participants. Mysticism, however, is characterized as an inner experience, whereby “continuity” is achieved via a negation of the self and its stable referents. The nuances of these concepts will be explored in detail in Chapter 5, along with a discussion of how the body in pain in the Christian tradition suggests the possibility of interplay between the two.

Unrestrained by conceptual formalism, it allows us to think across that which marks for subjective thought an explicit limit. Perhaps thinking “beyond” this limit is not possible, but an analysis of those elements of Bataille’s thinking that reveal the limit to be fundamentally unstable (i.e. excess and transgression) may allow us to at least think *across* it. This exercise, I argue, has interesting implications for Freudian metapsychology, particularly in regard to the role of death in the drive economy, which I explore as the excess rendered by the *general economy* of the drives, and for an understanding of the psychological structure of faith and mysticism, which I propose represent a situation of ontological uncertainty that evokes an experience of death in the psyche. Conversely, interpreting Bataille’s mystico-eroticism in the language of psychoanalysis clarifies Bataille’s notion of the “discontinuous subject” and, in turn, the continuity that subject achieves in and beyond the willful confrontation with his own destruction. Through its dialectics, this paradigm suggests that an experience or aesthetic of the sacred/erotic is bound to death and, moreover, that death propels psychic activity as the aim of a drive which is most primary and yet must be perpetually deferred. Furthermore, staying with the impossibility or “failure” of thought in the absence of the subject allows us to extrapolate psychoanalytic theory beyond its egocentricity.

Though the potential applications of this model are, to use a Bataillan term, *heterogenous*, I concentrate on the body in pain and its representation, specifically in the tradition and aesthetic of Christian mysticism. In these practices and their visual relics, we can discern the convergence of agony and ecstasy but also of signification and corporeality, a complex positioning that lets us explore the relationship between the psychic demands of integrity and dissolution. Searching for the sacred outside of the traditional forms of religion, Bataille found it bound to horror, at the limit with death. However, through his affirmation of the pre-ego feeling restored in throes of a crisis of

self and subjectivity, Bataille's work allows us to revisit the understanding of self-destructiveness at its most diffuse, not as an individual pathology or perversion but as a means of restoring a lost, 'oceanic' unity.

The aim of the work that follows is to consider the causes and implications of this ever-shifting structure. As such it will not reflect a neat application of Bataillan concepts to Freudian theory, nor *vice versa*. Rather, the intention here is to magnify the theoretical limit of psychoanalysis through the lens of Bataille's extensive work on the matter of transgression. As a result, the aim is not simply to establish a basis of comparison (although this certainly factors into the discussion) but to consider the doubling and violent alternation of affects that is effected when a certain conceptual limit is crossed, to consider this doubling as deeply indicative of the otherness that lies beyond. If the blurring of lines causes philosophical intelligibility to disintegrate into a heterogeneous mass, the matters and motifs which do so are suspended only momentarily in the signification that fails to contain them.<sup>21</sup> Thus, this work emphasizes "non-philosophical modes of enunciation"<sup>22</sup> and articulations that evade discursive utility, reading for analogous intensities, movements, and displacements instead of the aegis of a homogenous "meaning."

In that sense, the theoretical methodology draws from Andre Green's approach to the negative.

The proponents of the negative in psychoanalysis form a family whose members are not united by an organic link. But they are linked by a certain way of thinking which they share. In fact, a familiarity exists between them which enables them to recognize each other from the outset, not with

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<sup>21</sup> See Nick Land's elaboration of libidinal materialism in *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. xi.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve" in *Writing and Difference*, Trans. Alan Bass, (London: Routledge, 1997 [1978]), pp. 251-277; p. 253.

respect to a defined doctrinal position but by a cast of mind which identifies them in their way of looking at problems or of seeking the most interesting means of resolving them. It is once again the resistance they show towards another group of opponents that allows us to discern more clearly what they stand for...<sup>23</sup>

Each chapter thus builds upon the previous, gathering the concepts that gravitate around an “impossible” center in an attempt to speak not about but around it. We begin with a close reading of Freud’s formulation of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, examining the non-linearity of the revised theory of instincts as expressed in Freud’s speculative text and in its reuptake in other psychoanalytic paradigms: how can the concept be opened up in a way that does not abandon its original formulation and, of equal importance, what are the elements *implicit* in that formulation via which the instinct speaks itself? Staying with Freud’s metapsychological texts, Chapter 2 considers the paradoxical nature of the death drive as a function of the narcissistic entity in which it operates, neither tendency being conceivable nor tenable without its dialectical counterpart. Death cannot be posited as the binary other of life if it burgeons in the core of the individual unit, and so Chapter 3 proposes how and why an application of Bataille’s “anti-philosophy” both elucidates and *affirms* the difficult dynamic between the inherently wounded ego and a radical otherness, nuancing the conception of death as the “zero principle” opposed to the perpetuation of the ego-as-One. In deconstructing the economy of the drives as a tension between finite and infinite, this chapter serves as a meridian beyond which death can be put in play (*en jeu*) as a situation of deep ontological uncertainty.

This, I argue, suggests a version of the death drive that might be oriented towards a

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<sup>23</sup> André Green, *The Work of the Negative*, Trans. Andrew Weller, (London: Free Association Books, 1999), p. 14.

self-negating otherness in the form of non-differentiation, which we find both in Freud and Bataille as the ‘oceanic’ feeling associated with religiosity and the “continuity” achieved through the transgressive expenditure of self, respectively. The chapters that follow consider the possible applications of this model in uncontrollable modes of experience and, in turn, their representation in violent aesthetic practices. Mysticism, masochism, and traumatic/erotic visual depictions of the body *in extremis* are offered as specific examples of this more “excessive” interpretation of the death drive whereby the loss or laceration of self represents a destruction not in the service of negation but of the affirmation, radical communication, and sovereignty that traverse one another in the domain of the impossible.

Returning then to the contentious photograph that so influenced Bataille, his writing helps to understand the stakes of transgression, be it in thought, lived experience, or representation: a continuity or community in the sacred and/or erotic that comes at the greatest expense of the self and its stable referents. Given *where* one arrives in this way, the *how* loses a great deal of significance, such that the self-effacing practices of masochism and religious contemplation cannot be ascribed to a repressed sexuality. Rather, they would appear to be analogous expressions of the same primordial inclination, a view that has implications not only for our understanding of the practices themselves but also of the drive to unbind by which they seem governed. Perhaps then it is Susan Sontag who best discerns the “identity” of the man in the photograph. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she does not invoke a name. Rather, she artfully describes the man in the image as “a real Marsyas, not a mythic one—and still alive in the picture, with a look on his upturned face as ecstatic as that of any Italian Renaissance Saint



Sebastian.”<sup>24</sup> The “ecstatic (?)”<sup>25</sup> loss of self renders him nothing more or less than saint-like. The unnamed man in the image then, is not Fou Tchou Li, nor is he *not* Fou Tchou Li. He is unknown and unknowable, the fragmented body that challenges and supplants the coherent image. To say, then, that Bataille was captivated by the young man in the photograph, is an understatement. The two are continuous.

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Bataille writes that he “never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic (?) and intolerable,” (Bataille, 1989, p. 206) and the expression on the face of the tortured man has been the cause of much speculation and debate. However, as Amy Hollywood points out, the very deliberate question mark here suggests that the assumption of the tortured man’s inner state is “only reluctantly taken up by Bataille” (*Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 303). I would press this further, arguing that because of the ambiguity and contradiction that such extreme suffering materializes, such conjecture seems futile, absurd, or violent – if not all three.

1.  
IN DEFENSE OF THE DEATH DRIVE

But something other dearer still than life  
the darkness hides and mist encompasses  
we are proved luckless lovers of this thing  
that glitters in the underworld:  
no man can tell us of the stuff of it,  
expounding what is, and what is not  
we know nothing of it.  
Idle we drift, on idle stories carried.

— Euripedes, *Hippolytus*

Death, Heidegger writes, “stands before us – something impending,”<sup>1</sup> and this teleological understanding of death certainly seems to resonate with the theory of *Todestrieb* presented by Freud only seven years prior. With *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud too argues that life strives towards the fullness achieved in its own

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962), p. 249.

extinguishment, but the Freudian text includes a defining complication: the presumably linear nature of teleological thinking is bent back on itself such that the aim is also the origin. This circuitous logic, compounded by Freud's insistence on the unrepresentability of death in the unconscious, might account for some of the resistance to the concept introduced by Freud in 1920 and known since as the death drive. If aim and origin are one and the same, overlapping precisely in that domain which is unknowable and unsayable, then the entire endeavor of life could appear to be reduced to a prolonged frustration.

For scholars such as Jonathan Lear and Martin Hägglund this seems to be the dominant source of contention. Working at the intersections of psychoanalysis and philosophy, their respective arguments against the legitimacy or primacy of the death drive reflect a broader critical approach which emphasizes the ethical implications of subordinating life to its endpoint.<sup>2</sup> Life, they argue, attains value in relation to and against its passing and always potential loss, and our affective attachments, libidinal investments, and death anxieties suggest that we do in fact care deeply about the mortal life which will inevitably be lost, too much so for the death drive to be as primary as Freud suggested. Lear in particular takes issue with the elision of trauma, pain, aggressivity, and breakdown under the label of death. As he intervenes in *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, a "breakdown" can also be a "breakthrough" but a terminology that gravitates around death obscures or overshadows this possibility. Meanwhile, others such as Harold Searles (1961), Louis Breger (1981) and, most recently, Liran Razinsky (2013), have all raised the complementary objection that the death drive does not actually refer

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). See also: Duncan Barford, "In Defense of Death" in *The Death Drive: New life for a dead subject?*, Ed. Robert Weatherhill, (London: Rebus Press, 1999), pp. 12-39.

to “death” at all – that the transformation of death into the object of a wish or a drive binds it with finite life in a way that undermines its singularity and significance.<sup>3</sup>

I mention these perspectives here to clarify that the defense of the death drive promised by this chapter is not intended to be against such criticisms. They operate under a logic that I do not share and the rejection of which is the point of departure for the theoretical questioning of this investigation. Instead, this chapter is intended to defend the death drive against its own internal contradictions – to defend those very contradictions as inherent and necessary to any genuine understanding of this concept. These contradictions, I believe, are not indicative of theoretical failure. Rather, they signal the intrinsic complexity, anti-reductionism, and non-linearity of this theory, and this nebulousness, akin to the aim of the drive itself, opens an entire field of questioning as to what is meant by “death” if not the end of life, and more specifically, what is the function of death in psychic reality.

It is my impression that the aforementioned criticisms of the death drive hinge on a narrow understanding of death as a physical end-state or the termination of life, an understanding indicative of or culminating in a binary logic that forecloses the theoretical possibilities opened up by the Freudian concept and flattens the very concept itself. In treating life and death as mutually exclusive, these perspectives frame death as a function of linear time – an endpoint – neglecting death as an issue of representation. Given Freud’s assessment that the organizing principles of time and linear logic do not operate in the unconscious, such an understanding of death as a temporal function only serves to render it more inaccessible. However, if we take death’s irrepresentability to be its

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Breger, *Freud’s Unfinished Journey*, (London: Routledge, 1981). In *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) Liran Razinsky offers a comprehensive overview of the psychoanalytic attitude towards death as well as the responses of existential psychology to “death anxiety.”

defining feature, a starting point instead of a theoretical limit, we can engage the concept through its relation to the symbolic life whose tenuousness it reveals. The question then is not how can we think of and through death if it is unrepresentable, but how does that which cannot be contained in logocentric closure evoke an experience of death for the speaking subject.

Freud himself believed that his ideas concerning the death drive would need to be “left to future investigation.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this “future investigation” that Freud envisioned was never intended to assimilate or abandon the concept, but rather to show that we are drawn to it, that we return to it as if by the very compulsion that characterizes it. What I propose, therefore, is yet another return to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a (re-)reading of this text in which life and death are treated not as mutually exclusive biological states but rather as forces of mind which are ontologically inseparable.

Yes, Freud writes rather unequivocally that “the aim of all life is death,”<sup>5</sup> but I maintain that the conceptual use-value of the death drive lies less in the predisposition of life to extinguish itself entirely, and more so in the dialectical tension between this instinct and a life principle under the command of Eros – a tension between the psychic demands of binding and unbinding as exemplified in the game of disappearance and return that Freud observed in his grandson Ernst. In other words, death may be, as Freud states, the first and final goal of life, but by my reading, the death drive refers to something other than the tendency of life to seek its apogee in its own definitive annihilation; it refers instead to death as it is memorialized *in the psyche*, as a force or principle of return exerting its pressure on all the goals that fall in between the “first” and “final,” and to a great extent relying on its juxtaposition to the life principle to achieve expression.

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<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud (1933), *New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis*, SE XXII, pp. 1-182; p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, pp. 3-64; p. 38.

I would argue that this interpretation is largely obscured by Freud's grounding of the concept in biological principles. As we will see, Freud's conclusions are actually at odds with the discourse of evolutionary biology in which they are framed. But this is not the only difficulty with his contextualization. In an effort to clarify his ideas by carrying them over to the cellular level, Freud calcifies them instead, prompting a conceptualization of life and death as states rather than as *principles*. What this chapter suggests is that although death cannot be represented *as such*, it is nevertheless present in the psyche in a way that informs the trajectory of psychic activity – much like the “unplumbable” navel of the dream.

To defend this position, however, it is necessary that we shift the axis across which the life and death drives are positioned – not within a biological field of reference, but a *symbolic* one. In doing so, I believe we can better approximate the function of death in psychic life. From a symbolic standpoint, we can interpret death as a function of internal (but not absolute) negation, as the experience of anguish at the limits of signification. And yet, given the negative and/or non-representable nature of this concept, it cannot be understood without its dialectical counterpart. Precisely therein lies the theoretical use-value of the death drive. By considering death as it operates in juxtaposition to a life principle, the concept of the death drive offers a means of understanding how the negative and/or unrepresentable infiltrates unconscious semiotics and subjective experience without destroying completely the binding structures of Eros on which it relies for its perpetuation. By this reading, death stands neither in front of us nor behind us. It is not a vanishing point in the distance. It is an element that resides within us like a trace. Aim and origin are indeed bound together as Freud supposed, but within the individual, at all times and inextricably so.

FORT/DA

At the outset, the aim of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* appears relatively straightforward: to explore the psychic mechanisms at work in cases that did not seem to be adequately explained by the existing drive theory. In his examples of traumatic neurosis, child play, and transference, Freud isolates the compulsion to repeat, a tendency to return to the source of trauma or distress in spite of the unpleasure that such repetition necessarily brings about within the individual. Freud explains that, unlike the effort to avoid unpleasure that characterizes repression, the compulsion to repeat represents an inclination within the individual to return to the very source of unpleasure despite the impossibility of deriving satisfaction from it, an inclination which upon initial interpretation seems oriented neither towards pleasure or its temporary postponement and as such, does not operate according to either of the drives that Freud had previously outlined – the pleasure principle and reality principle. There must be then, as Freud explains, a psychical/physical force at play that is not derived from the libidinal impulses, something “more primitive, more elementary, more driven than the pleasure principle which it overrides.”<sup>6</sup>

Upon closer consideration of the psychical processes beyond the scope of the pleasure principle, Freud notes that the compulsion to repeat is quite difficult to isolate, that “only in rare instances can we observe [its] pure effects, unsupported by other motives.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in his examples of repetition compulsion there appears to be more at work than the desire or drive to return to previous stages of development. But what are these “other motives” to which Freud refers?

The archetypal example of the game of disappearance and return that he observed

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

in his grandson Ernst offers some suggestions. By Freud's interpretation, the child revisits the trauma of his mother's departure by throwing a wooden reel attached to a piece of string (*'fort'*) but then proceeds to take an active role in response to the distressing experience by pulling the reel by the string and making it reappear (*'da'*). Whereas the first part of the child's game may be interpreted as a manifestation of the repetition compulsion, the second and more decisive part suggests an effort on behalf of the child to master the distressing experience of his mother's absence by becoming the active center of that experience. Within the logic of the game he can defiantly send her away (*'fort'*) and with a pull of the string, he can bring about her return (*'da'*).

The inherent aggression in throwing away the toy coupled with the satisfaction of its reappearance points toward how this game is in the service of recapitulating loss through return. The game then does yield some form of pleasure, suggesting that (1) the function of the repetition compulsion is not simply to return to a trauma, but to return in the interest of *mastery*, and subsequently (2) the compulsion to repeat that characterizes the death drive is best observed as it operates in dialectic with the life drives and its corresponding principles.

Curiously enough, the very phenomena which might best have demonstrated the tendencies that do in fact surpass the pleasure principle are those which Freud dismisses rather quickly, namely "artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which, unlike those of children, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable."<sup>8</sup> According to Freud, these cases fall under the domain of aesthetics and, being dominated by the pleasure principle, are "of no use for *our* purposes."<sup>9</sup> However,

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*. The role of aesthetics in relation to the repetition compulsion will, however, reappear in Freud's writing, most notably with his 1919 paper "The Uncanny," *SE XVII*, pp. 217-256.



seeing as it is difficult to uncouple or isolate pleasure and death as motives, I would like to argue the contrary. Given how intimately the two operate, each relying on the other to derive satisfaction, it is possible that the drives that Freud locates “beyond” the pleasure principle are perhaps best observed in this very domain where they manifest *alongside* the pleasure principle instead of as prior or posterior. In that case, we turn to Lacan, who in his notion of *jouissance* encapsulates (insofar as *jouissance* can be encapsulated or enclosed) the pleasurable pain derived from excessive experience, suggesting that precisely therein lies “the possibility of the conjunction between Eros and Thanatos.”<sup>10</sup>

Considered as the satisfaction or enjoyment deriving from the death drive, *jouissance* is necessarily in relation to the categories or structures which this drive seeks to exceed. As a symbolic or aesthetic tendency, this enjoyment would correspond to a manipulation or distortion of the representable that radically alters the relation to the “object” being seen/signified and, in turn, to subjectivity itself. This idea will be elaborated throughout the subsequent chapters, but I mention it here to draw back into our discussion of the death drive those aesthetic experiences which Freud dismissed, a necessity if we are to work with the death drive as a function in relation to representation.

As Freud points out, certain aesthetic experiences can be both painful and enjoyable. But whereas this leads him to relegate these experiences to the realm of the pleasure principle, we could also argue that such experiences may be enjoyable *because* painful, painful because they are “excessively” enjoyable. From a symbolic standpoint, the “pleasure” derived here would be the result of a challenging of

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<sup>10</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XIV: The Logic of Fantasy*, Trans. Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts. May 24, 1967. Of *jouissance*, Lacan writes: “it is on this plane and on this plane alone that Thanatos can be found to be in any way connected to Eros. It is in the measure that the *jouissance of the body* – I am saying of one’s own body, beyond the pleasure principle – is evoked, and is not evoked elsewhere than in the act, precisely in the act which puts a hole, a void, a gap, in its center, around what is localized in hedonistic detumescence, it is from that moment on that there is posed a possibility of the conjunction of Eros and Thanatos” (p. 138).

the subject's stable referents and of the devastation experienced by the subject as a result. Describing this "pleasurable unpleasurable tension" as it relates to sexual excitement, Leo Bersani quantifies this condition as an excess of the body's "normal" range of sensations, an experience in which "the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow 'beyond' those compatible with psychic organization."<sup>11</sup> But this experience, as rooted as it is in the experience of the body, is not limited to its capacity as a function of sexuality or corporeality: grounded in the processes of signification (i.e. the "I" as sign projected onto the surface of the body) and the individual's psychic investment therein, it extends to any event that fractures the subject's self-perception, including the devastation that can be evoked aesthetically through the visual sublime. The aim of this investigation is to explore the contradictory affects that converge 'beyond' the limits of psychic organization and to consider their coincidence as indicative of the uncompromising paradox that the un/pleasurable fracturing of the self (re)presents for subjectivity and theories thereof. As support, I will trace out a textual and visual aesthetic of woundedness and uncertainty, arguing that the uneasiness evoked by bodies (or texts) *in extremis* incarnates, in a sense, what is unavailable to forthright contemplation. In order to make that claim, however, it is necessary to establish the uneasy relationship between death and representation and how this relationship plays out through the body as the locus of these competing desires.

In that case, it is not pleasure *per se* that we are discussing, but *jouissance* as an excessive or transgressive pleasure that is "intolerable to the structured self"<sup>12</sup> and is thus experienced as pain. Drawing from Lacanian theory, we might consider the devastation to the structured self a momentary satisfaction of the death drive. In fact, Lacan borrows

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<sup>11</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

Freud's language, explicitly positioning *jouissance* "beyond the pleasure principle."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps then the "enjoyment" Freud attributes to the spectators of tragedy (or other pain-evoking imitations) is less outlet for the pleasure principle, and more akin to its French translation as described and developed by Lacan throughout the course of his seminars.<sup>14</sup>

And yet, while we can, following Lacan, align this excessive "enjoyment" with death and its corresponding drive, we nevertheless see how a life principle is at work here as well, providing and protecting the signifying structures beyond and through which the death drive finds an outlet. In other words, much as the reality principle safeguards the pleasure principle, so do the life instincts sustain the death instincts.<sup>15</sup> Like the child engaged in the game of disappearance and return, we recreate the painful or traumatic situation in which the self and its attachments come undone. We do so to become the active center of that experience, to attempt to assimilate the unassimilable or (re)signify that which the trauma renders unsignifiable. It would appear then that only the first half of the game (*fort*) represents the death-drive, whereas the *da*, by which order is restored through the child's feeling of omnipotence, would indicate that the self-preservative instinct of narcissism is also involved and is, in fact, the element that affords the child the "conventional" satisfaction derived from the game.

If we wish to isolate the death-drive, we might say that it is the urge that seeks the *fort* without the *da*. In fact, Freud observed the first half of the game far more frequently than the episode in its entirety. "As a rule," he writes, "one only witnessed its first act,

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<sup>13</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (New York/London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981), p. 184.

<sup>14</sup> References to *jouissance* appear in Lacan's earliest seminars in the context of the master-slave dialectic, where *jouissance* is conceptualized as enjoyment or rights over the other. It is not until Seminar VII (1959-1960) that Lacan begins to discuss *jouissance* as it is more commonly understood: as the pleasure-pain of excessive experience. It is this notion of *jouissance* that he continues to develop throughout his later seminars (particularly Seminars VII, XIX, XVII, and XX), elaborating on its relation to the body and its multiple instantiations (i.e. surplus, phallic, and 'feminine' *jouissance* and *jouis-sens*).

<sup>15</sup> Paraphrased from Freud (1920): "The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts" (*SE XVIII*, p. 63).

which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act.”<sup>16</sup> Still, Freud argues, even when the first part of the game is repeated without the second, there is still an element of mastery involved, namely the child’s enactment of an impulse to revenge himself against his mother. “In that case,” Freud explains, “it would have a defiant meaning: ‘All right then, go away. I don’t need you. I am sending you away myself.’”<sup>17</sup> The child enjoys the fantasy of inflicting on the mother the pain of separation that she originally caused him, but in order to do so he must revisit the source of his own suffering. In other words, the child returns to the site of trauma not simply to re-experience the event, but to re-signify it. And yet, *his mastery of the situation is inseparable from the repetition of his pain*, thereby accentuating the association between pleasure and harm to the ego suggested by the game in its entirety.

To summarize, it would appear that the “competing” instincts of life and death are not competing at all. Rather, they are bound together in a difficult dialectic of presence and absence, being and nothingness, lack and (over)abundance in which the subject and his coherence is at stake. It is my impression that this dialectic sustains the individual’s relation to his own being, a relation which vacillates between unreality and necessity.

#### THE OLD STATE OF THINGS

It would seem that Freud’s examples of the repetition compulsion are not entirely adequate for demonstrating his revised theory of the drives as a dynamic. If however we momentarily set aside this criticism, perhaps we can see more clearly what Freud does in fact accomplish in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which is to show that the analysis of painful or traumatic experiences does, in fact, fall outside of the scope of the libidinal

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<sup>16</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p.16.

drives and that such experiences require a revised theory, or rather a new drive altogether, to explain their resistance to analysis. Freud calls attention to *a drive beyond the drives*, a force existing prior to the primary processes but relying, to a certain degree, on those very processes for its manifestation. Does he put forth a complete or decisive theory of this drive? Not exactly, but he does acknowledge and draw into the domain of psychoanalysis what appears to be a seemingly counterintuitive force at play in the individual, a force oriented *elsewhere*, beyond the dichotomy of pleasure and unpleasure where these sensations coexist. “But where?” the reader asks, and Freud’s boldest move is in his answer to this pressing question.

He opens Section IV with a forewarning. “What follows,” he writes, “is speculation, often far-fetched speculation,” and it would appear that one cannot adequately discuss *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* without borrowing this same disclaimer.<sup>18</sup>

It would be a contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never been attained. On the contrary, it must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or another departed from and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads.<sup>19</sup>

The “*old* state of things” to which Freud refers is the inanimate state that preceded life. In this view, life, with all of its increasing complexity (i.e. Eros), evolved in spite of and contrary to the most basic desire of the organism – inertia. As an instinct to restore a previous restful state, Freud treats this tendency as something of an evolutionary adaptation, “the very first instinct”<sup>20</sup> developed by organic life as a means of resolving the

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 24. The function of speculation as a particular intellectual operation is revisited in Chapter 3 in a discussion of Derrida’s essay “To Speculate – On Freud.”

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 41.

pressures of external forces and excitations that threaten the organism's stasis. The entire living organism, Freud proposes, much like its constituent elements, possesses a natural inclination to maintain the equilibrium of an original condition: non-existence, which in the course of the individual's development would equate both practically and theoretically to "death."

Ulrike May clearly and concisely summarizes this in "The Third Step in Drive Theory," an essay on the genesis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "[w]ith the origin of life there came into existence the first 'drive,' which wished to return to the inanimate state; life was only a detour towards death; the entire life of the drives served to bring about death."<sup>21</sup> Higher forms of existence, therefore, reflect not a desire on the part of the individual, but rather a consequence of external circumstances, a detour on the way to that inevitable destination. It is on these grounds that Freud revises his earlier theory of instincts, positing that in addition to the libido, there exists another drive which more so than opposes or competes with the libidinal urges, *precedes* them, and manifests in the individual as an inclination to return to his most primordial condition. For Freud, this condition is non-existence – death – and so he designates the drive accordingly.

By aligning non-existence and death, Freud locates the genesis of organic life in death, which in turn becomes both its aim and origin. This seems straightforward enough: life springs from its own absence and to that initial condition inevitably returns. But is it the inevitability of death that prompts the death drive? If so, it would appear to be less of a drive and more of a resignation. To consider the death drive as an internal, purely biological tendency is to eclipse its role in the psyche, rendering it passive in a way that undermines the element of wish or desire that is also bound therein. Death is not just the

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<sup>21</sup> Ulrike May, "The Third Step in Drive Theory," *Psychoanalysis and History*. Vol. 17, No. 2 (2015): 205-280; p. 231.

condition that awaits all life; we do not gravitate towards it simply because we have no other choice. Although his bio-analytic justifications obscure this, by folding the aim of life back onto its origins in non-existence, Freud does make a powerful suggestion. Yes, we are destined to die, but the death drive is neither the acceptance of this fact nor the desire to hasten its occurrence. Rather, it is the persistent sensation of having departed, the nostalgic desire to return to a pre-existing state.

By my understanding, the reading of the death drive as a desire to *return* has a number of implications, three of which figure most prominently in the present discussion:

- (1) The death drive manifests in the inclination to reduce the tension of life in order to re-create, in some capacity, the original condition from which life differentiated.
- (2) Death as the condition which the drive seeks to restore is somehow present in the psyche, memorialized in its own absence like a memory, a wish, or a trace.
- (3) The death drive as the first drive comes into being as a tension introduced by an extrinsic force that stimulates the impulse to cancel itself out.

As self-evident as it seems, it warrants mentioning that the desire to reduce tension can only be expressed when a tension is introduced in the first place. The death drive, therefore, comes on the scene as the shadow of life, acting as a reminder of its origins in non-existence. And yet, without the self – this composite of desires, memories, and fantasies – there can be no contemplation of this non-existence, just as there can be no shadow without a body to cast it. Like the ego that is constituted by its objects, the vague and formless *pulsion* existing prior to desire takes shape in those desires in the form of a wish or a trace, “present” but in need of synthesis or symbolization in order to find its expression, in need of the very composite that the drive aims to destroy.

The body as sign and signifier figures prominently in this dynamic. In other words, it is as if through desire, fantasy, and above all *jouissance*, the drive were seeking the liberation of the element of death that always-already resides in the individual, relying on these psychical functions to express the urge that precedes them: the inclination to undo the “I” that arises as soon as it identifies with a perceived unity and declares “I am.” Perhaps therein lies the difficulty in isolating the death drive – it precedes the other drives and is intimately bound to them.

#### CRITIQUES AND CONTRADICTIONS

It is necessary to clarify that, despite what its name may imply, the death drive in Freud’s understanding is not quite a destructive drive, but rather a conservative one. Supremely conservative in fact, seeing as what it seeks to conserve is a *bare minimum*, a less-than-being. Unlike the pleasure principle, which seeks a release of tensions or an energetic discharge in the form of pleasure or satisfaction, the death drive as formulated by Freud seeks *complete satisfaction* in the total reduction of tensions in the organism. For Freud, the first and “final goal of all organic striving”<sup>22</sup> is the return to zero excitation.

Here we see that Freud’s theorizing of the death drive is governed by a radical economic principle – the tendency to zero<sup>23</sup> – and as Laplanche explains in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, it is this principle that accounts for a number of paradoxes within the

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<sup>22</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> Freud borrows this notion from Barbara Low. In her 1920 work *Psycho-Analysis: A Brief Account of the Freudian Theory*, Low introduces the “Nirvana principle” (*Nirwanaprinzip*) as the tendency of the mental apparatus to reduce its quantity of energy to zero, or at least to maintain its levels constant. It is mentioned by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (SE XVIII, p. 56) and in the 1924 paper “The Economic Problem of Masochism, where he describes the aim of the Nirvana principle as the “extinguishing, or at least of maintaining as low as possible, the quantities of excitation flowing into [the mental apparatus]” (SE XIX, pp. 159-60). Thus, “Nirvana” operates here as it does in the eastern philosophies of Buddhism and Hinduism – as the removal of internal tensions attained through the extinction of desire.



Freudian concept. The tendency to zero appears only to find its justification in psychoanalysis, and yet pursuing his speculations to their “logical” conclusion, Freud relies largely on biological phenomena and economic principles to give his theory shape. By investigating the sliding of concepts and the blurring of reference points necessary to identify the death drive outside of the domain of psychoanalysis, Laplanche traces the internal complications within *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

For instance, Freud couches his formulation of the death drive in biological principles, attempting to carry death back to the very level of biology as an instinct even though the priority of zero over constancy is not congruent with biological fact. If we take into consideration homeostasis, we see that the organism, depending on its circumstances and on its internal energy level, can just as well be in search of excitation as desirous of avoiding or evacuating it. Perhaps to obscure this incongruence or to press on in spite of it, Freud’s formulation of the economic principle governing the death drive oscillates between the tendency to reduce or remove internal excitation (i.e. zero) and the tendency to maintain the quantity of excitation low and stable (i.e. constancy). However, the two are neither equivalent nor reducible to one another. Laplanche clarifies as follows:

[t]hus the terms “zero” and “constancy,” which we would separate, are often presented by Freud as situated on a continuum, either by establishing between them a vague synonymy, with “psycho-physiology” receiving the task of distinguishing between them more clearly, or else by presenting the tendency towards constancy as a “makeshift” replacement for an absolute reduction of tensions.<sup>24</sup>

Biologically speaking, the tendency for constancy is not a drive of the organism, but an adaptation, the process of storing as much energy as needed to meet the demands for a

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 113.

specific action in order to maintain the stores of energy stable. As such, this principle does not appear to support the conceptualization of the death drive that Freud puts forth. And yet, to rely exclusively on the notion of the zero principle is equally problematic, for if the death drive is the most “primitive” drive – preceding both the reality principle and the pleasure principle and regulating the course of psychical processes before these two even come into effect – if it operates according to a zero tendency, we arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that *the drives are driven not to be drives at all*.

The difficulty in clarifying the principles governing the death drive, especially when those principles are borrowed from biological and economic points of view, stems from the fact that there is no one clear definition of the death drive. Rather, as Daniel Lagache explains in “Aggressivity,” the death drive is “the formal unity of several ideas that are related but not identical,” those ideas being (1) the tendency towards a transition from organic to inorganic; (2) the tendency toward a reduction of tensions; and (3) primary masochism.<sup>25</sup> Whereas the first and most speculative of these interpretations reflects the zero principle carried out to its most extreme, the second offers a slightly clearer approximation of what might lie “beyond the pleasure principle” if, that is, we define pleasure as the sensation of discharge as the organism moves towards zero excitation. Primary masochism, however, is that aspect of the death drive that best lends itself to psychoanalytic observation and analysis, the “most radical form of the pleasure principle”<sup>26</sup> in which the tendency towards zero manifests itself as a primal destructiveness directed against the ego itself.

In attempting to overlay these three ideas, we begin to see what Laplanche terms “the economic paradox” of the death drive: how can we attribute to a single drive the

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Lagache, “Aggressivity” (1960) in *The Work of Daniel Lagache: Selected Papers* (1938-1964), Trans. Elisabeth Holder, (London: Karnac Books, 1993), pp. 207-236; p. 236.

<sup>26</sup> Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, p. 108.

tendency towards zero as well as the most radical form of the pleasure principle, both the desire to return to a condition prior to existence (i.e. the *Nirvana principle*) and the frantic masochistic search for pleasure in unpleasure? This could only be the case if this masochism (as primary as the drive it manifests) functions by increasing tension to a tipping point beyond which energetic stores overflow and are emptied entirely, if the quintessential aim of the drive were undoing the ties that bind those tensions together, the foremost being the ego and the body on and through which the ego projects its imagined unity. Essentially then, an attack on the symbolic waged at the point of entry – the ego and the body as its signifier. Still, are the two reducible to one another? Though I will address the other ideas associated with the death drive, the work to follow focuses on primary masochism and, more specifically, how the pleasurable unpleasure of symbolic collapse might be read as a manifestation of the death drive as a psychic principle that operates through and in relation to the life principles rather than in strict opposition to them.

Here we distinguish between secondary masochism as a libidinal pleasure in which sexual satisfaction is achieved through pain, humiliation, and/or surrender, and primary masochism as the non-libidinal expression of the death drive that directs destructiveness towards the ego as unity.<sup>27</sup> The former, presumably derived from the latter, seeks a distressing increase in tension in the name of pleasure, sexual excitement or gratification in the experience of the woundedness or susceptibility of the body. Primary masochism, however, is not directed explicitly against the body, but against the fantasy of the unitary self projected onto this surface – a symptom of the dysfunctional relation of language to the body.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is this uneasy contiguity that Bersani identifies as the source of

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<sup>27</sup> This will be elaborated in Chapter 4 through a close reading of Freud's 1924 paper "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (*SE XIX*, pp. 155-170).

<sup>28</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 64.

difficulties in the later Freudian texts.

I would suggest, therefore, that it may be useful here to set aside Freud's more biological suppositions and juxtapose *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with work on narcissism instead, a juxtaposition which Freud gestures toward at near the end of this text. In this way we can draw the death drive out of the realm biological function where it does not find its justification and reframe it within psychoanalysis as a primary function of the ego that works in the interest of its own destruction. Only then can we begin to form an idea of where this drive might find its self-negating satisfaction, and how we can conceptualize this satisfaction which cancels out the subject who experiences it.

#### A NECESSARY LINK

With the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud puts forth his revised and final theory of the drives, suggesting that there exists a primal destructiveness that opposes the life instincts, an inclination towards non-existence that the libidinal drives are tasked with mediating. The latter, which encompass the tendencies toward survival, propagation, sex, and other creative or preservative behaviors, Freud aligns with “the *Eros* of the poets and philosophers which holds all living things together.”<sup>29</sup> The former, on the other hand, eventually came to be identified as *Thanatos*, although Freud did not employ this terminology in his elaboration of the death drive.

This opposition supplanted the diverging demands of the sexual instincts and ego-instincts as the main source of psychic conflict.<sup>30</sup> Freud no longer perceived psychic struggle as the result of a clash between sexuality and the drives of self-preservation as expressed, for instance, in narcissism. Rather, in the revised drive theory Freud identifies

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<sup>29</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *SE XVIII*, p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> See Freud (1915a), “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” *SE XIV*, pp. 117-140.

these two as sharing an organizing principle – life and its perpetuation through forms of increasing complexity. The competing aims responsible for the conflictuality in psychic life, as Freud suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, are far more primal: synthesis and destruction, life and death. The result is a classification of the drives<sup>31</sup> into two categories: “those which lead what is living to death, and others, the sexual instincts, which are perpetually attempting and achieving a renewal of life.”<sup>32</sup> This broad classification, compounded and complicated by the difficulty of identifying the death drive in observable phenomena, envelops the Freudian concept with a psycho-mythological quality.

In Kleinian theory, however, this opposition acquires a clinical application. The life and death drives correspond respectively to the depressive and paranoid-schizoid positions, the former of which designates the mastery of the feelings of ambivalence that in the latter are managed by splitting the object (i.e. the mother's breast) into “good” and “bad” part-objects. In the depressive position, which Klein considers a prerequisite for interpersonal relationships and social life, the child begins to reconcile a series of polarized relations, beginning with his relation to the maternal breast, subsequently comprehending the object (e.g. the mother) as an integrated but complex whole. Fantasies of omnipotent control over the object carried out through projection and introjection give way to a perception of the object as cohesive and separate. In so far as the transition from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position is linked to development, maturation would appear to be closely linked to loss and mourning. However, according to Klein, paranoid-schizoid ways of relating are never given up completely and her writing

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<sup>31</sup> Freud refers to the “death drive” in the plural. Strachey’s translation is “death *instincts*” but this has been much criticized as being unfaithful to the language of the Freudian text, which makes a distinction between *instinkt* and *trieb*. I will exclusively be using “drive” (and generally in the singular) unless referring to a text which uses alternative forms.

<sup>32</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, p. 46.

frames these positions as transient states of mind: the paranoid-schizoid position can be thought of as the phase of development preceding the depressive position as a defense against it and also as a regression from it. Klein's model favors oscillations between these positions rather than a linear progression through stages, thus rejecting the Freudian representation of the ego as developed unity. Although Klein posits these ways of relating to the object in the place of primary narcissism, this view highlights meaning as a relational function that relies on the assimilation of separation in order to consolidate otherwise scattered perceptions and affects.<sup>33</sup>

Extending this oscillation outside of the Kleinian framework and consider Eros – the principle which unites and sustains life in forms of increasing complexity – alongside primary narcissism. This concept, along with the problems and paradoxes it too presents, will be discussed more extensively in the following chapter. The current discussion is primarily concerned with establishing narcissism as the procedural and theoretical complement to the death drive. For those purposes, we can rely on a working definition of narcissism as the process by which the ego is constituted and maintained through psychological investments in its perceived unity. The perspectives considered thus far associate the death drive with a tendency to zero. Following that logic, if we are to frame narcissism in terms of the numerical value it seeks, we might say that it reflects the *tendency to One*. However, interpreting this difference as a binary forecloses the productive ambiguities of both concepts. Perhaps their variance is better conceived of as operating like a binary code – a generative system of alternating zeros and ones which

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<sup>33</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

sustains the necessary tension between illusions of integrity and self-sufficiency and the desire to diminish these conscious representations.

In a collection of case studies titled *A Child is Being Killed*, Serge Leclaire offers some suggestions as to how we might envision this dynamic. According to Leclaire, the life instincts, to which we can ascribe the narcissistic tendency for example, dominate the organization of conscious representations. He writes,

[t]he instinctual forces said to be on the side of life... tend to valorize the positive terms of the opposition and to produce systems of representation and bodies of inscription whose primordial function is always to contain, to keep repressed, and to deny the ‘negativity’ of the other terms in the opposition, as well as heterogeneity itself.<sup>34</sup>

The death instincts, however, appear to resist such concrete notions, privileging instead what is “non-figurative” or non-representable. And yet, nothing can be said, written, or represented about the death drive without relying on the structuring references of signification and the ego that operates within it. The death drive, then, can only be represented as the “not-one,” the dialectical counterpart of language, law, and primary narcissism, without which the death drive cannot be conceived or envisioned. Psychic reality, therefore, is the result of this interminable struggle between the life drives, without which there can be no speaking/desiring “I” and the death drives, which favor the non-figurative and thus work against the “I” as the narcissistic representative of *One*. By this reading, for the “I” to exist as such, it must cut itself off from the unrepresentable of fullness from which it originated. The death drive, in turn, corresponds to the “instinct” in the subject to reject that constitutive loss as a stable truth. In this case, what Freud describes as the most primary desire is also the most terrifying one – to give over to the

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<sup>34</sup> Serge Leclaire, *A Child is Being Killed*. Trans. Marie-Claude Hays, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 40.

unnamable condition of non-differentiation in which the perceived boundaries of self are dissolved into infinite openness or immanent nothingness. But in the absence of any and all points of reference, how can these two conditions be distinguished?

Freud's revised drive theory suggests a peculiar opposition between the life and death drives in which the former both mediate and sustain the latter. Life as we know cannot escape death, but the *desire* for death concentrated in the death drive suggests that this condition is not entirely contrary to life. Rather, the death drive refers to that element of death which is inseparable from life, which requires life as a precondition and emerges as the result or remainder of life. Death dissolves, but the death drive, bound as it is to the condition of life, takes the shape of a shadow – the projection of a presence as its own absence, a negative that retains to some extent its shape but is emptied of contents or, as we will consider at the end of this chapter, *vice versa*. By transforming death into the object of an aim, wish, or desire the Freudian notion of the death drive allows us to examine how the principles of life and death influence and inform one another, which is not distinguishable from how they each operate “independently.” The trouble, it appears, arises if we attempt to isolate life and death, to conceive of them as mutually exclusive. Without reference to death, we cannot conceptualize life as a situation of tension seeking release, the sum of the conflicts and contradictions held together under the uncomfortable fiction of coherence and its unstable representations. If we abandon life, however, death is reduced to a limit of theorization, a concept that will not allow itself to be thought for it forecloses the possibility of the subject that does the thinking.

Regarding his revised theory Freud writes, “our views have from the very first been dualistic, and today they are even more dualistic than before – now that we describe the opposition as being, not between ego-instincts and sexual instincts, but between life



instincts and death instincts.”<sup>35</sup> How to reconcile this dualism? It is my impression that Freud offers a suggestion in his analysis of the game of disappearance and return, wherein the “opposing” drives appear inextricably linked. Not a dualism then, but a difficult dialectic that, as these initial chapters will attempt to show, is comprised entirely of paradoxical elements. However, as we might expect, there are many ways of conceptualizing this contradictory, self-negating dynamic. André Green, for instance, reads the death drive *into* the life drives, sustaining Freud’s assertion that the death drive is the most primary drive through the suggestion that even in the arguably self-preservative instinct of narcissism there persists a trace of primal destructiveness. In *Life Narcissism/Death Narcissism*, Green explores the relation between narcissism and the death drive in a state he terms negative narcissism.

According to Green, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the final drive theory contained therein marked a significant revision of the concept of narcissism presented only seven years earlier. In his 1914 paper on the subject, Freud defines narcissism as the libidinal investment in an always-developing ego. But “On Narcissism” is not at all the straightforward analysis of self-love that one might expect given the title. Rather, it is the preliminary consideration of an unsettling possibility: that the “unity” referred to as ego does not, in fact, designate a complete contained unit where drives, wishes, or desires originate and play out. Instead, this perceived unity is a process governed by a libidinal economy and sustained by an instinct of self-preservation. This concept of narcissism, Green explains, was for psychoanalysis an epistemological expression of what the process of narcissism is for the libido: *the creation of unity where there is none*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> Paraphrased from Green: “In short, narcissism was particularly enticing because it subjected psychoanalytic theory to the same seduction which it itself was an expression of, that is, the illusion of unity; this time with regard to the libido” (*Life Narcissism/Death Narcissism*, p. x).

Yet, as Green notes, while this process would seem of great interest and importance to the project of psychoanalysis, narcissism is scarcely mentioned by Freud following 1920, surviving only under the auspices of the ego-ideal:<sup>37</sup> without the “I” as established by narcissism, the death drive was unthinkable, but the introduction of this conflictual “zero” principle revealed internal contradictions in the narcissistic tendency to One, the most significant of which being its fundamentally *illusory* nature. With *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud revisits his formulation of narcissism only to abandon it almost definitively as a highly tenuous accomplishment of the life drives tasked with mediating a primal destructiveness. That is, in positing the death drive, Freud challenges his own theory of narcissism, making a case against the pertinence or use-value of the concept given that the unified view of the ego established both by primary narcissism (as a psychic function) and by his initial theoretical formulation of it (as a libidinal investment in an autonomous ego) is not congruent with the notion of an underlying current of psychical fragmentation.

Paradoxically, it is precisely because of its illusory but *necessary* nature that narcissism occupies a central position in the dynamic of the drives: if the death drive seeks the release of tensions bound up in a fictive unity, the life drives must protect this unity all the more. And where is the latter better expressed than in the psychic investment of narcissism? Positioned in this way, alongside the death drive, narcissism emerges as a function that conceptually reveals the absence of an origin while psychically concealing it. This central absence, in turn, might explain both the insistence of the self-preservative instincts on a unified libidinal economy and the resistance of the death drives against this monadic model.

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<sup>37</sup> André Green, *Life Narcissism/Death Narcissism*, Trans. Andrew Weller, (London: Free Association Books, 2001), p. 15.

Green insinuates that Freud abandons the concept of narcissism because of the difficulty of the absent origin, a difficulty which he in turn attempts to reconcile by identifying within primary narcissism two different narcissistic tendencies: positive primary narcissism and negative primary narcissism. Both, Green explains, aim at overcoming a prevailing feeling of fragmentation however the two are organized around distinct polarities. What he distinguishes as positive primary narcissism is essentially the dominant interpretation of primary narcissism. Negative primary narcissism, on the other hand, is narcissism as withdrawal from the external world. As an expression of the tendency of the ego to proceed towards zero, Green's negative narcissism juxtaposes primary narcissism and the death drive to conceptualize an experience of *ego-as-emptiness*.

With this concept of negative narcissism, Green calls into question the Freudian formulation of narcissism as situated entirely on the side of the life drives, proposing that positive narcissism has an “inverted double” which seeks its immortality in the non-desire, non-existence, and non-being. He describes this negative double as follows:

[...] Narcissus is also Janus. Instead of sustaining the aim of unifying the ego through the activity of the sexual drives, negative narcissism, under the influence of the Nirvana principle, representing the death drives, tends towards lowering all libido to the level zero, aspiring for psychical death. I think this is what may be logically inferred with regard to the fate of narcissism after the final theory of the drives...<sup>38</sup>

What Green proposes – and elaborates under the notion of “The Dead Mother” – is that the negative narcissist experiences the object as absent even when it is present. As a means of maintaining libidinal tension low, especially in the face of loss or abandonment,

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, p.222.

this form of narcissism posits the ego as an emptiness such that absence can be internalized: instead of resulting in acute but localized psychic pain to the narcissistic ego, loss directly contributes to the sensation of the ego as an expanding vacuity. That is, mourning for the lost object becomes the organizing principle of the ego, and the ego itself becomes one such lost object.

Green's writings on the negative are extensive, and I do not pretend to summarize them here. We will revisit his work on the concept in the following chapter. For now, however, we are primarily concerned with how his theory of negative narcissism incorporates the two categories of drives under the pursuit of an immanent nothingness – life seeking its own renunciation.

For Green, the aim of narcissism is the reduction of tensions to the level zero, “either death or immortality, which is the same thing.”<sup>39</sup> Green clarifies that primary narcissism is “the organization of the ego's component drives into a unitary ego-cathexis”<sup>40</sup> whereas absolute primary narcissism is an expression of the principle of inertia identified as the *Nirvana principle*, a term borrowed from Barbara Low and used by Freud to describe the effort to remove internal tensions associated with both the pleasure principle and the death drive.<sup>41</sup> The narcissistic endeavor then is to do away with the object that is the object of a loss or a lack and as such the indicator that one is limited and incomplete. In positive narcissism the aim would be a self-enclosed and self-sufficient ego, autonomous and omnipotent. In the case of negative narcissism, however, the individual finds his “unity” not in the experience of self as One, but as Zero – in place of desire, the disavowal of desire; in place of omnipotence, profound indifference.

Nevertheless, these two narcissisms appear to share a common aim: the abolition

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p. 149.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> See Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, p. 56.

of the primary difference between one and other. Following Freud, Green describes absolute primary narcissism as a state of zero excitation that can be likened to the experience of the fetus in the womb. Characterized by the absence of need or tension arising from the demands of the external world, this state calls to mind Freud's formulation of the aim of the death drive as the return to inorganic life. In fact, this is the reading of the death drive that propels Green's work: "[t]he metaphor of returning to inanimate life is more powerful than it seems," he writes, "since the goal of this petrification of the ego is anaesthesia and inertia in psychical death."<sup>42</sup> Returning to Lagache's description of the death drive as a formal unity of ideas, Green's reading of the Nirvana principle into absolute primary narcissism suggests that narcissism, in its ultimate configuration, overlaps with the extreme interpretation of the death drive as the zero principle which carries the individual toward or back to a condition of non-existence. Then are the aims of these "opposing" demands actually one in the same? And if so, what does this mean for our dialectic?

#### ONE VS. ONENESS

It seems that as Green points out, "there is therefore a necessary link to be found between narcissism and the death drive, a task Freud scarcely concerned himself with, leaving for us to discover."<sup>43</sup> However, in place of Freud's "dualistic view," Green emphasizes the dialectical nature of this relation. He clarifies that we cannot think usefully about narcissism if we attempt to isolate the concept, as if the problem of *thinking about narcissism* were the same as the problem of narcissism itself, in which the ego, in all of its desire for self-sufficiency, only reveals itself in opposition to an external object. As he

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<sup>42</sup> Green, *Life Narcissism/Death Narcissism*, p. xxi.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p. xi.

explains, *narcissism is desire for the One*.<sup>44</sup> But One does not exist from the outset. The narcissistic ego cannot be the self-referential entity it desires to be. He writes,

[w]hile it is useful, at certain times in our thinking if we wish to understand the nature of narcissism as closely as possible, to shut ourselves away with it, deeply within ourselves – for it is the very core of our ego – the centripetal movement in which the sole object of knowledge is oneself, only reveals its meaning by opposing the object and the ego.”<sup>45</sup>

And still, his interpretation does not help us to move past the limit death presents in the Freudian framework as a negative concept, unrepresentable in the unconscious because it entails the elimination of the individual as center of thought. For Green, it seems that the difficulty of narcissism lies in the element of death it contains. He positions the ego between One and Zero, but as he writes, “while the One can be grasped immediately by phenomenological apperception, the Zero for its part, can never be conceived of when it is oneself that is involved, in the same way that death is unrepresentable for the unconscious.”<sup>46</sup> But I would like to argue the possibility that there exists something on the other side of the One – not only a regressive slipping back into Zero, but the possibility of expansion through dissolution.

We might think of this as *Oneness*, an idea Freud gestures towards in *Civilization and its Discontents* with his notion of the ‘oceanic’ feeling. If it exists, Freud explains, the oceanic feeling is the preserved “primitive ego-feeling” from infancy, when the child is regularly breastfed and does not distinguish his self from the mother’s breast. Or, as Freud himself explains in a rather uncharacteristic way,

[o]riginally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p. xxiii.

world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, unlike the unifying force associated with *Eros*, the ‘oceanic’ feeling described by Freud connotes a dissolution where the boundary between ego and object is lost, blurred, or distorted – a regression to an earlier state of consciousness, before the ego had differentiated itself from the world of objects. Despite associating the ‘oceanic’ feeling with a condition prior to the creation of the ego, Freud at no point draws out the possible correlation between this feeling of limitless non-differentiation and the death drive. Rather, he analyzes the ‘oceanic’ feeling as a regressive fantasy, a surviving fragment of infantile consciousness, seized upon by religion to exploit the “weak-willed.”

But what if the “ancient goal” that we attempt to reach “by paths old and new”<sup>48</sup> is not singular, but plural? In addition to the condition of non-existence or Zero that Freud suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, might we imagine a situation of radical unity that also fulfils the death drive? Though Freud does not explicitly make this association, he does gesture towards the possibility of unboundedness under the heading of the ‘oceanic’ feeling, a notion which makes its appearance nearly ten years after Freud’s theory of the death drive and which he would identify (but also repudiate) as a source of religious sentiment. If this is the case, then the death drive, that force that compels the individual towards the most primary state in his development and towards the paradoxical, self-shattering *jouissance* that lies beyond the pleasure principle, does not belong confined to the domain of biolanalytics. Rather, it extends to the domain of

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<sup>47</sup> Freud (1930), *Civilization and its Discontents*. SE XXI, p. 68.

<sup>48</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 38.

culture, or more specifically of aesthetics and, as we see in *Civilization and Discontents*, of religious feeling.

By considering a condition of *Oneness* in addition to the negativity of Zero, we can conceptualize the One as suspended in a state of tension, not only with the objects and others which constitute it as One, but also between the self-negating conditions before and beyond intersubjectivity. Or, as Green writes, “it will not be enough to introduce its antagonist, the Other. With the One it is necessary to think not only about the Double, but particularly about the Infinity of chaos and the Zero of nothingness.”<sup>49</sup> Green’s concept of negative narcissism enables us to conceptualize psychic death though the withdrawal from the external world in which the psyche find the objects and others that give it shape. In this interpretation of the death drive as manifestation of the Nirvana principle, the ego attempts to satisfy the aim of the drive through a dissociative fugue into the kernel emptiness of the ego. In other words, Zero. But what about Infinity? “The ego,” Green writes, “is never more immortal than when it claims that it no longer has any organs or body.”<sup>50</sup> What do we make then of the fragmented body, the body-in-pieces (or “without organs”) that resists the unifying effects of Eros and the sign? Here I propose that we consider psychic death that is brought about symbolically, not a retreat from the symbolic and its imaginary foundations, but an encounter with its limits, where the necessary fiction of identity begins to disintegrate. As we have and will continue to see, it was not a very stable structure to begin with.

