
Traumatic Ambiguity

Interpretation, the Subject and the Literature of
Georges Bataille

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Summary of Thesis:

This thesis pursues two closely related lines of argument. In the first half, I explore the Bataillean notion of man through his complex relationship with Hegel and Nietzsche. The Janus-like conception that will be discovered results from Bataille's unwillingness to grant priority either to Hegel's insights concerning the structure of consciousness or to Nietzsche's claim, contra Hegel, that those putative insights 'involve a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization' (*The Gay Science*)

Bataille acknowledges the heuristic value of both thinkers' work but ultimately refuses to let either become the dominant force within his thought. In the end Bataille's human being remains caught between the 'excess' of Nietzschean Will and the 'restriction' of Hegelian consciousness. He sees human existence, much like Freud, as moving with a 'vacillating rhythm' (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) between 'conscious' and 'unconscious' activity. This recognition leads him to conclude that there exists a fundamental ambiguity to human existence – the Impossible – which resists reduction or assimilation to any kind of formal discourse.

The second half proceeds to explore this ambiguity in more detail by first teasing out the relationship between the traumatic experiences at the heart of two of Bataille's novels against the Freudian notion of Trauma (repetition automatism) and its relation to the creation of Identity. This ultimately proves insufficient when it comes to interpreting the actions of Bataille's fictional characters. However it opens a space within which other methodologies of interpretation, namely those of Lacan, Girard, and Derrida, can be investigated as potential sources of insight into those characters' psychological structures and motivation. Here they are explored in relation to each other and in order to describe and explain more adequately the 'impossible' ambiguity at the heart of Bataille's novels and conception of the human.

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This work has not been submitted in substance for any other degree or award at this or any other university or place of learning, nor is being submitted concurrently in candidature for any degree or other award.

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Prologue

Intoxication

In his critique of Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience*, Sartre claims that the experience of nonknowing "rejects every concept" that allows "designation and classification" (Bataille, 2004, p. 169) but ultimately fails. He claims that, "with the phrases 'nothing', 'night', and 'a nonknowing that lays bare' he has simply presented us with a fine little pantheistic ecstasy." (pp. 170-2) Bataille does not disagree with Sartre's claims, writing that "He accurately analyzes my mental state and, as I should point out, objectively and clearly dissects this state", going so far as to acknowledge that Sartre manages to uncover "the workings of my mind, underscoring the foolishness of its workings better from the outside that I could from the inside." (p. 170) "I was moved" (p. 170) Bataille tells us, and concedes that "I've myself observed these inextricable difficulties to which Sartre refers: my thinking and its workings took these very difficulties as their starting point, though this was like a landscape glimpsed from a speeding train." (p. 172)

'Inner Experience' is thus characterised as a movement where man is subject to "dissolution into movement" and are "reborn in other shapes, accelerating at catastrophic speeds" (p. 172). Bataille tells us: "Peering into the very limits of existence, my headlong path forward, as it formed and reformed (opened and closed), never excluded awareness of the emptiness and foolishness of my thinking." (p. 172) Thus Bataille acknowledges Sartre's claims, recognising the difficulty facing the inscription within words of an experience *in which the subject is in movement*. Sartre views the ecstatic experience that Bataille communicates as "equivalent to the pleasure of drinking a glass of spirits or feeling the sun's warmth at the beach" which cannot be "integrated into a framework of new endeavours and don't contribute to forming a new humankind superseding itself towards new goals" (p. 173) The charge then is that Bataille's dissolving movement doesn't resolve anywhere. Bataille doesn't overcome the surreptitious negative conceptualisation of nonknowledge, which puts him "*on the path to transcendence*" and is where, for Sartre, "you will find all of Mr. Bataille's bad faith..." (p. 170) Bataille however highlights one important factor missing from Sartre's critique. Sartre, judging Bataille from the outside, who "never intoxicated with any impulsiveness" (p. 172), fails to see the anguished revelation that is at the heart of this movement:

That is true, although I insist: specifically from the fact that that is what they are, specifically because I am left empty, they continue on within me as anguish. What I tried to describe in *Inner Experience* is a movement that as it loses any possibility of coming to a halt, falls easily under the attack of a criticism

that thinks it can effect a halt from the outside, since this criticism itself isn't *caught* in that movement. My giddy fall and the *difference* it introduces into the mind can be grasped only by those experiencing it for themselves. Hence the possibility of reproaching me, as Sartre has done, first with leading readers to God and then with leading them to the void! These contradictory reproaches support my own assertion: *I don't lead anywhere*. (p. 173)

Judging from the outside and not 'giddy' with intoxication, Sartre is unable to see, challenging Bataille on the *appearance* of what he says, that the "certainty of incoherence in reading, the inevitable crumbling of the soundest constructions, is the deep truth of books. Since appearance constitutes a limit, what truly exists is dissolution into common opacity rather than a development of lucid thinking. The apparent unchangingness of books is deceptive: each book is also the sum of the misunderstandings it occasions" (p. 173) The problem facing Sartre here then is one of interpretation, of approaching a text "from methods that, adequate only to an *outcome* of knowledge, confer on individuals whom they limit a sheerly *fragmentary existence*" and present "an existence which is mutilated with respect to the whole that remains inaccessible." (p. 175)

Bataille counters Sartre by claiming that his interpretation was bound to fall short owing to its sobriety. Without *intoxication* Bataille claims that one would fail to recognise the "uncoordinated flashes" of thought which withdraw "endlessly from a term to which its movement pushes it." (p. 175) However, one might argue that rather than approaching from a position of philosophical sobriety and thus limiting his ability to be caught within Bataille's movement, Sartre may be himself intoxicated with his own position, one which prevents him from sliding into an alternative mode of intoxication and blinds him to the self-effacing aspects of Bataille's thought. Bataille recognised this difficulty affecting his own position: "I can't tell if I'm expressing human helplessness this way, or my own..." (p. 175). It is here that I can state the aims of this thesis, where three central issues are to be explored:

- 1) That within Bataille's novellas there can be perceived a desire to affect the reader and induce a dislocating moment of 'trauma'. This trauma is one that seeks to undermine the fictional self-conscious subject through the uncovering of a locus of unintelligibility that resists the movement of negative appropriation that is constitutive of the subject, without however leading towards a position of total loss. Such a desire to enact trauma is an integral part of Bataille's theoretical conception of literature arising as the result of a "still sickly will to *agitation*" (Bataille, 1985d, p. 93), reinforced by his conception of Transgression and Taboo.

- 2) That Bataille's conception of man – of his “*whole human being*” (Bataille, 2004, p. xxii) – is one of a *contested* individual, caught between the movement towards dissolution inherent within ‘life’ and the drive to restrict loss which is constitutive of the subject. The reading proposed here is one that seeks to reveal Bataille's man as caught between poles of affectivity, between excess and restriction, and recognises that neither total loss (except in death) nor complete appropriation is possible within the paradoxical lived life of man. In the relationship between Bataille, Hegel and Nietzsche, it will be shown that, as Bataille is not able to jettison the Hegelian tendency towards negativity, he will be unable to fully leave him behind (despite his conflicting engagement with Nietzsche), where the resultant tension between their positions within Bataille's work is evocative of his conception of man.
- 3) That the process of interpretation, of reading the text, involves in the reader an *intoxication* with the position from which interpretation follows and, seeking to appropriate that which it interprets, exacerbates the acceleration towards that “terminal result” that produces the “*excretion of unassimilable elements.*” (Bataille, 1985d, p. 99) The limitations of interpretive method as a negative process of appropriation will be explored with reference to Freud, Lacan and the ‘imaginary’ or fictive self. Read in such a way, in attempting to delimit and appropriate the ambiguous locus – a festering nub of illegibility – at the heart of Bataille's work, we will see that the drive towards appropriation falls prey to its own methods of appropriation. This however is essential to understanding Bataille's method of writing.

One might say that the reading of Bataille's work to be presented here is a *conservative* one, and one which seeks, as far as possible, to be mindful of the pitfalls of a reading which implies that one already approach the text *under the influence*. That is not to say that the reading being proposed here is superior to that of others, but instead, recognises that it is one interpretation amongst others, *intoxicated in its own way*, and recognises that the varying interpretations can be read as responses to the ambiguity that is at the heart of Bataille's writing. What it does provide however in contrast to other interpretations is one which is sensitive to an aspect of Bataille's work which often goes unnoticed within the secondary literature – that of the inevitability of the *decline* back into restriction following excess. My approach aligns itself with the insights Shoshana Felman provides into the problematic of interpretation where it seeks:

Not so much to solve or *answer* the enigmatic question of the text but to investigate its structure; not so much to name and make *explicit* the ambiguity of the text, but to understand the necessity and rhetorical

functioning of the textual ambiguity. The question underlying such a reading is thus not “*What* does the story mean?” but rather “*How* does the story mean?” How does the meaning of the story, whatever it may be, rhetorically take place through permanent displacement, textually take shape and take effect. (Felman, 2003, p. 165)

In her work *Writing and Madness*, Felman draws attention to the potential pitfalls which the critical reader must be aware of when approaching a text. In reference to the critical divide between Freudian and anti-Freudian readings of Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw* she identifies that when the critic begins the process of interpretation they bring with them their prejudices and preferences which affect not only how they approach a text, but also how they interpret it. This results in a tendency (evidenced, she feels, in the critical debate surrounding James’s novella) “not so much to answer *to* the text, as to answer *for* the text.” (Felman, 2003, p. 152) James’ critics, both those of the Freudian and anti-Freudian camp are arguing about the *appearance* of the text under the rubric of Psychoanalytic attempts to interpret it. The legitimacy of such an endeavour is what is brought into question, and as Felman argues, such an attempt leaves them blind to the fact that in their drive to answer ‘for’ the text, they are in truth being made to answer ‘to’ it; the ambiguity of the text serving to add oxygen to the already burning fire of Freudian fuel and interpretive heat. Suleiman, in her essay ‘Transgression and the Avant-Garde’, echoes this thought, and recognises that ‘textual’ interpreters of Bataille’s work suffer from a certain blindness:

If there is one thing, however, that the theorists of textuality have taught us, it is that no reading is innocent. Every reading is an interpretation, and every interpretation is an appropriation of a text for its own purposes. Every interpretation has its blind spot, which I like to think of not only as the spot or place from which the interpreter cannot “see” his or her own misreading of a text, but also as the spot or place in a text from which the interpreter averts his or her gaze. (1995, p. 318)

The ‘textual’ critics (Barthes, Sollers, Kristeva and Blanchot amongst others) for Suleiman recognise, as this thesis itself contends, that “Bataille’s pornographic narratives” are “inseparable from his other writings” (p. 319), but their focus on the linguistic ‘games’ that Bataille plays leaves them blind to other aspects of Bataille’s narratives. Barthes in his ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’ examines the “metaphorical composition” (2001, p. 120) of Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* and traces the migration of the image chains within Bataille’s work which “exhibits a controlled difference” between their successive variations. This migration is subject to a “metonymy that interchanges” and “sets about abolishing” the distinctions between them, resulting in a “blurred” world where “properties are no longer separate” and “form a *wavy* meaning” (p. 125). For Barthes it is this play with the structure of language which allows for the creation of a seam between two edges, and opens the space in which Bataille, through his writing, is able to draw in his reader:

Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarising edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. (1975, p. 6)

Bataille's [writing] has the connotation of the man's very being and is a style. Between the two something is born that transforms all experience into language that is *askew*. (2001, p. 127)

By focussing on the linguistic structure and its violation, the 'textual' critic seeks to isolate within Bataille's work the stylistic methodology which Bataille uses to draw his reader into a moment of diffusion. However, for Suleiman, such a reading downplays the obscene representations within his work by focussing on "the primacy of Bataille's linguistic violations over the sexual and cultural violations that the narrative represents" (1995, p. 319) which she argues arise more from "their general suspicion and critique of representation in art, and in narrative fiction in particular, than to sexual timidity" (p. 320) In contrast to such a reading, she identifies in the work of Dworkin an overriding focus on representation. Suleiman tells us "she cannot take her eyes off it" and that this gives rise to an alternative blind spot: "Dworkin reads too quickly; she devours the text in order to get to its 'core,' or (to change metaphors) she traverses it without attention to its shape or the grain of its surface." (p. 322) This 'wilful misreading' by Dworkin however does serve to highlight a pertinent question that Suleiman feels is not addressed by those textual critics closely aligned with the intellectual avant-gardes:

Dworkin's wilful misreading, or flattening, of *Histoire de l'oeil* provokes at least one important question of anyone interested in modern writing: To what extent are the high-cultural productions of the avant-gardes of our century in a relation of complicity rather than in a relation of rupture vis-à-vis dominant ideologies?... twentieth century avant-gardes have proclaimed their subversive relation to the dominant culture; in a sense they have lived on (or off) this relation. (p. 325)

Following her identification of the blind spot in both the textual and representational readings, she proceeds to present her own conception of Bataille's work which combines aspects of both claims (of the linguistic violations in Barthes and the critique of narrative representations of sexuality in Dworkin) to present her own synthetic reading:

The female body in its duplicity as asexual maternal and sexual feminine, is the very emblem of the contradictory coexistence of transgression and prohibition, purity and defilement, that characterizes both the "inner experience" of eroticism and the textual play of the pornographic narrative. (p. 327)

And:

As far as Bataille's text is concerned, it is clear that whichever interpretation one emphasizes, the focus is on the son's view of the mother's genitals, which invariably leads him to a recognition of sexual difference and to a split in his own experience: either through the combination of fascination and terror provoked by the mother's sexuality (in the first interpretation), or through the combination of fear and desire, manifested in active versus passive sexual roles, as concerns his own castration (in the second interpretation)... In its self-conscious mediation on its own Oedipal sources, Bataille's pornographic

fiction (one finds this mediation, in one form or another, in all Bataille's novels) is a far cry from the pulp novels or trashy magazine photos that serve up their fantasies straight. The difference between them is, one could argue, the difference between blindness and insight. (p. 328)

Recalling Felman, the focus within this thesis will not be to illustrate *what* the text means (what the obscene depictions mean or represent), nor the linguistic play¹ within his texts, but *how* the text means. The *how* that I am proposing, that the ambiguous traumatic impact of Bataille's literature reveals the contested nature of human existence, aligns with what Patrick ffrench claims as the "possibility of situating, historically and, let's say, erotically, the *action* of the structural, its *affect*." (1999, p. 25) Along with ffrench, I am mindful of attempts to establish Bataille as a 'crown prince' of transgressive literature who reveals the excessive 'reality' that exceeds the boundaries of restricted identity. ffrench recognises that such a tendency reveals itself in certain strands of Bataille scholarship as "a desire to dirty one's hands, to 'get down into the shit'", and it is with him that I recognise that this can reveal a tendency towards a "potentially exploitative and redundant discourse"² (p. 25) Such a statement requires further qualification, and it is in reference to Nick Land's *The Thirst for Annihilation* that we will turn to check such a tendency.

Land's book seeks – explicitly³ – to align itself with Bataille (along with Sade, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) and evoke the de-structive power of Bataille's work. He seeks to fight against the 'inanity' of Bataille scholarship (and academic discourse in general) which seeks to have him "pimped out into the career flows of the Western academies" (1992, p. xii) and that he sees as resulting in Bataille being "increasingly snarled up

¹ I include the 'textual' readings as evoking the 'what' of Bataille's writings as, despite claims to the effect that the sliding of linguistic rules pushes the reader towards dissolution, it does not seem apparent why this has the effect that it is claimed. Richman stresses the following point which suggests that the textual interpreters overstate the importance of linguistic violations for Bataille's aim of literature as enacting a practical heterology which reintroduces heterogenous elements:

Bataille insists that he uses language in a "classical" fashion, implying that the experience of sovereignty cannot be transmitted through play on words. (1982, p. 69)

² It is worth mentioning ffrench's own frame of reference here for he approaches these 'redundant' discourses – in relation to the reading of Bataille's *Story of the Eye* – from a position where he states: "I hold that one cannot read *Histoire de l'oeil* except in relation to Barthes, today" (pp. 6-7)

³ Some examples of Land's self-alignment:

"They are right to say that in trafficking these words I correspond to a zone of Nietzsche's maximum detestation; vermin, disease, madness, anarchy, and religion flow through me as through their own space. Through Bataille also" (1992, p. 205)

"The horror of Sade's writing is not to be diminished... Perhaps no one has betrayed life with the ardour he has, unless Bataille, or myself." (p. 193)

in the deconstructivist pulp industry of endless commentary on Logocentrism, Western metaphysics, and other various *Seinsvergessenheiten*.” (p. xiii) To this end, Land provides an incisive commentary ‘on’ Bataille which positions them both (Bataille and himself) on the outside of philosophical discourse, and which seeks to show that his texts result, to use Bataille’s comment on Nietzsche, in a “dazzling dissolution into totality” (2004, p. xxviii). In this vein Land poses the following question:

What do we find in these texts after all? Even at the discursive level they seem to suggest that individuality, creativity, and possession are illusions, that literature is something quite other than work, and that completion is inevitably aborted. They dramatize their gaps, absences, discontinuities, repudiate their authenticity, contest themselves. The rafts of coherence one finds are always adrift in disorder and confusion. Tortured juxtapositions, fragments, and abandoned plans abound. (1992, pp. 177-8)

In contrast to ‘academic’ interpretations, Land emphasises those ‘dissolving’ aspects of Bataille’s work which, drawing power from the excessive energy flowing from the general economy, “floods the nervous system with potentially catastrophic quantities of nervous excitation”. (p. 48) The “fragmentation” of the structure of Bataille’s writing which “cannot be domesticated” (p. 178), leads to a “death denuded all sophistical ornamentation” (p. 73) which “betrays, corrodes, and liquidates utility – regressing to the burning lava flow of its base materiality” (p. 185) Reading Land, one finds him obsessed with Bataille as an *excremental* writer, feeding off the excessive themes perceptible within his work and chastising those who seemingly ‘don’t get it’, descending as he does into grand verbiage as if in parody of Bataille himself:

Ah! Such abysses of disease open before me. I decay, transfixed upon abolition. Ardent for collapse, I explore the rotting cities of the inner edge. The stink of opium interweaves with that of bat-dung and fungus. The moon mutters its electric paean to ruin, and I gaze into the grave of my life which gapes its moist idiocy. (p. 208)

Perhaps such a characterisation is unfair, although given his staunch anti-intellectual tone throughout⁴, and his vehement disregard for practitioners of deconstruction in particular – he amusingly claims that “If deconstruction spent less time playing with its willy maybe it could cross the line...” (p. 26) – one senses that his desire to present Bataille (and himself) as an excessive, excremental writer has more to do with some desire to distance himself from the academy than an experience “of death entangled in wolf threads and ravings” (p. 209) We find two conflicting tendencies within Land’s work, one to present a work *through* Bataille, evoking the dissolute *impossible experience*, the second to concurrently utilise the very tools and tricks of those he

⁴ Land’s work is littered with broadsides against academia. He tells us: “Scholarship is the subordination of culture to the metrics of work” and “Scholars have an inordinate respect for long books, and have a terrible *rancune* against those that attempt to cheat on them. They cannot bear to imagine that short-cuts are possible, that specialism is not an inevitability, that learning need not be stoically *endured*... Scholars do not write to be read, but to be measured. They want it to be known that they have worked hard.” (1992, pp. 35-6)

despises. His work is not a mad raving, but one through which a vein of academic rigour flows in parallel with the presentation of dissolution. It is this academic rigour that goes unacknowledged and leads us to recognise that he remains blind to the inevitability of falling back into the ‘perversity’ of academic interpretation. By claiming that his work makes no “special pleading for itself” (1992, p. xiii) and contrasting it with that “pure pornography” which seeks to “season Bataille in preparation for his comfortable digestion by capital’s cultural machine” (p. xii) he fails to acknowledge the apparent hypocrisy of his academically orientated analyses of Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Aquinas and Augustine. This, however, is not reason for the indictment of Land’s work, for as has already been noted, ‘intoxication’ (in Land’s case with the transgressive, *subversive* Bataille) is central to the problem of interpretation (see chapter 2.5) and, as this thesis will contend, the locus of ambiguity at the heart of Bataille’s work draws towards it those who to seek to interpret, interrogate and appropriate this festering nub. In being drawn towards it they ultimately fall prey to the ‘shock’ (Benjamin) of its traumatic affect when intoxication leads one to fail to prepare adequately⁵ for this irruption.

As such, in recognising (genuinely or not) the interwoven practical elements (textual, representational, psychological, and economic) that Bataille puts into play to evoke his traumatic affect, Land exceeds other interpreters. However, despite the subtlety of his interpretation (but perhaps not presentation), one can perceive within his work his own ‘blind spot’; that of the inevitability of the failure of the moment of ‘excessive’ communication and the return to ‘capital’s cultural machine’. Land tells us:

Due to the general hunger for land, and the richness of the sediment that has been carried down to the sea, these fragile traces are enthusiastically occupied, rice is cultivated upon them, and fish harvested from their shores. It takes no great feat of imagination to envisage the fate of the peasants and fishermen clustered on these insubstantial ripples of earth when the cyclones return. (p. 106)

In the above anecdote, Land illustrates how the ‘economic’ need for appropriation shields us from the “harsh truth from which we can momentarily hide” (p. 106), and establishes an illusory sense of security and stability over and above the “immense explosions” (p. 106) which both gave birth to and will ultimately be subject to “annihilation... in which all stability is washed away”. (pp. 106-7) ‘Clustered’ on the ‘insubstantial ripples’ of

⁵ Benjamin comments on the nature of the self and how it reacts to such ‘shocks’: “The threat from these energies is one of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect. Psychoanalytic theory strives to understand the nature of these traumatic shocks ‘on the basis of their breaking through the protective shield against stimuli.’ According to this theory, fright has a ‘significance’ in the ‘absence of any preparedness for anxiety’” (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 157-8)

land, the inhabitants eager appropriation of resources is foolhardy given the impending doom that awaits them. Land perceives the desire to exploit the resources that are deposited by the cyclone's passing as akin to those of Reason and Philosophy, which "in its legitimate function is a defence against the sea" but is ignorant of the "longing for the open ocean" and the "dark fluidity at the roots of our nature" (p. 107) In this way, the life which has been reclaimed from the sea is presented as illusory, temporary and futile in the face of the vast impersonal destruction of nature. What Land fails to acknowledge is that following the cyclone's ultimate return *new* 'fragile traces' will be produced whilst the former are washed away and, much like before, new occupants will come, just as hungry and just as ignorant of the fragility of their predicament as those that came before. It is not a question therefore of excess versus restriction (as we will see in Chapter 2.3 where Bataille's notions of Taboo and Transgression will be discussed), since their relationship, as Michele Richman tells us, is much more complex:

The heterogeneous, which for Bataille encompasses the sacred, may ultimately be determined by the boundaries of the profane restricted economy, but the homogeneous itself also depends upon that limit for its definition and derives its internal cohesion from an initial ejection. The attraction/repulsion dynamic therefore shifts the frontiers between rationality and irrationality as they are established by the inside/outside limit. (1982, p. 53)

The Terminal Phase

The objectivity of heterogeneous elements thus is only of purely theoretical interest, since one can only attain it on the condition that one envisage *waste products* in the total form of the infinite obtained by negation (in other words, objective heterogeneity's shortcoming is that it can only be envisaged in an abstract form, whereas the subjective heterogeneity of particular elements is, in practice, alone concrete). (Bataille, 1985d, p. 98)

In his 'Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade' Bataille provides us with a conception of writing as an *active*, practical undertaking which seeks to accelerate the workings of a rational and productive accumulation to arrive at a 'terminal phase' where the waste products of this process resist "regression to homogeneous nature" (p. 98) By outlining the "two polarized human impulses" (p. 94) of appropriation and excretion (aligned to the profane and sacred realms respectively) Bataille identifies that these two opposing tendencies are driving towards homogeneity in the first instance, and heterogeneity in the second. However, he does not see both of these impulses as running parallel to each other, that is, in conflict for superiority. Indeed, owing to the character of rational appropriation which involves "everywhere replacing *a priori* inconceivable objects with classified series of conceptions or ideas" (p. 96), the inevitable result for Bataille is the definition – or excretion – of "the irreducible waste products of the operation." (p. 96) Thus, the process of appropriation – that of "the *sufficient*

identification of an endless world with a finite world, an unknowable (noumenal) world with the known (phenomenal) world” (p. 96) – ultimately, by seeking to subsume the objects of the world into a unified and homogeneous system, delimits spaces which resist assimilation:

The intellectual process automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element. Heterology is restricted to taking up again, consciously and resolutely, this terminal process which up until now has been seen as the abortion and the shame of human thought. (p. 97)

These waste products are an inevitable, if unpalatable, result of the drive towards homogeneity. However, Bataille acknowledges that the tendency to seek to “attain *once again* the notion of the unity of being” (p. 98) is one that attempts to avoid confronting at all costs its own waste products, and through a process of abstraction attempts to arrive at a “cancellation of their excremental character.” (p. 98) In seeking to re-appropriate for a second time the objects which are spat out of its process, they are reduced and defined again:

It would be too easy to find in objective nature a large number of phenomena that in a crude way correspond to the human model of excretion and appropriation... One can attain it more generally through animals, plants, matter, nature, and being, without meeting really consistent obstacles. Nevertheless, it can already be indicated that as one moves away from man, the opposition loses its importance to the point where it is only a superimposed form... borrowed from a different order of facts. (p. 98)

Bataille therefore identifies the need for a practical heterology which seeks to “resist this dilution” through an active process which “resolutely goes against this regression to homogeneous nature” (p. 98) and which, as he defines elsewhere, attempts to “affirm on the contrary that the universe resembles nothing at all and is only *formless*... that the universe is something akin to a spider or a gob of spittle” (1995, p. 52) Writing (or poetry) for Bataille is here a practical attempt to undermine the rational drive towards appropriation and sublimation of heterogeneous elements, which as he claims in his ‘Notions of Expenditure’, works to “provoke dread and horror through symbolic representations of tragic loss (degradation or death)” (1985c, p. 120) and seeks to effect in the reader what Barthes highlights as a recognition of “a scandal (an irregularity), that it is always the trace of a cut, of an assertion (and not of a flowering), and that the subject of this history... is never anything but a ‘living contradiction’: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall.” (1975, p. 21)

The poetry Bataille defines must be distinguished from what normally passes for poetry. He stresses that heterological poetry bears little resemblance to a poetry which “is reduced to playing the role of the standard

of things” at the mercy of the “great historical systems of appropriation” (1985d, p. 97). The poetry of which Bataille speaks recognises and seeks to exacerbate that terminal process of appropriation, utilising language and reason as a means towards the introduction of excremental, heterogeneous elements. This process involves more than a mere play with words or the representation of – read symbolic – expenditure, for it is both the poet and reader who are involved in the game. Poetry, utilising language to accelerate the terminal process, induces in the reader who seeks to ‘appropriate’ it (for the tendency to appropriate is “characterized by a homogeneity [static equilibrium] of the author of the appropriation” (Bataille, 1985d, p. 95)) a potential laceration or split. The literary process, or perhaps better, the practical enactment of poetry, is an *insubordinate* process, not revolutionary, but one which tends towards *agitation* by working to liberate “impulses whose ambivalence is more and more pronounced” (p. 95) all the while being painfully aware of its complicity with the process of appropriation. The poet is aware of such a predicament:

Poetic expenditure ceases to be symbolic in its consequences; thus, to a certain extent, the function of representation engages the very life of the one who assumes it. It condemns him to the most disappointing forms of activity, to misery, to despair, to the pursuit of inconsistent shadows that provide nothing but vertigo or rage. The poet frequently can use words only for his own loss; he is often forced to choose between the destiny of a reprobate, who is as profoundly separated from society as dejecta are from apparent life, and a renunciation whose price is a mediocre activity, subordinated to vulgar and superficial needs. (Bataille, 1985c, p. 120)

However, for Bataille, even in such a position, this attempt is essential:

It is only by such insubordination – even if it is impoverished – that the human race ceases to be isolated in the unconditional splendour of material things. (1985c, p. 128)

Bataille expands upon this in his *Literature and Evil* where within his study on Blake he draws attention to poetry’s dual aspect. Although the aim of poetry is to undermine the apparent mastery of the process of appropriation, it must acknowledge that the individual that is founded upon the very rejection of heterogeneous elements is a *conscious* individual. Though in relation to the total movement of appropriation and excretion this consciousness may only be *partial* or *illusory*, it nevertheless remains present, in relation to itself as a conscious subject:

Though poetry does not accept sense-data in their naked state, it is by no means always contemptuous of the outer world. Rather, it challenges the precise limitations of objects between themselves, while admitting their external nature. It denies and it destroys immediate reality because it sees in it the screen which conceals the true face of the world from us. Nevertheless poetry admits the exteriority of tools or of walls *in relation to the ego*. (1973, p. 64)

The reader and writer of poetry rely upon their consciousness to experience the very poetry which seeks to destroy its immediate reality. Thus poetry and the poet are reliant upon the very system that they seek to

undermine. Within such a space, the agitation of practical heterology seeks to exacerbate the appropriative tendency towards the 'terminal phase' which reveals man as a 'scandal'. Through 'poetry', Bataille seeks to effect between "between a man and his fellow creatures" (Bataille, 1991, p. 1) what Richman terms "disruptive 'breaks' with the closed systems" (1982, p. 68) which define him as "a truncated creature severed from any sense of wholeness" (p. 43). It is through the "rending transgression of limits" (p. 74) which "divest the individual of impediments" (p. 69) that prevent a mode of communication, founded upon a movement born of crime – that is the transgression of the inviolable sanctity of the self – from taking place. The 'sickly will to agitation' that drives the author to write seeks to undermine the structure which is "perceived as an agonising affliction" (Bataille, 1991, p. 1) "Literature", Bataille tells us, "is communication: a sovereign author addresses sovereign humanity, beyond the servitude of the isolated reader" (1973, p. 160), and it is through his practice of poetry as agitation that he seeks to affect the reader and induce this moment of communication which interrupts the restricted economy of identity:

Scandal is the same thing as consciousness: a consciousness without scandal is alienated consciousness – a consciousness, experience proves it, of clear and distinct objects, intelligible, or thought to be so. The passage from intelligibility to unintelligibility, from that which, no longer being knowable, suddenly no longer seems tolerable to us, is certainly at the origin of this feeling of scandal, but it is less a question of difference of level than an experience 'given' in the major communication of beings. (p. 171)

This scandal takes the form of an irruption into the closed homogeneous economy of rationality and order. By revealing "the *instantaneous* fact that consciousness is consciousness of another consciousness" (Bataille, 1973, p. 171), Bataille's writing becomes what Hollier calls an "antiarchitectural gesture" (1992, p. 23). By introducing a *rupture* that reveals the "multiplicity of consciousnesses that reflect each other" (Bataille, 1973, p. 171) the relational - and partial – restricted identity is subjected to a revelation of its "habitual activity" (p. 171) that it has mistaken for the truth of itself, and is *scandalized, shocked, and traumatized*.

For French, this traumatic revelation is "a shock or affect which remains unrepresentable" and "will not allow itself to be represented, because it is immediate" (1999, p. 86). If this traumatic irruption is indeed unrepresentable, and given the previously highlighted reliance poetry has on the very structure Bataille seeks to subvert, the following difficulty is raised: If the poet is complicit with the very system of appropriation, if indeed to agitate he must use the very structure of linguistic appropriation to introduce heterogeneous elements

but resist the tendency which seeks to neutralize excremental phenomenon through the appeal to an objective, abstracted reality, then how can such an impossible poetry be possible? Can one write from within the structure that the poet seeks to unravel and, using its tools, inscribe “that untenable, impossible, purely novelistic instant” which equates with a man managing “to be hanged and then cut the rope at the very moment of his orgasm”? (Barthes, 1975, p. 7)

Habermas and the Possibility of Sovereignty

The fundamental economic question is inverted: the key problem is no longer the use of scarce resources but the unselfish expenditure of superfluous resources. That is, Bataille proceeds from the biological assumption that the living organism collects more energy than it uses to reproduce its life. The surplus energy is used for growth. When this comes to a standstill, the unabsorbed surplus of energy has to be spent unproductively – the energy must be lost without gain. This can occur in either a ‘glorious’ or in a ‘catastrophic’ form. Socio-cultural life also stands under the pressure of surplus energy (Habermas, 1984, p. 100)

Habermas observes that Bataille’s conception of the Sovereign derives directly from his understanding of the biological ‘make-up’ of man; in life, man has more energy at his disposal than is required to sustain growth and reproduction. Following the accumulation of energy, if it cannot be utilised towards some useful end, it is instead expended in a way in which the utility of this expenditure is not considered. This theory can be seen to apply to the erotic when, once the requirement for reproductive sexuality is no longer a necessity for survival – that is, the survival of the individual, family, society or humanity at large – desire gives rise to a surplus of erotically charged energy which finds an outlet through non-reproductive eroticism. One thinks here of the advances in medical care that have led to a state where constant sexual activity aimed at reproduction is redundant as improving health care has led to a significant drop in infant mortality and (particularly in Western society) where the need to create a sufficiently large family to provide support and care to the elderly and infirm is no longer a necessity. However, the energy that produces sexual desire is itself still present and, whilst not *necessary* for the support and growth of the individual or societal group, requires an outlet – in this case the erotic discharge.

Now this for Habermas is not entirely problematic in and of itself. What he takes issue with at this point is not Bataille’s ‘metaphysics’ or theory of expenditure but instead the apparent conflict between the identification of this ‘expenditure’ and the logic that he uses to draw his conclusions. In delineating this moment of

sovereignty, Bataille has indicated a limit to reason in its ability to understand the totality of man's 'being'. However, as we shall see, Bataille believes that whilst this produces an inconsistency in knowledge, that is, the recognition of a *rupture*, by pushing ourselves towards this limit and through pursuing the object that produces this rupture we are able to obtain what Habermas calls a 'boiling point'. It is a point where, on the cusp of dissolution, the knowing subject is able to enter into the movement of total risk whilst retaining 'knowledge' of the experiences which lacerate his being. In such a way, it could be said that Bataille is attempting to create a 'science' of sovereignty. This science of sovereignty would involve an apparently paradoxical reclamation of the dissolving sovereignty into an *Impossible Writing*, a meditation on the moment of sovereignty and the experience that one has in this moment, where the Subject speaks as Subject in the moment of its own dissolution. Habermas identifies a potential problem with this attempt which forms the basis of his critique:

If sovereignty and its source, the sacral, is related to the world of purposive-rational action in an absolutely heterogeneous fashion; if the subject and reason are constituted only by excluding all kinds of sacral power; if the other of reason is more than just the irrational or the unknown – namely, the incommensurable which cannot be touched by reason, except at the cost of the explosion of the rational subject – then there is no possibility of a theory that reaches beyond the horizon of what is accessible to reason and thematizes, let alone analyses, the interaction of reason with a transcendent source of power. Bataille is aware of this dilemma; he has experimented with the idea of a non-objectifying science and speculated about the extreme where the knowing subject... reaches his 'boiling point'. At this point however, the knowing subject would – paradoxically – have to surrender his own identity and yet retrieve those experiences to which it was exposed in ecstasy – to catch them like fish from the decentred ocean of emotions. (1984, p. 101)

Habermas identifies the central issue with which we are concerned: if in the moment of eroticism (that 'boiling point'), the Subject has to let go of its Identity which is required to *experience* this very sovereignty, then how is this *possible*? If this is indeed a paradox, and the experience exceeds the potential of reason to accumulate and maintain itself in Identity, then how can we legitimately claim to talk about this 'sovereignty'; if it escapes discourse, it necessitates that one remains silent in regard to it. Bataille recognised this and posited that the experience itself forces a profound silence onto man, a silence akin to that of Christian mystics in the face of the divine for (as we will see in our coming analysis of Hegel); "Discursive knowledge remains hopelessly caught in the circle of linguistic sequences: 'Language assembles the totality of what has meaning for us, but fragments it at the same time... Our attention remains directed towards that whole which slips away from us in a series of statements, but we cannot reach the point at which the flashes of successive statements yield to the grand illumination'." (Habermas, 1984, p. 102) Unable to create a *meaning* for the sovereign moment, the

movement of discursive knowledge remains perpetually caught in an attempt to sublimate within Identity the knowledge of a moment in which it is slipping away.

At this point Habermas believes he has found the weak point in Bataille's 'critique' of reason for he believes that, by establishing the limit of reason (and by proxy philosophy and science) but not being able to stop its voracious march towards knowledge, Bataille has 'failed' to press right through with what he set out to do. He claims that "philosophy and science cannot in the same way break out of the universe of language" and that ultimately "Bataille undercuts his own radical critique of reason with the tools of theory" (Habermas, 1984, p. 102).

Habermas' critique is analogous to that which Derrida makes against Foucault in his 'Cogito and the History of Madness'. Counter to Foucault's claim that he "wanted to write a history of madness *itself*, that is madness speaking on the basis of its own experience and under its own authority" (Derrida, 2001, p. 39) Derrida raises the following challenge:

Would not the archaeology of silence be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the *repetition*, in the most irreducibly ambiguous meaning of the word, of the act perpetrated against madness – and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced? (2001, p. 41)

In Foucault's work, Derrida focuses upon the apparent 'decision' between reason and madness he finds in Descartes meditations and from which Foucault establishes the nature of madness as the 'other' of reason. From this, inferring the oppositional framework of the reason/madness structure, Derrida, much like Habermas in his critique of Bataille, homes in on the problem with such a conception:

To be true and for there to be a real choice between them, it must be assumed in *general* that reason can have a contrary, that there can be an other of reason, that reason itself can construct or discover, and that the opposition of reason to its other is *symmetrical*. This is the heart of the matter. (2001, p. 48)

We have already seen how Bataille employs oppositional notions in his writing to undermine the structure of restricted Identities founded upon them. Day and Night, Good and Evil; such oppositions are subverted by Bataille in his work through the 'reversal of cosmic order'. Recognising this, we are able to make the claim that the undermining of these structures exhibited within his fiction can be extended to the Reason/Unreason

dichotomy identified by Habermas.

The mistake that Habermas makes is to assume that Bataille wanted to write ‘sovereignly’ and that this also entailed an attempt to bring this writing into the sphere of significative discourse. The assumption here is that the object of Bataille's *method* (to evoke the sovereign) is something that itself is able to be inscribed within the lexicon of rational discourse, that the moment of sovereignty must be equivalent to its exposition and the descriptive language used must be equivalent to the object. We will see that this is in fact contrary to what is exhibited in his works. It is by a sleight of hand that Bataille creates a moment of communication that upsets the subject and language through its *affect*.

Habermas *misreads* Bataille, just as Derrida, characteristically⁶, claims Foucault misreads Descartes. It is such a misreading which ultimately undermines Habermas’ argument for he fails, as Derrida claims Foucault does, to recognize that:

Language being the break with madness it adheres more thoroughly to its essence and vocation, makes a cleaner break with madness, if it pits itself against madness more freely and gets closer and closer to it: to the point of being separated from it only by the “transparent sheet” of which Joyce speaks. (Derrida, 2001, p. 66)

For Bataille it is not a case of overcoming reason or producing a ‘new’ philosophy founded upon the idea of excess. Instead, what he is attempting to show are the limitations of discursive language in pursuing the final object of its desire (the absolute). Far from revalorising language to bring this moment into a cohesive whole, Bataille wants to show how language itself leads us towards objects that irrupt through and open the *wound* that reveals itself as man. It is by pushing significative discourse to a point of rupture that Bataille affords us a glimpse of, through the cracks and fissures, a picture of man *contested*; “Where would we be without language? It has made us what we are. It alone can show us the sovereign moment at the farthest point of being where it can no longer act as currency. In the end the articulate man confesses his own impotence” (2006, p. 276)

⁶ Characteristic for Derrida makes the same charge against Lacan in his analysis of Poe’s work (as we will see in Chapter 2.4), and also towards Searle in his ‘Limited INC’, the reply to Searle’s critique of his ‘Signature, Event, Context’

For Derrida, Descartes' Cogito never truly makes the break with madness which he claims Foucault perceives. The certainty that the cogito achieves, that apparent triumph of reason over doubt, has for Derrida, owing to our being "too well assured of ourselves and too well accustomed to the framework of the Cogito", blinded us to the "mad audacity" (2001, p. 67) which determines its inaugural moment:

An original point which no longer belongs to either a *determined* reason or a *determined* unreason, no longer belongs to them as oppositional or alternative... Madness is therefore, in every sense of the word, only one *case* of thought... to this zero point at which determined meaning and nonmeaning come together in their common origin. (2001, p. 68)

Here, one can infer that the 'boiling point' that Habermas speaks of is akin to that "silent and specific moment" where reason and unreason coalesce "at the point of greatest proximity to madness." (Derrida, 2001, p. 72) It is here that the sovereign moment comes into view. It cannot, exceeding reason, 'describe itself', reflect on itself or produce a *meaning* for itself. It is only within the boundaries of language that we can reflect upon this sovereignty, the irony being, that the closer it gets to the object of its reflection, the closer it is to its ruination. In this way we can describe Sovereignty's *effects*, we can *observe* its resultant phenomena, but we cannot, ultimately, capture this *experience* itself and reduce it to knowledge. This moment is not knowledge; it is outside of that economy of equivalent exchange and provokes silence at the moment of its appearance. It makes me ecstatic; I am at the moment outside of myself, I am at once both I and not I.

Bataille's writing stands between the possible (reason) and the impossible (unreason) and "keeps within itself the trace of a violence." This violence anticipates the "menacing powers of madness" (Derrida, 2001, p. 75) and seeks to create a moment which lacerates language and its structure of significant meaning. However, as Bataille notes, this attempt to *say* the impossible cannot be completed within a 'significant' discourse. Philosophy and reason are not up to the task: "It uses language in such a way that silence never follows, so that the supreme moment is necessarily beyond philosophical questioning. At any rate, it is beyond philosophy as far as philosophy claims to answer its own questions" (2006, pp. 274-5). But, whilst Bataille recognises the limitations of language, he acknowledges the impossibility of avoiding the desire to inscribe the experience into his project. Whilst acknowledging the impotence of discourse in accumulating and subduing the experience, he recognises that apparently paradoxical drive to *speak* and attempt to draw it into understanding and significant discourse. *Anguish* requires this; it pushes man towards an object it knows it will never obtain.

Yet this object can never be accumulated into the economy of absolute knowledge for, as we are aware, the individual Subject that is required in order to sublimate the object into knowledge is *not* present in the moment itself.⁷

Following Hegel's logic to its end, at the point of its apparent grasping of the object, man finds that the swelling tumult that is life exceeds this calculated formulation. Life exceeds this logic without presenting meaning, the sovereign moment itself a *silent* rebellion against calculated existence, a rebellion that arises from life itself and ruptures the formulated identity that brought it to this point. Meaning, knowledge and understanding begin to crack; life exceeds the possibility of understanding its own movement; *serious* calculation becomes impossible, finds itself outstripped, and the restricted Identity of man is provoked to silence in the face of its own self-excess. It is at this point of rupture, this point of the dissolution of calculated 'being', that *laughter* is provoked. In the senseless quaking of the foundations of understanding, in the face of the void, a trembling laughter *irrupts* in a moment which exceeds calculation. It is the paradoxical understanding of this impotence that provokes laughter which, as Derrida notes, provokes a response:

To laugh at philosophy (at Hegelianism) – such, in effect, is the form of the awakening – henceforth calls for an entire 'discipline,' an entire 'method of meditation' that acknowledges the philosopher's byways, understands his techniques, makes use of his ruses, manipulates his cards, lets him deploy his strategy, appropriates his texts. Then, thanks to this work which has prepared it – and philosophy is work *itself* according to Bataille – but quickly, furtively, and unforeseeably breaking with it, as betrayal or as detachment, drily, laughter breaks out. (2001, p. 319)

At this *impossible* moment, in the deepest folds of desire, discourse finds itself shipwrecked in the night of its own desire. As sirens lured ships off their course onto the jagged rocks which were their undoing, so the object of desire has run Identity aground, calculation has foundered, and is left groping in the dark of the cold wet night. The problem faced is that this shipwreck is not totally unfamiliar territory; it is a strangely familiar place. A recognition of sorts occurs; the sovereign moment that forces rebellion greets us with a smile. Yet, before we can grasp it and reflect upon this moment, like the camera flash that momentarily blinds, we regain composure only to find that the picture has already been taken and, shaken, laughter irrupts. Provoked by

⁷ In this way, we can identify like Derrida that Bataille does not question Hegel's phenomenology, he follows it unwaveringly and pushes it towards its own limits, to the point where the individual finds itself outstripped, and the logic of Hegel's discourse unravels at the point of its potential completion.

desire, the questioning that is carried with it forces us to question this moment, to attempt to bring it into the fold of calculation. Ultimately however, we are forced to recognise that the methods of calculative reasoning fall short. It is this impotent desire to understand that forces Bataille to recognise that the *impossible* moment cannot be subdued, and also that this moment provokes a necessary drive to attempt to do so nevertheless. The philosophical method being impotent then, as Derrida recognises, the task before us is not to bring this moment to heel. The questioning that provokes the attempt to catch this elusive *impossible* requires a different method, outside of the calculated discourse of philosophy, one that causes language to slide, and brings the experience as close as possible to enunciation. Yet the problem that Bataille recognised remains. Derrida, echoing Habermas, asks: “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?” (2001, p. 319)

Bataille's answer to this charge is not contained within the texts themselves. Understood as a practical activity which seeks to affect the reader outside of the text and evoke a moment of communication, we have to understand that the impossible moment that Bataille sought to induce the moment to take place *between* himself and another outside of the text itself. Bataille's Sovereign Communication occurs *outside* of the works themselves, or more precisely, it is *through* his work (his non-objectifying science) that we see him looking to bring about an affective *communication* that remains outside of the realm of knowledge which would seek to isolate and subdue the experience he seeks to evoke.

What's in a Name?

There was not one man born in 1897 called Georges Bataille who wrote some of the most beautiful and most terrible books of twentieth century French literature. Or not only one. There is not *one* Georges Bataille but *several*, variously called Lord Auch, Louis Trente, Pierre Angelique. Georges Bataille used pseudonyms... in such a way that before we begin to gain an understanding of his work, we need to see under which signs... (Surya, 2002, p. 88)

Bataille wrote extensively (as is well recognised) under a myriad of names alongside his own. Conventional wisdom would seem to dictate that given the nature of his preoccupations, the adoption of a pseudonym granted

Bataille a freedom of expression that might not have been possible had he published his more offensive works under his own name. However when we recognise, as Surya (author of a detailed and illuminating biography of Bataille) did, that this adoption is not uniform across the entirety of his work: “The play Bataille maintained with his names, real and borrowed, is quite different and positively complex” (2002, p. 89). He informs us that the employment of pseudonyms is not consistent across the body of his literary output, with *Story of the Eye*, *Le Petit*, and *Madame Edwarda* requiring the use of a pseudonym, whilst the no less 'offensive' *L'Abbe C*, *Alleluia* and the outrageous *Blue of Noon* were published under his own name. This leads us to recognise that we cannot draw the conclusion that his use of literary pseudonyms was as a result of practical considerations for the publication of his work. After all, if the content of the former listed works required the use of this method of subterfuge, then why not the entirety of his fiction? The answer here is not that the explicit content of his work determines whether it received his own signature or not, but instead is found in an ambiguous *touch* which Crowley describes for us: “Bataille's writing seeks to touch us. That this touch is always mediated, never certain, always perhaps only a readerly fantasy, cannot rule out the opposite possibility: that it perhaps takes place” (2004, p. 767)

We have already seen how Bataille sought to undermine the structure of reason that has the subject as its foundation, with his explicit aim being “to nullify a game of subordinate operations.” (2001e, p. 98) And yet, it is only by bringing this together with his play of names that we can begin to see the notion of communication as “*effective contact*” (Crowley, 2004, p. 767) which leads us back to a recognition of the role these works play in his oeuvre as a whole. What we will find is that the employment of the pseudonym in Bataille's work serves a purpose akin to that reversal of order examined previously for, through the use of these names, we see him trying to subvert the illusory quality of self-conscious subjectivity that he saw as erroneously equated with the whole of human existence. Crowley addresses the problem of Bataille's use of pseudonyms and highlights for us the issue that is at the heart of tackling this problem:

While the complications attaching to Bataille's proliferation of pseudonyms are undeniable, they are entirely unable to rule out the naive possibility that these are, after all, merely pseudonyms, adopted by the biographical subject... this is not particularly interesting for the critic, admittedly; but the greater intellectual attractions of complication cannot remove its haunting platitude. (2004, p. 771)

The question raised here is of the integrity of authorial identity, and it is through examining the status of the

author in Bataille's model of communication that we will begin to recognise the function his signatories play. As we have seen, Bataille takes words and language to be reflective of the structure of the subject that uses them, and language *always* being that of a social being we must recognise that the words that comprise the text are reflective and constitutive of both the author and reader. The author, an 'I', and the reader, also an 'I', communicate through the book. When Crowley hints at the problems surrounding Bataille's authorial identity what he is indicating is that the alter-ego, when employed, becomes a mask through which the writer speaks but which, as a mask, still implies the author behind it. In this sense there is not a formal identity between the two and yet there is a trace that is "*residual*: neither simply absent nor simply present" (2004, p. 771). Similarly, Dean tells us that Bataille's use of pseudonyms is a "paradoxical strategy in which the author silences himself" and because of this "loses its point of reference", which leads writing to come to occupy "a space between presence and absence" (1992, p. 233). The question of authorial integrity then is linked to Bataille's literature as a practical activity. If his writing seeks to de-structure the reader through the impact of the reintroduction of excessive (heterogeneous) elements, then is it from a position of surety or fragility that the author attempts this?

We will examine the nature of Bataille's relationship with his pseudonyms through the contestedly autobiographical 'Coincidences' which Bataille saw as "a psychoanalytic exercise employed to decode the meaning concealed in the obscene images of *Story of the Eye*" (Dean, 1992, p. 235). Yet, before we plunge headlong into a mire of fragmented consciousness and psychoanalysis, we must be mindful of Bataille's position on the nature of self-consciousness. Born of exhaustion, self-consciousness is only ever a pale shadow of the *whole human being*, a notion that includes that which exceeds this identity formed through restriction. It is through this identification that Bataille comes to recognise his own identity's poverty, and it is imperative for our analysis here to recognise that the conception of Identity that Bataille seeks to illuminate, with all its anguish, tension and restriction, applies just as much to Bataille as the impersonal 'man'. What will become apparent is that the person 'Georges Bataille' is as tenuous a construct as that of Louis Trente, Lord Auch et al. We must keep in mind that all the conditions that Bataille sought to evoke as applicable to man, were also applicable to him. To name for Bataille is to distinguish, to solidify the demarcation between what is and what is not. Surya claims that the use of pseudonyms in his work seeks to "hide" at the same time as breaking "the

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formality of a name that has been handed down.” (2002, p. 89). We shall see that the identity of 'Georges Bataille' itself was founded upon very flimsy ground, to the extent that it carried with it no more *real* authorship than that of his pseudonyms. This is indeed a bold claim, and it is only through an investigation into his *Coincidences* that we will begin to understand what constitutes the justification for this. It is vital however to do so as, once established, we will be able to see the psychological justification for the use of pseudonyms in his writing which, together with the inverted structural couplings present in his prose, will enable us to see more clearly *why* this 'tacky touch' is imperative to his notion of communication. Communication “effects, in fact, nothing substantive; an intermittent, unjustifiable contact with no content” and becomes “The unlocatable touch of Bataillean communication”, of “intermittent, ruptured proximity, no matter how distant”. Ultimately within Bataille’s work, and perhaps frustratingly, we will find an “empty model, admittedly, which does no more than open a channel and shade it about with putative contact, but seriously, what more could we ask for?” (Crowley, 2004, pp. 775-9)

Coincidences

I was very astonished at having unknowingly substituted a perfectly obscene image for a vision apparently devoid of any sexual implication. Still, I would soon have cause for even greater astonishment. (Bataille, 2001a, p. 70)

Much has been made of the seemingly explanatory section following the main narrative in *Story of the Eye*. Questions surround the biographical integrity of the descriptions given, whether these descriptions themselves are a continuation of the preceding narrative of the work, and whether they should be taken into consideration as fictive or semi-fictive. I do not intend to examine in detail the content of *Coincidences* with reference to the biographical history of Bataille himself. To ask whether scenarios presented in the work are correlative to events in his life and historically accurate is fraught with difficulties. Dean notes that Bataille’s accounts of his past often challenged by those close to him. Recounting such an instance, she tells us of an occasion where his brother Martial suffered “distress” at Bataille’s “misrepresentation” (1992, p. 232) of their parents – both of whom are central ‘characters’ within the *Coincidences*. Whether Bataille's mother really “suddenly lost her mind too” or whether his father wailed in syphilitic delirium “Doctor, let me know when you're done fucking my wife!” (Bataille, 2001a, p. 73) are not of concern. The reason for this lack of attention will become clear in the following analysis, for what we will find is that the content of this work itself and the place in which

Bataille found himself able to write his 'first' work are of more importance. We will find that, under the auspices of a course of psychoanalysis, connections have been made by Bataille, whether real or unreal, which bring into question the *state* of his Identity (suggesting a certain *ir*-reality to 'Georges Bataille' along with his pseudonyms), and reveal as the founding drive for his writing: "no precise goal, animated chiefly by a desire to forget, at least for the time being, the things I can be or do personally." (Bataille, 2001a, p. 69)

Bataille wrote his *Story* during (or shortly following) a course of analysis with the psychoanalyst Adrien Borel.⁸ The importance of this writing under analysis cannot be overstated, for it is a crucial piece of the puzzle if we are to understand the relationship between the 'novel' and 'coincidences'. Surya allows us a glimpse of the potential structure of the analysis which Bataille underwent with Borel. Notably a "heterodox Freudian", Borel's analysis he tells us was "above all else therapeutic, adaptive and founded with an attention to suffering", performed in a way that was "not very rigorous" or "ritualised" and allowed the Analysand to investigate and "struggle with the violence of their unconscious" (2002, p. 97).

The structure and content of the *Coincidences* closely mirrors the process of development that we find in the Freudian analysis of the Dream. The psychical unpacking of representations found in *Coincidences* (where Bataille 'uncovers' repressed unconscious desires and memories) is analogous to those found in Freud's theory and method of Dream interpretation. French notes how "the narrative structure of the text thus corresponds to a broadly psychoanalytic pattern" but stresses that critical differences exist between the two, primarily owing to the lack of a *distinct* analyst: "the text enacts its own auto-analysis, establishes a metatextual, narrative voice within the narrative, and this voice is in close but also parodic and subversive proximity to that of the analyst" (1999, pp. 92-3). By taking on the mantle of analyst and analysand Bataille concurrently subjects himself, and

⁸ We can be confident of the timing of this as he is the doctor to whom he refers as providing an anatomical correction of the colour of the bulls testes in his narrative: "I visited a friend of mine, who is a doctor", he tells us, "I read the description to him, never having seen the skinned balls of a bull, I assumed they were the same colour as the erect cock of the animal... my friend remarked that I had absolutely no idea of what the glands I was writing about were really like, and he promptly read aloud a detailed description in an anatomical textbook." (Bataille, 2001a)

is subject to, the process of analysis. Bataille draws out relations between the contents of his novel by “assuming a profound region of my mind” where an unconscious collusion takes place where “certain images coincide, the elementary ones, the *completely obscene* ones” and are shown to be linked at a point where unconscious desire and conscious awareness meet - a point that he terms “The breaking point of the conscious.” (Bataille, 2001a, p. 71)

It is this breaking point that Bataille identifies as the place in which “personal memories were quickly associated with some harrowing images” (Bataille, 2001a, p. 72), thus allowing us to see the parallels between the personal process of 'working through' the content of *Story* and the dream analysis that we find in Freud. Bataille himself draws a link between several constituent parts of the narrative and his conscious or unconscious observations, such as between eyes and eggs, the deeply buried memory of his brother's practical jokes, and of the removal of the priest's eye with the witnessing of a bull tearing out the eye of the bull-fighter Granero. In Freudian dream-analysis we see a similar developmental process where the Analysand, with the assistance of the Analyst, works through the manifest content of a dream to uncover the unconscious matter at the root of a 'disorder'. We see this process evidenced clearly in Freud's *A Case of Hysteria*, where rather innocuous elements in the dreams of 'Dora' are through investigation revealed as having sexually traumatic origins. In this relation Freud tells us:

'That is to say, you *knew* that *it was* so – the meaning of the dream is now becoming even clearer. You said to yourself; “this man is persecuting me, he want to force his way into my room. My 'jewel-case' is in danger, and if anything happens it will be Father's fault.” For that reason in the dream you chose a situation which expresses the opposite – a danger from which your father is *saving* you. In this part of the dream everything is turned into its opposite.' (2001a, p. 69)

In his analysis of 'Dora', Freud claims that the manifest content of the dream and the Analysand's 'conscious' beliefs can be traced back to the unconscious lingering of several forgotten traumatic events, notably her latent homosexual desires for her mother and 'Frau K', and her repressed feelings of love for 'Herr K'. These revelations seem in direct contradiction to the manifest content in 'Dora's' dreams as well as her conscious thoughts and feelings. The revelation of her unconscious wishes and desires cause her no small amount of grief and result in the further repression and transference of her desire for vengeance onto Freud himself. This he cites as her overriding motivation for her cutting short her course of treatment:

Her breaking off so unexpectedly, just when my hopes of a successful treatment were at their highest, and her thus bringing those hopes to nothing – this was an unmistakable act of vengeance on her part. Her purpose of self-injury also profited by this action. (Freud, 2001a, p. 109)

It is inferred by Freud that his patient, unwilling to accede to the Analyst's exposition of her underlying issues, transfers her unconscious troubles onto him. It is implied that what is revealed to the patient is dangerous or threatening to the conscious psychological structure of her identity where what has been repressed manifests itself in the phenomena about which the patient seeks help. However, in this case it is revealed that that it is not the patient's neurotic tendencies (fits of coughing, abdominal pains and other phantasmic illnesses) that are to be treated, but instead it is the roots of these psycho-physically manifested neuroses that Freud wants to have exposed and resolved. We see it evidenced in that the whole of 'Dora's' ego is presented as poisoned by her unconscious repressions, with her conscious beliefs being just as much a manifestation of and reaction to her unconscious memories and desires – for instance, her vehemently professed outrage at the advances of 'Herr K' by the lake becomes for Freud only a reaction of her consciousness which is unwilling to deal with her unconscious desire to accede to these advances. The upshot of analysis of this kind (aside from the problematic of the Freudian 'reading' itself) is that it reveals to us that the Subject, the self, the 'I' or Ego, is itself by no means eternal and unchanging. Instead, we find the psychically constructed self that is conscious of itself revealed as a tenuous construction which in its conscious understanding of itself is blind to its own repressed desires and memories. The 'I' that seeks out treatment for its neurotic afflictions is revealed as in cahoots with the symptoms afflicting it, these being the reaction of consciousness to its threatening unconscious that makes these symptoms manifest. The subject is shown to be struggling with both its unconscious desires and repressed memories, and the revelation of its fractured, only ever partial nature, is fundamental to the psychoanalytical process.

Freud finds the subject to be attempting to maintain a stable unity and coherence to its identity, which the symptoms of its afflictions reveal to be lacking. However, more importantly for us, the totality of the construction of the 'I' is implicated in the manifestation of its neuroses; the desire for mastery which seeks to create a coherence of identity excludes aspects of the self that threaten this surety⁹. The neurotic patient (and

⁹ This idea, along with a more detailed exposition of Freud's thought will be addressed in Chapter 2.2.

by extension ourselves) have constructed a restricted domain of consciousness which is erected in opposition to, and consequently threatened by, past trauma and unconscious desire. Freudian analysis here allows us to glimpse the fact that around, outside and underneath the restricted ego there is a sea of unconscious activity which, though fundamental to the creation and maintenance of Identity/Ego, in some cases can lead to the destruction of this self-same subjectivity.

By subjecting to and being subject to a process of 'auto-analysis' Bataille thus struggles with a double movement of repression and sustained examination of the symptoms of his subjectivity manifest in the *Story of the Eye*. For French, such self-examination is a process which is:

The indication of a disorder, of a disease. But in the psychoanalytic sense it is also the sign of a conflict, the overcoming of a repression, of a crossing of boundaries, of a transgression. The symptom is also a manifestation, it is manifest, but it cannot be interpreted directly, it does not refer directly to the trauma or disease it results from, but has undergone a work of transformation, a work of displacement of forms. (1999, pp. 29-9)

He continues:

Symptomal form, then, is a form which is always already ruptured, deformed, unformed, hollowed out by the movement of differentiation which 'informs' it. The maintenance of this notion of a form (not form) is evidently difficult – it is difficult not to just slip into a consideration of it as a new form, leaning too heavily on the positive side of the operation, or a consideration of it as nothing, overemphasising the negative turn. The difficulty of form (not form) whose contours are effaced by its own inkstain, is connoted by the clinical register of the word symptom: pain, tension, illness. (p. 29)

It is perhaps then, as the double veiling/unveiling which reveals the 'trauma' at the heart of the symptomal form of Bataille's literature, that we should view the following statement from Bataille:

He shrieked in a stentorian voice: 'Doctor, let me know when you're done fucking my wife!' For me, that utterance, which in a split second annihilated the demoralising effects of a strict upbringing, left me with something like a steady obligation, unconscious and unwilling: the necessity of finding an equivalent to that sentence in any situation I happen to be in; and this largely explains *Story of the Eye*. (2001a, p. 73)

So what conclusion can we draw from Bataille's use of the pseudonym? As a process of 'auto-analysis' Bataille's *Story* reveals an author subject to a dual process of interrogation/defence and demarcates a space in which the self is brought into question, through writing, by its own writing self. Through such a lens we can view the employment of pseudonyms as the placing of a marker, a placeholder to indicate the site of a subject examining its struggle to master its own origins whilst subject to the "difficult and unmediatizable nature of

immediate shock” (French, 1999, p. 86). It is this trauma that threatens to undermine and destabilise his fractured self and which reflexively lends an ir-reality to the Identity that was ‘Georges Bataille’. His own Identity having suffered traumatic lacerations he finds no ground upon which he can build a solid bastion of self. We recognise also that his conception of the *whole human being*, paradoxically fractious and under threat of dissolution as it is, applied just as much to him as to impersonal *man*. ‘The extant relations are judged unacceptable and are perceived as an agonising affliction’ he tells us. It is by recognising the restricted identity that is self-consciousness which, through the many byways of repression seeks to *ignore* its traumatic origin, we can begin to see what is meant by him wanting ‘to modify the relations that exist between a man and his fellow creatures’. We are not seeing here a herald of the second coming of a Zarathustra, nor the messenger from the gleaming spires of the Hegelian Absolute. Instead we see man trapped within a lie of his own making, believing that he can overcome his limitations, ignorant of his self-deception, yet rushing headlong towards his own dissolution. No resolution is found within Bataille’s work; instead we find only violence. It is a violent intent, directly seeking to affect those whom it can; to lacerate and re-open an already festering wound. However, we risk getting too far ahead of ourselves – you cannot get to the top floor without getting in the lift at ground level – and thus we turn to Bataille’s ground, that of Hegel and his Absolute.

Part One

1.1: Bataille, Being Hegel, Being Nietzsche

Hegel closes; he closes the library back upon itself with the identity of the subject and the object, an identity produced when the long journey accomplished by discourse reaches its end point at the moment of absolute knowledge. Nietzsche, on the contrary, undermines the library, causes it to explode, puts fire to it. A double register, then, for this library which, on the one hand, evokes Bataille's work place – Bataille, the conservator of knowledge, a Hegelian civil servant at the library, which, as one knows, was the National Library; but on the other hand, the latter evokes the place worked through by Bataille, that space of the book that he transgressed, even though this meant damning several of his own works (Hollier, 1995, pp. 62-3)

A complex relationship exists within Bataille's work between Hegel and Nietzsche. Hollier characterizes it thus; Bataille is led into a position in which he “must actualize Hegel but hide Nietzsche.” (1995, p. 65) To hide Nietzsche? Does he mean Bataille seeks not to mention him, to keep him hidden from view? Not so, as even a cursory reading of Bataille's work will make clear. The tie that binds Bataille and Nietzsche runs deep, and is one that has been rightly recognized in Bataillean scholarship¹⁰, which acknowledges that “except for a few exceptions, my company on earth is mostly Nietzsche...” (Bataille, 2004, p. 3)

In his ‘Horror of Liberty’, Stuart Kendall, quoting Bataille, evokes the depth that this influence runs to when he states: “Bataille does not simply agree with what Nietzsche says; he is not merely influenced by him... Bataille, for whom ‘each thing is a parody of another, or the same thing in a deceptive form,’ *presents himself as the same as Nietzsche*” (2009, p. 57) This itself is a view that finds grounding no doubt in Bataille's own claims that are littered throughout his work. Bataille's relationship to Hegel is much more complex however, and though essential to understanding his work (Land acknowledges that Bataille's writing is “steeped in Hegel” (1992, p. 4)), often suffers from a lack of attention. In the article by Kendall for instance, though professing to consider Bataille's relationship with liberty we find only sparse mention of Hegel – which can present a skewed view of the relationship between the two.

In Hollier's article, titled ‘Beyond Hegel to Nietzsche's Absence’, he puts forwards a line of argument which situates Bataille's thought as caught between Hegel on the side of man's *possibilities*, which is then placed

¹⁰ For instance in the work of Hollier and Kendall (to be discussed shortly) and others, amongst them are Land who tells us: “Nietzsche – accompanies Bataille throughout the entire length of his textual voyage, with an intellectual solidarity so great that it touches upon a complete erasure of distinction” (1992, p. 61).

into tension with a Nietzschean destruction. For Hollier, a view which will be echoed within this thesis, Hegel resides upon the side of the subject, of reason, discourse and language. Hegel, the structuralist par excellence, is aligned in Hollier's argument with those structures which are on the side of Bataille's notion of a restricted economy, against which he aligns a Nietzsche which embodies a "system of ruptures, of gaps and of everything which escapes Hegelian discourse." (Hollier, 1995, p. 66) To make sense of Hollier's claim that Bataille must *hide* Nietzsche, we must understand that he seeks to align Bataille directly with Nietzsche, *as* Nietzsche, and contends that Bataille seeks to protect Nietzsche from becoming 'actualized' (by falling into the regulated discourse of Hegel), which would result in his succumbing to "irreparable misrepresentation" (p. 66). It is this desire that he attributes to Bataille and claims explains the fact that often, when speaking of Hegel or Nietzsche, Bataille uses a 'double register' where his writing "on Hegel and on Nietzsche do not obey the same rules... do not belong to the same zones of his writing" and establish a strict delineation between the places where both are treated. He continues; "he has almost never explicitly confronted them: from one to the other, the absence of a relationship, the strangeness of the zones prevent a meeting, an articulation in form." (p. 65) In speaking of an *absence* of a relationship, is he here saying there is *no* relationship? The absence of a relationship is normally considered to allude to the lack of any interaction between a pair or group. Is Hollier here suggesting that Bataille's interactions with Hegel and Nietzsche are independent of each other and that they belong to different spheres of concern? In one sense this is correct, and yet at the same time he is alluding to a deeper plane of interaction over and above articulation. Let us examine the differing registers that Hollier draws our attention to in Bataille's writing:

The essential – and the original – characteristic of Hegelian philosophy is to describe the totality of what is; and, consequently, at the same time that it accounts for everything which appears before our eyes, to give an integrated account of the thought and language which express – and reveal – that appearance. (Bataille, 1990, p. 11)

Chance represents a way of going beyond when life reaches the outer limits of the possible and gives up. Refusing to pull back, never looking behind, our uninhibited boldness discovers that solutions develop where cautious logic is baffled. So that it was only *with my life* that I wrote the Nietzsche book that I had planned – a book in which I intended to pose and resolve intimate problems of morality. (Bataille, 2004, p. xxiii)

It is plain to see here the different registers on which these two passages are operating. The first on Hegel reads matter-of-factly, it is drier, more austere and more in keeping with what one would expect from an academic treatise. This is in contrast to that on Nietzsche. When reading Bataille talking on – or *as* – Nietzsche we feel the surge of energy, we can see the struggle to bring to enunciation that which he wishes to say *with*

Nietzsche. Passages like these, and indeed many more like it, characterize Bataille's writing upon them, and yet, such a divide between the treatments they seem to receive lends to the process of interpretation a potential problem:

- 1) Such a disparity in approach can lead one (unsurprisingly given Bataille's professed kinship with Nietzsche or his penchant for the excessive) to suggest his alignment *with* Nietzsche *against* Hegel. Conversely, one could also read the opposite into the difference of approach where Nietzsche, often erratically, deliriously evoked is placed in opposition to the *serious* Hegel, one which perhaps aligns itself better with the gravity of exposition one often finds elsewhere in his work.
- 2) This disparity of registers gives rise to a certain ambiguity, one which, when Bataille's work is approached in the piecemeal way that can characterize an academic paper, often precludes a treatment of his work sensitive to the complex interrelation between the two. This tendency often leads to the establishment of different *kinds* of Bataille where, dependent upon the issue or passage at stake or (like those interpreters of James's novella) on external prejudices, we see the evocation of a Bataille-Hegel or Bataille-Nietzsche, with one set up to argue for or against a given position. Taking the lead from Felman we recognize that academics, like journalists seeking to get their 'scoop', must 'find an angle' on the story.

So why actualize Hegel but hide Nietzsche? Let us now consider this issue in more depth. We have already touched upon the notion of *communication* within Bataille's literature and how this seeks to undermine the restricted notion of identity by a process of lacerating wounding which undermines this rigid structure. Hegel, as the author of the *Phenomenology*, established the dialectic of master and slave which Bataille felt to be fundamental to understanding how our self-consciousness is formed. Indeed, we can recognize the importance of this notion when he tells us:

(The dialectic of the master and the slave) is the decisive moment in the history of the consciousness of self and, it must be said, to the extent that we have to distinguish between each thing that affects us, no one knows anything of *himself* if he has not understood this movement which determines and limits man's successive possibilities. (1988b, p. 109)

Nietzsche balked at the poverty of the man of Hegelian self-consciousness (this will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 1.3), which despite the incisive nature of his critique, Bataille rightly recognized as lacking in sophistication. It was Nietzsche's 'Death of God' which held more importance for Bataille, and it is this notion

that evokes the loss of the possibility of any absolute guarantee for Identity:

An extreme, unconditional yearning was expressed for the first time by Nietzsche *independently of moral goals or of serving God...* On my own, I'll have to face the same difficulties as Nietzsche – putting God and the good behind him though all ablaze with the ardor possessed by those who lay down their lives for God or the good. (Bataille, 2004, pp. xxvii-xix)

We have already touched previously upon the relationship between language and Identity where words “make identities intervene” (Bataille, 2001f, p. 64), and it is this intervention that places language (rational language) firmly within Hegel’s dialectic. For Bataille, when a word is uttered, it is given voice and placed within a system of names and identities which result in its being actualized. When I speak of an apple I have utilized a concept which enters into a relational framework with those between whom it is used. This utilization further reinforces the concept of the apple and by its being shared seeks to disambiguate the referent object (a poor example perhaps given the everyday nature of an apple). However, when we consider the work of Nietzsche, itself concerned with the destruction of the bonds that restrict our own conceptions of self, and transfer from a position of simply reading him and start to engage with his thought in a systemic (read philosophical) way, we run the risk of turning his thought from that of the free play of the dervish into the rigid one-two of the ballroom dancer. What leads Hollier to make the contention that Bataille must *hide* Nietzsche is that when speaking we introduce the free-play characterized by Nietzsche’s vertiginous thought into the utilitarian realm of academic consideration. In actualizing his notion of the ‘Death of God’ we reduce it to the level of argument, one proposition to be played against another which, when taken *seriously*, brings the speaker to ridicule in the marketplace.

For Bataille, discourse is inescapably Hegelian, and even to introduce concepts which seek to threaten the structure which *chokes* does not result in the overturning of the system itself. Hegel’s greatest philosophical trick was the creation of a system of subjectivity which, like a hungry spider’s web, catches everything which gravitates near to it. To speak is in a way to ‘take up Hegel again’, and any discussion, any reasoned argument will be caught by the dialectic even when the greatest care is taken to avoid it: “Hegel’s discourse will always be taken up again by the fabric of this discourse” (Hollier, 1995, p. 71). It is this that leads Hollier to state that Bataille must *hide* Nietzsche from actualization, for it is chiefly the Nietzschean *experience* that he grapples with, not the reasoned arguments. Like his Madman, Nietzsche’s gift to Bataille was the experience of the radical loss of a guarantee of self that explodes following the death of divinity. The radical dissolution of

Identity that Bataille felt in the wake of Nietzsche could not be enunciated or ‘argued’ for. To do so, to try and *explain* the impact of this, would be to introduce it into Hegel’s game and to isolate, reduce and solidify an experience which in its experiencing leads to a dramatic rupture; “Nietzsche is ‘in’ Bataille; Bataille is ‘in’ Nietzsche or in Nietzsche’s absence which will then at the same time lead necessarily to Bataille’s absence.” (Hollier, 1995, p. 73)

So, is Hegel the trap that Bataille seeks to avoid? Is his work on transgression and sacrifice a move to undermine the Hegelian edifice which strangles the sovereign subject? If Hollier is correct in his contention that Bataille must hide Nietzsche from the net of Hegelian actualization, we seem to have established a relationship between the two in which Hegel must be overcome to allow for Nietzschean experience to make itself felt. Within such an interpretation, which is the upshot of Hollier’s analysis, Hegel becomes the figurehead of a suffocating and creeping logical structure which seeks to isolate (actualize) the free flowing effervescence of life. I have already drawn attention to the potential pitfalls of such an analysis and in his paper we find the evocation of the Bataille-Nietzsche – albeit the dissolute, ruptured Bataille-Nietzsche – which is placed in opposition to Hegel. By positioning Bataille in such a way between them, Hollier tacitly establishes a hierarchy of value into his analysis, where Hegel is portrayed as the stumbling block to the engagement with the experience of Nietzsche. *Beyond Hegel to Nietzsche’s Absence*: what such a title evokes is that Hegel is the starting point while Nietzsche, despite his influence being destructive, ultimately is the point where Bataille really resides (albeit a residence in absentia). The structure of the title, starting from Hegel and going beyond him *to* Nietzsche establishes a directional movement and echoes the very movement of the Hegelian dialectic against which Hollier is positioning his Bataille-Nietzsche. Therein lies the difficulty, for by bringing the two into a dialogue a reduction has occurred, one which in Nietzsche’s words “involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization” (2001, p. 214) Such a process unavoidably levels the playing field, establishes *common* terms by which they can engage, and ultimately ensures that such re-organisation leads us back into Hegel’s web.

This is not to say however that this interpretation will be free from such difficulties, indeed, it is after all only another interpretation and perhaps we will see that once again the emperor has no clothes. However, an interpretation sensitive to these difficulties will allow a critical acknowledgment of the limitations of its

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argument, one which in the end, as will become apparent, is recognized by Bataille as constitutive of the ‘whole human being’ and central to the functioning of his traumatic literature. Opposed to interpretations which segregate Hegel and Nietzsche or place them within a hierarchy of value, I will posit a paradoxical relationship between Bataille *as* Hegel and *as* Nietzsche, not separate or compartmentalized, but like Janus gazing out in opposite directions whilst still part of the same face. It is this paradox that Libertson draws our attention to, one which he applies to Bataille’s work as a whole (but equally applies to Nietzsche and Hegel’s place within it) where, unable to let either go, Bataille wants to integrate what ultimately are mutually exclusive modes of thought: “To want to be all is to want to lose the limits of one’s particularity, and at the same time to want to enclose all within the limit of one’s particularity.” (Libertson, 1995, p. 216)

1.2: Absolute Relation

Since to begin with they are unequal and opposed, and their reflection into a unity has not yet been achieved, they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; 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. The former is lord, the other is bondsman. (Hegel, 1977, p. 115)

Hegel's 'Absolute Idealism' grew, like the idealism of Novalis, Holderlin and others traditionally encapsulated within the term of the German 'Idealists' or 'Romantics', from a revitalization of Spinoza's absolute metaphysics in the wake of the problems made apparent through the philosophies of Kant and Fichte. What we will see through analysis of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is that in his attempted synthesis of Idealistic and Epistemological thought into a revised 'Absolute Idealism' there exists an assumption that rests on the belief in a necessary restriction of energy which is required to establish the recognition that is fundamental to the Hegelian notion of the absolute. We will examine the development of this notion first hand from the *Phenomenology* and it will become apparent that the intense power that the thought of Hegel holds for Bataille constitutes one aspect of the *contested* human life of which Bataille sought to explore.

Hegel sought an epistemological grounding to the transcendental metaphysics of Kant, in an attempt to avoid the apparent paradoxes of logic that arise within the antinomies of his Critique¹ - what Beiser calls an establishment of an "immanent metaphysics" (2005, p. 177). What Hegel wanted to show was that the apparent paradoxes of Kant's antinomies, and more widely those of 'Idealism' and 'Empiricism', were in fact paradoxes that arise from a misunderstanding of the logic of Identity and non-Identity. For Hegel these apparent paradoxes arise from a misunderstanding of the nature of the development of self-consciousness. Hegel indicates that the problem facing philosophers arose because they, rather than following the development of 'Self-consciousness' from its initial 'awakening' in self-certainty through to the eventual establishment of self-consciousness, instead placed the self-conscious subject as the grounding of metaphysics. What in essence he identified was that philosophers were mistakenly taking the self-conscious subject as the starting point of their systems, rather than recognizing it as the culmination of a journey that results in the establishment of Self-consciousness as the absolute.

¹ The apparent incongruous realms of the Noumenal and the Phenomenal, where the world of the subjective 'I' and the external world of representations are apparently in conflict.

The problem facing Hegel is this, how can the subject, when faced with the apparent Nihilism that results from the Transcendental Idealism of Kant and Fichte², overcome the apparent paradox that exists between the individual and the external world? As mentioned, rather than positing the self-certainty of consciousness as the starting point of philosophical enquiry (a philosophical heritage most readily recognizable in Descartes' Cogito), he instead reverses the methodology and seeks to illuminate how this certainty is established through the experience of consciousness and its interaction with the world.

Hegel, in the earlier chapters of the *Phenomenology* traces the development of the Self through the initial flowering into consciousness of the Non-Identity of the 'self' (the non-Identity of the self and the objects of its perception) through to the assertion that the 'I' (ego) is the grounding of the possibility of knowledge of the objects of its perception. This conclusion is the gulf that apparently separates Dogmatic Idealism and Empiricism, and can be extended to the Transcendental Idealism of Kant and Fichte where, through the mode of perception, the objects which initially gave rise to the self-certainty of consciousness (that 'I' am different to the objects of my perception – Non-Identity) are shown as not being objects in-themselves but in fact, through reflection, are reliant upon the intuition of the subject. Hegel identifies that in the mode of perception, what is revealed about the object is not the object itself but a universal aspect or attribute (to borrow Spinozian terminology) of the universal or absolute nature of existence. However, through refined analysis, these perceptions of the object are shown not to reveal a perception of an object in-itself, but only the certainty of the consciousness of the perception of these objects³. Hegel brings this to our attention when he notes: "In the previous modes of certainty what is true for consciousness is something other than itself. But the Notion of this truth vanishes in the experience of it. What the object immediately was in itself – mere being in sense-certainty, the concrete thing of perception, and for the Understanding, a Force – proves to be in truth, not this at all; instead this in-itself turns out to be a mode in which the object is only for an other." (1977, p. 104) This leads the self-certain subject into a problem: either self-consciousness is the starting point and the objects of

² This is the charge of nihilism that Jacobi levels against them, where the outside world becomes something outside of the limits of possible knowledge (Kant) or an invention of the individual 'ego' itself (Fichte)

³ This is essentially the problem that Kant was unable to overcome and had to essentially concede. That is that outside the modes of apprehension of the individual, knowledge of the objects of perception as they are *in-themselves* becomes impossible and all we can say with certainty through a transcendental logic is that the truth of these objects is only achieved through the faculty of understanding where the objects conform to given rules gleaned through the lens of the limits of possible reason.

perception are reliant upon this self-consciousness or the objects are not reliant upon this self-consciousness and this self-certainty is brought into question – this is essentially the crux of the problem identified by Kant in the Third Antinomy, and in a wider sense as affecting the Copernican Revolution as a whole.