If we consider the One as the aim of narcissism, we might formulate the aim of the death drive as *Oneness*. Whereas in the former the ego draws into itself, withdrawing its libidinal investments in the external world in an effort to become a sealed-off unit, the

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<sup>49</sup> Green, *Life Narcissism/Death Narcissism*, p. xxiii.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p. 222.



latter connotes a dissolution of self, a state of unity or limitlessness with the external world in which neither the ego nor its objects are discernable because they have ceased to be separate, quantifiable entities. This interpretation assumes that if death is a limit of representation, the relation could theoretically be bidirectional, symbolic rupture bringing about in the psyche an experience of the proximity of death. This would imply a satisfaction of the death drive without the abandonment of the external world – the abandonment of self as held together symbolically, but through a function of expansion rather than negation.

For Green, the situation of withdrawal is comparable to that of dissolution, though not equivalent:

Whether the ego achieves a unitary cathexis emerging from fragmentation or whether it appears to attain absolute zero, the effect attained is similar (which does not mean identical). In both cases the ego finds satisfaction in itself; it has the illusion of self-sufficiency and frees itself of vicissitudes and dependence on an object...<sup>51</sup>

Green's work reveals the connections between the death drive and narcissism in a way that avoids a critique of Freud in favor of an approach that opens up the possibilities in the Freudian text. The work that follows would not be possible without a consideration of the role and function of the negative in the psyche, his work being quintessential in this regard. However, this investigation departs from Green's in that its emphasis is on the function of dissolution and, more precisely, the role that primary masochism plays in this phenomenon.

The manifestation of the death drive as self-destructive tendency, I believe, is quite different from the negative narcissism that Green proposes. In my interpretation, Green's

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

concept represents the death drive as a centripetal force – a retreat into the narcissistic wound. However, by my interpretation, the death drive can also manifest as a centrifugal force, directed not towards the negativity in the center, but the (symbolic) chaos in the periphery. And yet neither of these readings disqualifies the other, revealing that there does indeed exist a complex dynamic between narcissism and the death-drive, one that can neither be reduced to a comprisal nor a straightforward dialectic, seeing as neither can find full expression without eliminating the very subject in whom the drives operate and originate. The work of these initial chapters is to explore this dynamic. If death cannot be represented in the mind, let us at least attempt to understand it asymptotically by examining how it sought out, approached, and experienced. To do so, I propose that we consider the relationship between such encounters and the signifying structures which death evades, and though their effects on the subject who in the face of death loses the words “I am.”

2.  
NARCISSISM IN CRISIS

*The dead little girl says, 'I am the one who guffaws in horror inside  
the lungs of the live one. Get me out of there at once!'*

*— Antonin Artaud, *Suppôts et supplications**

As suggested in the previous chapter, we might reconsider the death drive as the internal force or pressure whose aim is contrary to that of primary narcissism. And yet, the dialectical relation between these two categories of instincts cannot simply be reduced to a polarity between construction and dissolution, isolation and merger. Rather, each is oriented, in its own way, towards the foreclosure of intersubjective relationality. Perhaps we expect as much from the death drive, which seeks to restore a primal unity or *Oneness* through the shattering or suspension of subjective difference. However, a closer consideration of the conflicts and contradictions inherent in narcissism reveal that this “self-preservative” instinct, when pushed to its theoretical culmination, may actually pose an equal yet inverse threat to the “I” turned speaking subject. Thus, before examining what is generated by the difficult dialectic between the death drive and primary narcissism, I propose a closer consideration of the “second term” and the structural

instabilities that reveal its product – the ego or “I” – as inherently vacuous and/or wounded. If psychic life is the interplay of the death drive, which aims towards a release of the tensions held together by subjectivity, and the process of narcissism, which works to conceal a fundamental fragmentation or lack, we are left with a subject ceaselessly caught between disappearances. By this reading, the death drive figures as a principle of return in that it empties out a subject that was always-already hollow. What follows in this chapter is a case for that underlying emptiness.

In its absolute configuration, narcissism marks a retreat from meaning as both byproduct and function of intersubjectivity, a fugue into the negativity at the heart of being. The death-drive, on the other hand, may seek discharge *through* meaning or rather, in the confrontation with the chaos concealed in the imaginary and the symbolic that results in a catastrophic release of the tensions within the subject that hold his subjectivity together. If we posit the relation between the two as a polarity, at one end we have denial and negation and at the other, unbounded and unsignifiable totality. In either case, the subject – as both theoretical construct and as mode of experience – disappears. In the narcissistic state, the ego as a closed self-sufficient unit forecloses the possibility of subjectivity, for if both the ego and the subject come into existence through the external world, then the narcissistic denial of the external world negates the self that is in every capacity a function of this relation. In its most extreme configuration, then, narcissism marks a retreat into the vacant center of the “I”. Contrarily, in the return to “stasis” sought by the death drive, subjectivity is suspended through the renunciation of the attachment to the ego, and the unitary self ceases to be such, dissolving into a world without objects or others. In place of the denial of the external world characteristic of the narcissistic mode, here we find a denial of the “I” as center of being and experience. In either of these scenarios, we lose the subject as our point of reference.

This presents a serious complication for the supposed dialectic between primary narcissism and the death drive, suggesting to us that a third, intermediate term is necessary. It is my impression that we find traces of this intermediate term in a number of psychoanalytic concepts, namely all of those characterized by ambivalence and deeply resistant to any form of stabilization. These will be explored in later chapters, but for the time being we can take as an example Kristeva's theory of the abject as a representation and/or revelation of the formless ambiguity that is occluded in the image and the symbol, an encounter with the death that lies on either side of subjectivity. According to the formulation put forth in *Powers of Horrors*, the abject eludes and disturbs the dichotomy between subject and object, laying bare the instability of the object relations that structure symbolic and intersubjective existence and thereby presenting what Kristeva describes as a "narcissistic crisis." However, I would propose that we adjust this slightly, considering the abject and its allied concepts not as posing a crisis in and of themselves, but rather as that revealing the state of crisis the subject is always-already in, confronting the subject with the reality of his interdependence and incoherence from a place *within* subjectivity. In this way, these highly-mobile concepts – all of which signal a theoretical third – allow us to understand the implications of narcissism and the death-drive without entirely foreclosing/dissolving the subject whose experience is the object of our inquiry.

#### EGO WITHOUT ORIGIN

In his 1914 paper "On Narcissism," Freud's first maneuver is to supplant the assumption of narcissism as perversion with the formulation of narcissism as "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature."<sup>1</sup> This original and, to a certain extent,

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<sup>1</sup> Freud (1914), "On Narcissism," *SE XIV*, pp. 73-4.

*necessary* investment of psychic energy in the self, Freud designates *primary narcissism*, which he differentiates from a secondary narcissism that withdraws libido from external objects in the interest of re-directing it inward. Whereas primary narcissism designates the preliminary investment in the ego that grounds the instincts of self-preservation and initiates a process of “self-construction” (or *vice versa*),<sup>2</sup> secondary narcissism connotes an excessive or pathological investment in the self that comes at the cost of the external world. For our purposes, we will be working mainly with primary narcissism as the necessary ego-libido that, as we will see, relies on the object-libido and comes into existence through the external world rather than at its expense. However, we will touch on secondary narcissism, in particular the dynamics involved, in order to conceptualize the untenable isolation of “self-sufficiency” and, consequently, the structural impossibility of an unmitigated narcissistic state.

Freud writes, “we are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed.”<sup>3</sup> While this is not the focus of Freud’s exposition on narcissism, these lines signal the profound shift from the topographical psychology of the unconscious to the ego-psychology characteristic of his later work, encapsulating the peculiar property of the ego that would eventually develop into structuralist and post-structuralist theories of the intersubjectively-constituted

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<sup>2</sup> If the ego does not exist at the start, it would seem that primary narcissism is necessary in order to put in place a mental representation of the ego which the self-preservative instincts seek to protect. Certainly subsequent libidinal investment in the ego in the form of narcissism stems from an instinct or need to preserve the supposed unity designated as “ego.” However, given the ego’s confounding lack of origin – its emergence and negotiation being an effect of its engagement with the external world – it is difficult to disentangle the functions of preservation and construction. The ego, it would appear, is always *in formation* and the complementary effects of these dual processes maintain it, each re-negotiation of the ego facilitating its perpetuation and each investment of psychic energy in the ego-as-unit affirming the product of this negotiation or construction while obscuring that any such processes have taken place. In other words, what narcissism seeks to preserve is an ego which must first and forever be constructed or constituted and yet, the entire enterprise of narcissistic self-preservation hinges on obscuring this fact, on supplanting the psychic reality of ego-as-process with a formal unity which is taken to be an ontological fact.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, pp. 76-77.

subject. In that regard, this observation also highlights the element of the narcissistic tendency most relevant for our present discussion, namely the *absence of an origin* or, more accurately, the *origin as absence*. And yet, we can only grasp this absence through the present elements that obscure it, by backtracking through the processes by which the ego not only preserves itself but also passes itself off as primal despite inconsistencies inherent therein. In other words, the means to conceptualize the ego's lack of origin is through its desperate *want of origin* – narcissism.

In the Freudian account, this want of origin takes the form of ego-libido. Unlike the object-libido that sends out and binds psychic energy in the form of object-cathexes, the ego-libido re-directs psychic energy inward. But if as Freud points out, the ego does not exist from the start, if there is not yet a discernable ego to be preserved, what prompts the initial interior investment of libido and where, if not at the “true ego,” is that psychic energy directed?

Accentuating this theoretical complication, Freud writes, “we form an idea of there being an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects, but which fundamentally persists and is related to the object-cathexes much as the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out.”<sup>4</sup> However, he goes on to explain this “original” allocation of libido “remained hidden from us at the outset, and only the *emanations* of this libido – the object-cathexes – could be discerned.”<sup>5</sup> Returning to Freud's metaphor, it is as if the body of the amoeba can only be discerned when it sends out its pseudopodia, through this temporary protrusion into the external world. It would appear then that the question that regards the ego then, is not “who?” or “what?” but rather “*how?*” – what are the psychic and symbolic mechanisms by which it

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 76.

comes into being and to what end? In attempting to answer this question, we find that only in this space of development, between illusion and the external world, does the ego exist as such and even then, as a function of loss.

As Freud explains, we can only distinguish the ego-instincts from the sexual instincts following an initial object-cathexis.<sup>6</sup> Prior to this original object-cathexis, the infant exists in a monadic state, unable to discern neither objects nor others and therefore unable to discern himself – his self – as an independent unit. This inability to distinguish between self and other is exemplified in the infant's relation to the mother's breast. As if a vestige of the intrauterine stages of development in which the needs of the foetus are met by the mother before they arise, the nursing infant takes the breast which nourishes him to be an extension of himself.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, at this stage, object-libido and ego-libido (as well as the types of love which correspond to them – anaclitic and narcissistic, respectively) are not differentiated. Furthermore, with ego and object being an extension of each other, the result is a compound love in which the anaclitic and narcissistic types fold into one another, any love or libido directed at the (not-yet) object amounting to an investment in the (not-yet) ego and *vice versa*.

The traumatic separation experienced at birth is not sufficient to establish individuation: another separation must take place, this time between the ego-to-be and its object. Through this separation, by which the object becomes external and the mother becomes other, the object-libido becomes differentiated from the ego-libido. This differentiation allows the infant to form an idea of the person to whom the object of satisfaction belongs and, via this identification of object/other, an idea of its own autonomy as well. This implies the following:

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> See Freud (1905), "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," *SE VII*, pp. 123-246.



- (1) The ego comes into being through a *loss* – the loss of the object that was once an extension of the self and, in turn, the loss of the psychic energy invested in the object in the form of object-libido.
- (2) The ego's recognition of its autonomy coincides with recognition of the *limits* of that autonomy as suggested by the existence of objects and others external to it and not under the influence of its "omnipotence of thought."

According to Freud, the sending out of psychic energy in the form of object-libido "impoverishes" the ego. And yet, as we have seen, he also implies that prior to the recognition of the object as external and the subsequent investment of libido in that object, neither ego nor ego-libido are discernable as such. The ego, then, emerges as a result of its own impoverishment, its very existence both a function and concession of incompleteness. Narcissism, in turn, could be interpreted as the ego's instinct to obscure the fact of its absent origin, a means of establishing and subsequently investing in the mental representations of ego-as-whole to mediate the fact that through the relation with the external world the ego is depleted and constituted, or rather, constituted as a function of its depletion. By this formulation, narcissism appears to be a defense mechanism, a means of bypassing the problem of the origin, overcompensating for the foundational lack or incompleteness of the ego as established by the fact that it is only made discernable by an object, an other, a *separation*. As Stephen Frosh suggests, "narcissistic libido is not just love for the self, but love that covers up a loss."<sup>8</sup>

The narcissistic fantasy of self-sufficiency, then, will remain precisely that – a fantasy – any perception of self-containment or self-contentment being in itself a product

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Frosh, *Identity Crisis: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and the Self*. (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 70.

of an experience of absence or loss and the subsequent mental representation of this absence as incorporated by the ego through its identifications. Despite this, or perhaps to conceal the fact of loss and fragmentation that is the kernel truth of the ego, the narcissistic mode works to re-inscribe the ego and its illusion of self-sufficiency, unifying absence and disparity into a coherent mental representation of self that is then reinforced through the interplay of body-ego and ego ideal. In a display of the tendency towards greater complexity associated with *Eros*, the ego synthesizes and organizes psychic contents into a unified concept of the self that the body-ego holds together: the many comprised in the ego are integrated in the mental representation of One as suggested by the unit of the body. We will explore the significance of this process and the difficulties therein shortly but first, an alternate reading of the ego via its relation to the I-function that considers narcissism from a more Lacanian perspective, not only as a defense mechanism but also as the initial and sustained investment in a formative illusion.

#### EGO-AS-OBJECT

How do the psychic energies become differentiated? Freud arrives at the conclusion that in the state of narcissism, they exist together. To explain why this might be, we could suggest that the ego-libido is object-libido, that although ego-libido is directed toward the self, it too is actually oriented *outward* as an investment in the *idea* of the ego. Freud himself poses a similar question, asking if these two types of psychic energy cannot be consolidated. However, he dismisses this possibility given that the ego is not present from the start and thus cannot be cathected as an object.<sup>9</sup> And yet, if only through an initial libidinal investment in an object do we begin to discern the ego-libido and the unity in which this libido circulates, perhaps the relation to the object provides the psychic

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<sup>9</sup> Freud (1914), "On Narcissism," *SE XIV*, p. 78.

framework for the ego's relation to itself, the result being an ego which is also in effect an object. If this is the case, then we find in Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage a suggestion as to what may be the "new psychical action" that is added to the auto-erotic drives in order to bring about narcissism,<sup>10</sup> namely the *capture by the image*.

Whereas Freud posits an ego ideal projected by the adult individual as "the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal,"<sup>11</sup> in Lacan's formulation the process of idealization is compounded by *identification*. As discussed, in infancy the individual lacks in any concept of himself as such. By the Freudian account, this is observed in the relation of not-yet ego to not-yet object, and a decisive shift occurs when narcissistic love and attachment love become differentiated and the latter, folding into the former, is experienced as a formative effect on the ego that operates through the ego ideal. But if this ego ideal is a precipitate of attachments and object-cathexes – if it *leans on* its objects and attachments as the name "anaclisis" suggests – it would mean that this unified representation of the self as it should be is actually a composite, a patchwork. The standard by which the ego measures itself is the sum of its parts, the caveat being that its component parts are actually *others*.

The formation of the ego ideal, then, implies an idealization in two parts, the first being an idealization of the other or object that the ego ideal incorporates and the second being the narcissistic idealization of the ego-as-unit to be submitted to comparison to this composite ideal. However, as Freud explains, "idealization is a process that concerns an object; by it that object, without any alteration in its nature is aggrandized and exalted in the subject's mind."<sup>12</sup> By this account, it is not the ego itself that is idealized (and objectified) but rather a mental representation of the ego in an ideal *unified* form that

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 94.

subsumes the heterogeneity of its composition. Turning to the Lacanian framework, it is only through this mental representation of ego-as-object that the individual establishes a point of reference for his selfhood.

For Lacan, this representation is the ego, the imaginary fixity identified as “I” that is contrasted to the shifting entity known as the *subject*. Whereas the subject is mobile, constituted and defined in (symbolic) relations, the ego is inert, not an entity in itself, but a function – an *imaginary* function – that establishes the self as unit, a stable object that can then be submitted to symbolization. Like the Freudian ego and ego ideal, the Lacanian ego and the subject are irreducibly distinct and yet, it is only through the ego represented under the sign of the “I” that the subject speaks: the individual can only assume his position as subject via the imaginary “I,” which does not connote the “true ego,” if such a thing can even be posited, but rather the ego-as-object that is animated and assumes meaning through the symbolic.<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is precisely from the “failure” to approximate the “true ego” that the “I” derives its function. Or, as Lacan explains:

...the ego isn't the *I*, isn't a mistake, in the sense in which classical doctrine makes of it a partial truth. It is something else – a particular object within the experience of the subject. Literally, the ego is an object – an object which fills a certain function which we here call the imaginary function. <sup>14</sup>

The ego ideal set out by Freud provides a prototype. If we apply the Lacanian perspective, the unification of that prototype with or under the image of the body-ego produces an object. Although, as Lacan explains, Freud's metapsychological texts aim at establishing the excentricity of the subject in relation to the ego,<sup>15</sup> because he considers this from the perspective of unconscious fantasy and cannot yet take into account the “stabilizing”

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<sup>13</sup> Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, Ed. Jacques Alain Miller, Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 38-41.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 44

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

effects of the image, he does not formulate the individual's relation to his own ego as one of subject to object. In the Lacanian framework, however, this prototype is submitted to the capture by the image in a process that fixes the ego to the illusion of wholeness in the form of an imaginary "I" that the subject, choosing alienation over the fragmentary real, henceforth identifies with. The issue of the excentricity of the subject vis-à-vis the ego, therefore, is inextricable from the role played by the image, namely the spectral image, in the precipitation of the ego as an object that is integral to the experience of the subject and yet simultaneously at variance with him.

To recapitulate Lacan's paper on "The Mirror-Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I'": the child sees in the mirror a coherent visual counterpoint that counteracts his primordial feeling of fragmentation. Despite the fact that the coordinated image does not correspond to his uncoordinated experience, he identifies himself in that image – he identifies *as* that image – situating the otherwise discordant ego in a gestalt that doubles as a promise of the unattainable "wholeness" which the child subsequently anticipates. However, this privileging of image over experience results in an "I" that corresponds to the ego but functions externally as the idea that holds it together. We might say, then, that the capture by the image that takes place in the mirror-stage brings together the two (imaginary) processes of idealization and identification, idealization being the process which posits the illusion of wholeness or fixity as applied both to the identifying "I" and the object identified with, and identification being the process that establishes affinity based on this perceived but illusory unity.

Do we find in these dual processes the "new psychological action" that must be added to the auto-erotic drives to produce narcissism? If so, then the action which enables the ego to discern itself from objects paradoxically does so by fixing the ego as one such object with the help of an image that provides the basis for a gestalt. The mirror-stage, therefore,

is defined by its alienating function, producing an ego as object and an “I” that is, in effect, an other. And yet, as Lacan explains, this constitutive (mis)identification with the spectral “I” is but the first in a long series of alienating misrecognitions: “the imaginary is the matrix where the “I” is precipitated in a primordial form before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other and language restores it to its universal function as subject.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the identification with the image is the first of an endless chain of misrecognitions that will inscribe the subject, the product of constant negotiation, deferral, and dialectic relation that under the sign of the “I” is represented as stable and coherent.

However, the imaginary nature of the “I” does not undermine its *necessity*. Through the association with the body, this imaginary entity assumes a tangible nature on which symbolic meaning is then inscribed. In other words, the “I” in its bodily envelope functions much like paper money, which despite lacking any intrinsic material worth, acts as “stable” currency (though corresponding to fluctuating values) and in that capacity serves as an instrument of exchange. The “I” then is an imagined “object” projected onto the surface of the body whose integrity sustains the illusion, but precisely because it operates in and through this multiplicity of displacements, it serves as the basis for symbolic interaction. Following Lacan, we might say that the speaking subject does not *use* language, but rather is constituted by language by virtue of sharing its defining principle: the replacement of the thing-in-itself for its (partial) recognition.

As Lacan discusses in *Seminar II*, the function of language is not to represent reality – an impossibility because no “true” correlation exists – but to provide a means of recognition. And yet, this recognition cannot be of the thing *as such* because language

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<sup>16</sup> Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function” in *Ecrits*, Trans. Bruce Fink, (New York/London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1999), pp. 75-81; p. 76.

functions through difference and deferral, what Derrida refers to as *différance*. Thus, the imaginary register stabilizes the fixity to be submitted to and mobilized by the symbolic. In so doing however, it also introduces an inevitable element of instability in the form of misidentification. But this interplay of stability and instability, or rather of instability *disguised* as stability, is the essence of the subject's discursive life. In this seminar, in which Lacan most explicitly takes up Freud's concept of the ego and explores its relevance following Levi-Strauss and Saussure, we find the ego operating not as a self-conscious entity, but as the function which makes consciousness of self and other possible:

The ego, the imaginary function, intervenes in life only as symbol. One makes use of the ego in the same way the Bororo make use of the parrot. The Bororo says *I am a parrot*. We say *I am me [moi]*. None of that has the slightest importance. The important thing is the function it has.<sup>17</sup>

By assuming a place in the symbolic, the "I" turned subject acquires a capacity for meaningful action. However, this agency comes at the cost of self-sufficiency: he is constituted as the Other's other and by identifying himself in this way, by recognizing himself on these terms, he is also other to himself. The symbolic then is the detour whereby the individual arrives back at himself as a speaking subject. And the *différance* that characterizes the experience of the subject not only mimics symbolic thought, but also reveals how it functions as the chain of movements between the not-yet and the perpetually deferred. Meaning exists precisely because the word and the thing are not identical; the subject exists precisely because the "I" and the individual are not identical. Like a dictionary in which the "meanings" of words are always other words, both occupy the space of possibilities created by incongruence.

The ego then is both a symptom and denial of insufficiency, of the impossibility of

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<sup>17</sup> Lacan, *Seminar II*, p. 38.

capturing under the sign of the “I” the fragmentation and instability of the individual in his function as subject. The ego will never converge with the subject. Each time the subject attempts to affirm himself – his *self* as the “stable” ego represented by the imaginary “I” – he essentially proclaims “I am ~~me~~” because “me” is not the stable fixed entity I believe it to be and yet this illusion, this fixing of the ego so it may be submitted to a sign (albeit a barred one) is necessary for intersubjective relation as structured by the symbolic. Indeed this process marks the entry into the symbolic, which operates according to this very principle: not only is the word *not* the thing, but the word is precisely where the thing is not. Therefore, as fictive and fragile as it may be, the “I” establishes both the vital relation between the individual and his ego and, contingently, between the individual and the symbolic existence that structures and mediates his existence as subject.

#### THE CASTRATED SUBJECT

Comparing these frameworks, we find that the Freudian concept of narcissism privileges autonomy or self-sufficiency while the Lacanian reading of the ego privileges *coherence*, autonomy being an impossibility given one’s dependence on the image and the signifier.<sup>18</sup> In the following chapter, we will see how autonomy and impossibility are unified under Bataille’s notion of *sovereignty*, wherein the illusion of coherence is displaced by an incoherence so total that it becomes an alternative, albeit incomprehensible, form of wholeness. For now, however, I wish to stay with the paradoxical positioning of the ego or “I” within psychoanalytic inquiry itself, as the variable which consistently appears as either composite or incomplete and, despite its self-perception, appears only on those conditions. What is inaccessible (or inexpressible) under the sign of “I” recalls the inaccessibility of death as considered in the previous chapter: a state of either absence or

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<sup>18</sup> Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” p. 80.



fragmentation. We cannot approach its so-called “signified” without effectively abandoning the “I” as point of (self-)perceptive reference and symbolic entry, otherwise by resorting to a fetishization of the lack innate to subjectivity (as in melancholia) or a view of identity itself as a perversion of said lack. These considerations will be taken up again in the following pages, but first it is necessary to establish why *insufficiency* is inherent to subjectivity.

Unlike the subject, who is always in question, it appears that the ego is never in question, or at least it cannot ask the question of itself. Doing so, it seems, would undermine the narcissistic enterprise by revealing its construction on an ever-shifting foundation. For instance, narcissism plays into the desire for the other in the form of the desire for *recognition*. But how can the “I” be recognized when its own relation to itself is one of *meconnaissance*? This formulation suggests that the “I” is an other from the start, the object of the self’s own othering gaze. Above we reflected on how this lack of self-identical origin relates to the desire for coherence as “satisfied” by the image. In relation to logos, we encounter yet another well-disguised threat to this desired integrity: only the castrated subject is representable.

The main textual reference here is Lacan’s 1960 paper “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” wherein he deconstructs the imaginary and symbolic processes by which we give into an identity which is not one and in so doing assume a place in the monolithic structure of the Law – simultaneously the source of desire in the form of lack and the failure of desire in the form of its deferral or postponement. As Lacan concludes, “[c]astration means that *jouissance* has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire.”<sup>19</sup> Here desire is the movement by which the

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<sup>19</sup> Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire” in *Ecrits*, Trans. Bruce Fink, (New York/London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1999), pp. 671-702; p. 700.

subject is de-centered, separated from the object (*objet a*) which he then seeks, always to a degree of disappointment, in order to reconstitute his unity in the pursuit of satisfaction. That is, his desire is to reunite with the *jouissance* that has been given up in order to enter into this dialectic, and its articulation as desire also operates as a defense against that *jouissance* and the limit it designates for the speaking subject.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the function of the subject disqualifies from the outset a “complete” recognition of the individual, except under the condition of a nihilating subversion which we might equate with death.

Following Freud, Lacan suggests that the criteria for recognition is integration. However, given that any act of (self-)perception or recognition is contingent on a doubling or splitting of the organism in to seeing and seen,<sup>21</sup> any such unity or coherence is an impossibility as soon as it is posited. And yet this impossibility is readily dissembled by the capture and submission to the image by which “the ego masks its duplicity.”<sup>22</sup> That is, the functions by which the ego assures itself of an “indisputable existence” are contingent upon *alienation* and *amputation*.

This is what the subject is missing in thinking he is exhaustively accounted for by his cogito – he is missing what is *unthinkable* about him...

We cannot ask this question of the subject qua *I*. He is missing everything he needs in order to know the answer, since if this subject, *I*, was dead, he would not know it.<sup>23</sup>

Lacan alludes here to the Freud’s dream of the father who “didn’t know he was dead” and, despite his deteriorated appearance, behaved as though he were still alive.<sup>24</sup> To briefly

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 699.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p. 673.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 685.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p. 694.

<sup>24</sup> Freud (1900), *The Interpretation of Dreams (Part II)*, *SE V*, pp. 429-31. Freud writes, “[i]t very commonly happens that in dreams of this kind the dead person is treated to begin with as though he were alive, that he then suddenly turns out to be dead and that in a subsequent part of the dream he is alive

interpret the reference in this context, we might say that in order to instantiate the distance/difference needed for self-perception, the individual relates to himself as dead. But paradoxically, it is on the condition of this death and, even more crucially, its *disavowal* that he assumes discursive life.

In Lacan, however, the scope of this reading is dilated as the dead father becomes the phantom of omnipotence – the Name-of-the-Father – whose Law gives the subject the possibility of desire through the instantiation of prohibition. Whereas the prior interpretation focuses more strictly on the relation between language and negativity, the dialectics of which will be explored in greater detail shortly, the Lacanian formulation evokes the castration complex: the (dead) Father-turned-Name demands a phallic sacrifice in exchange for the possibility of desire and its double in the form of speech. The castrated subject, in turn, only has access to the lost phallus via the Other, who does not necessarily possess the phallus but is experienced as that which denies or deprives the subject of phallic authority. It is this deviation of demand (or *jouissance*) through the Other that makes it articulable by transforming it into its alienated form – desire. Thus, castration is the function which seals desire, with the phallic signifier suggesting not a self-identical possession but rather the persistent threat of not-having. Turned symbol, it can be “had” in its absence, a strategy that has the dual function of protecting the endangered phallus while masking that it has always-already been lost. As Lacan writes elsewhere, the phallus “is the signifier of the very loss the subject suffers due to fragmentation brought on by the signifier,”<sup>25</sup> and the ego is the concealment of that loss,

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once more. This has a confusing effect. It eventually occurred to me that this alternation between death and life is intended to represent *indifference* on the part of the dreamer. (‘It’s all the same to me whether he’s alive or dead.’) This indifference is, of course, not real but merely desired; it is intended to help the dreamer to repudiate his very intense and often contradictory emotional attitudes and it thus becomes a dream-representation of his *ambivalence*” (p. 431).

<sup>25</sup> Lacan, “In memory of Ernest Jones: On His Theory of Symbolism” in *Ecrits*, Trans. Bruce Fink, (New York/London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1999), pp. 585-601; p. 599.

the function behind which “the neurotic hides the castration that he denies.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, the phallus designates meaning effects as a whole, which it initiates by its disappearance,<sup>27</sup> and the ego in turn assumes its activity as the denial of that disappearance.

The phallus is given up – the price paid for desiring – and this transaction is excised such that no judgement can be properly made about its existence, but it always-already as if it never existed nor belonged to the subject: “[s]uch is the inaugural affirmation, which can no longer recur except through the veiled forms of unconscious speech, for it is only by the negation of the negation that human discourse allows us to return to it.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, in the symbol of the phallus, renunciation and disavowal of that renunciation are bound together, a double negative which allows for the “positivism” of psychic life which works to conceal or deny this lack, first and foremost to itself. But is there another way to interpret this double negative, this negation of negation?

Unable to find its certainty, subjectivity thus relies on the *anticipation of certainty* as conferred by a signifier, which is in itself meaningless, or rather whose “meaning” equates to none other than the discursive detours which veil that meaninglessness. This situation is described by Lacan as “the ambiguity of a misrecognizing that is essential to knowing myself [*un méconnaître essential au me connaître*].”<sup>29</sup> Symbolic life then reveals a significant unity in intention that is, counter-intuitively perhaps, sustained by constitutive ambiguity. It is this very ambiguity whereby thought can be used to contradict or lie to itself. Indeed these appear to be the functions which instantiate language in the

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<sup>26</sup> Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” p. 700. See also “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” in *Ecrits*, pp. 445-489; pp.463-4.

<sup>27</sup> Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus” in *Ecrits*, pp. 575-584.

<sup>28</sup> Lacan, “Response to Jean Hyppolite’s Commentary on Freud’s ‘Verneinung’” in *Ecrits*, pp. 318-333; pp. 322-323.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” p. 684.

first place and establish its primary aim: to deny or defend against a castration that has already occurred. Thus, insofar as the phallus is concerned, the truth is not in the place where it never left, like some purloined letter. Rather, it is in the place where it never was. The consequence? “This moment of cutting is haunted in the form of a bloody scrap: the pound of flesh that life pays in order to turn it into the signifier of signifiers, which it is impossible to restore, as such, to the imaginary body...”<sup>30</sup>

Diane Jonte-Pace offers an alternative to all this phallic anxiety. In *Speaking the Unspeakable*, she argues that the emphasis on castration as the decisive turning point stems from the Oedipal masterplot. But perhaps we can follow another, less explicit current in Freud: the “counterthesis” suggested by the desire of the mother and, in his later work, the unspoken link between death and religion. According to Jonte-Pace, these themes destabilize the masculine reactivity of the Oedipal paradigm in absentia, unsettling the family romance as the psychoanalytic catch-all. In place of the death wish that polarizes around the father and the stress upon parricidal phantasies as the basis for culture and religion, she invites us to consider the devouring body which is denied or, as per Kristeva, abjected so that desire can both reveal and hide itself.

In developing the themes that bring us back to pre-oedipal considerations, Jonte-Pace follows lines of inquiry that avoid psychoanalytic androcentrism, suggesting that castration anxiety is secondary to anxieties surrounding the original loss that instantiates an even more elemental repression. By this reading, the ego is an internalization of absence or incompleteness that proceeds from the differentiation from the mother and the maternal body, such that the organizing principle of the ego is one of melancholic mourning. “The ego, in other words, acts as a memorial or monument for the losses that created its structures... We become, in this paradigm, what we have lost. The shadow of

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<sup>30</sup> Lacan, “The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power” in *Ecrits*, pp. 489-542; p. 526.

the lost object becomes the ego.”<sup>31</sup> By this reading, the narcissistic tendency (which encompasses melancholia) is both byproduct of and defense against a foundational loss – the loss of a state of fusion without difference, a situation which can never be fully mourned for mourning itself only makes the separation more acute. And yet, the experience of separation is necessary for the becoming and continuity of self; fusion or (re)union equates to symbolic disintegration, to death.

In fact, as Jonte-Pace points out, even the fort-da game (and the compulsion that it enacts) arises in response to maternal absence, an attempt to “master” loss or separation through traumatic repetition. But this interpretation does not end with Ernst: though *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was published shortly after his daughter Sophie’s death, Freud finds it important to mention that it was written when his daughter was “young and blooming,” denying any possible correlation.<sup>32</sup> Death, it seems, signals a dispossession which goes beyond the fear of castration: the loss of the primary object or the loss of oneself as the object that results from this initial distinction. Thus, as Jean-Bertrand Pontalis also suggests, the experience of negation, absence, or death corresponds to an unconscious component that is as vital and more primary than sexuality, the latter operating as a means to divert from the former, shaping the ego that fantasizes integrity and immortality by negating castration and death as its unyielding bookends.<sup>33</sup>

Jonte-Pace also draws religion into this framework, exploring the connection between death, maternity, and spirituality in relation to Freud’s 1928 paper “A Religious

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<sup>31</sup> Diane Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud’s Cultural Texts*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 136.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, pp. 47-49.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, “On death-work in Freud, in the self, in culture” in *Psychoanalysis, Creativity, and Literature*, Ed. Alan Roland, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 86. See also Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Trans. Leon Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 26.

Experience” and suggesting that, like the dead mother, the notion of an absent God also represents “a heavenly home in the uncanny.”<sup>34</sup> I set aside this element of religiosity in the present context as it will be revisited in subsequent chapters. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how these evasive threads – death, maternal absence, the uncanny, and religiosity – already appear intertwined in Freud’s texts under a promise of fusion experienced by the ever-emergent ego as aim of a drive and as well as a threat, both likewise unthinkable. All appear to signal a sinister but all-too-familiar terror of engulfment that threatens the boundaries of self as it comes into being out of an undifferentiated state.

Kristeva, who picks up many of Freud’s deferred speculations, argues that these uneasy objects and the archaic instinct they evoke suggest a wound deeper than that of castration. Together they mark a “rage against the symbolic,”<sup>35</sup> against the father and his law. The Oedipal framework however conceals this complex dynamic of fear and fascination under the ambivalence towards the father or rival; the paternal injunction (paired with the objectification of the mother) reconditions a desire for death into the deadliness of desire. But the death anxiety provoked by the former cannot be contained or summarized in the castration anxiety of the latter. Indeed, according to Kristeva, castration anxiety is but one of the echoes of abjection anxiety, the fear of a localized amputation that minimizes the more consuming threat of the loss of bodily integrity, doubly-dreaded because it also recalls the subject of the constitutive splits which instantiated his identity in the first place.

These accounts gravitate beyond or *before* the Oedipal drama, focusing on the earliest repression of the unthinkable that establishes one’s subjective identity and

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<sup>34</sup> Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 178.

suggesting the primacy of the death drive over the castration complex. A mutilation occurs nevertheless. The point of emphasis however is not “the pound of flesh” but the initial experience of differentiation which severs, dislocates, and casts the Real out of the subject, positioning it outside where he can then attempt to refind it. Still, these readings converge with the Freudian or Lacanian descriptions, all seeming to infer that subjectivity is contingent on the foreclosure of plenitude. As in Lacan’s formulation, in which *jouissance* is exchanged for its inverse in the form of desire, the experience of (non-discursive) fullness is sacrificed in exchange for psychic life, which in turn is the (re)seeking of that fullness as conditioned by the nostalgia for a lost wholeness encompassed in the death drive. In other words, life and death are not in opposition. Rather they sustain one another through the play of their inconsistencies and impossibilities.

This understanding provides a theoretical pivot for investigation which might be summarized as follows: life is propelled by the repression of its deathly origin, and death is the condition that first makes life possible and then restores to that life the fullness that it renounces in order to perpetuate itself. Still, these are speculations and “dark continents” which cannot be fully pursued as such, only formulated as insistent and interruptive questions, as riddles which “escape Oedipal solutions.”<sup>36</sup>

### *JE ME TUE*

As Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “[h]itherto ... all the paths along which we have traveled have led us towards the light – towards elucidation and fuller understanding. But as soon as we endeavor to penetrate more deeply into the mental processes involved ... every path will end in darkness.”<sup>37</sup> As in the unplumbable depth of

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<sup>36</sup> Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Freud (1900), *The Interpretation of Dreams (Part II)*, SE V, p. 511.



the dream, there is a domain where interpretation fails and bends back on itself. We may call it the “navel,” reminiscent of the site of umbilical connection and inexorable separation, or simply a “great unknown” that is beyond the thinking that leads us towards it. In either case, we refer to those places where interpretation begins and never finishes, returning always to its own blindness. In the following chapter we will consider why this ontological blindness or uncertainty is deeply demonstrative. Here however, I mainly wish to challenge the narcissistic certainty that is none other than the anticipation of that certainty, a “truth” that is only visible from a distance, when we are standing apart from it.

Without the instrument of modern linguistics at his disposal, there are limits to Freud’s theory of subject-formation and, consequently, of death as an experience of the *speaking subject*. But perhaps this makes his work all the more instructive, the psychic processes and interpretations inaccessible on the level of signifiers appearing as disruptions resistant to theoretical synthesis. Paradoxes, theoretical knots, repetitions, and questions that hang in suspense appear to *implicitly* (or instinctively?) designate the effects of unassimilable content without irremediably altering its unconscious quality, suggesting an elusive or evasive element of the unconscious that must not, cannot, will not be transcribed into conscious awareness and yet conditions its pathways. Of this unseen dimension, Lacan writes,

instinct [...] is defined as a kind of [experiential] knowledge (*connaissance*) we admire because it cannot become [articulated] knowledge (*savoir*). But in Freud’s work something quite different is at stake, which is a *savoir* certainly, but one that doesn’t involve the slightest *connaissance*, in that it is inscribed into a discourse of which the subject... knows neither the meaning nor the text, nor in what language it is written, nor even that it was

tattooed on his shaven scalp while he was sleeping.<sup>38</sup>

That is, the subject's knowing is contingent upon a denial or expulsion of awareness regarding where or how that knowing originates: instinct is encrypted into subjectivity as refusal of the cipher.

The theoretical interventions thus far suggest that narcissism represents a negotiation of symbolic life and death that cannot be accomplished without the element of negativity which it works to reconcile and/or conceal. But is this a characteristic of narcissism itself or of the imaginary and symbolic processes which it institutes and deploys? We know from the mechanisms of word-presentation that language operates on absence. Then the "I" too must have a negative component. André Green is a crucial referent here. In *The Work of the Negative*, he points out the formative association between language and various negating operations such as denial, disavowal, and foreclosure. In fact, as he suggests, the topic of negation, and particularly its complex positioning within psychoanalysis, is linked with linguistics even before the emergence of any such field. Green points out that the use of verbal negation as an integral psychic defense, as well as a way to free oneself from the consequences of repression, is theoretically developed by Freud in his 1925 article "Negation." Therein Freud considers two types of negation. The first, a rejection of an unpleasant or unassimilable idea (i.e. *Verleugnen* or "disavowal"), is a defensive mechanism that allows the individual to successfully form a thought while distancing himself from it. By constructing it in a negative form, the individual (consciously) avoids responsibility for its disagreeable implications. Freud distinguishes this from "negation" (i.e. *Verneinung*), which is the (negative) conclusion by the psyche that external reality fails to satisfy desire. What the

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<sup>38</sup> Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," p. 680.

individual seeks in the outside world, in other words, is judged by the psyche to be lacking. This type of negation, as Freud explains, amounts to an assertion of absence that, while disappointing, is a necessary form of reality-testing as well as the basis for hallucinatory satisfaction. *Verneinung*, thus, is the negation that establishes the distinction between ideational content and external reality, producing the mental representation of a wish as a consequence of the absence of the wished-for object. Absence, in other words, is a precondition of the emergence of the mental representation, and negation is the ideational operation that allows the individual to articulate the gap between what is desired and what is immediately present.

For Green, however, the negative encompasses more than the denial of the positive or the imperceptibility of absence, both of which still have inverted counterparts in the representational domain. He suggests another mode of negation in the form of an aporia maintained through denial and resistance and existing only on the stipulation that it *never* exist. This “Nothing,” he explains, refers to all that is unable to be represented to the extent that is not even subject to repression, nor to association with other representations – that which cannot be accounted for by the psyche and which is expelled in order that other psychic content may exist. Unlike repression, which still maintains an unconscious representation, the categorically inaccessible negativity which Green proposes can be traced only in the defensive mechanisms it evokes. And narcissism – in both its primary and negative forms – appears to operate as one such defense. Or, as Green writes, “[t]he negative appears to be a precondition of access to the concept of the subject.”<sup>39</sup> The negative then is all that works against recognition, interpretation, and the regulation of forms, and yet it cannot be extricated from these processes. For instance, the very notion of a primal object or unsignifiable Thing exists because of a discourse that

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<sup>39</sup> Green, *The Work of the Negative*, p. 19.

negates and overwrites such an object, such that it can only exist for and through discourse and the constituted subject who reconstructs it mythically to explain some intrinsic nostalgia or dissatisfaction. Thus, following Green, we might say that there is no language without the work of negation and no negation without the preliminary construction of a notional domain.<sup>40</sup>

What the aporia signals therefore is not quite an absence, but rather the non-verbal substratum of psychic life. It presents itself and persists as an *epistemological problem*, and according to Green it is precisely this problem that conditions Freud's theory of narcissism and that "raise[s] its head again with the final theory of the drives."<sup>41</sup> Thus, perhaps more is said by the implicit than the explicit, particularly concerning the intuition of a psychoanalytic process that begins to disintegrate as it approaches the unsayable. Furthermore, given that discourse cannot illuminate this blind spot, the only epistemological recourse – other than abandoning the attempt on the basis of inevitable failure – is to consider the relation *between* forms of negativity instead of staring into a singular abyss. Indeed, this is Green's methodology:

It looks as if the conceptual fringes work secretly on the central concepts, clarifying them in a way which makes them appear in a new light. They would thus reveal, through their potential for reversal, the measure of the negativity which they enclose.<sup>42</sup>

I wish to carry out a similar approach here, extending it also to the undifferentiated, which despite its patent but indiscernible fullness also seems to function as a mode of negation: one which negates all other forms of negation, and thus the entirety of the notional domain.

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p. 3.

Lacan tells us that “the ego is never but half of the subject; moreover, it is the half that he loses in finding that image.”<sup>43</sup> In this interpretation, the passage into the representational domain marks a mortal splitting, and for all its promised wholeness, the image always-already signals a self-divided being. For Maurice Blanchot, this manifests as the problem of language and of writing, a problem that might be encapsulated in the sentence “*je me tue*.”<sup>44</sup> A straightforward translation renders this sentence as “I kill myself,” but according to Blanchot, what the statement reveals is that “I” and “myself” are not the same entity, that the utterance is possible only because of the very doubling that it seeks to remedy.

“I” is a self in the plenitude of its action and resolution, capable of acting sovereignly upon itself, always strong enough to reach itself with its blow. And yet the one who is thus struck is no longer I, but another, so that when I kill myself, perhaps it is “I” who does the killing, but it is not done to me. Nor is it my death – the one I dealt – that I have now to die, but rather the death which I refused, which I neglected, and which is this very negligence – perpetual flight and inertia.<sup>45</sup>

The enunciation supplants, putting the “I” in place of being and the double in the place of the victim who in turn becomes unidentifiable or unrecognizable. To utter the phrase is an affirmation of the self-as-speaking subject that comes at the expense of the self that seeks to affirm its existence, or to end it. In this way, “*je me tue*” is not so different from “*je suis*” – both involve the confession of a murder of a “~~me~~” by the self-splitting “I” for, as Lacan expresses, “I” is “an enunciation that denounces itself, a statement that renounces itself, an ignorance that sweeps itself away, an opportunity that self-destructs

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<sup>43</sup> Lacan, “Variations on the Standard Treatment,” in *Ecrits*, pp. 269-302; p. 287.

<sup>44</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, Trans. Ann Smock, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 107.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

– what remains here if not the trace of what really must be in order to fall away from being?”<sup>46</sup>

We see also in the myth of Narcissus that the only release from the capture by the image is a reunion with it, a fatal fusion. We could read this as cautionary, but maybe there is more at stake, namely the confrontation with the fact of non-existence (i.e. death) that the image conceals and, through its processes of concealment, expresses. Or, as Lacan writes:

death brings in the question of what negates discourse, but also the question whether or not it is death that introduces negation into discourse. For the negativity of discourse, insofar as it brings into being that which is not, refers us to the question of what nonbeing, which manifests itself in the symbolic order, owes to the reality of death.<sup>47</sup>

By this reading, “knowing oneself” involves plunging into that enigmatic aporia which sustains subjectivity on the grounds of its exclusion and inaccessibility. But the two cannot coexist: they can only be juxtaposed as a subjective dispersal that reconfigures knowledge as a total situation of *unknowing*.

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva considers melancholia as a psychic (dis)organization in which this situation is experienced not as tragic, but inescapable. Her exposition of melancholia bears a resemblance to Green’s formulation of negative narcissism as discussed in the previous chapter: the experience of the self as an expanding emptiness or as the mere trace of its own non-existence. This expression of being as the *disappearance of being*, she suggests, is both a consequence and a negation of primary separation: an acute awareness of language as the sedimentation of loss leads the

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<sup>46</sup> Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject in the Dialectic of Desire,” p. 678.

<sup>47</sup> Lacan, “Introduction to Jean Hyppolite’s Commentary on Freud’s ‘Verneinung’” in *Ecrits*, pp. 308-317; p. 316.

melancholic to mourn meaning itself as the death of the Thing, and through the refusal of symbolic separation, the melancholic remains riveted to both signification (as failure) and the dead Thing.

According to Kristeva, narcissistic identification has a dual purpose: to serve as a compensation for the lost Thing while “at the same time secur[ing] the subject to another dimension, that of imaginary adherence.”<sup>48</sup> The Thing then is the ambivalent core of the symbolic which does not lend itself to signification, that which must be renounced or excised from being in order to render it speakable. We find here a similarity with the *de facto* negative form elaborated by Green. Beyond denial or disavowal, Kristeva and Green seem to speak to a more elemental operation that wards off the lack of reality that representation both engenders and suffers from, a negation of the negative as the grounds for symbolic processes “designed to make the object ‘emerge’ from its absence.”<sup>49</sup> For the melancholic though, “utility” or “meaning” is found only in a non-representability that stands in as a referent for the impossible merger with the primary object. Since being is denied – since it has been abandoned – the melancholic (or negative narcissist) sinks into the lack of being instead. Rather than conceal the narcissistic wound, she tears at it until it is big enough to crawl into:

I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized... Absent from other people’s meaning [...] I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my depression. On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and being.<sup>50</sup>

This “arrogant” “lucidity” alerts us that melancholia is also a form of *intellectual*

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<sup>48</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>49</sup> Green, *The Work of the Negative*, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 4.

*narcissism* wherein the only “authentic” meaning is found in loss or refusal of meaning. The melancholic, in effect, opts for an interiorized negation of self in place of the imaginary or symbolic negations that would sustain a positivist view of the ego. The result is a (non-)positioning of self that, though affectively painful, is not experienced as pathological but rather as profoundly legitimate: “[t]hrough their empty speech they assure themselves of an inaccessible (because it is “semiotic” and not “symbolic”) ascendancy over an archaic object that thus remains, for themselves and all others, an enigma and a secret.”<sup>51</sup> That is, in place of the linguistic armor that the symbolic offers against death, the melancholic experiences meaning without signification, in all of its arbitrariness.<sup>52</sup> Because of this, Kristeva writes, “the speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue... The dead language they speak, which foreshadows their suicide, conceals a Thing buried alive.”<sup>53</sup>

But, as Freud too pointed out, melancholia falls in the category of narcissistic neurosis. Thus, in a peculiar way, this melancholic denial too functions as a shield: all meaning is taken from life such that it has none (i.e. is has only its non-meaning), and value lies only in the Thing that is forever unnameable and inaccessible. The melancholic hyperlucidity, in turn, stems from an awareness of the objectifying transformations of language, a recognition of the fact that for all the agency, possibility or “life” that proliferates in the symbolic register, it is undergirded by mutilation, by death. Melancholia therefore stems from the individual’s awareness of a *non-choice*: be mummified by signification or buried alive with the Thing. In the place of an idealized unity under the mutilating image and its sign, the melancholic retreats into the amputation and the shadow that this loss casts on the fragile ego. If desire is a function of

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*, p. 53.



a lost phallus, melancholic depression transforms the entire self into the phantom limb.

We begin to see here how both narcissism and its melancholy counterpart converge in the desire for lethal fusion, “a chance to imagine the non-meaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing.”<sup>54</sup> In the narcissistic configuration, we find a phantasy of the One without others or limits upheld by the spectral image, which also obstructs the fulfilment of that phantasy through the doubling it occasions and represents. Narcissism then equates to the ideational obstacles and negations that serve as a defense against both a desired death (i.e. fusion) and the death which has already occurred (i.e. self-splitting). In melancholia this phantasy of fullness is inverted as a wish to “reunit[e] with archaic non-integration.”<sup>55</sup> However the “oceanic void”<sup>56</sup> that the melancholic puts in the place of meaning still anchors the subject to the symbolic on the basis of refusal. But perhaps we can imagine another alternative: a non-integration that impedes the cohesion of self through heterogeneity rather than strictly on the basis of negation. The chapters that follow consider this (im)possibility.

Moving in that direction, let us take the following from the considerations presented thus far: life as it manifests in the form of narcissism or discourse is not the binary other of death but the defense against death in the form of deferral. And yet, only in that deferred demise is life restored to itself without mediation by the signifying chain. As Green describes, life and death are ‘against’ one another in the two senses of being *close to* and *opposing*, and only by formulating their relation in this way is it possible to conceive of their union while preserving the difference that allows us to distinguish between them. “However,” he continues, “we know that being in contradiction with the

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, p. 97.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, p. 29.

other corresponds to our own self-contradiction.”<sup>57</sup> The “I” then encompasses the ideated One and the double, as well as a the Third: both life and death are “against” the individual, and if we take either away, he has neither existence nor the means to speak of it.

#### THE ONE IN NEED OF A SECOND

As we have seen, primary narcissism is necessary for social and symbolic life, but also has the effect of rendering the individual inaccessible, most significantly to the individual himself. It requires the fixation on the ego as self-contained and self-possessed unit, a unit that, in the case of secondary narcissism, is to be defended and maintained at the cost of the external world, keeping away from the ego anything that would challenge or diminish it. And yet, all that we have discussed thus far suggests that very formation or fixation of an ego implies precisely this – separation, impoverishment, alienation. It would appear, then, that though the narcissistic concept of the ego is one of a closed psychological system, it is only through the vulnerability and inscrutability of the ego that the narcissistic tendency operates. And, in what presents itself as a glaring contradiction, it is only through the engagement with the environment that the individual produces his narcissistic phantasies of self-sufficiency.

In *Narcissism and its Discontents*, Julie Walsh examines this contradiction from a psychosocial perspective, suggesting that precisely therein lies the productive potential of narcissism. Her work represents a close engagement with Freud’s assertion that “the individual does actually carry on a twofold existence: one to serve his own purposes and the other as link in a chain.”<sup>58</sup> According to Walsh, primary narcissism is not a necessary yet fictive state, but rather necessary *because* fictive: on the basis of that causality, narcissism establishes the entry into the world of the imaginary and, subsequently, the

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<sup>57</sup> Green, *The Work of the Negative*, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> Freud (1914), “On Narcissism,” *SE XIV*, p. 78.

sign.

From a Lacanian point of view, we might say that this initial privileging of image over experience initiates the process that establishes the primacy of the signifier. Walsh, however, is not explicitly concerned with the symbolic function of the “I” but rather with its social function and narcissism, being the process that establishes that “I,” as the condition necessary for sociability. Considering the role of narcissism in a range of contemporary social relations, Walsh argues that though the concept does not initially appear to lend itself to subjective fluidity, perhaps it is none other than narcissism that creates the conditions for thinking about fluidity in the first place. The individual comes to participate in the world of others/objects through an ego that is essentially other/object to his self, which he in turn submits to this fictive unity that then participates in the world as sign. “It is,” Walsh writes, “at the heart of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic that the social world takes place through the fantasy of the “I.”<sup>59</sup> Primary narcissism, then, is the decisive (yet deceptive) operation that establishes the priority of illusion— the first and foremost being the illusion of the unitary self – and in this way, lays the foundation for the processes of differentiation and (mis)recognition that structure the relation to the other. Narcissism, in other words, sustains the first formative illusion that will ground all the rest and which reveals, as Walsh suggests, that the entire metapsychological edifice “relies upon a fantasy-construction for its foundation.”<sup>60</sup>

The infant-narcissist stumbles upon his ego through the dual processes of differentiation and misrecognition, processes that *require* an other, first the spectral other that comes to greet the child through the mirror and then all subsequent others in whom the child anticipates his self despite the fact that the self is re-inscribed *by* the

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<sup>59</sup> Julie Walsh, *Narcissism and its Discontents*, (Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

encounter. Essentially, then, the narcissistic phantasy of self-sufficiency will never be satisfied because narcissism engenders and relies on a relationality that makes its aim unrealizable. The narcissist then, in his inevitable dissatisfaction, will continue to be such (both narcissistic and dissatisfied), for if the ego as the object of narcissistic love is a precipitate of the relation to an other, then the narcissistic object-choice forecloses the possibility of satisfying the aim. And yet, bound up in narcissism is the very renunciation or denial of this fact: the individual will always be in need of an other in order to discern himself, loving his ego much as he would another person. For Walsh therein lies the productive capacity of narcissism, which compels the individual to recognize others in order to discern the self that (in the form of ego or “I”) he will in turn submit to the recognition by the other.