Through its interaction with the objects of its own desire (for Hegel, this is how the subject as consciousness interacts with its world) the subject encounters its own self-certainty by forcing the objects of its desire (food, tools etc) to conform to its own self. Through the negative movement of desire the individual, in forcing these objects to conform to “its life-processes” (Beiser, 2005, p. 182), realizes that by subjugating the objects of its perception to its will, these objects can no longer be deemed distinct. Judith Butler, in her *Subjects of Desire* notes: “the satisfaction of desire is the transformation of difference into identity: the discovery of the strange and novel as familiar, the arrival of the awaited, the re-emergence of what has been absent or lost.” (1999, p. 9) In the negative appropriation of the movement of desire, Hegel indicates that the subject, in assimilating the objects of its perception, finds these objects become identical to itself. However, for Hegel, the subject soon realizes that as objects of desire continually appear that he is caught in a regress where, ultimately, all objects are revealed as the ‘I’, trapping him in the *tomb* of self-certainty and unable to establish the absolute nature of the ‘I’.

However, when faced with an object that cannot be sublimated into the ‘I’, the subject is faced with another problem: either the object of desire is consumable within identity and as such becomes nothing more than the subject or an object is encountered that is unassimilable into the subject and (as the object lies outside of its own control) proves that the individual is not the foundation of all existence. In this way, desire finds itself unable to reach satisfaction in this negative movement, and seems caught in a paradox that leads to the apparent contradiction of the Identity of Subject and Object and the Non-Identity of Subject and Object. Hegel identifies this when he states: “Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well.” (1977, p. 109) Here is revealed an infinite regress; as objects of desire are assimilated into being, further objects present themselves to be again assimilated, and thus as desire continually represents itself, the subject is unable to transform its self-certainty into an absolute knowledge of its self-consciousness. This means that the Subject’s ‘Identity’ is either based in a fundamental identity between Subject and Object or the Subject’s ‘Identity’ (its self-

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consciousness) is founded upon a principle of non-Identity between Subject and Object. The infinite movement of desire does not establish the truth or falsity of either proposition, and as a result, the subject is caught between the movement of satisfaction and desire.

Lordship and Bondage

In Chapter's IV and IVA of his *Phenomenology* Hegel attempts to overcome this issue through some astounding analyses. What he seeks to show is that rather than an apparent paradox, there is in truth a fundamental unity of Identity as both Identity as Identity and non-Identity. The problem for Hegel is the tension between their mutual exclusivity, but, rather than forcing one into a decision between empirical and idealistic thought, Hegel wishes to show that this apparent paradox is in fact a *misunderstanding*, where the simultaneous Identity and non-Identity of the I is the truth of the Subject's self-consciousness. For Hegel, this truth is revealed through the movement towards 'recognition' and is explored by him in the *Phenomenology* through the stages contained within the chapter 'Lordship and Bondage'.

The self-certain consciousness of the 'I' or ego, in order to assert its own independence and autonomy, that is its being 'for-itself', must according to Hegel proceed into the world through action in order to test the hypothesis and establish the certainty of its own independence and autonomy over the world. It must act in order to establish that it's 'I' (its self-certainty of its own independence) can be extended to encapsulate the objects of its own perception. As has been noted, it must engage with these objects in order to establish its primacy over them and prove that the self-certainty of its independence is not reliant on another object (that it is not in fact a dependent existence). Without acting to prove this self-certainty, the self-certainty of the 'I' could be in fact be a misperception, and as such, to establish the truth of the self-certainty of its own consciousness it must *act out* and sublimate the objects of its perception to the 'I'. For Hegel, this action becomes problematic when the self-certain individual finds itself in confrontation with another, which is in turn itself seeking to establish its own self-certainty. At this stage the Other is not recognized by the self-certain 'I' as another rational being for it might be a mere automaton. This apparently independent Other stands in opposition to the self-certainty of the 'I', and as a result the 'I' is forced to do battle to raise it's apparent self-

certainty of consciousness to truth. In the first meeting the Other presents itself as a threat that must be subsumed into the self-certain consciousness of the 'I' in order to elevate the perception of its of self-certainty to Truth. Hegel states that the 'I' must: "proceed to supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself as the essential being" (1977, p. 111)

For Hegel, the 'I' and the Other must "engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case." (1977, p. 114) This struggle eventually comes to a close and establishes a hierarchy of Lord and Bondsman after one of the combatants concedes defeat and the victor establishes themselves as having power over the other. The defeated valued life more intensely in this struggle than their new master; it valued its own existence more highly than the promise of establishing the certainty of its independence, whereas the victor was willing to go further, risk more, risk it all, under the promise of establishing the truth of its independence. It is important to note here that this does not imply that the Lord would have risked his life *totally* but only that he was willing to go further in risking his than the other. The Lord establishes his independence through the subservience of the Bondsman, with this subservience serving to confirm that the master is the truly 'independent being' as, having shown that it has the power over its own existence, it was willing, unlike the Bondsman, to conquer its desire for self-preservation and able to establish the apparent sovereignty of its self-certain will. The struggle has resulted in a relationship of dependence on the part of the Lord, where the 'essentiality' of self-consciousness (its independence) is achieved through the subservience of the Bondsman; "they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; 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. The former is lord, the other is bondsman." (Hegel, 1977, p. 115)

In this relationship, the Lord maintains his independence through a marriage of control and mercy, for the Lord, in establishing its essentiality over the Bondsman, must turn the Bondsman into an object 'for-himself'. However, he must also maintain this object in a relationship of subservience - it cannot destroy the other totally - for it necessarily requires the other to ensure its own position of power. For the Lord, his independent nature is maintained through the "unessential consciousness" of the Bondsman, which as an object under its control "constitutes the truth of his certainty of himself" (Hegel, 1977, p. 116).

The maintenance of the Bondsman under the Lord reveals for Hegel what will turn out to be the root of his great dialectical reversal; in requiring the Bondsman to continue to exist to establish its independence (after all, as Beiser identifies: “a corpse cannot salute” (2005, p. 188)) the Lord is shown to need the Bondsman to *recognize* its sovereignty. It is this need for the master to have his slave that for Hegel undermines the apparent mastery of the Lord by unveiling his dependence on the Bondsman (he requires his slave for the reassurance of his mastery). The master is in essence dependent upon the slave; he is not free ‘in-himself’ requiring as he does the slave for his independence. This is problematic, for it has revealed to the self-certain master that the forced recognition of the slave does not afford him the self-certainty of his independence that he fought for, for, in forcing the slave to acknowledge the master, the master becomes dependent upon the recognition of the subservient individual, with this power over the slave being mistaken for confirmation of his own autonomy. This for Hegel is not enough for the master to establish his own autonomy and results in a relationship that is “one-sided and unequal” (Hegel, 1977, p. 116) as the slave only acknowledges the master’s ‘power’, and as this forced acknowledgement needs to be constantly maintained, it reveals that this ‘recognition’ involves a dependence of the master on the slave. Richman tells us; “The master’s apparent autonomy masks the reality of his double dependence upon the slave for the production of the goods he consumes and for the recognition of the superiority he seeks” (1982, p. 61).

Now, the master, relying upon the enforced acknowledgement of the slave has, through a dramatic reversal of fortune, revealed his dependence on the slave for his mastery. However, as a ‘rational’ being⁴, in order to prove that it is truly independent and autonomous, the master requires the *free* recognition of the slave as to his independence, for the enforced acknowledgement does not confirm for the ‘rational’ individual that it is free, and at this stage, both the slave and the master are trapped in a relationship which, being based on coercion, does not afford to either participant the ability to fulfill their apparent potentiality of consciousness. Beiser indicates the degrading aspect of this relationship when he states:

The master regresses back to the stage of his animal desires. This is for two reasons: (1) he treats the slave only as a means to his own ends, and as an instrument to satisfy his desires; (2) he simply consumes the products of the slave’s labour; he does not gain independence over his objects through labour, like the slave who labours for him, but he depends on the slave’s labour for his idle enjoyment. So if the slave is not worthy of giving recognition, the master is not worthy of receiving it. (2005, p. 189)

⁴ The master has proved its rationality through the life and death struggle which established this hierarchy as it proved that it had mastery over its own bodily desire for self-preservation.

The relationship of the Lord to the Bondsman has revealed to the former that rather than ensuring his own independence, it has in fact placed him in chains to his Bondsman and, in order to re-establish the independence of the rational individual, the collapse of the subservient relationship is required. As such, the masterfully subtle twist of the dialectic is now revealed where, in the movement toward recognition and establishment of the independence of the individual, the rational 'I' must be recognized as such, and *in return* recognize freely, the autonomous independence of the Other. Hegel states: "Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another" (1977, p. 112) We must also note here, that it is this recognition which for Hegel forms the grounding of the possibility of the State and 'Ethical Life', for it is this mutual recognition, this *need* to be recognized by the Other that binds the individual and the Other in a relationship which forms the basis of civil society. In his *Philosophy of Right* Hegel indicates this clearly when he analyses the implications of this dialectic on a societal level and finds that the drive towards the individual satisfaction (of individual desires) of needs is tempered, and in fact enhanced by, the need for recognition by and of the Other:

That is to say, by a dialectical advance, subjective self-seeking turns into the mediation of the particular through the universal, with the result that each man in earning, producing, and enjoying on his own account is *eo ipso* producing and earning for the enjoyment of everyone else. The compulsion which brings this about is rooted in the complex interdependence of each on all. (Hegel, 1945, pp. 129-130)

This 'complex interdependence' indicates to us that the individual has reached a point of understanding of the absolute nature of its own existence, as both finite and infinite. Autonomy is limited in that its essential nature involves the recognition of the autonomy and existence of a rational Other and, at the same time, through this relationship, its infinite nature is revealed; the autonomy of the other establishes the infinite nature of its existence *as* this mediation. In this manner, Hegel's dialectic has seemingly overcome the apparent paradox of Identity as Identity and Identity as non-Identity. Identity is established as existing as both Identity (the 'I' and the 'Other' as essentially the same) and as non-Identity (the 'I' and 'Other' being essentially different). It is here where Identity for Hegel is revealed as absolute; the Identity of the 'I' is contained both within the recognition of the non-Identity of the I and the Other, and at the same time, through recognition, the Identity of the I and the Other as rational free individuals. Both say to each other; "we are the same you and I, because we recognize each other as different". Hegel's dialectic could be summarized somewhat over-simply with the

dictum “We think, and thus I am”, and it is this dialectic of recognition that Hegel uses to escape from the regressive circle of consciousness that results from a separation of the I from the world. This method is, in effect, Hegel’s reply to the Transcendental Idealism of Kant and Fichte, where he uses the recognition of the Other to overcome the charge of nihilism⁵ that could be leveled against his predecessors without having to resort to some kind of faculty of intuition to bridge the apparent disparity between the ‘I’ and the world (for the subject already *is* this bridge, as mediation between the ‘I’ and the ‘world’).

For Hegel, what is explicitly stated within his dialectic of recognition is a fundamental reserve to desire which is kept in check in order to allow for the recognition between the ‘I’ and Other. He has sought to illuminate through his dialectic a fundamental ‘communality’ to Being based upon the necessary recognition of individual consciousnesses with each other. It seeks to ensure the autonomy of the individual and overcome the regressive circle of consciousness that results from positing a self-conscious individual in opposition to the world. Hegel’s dialectic in this way brings the individual directly into the world *as* the world and indicates that the development and establishment of the self-consciousness of the rational ‘I’ necessarily results from its interaction with the world outside of its apparent limits.

Restricted Mediation

Hegel sought to show the essential nature of man as arising from a recognition of self-consciousness established through a necessary social interaction between two self-certain individuals. For Hegel, through the dialectical struggle, the two wrestle to elevate their own self-certainty to an understanding of the essential nature of their Being, which becomes apparent only through the mutual recognition of the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’. At the heart of the dialectic there is a requirement for a necessary *reserve* in the movement towards self-consciousness of absolute being; only through a reserve that holds desire in check will the individual be able to elevate its understanding from the apparent self-certainty of its own existence towards the absolute knowledge of its essential nature as being as both the ‘I’ and the not ‘I’. This for Hegel only becomes apparent

⁵ Nihilism here as, for Hegel, the self-conscious individual recognising the other is an *ethical* creature, and as such, a philosophy divorced from such a fundamental relation between the I and Other would be one which the solipsism of the isolated individual results in an un-ethical existence.

when the 'I' restricts its own desire to afford the other individual the same free autonomy it was seeking to establish for itself. It was previously acknowledged that in the moment of the life and death struggle between the Lord and the Bondsman, the Lord was willing to go further and risk more than the Bondsman. What however is not stated but implied is that whilst willing to go further, the question as to whether he would be willing to risk *everything* to the point of self-destruction is not tackled. We can assume that as the Lord also wishes to establish the essential truth of its self-certainty it would, like the Bondsman, only risk itself up to a point; it would not risk itself to the point of destruction, as the drive towards self-preservation is a necessary aspect of the mediated subject. Without this reserve, the self-certain subject would be unable to reach the point at which its subjectivity as mediation could be revealed.

As we have seen implied, for Hegel this movement is involuntary and necessarily occurs as the individual, unable to conquer its object (due to it necessarily requiring the other for its recognition), effectively enters into an economy of equivalent exchange with the Other. "I recognize you as you recognize me", the one says to the other, "and I you also" comes the reply. In this moment they realized their worst nightmare, they needed each other but wanted the other dead. The reserve and safeguard against loss that is used by Hegel's subject in order to guarantee his own independence, to prevent its loss in the life and death struggle towards recognition, necessarily eliminates a sphere of activity from incorporation into the greater understanding of the 'essence' of Being. As we have seen, in the movement towards recognition, the individual's desire to elevate its self-certainty to Truth requires both the reserve against total loss of the self-certain 'I' and also the holding back from total annihilation of the 'Other' - that object of its perception - in order to establish the mutual recognition that for Hegel reveals the essence of Being in all its communal beauty.

Shown to us in this way is a fundamental reserve in the formation of self-consciousness; in order to reveal itself as mediation, the 'I' is forced to recognize the 'Other' as essentially the same as itself. Neither can exceed the other, both participants have to ensure that they are equal if they are to give and receive the recognition required to reveal its essential Being. Throughout the movement, there is only a semblance of risk; a calculated dance between them, where in order to establish their subjectivity neither participant can break the rules of the game.

In this way the movement of desire is revealed as being part of the dialectical movement towards the establishment of the absolute knowledge of being. Desire is a fundamental part of the journey of the 'I' towards knowledge of itself and it is desire held in check, both on the part of the 'I' and the 'Other', that enables the establishment of absolute knowledge as recognized self-consciousness. Yet for us, if we ponder for a moment the way in which desire manifests itself in the world, there may be certain situations which seem to present themselves as a direct challenge to the restricted relationship between individuals, and serve to question the hierarchy of Being that Hegel brings into play through his dialectic.

What we must keep in mind is that Hegel's dialectic should not be misconstrued as an exposition of how the 'I' becomes conscious of itself as an absolute relation, but is used in order to show how, through *reason*, we can overcome the apparent incongruities between reason and the world and bring to light the absolute self-consciousness of Spirit (self-consciousness through recognition) that man *already is*. In other words, the phenomenological analysis that Hegel submits the 'I' to is carried out in order to illuminate not how man comes to 'be' but rather to elucidate, through the dialectical movement, an understanding of the *absolute knowledge* of man *as* his relation to the world.

Now, as just mentioned, Hegel's dialectic is used to explicate through reason an understanding of how man already is absolute knowledge. Hegel's thoughts upon the development of humanity and self-consciousness must be viewed in this light, and it would be a mistake to misconstrue Hegel's analysis on the dialectical development of the understanding of 'spirit' as a metaphysic based in a chronological development. Man for Hegel is already in the position in which the absolute knowledge of his relative nature can be revealed through reason. His faculty for understanding his position develops through the dialectical movement, but the position towards which understanding seeks illumination is always already there. Man is always a restricted relational consciousness, and it is only through the faculty of dialectical reason that this becomes incorporated into the understanding as self-consciousness. *Being* always is as it is, being by its very nature absolute, and it is only the *Knowledge of the Truth* of this Being that develops through Hegel's dialectic. We should note that it is through the knowledge of this Truth that the 'ethical disposition' is created in man, compelling him to "make oneself a member of one of the moments of civil society by one's own act, through one's energy, industry, and skill, to maintain oneself in this position, and to fend for oneself only through this process of mediating oneself

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with the universal, while in this way gaining recognition both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others.”
(Hegel, 1945, p. 133)

Mediation is the watch-word of Hegelian philosophy, where the grounding of his entire thought, formed within the *Phenomenology*, is created through the mediation of the contradiction between the identity of the 'I' and the 'Other' and their apparent non-Identity. It is revealed that the 'subject' is no longer typified as a distinct entity, it is no longer simple subsistence, but is in fact illuminated as a knowledge which results from the dialectical mediation of this contradiction. The subject is no longer the subject 'in itself', nor simply 'for itself'; in the movement between the master and slave the subject is revealed as a point of mediation during the process of movement that it itself is. Nancy indicates this to us in his seminal *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative* when he states:

It is thus that the subject is, and nothing other than the act of going into movement as the movement of this being-affected and this passing-into-the-other. 'A being which is capable of enduring its own contradiction is a "subject", this constitutes its infinitude'. (2002, p. 42)

The subject is formed at a given point as a *manifestation* into sense (knowledge) of the movement of the dialectic that it itself is, coming into knowledge through the understanding of its own being-affected by and as the Other. This subject proves itself as the continuous mediation between the seemingly contradictory logical possibilities that make up man, and the subject as such is revealed as only a momentary respite, a conciliatory moment in the movement of the dialectic. The subject is thus shown to be a moment of *reserve*, a fragile balance, where the conflicting drives towards self-certainty and self-preservation (typified by the Lord and the Bondsman) are revealed as aspects of a continuing movement between the I and the Other. In this way, the subject is revealed not as a distinct substance, as either the originator of or the result of its interaction with the world, but *as* the moment of knowledge of mediation. The absolute, when brought into knowledge *as* being, is revealed as the moment of conciliation, the mediation of conflict and the amalgamation of these desires into and as the subject. Nancy tells us:

Sense is not 'the meaning of being', as if it were a property of being, or an ideal signification floating above it, more or less perceptible to the minds of men. Sense is being as sense, being torn away from subsistence and away from fixed determination, and it is the appropriation of being by the subject, as subject... the restlessness of the negative is the agitation, the tension, the pain and the joy of this appropriation. (2002, p. 50).

As we can see, in the mediation which is revealed as the manifestation of the subject, there is involved a restriction, mediation itself requiring the temperance of the apparently contradictory elements in order to

establish its 'unity' (however fleeting or momentary this proves to be). This restriction, when elevated to the level of the truth of the subject, is made manifest as mediation of conflict, and as a result becomes the problematic and also the terrifying power of the Hegelian Dialectic. The subject as mediation, when called into question by the idea of *un-knowable* excess, opens up a space in which the subject *as* restrictive mediation is brought into question, but, in tackling this excess through the syntax of language and attempting to bring this challenge into discourse, the only thing that escapes is a stifled *scream*, a *rebellion* against the suffocating logic of the subject *as* restrictive mediation. It is here that a further problem arises; if the subject always *is* this mediation, what happens if we seem to uncover a moment of existence *without* reserve?

In order to tackle this question we will need to turn to Bataille's encounter with Nietzsche. We must, however, hold in our minds the notion that Hegel makes present in his Dialectic; that the subject, the 'I', is always a manifest *knowledge* of the mediated relation that is itself. It is counter to Hegel's suffocating logic that Nietzsche enters as a defiant scream against the dialectic:

Knowledge is in no way distinct from me: I am it, it is the existence which I am. But this existence is not reducible to it; this reduction would require that the known be the aim of existence and not existence the aim of the known. (Bataille, 1988b, p. 110)

Nietzsche becomes present for us in this dialogue at the point of the 'completion' of the Hegelian dialectic, where the development of the self-conscious subject (as absolute knowledge) becomes manifest as man's existence. However, what Bataille wants to tackle is the nature of human experience following this revelation where, at the close of the system, as knowledge and existence converge (being absolute, there is perfected symmetry between the knowledge of existence and existence *as it is*), existence as such, in all its meandering movements, reveals the limitations of Hegel's dialectic (Hegel's subject becomes abstract following the establishment of the absolute subject, for the absolute knowledge that *is* the subject is effectively a truth abstracted *from* life). Bataille will find the apparent counterfoil to Hegel in the Nietzschean 'Death of God', and the revelation that this shows of the apparent insufficiency of any absolute.

1.3: Killing God

Nietzsche's 'Death of God', as we have intimated, is intended not as a simple atheistic rejection of the personified God of theology. Indeed, Nietzsche was not the first to reject God but, for Bataille, his notion of the *impact* of this attack upon the foundations of a self-assured identity proves devastating. The impact of the 'Death of God' is illuminated perhaps best in Nietzsche's writing in his *Gay Science*, in the section entitled 'The Madman'. The scene centres on this 'madman' careering around a marketplace berating all he meets with desperate shrieks, imploring them to bear witness to his proclamation of the murder of God. In this passage, the focus of the parable is not a critique of a theistic belief in God, but in truth is, as Land identifies¹, an illumination of the gravity of the *crime* that has been committed by our consignment of the idea of God to the scrap heap: "Where is God?' he cried; 'I'll tell you! *We have killed him* – you and I! We are all his murderers." (Nietzsche, 2001, pp. 119-20). Now, it is important for us here not to confuse the madman's ramblings with those of one racked with *guilt* (those of the ravings of a man who, having broken a moral imperative, has been driven out of his wits). Instead, we need to recognise that what has driven the man *mad* is the effect that the death of God has had upon his Identity. As such, we need to examine what the image of God represents in this section and what it is about this murder that causes the man to descend into madness. What will become apparent is that in Nietzsche, Bataille found a teaching which embodied "the most violent of solvents" (Bataille, 2004, p. xxi), a solvent which drives man to 'madness':

How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us this sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions... Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? – Gods, too, decompose, God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him. (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 120)

Nietzsche's Madman, in announcing the death of God, is alluding to the impact that the death of the absolute *as a concept* has in general. If we recall the rise of the Olympian edifice in his *Birth of Tragedy*, we note how the Apollonian dream-world was created in response to the swelling meaninglessness threatening man so as to; "afford him an interpretation of life, and it is by these processes that he trains himself for life" (1995, p. 2). It is in this sense, of God as "guarantor of the good" (Land, 1992, p. 59), that Nietzsche is proclaiming deicide.

¹ Land notes that the 'Death of God' as conceived of by both Bataille and Nietzsche is perceived as a criminal act: "Amongst the diseases that Bataille shares with Nietzsche is the insistence that the death of God is not an epistemic conviction, but a crime" (1992, p. 63)

God serves to be the figurehead for the absolute, and we can infer that any absolute, such as an absolute good or law of morality, the divinity of man in atheistic socialism, or the state or nation in fervent nationalism, share too these aspects of the divine illustrated in the figure of the theistic God. What this absolute indicates is the ultimate and unchanging frame of reference in which a given system of thought or 'world-view' finds its locus and foundation. For instance, in the Christian faith, the eternal and infinite good of God is the guarantor of the Christian ethical conception of existence, and it is without God as frame of reference, that this system flounders without the premise of its 'world-view'. The ethical *command* to do good with a view to either cleansing the soul of sin or of ensuring access to an afterlife in heaven, without God, as the judge and guarantee of their *being* an afterlife, finds its premise to have been uprooted. Bataille indicates the impact of this deicide as follows:

The atheist is satisfied with a world completed without God; the one who sacrifices is, on the contrary, in anguish before an incompletable world, incompletable and forever unintelligible, which destroys him, tears him apart (and this world destroys itself, tears itself apart) (1988b, p. 153)

However, this is not a problem that is exclusive to the theistic conception of God, and it is by extrapolating this impact and applying it to existence in general that we will see how the proclamation 'God is Dead' becomes a solvent in which Bataille struggled with his own impression of man. It is not a question of killing 'God' to raise another, for as Bataille indicates, the 'atheist is satisfied with a world completed without God'.

Without the horizon of 'God' as the frame of reference (as the "the ideal instrument of human reactivity, the numbingly anti-experimental principle of utilitarian calculus" (Land, 1992, p. 59)), then a fixed or *restricted* Identity - such as in Hegel's *Phenomenology* – loses the basis from which its Identity is constructed. For Nietzsche, this destruction of guarantee for identity is a herald of *madness*, it destroys the fragile construction around which a *false* identity is produced (we will tackle this statement in more detail in Part 2) and reveals for Nietzsche a 'poly-theistic' aspect to humanity in opposition to a 'mono-theistic' conception that he sees as supporting a *restricted* identity. Now, as we have seen, this *restricted* identity finds itself for Bataille illustrated *par excellence* in the construction of the Hegelian 'Absolute Knowledge' and it is through analysis of the impact of the deicide on this conception that we will perhaps see more clearly the basis from which Bataille presented his 'impression' of man.

As noted, the basis of the Hegelian conception of man rests upon his identification of the necessity for recognition that arises from the 'I' and its attempt to establish its self-certain autonomy. In this analysis, what is discovered is that man is always enmeshed within an economy of being whose frame of reference for the establishment of Identity rests upon the relationship of recognition that exists between the 'I' and the 'Other'. This relationship of recognition forms the *absolute* basis for Identity, and indeed it is the identification of this relationship that forms its fundamental locus. As such, being the basis of the 'I', this recognition which proves the fundamental grounding of man in social existence (for Hegel, man is never anything but social) is extrapolated outwards from the individual relationship between 'I' and 'Other' to society at large. Recognition becomes the absolute by which ethics, law, politics and all society finds its metaphysical basis (as we have seen, it is the *need* for recognition for Hegel that proves the basis of ethical and social life as laid out in his *Philosophy of Right*). The concepts of right and wrong, true and false, are all then judged against the referent of the absolute, and it is in the shadow of this absolute that desires; animal, sexual and political are necessarily tempered in order to abide to the rules of Hegel's economy of Identity.

As previously intimated, it is through the intellectual faculties that this absolute comes into self-consciousness, where through the process of Dialectical advancement, the 'I' overcomes the apparent towards an understanding of the *true* nature of recognition *as* the absolute. Similarly, any posited absolute, whether Hegelian, Christian, Marxist or Fascist, proclaims the primacy of a given apprehension or aspect of existence (its *Truth*) to the exclusion of other aspects which (depending upon the grounding of a particular system), precluding their validity, often consider them base, perverted or plain *evil*. It is the equivalence of what has been deemed true, right, or good with what has been deduced through the intellectual faculties (phenomenal, rational or empirical amongst others) that is the 'God' that is murdered by us all in Nietzsche's 'madman', the 'sponge' being the deicide and the restricted identification of what Nietzsche essentially claims as a falsity – that of the *True* – being the 'entire horizon' wiped clean in murder.

What Nietzsche is rejecting in his 'Madman' is a conception of man which finds in its basis some absolute by which existence is put to task, made to line up against the judging post of *Truth* and, for those that do not measure up, are rejected as not forming part of man's true nature or existence. Pierre Klossowski reminds us of the pitfalls of equating that which has risen to knowledge within consciousness to Truth when he writes; "since only the last scenes of reconciliation and the final accounting at the end of this long process rise to our consciousness, we suppose that intelligence must be something conciliatory, just, and good – something that stands essentially opposed to the instincts, while it is actually nothing but a certain behaviour of the instincts towards one another" (2007, p. 107). For Nietzsche, it is these 'last scenes' and the 'final accounting' that creates a fixed consciousness in opposition to the free play of forces that constitute human existence, and it is in the shadow of Hegel that he is thinking this, where the 'knowledge' that arises from this conciliatory movement is framed by the need for recognition between men. Nietzsche states:

My idea is clearly that consciousness actually belongs not to man's existence as an individual but rather to the community and herd-aspects of his nature; that accordingly, it is finely developed only in relation to its usefulness to community or herd; and that consequently each of us, even with the best will in the world to *understand* ourselves as individually as possible, 'to know ourselves', will always bring to consciousness precisely that in ourselves which is 'non-individual', that which is 'average'. (2001, p. 213)

Poor Man's Consciousness

If we recall Hegel's movement of the individual in the *Phenomenology* we will note that the desires and actions of the individual are tempered by the existence of and need for recognition from the Other. From this restriction arise morality, politics and all social interaction that is considered 'true' (true as it is based in an understanding of the absolute) Yet potentially, to extend to knowledge the insights that arise from this restricted Identity serves only to undermine the heterogeneous aspects of existence which are explicitly restricted or rejected in a system such as this (such as the erotic or an excessively violent desire for power). For Nietzsche this operation of generalisation serves to illuminate the false truth that is ascribed to the absolute; it being universally absolute at the expense of individual excess. Existence's 'absolute' is obtained through a movement that produces a truth based in the lowest common denominator; for what is absolute for one has to be, to retain its attribute of universality, shared in common with the other. Within this moment, an opposition emerges, not between subject

and object, or freedom and autonomy, but between the absolute as average, and existence that is excessive:

At bottom, all our actions are incomparably and utterly personal, unique, and boundlessly individual, there is no doubt; but as soon as we translate them into consciousness, *they no longer seem to be...* This is what I consider to be the true phenomenalism and perspectivism: that due to the nature of *animal consciousness*, the world of which we are conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world, a world turned into generalities and thereby debased to its lowest common denominator, that everything which enters consciousness thereby *becomes* shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, a sign, a herd-mark; that all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization. (Nietzsche, 2001, pp. 213-4)²

Identity formed in the shadow of the absolute, or indeed, *as* the absolute, arises from the exclusion of certain aspects owing to their nature as contradictory to a given system; the kind of Identity that arises for Nietzsche in this situation can be termed *monotheistic*. For in the shadow of an absolute, the ‘boundlessly individual’ is reduced through ‘corruption’ to produce an Identity that is general, average and superficial. For Nietzsche, Identity formed in this way is monotheistic due to its orientation towards *a* truth or *an* apprehension of existence, an orientation which, in the light of its absolute becomes orientated towards this given; life sets itself a goal or a truth from which its *value* is gained and Identity, through the process of its relation to its absolute, sheds the aspects of its existence which are deemed contradictory or conflicting with its conception of Truth. In the shadow of the absolute, life itself becomes *accountable* to a singular conception of existence or Truth, and life, actions and meaning gain or lose their *value* in accordance to the economic accounting that takes place in its formation. For Nietzsche, at the point that life as *will* is translated into consciousness through language, the essential individuality that is an individual's Will becomes lost, distorted in the establishment of the relational movements of language and, in its drive to be communicable, existence is reduced to the lowest common denominator through the necessary constraints imposed through language.

This calculation, which Nietzsche criticizes, is the same issue that Bataille takes with Hegel. It is the *accountability* (the *calculation* that is involved in a monotheistic conception of Identity for Nietzsche, and the equation of knowledge of the absolute *as* existence for Bataille) that, when faced with life as excess, finds itself caught short against existence which exceeds the possibility of accumulation into the system of absolute

² This comment is reminiscent of Dostoyevsky's ‘Underground Man’ who states: “All the same, I’m firmly convinced that not only a great deal of consciousness but even any amount of consciousness is a disease” (Dostoyevsky, 2009, pp. 6-7)

knowledge. The problem that Bataille is grappling with is not to try to uncover the *true nature* of man and gain knowledge of what he *essentially* is (as if there were aspects to him which were not true, or actions which held a merely phantasmal quality to be excised in the cold light of knowledge), but instead to try to evoke in language “The problem of the whole human being” (Bataille, 2004, p. xxii).

An individual’s limit is not represented simply by the rights of another individual but even more by the rights of the masses. We are all inextricably bound up with the masses, participating in their innermost sufferings and their victories. And in our innermost being, we form part of a living group – though we are no less alone, for all that, when things go wrong. (Bataille, 2004, p. xxii)

Entirety exists within me as exuberance. (Bataille, 2004, p. xxiv)

Bataille’s *On Nietzsche* is a meditation on the personal experience of life lived through the Nietzschean ‘Death of God’. It seeks to elucidate the impact that the destruction of the absolute has on Identity, with moments of exuberance having a fortuitous impact through chance moments of ecstasy. These moments find themselves placed in opposition to a restricted Identity formed through action (for example, as in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*), which although founded on the illusion of the harmonious individual, is unable to be permanently overcome by the chance moments of excess.

We will focus here on the second chapter in *On Nietzsche*, in which we find the central theoretical discussion of the tension in humanity that reveals an inconsistency at the heart of ‘being’. Bataille lays the ground of his investigation when he states: “Good is given first as the good of the individual. Evil seems to be a bias that obviously acts against this or that given individual. Possibly, good is respect for individuals and evil their violation.” (2004, p. 15) Bataille is taking the general moral view of existence – similar to that of Hegel - where the absolute (the good) is aligned with recognition (respect) for the Other. However, through recourse to Nietzsche and the death of the absolute, Bataille will re-evaluate the meaning of evil which in turn opens the possibility for the positing of his idea of a *summit morality* in contrast to a *morality of decline*.

Like Nietzsche before him, Bataille recognised that within the general conception of good and evil (whatever the parameters) grounded in the idea of an absolute, there is a general contempt for the individual, with an antinomy arising through this conception. He states; “On the contrary, good relates to having contempt for the

interest of beings in themselves. According to this secondary conception (secondary, though remaining part of the totality of emotions) evil would be the existence of individuals – insofar as this implies their separation.” (2004, p. 15) Like Nietzsche however, he does not want to merely oppose a social conception of existence which gives primacy to others, with a conception which places the individual as the sovereign in a competing system. This would be unsatisfactory for it would be merely to topple one God with an eye to crowning another, to replace the absolute responsibility for the Other with the sovereignty of the individual, and as such would exclude the recognition that in man there is a social aspect to his existence. ‘We are all inextricably bound up with the masses’ Bataille reminds us, and it is the inconsistency in existence that he wishes to examine further. We are, for Bataille both, ‘incomparably and utterly personal, unique, and boundlessly individual’ but, at the same time, we cannot escape that generalization, that ‘herd-mark’ which is also fundamental to our nature as human beings.

For Bataille, his notion of summit morality and the morality of decline are both marks of “humanness taken as a whole”, a humanity marked specifically by its “inconsistency” (2004, p. xxvii). This inconsistency makes itself manifest for Bataille as a desire for totality *and* for loss, both paradoxically linked as aspects of individual existence, but although present within life necessarily, are not involved in a *relationally contradictory* existence with one another.

Now, in looking at the way in which Bataille outlines his 'summit morality' and his 'morality of decline', we will see how through this conception Nietzsche and Hegel are made manifest as conflict within his thought. We will see that it is not a case of simple opposition or synthesis of the two in a more 'complete' composition. For Bataille the two necessarily coexist with each other whilst cancelling each other out, where the desire for totality will inevitably lead to the loss of totality at the summit, and yet, following this loss of self, the desire to understand and reduce this transgression to knowledge remains strong; “*The summit isn't 'what we ought to reach'; nor is decline 'what ought to be done away with.'* Just as in the last analysis the summit is simply *inaccessible, from the start, decline is inevitable.*” (Bataille, 2004, p. 39)

1.4: Summit and Decline

The summit corresponds to excess, to an exuberance of forces. It brings about a maximum of tragic intensity. It relates to measureless expenditures of energy and is a violation of the integrity of individual beings. It is thus closer to evil than to good. The decline – corresponding to moments of exhaustion and fatigue – gives all value to concerns for preserving and enriching the individual. From it come rules of morality. (Bataille, 2004, p. 17)

The 'summit' for Bataille is the moment at which an individual *risks* itself, where the integrity of the separate human being is pitted against the chance of total loss in a moment of expenditure. This moment for Bataille allows individuals to be brought to the limit of their individual existence in the face “of death and nothingness.” (Bataille, 2004, p. 19) For Bataille, this summit is only encountered through *chance*, and comes about from an excess of energy which leads the 'subject' to and beyond the limit of its own subjectivity – the moment that illuminates this *par excellence* being the sacrificial or erotic moment. This he contrasts with a morality of decline, in which the 'morality' is not one based upon the foundations of some rational or empirical imperative, but is in fact, for Bataille, a 'morality' that arises from *exhaustion*. As the individual expends energy, he finds himself outstripped (as in the erotic moment, the exuberant movement of bodies can only sustain itself to a point; at the zenith of the movement comes an explosion and with it, exhaustion, decline, rest, sleep) and must subordinate his desire for the future preservation of his existence. This decline Bataille sees as inevitable for, when brought to the limit of its own *possibilities* through chance excess, the individual exhausts itself, following which the concern for 'preserving and enriching the individual' is restored.

Driving Bataille's thoughts on the Summit and Decline is a complex 'corruption' of the thought of Nietzsche and Hegel. In the movement between Summit and Decline we see elements of the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic and Nietzsche's critique of 'consciousness' combine in such a way as to highlight the interdependence of Hegelian 'communality' and Nietzschean rebellion within the 'whole human being'. Bataille uses the phenomenon of 'communication' to portray this complex interdependence, stating that within man there exists a necessity to 'communicate' with the Other outside of the limits of individual integrity. Bataille notes:

Being under the necessity to communicate, they're compelled to will 'evil' and defilement, which by risking the being within them, renders them mutually penetrable to each other. (2004, p. 25)

For Bataille, the term 'evil' does not refer to the transgression of a set moral code nor implies that the actions

are necessarily 'harmful' in the way that the term evil would normally suggest. As with many of his concepts, he intentionally uses one laden with a pejorative edge, whilst simultaneously attempting to strip this term of its moralising connotations. For Bataille, 'evil' is indicative of an intentional 'wounding' of the integrity of another individual in the movement to communicate outside of the integrity of the isolated individual. He states: "Communication' cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness; the moral summit is the moment of risk taking, it is a being suspended in the beyond of oneself." (2004, p. 19)

If we recall Hegel's *Master*, we will see a correlation between the way the master needs to exceed the limits of his own self-certainty (to attempt to establish the absolute nature of his being he must encounter the other and make him his slave) and Bataille's notions of communication and evil. As we have seen, within this process a necessary *risk* is involved in which the master and the eventual slave engage in a life/death struggle to bring their own self-certainty to absolute knowledge. Now while Hegel's master must do this in order to elevate its own self-certainty, Bataille is already coming from the position in which the 'absolute relation' of self-consciousness has been established. For Bataille, the risk involved in the relation between master and slave and its *overcoming* in the absolute is not the end of the movement of risk. For Bataille, as can be seen in his 'The Notion of Expenditure'¹, there will always be an oscillation between excesses of and conservation of energy without end, and it is this which drives him to posit that there will be a constant *desire* to 'communicate' between individuals which necessarily involves risk. Now this constant fluctuation for Bataille necessitates *evil* due to the fact that the desire to communicate involves a transgression of the integrity of the 'absolute self-consciousness', in which, akin to the master and slave, the 'I' and the 'Other' will need to pierce the individual integrity of one another.

¹ Bataille states: "Human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, and consumption must be divided into two distinct parts. The first, reducible part is represented by the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the continuation of individuals' productive activity in a given society; it is therefore a question simply of the fundamental condition of productive activity. The second part is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures; luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexually activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality) – all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves." (Bataille, 1985c)

Could this however be construed as a revised version of Hegelianism? Is this transgression as part of the desire to communicate just another element within the establishment of the 'absolute relation' of the 'I' and the 'Other'? Could communication in this way be incorporated as part of the developmental phase of the dialectic of mediation? Bataille, in order to address these questions, where *risk* would be ultimately reducible to the establishment of the 'absolute', places into the equation the idea of 'consent'. This is so for as we will recall, the idea of consent only appears in the dialectic at the moment of reconciliation, where the master *had to acknowledge regretfully* the autonomy of the Other in the need to establish his own. Bataille instead is indicating that in the movement towards communication, a consensual willing to *risk* takes place, in which caution is abandoned in order to attempt to bridge the gap between the restricted 'I' and 'Other':

But these burning trajectories only replace isolated humanness if there's some consent, if not to annihilation, then to *risking* yourself and, in the same impulse, *risking* other people. All '*communication*' *participates in suicide, in crime*. Lethal horror goes with it, and disgust is its sign. And in such a light, evil appears – as a life source! By destroying the integrity of existence within myself and in others, I open myself to communion – I attain a moral summit. And the summit isn't a *submission to* but a *willing* of evil. It is a voluntary pact with sin, crime, and evil. A pact made with a relentless fate that requires that while some live, others die. (Bataille, 2004, p. 26)

Now, we must not confuse the notion of 'consent' given here with that of a self-conscious decision to *risk* oneself, that is, a calculated decision in which a risk is taken following the weighing of the pro's and con's *before* the transgression. If we recall Nietzsche at this point, we will see how Bataille inherited his belief that under the assured self-consciousness of identity there exists a swelling undercurrent of *willing* from which arises only a residue into consciousness. This 'consensual' movement towards risk has, for Bataille, more in common with the idea of expenditure he expresses elsewhere, where the risk is one that is driven by an unconscious *willing* and forms a necessary part of the existence of the 'whole human being'. Bataille in this way sees the *risk* and the drive to communicate as momentary *excesses* or *expenditures* which are not a product of self-consciousness, but instead indicative for him of the moment of *sacrifice* that is encountered through chance; it is unconsciously *willed*, arises from an excess of energy, and will inevitably lead to exhaustion and the morality of decline.