In what reads like a contemporary protraction of the vindication of narcissism begun by Freud with his 1914 paper, Walsh suggests that the narcissist is, fundamentally, a *subject-in-formation*.<sup>61</sup> But could we suggest also that the narcissist is a subject in *need*, that his narcissism is the investment in the illusion of self-sufficiency that obscures this fact of dependency? In *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Juliet Mitchell clarifies this interpretation numerically. She writes, “[t]he infant is at first not yet One, but Zero (mathematically Zero is never nothing, nor is it something); *for One to exist at all, two are needed*, even if the second is in fact the reflection in the mirror.”<sup>62</sup> The narcissist is the Zero that mistakes himself for One, but given that for this to occur a second must be present, built into narcissism must be the search for a second that permits the constitution of the One in the place of Zero. Or, as Mitchell explains, “[z]ero indicates the lack, it is a situation of non-relationship in which identity is meaningless, but because it

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 385; my italics.

makes the lack visible, it sets in motion the movement forward.”<sup>63</sup> Paradoxically then, the narcissistic desire for identity is the product of the individual’s non-self-identical origins: the origin he seeks is outside of himself.

However, returning to the dynamic of secondary narcissism in which the narcissistic tendency withdraws libido from the external world in order to reinvest that psychic energy in the self, we might conjecture that this tendency, in its absolute culmination, would eliminate the Second that makes the One possible, the One returned to his original condition of Zero at the expense of the external world and, subsequently, of the One himself whose existence is contingent on a decisive act of differentiation. If, in turn, we apply this model to our working theory of the death drive, we find that the aim is inverted, the drive being not to do away with the external world, but rather to do away with the self as the limited mode/mechanism of experiencing, to achieve a continuity or totality that encompasses all and which we might describe as *the One without the Second* or, as suggested in the previous chapter, *Oneness*.

Here we begin to see why the dialectic relation between primary narcissism and the death-drive is more complicated than it initially seems. Viewed from within Freud’s model of libidinal economy wherein ego-libido and object-libido exist in antithesis, we might formulate narcissism as the instinct to *invest* libido in the ego and the death drive as the instinct to *discharge* or *evacuate* the libidinal energy that the ego binds together. Considered in this way, it seems clear why we might posit these instincts as opposing forces. However, if we revisit and extrapolate the conceptual model put forth by Mitchell, the ego is untenable in the narcissistic state and so it may be deduced that narcissism is perhaps not necessarily the “self-preservative” instinct we believe it to be. Indeed, it may be a drive with a negative aim.

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, p. 386.

As finalities, the narcissistic state or the ‘oceanic’ feeling sought by the death drive imply, respectively, the non-existence of the external world or of individual subjectivity: in both scenarios the subject vanishes as our point of reference, either through the foreclosure of the objects and others by which “I” posits itself as a separate entity or through a dissolution of the boundaries that demarcate the subject from its encompassing world. However, as drives, as vectors operating within the experience of subjectivity to destabilize the unity of the ego, we can consider the pressure they exert on the individual and how they operate as psychic forces seeking (temporary) satisfaction in such a way that the subject may experience this satisfaction without being extinguished. Still, if we position the two in binary opposition, we are faced with self-construction on an empty foundation on one end and dissolution into formless ambiguity on the other. The choice between vertigo and nausea, it would seem, matters little.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Still, as Lacan writes in “The Freudian Thing” (in *Ecrits*, pp. 334-363), “[d]oes this little, then, which can become everything on occasion, perhaps deserve an explanation? What is this truth without which there is no way of distinguishing the face from the mask, and apart from which there seems to be no other monster than the labyrinth itself? In other words, how are they to be distinguished, in truth, if they are all equally real?” (p. 338).

### 3. WAVE UPON WAVES

...it all came down to continuing his endless journey, with an absence of organism in an absence of sea. The illusion did not last. He was forced to roll from one side to the other, like a boat adrift, in the water which gave him a body with which to swim. What escape was there? To struggle in order not to be carried away by the wave which was his arm? To go under? To drown himself bitterly in himself?

— Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to outline the conceptual difficulties inherent in the Freudian formulations of the death drive and narcissism. The considerations thus far suggest that these difficulties are largely structural: as aims and as concepts neither the narcissistic One nor the zero principle of the death drive are tenable as both foreclose the possibility of any relational position from which we might observe, interpret, or reflect on their significance. In this absence of alterity, the signifying process itself collapses and subjectivity along with it, for even the narcissistic fantasies of autonomy and self-sufficiency are grounded in an initial experience of separation and difference. We cannot therefore present these concepts as two polarities around which the individual gravitates,

nor can we lean exclusively on a reductive binary that frames the death drive and narcissism as two competing internal forces orienting the individual toward opposing aims. Doing so will bring us again and again to the same impasse, specifically the impossibility of further questioning particularly if that line of questioning is psychoanalytic in nature: neither aim can be isolated theoretically because doing so negates or disperses the subject as our point of reference.

Let us rephrase the question then: how can we conceptualize death *relationally*? What is the enigmatic function of death *in the psyche*, and how is that function in turn experienced by the individual? Rather than focusing on death as a situation of pure-loss, let us ask what is *preserved* when the self is not. This, I believe, reveals the question to be two-fold: (1) how does death (as memorialized in the psyche) operate as a motor for psychic activity and (2) what it is that death (as experience) bears witness to. These concerns reflect a move away from the structural method and the issues it presents. They require, I suggest, an *economic* approach capable of accommodating terms that overflow both one another and the terms of their existence. In this way, we might reformulate the encounter with death – in lived experience and in fantasy – as a situation of ontological uncertainty that doubles as nonpareil aim and source of anxiety. Here I argue that perhaps death can only be conveyed by that very doubling.

I propose therefore that we turn to Georges Bataille, in whose dissolute and decadent body of work this inquiry finds recurring expression.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, Bataille identifies the futility of imagining transcendence, maintaining what I have thus far

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<sup>1</sup> In an essay titled “Bataille, Experience, and Practice,” Kristeva suggests that Bataille’s oeuvre performs the fragmented body, describing his heterogeneous “literature of themes” as a transposition of his notion of “sovereign operation.” She maintains that his theoretical writings, anthropological studies, political manifestos, poetry, and erotic fiction all link and simultaneously dissolve their content, performing the experience of rupture, the re-doubling of semantic contradictions, and the radical heterogeneity concealed in logical sense – in other words, the violence of thought where it loses or denounces itself. In *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, Ed. Leslie Bolt-Irons, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 237-264.



attempted to demonstrate in relation to primary narcissism and the death drive: a dialectic procedure, when completed, suddenly collapses. This would leave us with two unsettling understandings – infinite regress or a complete renunciation of meaning. Or as Bataille writes, “[t]he absurdity of an endless deferral only justifies the equivalent absurdity of a true end, which serves no purpose.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the transcendental categories that should reflect a release from subjugation actually have the opposite effect, requiring the justifications that render them and without which these categories are emptied of all content. Therefore, like Nietzsche, Bataille substitutes the search for truth in philosophy with a search for aesthetic phenomena that exceed the limits of dualism.<sup>3</sup> He directs his attention to the base matter that resists the conceptual edifice-building of idealism and traditional materialism, discerning therein a moment of non-logical difference in which two necessary but incompatible positions meet and mutilate one another, thereby asserting an immanent form of sovereignty that admits no possible or potential subordination.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, Bataille’s work emphasizes the *lived experience* of death as function of and in relation to the limits that enclose and constitute the individual – the irrecoverable negativity that simultaneously threatens and sustains subjectivity. The taboo creates the condition for transgression or, in more Lacanian terms, the prohibition creates the condition for *jouissance*. In violating the taboo or exceeding the prohibition, one exceeds the self that is essentially bound together by that prohibition. In the act of transgression,

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<sup>2</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Nietzsche’s influence on Bataille’s thought see Lionel Abel’s “Bataille and the Repetition of Nietzsche” in Leslie Boldt-Irons, Ed. (1995, pp. 51-60) or Bataille’s own defense of the German philosopher in *On Nietzsche* (Trans. Bruce Boone, London: Athlone Press, 1992), the final book of his three-part *Summa Atheologica* wherein he engages most closely with Nietzsche’s notion of the Death of God.

<sup>4</sup> “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade” (1930) in *Visions of Excess*. Ed. Trans. Allan Stoekl, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); pp. 91-102. See also Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, pp. 29-49.

which is the beating heart of his work, Bataille discerns an ecstatic release of the tensions held together by the perceived unity of the self – no longer fearing the castration that has always-already occurred, but in turn no longer a subject either. And yet, for Bataille this transition, if we might call it that, does not have the quality of a negation. Rather it signals a situation in which the individual who, aware of his constitutive lack (or *insufficiency*<sup>5</sup> as Bataille refers to it) opens to the world, expending himself entirely as an affirmation of the incompleteness that he is. Mourning gives way to delirium, and though both of these responses signal a loss Bataille does not wallow in this, emphasizing instead what persists in the wake of this excessive outpouring of self, namely a condition of non-differentiated being and, equally important, its unassimilable remainder. For Bataille the remainder is death, which is experienced in the transition but is as inconceivable in isolation as it is in dissolution.

This brings us to the matter of Bataille's atypical "subject." In place of the self, ego, or "I" as a unified representation, Bataille posits the fragmented *ipse* for whom wholeness or completion is not simply deferred but altogether unthinkable.<sup>6</sup> On the side of the prohibition or taboo, wholeness cannot be because the subject is castrated or wounded. Indeed, as discussed in the preceding chapter, that woundedness is the necessary condition of his subjectivity. On the side of transgression, however, the subject cannot be because he abandons his stable referents and himself as a function of the relation to them. *Ipse*, in other words, connotes not the existence of a separate individual, but his existence, the experience of the self as an always prior exteriority or as its own

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the principle of insufficiency, see "The Labyrinth" (1936) in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 171-177.

<sup>6</sup> As William Pawlett explains in *Georges Bataille: The Sacred and Society* (London: Routledge, 2015): "The influence of Kojève's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is very pronounced here. Kojève presents the self as an inner nothingness constantly striving for or desiring that which is out of reach." (p. 117)

disintegration.<sup>7</sup>

This certainly raises the critique, as posed by Jean-Luc Nancy, that Bataille has “no concept of the subject”<sup>8</sup> in the sense of a consistently fixed category. But it appears to me that Bataille posits “ipseity”<sup>9</sup> not in place of subjectivity but at its core and its margin; encompassing both absent origin and impossible aim, *ipse* would appear to be the “subject” of the death drive. Whereas subjectivity is the individual’s relation to language and law, ipseity posits a before and beyond to these limits. However, that which distinguishes *ipse* also makes *ipse* inconsequential: *ipse* is absent, is scattered, is not-one. But again – and here lies the power and pertinence of Bataille’s work – this inconsequentiality is not in the least trivial: yes, the insufficiency of the individual is a narcissistic injury, but the deep laceration caused by the impossibility of the One is what creates the condition for Oneness, a situation of non-differentiation or, as Bataille refers to it, *continuity* that bears a striking resemblance to what Freud describes as the ‘oceanic’ feeling.

Bataille returns to this concept throughout his work, describing the feeling of continuity as a communication resulting from heightened ontological anxiety, which having annihilated both reason and particularity gives way to an ecstasy that not only mirrors the climax of religious contemplation (and eroticism) but accounts for the mystical or sacred element therein. Continuity, in other words, connotes “the absence of separate individualities”<sup>10</sup> – a negation of the individual quality, but not a negation in and

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<sup>7</sup> Bataille elaborates his concept of *ipse* most thoroughly in *Inner Experience*. Both concept and text will be revisited in Chapter 4.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, Trans. Peter Connor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> In Latin, *ipse* is a reflexive pronoun that can be translated as “itself.” It may also be translated as the “actual,” in this case referring to the ‘ego itself’ *as it actually is*, rather than as its representation under the sign of the “I.”

<sup>10</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, Trans. Mary Dalwood, (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986), p. 91.

of itself. And for Bataille, the “vertiginous loss of consciousness”<sup>11</sup> that gives way to the feeling of oneness with the whole marks the decisive moment of religious feeling. He writes:

In the inert beatitude of this [theopathic] state, when each object and the whole universe have become utterly transparent... [t]he object of contemplation becomes equal to *nothing* (Christians would say equal to God), and at the same time equal to the contemplating subject. There is no longer any difference between one thing and another in any respect; no distances can be located; the subject lost in the indistinct and illimitable presence of the universe and himself ceases to belong to the passage of time.<sup>12</sup>

It is a disorder opposed to the frantic proliferation of life (i.e. *Eros*) that binds increasingly complex forms around an unstable if not vacant center – the return to the Zero concealed by the narcissistic fantasy of One. But by Bataille’s approximation, this renunciation engenders a situation in which the individual, essentially dissolved, becomes part of and commensurate to the totality of existence.

Are we getting carried away? Most likely, but it would seem that for Bataille this is precisely the intention of religious contemplation or mystical experience. More importantly, however, this form of intellectual elaboration – culminating always in the wordlessness of trance, orgasm, or laughter – is what allows Bataille to reconcile the inevitable contradiction which rational comprehension comes up against in trying to approach death. Perceiving something to be recovered in theology even after the “death of God,” Bataille searches for the radical potential in what Freud dismisses as the “regressive fantasy” of religion, namely the possibility of affirmation through self-

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 249.

abandonment, of a mode of communication beyond misrecognition on the basis of identity.<sup>13</sup> In Bataille's understanding, this is certainly not, as Freud suggests in *Civilization and its Discontents*, a task for the weak of will.

Curiously, however, Bataille often describes this confusion in aquatic metaphors, as an experience of being in the world "like water in water."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, although Bataille's atheological stance situates this experience of unbounded oneness in a way that is profoundly different from Freud, it would seem that the 'oceanic' is still very much present in Bataille's notion of continuity. Indeed, the resonance between these two impressions is compelling and has been alluded to by psychoanalysts and scholars alike. Leo Bersani (1986), Stephen Webb (1993), Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (1997), André Green (2001), Amy Hollywood (2002), and Jeremy Biles (2007) are just a few to have suggested the semblance between Freud's 'oceanic' feeling and the situation of continuity as described by Bataille. However, a close reading of these two concepts that takes into consideration the possibilities opened up by Bataille's atheological approach has yet to be undertaken. I believe it is worth revisiting the Freudian concept through a Bataillan prism, as doing so might allow us to consider its potential link to the death drive, a possibility undeveloped in Freud's writings.

There is also an economic element to Bataille's work that is particularly relevant to our continuing discussion of the drives. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Laplanche identifies the issue with the death drive as its radical economic principle. Instead of dismissing the death drive on this basis or, worse, trying to resolve this paradox, I suggest that we turn to the notion of *general economy* as put forth by Bataille. Though this is one of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Editor's Introduction (pp. 1-18) and David Allison's "Transgression in the Community of the Sacred" (pp. 83-98) in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, Ed. Andrew Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 29.

“organizing” principles throughout his work, *The Accursed Share* (1949), *Erotism* (1959), and his posthumously published *Theory of Religion* (1973) in particular represent “systemic” considerations of the limits of restricted economies.<sup>15</sup> Respectively these texts consider political economy, sensuality, and (a)theology but all converge on the notion of a “general economy” which is always given to moments of excess that, despite being a product of the system cannot be accounted for, stabilized, or assimilated by the system as a whole. This theoretical position may allow us to account for some of the difficulties inherent in the Freudian formulation of the death drive, and I will attempt to pursue this line of questioning in the following pages.

Psychoanalytic theory is already permeated by Bataille’s ideas.<sup>16</sup> I am referring here especially to Lacanian psychoanalysis, post-Lacanian feminist critiques of psychoanalysis, and the intersections of psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, although Bataille’s influence is certainly not limited to these domains.<sup>17</sup> The list of thinkers influenced by Bataille is extensive, including names such as Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Barthes, and Agamben. The two we will engage with most closely, however, are Lacan and Kristeva, neither of whom renounce the power of raw religious feeling despite the fact that, like Bataille, both turn away from their religious upbringings in Catholicism.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as I will show here, his work is rarely engaged with carefully in these contexts, most often reduced to a passing mention or prurient caricature, or otherwise

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Noys, *Bataille: A Critical Introduction*. (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, in his essay “Moral Narcissism,” André Green considers the link between sexuality and morality and writes, “Georges Bataille, to whom tribute should be paid by psychoanalysts, has profoundly understood the consubstantiality of the erotic and the sacred.” (See Green, *Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism*, p. 155). There are many such references alluding to the significance of Bataille’s work without engaging with it as such.

<sup>17</sup> See Will Stronge (Ed.), *George Bataille and Contemporary Thought*, (EPUB: Bloomsbury Academics, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> For instance: Lacan, *The Triumph of Religion*, Trans. Bruce Fink, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), and Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Trans. Beverley Bie Brahic, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

considered altogether separately, in relation to philosophical dialectics, radical politics, or theology but not with regard to its relevance to metapsychology.<sup>19</sup>

It is my impression, however, that we find in Bataille's (anti-)philosophy much more than anecdotal symmetries with psychoanalysis. Indeed, Bataille's thought – hinging as it does on confounding contradictions, acknowledging impossibility without attempting to assimilate it, acknowledging that its importance comes precisely from being unassimilable – underscores the peculiar quality of metapsychology as a speculative project that seems to resist attempts at stabilization or completion. More specifically, however, Bataille's understanding of insufficiency as a necessary condition for continuity would appear to illuminate the dynamic between primary narcissism and the death drive. It does so with a blinding brightness, tearing out the unified "I" as a limited mode of seeing, being, and experiencing.<sup>20</sup>

I would like to clarify here that I do not intend to produce a philosophical reading of Bataille, and in any case it would be a question of pursuing Bataille's resistance to philosophy.<sup>21</sup> Nor do I wish give an intellectual biography as there is already substantial literature on the subject.<sup>22</sup> What I am attempting, however, is to suggest a synonymy between Freudian metapsychology, particularly the ill-defined role of death therein, and Bataille's heterological thinking – two forms of intellectual elaboration that resist stabilization, straightforward synthesis, and homogenizing representations.

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Biles (2015) and Liran Razinsky (2009) offer readings of Freud alongside Bataille. In "Does Acéphale Dream of Electric Sheep?" (*Negative Ecstasies*, Ed. Jeremy Biles and Kent Brintnall, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015; pp. 217-239) Biles examines Bataille's references to dreams as a way of considering both his difficult relationship with the Surrealists and his engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis. Razinsky, on the other hand, considers Freud and Bataille as they overlap over the concept of death, and specifically what it means to observe death as a spectator; see "How to Look Death in the Eyes: Freud and Bataille" in *SubStance* Issue 119, Vol. 38, 2; pp. 63-88.

<sup>20</sup> The recurring theme of blindness in Bataille's work will be taken up in Chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> See Boldt-Irons, Ed. (1995), Stronge (2017), and Scott Wilson and Fred Botting (Ed.), *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> See Noys (2000) and Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, (London: Verso Books, 2002).

As always, much nuance is lost in translation. Still, it is my hope that doing so will allow us to approach death as an *experience of liminality* rather than a limit as such. This conceptual shift enables us to explore affinities with other experiences and practices that expose subjectivity to its own precariousness. And, in turn, the convergence of these associations under the barred sign of death enables us to re-imagine the theoretical applications of this enduring philosophical paradox.

#### FROM ATHESIS TO ATHEOLOGY

Derrida proposes that the nature of the dynamic between the life and death drives, though not explicitly stated, is written into *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In “To Speculate – On Freud,” he considers the textual movements by which Freud expresses the interdependence of the drives without ever positing it as such. According to Derrida, each example and explanation of the death drive given by Freud confounds itself and forces the text to begin again, as if every step forward always-already carried within it the backward motion. The case for the repetition compulsion, itself caught in an interminable repetition.

In Chapter 1, I attempted to explore this conceptually, looking at the internal contradictions of Freud’s argument as indicative of the non-linearity of the theory – perhaps not consciously motivated, but certainly meaningful. Derrida focuses on the text itself, not what is written in or of the text but what is *performed by the text*, specifically the impossibility of arriving at a destination. He writes of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “the very procedure of the text is diabolical. It mimes walking, does not cease walking without advancing, regularly sketching out one step more without gaining an inch of



ground... without ever permitting the conclusion of a last step.”<sup>23</sup> However, this is not intended as a criticism. Quite the contrary: it is this “diabolical” movement that allows the text to approach the subject at all, offering a conclusion of sorts precisely by not offering it as such. Therefore, according to Derrida, the thesis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is actually the absence or deferral of a thesis – its *athesis* – as found in the unsettling rhythm of the text.

Freud cautions the reader, qualifying what he attempts to put forth as of Section IV of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as “speculation, often far-fetched speculation.” For Derrida, this does not compromise Freud’s (a)thesis, but rather signals the fact that the “understanding” of the economy of drives, and specifically the role of the death drive therein, is contingent upon a situation of non-understanding that in turn always draws us back to the original question. Derrida defends speculation as a peculiar intellectual operation, radically different from hypothesis, theory, or observation in that it reflects a certain “aimlessness” of thought. Or, perhaps more accurately, we might say *aim-inhibition*. The issue being not that the thought lacks an aim, but rather that the aim is an impossible one – one which cannot be reached by the subject as such and whose proximity therefore elicits a certain degree of recoil.

Freud touches on this mechanism briefly in “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” the 1915 paper in which he puts forth the preliminary drive theory that is radically revised with the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* five years later. He describes as aim-inhibited those “processes which are allowed to make some advance towards instinctual satisfaction but then are inhibited or deflected.”<sup>24</sup> Although Freud has not yet introduced the death drive at this point, he has clearly considered the idea of partial

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<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, “To Speculate – On Freud” in *The Postcard*, Trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 257-387; p. 269.

<sup>24</sup> Freud (1915a), “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” *SE XIV*, pp. 111-140; p. 122.

satisfaction of an aim-inhibited drive perpetuated through repetition, as also suggested by his 1914 paper “Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through.”<sup>25</sup> Like the libidinal and self-preservative drives later to be grouped under a common life principle, Freud’s theory itself seems to be demanding the death drive – a ‘first and final drive’ whose aim (i.e. ultimate satisfaction in the complete reduction of tension) is both thwarted and sustained by the life drives through which it seeks partial satisfaction, the drive whose deferral sustains the entire economy.

How does Freud respond to this theoretical demand? In *Civilization and its Discontents*, he writes: “I remember my own defensive attitude when the idea of a destructive instinct first emerged ... and how long it took before I became receptive to it.”<sup>26</sup> Is this resistance, aim-inhibition, or both? And yet, in light of the ideas in this particular text, his drift (albeit skeptical) into the ‘oceanic,’ it would appear to be as Freud himself admits: “it was only tentatively that I put forward the views I have developed [in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*], but in the course of time they have gained such a hold upon me that I can no longer think in any other way.”<sup>27</sup> The thought that cannot be posited as a fixed theory or hypothesis cannot be avoided either: what Derrida describes elsewhere as the “invincible necessity”<sup>28</sup> of the death drive will only be expressed through an atesis in the form of theoretical departures and returns.

The speculation, as Derrida writes, “advances without advancing, without advancing itself, without ever advancing anything that it does not immediately take back.”<sup>29</sup> Much like the *fort-da* game in its entirety, it enacts overlapping but unequal movements. In that

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<sup>25</sup> Freud (1914), “Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through,” *SE XII*, pp. 147-56.

<sup>26</sup> Freud (1930), *Civilization and its Discontents*, *SE XXI*, p. 120.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> In *Archive Fever* (Trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) Derrida describes both the death drive and Freud’s speculative formulation of it as “another name for *Ananke*,” that which is irreducible since it operates in silence as the destruction of its own archive. (pp. 9-10).

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, “To Speculate” in *The Postcard*, p. 293.

sense, this thought operation also has a mirror-like quality, producing a gestalt that is not equivalent to the composite it reflects: the alienating reflection that both satisfies and does not satisfy the attempt to master or reconcile feelings of fragmentation. A “specular” logic, in other words, requires an other. Death however is not opposable – it is the negation of everything including negation itself. Without the quality of difference or alterity, it is non-inscribable. In so far as it is thought then death is the unrepresentable that lies beyond the possibility of difference with life. Or, we might say that death “represents” none other than the impossibility of its own representation. In any case, as soon as we consider it, Derrida writes, “it is, already, *life death*.”<sup>30</sup> Once death exceeds its reciprocal other, there is only silence.

The speculation then reflects a particular strategy, the only *possible* strategy, when the “finality cannot be clear, cannot be itself.”<sup>31</sup> Unlike the theory, the speculation produces a non-positional structure based on a lack of equivalency – no advancing, but no resting either. We might liken this to the lack of equivalency with the reflection that consistently brings us back to the mirror. As far as death is concerned, however, it would appear that the speculation is not merely the only available approach, but also the most demonstrative. Like the symptom, the speculation is a response to a forbidden or foreclosed thought that expresses a conflict most fully precisely in the inability to express it verbally. Perhaps it is also the strategy of one who simultaneously desires to exceed a limit but also to maintain it, if only as a point of reference. In *Erotism*, Bataille considers this possibility.

We can conceive of nothing except in terms of our own life, and beyond that, it seems to us everything is wiped out. Beyond death, in fact, begins the inconceivable which we are usually not brave enough to face. Yet the

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p. 285.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, p. 278.

inconceivable is an expression of our own impotence. We know that death destroys nothing, leaves the totality of existence intact, but we still cannot imagine the continuity of being as a whole beyond our death, *or whatever it is that dies in us*. We cannot accept that this has limits. At all costs we need to transcend them, but we should like to transcend them and maintain them simultaneously.<sup>32</sup>

Is this ambivalence what the textual performance of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* expresses? I would argue that it is, but Bataille's interpretation reveals a nuance that is absent or at least occluded (on the level of signifiers) in Freud's system.

Freud touches on the difficulty of isolating the death drive in *Civilization and its Discontents*. He writes: “[t]he phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of these two instincts. It was not easy however to demonstrate the activities of this supposed death instinct.”<sup>33</sup> Here we are presented again with two movements, one of which exceeds the other, and with a conceptualization of death as the unthinkable remainder that results from this lack of equivalency. It is a system that ends in silence, whose finality is always beyond the questioning that would lead us there. Or, in Freud's words, “[i]t might be assumed that the death instinct operated silently within the organism towards its dissolution, but that of course, was *no proof*.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Freud proposes considering how the death drive “could be pressed into the service of Eros,” directed towards the external world as aggressiveness or destructiveness such that something else might be destroyed in place of the self.<sup>35</sup> This, Freud suggests, is a way of thinking about the death drive that does not lead us into the field of total dissolution. The aim being beyond questioning, the death drive can only be thought in so

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<sup>32</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 141; my italics.

<sup>33</sup> Freud (1930), *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE XXI, p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

far as life as its other is still present – it can only be *speculated*. Indeed, revisiting the death drive as repetition compulsion in light of this, it would appear that built into the death drive is the means of its perpetuation: the death drive consistently returns to its other through which it both finds and postpones its paradoxical satisfaction.

Both Freud and Bataille discern that death operates silently, but there is a marked difference. Freud equates death with non-existence, imbuing the concept not only with a regressive quality, but also with an element of negativity. For Bataille however, *death destroys nothing*. It is not animate life that ceases to exist, but difference. The result is a situation of radical presence, of undifferentiated and exuberant being, which could be likened to the Lacanian Real. If we wish to find an equivalent in the Freudian framework, however, we might consider the unboundedness of the ‘oceanic’ feeling. I will explore the similarity between the ‘oceanic’ and Bataille’s notion of continuity in subsequent pages, attempting to draw these ideas into our discussion of the death drive. In order to open that dialogue however, it is first necessary to demonstrate why and how the conceptual difficulties in the final drive theory might be clarified or at least accounted for under a Bataillian lens.

The answers to those questions, I believe, lie in the fundamental asymmetry of the drives. For Bataille, such an asymmetry presents a complication in the form of a remainder, but this remainder is not meant to be assimilated or recuperated. The excess rendered by asymmetry reveals a threat not necessarily to a particular system (whose function is likely the concealment of some asymmetry) but to systemic thought in general, and precisely for that reason might be re-cast as radical possibility. Ironically however, this unassimilable excess also reaffirms the need for the system that operates as a defense against the threat produced as its byproduct. The result is a constant re-doubling: without the “operative” system there can be no excess, and without this excess the system has

nothing to shore itself up against, operative only in relation to the inoperative element that it excludes and on the basis of that exclusion. Such a system cannot be stabilized.

Bataille, in equating death with the confusion of non-differentiation rather than non-existence posits death not as finality but as an encounter with the precariousness of subjectivity. For Bataille the “unbearable surpassing of being”<sup>36</sup> is death or at the very least is experienced by the individual as death insofar as it entails the loss of self as a point of reference. By this understanding, death itself cannot be known, but the feeling of ontological uncertainty posed by the “excessive” can be. We could reason then that death, being the excess rendered by the drive economy, might be interpreted in this light. Doing so shifts our focus from death as a categorical impossibility to the *experience* of death as a function of the individual’s relation to an asymmetrical economy of opposing but interdependent forces. In this way, the feeling of “paralysis” evoked by death is transformed into a situation of vexatious motion. This experience of an immobility that is neither still nor idle recalls the last lines of Beckett’s *The Unnameable*. The disjointed monologue of the motionless but wavering character “concludes” as follows: “...where I am? I don’t know, I’ll never know: in the silence you don’t know./ You must go on./ I can’t go on./ I’ll go on.” For Bataille, existence is none other than this experience of ontological oscillation between deleterious desire and the anxiety it produces, the “alternation of fascination and horror, affirmation and denial.”<sup>37</sup>

As we can see, Bataille’s text also oscillates. Like the atthesis that Derrida identifies in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Bataille’s thinking rests neither on one position nor the other, moving between the awareness of insufficiency and the delirium of dissolution. For instance, he writes:

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<sup>36</sup> See Bataille’s *récit to Madame Edwarda* in *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, Trans. Austryn Wainhouse, (London: Marion Boyars, 1996), pp. 137-159; p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 211.

Two things are inevitable: we cannot avoid dying nor can we avoid bursting through our barriers, and they are one in the same. But as we break through the barriers, we strive to escape from the terror of death and the terror that belongs to the continuity glimpsed beyond those boundaries... As we are about to take the final step, we are beside ourselves with desire, impotent in the clutch of a force that demands our disintegration. But the object of our urgent desire is there in front of us and it binds us to the very life that our desire will not be contained by.<sup>38</sup>

And yet, Bataille offers something beyond the deferrals of deconstruction.<sup>39</sup> Aware that Absolute Knowledge has as its hostile double the loss of the individual, Bataille inverts the approach: instead of posing the question of Absolute Knowledge at the expense of subject, he considers the situations that evoke a loss of self – be they erotic or mystical – in order to arrive at the “knowledge” they might confer. In the case of mysticism, the result is what Bataille terms *non-savior*, an “unknowing” that reduces existing categories – especially moral – to collapse and disorder, dispersing meaning and consequently the subject into fragments. In his exposition of the role of mystical tradition in Bataille’s thought, Andrew Hussey describes *non-savior* as “a revelation, or anti-revelation, which undoes all categorical version of truth.”<sup>40</sup> The result is an affirmation of silence and absence – of death.

Given that *non-savoir* can neither be defined in positive terms nor as a negative proposition, Bataille privileges experience over knowledge and positions himself against

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>39</sup> According to Robert Trumbull (2012), Derrida’s emphasis on endless deferral actually restricts some of the productive ambiguities in Freud’s text. See “Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis: A Problematic Proximity” in *Derrida Today*, Issue 5, Vol. 1: 69-91.

<sup>40</sup> Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, p. 89.

philosophy as a synthesizing operation.<sup>41</sup> For instance, he writes that “[d]eath is a disappearance”<sup>42</sup> and this disappearance makes it impossible to decide if death is a lived experience, the end of lived experience or is outside of lived experience. In his preface to *Madame Edwarda* he complicates this further:

There seems to exist a domain where death signifies not only decease and disappearance, but the unbearable process by which we disappear *despite ourselves* and everything we can do, even though at, *at all costs*, we must *not* disappear... the *insensate* moment towards which we strive with all that is in our power and which at the same time we exert all our power to stave off.<sup>43</sup>

We can agree that death is an experience at the limit, but for Bataille the limit functions not by dividing life from death but by drawing them together – it is a place of contamination, much like what we find between the death drive and primary narcissism. And, as Allan Stoekl explains, “it is precisely the conjoining of the two that establishes their identity as automutilation, their violent doubling.”<sup>44</sup>

This is speculation as Derrida describes it, but it is *violent* speculation. The speculation requires an other, a mirror. Bataille’s thought process does as well but it refuses to uphold their difference as that which sustains that relation. Rather, he seeks “to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and vertigo of death opening on to the unknown.”<sup>45</sup> His speculation shatters the mirror, and his writing in turn becomes an exercise in transgression that attempts to approximate the convulsions of the subject in his encounter with the threat of his own disappearance. The transgression

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<sup>41</sup> In *Erotism*, Bataille writes, “[p]hilosophy is the sum of ideas in the form of a synthesis, or nothing.” (p. 254).

<sup>42</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, Trans. Bruce Boone, (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, pp. 140-1.

<sup>44</sup> Allan Stoekl, Introduction to *Visions of Excess*, p. xiii.

<sup>45</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 91.



however can only be translated into language through a framework or vocabulary which it actively denies, a system in which the processes of signification and reference persists but only in relation to their terminal subversion.<sup>46</sup>

Sartre and Breton, as some of Bataille's most virulent critics, referred to such a system as "excremental" and "pathological," adjectives Bataille probably would not have contested. Bataille himself however designates this system *heterological*. Heterology, as Bataille describes it in early writings such as "The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade" (1930) and "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" (1933), is opposed to synthesizing operations that produce a homogenous representation of the world. Whereas homogeneity signifies commensurability in the service of productivity or utility, the heterological concerns those elements which are impossible to assimilate and are thus charged with an unknown or dangerous force. They break the laws of social homogeneity and are rendered taboo. In the realm of religion, such elements account for the sacred. In the secular realm however the heterogeneous is rendered as the result of "unproductive expenditure" – the waste of the homogenous system that, in threatening the stability of that system as a functioning whole, produces as its effect an experience of violence, delirium, or madness.

In "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" Bataille positions this framework in relation to psychoanalysis: "The exclusion of heterogeneous elements from the homogenous realm of consciousness formally recalls the exclusion of the elements described (by psychoanalysts) as unconscious, which censorship excludes from the conscious ego."<sup>47</sup> Here he not only suggests that difficulties opposing the revelation of unconscious forms of existence are of the same order as those opposing the knowledge of

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<sup>46</sup> Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Bataille (1933), "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 137-60; p. 141.

heterological forms, but also goes as far as to assert that “the unconscious must be considered as one of the aspects of the heterogeneous.”<sup>48</sup>

Heterology then deals with that which cannot easily be kept within the field of either science or philosophy, that which loses its incommensurable character if objectified, stabilized, or incorporated. As a result, this approach focuses instead on the process of limitation which produces heterological elements and the violently alternating reactions of rejection and fascination these elements effect.<sup>49</sup> Like the unconscious that Bataille designates as one such element, the heterogeneous resists, leaving us able to consider it only in relation to the violent re-doubling it produces. This resonates with Kristeva’s elaboration of the abject, however we do find something of this logic in Freud’s process as well. In “The Unconscious” (1915), Freud writes: “How are we to arrive at a knowledge of the unconscious? It is of course only as something conscious that we know it, after it has undergone a transformation or a translation into something conscious.”<sup>50</sup> In Bataille’s thinking, this does not undermine unconscious activity but rather functions as a defining characteristic: it can either be or be known, never both.

Such a logic reveals otherwise stable references – such as the perceived unity of the ego – as pseudostable, necessary but fragile or fictive. For Bataille this does create a feeling of loss, a need to create a new system. Rather in his heterological thinking this rising and falling becomes a system unto itself. The fall is not stabilized nor remedied through the elevation of another system. In fact, the fall is the critical moment.<sup>51</sup> As we saw above, there is no possibility of rest in this system. And yet, while this process is necessarily a repetitious one, it is not without pleasure or satisfaction. However, here the

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Bataille (1930), “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade” in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 91-102; p. 97.

<sup>50</sup> Freud (1915b), “The Unconscious,” *SE XII*, pp. 159-215; p. 166.

<sup>51</sup> See Rodolphe Gasché, “The Heterological Almanac,” in Boldt-Irons, Ed. (1995), pp. 157-208.

pleasure is not in the repetition itself, but its remainder – the enjoyment of excess or what for Lacan will become the excessive enjoyment of *jouissance*. By focusing on the excess rendered by the repetition and the pleasure-pain associated with it, Bataille might be positioned between psychoanalysis and deconstruction, having put forth a system in constant motion, in need of difference and of repetition but entangled with desire or pleasure.

Convinced that such thinking runs counter to the edifice-building of science and philosophy, Bataille attempts to recover from theology the primacy of experience over knowledge. Arguing for a discourse of transgression that would replace the Hegelian logic of contradiction and the law of the dialectic, Bataille discerns in mysticism a way to articulate a void in philosophical thinking.<sup>52</sup> Though not entirely separate from philosophy, the mystical experience – as a desire to “know” God that exhausts the knowing self – reflects an active situation of contradiction that undermines the language of philosophy and the possibility of a philosophical project in the form of a synthesis: for Bataille, the understanding of God as impossibility overcomes the movement of the dialectic through the affirmation of silence or ecstasy as response. Such ecstasy is the result of a self-annihilation which, given the mystical tradition, he perceives as the quintessence of the sacred – a loss of self that can neither be entirely completed nor recuperated in discourse.

By Bataille’s interpretation, the conclusion of religious contemplation in an *experience* of God doubles as the negation of God: the mystic becomes part of and equal to the totality of God that in encompassing all actually produces as its double an experience of absolute negativity. Bataille in turn tries to conjure the sacred in a Godless

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<sup>52</sup> In *Sensible Ecstasy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), Amy Hollywood explores what the figure of the mystic does for 20<sup>th</sup> century French intellectuals. Bataille figures prominently here, as do Lacan, Irigaray, and Kristeva. Her project will be considered more closely in Chapter 4.

form, a way that affirms the death of God but not of religious feeling. Actually, Bataille suggests that only through the death of God can something like religious feeling be reawakened. The result is a theological operation without a center, without a head: *atheology*. Unlike atheism, which would by this logic be only the inverse form of monotheism, atheology is predicated on and has its center the abolition of its own subject – the collapse of meaning which abolishes the possibility of a fixed referent. It connotes an encounter with absence (specifically the absence of God) which, as is the case in traditional mysticism, alters the thinking subject. The atheological speculation then reflects a form of “knowledge” that is mystical in that it exceeds discourse but belongs to no specific tradition or mystical idiom.

In their respective studies of Bataille’s mysticism, Hussey (2000), Amy Hollywood (2002), and Peter Connor (2003) explore its similarity to religious counterparts and its departure from them – namely its absence of any theistic commitments and its insistence on the experiential power of the mystical encounter rather than the “revelation” itself. These considerations will factor prominently in the discussions to follow and will be considered more closely in the following chapter. For the time being, however, I only wish to establish why it is that a Bataillian perspective might shed some light on the dialectic of the drives and the role of death therein. Such a perspective, I believe, expands the field of psychoanalysis precisely because it exceeds the restrictions that enable the formation, codification, and formalization of knowledge. Not unlike Freud, Bataille is constantly driven into unfamiliar territory and unfamiliar forms of expression. However, in attempting to sustain the heterogeneity of his thought, in drawing from the mystical tradition the expressiveness needed to convey his atheological speculations, Bataille transforms a limit of theorization into a liminal space, similar to that of a ritual, sacrifice or a festival – not rendered complete or incomplete by a transcendent “beyond” but

continuously (or compulsively) made and unmade through the transgression of its own limits.

In other words, *the atthesis finds its expression as atheology*. Like the atthesis, atheology cannot be easily enunciated, only performed as a movement towards a terminal subversion of thought or self that doubles as its own affirmation. This mutilation would appear to exceed the oppositions that govern logic and, consequently, the discourse of philosophy, but as we have seen in Bataille's thought, excess acquires its (non-)meaning from the system that it so thoroughly destabilizes.

#### ANTI-PHILOSOPHY

As briefly mentioned, when Bataille positions himself against "philosophy," he is referring to thought as a conclusive project, motivated by a rational aim with the possibility of formalization or completion. According to Bataille, such a project cannot assimilate intense experiences that call into question the integrity of subject as the seat of rational thought. "Philosophy," he writes, "can only be the sum of the possibles in the form of a synthesis, or nothing."<sup>53</sup> Significantly, especially given the argument above, Bataille finds this statement warrants a repetition – as if the alternative to philosophy (i.e. "nothing") calls out for its other. Bataille's "anti-philosophy" however opposes the culmination of thought in any discernable sum. In that regard, it is typically the discipline and efficiency of Hegelianism that he is responding to, and of Hegel's "practically impenetrable system" he writes: "[i]t assembles ideas, but at the same time cuts them off from experience."<sup>54</sup> Bataille's response in turn is to call attention to a realm of experience, simultaneously necessary and impossible, that cannot be mediated by a thinking subject. Knowledge, by this understanding, "concludes" not in a whole but in its own disintegration, an encounter

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<sup>53</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 254.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, p. 255.

with formlessness that calls out for its other in the form of a repetition. And yet this operation produces an unassimilable remainder, an unobjectifiable excess that threatens, dislocates, and witnesses the objectified system from a position of radical exclusion. The two philosophical modes would appear to be at odds, but here I would like to defend the position that the relation between them, far from being oppositional, is performative of the interdependence of their respective economies and perhaps more *generally* of the economy of drives itself.

As scholars and biographers of Bataille point out, it is important to first clarify *which* Hegel, or more specifically *whose*, Bataille is responding to.<sup>55</sup> Like a number of French intellectuals at the time, he attended Alexandre Kojève's lectures on *Phenomenology of Spirit* between 1934 and 1939 at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. Also attended by Lacan, Klossowski, Merleau-Ponty, and Breton, Kojève's lectures might be broadly characterized by a Marxist leaning that transformed the master/slave dialectic into the key to the whole of Hegel and by a general distaste for any transcendent "beyond."<sup>56</sup> It is this secondary reading that most came to associate with Hegelian theory and which would continue to unfold in Bataille as a hostility towards the idea of any foreseeable end to struggle.

Bataille had written about Hegel prior, most notably in his 1932 essay "The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic," wherein he likens the dialectical method to blood in the body and insists on the need for reconciling its tactics and historical origins and with lived existence and ideology.<sup>57</sup> During the course of Kojève's lectures, however,

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<sup>55</sup> This is mentioned in the vast majority of secondary writings on Bataille and explored in detail in Hollier (1992), Hussey (2000), and Stuart Kendall's edited compilation of Bataille's *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> See Patrick Riley (1981), "Introduction to the reading of Alexandre Kojève" in *Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 1: 5-48, and Boris Belay (2011). "That Obscure Parallel to the Dialectic: Tangled Lines Between Bataille and Kojève" in *Parallax*, Vol. 3, Issue 1: 50-77.

<sup>57</sup> Bataille (1932), "Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic" in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 105-115. For more on Bataille's prior notions of *The Phenomenology* see Kendall's introduction to *The Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

Bataille expressed that he felt “suffocated, crushed, shattered, killed ten times over”<sup>58</sup> by Hegel, and his resistance to the Hegelian Absolute would become a defining feature of his thought.

Following Kojève, he perceives the Hegelian system as one that cannot accommodate transgression – at least not in any *truly* transgressive sense – because by accounting for such elements *a priori*, the movement of the dialectic renders transgression operative or meaningful, thereby undercutting any possibility of violation or defiance.<sup>59</sup> According to Bataille, a transgression that does not jeopardize the integrity of the self-possessed individual and/or of a system in its entirety is not a transgression at all. Furthermore, a system without the threat of collapse is one without the possibility of sovereignty, as he defines it. The confluence of these contratemps amounts to one expressed most plainly by Bataille in a correspondence to Kojève written in 1937 and published later as “Letter to X”: “I imagine that my life – or, better yet, its aborting, the open wound that is my life – constitutes all by itself the refutation of Hegel’s closed system.”<sup>60</sup>

Given this understanding, Bataille might have abandoned the operation of the dialectic entirely, but what he develops instead is a rather complex and deeply uneasy position vis-à-vis Hegel. I certainly do not pretend to do justice to this philosophical tradition nor to the history of its interpretation in just a few short pages: both point to a vast amount of literature and even vaster lines of inquiry that are well beyond the scope of this project. However, it is difficult (or perhaps *impossible*) to situate Bataille’s thought

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<sup>58</sup> Bataille as quoted in Noys (2000), p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> These ideas are evident across Bataille’s writings, but the divergence from his previous attitude towards Hegel is most explicitly rendered in “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice” (1948), to be discussed in a later subsection.

<sup>60</sup> Bataille (1937), “Letter to X” in *The Bataille Reader*, Ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 297-300; p. 269.

and express its rigor without at least a brief consideration of Hegel and, more specifically, what Bataille interprets (via Kojève) as Hegel's "closed system." For that we turn to Hegel's well-known though not so easily read text.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel traces out a trajectory of human history as "the history of desired Desires"<sup>61</sup> and the dialectical negotiating of such desires between two figures – the lord and bondsman which, in Kojève's interpretation, would become the master and the slave. According to Hegel, an initial murderous encounter, akin to the parricide committed by the primal horde but in inverse form, precipitates a hierarchy of antagonistic desires.<sup>62</sup> This first struggle for the recognition of desire results in the casting of two roles – a master whose desire is acknowledged and satisfied, and a slave who works to satisfy the desires of the master. One is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be *for itself*, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be *for another*. But master and slave do not partake equally in this peculiar history of desire.

The master/slave episode is quite familiar, but I do wish to give a brief summary here in order to mediate Bataille's notion of sovereignty, which contests that these are the only two subjective conditions despite being the only *possible* ones. The slave, in a twist of historical contingency, becomes the focus of history despite his seemingly subordinate position: unlike the master *for whom the struggle has concluded*, the slave continues to work towards the recognition of his own desires. As a result, the slave's incomplete desire – sustained and, to borrow a psychoanalytic term, sublimated through work – becomes

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<sup>61</sup> Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Ed. Allan Bloom, Trans. James Nichols, Jr., (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> Curiously, Bataille draws out this comparison as defense of his argument for "a dialectic of the real" in his 1932 essay on Hegel, identifying in the relation between father and son a demonstration of the psychoanalytic principle whereby goals expressed in psychical terms are given basis in the soma, thus reflecting an attempt to draw together nature and pure logic.



the motor of the dialectic. The slave, whose desire persists precisely through its deferral, is simultaneously *for himself* and *for another*, a situation which produces in the slave that profound awareness of his split condition which Hegel designates self-consciousness. In other words, the slave experiences a form of autonomy made possible by the consciousness of his condition as provisional on a material *lack of autonomy*. The master, however, having reached the “ultimate” of consciousness and subjectivity – the completion of his desire – is reduced to an atemporal figure unable to experience the unfolding of the social in time. He is trapped in a solitary or, psychoanalytically-speaking, *narcissistic* state in which the recognition by the slave becomes obsolete precisely because their hierarchical relationship establishes the master’s desire as “recognized” once and for all.

We can see then that intersubjectivity, though never designated as such, is vital in Hegel’s understanding of being and consciousness. By Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel, it is desire that determines consciousness, that defines the subject’s being: “the (conscious) Desire of a being is what constitutes that being as I ...”<sup>63</sup> And yet, desire alone is not enough to constitute the social subject. As we have seen already in the psychoanalytic framework, the self cannot exist without the other: the ego is precipitated by an initial experience of separation and finds itself again through the recognition of and by an other. However, to the extent that this other is objectified, not acknowledged as possessing their own operative desire, we find undermined the subject’s dependency on that other whose being and recognition constitute the subject as such. This objectifying desire, this desire without need for recognition, signals a self-consciousness that is (in)complete or, rather, asocial.

Recalling the discussion of primary narcissism and its paradoxes from the previous

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<sup>63</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 3.

chapter, it would appear again that autonomy – either in the form of ego or self-consciousness – is none other than the recognition of the limits of that autonomy as established by the desire of the other. The self-consciousness of each subject is mediated by the self-consciousness of the other, and such mediation is radically transformative as it challenges the unity of the pre-social subject by submitting being (that is, desiring) to a situation of intersubjectivity. Without object or other, the subject cannot posit himself as such, much less come to any awareness of how that subjectivity conditions his thought and existence. On an intrapsychic level, we might equate this to how the ego comes into being both as a function of loss or separation and in the interest of reconciling that loss through an engagement with the external world coupled with fantasies of self-sufficiency.

What then do we make of Absolute Knowledge? Relying on Kojève, we might define Absolute Knowledge as a homogeneous state in which there would be nothing in the external world that is not mediated by mind or there would occur to the mind nothing that does not take place in the external world. The rift between the mind and the world would thus dissolve and this situation of reciprocal equilibrium would mark the ultimate triumph of reason but also, incidentally, “the end of history.” But, without otherness to ground the experience of consciousness, the entire procedure theoretically collapses. Further on in this chapter we will consider interventions suggesting not only that this need not be the case, but that such a position might be a misrepresentation of Hegel by Kojève. Nevertheless, it is this stifled Hegelianism to which Bataille reacts so strongly.

Bataille’s response then represents a emancipatory struggle to preserve an individual quality – though not exactly the individual as such – against this homogenizing force. We might say that the reason for this is two-fold: (1) to emphasize the incommensurability of thought itself with such a state and (2) to bring to the fore the act and experience of transgression which reveals the deep and irreconcilable ambivalence of

the individual when faced with the promise/threat of dissolution. Essentially, what Bataille suggests is a system with neither the possibility of closure nor of realization by the individual as such, the two conditions being mutually dependent. The result is a *reciprocity without equivalency* that simultaneously negates and preserves the dialectic through the inevitable eruptions of heterogeneous elements.

This is of course a cursory and relatively static summary, but I hope that the discussion to follow will allow us to engage more closely with and, more importantly, to *mobilize* those formal elements that are of particular relevance here, namely Absolute Knowledge, sovereignty and negativity/death, whose function in the dialectic we have not yet addressed but will consider in the pages to come. Thereafter other elements in the Hegelian system that signal deeper affinities with Bataille's thinking will also be discussed, but for now I am constraining myself to those that dominate Kojève's reading and which, via that reading, came to characterize Hegelian thought for Bataille.

To begin, Bataille vigorously contests the idea of Absolute Knowledge. And yet he does so in a rather anomalous way: not by positing its inverse in the form of a negative dialectic, but rather by endorsing Absolute Knowledge as fact. Indeed, in a 1948 paper he rather presumptuously writes of Hegel: "He did not know to what extent he was right."<sup>64</sup> Initially this appears contradictory to his attitude towards Hegel as espoused above. However, what Bataille suggests is never to abandon the dialectic, but rather to take a step further: to approach the dialectic in light of what Bruce Baugh describes as the "*contingent existence of knower*."<sup>65</sup> For Bataille, knowledge is so ontologically conditioned by a knower no knowledge could be complete to the degree required by the Absolute. Furthermore, there is a domain of "knowledge" that can only be experienced as

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<sup>64</sup> Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" in *The Bataille Reader*, p. 289.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 84-85.

or because of a threat to the integrity of the knower. Thus, something akin to the Absolute may exist – Bataille certainly thinks it does – but no knower may possess it, and as a result it is structurally unlike what we associate with knowledge. Consequently, Bataille terms this experience of one’s own contingency as a situation of “non-knowledge” or “unknowing”: *non-savoir*.

We might say then that Bataille’s “refutation” of the Absolute circles compulsively around the idea of *sovereignty without mastery*.<sup>66</sup> For Bataille, Hegel’s notion of Absolute Knowledge implies the possibility of a culmination of consciousness whereby knowing is equivalent to becoming. These are posited in the continuous tense because the equivalency is *in action*, made possible through a series of reversals. And yet, the formulation of Absolute Knowledge in Kojève’s reading seems to imply a possibility of completion – hence a “closed system” – in which everything is accounted for, including autonomy and negativity, both of which posit the self as an entirety, either as full presence or complete vacuity. But let us recall that the Bataillian subject – *ipse* – is the always fragmented “not-one” whose incompleteness is its greatest virtue. If wholeness or completion of either self or thought is absurd, serving no purpose, sovereignty that can be fixed as an object, or as totalizing absence, is not sovereignty at all but merely disguised servility or abstract negativity.

“Sovereignty,” Bataille writes, “is the object which eludes us all, which nobody has seized and which nobody can seize for this reason: we cannot possess it, like an object, but we are doomed to seek it.”<sup>67</sup> In Hegel’s dialectic, the bondsman/slave is the true sovereign on the basis of his ascension towards Absolute Knowledge through self-

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<sup>66</sup> See Andrew Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (Ed.), “Editor’s Introduction” in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), pp. 1-19; pp. 9-10.

<sup>67</sup> Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, Trans. Alastair Hamilton, (New York/London: Marion Boyars, 1985), pp. 193-194.

consciousness. In Bataille's view, however, the true sovereign would be free of the security of any certain knowledge. Absolute Knowledge, being a situation in which the distinction between subject and object dissolves, would signal such an experience but always at the expense of the knower who in the absolute would lose all discursive points of reference, the most significant being his self. Sovereignty then would be an ontological category of its own rather than the culmination or pinnacle of consciousness, not conferred or acquired on the basis of social or economic distinction but violently experienced as *outside* of these institutions – a realm of pure experience that knowledge cannot penetrate because it presumes the loss or dissolution of the self as the entity which knows or possesses. For this reason, Bataille associates sovereignty with the heterogeneous or with the base matter that such institutions exclude from their functioning.

Is this nevertheless the production of another system? It would appear so, and we see this in Breton's critique that Bataille, in spite of his embrace of the heterogeneous, is still given to reason and thus "cannot claim, no matter what he may say, to be opposed to any system, like an unthinking brute."<sup>68</sup> However, Bataille at no point denies the dialectic operation or the condition of intersubjectivity that sustains it: a sovereign being, useless as it may be in the material sense of the word, is still constrained to the discourse of utility. To the extent that such a being occupies a position assigned by the symbolic space of society, productive or not, it cannot break with the paradigm of utility however useless it appears. The condition of "uselessness" itself is contingent on the paradigm that excludes it, and in reaffirming that paradigm it is, in a sense, not "useless" at all.

It is at this point, made most explicit in the third volume of *The Accursed Share* (1949), that we come to sense what is radical in Bataille's definition of sovereignty: the

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<sup>68</sup> André Breton (1930), "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen Lane, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 184.

Absolute becomes the *impossible*, and exists precisely as that impossibility, as that which cannot be reached by the subject as such. Sovereignty then is not the quality of an actor or of a group, but of an *experience* – one that cannot be sustained because, for reasons we have seen above, it cannot free itself entirely and circles endlessly around the encoding system, much like Bataille’s “anti-philosophy” gravitates around the dialectic. Bataille however acknowledges the duplicity of his writing readily: in *Literature and Evil* (1957) he outlines that any sovereign operation is characterized by impossibility and as such will always be relegated to the domain of failure, and in *Erotism*, first published in the same year, he declares that he himself “feels quite free to fail.”<sup>69</sup> Throughout and across his works, Bataille’s thinking on the subject of sovereignty represents in each and every sense a borderline phenomenon: “it is impossible yet there it is.”<sup>70</sup>

In *Hegel contra Sociology and Dialectic of Nihilism*, Gillian Rose defends the speculative nature of Hegel’s thought, leveling criticisms at post-structuralism for its tendency to “totalize” Hegel. These readings, she argues, confine Absolute Knowledge to the level of essence where thought is still treated as object. But for Hegel, the formulation of Absolute Knowledge is about fracturing the very understanding of objectivity: it signals an unobjectified “witness” to the objectified system in its entirety, the Third which is the collapse of difference between two. The choice between nihilism and dialectics, she in turn suggests, is artificial and misleading: without formal rules for creating categories of judgement or reasoning, each category is a response to the *failure* of previous categories. Following this logic, in the case of Hegel the Absolute would be the response to the failures of objectifying categories which in turn would be the response to what Bataille designates the impossibility of the Absolute. Or, as Rose writes, it is “not that comprehension

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<sup>69</sup> Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, p. 194. Also in *Erotism*, p. 255.

<sup>70</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*: Vol. 1, Trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 257.

completes or closes, but that it returns diremption to where it cannot be overcome in exclusive thought or partial action.”<sup>71</sup>

The very idea of an entity is unsustainable without contact or mediation by the whole, which in turn is incomplete without the particulars which comprise it. The Absolute then cannot represent any possible end as the duality between identity and non-identity is not simply unsustainable, but structured upon that very unsustainability: neither can be maintained in isolation. By this understanding, both Hegel and Bataille are fundamentally engaged with the same speculation: the (im)possibility of a non-boundaried individual.

Thus, while Bataille’s anti-philosophy is a *forceful* (others might say obsessive) contestation of the “closed system” that the *Phenomenology* performs, in a rather Hegelian turn of events, they are inseparable, bound together like entity and whole or lord and bondsman, the later arriving at a dynamic “self-consciousness” through constraint to the former. Bataille cannot free himself from the mechanics of the “suffocating” or “impenetrable” dialectic. However, by emphasizing the doubling and re-doubling as a function of the impossible rather than in service of the Absolute, he does add to the system a more unsettling degree of instability. This instability – this Hegelianism without reserve – marks the singularity of Bataille’s position.<sup>72</sup> As Derrida, still very much present in this discussion, writes: “rarely has a relation to Hegel been so little definable.”<sup>73</sup>

#### TOWARDS A GENERAL ECONOMY OF THE DRIVES

The step that Bataille invites us to take is in the domain of impossibility, of failure, where

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<sup>71</sup> Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 158.

<sup>72</sup> Tony Corn, “Unemployed Negativity: Derrida, Bataille, Hegel” in Boldt-Irons, Ed. (1995), pp. 79-91; p. 80.

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” in *Writing and Difference*, p. 253.

we as such cannot actually advance. Here I believe we might revisit Derrida's analysis of the *pas de thesis*<sup>74</sup> that Freud puts forward (and then backward again) regarding the death drive, the absence and/or steps of the thesis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that Derrida discusses in "To Speculate" and which we have already considered in the previous pages. Freud, as Derrida maintains, advances his "thesis" precisely by not advancing it: through a series of back and forth motions that play out in the text much like the *fort/da* game that becomes its defining episode. To determine whether for Freud this is consciously or unconsciously motivated is more speculation than I am comfortable with. Bataille, on the other hand, has a distinct awareness of the convulsive motions that take place as one approaches the domain where self and subjectivity begin to disintegrate. In fact, that convulsiveness is precisely his (non-)object of inquiry. For this reason, I believe his thinking might help illuminate that particularly dark and inaccessible corner of Freudian theory – the death drive.

Despite what I perceive to be profound resonances, little work has been done to draw out this possible juxtaposition. And though Bataille occasionally references or alludes to psychoanalysis, the same being true *vice versa*, there does not appear to me to be enough literature, neither primary nor secondary, to advance an argument based exclusively on direct comparison. Furthermore, given the subject matter, such a comparison would generally lack a foothold in formalized thought and thus be largely confined to the "unproductive" domain of unthinkability. For these reasons I have chosen to mediate this discussion with Hegel in order to establish some theoretical groundwork for Bataille's thinking and, via Derrida, attempt a transposition.

In addition to Derrida's extensive writings on Freud, he also produced a crucial essay

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<sup>74</sup> One the many bilingual puns in this essay: "step" in French is *pas*, which is also the most common word for negation. Hence, as Derrida explains, "steps for nothing," the legwork/legacy that goes nowhere.



on Bataille's theoretical relation to Hegel. However, despite the fact that in *Archive Fever* Derrida discusses how the introduction of the death drive transformed the psychic economy into an "aneconomy," that in the same sentence he describes the expenditure of its annihilating force as "the accursed share,"<sup>75</sup> this very obvious gesture towards Bataille's 1949 text of the same name is not elaborated. Actually, Bataille is not mentioned at all. The two are never explicitly brought into consideration with one another. But I argue here that there are compelling similarities (and one glaring difference) between the textual and conceptual movements that Derrida describes in relation to the *athesis* of the death drive to those he identifies in Bataille's general economy.

In "From Restricted to General Economy," Derrida deconstructs Bataille's complicity with Hegel, suggesting that in spite of his temperamental resistance, Bataille actually poses no *philosophical* objection to Hegel's logic or discourse. Instead, he introduces "a certain burst of laughter"<sup>76</sup> that exceeds and dislocates its sense. However, Derrida explains, this "can be done only through close scrutiny and full knowledge of what one is laughing at."<sup>77</sup> According to Derrida, Bataille calls into question the Hegelian system while maintaining the rigor of its reasoning. He does not extract, manipulate, or transpose individual elements of the Hegelian system. Rather, he takes the system in its totality and through the suggestion that in addition to the interdependence of its internal elements, it is also contingent on functions of exclusion and impossibility, sends a shudder through it.<sup>78</sup> Derrida writes:

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<sup>75</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, pp. 9-10, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 253.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, in *The Gift of Death* as well as in his auto-biographical "Circumfession," Derrida also describes religious belief as a trembling. God, he explains, has no essence, no presence, no substance – no *ontology*. Either he is or he is, but in either case *he is not* and as a result true faith is always exposed to and accompanied to by radical doubt and, in a sense, atheism. He writes, "[i]t is in the epoché, the suspension of belief, the suspension of the position of God as a thesis, that faith appears" (1993, p. 46). For more on Derrida and religion see also John Caputo's "The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical

Taken one by one and immobilized outside their syntax, all of Bataille's concepts are Hegelian. We must acknowledge this without stopping here. For if one does not grasp the rigorous effect of the *trembling* to which he submits these concepts, the new configuration into which he displaces and reinscribes them, barely reaching it however, one would conclude, according to the case at hand, that Bataille is Hegelian or anti-Hegelian, or that he has muddled Hegel. One would be deceived each time. And one would miss the formal law which, *necessarily enunciated by Bataille in a nonphilosophical mode*, has constrained the relationship of all his concepts to those of Hegel, and through Hegel's concepts to the concepts of the entire history of metaphysics.<sup>79</sup>

The result is not a contestation per se, but the signaling that in any system that appears stable, complete, or "impenetrable" there is a constant unease, an interminable shifting – a system not of differences but of *intervals*. As Derrida explains of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: there is no stopping, no advancing.

This is not far from the Hegel that emerges in Rose's reading, but as always there is a certain violence in Bataille's thinking that stems from the focus on the loss of meaning as a lived experience of contingency – an experience that he equates with death – rather than as a theoretical construct.<sup>80</sup> By this equivalency, he attempts to approach death as it is whenever thought is concerned: the unspeakable excess rendered by a situation of alternation and ambivalence between the desire for meaning and the drive to surpass it. But the fascination-turned-horror of a transgression that puts one beyond alterity reawakens the desire to install again the limits that one has just surpassed. Death, in other words, is not an ontological category of its own: as such it would be either unviable or

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Atheism to Radical Theology" in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 2011): 32-125.

<sup>79</sup> Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 254.

<sup>80</sup> See Robyn Marasco's *Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

fundamentally fraudulent. Rather, it is only “knowable” as the situation of ontological uncertainty that it reveals or the ontological oscillation it evokes – as what Derrida refers to in “To Speculate” as *life death*.

From this perspective, the master/slave episode is transformed as follows: Sovereignty, as an extreme (but fleeting) experience of *non-savoir*, results in a necessary regression to the condition of slave or bondsman who represents the “truth of the independent consciousness.”<sup>81</sup> The slave recognizes that it is none other than servility that makes consciousness and its mediation possible. Or, as Derrida writes, “[s]ervility is therefore only the desire for meaning.”<sup>82</sup> As for the master, he exposes himself to death but in doing so “for pure prestige” is unaware of the doubling that this situation creates: his mastery – like all mastery – is always an act of servility to meaning, and his encounter with death, far from an expression of sovereignty, is “mute and unproductive.”<sup>83</sup> Without the step backward that allows us to contemplate the experience from the perspective of life, the mute death of the master, of one who feels his work is *finished*, is reduced to abstract negativity. And yet if life restricts itself exclusively to its conservation it can never express its highest principle. The question for Bataille is: how to negate and conserve at the same time, thus accomplishing both and neither?

We can discern here a distinct resonance between Bataille’s relation to Hegel and the *athesis* that Derrida identifies in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, incidentally also “enunciated in a non-philosophical mode” through the departures and returns of Freud’s text. Of the former, Derrida writes:

What has happened here? In sum nothing has been said. We have not

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<sup>81</sup> Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* quoted in Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” in *Writing and Difference*, p. 256.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*, p. 262.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*.

stopped at any word; the chain rests on nothing; none of the concepts satisfies the demand, all are determined by each other and, at the same time, destroy or neutralize each other.”<sup>84</sup>

We see here the same “impossibility of a resting point”<sup>85</sup> that emerges in relation to the death drive. In this way, perhaps Bataille also seems to behave like Freud’s grandson Ernst.

In the exemplary example the child throws away and brings back to himself, disperses and reassembles, gives and takes by himself: he reassembles the reassembling and the dispersion, the multiplicity of agents... the unity of a multiplicity that can be scattered.”<sup>86</sup>

It would appear that the sovereign operation, very much like the death drive, must by necessity confirm or conserve that which each exceeds in order to affirm itself or, more precisely, accede to the *impossibility* that characterizes it. But again, we notice that Bataille’s approach does not have the same Sisyphean quality. The issue is not a desired object always-already out of reach but an object that is not-one, not a simple repetition but a violent re-doubling that shatters and affirms, that affirms *by* shattering: through the expenditure and loss of self, one arrives again at the fractured *ipse* that one always-already is. Or as Derrida writes, “[n]ot a reserve or a withdrawal, not the infinite mummer of a black speech erasing the traces of classical discourse, but a kind of potlatch of signs that burns, consumes, and wastes words in the gay affirmation of death: a sacrifice and a challenge.”<sup>87</sup>

I attempted in the previous pages to trace out the ways in which Bataille’s work represents reinterpretation of Hegelian discourse that is also a repetition or re-

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<sup>84</sup> *ibid*, p. 274.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, p. 261.

<sup>86</sup> Derrida, “To Speculate – On Freud” in *The Postcard*, pp. 309-10.

<sup>87</sup> Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” in *Writing and Difference*, p. 274.

instantiation. Moving forward however, I would like to emphasize the “sacrifice” that Bataille introduces in the form of excess. He follows Hegel beyond Hegel, into the domain of the unassimilable wherein negativity ceases to “work.” The challenge that Bataille’s excess presents to Hegel’s notion of negativity (and likewise to the psychoanalytic attitude of mourning) will be discussed in greater detail shortly, but to conclude, although inconclusively, the discussion of Bataille’s so-called opposition to Hegel: the introduction of an unassimilable element does not alter the play of forces; it does however reveal them as defiantly paroxysmal.

If excess is, as per Derrida’s description, that which “fold[s] into strange shapes”<sup>88</sup> beyond the oppositions governed by logic, then I believe we can begin to discern these “strange shapes” in the uneasy relationship between these two economies (if they can in fact be posited as separate) and what is performed by their writhing. First, Bataille’s resistance to Hegel is constrained to Hegelian thought, and as such is a re-affirmation of the dialectic which it would like to challenge or contest. Bataille’s critique, in other words, takes the form of a recognition of its own invariable failure through its subordination to a discursive goal: “[w]isdom alone will be full autonomy, the sovereignty of being... At least it would be if we could find sovereignty by searching for it: and, in fact, if I search for it, I am undertaking the project of being sovereignly: but the *project* of being-sovereignly presupposes a servile being.”<sup>89</sup> Raymond Queneau, who also attended Kojève’s lectures and like Bataille was eventually spurned by the Surrealists, expresses this uneasy relationship as follows: “[Bataille] came to know himself – know himself as radically non-Hegelian, but by knowing that this self-knowledge could only take place after he had knowledge of a doctrine which he claimed was comparable to no other, and by this finding

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid*, p. 253.

<sup>89</sup> Bataille, “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice” in *The Bataille Reader*, pp. 292-3.

himself once again, *mediated but not reduced*.”<sup>90</sup> And so in this interplay of ideas, Bataille also comes to represent the excess which he so championed – that which reifies the grounding system but in the form of a threat. If the two do indeed co-exist in opposition, it is one which cannot be stabilized because each simultaneously mutilates and affirms the other. The relationship between their thought – one of necessary and inevitable reversals taking place around *impossibility* – performs and supports each of their positions through a demand for the other. That the “anti-Hegelian” system is deeply Hegelian whereas Hegel’s system carries within itself its own “anti-matter” seems to be support for a general economy – a system given to and contingent upon its own overflowing.

Furthermore, I believe that the relation between the two operates as an epistemological representation of the notion of the drive economy that I am attempting to put forth here, whereby any attempt to exceed the system results in a return or repetition *as well as* an unassimilable remainder. Life posited as a function of lack, work, or desire strives towards a fulfillment which is also an extinguishment, but this encounter with death can only claim significance if it calls out to its other in the form of life or meaning. However, while this necessary dependency is reciprocal, the principles themselves are not equivalent. This lack of equivalency submits the entire economy to a situation of trembling much like Bataille’s “anti-philosophy” does to the Hegelian dialectic. Death, by this interpretation is not the principle of return or repetition itself but the remainder, the excess rendered by a psychic economy in which the aim of the death drive surpasses its reciprocal other and thus cannot be articulated or represented in the psyche except as its own impossibility. The death drive, in turn, could be thought of as a psychic force of expenditure oriented towards the mutilation of the difference that

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<sup>90</sup> Raymond Queneau, “First Confrontations with Hegel” in *Critique*, 195-6 (1963): 694-700; my italics.

sustains it. However, it is in every sense dependent upon that relation, existing only in so far as it is mediated by the life drive to which it consistently returns in order to perpetuate itself. The impossibility of its aim is the impossibility of the sovereign operation: *it cannot be known except as the failure of being known.*

Bataille's contribution then consists in showing that even if the movement of knowledge accomplishes the absolute, the individual as such cannot. The reason is clear: death, being beyond alterity, is beyond the functions of desire and discourse that maintain the self as a separate entity. Returning to Derrida's essay,

the *impossible* mediated by Bataille will always have this form: how, after having exhausted the discourse of philosophy, can one inscribe in the lexicon and syntax of a language, our language, which was also the language of philosophy, that which nevertheless exceeds the oppositions of concepts governed by this communal logic?<sup>91</sup>

From this Bataille concludes that there are some occasions when the mind fails to articulate or to proceed in the direction from the unknown to known. Upsetting the function of mind, these heterogeneous occasions or elements open up to the domain of the impossible, triggering an experience resulting in the collapse of the very faculty through which world becomes known. It is exactly at these points or moments, referred to by Bataille as "blind spots," that the individual becomes sovereign precisely because he ceases to be, and though this blind vision is fundamentally untenable, by it something is accomplished and affirmed. This will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter through a consideration of the psychological structure(s) of masochism and mysticism, and subsequently in relation to violent forms of representation which appear to trigger similar effects. But before proceeding in the domains of experience and representation, I

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<sup>91</sup> Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 253.

wish to focus the remainder of this chapter on the concepts that allow us to approach such a situation of subjective/objective collapse as unbound energetic flux rather than an inconceivable encounter with negativity.

To that end, I offer here a few words in which I believe we can find encapsulated the uncanny oscillations of Bataille's non-philosophical mode as well as its constraint to Hegel: "These judgements should lead to silence yet I am writing. This is in no way paradoxical."<sup>92</sup> It is this attitude that I wish to apply to Freudian metapsychology, wherein death remains largely unspeakable.

#### DEATH AND DIALECTICS

In his 1950 paper "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,"<sup>93</sup> Bataille expresses admiration of Hegel's audacity in trying to subsume death and his lucidity in recognizing the threat that death posed to any philosophical system. Here he includes a passage from the preface to the *Phenomenology* wherein Hegel writes:

Death – if we wish so to name that unreality – is the most terrible thing there is and to uphold the work of death is the task which demands the greatest strength... Now, the life of Spirit is not that life which is frightened of death, and spares itself destruction, but that life which assumes death and lives with it. Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in *absolute dismemberment*.

Up to this point, we can notice a profound resonance with Bataille's thinking, but Hegel continues,

It is not that (prodigious) power by being the Positive that turns away from

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<sup>92</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 68.

<sup>93</sup> An English version was not published until 1990, when it appeared in *Yale French Studies*, No. 78, translated by Jonathan Strauss. The version of "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" I refer to can be found in *the Bataille Reader*, (Ed. Botting and Wilson), pp. 9-28.



the Negative, as when we say of something: this is nothing or (this is) false and, having (thus) disposed of it, pass from there to something else; no, Spirit is that power only to the degree in which it contemplates the Negative face to face (and) dwells with it.<sup>94</sup>

For Hegel then, it would appear that death can be transposed onto being as a consciousness of negativity: the work of death can be upheld and looked in the face. And on this foundation of nothingness rests the whole of concrete reality, subjects differentiated from objects and each from its other. “Man works and fights,” Bataille writes of Hegel’s approach, “he transforms the given; he transforms nature and in destroying it he creates a world, a world which was not.”<sup>95</sup> Only in this way can he arrive at any awareness of his condition and of the negativity which precedes and perpetuates it. In this discourse, considered also by Derrida in his essay on Bataille, negativity exists as the “underside and accomplice of positivity. [It] cannot be spoken of, nor has it ever been except in this fabric of meaning.”<sup>96</sup> This, by Bataille’s understanding, recuperates negativity, makes it *useful*.

Furthermore, this “dwelling with death” presents a theoretical problem when coupled with the desire to be recognized that initiates the master/slave episode so prominent in Kojève’s reading. Relying again on Kojève’s interpretation, Bataille quotes: “It is only in being or becoming aware of one’s mortality or finitude, in existing and in feeling one’s existence in a universe without a beyond or without a God, that Man can affirm his liberty, his historicity and his individuality – ‘unique in all the world’ – and

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<sup>94</sup> Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” in *The Bataille Reader*, p. 283.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid*, p. 280.

<sup>96</sup> Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” in *Writing and Difference*, p. 258.

have them be recognized.”<sup>97</sup> But, as Bataille identifies, this desire for recognition is not easily reconciled with Hegel’s notion of “absolute dismemberment.”

To some extent, the same is true of psychoanalysis. Freud, for instance, writes the following of the impossibility of thinking death:

The theoretic significance of the instincts of self-preservation, power and self-assertion, shrinks to nothing, seen under this light; they are part-instincts designed to secure the path to death peculiar to the organism and to ward off possibilities of return to the inorganic other than the immanent ones, but the enigmatic struggle of the organism to maintain itself in spite of all the world, *a struggle that cannot be brought into connection with anything else, disappears.*<sup>98</sup>

We can discern here what Norman O. Brown is referring to when he describes the psychoanalytic attitude towards death as one of mourning. In *Life Against Death*, published around the time of Bataille’s *Erotism*, Brown attempts to reframe the function of death in instinctual life. The death drive, he argues, is abandoned because of the opacity and pessimism it introduces and likewise because its only therapeutic application is as obstacle to the analytic cure, as Freud himself suggests in 1937 with “Analysis Terminable and Interminable.”<sup>99</sup>

As considered in Chapter 1, Freud’s formulation of the instincts reflects a dualism: a conflict between the drive(s) to preserve life and the drive to *reduce* life to the inorganic state out of which it arose. Death here appears as both “less than” life and its final goal, an *absence* out of which life emerged and to which it invariably returns. But this reading

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<sup>97</sup> Kojève quoted in Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” *The Bataille Reader*, p. 289. The original text, as well as most of Bataille’s references in this essay, are found in Appendix II, “The idea of Death in the philosophy of Hegel,” which is not included in Allan Bloom’s re-edition (and abridgment) of Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.

<sup>98</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, p. 39; my italics.

<sup>99</sup> Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, (Hanover: Welseyan University Press, 1959), p. 81.

turns the death drive into a mode of resignation to negativity. The outright dismissal of the death drive on the basis of this theoretical pessimism, however, leaves us with instinctual monism. Neither allows us to consider how the prerogative of the death drive sustains the ambivalence which characterizes psychic life. “We need,” as Brown writes, “instead of an instinctual dualism, an *instinctual dialectic*.”<sup>100</sup>

Much like Bataille, he distinguishes the neurotic or conflictual human condition from the harmony of animality: “a strife of opposites is produced by the separating of opposites out of a primal state of undifferentiated unity.”<sup>101</sup> Brown too calls upon Hegel in this context, identifying “an intrinsic connection between death and the essence of true life, individuality:”<sup>102</sup> the “ontological uniqueness” claimed by the individual is a function of a mortal body rather than an immortal essence, as the latter would render the “individual” none other than a mode in an infinite and eternal substance. Death then is that which confers individuality; an organism “has uniqueness and individuality because it lives its own life and no other – that is to say, because it dies.”<sup>103</sup> According to Brown, Freud’s drive theory suggests something similar. “*The aim of all life is death*,” Freud is “compelled to say,”<sup>104</sup> but the life drives, always under the pressure of this first and final instinct, function to “assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death.”<sup>105</sup>

However, a model which emphasizes dualistic opposition, as Brown argues, is unable to conceptualize death as a pre-ambivalent fullness, only as a vacuity which life or Eros works to conceal through the processes of separation and binding and which death restores through diminution. Brown however suggests modifying Freud’s ontology in a

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<sup>100</sup> *ibid*, p. 83; my italics.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*. Bataille also discusses this distinction at length in both *Erotism* and *Theory of Religion*.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid*, p.104.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>104</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *SE XVIII*, p. 38.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid*, p. 39.

way that accommodates the notion of dialectical unity. With this interpretation, Brown challenges the notion of the death drive as an innate aggressiveness inclined toward and in service of indifferent destruction, and in its place offers a view of the death drive that we might conceptualize as “extroverted,” aimed at restoring an obscured continuity rather than a disguised negativity. And yet, to organize concepts of identity, truth, history, meaning, etc. *around* negativity, reveal negativity as a philosophical determinant, but one that is always made intelligible through work which subsequently gives it meaning through labor. As Brown also indicates, death by such readings is something lost by the individual, something to be either repressed or recuperated rather than attained or affirmed. But if negativity is always re-appropriated in a dialectic, how radical can it be?

Bataille’s *ipse* signals that he too operates around a negative nucleus. However, he does not aim to *signify* the vacant center but to (1) elevate it as the basis of insufficiency which is, incidentally, the condition for continuity and (2) simultaneously call attention to the *nonproductive expenditure* that leaves no “underside,” challenging the dialectic between positivism and the negativity that makes it possible by introducing a third term – *excess*. This is a threat to the system that does not appear in the form of an inverse, that does treat negativity as *resource* on which to sediment layers of meaning.

Unlike André Green’s negative, which “works,” Bataille’s expenditure without reserve is the very surpassing of any reciprocal other and thus cannot be circumscribed in either positive or negative terms. In this reading, death is not a straightforward reduction of tension, but a situation of release through expenditure: an emptying out of the tensions held together by the necessary fiction of the “I” and by the processes of *Eros* that maintain its individuality through separation. Paired with Bataille’s notion of insufficiency, which identifies each “whole” as less-than or lacerated (i.e. always-already organized around an absent center), this expenditure signals an *opening*, namely to the community/continuity

that lies beyond the separation(s) maintaining the “I” as a discreet entity. This is not the expanding vacuity of Green’s negative narcissism, but a dissolution or scattering of self which takes place precisely through a narcissistic wound. As Bataille articulates:

It seems to me that the totality of what is swallows me, and if it swallows me, or since it swallows me, I can’t distinguish myself from it; nothing remains, except this or that, which are less meaningful than this nothing. In a sense it is unbearable and I seem to be dying. It is at this cost, no doubt, that I am no longer myself but an infinity in which I am lost...<sup>106</sup>

What I am proposing here is an application of this perspective to psychoanalysis, the theoretical significance of which would be twofold. First, in relation to the economy of the drives, we might consider the death drive as the instinctual component that surpasses its other and, as such, aims for a situation without discursive points of reference. And secondly, it might be that Freud, in spite of his pessimism or skepticism, does in fact provide a means of conceptualizing this engulfing totality when he outlines the ‘oceanic’ feeling. This would challenge the prevailing preconception of the idea of the death drive as an aggressive force, suggesting that perhaps it aims instead for the fusion or continuity beyond the individual restlessness of the pleasure principle, yet still in constant motion.

Eros then reflects what Bataille describes as “the monstrous energy of thought” that maintains the “pure abstract ‘I’” and upholds the separations that create its world. Here I believe that Brown expresses quite clearly the affinities that we begin to see between Hegel, Freud, and Bataille:

The history of mankind consists in a departure from the condition of undifferentiated primal unity with himself and with nature, an intermediate

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<sup>106</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Vol. II & III*, Trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Zone Books, 1993), pp. 115-6.

period in which man's powers are developed through differentiation and antagonism (alienation) with himself and with nature, and a final return to the unity on a higher level or harmony. But these categories – primal unity, differentiation through antagonism, final harmony – remain in the romantics arbitrary and *mystical* because they lack a foundation in psychology.<sup>107</sup>

Perhaps, as Bataille's texts seem to suggest, this "mysticism" is the only way to approach these concept at all. In adopting this highly-controversial approach, Bataille rejects and opposes both Freud's dualism and the recuperation of negativity as feature of the "classic dialectic," both of which I would argue account for difficulties within the psychoanalytic formulation of the drive theory. However, if we shift from a restricted to a general economy, if we apply here the *trembling* to which Bataille submits Hegel's concepts we might, I believe, perceive the drive economy "differently" without altering any of its formal elements.

With the theory of the general economy, Bataille does not outline an efficient system but rather one that relies on extreme (non-productive) expenditure, excess to the point of destruction, which incidentally is the highest expression of the life principle – an emptying out of the tensions contained in the fiction of the self-possessed, self-sufficient individual. Then perhaps if there is indeed a dialectic between primary narcissism and the death drive, it is unstable, prone to violence or excess which cannot be accounted for by system as a whole.

Bataille "defines" excess as follows: "[e]xcess transcends its foundations and by very definition sets being beyond the limits of definition. Being no doubt also exists within limits and they allow us to be articulate."<sup>108</sup> Excess then is the remainder of the relation

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<sup>107</sup> Brown, *Life Against Death*, p. 86; my italics.

<sup>108</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 268 n1.

of the subject to his limits, signaling what overflows of being as he operates within and beyond them. By replacing the fixed limit with this situation of oscillation, we might maintain not only the subject, but also the *experience* that subjectivity cannot contain. For Bataille, whether one lives or dies, an immediate knowledge of death is unthinkable. With the notion of sovereign operation, however, Bataille attempts to draw this impossibility back into the economies which exclude it, even if this can only be accomplished as failure. As Derrida describes, “[n]ow the sovereign operation, the point of of *nonreserve*, is neither positive nor negative. It cannot be inscribed in discourse, except by crossing out predicates or by practicing a contradictory superimpression that then exceeds the logic of philosophy.”<sup>109</sup>

We are indeed faced with two groups of processes continuously unfolding in “contrary directions” – assimilation and dissolution, life and death – but the relationship between them would appear to be one of *violent alternation rather than opposition*. This approach, I believe, allows us to conceptualize the system precisely by destabilizing it, by setting in motion as interdependent principles what is theoretically inaccessible when posited as a fixed state. By focusing on the mutual processes of accumulation and dispersal rather than the pure-loss, this economy<sup>110</sup> of reciprocity without recuperation leaves room for a provisional subject – the not-quite One who is caught between insisting and resisting to be. This albeit partial preservation of the subject allows us to reconsider the role of death in the psyche, to consider it as the subject’s relation to his own precariousness: as “the totality in which we lose ourselves insofar as we take ourselves for a strictly separate entity (for the pure abstraction that the isolated individual is, or thinks

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<sup>109</sup> Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” in *Writing and Difference*, p. 259.

<sup>110</sup> Freud highlights this in the first paragraph of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: “the consideration of the mental processes which are the subject of our study introduce an ‘economic’ point of view into our work.” (*SE XVIII*, p. 7)

he is).”<sup>111</sup>

But how can we think of an aim that is not one, that is its very own disintegration? Following Bataille, the (non-)response is to be found in the eruption of the heterogenous or excessive, which threatens the oppositions that sustain life as a situation of separation and as such evoke in the individual an experience of death as the loss of a discrete or “stable” self. By this reading, the death drive would not signal a destructive instinct, as it is so often understood and portrayed, but a *destabilizing* instinct. The question then would be: in service of what?

#### LIBIDINAL MATERIALISM

In *Hegel and Psychoanalysis*, Molly Macdonald presents an alternative reading of Hegel that challenges the predominant interpretations of Absolute Knowledge. Framing the reading through the perspective of the Third (*Dritte*), Macdonald puts forth a bird’s-eye view of the dialectic – the constant mechanical shifting between two observed from a position of exteriority as the organic movements of a larger whole. By introducing this witness, she bypasses the overemphasis on the individual trajectories of either lord or bondsman. Rather, she foregrounds the *mo(ve)ment* in which two terms, mutilated beyond the possibility of recognition (that is, distinguishment) give way to a dynamic interplay between unbound forces – a reciprocal interaction that we might refer to as “intersubjectivity” were it not for its lack of any identifiable subjects.

This interpretation is made possible by the emphasis on Force – on the energetics or economics of the system in its totality instead of the integrity of its individual components. In that sense, Macdonald reads into Hegel the play of forces more commonly attributed to Nietzsche. However, she introduces a stipulation that deconstructs

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<sup>111</sup> Bataille, “The Object of Desire and the Totality of the Real” in *The Bataille Reader*, pp. 264-270.



dialectical opposition: Force as Universal Medium. Force, as Macdonald explains, is a unique concept within the *Phenomenology*: “in order for it to ‘be, it must be completely set free from thought,’ it must be allowed to exist and function without meddling from any process other than its own.”<sup>112</sup> That is, Force cannot be ideated or iterated: it manifests as its own existence, bound or unbound, and corresponds to the multiplicity, potentiality, and changeability of form rather than any given form as such. By reading the movements of the dialectic through the differentiations of Force, Macdonald puts forth a model capable of considering the negation of the subject on the principle that doing so does not lead us into the field of abstract negativity. Undergirded by non-differentiation, such a model signals the radical otherness most foreign to individual thought. However, in this interpretation, the absence of the individual does not assert itself as a mourning. Instead it gives way to a reuptake in the form of an experience of oneness with the whole.

“Force,” Macdonald writes, “is the movement of ‘matters,’ of moments, of objects that causes them to leave their individuality behind, becoming one with other(s), only to break this unity back up into its particularity and then start the whole process again.”<sup>113</sup> Thus, Force functions as a transitional material between particularity and unconditional unity: no force is inherently different to its “other” but an opposition is produced so that one might arrive at the realization of the absolute-as-impossible through consciousness (i.e. self-consciousness), which is always an awareness of difference.

The juxtaposition of this energetic model with Freudian metapsychology allows for an otherwise interpersonal dynamic to be transposed onto the intrapsychic level. In this way, the monadic (though internally divided) ego can be substituted for the movement of self-consciousness as a process of binding-unbinding-rebinding. As in the psychoanalytic

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<sup>112</sup> Molly Macdonald, *Hegel and Psychoanalysis*, (London: Routledge 2014), p. 5, quoting Hegel.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid*, p. 29.

schema, the subject is at once bound to itself, to its own process of consciousness, and to the external world. But the emphasis on a general energetic economy privileges the *porousness* of these implications rather than the subjective self-perception they sustain. In foregrounding externalization as a necessary movement of thought, this interpretation addresses the impossibility of theoretically isolating death or narcissism. However, by taking a primordial condition of non-differentiation as the “starting point” Macdonald supplants the fight for recognition as the hinge of the Hegelian dialectic. Focusing instead on an episode through which the whole is restored to itself by the mutual permeations of its particulars, this hermeneutic allows us to think two “impossible” variables – loss of the subject and totality – as functions of their reciprocal dependency. Sacrifice, in other words, is also the means of fusion, and this equivalency fills an otherwise conceptual void by re-imagining it as a situation of *superfluidity*: what would otherwise appear as abstract negativity is formulated as an energetic flux that is mobile, mutable, and total.

It is my impression that the variegated lines of reasoning of this chapter converge here and might be summarized as follows: death operates as the “vanishing mediator” that never quite vanishes, the elusive third term of a psychic economy of binding and unbinding forces, driven by the latter but only able to posit itself through recourse to the former. Death, by this reading, would be that which insists and through that insistence (i.e. the impossibility of its re-uptake by the system) maintains the system in motion, the first struggle reproduced again and again, always equal to itself and yet never quite the same. As the aim of a drive then, it would correspond neither to a “return to zero” nor to “the end of history” – both of which reflect terminal conditions – but rather to an affirmation of the grounding non-differentiation out of which forms proliferate and into which they dissolve so that the process might begin again. Repetition and remainder.

To square this in Bataillian terms we would say that the insufficiency of the self

signals more than a constitutive lack: it is also that which ensures contact with the other, not only through the intersubjective dynamics of reversal, introjection, and identification, but also as a form of porous communication. That is, the narcissistic wound as a cause of mourning, anxiety, or anguish is also the means for an ecstatic transmission unrestricted by the formalism of subjectivity, what Bersani describes as “an intransitive pleasure intrinsic to [...] *a self-subtracted being*.”<sup>114</sup> Indeed, as both Bataille and Bersani suggest, such a transmission occurs precisely through the fissure in subjectivity that otherwise propels desire and relationality, however it exceeds both of those functions as determinants of difference.<sup>115</sup> And yet, I reiterate, concentrating on non-determination as that which constitutes identity as its own non-existence leads us down a theoretical dead end. After all, how to produce evidence of a negative proposition? Macdonald’s interpretation, however, puts into Hegelian terms one of the fundamental precepts of Bataille’s work: the communication or fusion of difference made possible by the *openness* of non-determination, a situation that cannot be described in terms of the appropriation of the other nor the expropriation of the self because what is foregrounded instead is a total situation of *mutual and mutable permeability*. This hermeneutic reconciles the “anti-philosophical” Bataille with the “impenetrable” Hegel because it supposes a totality that is profoundly heterogeneous: instead of taking difference as the valued term in opposition with sameness or homogeneity, such a model takes the two to be complements

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<sup>114</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And other essays*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 48.

<sup>115</sup> Or, as Bersani continues: “There is no other explanation for that pleasure. It doesn’t satisfy conscious or unconscious desires; instead, it testifies to the seductiveness of the ceaseless movement toward and away from things without which there would be no particular desire for *any* thing, a seductiveness that is the ontological ground for the desirability of all things” (ibid, p. 48). Here, Bersani is specifically describing the pleasure of queer sociability as a relational mode operating with a “partially dismantled subject.” While his object of inquiry differs from that of this investigation, the exploration of self-renunciation as a means to alternative ways or relating – or “knowing” – resonates with the present aim. The affinity with Bersani’s work will be discussed more thoroughly in relation to masochism in the following chapter.

and *complices* that can be synthesized by establishing the primacy of contact and its porousness. Thus, we displace (and abstract) the site of mutual constitution, privileging not the subjective “self-object” in relation to its other(s) but rather, the irrepressible energetic flow between non-differentiation and the differentiated forms that emerge out of that pre-existing situation and make it, at least to some degree, conceivable.

Borrowing from accelerationist Nick Land, we might describe this approach as *libidinal materialism*. With features of Lyotard’s libidinal economy (1974) and Deleuze and Guattari’s complexity theory (1988), Land’s theoretical approach is not the first of its kind. It is, however, the only such interpretation couched in Bataillan rhetoric, and for that reason is of particular interest here.

All three perspectives share an emphasis on the productivity of differentiating force in relation to the secondary position from which non-differentiation might then be considered. This idea emerges in Deleuze’s writing as early as 1962, with *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, and is carried through in collaboration with Guattari in both *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus*, where it culminates in an exploration of the thresholds at which matter achieves self-organization. Free of transcendent agents, this model of identity-producing difference refuses any effort at totalization through a decentralization of dialectical contradiction. “Pluralism,” Deleuze writes, “sometimes appears to be dialectical – but is its most ferocious enemy, its only profound enemy,”<sup>116</sup> and with the rhizomes and assemblages of complexity theory, he and Guattari endeavor to deterritorialize opposition. However, in light of the theoretical frameworks outlined in this chapter, such a model leaves us wondering: without friction, how do we account for movement?

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<sup>116</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson, (London: Athlone Press, 1983), p. 8.

We find a comparable difficulty in attempting to transpose Lyotard's libidinal economy. Though Lyotard's elevation of the energetic component of the unconscious is much in line with general economic view of the drives being elaborated here, his framing of representation as a local effect of libidinal intensities does not quite allow us to account for the importance of representation in Freudian and Lacanian theories of ego/subject-formation. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard employs the concept of libido at its most diffuse in order to replace ego- and anthropocentric considerations with a more ecological/energetic interpretation. It is my impression, however, that such models cannot quite accommodate psychoanalytic speculation, at least not without an element of disingenuousness, and this is what sets Land's libidinal materialism apart.

Following Bataille, Land takes into consideration what is at stake when privileging the decentralized and deregulated flow of energy between matters, namely subjectivity itself. In other words, this thinking can only be experienced as a *crisis* for/of the thinking subject. Such a reading re-inscribes the subjectivity as the sacrifice that such a perspective implies and demands. Thus, the "self" is somewhat retained, if only as its disintegration and loss, and this allows for the possibility of recourse to psychoanalytic thinking, if only through a consideration of its limitations. In his elaboration of libidinal materialism, Land identifies this mode of interrogation as one that is thematically psychoanalytical but morbidly and perhaps even "irresponsibly" so in its "enthusias[m] for the accentuation of intensity that will carry it through insurrection into anegoic delirium."<sup>117</sup> Like Deleuze and Lyotard, he speaks to a compulsion to abstract civilization and subjectivity into tides of impersonal energy, a model that operates largely according to thermodynamic principles however, as Land explains, it has no predicates: "in contrast to the energy of physical

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<sup>117</sup> Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. xx.

thermodynamics, libidinal energy is chaotic, or pre-ontological.”<sup>118</sup> In this view, chaos is the irrepressible flux of compositions and being (or rather *becoming*) is its effect. This, Land argues, is against Lacan’s foregrounding of lack, as well as the Platonic or Christian positing of an end to desire. Actually, he describes that this view is closest to Freud’s “dissipative energetic flows,” a return to Freud that is especially relevant here given that it is discussed in the context of Bataille’s peculiar nihilism.

Libidinal materialism, it would appear, accounts for the associative link between Freud and Bataille. But Land is wary in this regard. In a way that both echoes Bataille’s view of his own work as “failure” and encapsulates the implicit or inhibited complexity beyond the level of signifiers in the Freudian texts, he writes:

No one could ever ‘be’ a libidinal materialist. This is a ‘doctrine’ that can only be suffered as an abomination, a jangling of the nerves, a combustion of articulate reason, and a nauseating rage of thought. It is a hyperlepsy of the central nervous-system, ruining the body’s adaptive regimes, and consuming its reserves in rhythmic convulsions that are not only futile, but devastating.<sup>119</sup>

How, then, do the two attempt to accommodate this “abomination” of thought?

#### LIKE WATER IN WATER

To conclude this chapter, I propose that we consider the metonymical use of water as means of conceptualizing this state of constant, churning flux. Both Bataille and Freud employ aquatic metaphors in order to imagine the exuberance of such a state.<sup>120</sup> These

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<sup>118</sup> *ibid*, p. 43.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid*, p. xiii.

<sup>120</sup> As do Wilfred Bion (1970) and Sandor Ferenczi (1924). Bion describes the movement from knowledge (“K”) to the ineffable (“O”) as an experience of “psychological turbulence” and an “act of faith.” As examples of turbulence as a characteristic of “O” he offers the mystic writings of Saint John of Cross – specifically the metaphor of the “dark night of the soul” – and the depictions of unsettled water in

elaborations present libidinal materialism at its most *material*, and the theoretical implications are twofold. The first and perhaps more evident is a reduction of the nebulousness of this interrogative mode in a manner that nevertheless resists structural formalism. The second implication, as I see it, is more contextually specific: the juxtaposition of Bataille's fluid descriptions of continuity and inner experience with the Freudian 'oceanic,' allows us to consider religious contemplation as an expression of the death drive – a possibility that seems to be implicit in Freud's later writings but remains largely undeveloped.

"The separate being," Georges Bataille writes, "is precisely a thing in that it is separated from itself: *it is the thing and the separation...*"<sup>121</sup> Psychoanalytically-speaking, this "separate being" would correspond to the ego, which in so far as we come to understand it, corresponds to feelings of certainty and autonomy, of being "marked off distinctly from everything else."<sup>122</sup> But this, as Freud plainly states, is *deceptive*. "The feeling of our own ego is subject to disturbances," he writes in *Civilization and its Discontents*, "and the boundaries of the ego are not constant."<sup>123</sup> The ego, in other words, is not a distinct entity, but the projection or perception of unity where it is uncertain, unstable, unr/Real – "the shrunken residue of a more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling."<sup>124</sup> This primary, "all-embracing" ego-feeling – which Freud associates with a feeling of limitlessness or oneness with the universe, wherein something like an ego is perhaps not discernable at all – Freud describes as *oceanic*, borrowing the

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Leonardo da Vinci's sketches. See, for instance, *Attention and Interpretation*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), pp. 106-113. Ferenczi, on the other hand, considers the importance of the "aquatic" in *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, (Trans. Henry Alden Bunker, London: Karnac, 1989), wherein he develops the view that life strives to return to womb and water as embryonic environments.

<sup>121</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 75.

<sup>122</sup> Freud (1930), *Civilization and its Discontents*, *SE XXI*, p. 66.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*, p. 68.

term from a letter written to him by French poet and mystic Romain Rolland in response to *The Future of an Illusion*. Therein Rolland accepts Freud's critique of religion and the juvenile nature of prevailing forms of belief but clarifies that Freud's analysis neglects the "the true source of religious sentiments" which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity,' an experience of the limitless and unbounded – *une sentiment oceanique*.

Freud is willing to acknowledge that this 'oceanic' feeling exists but finds unconvincing the claim that it might be regarded as the source of religious *need*, insisting, as per his argument in *The Future of Illusion*, that the motives for religious tendencies lie instead in infantile helplessness, the desire for submission to a superior power, and the narcissistic wish of an ego to endure beyond death. "I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself,"<sup>125</sup> Freud confesses, nor does he feel able to "work with such intangible quantities."<sup>126</sup> Classing the 'oceanic' as a sensation which defies scientific characterization, Freud concedes that "nothing remains but to fall back on the ideational content most readily associated with the feeling."<sup>127</sup> And it is here that I wish to introduce a caveat, namely that the 'oceanic' suggests to us the altogether absence, perhaps even the irrelevance, of ideational content as such. In fact, I would argue, this "feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole"<sup>128</sup> seems to suggest the very emptying out of the centrifugal circularity of language and subjectivity as the mutually constituted contrivances that provide the "I" its pseudo-stability on the condition of difference and separation.

Freud does not conceive of this outpouring of self, perceiving in its place an affirmation of inferiority and the consolation it offers to feeble or tenuous ego. By

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<sup>125</sup> *ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid*, p. 72.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid*.



Rolland's approximation, however, the 'oceanic' is quite contrary to the desire for eternal self-preservation: it is a situation of intense contact and free vital upsurge, a state of constant flux opposed the immortalization of the "I" and, as such, a limit of reason rather than its opposition.<sup>129</sup>

Freud, following Rolland, associates the 'oceanic' with religious sentiment, but I suspect it also shares profound affinities with Freud's most speculative concept. Still, despite the fact that he postulates the aim of the death drive as a restoration of a primordial situation of non-existence, Freud draws out no relation with the 'oceanic' feeling. We might, following Ana-Maria Rizzuto, attribute this to his skepticism on the matter,<sup>130</sup> or it to the fact that he associates the 'oceanic' with psychic content of some sort whereas death, he maintains, has no place in the unconscious. Still, the unboundedness of the 'oceanic' – wherein the individual is no longer discernable as such – also seems to connote a collapse or dispersion of the ego and its objects. However, in the place of the "zero" associated with the death drive, it describes a situation of pre-ambivalent fullness – of *oneness*.

In a sense, it is here, in the absence or dissolution of its object and mode of inquiry, that the enterprise of Freudian psychoanalysis, perhaps even of philosophy more generally, begins to disintegrate. But, as I have attempted to substantiate in this chapter, such a disintegration is not a mark of theoretical failure, but a position in and of itself. That is to say the irrepresentability of death need not present a fixed limit. Rather, we might take this irrepresentability as death's characteristic feature – a situation of impossible closure accessible only as the forfeiting of language and subjectivity, that is to say the forfeiting of individuality as a function of *difference*.

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<sup>129</sup> Henri and Madeline Vermorel, *Sigmund Freud et Romain Rolland correspondence (1923-1936)*, (Paris: PUF, 1993).

<sup>130</sup> Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *Why Did Freud Reject God?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

According to Derrida, for instance, the only of means of expressing the death drive, both in psychic life and in textual performance, is through the postponement of any conclusion because the loss of a subject always constituted in and by language can only be articulated as the impossibility of articulation. But what if we move away from an ego- or anthropocentric model? Surely the loss (or sacrifice) of self as point of reference or primary mode of interface does not come at the expense of the so-called “external” world. And in the notion of the ‘oceanic,’ I believe, we begin to discern a post-human current in Freudian psychoanalysis, an attempt to think through or at the very least *in* the absence or anonymization of the subject.

Here, egocentricity is neither supplanted nor replaced. Rather it gives way to a model without any discernable center at all, one which – like Macdonald’s interpretation of Hegel – emphasizes economic or ecological flux in its entirety rather than the integrity of individual components: a turbulent, constantly churning dynamic that can be transposed onto the intrapsychic level on the principle that the very categories of “inside” and “outside” cease to be viable determinants. The result is not a play of actors but a play of *forces*, not an opposition but a situation of dependency that is also a mutilation of each of the individual terms – an aquatic mode of thinking wherein even a discernable wave is not separable from any other nor from the entire agitation of the water which together they sustain.

Bataille’s writing teems with such marine metonymy. “The animal is in the world like water in water,”<sup>131</sup> he writes, defining animality as the absence of individuality that reduces being to a thing. Animality then corresponds to a situation of immanence and intimacy, an experience of the world entirely different from the one mediated by subjectivity and in which the subject ordinarily lives – different precisely because it is

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<sup>131</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 19.

experienced as *entirety*. This, in other words, is difference *beyond difference*, a situation of *radical otherness* that subverts any form of completion or closure and instead affirms exposure and openness as that which ensures contact through permeability. In other words, the situation described here is not one of intersubjectivity as a mode of interaction mediated by self as opposed to other/ness. Rather, it is one of intrusions and introjection, of mutual contingency and necessary insufficiency.

But the individual, in so far as he arrives at this through contemplation or consciousness, adheres to his own presence as such. According to a formula borrowed from Saint John of the Cross and referred to repeatedly by Bataille, the subject *veut etre tout* – “wants to be all” – but even this desire is sustained by the discontinuous need to survive in an integral form.<sup>132</sup> Bataille stays with this paradox, and the impossibility of this sustained engagement erupts in the convulsiveness of his writing. For instance:

In picturing the universe without man, a universe in which only the animal's gaze would be open to things, the animal being neither a thing nor a man, we can only call up a vision in which we see *nothing*, since the object of this vision is a movement that glides from things that have no meaning by themselves to the world full of meaning implied by man giving each thing his own.<sup>133</sup>

It is consciousness then that distances us from that unknowable or unfathomable truth that appears only as its own slipping away – and ours.

The totality then, might be expressed as that which “is truly alien to ordinary reflection in that it includes at the same time objective reality and the subject who

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<sup>132</sup> Joseph Libertson, “Bataille and Communication” in Boldt-Irons, Ed. (1995), pp. 209-230; p. 215. See also Libertson's 1990 essay “The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille,” in *Yale French Studies*, 78, pp. 124-39.

<sup>133</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 21

perceives objective reality.”<sup>134</sup> Just as the emphasis on Force-as-Universal Medium supplants the individual trajectories of the lord and bondsman, here too we see a foregrounding of the relation of form to itself made “possible” through the positing of an energetic flux that is true to its existence in either form or formlessness and, as such, presents a contestation to essence. By this understanding, opposition is produced so that one might arrive at the realization of the whole or Absolute through the experience of the particular. And yet, so long as one arrives at the whole through (self-)consciousness, it is always-already as a result of the initial experience or perception of difference. The result is as glaring as it is inescapable: the subject as such cannot access or accede to the totality of the whole.

Death, in turn, insofar as it manifests in psychic life ‘oceanically,’ would suggest the demise of individual principle rather than of being in itself. It would represent therefore a Third: not a term in binary opposition with life, but the entirety of a precarious system which cannot be grasped from either position, only as the contamination or collapse of the categorical integrity of the two – a “vanishing” mediator. Or, as Freud writes, it is “something that was originally there” and that persists “alongside of what later derived from it.”<sup>135</sup> In other words, death (as the trace of situation of non-differentiation) has neither evolved nor disappeared, simply given itself to alternate mode that allows for it to be experienced precisely as that alternative mode’s excess – as that which cannot be enunciated but exists as the wordlessness that it engenders as its condition. If we adopt this approach, death is not opposed to the exuberance of life: it is opposed to ontological totalization, corresponding instead to an absence of alterity, an all which leaves nothing outside. This abolition of exteriority is what Bataille describes as *continuity* – a mode of

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<sup>134</sup> Bataille, “The Object of Desire and the Totality of the Real” in *The Bataille Reader*, p. 268.

<sup>135</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, p. 68.

being without the limits or enclosures of particularity, and whose so-called “ideational content” bears a striking similarity to the Freudian ‘oceanic.’

The specificity of Bataille’s dialectic however is the sacrifice of synthesis in favor of tense contamination in which two modes – individual and all – invade and compromise one another while paradoxically retaining the integrity of their difference. Violent alternations roll over one another like the tides as he posits a discontinuous being that, above all else, desires to escape its limits but is constrained to rely on them as a point of reference; a subject who attempts to exceed a prohibition but whose transgression cannot be other than a maintenance of the prohibition; an intersubjectivity that must abolish alterity but which cannot function as other than a mutual impenetrability.<sup>136</sup> Each relation is more than what the opposition of its independent terms can contain. A duality will not hold. Instead, an endless rising and falling wherein the only recurring theme is the absence of any fixed or certain boundaries.

Throughout his oeuvre – though most notably in the *Summa Atheologica* – Bataille develops this heterology in terms of waves upon waves. From reproducing cells and erotic couplings to sacrificial rituals, Bataille describes situations in which the participating elements are indistinguishable without being the same, not just mutually constituted but together comprised of and comprising the whole. This thalassic thinking does not allow for any sort of identification, but nor does it signify a self-evident field of unity. The result is a mode of contact that is uncontainable, a persistence of the finite but without limit: “no more separate than are two waves, but their unity is *undefined*, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters.”<sup>137</sup>

Sabina Spielrein poetically expresses this littoral phenomenon in “Destruction as

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<sup>136</sup> Liberston, “Bataille and Communication” in Boldt-Irons, Ed. (1995), pp.212-3.

<sup>137</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 95-96.

the Cause of Coming into Being.” Encapsulating the conceptual unfettering opened up by the disappearance of the self, she writes: “each differentiated image will be dissolved, i.e. it will be transformed into an undifferentiated state.”<sup>138</sup> Indeed, she too turns to fluid metaphors and myths to convey this indeterminacy, reminding us that it is impossible to say whether the water in the mouth and gills of the fish belongs to fish or to the sea. In aquatic thinking, it seems, we can discern – however “impossibly” or tenuously – a fluid heterology that beats back against the currents of homogenization and totalizing ontologies. For Bataille, this play between isolation and dissolution is communication at its most open and it is also the very substance of existence: the constant overstepping of one’s own bounds in the hopes of reaching the other, of reaching otherness itself.<sup>139</sup>

The sense of the totality then demands an extreme intensity of the most ambiguous sensations, which reveal to us nothing clear or distinct but effect a reversal which “restor[es] things to the immanence from whence they come, to the vague sphere lost intimacy.”<sup>140</sup> This intimacy, however, is incompatible with the positing of separate individuals and thus is not without the trace of death. It marks “the totality in which we lose ourselves insofar as we take ourselves for a strictly separate entity (for the pure abstraction that the isolated individual is, or thinks he is).”<sup>141</sup> These categories – primal unity, final harmony, intimacy, totality – remain, in a sense, *mystical* because they evade formalized/formalizable thought. But the mystical, in so far as it concerns the experience of a totality which lays bare the precariousness of the subject, perhaps can only be

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<sup>138</sup> Sabina Spielrein, “Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being” in *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 1994, 39: pp. 155-186; p. 158.