The Antique Wardrobe

I will now turn to Bataille's treatment of the notion of *sacrifice within excess* as exhibited in his *Story of the Eye* where, within the character of Marcelle, we will see writ large the relationship that occurs between expenditure and conservation, excess and exhaustion, the summit and the decline.

And all at once, something incredible happened, a strange swish of water, followed by a trickle and a stream from under the wardrobe door: poor Marcelle was pissing in her wardrobe while masturbating. (Bataille, 2001a, p. 17)

Poor Marcelle indeed, for she was the ‘purest and most affecting’ of the protagonist’s associates in Bataille’s ‘Story of the Eye’, a girl who, when caught in a swirling orgy of chilled champagne, dancing and licentiousness, owing to her ‘unusual lack of willpower’ was overcome by her carnal urges. Once the descent into sensuality occurs (heralded by the character Simone’s request to a boy to “piss on my cunt” (2001a, p. 16)), she is caught in a whirlwind of anguished sexuality in which she debases herself in a wardrobe. Marcelle, defined by her purity, finds herself in the face of her own *evil* that comes from within; the sexual urges serve to destroy her ‘pure’ identity and her ensuing descent into madness illustrates the impact of the erotic *summit* in tension with the inevitable morality of decline.

In the chapter titled ‘The Antique Wardrobe’ we see a group of *‘libertines’* engage in a frenzied orgy of bewildered sexuality, and through this Bataille attempts to illustrate that within the rising erotic delirium, the arbitrary distinctions between the participants are ruptured through the ‘wound’ of their sexuality; their everyday existence becoming lost in a “debauche of tumbling bodies, lofty legs and arses, wet skirts and come” and a “brutal onslaught on cunts and cocks” (2001a, p. 17).

Now the turmoil in which Marcelle is engulfed is indicative of the destruction of the ‘restricted’ identity which cannot assimilate this violent desire (a desire which destroys) into itself. In surrendering to her ‘animal’ desires we see Marcelle’s identity ruptured (her ‘identity’ being defined by her piety and morality), unable to come to terms with that which came almost from under her, was of her, and yet wounded the integrity of her identity *as she was conscious of it*. Marcelle attempts to contain the dual transgression of public sexuality and excremental loosing; she shuts herself in that ageing wardrobe in an attempt to hide her defilement. Yet, the trickle of water and her audible masturbation betrays to those present the laceration that she is subject to, and we see Bataille portraying this destruction through the sobs emanating from this “makeshift pissoir that was now her prison.” (2001a, p. 17) Whilst she is alone she is able to shut out the world from viewing her but, once she is let out from her prison, she is revealed in all her *nakedness* (that is her ‘Being’ as it is in its excess and defilement) and, when confronted with her associates in indecency, finally loses her grip on stability to

which she clung to so desperately:

Marcelle, staggering wildly across the room with shrieks and snarls, looked at me again. She flinched back as though I were a hideous ghost in a nightmare, and she collapsed in a jeremiad of howls that grew more and more inhuman.

And yet, what an atrocity! It seemed as if nothing could terminate the tragicomical frenzy of these lunatics, for Marcelle, still naked, kept gesticulating, and her agonising shrieks of pain expressed unbearable terror and moral suffering; we watched her bite her mother's face amid arms vainly trying to subdue her. (2001a, p. 18)

This orgy of sexual violence presents a *rupture* of the order of utility through a *summit* of exuberance. There is no usefulness here; indeed the participants lost all reserve at the moment when Simone, after removing a boy's trousers, proceeds to remove his shirt "to keep him from looking ridiculous" (2001a, p. 16). The shedding of clothes appears symbolic of a destruction of *order*; in becoming naked, the participants are undertaking an overturning of imposed 'servility' and 'work' and giving free reign to their animal urges. This erotic desire for the Other necessarily involves letting loose *evil* desires for debasement and defilement, 'evil' here in the sense that they do *harm* to the integrity of the self-conscious Identity. The expulsion of fluid and energy in the orgasm, coupled with the frenzy of the participants, announces the departure of morality, the departure of reserve. It is a moment of expenditure in which the concern for the future which typifies *moral* existence is led to its own destruction and is subject to "an experience or event, of negation of limits" (Guerlac, 1990, p. 92) by the object of its desire. The fleeting moment that passes without concern for itself, the moment at which existence is exceeding itself, is unable to be subdued. The animal cries of pleasure that accompany this moment as its tortured overture, signal the rupture in existence in which desire has followed an object that has led itself to shipwreck, plotting a course to an excess without reserve.

As the desire which outstrips the subject, with no future *goal* or *end* to its movement other than expenditure of energy, the subject caught in erotic desire momentarily revels in their *crime*, the different participants engaging each other through their *evil* desires. These desires are 'evil' in the traditional sense to the extent that they run counter to the established morality; excess and sexual licentiousness are seen at the least as 'a bit of fun' (excised from the true world of work and life), and at worst, base, reprehensible, and at times, harmful to human beings and society. It is apparent that sexual desire forms an inescapable part of the whole human being,

and whilst individuals may not indulge to the same extent as those in Bataille's 'Story of the Eye', it will be difficult to deny that sexual desire itself forms part of the makeup of the human story; to ignore or to downplay the importance of this aspect of existence is to ignore the fundamental place that this summit of desire occupies within humanity. Bataille is opposing, in much the same way as Nietzsche in his critique of morality, the base aspects of existence against a conception of the essence of man that excludes or nullifies this aspect. In *On Nietzsche*, Bataille draws parallels between sensuality and the crucifixion of Christ to bring to light the importance of evil in human existence. He brings to our attention the fact that, in the crime that was the crucifixion, humanity and God *communicated* through the wound caused by the death of Christ. God, in his perfection, is eternally wounded by the death of himself as his son, and human beings share or *communicate* in and through this wound with God and each other. For Bataille, as we have seen, human beings are essentially 'bound up with the masses', and what he gives as the basis for the relation between them is *crime*²:

In the elevation upon a cross, humankind attains a summit of evil. But it's exactly from having attained it that humanity ceases being separate from God. So clearly the 'communication' of human beings is guaranteed by evil. Without evil, human existence would turn in upon itself, would be enclosed as a zone of independence: And indeed an absence of 'communication' – empty loneliness – would certainly be the greater evil. (2004, p. 18)

This summit of 'evil' which leads to communication is illustrated in *Story of the Eye* when, following the debauchery of the initial orgy, the protagonist and Simone find themselves unable to indulge fully with each other without the presence of Marcelle. She becomes for them their Christ, her lacerated being becoming a corrupted image of the crucified, sacrificed son: “But we no longer thought it could be done without Marcelle, whose piercing cries kept grating on our ears, for they were linked to our most violent desires” (Bataille, 2001a, p. 21). The destruction of Marcelle, and the *community* felt by the protagonist and Simone with her, binds her tragic fate to theirs, sharing in her misery and destruction. Through the repeated recollection of the moment that bound them in crime they descend into a delirious existence: “Thus it was that our sexual dream kept changing into a nightmare” (Bataille, 2001a, p. 21). Further on in the novella, following Marcelle's incarceration in a mental institution, the two libertines cannot fully explore their desires through their

² This is reminiscent of Freud's hypothesis in his *Totem and Taboo* of the binding power of crime. Freud posits that human society originated through the primordial patricide of the father by his sons. In conspiring to commit this murder, Freud argues that their complicity ensures that social cohesion is maintained through *guilt*: “Society was now based on complicity in the common crime; religion was based on the sense of guilt and the remorse attaching to it; while morality was based partly on the exigencies of the society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt” (Freud, 2007)

imaginings only, and as such are forced to go to Marcelle, find her, rescue her, and defile her and themselves in an act of destructive sensuality. Their first meeting with Marcelle following her incarceration finds her in the window of her cell, masturbating in tandem with Simone, the only distinction between the two being the contrasting colours of their meagre clothing; the 'pure' Marcelle "wearing a white belt and white stockings" with Simone, "wearing a black belt and black stockings". Both are contrasting mirrors of each other, face to face and "masturbating with terse, brusque gestures... nearly motionless, and tense, and their eyes gaped with unrestrained joy" (2001a, p. 27). Unable to reclaim Marcelle from her prison at the first attempt, the duo return later to try again (and this time succeed), but find her mind altered. The shock of the event that put her in the asylum has rent her mind and she is no longer aware of her surroundings, oblivious to Simone "pressing her lips to the cunt, which she greedily devoured." (2001a, p. 39) Nevertheless, they bring her back to Marcelle's house, back to the scene of the debauch that led her to madness, and face to face with the *cardinal*.

Caught by the Cardinal

Poor Marcelle, unable to control her urges and yet unable to succumb fully to them, descends into a delirium of terror; her self-consciousness is shattered by her actions as she is unable to justify them yet cannot deny them either. The result for her is a destruction of her sanity, she is dragged away and placed in an asylum, her grip on reality tentative, haunted by the ghost of her desires in the form of the 'the Cardinal'. In the protagonist's attempt to reclaim Marcelle from the 'Haunted Castle' in which she was placed by her parents, we can see a device orchestrated by Bataille to show that the retreat into the castle of self-consciousness, protected from the diffusion announced by the erotic, will inevitably result in the erotic desire coming back to claim its 'victim'. Unfortunately for Marcelle, the erotic does indeed return (in the form of the protagonists of the story) and, when confronted by the return of 'the Cardinal', what little grip she has left upon reality slips, she is unable to reconcile the erotic excess with her 'pure' identity, and ultimately hangs herself.

In the character of Marcelle, we can see a direct illustration of the nature of the Summit and Decline, and we see that in this character, a co-existence is present between Hegel and Nietzsche as Bataille's writing. It is the irresolvable *tension* that Marcelle exhibits, the violent rupture of self that arises from the direct conflict

between her unconscious erotic desires and her self-conscious identity, and the *impossibility* of reconciling the two contradictory aspects into a single harmonised self. The tension between the two is effectively the tension between the desire to *assimilate* all into identity and those phenomena which, being at odds with *calculated consciousness*, put this constructed identity at *risk*. Bataille here is bringing both Hegel and Nietzsche together in a paradoxical system; he goes with Hegel, acknowledging the fundamental desire to bring into self-consciousness all that man is, while at the same time, in the face of excess, follows Nietzsche in recognising that what is brought into consciousness 'involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization'. In his *French Hegel*, Baugh identifies this contradictory attempt when he states: "Bataille tries to develop a 'heterology and a theory of expenditure', a non-science of those elements not assimilable into systems, and a paradoxical system of non-knowledge" (2003, p. 73)

Marcelle and her sufferings are a direct portrayal of the contested place in which man finds himself caught between summit and decline, where excess of energy leads to expenditure through the erotic and outstrips established 'pure' self-consciousness. Following the orgy and her experience in the 'Antique Wardrobe', Marcelle is forced to retreat to the asylum (indicative here of the decline following the summit), where her parents place her in order - we presume - to restore her sanity, or at best, *protect her* from the excessive aspects of her desires. What Bataille is attempting to show here is that these two conflicting aspects of the 'whole human being' (assured self-consciousness and the elements which exceed it), find themselves unable to be reduced into a developed, heightened or more refined consciousness of existence. When Marcelle ultimately dies by her own hand, we see Bataille attempting to illuminate how the desire to exceed limits which is found within the erotic *sacrifice* can be at odds with the calculated reserve of self-consciousness. Marcelle *must die by her own hand* for she is unable to *let go*, unable to let the movement towards excess run its course and indulge in the momentary sacrifice of her own identity, and as such, in being unable to reconcile the debauchery that was her own defilement, she is forced into a situation in which she must commit suicide.

Marcelle must force her own hand as the summit of erotic frenzy in which she was caught reveals a *baseness* to her humanity, an excess and a desire to *will* evil (as we have seen Bataille indicate the nature of the movement towards the summit to be), which is alien to the identity of that "blond girl, timid and naively pious"

(Bataille, 2001a, p. 15). Her experience leaves her “trembling and shivering feverishly” (p. 17) producing “agonizing shrieks” (p. 18) and expressing “unbearable terror and moral suffering” (p. 18). Her naïve piety, her life ordered around the absolute of God and the Good is directly at odds with the sensuous excess which is also of her, an excess which, once encountered, is then unable to be reconciled within a greater understanding or self-consciousness. Marcelle, when faced with her own wilful defilement, is caught in an inescapable paradox from which she cannot escape *and* live, and as such, she has only one remaining option, that of suicide. It would be wrong however to assume that Bataille would have insisted nihilistically that a recognition of this would always result in death. We will see that what is the *truly terrifying and laughable* aspect of the summit and the decline is the recognition of the inescapable irony of being trapped between a desire to know all and the recognition of those elements which outstrips knowledge:

Essentially the summit is where life is pushed to an impossible limit. I reach it, in the faint way that I do, only by recklessly expending my strength. I won't again possess a strength to waste unless, through work, I can gain back the strength lost. What am I moreover? Inscribed in a human context, I can't dispossess of my will to act. The possibility of giving up work forever and in some way pushing myself definitively to some goal, which in the long run is illusory: this isn't conceivable... But I can't give up the summit! I protest (intending to put lucid, dispassionate ardour into such protests) against anything that asks us that we stifle desire. Though I can only contentedly resign myself to the fate compelling me to work: I'd never dream of *doing away with moral rules*, since they spring from inevitable decline. (Bataille, 2004, pp. 39-40)

1.5: Twin Lovers Entwined

In Sacrifice, the victim is divested not only of clothes, but of life (or is destroyed in some way if it is an inanimate object). The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. (Bataille, 2006, p. 22)

As in tragedy, the fundamental aspect of the sacrificial act is revealed in the sundering of an economic world based in 'potentially' useful things, where the sacrifice irrupts into the world and violates the boundaries - albeit only momentarily - that exist between isolated, distinct individuals. In this sacrificial movement, an individual, group of people or entire community engage in a practice which involves the necessary removal of a given object or person from its *normal* useful role around which the I, the Other and Society at large is constructed to aid the goal of continued self-preservation. It is important to note here that Bataille's conception of an overall excess of energy as the *rule* for life holds fast not only in the case of the individual, nor just between the individual and the Other, but also again for society as a whole. Indeed, as Richman identifies, excessive elements within Bataille's economic structure reinforce and underpin restricted economies as "the substrate uniting specialized systems" (1982, p. 40).¹ In all cases, and in all manifestations of life, Bataille sees a drive to expend, this expenditure being necessary for more energy is accumulated than is *required* to sustain life, and as an excess is, in certain circumstances, wasted. We have already seen how Bataille sees restricted Identity, based in the restriction of desire and the Hegelian 'economy of equivalence', insufficient to capture all necessary facets of that elusive *whole human being*, and it is in this light that he views the event of sacrifice as providing an essential 'outlet' for the removal of excess energy from the economy which is unable to sustain it.

If however, we remember that for Bataille the movement of energy and its expenditure is only ever a momentary flash and that following this life will attempt to recover energy (to relieve exhaustion and conserve further life), then a question is raised. If, ultimately, the expenditure of energy is only ever fleeting and the return to restriction is inescapable, then what *function* do these sacrificial phenomena serve, and indeed, what significance do these activities hold if they are nothing more than a release of excess energy? In this way, does

¹ We will see a parallel between this aspect of Bataille's thought and Freud's conception of the relationship between the Ego and Unconscious in the coming chapters.

the release of energy at the summit and the eventual decline in exhaustion, simply have for us a physical or biological explanation? Are the notions of excess, sacrifice, summit and decline *understandable* in this manner, and as such, does the importance that Bataille gives to such actions reveal a desire to mystify an experience which at end, is readily incorporable into an understanding of man? In order to explain this more fully, and see what is really at stake in such a question, we must delve deeper into the nature of eroticism, that manifestation of sacrifice that was Bataille's obsession, and its relation to death that will allow us to tackle this question.

It is important for us to dwell momentarily on the notion of the contested individual. As indicated before, man for Bataille cannot live in the moment of excess, it is not a *possibility* for man as the act of excess cannot be sublimated into self-consciousness – man cannot *be* erotic, this not being a path that he can choose. Eroticism is far removed from the sexual act of reproduction, and we will in fact see that the erotic movement has more in common for Bataille with the act of sacrifice than it does with a biological sexual function. The character of Marcelle, whilst indeed providing for us an extreme illustration of the destructive energy that Bataille was attempting to show, does not reveal *why* the erotic act is so destructive to her identity. To bring this to light, if we are to understand the central role that eroticism plays within Bataille's thought, we must draw some parallels between the notion of Sacrifice and that of the Erotic.

Bataille sees desire as the fundamental orientation of man, with desire shaping our consciousness, our society, our interaction with others and our own identity, and yet, this very desire which constructs, also *de*-structs at the same time. For him, the lack or surplus of energy proves to be the determining factor in human activity. In the formation of society, the construction of economies, families, and the continuation of life, there is a necessary conservation of energy, which furthers the preservation and extension of life. Within this type of economic calculation is presupposed a restriction of desire (necessarily so), for in order to maintain life man cannot consume the entirety of his resources, that is, squander them, lest he risks losing the very resources required for the continuation of his own life. In this way, potentially useful resources need to be 'reinvested' into activity which finds its core in the continuation of life. Indeed, one cannot consume the entire harvest in one night if one wishes to see through the winter. This 'restriction' for Bataille, and it would be hard to disagree

with this, is a necessary facet of human activity, for one must 'work', eat, and sleep, and to not do these things will inevitably lead to exhaustion, resulting ultimately in death.

We see here parallels with the Master/Slave Dialectic as contained within Hegel's *Phenomenology*, where the relationship between the two (in order to maintain both parties necessary existence) requires a restriction of the master's desire to allow for the eventual establishment of the self-consciousness of the individual, bound up as they are with the continued free existence of each other. Human existence is necessarily tempered by such restrictions which are set in place in order to maintain this existence itself. The master has to allow the slave the autonomy to recognise him to prevent the self-certainty of its own consciousness from remaining meaningless. Without the restriction of the desire towards the Other, human beings, for Hegel, would not *be* at all. For Bataille however, human activity is not solely constituted of factors rooted within the sphere of restriction, and it is here where we can perceive a place of tension between Hegel and Nietzsche in Bataille's thought:

The imposition of interdiction upon the violence of nature inaugurates a human world of work, consciousness of death, and restricted sexual activity. It marks the passage from the animal world to the human order. However, just where Hegel would place his anthropogenic scene of the struggle for recognition, Bataille's theoretical elaboration splits in two. (Guerlac, 1990, pp. 94-5)

Like Nietzsche, who when critiquing the idea of 'consciousness', pointed towards the Will churning underneath existence (of which only a residue would rise into consciousness), so Bataille after him recognised that outside of the sphere of human activity based within restriction there exist aspects of human activity which, rather than restricting desire, actively follow desire to its limits; that is to the destruction or loss of its object without an eye towards its potential utility. In this sense, rather than tying desire to its 'satisfaction' (in the sense of its satisfaction in its restriction in the creation of identity as in Hegel), Bataille is looking at the function of desire as something rather different. For Bataille, the movement of desire leads not always to a 'fuller' subject which, upon incorporation of the object of its desire into the subject (or in relation to it) leads to the satisfaction of a desire through the destruction of its object (as in hunger, tiredness or cold, where through its satisfaction, the hunger is quelled through food, the tiredness through sleep, and the cold through warmth). Instead he is seeking to illuminate that, when desire is not embraced within a strictly utilitarian sphere of activity, and is allowed to run rampant, it can lead to the destruction of the subject itself. Now this does not always mean that when desire is allowed to run its course without restriction the subject itself will suffer *physical* death. Instead, he is

pointing us towards the potential *loss* of the self-conscious subject which, through desire, is torn from the economic restrictions which were the grounding of the possibility of consciousness itself.

It is important here to remember that Bataille does not refute that man, by necessity, lives a 'restricted' life. But, as we have seen, it is the elevation and conflation of this restricted identity with an 'absolute' nature of man that he takes issue. He sees it as a mistake to attribute to man only those restricted, useful aspects at the expense of those that are excessive. In *On Nietzsche*, we have seen how he identifies an alignment between morality (Good and Evil) with actions which abide to this rule of utility. Further to this, he has shown that not all action falls under this structure, and instead of discounting these actions (excluding them through an alignment with 'Evil'), he instead insists that these evil acts are a fundamental part of the makeup of human activity, and moreover, that these constituent parts are *not* a part of humanity that is to be shunned, excised or repressed as at odds with the *true* nature of humanity. In his treatment of morality we have seen that actions normally describable as 'good' are those that serve to reinforce and respect the integrity (separate, isolated and inviolable) of the other human being, with evil on the other hand being that which violates (or risks violating) that same integrity. For Bataille, what risks isolated integrity most is the fact of Death, and what interaction with death makes manifest. It is this inescapable destiny, this death that I will die, that proves most horrifying and yet simultaneously desirable, and for him it is at the root of the drive towards Sacrifice and Eroticism. Eroticism allows for the separate, discontinuous, integrated subject to touch the limits of their own integrity by sharing in the violation and dissolution of self that Death promises, and that its partner, sexuality allows to make present:

The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives. (Bataille, 2006, p. 17)

Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals. (Bataille, 2006, p. 18)

The *act* that is undertaken in the moment of eroticism is not erotic in and of itself. There are not acts for Bataille that are more 'Erotic' than others, for what makes something erotic is not some objective quality inherent within the act. Indeed, it is possible, as Hollier argues (1992, p. 67), that Bataille's literature constitutes an erotic act, a contention which will be examined shortly. What is of cardinal importance, indeed what *makes* something erotic, is the way in which the participants engage with the act itself which provides it with its erotic character.

At this stage it will be merely sufficient to note (but important to make the distinction between) what makes a given phenomenon erotic, and those acts which are portrayed within Bataille's literature. Indeed, we must not conflate the two with each other, for whilst in the way that they are used (and abused) within Bataille's work indeed brings them into the realm of the erotic as he saw it, it in no way means that the acts he describes, those that would be classically termed 'obscene' are the only inhabitants of the erotic sphere.

As in the realm of sacrifice, Erotic acts are not only those which are identified with what the word conjures for us. Indeed, Bataille pulls together acts of gambling, art and lavish expenditure with those involving the sacrificial knife. It is what these acts share in common; the squandering of useful objects and resources, which removes the given object from an order of utility and their giving over to a realm of waste that provides these disparate acts with their sacrificial flavour. But it is not just the removal of the given object from its potential that makes a particular activity *sacrificial*, what is of utmost importance for the phenomenon is that when it takes place, it is *witnessed*. In the moment of sacrifice, as in Tragedy, a leap is taken that attempts to exceed the boundaries of restricted identity:

Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea. In sacrifice, the victim is divested not only of clothes, but of life (or is destroyed in some way if it is an inanimate object). The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. (Bataille, 2006, p. 22)

The erotic act in this way is synonymous with those other acts which are grouped together in sacrifice; indeed, as indicated above, Bataille himself sees direct parallels between the two. In sacrifice, an object is divested of its potentially *useful* character and is delivered over into waste, in effect, to death. In Eroticism, two or more people engage in activity which grows from an excess of energy and, unable to be contained, is finally let loose. They find themselves engaged in an activity in which it is not some distinct, separate object which is sacrificed, but instead enter into a dance in which that which is put at risk is the very participants themselves. In the erotic act (and what for Bataille would define an act as erotic) it is the *laying bare* of the I and the Other in an excessive *reaching*, one where participants seek to exceed the boundaries of a self defined through restriction, that is as a *discontinuous* individuated existence. In effect, eroticism inhabits a realm of “violence, of violation” (Bataille, 2006, p. 16), it is the realm of *evil* as willing laceration that Bataille outlines for us in *On Nietzsche*, where distinct, individual beings seek to communicate with each other and recognise some kind

of communion with one another, albeit one based in violation. Here, *Nakedness* and *Obscenity* are key:

Stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognised and stable individuality. (Bataille, 2006, pp. 17-18)

Nakedness/Obscenity

Nakedness and obscenity leads to a stripping bare of the layers of restriction around identity – the clothes that maintain our modesty – and allows for the I to come face to face with the challenge that is its own body and that of the Other. Nakedness forms a challenge as it is the presentation of flesh, ultimately seductive, which drives desire to lose itself ultimately through the violation and desecration of the 'sacred' individual. In this violent space where integrity is ruptured, those involved engage with each other through a 'criminal' desire towards reciprocal desecration which, for Bataille, revealing the illusion of the sanctity of the I, creates something properly sacred, a moment of excess which itself, unlike the sacred 'I', cannot be put to work:

Men in the past represented themselves as an indivisible reality. Some animals can be cut into two sections; after a certain length of time these two sections form two complete animals, distinct from each other. But nothing could be more shocking to those who limit themselves to a classical conception of the human soul than conducting such an experiment on man. Habits of thought are so well established that it remains difficult for each of us to see himself doubled, one side seeing, loving, or fleeing the other. (Bataille, 1985b, pp. 248-9)

This is a familiar idea for us to grasp; man as embodied individual (a self-conscious 'I'), requires a kind of unity to maintain its existence. The body physically torn in two results in the death of the person, and yet, to conflate this physical necessity for 'unity' with an *absolute* unity of man is mistaken.² We have seen through Bataille's interactions with Hegel that he feels such a conception to be insufficient, recognising as he does the contradictory drive to violate or exceed this very necessary integrity. It is in the realm of sexuality that Bataille find this desire towards violation most apparent, seeing in the reproduction of life a violence against the individual involved in the sexual act. In the introduction to his *Eroticism* he traces for us the nature of this inherent violence from the asexual division of single cell organisms through to the sexual lives of those that require *intercourse*:

² This notion of the conflation between the physical and the 'psychic' unity of man as knowable shares similarities with the work of Lacan on the 'Mirror Stage' of childhood development. This notion will be addressed in Chapter 2.4

It is my intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play that continuity; that is to say, it is intimately linked with death. (2006, p. 13)

Beings which reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents. Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone, he dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity. (2006, p. 12)

Man, is born and dies alone. But does this preclude any deeper connection between beings above them merely having 'interest' in each other's affairs? If this were the case then it would be a cause of great sadness and would seem to cheapen the closeness that is often the valued tie between one and another, so tentatively we must answer negatively to this question. However, we do risk jumping ahead of ourselves here and before coming to a point at which we can engage with this question, we need to be clearer about the relationship between sexuality and discontinuity. Bataille starts his analysis with a look towards simple celled organisms, those who 'reproduce' asexually through a process of cellular division, seeking to show how in the movement from the initial cell which divides into the resultant cells, death lurks and goes hand in hand with growth as a necessary constituent of sexuality.

To illustrate his point we will examine the division of the cell 'A'. After a certain period of growth the cell will reach a point at which it will split and divide into a number of resultant cells, in our example, the two cells 'AB' and 'AC'. Now whilst cells AB and AC are the product of, and identical copies of, the original cell A, the resultant cells themselves were not 'given birth to', their existence being a direct result of the division and resulting destruction of cell A. However, whilst there are chemical and physical similarities between the three cells; A, AB and AC, despite this, for Bataille there is always a stark distinction between the three entities. In the division from A to AB and AC, the original cell A as a distinct entity has 'ceased to be': "the first being has disappeared. It is to all intents and purposes dead, in that it does not survive in either of the two beings it has produced... It ceases to exist in so far as it was discontinuous." (2006, p. 13) Herein lays the crux of Bataille's argument; whilst AB and AC are the product of A, in the creation of AB and AC, the original cell A is destroyed. A is *neither* AB *nor* AC, and AB and AC are *not* identical either. Whilst they may share the same chemical composition and they may be physically identical when observed, they do in fact occupy distinct spheres of

existence, they are all three separate, *distinct* instances of matter or, in Bataille's terminology, they are *discontinuous*. There lies a moment however, in this violent move from distinct entity to distinct entity, where for a fleeting instant, a moment occurs at which there is continuity between all three:

There is a point at which the original *one becomes two*. As soon as there are two there is again discontinuity for each of the beings. But the process entails *one instant* of continuity between the two of them. The first one dies, but as it dies there is a moment of continuity between the two new beings. (2006, pp. 13-14)

At this point of continuity, at the point of division, the original is no longer really itself, just as the new have not yet come to be. Then, at that fleeting juncture, none of the cells have a distinct integrity; at the point which Bataille draws our attention to, there is rightly no A, no AB, nor AC, for there is only the moment of continuity. This, however, is not a point of stability. Indeed, it would be wrong to state that there, at that moment, any form of identity persists for, like the *summit*, it is a point that exists *as movement*. There is no middle entity between the three, no transitory being which we can identify and attribute the property of continuity to. There is no 'missing link' for, the link itself, the continuity that binds the three is only a moment of movement, a moment in which, properly speaking, there is *no* Identity. In this movement from one being to its duplications, we can begin to see why death is intrinsically linked for Bataille to sexuality, where contained in the death of the original is already the creation of the new. Death in this way is fundamentally connected to the notion of sexuality as creation relies upon destruction. It is the link between the two that reveals the continuity that is the tie that binds distinct entities in a moment of unity.

Bataille insists that this link between reproduction and death that is present in simple cell asexual reproduction holds true for more complex *sexual* beings. Yet, problematically, in sexual reproduction neither participant is annihilated physically as a necessary pre-requisite for the creation of new life. Unlike cell A which is destroyed in the creation of AB and AC, two sexual beings which reproduce remain 'alive' during and following the reproductive act (with a few notable exceptions). The question then remains: if death is still intimately linked for Bataille to sexuality in the reproduction of sexual creatures, then why is this the case if the act itself does not involve the destruction of the participants? For Bataille the answer here rests in the fact that sexual reproduction maintains this link with the destruction and mortality of its participants through an inversion:

Sperm and Ovum are to begin with discontinuous entities, but they *unite*, and consequently continuity

comes into existence between them to form a new entity from the death and disappearance of the separate beings. The new entity is itself discontinuous, but it bears within itself the transition to continuity, the fusion, fatal to both, of two separate beings. (2006, p. 14)

Rather than being a question of *division* which provides continuity in asexual beings, in the reproduction of sexual beings it is rather instead a movement of *fusion* which results in the creation of a third discontinuous being. What joins the asexual with the sexual most deeply for Bataille however are not the notions of division and fusion. Indeed, as he notes: “it is a far cry from ourselves with our self-awareness to the minute organisms in question.” (2006, p. 14) What is important here, and proves fundamental for Bataille, is that whether reproduction is asexual or sexual, both entail a movement from an individual or pair of individual existences, through a moment of fleeting continuity, to the establishment of a new discontinuous existence. Discontinuity for Bataille is the 'normal' state of affairs; we are separated from each other, never able truly to step outside of this and into communion with others, for him, we exist as: “discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity.” (2006, p. 15)

It is important to note here that Bataille's notions of continuity and discontinuity differ from Hegel's creation of a self-consciousness that exists in a state of absolute relation. As we have seen, for Hegel, the 'I' is formed as part of and in relation to the world, where the apparent distinction, between the 'I' and the Other, is only a mistaken recognition of the state of affairs. In Hegel, the 'I' is part of the universal whole by dint of the fact that it is only 'I' through its relation to other distinct self-consciousnesses and the world at large. Where Bataille differs is that he does not posit the idea of the discontinuous and the continuous in opposition to Hegel's schemata, indeed, the notion of *absolute relation* as seen in Hegel is not affected by the problem that Bataille identifies. As in Hegel, man's 'I' is born in relation to the Other, but for Bataille, even in a state where man recognizes his identity as formed in an absolute relation, the fact still stands that the 'I' and the 'Other' are still fundamentally distinct from each other. What Bataille was seeking to illuminate here as the moment of continuity differs fundamentally from the notion of the absolute, for whilst in the latter the 'I' is present as part of the absolute, in the former there is a point at which there is no real 'I' to speak of properly as the 'I' is no longer present. In contrast to Hegel, where I and Other remain distinct self-consciousnesses *in relation*, the moment of continuity is the point at which two beings - two distinct identities - come together in a movement which leads to a point at which the distinction dissolves, where the I and the Other no longer stand apart and

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are conjoined in a fleeting moment of communion. This notion of eroticism, based in the movement between discontinuity and continuity, draws heavily upon and shares stark similarities with his ideas on the general and restricted economies.³ What lends eroticism its power, along with other forms of action that can be termed *sacrificial* (for in the movement between the discontinuous and the continuous, the participants sacrifice themselves), is its ability to upset and interrupt our calculated, restricted identities or, as Guérac acknowledges, the challenge of eroticism lies in the fact that it “is a question of losing oneself knowingly it seems, and not too completely after all” (1990, p. 91). It is an interruption which torments at the same time as it fascinates, pushing us closer to the brink as it draws us closer together:

We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is. (Bataille, 2006, p. 15)

The concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity. (Bataille, 2006, p. 15)

Nakedness and Obscenity are fundamental to eroticism; the erotic act inhabits that realm of the summit which we saw Bataille discern as *evil*. The desire that moves one to the Other or some object in erotic frenzy precludes a necessary violation of the integrity of both involved. Nakedness here does not mean solely the removal of clothing and baring of the body, though this act is in itself important. What is meant here by nakedness becomes a *laying bare* of the individual, an opening which penetrates the integrity of the person. It is important here to place emphasis on the difference that is apparent between 'reproduction' and 'eroticism'. The destruction that makes itself known in the sexual fusion is 'offset' by the resultant entity. The arrival of the child in this way is seen commonly as a 'blessing'; the product of the communion of two intermingling distinct entities. The birth and creation out of the loss and exhaustion of the two is the 'natural' outcome of sexual reproduction – biologically speaking – just as, in the most simple of cells, their death signals the birth or creation of the new. The destruction of the individual and the threat that sexuality poses to it is mitigated by the ensuing creation. In this way, the discontinuity of the individual seems negated through the birth of the new, indeed, the individual in this way 'lives on' in its offspring.

³ C.F. *Accursed Share, Theory of Religion, The Notion of Expenditure*

Reproductive sexuality, as opposed to erotic sensuality, serves a defined *purpose*, with reproductive sexuality being an action with a perceived and calculable end (and it is indeed no surprise that this form of monogamous reproductive sexuality is the kind most commonly enshrined in law), with the resultant offspring being often the justification of, or motivation behind, the carnal act. However, what reproductive sexuality does, with its eye towards the future, is to nullify the power of sexuality itself. It reduces the erotic act to a *function*, a means to an end; the nod to the future serving to negate the power and importance that death plays within the sexual act. Now, I feel the need to make plain here, although I feel it hardly needs stating, that I am not insisting upon two notions of sexuality here, a 'natural' heterosexual reproductive sexuality as opposed to an erotic effusion divorced from reproduction. The biological function highlighted here, which is in truth an act of *production* in the sexual act, is opposed to the erotic as a movement which undoes the productive sublimation of eroticism to Identity.⁴ Within the first category, I would include non-biologically reproductive sexual acts as acts which attempt to wrestle some kind of product, or effect from sexual desire. The distinction between the two here reduce to a simple delineation; the former, reproductive sexuality centres around the notion of obtaining some form of mastery over the debilitating effects of the sexual effusion, whereas in the second (which we will examine in more detail presently), does not seek to glean any result or product from the movement itself, the object in question for the erotic, being nothing other than the movement itself.

To illustrate more clearly what differentiates eroticism from other forms of sexuality, it will serve us well to examine a situation in which the biologically reproductive aspect of sexuality is not present. Let us take that sexual order to engage with and gain mastery over one's own sexual potential, most often associated with liberation movements. A movement such as this would insist upon the mastery of one's sexuality as a means towards sexual or political liberation (to free one's politically dictated identity through the re-appropriation of one's own sexuality). In seeking to free oneself from the shackles of political oppression, a person would seek to gain mastery over their own body and desires, refusing to align themselves with the dictated norms or expectations of society. Such an act however is divorced from what Bataille is pointing us towards when he is

⁴ An interesting study would be to draw together the notions of the performativity of sexuality/gender (Butler) with Bataille's notions of erotic diffusion. This would potentially lead one to be able to establish a critical discourse that engages with the heterosexual 'phallogocentrism' identified by Butler but allow one to remain conscious of the paradoxical relationship that such political critiques of power structures have with the very identities they seek to free.

talking of the erotic. To explain more fully, and to draw the delineation between sexuality and eroticism, the following example will suffice. In the example of the person attempting to gain mastery over their individual identity to gain political freedom, they perform an act of sublimation. Their sexual actions and desires are sublimated as the actions that are performed are carried out with a view to being able to establish (through rebellion against established sexual norms) a more *authentic* Identity in line with their own desires. The actions themselves, whatever they may be, are in this sense not *erotic*, but *political*, for, just as in the reproductive act, what is of prime importance in the act itself is the future result of the action, not the action itself. This is not to lessen the power or importance of utilising sexuality as a politically subversive activity, and indeed, such actions can be used in opposing proscribed forms of sexual identity and are important in reshaping pre-existing societal impressions and values. However, it is important to highlight that sexuality *used* in such a fashion would not for Bataille fall into the realm of erotic action for, at base, no matter how deeply at odds with existing conventions regarding sexual 'normalcy' (hence why an act does not either have to be 'extreme' or obscene to be erotic), a sexual act only becomes *erotic* when it has as its aim *nothing*. A potential positive result or outcome that is aimed for through sexual action is at odds with Bataille's conception of the erotic. What gives the erotic its particular flavour is that it has no *end*, it is only the movement of desire to the summit, and following the act itself, all that is left is an anguished residue that brings to the fore the limit of the individual that is its inevitable death.

Face to face with you, naked, gleaming flesh radiates, part seductive, part ridiculous. Removed from desire, what reaction would the genitals provoke but laughter? Without the creation of a new being, without *potential* and without that which legitimises the desire for the body (a machine of effluence and excreta) what are we left with? Without the promise of 'new life', when the sexual act becomes devoid of a *future* what does this willed violation of integrity provoke?

Two beings communicate with each other through their hidden rents. There is no communication more profound: two beings are lost in a convulsion that binds them together. But they only communicate when losing a part of themselves. Communication ties them together with wounds, where their unity and integrity dissipates in fever. (Bataille, 1985b, p. 250)

Communication, wounds, nakedness and obscenity. These are essential to understanding Bataille's notion of eroticism. The distinct individual, faced with the Other, when engaging in frenzy, interacts in a way which

does 'harm' to the other, Evil is the necessary outcome, the integrity of the self-conscious 'I', in relation to the Other as a distinct self-contained identity is violated in the erotic movement, the erotic union requiring that they do not respect the integrity of each other. The erotic act, tied as it is to death, requires the violation of its participants (as in reproductive sexuality, where within the resultant offspring is contained the traces of its parent's demise). Yet, without the promise of offspring (either physical or metaphorical) which negates death through its sublimation to the future, sexuality without future remains caught within the moment of excess which, subordinate to nothing, is what Bataille would deem *Sovereign*.

Sex, involving as it does a fundamental link with death, when devoid of a *product* (a useful outcome), remains as a wounding of integrity, an intentional violation resulting in a moment of communion that is insubordinate and sovereign. This moment, however, as at the point of division, does not exist. The point of communion, being movement but never truly *being*, is only a fleeting moment stretched out indefinitely; nothing is established save a blank affirmation of the sovereignty of life. Two distinct identities engage with each other, the result of which leads to nothing other than coming face to face with their own isolated insufficiency; the limits of Identity are revealed and the I is found wanting, caught short and sent back into its prison with a taste of its own limitation. Eroticism, like the sacrificial act, proves a challenge to the established order. Just as ritualistic sacrifice upsets the order of economic utility that a society is founded upon, so the erotic moment violates the order of individual Identity, challenges it, affirms nothing except itself; a scream of insubordination that wreaks havoc on the I by revealing that within himself, man is more than himself.