<sup>139</sup> Or, as Hegel writes in the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: fruit and blossom are mutually incompatible, “[y]et, at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole,” p. 2.

<sup>140</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 50.

<sup>141</sup> Bataille, “The Object of Desire and the Totality of the Real” in *The Bataille Reader*, p. 267.

articulated in a vocabulary that is energetic or ecological, one which allows us to think, however deceptively, beyond the subject as center of the visible world. The enigma of the 'oceanic' feeling then, is perhaps not enigmatic at all, but rather a very precise description of a most imprecise feeling.

4.  
DESIRING DISSOLUTION/DISSOLVING DESIRE

*If I could sketch I would allegorically show pain chasing the soul out of the body, but at the same time I would give the impression that it's all untrue: mere modes of a complex whose unity lies in not having any.*

*—Julio Cortázar, *Rayuela**

If metapsychology is concerned with the instability of the subject as introduced by the suggestion of unconscious life (or death), its “object” is one that cannot be adequately contained by formalized discourse(s). The previous chapters have considered Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly leading up to and following the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as a deeply speculative project whose theoretical knots become most

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<sup>1</sup> In “Eroticism, Mysticism and Desire in Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela*” (*International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, Vol. 4: 1 (2019): pp. 1-5), Maria Luisa Cappelli makes the argument that Morelli, the fictional philosopher that Cortázar deploys to express the experimental novel’s fractious philosophy, is in large part based on Bataille and his work on transgression. A similar comparison is made by Juan Carlos Ubilluz in *Sacred Eroticism: Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski in the Latin American Erotic Novel*, (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), wherein he explores how all these authors – real and fictional – rely on fragmentary writing to transmit a message that is not literary but experiential (pp. 130-4).



tangled around the question of an ego that itself appears to be the product of a speculation. This certainly did not escape Freud, who writes in the 1914 paper “On Narcissism” that “...a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist”<sup>2</sup> and reiterates in *Civilization and its Discontents* (as well as in the metapsychological papers published in between) that “the boundaries of the ego are not constant.”<sup>3</sup> However, the question here regards neither the instability nor pseudo-stability of those boundaries but rather the complex relation that the always-tenuous ego has to them, a difficult dynamic of insistence and suspicion, of release and recoil.

As the insistence on a self-identical origin, narcissism poses a paradox that stems from a crisis of the reflexive surface: all the confirmation one seeks lies external to the self being “affirmed” as whole and sufficient. Narcissism then signals *a situation of woundedness that presents as the denial of that woundedness*. But in so far as layers of meaning are sedimented on that wound, the result is an alienating process of self-construction that uses undergirding lack or laceration as a resource while concealing the heterogeneity of its composition. Of course, this production of the fantasy in which other fantasies originate is psychic work in its most vital form, laying the foundation for one’s imaginary and discursive interaction with the external world. But what about something that we might designate as psychic *play*, something *other* to the tension-increasing processes of binding and construction? These processes, as I have gestured at in the preceding chapters, are inextricable from the denial and disavowal of an otherness which can neither be assimilated through identification nor inscribed symbolically. But if we begin to conceptualize this “otherness” as an oceanic *Oneness* wherein otherness itself dissolves, the question then is can psychoanalytic thinking tolerate the temporary

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<sup>2</sup> Freud (1914), “On Narcissism,” *SE XIV*, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Freud (1930), *Civilization and its Discontents*, *SE XXI*, p. 66.

disappearance of subjects, objects, and subjects-as-objects? If so, I believe that t/here we find psychic life at its most effervescent where, incidentally, it coincides with death.

Moving “forward” then, I draw into this continuously expanding and contracting discussion the notion of masochism, tracing its elaboration as it relates to the desire for violence in psychic life and, consequently, textuality. “Text” here is deployed in a decidedly post-structural manner, referring not only to what is pressed into signification but also to that which is conveyed or exposed by the instabilities and uncertainties arising from this process. With this approach, the decisive part of the text is precisely that which cannot be written and instead manifests on the level of signifiers as a disruptiveness that calls attention to a certain misfit between referent and semblant. We could say, in this sense, that ego too has a “textuality” – as does the body on which it is written or projected. Given the unsparing vicissitudes of signification, all “texts” are subject to unsettling, and in this chapter, the inclination toward such disruptions is explored under the aegis of masochism.

Where primary narcissism functions by affirming an absence through its concealment under the (un)stable sign of the “I,” primary masochism indicates a countercurrent in the form of an impulse to undo, negate, or disperse the subject that is always-emergent under that sign. As aims both circle around an absent origin, but only masochism seeks to collapse the two through the seeking of its own extinguishment. And yet, even as the insistence on the destruction or dissolution of the perceived unity of the ego, fictive as it may be, masochism too signals a dialectical procedure without the possibility of closure or completion: it requires the very life, desire, or fantasy it seeks to extinguish. Thus, any effort of self-construction involves a loss of self, whereas any effort of self-destruction cannot help but call upon and make use of the very object it seeks to destroy. In other words, the wish *not to be* deconstructs the ego in which that very wish

originates and so fulfillment coincides with the impossibility of fulfillment, with *fulfillment-as-impossibility*.<sup>4</sup>

Given that such a procedure resists closure and, therefore, straightforward formalization, I suggest retracing a conceptual perimeter that foregrounds this very impossibility as its characteristic feature. That is, the difficulty that masochism presents for psychoanalytic inquiry might be accounted for by the manner in which this inclination strives towards the subversion or erasure of the subject in whom the wish or fantasy originates. We find a similar difficulty, I argue, in mystical forms of religiosity that give way to apophatic revelations and/or a rapturous loss of self. Perhaps by drawing out the affinities between these traditions we can conceptually approximate the experience of self-contradiction which lies at their core. Such a juxtaposition also allows us to consider the manner in which “self-shattering” practices – be they erotic or spiritual – fundamentally destabilize or exceed psychical organization and thus resist containment in these narrow categories. Both overflow their containing structures – corporeal, discursive, and subjective – intimating that the motivations for such practices may not be as dissimilar as the divergent cultural constructions of these domains would have us believe.

In this discussion, masochism is understood as the self-canceling tendency of the subject, an operation of which can be summarized succinctly by Freud’s dissection of the beating fantasy: *the child being beaten is never the one producing the fantasy*. That is to say, the fantasy or wish of self-annihilation – in so far as it involves thinking about (one’s own) death – is, like narcissism, paradoxical but it is also paroxysmal. We have here a Hegelian sense that neither self-consciousness nor dissolution can be extricated from the constraints imposed by the demands of subjective identity. This position, which seems to

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<sup>4</sup> For Bataille, this is *sovereignty*.

pertain more to the difficulty of narcissism, challenges the positivist model of a self-identical subject. Masochism however disrupts this model even further. Whereas the former suggests a structural inconsistency – the gestalted spectral image that is not equivalent to the fractured/fragmented self it reflects – the latter is highly mobile, not “the static existence of an elusive internal otherness”<sup>5</sup> but an active tension between the desire and fear of self-undoing that expresses the “daemonic” force of the death drive in the form of violent alternations.

However, following from the previous chapter, I would also argue that as far as masochism is concerned the issue is not necessarily a destruction or diminution of self. Certainly we see this in accounts of moral masochism and negative narcissism as more melancholic constructions (where a morbid pleasure is nevertheless derived), but we also find more ecstatic forms which suggest that the masochistic inclination is not simply about the erasure of a hated self or its swallowing up by an ever-expanding negativity. Instead, at its most primary, it seems to signal a sort of almost playful deployment of the death drive as repetition compulsion: the disintegration or temporary disappearance (*fort*) of a fictive unity that takes place *through* that fictive unity and “concludes” in the release of the tensions held together by it. But as an experience of dispersal or disbanding, the psychical state which this inclination seeks can only be conceptualized with great difficulty – both by theoretical approaches which cannot quite accommodate the “pleasurable abandonment of identity”<sup>6</sup> and by the self-same subject who in the movements of disappearance and reappearance comes to occupy spaces beside oneself.

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<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 35-6. Referring back to the discussion of narcissism in Chapter 2, perhaps “static” seems reductive, however it is used here to refer to the perception of one’s own ego under the sign of the “I” rather than the narcissistic modes themselves which are always leaning on or incorporating otherness into that self-perception.

<sup>6</sup> John Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 4.

The subject of masochism is further complicated by a vast and variable range of manifestations, both conceptually and in practice. Aside from fantasies of bodily harm or injury, other masochistic determinations might include objectification, humiliation, bondage, restraint, or total power exchange as forms of surrender or self-abandonment. However, the present discussion is not necessarily about masochistic practices *per se*, but rather the psychic current that such desires seem to express. Nevertheless, in all of these “techniques” there is an element of willful submission by which the masochist comes to occupy an ambivalent position in relation to control or power, suggesting that what the masochist seeks lies somewhere in the complex dialectic between self-abandonment and self-reflection on that abandonment.<sup>7</sup> Thus, both in theory and in practice we find that masochism corresponds to a difficulty of positioning: where discourse or subjective self-fashioning seeks synthesis, masochism revels in the fragmentation, disruption, or interruption of identity through a super-sensuality that turns desire itself against the grand narrative of self-possession. In so far as these disruptions are experienced as ‘pleasurable,’ they reflect a renunciation of the subjective demands of coherence or integrity in favor of a vulnerability and/or contingency in which the binding principles that hold the “stable” or “autonomous” self together come undone. Following John Noyes, we might say then that masochism, in its multifarious instantiations, “fantasizes scenes in which the subject is suspended delicately on the brink of death.”<sup>8</sup>

However, as we have seen, insofar as death is concerned, the conclusion invariably comes in the form of its own absence or deferral: ecstatic release gives way to a return and the remainder, an unassimilable situation of ontological uncertainty, which maintains the system in motion, perpetually shifting to accommodate that which resists any form of

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<sup>7</sup> Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission*, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 12.

stabilization or fixity. We have explored this remainder as it emerges in Bataille's thought under the term *excess* and considered how the introduction of a principle without reserve or restraint both mutilates and reifies the functions of life and death in the psyche. In this chapter, this principle appears in its Lacanian instantiation as the pleasure beyond the limit of satisfaction – *jouissance*. A referent which resists stabilization, *jouissance* speaks to the mutual embeddedness of eroticism and sacrifice as beyond-symbolic encounters. As a rupture or intervention in a language that enables subjectivity by transferring experience to the symbolic domain, *jouissance* corresponds to the pleasure of restoring the immanence of reality to itself but at great cost to the self, which in the loss of symbolic anchors has no recourse to subjectivity as a binding principle.

In the discussion of narcissism, Lacan's positing of three interlocking registers allows us to account for the gaps and displacements that make self-positioning an unstable enterprise. In this chapter, his foregrounding of language as that which constitutes and is constituted by the mobility of a subjectivity that never quite finds itself, provides the means of re-signifying violence or aggressiveness in textuality. At the intersection of the alienated ego, the circularity of discursive life, and the inaccessibility of the Real, lie "the paradoxical losses and gains of language acquisition."<sup>9</sup> Here I suggest a reversal through the consideration of textual disturbances and symbolic failure: what is "lost" and "gained" when discursive thought encounters its self-referentiality? If the symbolic circling around an unstable (or absent) origin creates the illusion of a perimeter, permitting the subject to access himself as a discursive entity, as his own other, then *jouissance* refers to the failures or excesses of these stabilizing functions that, through resistance to symbolization, restore the subject to himself through a collapse of subjectivity as intermediary. In other words, the eruption of the Real unravels discourse,

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<sup>9</sup> Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*, p. 52.

reveals the fault-lines of the subject, and exposes the always-partial nature of the ego. However, given that these processes always-already reflect an interplay with their own tenuousness, perhaps the flight from subjectivity expressed in *jouissance* is also a return to its questionable core.

By this understanding, *jouissance* is integral to masochistic fantasy insofar as the latter corresponds to the unraveling or undoing of the conscious ego in favor of a non-phallic “truth” in which the subject is untenable and non-viable. Moving beyond discourses of self-punishment, sexualized or otherwise, masochism could be interpreted as the “adaptive mechanism” through which the individual seeks the “shattering of [...] psychic stability as a source of pleasure.”<sup>10</sup> Such a reading, exemplified by Laplanche and Bersani, posits the ego as a response to a wish for its own dissolution and constituted through that wish.<sup>11</sup> The self-cancelling structure of masochism, in turn, provides a means of reflecting – albeit inconclusively – on the subject’s paradoxical “origin.” But, as we have been discussing, psychoanalytic theory can only uneasily accommodate the tendencies or processes that circle inexhaustibly around subjective absence or disappearance. Looking outside the psychoanalytic framework, however, we find a resonance between psychoanalytic discourses on masochistic self-shattering and the ruinous apotheosis of mysticism.

This is not to imply that the two are equivalent, nor that mystical theology offers the means to “explain” masochism. Actually, the impression I wish to leave is far more subtle: the difficulties that arise in attempting to stabilize a theory of masochism might be accounted for through recourse to mystical expositions and their resistance to narrative formalization. As practices that gravitate around the dispersal of the subject,

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<sup>10</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*, p. 10.

both appear to be effects of the very instability (or impossibility) that they fold back into – the incommensurability of the subject with the primary desire to become nothing or to become all. What I suggest, therefore, is a complicity between masochism and mysticism established not on the grounds of sexuality but based on the ontological crisis provoked by proximity to death and through which that asymptotic approximation expresses itself. As discussed thus far, this crisis insinuates that “nothing” and “all” are perhaps not so different, at least in so far as the vanishing subject-in-question is concerned.

#### LOCATIONS AND DISLOCATIONS

The view of masochism being put forth here cannot be separated from the fractured or fragmented status of the subject. Seen from a historical or genealogical perspective, this subject is a product of changing social, cultural, political and/or epistemological values, expectations, discourses, etc. Following this approach, exemplified by Foucault, the introduction of new modes of self-construction or self-understanding coincide with the emergence of deconstructive practices in a multiplicity of theoretical, literary, as well as material forms. Approached in this manner, locating the dislocated subject is largely a question of where and when.

According to Carolyn Dean, for instance, the “decentered subject” as she refers to it in *The Self and Its Pleasures*, emerges in France in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the image of the fractured male body brought to the fore by WWI. The inter-war period, she explains, gave rise to the historical conditions necessary for the construction of a new form of subjectivity, conditions which include but are not limited to a crisis of masculine authority and the reconsideration of the boundaries between normality and pathology. The result was a moment of critical rupture in which an individual emerges but always-already dispossessed of its anchoring signifiers – a castration which becomes a source of



mourning (or melancholia) but also of reflexive agency. Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg undertakes a similar project in *Sublime Surrender*, however she argues that the decentered self emerges earlier, in mid-19th century Germany in the discourse surrounding male masochism. Like Dean, Stewart-Steinberg locates the origins of this “modern” subject in a constitutive split of the phallic signifier, where law and authority originate and against which all forms of subjectivity seem to measure themselves. Conceptualizing the gap between the phallic signifier and the concrete subject of a particular historical moment, Stewart-Steinberg, like Dean, presents the decentered subject as one that is historically determined.

At the risk of digressing or deviating from the subject at hand – then again, perhaps we only find our subject in such deferrals – I would like to call attention to the fact that these investigations focus on the male body. Analogous accounts of the embodied practices of women, however, seem to resist determination by a defining moment. This is not to say that the analyses by medieval scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Amy Hollywood are undertaken without historical contextualization, quite the contrary, but rather that they foreground paradoxical or self-contradictory inconsistencies as *different ways of knowing* rather than as products or effects of a particular cultural current or epoch. Engaging closely with Christian mysticism and feminist theology, their work is of great relevance to this investigation. For the moment, however, what I wish to emphasize is that such accounts operate from a more nuanced awareness of the cultural construction of the body not only as the site in, on, and through which gendered and historically-coded mores transpire, but also as a sign or symbol of a deeper duality at play: a problem of parts versus whole. This may seem like a fine distinction, perhaps one which

alters little as far as what is actually perceived, but what is at stake is a matter of *looking with* the decentered subject rather than *looking at* her.<sup>12</sup>

By considering the body as a locus of pleasure and personhood as well as a mode of limitation, bodily practices – particularly those of an ascetic or masochistic nature – take on a subversive quality. Indeed, according to Bynum and Hollywood, mystical and paramystical experiences owing to asecticism or self-inflicted suffering, all of which were far more common of female devotion, suggest a mode of religiosity that teeters on heresy. As Bynum suggests in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, these forms of devotion signal a piety without characteristic or institutional form, thereby undercutting the sacramental authority of the church and clergy. Focusing on the semi-monastic beguine communities that formed in northern Europe between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Bynum explores a piety wherein participation was not defined or delineated by vows, rules, or hierarchical leadership: to view the humility, chastity, and servitude that characterized the beguines' voluntarily involvement as reproductions of gendered expectations, Bynum argues, undermines the fact that their autonomous religiosity reflected a bypassing of or rebellion against ecclesiastic structures, not quite anti-institutional but a-institutional – we might even say *acephalous*. When “looked at,” however, these forms of piety and modes of spiritual expression are inevitably signified to suit some *other/other's* purpose. But the attempt to formalize the *informe*, to homogenize that which is characterized by a state of exclusion, exhausts its “defining” feature by submitting it to discourses of knowledge or utility. Thus, a question bearing a distinctly Lacanian impression arises: can we theoretically engage with *jouissance* in any way that doesn't sacrifice it for meaning?

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<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 47.

We see the imperative to categorize in Max Weber's posthumously published *Economy and Society*, wherein he outlines three "ideal types" of religious activity: world-fleeing mysticism, world-rejecting asceticism, and innerworldly asceticism. Whereas the former aims at a possession of truth that culminates in ecstatic trance – Weber uses examples of mysticism in India – the two forms of asceticism are described as active as opposed to contemplative, characterized either by a formal withdrawal from or engaged participation in the world. Of the latter, more participatory innerworldly asceticism he qualifies that involvement takes place "within the institutions of the world but in opposition to them,"<sup>13</sup> which would seem particularly relevant given what we have just discussed about the beguines. Nevertheless, this categorical view obscures both the ontological uncertainty of the participating subject and the paradoxes that present themselves when liminal experiences mutilate the boundaries between classifications, as they invariably do. Furthermore, as Bynum notes, Weber's classification leaves no room for a mode of spiritual engagement that is neither a rejection nor a retreat and which might be described as "world-affirming."<sup>14</sup> These aims will be taken up throughout the course of this chapter in relation to their psychoanalytic counterpoints, as will the way in which the Bataillian framework allows us to posit the category excluded in Weber's classification. It is however worth noting that within this sociological encyclopedia Weber associates women's religiosity, across cultures and world religions, with a "distinctly feminine emotionality."<sup>15</sup> Writing of the "legitimization" that salvation religions supposedly offered the disprivileged, he writes, "the influence of women only tended to

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<sup>13</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: Vol. 2*, Ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 542.

<sup>14</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 490.

intensify those aspects of the religion that were emotional or *hysterical*.”<sup>16</sup> A loaded descriptor.

Returning then to Dean and Stewart-Steinberg, there is something of a revelation involved in their historical analysis: a new subject appears as a result of a *mis-en-scène* of which he in turn becomes representative. This subject and the shifting self-perceptions that constitute his subjectivity are historically determined and become coded. That which might be designated “hysterical,” on the other hand, does not lend itself so readily to genealogical inscription. From the “wandering uterus” of Ancient Greece to medieval humoralism and possession to its uptake into psychoanalytic discourses, the hysteric appears to be a perennial (though highly-mutable) figure signaling an always-emergent subject that, owing to an “excessive” (i.e. non-discursive) expressiveness, cannot be reconciled with the pseudo-stabilizing function of subjectivity. The distinctions between subjectivity, textuality, and embodiment are disrupted as that which is disavowed or repressed by the former two find alternative expression in the latter, the body enunciating what the speaking subject or text can only approach as crisis or failure. So, what are we to make of Weber’s association of feminine religiosity with the hysterical?

If we read mystic contemplation or ascetic practice as refusals or repressions of a sinful body, we arrive at a view of religiosity which is anti-incarnational and, in so far as these practices supposedly mark a fleeing from or rejecting of the world, ahistorical. And yet, like the conversion phenomena that for so long characterized hysteria, these practices make use of the body as well as its historical or cultural construction. However, they do

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* The connection between hysteria and religion also appears in the history of psychoanalytic discourse, particularly as regards neurologist and anatomical pathologist Jean-Martin Charcot, who Freud observed during a relatively brief stint (1885-1886) at the Salpêtrière and whose work on hysteria and hypnosis was a noteworthy influence for Freud. Through questionable and, at times, counter-intuitive methods that will be discussed further in the following chapter, Charcot’s mission was to expose religion as always having been a hysterical phenomenon.

so, I argue, in relation their terminal subversion in paradoxical enjoyment. Just as the hysteric “enjoys” a symptom without knowing its cause, the mystic experiences the *non-savoir* of ecstasy or, rather, experiences *non-savoir as ecstasy*.<sup>17</sup>

In the sensual descriptions of union with God, these self-negating or self-evading practices are inscribed as bodily occurrences, thinning distinction between the mystical and the erotic. But how do we reconcile the innerworldly or world-fleeing aim of such forms of religious activity with their otherworldly sensuality? An analysis which maintains that monastic asceticism or self-mortification represents a sublimation of repressed sexual desire, I believe, forecloses the richness of such a question. Scholars like Bynum and Hollywood argue that these forms of ecstatic religiosity, particularly as experienced by women, are too polysemic to be read through modern dichotomies such as active/passive or sensual/spiritual. For Bynum specifically, the issue is how medieval women seemed to signify their own practice as a passive suffering for God which was also a mode of active service, both for-another<sup>18</sup> in the form of acts of charity and for the spiritual “self” as disciplined through asceticism. In other words, neither a purely world-rejecting or innerworldly asceticism nor a sustained state of mystic contemplation, but a “mixed life” of withdrawal, opposition, participation and above all ecstasy in which the contradictions arising from the other three forms of engagement are effectively subsumed. In this view, “being a vessel” loses its purely passive connotation and becomes decisive way of being in the world, of engagement or participation *as such*, with all the

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<sup>17</sup> In their collaborations, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément consider hysteria as an “unsettling force” similar to that of female mystics. Teresa of Avila, Cixous suggests, is a hysteric. This is not intended as a pathologization of ecstasy, but rather as a recognition of its disruptiveness: the hysteric/mystic “demand for totality [...] is intolerable,” unthinkable within a “restricted little economy” whose rigid structures it destroys. See Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, Trans. Betsy Wing, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 155. For more on hysteria and female sanctity in the context of sexual difference, see also Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, pp. 236-273.

<sup>18</sup> If we follow Lacan’s reading of hysteria as complicity with every imaginary father – each [little] other assuming the place of the [big] Other – than this “for-another” becomes “for-*every*other.”

contradictions this entails, as opposed to *as a self* in which such contradictions must be flattened to produce a coherent narrative corresponding to a particular contextualized subject.

I would like to clarify that my focus here is not on the empirical conditions that render such a subject, but more so on the notion that in ecstasy or *jouissance* otherwise containing structures fail (or are revealed as inadequate) and the loss of recourse to these stabilizing functions effectively scatters the subject. I emphasize this particular and decidedly more abstract idiosyncrasy because I believe that in these motions of disassembling, scattering, and re-assembling we discern the death drive as a destabilizing force. Bynum, for instance, defends the a-institutional character of beguine devotion as a resistance to hierarchical structures – structures that according to Nietzsche and the Nietzschean echoes in Bataille are *fundamentally un-religious*.<sup>19</sup> I don't dispute this. However, the heterogeneity of actions, activities, and affinities that characterize the semi-monastic "mixed life," I would argue, relate not only to specific modes of practice and their contextualization, but also to a peculiar quality of the self in liminal states: *it is not there*. How then can we positively identify or interpret these uncertain subjectivities? How can we locate a subject actively-passively engaged in its own erasure, dissolution, or disappearance? And these questions are bound up with another: why might we feel compelled to do so? With these questions the acephalous nature of mystical practice appears to be less of a deliberate choice, cause, or characteristic and more of an inexorable effect of an unstable or uncertain subjectivity. That is to say, I have not chosen to discuss the mystic tradition with the intention of enunciating something about it. Rather, I bring mysticism into this investigation because it enunciates what is to an extent unsayable in

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<sup>19</sup> See Nietzsche's *Antichrist*, Trans. H. L. Mencken, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1924) and Bataille's *Inner Experience*.

psychoanalysis, perhaps in philosophy more broadly, namely the subject's experience or, more specifically, *enjoyment* of his/her own absence.

Bataille also chooses mysticism as mode of expressiveness capable of surpassing the confines or limitations of philosophical discourse. In this sense, mysticism operates for Bataille similar to mythology for Freud or mathemes for Lacan, all of which reflect mediums that deploy metonymy as a means of acceding to that which lies beyond speech or text. As Lacan writes, “[t]he Real can only be inscribed as an impasse of formalization.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike mythology or mathemes, however, the venture into the mystic domain also carries implications beyond the poetics of its use. It allows us, I maintain, to draw a connection that thus far appears only implicitly in the psychoanalytic framework: an association between the death drive and religiosity. With that in mind, what I hope to accomplish in these pages is to draw out the likeness between complex forms of religiosity and another practice or tendency more prevalent in psychoanalytic literature, though still very much ambiguous, which also deploys the body and conventions of subjectivity the interest of their subversion. A tendency which, I argue, affirms through acts of erasure – masochism.

Bynum, for instance, rejects the allusion to masochism in cases of asceticism or bodily mortification.<sup>21</sup> This is in part because masochism is unable to shake its sexual connotation and its use in these contexts tends to suggest a capitulation of religious experience under the influence of sexual drive. But also, with regards to the Christian narrative more specifically, pain and suffering appear as the opportunity or cause of

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<sup>20</sup> Lacan, “Knowledge and Truth” in *Seminar XX: Encore, 1972-1973. On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, Trans. Bruce Fink, Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), pp. 90-103; p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> See Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption* as well as *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

salvation – as is the case in the enfleshing and passion of Christ – rather than as a means of self-negation. As Bynum argues, in this view the experience of pain is willful and purposeful, thus far more “active” than the passivity suggested by prevailing understandings of masochism. But to this I would raise a few objections. First, given that Bynum’s argument hinges on the polysemy of autonomous forms of devotion, on the problematization of active versus passive, it seems odd to dismiss masochism on the basis of such a restricted definition. And secondly, read through the French (post-)Freudian lens of this investigation, it seems that what Bynum terms “salvation” need not be extricated from the self-abasing or self-shattering sought out by masochistic tendencies.

Most salient in Laplanche and Bersani, the interpretation of masochism being put forth here is one in which sovereignty coincides with refusal of autonomy. When read as a *compulsion* this tendency cannot be easily reduced within an active-passive dualism as submission to the drive gives way to the irrefutable force of the drive itself. Here, the compulsive movement towards annihilation is not read as being in the interest of destructiveness. On the contrary: as an undoing of individuated forms which gives way to an ecstatic fusion with otherness, it seems to follow the conservation principle, the outcome or aim being not a destruction, but a *release* that takes place when the subject – along with the separations and perceptions of separations that subjectivity sustains and is sustained by – are dissolved in an affirmation of unbound energetic flux. In a way that bears a striking resonance with Bataille, both Laplanche and Bersani theorize this self-undoing or self-shattering in a manner that might be described as *world-affirming*, a mode of correspondence or communication beyond otherness as both cause and effect of discursivity. I will revisit this shortly, but for now what I wish to clarify is the vague seam along which this investigation is positioned, where the fringes of psychoanalytic ontology might be juxtaposed with (a)theology.



Let us take for example how thirteenth century poet and mystic Hadewijch of Antwerp describes a vision of Christ coming down from the altar in the form of a man who approaches and embraces her:

...for a short while, I had the strength to bear this; but soon, after a short time, I lost that manly beauty outwardly in the sight of his form. I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference.<sup>22</sup>

In the dissolution of the meditative “object,” the vision itself is negated or overcome. Reframed in terms of the loss of distinction and/or individuated forms, it would appear that masochism, specifically *primary* masochism, offers an alternative paradigm that allows us to approximate the fraught ontology of mysticism as one of non-differentiation.

And yet, a state without difference is inaccessible to a discursive or anthropo-/egocentric mode of inquiries. Hence the paradoxical difficulties that such experiences pose within psychoanalytic questioning. But I believe that positing the pursuit of ‘oceanic’ states as functions of a drive whose satisfaction is both given and mutilated by the impossibility of its closure, renders them remotely accessible to analysis in a way that also acknowledges or allocates for their unfeasibility. Interpreting the death drive as the disintegrative urge embedded in subjectivity that keeps it mobile gives us a means to re-interpret the “passive suffering” of mysticism or masochism as a situation of ontological uncertainty that weaves together questions of erotics, ethics, and aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> Whereas ego psychology asserts essentialist notions of subjective identity, it would appear that

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<sup>22</sup> Hadewijch, vision 7, from *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, Trans. Columba Hart Bynum, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 280-1. Also quoted in Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 120.

<sup>23</sup> See Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission*. Noyes contests the association between masochism and death: “masochism is not about death,” he writes; “it is about *nomadic disappearances*” (p. 217). Here I am arguing that the two are the same.

mysticism and (sado)masochism, both as theoretical constructs and practices, work against established models of subjectivity, collapsing the socially-sanctioned identities they subversively deploy as means rather than ends.

Addressing to some extent the issue posed by the unstable subject, Roy Baumeister identifies several aspects that render masochism paradoxical from the perspective of social psychology. The enjoyment of suffering paired with the relinquishing of control, he maintains, poses a challenge to the pleasure-seeking self and its narcissistic tendency to maintain positive (or at least positivist) perception or evaluation of its being. Interpreting masochism as systematic attempt to eradicate the main features of the self, Baumeister's main concern is *why*, and his suggestion is that one would engage in masochism to escape the burdens of self-awareness. I would modify this assessment slightly or at least present an alternative as it emerges in psychoanalytic literature: to escape the limits to awareness imposed by the self as the primary mode of interface with the external world and organizing principle of discursivity.

According to Baumeister, sadomasochism emerges in Western culture alongside modern subjectivity, the increasing regulation of subjectitive experience coinciding with the pleasure derived in subverting those codes. Prior to the 17th century, Baumeister claims, we find only isolated cases of sadomasochism. And although not a familiar feature of the sexual landscape until the 1700s, by the 19th century sadomasochistic tendencies had been isolated as identifiable perversion(s).<sup>24</sup> Baumeister's argument, which to some extent also involves the locating of an emergent subject, hinges on the increasing pleasure such a subject takes in his/her temporary disappearance as the experience of external pressures or internal tensions increase. But again, I do not wish to "locate" such a subject so much as call attention to the complications that invariably arise when we attempt to

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<sup>24</sup> Roy Baumeister, *Masochism and the Self*, (Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1989).

apprehend a subject whose active-passive engagement with its own disappearance places it just beyond theoretical reach.

If we approach this premise psychoanalytically, Baumeister's position reflects a reading that is in line with the reduction of tensions as a primary psychic aim. But how is this reconciled with the extremes of excitement and repulsion that these proclivities seek out? We are back again at the question of the economic paradox that characterizes Freud's formulation of the death drive. As discussed in Chapter 1, the complete reduction of tension (i.e. the "zero" or Nirvana principle) can only coincide with the drastic increase in tension of primary masochism if we imagine a situation wherein self-undoing is not achieved through diminution but rather through ecstatic release. Now, working with a view of the death drive as aimed toward a situation of disintegration rather than destruction, such a release leaves the subject not eliminated or minimized but *mediated* by a oneness into which it dissolves. But the subject, in so far as it is primarily a discursive entity, cannot survive a situation of non-differentiation and is lost in the totality that engulfs it. Yet, having been only a discursive entity – substance or being immortalized (but also alienated) as an idea or essence – what is "lost" except the ability to speak of loss?

This, I believe, is what is at stake in the discussion of masochism and, by association, mysticism. And yet a position which emphasizes these practices/tendencies as sublimations of a repressed sexual instinct occludes this possibility, which cannot be disentangled from the paradoxical expression of the death drive. We see this interpretation fold into strange shapes in Lacan, Laplanche, and especially in the work of Bersani – as well as in the recent work of a number of medieval scholars. The effects or implications of such a view is, however, rendered most visible in Freud's understanding

of masochism and the manner in which it shifts considerably with the introduction of the death drive in 1920.

#### THE ECONOMIC PROBLEM

Freud initially approached masochism as a perversion of secondary formation, but it gradually came to occupy a central position in his theory. In “Three Essays...,” for instance, masochism appears only as a sexual proclivity and Freud, giving primacy to the sadistic impulse, initially doubts that masochism “can ever occur as a primary phenomenon.”<sup>25</sup> And yet, he also suggests that the two expressions are the active and passive forms of the same tendency: “[a] sadist is always at the same time a masochist.”<sup>26</sup> Even in these early essays, masochism seems to correspond to a difficulty of positioning, a difficulty which is exacerbated in subsequent texts, most notably “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” and which culminates (though inconclusively) in Freud’s positing of a primary masochism as the most radical expression of the most primal drive.<sup>27</sup>

Though masochism is usually discussed in relation to its sadistic counterpart, we see that the latter is less problematic from an instinctual point of view. Representing an element of aggressiveness characteristic of Freud’s view of (masculine) sexuality that is oriented toward the external world, sadism it would appear maintains the primacy of the pleasure principle as well as the desire for mastery. Masochism, however, presents a

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<sup>25</sup> Freud (1905), “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” *SE VII*, pp. 123-246; p. 158.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>27</sup> See also Jens De Vleminck’s “Sadism and Masochism on the Procrustean Bed of Hysteria: From *Psychopathia Sexualis* to *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*” in *Psychoanalysis and History*, Vol. 19, 3 (2017): 379–406. Here De Vleminck suggests that the difficulty Freud encounters in positioning sadism and masochism stems from an insistence to relate these proclivities to sexuality (and, by association to hysteria or sexual inversion) rather than to an innate tendency for aggressiveness. A close reading of Freud reveals this tendency as independent of the erotogenic zones but capable of eroticizing other parts of the body, such as the eyes (i.e. scopophilia) and the skin (i.e. contrectation). However, as De Vleminck argues, this transforms the underlying non-specificity of aggression (or the death drive) and its sources of pleasure into particular, “perverse” reaction formations.

deconstruction of Freud's initial view of the self as predominantly pleasure-seeking, and as such required a new understanding of drive. In *practice*, sadism might be given as the inverse or counterpart of masochism,<sup>28</sup> but *psychically* it appears that masochism is in dialectic relation to narcissism, a tendency whose mechanisms are also at odds with its aim and whose expression is also given to paradoxes because of the speculative nature of the ego.

In *The Shattering of the Self*, Cynthia Marshall identifies Freud's struggles with the concept of sadomasochism, describing the concept as "the barbarian within the gates of psychoanalysis."<sup>29</sup> Here Marshall provides a historical analysis of the forms of literary expression and enjoyment of the early moderns. In that sense, Marshall's work reflects a very different project than that which is undertaken here. Nevertheless, it follows a similar line of questioning by centralizing the notion of masochism not as an isolated perversion but rather as a paradoxical psychic structure indicative of the fundamental instability of subjectivity itself. Like the concept of narcissism, which was also radically altered by the introduction of the death drive, masochism troubles the established models of self-as-whole, confirming what such models imply but do not embrace: the contradictory, self-canceling nature of subjectivity.<sup>30</sup>

As Bersani also identifies, the issue with Freud's conception of masochism, the issue he encounters in each of the three essays and that will carry through the evolution of the drive theory is the inability to reconcile the derivation of pleasure from

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<sup>28</sup> In a 1967 essay, Deleuze offers, through a close examination of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's erotic literature, an interpretation of masochism beyond its dialectical opposition with sadism, which he describes as an "etiological fallacy" (p. 128). Here he suggests that the notion of masochism as sadism turned toward the self is inadequate and that, rather, sadism is characterized by an apathy that is not quite the complement of masochistic "coldness." Thus, the disavowing masochist seeks not the negating sadist, but an inverted *masochistic* complement. See Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty" in *Masochism*, Trans. Jean McNeil and Aude Willm, (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, pp. 40-41.

unpleasurable increases in tension. If pleasure is not the ultimate goal, then what? What is the first and foremost motivation/impulse if not to attain satisfaction? Given the shifting positions and instinctual reversals that Freud puts forth in “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” – the very mechanisms that, as per Freud, allow us to account for masochism – the introduction of another drive is a logical necessity.

Just prior to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud publishes a paper that establishes the primacy of masochism, if not yet in the economy of instincts then at least in his thinking. In “A Child is Being Beaten,” the 1919 paper notoriously based on the analysis of his daughter Anna, Freud proposes a sequence for the child’s beating fantasies. Here too he grounds masochism in something like sadism, though the child producing the fantasy does not inflict the beating herself. What I believe is especially relevant, however, is that in neither of the two conscious stages of this sequence, nor is she the one receiving the beating.

Initially, Freud suggests, there is a proto-fantasy, wherein the identity of the one who does the beating remains obscure – perhaps it is irrelevant to the masochist – but Freud says we might characterize him as “the father.” The child being beaten, on the other hand, is *another* – a sibling or classmate for instance. Designated by Freud as the first phase, this episode and its partial nature can be summarized as: *my father is beating the child whom I hate*. This is followed by a second phase “of an unmistakably masochistic character” that, rather significantly, Freud writes is never remembered. It is in this repressed stage that the wish to be beaten arises and acquires a sexual charge. The second and only unconscious stage, identified by Freud under the phrase *I am being beaten by my father*, then gives way to the vague construction *a child is being beaten*, the phase of the fantasy that supposedly affords pleasure. Whereas in the first stage the child “absents” herself from the beating fantasy, “replacing” herself with a “hated child” that may or may

not be the idea of her own self, the second is charged with the repressed wish that although “forgotten,” gives way to the third stage in which the child *enjoys* the fantasy by replacing herself again with an anonymous child. In this way, the previous masochistic phase (i.e. *I am being beaten*) and the unconscious or intolerable masochistic pleasure associated with it is overwritten. Nevertheless, according to Freud, the repressed wish arising in this intermediate stage (1) binds together ambivalent feelings of excitement and repugnance, and consequently (2) affords the motive and the conscious pleasure or masturbatory satisfaction derived from the final formulation.

While Freud still does not prioritize the masochistic wish here, I believe this sequence does lay bare the deeper issue of masochism: *the masochistic wish is fulfilled through the absence or anonymization of the subject producing the fantasy*. Or, in other words, the masochistic wish is not fulfilled by the one in whom the fantasy originates. We see this in the way the third stage translates the masochistic wish into consciousness through the replacement or erasure of the desiring subject: the third stage involves *two children*, the one being beaten and the one producing the fantasy, and they are not reducible to one another. *The child being beaten is never the one producing the fantasy*,<sup>31</sup> Freud writes, and the implications of this are two-fold: (1) by ostensibly “erasing” its desiring subject, masochism performs a “de-objectifying function,” scattering narcissistic investments in a process that, according to André Green, is mediated by the death drive as an unbinding principle,<sup>32</sup> and yet (2) the subject also appears to remain present as a spectator of that very erasure. The latter might be read as a form of censorship or a means of disavowing the full nature of the underlying desire. Or, on the other hand, it might be that the transformation of the masochistic fantasy into a *spectacle* defends against the

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<sup>31</sup> Freud (1919a), “A Child is Being Beaten,” *SE XVII*, pp. 175-204; p. 184.

<sup>32</sup> Green, *Life Narcissism/Death Narcissism*, p. 65.

outright loss of self by providing a secondary position from which to observe said loss. We will consider the role of dramatization in the masochistic imaginary more closely in the pages to follow and particularly in the following chapter. In the present discussion, however, I wish to stay with the ambiguities of a self-cancelling subject as opened up by Freud's texts.

In the attempt to "remove the amnesia" that conceals the masochistic wish, Freud constructs this sequence in which the beating fantasy is not the initial manifestation of a perversion but the result of a series of substitutions concealing a core repression, "a feeling of mixed character." Freud only identifies the second stage as masochistic, but perhaps the third reflects a "completion" of sorts, in which case we might conceptualize the first stage as providing the masochistic motivation: hatred of one's self or, rather, the self (fictive, inadequate, etc.) with which the masochist feels obligated to identify. The repression of the incestuous object-choice and the accompanying feelings of guilt arising from the persistence of the wish in the unconscious do indeed suggest masochism, but I would argue that this corresponds more so to the (negative) narcissistic formation of moral masochism. Emphasizing the anonymization or self-erasure that occurs in the third phase as a function of the masochistic wish itself rather than its repression, however, produces a very different reading. Does this suggest a portion of libido capable of surpassing its source? Might the unconscious or unrepresentable core of the fantasy correspond to the remainder associated with the destructive instinct? Perhaps, but without the notion of the death drive, not yet introduced at this point, these interpretations are foreclosed. Or, as Freud's masochistic analysis expresses, "I know nothing more about it: a child is being beaten." The following year *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is published and when Freud revisits the topic of masochism in 1924, we find



the concept dramatically altered; it seems very likely that these differences can be attributed to the introduction of the death drive.

In “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924), Freud tackles the notion of primary masochism that had been mentioned in *Beyond...* as one of the modalities of the death drive (along with the zero and constancy principles), if not its most radical expression. Now no longer an inversion of sadism, masochism becomes a primary phenomena, the mechanism that upholds the aims of the death drive as the very first instinct. As Bersani indicates, the difficulty with this concept lies in reconciling the self-contradictory nature of an instinct that strives for unpleasure. But the final drive theory, which posits the complex relation between life and death in place of the distinction of pleasure and unpleasure, allows us to conceptualize the way these “oppositions” double one another.

“The Economic Problem” revisits a possibility that Freud suggests in *Beyond...*, proposing that the Nirvana principle undergoes a change in living organisms by which it becomes a pleasure principle that strives towards zero but never arriving, “zero” referring here to the most conservative form of the death drive: the return to inorganic life. The Nirvana Principle would thus express the trend of the death instinct whereby deathly satisfaction is postponed or deferred by being pressed into the service of Eros through the demands of the pleasure principle-driven libido. Like the relationship between the reality and pleasure principles that Freud discusses in the 1911 paper on “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,” the pleasure principle and its excessive counterpart are not in opposition; each safeguards the other, one furnishing the means and the other the first and final goal. The death drive then is perpetuated through the life drives and furnishes the unattainable wish that keeps the pleasure principle seeking a temporary or incomplete satisfaction.

So, what is the “problem” Freud perceives? If, as Freud posits in “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” pleasure equates to a reduction of tensions while the reduction of tension to zero (i.e. Nirvana principle) equates to death then logically (1) unpleasure would coincide with a heightening of tension, and (2) the ultimate aim of the pleasure principle would be death. The former presents a more manifest issue in that there exist pleasurable increases in tension and unpleasurable decreases in tension, particularly in relation to sexual excitation. But the fundamental “problem” that Freud identifies in giving masochism primacy is that it insinuates that the underlying aim of every desire is not to attain its object, but to extinguish desire itself. That is to say, if unpleasure can also be an aim, indeed if it is the aim of the drive which precedes and overrides the pleasure principle, then the other drives would be driven *not to be*. Rather, they would reflect the cathexis or sublimation of a drive for non-existence. We see this to some extent in “A Child Is Being Beaten,” where the original wish is obscured (but also realized) through its attachment to another. Throughout his work, but most notably in *The Freudian Body*, Bersani develops this idea: masochism does not pose a challenge to the primacy of the pleasure principle – it sends the pleasure principle into paralysis.

To escape or bypass this paradoxical situation, Freud proposes that we not think of the axis of life-death quantitatively but rather qualitatively, and in the place of the increasing or decreasing of pleasure or unpleasure he offers the functions of binding and unbinding. Libidinal pleasure, Freud explains, binds things together in increasing complexity (i.e. Eros), which incidentally corresponds to an increase in tension. Psychic pain on the other hand is experienced at unbinding, which ultimately leads the individual back to a question of binding. Shortly we will consider if such a collapse of existing psychic architecture is the aim and enjoyment of *jouissance*. For the time being however, I wish

to focus on the way in which the concepts of the death drive and a primary form of masochism evolve concurrently within the Freudian framework.

In “The Economic Problem” Freud distinguishes three types of masochism: a feminine form associated with passivity; a moral form expressed through guilt and self-punishing; and erotogenic masochism, which Freud describes not so much as type of its own but as the basis of the other two expressions. Of the three, moral masochism would appear most closely bound to a narcissistic trend. Green, for instance, describes how moral (or intellectual) masochism produces the expression of what he terms “negative narcissism,” a concept explored in greater detail in earlier chapters. To summarize here however, this is masochism that appears loosened from its connection to sexuality, wherein only an unconscious sense of guilt or need for punishment persists. This situation maintains the tension between the superego and an ego that fails to live up to the ego ideal, but it does so in the negative – each object or other absorbed as an absence or loss. In other words, moral masochism maintains the architecture in an inverted form, seeking affirmation not through approval but through punishment, pain, or loss. Freud suggests that this form of masochism might reflect a sexualization of morality, whereas Green reads this as a possible fusion the instincts, an expression of life under the command of a death drive that operates as a negating force.<sup>33</sup> But again, here we are more invested in a view of the death drive that goes beyond the discourse of negativity, and we find support for this in erotogenic masochism, which seeks to collapse the psychic architecture entirely.

The moral or feminine expressions of primary masochism, Freud explains, retain a libidinal component: “even the subject’s destruction of himself cannot take place

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<sup>33</sup> Green, *Life Narcissism/Death Narcissism*, pp. 210-222.

without libidinal satisfaction.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, these two forms cannot seek the total destruction of the self without which there be no moral or subjective element to afford libidinal satisfaction. Both thus reflect a mode of postponement that prolongs masochistic pleasure under the operation of an internalized father, according to Freud, or as per Green’s analysis, a dead mother. Overlapping these approaches allows us to see that the function of negation still maintains an egoic structure, though it does so in an inverted form: in Freud, the evolved forms of masochism maintain the psychic structures responsible for guilt or self-punishing, thus allowing the ego to experience the “perverse” satisfaction that stems from these functions; in Green’s negative narcissism, the ego persists as an expanding vacuity. Both reveal that process of binding are still in place even though they occur in the negative. Primary masochism, however, would seem to suggest the possibility of a situation of unboundedness as well.

According to Freud, primary or erotogenic masochism reflects the libidinal component of the destructive instinct that, unlike the will to power or instinct for mastery which is directed outwards in sadism, remains inside the organism where it is placed in the service of sexual excitation. Freud describes this as a taming of the death instinct by the libido,<sup>35</sup> but it could indicate what *Beyond...* implicitly signals and what we have been exploring in the preceding pages: that the death drive relies on the life drives to achieve expression. As “A Child is Beaten” also indicates, we cannot conceptually isolate a drive which functions by cancelling its subject. Freud addresses this issue explicitly in the 1924 paper on masochism, clarifying that we never deal with the life and death instincts independently, only with mixtures of them in different amounts.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” the 1915 paper wherein Freud explicitly tackles the

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<sup>34</sup> Freud (1924), “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” *SE XIX*, pp. 155-170; p. 170.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p. 164.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*.

attitude towards death, he specifies that even when we imagine our own death, we are still present as spectators; “no one believes in his own death,” he writes.<sup>37</sup> But the paradoxes we have been considering thus far, and specifically their reuptake in Lacanian psychoanalysis, would suggest a portion of the death that resists being bound up with the work of the life drives in the form of libido. It is that portion which concerns us here, in the present discussion of masochism but also in this work as a whole.

Freud, keeping to the Oedipal masterplot, posits the masochistic fantasy as a regressive anal-sadistic distortion of the desire for a sexual relation with the father. This view, most present in the 1919 paper and persisting under the heading of feminine masochism in “The Economic Problem,” submits masochism to the sexual drive, rendering the masochistic tendency secondary to libidinal desire, despite the fact that Freud is arguing now for its primacy. Like moral masochism, this form retains and is identified by the persistence of a subjective component. And yet, in positing feminine and moral masochism as manifestations of erotogenic masochism, Freud implicitly suggests that both passivity and self-punishing reflect modes of accommodating for a death drive in a libidinal economy. The existence of a primary masochism that gives way to these forms, however, implies that while the death drive must be pressed into the service of Eros, this relationship is perhaps bi-directional, libidinal satisfaction owing to and amplified by its ghostly core. “[P]erhaps we may say in terms recalling the prophecy made by the Three Witches to Banquo: ‘Not clearly sexual, not in itself sadistic, but yet the stuff from which both will later come.’”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Freud (1915c), “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” *SE XIV*, pp. 273-300; p. 298. This is also discussed at length in Razinsky’s 2009 article, “How to Look Death in the Eyes,” which compares Freud and Bataille vis-à-vis their attitudes toward death.

<sup>38</sup> Freud (1919a), “A Child is Being Beaten,” p. 187.

Observed from this perspective, religiosity and, more specifically masochistic spiritual practices, might also be related to this primordial drive: sublimations of an impulse preceding sexual desire, attempts at psychic death or dissolution rather than pleasure or mastery. For Lacan, the two are mutually inclusive under the traces of *jouissance*.

#### THE EROTICS OF EROSION

How do we conceptualize the being – or *enjoying* – that takes place in excess or absence of subjectivity? Laplanche and Bersani suggest that the notion of primary masochism is highly demonstrative in this regard: destabilizing both the notion of the libido-driven subject and the phallic authority around which (oedipal) organization takes place, primary masochism signals the deep fissure in a tenuous ego characterized by a simultaneous demand for and resistance to being. As a psychic phenomena which heightens this tension, primary masochism lays bare the ontological struggle that undergirds subjective self-positioning. In other words, through the interplay of a self-destructive wish and its multifarious sublimations, primary masochism reveals and revels in the strained relation of subjectivity to itself: if it is only in between, in the space of desire and fantasy, that a subject exists – even then as a barred question mark – then in *jouissance*, the loss of subjectivity coincides with its fullest expression.

Freud preemptorily alludes to such a possibility when, in “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” he considers the “pleasurable unpleasure” of increased sexual tension as well as the effect of mimetic representations of pain. However, without Lacan’s introduction of the symbolic “third term,” we cannot quite account for “pleasure” and “unpleasure” as experiences mediated by the norms of representation. Nor can we account for masochism as the very troubling of those norms. Considering masochism as

a dramatization of the subject's difficult relationship to subjectivity, Bersani draws together Freud's original (but consistently evolving) formulation of the self-destructive tendency and its implications in the representational domain. In this reading, the Freudian conceptualization of primary masochism is broadened as that which is intolerable to the structured self.<sup>39</sup> "[P]leasurable unpleasurable tension," Bersani explains, "occurs when the body's 'normal' range of sensations is exceeded, and when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow 'beyond' those compatible with psychic organization."<sup>40</sup> In this way, masochism extends beyond an enjoyment of the "unenjoyable," codified instead as an attack on the imaginary "wholeness" which undergirds the symbolic structure. That is, if the subject is mediated symbolically, then masochistic (self-)destructiveness must entail a textual or discursive component. According to Bersani, this component can be "read" not as a definitive destruction but as the distress or disfigurement resulting when the self-referentiality of subjectivity is simultaneously revealed and challenged. Masochism, in this interpretation, does not seek "new" pains but rather the means of savoring the narcissistic wounds that language conceals: masochistic *jouissance* is engendered by the symbolic structures it protests, finding its expression as a failure of mastery or, perhaps, a "mastery" of failure.

Bersani suggests that masochism presents itself as problem of language even in Freud's work, an assessment that finds support in a number of interventions on the subject.<sup>41</sup> Drawing from *Civilization and its Discontents*, we could attribute structural inconsistencies and textual tensions to the inevitable frustration of a socialized subject –

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<sup>39</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed discussion of the role of masochism in post-modern and post-structural thought, refer to Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission*, pp. 198-222.

a frustration which, in Freud's view, results more so from "a structural complexity within the human constitution" than from the demands of civilization as such.<sup>42</sup> Or, approaching this tension as a function of the vicissitudes of instinctual life, we can examine the about-turns involved in Freud's initial attempt at accommodating masochism as a function of fantasied identification. Presented as a dynamic of passivity versus activity, masochistic "identification" deflects the underlying ontological crisis, cutting the ego into an object submitted to (self-)punishment by an extraneous subject.<sup>43</sup> Pairing this with Freud's interpretation of sadism, we find another complication: "while these pains are being inflicted on other people, they are enjoyed *masochistically* by the subject through his identification of himself with the suffering object."<sup>44</sup> In other words, the sadomasochistic dynamic is made possible by a splitting of instinctual components followed by their (re-)amalgamation across a subjective divide. This reiterates not only the deceptiveness of the unitary ego, but also of the perception of discrete ontological divisions between subjects.

Laplanche suggests that Freud overlooks the most available explanation for masochism: the *internalization of the entire scene*.<sup>45</sup> If the subject divided against itself causes pain with one agency in order to produce pleasure for another, this internalization supposes a split but highly-aware consciousness. Here Laplanche intervenes: "[t]he subject is masochistic only insofar as he derives enjoyment *precisely there where* he suffers, and not insofar as he suffers in one place in order to derive enjoyment in

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<sup>42</sup> Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*, p. 29. Of course, Foucault complicates this view through his genealogy of sexuality as a "technology," arguing that the proliferation of discourse around sexual proclivities and practices also "satisfied" a demand, that of transforming desire into discourse. As he writes in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley (London: Vintage Books, 1990): "we demand that sex speak the truth (but, since it is the secret and is oblivious to its own nature, we reserve for ourselves the function of telling the truth of its truth, revealed and deciphered at last), and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness" (p. 69).