One must, in fact, understand literature itself, the practice of writing and reading initiated by Bataille, as an erotic practice: henceforth there could no longer be an erotic literature, literature and eroticism being now inseparable and utterly coextensive. Everything Bataille develops surrounding this theme of communication is intended to establish precisely this "communication" between eroticism and literature. (Hollier, 1992, p. 67)

Hollier equates Bataille's literary practice to that of Eroticism, and we can recognise also how the interruption of the restricted economy of identities heralded by the descent into Erotic diffusion is paralleled by Bataille's contention that literature as practical heterology seeks to introduce "the demand for the violent gratifications implied by social life" (Bataille, 1985d, p. 97). The communion felt between those who 'communicate with each other through their hidden rents' in the erotic moment is reflective of the "mode of communication" that occurs in literature which sees "a dépense of the self in union with the other" (Richman, 1982, p. 68). This

'communion' which is a result of desire is distinct from the relational interdependence of the Hegelian subject, although as Guérlicq correctly acknowledges: "from what has been said so far it should be clear that there is a version (or fiction) of Hegelian recognition in eroticism" (1990, p. 93). The movement of desire which draws together those engaging in erotic acts is not, as in Hegel, the delineation of distinct spheres between individuals whose relationship to each other is defined negatively. The erotic communion is an expenditure of energy and "not an appeal, an exchange, or a negotiation, but an uninhibited wastage that returns energy to its solar trajectory" (Land, 1992, p. 33) and as such is the movement of individuals subject to the "mega-motor" (1992, p. 37) of energy flow that characterises the general economy. For Bataille, the relational subject of Hegel is a temporary stabilisation, a dam in the general flow of energy where, in Land's words, "the burning passage of energetic dissipation is restrained in the interest of something that is taken to transcend it; a future time, a predatory class, a moral goal" (p. 33). What Eroticism, and by extension Literature, serves to do is to interrupt the illusion that the Hegelian subject creates for itself (where its discontinuous integrity is taken as Truth) by consuming the resources appropriated by the subject in its creation. Hollier summarizes it as follows:

Communication does not use, but consumes (spends, *dépense*) the elements whose composition forms the structure of any exchange. It makes the separate poles (sender, receiver) lose any distinct identity at the same time that it disturbs the code they obey. (1992, p. 142)

The violation of the restricted subject involved with literary and erotic communication introduces a traumatic moment where the illusion of the integrity of the subject is interrupted by unveiling the elements which, through the process of negation, it has excluded or suppressed (as excremental or external) from consciousness. Desire here is the unrestricted flow of energy which is held back by the subject utilising its energy to cement its own self-consciousness. What it fails to recognise is that through the process of creation it has necessarily repressed aspects of itself which the practice of literature seeks to awaken through the breaking down of the barriers created to stem the tide. This unbridled energy as such has a threatening character, containing the potential to undermine the sense of security that the restricted subject has erected and which it struggles to maintain. Benjamin tells us:

The threat from these energies is one of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect. Psychoanalytic theory strives to understand the nature of these traumatic shocks 'on the basis of their breaking through the protective shield against stimuli.' (1999, p. 157)

It is now that we turn towards the thought of Freud to examine in more detail the nature of trauma, its relation to the creation of the subject, and the relationship between desire, taboo and transgression which will allow us

to better understand “the price paid to maintain the illusion of homogeneity through the repression of its heterogeneous foundation” (Richman, 1982, p. 42)

Part Two

2.1: The Erotic Neurotic

For those familiar with the biographical history of Bataille, it will come as no surprise that his work was formed under the heavy influence of Freudian analysis. Indeed for those who are less familiar, his subject matter of choice and its execution seems to scream 'neurotic'. What reveals the importance that analysis had in his writing is best indicated by the fact that he produced his first 'mature' work – his *Story of the Eye* – whilst undergoing a course of treatment with the heterodox Freudian Adrien Borel.¹

Given this, it is not unsurprising that between the thought of Freud and Bataille there exist a great number of similarities and yet, Bataille's relative silence in regard to this is indicative of the important points of divergence we find between them. What will become clear is that within the Freudian edifice, between the Ego and the Unconscious, we find parallels with Bataille's notion of sexuality and its relation to consciousness and death. Interestingly, we also find that at the points where the Freudian theory starts to strain to maintain the distinction between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, Bataille attempts to resolve this problematic. It is by maintaining the Freudian notion of a “vacillating rhythm” (Freud, 2001b, pp. 40-1) to man’s existence that he seeks to resolve the potential conflict between the two. By displacing their functionary role in relation to self-consciousness, Bataille looks to bring the two competing concepts into a greater collusion by stressing what Land sees as the “primary process” (1992, p. 31) or “mega-motor” (p. 37) of energy flow that underpins Freud’s thought of both *Eros* and *Thanatos*. To begin with however, a sketch of the Freudian structure of the psyche is necessary.

As should be recognizable to those even unfamiliar with the work of Freud, sexuality plays a constitutionally foundational role in the construction of the psyche. Indeed, throughout his early works with their focus on the analysis of ‘neurotic tendencies’, he establishes (or seeks to establish) the link between neurotic manifestations

¹ The freedom that he gained through this course to be able to write perhaps cannot be overstated. Whilst he is notably rather silent on the subject, the fact that following this initial analysis, each book that he subsequently wrote and published - including his *Story* - he would send the first printed copy to Borel, does allow us to make the conjecture that he understood well, and indeed felt a certain indebtedness to Borel and Freudian psychoanalysis. Dean highlights the importance that Borel had for Bataille:

He had also psychoanalyzed many members of the dissident surrealist group that met at Raymond Queneau’s apartment in the Desnouettes Square, including Bataille, Leris, Robert Desnos, Roger Vitrac, and others, and he was closest to Bataille, to whom Borel remained attached his entire life. (1992, p. 217)

and libidinal desires. Commonly, even today we suppose that the development of sexuality in a person begins during puberty. However, for Freud, in tracing back the sexual development of a person further into the formative moments of childhood, he links the development of an awareness of a 'separated' consciousness with the sexual desires of the child:

Infantile sexual activity may assume a variety of different forms which can only be determined by a precise analysis of individual cases. But all its details leave behind the deepest (unconscious) impressions in the subject's memory, determine the development of his character, if he is to remain healthy, and the symptomatology of his neurosis, if he is to fall ill after puberty. (Freud, 2001d, p. 189)

Between the ages of three and five, they also begin to show signs of activity which may be ascribed to the instinct for knowledge or research... we have learnt from psycho-analysis that the instinct for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them. (Freud, 2001d, p. 194)

The sexual researches of these early years of childhood are always carried out in solitude. They constitute a first step towards taking an independent attitude in the world, and imply a high degree of alienation of the child from the people in his environment. (Freud, 2001d, p. 197)

At its very foundation, the Ego for Freud develops directly out of a sexual 'arousal' or 'excitation' in relation to an object of desire. Bataille himself does not directly share this story of 'origin' with Freud however, instead drawing upon Hegel to make the claim that it is the positing of *objects* as distinct from the subject (as tools separate and subordinate to self-consciousness) that is the formative movement for subjectivity. What is different however when we talk of the subject/object relation is that when the object is of a *sexual* nature it becomes of a different order than that of the mere 'object of perception' as in Hegel. The sexual object in Freud, and also for Bataille, plays a role more akin to that of the Hegelian 'Other', where it is involved in the construction of the self-certain identity of the 'I', specifically at the moment of confrontation between the two which serves to bring into conflict (and distinctly separate) the two concepts, prior to the overcoming relation that was ultimately Hegel's conclusion. However, the development of the Freudian Ego does not always follow this dialectical path, and the mature self-consciousness of adulthood, whilst a result of its formation through and in reaction to this sexual awakening, does not always result in a harmonious *balance* between subject and object.

It was through recourse to the neurotic fantasy that Freud sought to illustrate that these manifestations reveal an undercurrent of discord between a person's express conscious desires and their hidden, *unconscious* desires.

In contrast to the Hegelian conception of self-consciousness, in Freud we find that, whilst taking into account this subjectivity in relation but born through opposition, by recognizing the importance of the unconscious

apparatus of the psyche, subjectivity is founded upon a continuously churning conflict. Let us now examine his most illustrious patient 'Dora' in more detail to allow us to flesh out this notion:

A house was on fire. My father was standing beside my bed and woke me up. I dressed quickly. My mother wanted to stop and save her jewel-case; but Father said: "I refuse to let myself and my two children be burnt for the sake of your jewel-case" We hurried downstairs, and as soon as I was outside I woke up. (Freud, 2001a, p. 64)

This is the account of Dora's first dream as recounted in Freud's case history. It is a seemingly innocuous account to one not aware in advance of the conclusions that Freud is likely to draw, but, just from its explicit content, we can infer an undercurrent of anxiety in the tale. A house on fire, quickly dressing, a confrontation between mother and father, and a hurried flight from the burning building all lend themselves to the impression of a great disturbance at the root of the dream. However, whilst Freud would agree that at origin there is indeed a deep anxiety at play here, it is not initially clear how this arises from Dora's unconscious sexual desires. In regard to dreams Freud tells us:

A regularly formed dream stands as it were, upon two legs, one of which is in contact with the main and current exciting cause, and the other with some momentous event in the years of childhood. The dream sets up a connection between these two factors – the event during childhood and the event of the present day – and it endeavors to re-shape the present on the model of the remote past. (Freud, 2001a, p. 71)

We see here that the 'manifest' content of the dream (the fire, the fight, the flight) has an indirect link between the initial cause of the dream (an event or situation encountered during the immediate or recent past) and some *traumatic* event that occurred deeper in the history of the person. In the case of the recurrent dream, a current excitation or event is being linked repeatedly to the same event which up to the point of the dream has not been adequately 'dealt' with; a conscious repression of some traumatic event of the past is the cause of the repetition of the dream. In the case of Dora, with this in mind, Freud links the manifest content of her dream with the repressed sexual desires of Dora herself. Whilst he draws many correlations between content and unconscious desire in detail from the patient, he gives us a brief summary which serves us well:

Perhaps you do not know that 'jewel-case' is a favorite expression for the same thing that you alluded to not long ago by means of the reticule you were wearing – for the female genitals, I mean... the meaning of your dream is now becoming clearer. You said to yourself: "This man is persecuting me; he wants to force his way into my room. My 'jewel-case' is in danger, and if anything happens it will be father's fault." For that reason, in the dream you chose a situation which expresses the opposite. (Freud, 2001a, p. 69)

Two things jump out here that require qualification. Firstly, who is 'he' that wants to get his grubby hands on Dora's jewels, and secondly, why should the dream in fact seemingly express the opposite of what she *subconsciously* (rather than unconsciously) wishes to see fulfilled? Establishing the first will lead to the

second, and will also enable us to see the particular relationship that the Ego has at times to the sexual instincts.

'He' in this passage refers to one of the central 'characters' in Dora's neurotic drama, one 'Herr K', who we are told pursued the young Dora (whose father was incidentally having an affair with 'Frau K'). This pursuit ultimately culminated in his making sexual advances towards her in a scene by a lake. This is presented to us as supporting the claim made previously as to the interpretation of the dream, and yet, a spanner is thrown into the works of this straightforward analysis when, through further questioning, Freud uncovers that Dora, far from being disgusted and fearing Herr K's amorous intentions, is in fact *subconsciously* in love with him. However, this aspect of her desires having been repressed, we are led to believe that without the intervention of analysis she would have remained unaware of this as the primary cause of her neuroses, neuroses which seem in part to be 'self-caused' by the Ego rejecting aspects of unconscious desire which run counter to and threaten to undermine its structure:

There was a conflict within her between a temptation to yield to the man's proposal and a composite force rebelling against that feeling. This latter force was made up of motives of respectability and good sense, of hostile feelings... and of a neurotic element, namely the tendency to a repudiation of sexuality that was already present in her and was based on her childhood history. (Freud, 2001a, p. 88)

This allows us to glimpse the three layers that underlie Freud's theory of the psyche, namely that of conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious mental activity. His thoughts on this are crystallized in his later work and most clearly outlined in his *Ego and the Id* where he sets out in detail the dynamic relationship that exists between the three. In relation to Dora's dream we can illustrate this in the following way:

- 1) The manifest content of the dream and the initial interpretation gives us a glimpse into the conscious and pre-conscious activities of the patient, that is, that her father is 'protecting' her from the advances of Herr K.
- 2) It is only by delving into the analysis of the dream that Herr K's relevance to its content is revealed as at work on a pre-conscious level.
- 3) Through further investigation into the unconscious desires and personal history of the patient herself her neuroses are shown to be based not upon hatred or fear of Herr K, but in fact from a sincere love and desire for him.

Both pre-conscious and unconscious mental activities here seem to be equally out of reach of the patient. However, through the course of analysis those pre-conscious thoughts (hatred/fear of Herr K) are more easily brought to the surface when they are attended to in comparison with those deeper buried desires which reveal for us both her feelings of love towards the object of her conscious hatred and her libidinal desires more generally. It should also be noted that the pre-conscious hatred for Herr K is more easily brought into conscious reflective focus because of the common vein that runs between this pre-conscious desire and her conscious ego. What is meant by this is that as her conscious Ego has as one of its founding principles notions of 'respectability' and a rejection of sexuality in general, the feelings of hatred for Herr K are more easily aligned to this conscious Ego, involving as they do a rejection of Herr K in the particular and a rejection of sexuality more generally. The unconscious desire *for* Herr K and the attached feelings of sexuality are buried more deeply (repressed) due to them running counter to the established Ego, and are uncovered eventually as the root cause of her neuroses in general. Freud tells us in regard to this distinction in non-conscious activity:

We see, however, that we have two kinds of unconscious – the one which is latent but capable of becoming conscious, and the one which is repressed and which is not, *in itself and without more ado*, capable of becoming conscious. (2001c, p. 15)

Putting aside for the moment considerations of the dynamic of interaction between the conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious, what becomes apparent from this is that the conscious structure – the Ego – seems to be acting in such a way as to censor those aspects of its own psyche that run counter to its conscious conception of itself. In Dora's case we see this manifested through her conscious awareness of her actions which serve to reinforce her anti-sexual Identity (such as her hatred towards Herr K). However, her neurotic tendencies, in which Freud finds the genesis of her unconscious libidinal desires, reveals that the conscious Ego has been set up in opposition and reaction to her libidinal urges. This means that her conscious awareness of what she thinks and feels (and also to what she thinks she thought she felt previously) is ordered and filtered through the lens of her Ego, where her love for Herr K is changed into an conscious hatred by dint of the fact that tied up with her feelings of love towards Herr K is a recognition of the nature of her sexual desires which she seeks directly to repress.

This is not to say that all constructed self-conscious decisions are created in opposition to all desires, as this sort of ruthless censorship which turns back upon the psyche is the realm of the super-ego properly speaking.

In this case it is the particular unconscious desire to acquiesce to Herr K's advances that become tied to her

libidinal desires in general, but, this is not to establish or imply a general rule from the particular instance. What Freud does do however, through recourse to his other case histories, is to infer that the general structure of the Ego, formed through a particular ordering of desire and its cementing in the development of the child, *can* be at odds (and often will find itself confronted) with a conflicting desire which *threatens* it. Simplified, in whatever structure the Ego takes, for Freud, the guiding desire or 'principle' that frames the particular assent or refusal to adopt a certain course of action is regulated by the pleasure principle which entails that “unpleasure corresponds to an *increase* in the quantity of excitation and pleasure to a diminution” (Freud, 2001b, p. 8), and it is in this way that we can see that the pleasure regulates the activity in the Ego. In this sense we can understand that the pleasure principle dictates how the Ego 'regulates' which psychic phenomenon are allowed to be made conscious by seeking to reduce those 'excitations' (read *disturbances*) which through their activity or existence threaten the harmony and stability of the Ego.

This idea seems to allow us to make the claim, and indeed people do, that if only we could reconcile those unconscious aspects of our selves with the conscious ones – indeed, even if to do so involves jettisoning the latter through a recognition of their being held in 'Bad Faith' – we would be able to re-establish a harmony and unity to our mental activity. This is not an uncommon idea, and is in fact implied as the end result of psycho-analytic discourse, and yet, in Freud's later works this becomes problematic, as he recognizes that this drive towards a potential harmony is contested by a contradictory impulse to *increase* our 'excitations':

It must be pointed out, however, that strictly speaking it is incorrect to talk of the dominance of the pleasure principle over the course of mental processes. If such a dominance existed, the immense majority of our mental processes would have to be accompanied by pleasure or lead to pleasure, whereas the universal experience completely contradicts any such conclusion. (Freud, 2001b, p. 9)²

² Martin Hägglund has recently called this problematic into question, making the claim that the apparent contradiction between the Pleasure Principle and the Death Drive arises from a misunderstanding of the process of how 'excitations' are bound to experience. He argues that the process of binding “is undecidable: it is the source of pleasure *and* pain, chance *and* threat, love *and* hate” (Häggglund, 2013, p. 191) and that the subject “comes into being through the bond” (p. 191) Binding for Häggglund provides a necessary condition through which excitations are aligned to a given drive, and it is in this way that he feels able to overcome this apparent disjunction:

The structural necessity of binding entails that the experience of pleasure is bound internally to pain. Without the binding of excitation, there could be no pleasure in the first place. But the binding that makes pleasure possible at the same time limits it and charges it with tension. Accordingly, there is *an interrelation between the pain of limitation and the intensity of pleasure.* (p. 191)

For Häggglund, this process of binding underpins his conception of 'care' which itself is reflective of the structure of the subject as a temporal being “who can suffer, can lose things, and can die, but who for that very reason has a sense of what it means for something to be precious, to be valuable, to be worth caring for.” (p. 195)

Wishing for Death

In the case of Dora, we saw how in her dream Freud claimed to have uncovered a hidden wish tied to her unconscious libidinal impulses. Indeed, early in his work, Freud goes so far as to tie all dream material to the notion of 'wish-fulfillment' which was subject to the 'pleasure principle'. In regard to Dora, the pleasure principle was at work in her dream in that it sought by roundabout ways to fulfill her repressed love for Herr K in particular, and her repressed sexuality in general, with her neuroses being a manifestation of her conscious activity running counter to, and attempting to keep repressed, her libidinal impulses. Here we seem to have a case, founded in a rejection of sexuality, of Sartrean 'Bad Faith', where the mental illness arises from a disjunction between the conscious activity of the subject and their unconscious desires. We seem in this way to have a rather 'simple' prescription for a cure, in that, much in the same way as Roquentin resolves to leave town and write a novel, if the patient were here to *recognize* those hidden, and dare I say, 'authentic' desires, then we would not be far off the mark in being able to point the way to resolving the unconscious/conscious conflict which is at root of the neuroses. Such an interpretation here would maintain the early Freudian claim to the primacy of the pleasure principle and also explain away 'unpleasure' as those actions which inhibit the development and free flow of the unconscious. In this sense, the neurotic's conscious Identity would be a 'sick' identity, perverted or corrupted by some past traumatic event such that, if only the originating cause were revealed and *explained* – through a 'talking cure' – then we would be able to resolve the apparent conflict at heart of the subject and restore a sense of unity and harmony to Identity.

We can forgive the medical practitioner in Freud for seeking such a conclusion³ for, in comparison to 'normal' people, the neurotic displays through the manifestations of illness actions which seem to highlight their internal disharmony when compared to the apparent harmony of the 'normal' healthy subject. However, as we are well aware by this stage, Bataille would reject such a conception, explicitly disavowing the potential harmony

³ Hollier extends this and identifies this desire as fundamental to psychoanalysis as a discipline:

“Freud seems committed to the right of the reality principle, and its representative the ego, and thus to accept a survival (or adaptation) imperative as the principle of therapeutic practice. It is because of this basic prejudice against the claims of desire that psychoanalysis has always had a tendency to degenerate into a technology of repression that subtilizes, and therefore reinforces, the authority of the ego” (1992, p. 46)

between the conscious and unconscious levels of psychic activity for any extended period. Freud himself in his later works begins to acknowledge such an impossibility, where he begins to recognize in human behavior tendencies and actions which do not fall under the sway of the pleasure principle (which Freud claims has the goal of seeking to reduce mental 'excitations' that cause disharmony) and which ultimately lead him to posit a second, contradictory instinct, that of his 'Death Drive':

Enough is left unexplained to justify the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat – something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more *instinctual* than the pleasure principle which it overrides. (Freud, 2001b, p. 23)

Freud outlines the shortcomings of a reliance upon the pleasure principle in the field of analysis in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (though he notably stops short in this work of proposing a strict definition of this 'death drive' which he sees as running counter to the activity of the previously established pleasure principle), also admitting that he had up to this point been unable to “solve the problem of the *relation* of the instinctual processes of repetition to the dominance of the pleasure principle.” (2001b, p. 62) He does however, in the course of his investigation, allow us to glimpse the nature of the phenomena which run in opposition to those of pleasure.

He examines two distinct manifestations of the notion of 'repetition', that of recurrent dreams originating in 'war-trauma' and a child's game repeated *ad nauseum*. In both cases he identifies the existence of a predisposition towards repetition and seeks to explore the causal link between the origin and manifestation of the repeated activity. In the first case, the 'traumatic' nature of this phenomenon is particularly evident, it being the result of the horrific experience of the subject in warfare; however, on initial inspection, similarities between this and the child's game are not immediately apparent:

The only use he made of any of his toys was to play 'gone' with them... the child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it... What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful '*da*' ('there')” (2001b, p. 15)

In the first case, what is problematic is that the recurrent dream revisits the scene of the trauma and this would seem to run counter to the function that Freud ascribes to dreams in his earlier work as seeking to fulfill some repressed wish (why would the soldier wish to revisit the scene of the traumatic event that is the source of his distress?) The interpretation that we saw in the Dora casebook, where her repressed libidinal desires (what she *actually wanted*) found expression in the dream content, is seemingly incompatible (if the driving force of

the dream is wish-fulfillment), with the claim that the soldier revisits the scene of trauma to realize some repressed wish that finds its expression in the content of the event. If we maintain that the manifest content of the dream does indeed veil some unconsciously held desire, it leads us to question what this wish could indeed be, for the content at first glance seems to be irreconcilable with any notion oriented towards pleasure. This however, given the reversal that we found in the analysis of Dora's dream, may not be an impossible task.

Moving away from the case of 'war-trauma' and toward the child's game, we will begin to see how this apparent contradiction can be reconciled. In the case of the repeated game of 'gone!' Freud finds that the repeated 'o-o-o-o' ('gone!') and 'da!' ('there!') displays a repetitious 'working over' of an initial event of *loss*. Freud ultimately ties this game to the child's traumatic experience of the mother's leaving (and subsequent return to) him, and this allows him to tie the strange game to a 'traumatic' event in the child's world. This tendency to 'make a game' of the traumatic event (that of the child's separation from its mother) and its continual repetition, Freud believes is incompatible with the notion of the pleasure principle for, in the act of repetition, the 'excitation' (trauma) caused by the loss of the mother is re-enacted by the child in their game. If the Pleasure Principle held sway over the workings of the psyche, then, if Freud is to be believed, we would not expect to see such a 'dredging up' of a traumatic event. This repetition reproduces the initial feelings of loss experienced within the child at the loss of the mother, transferring those feelings onto the loss of the toy. This brings with it the reintroduction of the traumatic experience of loss and the corresponding increase in feelings of *un*-pleasure that accompanied the mother's absence, a manifestation recognizable with each utterance of the 'o-o-o-o'.

However, as can be seen from the culmination of the game and its accompanying 'da!', even in this instance it is difficult to divorce the pleasure principle completely from the situation. The symbolic return of the mother ('da!') implies that, whilst the initial unpleasure is brought to bear, the resolution of the game nullifies and brings to a close the disharmony by reintroducing the pleasure felt at the return of the mother/object. Could we thus posit that the game and the traumatic recollection of the war-trauma in the dream are repeated in order to result in a feeling of pleasure at its close? Or perhaps, is the repetition itself caused by a contradictory impulse, the conclusion of which is only the conscious subject's intervention which seeks to resolve the tension that is reintroduced independently of it? This requires further examination as Freud recognized:

Even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what

is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind... they give no evidence of the operation of tendencies *beyond* the pleasure principle, that is of tendencies more primitive than it and independent of it. (2001b, p. 17)

What strikes us here as potentially misleading Freud is that whilst he seems to highlight some need to repeat or 'work through' unpleasurable experiences, the oppositional forces at work that generate this *need* (as seen in the repetitious dream of the soldier and the child's game) only seem to arise as a result of the influence of an *external source*. This external influence, once experienced, then seems to be worked through by the individual in such a way as to seek to master (and thus nullify) this intrusion under the sway of the dominant pleasure principle. In order to maintain his hypothesis of the existence of an instinct that runs counter to the pleasure principle, Freud must then shift the source of unpleasure from the external source – the mother and war – towards one which arises from the internal mechanism of the psychical processes. He will ultimately seek to resolve this problematic by identifying an 'instinctual' drive within nature (and by extension in man) towards a state of *inertia* which leads him to posit that the true aim of life is paradoxically geared to the attempt to “bring about death” (2001b, p. 39)⁴.

A particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation against them. (2001b, p. 29)

Whilst the traumatic experience of the soldier is generated by an external cause – war – it seems to be the case that the cause of unpleasure in the child's game is likewise external, being generated by the child's upset at the departure of its mother. In this type of interpretation, we can clearly see how the child's game and the soldier's dream are an attempt to seek to “master the stimulus retrospectively” (2001b, p. 32), by seeking to recreate the feeling of anxiety and trauma through repeated simulation of the event, the reason being that when the event of trauma occurred, the subject in both cases was not *ready* for it, and was unable to prepare itself in defense against it. When viewed in such a manner, these stimuli take on a violent character (in the sense of a *violation*) which proves threatening to the assured integrity and harmony of the subject that experiences them⁵. As

⁵ Walter Benjamin makes some interesting remarks on this topic in his essay ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’. He notes that the role of consciousness in the psychical dynamic is not to be receptive to external stimuli, but chiefly to provide this “protection against stimuli” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 157). In his reading of Freud, Benjamin, quoting Freud, draws our attention to the special conserving function the Ego plays in protecting itself “against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world” (p. 157) In seeking to master retroactively the traumatic stimuli, the Ego works to ensure that the “acceptance of shocks” (p. 157) through repeated “training in coping with stimuli” (p. 157) takes the form of “dreams as well as recollection” (p. 157) and leads to the ‘sterilization’ of the external threat and its reduction to ‘lived experience’:

previously noted, if we are able to bring the origin of these stimuli from the strictly external source into the psyche itself as involving its own internal processes, then we will be able to more fully recognize the contrary instinct that Freud is seeking to establish. This is something that will come into focus by establishing the link between the departure of the mother and the cementing of the child's identity, that through investigation becomes apparent in the game of 'gone' and 'there!'.

Don't leave me Mother!

Why is the departure of the mother such a traumatic event for the child, and why does it cause such an unpleasant experience that it has to be simulated by the child in play? The answer here seems that the child either suffers at the unexpected loss of the object of its affections, or it feels threatened by the loss of the presence of the mother that provided a reassuring frame of reference. Whilst both these elements play a part, we must look beneath the surface explanations to reveal that it is both the traumatic threat to its burgeoning identity that is *bound up with the parent*, and the trauma of the transformation to a new form of identity, one which the working through aims to resolve. At base, we will see that the traumatic event reveals a *violent moment* of transition, one which arises from an internal desire to maintain its current identity against the loss of itself, and concurrently a desire to cement and master this new identity that it was not ready for.

Within the context of Freud's tale, it is implied that prior to the event of *separation* it is not right to talk of a properly self-reflexive and independent Identity of the child for, owing to the total reliance upon the parent, we cannot truly claim that there exists between the mother and child a distinct I/Other separation when viewed from the vantage point of the child. In its reliance on the mother, and prior to the moment of her departure, we can tentatively posit that for the child, with its rapidly increasing awareness of the world, the lines between itself and its surroundings (including its mother) are blurred, lacking a proper representation of itself, which as we saw in Hegel, arises from the reciprocal recognition of a *distinction* between itself and another. This apparent blurred identity – where the line between mother and child, *for the child*, is not clear – leads Freud quite justifiably to state that the departure of the mother provokes a reaction in which “the child cannot possibly

That the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of having been lived in the strict sense. (p. 158)

have felt his mother's departure as something agreeable or even indifferent” (2001b, p. 15) In the departure of the mother, the child is losing a part of itself, its own identity being so closely linked to her own, and in the sudden disappearance of part of itself, this violent absence shows itself as particularly traumatic. The departure that generates its simulation in the game serves to illuminate the nature of the 'threat' to the embryonic identity of the child. The separation that causes anxiety in the child is revealed as an experience which threatens the child's Identity, with the working through in the game being evidence of an attempt to master this loss and an operation to reinforce and solidify the remaining Identity. The game in this sense both protects and creates the Identity of the child by protecting itself from the loss of *part of itself*, and serves to create and reinforce a new sense of self that *excludes* the part that was lost through the traumatic event. We are beginning to see that in the process of repetition we have two conflicting impulses at work; one which is threatened by the loss of itself and seeks to re-establish itself, and the secondary impulse which seeks to master it by externalizing the source of the trauma and leads to the creation of a sense of Identity which *excludes* this traumatically lost portion of itself. This leads Freud to see the instinct contrary to the pleasure principle as:

An instinct...inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been *obliged* to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces. (2001b, p. 36)

Taking this into account, we can begin to see that the Ego is constructed and acts in such a manner as to protect itself against these 'disturbing forces', where the *violent* experience disturbs the instinctual drive to maintain the “status quo” or “old state of things” (p. 38), and consequently, the protective forces (under the auspices of the pleasure principle) are set in motion to damp down and nullify the event of Trauma. This creates an 'externalization' of the event and effects a 'split' between the conscious mental activity which forms and constitutes the *new* subject, relegates the previous state of affairs through repression and denies the contrary drive to maintain or return to the previous state by transforming it into a threat. This externalization in effect reinforces the separation that it is working to protect against by distancing itself from the source of its own trauma. In separating out the internal Trauma from the sphere of mental activity (where conscious mental activity is construed as identity) the Ego serves to repress it by transferring the internal disturbance outside of itself and onto an external cause. In this case, we see the child transferring the cause of the trauma, that of its *insufficient self-hood*, externally (for whilst the mother is indeed external to the child, in relation to the identity of the child that is not strictly true⁶) and attributing it to the mother's departure, thereby ensuring its own

⁶ Despite the fact that the child is, from an external viewpoint, *not* part of the mother, it is important to recognize that

perpetuation by excluding an aspect of itself as foreign that previously was an intimate part of it.

The Ego here forms itself in the first instance in the recognition of the distinction between Subject and Object and their non-Identity (as we saw in Hegel), and we find that in the very initial movements of the creation of Identity a *fabricated* externalization of Object from Subject takes place. For Freud, life itself exists in a state of inertia, in which the distinction between Subject and Object is not truly 'there'. Nature, excluding consciousness (to borrow a phrase from Bataille), exists in a state akin to "water in water" (1989, p. 24). Here we find two conflicting notions of desire; one which seeks to maintain and preserve the distinction between Subject and Object (self-consciousness) through "self-preservation, self-assertion and mastery" (Freud, 2001b, p. 39) and the other which endeavors to return to a state of existence prior to this distinction. The distinction that he finds at the formation of the Ego leads Freud to claim that instincts that run counter to the pleasure principle (and thus at times to the Ego itself) desire to "bring about death" (2001b, p. 39), even going so far as to claim that the "aim of all life is death" (2001b, p. 38). This death we must therefore see as two-fold. Firstly it involves the implication of a 'real' physical destruction or death where life seeks to return to the 'inertia' of the point before the existence of the distinct mode of existence. Secondly, it implies a state of affairs prior to the establishment of the Ego, where a retrograde movement to return to the point prior to the traumatic origins of self exerts itself. Ultimately, Freud comes to recognize that man lives *caught* between two opposing poles:

It is as though the life of an organism moved with a *vacillating rhythm*. One group of instincts rushes forwards so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage is reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and continue the journey. (Freud, 2001b, pp. 40-1)

We are beginning to see where an apparent convergence between the thought of Bataille and Freud takes place for both share a similar conception of a 'vacillation' between two poles of activity. Freud places these opposing poles under the terms of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, and the movements that he sees between these poles (and their oppositional character) seems to echo the structure that Bataille characterizes in his General and Restricted economies.

misapprehensions of reality can still be of import for psychical development. In his response to Hägglund's 'On Chronolibido', Johnston notes: "how subjects self-consciously experience and spontaneously self-interpret their emotions and motivations cannot be dismissively written off as inconsequential *qua* purely epiphenomenal, false, fictional, illusory, reducible, and the like." (Johnston, 2013, p. 153) This idea, that what may be a psychological 'fiction' may, for the subject, be felt as no less real is how we should view Bataille's 'restricted' subject who is the target of his literary practice.

However, it is at this apparent point of convergence that we will ultimately see the two diverge – it being in actuality only a similarity of structure – where although the two recognize the vacillation between the opposing poles, we will find that it is Freud’s tethering of the notion of Eros (sexuality, growth, preservation) to the conscious ego with which Bataille will take issue. In much the same way as we have seen Bataille examine in his *Eroticism*, Freud turns to simple-celled organisms - “protozoa” (2001b, p. 47) – to initially seek to establish in more detail the relationship and tension that exists between sexuality and death. As he is seeking to establish the *reality* of the existence of instincts that run counter to the pleasure principle as part of the psychical make up of man, he, not unlike Bataille, seeks to establish this relationship in an empirically verifiable way. Again like Bataille (though preceding his analysis), he identifies that in the scissiparity of unicellular reproduction, the distinction between sexuality and death proves 'indistinct'; reproduction occurs at the point of destruction of the parent animal which, involving as it does the creation of the new, means that the death of the original organism is “obscured by it” (2001b, p. 47). This observation could easily be drawn from the same well of knowledge as is tapped by Bataille, and it is unsurprising to see the correlation between these two analyses. However, what is of note (and what is lacking in Bataille's analysis) is that Freud recognizes that unless “stimulating agents” external to the dividing cells are introduced and maintained throughout the act of division, the resultant cells are eventually “injured by the products of metabolism which they ultimately extruded” (2001b, p. 48). Freud makes this observation when he is seeking to counter the proposed 'immortality' of protozoa, in that, as the chemical identity of the parent cell continues intergenerationally (in that the 'parent' and 'child' cell are identical) that he observes that it is only so under scientific experiments where resultant offspring are maintained with the introduction of fresh material that proves a catalyst for their reproduction. He observes in cases where the resultant offspring are not 'nurtured' in this sense that they are ultimately destroyed by attempting to metabolize the by-products that they excrete during this process of division – in other words, the waste product ultimately is ingested and destroys the organism. Again, there are parallels here with Bataille who recognized that, in order to create and sustain itself the rational subject by way of “the intellectual process automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products” (Bataille, 1985d, p. 97).

As we saw in Bataille's *Eroticism* it is when we begin to proceed from this immediately apparent relationship between sexuality and death in 'protozoa' to seek to establish the same relationship in more complex organisms

that we encounter problems. Freud at this juncture also acknowledges that he gets into difficulty, and we can see that this problematic arises once we attempt to move from the observation of a *biological* relationship between sexuality and death (through empirical scientific observation) to seek to understand why a recognition of the link between the two was understood by man long before such a biological observation could be made.

Freud notes:

Science has little to tell us about the origin of sexuality that we can liken the problem to a darkness into which not so much as a ray of a hypothesis has penetrated. (2001b, p. 57)

Freud turns to 'mythical' interpretations of the nature of the origin of sexuality, most notably Plato's account of it as contained in the *Symposium*, to gain insight into the operation of sexuality and death in more complex organisms. As we would expect for a man of 'science', Freud finds such an explanation ultimately lacking, requiring as he does a scientifically verifiable basis for his notion of the death instinct. Importantly though, he does not jettison his notion for lack of certainty, and whilst in regard to the details of his own argument he claims "I am not convinced of them myself" (2001b, p. 59), he does not reject his inference of the existence of such an instinctual process that runs counter to pleasure, acknowledging that he still has to resolve "the problem of the *relation* of the instinctual processes of repetition to the dominance of the pleasure principle" (2001b, p. 62).

The relationship of the desire for inertia (death) to that of the process of repetition can be seen in the trauma in evidence in the play of the child. The desire to try and maintain or return to the prior state of affairs before the departure of the mother (which proves the catalyst of the repetitious game) and the relationship to the notion of the pleasure principle is, though we have hinted at it, not completely clear for Freud. If the two notions (pleasure and death), are both biologically instinctual processes, then there must for Freud be a scientifically verifiable phenomenon that proves the relationship between the two; both in the case of the protozoa and also the human being. Being both parts of existence and 'life', the two, whilst allowing for differences in degree regarding how the instincts manifest themselves, we find that being *instinctual*, there must be some common bond or similarity in the relational structure of the opposing instincts that is common to both. Freud does not manage to complete this explanation to his satisfaction in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, though he does believe that his argument serves as a preliminary foray that allows us to glimpse that there is indeed something fundamental to such a relationship.

There does however exist within *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* something of a thread which, with a bit of rearrangement, will allow us to overcome this apparently obscure relation between instinct and Ego which, at times, seems to intimate a desire which works contrary to that of the pleasure principle, whilst at others in harmony with it. The problem that we are essentially grappling with here is that as the nature of 'Eros' is tied to the desire for growth and self-preservation (that being the founding movement of the pleasure principle) then why do phenomena that seemingly arise from acts generated in Eros often run counter to the apparently desired outcome – the maintenance and growth of the Ego? We are primarily thinking here of those *erotically charged moments* in contrast with 'normal' manifestations of sexuality. Both events seem to have their roots in the libidinal desires of man, and yet, the *erotic phenomenon*, as illustrated through the actions of Marcelle, seems to run in opposition to the surety of the Ego itself. The answer that we seek here arises when we recognize that the relationship between Eros (libidinal desire for growth) and the Ego is not as straight forward as has been intimated. The problem of a disjunction between (and apparent opposition of) Eros and Thanatos can be resolved if we remove the link that ties Eros and the Ego under the auspices of the pleasure principle and instead posit that both Eros and Thanatos can work in collusion with and in opposition to the Ego dependent upon the particularities of its manifestation and how the Ego was structured at the time of its insurgence. We have already seen in the case of Dora and the child's game that oftentimes the Ego will, in its drive to protect itself and maintain its perceived 'harmony', exclude as alien instinctual desires as foreign and harmful to itself. There is here illuminated a *selective* process in the Ego which allows access to and assimilation of certain phenomena along with the exclusion of others. The pleasure principle guides this process in that it seeks to reduce the impact of these phenomena that cause an increase of 'excitation' in the Ego. In the case of Dora particularly, we can see that in the repression of her sexual desire for Herr K the Ego functions in such a manner as to exclude from its constitution those aspects which are potentially harmful to it and that upset its apparent harmony. In the child's game we have seen that the desire to repeat the game itself stems from a foundational *trauma* in the establishment of the child's own self-consciousness – indeed, the trauma is in Freud's analysis the *cause* of self-consciousness. In both cases what strikes one is that both the desire that arises from the libido (Dora's desire) and those that Freud ascribes within the compulsion to repeat (which he aligns with the death drive) share the same characteristics of being potentially *threatening* to the self-conscious Ego.

In both cases, though the desire which precedes the repression/repetition came from the individuals themselves, it is right to say that they were not conscious of it. Through the process of its breaking (or threatening to) into the conscious sphere of the psyche it is immediately pushed outwards and made external to conscious activity. What we can recognize is that the two perhaps need to be re-evaluated in such a way as to recognize the common factor of *excess* that runs within each. These two phenomena, Eros and Thanatos, become excessive in that they are at times 'too much to handle' for the Ego, where their very manifestation threatens to overcome the stability and harmony of the Ego as it is conscious of itself. What we are led to acknowledge is whilst the two categories of instinctual processes which Freud identifies do indeed seem to have contradictory characteristics (Growth vs. Death), that instead, by recognizing the common bond of excess that ties them (that of Land's 'primary process'), we can posit that the distinction Freud makes potentially arises only from a confusion of categorization that fails to acknowledge what they share.

This 'common bond' differs from that proposed by Hägglund (2013) in that, through recognizing the fluctuations in the movement of energy (excess and exhaustion), the subject is able to retain its dynamic character. The establishment of a unifying absolute (time in Hägglund's case) underpinning the psychical structure, effectively "paralyses" the Ego and prevents it "defending in any effective fashion" (Johnston, 2013, p. 150) against this absolute. Instead, if we recognize that the apparently contradictory Eros and Thanatos are only shades of excessive desire *interpreted* differently, then we can see how at times desire runs in support of the Ego's "various investments" (Land, 1992, p. 48), whilst at others it runs in opposition and threatens to submerge it. The Ego in this fashion floats atop a sea of desire, at times sailing with the prevailing wind and happy to be carried with it, whereas at others, it struggles to stay on course whilst fighting against the threat of capsizing⁷.