<sup>43</sup> It is worth mentioning that Freud posits this dynamic prior to introducing the theory of the superego as critical agency.

<sup>44</sup> Freud (1915a) "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," SE XIV, p. 129.

<sup>45</sup> Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, p. 104.



another.”<sup>46</sup> That is, pain is not endured in order to be able to derive pleasure. The masochist derives pleasure from pain itself, from the dramatization of violence or trauma that supplants the spectacle of subjectivity.

Reading Freud’s lifelong work as an attempt to track down the enduring elusiveness of the unconscious in spite of the instabilities and impossibilities arising therefrom, Laplanche aims to steady the Freudian edifice by accommodating its more rebellious elements. In so far as sexuality is concerned, he presents libido as the buttress of deficient self-preservation, suggesting that sexuality is inherently traumatic and, thus, that masochism is always-already primary. Of the “other” instinctual components, Laplanche presents an interpretation similar to that undertaken here thus far: the death drive does not refer to biological death but to a psychic unbinding that jeopardizes the binding capacity of the ego. Overlapping these interpretations, Laplanche deduces that sexuality, originally classed by Freud under the life drives which seek to “maintain, preserve, and even augment cohesion,”<sup>47</sup> must in fact operate according to a principle of unbinding, thus corresponding to the death drive instead.<sup>48</sup> This establishes a link between sexuality and the suffering position in what Laplanche designates as (self-) *ébranlement*. Though generally appearing as “self-shattering,” this translation overlooks a key element of the French term, which refers also to “shaking” and thus carries with it a

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid*; emphasis in original.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p. 123.

<sup>48</sup> In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), Judith Butler compares the accounts of subject formation in Lacan and Laplanche, arguing that life is always already interrupted or dispossessed by the demand for narrative reconstruction, and that psychoanalysis articulates the fear that the absence of narrative threatens life with the risk of death. “But this death,” she writes, “if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery” (p. 65). In *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), she emphasizes the association of this “certain kind of death” to sexuality, stating: “Let’s face it. We are undone by each other. And if not, we are missing something [...] sexuality is [not] a possession, but rather, a mode of being dispossessed” (p. 24).

certain *convulsiveness*, a “trembling” like that of the ontological oscillations discussed in the previous chapter.

Drawing from Laplanche’s reading of Freud, Bersani theorizes an ego formed in response to the desire for dissolution and constituted by the manners in which that wish finds expression as desire. Here masochism is not (exclusively) a form of self-punishment, but rather an “adaptive mechanism.”<sup>49</sup> In *Culture of Redemption* as well as *The Freudian Body*, Bersani considers how masochism embodies the desire for dissolution, as the ontological ground of all sexual activity and, more generally, as the instabilities or slippages that disrupt all manners of formalism. According to Bersani, (sado)masochism is a melodramatic (or *metadramatic*) performance that makes visible the struggle between the undefined energy of thought and the injunction to define its terms. This being the essence of desire in its seeking of the unattainable *objet a*, pleasure and “satisfaction” are intimately linked, in origin, to the masochistic tendency.<sup>50</sup> But Bersani presses this even further, considering the aesthetic field itself as a replication or elaboration of masochistic tension: though its “anonymization” of the subject, masochism functions as a nonreferential substratum of both sex- and textuality.

Citing the reversals that occur in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Bersani interprets masochism as the troubling of the norms of representation and the position of authority on which language depends, extending its “aesthetic” to the linguistic domain where it manifests as a textual violence or distress revealing the paradoxical core of pleasure itself. Sexuality and self-preservation, he explains, operate in the service of a death drive which they sustain and postpone, aimed at always-partial satisfaction of an aim-inhibited wish. However, more central to Bersani’s argument is the manner in which Freud’s formulation

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<sup>49</sup> Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*, p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 41.

implies that the libidinal instincts exist as a “pale copy” of the death instincts from which they derive.<sup>51</sup> However, the dualism between the classes of instincts collapses as death settles into the core of sexuality, where that which cannot be “completed” is (compulsively) repeated in sublimated forms. Masochism, Bersani argues, zeroes in on this distressing dynamic and takes pleasure in its dilemmas: as an undifferentiated sexual energy independent of the erotogenic zones, masochism enables the subject to exist in the gap between self-shattering experience and resistant and/or defensive ego structures. In Bersani’s view, it is a psychic strategy which partially defeats a dysfunctional process by revealing and putting in play its dysfunctionality.

As a threat to – or mockery of – the self-referentiality of structural organization, the desire for or deployment of violence is neither anecdotal nor pathological. Rather it is intrinsic to a wide sphere of human activities which aims to challenge the ontological integrity of a structured self. Bataille calls this eroticism, which he distinguishes from sexuality. To apply Bersani’s terminology, eroticism, according to Bataille, is sexuality that derives from masochism: it manifests a desire for self-ruination and the pleasure of self-annulment that occurs through “nonreferential use of libidinal energy.”<sup>52</sup> What makes Bersani’s interpretation more radical is that he does not isolate eroticism as a special category within sexuality but argues that the self-destructiveness of eroticism is the very foundation of all sexual life: “sexuality,” Bersani writes, “could be thought of as a tautology for masochism.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*. In her work on male masochism as a form of “deviant” masculinity, Kaja Silverman takes this further, arguing that a dissolved subject superceeds the unified one by magnifying the dislocations on which identity is based. Through a refusal of subjective “suturing,” masochism troubles the status of mastery and thus operates as a subversive tool. The masochistic act of surrender, she argues, loosens power’s grip on the subject through a process that might be described as “de-oedipalization.” Masochism, in her interpretation, corresponds to the polymorphous “infantile” pleasure of a not-quite differentiated identity. See *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 185-214.

<sup>53</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 39.

Freud tells us that “the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it”<sup>54</sup> but as Bersani notes, “nothing is less certain in Freud than that first object to which we remain remarkably faithful.”<sup>55</sup> Given that the psychoanalytic model of the subject that Freud puts forth is neither autonomous nor self-identical – as discussed in Chapter 2 – then the dissolution of its perceived unity (under the auspices of masochism) might help to account for the “origin” that endlessly eludes Freud. Bersani elaborates: “*the first psychic totality would thus be constituted by a desire to shatter totality*. The ego, at its origin, would be nothing more than a kind of passionate inference necessitated by the anticipated pleasure of its own dismantling.”<sup>56</sup> Masochism, therefore, might be conceived of as the performance of the subject’s uneasy relation to subjectivity, a convulsive “articulation” of the paradoxical tension between subjectivity and its highest expression as violence towards itself. The choice the subject faces, Bersani writes, is not between violence and non-violence. Rather, “we are implicated in violence from the beginning; our choice [...] is rather between the psychic dislocations of mobile desire and a destructive fixation.”<sup>57</sup>

Interpreting the “dislocations” in relation to the objectifying transformations of language, we find that the “destructive fixation” also has textual component: if textuality (and, in turn, subjectivity) subsists on its always being in doubt or question, moments of textual “failure” call out from an underlying heterogeneity just as the parapraxis calls out from the unconscious. Bersani, therefore, claims that “[p]sychoanalytic truth can be analyzed – and verified – only as a textual distress.”<sup>58</sup> This is not because “everything is text” or because “the unconscious is structured like a language,” but because of an

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<sup>54</sup> Freud (1905), *Three essays on the theory of sexuality, SEVII*; p. 222.

<sup>55</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 38; emphasis in original.

<sup>57</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 70.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

“extratextual truth”<sup>59</sup> which presents as text folding back on itself, returning to its own absent origin. In attempting to expose the fact of self-referentiality that the individual must deny in order to achieve status as thinking subject, masochism results in a disturbed textuality that “problematizes its own formalizing and structuralizing aspirations.”<sup>60</sup> Other distressing transformations of form will be considered in the following chapter, extending this discussion to the visual domain. Here however I wish to focus on masochism as manifested in textual violence and, more specifically, on how any attempt to advance a theory of the death drive causes such violence to erupt. In these instances, the text performs what cannot be explicitly expressed, namely that *the adherence of psychoanalysis to its subject depends on a sustained theoretical instability*.<sup>61</sup>

This is the critical hinge on which Bersani’s aestheticization of Freud pivots: as in masochism, the “authenticity” of psychoanalytic theory is found in a situation of theoretical collapse.<sup>62</sup> Or, as Bersani writes, “the truth of a theory of desire cannot be dissociated from some recklessly self-defeating moves in the performance of the theory,”<sup>63</sup> and masochism, in turn, signals the “the secretive and pleasurable phenomenon of a self-destroying intelligence.”<sup>64</sup> The pleasure of masochism, then, is the pleasure of a “dissolved identity” as the site where subjective identity is both negotiated and dismantled – a site of variability and plurality by which the subject questions himself without mediation by structuring operations or the symbolically inscribed Other. In other words, the mediator in masochism is a vanishing one. For instance, let us consider the following assessment by Freud:

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

Even where [the death drive] emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfilment of the latter's old wishes for omnipotence.<sup>65</sup>

Here we see a collapse of narcissistic and destructive enjoyment, a breaking down of the boundaries that separate these instinctual components and their conceptualization as dualistic. Freud's text thus expresses the difficulty of trying to sustain oppositions that are always-already folded into one another.

In Bersani's view, this evokes *psychoanalytic questioning as a masochistic performance* always and never "culminating" in that which unthinkable to formalized thought, substantiating "a certain unreadability that has much less to do with a hidden and profound sense than with a dissolution of sense in a voice which continuously refuses to adhere to its statements."<sup>66</sup> In the context of masochism, the terms available to us (e.g. language, desire, pleasure) and the tensions that sustain them, are dissolved in the possibility of what Bersani describes as "*an eroticized, de-narrativized, and mobile consciousness*."<sup>67</sup> The result is an interpretive suspension, the theoretical collapse of the narrative and non-narrative that spills over into discursivity, sexuality, and aesthetics as the ontological distress evoked when the act of knowing itself is problematized. Curiously, Bersani describes this as a case of "*oceanic textuality*."<sup>68</sup>

[S]uddenly, aggressiveness is beginning to sound bizarrely like – of all things – the oceanic feeling, which, as we have seen, was an ecstatic sense of oneness with the universe, a breaking down of the boundaries between

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<sup>65</sup> Freud (1930), *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE XXI, pp. 120-122.

<sup>66</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 27.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, p. 20.

the ego and the world traceable to the ‘limitless narcissism’ of infancy. Like the oceanic feeling, aggressiveness includes an intense erotic pleasure.<sup>69</sup>

In the notion of the ‘oceanic,’ the collapse of the narcissistic fantasy and the desire for destructiveness is not conceptualized as a binary negation. Actually, insofar as the “loss” that masochism entails is none other than that of the subject as mediator maintaining these separations, the desired self-shattering – or ontologically speaking, self-*shaking* – might correspond instead to a “re-discovering of the self outside of the self,” a means of “reaching towards one’s ‘form’ elsewhere.”<sup>70</sup> And this, I believe, bears a striking resemblance to the *non-savior* of mysticism.

#### INNER EXPERIENCE

At the height of the Second World War, two decades after having renounced Catholicism and his aspirations of entering the priesthood, Bataille published a three-part treatise on the absence of God: *La Somme Athéologique*, a feverish first-person account of religious experience.<sup>71</sup> In the first volume, *Inner Experience*, he writes of the transcendent God as that which kills the thing, similar in that respect to Lacan’s elaboration of the symbolic. Just as the submission to discursive life alienates what is Real in the individual, worship turns God into a discontinuous being: “[i]nstead of the inconceivable unknown – wildly free before me, leaving me wild and free before it – there would be a dead object and the thing of the theologian...”<sup>72</sup> This, according to Bataille, subjugates not only the unknown but also the one who seeks it, thus reifying a categorical hierarchy and the demand for subservience. In turn, Bataille calls for a practice to replace the worship of a dead God:

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>70</sup> See Tim Dean, Hal Foster, and Kaja Silverman, “A conversation with Leo Bersani” in *October*, 82 (Fall 1997): 3-16; p. 15

<sup>71</sup> See Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 21-4, 32-5.

<sup>72</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 4.

the constant and necessarily repetitious *sacrifice* of God, the negation of the transcendental through mystical (or erotic) activity that annuls any possible categorization by subsuming all into an unthinkable totality.

*Inner Experience* and *Guilty*, the third installation of *La Somme*, engage closely (and at times critically) with the mystic tradition and the vertiginous reversals whereby the mystic “becomes all” such that neither mystic nor God exist as such. The “divine experience” that Bataille thus elaborates is an experience of the whole attained in the absence or negation of “God” and “self”: “instead of *me* eager to be me, there would be with respect *to me* only nothingness, as if I were dead.”<sup>73</sup> But without the self as center of experience or symbolic anchor, such a negation is all-inclusive – it cannot be explained or possessed, only grasped momentarily as the moment of slipping away. Self-renunciation thus clears the path for a fusion with the all, but “in fusion neither *ipse* nor the whole subsist. It is the annihilation of everything which is not the ultimate ‘unknown,’ the abyss into which one has sunk.”<sup>74</sup>

Throughout his work, Bataille posits *ipse* – the “actual” – in place of “I,” and this speaks to the complications discussed above in relation to masochism. According to Bataille, “I” is the domesticated appearance of *ipse* – another “pale copy.”<sup>75</sup> *Ipse*, on the other hand, is a rebellious referent for the paradoxical qualities of the narcissistic ego mentioned thus far, as well as the dangerous recognition of the “I” as a middle term between impossibilities. However, as that which slips away from discursive intelligence, *ipse* can only be restored through its own renunciation, through a becoming-unknown to itself which renders it commensurate to the unknown that “I” opposes: “two terms merge in a single wrenching, barely differing from a void – not able to be distinguished from it

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*



by anything that I can grasp – nevertheless differing from it more than does the world of a thousand colors.”<sup>76</sup> We might say then that in the desire to surpass limited existence, narcissistic longing converges with narcissistic insufficiency, and this is the battle – the *bataille* – of *ipse*, which desires “to become everything and can only become it by dying.”<sup>77</sup>

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the experience of God takes place in relation to an unlimited beyond that transcends individual experience. Bataille does not alter this structure very perceptibly, and yet he destabilizes it completely, replacing the notion of a transcendent “beyond” with the vast field of the “impossible” whose existence both binds and unravels individual experience, the unspeakable or unassimilable that is glimpsed in the moment of transgression. The sacred, in this interpretation, is not given or accessed through ritual piety but through (self-)sacrifice: “death, delivering me from a world which kills me, encloses as a matter of fact this real world in the unreality of a self-that-dies.”<sup>78</sup> In place of moral heroism or obedience to an eternal father and his Law, Bataille elevates willful expenditure to the point of self-ruination. Psychoanalytically-speaking, this corresponds to a deposing of oedipal narratives by the death instinct. But in Bataille’s view, this “blind destructiveness” is not driven by innate aggression. Rather, it expresses nostalgia for a lost continuity, a desire for fusion with the “origin” that functions in discontinuous life as a nameless object of mourning.

As Derrida explains, this is an expenditure without reserve, a “writing beyond the book” or a writing of the origin via the traces of its disappearance – “a lost writing of the origin.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, the title of *Inner Experience* is both misleading and appropriate for what Bataille attempts to express is neither an “experience” nor something that can be posited

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, p. 125.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, p. 74.

<sup>79</sup> Derrida, “Ellipsis” in *Writing and Difference*, pp. 294-300; pp. 294-5.

as “inner,” but rather the radical continuity in which these distinctions fail. Indeed, the continuity of which Bataille writes is a rupture of the very structure of recognition as a function of otherness, that which cannot be completed or revealed by consciousness and thus exists only insofar as discursive awareness about it does not. Long before it is designated as such, Bataille’s thinking bears the proto-traces of libidinal materialism.

Life is never situated at a particular point: it passes rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to other points), like a current... Thus, there where you would like to grasp your timeless substance, you encounter only a slipping, only the poorly coordinated play of your perishable elements.<sup>80</sup>

In this non-teleological philosophy, communication with the all implies a risk that exceeds any possible perception by the limited self. To the extent that it demands renunciation of attachment to that self and its discursive utility, such communication cannot be without an element of sacrifice, and it is precisely sacrifice which reintroduces the sacred into existence as that which is radically other to the ego and its desire for mastery. Indeed, therein lies what Bataille – and scholars of feminist theology after him – identify as the subversive element of mystical events and encounters: forgoing autonomy displaces power, mastery, and/or utility as the key terms of existence, replacing hierarchical thinking with anguish, fascination, and ecstasy at the improbability and precarity of being. Or, as Foucault writes, the sacrifice of the self – a feature of the abundantly contradictory hermeneutics of early Christianity – is “the condition for the opening of the self as a field of indefinite interpretation.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 94.

<sup>81</sup> Foucault, *About the Beginning to the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College (1980)*, Trans. Graham Burchell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 75-76.

In “A Preface to Transgression,” originally published in *Critique* as “Hommage à Georges Bataille” in the wake of his death, Foucault acknowledges the debt that theories of subjective dissolution or denial have to Bataille, his work exemplifying that such theories resist narrative closure by necessity – they reflect the unrest evoked by their own *impossibility*. According to Foucault, what Bataille puts forth is not a philosophical language, but “desperate and relentless attack”<sup>82</sup> on the philosophical subject through “the non-dialectical language of the limit which only arises in transgressing the one who speaks.”<sup>83</sup> If the establishment of limits renders “denatured” or meager forms of the sexual or spiritual, transgression disrupts these forms, exposing them as functions of a subjectivity that is operable as long as it serves as its own limit. “[T]ransgression,” Foucault writes, “forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps, to be more exact, *to recognize itself for the first time*), to experience in its positive truth its downward fall.”<sup>84</sup>

Following Bataille’s reasoning, Foucault links eroticism to the death of God on the grounds that both derive their force through the disclosure their own secret: excessive expenditure amounts to *nothing*.<sup>85</sup> Both lead into an ontological void,<sup>86</sup> thinkable only as the entanglement of thought. “What indeed is the meaning of the death of God,” Foucault asks, “if not a strange solidarity between the stunning realization of his non-existence and the act that kills him?”<sup>87</sup> Perhaps the same could be said of mystical self-denial and masochistic self-shattering as experiences of cancellation that foreground the reciprocal

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<sup>82</sup> Foucault, “Preface to a Transgression” in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Ed. Trans. Donald Burchard, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 29-52; p. 43.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*, p. 44.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*, p. 34; my italics.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>86</sup> Foucault elaborates this as follows: “Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the limitless into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. But correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it” (*ibid*, pp. 35-36).

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*, p. 32.

reliance of sovereignty and psychic death. The excessiveness of transgression then equates to the surpassing of the self and its symbolic limits, an outpouring via which the source returns to itself. The force of transgression lies less in the act itself and more so in the renunciation of the “I” that restores *ipse* to its inherent precarity, its *non-savior*. In a process that resonates with the reading of masochism above, by (temporarily) suspending or nullifying the structures that confer on the “I” its perceived unity, transgression opens up into the limitless domain where the divine or sacred functions. The transgressive experience, therefore, is more than a mere challenging of authority. It is the challenging of a self that is only permissible as co-signer of the Other’s phantasmatic desire, the “destructive” inclination to negate these terms by exceeding them.

As previously mentioned, Bataille draws these paradoxical “formulas” from the traditions of Christian and non-Western mysticism, as well as his reading of Nietzsche, elaborated in the second volume of *La Somme Athéologique*. His emphasis on the experiential reflects a refusal to objectify subjective rupture. Instead, Bataille exposes the contradictions in scientific and objective language in order to engender in the reader the experience of his own contradiction in the unassimilable interplay between the general and the particular.<sup>88</sup> For instance, he writes, “[y]ou shouldn’t doubt it any longer for an instant: you haven’t understood a word of Nietzsche’s work without living that dazzling dissolution into totality. Beyond that, this philosophy is just a maze of contradictions.”<sup>89</sup> This assessment gives us a sense of how to approach Bataille’s own texts, as well as the mystical writings to which he returns throughout his work.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 38.

<sup>89</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. xxxi.

<sup>90</sup> For more of Bataille’s writings on Christian mysticism, particularly in relation to sexuality, see *Erotism*, pp. 117-128, 221-264.

Still, Bataille is ambivalent to the term mysticism as its accommodation in Christian discourses is not in line with what he seeks to express:

By inner experience I understand that which one usually calls mystical experience: states of ecstasy, or rapture, at least of mediated emotion. But I am thinking less of confessional experience, to which one has had to adhere up to now, than of an experience laid bare, free of attachments, even of origin... This is why I don't like the word *mystical*.<sup>91</sup>

Though his elaboration of inner experience, Bataille envisions a “mysticism” without expiatory or salvific aims. However, such an experience – opposed as it is to narrative formalism – cannot be appropriated by any particular discourse without being fundamentally diminished.<sup>92</sup> Bataille thus claims that “inner experience” is truer to the spirit of mystical practice than institutional interpretations that manipulate the mystical encounter with God to suit dogmatic purposes.

In *Sensible Ecstasy*, Amy Hollywood offers a compelling analysis of Bataille's conflicted engagement with the mystical tradition, considering how Bataille's oeuvre (textually) replicates mystical ecstasy while charging such experiences with a sovereign subversiveness denied in ideologically-fixed and flattened interpretations. This attentiveness to the exigencies of late-medieval mysticism was not, however, limited to Bataille, and so Hollywood extends her analysis to the work of Beauvior, Lacan, and Irigaray, wherein questions of sexual difference are foregrounded. The writings and practices of late-medieval mystics, she argues, allow these 20th-century intellectuals to articulate or at least to approach – in Bataille's case, to *experience* – certain theoretical “blind spots” (e.g. feminine desire, *jouissance*, and psychosis). In that regard, there are

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<sup>91</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> In *The Sex Lives of Saints*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), Virginia Burrus offers a literary interpretation of mystical and hagiographical writings as “transgressive” texts, indicative of an exuberant “counter-eroticism” whereby asceticism, spiritual submission, and mystical rapture suggest acts of defiance against the Christian tradition and its sexual ethic.

many similarities between the thematics of Hollywood's work and those of the present investigation. Most notably, she makes several allusions to Freud – to the association between the death drive and his late theory of primary masochism as indicative of a drive to escape subjectivity – and, in turn, the possibility of reading ecstasy in those terms.<sup>93</sup> Hollywood's project, however, focuses less on metapsychology (and its impossibilities) *per se* and more so on establishing mysticism as a mode of thought that exceeds restrictive oppositions and thus allows a means of contemplating the more paradoxical facets of subjective understanding. These two lines of inquiry, in my view, are deeply intertwined, and so her consideration of masochistic desires, lacerated subjectivities, and anomalous textualities as indicative of an “ethical compulsion to confront the real”<sup>94</sup> is of significant relevance here, enabling us to (1) conceptualize a perimeter, albeit tremulous, around death as the inaccessible, inarticulable center of thought, (2) incorporate mysticism as a means of approximating this center precisely because – like masochism – it dissolves the formal structures of subject-object thinking.

For instance, Hollywood considers how Bataille's reading of 13th-century Franciscan tertiary Angela of Foligno conditions his writings on ecstasy or, rather, how his (non-)understanding of her visions is performed by the textual liminality of his contemplations. Her *Book of Visions* offers an account of the movements or transformations of thought that lead to ecstasy, and in *Guilty*, Bataille reproduces large portions of her text, often verbatim, so as to repeat these transformations, transcribing

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<sup>93</sup> In *Sensible Ecstasy*, Hollywood clearly maps out the theoretical associations being traced here. She explains: “Bataille's account of ecstasy might be understood in light of Lacan's theory of *jouissance* and its deployment by Jean Laplanche and Leo Bersani. One can thus read ecstasy in terms of Freud's late account of primary masochism, as a self-shattering that lies beyond the pleasure principle and yet is itself *desired*” (p. 85).

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*

her words in order to bring himself to the moment where subjective dispersal opens up into the unknown (i.e. death). Angela writes:

One time my soul was elevated and I saw God in a clarity and fullness that I had never known to that point in such a full way... And then after that I saw him in a darkness, for his is good so great that he cannot be thought or understood. And nothing of that which can be thought or understood attains or approaches him.<sup>95</sup>

Of course it is not the “greatness” of God that compels Bataille, but rather Angela’s frequent references to darkness, to the all-engulfing unknowing of the abyss. For instance:

When I am in that darkness I do not remember anything about anything human, or the God-man, or anything which has a form. Nonetheless, I see all and I see nothing. And what I have spoken of withdraws and stays with me, I see the God-man. He draws my soul with great gentleness and he sometimes says to me; ‘You are I and I am you.’ [...] The soul is alive in that vision concerning the God-man. The vision with darkness, however, draws me so much more that there is no comparison.<sup>96</sup>

In the movement from an object-centered relationship to Christ to the experience of the all as an abyss – what Angela refers to as “the twenty-sixth transformation of the soul” – Bataille reads the inextricability of divinity and an experience of nothingness. This might be one’s own nothingness or that of God, but in a darkness without forms such a distinction becomes irrelevant, if not impossible. Still, it seems that it is precisely this dissolute unknowing which confers an experience of unity with God. For Bataille, the non-viability of these unbearable movements of thought accounts for the ecstatic core of mysticism as the experience of that which is “impossible” and “unknowable,” yet deeply

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<sup>95</sup> Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, Trans. Paul Lachance, (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 202.

<sup>96</sup> Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, p. 205.

and affectively *is*. And, perhaps more seditiously, Bataille considers that as such, the mystical experience deconstructs God as a projection of human desire by revealing the contradictions of that desire, namely that its fulfillment takes the form of a collapse.<sup>97</sup> This “transformation” allows us to establish a connection between mysticism and masochism that bypasses the logic of repressed sexuality in favor of a *non-savior* evoked through and manifested as ontological crisis: mystical “inner experience” and masochistic desire lay bare the inadequacies and limits of their containing structures and, in doing so, derive a paradoxical enjoyment that is incommensurate with the forms available within those structures.<sup>98</sup> Much like Bersani suggests of masochism – and psychoanalytic inquiry in general – the adherence of inner experience to its disappearing subject also hinges on a certain precariousness of thought.

By emphasizing the manner in which mystic engagement with the divine is also a problematization of surrounding discourses about divinity, Bataille presents an (a)theology that is not a return to Christianity but, as Hollywood writes, “a generalization of its logic and a rejection of the dualism by which it attempts to negate [...] the violence necessary to its instantiation.”<sup>99</sup> This is made possible through a renunciation of (redemptive) narrative in favor of the specificity (i.e. contingency) of the real as embodied in suffering. The resulting scenario – one of “guilt without redemption, anguish without salvation”<sup>100</sup> – may strike us as rather bleak, but perhaps reflects an ethical position, however conflicted, in the form of what Hollywood describes as “a compulsion to *see the*

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<sup>97</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 67.

<sup>98</sup> A similar case is made by Niklaus Largier with *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal*, Trans. Graham Harman, (New York: Zone Books, 2007). Here he explores how religious and erotic activity share a certain imaginary, as suggested by the manner in which the devotional practice of voluntary flagellation finds its way into sexual culture. This transposition, he argues, implies a shared fascination between religious devotion and “perverse” sadomasochistic practices, one which goes beyond the ecclesiastic discourse of piety as well as the boundaries of sexuality.

<sup>99</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 57.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*, p. 83.



*speechless body.*"<sup>101</sup> That is, the refusal to turn experience into a signifier or to reduce it to its "use value" such when it so thoroughly rejects discursive meaning. However, like a mystical theology in which the very concept of God (as understood by the Christian West) is subverted by the *non-savior* through which the divine is *experienced*, this compulsion cannot avoid its own crisis. The obscure doublings that arise in mystical writings, as well as their fragmented reflection in Bataille's texts, seem to be symptomatic of this: even the self-shattering experience of the limit "require[s] a lingering subjectivity [...] if that dissolution is to be lived and communicated."<sup>102</sup> Hence the desire for *dramatization* or, more generally, for modes of self-interrogating representation that, though the disturbance of narrativization, communicate a psychical or textual experience of *ébranlement* rather than negating the possibility of communication altogether.<sup>103</sup> But how to write without an object or a subject, without an end and a 'why?'

Here we might say that textual chaos or "failure" evokes experience by foregrounding the contradictions of a subjectivity which attempts aimlessly to exceed itself. This is not far from Hollywood's defense of Bataille's ethico-aesthetic: in "turn[ing] to writing as the site of self-laceration and dissolution" he does not glorify suffering but rather attempts to communicate suffering through its "*textual effects.*"<sup>104</sup> And yet, Bataille's meditation on the speechless body, his attempts to communicate the unassimilable – rather than to simply to produce a narrative about it – can only be translated textually through the risking of language itself. For instance, according to

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<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>103</sup> In "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" (*The Bataille Reader*, pp. 279-295) Bataille expresses the importance of dramatization – of the "subterfuge" of the spectacle – to any knowledge that we might have of death. He states: "at all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying. [...] This difficulty proclaims the necessity of spectacle, or of representation in general, without the practice of which it would be possible for us to remain alien and ignorant in respect to death, just as beasts apparently are" (p. 287).

<sup>104</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 58.

Hollywood, the “antigeneric” nature of Bataille’s episodically poetic, pornographic, and (anti-)philosophical writing is a mode of communication in that it exceeds distinction on the basis of style or genre. Fragments from letters and journal entries mix with confessions and theoretical reflections and create a flux between experience and writing, a flux which Hollywood likens to the “immediate outpourings”<sup>105</sup> found in Angela’s *Book of Visions* or Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Flowing Light of the Godhead*.<sup>106</sup> But refusal of convention is not the only manner in which Bataille places language *en jeu*. This is also, in part, accomplished through his choice of subject matter – the erotic, mystical, and sacrificial – and the manner in which these categories collapse in his writing. His contemplations of “impossible” texts, like his life-long meditation on the image of the *Dionysus chinois*, reflect an attempt to communicate realities that exceed limited or discontinuous understanding, to “force the onlooker/reader to recognize (to remember) the anguishing catastrophic real hidden by narrative memory and the illusions of wholeness and unity on which it depends.”<sup>107</sup> Mostly, however, Bataille risks language through the self-defeating moves of his writing, which in its attempt to sustain its contradictions performs a contestation of itself. In deliberately throwing itself, its writer, and its reader into question this body of text elicits an inner experience that reaches beyond the level of signifiers in that, on that level, it ceaselessly enacts the very crisis of signification. Or, as noted by Hollywood, “[b]y exacerbating the paradoxes of writing a desire without object and without aim, Bataille creates a performative text in which inner

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<sup>105</sup> *ibid*, p. 102.

<sup>106</sup> In some ways, this is comparable to Julia Kristeva’s *Teresa, My Love*, Trans. Lorna Scott Fox, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), an uneasy work of “fiction” in which semi-autobiography merges with the life and writings of Saint Teresa of Avila. This text is as “confessional” as the Spanish mystics own writings and, simultaneously, a psychoanalytic exploration of desire and faith as well as a devotional missive – at times a love letter – to the saint herself.

<sup>107</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 82.

experience is (for him and perhaps for the reader who thinks the contradictions of his text) ‘realized.’”<sup>108</sup>

Through a textualized ambivalence that refuses even the more apophatic forms of narrative closure, Bataille (re)creates in writing the laceration of the subject as the means of communicating a convulsive ecstasy in the face of the contingency of existence. In this view, masochistic or mystic self-denial is not a denial of pleasure but of the self as the primary locus of pleasurable experience, not the absence of eroticism but its presence as exuberant excess or loss of self. This is not far from Bersani’s formulation of masochism. And indeed, when we consider that mysticism culminates in an experience of anonymity or spiritual cancellation, we find resonances with Freud’s formulation as well: just as the child being beaten is never the one producing the masochistic fantasy, mystical experience cannot be simply traced back to the mystic. Both signal a situation without the possibility of closure or completion because the critical moment involves self-annulment and structural collapse, the two being mutually indissociable. Referring back to the previous chapter, as well as Bersani’s reading of Freud, it seems that instances of textual distress seem to gather around death and dissolution as the unthinkable aims that lie beyond the pleasure principle.

“The libertine is closer to the saint than the man without desire,”<sup>109</sup> Bataille writes, drawing the erotic and the mystical together as analogous expressions of an inexorable impulse to self-abandon that requires, at least to some extent, the very particularity it seeks to elude. In its culmination, there is only the *nihil incognitum* – “unknown nothingness” – that Angela of Foligno reportedly called out to with her final words.<sup>110</sup> In its compulsive repetition however, this impulse perpetuates itself as a radical questioning

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<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>109</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 122n. 1.

<sup>110</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 104.

of subjectivity and discursive self-positioning that manifests in and as ontological rupture. Establishing a correspondence between mysticism and masochism in terms of their resistance to formalization advances an interpretation of the death drive as a destabilizing force that exerts itself against narrativization and textuality, both of which it deeply disrupts in order to reveal the Real concealed behind a veil of signifiers. But, because it implicates the disappearance or dissolution of its own subject, such a theory appears only be *textually* affirmed or “realized” through a traumatization of writing itself.

5.  
VIOLENT REPRESENTATION AND THE EROTIC IMAGINARY

I laugh when I think that my eyes persist in demanding objects that do not destroy them.

– Georges Bataille, “La pratique de la joie devant la mort”

Leo Bersani describes psychoanalysis as the study of the difficult relationship between language and the body.<sup>1</sup> This has been discussed in relation to the narcissistic fantasy of the I-as-gestalt and the contradiction bound up therein: for all of its willed autonomy, omnipotence or coherence, the ego or “I” necessitates an other – either as a separate entity or as a spectral image. Reflecting on how the gestalted image conceals a foundational lack,<sup>2</sup> we traced out the trajectory of the “I” as the discursive entity in the difficult relationship Bersani alludes to. But what of the body itself?

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<sup>1</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> This is in reference to Lacan’s main point in “The Subversion of the Subject in the Dialectic of Desire,” as discussed in Chapter 2: the subject sacrifices *jouissance* in order to participate in the symbolic where he finds it as its inverse in the form of desire; if participation in the symbolic is on the condition of this lack or loss, then (‘Other’) *jouissance* equates to the *fullness* that lies beyond the taboo, the prohibition, the *interdit*.

If language cannot be easily mapped onto the body, or if the vulnerability of the body is incompatible with the symbolic demand of integrity, ostensibly we are left with the body as its own means of representation. What “linguistic activity” is it capable of and under what conditions? In this chapter, I consider through the alternative symbolic of the wound the paradoxical manner in which an aesthetic of laceration or fragmentation offers an escape from the egocentrism that mediates, dissects, and objectifies embodied experience as a separation from the whole. Such an aesthetic, I maintain, has no “object” as its goal. Rather, it reflects an uneasy overlay of representation and referent, specifically the uncertainty, vulnerability, and impermanence of the body that otherwise operates to set the boundaries of individual subjectivity.

As Freud writes, “the ego is first and foremost a *bodily ego*.”<sup>3</sup> It would follow then that a threat to its form is also a threat to its content. In turn, aesthetic practices that foreground the lack of bodily integrity reintroduce into representation its own excesses or inadequacies, destabilizing the objectifying transformations which representation undertakes and facilitates.<sup>4</sup> That is, the body in pain (or ecstasy) may be represented but because of the difficulty of its referent, it is a representation that simultaneously asserts its resistance against discourse. Such images, I argue, recall or restore the r/Real appearance of a subject as an inaccessible, fundamentally fragmented entity, and in scattering the subject, they also challenge the symbolic structure that the individual accesses on the condition of subjectivity.

But the loss of self, be it experienced or perceived, cannot be confined or ascribed to any self-identical subject, least of all the one whose *jouissance* or sovereignty is in

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<sup>3</sup> Freud (1923), *The Ego and the Id*, *SE XIX*, pp. 3-63; p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> See Rina Arya’s “The fragmented body as index of abjection” and Ernst von Alphen’s “Skin, body, self: the question of the abject in the work of Francis Bacon,” both in *Abject Visions: Power of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*, Ed. Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 105-129.

question. Rather it overflows as mutual contingency, a merger of experiencing and perceiving, a breakdown of viewed and viewer through the refusal of integrated form(s) which sustain them as separate entities. In short, such images extend beyond the frame to a deep, engulfing questioning of the entire enterprise of subjectivity: without the “proper” imaginary contours or the intact skin of the symbolic, there is neither containment nor constriction. The result is an aesthetic situation in which identification is not possible. Nevertheless, or rather precisely for this reason, a communication takes place.

The aim of this chapter will be to explore such aesthetic situations as means of representing the “unrepresentable” precisely as that which exceeds or overflows the frame. Through a consideration of certain visual artifacts and the violent doubling they effect in both the viewer and the viewed, I suggest an aesthetic of the death drive that operates by challenging the validity of the gaze itself. Experiences of pain and ecstasy that break with the possibility of subjective positioning are examined in terms of their inaccessibility, as deeply “interior” corporeal experiences without recourse to external counterpoints. Yet, somehow, they appear capable of conveying their content through the corresponding unsettling they provoke in the onlooker, an unsettling that, as I have been arguing thus far, both results from and refers back to an event of ontological crisis: situation wherein distinctions – and in particular the distinction between “interior” and “exterior” – are dissolved through the loss of the subject that meditates them. Incidentally, this is also the case of mystical *non-savior*, an inner experience of unboundedness beyond the limits and separations of subjectivity, that, as Lacan demonstrates, cannot be approached theoretically without an element of self-subversion.

After tracing these inescapable contradictions, we will consider the body *in extremis* and, arguably, beyond, eliminating piecemeal the functions that contain and

organize subjective experience. Reading scenes of mutilation through Didier Anzieu's notion of the 'skin-ego' and the Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs," we gradually peel away and disassemble the bodily integrity on which psychic integrity leans. But, the consequence of this, at least as I hope to convey it, is a total experience of disarray and disorder. By (re)introducing into semblance its own impossibilities, this manifold but evasive aesthetic sabotages not only the forms that it manipulates, fragments or liquefies, but the very functions of containment or closure that render discrete forms to begin with and establish them as viable determinants of separation. As I have been insisting, what lies beyond such determinants can only be approached asymptotically, and in these final pages we "see" where such attempts, be they aesthetic or textual, lead: in an encounter with formlessness that tears out the eye – or "I" – itself, all the tributaries of this investigation flow into a situation of heterogeneity (un)defined by its radical otherness to subjective thought.

#### PAIN AND DIS/CONTINUITY

As discussed under the auspices of masochism, pain marks a limit of self-identification as a function of difference and, as such, it also marks a limit of intersubjective communication. Thus, sexualized or not, pain falls under the domain of the erotic – an experience that restores one to the realm of immanence, to the realm of lost intimacy that is fragmented in discontinuous existence.<sup>5</sup> Discourse is intrinsic to this discontinuous existence in which the self is perceived as a separate entity and center of meaning: in the logic of the restricted economy, discourse and discontinuity sustain one another as the preservation of the individual self. Transgression then is all that which sacrifices this restricted vision, liberating the forces uneasily contained by crystallized forms. But this

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<sup>5</sup> In reference to Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, pp. 30-38.



violent exuberance comes at the expense of the separations and differences that maintain the boundaries of the self: the shattering of forms is also a shattering of the speaking subject.

Elaine Scarry, though not operating under the same Bataillan vocabulary, offers a comprehensive examination of this topic. In *The Body in Pain*, she explains that what pain communicates it does so as its *incommunicability*.

Vaguely alarming yet unreal, laden with consequence yet evaporating before the mind because not available to sensory confirmation, unseeable classes of objects such as subterranean plates, Seyfert galaxies, and the pains occurring in other people's bodies flicker before the mind, then disappear... pain comes unshareably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.<sup>6</sup>

This resistance to language, Scarry explains, is not an “accidental attribute” of pain. Rather, it is essential to what pain is: an interior state with no external counterpoint. Unlike other affects which are accompanied by or seek affirmation through objects in the external world, the only “object” of pain is the body that experiences it and which, owing to that experience, cannot be stabilized as an object at all. By Scarry's account, “physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language.”<sup>7</sup>

The injured body then does not speak or, rather, it communicates wordlessly. But because of its silence we speak for it, over it.<sup>8</sup> Scarry reads this tendency through the

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Pain, Scarry argues, is not grasped as such but rather through its attributes or as an effect. We might, for example, attempt to give it a size or shape or form. Likewise, we might describe a pain as “sharp” or “stabbing” even if there is no knife. Scarry describes this – the locating of pain in a real or metaphorical object as opposed to in the experience of perceptual confusion – as a misidentification, a means of

trepidatious relationship between torture and interrogation.<sup>9</sup> We might however discern a similar clamor around the mystical (and masochistic) expressions discussed in the previous chapter, namely the reuptake of ecstatic experiences, martyred bodies, and self-mortifying practices within institutional discourses, clerical as well as clinical. Of this particular subject matter, Scarry writes:

The self-flagellation of the religious ascetic, for example, is not (as is often asserted) an act of denying the body, eliminating its claims from attention, but a way of so emphasizing the body that the contents of the world are cancelled, and the path is clear for the entry of an unworldly, content-less force.

Having hitherto considered this “content-less force” in relation to the unbound energetic flux of Bataille’s general economy as well as the osmotic diffusion of the “oceanic,” here I too wish to emphasize the body, examining how its representation is deployed in religious devotion in a manner that is simultaneously effective and subversive. We find a difficult dynamic between the corporeal and the transcendent, which in all its attempts to exclude the immanence of the body, finds itself constrained to it. Described by Scarry as “language-destroying” and, specifically in the case of mysticism, “path-clearing,” physical pain “empt[ies] the body of cultural content.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it conveys the certainty of its material existence. We are thus faced with the crisis of substantiation that takes place when the extremes of the material and immaterial are laid edge to edge. This will be placed in a Lacanian context shortly, but for the present discussion it suffices to say that in the derealization of verbal meaning, the metaphysical is coupled with the physical at the expense of the subjectivity that otherwise functions as intermediary.

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maintaining an external counterpoint, an attempt to rescue what is lost in pain through its re-signification as *by* or *for* something.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, pp. 27-59.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 118.

It would follow then that the manipulation of the flesh, in its capacity as self-referential sign, allows us to challenge the boundedness that the body presumes. Much like the referent of the abject is not the source of filth or contamination *in general* but rather its “out-of-placeness,” the fragmented body also signals something more archaic than the sum of its scattered parts. The challenging of the integrality of the body, I argue, recalls the early circumstances of the (proto-)ego in the pre-ambivalent fullness of the *chora*, and in the simultaneous but violently alternating desire for and refusal of this situation, we discern the force of the death drive.

Death according to Bataille, is not only a source of anguish, but also that by which we ecstatically escape our limited senses of self. An experience “on the level of death” occurs in erotic encounters or in moments of extreme emotion, “jerk[ing] us out of our tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being.”<sup>11</sup> Death, by this understanding, corresponds to a wounding of the closed form of the individual, which in turn elicits a sense of continuity with other ruptured beings, an alternative, non-discursive mode of communication. “Divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror”<sup>12</sup> become interchangeable, if not equivalent, both threatening the self-contained nature of the subject through the suggestion of an undifferentiated existence beyond prevailing discursive or aesthetic frameworks that privilege visible presence or coherence. It is through this lens that I wish to interpret the representations of mysticism and martyrdom in the Catholic aesthetic: the open body lends its truth but because it cannot be objectified the referent must be held steadily visible.<sup>13</sup>

This interpretation is far removed from a reading of repression of erotic desire as the feature of Christian sanctity, of asceticism as sublimated sexuality. To repeat Bataille’s

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<sup>11</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 207.

<sup>13</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 125.

words: “[l]et me stress that in this work flights of Christian religious experience and bursts of erotic impulses are seen to be part and parcel of the same movement.”<sup>14</sup> By this reading, mysticism, like eroticism, corresponds to an exuberant excess or overflowing that arises from the sacrifice of the integrality of individual form (i.e. a loss of self).<sup>15</sup> Both gravitate around an ineffable “lost object” – death – and to the transgression of the limits set by discontinuous being. And yet, as Bataille explains, the mystical experience is one of enigmatic interiority, an anguished “voyage to the end to the possible.”<sup>16</sup> How then to express or *communicate* its formless content? Here I suggest that perhaps certain forms of representation – those which challenge or rupture the integrality of form – are capable of a deliberate destruction that evokes the same violent alternation of affects, the same ontological mutilation that we have been exploring thus far in relation to death.

Kristeva writes of the “erotic cult of the abject.”<sup>17</sup> Considered alongside Bataille’s work on the subject of transgression, alongside the deployment of the fragmented body as a (non-)object of religious contemplation, we might also discern a *sacred* cult of the abject. Would such imply a distinction between the two? I wish to argue here that the sacred and the erotic are not in the least exclusive domains. Culturally and historically perhaps they have been constructed as such, but on the level of psychic energetics they seem to operate according to the same primordial principle: non-differentiation or, in other words, death. That is to say, what is perceived as erotic in religion or, as pertains to this chapter more specifically, religious iconography suggests the concomitance of erotic and sacred activity. Viewed through the Bataillian lens of this investigation, both appear indicative of a deep-seated desire to be lost in what lies beyond limited being, to

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<sup>14</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, pp. 246-7, 259-60.

<sup>15</sup> See Thomas Minguy, “Erotic Exuberance: Bataille’s Notion of Eroticism” in *PhænEx*, Issue 12, 1 (2017), pp. 34-52.

<sup>16</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 7

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 55.

experience a divine/transgressive mode of communication in excess of discursive representation. In the case of mysticism for instance, God ceases to function as a concept and becomes instead the pure experience of rapture beyond rational explanation. However, whereas mysticism seeks the absence of objects in the experience of the divine One, eroticism seeks the absence of difference through fusion or the surpassing of form. Or, as Thomas Minguy writes, “[m]ysticism finds sense in the night of reason, where eroticism experiences the absurdity of chance.”<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, it is not my intention to argue that the two are one in the same, rather that they are alternative modes of expression of the same primordial tendency: the paradoxical desire for dissolution which, by my understanding, falls under the impossible articulation of the death drive.

We might therefore expand our impression of religious thinking to assimilate *as religious* the experiences, embodied or aesthetic, which entail “the overcoming of the representation of selfhood upon which all acts of perceiving are mistakenly predicated.”<sup>19</sup> The experience of the sacred, then, might be vaguely traced as a rare harmony with the non-being that is always-already a part of being – the desire for death that resides in us like a trace and is partially eased in formless reflections. If, as all of this circuitous reasoning would suggest, religious contemplation as outlet for the death drive relies on a proximity to disquieting forms, then we have cause to revisit the field of religion from a unique perspective, focusing on its abject, excessive, and transgressive elements as the wellsprings of religious potential, and identifying the culmination of religion in the ecstatic loss of self, which in addition to being the decisive condition of eroticism, is both

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<sup>18</sup> Minguy (2017), p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> S. Romi Mukherjee, “Apophysis in Representation: Georges Bataille and the Aesthetics of the Negative” in *Durkheim, the Durkheimians, and the Arts*, Ed. Alexander Tristan Riley, William Watts Miller, and W.S.F. Pickering, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), pp. 223-257; p. 243. Mukherjee offers a thorough exposition of Bataille’s aphopathic aesthetic, considering the theoretical performativity of base matter, “blind spots,” sacrifice, and formlessness as ethico-aesthetic affirmations of the ineffable.

a retreat from religion and its most radical configuration.

#### AESTHETICS OF UNCERTAINTY

Freud opens his 1919 paper on “The Uncanny” with the following lines: “[i]t is rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics, even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty, but the theory of the qualities of feeling.”<sup>20</sup> I include this stipulation here because it encapsulates to some extent the aim of this chapter, which intends less to analyze what is seen and more so what is effected by the seeing – a certain feeling that is only uneasily contained by the image, *an ambiguity or ambivalence that is perhaps the very resistance to containment*. Much like Freud in his elaboration of the *unheimlich*, what motivates this speculative venture into aesthetics is something “remote,” something otherwise “neglected,” that which does not evoke positive sense-impressions but rather feelings of repulsion and distress.

These aesthetic concerns can be traced to the 18<sup>th</sup> century elaborations of the sublime by Edmund Burke (1756) and Immanuel Kant (1790), both of whom, despite their disagreement as to the source of the pleasure derived from the sublime, discern therein a *crisis*. For Kant, the sublime is to be found in an experience of “boundlessness” that surpasses the faculties of the mind, suggesting that the sublime is not something that we might attribute to the external world but rather to the manner in which it overwhelms reason and opens up other forms of contemplation.<sup>21</sup> Burke, however, emphasizes the psychosomatic response to the sublime over its transcendental prospectives, identifying

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<sup>20</sup> Freud (1919b), “The Uncanny,” *SE XVII*, pp. 217-256; p. 219.

<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique on the Power of Judgement*, Ed. Paul Guyer, Trans. Eric Matthews, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); See also Kant’s 1764 essay *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Trans. John Turner Goldthwait, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

the aesthetic pleasure associated with the sublime in an overpowering and bewildering coupling of fear and attraction that brings the individual to a realization of his limitations.

He writes:

astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, anticipates our reasonings and hurries us on by an irresistible force.<sup>22</sup>

This is of course a cursory summary of a field of philosophical inquiry nearly as vast as the sublime itself and which extends well beyond the psychoanalytic frame of this project. The emphasis here is more so on what certain aesthetic maneuvers suggest about subjectivity and its limits rather than aesthetics *per se*.<sup>23</sup> In that regard, the relevance of Burke's Romanticism and Kantian Idealism lies in the manner that elements of the two converge in the Freudian uncanny, where they are compounded by the impression that perhaps what renders the sublime likewise terrible and unthinkable is, in fact, an obscurity which always-already resides *within* the subject. Freud's venture into the aesthetics of the unsettling renders the ambivalent feelings of awe and dread not as a response to something foreign, but as indicators of a confrontation with the externalized forms (or lack thereof) in which unconscious fears and desires take shape.

As an aesthetic category, the uncanny refers to that which is frightening, which arouses dread or horror, and yet feels strangely familiar. Borrowing from Schelling, Freud

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<sup>22</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Ed. J. T. Bouton, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> For more on the confluence of these discourses, see: Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), and James Kirwan, *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics*, (New York: Routledge, 2005).

defines the uncanny as “everything that ought to have remained... secret and hidden but has come to light.”<sup>24</sup> And referencing Ernst Jentsch, he associates the feeling of uncanniness with a situation of “intellectual uncertainty.”<sup>25</sup> But for Freud such a definition is incomplete as it does not evoke the disquieting or sinister quality of the uncanny as that which feels unfamiliar without necessarily being new or unknown. Consequently, Freud locates the main source for an experience of the uncanny in the return to a familiar that has been repressed. The uncanny then is not simply that which causes fright or alarm, but that which does so on the condition that is not agreeable with the narcissistic fantasy: it is the return of that which must not or cannot be identified with or incorporated.

The repressed remainder of language – and subjectivity as its counterpart – returns in the guise of a reminder: something has been overwritten; something eerie but intimate has been concealed. If there is then as Jentsch suggests, a feeling of uncertainty associated with the uncanny, it is not clarified by Freud’s analysis but deepened or doubled. That is, said uncertainty relates not to the difficulty of positioning that which is designated as uncanny, but rather to a precariousness that is always-already internal. As such, the uncanny signals a *primal repression*. Unlike the irreconcilability of an individually-specific wish or desire, the material of the primal repression is that which is not compatible with subjectivity itself: it is the very first repression of the unrepresentable that allows the “I” to come into its individuated being as such, the all that must be buried alive to give desire its borrowed priority. Hence the primal dread epitomized by the Sand-Man: the tearing out of the eyes, those sense organs which privilege presence over absence and thus establish the primacy of the phallus. What is feared then: the loss of the eyes as

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<sup>24</sup> Freud (1919b), “The Uncanny,” *SE XVII*, pp. 217-256; p. 224.

<sup>25</sup> Ernst Jentsch (1906), “The Psychology of the Uncanny” quoted in Freud (1919b), *SEXVII*, p. 221.



a form of castration, or the loss of the “I” in the realization that the feared castration has already occurred?

Describing the uncanny as the aesthetic quality of the “fateful and inescapable,”<sup>26</sup> Freud’s paper makes several references to the repetition compulsion, to the dominance in the unconscious of an impulse to overrule the pleasure principle that “lend[s] to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character.”<sup>27</sup> The uncanny then does not necessarily signal dread at an external object, but rather at the inclination revealed by the paradoxical fascination or arousal which accompanies and likely exacerbates that dread, the return or upsurge of something “old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”<sup>28</sup> Given Freud’s formulation of death as the situation of non-existence that precedes life, what might be older-established than the original “absence” out of which life emerges? And, drawing from previous chapters that consider death as a structural impossibility, what could be more repressed than that which, structurally-speaking, cannot be thought without negating the thinking subject? Freud himself concedes, “many people experience the feeling in highest degree in relation to death.”<sup>29</sup>

But we have been considering these forces in terms of the dialectic of their operation, that is, in terms of the mutual bi-directionality of their functioning. Therefore, if death triggers an experience of the uncanny, then we might invert the formulation, positing the possibility of an experience “on the level of death” as evoked by a proximity to secondary “objects” associated with the primal repression. As discussed in Chapter 3, the persistent presence of death in life as absent and inaccessible origin, introduces into

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<sup>26</sup> Freud (1919b), “The Uncanny,” *SE XVII*, p. 237.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

the psychic economy an instability that in turn operates as the very motor of psychic life. We find a similarly difficult dynamic in “The Uncanny” as Freud traces out the linguistic usage of the term “uncanny” and its supposed antonym in form of the “homely” or “familiar”: so great is the ambivalence produced by the *unheimlich* that it eventually coincides with the *heimlich*. This is to some extent the same paradox that Freud touches upon in “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” in relation to the quantitative mechanics of pleasure and unpleasure. As mentioned in previous chapters, the speculations on the death drive that eventually followed did not minimize this paradox. They did however *accommodate* for the paradoxical combination of affects, suggesting a “beyond” where pleasure coincides with unpleasure such that the two become indistinguishable, indeed inseparable. Still, as the visceral response to the uncanny suggests, the coincidence of opposing affects does not collapse the conflict but rather sustains it through violent alternations and re-doublings: ontological uncertainty is not a position in and of itself, rather that which communicates a certain *impossibility of positioning* as a situation of intense restlessness, of trembling.