The establishment of a notion of a 'death drive', whilst alluring to the reader, serves to confuse and deflect us from the reality of the relationship between desire and the Ego. We can see here how if we remove the distinction between life and death drives and instead insist upon the common bond of excess that underpins

⁷ This notion is reminiscent of the passage from Schopenhauer quoted by Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy* which depicts man as a 'flimsy barque' atop a raging sea.

both phenomena, we are able to resolve the apparently contradictory ‘impulse to repeat’ that finds itself manifest in human activity. By viewing both Eros and Thanatos as *shades of desire* we are able to understand the relationship between actions which can be both in harmony and in opposition to the Ego whilst drawing their water from the same well. We will now turn to the notion of 'Taboo' and 'Transgression' to see how Bataille takes this insight and extends it to the structure of human society as a whole. It will clarify my contention that the conflicting aspects of Desire Freud struggled with are only manifestations “deployed by the psyche” as it wrestles with an impersonal energy flow “that floods the nervous-system with potentially catastrophic quantities of alien excitation” (Land, 1992, p. 41). Similarly, it will also allow us to highlight the co-dependence Bataille’s notions of restricted and general economies, played out at a societal or individual level, have:

The experience of transgression is indissociable from the consciousness of the constraint or prohibition it violates; indeed, it is precisely by and through its transgression that the force of a prohibition becomes fully realized. (Suleiman, 1995, p. 317)

2.2: Don't you dare touch that!

Man belongs in any case to both of these worlds and between them willy-nilly his life is torn. The world of work and reason is the basis of human life but work does not absorb us completely and if reason gives the orders our obedience is never unlimited. Man built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence. (Bataille, 2006, p. 49)

'An undercurrent of violence': with these words we find an echo of the unconscious strata of the psyche that we saw in the previous chapter. *Violence* here does not coincide with the phenomena we most commonly associate with the term despite these events being included under its influence. We are not only dealing with acts of rape, pillage and murder – explicitly violent acts – but instead, to understand violence in the Bataillean sense, we have to recognize that he uses the term to define violent acts as acts of *violation*. Indeed, horrific acts normally described as violent share this characteristic (it actually being the defining one) but, as the notion of violation is key here for Bataille we can foresee how actions not overtly violent in character can be included within such a framework. Violation is the disregard for the integrity of an object or Other, the overstepping of a boundary of respect that normally exists between people and involves the recognized relation (as we saw in Hegel) being disregarded. An act that takes on this violent *flavour* need not be physically or mentally damaging and, in order to understand Bataille's use of the term (for violence is central to his literature) we must allow ourselves to jettison morally inherited notions that equate violence with evil.

We have already examined in much detail a violent act which falls outside this normal conception, which upon reflection reveals itself as a particularly traumatic and violent experience; that of the child's game. Initially, the game seems an innocuous expression of childhood curiosity; however, in the course of Freud's deconstruction of the act, the motive force that drives its repetition, along with the generative separation, is revealed as distinctly violent in regard to the burgeoning self-hood of the child. The separation from the mother violates the pre-existing proto-identity of the child whilst reflexively, the Ego, in its attempt to exorcise and dominate this disturbance, perpetrates its own acts of violence against itself. Violence – understood as a violation – is shown to be present at the founding movement of the Freudian subject, where desire has split itself apart, establishing a duality that oscillates between self-preservation and self-loss. Bataille, though not explicitly drawing reference to Freud, reaches a similar conclusion and finds this structural relationship evidenced in the construction of the Ego in operation at a societal level:

Work demands the sort of conduct where effort is in a constant ratio with productive efficiency. It

demands rational behaviour where the wild impulses worked out on feast days and usually in games are frowned upon. If we were unable to repress these impulses we should not be able to work, *but work introduces the very reason for repressing them.* (Bataille, 2006, p. 41)

Much like the Ego, the desire for self-preservation generates, in the face of heterogeneous elements, a counter movement which seeks to sublimate and direct desire away from destructive outlets and towards useful (read productive) ends. And yet, whilst on a mechanical level we understand that this action is necessary (as man cannot forever 'spend without reserve' – Chapter 1.4), what we find is that in the sublimation to 'work' (or Ego) there is a break with the dynamic general economy of energy towards one which excludes wasteful, violent expenditure. Protection against dissolution and the guarantee of self-preservation in the first instance establishes work/Ego, which then *as* established becomes the reason itself for future repression. In other words, though initially the repression and exclusion of violence occurs in a reactive, protective manner following the act of trauma, it then metamorphoses into a pro-active self-perpetuating mechanism which functions to the exclusion of those things which, although part of its constitution, threaten the integrity of what it worked so hard to maintain. In a remark that is again distinctly reminiscent of this psychic development, Bataille identifies 'taboos' functioning in a similar way: “Hence the human collective, partly dedicated to work, is defined by taboos without which it would not have become the world of work that it essentially is.” (2006, p. 41)

In his *Eroticism* Bataille outlines his conception of the nature of Taboo in such a way that it echoes directly the Freudian conception of the Ego as it functions as a “protective shield against stimuli” (Freud, 2001b, p. 31). It is in the nature of how Taboos function in relation to their transgression that we can infer similarities of intuition between Freud and Bataille. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, Freud struggles with the relation between the instincts and the subject, and I ascribed this to a confusion of categorization. I posited that by removing the distinction made between the instincts of life and death they could be unified under the auspices of the *violation* that is in common with both of them. In focusing on this aspect we are able to see the commonality that exists between taboos and the Ego where, when faced with phenomena that it is unable to contain, the Ego suffers a traumatic experience (whether the origins are those that Freud would deem as arising from Eros or Thanatos). We can be confident here that Bataille would agree with such a conclusion (one itself evocative of the Nietzschean critique of Hegelian consciousness), for we see him emphasizing a similar relationship between Taboo and its Transgression when he tells us: “Violence is what the world of work

excludes with its taboos; in my field of enquiry this implies at the same time reproduction and death.” and “this link ought not to sound paradoxical. The excess from which reproduction proceeds and the excess we call death *can only be understood with the help of the other.*” (2006, p. 42)

Violent excess characterizes both sexual phenomena and death, and it is in the dynamic structure of Taboo and Transgression that we can see the link most clearly. In the second and third chapters of his *Eroticism*, Bataille works to examine the natures of taboo in general alongside a focus upon those regarding sexuality and death in particular. In doing so, he is able to do away with the apparent incongruity between sexuality and death that we saw in Freud by bringing them together under the common bond of violence. By reviewing his comments on Taboo in general and in particular we are able to see this common aspect most clearly. On Taboo's relating to death he tells us:

For each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is the image of his own destiny. It bears witness to a violence which destroys not one man alone but all men in the end. The taboo which lays hold on the others at the sight of a corpse is the distance they put between themselves and violence, by which they cut themselves off from violence. (2006, p. 44)

Whilst in regard to sexuality:

All we can say is that as opposed to work, sexual activity is a form of violence, that as a spontaneous impulse it can interfere with work. A community committed to work cannot afford to be at its mercy during working hours, so to speak. We would then be justified in thinking that, from the first, sexual liberty must have received some check which we are bound to call a taboo. (2006, p. 50)

And finally on taboo in general:

Its shape and its objects do change, but whether it is a question of sexuality or death, *violence*, terrifying yet fascinating, is what it is leveled at. (2006, p. 51)

Violence, both against the individual and against the organization and motivation of society at large, is the threat against which taboos are erected. Whether in the case of menstruation, whose “discharges are thought of as manifestations of internal violence” (2006, p. 54) or the “nauseous, rank and heaving matter” (p. 56) of death and decay, it is the threat of violation of the perceived integrity of the individual or society against which the taboo seeks to protect. In both cases, menstruation and death, we can perceive the dissociation that is carried out by the individual/group in its ostracizing movement that occurs with the erection of the taboo. Functioning as it does in an analogous way to the 'protective shield' of the Ego, society erects barriers against those aspects of its own constitution which threaten its continued stability and growth. Like the Ego, it serves to eliminate certain *vital* elements which potentially – certainly in the case of death – by their very nature, if

left unchecked cast a threatening shadow over the productive, accumulative march of progress.

Whilst we can perceive the common facet of violence that draws sexuality and death together, it is still not apparent whether this violent character is the result of a unity between these phenomena, or whether this is only an apparent unity. To pursue this conjecture, it is not clear whether sexuality and death are deemed threatening as a result of just their capacity to interrupt the smooth functioning of society, or whether they share some deeper connection beyond this. This is particularly pertinent in the light of our previous insight into the notions of Eros and Thanatos, and it will be necessary to show such a structural similarity if we are to prevent sexual desire from being completely nullified by a revised introspection of desire. If however we are able to establish the common bond and unity between sexuality and death, we will be able to discover over and above – or perhaps *below* – this politicized, sublimated sexuality, a sexuality that glows in its violent, traumatic and sensuous glory.

Excrement reeks. It reeks of death and decay, threatening to infect us by its presence. For this reason we expel it behind closed doors, flush it away, and at least in polite company, pretend *we do not do it*. Farmers however use excrement and waste matter as fertilizer for crops. The very object that is abject (Kristeva) is recycled and reintroduced into a cycle whereby death guarantees and nourishes life. Destruction leads to creation and creation leads to destruction. Recognizing this repetitious circularity, Bataille tells us:

The death of one being is correlated with the birth of the other, heralding it and making it possible. Life is always a product of the *decomposition* of life. Life first pays its tribute to death which disappears, then to corruption following on death and bringing back into the cycle of change the matter necessary for the ceaseless arrival of new beings into the world. (2006, p. 55)

This echoes the revelations uncovered in both Bataille and Freud's discussions of 'protozoa', and is evocative of Bataille's general economic theory being applied to biological concerns. Taking a step back from the microscope, if we extend our range of perception, we can see how this interrelation of sexuality and death functions on a more general level. Bataille draws our attention to the cyclical process of growth and death that we find in the movement of energy in the food chain (through the cyclical process of Plants->Herbivore->Carnivore->Decomposer's->Plants (p. 60)). At each stage the proliferation and growth of the successive stage is made possible and guaranteed by the consumption or destruction of the former. However, as is implied in this cycle, and perhaps what is most unpalatable for man, there is no ultimate protection possible against life

where, at the apparent 'top of the food chain', "nothing is left but this fierce beast of prey" who, despite their position of power, will become "in their turn the prey of hyenas and worms." (p. 60) The cycle of life here is guaranteed only by the perish-ability of the previous link in the chain. From this vantage point, death and decay allows for the possibility of growth and reproduction and vice-versa. In the end, our death and our waste are intimately bound up with our growth, and what gives us our sexual power can be traced back to the engagement with the festering matter of decay:

It takes an iron nerve to perceive the connection between the promise of life implicit in eroticism and the sensuous aspect of death. Mankind conspires to ignore the fact that death is also the youth of things. Blindfolded, we refuse to see that only death guarantees the fresh upsurging without which life would be blind. We refuse to see that life is the trap set for the balanced order, that life is nothing but instability and disequilibrium. Life is a swelling tumult continuously on the verge of explosion. (p. 59)

Nature itself, vast and impersonal, is the 'balanced order', and life, here human *conscious* life, is a trap which interrupts the flow of energy. Human conscious life becomes threatened by instability, a notion that we saw evoked in the functioning of the Ego. The barriers against excess – taboos – are erected in order to protect the stabilized human life against the current of existence, (to ensure the ability to "produce at cut prices" (Bataille, 2006, p. 60)) which works in opposition to the threat of destruction in consumption. Human existence for Bataille, as we have repeatedly seen, functions, as in Hegel and Freud, through the restriction of its own desire. Indeed, restriction is constitutive of the subject and precipitates the split between the sacred and profane. However, like Nietzsche and the child, we see how this fracturing of existence splits off a part of itself, so much so that "a febrile unrest within us asks death to wreak its havoc at our expense." (Bataille, 2006, p. 60) In such a bind we find Bataille's man, unable to engage fully with his own desire (threatening to unravel him as they do), hostile as they are to his productive social existence, and yet subject nonetheless to the natural cycle of energy which compels one to spend without reserve:

Nature demands their surrender, or rather; she asks them to go crashing headlong into their own ruin. Humanity became possible at the instant when, seized by an insurmountable dizziness, man *tried* to answer "No". Man tried? In fact men have never definitively said *no* to violence (to the "excessive" urges in question). In their weaker moments they have resisted nature's current but this is a momentary suspension and not a final stand still. (2006, p. 62)

There is a charge which can be brought to bear against Bataille, and is one that can be similarly leveled against Freud; are we able to make the transition from the observations of extremes of human behaviour (such as the 'sick' in Freud or the 'libertine' in Bataille) and apply the observations to those of 'normal' people? This albeit relatively weak challenge, would follow as such; granted that we can observe the functioning of the psyche or subject in the manner we have seen when we observe these 'depraved' characters, are we then able

to extend these findings to humanity in general? In other words, by the very fact that either the neurotic or the erotic exist upon the limits of human behaviour, can the lessons we learn from these 'abnormal' cases be extended to apply in the case of the 'normal' or healthy individual? To test this argument we will focus upon a taboo which Bataille deals with in detail, and against which one would be hard pressed to align its functioning to something found only in 'degenerate' peoples or societies. We will now turn to the taboo against Incest – the transgression of which was the subject of Bataille's novel *Ma Mere* – and find at its foundation an excessive sexual desire that is kept in check and which seeks to mitigate the potential violence that acquiescence to this desire can have.

The Enigma of Incest

We are struck straight away with the universality of prohibitions where incest is concerned. In one form or another all mankind is aware of it though the modalities will vary. (Bataille, 2006, p. 197)

Incestuous relationships are a universal obsession as dreams and myths show. If this were not so, why should the taboo be so solemnly proclaimed? Explanations of this order have a fundamental weakness. The disapproval which does not exist with animals is a historical occurrence, a result of the changes that made human life what it is, it is not simply part of the order of things. (2006, p. 199)

Two things initially jump out at us from the above passages. The first is that Bataille states that the phenomenon of Incest in its general appearance is a universal experience, and whilst the particularities of the prohibitions may vary, the general rule of prohibition holds. Secondly, we see him drawing attention to the exclusively *human* aspect of the taboo, the appearance of which he claims is unique to man and not found in animals. We can see in light of this that we can say that the taboo against incest is a particularly human phenomenon arising from the nature of the historical development of man as man. Bataille sees the taboo arising as a result of the generative forces in the consciousness of man and societies which, given the myriad times and places in which man has formed social groups, in turn explains the variations that can be found in the manifestation of the taboo. To draw attention to the multiple permutations that this taboo can take, a few examples highlighted by Westermarck will suffice to draw attention to the fact without belaboring the point:

The Malays of the uplands of Padang are forbidden to marry within the mother's tribe; the Bataks of Sumatra, Alfura of Ceram and Buru, Niasans, and Timorese, within the father's. Among the Italonos of the Philippines, marriage between blood-relations is not allowed. The Bugis and Watubela Islanders prohibit the intermarriage of cousins, paternal and maternal; whilst among the Orang-Banûwa of Malacca, the Macassars, and the natives of Aru, near New Guinea, children of brothers cannot intermarry, though children of sisters, or of brothers and sisters, can. Again, among the Lettis of the

Serwatty Islands, marriage may take place between brothers' children and between brothers' and sisters' children, but not between children of two sisters; and, among the Bataks, Rejangs, and natives of Amboina, a sister's son is allowed to marry a brother's daughter, whereas a brother's son must not marry a sister's daughter. (1891, p. 302)

The particular variations and nuances found in differing societies allow us here to glimpse the “multiple permutations” (Bataille, 2006, p. 201) that the taboo can take. It will not benefit us here to go further into an exploration of the many varied manifestations of the taboo as it is found. Instead, we will follow Bataille's lead, and recognize that to examine these variations in depth will not only become desperately tedious, but also that the conclusions we could draw from such an exercise would really only serve to lead us deeper into the quagmire:

The fog has only become thicker of course, while we have been probing into these details. Not only are the distinctions between these separate kinds of blood relationships purely theoretical ones, quite meaningless, not only are we miles from the clear and specific difference between our parents and sisters and the rest of mankind, but the relationships often mean different things in different places! (2006, pp. 202-3)

In seeking to find the answer to the problem of incest, it seems natural to focus upon the many manifestations that are found in the world, laying out the varying structures and hoping to identify some common bond that exists between the proscribed characters which lends them this prohibited value. Whilst there is merit in such an approach, in that it allows us to glimpse the structure that defines the prohibition, such an endeavor allows us to see nothing more in common between them than that the taboo *prevents certain groups from having sexual relationships*. It does not however tell us why certain people are forbidden, and it does not allow us to view the universal aspect of the taboo.

One theory that seeks to explain the variations of the taboo is a modified version of the Westermarckian notion of ‘negative imprinting’. This theory attests that the reason for the incest taboo is as a result of (depending upon the starting point of those who hold to it) either a process of socialization or, perhaps more radically, of our genetic make-up inherited from our forebears. This idea contends that for reasons of natural selection and the minimization of the possibility of infant mortality, during our upbringing we go through a process of ‘negative imprinting’ which serves to establish a pattern of behavior and results in us being at least less inclined towards and at most horrified by, the idea of sexual liaison with those with whom we share a close (most often blood) kinship.

Here, I think, we may find a quite sufficient explanation of the horror of incest; not because man at an early stage recognized the injurious influence of close intermarriage, but because the law of natural

selection must inevitably have operated. Among the ancestors of man, as among other animals, there was no bar to sexual intercourse. But variations, here as elsewhere would naturally present themselves; and those of our ancestors who avoided in-and-in breeding would survive, while the others would gradually decay and ultimately perish. Thus an instinct would be developed which would be powerful enough, as a rule, to prevent injurious unions. Of course it would display itself simply as an aversion on the part of individuals to union with others with whom they lived; but these, as a matter of fact, would be blood relations, so that the result would be survival of the fittest. (Westermarck, 1891, p. 352)

The formulation I am advancing argues that the biological consequence of inbreeding is a decrease in fitness... Given this lowered fitness a human group practicing incest operates at a selective disadvantage in competition with outbreeding human groups and ultimately would be unlikely to survive... one might expect over time that natural selection would lead to preservation of societies that practiced outbreeding (incest taboo) and elimination of those societies that favored, or were neutral to, the practice of incest. Consequently, what eventually remains is a substantial amount of variability in marriage rules and kinship structure across cultures, but with all varieties providing the basic minimum of outbreeding imposed by natural selection. (Lindzey, 1967, pp. 1051-2)

Linking the notion of the taboo against incest to the potentially damaging effects on the offspring of such a union seems to be rather convincing. Indeed, identifying the ill-effects that can be passed onto subsequent generations⁸ as the generative cause for the erection of the taboo seems a well founded argument. However, it is unsettling that such an idea which ostracizes this particular behaviour and expels it from the normal functioning of human beings under the banner of 'unnaturalness' can be seen to share similar undertones as those once leveled against homosexual or interracial relationships. Whilst such a notion as that of negative imprinting appeals as it removes the threat of incestuous desires from the realm of activity of the healthy individual, recent research⁹ suggests that the notion of a biological or genetic force that underwrites the taboo is mistaken, whereas in fact, far from being repelled by those who are close kin, we are in fact *more attracted*

⁸ Such as those proposed by Lindzey in the paper previous cited: "The findings most directly relevant to our present interest resulted from a very recent study by Adams and Neel (1967) in which they compared the children of 18 nuclear incest matings... with 18 control matings, rather closely matched with the incest group for age, weight, stature, intelligence, and socioeconomic status. At the end of 6 months they found that of the 18 children of an incestuous union, five had died; two were severely mentally retarded, were subject to seizures, and had been institutionalized; one had a bilateral cleft palate; and three showed evidence of borderline intelligence (estimated IQ 70)... On the other hand, none of the 18 control children had died or were institutionalized, none were severely retarded, only one had a major physical defect, and 15 were considered ready for adoption." (1967, p. 1054)

⁹ Fraley and Marks have carried out a series of experiments to question the validity of the Westermarckian hypothesis when used in conjunction with notions of evolutionary psychology – the results of which can be found in their paper *Westermarck, Freud, and the Incest Taboo: Does Familial resemblance activate Sexual Attraction?*. In brief, their investigations contested what Westermarck proposed, that; 'an instinct would have developed', in this case an aversion to close family members, and this arises from evolutionary concerns. Fraley and Marks challenged this by carrying out a series of experiments in which pairs of participants were shown a succession of images of strangers which were mixed using image morphing software at increasing gradations with pictures of themselves and their opposite sex parent. If we were to accept Westermarck's hypothesis then we would expect to see that the greater the mix of the parent image with the stranger, we would find that the attractiveness of the image would decrease to the participants. The converse was actually discovered with participants rating those images which were more like their kin as more attractive than those which contained less. The upshot of such research is two-fold, in that it suggests that the Taboo against incest is firmly rooted in either the psychic or social development of the individual, and secondly, perhaps more unpalatably, that we may in fact find our close kin to be more sexually appealing than we normally consider.

to them.

Research such as that carried out by Fraley and Marks (2010) is compelling evidence that suggests two things. Firstly it suggests that rather than having a 'natural' disinclination toward those with whom we share kinship bonds, we may actually *prefer* them to non-kin as sexual partners. Secondly, as a result, the question of the origin of the taboo is shifted away from biology and towards the social structure of society or the psychic development of the individual. This is where Bataille saw the taboo originating also, sharing the notion that the attraction felt towards those close to us was far greater than that of those who were distant. It is for such a reason that he saw the taboo arising from an economic structure which guarantees social cohesion through the prevention of the *hoarding* of potential sexual partners:

The father marrying his daughter, the brother marrying his sister would be like the man with a cellar full of champagne who drank it all up by himself and never asked a friend in to have it. The father must bring the wealth his daughter represents into a cycle of ceremonial exchanges. He must bestow her as a gift, but this cycle entails a number of rules valid within a social group. (2006, p. 205)

The brother giving away his sister is less concerned to deny the value of sexual union with somebody closely related to him than to assert the greater value of marriages that would unite his sister with another. (2006, p. 207)

Guerlac, in her ‘‘Recognition’ by a Woman!’ elucidates the particular position of women within this structure. For Bataille, she argues, women are ‘‘at the centre of eroticism’’ (1990, p. 100) owing to their position as the ‘‘paradoxical object which marks the limit between law and transgression’’ (p. 103). Women¹⁰ entering (or more rightly being 'given') into this economic exchange gain the ‘‘same sort of significance as champagne’’ (Bataille, 2006, p. 206), whose value is in the social communication that is ensured through the prevention of the monopolization of sexual relationships within the family. The taboo on incest, like festivities and the phenomenon of potlatch – and indeed sexuality in general – reveals a general economic structure in contrast to one which denies the value of loss within human relationships. The incest taboo thus: ‘‘Entail(s) and outward-goingness, a refusal to turn in upon oneself, and so the calculations of the miser, logical though they may be, are denied the highest value. The sexual relationship is itself a communication and a movement, it is like a celebration by nature, and because it is essentially a communication it provokes an outward movement.’’

10 It scarcely needs highlighting that though the literature deals with the 'distribution' of women within a cycle of exchange, the taboo against incest holds just as much for the male as it does the female. A charge of sexism that could be brought to bear here would be attributable to the social structures from which we are deriving this theory, and one could easily imagine that rather than a woman being 'given' in marriage, a man could be equally 'given' to the wife's family.

(Bataille, 2006, p. 207)

By focusing on the economic structure of exchange in the taboo on incest (which guarantees a form of social cohesiveness insured against violent envy and desire), we are straying into territory which reflexively adds substance to this argument. When considering the taboo on incest in this way, we are reminded of the notion of the 'Originary Crisis'¹¹ which cites a similar threat of violence as the genesis of societal structure, out of which grows the many forms of social organization (and particularly defines the Taboo and the Sacred). Such a theory contends that to avert the potential disaster that could arise from jealous violence, social conventions and rituals are established which serve to avert or *defer* the desire which threatens to undermine the stability of the group. The taboo against incest thus ensures that the reciprocal gift giving ("who *gives* this man/woman...") continues and defers the potential for violence that would threaten should this desire remain unchecked.

Here we are able to discern yet another similarity that exists between the Ego and the nature of Taboo. Both exhibit a function which ensures the continuation of the existent structure (either Ego or social grouping) through the averting or deferral of potentially threatening situations. However, to view the two structures working in such a manner runs the risk of overstating their utilitarian aspects and thereby reducing the function that they play to a classically economic principle; namely, that you have to 'speculate to accumulate' or, that the 'giving away' of those closest to you reveals a faith in a future gain or profit¹². To focus too narrowly on

11 Eric Gans, in his *Originary Thinking*, tells us in regard to the 'Originary Crisis': "we may conceive the originary event as follows: a circle of proto-humans, possibly after a successful hunt, surround an appetitively attractive object, for example, the body of a large animal. Such an object is potentially a focus of conflict, since the appetites of all are directed to something that cannot belong to all." (1993, p. 8) If we transpose the conflict of interest from surrounding a carcass, and instead, place within the center a potential sexual partner, we can see that the potential for conflict exists between jealous rivalries for the ownership of the available person. Thinking in such a manner, we can see the erection of the incest taboo under such conditions as being a mechanism in which the potential for disaster is averted by instantiating prohibitions which dictate who may, and who may not, be a potential sexual partner, thus reducing the potential for conflict by defining specific 'spheres of influence' in which a person may sexually operate. This is further reinforced when Gans continues: "But it also follows from the parsimony of the hypothesis that the peace brought about by the deferral... must ultimately lead to increased appetitive satisfaction for the participants; in order for a new conflict-deferring mechanism to survive, it must provide a more successful outcome than the old... the object must be equally divided among the participants. This is the foundation of the communal system of exchange" (1993, p. 9).

¹² In his *The Post Card*, Derrida makes the interesting claim that the method of Freud's 'speculation' extends beyond 'mere' scientific speculation and towards a model which foreshadows the return on this speculative investment: "You must already find that I myself am corrupting the 'properly Freudian' usage of 'speculation,' of the notion or the concept, and of the word. Where Freud seems to make of it a mode of research, a theoretical attitude, I am also considering it as the object of his discourse... it is the bias of this procedure which interests me. I am acting as if the very thing he appears to analyze, for example the relation between the two principles, were already an element of speculative structure in general: simultaneously in the senses of specular reflection (the pleasure principle can recognize

these aspects is to turn away from the truth that the *horror* incest provokes in us, a reaction that seems out of all proportion to its cause if we wish to stress its purely utilitarian aspects:

Everything suggests that these regulations deal with the play of deep seated impulses among individuals. How otherwise can the unnatural renunciation of near relations be explained? We have here a truly extraordinary process to make imagination boggle: a sort of inner revolution of *violent intensity*. (Bataille, 2006, p. 211)

The revulsion that one feels in the pit of the stomach at the thought of inter-familial relationships – however ‘familial’ is defined – indicates that there is more at play in the functioning of the taboo than this ‘miserly’ calculation. If the incest taboo was merely erected after the fashion of utilitarian considerations alone - that it is better to share the available ‘resources’ of sexual partners rather than suffer the jealous attention of others - we would expect to see the giving away of and prohibition against sexual congress with those close to us in existence much as it is now. However, such a calculation (that it is better to give than to hoard), whilst maybe explaining the economic structure of the taboo and its positive manifestations, is still unable to explain the disgust that accompanies such a desire if consciously recognized. It is the very real possibility of actually possessing sexually those closest to us that is at the root of the taboo itself, and the fact that it reveals a desire in the first place *to do it* that is perhaps the cause of horror. Bataille continues: “this movement is no doubt at the bottom of the potlatch of women, exogamy, that is, the paradox of giving away the coveted object.” (2006, p. 211)

We are dealing here with a question of sexual desire. Recalling the early stages of this argument, we can see that the choice of persons that the taboo guards against, when compared to our common understanding, appears arbitrary. There is nothing within the object itself that makes it liable to be placed under restriction save the relation of proximity between those subject to the taboo itself. When we understand that the persons with whom relationships are forbidden need not necessarily share any blood relationship (for instance in those ‘totemic’ societies in which relationship taboos exist outside of biological relations), we can infer that there is nothing in the participants themselves that prevents them from being the focus of sexual desire. The sexual object choice in children posited by Freud (which gives further credence to the findings of Fraley and Marks) states that the development of the child’s self-consciousness occurs chiefly through its interaction with the

itself, or no longer at all recognize itself, in the reality principle); of the production of surplus value, of calculations and bets on the Exchange, that is, the emission of more or less fictive shares; and finally in the sense of that which overflows the (given) presence of the present, the given of the gift.” (Derrida, 1987, pp. 283-4)

parents and other persons of close proximity which become the sexual object choice of the burgeoning identity. When we examined the child's game, we saw how the 'gone' and 'there' of the performance betrayed a desire to externalize the traumatic experience of the emergence of self-consciousness of the child, and which reflexively results in the erection of the Ego and its drive to perpetuate itself. The anxiety that the new person exhibits and sublimates in his playtime allows us to perhaps unlock a facet of the feeling of horror associated with incestuous desire for, as we have seen, the child's relationship with the parent (or others of close proximity) reveals a blended identity without the strict definitions of I and Other which develops later through the establishment of the Ego. In such a way, the mother, father, or sibling (whoever was the particular other that was at one stage integrated into this 'proto-identity'), when externalized retains part of the threat of trauma which was worked through in the game. We can see here the double aspect of the other person; subject to a desire to be reintegrated into the whole (formerly being part of it), and yet at the same time (because the existent identity only came about as a result of the expulsion and rejection of such an identity), a cause of horror as it reawakens the originary traumatic experience:

In other words, then, there is no pure origin of transgression, or of the economy of expenditure. It seems that the dance of interdiction/transgression goes all the way back – or circles round. There is no transgression which is not mediated by interdiction, no rebondissement – without a moment of recul. But neither is interdiction primary, for the historical narrative refers us back to a (violent) animal sexuality from which we step back in horror. (Guerlac, 1990, p. 102)

The key here to understanding the taboo on incest is that the taboo and its associated horror indicates a two-fold structure:

- 1) That in its manifestation and associated rules and regulations it guarantees the 'distribution' of potential sexual partners and averts the possibility of conflict arising – the utilitarian aspect.
- 2) That its structure exists owing to the very real desire for union that is apparent between family members which at the same time, is both desirable and in equal measures horrifying.

In summation, Bataille evokes this double aspect to the incestuous sexual object which, in its operation on an individual and societal level, is truly indicative of the human situation:

For a close relative to remove his right to forgo the enjoyment of his own property: this is what defines human beings... As I have said, such renunciation enhances the value of the thing removed. But this is

also a contribution to the creation of the human world in which respect, difficulty and reservations are victorious over violence... there would be no complete respect if the lapse into eroticism were not both possible and full of delightful promise. (2006, p. 218)

This brief review of the phenomenon of the Taboo in general and against incest in particular allows us to focus our attention on what is relevant to our investigation. We are able to see that the taboo against incest is not derived from some inherent opposition to familial relationships, instead deriving from the proximity between persons, and that in fact the prohibition itself is established to insure society against the threat of violence that comes with the greedy monopolization of relationships. Much like the Ego, and also the renunciation of Hegel's master, we can see Taboo functioning in such a way as to protect society and its members against the desire which threatens to damage its continued existence. The issue is that whilst the restriction of desire creates the Ego/self-consciousness, in its creation externalizes aspects of itself. This does not mean that the desire dissipates and is overcome in the movement to self-consciousness, but instead is repressed and disowned as a part of the resultant structure itself. This is what separates the thought of Hegel with that of Bataille; in the renunciation of desire in the name of 'respect', whilst essential for the creation and maintenance of self-consciousness, in the moment of overcoming does not truly remove desire from the playing field.

The object subject to taboo is shown to be dependent upon the interdiction which defines it as such and, owing to its double aspects of threat and lure, remains shadowed by the structure which determined it as taboo in the first instance. Because of this shadowing, the taboo object resists attempts to define it objectively. Bataille balks at such attempts, claiming that to do so results in a state of affairs where “the element envisaged remains in practice unreal; and can only be abstractly made objective”, so that to continue upon such a path only represents “the persistence of a dominant need for appropriation, the sickly obstinacy of a will seeking to represent, in spite of everything, and through simple cowardice, a homogeneous and servile world” (1985d, p. 98). *Subjective heterogeneity* by contrast, the experience of the object in its relation to the structure in which it is proscribed (either psychological or social), is for Bataille “alone concrete” (p. 98)

Transgression then is not the movement from one economy to another *outside* of restricted economies which create the taboo. Instead, as French tells us: “Bataille’s strategy... resists this tendency to formalize the space ‘on the other side’ of transgression. Transgression is rather an operation or a strategy of the cut, the interruption,

which destabilizes the fixity and structural coherence of form” (1999, p. 129). By not just reversing “the priorities of the existing order”, Bataille emphasises the tension at the heart of transgression by illuminating the “joy of consuming without return... fused with the anguish of loss” which creates a “profound ambivalence” (Richman, 1982, p. 103) in those participating in the act. Because the object deemed taboo is a product – and indeed part – of the structure which it is excluded from the taboo object is not an isolated, independent object.

Bataille’s anthropological presentation stresses that the taboo does not designate the content of an absolute law, but is tantamount to a limit whose inscription within a culture is historically displaced by transgressive acts. The limits that tempt most exist primarily in the consciousness of those who defy them. (Richman, 1982, p. 71)

In the consummation of the taboo object, the subject uncovers “its inability to generate an internal unifying force as the basis for its own identity” and finds that it “must derive its definition from an expelled object” (Richman, 1982, p. 40) This consummation however is not an appropriation for, despite it being designated as taboo by the process of negative desire which characterises consciousness, by being driven by the general economic movement towards *dépense*, it exceeds the limits of consciousness. The moment of transgression thus induces an ambivalent experience, the object challenging the mastery of the subject whose self is implicated in the erection of the taboo which whilst prohibited, is nonetheless fundamentally desirable. Just as the fledgling Ego through the process of repetition betrayed its concurrent desires to reinforce itself (through the repression of its traumatic origins) along with the desire to return to this lost state, so too the object subject to taboo pulls in two directions. These two directions are also at the heart of Bataille’s practice of literature, seeking as it does to subvert the restricted economy of language by utilising the very tools it seeks to subvert. As such, the following question is raised:

Bataille asked whether the self could be preserved from annihilation without betraying its desire for self-loss, its pleasure, whether literature could be the site both of repression (sublimation, projection, displacement, and so on) and of subversion (self-loss or transcendence, the explosion of limits), or prohibition and transgression. (Richman, 1982, p. 243)

I will now turn to Bataille’s novella *L’Abbe C* to examine this tension as it plays out between the character of Eponine, Robert and Charles and show how it produces an ambiguous moment where prohibition and transgression, pulling simultaneously leads the subject to a laying bare, and an anguished laughter.

2.3: Playing with the Priest

Eponine for her part, wasn't satisfied with the apparent unhappiness of my brother. What did she care if he suffered, when, in his suffering he continued to deny her existence? Furious and tired of laughing about it, she wanted Robert to recognize her, to let her be a part of his life; and since she knew that her immorality was the only thing about her that was authentic, she would never be content until she seduced him. (Bataille, 1988a, p. 56)

In *L'Abbé C* the intertwined relationship of the central characters (Charles, his twin brother Robert and the prostitute Eponine) unfolds in a way that provokes a distinct uneasiness in the reader. It is arguably Bataille's finest novel, dark, cruel and with moments of the blackest comedy, and yet, perhaps strangely for a novel by Bataille, it does not contain much of the 'obscenity' prevalent in (and which one comes to expect from) his other works. Further to this, the novel seems to contravene the "basic Bataillian pattern" of "an anguished young male narrator surrounded by (usually two) disturbingly aggressive females" (Richman, 1982, p. 82).¹³ It is a novel which, like his others, has the subject of eroticism at its heart, and yet, unlike the others, seeks to illustrate this notion through the psychological relationships between the characters rather than through their excessive, obscene actions. The novel is no less powerful or shocking for this; indeed, in focusing instead on the interrelation between the characters, he manages to provoke a heightened tension in his readers and allows the tenuous erotic structure to be portrayed in a much more subtle form. By shifting the focus of the narrative away from the extremes that we find in *Blue of Noon* or *Story of the Eye*, we find in this work a much more subdued and yet powerful portrayal of his conception of Eroticism, one which unfortunately can be overshadowed by the excessive events that often attract our attention in his more 'pornographic' writings. The three characters interact in such a way as to illuminate for us what we have examined previously; that sexuality, when devoid of 'potential', causes a great anguish, an anguish produced by the challenge that erotic desire makes to the integrity of the individual that seeks to sublimate it. What we will see, through recourse to Freud, is that the interaction of the central characters and the nature of their intermingling identity, brings into stark relief Bataille's notion of Eroticism and how he perceived it functioning on the part of human beings.

Eponine, a prostitute, is licentiousness personified. She feels her excesses are directly aligned to the core of her being and is in a 'relationship' with Charles, a 'trick' (Charles regularly pays Eponine's mother following

¹³ However, we will see in the coming pages that though this work diverges from the normal 'pattern' of Bataille's work that there are similarities which tie it to others within his oeuvre.

their rendezvous) who, despite this, is much more than that. Charles himself is equally debauched, indulging dutifully and with ardent fervor in her desires. Bataille tells us that he is her “most diligent lover” (1988a, p. 50), and together they engage in what we are impelled to consider as a very excessive affair: “before anything else, I had to satisfy the wishes of Eponine... all afternoon we had made love and I had laughed” (p. 37). Little however is explained in regard to the personal relationship between Charles and Eponine, for this relationship serves as the backdrop for what becomes the nexus of the story; Charles and Eponine's relationship in the shadow of Charles's twin brother Robert.

During the summer of 1942, Robert, Eponine and I found ourselves, for various reasons, together in a small town where we were born. (p. 34)

Robert, identical twin of our narrator Charles, shows a similarity with him that extends beyond the visible, reinforced by the claims that Charles felt that Robert was his “alter-ego” (p. 34). However, Robert is not a perfect mirror image of our libertine narrator, for in most things he represents the polar opposite of him. Whilst Charles revels in his base desires, Robert, a priest, lives a life so devout that we are told that he is given by his brother the title “the abbé” (p. 13), a title to which he is referred to more often than his own name. The physical mirror but moral opposite of Charles, Robert provokes a constant challenge to both Eponine and his own brother. Prior to her descent into licentiousness, Eponine and Robert enjoyed some kind of relationship, seemingly monogamous, which preceded his conversion to Christianity. However, once she had begun to indulge in her excesses, he openly shunned her and, for Eponine, this becomes tantamount to denying her very existence:

Only a few years earlier, my twin brother was, like me, just one of the young men of the village: as a boy he had been the object of Eponine's affections and she went around with him for a long time; later on, she openly went astray; and he pretended, out on the streets, that he didn't know her. (p. 37)

'Diligently' loved by one, yet rejected by the other whom she loved originally, the physical identity of the two brothers serves as a challenge to Eponine's 'authenticity'. Robert's rejection of (or perhaps more rightly, refusal to acknowledge the existence of) Eponine, coupled with his physical identity with Charles, gives us a strange 'love-triangle' in which the physical identity, and yet moral opposition antagonizes the relationship and identities of those bound up in it.

The three characters first come into contact on the roof of the village Church tower, a meeting arranged by Eponine with the express aim of luring Robert from his piety and drawing out his animal desires. Charles,

primed by Eponine, tricks his brother into following him up the tower in order to force a meeting between the three. During the ascent to the roof, Robert realizes that he has become the victim of a ruse and recognizes the “trap into which friendship had made him fall” (p. 38).

Raging, breathless and, on a narrow platform, isolated from the rest of the world, shut up, in a sense, in the limitless void of the skies, we stood confronting each other like dogs frozen by a sudden spell. The hostility that united us was static, confused, like the laugh of someone who has missed a good thing. (pp. 41-2)

With wind raging about them atop the tower, the three stand transfixed. The lovers have cornered their prey; brother betrayed by brother is led to confront that which he refuses to acknowledge. Eponine, drunk, was all “docility, and yet menace itself”, clasping her arms tightly around her coat, naked underneath, and seized by a “state of indecisive immobility”. Her nakedness under her overcoat provides here the potential provocation; with one movement of her hands she would bare all to Robert, and this suspension makes her hidden obscenity the “object of anxiety”. At this point, forced into a corner and unable to escape from a threat so at odds with his moral compass, Robert falls to his knees and begins to chant; “slowly and lugubriously, as if he were calling to the dead.” (p. 43)

It was a ravishingly melodious lament, but so ambiguous! Such a bizarre profession of horror before the delights of nudity! Robert was going to conquer us by self-denial and his very effort to escape made this more obvious; the beauty of his chant in the silence of the heavens enveloped him in the solitude of a pious ecstasy. (p. 43)

Robert falling to his knees in prayer here shows his fleeing in the face of obscenity. His shared past – now rejected – with Eponine and the presence of his brother brings to the fore the complicity that he shares with his interlocutors. Yet, mirroring Marcelle's incarceration in *Story*, Robert flees back into the surety that is given him by what he is self-certain of (his faith), and his lamentation serves here to protect him against the obscene assault to which he is being subjected. However (again like Marcelle), Robert cannot escape as easily as all that and, inevitably, through a chance occurrence, is confronted by that which he attempted to flee. Eponine, seized as she was by the tension of the moment, initially fails to notice that Robert has fallen to his knees, and on coming around from her “dreamy stupor” (p. 44) convulses with laughter at the sight, so much so that she loses her footing and ends up leaning over the side of the tower, consumed by the sight of the praying priest:

She was laughing with her face in her hands and Robert, interrupted by a cackle she couldn't suppress, looked up, with his arms outstretched, only to behold her naked bottom: the wind had lifted up her coat which, when she was seized by laughter, she had been unable to keep closed. (p. 45)

Following the episode in the tower, the narrator Charles tells us that his brother was “suddenly changed”, with people thinking he was “losing his mind.” (p. 46) This change begins to unravel the apparent sanity of the

pious 'abbé', and we are given the impression that his profound notion of religious morality was shaken. His inability to look away when faced with Eponine's nakedness undermines his attempts at self-denial and we are told that Robert "admitted that he had had a..." (p. 45). The following day, in his weakened state, his brother pays him a visit, and is asked to go to Eponine and sleep with her, being challenged that whilst he may object and see in her summons a provocation (Charles suggests that in fact he may be indeed be subject to provocation), that in truth he has received this request "to fulfill an obligation that you've never wanted to recognize." (p. 49)

Robert's previous involvement with Eponine, and his involuntary erection atop the tower all suggest that his rejection of Eponine and subsequent turn to piety involves a rejection not of Eponine herself (as his erection would imply the contrary), but *what* she stands for, who she is, and a recognition that what she is – her sensuality being her most 'authentic' aspect – is the very thing that he himself struggles to control. We see that within him there exists an unbridled sexuality that runs counter to his outward display of piety; an outward display which itself is undermined by his unconscious bodily reaction. Despite this momentarily traumatic event, Robert continues to refuse to visit Eponine, further exacerbating her desire to debase him. However, the novel is not a simplistic tale of the systematic wearing down of the resolve of this pious priest and his being lured into debauchery by a duo of libertines. It is a rather different story that unfolds in the pages of the book, and rather than Charles and Eponine bringing Robert to the brink of collapse – for up to this point with great effort he had maintained his purity – instead it is the priest that brings all to collapse around him.

In the first chapters of *L'Abbé C Bataille* seems to be setting up a similar scenario as we saw him develop in his *Story* and the character of Marcelle. The parallels between the characters at this stage of analysis being quite plain to recognize; Marcelle, 'the purest and most affecting' of characters, playing the same role as that of Robert, a man so pious that his own brother refers to him as the 'abbé'. Both share a similar quality of religious purity, and both are seemingly drawn into a confrontation with their own sexuality in which the realization of the inescapability from, and nevertheless the attempt to flee in the face of this sexuality results in the destruction of their ordered, self-conscious identity. Now, whilst this is undoubtedly true in the case of Marcelle, with Robert we are faced with a character that as the story develops draws further away from such a comparison. Instead, he is transformed into the object which challenged Marcelle, becoming for Charles and

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Eponine that which threatens the stability of their identities. He becomes much more than the object of erotic desire which Marcelle fulfills for Simone and the narrator in *Story*, becoming rather, through a reversal of 'common' logic, the agitating *center* which, when his mask of purity begins to slip, becomes an erotically charged challenge to the apparent self-assured identity of his twin and his lover.¹⁴

Traumatic Ambiguity

That was the language of a prostitute, but it was infused with such fanatical determination, with such intense emotion, that it was impossible for anyone to be misled by its undeniable crudity: it was, at the same time, the language of passion, which put on a vulgar face... (Bataille, 1988a, p. 57)

Eponine, as she is presented to us, cuts a figure that exudes sexuality. She wields her sex like a weapon, flaunting it in the face of Robert, using its potential for ruin to lure him in. We are given the impression of a strong, independent woman in possession of a powerful will. At first glance, her character seems to be in complete contrast to those of Dora and Marcelle that we met earlier in our investigation. Both Dora and Marcelle display a pervasive indeterminacy, a decided weakness of will in front of their own sexual desires and in this respect Eponine could not be more different. However, the relationship here is not as simple as all that. If we recall our interaction with both Marcelle and Dora, we will remember that their state of disintegration and confusion could be attributed to their failure to engage with their own sexuality following on from their respective traumatic episodes. We do not have to look far however to see a similar 'weakness' of character within Eponine, arising similarly from a comparable traumatic experience. It is an experience from which we are able to trace the origins of her licentious behaviour, along with her fervent desire to destroy Robert:

Only a few years earlier, my twin brother was, like me, just one of the young men of the village: as a boy he had been the object of Eponine's affections. (p. 37)

When Eponine had started making love with the local boys, he hadn't just kept away: she began, at the age of thirteen, to sleep around as much as she could. Robert, who had up to that time shared all her secrets, pretended that he no longer knew her. (p. 50)

¹⁴ It may seem strange, given Bataille's obsession with Eroticism that we seem to be seeking to establish how the pious Robert creates the erotically charged challenge to the other more 'erotic' characters, as it seemingly runs counter to our intuition here. However, it will become clear in due course why Robert is the illustration of the Erotic in this relation. Here it would be important to remind ourselves of what we have seen previously. It will be recalled how Bataille's notion of the erotic and of other sovereign acts have been conceived of being devoid of utility, that is, without 'purpose', and whilst Charles and Eponine are indeed excessively licentious, they do not 'inhabit' the erotic as they, by sublimating their actions to their identity (in much the way as Sade's heroes and heroines), their actions cannot truly be said to be erotic. The upshot here is that one cannot claim to, or indeed *be* erotic, this phenomenon only ever coming about through a 'chance' moment that whilst being the result of conscious action, cannot truly be said to have been the object of this or that desire.

Recalling the case history of Dora, we can plainly see a parallel between her case and the above description and which provides us with a potential explanation as to the origin of Eponine's desire to debase Robert. Having been very close to him (a position in which we are told he knew her intimately), his rejection of her, justified as it was by her actions, serves to create and confirm her hatred of him. It is implied that his continual refusal to accept her forms the provocation towards which her desire is directed. Robert, having been in a position of confidence, in rejecting her stands as a challenge to her 'authentic' self. As a result of this challenge, Eponine needs to bring Robert to his knees in an attempt to master his oppositional attitude and the threat that this poses to her. His 'intimate' knowledge of her and her subsequent 'vendetta' reminds us of the process of externalization that Freud's Ego passes through in the stages of development of the psyche, as well as that of the master/slave struggle that we saw in Hegel. When Robert rejects Eponine in both a physical and moral way, in order to protect her from the traumatic loss of this relationship she seeks to externalize and shut out the threat that he poses in a two-fold manner. Firstly, the continued erotic challenge to him can be viewed as an attempt to undermine his apparent position of moral authority and asexuality (after all he was a priest) by seeking to seduce him into a liaison with her. This pattern of behaviour would suggest that she believes that Robert has not *really* converted to a life of piety nor rejected his sexuality, and, could she just tempt him to bed, she would have vanquished her opponent, thereby vindicating her own 'authentic' outlook. Secondly, her zealous desire to debase him (so much so that it consumes her) reveals – much in the way that Dora's conscious hatred of Herr K was an external manifestation of her real repressed love – that the loss of Robert as a lover was in fact more upsetting for her than she is admitting both to herself and to others.

Her desire to ruin Robert, at first glance, can seem greatly out of proportion for one who was 'merely' rejected by a man we are told she was already moving away from. The thread that will lead us towards a potential resolution to this question can be found when the narrator tells us: "Robert's attitude was, it seemed to me, not only cowardly but a self-abnegation... Ultimately, *his refusal to recognize Eponine exacerbated her desire for me.*" (p. 55) We will do well to remember that Robert and the narrator Charles are identical twin brothers. Eponine's turn to Charles can be viewed as the finding of a substitute after being spurned by his brother; indeed, it is possible to examine her passion and find at its root only a displaced attachment to Robert that proves the origin of her taking up with his brother. The hint that we are given as to the extent of Robert and Eponine's

relationship, allows us to read into this movement the transference of emotions from the original brother to his double. Again, much like the case of Dora (for significant parallels exist) we can identify a further aspect of this situation, where Eponine directs her aggression towards Robert, consciously seeking his desecration, directly in opposition to her feelings of affection towards him (which have importantly been transferred to his brother). Owing to the process by which she is able to maintain her emotional connection by proxy, she is then able to circumvent any feelings that she may hold which would prove a stumbling block to achieving the first aim of subjugating Robert to her will.

The secondary aspect of this situation, when taken in conjunction with the first - being intimately related in truth - allows us to provide one reading of her character which explicitly aligns her behaviour, albeit with contrasting manifestations, with that of Dora and Marcelle. Such a reading would go as follows: Eponine, in her younger days, 'went around' with Robert and (we are told) they enjoyed each other's company and confidence. At this stage of the relationship we are given no hint of discord between the pair, and no apparent inconsistency of outlook on life between them is implied. However, she then begins to 'wander' sexually with other young men of the village. In reaction to (and what is possibly indicative of a betrayal of trust), Robert then rejects her (and his own) sexual behaviour, swinging so wildly to the other end of the spectrum that he joins the priesthood and becomes the 'Abbé' of the title. He represses his own sexual desires¹⁵ which, as we know following the episode atop the church tower, he struggles to keep in check. This complete rejection, not only of her, but of her whole way of life aligned to sexual expression, is the catalyst for her desire to re-awaken Robert to his previous self by forcing him to acquiesce to her advances and his own sexual urges.

Eponine, who once held tender affection for – one might venture so far as to say *loved* – Robert, following his rejection of her, has her certainty of self brought into question. In his continued public display of contempt, he at each juncture serves to challenge all that she is, having previously been so close to him. She must

15 It seems fair to make the conjecture that rather than rejecting Eponine for her sexual licentiousness whilst not rejecting his own, in order to externalize any source of trauma that this event caused he was forced to consciously renounce his sexuality *in full*. The reason behind this one can suppose would be that Eponine would not exclusively be the only one to have urges which would have caused the eye to wander. Understanding this, that Robert as a young man possessed sexual urges, and in order to justify his renunciation of Eponine based upon her behaviour, he would have had to reject his sexuality *as a whole*. For, should he admit that he himself wanted to do as she did, the conscious justification he created for his behaviour would be undermined, and thus any process of distancing would be more difficult to achieve.

accordingly 'despoil' him to prove as legitimate her own perception of her 'authentic' self, in contrast to his 'inauthentic' posing as a priest. One can imagine her train of thought running like this: 'Why has Robert rejected me? Does he not love me? Does this mean that I am not worthy of love, that who I am is not valuable, that I am not really a human being? This must be false! I am true to myself, I have always been! It is not *I* who have changed, but *him*; it is Robert who is lying to himself!' If we ascribe to her such a thought process, we can see that by causing Robert to reengage with his former sexual self, she would vindicate her reasoning as to why he rejects her, and thus validate her own Identity. In order to protect her own sense of self, she must externalize the threat that the separation poses and transfer any feeling of unease in the affair onto Robert. It is he who is betraying himself (and her) in this whole charade, and this transference of blame wholly onto him absolves her of any guilt in the affair so as to sidestep the event's traumatic legacy. This claim is further established when we consider her relationship with Charles for, owing to his physical identity with his brother, plays the role of substitute lover for Eponine. By indulging in carnal activity with Charles, she is able to surreptitiously maintain her 'relationship' with Robert through his mirror image, reinforced as this notion is by the lack of any real passion between Eponine and Charles.

This reading of the 'history' of Eponine allows us to glimpse more clearly the parallels that exist between her and the others that we have examined previously. In the case of Marcelle and Eponine, we can then make the claim that the former's piety and the latter's excess are constructed and function in an analogous manner. The psychological structures around which they orientate their conception of self and through which they attempt to protect themselves against the re-occurrence of trauma mirror each other. Marcelle (much like Dora) consciously rejects her sexuality and represses her sexual urges, potentially damaging as they are to her conceived notion of Identity. In much the same way, Eponine buries her feelings for Robert in a substitute lover, whilst consciously turning him into an object of hatred. In this manner, she externalizes and protects herself from engaging with the distress she feels at the loss of her confidante, whilst concurrently she is able to satisfy her emotional attachment to Robert by transferring it onto his substitute Charles.

In such a reading, Robert shows himself to fulfill the role of erotic object for Eponine. Functioning in much the same way as phenomena subject to taboo's – they also being erotic objects – he presents a dual aspect, being both the most attractive object for her whilst simultaneously being the object whose proximity causes

the most anguished. His character, who rejects Eponine, serves as the foundation upon and against which she constructs and maintains her Identity. Conversely, he also has an horrific quality to her for, by recognizing the unconscious current of warm feeling that she extends towards him, the more she tries to destroy him, the more she brings herself into question, being as he is the object of her sublimated desire. Such an interpretation here would seem to align her behaviour quite neatly to that of the Freudian interpretation of Identity, and yet it is not the only possible reading of their relationship.

We could also apply a secondary interpretation to this dynamic, one which mirrors the dialectic of Hegel's master and slave. The pair can be seen to be enacting the life and death struggle between self-certain individuals seeking to establish their own autonomy, where their conflicting desires pit them in a struggle against each other. Each seeks to validate their own self-certainty through the sublimation of the other. Eponine must enslave Robert to her will to validate her own conception of self, whilst Robert must resist at all costs Eponine's advances to maintain his own perception of autonomy. In this reading, Eponine's more 'troublesome' behaviour – that of her relationship with Charles and her potential *love* for Robert - would be justified by appealing to the final movement of the Hegelian dialectic. This would explain these apparently paradoxical desires by revealing them as indicative of a move to restrict her wish to defy Robert's challenge, pre-empting the moment of reserve required to overcome this opposition and establish a relational self-consciousness¹⁶ between them.

Admittedly however, both readings, whilst having many examples of behaviour with which to support them, do fall short of encapsulating the full range of behaviour that we see the pair exhibit. Both readings here will find it difficult to address a further, heretofore unconsidered occurrence in the novella, where Eponine's dogged pursuit of Robert reaches its climax with his collapse at the altar whilst giving Mass:

He smiled almost imperceptibly and seemed to be waking up but simultaneously lapsing into a coma, as he uttered something totally unintelligible... he fell, his body suddenly went limp, slid to the floor, and tumbled down the steps of the altar. (1988a, p. 76)

However, this is the point at which we find the most interesting and unsuspected twist in the tale for, despite

¹⁶ Whilst acknowledging the shortcomings that Bataille saw in the Hegelian system, it is not surprising here to be able to see this dynamic at work. Further to this, recognizing the *power* that Bataille felt this aspect of Hegelian thought to carry, the fact that we can read such a relationship existing between them, alongside a recognition that it is insufficient to explain all that we perceive, aligns itself well with the complex relationship that Bataille has with Hegel's thought itself.

his collapse, all is not quite as it seems:

I gulped and kept perfectly still, my brother lay there totally lifeless with his mouth wide open and his head hanging down, but he was pinching my wrist: he did it so discreetly that no-one noticed. Could I have imagined it? I was reluctant to believe I was being taken in like that... (p. 79)

With the revelation of Robert's masquerade the sense of the novel collapses. For, instead of being the sexually repressed priest, he is actually revealed as more debauched and depraved than either his brother or Eponine. Rather than being the pious 'Abbé' of the title, Robert unmasked is shown to embody unbridled madness; he fornicates wildly with prostitutes¹⁷, composes the notes that we are presented with as the fourth part of the book, and disappears on nocturnal excursions which we are told ultimately lead to his arrest by the Gestapo. Alongside these escapades, and in what is perhaps the most shocking manifestation of his irrational behaviour, he is also found to be the one who has been leaving Eponine 'gifts' of excrement beneath her window:

Eponine had once heard him making a small noise, she approached the window and saw him completely naked. He saw her and didn't make a move, but she turned away. She came back to sit on the edge of the bed and, keeping her head down, stayed there without saying a word. We didn't hear anything the other times but, in the morning, we would find traces of his visitation. (p. 124)

Robert's behaviour following his collapse is far removed from the picture we have previously been given. Once led to breaking point by the confrontation at the altar, he does not just acquiesce to his desires and engage with his repressed urges, instead seemingly acting with such abandon that he goes beyond the expectations that we have been given as to what he seemed to be fighting against. More troubling, this revelation comes to be implied as his own more 'authentic' self, one which we come to view as preceding both that of his religious period, whilst also being prior to his period with Eponine (which itself seems restrained in comparison). We find that his actions exceed the perception that Charles and Eponine have in terms of what they have felt the 'true' nature of his character to be, the impact of which proves drastic: "It was so obvious, so overwhelming, night was suddenly made day. Darkness was light and tears could laugh." (p. 114) For Eponine, the shock of this revelation (that the Robert she thought she knew and thought was repressing his true self was not Robert at all), is monumental, and this revelation throws her into turmoil:

Eponine was laughing, hiding her face in her hands; but she was naked and *it was her nudity that laughed*. It was a soft, intimate laugh, excessively ashamed... it was the same as excessive anguish, a gentle laugh like that is artfully stifled. Such a laugh is at the heart of excessive sensual pleasure and makes it a source of pain. (p. 114)

¹⁷ Here we see an example of the more usual 'pattern' identified by Richman. Robert, in his agitated state spends his time with two prostitutes. This however is not the focus of the novellas narrative and it is important to note that this occurs *after* the "relinquishment of all social and historical "points de repère" that help to solidify the sense of identity of a social being" (Richman, 1982, p. 82)

Interpreting Ambiguity

We have noted how Robert plays the role of the erotic object for Eponine, him being the center towards which her desire draws her and concurrently repels her. However, her laughter, her anguished and 'stifled' sobs which reveal her *nudity* challenges the position of Robert as a threat to her Identity with which we previously attributed to him. If we recall Hegel's master, and to a certain extent Freud's Ego, then we would expect to see (if she followed their respective notions of the movement of identity) an outcome potentially different from the dissolution we see above. In the former, with the removal of the 'challenge' to the master, whilst the possibility of transforming self-certainty into Absolute Relation is removed, it does not preclude the collapse of the sense of self-certainty itself. The master, when victorious over objects of its perception, then moves further to seek that elusive object which would provide the recognition he desires, and as we have seen (Chapter 1.2) this can only be achieved through the restriction of desire and the maintenance of the Other *as* Other. In this case, with the removal of the object of her perception (Robert), Eponine as master would perhaps mourn the loss of recognition but, as the source of her desire arises from within (the master's self-certainty does not rely on the other as a condition of possibility), we would be surprised to see the master's self-certainty dissolve into *nudity*. For this reason, Eponine's laugh, resounding as it does both with pleasure and pain, does not sit comfortably with the dynamic that we would expect to see Hegel's master follow. If we consider her position in the same way as the master seeking to establish her self-certainty (which her desire to debase Robert seems to attest to), then the nudity that she feels and that is perceived by Charles seems out of place.

Through Freud, we are able to obtain a much more nuanced account of this situation, and yet it is still insufficient to account for the full force of the behaviour that she displays. We have seen that if we take Robert to be the originating point of trauma for Eponine around which her Ego is built, it takes the form of a trauma which both repels her (causing her to seek his debasement) and attracts her (her transference of affection onto Charles betraying her feelings for Robert) simultaneously. This would allow us to sufficiently explain the co-existence of pleasurable and painful feelings, where the complete overturning of the grounding of the traumatic event (Robert was not even who she thought he was not being) causes her to feel joy at the removal of the

painful rejection he meted out to her, and pain at the realization that the Robert she loved was not Robert at all. Pleasure in this would come from the fact that as he was never really the pious priest he claimed to be, and as this false Identity was intimately bound up with his rejection of her, when revealed as a charade allows for the removal of the traumatic object (in effect it is annulled) as he never *really* rejected her. Similarly, pain would arise from the acknowledgment of the fact that he was never really the man that rejected her at all. The excessive behaviour he presents – which suggests that he may not have been the man he was prior to this rejection - would bring into question her unconscious affection for him, and as a result, would undermine this other aspect of her desire (to be with Robert).

Robert's lack of 'reality' and Eponine's *nudity* are problematic for us owing to their ambiguity. This ambiguity arises directly from the nature of Robert's indeterminate character, where the collapse of the relational structure between the three central characters occurs as a direct result of Robert's revelation. Both the Hegelian and Freudian model, when applied to this situation, seek to account for the existence of this ambiguity. The Freudian would align this ambiguity to feelings of ambivalence drawn from the wellspring of Eponine's conflicting desires, whilst the Hegelian would root this similarly in feelings arising from 'victory' over Robert mixed with the acknowledgement of the closure of the possibility of recognition. Both interpretations here seek to isolate the causal factors that contribute to this ambiguity, effectively reducing the impact of the revelation to known categories. Interpretations such as these establish Eponine's behaviour as either that of a 'confused' woman struggling with her own self-deception, or as a wounded 'master' interrupted on the path to absolute knowledge. In both cases we see a violence enacted towards this ambiguity, to pin it down and employ it in the service of either Freud or Hegel. However, we must be mindful of approaching this nudity in order to preserve its power – derived as it is from this ambiguity – and prevent it from being categorized, and as a result, neutered.

Shoshana Felman, when grappling with the problem of interpretation in the debate surrounding Henry James' *'Turn of the Screw'*, highlights the issue that faces us here: "Is a reading of *ambiguity* as such really *possible*? Is it at all possible to read and to interpret ambiguity *without reducing it* in the very process of interpretation?" (2003, pp. 163-4) The contention of this thesis, that central to Bataille's heterological practice of literature is the *affecting of a moment of trauma*, requires that the intentional evocation of this 'impossible' moment (the

ambiguity of Eponine's 'nudity' and of Robert's behavior) remain intact. It is an ambiguity that Bataille's work seeks to *affect in us*, and as such must remain resistant to interpretation. This issue of interpretation, particularly that of the 'baggage' that the reader will bring with them to the task, is acknowledged by Felman, and proves useful for us here. In drawing to our attention the contrasting justifications of the Governess's behaviour, she identifies two distinct trends:

The 'psychoanalytical' camp, which sees the governess as a clinical neurotic deceived by her own fantasies and destructive of her charges; and the 'metaphysical', religious, or moral camp, which sees the governess as a sane, noble savior engaged in a heroic struggle for the salvation of a world threatened by supernatural evil. (2003, p. 145)

Her argument develops in such a way as to demonstrate that interpreters of this text – a text with layers of indeterminacy, re-reading and re-interpretation at its heart – repeat the process of interpretation, of reading, being carried out within the novella. She claims that the interpreter's differing ways of viewing the Governess's behaviour and the attempt to undermine the opposing camps argument in a “fight against division” (p. 160) leads to an attempt to seek to answer “for the text.” (p. 152) And yet, in attempting to find the 'answer' or 'truth' of the text, they remain unaware that through the very process of conflict and *re*-interpretation that develops between them (a conflict that seeks to demystify the ambiguous center of the text) they can by “no means master or exhaust the very meaning of that division”, and are destined to repeat that division; “perform it, *be part of it.*” (p. 160). The indeterminacy of Robert's character and the resulting ambiguity of Eponine's nudity beg the reader for interpretation. The issue that Felman draws attention to is that the process of interpretation, in seeking to find the answer *for* the text, constitutes a *violence* enacted *towards* the text, and yet when considered within the framework of Bataille's writings as seeking to *affect* the reader - to draw them into a traumatic moment of communication – we can acknowledge that such a *violent* reading is exactly what Bataille is counting upon.

Eponine seeks to answer 'for' Robert, to justify his behaviour, and thus justify herself, and the more that she strives to achieve this, the further into the trap she is drawn. In seeking to answer for him, she leaves herself open to the eventual revelation of the lack of substance to his character. In other words, by bringing with her her own 'reading' of Robert's character, she leaves herself open to the eventual irruption of his unmasking, where this irruption forces her to answer *to* Robert. Her own sense of self, which she brought to bear against him (and which, as we have seen, was an identity formed in relation to the Robert that she thought he was),

when he is revealed to be a sham, is forced to confront the fact that not only was Robert not who he said he was, but that she, as a result, was not really who she thought she was either. The tendency to try to answer 'for' the text, to seek its truth or justify its existence through a particular reading (either as an artifact, or to justify the actions of its characters or narrative structure), brings us into a game that the text is playing, and by *being drawn* into the text to seek to answer for it - in the case of Bataille's work, just as much as in James' short novella - the reader, much like Eponine, is made to answer 'to' it.

Writing on is the epitome of a discourse in control, calmly assured of its position. It is deployed with complete assurance in a realm over which it has taken possession, one it has inventoried after first closing it off, to make sure it is absolutely safe. This discourse runs no risk at all: it is not uneasy about the future, it steadily expands. One chooses an object and relies on it. (Hollier, 1992, p. 23)

Hollier here echoes the concerns raised by Felman surrounding the process of interpretation but extends this to the act of writing itself. Writing as a 'discourse in control' is reflective of that desire to master the subject under consideration through the carving out of a space for the object to reside *safe from contamination*. He expands on this point:

Science and philosophy (models of discourse on) would like to fix and accumulate meaning in a closed language where clearly defined terms are enumerated hierarchically according to finite, calculable connections with no lateral linkage. They invest meaning in the lexicon, which as a result is allotted to control by the concept. (p. 26)

This process of writing however is fraught with difficulty: "Meaning exists only as risk. It is never fixed, never arrested. There are no guarantees. Meaning is uninsured. Not covered." (Hollier, 1992, p. 26) Recalling the discussion of Taboo in the previous chapter, it will be noted that transgression of a taboo generates ambivalence and we have seen a similar pattern with the character of Eponine and her interaction with Robert. A problem here becomes apparent for the reader and writer of literature that arises from the very ambivalence generated by the proscribed object involved in transgression. The cold, calculating reader or writer seeks to subjugate the object of study and establish their mastery over it after the fashion of Hegel's master who subjugates the slave to guarantee his own sense of self. The rational edifice that is constructed through the process of writing or reading sublimates the text and establishes it in a relationship of subservience to the identity that *produces* it, reinforcing it in much the way the slave regretfully acknowledges the master's superiority. However, much like the development of Freud's Ego, the process of reading or writing involves the excretion or exclusion of certain aspects (be they themes, narrative structures or content). Reading and writing in this way negatively define what *is* included, is reliant upon the suppression or repression of aspects which would contradict its key propositions, and retains only those which support it to provide a reassuring mirror for the reader or writer.

Bataille's practice of writing expressly seeks to subvert appropriation by introducing ambiguous elements (such as that of Eponine's naked laughter) which resist this movement towards restriction of the text. These elements are typified by failure and incompleteness which, in Hollier's view, "enter into the tactical arsenal of a writing that tries to escape the rules of mastery: they delineate the critical figures of a rhetoric of non-power" (1992, p. 118) which ultimately "undermines and destroys everything whose existence depends on edifying pretensions" (p. 23). The ambiguity which typifies the heterogeneous elements of Bataille's work is ultimately *seductive*. Existing at the limits of understanding they draw the attention of the reader by being that object which, like that of the erotic or taboo object, is the result of the process of excretion that creates the subject, and thus becomes a pole of affectivity which concurrently attracts and repels those who enter its orbit. It is with this in mind that I now turn to questions surrounding the interpretation of ambiguity as contained within Edgar Allan Poe's work 'The Purloined Letter' to seek to illustrate more plainly how ambiguity exacerbates the perceived problems of textual interpretation and reveals the implicit drive to mastery within approaches to Poe's work that struggle to contain ambiguity within their 'edifying pretensions'.

2.4: The Poetic Affect

Given that literary works are made of language, it is natural to imagine them as full of differential meaning and nothing else. *This is true to the letter, but the letter here is not everything, or perhaps it is too much.* In fact, it could be the vocation of great works to constrain language to say things that contradict its own laws, the sound and the fury of the relationship of the doubles, signifying nothing. (Girard, 1988, p. 42)

In seeking to explicate the importance of ambiguity within Bataille's work, it will serve us well to segue into another critical debate that surrounds a work with ambiguity at its heart. Poe's 'Purloined Letter', much like Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*, spawned a slew of critical debate (following Lacan's *Seminar*) and also shares with James's work a particularly ambiguous center, namely the letter of the title. What will become apparent is that the Lacanian analysis with its focus on the signifier underplays the role of rivalry within the text – a key notion in Girard's conception of Mediated Desire – and its relation to ambiguity. This focus on the signifier maintains the "straight line which joins subject and object" (Girard, 1980, p. 2) and results in a blindness to the role that mediation plays in generating what Felman calls its 'poetic affect' (Felman, 1988)

In his seminar on the 'Purloined Letter', Jacques Lacan identifies a triadic structure generated by the movement of the letter that he feels defines the trajectory and character-roles within Poe's tale. Within this structure he follows the path of the letter as it moves through successive stages of the work, establishing that, through its movement, the characters within the novella orbit around it and come to occupy successive places within a triangular structure. Lacan uses this orbiting as evidence of the structural underpinning of the Freudian 'repetition automatism' (which we examined earlier in Chapter 2.1) where the letter takes on and causes the repetition of the moment of 'originary trauma'. The letter, with its successive thefts, concealment and return are indicative for him of the dynamic that forms the subject, where repression, sublimation, transference and return endlessly revolve around the locus of the signifier. Lacan begins his seminar by telling us that "repetition automatism finds its basis in what we have called the *insistence* of the signifying chain" (Lacan, 2006a, p. 6) and that in Poe's work this signifying chain is uncovered through analysis of the successive structures which repeat themselves throughout the work. The letter takes upon itself the mantle of the 'pure signifier' whose place determines the 'displacement' of the characters due to their respective positions within the structure relative to it. By examining the successive triangles that are in evidence within the work we are able, for

Lacan, to track the movement of the letter as signifier within this chain and identify how, in each case, three characters successively occupy established places within the triadic structure. For Lacan, the three positions relative to the letter, defined by the place of the holder of the letter, are structured as a series of 'glances':

The first is a glance that sees nothing... the second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides... the third sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever would seize it. (2006a, p. 10)

These *glances* repeat themselves through the text, defined by the position of the letter, it being that which the second seeks to hide, and which reverberates throughout the novella. Lacan identifies two primary *scenes* as follows:

- 1) The 'Queen' receives the letter and hides it – in plain sight – from the King, who does not notice the letter at all. The Queen believes that the letter is safely hidden from discovery and yet the Minister has seen all, and knowing that it is ripe for the plucking, duly does so through a sleight of hand.
- 2) The Minister now hides the letter and foils the police charged with recovering it because of the simplicity of his method of concealment. The Minister feels confident that he has fooled his pursuers but is unaware that another, Dupin, has discovered his ruse. Once discovered, and with as much audacity as the Minister employed to acquire the letter, Dupin steals it away, again through a sleight of hand.

The contents of the letter, who it is from and why it has the potential to cause the Queen such jeopardy is never revealed to the reader. For Lacan, the unknown contents of the letter¹ are of less importance than the letter's place amongst the participants where the “fable is so constructed as to show that it is the letter and its diversion which governs their entries and roles”, or alluding to the etymology of the title: “if *it* be in sufferance, *they* shall endure the pain.” (p. 44) In his *seminar*, Lacan focuses chiefly upon the two scenes mapped out above. However, these are not the only scenes identifiable within the text, and indeed, one is able to locate this structure at several points within and across the text. One of the additional scenes (unnoticed by Lacan) is identified by Derrida in his critique of the *Seminar*. Derrida adds a further scene (and alludes to the potential

1 The contents of the letter are not unknown to the characters within the novel, and Barbara Johnson is right to draw attention to this fact in her essay “The Frame of Reference”, though, as I will argue in due course, the letter's contents, though known by the actors within this tale, are of little importance when we discover the motivation that generates the desire to obtain the letter.

existence of many others) to the two given by Lacan and, charging him with being too narrow in his view of Poe's text, claims that Lacan's analysis has an “effect of neutralizing exclusion (the 'narration' as commentary) that transforms the entire Seminar into an analysis fascinated by a content”, which ultimately leads him to “miss a scene. When it sees two... there are three. At least.” (1988b, p. 179). This is a just criticism, for Lacan does not acknowledge that in the course of his reading the letter has taken a further detour and escaped the confines of Poe's text.

Once Dupin has successfully 'purloined' the letter, he holds it and uses it to extract a large sum of money from the Prefect for its safe return (or perhaps *delivery* is a better term to use here). In this regard, he moves from the position of 'seeing' (hereafter referred to as (C)), where he initially perceived and obtained the letter, to occupy that of 'seeing that the other does not see' (B) that was previously held by the Minister. At this juncture, the prefect remains in the position of 'not seeing' (A), and Lacan enters the structure as the one who 'sees what is hidden' (C)². Dupin, in ensuring that the Prefect is at the end of his tether, and willing to forgo a portion of the large reward promised him for the letter's return, only reveals that he has obtained the letter when, aggrieved, the Prefect recounts: “I would *really* give fifty thousand francs to anyone who would aid me in the matter” (Poe, 2008c, p. 256). At this juncture, Dupin replaces the Minister in position (B) as seeing that the Prefect (A) does not see. However, it is here that Lacan enters the fray, is caught in the continuing 'sufferance' of the letter coming to occupy the third position (C) as seeing what Dupin sought to keep hidden.

Derrida quite rightly perceives Lacan's lack of recognition of his involvement in the game, but he can equally be charged with being drawn into the same process. In his eagerness to align psychoanalysis with the process of deduction employed by Dupin (a process encapsulated by Lacan in the game of even and odd utilized by Dupin as an illustration of his deductive method) Lacan takes ‘possession’ of the signifier from Dupin, effectively purloining the letter to be held against Dupin for his own purposes. Derrida here enters the fray at (C), for he perceives Lacan's blindness to other aspects of the tale, obsessed as he is with the power of the letter

2 This is not the only structure reducible to Lacan's triangular model. Another that he does not explicitly deal with involves the Minister moving to the first position (A) after the letter has initially been stolen, for, until he deigns to try to utilize the letter, the Minister it is implied is *unaware* that he no longer possesses the letter. However, I have not used this example here, for the relationship between the Prefect and Dupin, as it extends across the body of Poe's three stories involving him, is of capital importance.

and his desire to appropriate it for his own ends. It is in this manner, where the letter's power *lures the spectator* into its orbit, that the pattern of the triadic structure is able to repeat itself and extend its reach out of the text. The desire to possess the letter, to appropriate its power, generates a desire which, as we shall see in due course, leads us to acknowledge that, blind to the violence of their actions³, when “desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic.” (Larkin, 2003, p. 67)

Derrida charges Lacan with a certain blindness, a blindness to the limitations of his own method that excludes portions of the text, along with a complicity with the structure which he himself draws attention to. This, as we have said, is a 'fair cop', and yet, Derrida's perpetration of the same crime⁴ allows us to recognize something of note which is passed over in this intellectual conflict. Let us recall, a fact often overlooked within the secondary literature, that the stated aim of Lacan's seminar is to establish that Poe's work is an illustration of the truth of Freud's intuition of the nature of 'repetition automatism', as it reveals that “the *symbolic* takes hold in even the deepest recesses of the human organism” (Lacan, 2006a, p. 6). It is with this in mind that we return to the child's game of '*fort*' and '*da*'.

The Reassuring Image

Recalling our treatment of the child's game (Chapter 2.1), we will acknowledge that the departure of the mother is given as the traumatic event against which and around which the Ego constructs itself. One part of the tale however was not considered, and only appears as a footnote to the main narrative of Freud's tale, that being the interaction of the child and the mirror: “He had discovered his reflection in a full length mirror which did not quite reach the ground, so that by crouching down he could make his mirror image ‘gone’” (Freud, 2001b, p. 15n). This occurrence is given to us in a footnote to the main body of the text, and is not developed further by Freud in the main body of his argument. Yet, it is particularly relevant when we consider what this interaction with the mirror entails (Freud's recounting of the incident suggests that it occurred after the first

³ It is the violence of reading identified by Felman and touched upon at the close of the previous chapter. Such a violent reading is carried out by Dupin, Lacan and Derrida successively when they each seek to further demystify that which they perceived as insufficiently divined by their precursor.

⁴ Barbara Johnson identifies this when she states; “Derrida, by filling in what *Lacan* left blank is repeating the same gesture of blank-filling for which he criticizes Lacan” and “Therefore it is all the more noticeable that Derrida's own reading of Lacan's text repeats the crimes of which he accuses it.” (1988, p. 218)

appearance of the game) with its echoes of the ‘fort’ and ‘da’ of the game this child was so fond of. Lacan directs our gaze accordingly:

The important point is that this form situates the agency known as the Ego, prior to its social determination, in a *fictional* direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical synthesis by which he must resolve, as I, his *discordance* with his own reality. (Lacan, 2006b, p. 76)

We will recall that the originary trauma against which the Ego constructs itself in Freud’s schema is repressed by the Ego in an attempt to master and thus nullify its traumatic impact. In the process by which Freud’s Ego constructs itself, the traumatic event is repressed through the successive establishment and solidification of the Ego whereby it enforces its own forgetfulness as to the origins from which it arises. This repression however is precarious, and one can conjecture with Lacan that the repetition of the ‘fort’ and ‘da’ – uttered by the fledgling Ego – at the ‘mirror’ stage aptly illustrates what Freud proposes as the origin of the compulsion to repeat. As we saw in Chapter 2.1, the Ego that forgets (represses) its traumatic origins establishes within this dynamic a *fictive* image of its own self, fictive in that the illusory mastery that it has promised itself over its own trauma is never complete, and the play of the child in front of the mirror serves to further reinforce the imaginary wholeness of the self by aligning this mastery with the unified image of the body. By identifying the Ego with its own image, the Ego’s *manipulation* of its body reinforces the ever increasing sense of security and control that the fledgling ‘I’ has over its own destiny, arising as it has from “a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality”, and ultimately culminating in “the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure” (Lacan, 2006b, p. 78).

Through the identification with its own image, the Ego is firmly married to itself, elevated to the level of the *imaginary* where this image-inary unity of self invokes an illusory sense of self-mastery that the Ego carries with it; indeed, it is this imaginary unity of self which is constitutive of the Ego itself. Now, recognizing that this imaginary unity is built upon the suppression/repression of the traumatic splitting of itself from itself, and how the process of externalization results in an ‘objectification’ of the repressed trauma, we are at this stage better placed to see the way in which Lacan’s ‘signifier’ maintains a dynamic of desire which isolates desire and its genesis within the imaginary subject.