As Freud explains, closely related to the uncanny are concerns regarding the difficulty in distinguishing animate from inanimate, real from imagined, original from copy, repetition, or double: “[a] particularly favorable condition for awakening uncanny feelings is created when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one.”<sup>30</sup> This feared but familiar double might be another person or object (e.g. a doppelganger, a life-like doll, etc.) but, given the line of reasoning expounded thus far, perhaps it is none other than the individual himself – the stabilizing “I” that we accept and invest in as our self though one is not reducible to the other. In what reads like the situation of alienation that results from

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p. 233.

the precipitation of the “I” according to Lacan’s theory of the mirror-stage: “...the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which himself is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own.”<sup>31</sup> And as if foreshadowing Lacan’s tripartite schema, Freud explains that the uncanny is experienced when the distinction between real and imaginary has been effaced, *when a symbol becomes the thing it symbolizes or when something regarded as imaginary appears in its reality.*<sup>32</sup>

The representation of the self under the sign of the “I” – like representation in general – supposedly serves as a triumph both over material decomposition and symbolic fragmentation: the individual dies (or is already dead), but the “I” is the immortalization of the individual as an *idea*. The locating of oneself in an external counterpoint then represents a situation of doubling intended as a “preservation against extinction,”<sup>33</sup> perhaps even as a defense against the psychic current that propels us in that direction. However, the double is the figure that results from a split: something which was once whole has been divided.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the externalized representation that initially serves to prop up one’s narcissism, to assure one’s “immortality,” becomes the uncanny reminder of a foundational uncertainty. If, as Ernest Becker suggests, we construct a symbolic world of meaning to counteract the physical reality of death,<sup>35</sup> then the uncanny is a *memento mori*, not necessarily as a reminder of the inevitability of death itself but of its memorialization in the psyche as the ever-deferred wish or aim: the primordially

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, p. 234.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p. 244.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p. 235.

<sup>34</sup> See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 25-32, 227-230. Here Bronfen considers the literary and artistic trope of the dead woman in its doubleness, indicative of a violence of representation but also betraying the irrevocability of death in the imagination. The representation of the dead feminine, she argues, is a gesture of substitution that represses the inarticulable (i.e. death and femininity) by transforming it into image, but simultaneously the means through which that repressed returns to be “enjoyed” in its disguised articulation.

<sup>35</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

repressed desire to “[regress] to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people.”<sup>36</sup>

What is the source of anxiety then: the uncanniness of death, which is frightening but strangely familiar, or our own uncanniness as revealed by our desire for death? In eroticism, desire – a function of life as a continued situation of lack – converges with its own extinction in the fullness of death, and this categorical collapse confronts the viewer with the questions he must deny or disavow if he is to maintain any sense of stable identity. As a condition of fullness, of non-differentiation, death forces us to consider if we have not been our own double all along, closer to non-existence than we are willing to accept but “animated” by language or subjectivity. If we consider this in relation to the death drive, the thought is one as provocative as it is paralyzing. “Horror,” Bataille writes, “is the response to something incompatible with the tranquil unity of the self, it challenges the fragile ordering of a composite existence, decomposes me.”<sup>37</sup> For Bataille, this decomposition, this vertiginous declivity into non-self and non-form defines the spiritual, the mystical, suggesting that on the path towards death, between the Lacanian subject and Bataille’s notion of continuity, lies an experience of de-differentiation. If we are obliged to position the Kristevan abject, it might be on either or both sides of this same boundary.

The object, Kristeva explains, allows a subject to coordinate his or her desires in the constitutive lack of the symbolic order, thus perpetuating meaning and intersubjective relations. The abject however, is that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>38</sup> But, as Rina Arya points out, the term loses much of its force when it is used as a catch-

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<sup>36</sup> Freud (1919b), “The Uncanny,” *SE XVII*, p. 236.

<sup>37</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

all for all things disagreeable. As in transgression, what is at stake in abjection is not a peculiar quality of the filthy, gruesome, or disgusting that we might interpellate or classify according to some abject taxonomy, but a total feeling of ambiguity: a disarray of inside and outside or the confusion of “I” and “other” epitomized by the maternal body that Kristeva designates as the object of abject *par excellence*.<sup>39</sup>

We see here how the concept intersects with death as a pre-Oedipal, pre-symbolic situation of non-differentiation as well as with the sacred as a mode of activity in pursuit of the ‘oceanic.’ As the absence or rather *failure* of certain borders or boundaries, the interval between the confrontation with the abject and its rejection or disavowal is essentially an experience of the unassimilable. That is, it signals an experience of mutual contingency – “in-between, ambiguous, composite” – that is incompatible with subjectivity as the insistence on ontological integrity. In that this experience precedes and exceeds individuated modes of knowing, its “signified” is only accessible to consciousness as the experience of its own limits or gaps.

In this sense, the abject might be likened to the Freudian uncanny. Lechte, for instance, offers a definition that draws from Freud’s concept as well as the Batallian notion of *non-savoir*, describing the abject as “what one would prefer not to know about and which, in a sense, one cannot ‘know’ to the extent that knowledge privileges the object.”<sup>40</sup> However Kristeva specifies that her term implies a greater degree of violence or convulsiveness, at least in comparison to the uncanny. She intervenes as follows, describing the abject as:

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, pp. 101-2. The association between the maternal and the semiotic is a recurring theme throughout Kristeva’s work. Curiously, Freud (1919b) also associates the “maternal” with the uncanny on the basis of castration anxiety, suggesting that fears/fantasies of being buried alive are transformations of another “lascivious” fantasy– that of returning to intra-uterine existence, (*SE XVII*, p. 244).

<sup>40</sup> John Lechte, “Abjection, art and bare life” in *Abject Visions*, Ed. Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 14-29; p. 15.

a vision that resists any representation if the latter is to coincide with the presumed identity of what is to be represented. The vision of the abject is, by definition, the sign of an impossible object, a boundary and a limit. A fantasy, if you wish, but one that [...] prevents images from crystallizing as images of desire and/or nightmare and causes them to break out into sensation (suffering) and denial (horror)...<sup>41</sup>

That is to say that it is not abject matter *as such* that evokes horror but rather the difficulty it poses to systemic thought and its stabilization of difference through the crystallization of forms. The “narcissistic crisis”<sup>42</sup> presented by the abject, then, appears rooted in the experience of non-logical difference that escapes symbolization, synthesis, or objectification in discourse. And yet, we are continually drawn to the abject as if by compulsion. Kristeva accounts for this tendency by arguing that in the confrontation with abject lies the excessive pleasure of *jouissance*. “*Jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such,” she writes. “One does not know it, one does not desire it, one *joys* in it. Violently and painfully.”<sup>43</sup> Incidentally, these are also features of *mystical* experience, hence Kristeva’s assessment that “[t]he mystic’s familiarity with abjection is a fount of infinite *jouissance*.”<sup>44</sup>

We can also liken the uncanny/abject to the sacred whose “contradictory morphology” also holds together antithetical meanings: high and low, holy and cursed, consecrated and condemned.<sup>45</sup> Bataille’s notion of base materialism helps to make sense of the relation between these two concepts. Developed in the late 20s and early 30s, this

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<sup>41</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 154.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p.14.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p. 127.

<sup>45</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Trans. Willard Trask, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959). Of the distinction between sacred and profane, Eliade writes, “[t]he threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate” (p. 25). See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

notion reflects what Benjamin Noys describes as “the systematic exploration of the non-systematic”<sup>46</sup> through an emphasis on excluded modalities that demonstrate the vector of influence of the lowest of forms. According to the contradictory logic of base materialism, whatever is elevated or ideal is actually dependent on base matter – specifically its exclusion – and because of this dependence the purity of the ideal is contaminated. As Bataille writes in “The Big Toe,” man can only claim “a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things... on the pretext that he has [a] foot in the mud.”<sup>47</sup> But what is effected here is not an inversion or a privileging of “low” over “high.” Rather, as Noys suggests, this manner of thinking undercuts altogether the opposition of high and low by foregrounding the instability of a radical contingency which refuses to settle in thought. While this is similar to Kristeva’s boundary-disturbing formulation of abjection, Bataille’s peculiar materialism insists that base or transgressive elements do more than disrupt or disgust: they *disappear*. As that which escapes capture by knowledge, base materialism gestures towards the active flux of instability that ruins the closure of any discourse; it is the hinge that links and disrupts philosophical oppositions, and the hinge between changing states that sullies in advance the purity of those states.<sup>48</sup> To juxtapose this interpretation with the terminology of previous chapters, base matter challenges dialectical synthesis through the introduction of a “third term” which is the embodiment of a contradiction, much like death whenever we attempt to think it.

As with the “opposition” between the *heimlich* and *unheimlich* that eventually coincide with one another, Bataille’s base materialism suggests a similar relation between the “lowest” modalities of organic life and the “highest” transcendent forms. Thus, like the uncanny and the abject, Bataille’s base materialism arouses the intolerable

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<sup>46</sup> Noys (2000), p. 500.

<sup>47</sup> Bataille, “The Big Toe” in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 20-23; p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> Noys (2000), pp. 508-9.

contradictions that define the sacred. But what does the overlap of these aesthetic categories suggest? It is difficult, impossible even, to say given that the prevailing features of this aesthetic domain are ambiguity and ambivalence, but perhaps the violent alternations evoked by these unstable concepts and their referents are the only way to signal that which is barely presentable, which is the very impossibility of its appearing or being thought yet nevertheless is *there*.

#### ARROWS OF DESIRE

For the remainder of this chapter, I propose we consider more closely visual artifacts that attempt to convey the “impossible” through the reconfiguration of the body in excessive or abject states. Drawing from the categories and strategies elaborated above, I would like to view representations of the body in its convulsiveness, baseness, or “formlessness” as indicative of the r/Realism of a fragile subjectivity prone to breakdown or dissolution. I begin by considering the complexity of mystical *jouissance* conveyed as bodily pleasure in ambivalently eroticized images and the exorbitant expressiveness of the baroque.

As discussed, the mystical experience appears to amplify the reciprocity of “wholeness” and insufficiency. Lacan’s *Seminar XX: Encore* elaborates the closeness of these terms in terms of sexual difference, where despite claiming to loosen the “masculine” and “feminine” positions from gendered expectations and expressions, he too gets caught in essentialism. This seminar reflects Lacan’s attempt at illuminating the “dark continent” of feminine sexuality, calling for an understanding of femininity that is not conditioned by phallic signification. Insofar as femininity is confined to this logic – and that little, if anything, can be said outside of this logic – Lacan makes the infamous claim that “the Woman does not exist”:

woman [*la femme*] can only be written with the [*la*] crossed through. There is no such thing as woman [*la femme*] since of her essence – I’ve already



risked the term, so why should I think twice about it? – of her essence she is not all [*pas tout*].<sup>49</sup>

There is much to take issue with here – more than can be accommodated in these few pages – and indeed many have already done so.<sup>50</sup> Still, given portions dedicated specifically to mysticism and (feminine) *jouissance*, specifically “God and the Jouissance of Woman” and “A Love Letter,” it would be neglectful to omit in this context. In fact, here we find Lacan most adjacent to Bataille: Bataille’s mystico-erotic cosmology, though unmentioned by Lacan, appears refigured in terms of the doubleness of language and the vicissitudes of signification as suggested by the feminine position and the body.

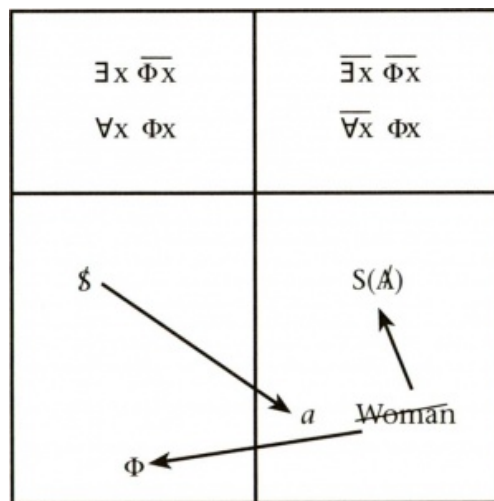


Figure 1. Lacanian diagram of sexual difference. Here  $\$$  corresponds to the (barred) subject,  $\bar{A}$  to the (big) Other,  $a$  to the *object a*, and  $\phi$  to the phallus.

<sup>49</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore, 1972-1973. On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, Trans. Bruce Fink, Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Toril Moi, Nancy Chodorow, and Jessica Benjamin are but a few to have posed interventions to Lacan’s formulation of sexual difference, but I hesitate to enter into these debates. First, it falls beyond the scope of this project, or rather, would correspond to another project altogether, in which the cultural and symbolic construction of sexual difference could be interrogated more closely. I am unable to do justice to these discourses here. Second, I have my own reservations about advancing any one position as they are deeply embedded in one another and their proliferation appears to me emblematic of the ontological crisis that lies “beyond the phallus.” I myself am disinclined towards Lacan’s reading. However, I am reminded of Juliet Mitchell’s appraisal: “psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one” (Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p. xiii).

Lacan's graph of sexuation outlines the asymmetry of phallic logic across an abyss of non-relation. In that phallic logic "reconciles" this asymmetry through fantasy and the workings of partial drives, it renders a (non-existent) sexual relation whereby woman supports the phallic fantasy through femininity as masquerade. Femininity thus goes from being a riddle to an impasse.<sup>51</sup> According to Lacan, this is a "privileged" vantage point from which to perceive the emptiness of the phallus. Still, as Luce Irigaray points out, it is hardly enviable.

Whereas the feminine side of the graph operates according to the logic of "not-all" [*pas-tout*], the masculine side claims access to the whole through the function of exception – the big Other or primal father who is not subject to castration. On the basis of this distinction, Lacan differentiates between a phallic *jouissance* and 'Other' *jouissance*, the former corresponding to the dissatisfaction, frustration, or failure of attaining the object of desire, and the latter to a beyond-phallic experience akin to mysticism. Situating this 'Other' *jouissance* on the feminine side of the graph, Lacan formulates mysticism as a mode of feminine *jouissance* exemplified, in his view, by Saint Teresa of Avila though other religious figures – Saint John of the Cross and Saint Sebastian, for instance – might well fall into this category. We will come back to the subject of mysticism shortly, specifically the manner in which mystical *non-savior* evades narrative (or theoretical) closure. But, since Lacan's interpretation of mystical *jouissance* is so closely bound with his elaboration of femininity, let us return for a moment to the graph itself, specifically, the manner in which the difference between the masculine and feminine positions is proposed via misalignments to a transcendental but empty signifier – the phallus. "As the transcendental signifier," Hollywood explains, "the phallus takes

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<sup>51</sup> See Luce Irigaray, "Blind spot of an old dream of symmetry" in *Speculum Of the other woman*, Trans. Gillian Gill, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 11-112.

the place of God or truth, that which ensures that the reality signified by language and language itself coincide.”<sup>52</sup> However, the result is a circular dependency – as indicated by the wayward arrows of graph – whereby the phallus does not actually define the subject but lends itself to a signifying chain that then *retroactively* gives “significance” to the lacking (i.e. speaking) subject. Configured according to this logic of misrecognition, sexual difference then operates through the perpetuation of its inconsistencies.

We see in the graph that the masculine subject (\$) relates only to the *objet a* – not woman herself – and this is emblematic of the lack of (sexual) relationship: masculinity asserts itself on the basis of the fantasied acquisition or possession of an impossible object (i.e. the “object” capable of restoring the lost phallus), and the relation to woman is conditioned by the view of her as one such object. In other words, a barred/castrated subject (\$) relates to the phallus which he does not possess by reducing “the woman” to a phantasmatic function that supports the claim to phallic mastery and totality. Or, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan writes, “woman is man’s symptom of a refusal to believe he is not whole”<sup>53</sup> nor capable of relating to the phallus as one’s own. Furthermore, no object can compensate for this deficiency and so the subject’s desire (i.e. to “be all” or “be whole”) can never be fulfilled.<sup>54</sup>

The subject designated “man,” caught up in the fantasy of totality conferred by the would-be phallus, confuses *objet a* with the Other (A) as the unknowable locus and source of signification. The subject designated “woman,” on the other hand, is barred and

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<sup>52</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 154.

<sup>53</sup> Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, “Introduction” in *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, Ed. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher, (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1-17; p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> As considered in Chapter 2, the speaking subject is patronized both by a fantasy of fullness and the threat of a loss that has always already occurred. And as Hollywood notes: “[t]ogether this fantasy and threat give rise to the subject’s ceaseless desire for the *objet a* through which it believes that it can fill in the gap in its being” (p. 158).” This “original lost object” is what the subject *believes* it has lost, that which would complete the subject if such a unity could be attained. However, this perpetual lacking establishes the mobility of desire and its endless deferral through signification, and thus is the very condition on which speaking itself rests.

dispossessed of the phallus; she is partial and always lacking from the standpoint of an imaginary male totality. However, recognizing that the *objet a* is merely a metonymic fantasy of the desire for unification or totality, this subject has access to the kernel truth of its being: regardless of claims to the phallus, it is always already partial and divested of the object of desire. Thus, woman marks the gravitational center of psychoanalytic discourse and of the phallus itself as “the signifier for which there is no signified, and which, in relation to meaning, symbolizes its failing.”<sup>55</sup>

Woman in this scheme is figured as the remainder of the phallic economy, her sexuality as the *encore* that exceeds the phallic term as an organizing principle. Whereas the masculine subject is supported and duplicated in the phallic economy, “woman” is characterized by an internal doubleness: the ability to relate to the phallus as well as to that which is “beyond the phallus” and cannot be accommodated within the phallic economy. This ‘supplementary’ *jouissance* reveals that economy to be a restricted one; the very principle that maintains the phallic economy on the basis of exclusion operates as a threat by calling attention to its inadequacy. Were it possible to stabilize this ‘supplementary’ *jouissance* in the economy, it would cease to be the “beyond-phallic” *jouissance* that it is. Indeed, according to Lacan, this ‘feminine’ *jouissance* cannot be located and, consequently, cannot be constrained in (analytic) discourse: women experience it, but “know nothing about it.”<sup>56</sup>

On the grounds of feminine lack, he aims to expose the fundamental *méconnaissance* of the masculine position. That is, if the Freudian subject can never be anything other than a mystery to itself, then the woman who “does not know,” in whom “there is always something [...] which escapes discourse,”<sup>57</sup> appears to be in a unique

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<sup>55</sup> Lacan, *Encore*, p. 74.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, p. 34.

position in regard to an understanding of subjectivity. However, as Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose observe, his formulation lapses into an essentialist mystification of woman that is not unlike the very fantasy he is trying to expose.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of an ecstatic pleasure that comes from the refusal of the phallus in favor of a relation with the “not all” calls to mind Bataille’s self-defeating *non-savior* and the continuity he considers is realized in the encounter with one’s own contingency. As Hollywood explains, “[o]n the one hand, [Lacan] upholds a position of male psychoanalytic mastery, reinscribing the phallic father who is supposed to know against the claims of femininity; yet at the same time, this position of mastery claims its own emptiness, a self-subversion that Lacan reads in terms of femininity.”<sup>59</sup>



Figure 2. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-1652), Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

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<sup>58</sup> See Juliet Mitchell’s “Introduction – I” and Jacqueline Rose’s “Introduction – II” in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, Trans. Jacqueline Rose, Ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), pp. 6-9, 31-37.

<sup>59</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p.160.

As an example of this less than/more than subject who both lacks yet exists in excess of any lack, Lacan considers Saint Teresa of Avila, further supporting the case for an associative link between the mystical experience and the instability underlying the psychoanalytic edifice. Hollywood considers the alliance between these discourses in detail, noting that “[t]he issue of the scientific status of psychoanalysis leads Lacan to Christianity and to the baroque (a return to the sources of Christianity, he says), for Christianity, like psychoanalysis, deals with that which cannot be fully known.”<sup>60</sup> Both gravitate around the impossible desire of the subject, striving for an absolute other through which it might be fulfilled only to realize that “fulfillment” comes through a recognition/collapse of the subject’s own lack and the unattainability of this other within the logic of subjectivity. In other words, the ability to set totality as a goal comes at the cost of castration and, consequently, “satisfaction” takes the form of relinquishing the goal itself. Apophatic and paradoxical, this thinking bears the characteristics of what Certeau calls the mystic’s *modus loquendi*.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Lacan likens his own *Ecrits* to such “mystical ejaculations,” considering them “of the same order” – “in sum the best thing you can read.”<sup>62</sup>

We see in *The Triumph of Religion* to what extent Lacan’s articulation of religious sentiment draws from an upbringing permeated with Catholicism; he himself acknowledges that he is “the product of priests.” However, unlike Freud’s “justified denial” of religious experience, which nevertheless leans on the Judeo-Christian mentality he eschews,<sup>63</sup> Lacan elevates the Catholic imagination and its ability to saturate

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, p. 162.

<sup>61</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic fable, Vol. 1*, Trans. Michael B. Smith, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp.113-56. Certeau also includes a brief section on the affinities between psychoanalysis and mystic speech, both of which he considers as disruptive to hierarchies of knowledge (p. 6-9).

<sup>62</sup> Lacan, *Encore*, p. 71.

<sup>63</sup> Lacan, *The Triumph of Religion*, Trans. Bruce Fink, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 26.

the unbearable Real with meaning. “The real we have thus far,” he writes, “is nothing compared to what we cannot even imagine, precisely because the defining characteristic of the real is that one cannot imagine it.”<sup>64</sup> But whereas psychoanalysis, he claims, is itself a symptom of the dissatisfaction that results from this situation, “religion is invincible.”<sup>65</sup> Why? Because it does not seek to get “get to the bottom of [the Real]”<sup>66</sup> but to fill this insistent, elusive aporia with significance. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan plays both sides with characteristic rhetorical arrogance, extolling the unreadability of a “feminine” mysticism while expounding its anomalous eloquence. Viewing Saint Teresa’s *jouissance* as something of a voyeur, of Bernini’s baroque sculpture of her moment of ecstasy (See *Figure 2*) he writes:

There is a *jouissance* proper to her, to this “her” which does not exist and which signifies nothing. There is a *jouissance* proper to her and of which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences it – that much she does know. She knows it of course when it happens. It does not happen to all of them.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, “she” experiences a pleasure but is unable to either understand or articulate this pleasure. Constructed entirely in the negative terms of non-existence and non-signification, “she” is merely a channel for a *jouissance* that remains a mystery: “you only have to go and look at Bernini’s statue of Saint Teresa in Rome to understand immediately that she’s coming [*jouit*], there is no doubt about it. And what is her *jouissance*, her coming from? It is clear that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it.”<sup>68</sup> Unlike “her” and “them,” Lacan assumes the position of the one who knows, the \$ from whom something is being withheld and yet purports to know more, even if all

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, p. 76.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, p. 78.

<sup>67</sup> Lacan, *Encore*, p. 145.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, p. 70.

he knows is that “she” doesn’t.

In her autobiographical writings, Saint Teresa, the unknowing subject, describes rather viscerally the *jouissance* eulogized by Bernini in marble and by Lacan in text:

I saw an angel close by me, on my left side, in bodily form. [...] I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. *The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.* The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. *The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one.*<sup>69</sup>

We do not need to dig too deep in either the image or text to recognize the convulsions by which the mystic body becomes interpreted as a site of pleasure. The experience does of course resemble sexual agitation, but according to Bataille, the reduction of mysticism to “a neurotic state of exaltation” reflects a “superficial conclusion.”<sup>70</sup> Rather, “the comparison implicit in the language of the mystics between the experience of divine love and that of sexuality, emphasizes the aptness of sexual union to symbolize a higher union.”<sup>71</sup> Elaborating this subtlety, Bataille maintains that the connection between ‘mystical’ and ‘sexual’ corresponds to “the gulfs of terrifying darkness that belong equally to both domains”<sup>72</sup> – the act of *dying to oneself* whose after-taste is not unlike that of *le petit mort*.<sup>73</sup> In Lacan, however, this mystical ecstasy is signified as a case of

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<sup>69</sup> The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus of The Order of Our Lady of Carmel (c. 1565), Trans. David Lewis (1904), chapter xxix, 16-17; my emphasis.

<sup>70</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 226. Bataille devotes an entire chapter to mysticism and sensuality, arguing that “nothing is further from [his] thought than a sexual interpretation of the mystic life such as Marie Bonaparte and James Leuba have insisted on,” (p. 224) as such a view reduces mystical experience to “nothing but transposed sexuality and hence neurotic behavior” (p. 225).

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*, p. 223.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*, p. 222.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*, p. 227-234.



Other/feminine/supplementary *jouissance* that emerges in and through the recognition of the emptiness of claims to the phallus: forgoing the masculine position and its claims to an always (at least in part) illusory power in favor of the “not all” of femininity marks an encounter with the Real.<sup>74</sup> But what are we to make of the proliferation of signifiers around this *jouissance*? Is this a conflation of excess, Woman, and the Other or a confusion endemic to any attempt at beyond-phallic signification?

Elizabeth Roudinesco suggests that Lacan’s notion of the Real, particularly in this late seminar, is indebted to Bataille and the notion of heterogeneity.<sup>75</sup> Lacan, she argues, disarticulates heterogeneity from Bataille’s “general economy” and places it within psychoanalytic theory as the Real. Unfathomable, undifferentiated, and irreducible this becomes the decontextualized aim of analytic discourse, that which is inaccessible to thought because it fragments the subject and, simultaneously, reveals subjectivity as provisional on fragmentation.<sup>76</sup> Lacan, like Bataille, associates this ineffability to mystical ecstasy. However, despite their personal proximity,<sup>77</sup> in this context Lacan makes no explicit reference to the general economy or inner experience, both concepts elaborated by Bataille over the course of the 1940s.

Despite Lacan’s passing mentions of “transgressive enjoyment” and Bataille’s more experimental works,<sup>78</sup> Bataille is mentioned in the context of a “mystical experience” only

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<sup>74</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 151.

<sup>75</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco, “Bataille entre freud et lacan” in *Georges Bataille après tout*, Ed. Denis Hollier, (Paris: Belin, 1995), pp. 191-212.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> As both Roudinesco (1995) and Surya (2002) recount, in 1941 Lacan married Bataille’s former wife, Sylvia Bataille, and later adopted their daughter Laurence. Roudinesco in particular reads Lacan’s emphasis on the paternal function (and especially the Name-of-the-Father) as a reaction to these triangulated relationship(s). While this is questionably psycho-biographical, it does render Bataille’s conspicuous absence in Lacan’s texts even more suggestive.

<sup>78</sup> At the end of *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan mentions Bataille’s critical reading of Sade in context of praise of Blanchot. Lacan also makes reference to *The Impossible* in ‘Identification’ (*Seminar IX*) and alludes to *Story of the Eye* in his discussion of the relationship between the *objet a* and the scopie field in ‘The sinthome’ (*Seminar XIII*).

in a footnote to the 1955 paper “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis.” Here, Lacan revisits Freud’s analysis of Daniel Schreber, a “case study” of psychosis – the threshold of psychoanalysis – as conducted on the basis of Schreber’s memoirs.<sup>79</sup> Freud interprets Schreber’s delusion – namely that his “unmanning” was necessary in order that he may copulate with God and thus redeem the entire world – as a result of repressed homosexual desire. Lacan, returning to Freud, argues that it must be the failure of the paternal metaphor (i.e. the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father) that gives psychosis its structure. Elaborating psychosis as indicative of a particular relationship to the signifier, Lacan writes “nowhere is the symptom more clearly articulated in the structure itself, assuming one know how to read it.”<sup>80</sup> The communication between Schreber and his divine interlocutor, he continues, appears to occur through “autonomous” messages whereby “the signifier itself (and not what it signifies) is the object of communication.”<sup>81</sup>

Lacan concludes this paper with the association of Schreber’s psychotic episodes with “inner experience”<sup>82</sup> and the insight that “God is a whore,” clarifying in the following note: “The inner experience I am speaking of here is a reference to Georges Bataille’s work. In *Madame Edwarda*, he describes the odd extremity of this experience.”<sup>83</sup> To contextualize, Bataille’s story begins in a brothel, with Madame Edwarda revealing “the old rag and ruin”<sup>84</sup> as she declares herself to be GOD – ostensibly supporting Lacan’s case for the overlapping of mystical and feminine *jouissance*. Later, when she and the arguably

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<sup>79</sup> Freud (1911a), “Psycho-analytic notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia” in *SE XII*, pp. 9-84. Freud’s analysis is based on Daniel Schreber’s own account of his mental collapse as recounted in *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, originally published in 1903.

<sup>80</sup> Lacan, “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” in *Ecrits*, pp. 531-584; p.537.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, p. 538.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*, 582-3.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*, p. 584, n. 36.

<sup>84</sup> Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, p. 150.

autobiographical narrator take to the streets, he perceives in her heightening sexual abandon something at once lifeless and convulsive, “distressing as an emptiness” in which meaning is both absent and overabundant: “I realized that she wasn’t frolicking, wasn’t joking, [...] that She had not lied, that She was GOD.”<sup>85</sup> This apophatic realization paired with the proximity to such a “foreign existence”<sup>86</sup> casts him out of himself in an experience of feverish vertigo, and yet at the same time fills him “with an exhausting impression of bearing witness to a miracle.”<sup>87</sup> Her rapture reverberates in him as a *crisis* beyond legibility.<sup>88</sup>

Lacan compares the revelation of *Madame Edwarda* with Bataille’s inner experience and stipulates that both are identical to Schreber’s psychotic break. According to Andrew Ryder, however, there are inconsistencies in the elision that Lacan effects here:

Schreber’s consideration of otherness is a hollow one that relies on identification with himself with a sun that sheds light on everything and cannot contemplate darkness; his language is an eternal linking of self with other. [...] Conversely, Bataille’s understanding of language insists on the reliance of life on death, knowledge on non-knowledge, identity on difference, and not through a monistic uniting of these opposites but rather an awareness of the gap between them and an openness to the outside.<sup>89</sup>

It is worth noting that, as a derealization of meaning that alters the relation to the external

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, 158. Bataille describes his experience of Edwarda’s abandonment as “the quick truth of an arrow: one knows it will pierce the heart, but death will ride in with it” (p. 155).

<sup>88</sup> This illegibility erupts in the increasing frenzy of the text, whereby the narrative account of this encounter is interspersed with anguished reflections, extended ellipses, and rhetorical pauses in which he stresses the impossibility and/or absurdity of recounting his experience. In a parenthetical aside he writes: “If you have to lay yourself bare, then you cannot play with words, trifle with slow-marching sentences. Should no one unclasp what I have said, I shall have written in vain. [...] This book has its secret, I may not disclose it” (p. 156). Maurice Blanchot uses similar devices in his works of “fiction,” particularly in *The Death Sentence*, a poignant novella which bears the traces (or scars) of a defining moment in Bataille’s life, namely the death of his lover Colette (“Laure”) Peignot.

<sup>89</sup> Andrew Ryder, “Inner Experience is not Psychosis: Bataille’s Ethics and Lacanian Subjectivity” in *Parrhesia*, No. 9 (2010): 94-108; p. 99.

world, psychosis was etiologically the closest to mystical ecstasy that had thus far appeared in psychoanalytic literature – both fundamentally *other* to diagnostic classification and thus beyond the possibility of psychoanalytic “cure.” Indeed, most ‘classical’ readings of mystical experience tended to view it as a regressive flee from reality, much like schizophrenic delusion.<sup>90</sup> And yet, for all of his skepticism about religiosity, Freud offers a compelling “conclusion” to the Schreber case: “[i]t remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I would like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber’s delusion than other people are as yet prepared to admit.”<sup>91</sup> Lacan, in a sense, echoes this consideration, insisting that “we must listen to the speaker, when what is at stake is a message that does not come from a subject beyond language, but from speech beyond the subject.”<sup>92</sup> Still, codified in the terms of oedipality and phallogocentrism, sensual experience with God (e.g. bliss, rapture, or Schreber’s “soul-voluptuousness”) is propped up by hermetic constructions of homosexuality and femininity.<sup>93</sup>

Whereas in Bataille’s writing, inner experience corresponds to an encounter with the contingency of being, in Lacan this ecstatic *jouissance* is formulated as a procedure unavailable to phallic logic. The latter helps to (re)contextualize the impossible sovereignty implied by the former as a situation of discursive collapse brought on by an awareness of the emptiness of the anchoring signifier. That is, Lacan’s emphasis on the doubleness of signification, allows us to describe mysticism as a particular relation to language itself. Hollywood summarizes that relation as follows: “mysticism seeks the transcendental signifier but discovers the paradoxical play of presence and absence

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<sup>90</sup> See W. W. Meissner’s “On Putting a Cloud in a Bottle: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Mysticism,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 74, 2 (2005): 507-559.

<sup>91</sup> Freud (1911a), *SE XII*, pp. 78-9.

<sup>92</sup> Lacan, “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” p. 574.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid*, p. 569.

through which signification is made possible.”<sup>94</sup> The result is a destabilization of signifying logic and subjective positioning, a situation which corresponds to Bataille’s notion of *non-savior* or, in Lacanian terms, an encounter with the Real. Lacan’s formulation, however, is complicated by the fact that he elides the mystical with the feminine on the basis of their unavailability to the masculine position. Despite the insistence against an anatomical reading, the phallus is not in the least arbitrary, and the understanding of “woman” as “not all” is at least metaphorically based on a supposed anatomical lack. This conflation creates a difficult and doubly-frustrating situation for the subject designated woman: as the always partial subject that “knows nothing,” the barred subject, blind to its own paucity, talks over her. But what is to suggest that “the woman” who “does not know” is unaware of her unknowing?

For example, Saint Teresa of Avila outlines in her autobiographical work the procedures through which she comes to a union with the divine. However, in her ecstatic state she is absorbed into God, losing perception of her body and her senses:

How what is called union takes place and what it is, I cannot tell. It is explained in mystical theology, but I cannot use the proper terms: I cannot understand what mind is, or how it differs from soul or spirit. They all seem one to me, though the soul sometimes leaps out of itself like a burning fire that has become one whole flame and increases with great focus. The flame leaps very high above the fire. Nevertheless it is not a different thing, but the same flame which is in the fire. You, sirs, with your learning will understand this. I cannot be more explicit.<sup>95</sup>

She speaks in flames, but we can discern ‘oceanic’ ebbings in the interplay of non-differentiation and particularity, the experience of *Oneness* erupting as an ontological

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<sup>94</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 149.

<sup>95</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*, Trans. J. M. Cohen, (London: Penguin Books, 1957), chp. 18, p. 2.

problem. Equally significant is the fact *she knows that she does not know*, indeed “cannot be more explicit” about it, consigning to her learned confessors the task of “coherently” articulating this experience. But as we saw in the previous chapter, unknowing itself is the feature of mysticism, both cause and effect of the self-shattering core of mystical *jouissance*. In that case, where are we to position Lacan’s claims?

Lacan is certainly aware of the self-subversion he is executing in *Encore*. Still, does he effectively displace his own knowing, or does he replicate the very positioning for which he critiques Jean-Martin Charcot?

Charcot and his circle attempted to reduce the mystical to questions of fucking. If you look carefully it’s not that at all. This *jouissance* that one experiences and about which one knows nothing, might this not be that which puts one on the path of ex-istence? And why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as supported by feminine *jouissance*?<sup>96</sup>

Two discourses seem to emerge around ecstasy in psychoanalysis: pathologization or the translation of mystical *non-savior* in terms of sexual difference. The two overlapped in Charcot’s clinical theater (See *Figure 3*), wherein the provoked bodily contortions and “delirious fits” of hysteric patients were likened to the expressions of religious ecstasy and possession and, in turn, interpreted as indicators that mystics and demoniacs had in fact been suffering from hysteria.<sup>97</sup> The result was a pictorial and highly eroticized representation of hysteria that doubled as “evidence” of the pathology behind ecstasy. Within Lacan’s notion of sexuation, this integration of hysteria, ecstasy, and illness seems indicative of the masculine fantasy, of the \$ that turns into an object of inquiry that which seems to evade understanding and indeed only exists on, in, and as that condition.

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<sup>96</sup> Lacan, *Encore*, p. 71.

<sup>97</sup> For more on the intersections of hysteria, religious experience, and dramatization in Charcot’s work at the Salpêtrière, see Cristina Mazzoni’s *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), and Asti Hustvedt’s *Medical Muses: Hysteria in 19<sup>th</sup> century Par*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).



Figure 3. André Brouillet, *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière* (1887), Descartes University, Paris.

In this vein, it is noteworthy that along with the depiction of Saint Teresa's ecstasy, Bernini grouped sculpted busts of his patrons, the eight Cornaro men, in the side walls of the chapel. Leaning on the mantels, they seem to be poised to witness, mirroring the scopical order of the Salpêtrière. Yet, most of the Cornaro busts are sculpted with their gaze looking elsewhere, either discussing with one another or reading. Only one of the busts is turned toward the sculpture of Saint Teresa, but by placing the sculpture in an edicule, Bernini has set her beyond their sight. The event of her vision occurs in a sphere of its own, removed from the eyes of the commissioning beholders. The chapel is thus converted into a theater for the vicissitudes of desire, the lack of (sexual) relationship. As is Lacan's seminar: in reading the woman, Bernini's Saint Teresa, as "a female orgasm constituted by the male gaze,"<sup>98</sup> Lacan reproduces this scene. So, as Méira Cook asks, where do we position ourselves in these texts: as subject or as viewer, as the woman having an experience of God or as the spectator having a fantasy of the woman's

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<sup>98</sup> Méira Cook, "The Missionary Position: A Reading of the Mystic Woman in Lacan's *Seminar XX*" in *Tessera*, Vol. 27 (1999): 82-89; p. 86.

experience?<sup>99</sup> Reading from the phallic side of the graph, we are made aware of an ‘Other’ *jouissance*, but is there an ‘Other’ way to read?

Beyond the plausibly sinthomatic attempts to force into signification and scientific discourse that which destabilizes both, the iconicity of ecstasy gestures towards the importance of the visual, specifically the representation of the body and its excesses: that which cannot be constrained to signification appears to be expressed through an aesthetic where the referent overflows the semblant. In mystic writing, “image-laden narrative,” interchangeable metaphors, and the impossibility of ontological positioning reflect in discourse what Cook describes as a body that “cannot be grasped except in effigy.”<sup>100</sup> This raptured body cannot itself be reduced to a figure of speech as neither subjective experience nor signification can carry the ontological burden of its experiences. The unbridled, labored, and overwrought aesthetic of the baroque, however, seems disposed to such excesses. Like the sculpted folds of Saint Teresa’s gown which overtake her figure, the immoderate materiality of the baroque threatens to supersede signification and mimesis as the objectives of representation.

Aligning all of this with Lacan’s seminar, Hollywood states: “Lacan’s allusions to mystical texts and the baroque, together with his account of the goal of psychoanalytic practice, suggest that in his work *jouissance* is elicited through the engulfing of representation by the materiality of the sign.”<sup>101</sup> The baroque, she continues, as “an art of excess in which that represented is always in danger of being overwhelmed by ornamentation,”<sup>102</sup> seems well-suited to this purpose:

When the materiality of the sign (whether pictorial or linguistic) takes precedence over representation and signification, meaning is effaced, and

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>101</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 166.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*



the subject, as a linguistic, meaning-communicating being, is shattered. The collapse of the distance between the sign and its referent, rather than effecting the unity or plenitude of being, effaces meaning, signification, and subjectivity.<sup>103</sup>

As Bersani argues in his elaboration of a death-driven aesthetic, the means of expressing that which is in excess of the normal range of sensation appears to be through a sensuality that exceeds its own representation.



*Figure 4.* Matti Preti, *Saint Sebastian* (1657), Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. In addition to his religious import as a Christian martyr, the languishing Saint Sebastian is also something of an erotic icon, arguably owing to the subtext of depictions such as these where baroque suffering is mixed with androgynous eroticism. See, for example, Derek Jarman’s 1976 film *Sebastiane*.

Lacan’s seminar, in elaborating feminine *jouissance* as both within and beyond language, also suggests that another disposition or approach is possible, one “not all”

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<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

governed by the phallus and characterized by the immediacy and intimacy of its relation to the Real. Insofar as the other two registers are concerned, this “return to the body” is expressed through representations that renounce their own claims to meaning and which, in turn, expose the phantasmatic quality of appeals to unity or totality.<sup>104</sup> But, by utilizing the language of castration and paternity to name this irreconcilable wound in subjectivity, Lacan continues to privilege the masculine position, thereby upholding the very fantasy he seeks to subvert. Positing “woman” as an emblem of some impossible “truth” or a means of refinding a lost plenitude, he reifies a situation of exclusion.

For Bataille, however, the excluded element is that which always threatens to wreck the restricted economy which casts it out. Furthermore, in Bataille’s view, subjective integrity is foreclosed from the outset, giving way to an ethical situation whereby communication occurs through a recognition of *mutual laceration* rather than a fetishization of the other’s lack. Like Lacan’s ‘Other’ *jouissance*, Bataille’s inner experience is poised between masochism and the traumatic encounter with a radical otherness, both signaling the contingency which quakes the core of an always already precarious subjectivity. In turn, the representation of *jouissance*, like the textuality of inner experience, corresponds to a recognition of the hole or laceration in being which gives way to the ceaseless repetition of desire around that emptiness. This anguished ecstasy is immortalized in Bernini’s marble, where the confluence upturned eyes, an open mouth, and a menacing arrow dissolve the restricted dichotomies of pleasure and pain, sacred and profane: the experience never culminates, the viewer never quite knows how to signify it, and the Real emerges again and again in this interminable doubling.

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<sup>104</sup> Lacan, *Encore*, p. 118.

## THE EPHEMERAL SKIN

Freud writes in *The Ego and the Id*, “[the ego] is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface.”<sup>105</sup> The speculative inquiry regarding the integration of psyche and soma, however, appears in embryonic form as early as *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895). Therein Freud proposes the *psychic apparatus* – a collection of neuronal networks organized and operating together to bind the otherwise diffuse intensities of sensory experience. Though Freud would abandon this particular model, the idea that integration on the mental plane (or the difficulty thereof) has physiological causes and consequences remains a defining feature of the distinct materialism of the symptom. Specifically though, I would like to focus on the primary experience of corporeality as a template for the various binding principles at work in the psyche.

Freud writes of a permeable *contact-barrier* that facilitates the regulation of energetic flux;<sup>106</sup> of a *protective shield* which protects the organism from excessive excitations;<sup>107</sup> and of a *psychical envelope* that sheathes the fluctuating sensations, functions, and structures that together comprise individual experience.<sup>108</sup> All gesture towards a complex, dynamic boundary between “outside” and “inside.” Didier Anzieu argues that these operations have a bodily equivalent in the perceptive surface that stretches over the body and sutures together the otherwise diffuse sensations of a proto-ego: the skin. This outermost membrane, he suggests, serves as “the backdrop against which psychical contents stand out as figures, or alternatively the containing envelope which makes it possible for the psychical apparatus to have contents.”<sup>109</sup> Through a close consideration of the functions of containment, protection, and inscription, he

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<sup>105</sup> Freud (1923), *The Ego and the Id*, SE XIX, p. 26

<sup>106</sup> Freud (1895), *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, SE I, pp. 283-411; p. 315.

<sup>107</sup> Freud (1920), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE XVIII, p. 18.

<sup>108</sup> Freud (1923), *Ego and the Id*, SE XIX, p. 15.

<sup>109</sup> Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, Trans. Chris Turner, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 84.

demonstrates how we might understand the skin as a surrogate for the ego. In this reading, the tactile envelope, in its “proper” functioning, connects a multitude of sensations and localized intensities which are in turn conceived of as operating on, in, or against a unified body. The result is a sense of subjective consolidation as well as spatiotemporal continuity – an entity held together by the sustained and bounded experience of its sensations. A defect in this function, however, gives rise to the anxiety of the body being fragmented or dismantled – an anarchic independence of the various sense organs.

If, following Freud’s elaboration, we consider ego feeling as the original narcissistic investment, then we are confronted with the fact that the self-preservative tendency has at first no object. We could turn here to Lacan and the (mis)identification with the spectral image encompassed in his theory of the mirror-stage, whereby the reflection serves an external counterpoint for the body image that can then be submitted to symbolization. But I wish to consider how the experience of skin itself operates as an intermediary between the nascent ego and its figurative representations. This is not to say that one interpretation is more or less alienating than the other, but rather to highlight that the skin too is a reflexive surface, one which corresponds not only to a visible index of intactness but also to a corporeal experience which may vacillate between unified and highly fragmented.

For Anzieu, the initial narcissistic investment appears to be contingent upon a mental representation of the body elaborated by the ego at an early stage in order to construct itself as a container capable of holding psychic contents.<sup>110</sup> “[B]ody image [thus] belongs to the order of phantasy and secondary development; *it is a representation*

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<sup>110</sup> *ibid*, p. 40.

*acting on the body.*"<sup>111</sup> Propped up by the visible surface onto which in turn it is projected, this proxy is designated by Anzieu as the *skin ego*.

From this perspective, the mirror simply reflects back to the individual the functions of his own skin. However, as Anzieu notes, this is not without complications:

...the skin appears in numerous ways to function in a paradoxical manner, to such a degree indeed that we may ask whether the paradoxicality of the mind is not to some extent grounded in that of the skin. The skin shields the equilibrium of our internal functioning from exogenous disruptions, but in its form, texture, coloring, and scars it preserves the marks of those disruptions. And through it a great deal is in fact revealed to the outside world about that inner state which it is supposed to protect... The skin is both permeable and impermeable, superficial and profound, truthful and misleading...<sup>112</sup>

Skin, it appears, possesses a structural primacy over the other senses: it covers the entire body, is capable of registering different sensations (i.e. pressure, contact, heat, pain, etc.), and as Freud also remarked, it is the only sense which possesses a reflexive structure.<sup>113</sup> It is *seen* like any other object, but to the *touch* it yields two kinds of sensations, one "active" and one "passive." Capable of this reflexivity as well as both internal and external perception, skin operates as a seam between differentiation and integration, between sensory experience and representation. It is the effort on behalf of an open system to self-regulate: a mode of containment but also of communication, a barrier but also an interface. In short, skin is many things but rarely is it just skin.

The same might be said of the skin ego, which Anzieu describes as "a reality of the order of phantasy."<sup>114</sup> As an intermediate structure demanded by the psyche for its

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<sup>111</sup> *ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>113</sup> Freud (1923), *The Ego and the Id*, *SE XIX*, p. 15.

<sup>114</sup> Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, p. 4.

functioning, it is always-already distorted by that demand. We see this in cutaneous fantasies which mobilize the body's surface, contributing to ego structuring but also capable of reflecting the failure of that structuring. For instance, the narcissistic tendency finds in the skin a confirmation of the integrity it anticipates, whereas a masochistic tendency seeks through this surface a representation or recognition of lack of integrity. In each of these configurations, the skin functions symbolically, either assuaging inner conflict vis-à-vis the unified image or rendering that conflict on the surface of the body such that the condition of the body image corresponds with its uneasy content. Continuity of self appears to rely upon a complementarity of "shell" and "kernel."

According to Anzieu then, the skin ego functions simultaneously as a sac, a sieve, and a screen. But what about an anti-function? If threat to form corresponds to threat to content, it would follow that trauma to the bodily envelope presents a challenge to the boundedness that the individual otherwise presumes on the basis of the body and its image.

Freud explains in *Project*, that intense and lasting pain disorganizes the psychical apparatus, threatens the psyche's integration with the body, affects the capacity to desire, and disturbs thinking. As noted by Anzieu, if pleasure is the experience of "the complementarity of differences," then "pain is the ordeal of de-differentiation": it bursts through contact barriers, short-circuits the distinction between quality and quantity, and produces a topographical disturbance, "obliterat[ing] the founding and structuring distinctions between the bodily and psychical ego."<sup>115</sup> While this is an account of physical pain, given the transposition of the bodily surface onto the psychical plane I believe we might effect a reversal here. After all, if the skin ego suffers a damage or the failure of its

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<sup>115</sup> *ibid*, pp. 200-1.

containing function, what becomes of the psychological contents it holds together? According to Anzieu, the result might be one of two forms of anxiety:

An instinctual excitation that is diffuse, constant, scattered, non-localizable, non-identifiable, unquenchable, results when the psychological topography consists of a kernel without a shell; the individual seeks a substitute shell in physical pain or psychological anxiety; he wraps himself in suffering. In the second case, the envelope exists but its continuity is broken into by holes. This skin ego is a colander: thoughts and memories are only with difficulty retained; they leak away...<sup>116</sup>

In either case we are faced with the crisis of a containing materiality that cannot stabilize its immaterial contents.



*Figure 5. Juan Valverde, “Male Figure with Skin Removed” from *Historia de la composicion del cuerpo humano* (1560).*

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<sup>116</sup> *ibid*, p. 102.

Accepting that psychological integrity corresponds to a degree of intactness or continuity as conveyed by the body's surface, what is conveyed by the bodily envelope in its tenuousness? If the former corresponds to the binding principles of self-preservative instinct, then the latter disrupts the logic of self-representation and, in turn, subjectivity. Or, to juxtapose the ego and its surrogate, we could say that the torn or wounded skin evokes a crucial detail of Freud's second topography: the aperture in its depth indicating that the ego cannot be posited as a closed system, that its boundaries cannot be sealed because it is always subject to the influence of drive. Perhaps then it is not only the intact body which satisfies a psychic demand...



Figure 6. Marco d'Agrate, *Saint Bartholomew Flayed* (1562), Duomo, Milan.

From this perspective there is something to be said about violent, grotesque, and formless imaginings of the body as representations of an underlying uneasiness. These, I



argue, are visual strategies corresponding less to the character of the image itself and more so to the difficult sense-impressions elicited: representations of the body in its raw corporeality reconfigure the body not as an external static representation but as a unit prone to breakdown and fragmentation, dismemberment and dissolution. “Skin,” Anzieu reminds us, “peels away as easy as paper.”<sup>117</sup>



Figure 7. Michelangelo, detail from *The Last Judgement* (1536-1541), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

We find phantasies of mutilation expressed in Western painting since the 15th century, appearing largely under the guise of anatomical art. Juan Valverde's *Historia de la composición del cuerpo humano*, first published in Rome in 1556, contains 42 copperplate illustrations of the human body in various states of dissection. While many

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<sup>117</sup> *ibid*, p. 20.

are based on Andreas Vesalius' *Fabrica* (published in 1543), one of the most striking original plates in this compendium is that of a muscle figure holding his own skin in one hand and a knife in the other (See *Figure 5*). This depiction is often likened to the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, who according to popular hagiography was skinned alive and beheaded.<sup>118</sup> The symbol most associated with the martyr is his own skin – removed but curiously intact – which he usually holds or wears draped around his body, as in Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* (See *Figure 7*) or Marco d'Agrate's (1562) highly-detailed sculpture of the flayed saint (See *Figure 6*). Agrate's gruesomely realistic statue of the apostle renders every muscle, vein, and tendon clearly visible – a haunting anatomical depiction of the human body without its flesh. And yet, for all its detail, the graphic display still evokes a divine incomprehension. We could attribute this to the sculpture's saintly reference, but I believe the same is true of the engravings of anonymous models that we find also in Govert Bildoo and Gerard de Lairesse's *Anatomia Humani Corporis* (1685) or of Clemente Susini's "Anatomical Venus" (1782), a life-size, dissectible wax woman suggestively posed and primed to be dissembled into seven anatomically correct layers (See *Figure 8*).

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<sup>118</sup> Though it clearly resonates with Bataille's *acephalous* perspectives, I have not touched upon the topic of beheading, in part for economy of language, but also because I believe this imagery to be more pronounced: the severing of the head – according to Freud, an "imperfect" substitution for castration (see "Medusa's Head" in *SE XVIII*, pp. 273-4) – severs the body from the seat of rationality and bisects any possible "identification." For a historiographical interpretation of the significance of the head, execution-by-decapitation, their respective "ideologies," see Regina Janes' essay "Beheadings" in *Death and Representation*, Ed. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 242-262. And for an "intellectual history" of beheadings as a form of revolutionary sacrifice – which includes an analysis of Bataille's "headless" intellectual agenda – see Jesse Goldhammer's *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

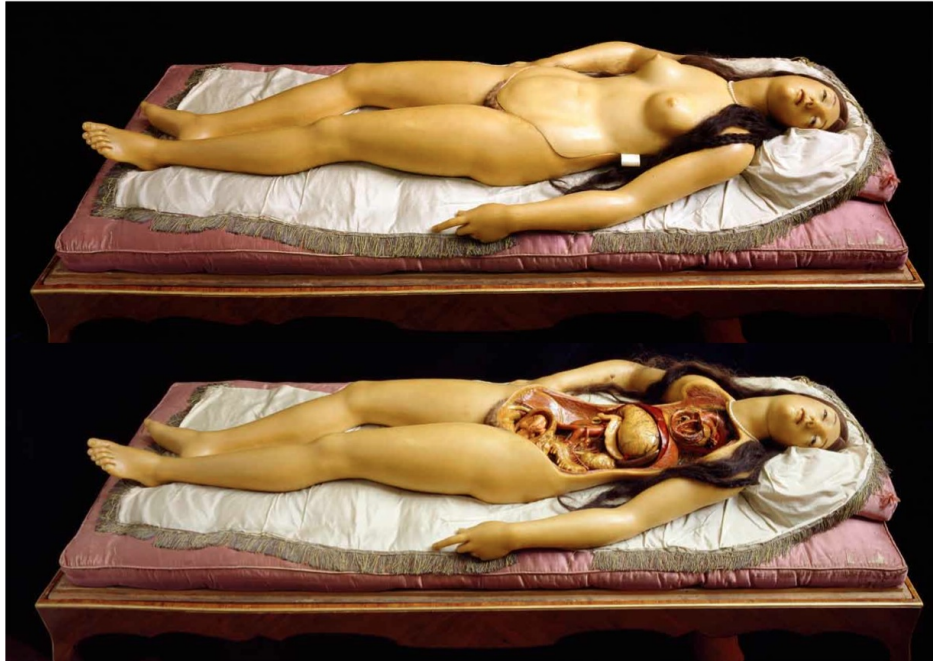


Figure 8. Clemente Susini, *Medici Venus* (1780-1782), La Specola, Florence. Image © Johanna Ebenstein, *The Anatomical Venus*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2016.

All, as it were, introduce the viewer to the unseeable and unimaginable: mortality of course, but also the organic apparatus of the body in all of its materiality. The overlap of the two suggests an interiority that can only be revealed through invasion, fragmentation, and the utter ruination of the body's containing functions – the enigma of ephemerality so other to individual subjectivity. As Joanna Ebenstein writes, we can perceive in these aestheticized raw anatomies “a lost attitude to life: one that unifies rather than divides and allows for mystery and incomprehension.”<sup>119</sup> Or, we might say, that they reflect a means of contemplating death as the place where the “base materialism” of the body meets the divine. And is this not precisely what Bataille seeks in his image of the *Dionysus chinois*, in the ruined and ruinous figure Sontag gives the name of the mythologically flayed Marsyas?

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<sup>119</sup> Joanna Ebenstein, *The Anatomical Venus: Wax, God, Death, and the Ecstatic*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2016, p. 19.



*Figure 9.* Jusepe de Ribera, *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1637), Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. Ribera's work expresses extremes of physical suffering not only in the gruesome depiction of this mythological scene (i.e. Apollo flaying Marsyas), but also in a series of paintings which show the progression of the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew. As in the paintings of Saint Bartholomew, here Ribera compels not only with violence and horror, but also with the provocative gaze of the flayed that fixes on the viewer to convey the full agony of the scene.

In presenting the skin as the body's own clothing, such representations are, in a word, *uncanny*. Likewise, we could interpret the hyper-reality of these bodies through Kristeva's notion of the abject, that broad category of non-objects characterized by their threatening ambiguity: the leaking orifices of the body where the vulnerable coincides with the erotogenic; the bodily wastes that remind us of the animality and inevitable decay concealed in the ideational affair of subjectivity; the corpse that is neither human nor non-human, or a body turned inside-out revealing the meat that it is. The abject, in other words, is the attempt to conceptualize a "new significance" that is in effect the dispersal of significance resulting from the deterioration or decay of otherwise containing functions. Or, as Lechte explains: "if the object is the mediating thing through which the subject can gauge itself in the world, abjection evokes an immediate force that fragments the embryonic ego/subject."<sup>120</sup> The result is "an immersion in meaninglessness,

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<sup>120</sup> Lechte, "Abjection, art and bare life" in *Abject Visions*, p. 14.

repugnance, and incoherence – everything, in effect, that subjectivity will strive to keep at bay in its ego life within the borders of sociality.”<sup>121</sup>

According to this particular semiotic approach, the perpetual need to rid ourselves of corporeal traces is part of the unspoken agreement made upon entering the symbolic. To an extent, we see this as well in the notion of skin ego, which effectively distills from the corporeal a defense against psychical disintegration. Indeed, though Anzieu originally posits a destructive “anti-function” of the skin ego, he would later reconsider, eliminating such a function as a manifestation of the death drive rather than an attribute of the skin ego as such. But as Elizabeth Grosz reminds us: if “[t]he subject must disavow part of itself in order to gain a stable self, [...] this form of refusal marks whatever identity it acquires as provisional and open to breakdown and instability.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, aesthetic practices that foreground the lack of bodily integrity or unity reintroduce into representation its own excesses or inadequacies, destabilizing the objectifying transformations which representation undertakes and facilitates.<sup>123</sup> The uncomfortable image, therefore, does not present a crisis. It simply reveals the crisis in which the subject always-already is: a topography which cannot be sealed, an integrity bolstered and cursed by the vicissitudes of the flesh, a vast Moebian skin constricted into a communicable trace.<sup>124</sup>

In other words, extremely exposed anatomies fracture, corrupt, and reimagine the coherent form, revealing what it means to *be a body* rather than to *have a body*. By representing the insufficiency of the outermost defense they also reflect an affirmation of the excess, fragmentation, and impermanence otherwise masked by the gestalted “I.” If

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<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “The Body of Significance” in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, Ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 80-103; p. 89.

<sup>123</sup> See Ernst van Alphen’s “Skin, body, self: the question of the abject in the work of Francis Bacon” in *Abject Visions*, pp. 119-129.

<sup>124</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 25.

so, they conjure up the “revolution of the whole body”<sup>125</sup> called for by Antonin Artaud, a return to a ‘pre-inscribed’ body in a state prior to the symbolic – fragmented, without organs or limbs, eternally incomplete but, as a result, in constant metamorphosis.<sup>126</sup> Here the mirror image is dissolved into a Real and resistant aesthetic of open-endedness and incompleteness that shatters the anthropomorphic image. Incidentally – but not arbitrarily – the vast band of indissociable and ebbing intensities that might allow us to think beyond the confines of individual subjectivity is termed by Lyotard as “the great ephemeral skin.”<sup>127</sup>

#### FORMLESSNESS AND ‘OTHER’ BLINDING VISIONS

Continuing to peel away the material layers of subjectivity, here I propose that we consider the figural reversal of the gestalted form through highly-charged fragments of the body that are taken out of context and (re)presented in uncanny ways. While the imagery of the fragmented body may be designated to certain aesthetic categories (e.g. grotesque, abject, etc.), both referent and semblant correspond to structural instabilities and violently ambivalent sense-impressions that are fundamentally resistant to nominalization. But, whereas ‘uncanny’ and ‘abject’ might be deployed as adjectives describing a quality of a threatening (non-)object, Bataille’s performative conveyance of

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<sup>125</sup> Antonin Artaud, ‘Theatre and Science’ in *Anthology*, Trans. Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965), p. 173. For a thorough yet poetic comparison of the visions of Bataille and Artaud as read through a very different lens than that of this investigation – namely that of contemporary Japanese dance-performance – see Catherine Curtin’s “Recovering the Body and Expanding the Boundaries of Self in Japanese *Butoh*” in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 20, 1(2010): 56–67.

<sup>126</sup> Artaud, ‘Description of a Physical State’ in *Anthology*, pp. 28–9. Here Artaud describes the unreality (and painful fatigue) of physical intactness, narrating an experience of breakdown that renders the limbs “distant and dislocated” – a “disembodiment of reality” corresponding to a form of “self-multiplication.”

<sup>127</sup> Mentioned throughout Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* (and especially salient in pages pp. 241–7), “The Great Ephemeral Skin” is defined in “Glossary” as “the connivance of the figural and the libidinal” by which unconscious intensity “invades” the realm of the conceptual and produces material effects (pp. xii–xiii). The libidinal materialism suggested by the “ephemeral skin” is a means of positing this situation not as one of opposition or negation, but rather in terms of a polymorphous plasticity that dissolves difference while intensifying the potential of matter itself.

the *informe* emphasizes the uncontainable alternation of affects that causes the absence (or excess) of discernable forms to spill out of the object itself and flood the entire scene. By this reading, the presentation of de- or re-contextualized body-objects is capable of a transformative event, signaling an experience of “blindness” evoked through subjective rupture rather than exposure to a particular category of the visual. Indeed, the indistinguishability of discrete forms corresponds to manner of (non-)seeing, a “blindness” which emerges alongside sacrificial violence as another recurring trope in Batiaille’s life and work.

These pages intend to expose the *informe* as the destination where the concepts explored thus far might lead, were they capable of moving beyond the situation of restlessness which by structural necessity defines them. If the subject is caught between the insufficiency (or fragmentation) that narcissism conceals and death as that which affirms the underlying *ipse* as unthinkable, what renders these principles paradoxical is none other than the subject who attempts to mediate them. In the ambiguity and violent ambivalence of *jouissance*, masochism, and abjection these distinctions are destabilized in what might be considered the subject’s play with its own disappearance, both feared and desired. These “auto-mutilating” functions operate like the *fort/da* game, the game of disappearance and return inbuilt with its own reversal so that it can perpetuate itself through (compulsive) repetition. In that sense, we can discern therein the traces of the death drive. But what of the *remainder* that cannot be assimilated by these movements? We have called this remainder by many names: the excessive, impossible, and unrepresentable; death and ‘oceanic’ unboundedness. Having considered thus far the convulsive operations over which this deathly remainder looms, here I attempt to convey its formless heterogeneity. Or, rather, I mean for that heterogeneity to convey for itself why it remains elusive to even the most insistent inquiries.

Bataille's early writings invoke the *informe* as a third term that disrupts the relationship between form and content. Introduced in the 1920s with other experimental explorations of heterogeneity, "Formless" appears in both *Documents* and *Critical Dictionary*, both of which compile "anti-structural" ethnographies of cultural and historical artifacts at their most miscellaneous and diffuse.<sup>128</sup> Man, abattoir, and eye are but a few of the terms that Bataille "defines" unconventionally, calling attention to their extraordinariness when taken out of their designated contexts and viewed in unfamiliar ways. Also gathered under *Visions of Excess* – a title that seems especially apt in the present aesthetico-theoretical framework – writings such as "Mouth" and "The Big Toe" dismember the body into its component pieces, foregrounding the independence of certain organs and orifices when severed from the intact body, a "sacrificial" fragmentation that speaks to the heterogeneity of bodily experience as opposed to the homogeneity supposed by the gestalted form.

*Disgust*, Winfried Menninghaus's encyclopedic text on the objects, aesthetics, and philosophies of revulsion, presents a structurally similar (albeit more historical) treatment of the "strong sensation" aroused by base matter and its representation. Therein, he suggests the *informe* signals an "anti-aesthetic," even more so than the abject, in that it does not merely seek the "monstrous antithesis" of appealing forms but rather the outright refusal of any definition that might sustain these as contraries.<sup>129</sup> "In the articles from *Documents*," Menninghaus writes, "all mere signified of disgust are always simultaneously signifiers, or agents performing an active representational function. They are not (only) objects of artistic representation, but always – and above all – the formal

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<sup>128</sup> Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 121.

<sup>129</sup> Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), p. 345.



element of the operations comprising art itself.”<sup>130</sup> In other words, much like the textual instantiations of impossibility considered in the previous chapter, the *informe* represents a disturbance in signifying logic through referents that convey not their signification but their very *woundedness*.

Turning to Bataille’s own words, his brief but forceful essay on the *informe* reads as follows:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.<sup>131</sup>

Thus, as a signifier, “formless” is its own signified: the active representation of a decomposition which “gets itself squashed everywhere,” undoing notions of perceived unities in the disorder of declassification.

With *L’informe: Mode d’emploi*, a 1996 exhibit at the Centre Georges Pompidou predicated on the undoing of form, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss express the difficulty of staying true to Bataille’s heterology. The exhibit itself reflects a declassifying over two hundred pieces of work through the sabotaging of the usual curatorial principles of period, style, or subject matter. With a few exceptions, most of the artworks range from the 1920s to the 1970s, however, as Bois and Krauss explain, they were organized neither

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Bataille, “Formless” in *Visions of Excess*, p. 31.

thematically nor chronologically: a 1930s sand-relief by Picasso hangs beside one of Robert Rauschenberg's black monochromes (1951) and one of Edward Ruscha's "liquid words" (1969) speaks to Andy Warhol's "Oxidation" (1978) within range of a Marcel Duchamp's "3 Standard Stoppages" (1913-4), a work which reveals the metric system as a construct rather than universal.<sup>132</sup> In the theoretical catalogue which accompanied the exhibit, Bois and Krauss clarify that their "organizing principles" are the permutations and degradations that lead to increasing disorder and non-differentiation.

We could treat the inform as a pure object of historical research ... But such an approach would run the risk of transforming the *formless* into a figure, of stabilizing it. That risk perhaps is unavoidable, but, in putting the *formless* to work in areas far from its place of origin, in displacing it in order to shift modernist production by means of its sieve, we wanted to start it shaking...<sup>133</sup>

And that they do. Like the exhibit, the catalogue also privileges the porousness of the *informe* over "modernism's formal certainties."<sup>134</sup> As an amalgamation of intellectual biography, aesthetic interpretation, and psychoanalytic speculation which, in some ways, replicates Bataille's *Critical Dictionary*, *Formless: A User's Guide* places emphasis not on an overarching theme but on the "alterations" (and *alternations*) by which heterogeneous events, encounters, and artifacts become informally linked. An (anti-)systematic exploration of Bataille's concepts and his fraught relationship with the Surrealists is contextualized through base or abstracted matter and unstable psychoanalytic concepts such as narcissism, castration anxiety, and the uncanny. But perhaps the most relevant to this present investigation is Krauss's exploration of the linguistic principles of the death drive, which appears under the heading "Yo-yo" and

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<sup>132</sup> Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 24.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid*, p. 16.

considers the *fort/da* game in light of the rhythm it suggests between representation and negation.<sup>135</sup> According to Krauss, rhythm still lends itself to form and the operation of the pleasure principle, to negativity as a compositional resource. The *informe*, on the other hand, has no such cadence. Rather, it *pulses* violently, indicating “a repetition always undergirded by the rupture of total extinction.”<sup>136</sup> However, as we have already considered in preceding chapters, beneath the skin of its signifiers *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* does indeed pulse, its ontological vacillations signaling the impossible, arguably *informe*, thought operation at its restless center.

The question, then, is do Bois and Krauss “start it shaking” or is it that the *informe* conveys itself as the trembling of representation? As Rina Arya expresses, given that its operational principle is to “disrupt and derange,”<sup>137</sup> formlessness can only be itself as the antithesis of its own purpose, as the communication of its own “anarchic sense.”<sup>138</sup> It seems evident that this violent, self-mutilating decomposition shares (anti-)structural and (anti-)aesthetic similarities with the abject. However, as Krauss and numerous others suggest, the *informe* reflects a more subversive strategy in that it describes a process *driven by structural impossibility*.<sup>139</sup> That is, whereas the abject disrupts boundaries, the *informe* “brings down” the very structures of signification that render those boundaries: the *informe* does not return to the referents it seeks to subvert but disrupts the very task of interpretation which is never able to assimilate its own dissolution. Noys expresses a similar persuasion, describing the *informe* as “a more radical and disorienting freedom

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<sup>135</sup> *ibid*, pp. 220-1.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid*, p. 223.

<sup>137</sup> Arya, *Abjection and Representation*, p. 122.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid*, p. 124.

<sup>139</sup> See Krauss' conclusion in *Formless* (pp. 251-252), as well as Arya (2014), Foster (1996) and Lotringer (1999).

which inscribes instability into *all* discourses,”<sup>140</sup> as does Hal Foster, who maintains that amid the unruly and uncontained content of the *informe* it is the gaze itself, not the object, which is rendered dysmorphic, “presented as if there were no scene to stage it, no frame of representation to contain it, no screen.”<sup>141</sup> Emphasizing formlessness as an unstable, unthinkable situation of non-differentiation, such considerations lead us back to questions concerning the unavailability of death to thought, not as a situation of outright negation but of dispersal or dissolution, a teeming heterogeneity that leaves us without recourse to the structures of meaning. Here we begin to see how the wounding of form (and, by association, its function) erupts in something of an ‘oceanic’ experience wherein, or perhaps *whereby*, boundaries are blurred or distorted.

Bois and Kraus consider the failure of the frame in relation to abstract expressionism and post-modernism, but of course the *informe* is not confined to any particular cultural epoch. In fact, it seems that the *informe* operates alongside the modes of sublimation as the dialectical desire for transgression: “[i]t is the force invested in desublimation.”<sup>142</sup> We see this in *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, wherein Bataille argues that, as evidenced by the distorted figures painted in the Paleolithic caves of the Vézère Valley, the pulsing principle of art is not the law of gestalt but the desire to interfere with form, to distort and disfigure.<sup>143</sup> In that sense, its operation is not unlike that of the death drive which, by Freud’s approximation, emerges alongside life as the wish to return to a prior condition; like the emergence of life which precipitates the desire to return to the inertia that precedes it, the congealing of forms renders as a byproduct the “destructive”

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<sup>140</sup> Benjamin Noys, “Georges Bataille’s base materialism” in *Cultural Values*, Vol. 2, 4 (1998): 499-517; p. 499.

<sup>141</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 149.

<sup>142</sup> Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, p. 244.

<sup>143</sup> See Foster *et al*, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011), p. 262-4.

tendency to de-form. We might, therefore, contemplate base materialism as an articulation or, better yet, *disarticulation* of the (impossible) aim of the death drive.

Jeremy Biles considers *Lascaux* in another light – in terms of its “*coincidencia oppositorum*,” the coincidence of opposites.<sup>144</sup> In order to “capture” the images, the dark, underground world had to be brightly illuminated. The fact that this work was done in the hours of darkness, loosely recalls the Nietzschean axiom that propels Bataille’s *Inner Experience* – “Night is also a sun.” Still, the “anamorphic splendor”<sup>145</sup> of the cave paintings “literally def[ies] the camera.”<sup>146</sup> According to Albert Skira, the editor of the “Great Centuries of Painting” series in which *Lascaux* is published, the figures depicted in the Lascaux caves “mysteriously shift and change [...] almost beyond recognition.”<sup>147</sup> Biles reads this as an “anti-Platonic” allegory: “men did not emerge from a cave to be enlightened, but descended into its bowels to inscribe the walls with visions of animality, monstrosity, and death.”<sup>148</sup> Further, Biles emphasizes the manner in which the contemplation of these “visions” is invariably obstructed as the labyrinthine structure of the cave only offers oblique points of view. Are the animal and human figures deformed, then, or is it the lack of an “adequate” vantage point which distorts them? The juxtaposition of these interpretations – the coincidence of opposites and the tendency of certain content to exceed its available forms – helps to clarify the interpretation of the death drive as a barely legible palimpsest. As an experience of disorienting dissolution resulting from the loss of stable referents, death can only be “represented” as a crisis of

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<sup>144</sup> Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 73.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>146</sup> Albert Skira, “Preface” to Bataille’s *Lascaux, or The Birth of Art*, Lausanne: Skira Color Studio, 1955.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* Skira elaborates: “A bull looks squat and hunk-necked; shift your position and the same animal acquires an elongated body and the head of a giraffe. What is the ideal point of vantage? [...] often, where the greatest depth of field is wanted, the photographer, as he backs away, is brought up short by the other side of the narrow corridor.”

<sup>148</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, p. 74.

perspective. Aesthetically, this crisis seems to find expression in and as endless transfigurations, formlessness, and the impossibility of a suitable viewing angle, all of which break down both scene and stage.

Menninghaus too brings death and desublimation together under the heading of the formless, insinuating that all three correspond to the “never fully tamed nature of human instincts.”<sup>149</sup> As he explains:

a threefold ‘return to reality’ hovers on the horizon of the *informe*: aesthetically, a desublimation of beautiful forms moving to the point of ‘base materialism’; psychologically, a ‘liberation’ of violent sexuality; historically, a reactivation of archaic practices for generating and affirming societal life through feelings of repulsion and acts of sacrifice.<sup>150</sup>

There are echoes here of both Freud and Nietzsche, but Menninghaus argues that the *informe* goes beyond the moderating principles of Eros and the Apollonian, re-envisioning these “controls” as resources that exist in service of their own terminal subversion in death and the Dionysian. But he stresses that Bataille goes further still, arguing these “gestures of revolt” are an affirmation of the violent, compulsive core of human nature, and as such the very motor of existence.<sup>151</sup> Whereas Freud, for instance, considers destructiveness as a protestation of the demands of civilization, for Bataille the desire for “perversity,” violence, and the return to the raw materiality of death marks “the first and positive constituent of social life.”<sup>152</sup> The *informe*, by this understanding, corresponds to a *principle of return*. Or as Biles artfully expresses, the formless testifies that “man is not himself until he has mutilated himself, revealed in himself the contradiction of life and death that simultaneously animates and annihilates him.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Menninghaus, *Disgust*, p. 346.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>153</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, pp. 82-3.

Having thus far surveyed the heterology and loss of perspective associated with the *informe*, let us return to the disarticulation of the body-as-gestalt to consider what might be suggested by the convergence of these features under the heading of formlessness. In the “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” Bataille considers (auto-)mutilations as linked to a “spirit of sacrifice” in that they reflect the “necessity of throwing oneself or something of oneself *out of oneself*.”<sup>154</sup> As elsewhere, he stipulates that, much like mystical ecstasy, the sacrifice of bodily integrity – either of the self or of the other – gives way to standing outside of oneself in which self-presence is rendered impossible. “Such an action,” he writes, “would be characterized by the fact that it would have the power to liberate heterogeneous elements.”<sup>155</sup> However, interventions in the “habitual homogeneity”<sup>156</sup> – Bataille’s examples include “the victim struck down in a pool of blood, the severed finger or eye, the torn-out eye”<sup>157</sup> – invariably break with the “homogenizing” discourses of utility or identification. Instead, as an encounter with the precariousness, contingency, and “constitutive improbability” of the “I,” they signal a “liberation of existence from the forms of appearance,” revealing those forms as operative illusions corresponding to “the extreme demands of life.”<sup>158</sup> Thus, as relates to the “aim” of sacrifice, such acts cannot be purely concerned with appeasement or expiation. In fact, Bataille writes, these intentions “would be seen as secondary, and one would only retain the elementary fact of the radical *alteration*.”<sup>159</sup>

But this fact of alteration, which Bois and Krauss suggest as indicative of the

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<sup>154</sup> Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh” in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 61-72; p. 67.

<sup>155</sup> *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>156</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Bataille, “Sacrifices” in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 130-136; p. 131.

<sup>159</sup> Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation,” p. 70.

formless,<sup>160</sup> corresponds to a difficulty (or impossibility) of positioning that fractures the discourse of identification. Describing the de-differentiation that occurs through the violation of individualized forms, Bataille writes: “sometimes the man sacrifices the animal, sometimes the animal sacrifices the man, but each time it is a case of *auto-mutilation* because the animal and the man form but a single being.”<sup>161</sup> By all means, this auto-mutilation also extends to Bataille’s relation to the image of the tortured *Dionysus chinois*. In his contemplation of this maimed figure, “hideous, haggard, striped with blood, beautiful as a wasp,” Bataille too seeks dismemberment, expressing a desire to “ruin in [himself] that which is opposed to ruin.”<sup>162</sup> The object, he writes, “incapable of liberating itself except outside of itself, demands [the limit of death] in order to let out the scream of lacerated existence.”<sup>163</sup> But being beside or beyond oneself constitutes experience as one of breakdown or vertigo, wherein thought coincides with its own annihilation or dispersal: such an experience “has not only catastrophe as its object; its very structure is *catastrophe*.”<sup>164</sup> It might do well to mention here that Dionysus is not only the “dismembered God” but also the “the god of disturbed reason”...<sup>165</sup>

In many ways, these lacerated figures resonate with Deleuze and Guattari’s *body without organs* (BwO) as a means of imagining difference or heterogeneity “outside the dominance or regime of the one, the self-same, the imaginary play of mirrors and doubles, the structure of duplication presumed by notions of signification and subjectification.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, p. 50.

<sup>161</sup> Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation,” p. 70.

<sup>162</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 119.

<sup>163</sup> Bataille, “Sacrifices,” p. 134.

<sup>164</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Bataille’s “La Mère-Tragedie” (in *Oeuvres complètes*, Ed. Michel Foucault, Paris: Gallimard, 1987) as quoted in Biles, p. 55.

<sup>166</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 164.





*Figure 10.* Notable relics, clockwise from top-left: Saint Catherine of Siena’s “uncorrupted” – but severed – head (Basilica San Domenico, Siena); the bejeweled hand of discolored Carmelite Saint Teresa of Avila (Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Merced, Ronda); Padre Pio’s heart touring the world (shown here in Manila Cathedral, Philippines); and the miracle of San Gennaro’s “liquefying” blood (Duomo, Naples). Relics such as these underscore the material aspects of religious practice, embodying the contradiction of a transcendence that is deeply bound to materiality.<sup>167</sup> If relics are indeterminate matter imbued with religious significance, do we read practices of relic-worship as a fetishization of death and the dead body or as an index of the “sacred materialism” of base matter?

Suggestive of the disarticulated sense of matter in its unbound potential, the BwO, like the vast majority of Bataille’s key concepts, breaks from synthesis as the organizing principle of philosophy.<sup>168</sup> In challenging the perception of the body as a totality, Grosz explains, the BwO rejects, displaces, and moves beyond “the four great ‘illusions’ of representation: identity, opposition, analogy, and resemblance.”<sup>169</sup> This refusal to subordinate the body to a homogeneity based on biological organization foregrounds an

<sup>167</sup> Patricia Cox Miller, “Relics, Rhetoric, and Mental Spectacles in Late Ancient Christianity” in *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Ed. Giselle de Nie, Karl Frederick Morrison, and Marco Mostert, (Utrecht: Turnhout, 2005), pp. 25-52.

<sup>168</sup> Arya, *Abjection and Representation*, p. 122.

<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*

imperative of metamorphosis and experimentation, a deregulated approach that transforms “functional units” into nomadic fragments capable of potentially infinite assembling and disassembling.

Bataille writes that “[t]he filthy aspects of the torn apart body guarantee the totality of disgust where life subsides,”<sup>170</sup> and we find similar (though far less morbid) undertones in Deleuze and Guattari. As they note, “[t]he body without organs is not a dead body but a living body all the more alive and teeming once it has blown apart the organism and its organization.”<sup>171</sup> In other words, the BwO is not “lacking” its organs. Rather it is a “body” which, through the anarchic independence of its shifting, transmuting parts, behaves *in excess* of any possible organization or stabilization. Conceived of in pieces, the BwO calls attention to the effervescence of its peices, which belong to no particular body but rather are in a perpetual state of becoming. As discussed in relation to the libidinal materialism under which Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic writings might fall, here too we see intensity and contingency replacing the “meaningful, organized, transcendent totalities constituting the unity of the subject and signification.”<sup>172</sup>

Grosz describes this approach as “an acidic dissolution of the body and the subject along with it.”<sup>173</sup> However, she also addresses the paradoxical concerns that have been driving this investigation: “[t]here must, it seems, be a minimal level of cohesion and integration in the BwO in order to prevent its obliteration; there must be small pockets of subjectivity and signification left on order for the BwOs to survive.”<sup>174</sup> That is, as concepts

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<sup>170</sup> Bataille, “Sacrifices,” p. 132.

<sup>171</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 30.

<sup>172</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 170.

<sup>173</sup> *ibid*, p. 179.

<sup>174</sup> *ibid*, p. 171. Grosz offers a similar critique of the abject in “The Body of Significance,” where she argues that in emphasizing the desire to return to a pre-oedipal state of non-differentiation, Kristeva’s elaboration of abjection cannot accommodate sexual difference or feminine autonomy. Kristeva, as Grosz maintains, presents maternity as process without a subject, thus foregrounding the semiotics of the body

which destroy the integrity and intelligence of containing bodies, the BwO and the *informe* cannot be defined, only *performed* and even so, without the possibility of closure – similar to the aim-inhibited formulation of the death drive. Thus, these abstract and abstracting concepts speak less to a terminal situation of dissolution and more so to the “play of man and his own decomposition”<sup>175</sup> – a dynamic expressed as the subversion of signifying conventions or the lacerating of forms, experienced as a crisis of (self-) positioning for a subject whose viability relies on the reification of the narcissistic fantasy of intactness. For Bataille, this crisis, simultaneously ecstatic and horrifying, is the feature of the sacred as the domain wherein the loss of self is experienced. In Deleuze and Guattari, however, the mutually constitutive nature of assemblages and “desiring machines” does not convey the same sense of loss: horror is subsumed in a de-anthropomorphized complexity that fails to take into account what is at stake for the auto-mutilating subject. As a result, nor can it account for the anguished bliss that such a subject experiences in its ruination. Nevertheless, the BwO is germane to the *informe* in that it experiments with metaphor of the body, giving prominence to its unbound potential when considered in a state of fragmentation as opposed to a perceived or desired integrity.

Arya and Foster, both contemporary theorists of aesthetics, explore other such “experiments” in the field of the visual, both citing Hans Bellmer as a key example.<sup>176</sup> Both classify Bellmer’s work under “abject art” – a category in which we might also place the “liquefied” forms of Francis Bacon.<sup>177</sup> However, as the considerations above indicate,

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underlying the signifying process. However, in the field of non-differentiation, this body loses its sexual specificity.

<sup>175</sup> Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation,” p. 70.

<sup>176</sup> See Foster, “High/Low Art: Art and Mass Culture” in *October*, 56 (1991): 64-97, p. 87. Arya elaborates Foster’s argument in her discussion of Bellmer in *Abjection and Representation*, pp. 90-94.

<sup>177</sup> Michel Leiris uses the *liquefaction* to describe the debilitating turbulence by which the body overflows its boundaries. See Leiris, *Francis Bacon: Full Face and in Profile*, Trans. John Weightman, (London:

perhaps this classification minimizes the effect of his “fetishistically” *informe* dolls and drawings. Comprised of doubled and re-doubled life-sized parts that could be assembled, disassembled, and reassembled, Bellmer’s *Die Puppe* is quite literally a body-in-pieces. Simultaneously “womanly” and pubescent, seductive and disturbing, Bellmer’s doll is ineradicably uncanny, at times as an “intact” body posed to unsettle the distinction between animate and inanimate and others as “monstrous” composite of limbs arranged around a central joint. Either way, *Die Puppe* provokes penetrating questions about identity, representation, and the susceptibility of both to destabilization: at the sight of this disarticulated double, revulsion coincides with an “identification” of sorts, a strange sympathy that reveals the viewer’s own doubleness.



Figure 11. Hans Bellmer, gelatin silver print of *Die Puppe* (1936) “dissembled.”

By Foster’s interpretation, Bellmer’s doll recreates “a pre-Oedipal moment,” gesturing towards a pre-ambivalent fullness through the pairing of “irrational desires”

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Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 13. See also Arya’s *Francis Bacon: Painting in a Godless World*, (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2012).

and an “aberrant and corrupt materiality.”<sup>178</sup> Indeed, the doll was notoriously created by Bellmer to indulge his own uncanny desires.<sup>179</sup> However, though generally posed suggestively, Biles argues that its “perverse” appeal is not as a sexual object, but rather as a fragmented body that acts as a transgressive sacrifice of form.<sup>180</sup> Establishing an affinity between Bellmer’s artistic works and Bataille’s texts, Biles argues that both reach beyond impulse to sexual excess, representing instead a “confusion of senses and organs” that “insist[s] that the viewer/reader *experience* the contradiction they seek to portray.”<sup>181</sup> If we accept that the paroxysmal alteration of affects reflects the unstable configuration of the death drive, that it corresponds to a traumatic encounter with a non-symbolizable Real, then the “lived realization of contradiction,” as Biles emphasizes, “shows what cannot be seen in any literal sense.”<sup>182</sup> In the *informe*, the psyche pursues its morbid pleasures, perhaps even momentarily assuages the first and final drive.

It is worth noting here that Bellmer also provided the illustrations for two of Bataille’s pornographic novellas, *Story of the Eye* and *Madame Edwarda*. Depicting sexually-explicit figures in what seem to be a states of dizzying metamorphosis, Bellmer renders the spirit of Bataille’s texts more so than their distinct scenes, providing the visual equivalent of a “degenerate” sexuality that strives to deform and decompose its participants.<sup>183</sup> However, as Biles notes, the *continuity* of their textual and aesthetic

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<sup>178</sup> See Foster (1991), p. 87.

<sup>179</sup> See Therese Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.64-67. Here Lichtenstein considers *Die Puppe* as inspired by Olympia, the life-sized doll/double that is animated and later disassembled in E. T. A Hoffman’s tale “The Sandman.” The uncanniness of this text is analyzed by Freud (1919b) as owing to a confusion between familiar and unfamiliar, animate or inanimate, that “robs the eyes” – just like Coppélius (or the Sandman) does in Hoffman’s tale.

<sup>180</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, pp. 135-7.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid*, p.147.

<sup>182</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>183</sup> See Elliott Vanskike, “Pornography as Paradox: The Joint Project of Hans Bellmer and Georges Bataille” in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 31, 4 (1998): 41-60. Here Vanskike considers how, precisely by not adhering to the Bataille’s story, Bellmer captures the r/Real sense of the text as a transgressive play of metonymy and metaphor that collapses “stable” dialectics.

inclinations suggests that the affinity between the two goes beyond mere collaboration: they share a *religious sensibility*.<sup>184</sup> Searching for the sacred in the contemporary world, both seem to find its residues in the always-already (auto-)mutilating laceration of form, Bellmer drawing inspiration from Matthias Grünewald's depiction of the crucifixion in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as Bataille does in the photograph of the *Dionysis chinois*.<sup>185</sup>

Like Bataille's writing, Bellmer's aesthetic conjures a state of intoxication and frenzy, a destruction of the self-contained body, and a devolution of the anthropomorphic form into a contorted, writhing mass: the decentralized self is swallowed up in a primordial rabble of extremities (See *Figure 12*). Doubled limbs and fractal lines create an optic ambiguity that gives the impression of animation, of the convulsive shudder symptomatic of the sacred. The anatomies themselves are fleshy and unmistakably erotic, but their graphic contortions exceed the body proper, suggesting the destruction of the closed and individual form which, by Bataille's understanding, restores an impersonal continuity. Horror, eroticism, and the sacred reverberate together in an aesthetic of de-differentiation that strips the viewer of the ability to discern discrete entities. But given that subjectivity itself relies on othering and objectifying transformations, the inability to posit separateness is a critical inability to (discursively or representationally) posit anything at all. Unable to convey this terminal situation as such, the strategies of liquefaction, laceration, and "Dionysian expression" reflect an attempt to restore the sacred through the evocation of a pre-discursive chaos, a loss of distinction which recalls the unboundedness of the 'oceanic.'

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<sup>184</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, pp. 126-128.

<sup>185</sup> *ibid*, p. 124-6.



Figure 12. Hans Bellmer, illustration 1/6 in the a re-publication (Paris: K, 1947) of Bataille's 1928 novella *Histoire de l'oeil*.

Evidently, this “religious sensibility” differs wildly from analytical attempts to arrive at the sacred through intelligibility. This was explored in the previous chapter in relation to mystical texts which convey the paradoxical nature of sacred experience through subversions of convention and the disruption of syntactical meaning. And, prior to that, we considered how theoretical speculations beyond the limits of subjectivity render a “thesis” which is its own absence, failure, or mutilation. Visually, however, apotheosis appears to find expression as a breakdown of stable forms and their containing functions, an ‘oceanic’ or exorbitant formlessness that liquefies the boundaries between discontinuous beings. Across Bataille’s oeuvre though, we also see the experience of God and/or indeterminacy of distinction conveyed in another, albeit similar way – as an experience of blind vision. Considering the etymology of “mysticism” – a derivative of the verb *μυέω* (*myéō*) which means “to close [the eyes]”<sup>186</sup> – Bataille’s emphasis on blindness

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<sup>186</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 146.

is doubly suggestive: *some mysteries appear only to be “revealed” precisely as they hide from view.*



Figure 13. Domenico Beccafumi, *Saint Lucy* (1521), Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.

Bataille’s *Critical Dictionary* decomposes the body into sovereign parts with destructive tasks rather than meanings, but among these parts the eye has a pivotal position. “Oedipal enucleation,” he writes, is “the most horrifying form of sacrifice.”<sup>187</sup> It is also the trope to which he returns compulsively. In his texts, the eyes are wounded, gauged out, proliferated, made to “see” from other vantage points. In “Eye,” for instance, Bataille considers the “seductiveness” of the eye as lying “at the boundary of horror.” The essay functions like the visual artifacts it discusses, simultaneously as the razor that Dali and Buñuel take to a woman’s eye in the short film *Un Chien Andalou* (See Figure 14), and as the persecuting and devouring eyes of J. J. Grandville’s illustration, following a criminal through the sky and ultimately taking the form of a fish that eats him as he

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<sup>187</sup> Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation,” p. 67.



reaches for salvation (See *Figure 15*). “Innumerable eyes,” as Bataille describes, “multiply under the waves,”<sup>188</sup> and the result is not a lack of vision but the consequence of its excess, vision to the point of its own ecstatic extinction: a “blindness that results from seeing too much, from exceeding what our eyes find tolerable,”<sup>189</sup> not unlike what drives Oedipus to mutilate his own eyes.



*Figure 14.* Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel, still from the short 1928 film *Un Chien Andalou*. Of this film and its surreal sequences, Bataille writes, “how then can one not see to what extent horror becomes fascinating, and how it alone is brutal enough to break everything that stifles?”

The torn-out eyes transmute the scopic field, implying a perception without an active viewer and displacing the *I* as the egoic center of the visible world. For Bataille, therein lies the disturbing nature of the eye out of its context. If, as he writes in *Story of Eye*, “decent people have gelded eyes,”<sup>190</sup> then the immersion in base materialism that follows from transgression “opens” them.<sup>191</sup> And is the uncanniness of this desublimating

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<sup>188</sup> See “Eye” in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 17-9.

<sup>189</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, p. 158.

<sup>190</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, Trans. Joachim Neugroschal, (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 42.

<sup>191</sup> For more on the blindness as theoretical metaphor, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

experience not akin to the primal dread epitomized by E. T. A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman,” the mysterious figure who also “robs the eyes” in Freud’s 1919 paper on the *Unheimlich*?



Figure 15. J. J. Grandville, “First Dream: Crime and Expiation” (1847),  
Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

In *Story of the Eye*, the “blind vision” of desublimation coincides with eroticism. Perhaps Bataille’s best-known work, I am reluctant to summarize it as the plot is somewhat secondary to the experimentation with the metonymy of base materialism that makes the reading of this text a descent into the *informe*. Nevertheless, the novella follows the sexual discovery, insatiable arousal, and dissolute obsessions of a nameless narrator and his companion in debauchery, Simone. The typology of their desire is transgressive: they engage in erotic acts involving globular objects, torrents of bodily fluids, the desecration of corpses, and most generally, a remorseless violence towards the expectations of morality and decency. However, as Susan Sontag suggests in “The Pornographic Imagination,” *Story of the Eye* is not merely a scandalous or scandalizing

text but *pornography-as-literature-as-art*;<sup>192</sup> it doesn't seem to aim at sexual arousal or self-gratification *per se* but rather, as Sontag argues, "at disorientation, at psychic dislocation," at the incarnation of "extreme forms of human consciousness."<sup>193</sup> In Bataille's cosmology, these aims are not that different, both corresponding to, in Sontag's words, "the voluptuous yearning for the extinction of one's consciousness, for death itself."<sup>194</sup>

Indicative of what Sontag describes as an "immense spiritual risk,"<sup>195</sup> *Story of the Eye* is a potent literary exploration of the proximity of sex and death where transgression is transformed into an expression of violent desire and likewise into delirium as a contestation of *ennui* or malaise. Blood, filth, and crime are linked to deep erotic experience by a subterranean connection – a craving for upheaval, for the effervescence of death:

And it struck me that death was the sole outcome of my erection, and if Simone and I were killed, then the universe of our unbearable vision was certain to be replaced by the pure stars, fully unrelated to any external gaze and realizing in a cold state, without human delays or detours, something that strikes me as the goal of my sexual licentiousness: *a geometric incandescence (among other things, the coinciding point of life and death, being and nothingness), perfectly fulgurating.*<sup>196</sup>

That is, Bataille's "aesthetic of evil" does not glorify suffering, depravity, or vice for its own sake. Rather, it seeks to shatter moral dichotomy – perhaps even *all* dichotomy – through a disruptive and exuberant violence that violates the boundaried conception of

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<sup>192</sup> Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination" in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 205-233; p. 205. Among other pornographic texts such as Jean de Berg's *The Image* and Pauline Réage's *Story of O* – both written under pseudonyms – Sontag describes *Story of the Eye* as "a body of work belonging to literature considered as an art."

<sup>193</sup> *ibid*, pp. 213-4.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid*, p. 222.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid*, p. 213.

<sup>196</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p. 30; my italics.

the individual. Affirming the (too-)bright, overwhelming flash where life and death mutilate one another, he attempts to evoke in the reader the concomitance of terror and desire that drives his characters (and arguably himself) towards blindness: "...the contradictory impulses overtaking us in this circumstance neutralized one another, leaving us blind and, as it were, very remote from anything we touched, in a world where gestures have no carrying power, like voices in a space that is absolutely soundless."<sup>197</sup> Fulfillment comes in the "form" of fulgurating *extinguishment*.

An epilogue titled "Coincidences" offers what reads as Bataille's self-analysis, tracing the traumatic imagery of the text back to a dysmorphic oedipal situation: his father, blinded by syphilis, urinating at the armchair to which his paralysis had confined him. Recalling this scene, Bataille describes his father's white upturned eyes as "a completely stupefying expression of abandon and aberration in a world that he alone could see."<sup>198</sup> Given the psychobiographical contextualization that Bataille himself provides, we might read *Story of the Eye* through the failure of the paternal metaphor that disrupts both law and symbolic logic. Indeed, this is the pervasive interpretation encapsulated by Arya: "[t]he novel is an overhaul of the Symbolic order that is represented by the parental authority, the law, morality, and religion, and each episode involves transgressive at least one of these structures."<sup>199</sup> In the collapse of patriarchal order, she continues, "abjection and nihilism reign."<sup>200</sup> Moreover, in light of the unconventional "primal scene" Bataille recounts, the failure of the paternal function appears to be both expressed and (partially) compensated for by the substitution of the phallus as signifying organ. It is replaced with the eye(s), which in Bataille's texts are gouged out or subjected

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<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>198</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>199</sup> Arya, *Abjection and Representation*, p. 178.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*

to mutilations that, by this interpretation, evince a sort of castration. However, for Bataille the resulting blindness is not a feared punishment but a means of restoring a lost vision, a desublimation that empties reality of its “transcendental pretensions.”<sup>201</sup>

According to Arya, Bataille’s novella is propelled (or possessed) by a post-moral impulse to “embrace ignoble materiality”<sup>202</sup> and to be swept “into cycles of destruction and anarchy,” an impulse which she traces back to abjection, to formlessness, and even to the sacred on the basis of the “momentary fusion” effected in the return to base materialism.<sup>203</sup> It is here that I wish to take a step further, suggesting that these movements are analogous as configurations of the death drive. If woundedness reveals a truth of being – the emptiness of the transcendental and the insufficiency of discontinuous being – then its evocation in disturbed textuality or formless imagery is a means of acceding to and *communicating* the continuity that is inaccessible, indeed *unthinkable*, to the individualized subject. Death, in other words, is made manifest as an experience of de-differentiation that restores a lost unity at the cost of the perceived integrity of the self. But formlessness is by its “definition” unconfined: it dissolves the perception of separations that sustain and are sustained by the “I” which it tears apart.

In *Story of the Eye*, Bataille conveys this through the convergence of somatic and figural transgressions which deliquesce the text’s referents. He writes: “[m]y kind of debauchery soils not only my body and my thoughts, but also anything I conceive in its course, that is to say the vast starry universe, which merely serves as a backdrop.”<sup>204</sup> The transgressive movement beyond the acceptable range of pleasure or the tolerable range of sensation, it appears, contaminates not only the partaking individual but the notion of

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<sup>201</sup> *ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>204</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p. 42.

decency itself. Through heightening transgressions, Bataille paints the *formless* image of a “dirty” and disintegrating world, turning the “vast starry universe” into “astral sperm” and “heavenly urine.”<sup>205</sup> Roland Barthes evocatively explores this peculiarity in “The Metaphor of the Eye,” tracing the bizarre signifying chains of objects and liquid flows that form the perplexing net of text. The first chain is comprised of globular objects – eggs, eyes, and testicles – and the second of “streaming” liquids such as milk, urine, and semen. But the liquids do not seem to correspond to their objects, and the objects of themselves are presented out of place: eggs bob in a toilet, eyes dangle out of sockets, and testicles are served on a dish, peeled and bloodshot recalling the other bodiless globules. As he writes of Simone, Bataille “play[s] gaily with words, speaking about *broken eggs*, and then *broken eyes*, and [the] arguments become more and more unreasonable.”<sup>206</sup>

According to Barthes, the novella is a metaphorical composition in a process of liquifaction. Of the two signifying chains, he writes, “each term is never anything but the significant of the next term;” neither can be ascribed a “bottom” or a “beginning” – “*the paradigm begins nowhere*.”<sup>207</sup> And where does such a paradigm culminate? By substituting the usual contiguities of objects with the exchanges of meaning between them, Barthes argues that the text reflects “the violation of a limit to the signifying space,” an act of transgression “that is eroticism itself.”<sup>208</sup> Through this “metonymic eroticism” we find ourselves in a situation of tremulous indeterminacy: “the world becomes blurred; properties are no longer separate; spilling, sobbing, urinating, ejaculating form a *wavy* meaning...”<sup>209</sup> Or, as Arya writes:

the momentum of the novel is sustained by a wet and protean flow of

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<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>207</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye” in *Story of the Eye*, (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 119-127; p. 122.

<sup>208</sup> *ibid.*, 126.

<sup>209</sup> *ibid.*, 125.

objects, like a semiotic *chora* that sweeps away syntactical sense. The novel is propelled by the unyielding libidinal energy of the characters and their fetishized objects and this continues in an endless cycle of motion *ad infinitum*.<sup>210</sup>

Bataille evokes the formless through the contingent compositions that proceed from the doubleness of objects, and through those compositions the *informe* appears as the heterogeneous “blind spot” that violates signifying practice itself.

In the climatic scene, we find the erotic, murderous, and sacred all submerged in their own excessive fluidity. The Eucharistic body and blood of Christ are substituted with semen and urine as a young priest is forced to participate in an orgy and then “martyred” like “a pig being slaughtered.”<sup>211</sup> And the eye that views the brutal scene and truly sees it is the enucleated eye of the dead priest, staring not out of the head, the seat of rationality, but out of an unlikely, erogenous socket itself flooded with fluid. This base re-positioning of the eye transmutes the scopic field into a “blind universe” where meaning and sense are submerged in “liquid sensation.”<sup>212</sup> In this situation, Arya writes, “the reader cannot hold on to certainty and all former points of reference are brought into question.”<sup>213</sup> Opposed to the consolidation of forms or the structure of signifying chains, the anarchism and excess of the body in its base materialism gives way to the intractable chaos of contingency in which neither self-positioning nor seeing are possible. In the blinding light (or darkness) of death-as-impossibility, these beyond-discursive configurations permit a re-visioning of the death drive whereby its inhibited aim is not an all-negating destruction, but a dissolution into protean heterogeneity – an ‘oceanic’ feeling.

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<sup>210</sup> Arya, *Abjection and Representation*, p. 179.

<sup>211</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p. 62.

<sup>212</sup> Arya, *Abjection and Representation*, p. 181.

<sup>213</sup> *ibid*, p. 165.

## POSTSCRIPT

*A persistent thought is completely beyond the reach of its conditions.*

— Maurice Blanchot, *The Death Sentence*

“WE ARE FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS,” Bataille writes in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, declaring war against the servitude to meaning and utility that drains from life of the courage to confront decomposition.<sup>1</sup> In these pages, I have aimed to express this religious sensibility as the osmotic turbulence of the ‘oceanic,’ to justify the ferocity of this sensibility as the necessary violence it enacts against the forms and structures which sustain the subjective gaze and the separations it perceives. By this reading, the “destructiveness” of the death drive reflects a desire to rupture the structures of recognition, to affirm a primordial experience of fragmentation through the exorbitant expenditure of self-possession, to abdicate discursivity in favor of the wordless transmission that occurs through an undifferentiated medium. But how to write of this

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<sup>1</sup> Bataille, “The Sacred Conspiracy,” in *Visions of Excess*, p. 179.



pre- or post-discursive anarchy without abating it, without enacting a betrayal? As Derrida asks, how to find a speech which maintains silence?<sup>2</sup>

The application of a Bataillan “reasoning” to Freudian metapsychology does not answer these questions; to claim that it does would be a deception. I believe that it does, however, *sustain* these questions, anticipating that which is otherwise excluded, excessive, or impossible as modes of transgression and, via the ontological crisis conjured by transgression, means of speculating the radical otherness that lies beyond. Approached as neither an object nor an abstract negation, death resists closure or synthesis in discontinuous thought, and through the heterogeneity of his writings, Bataille too resists, emphasizing or, rather, *performing* the liminality of death at its moment of occurrence<sup>3</sup> rather than reducing it to a thing of conjecture. This liminality jeopardizes the integrity of the limit, rendering it porous in such a way that life and death seep into one another, the former at its most effervescent and the latter at its most “thinkable.”

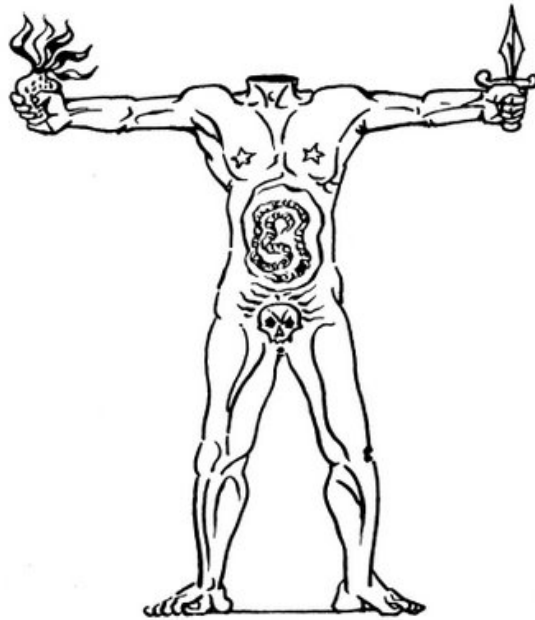
Arguably this is how the death drive operates, both in the economy of psychic life that it propels as well as in the economy of psychoanalytic theory that it so deeply destabilizes. Inhibited by the structural impossibility of its aim, the death drive does indeed appear to operate as a principle of return, not only in its compulsive striving for a pre-egoic entropy but also in the backwards motions that restore that which it dissolves, presumably so that dissolution can be experienced once more, again and again. Viewed through the peculiar prism of Bataille’s “anti-philosophy,” this restlessness is as telling as it is dizzying: the notion of life as a linear movement towards death-as-finality is displaced by the processes of alternation and alteration by which the subject engages with its own unthinkable disappearance. We have considered at length why as terminal situations

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<sup>2</sup> Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” in *Writing and Difference*, p. 262.

<sup>3</sup> Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 471-72.

neither death nor disappearance are available to thought. But, in taking up the latter as both as an experience “at the level of death” and an operation characterized by and accessed precisely as impossibility, Bataille reminds us that the force of auto-mutilating concepts lies none other than in the fact of mutilation: they lead us where we as such cannot advance, into a labyrinth of contradictions in which we lose ourselves or, otherwise, to the violent sacrifice of subjectivity itself.



*Figure 16.* André Masson, *Acéphale* (1936), drawn for public review (and para-religious society) of the same name, founded by Bataille and operational until 1939. © ADACP, Paris, 1985.

We began with one Dionysus, and I propose here we end with another – the headless emblem of *Acéphale* drawn by André Masson, and of whom Bataille writes:

He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me, but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bataille, “The Sacred Conspiracy” in *Visions of Excess*, p. 181.

Without a head to establish the dominance of reason over base matter, his is the experience of disarticulated being: “[h]e can set aside the thought that it is he or God who keeps the rest of things from being absurd.”<sup>5</sup> A labyrinth twists in the emptiness of his abdomen, suggestive of the vicissitudes of the narcissistic illusion whereby contradictions are sustained by their own endless doublings and reversals. His hand holds a dagger with which to lacerate himself, and where a phallus might be, we find a *memento mori* instead – a reminder of death as the enigmatic underbelly of (auto-)erotic union. In this confluence of horror, ecstasy, and sovereignty, the figure proclaims the self-mutilating violence of unconscious forces. A distortion of the ideal architecture of the human form and its “proper” proportions as sketched by Leonardo Da Vinci, is he perhaps the Vitruvian man of the death drive? If so, he gives us the sense of another aspiration, not of harmonious symmetry but of the riotous chaos that follows from a “logic of destruction.” Similar to what the fragmented body reflects back to subjectivity and poetry to language, the “content” of this logic is precisely what the disarticulated image or text *uncontains*: a referent that exceeds the assumptions of representation is sovereign in that it breaks from symbolic constraints, but *informe* and “impossible” for that same reason.

Incidentally, these features – excessiveness, formlessness, impossibility – also belong to a vision of the sacred which is morbid and dangerous, a “religious sensibility” which, like the fact of death or disappearance, requires that the subject abandon all anchoring points of reference in discourse and subjectivity. Indeed, it is none other than this risk which constitutes the sacred as a religious experience occurring at the level of death, as “that which, being only beyond meaning, is more than meaning.”<sup>6</sup> With its

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 180.

<sup>6</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 20.

emphasis on perishability, laceration, and the agitations of deep contradiction, Biles describes this as *hyperchristianity*. And “[t]he truth of hyperchristianity,” he writes, “is that death is at the heart of life, it is the mortal seed within life, and that the encounter with God is an experience of death within life, an impossible experience of ‘being dead.’”<sup>7</sup> Here the sacred appears through the rejection of transcendent and salvific narratives in favor of the convulsiveness of apotheosis and base materialism, the result of which is an experience of being outside of oneself – *ex stasis*.

Thus, decay and decomposition confront us with the horror of death but, as Menninghaus writes, “[o]n the other hand, the same disgust grants us a sense of the shift of rotten matter into new, rampant life.”<sup>8</sup> Beyond the separateness of “autonomous” individual beings, this teeming superfluidity of life is a oneness without homogeneity – undifferentiated but not without particularity – wherein the contingency and precariousness of existence both annihilates and animates.

In “The Pornographic Imagination,” Sontag writes: “He who transgresses not only breaks a rule. He goes somewhere that the others are not; and he knows something the others don’t know.”<sup>9</sup> What I have tried to express is that what he “knows” is something that he cannot know; where he goes, even he no longer is... But as Blanchot “concludes” *The Instant of My Death*, “[w]hat does it matter. All that remains is the feeling of lightness that is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death always in abeyance.”<sup>10</sup>

The death drive, bound as it is with life, allows for death – the “lost object” – to exist in the psyche as the unnamable aim of wish and fantasy. It is the engagement of the

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<sup>7</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Menninghaus, *Disgust*, p. 354.

<sup>9</sup> Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” p. 232.

<sup>10</sup> Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death and Demeure* (J. Derrida), Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000; p. 11.

subject with his/her own disappearance, that which allows for the *enjoyment* of an experience “on the level of death” yet, through its overflowing dialectic with life, pulls the subject back to himself like a reel on a string. Beyond the drive, there is only formlessness. A situation without referents. A situation that exceeds us, or rather, by which we exceed our limited selves. An encounter with the all, mediated by nothing.

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