Hiding in plain sight, and stealing by sleight of hand: these are the two maneuvers which accompany the second (B) and third (C) positions within Lacan's triadic structure. The first (A) position has blindness as its distinctive feature, and the work of stealing and hiding (B) seeks respectively to take advantage of this inability to see and avoid the repercussions should the first position discover the hidden letter. In the first or 'primal' scene, the Queen conceals the letter by turning it face up so as to conceal it from the King. This simple ruse succeeds in its aim, hiding it from him who, should he discover it, will cause the full force of law to descend upon the Queen. However, in her concealment, with her attention fixed upon the King, she leaves herself open to a secondary, unprepared for threat; that of the sly Minister. In the 'second' scene, we see the Minister perform the same movements that we witnessed the Queen carry out when she held the letter. He, in order to maintain his position of power as the controller of the letter's destiny (for it is the letter's *potential* to be used that provides it with such momentous import), hides the letter simply by turning it inside out and replacing the original address and seal with his own. Again, despite successfully fooling the Prefect and his officers, he does not fool Dupin who, promptly, and with as much gall as the Minister before him, extracts the letter right from under his nose. The analogies between these scenes and the 'mirror' stage are here plain to see, for the letter is ultimately seductive owing to the potential for power (or the threat of destruction) that it holds, a promise that entails that should one control the letter, the holder would be in a position of heightened mastery of his environment. The letter is coveted for this potential power that it holds, which, when faced with another who holds it, ensures that they have more self-mastery (more resources at their disposal) than the one who lacks and therefore covets it. The desire to possess the letter is thus seen as the desire to increase the mastery of the one who wishes to possess it, recognizing the lack of control that they have over their situation when it is in the clutches of another. Interestingly, and in a direct parallel to both the child's game and the subsequent play with the mirror, once the letter is in one's control (thus nullifying its potential to cause the possessor further trauma) it is swiftly hidden from view (repressed) and that person then, like the Minister, carries on outwardly as *if there were no letter at all*. This is the key to understanding Lacan's interpretation of the tale, and Felman succinctly summarizes it for us as follows:

In much the same way as the repressed *returns* in *symptom*, which is its repetitive symbolic substitute, the purloined letter ceaselessly returns in the tale – as a signifier of the repressed – through its repetitive displacements and replacements. (1988, p. 146)

We can utilize this insight and apply the structure identified in the first and second scene to others seen both throughout the novel and within the critical literature which grows from it. We can identify the scene involving the Prefect, Dupin and Lacan, along with that of Dupin, Lacan and Derrida; the ‘scene’ as perceived by Lacan is repeating itself successively through the text and eventually outside the text with each successive re-reading of the reading of the text. The position of analysis, that is, the position (C) is the place in which the *reader* (be they Dupin, the Minister, Lacan or Derrida) occupies and obtains insight *into* and *over* the preceding position (B). When this position is occupied by Lacan, it is a position of insight where he, much like Dupin and the Minister before him, is able to make his claims for the truth of the triadic structure by dint of his ability to perceive clearly “what must be hidden.” (Lacan, 2006a, p. 10), and from which he claims he was able to have “deciphered Dupin’s true strategy.” (Lacan, 2006a, p. 30) However, it is at this stage that Derrida levels another of his criticisms of Lacan’s method, claiming that his focus upon what is “recounted in the account”, that is, the content of the novella, is to the detriment of “the scene of writing.” (1988b, p. 179) He tells us:

The seminar’s interest in the agency of the signifier in its letter seizes upon this agency to the extent that it constitutes precisely, on the first approach, the exemplary content, the meaning, the written of Poe’s fiction, as opposed to its writing, its signifier and its narrating form. (p. 179)

Lacan is charged with blindness (one might say critical obtuseness or poor scholarship), being seemingly ignorant of the other factors at play within and across the text. A kinship exists between Lacan under Derrida’s gaze and the Minister under Dupin’s. Dupin is able to take advantage of the position that the Minister finds himself in due to the fact that he is *not looking*, or perhaps, focusing too narrowly on those aspects he perceives to be a threat to his continued holding of the letter, and as such, leaves himself open to attack from an obtuse angle. Similarly, in being charged with being overly concerned with content – a concern that Derrida links to the limitations of Lacan’s method – we can tease out the similarities between the two situations. In Derrida’s critique we see a Lacan who sees that the other does not see, whilst remaining ignorant of the gaze that sees what it hides. What Lacan hides, indeed perhaps represses, are the aspects of Poe’s text (the position of the narrator and Poe’s work as a ‘scene of writing’) that threatens to destabilize the theoretical structure he has mapped out in his Seminar. Lacan has in this manner been drawn into the orbit of the signifier to take the position (C), where he previously situated the analyst-Dupin, seemingly able to observe the shortcomings of the one who preceded him. Interestingly, this potential *pull of the signifier*, which draws along the actors within the novella, in turn affects Lacan (not without a tinge of irony), and also seems to be infecting Derrida.

Henry James, in the New York preface to his *Turn of the Screw*, made the following comment; “I need scarcely add after this that it is a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught” (James, 2000, pp. XXXII-III) and it would be fair to say that this is a comment that could equally be applied to Poe’s work, given the extensive debate that was instigated by Lacan’s seminar. What is most striking about Poe’s work and its ensuing critical re/interpretation is that it evinces an undeniable *affect* on those it touches, an affect that itself structurally mirrors that of the movement of the letter within the text itself. Felman, in her *On Reading Poetry*, alludes to this when she contends that: “it is overwhelmingly obvious in a case like Poe’s, that the discourse of literary history itself points to some unconscious determinations that structure it but of which it is not aware” (1988, p. 154). The critical conflict that surrounds this text is for Felman symptomatic of the poetic effect, where the drive to dominate the truth of the text through its repeated interpretations becomes a “deadly struggle” with the conscious need to master the text continually undermined by the unconscious undertow of the poetic object. “Poetry”, she tells us, “has to do with what can be neither resisted nor escaped” (p. 154), and acknowledging this, we should perhaps adopt a more cautious approach, one sensitive to the dislocating power of poetry, an approach which seeks “not necessarily to recognize a *known*, to find an answer, but also, and perhaps more challenging, to locate an *unknown*, to find a question.” (p. 153)⁵

Jealousy and Envy

Critical interpretations such as those of Lacan, Derrida or indeed Dupin are undertaken with a focus upon the need to clarify the text, to identify its truth or the process by which it displaces truth. They focus upon trying

⁵ This line of argument leads to the same concerns as raised by Meno: “How will you look for it Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?” (Plato, 2002, p. 70) Following this, Socrates, insisting that he is “not teaching the boy anything” (p. 73), proceeds to illustrate how the slave arrives at understanding through a process of recollection. What such a critique fails to understand is that the cautious approach Felman wishes us to take with poetry is an approach that seeks not to answer that which the slave already *knows*, but to approach the work with a mind aware of the potential critical pitfall of doing so. Such an approach would approach a text to let the potential ambiguity *affect* the reader and allow for a critical evaluation of this ambiguous point without insisting upon its reconciliation with some ultimate truth.

to identify the *known* within or about the text, to dominate the letter and dominate the other which epitomizes what Hollier terms a “discourse in control” (1992, p. 23). Such a focus leaves those concerned blind to one important factor of this work which defines the trajectory of the signifying chain (Lacan) and is the undercurrent which pulls along the critical interpretations. Rivalry here will be our guide, and it will be by tracing the disquieting, unsettling effect of the poetically ambiguous letter - a letter whose possession promises great power and tempts those who see it as ripe for the picking – that we will be able to see the unveiling of a double mediation (Girard) that defines not only the content of Poe’s work, but also that of the ensuing critical debate.

Why – it did seem not altogether right to leave the interior blank – that would have been insulting. D-, at Vienna once, did me an evil turn. (Poe, 2008c, p. 265)

To begin, let us re-examine Poe’s work to root out rivalry as it functions as part of the content of the text. In addition to his extraction of the monies from the Prefect, Dupin’s actions are motivated further by his acting “as a partisan” (p. 265) on behalf of the ‘Queen’. Further to this, we can glean an eagerness in his actions to revenge himself upon the Minister for some wrong carried out in a previous encounter. He places the oft discussed quote (a quote that itself hints at their similarity, or perhaps, identity and which was unnecessary in that it did not further the aim of returning the letter to its rightful owner through its inscription) upon the fake letter substituted for the original. By placing his signature, we see that for Dupin it is not enough to have outwitted his adversary, but in fact he must go further and rub his foe’s nose in his defeat, leaving him in no doubt as to who was responsible for his downfall.

Jealousy, envy and retribution pervade the ‘Purloined Letter’, and it is this which will allow us to flesh out this tale and explain how the movement of the signifier, the letter, comes to interact with the characters, defining their actions and their preoccupations. The key here will be the notion of Mediated Desire⁶, and particularly those insights of Girard into the relationship between the model and the subject, defined as it is for him through the double movement of rivalry and admiration. This will be in stark contrast to Lacan who places the stress in his observation of the inter-subjective movement on the signifier. For Girard, the letter as signifier would fade from its central position, it instead being the mediator that becomes the focus of this structure. Lacan tells

⁶ Girard uses several different words to denote his conception of desire including, among others; metaphysical, mediated, triangular and mimetic.

us:

Such is the signifier's answer, beyond all significations: "You believe you are taking action when I am the one making you stir at the bidding of the bonds with which I weave your desires. Thus do the latter grow in strength and multiply in objects, bringing you back to the fragmentation of your rent childhood. That will be your feast until the return of the stone guest who I shall be for you since you call me forth." (Lacan, 2006a, p. 29)

Lacan establishes and places the desiring locus of the subject relative to the position of the letter as signifier. It is a position which itself betrays a *repetition* of the originary formative movement of the 'mirror stage' that for him generates the image-inary subject. However, despite side-stepping the scientifically dubious grounding that Freud gives repetition (where he seeks to place this originating stage within some biological imperative - *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), Lacan is able to recognize the importance within the Freudian structure of the imaginary, illusory nature of the unified subject. For those familiar with Girard's work, the signifier's challenge to the subject echoes the description that he gives to the work of the mediator upon the subject, where this model rouses desire within the subject, and as a result defines the identity of the subject for which it is a model. However, despite these similarities, Girard takes issue with the rooting of this dynamic within the obscure realm of the unconscious. He tells us that psychoanalytic readings "succumb to familial fetishism" which search "exclusively in a distant past or in the depths of some unconscious for the cause of neurosis" (1988, p. 55) Instead, he feels that this same dynamic is able to be explained sufficiently by the identification of the mediator as the generator of desire, rather than the resulting action being caused by the irritation of a signifier reverberating since childhood. What is key to his analysis of mediated desire, and what as we will see in due course is applicable to Poe's case, is the desire for (and promise of) power resulting from possession of the letter.

Within, preceding and following the text of the 'Purloined Letter', jealousy or admiration of the Other defines the trajectory that the letter takes. At a given point, whether it be in Lacan's first or second scene, or indeed in any of the following 'scenes' that constitute the critical discourse, we can identify the rivalry at play that defines the inter-subjective structure, a rivalry which defines the participant's entry into the scene prior to their engagement with the letter. I do not wish to take issue with Lacan's insistence upon a structure which defines the content of the work, and yet, I do wish to contend that it is not the signifier itself which defines the participant's position within these structures, for as it will become clear, the participants are defined prior to

the intrusion of the signifier and, more importantly, the signifier as desired object is no more than an *excuse* for the actions that are carried out in its name.

The importance Lacan gives the signifier results in him mistaking the letter for the cause that generates this structure, giving as he does the letter the primary position in generating desire. However, through a re-evaluation of the dynamic we can see that the letter's entry into it is defined in advance. Rather than the letter as signifier being of prime importance, it is instead the Other as model in whom we will find the source of the desire to possess this letter. This Other who is in *possession* of the letter, who generates desire, is hidden within Lacan's analysis by dint of its focus upon the letter for, mistakenly, the person who seeks to *purloin* the letter, sees only this object and not the model that designates it as such. Girard notes here: "In the 'normal' stages of mimetic desire, the object is already designated by the model, but this model stays in the shadows, *the object remains the principal pole of affectivity and desiring activity.*" (1988, p. 53) Lacan here could with good reason concede much ground to the Girardian notion that it is the Other that defines the letter's entry and movement within the tale, and yet, a fundamental difference exists between the two, one which potentially undermines Lacan's insistence upon the letter's course being a repetition of the foundational mirror stage which defines the signifier and its repetitive movements. Lacan reminds us that the signifier serves to bring back 'the fragmentation of your rent childhood' and that its source can be located squarely within the subject which grapples with it. The signifier and its movements are grounded (indeed caused by) the subject themselves for, as Lacan reminds us: 'I shall be for you since you call me forth.' A direct genealogical line is thus posited by Lacan which traces the signifier back from the current dynamic which determines its trajectory to its genesis within the traumatic childhood formed in the mirror stage. In such a manner the subject is at the mercy of themselves as signifier for, whether conscious of the 'true' nature of the object-signifier or not it nevertheless retains that thread which ties it to the burgeoning subject in the mirror stage. The mechanisms which bring the letter into the grasp of a particular person allow for the transference of spontaneous desires and traumas onto the letter and its subsequent transformation from a piece of paper covered with words into the ambiguous signifier of Lacan's analysis.

Within such an analysis the other actors within Poe's tale fade into the background through the stress that is placed upon the letter as signifier. This blindness to the Other can be viewed as an inherited prejudice that gives primacy to an interpretation which favors the autonomy of individual desire; the signifier and the movement it dictates rely upon the subject's relation to itself, it being the signifier of *their* subjectivity, and it is this which lends the letter the ambiguity it holds. This contrasts sharply with the Girardian model which would seek to explain the ambiguous nature of the letter by dint of the fact that what is seemingly the locus of the tale (the letter) is in fact not that at all. In such a conception, the illusion of autonomy that grounds the narrative of subjectivity (as we saw in Hegel and Nietzsche) is not questioned by the subject, who believes in the autonomy of their own desires and choices. What we will find by re-examining both the content of the text and the dynamic that determines the critical literature is that the letter, be it the letter within the text, or the text itself when we move outside of it, becomes secondary to the subject who is in 'possession' of it. Firstly, let us examine two scenes within the text, beginning with Lacan's 'primal' scene.

The Queen has received a letter, one which, should it become known, threatens her position of confidence with the King. Concealing the letter from him by turning it face up, she does not fool the canny Minister who spies the letter and steals it away. The Queen seeks to conceal it from the King (or whoever he is; all we are told is that both of these are Royal personages) for it threatens her position with him. The Queen's relationship to the King ensures, we can presume, a certain level of prestige and power afforded to her by his faith in her. It is through the King that the Queen gains her power, and by his leave that she maintains it. The Minister steals the letter primarily with the aim of establishing a hold over the Queen thus ensuring that he would by proxy be able to exert an influence upon the King through forcing her hand⁷. Without this threat to the established power the letter would not be enticing in the slightest, and the Minister would not have sought to obtain it.

The motive that we can read into the Minister's actions is that he is envious of the Queen's position of authority,

⁷ Whilst we are not told explicitly that this woman of Royal lineage is indeed the Queen, we can infer that by the fact that vast sums are spent in ensuring its safe return, that she holds some great power or influence with the court that is threatened by the letter's content.

and that his behavior betrays his wish to elevate his own amount of power to the level of the Queen, that is, to effectively become the Queen. The Queen is his model here, and through her the King, and it is envy that drives the Minister to seek out some means of redressing the balance of power by reversing the hierarchy that they currently inhabit. By taking the letter he is effectively able to take her place as regards her influence over the King, with the desire to supplant her in this way revealing the ambivalent attitude he shows towards her. Girard notes on this ambivalence: “The person who hates first, hates himself for the secret admiration concealed by his hatred” (1980, p. 11). When we view the relationship between the participants in such a way – for it is difficult to agree with Lacan that the signifier defines the inter-subjective relationships fully – the importance that it placed upon the signifier fades, where instead of the object-signifier generating the desire for its possession, it is the model who reveals their desire for the object that generates the desire in the Other. The Queen’s attempts to conceal the letter invest it with the promise that it holds some key to her power and, spying this, the Minister covets this object which the Queen desires to keep to herself so badly. One feels that within this situation, had there not been this letter, there would have arisen some other opportunity - or excuse - whereby the Minister could have, or would have, attempted to take the place of the Queen (either by having her deposed of her position, or as in the text, by controlling her actions). Girard reminds us of the arbitrary nature of the designated object when he tells us “This power (of the object) he confers elsewhere, on a second object, on a new desire. The Hero goes through his existence, from desire to desire, as one crosses a stream, jumping from one slippery stone to another.” (1980, p. 89)⁸

The nature of the *glances* that the characters successively exchange through the course of the story serve to reinforce the implication of a mediated rivalry at play within its structure, where (in contrast to Lacan’s conclusion) the possessors of the letter take upon themselves characteristics of the former possessor, namely a

⁸ This is echoed by Lacan but, despite this similarity which recognizes that the actors within the tale will make arbitrary decisions as to what generates the desire, it is important again to stress that this type of object choice (effectively that *any* object will do) differs between Lacan and Girard. For Lacan as the individual is struggling with their own traumatic origins the arbitrary choice betrays a belief that the imaginary self clings to (that *they* are dictating the choices they make, *not* the signifier). For Girard it is the Other which, as model, defines the choices for the subject, but which the subject ‘ignores’ wishing instead to believe in their own spontaneity of desire. The contrast, as said previously, is that the Lacanian analysis roots this ‘false’ object choice within the subject’s relation to itself (the signifier) which maintains the closed genealogy (even if the subject is unaware of the signifiers influence it nevertheless influences the subjects *own* desire) which Girard is working to contest.

directed gaze that leaves them blind to the gaze of the unseen, unexpected observer. The very desire to take hold of the letter is evocative of what Girard notes when he states “every hero expects his being to be radically changed by the act of possession” (1980, p. 53), it being of course a letter which promises to give “its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable.” (Poe, 2008c, p. 250) The letter is immensely *seductive*, drawing people to it, not by dint of what the letter contains – and on this point Lacan is correct – but instead by what possession of the letter promises the bearer. What this letter promises is an increased level of power, of mastery, in relation to the model of that desire, a notion reinforced when we recall that whosoever is in possession of the letter has something that the person in the first position previously had and lost, at which point the person in the third position, once perceiving that the model has something that they do not, succumbs to the desire to possess it.

Each of the letter’s bearers has their rival (in some cases more than one), and the interplay of these rivalries influences the course that the letter shall take. We can trace many rivalries at play within and across the text. We can acknowledge the Minister’s desire to depose the Queen, Dupin’s need to revenge himself upon the Minister for that slight in Vienna, and the long standing rivalry between the Prefect and Dupin. This rivalry itself stretches from the ‘Rue Morgue’ where Dupin, in solving that case, defeated the Prefect “in his own castle” (Poe, 2008a, p. 122), and again, in solving the ‘Mystery of Marie Rogêt’, he received the reward “punctually, although with *reluctance*” (Poe, 2008b, p. 191) through to their final encounter, where “thunderstruck”, the Prefect, after “several pauses and vacant stares” is given the letter - less 50,000 Francs of course - “in a perfect agony of joy” (Poe, 2008c, p. 256) Each of the characters in this way has a pre-existing orientation to the other, and the letter itself becomes in this light little more than a pretext which is attached to the already existent rivalries being played out. When we recognize that the letter forms the pretext for a character’s introduction into the dynamic, once the subject and mediator are close to conflict, we see how the letter slides out of view: “When the mimetic mechanism of the subject tends to turn from the designated object towards the rival designating the object, *the object fades away.*” (Girard, 1988, p. 53)

Mediated Rivalry

The revered object has come close; it seems within reach of the hand; only one obstacle remains between subject and object – the mediator himself. *The closer the mediator comes, the more feverish the action becomes.* (Girard, 1980, p. 85)

The work of René Girard is focused upon the dynamic of ‘mediated desire’, formulated most eloquently in his seminal *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, and is a notion that underpins the entirety of his work. Girard systematically explores the works of Stendhal, Proust, Dostoyevsky and Flaubert, tracing the workings of desire and the role of the mediator within their novels. The mediator, or mediation in general, is the “generator” of desire which (in contrast to psychoanalytic conceptions which root desire within the unconscious), Girard believes to be “the simplest possible.” (1980, pp. 172-3) Rather than proximity to the object defining the subject and their relationship to desire, instead Girard seeks to undermine the primacy of the object in the subject/object relationship by introducing the third term – the mediator. By an extensive analysis of the role of the mediator within ‘novelistic literature’, he claims that consideration of this third term reveals that “the impulse towards the object is ultimately an impulse towards the mediator” (p. 10). Without considering the role of the mediator, we are unable to overcome the “myth of personal mastery” (p. 44) which is our legacy from the enlightenment, and which we can see traces of in the thought of Hegel and Nietzsche, as well as in the stated aim of psychoanalysis (through the drive to eradicate or master neurosis). Should we choose however to acknowledge the defining role that the mediator plays within the genesis of desire, and thus of subjectivity, Girard would have us recognize that “in reality no one is spontaneous.” (p. 206)

Girard is proposing here a socialized Identity akin to that which we saw in the analysis of Hegel (Chapter 1.2) and indeed, similarities do exist between the two. Chiefly, this involves a shared recognition of the primacy of desire as the foundation of Identity, and initially, without further explication, it could be difficult to tease the two apart. We will recall that for Hegel, man’s subjectivity is formed through the restriction of desire in the face of the other, and as this restriction already had taken place at the point of recognition, Identity is revealed as a relation between subjects reliant upon each other for the formation of each other’s Identity. In the reading of Hegel proposed in this work, one could argue that the myth of the self-sufficiency of a person’s

Identity is undermined by the very recognition of the absolute relation to the Other that is the cornerstone of Hegel's conception of subjectivity. Such an absolute relation, one in which it would not be right to consider a subject in isolation, would allow us to draw the same conclusion as that made by Girard, namely, that the 'myth of self-sufficiency', of the autonomous man, is proven false by the very relational nature of this self-same identity. Reliant upon the Other for its very constitution and maintenance, the Hegelian subject as master of his own destiny is undermined (indeed, the very dialectic which Hegel proposes involves the removal of this notion of Mastery as a pre-requisite to the establishment of subjectivity) and within this model, the 'spontaneity' of the subject is challenged by a recognition of the intertwined destiny of the I and Other. However, within the mythology of the subject that Hegel creates, prior to the establishment of the subject proper the proto-subject is one that is defined by its desire to establish without question its own certainty of self. Prior to the acquiescence of the I to the Other (and vice-versa) the 'subject' is defined by its *own* desire, a desire that originates from the negative relation of the I to the world⁹.

Girard avoids discussing the origin of the desiring self in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. The tendency to trace the origins of desire, through either its reduction to a murky, traumatized unconscious, or as the first grasping of a self-certain Identity would be considered by Girard as only so many ruses by which we reinforce the romantic 'myth' of personal autonomy. By identifying the strange workings of desire with the mysterious pre-history of the self or the machinations of a relatively dim unconscious, we inevitably avoid confronting the mediator's presence by locating the unknown of desire within another unknown, albeit one that is ultimately *mine*. Now, we will see presently how uprooting desire from its foundations in a mythologized self has parallels in the work of Bataille, but it is important to recognize that Girard, again like Bataille (and Hegel and Nietzsche before him), did not seek to sever the tie that binds desire and Identity. Indeed, Girard too sees desire as constitutive of the subject, since it is through it that the subject's identity is formed. Girard's subject, like Hegel's, is one that is formed negatively in relation to what it is not; however, the distinction here rests not on the primacy of the subject faced with the not that is the object of its perception as found in the

⁹ It is this issue that we drew attention to in the previous chapter. We saw how in the character of Eponine the Hegelian conception, reliant as it is on the basis of the self-certain individual, was insufficient to explain her actions following Robert's 'collapse'.

Phenomenology, but instead rests the subject encountering another subject. This distinction is further teased out when we recognize that the Hegelian subject is engaged in the life/death struggle which characterizes his dialectic, and whilst this aspect of conflict carries over into Girard's work, he stresses the dual aspect of the Other, not solely as competitor, but also as one to be admired and copied. If we are ignorant of the role that the mediator plays in the generation of desire, then Girard points us towards the tendency, when an object is seemingly not enough to engender the actions around it, to seek to find the motivation located within the desiring subject (thus ignoring the role of the mediator). He tells us; "when the 'nature' of the object inspiring passion is not sufficient to account for the desire, one must turn to the impassioned subject. Either his 'psychology' is examined or his 'liberty' invoked." (1980, p. 2)

Returning to Poe's work, we can see evidence of this tendency within the *Seminar* where Lacan, by aligning the letter with the signifier (arising from the traumatic 'birth' of the subject), is able to overcome its ambiguity by reducing the generation of desire caused by the letter to the particular moment of Trauma. In order to account for the excessive labors that are undertaken to obtain, conceal and return the letter, Lacan, by equating the particular letter with the general signifier, reinforces the subject/object model of desire by tracing back what Girard calls the "simple straight line which joins subject and object" (1980, p. 2). This effectively reduces the presence and influence of the mediator within the text by sidestepping any influence that they might have had in instilling the desire for the letter in the mediated subject, a sidestepping which reinforces Derrida's claim with regard to the partially blind approach which Lacan takes to the text. If we accept the role that the mediator plays within the text - and we have seen how key the role of rivalry is in this respect - then we are in a position to extend this acknowledgment to the critical literature. In her analysis of Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*, Felman establishes that the central ambiguity of the text is in direct contrast with the uncritical approach to the hinterland of theory which frames the debate, namely Freud, and particularly his conception of repression: "James's critics curiously enough, all held *Freud* responsible for their disagreement: 'Freud' is indeed believed to be the cause and is referred to as the demarcation line of their polemical divergence" (2003, p. 161)

In this debate, we find Freud functioning as mediator, setting the terms by which the object is approached.

Freud and his thought function as either the mediator-model or mediator-rival for the opposing camps, whereby he becomes the third presence in respect to whom the text is read either 'for' or 'against'. What is at stake is not so much the truth of James' work (despite the lengths to which the critics go to make such a claim), but the validity of the Freudian claim to be able to approach and interpret literature. The central ambiguity of James' work, indeed, its *intentional ambiguity* serves only to heighten the tension between the parties, and the actual object (the work itself), as an ambiguous trap, fades from view in the shadow of the mediator. We find parallels between the ambiguity central to James' work and Poe's 'Purloined Letter', where the letter, which for the reader is ambiguous (as we are the only ones *not* to know its content), is put to use by those who seek to venerate or violate their mediator. When Felman talks of those 'unconscious determinations' which define the debate, we should cast our nets wider, and recognize that, lurking in the background, "the mediator is there, above that line, radiating toward both the subject and object" (Girard, 1980, p. 2) and that both within the text and in the ensuing interpretations, we can see that it is mediated desire which ensures that character and critic alike are "imprisoned with their contemporaries." (p. 3)

James' work, as he himself attests, is a work which traps those who approach it. The ambiguity of the novella begs for a Truth to be established (is the Governess mad or are the ghosts real? Is the child evil or possessed?), and yet frustratingly, there is no definitive answer to be found within the text. This Truth is applied to (read into) the text, for or against an Other. Similarly, the truth of Poe's text, whilst being sought in, on or around the text, is fought out upon the plains of psychoanalysis. What is at stake, much as in the James debate, is the validity of the psychoanalytic method of interpreting literary works (particularly prominent in Derrida's critique¹⁰), and the legitimacy of the discipline's method as a whole.

We have acknowledged how the characters within Poe's tale are defined in a two-fold manner by their mediators. Their orientation (gaze) is directed towards the letter by their mediator, and the actions which follow this directing of gaze are similarly determined not by the letter itself, but by the mediator with which

¹⁰ It is worth noting that another of Derrida's critiques of Freud centres on the narrative interpretation he creates around the now well-worn 'Child's Game' which, as we have acknowledged, informs the terms of the Lacanian interpretation of Poe's work.

they are engaged at a given point in the drama¹¹. We have found further evidence of this mediation at play by dint of the fact that the letter as desired object ‘fades from view’ once it is successfully obtained from the rival for, once vanquished, another rival or object is found which re-directs the subject’s attention. Specifically, this can be seen in the fluid transfer of rivalry from Dupin and the Minister, to Dupin and the Prefect (where the pre-existing rivalries between them have been noted) where we can recognize the letter’s role as a pretext which enters into an already pre-existing dynamic, a dynamic which evokes a veritable web of mediation. Such a recognition of overlapping and interweaving webs of mediation further allows us to take account of Derrida’s critique of Lacan’s insistence on the triangular ‘scenes’. By shifting attention away from the letter to the interplay of rivals, we can allow for the fluid dynamic required by Girard’s conception and account for the multiple ‘scenes’ that Derrida alludes to that strain against the restrictions that Lacan places on it with his rigid subject/signifier structure.

Poe’s work operates both on an intra and extra-textual level and manifests one potential dynamic of mediated desire¹². By utilizing the ambiguity of the letter Poe is able to highlight the primacy of the mediator-rival by “multiplying surfaces on different planes” (Girard, 1980, p. 146) which generates desire for the letter and evokes the ridiculous one-upmanship that characterizes the actions of the actors within the tale. The ambiguity of the letter, an ambiguity that serves to attract us, concurrently acts to deflect the gaze of the desiring subject away from that which generates that very desire – namely the dynamic of mediated rivalry. This ambiguity seeps out of the text and towards those who approach it either as reader or critic, all of whom seek to demystify the object and reveal its ‘Truth’. By desiring the object so much, we model our desire to grasp the Truth of Poe’s tale after the fashion of his characters. Such desire is exacerbated by the unknown qualities that define the letter, qualities which cause the letter as Truth to become immensely seductive.

¹¹ This is seen in Dupin’s desire to leave his trace upon the facsimile and his desire to extract 50,000 Francs from the Prefect, actions which seems incongruous with the equation of the letter with the signifier, leaving the blind-spot of revenge unexamined.

¹² It is noted that the structure of Mediated Desire is not a strict structure as found in Lacan’s *Seminar*; that and alternative structural permutations, such as will be seen when we return to Bataille’s *L’Abbe C* are possible. Girard notes: “The triangle is a model of a sort, or rather a whole family of models. But these models are not ‘mechanical’ like those of Claude Levi-Strauss. They always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations.” (1980, pp. 2-3)

It is this seduction by the unknown that opens us to the disorienting affect, the ‘poetic affect’ (Felman) of Poe’s work, and allows it to take root. Dupin knows how to obtain the letter; he knows how it was concealed and what was inside it. The elaboration of his deductive method serves only to heighten the tension that surrounds the letter. We know all about the letter save one thing, what was inside. Dupin’s powers of deduction are unparalleled (it is owing to this that the Prefect grudgingly comes to seek his assistance in the first place), and it is these very powers of deduction which seduce Lacan into aligning his own (psycho)analytic method with that of Dupin. Therein lies the source of the “permanent displacement” that Felman alludes to; this displacement that is the *affect* of Poe’s work is a result of an intended ambiguity investing the letter, in tension with the clarity of the deductive method that permeates the rest of the work. By presenting a general aura of ambiguity as regards certain aspects and contrasting it with the clarity of exposition and deduction which precedes the letter’s return, Poe is able to create an affectivity which draws in those who read the text and, seeking to appropriate the methods of the mediator, opens them to the touch of the text which promises so much, indeed, clarifies so much, but leaves what is most seductive (the apparent Truth that the letter contains) so very much in the dark. It is a tension that extends out of the tale and across the ‘Dupin trilogy’, such as in the strange circumstance which led to Dupin losing most – but not all – of his inheritance, the unnamed book which drew the Narrator and Dupin together in the first instance, or the vague allusions to the affront in Vienna.

The process of interpretation determines heterogeneous elements (be they the blind spot of Lacan’s analysis identified by Derrida or the place of rivalry within Poe’s work that can be perceived through the lens of the Girardian method) delineates the terms by which a text will be approached and understood. The ambiguity at the heart of the novella lends itself well to interpretation, as we are able to fashion its shape after our own prejudices and utilize its lack of determinacy to support our conclusions. Given its indeterminate character, it retains the possibility of multiple readings and its very malleability allows it to fulfill whichever task it is employed to do. french notes:

Nevertheless, from within this world, this side, as it were, of the cut, the hole is constructed as a space, which can be occupied, and given a number of different figures, according to the reading one adopts. (1999, p. 126)

However, given its adaptability to multiple readings, ambiguity also retains a threatening character, as the ease

of use which makes it so seductive to the interpreter also means it always retain a dimension which could exceed (as heterogeneous), and thus undermine, the reading it was employed to support. This plurality of meaning reveals a certain arbitrariness in the process interpretation and ensures that it is continually displaced:

The text, its reading, are split. What is overcome, split, is the moral unity that society demands of every human product... in the text of pleasure, the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural. (Barthes, 1975, p. 31)

The Affect of Collapse

Let us return to Bataille. In the previous chapter we saw how the collapse of Robert at the altar ushered in the disintegration not just of *sense* within the novel but also, in the scene on the bed with Eponine sobbing, the potential difficulty in interpreting the event. We found that the tension and conflicting emotions that Eponine exhibits in this passage did not sit well with either the Hegelian or Freudian model, and that her reaction was inconsistent with what we would expect from such a conception of human behavior. What is common to both methods of interpretation is an assumed integrity between Eponine and her desires, that is, that her desires are definitively her own. The Hegelian model, as we acknowledged, would fall short in this case as the removal or collapse of the opposing Other (Robert) in the face of the master (Eponine) would fail to give rise to such a collapse of self-certainty as discerned in her behavior. Similarly, whilst the Freudian approach allows us to grapple more readily with the intricacies of her behavior, it still falls short of being able to account for the dissolution that she feels. Both methods of interpretation have at base the assumption that Eponine's actions are rooted in a desire which is very much her own, either as that of a self-certain master, or (supported by reference to the transference and displacements) of a young woman grappling to control her unconscious in the face of the traumatic memory of her former lover. These models of behavior we can contrast with that proposed by Girard where, owing to the mediated nature of desire (and thus Identity), we are able to account for the displacements and transferences that constitute the characters' interrelations, along with the collapse at the altar and the scene on the bed.

Ultimately, his refusal to recognize the existence of Eponine exacerbated her desire for me, or mine for her; that was, no doubt, what made our relationship endure. (Bataille, 1988a, p. 55)

Robert was known as a particularly pious priest, and yet, as was seen atop the church tower, he struggled to control the very sexuality that he sought to suppress. When Eponine started to 'sleep around as much as she

could', Robert 'pretended that he no longer knew her'. His turn to the priesthood reeks of being a desperate move by an "affronted consciousness", the reaction of a spurned lover who, as Girard notes, chooses "their political, philosophical and religious ideas to fit their hatred" (1980, p. 158). Robert's attitude towards Eponine is, much like hers towards him, one which is characterized by ambivalence. If we agree with the premise that his turn to the priesthood is one that is made by a wounded animal seeking to sublimate his feelings of hurt at her previous behavior¹³, then the repeated and increasingly feverish rejections of her advances become problematic. For if he wanted no more than to be re-united with Eponine, if indeed that was the motivating desire behind his turn to religion, then what accounts for his continual refusal to indulge in what he truly wants?

When the mother refuses her son a kiss she is already playing the double role characteristic of internal mediation: she is both the instigator of desire and a relentless guardian forbidding its fulfillment. (Girard, 1980, p. 35)

He can only hope to draw the desires of his beloved towards himself by feigning indifference; but he can hide his desire only by suppressing everything that is real and concrete in his sexual drive. (Girard, 1980, pp. 159-60)

The betrayal that constitutes the point of trauma within the narrative is shot through with double mediation. In her turn away from Robert, Eponine becomes like a mother weaning her baby, who necessarily distances herself from the child, forbidding the continuance of previous behavior, while concurrently exacerbating the very desire to continue with this practice in the child. Robert (if his turn to the church is directly related to his wish to be with Eponine) plays the reverse role by totally rejecting his sexuality and portrays himself as 'indifferent' to Eponine, which in turn exacerbates her desire to possess him. Robert's desire to be indifferent, to pretend that she does not exist, can be traced back to the desire to draw Eponine to him, to refuse her access and thus make himself taboo, that is, more desirable. Each player's desire is directly influenced by the actions of the other; Eponine's actions, her fervent desire to debase Robert, generates a matching desire in him for his own body that results in the asexual position that he struggles to maintain.

As soon as the subject reveals his desire for possession the mediator copies that desire. He will desire his own body; in other words, he will accord it such value that to yield possession would appear scandalous to him. (Girard, 1980, p. 159)

The feverish interrelation and escalating tension between the pair (and also of Charles as the doubled-Robert) evokes the nature of mediated desire as mapped out by Girard, where Robert and Eponine successively feed

¹³ The reasons for his complete rejection of sexuality as a method of externalising the source of trauma (Eponine's betrayal) have been explored previously

off and into each other's desire. This dynamic serves to define their Identity, for the link between desire and identity remains consistent within the Girardian model, yet importantly we can see that the desires themselves, such as Eponine's fervent desire to destroy Robert and his flight into asceticism, are generated within the actions and desires of the other. This self-referential looping of causes, where one feeds off and in reaction to the other, removes the grounding that is given with a theory of behavior which gives primacy to the autonomous individual. Without this potential anchor, things begin to spiral out of control. The sight of Eponine's bare bottom on top of the tower causes Robert to get an erection. She taunts him by sending his brother to him: "Tonight, at nine o'clock, Eponine will be in her room. You will join her there, but she won't tolerate the least bit of hesitation. She'll be undressed, and you won't have to speak to her" (Bataille, 1988a, p. 59). Robert becomes successively more fragile, ever closer to the point of collapse, whilst Eponine becomes more determined and frantic in her pursuit of him. Charles is also not immune to the influence of double mediation, for his 'perfect identity' with Robert and his role as Eponine's "most ardent lover" (p. 60) means he oscillates between the opposing poles of his twin and his lover, making him one moment her emissary against his brother, and then, when 'switching sides' against Eponine, he is accused of the "height of perfidy" (p. 63) by her. All three are caught up in what Girard defines as the "whirlwind of increasing velocity and narrowing circumference" (1980, p. 249) that characterizes double mediation, where despite the fact that each is "diminished through the fault of the other, and we each inevitably felt that the other, being the cause of that diminution, was hostile" (Bataille, 1988a, p. 63), they are nevertheless drawn closer together to the ultimate confrontation at the altar.

Without the locus of an 'autonomous' free self that stabilizes the participants, without a foundation to which they can cling to weather the 'whirlwind', the possibility of the collapse of one of the participants raises the specter of disaster. During the course of the altar-cation, we discover that Robert's character, his piety and actions were really only a 'masquerade' and this unveiling reveals the mediated element of their relationship. The narrator tells us that following the scandal at the altar "I can see now that, without that ridiculous farce, we would have continued to be mindlessly dependent on each other", recognizing as he does that the contrary dispositions they previously held betrayed "the similarity, not the contrast between our characters", and that it was this similarity which led them to "express opinions that were incompatible and which were most likely to

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disappoint and irritate the other person.” (Bataille, 1988a, p. 77) Thus we are able to draw attention to two factors at work in Bataille’s novel, and it is these factors that generate the ambiguity of Eponine’s dissolution. The first is the link between a relational, mediated identity and self-consciousness, brought into stark contrast by this novel¹⁴, and the second, complementing the first, is that if the illusory foundation of self-consciousness – the image-inary self of the Freudian or Lacanian Ego – is undermined then this leads to a dissolution of the certainty of self.

Girard notes that, should the mediator fail, or should the object be obtained, then (as we saw in our analysis of Poe’s work) the mediated subject will simply *slide* to another: “the disillusioned hero can let his former mediator point out another object for him, or he can change mediators” (1980, p. 89). This ‘sliding’ from one object or mediator to another would allow for the lack of reality (of the illusory nature of the spontaneous subject) to be hidden, brushed aside as it is by the sliding from one mediator to another. Such is one of the byways through which mediated subjectivity is able to maintain its illusion of mastery, those “new romantic lies destined to prolong the Promethean dreams to which the modern world desperately clings.” (1980, p. 258) In Bataille’s work, the web of mediation builds with each successive revolution down the spiral, the trio move closer and closer and, caught as they are, their “ontological sickness grows more and more serious” (Girard, 1980, p. 279), the tension escalates and the delirious activity results in all else fading into the background. In the scene at the altar, this tension has reached such a fever-pitch that despite occurring in an “enormous church” (Bataille, 1988a, p. 72) and despite the presence of others, the overwhelming feeling is given that only three are really present, Robert, Charles and Eponine.

The dramatic revelation that was Robert’s collapse proves that the identities that all have constructed are only so many masks, each having built their desires through the other, where the revelation of the *real* masquerade, coupled with the peak of intensity that the mediation has brought them to, irrupts into the narrative. By

¹⁴ We also recall that from both Hegel and Nietzsche Bataille inherited the notion of self-consciousness as a socialised identity, both with the stifling Hegelian absolute relation and the Nietzschean critique of the ‘poverty’ of this self-consciousness.

focusing on Eponine as we have done, we can now perceive the duality in her dissolution. Anguish at the revelation of Robert's 'sham' is combined with the recognition of the illusory nature of her own sense of self. This revelation is the end result of a non-deferred mediation, it being "the fragmentation and... complete disintegration of the subject." (Girard, 1980, p. 279) The collapse of Robert and the ensuing unveiling of the illusory nature of the self bring to the fore the "contradictions caused by internal mediation" (p. 279), and gives rise to the Janus like laugh that is "at the heart of excessive sensual pleasure and makes it a source of pain" (Bataille, 1988a, p. 114). This is the heart of the ambiguity in Eponine's laugh, this contested illusion that is the 'poetic affect' within Bataille's work, and forms the central tension that is his 'whole human being':

Everything that had just happened was amazingly simple. I knew that either my sufferings or Robert's affectations were a game... I ceased to distinguish between a simplicity that amazed me and the awareness of a vast deception – a prodigious, ingenious deception. It would be hard for me today to give the meaning of the word, but I know that it had the universe as its object and that there wasn't anything anywhere that was any different... I surrendered to sleep: it was the only way I could endure what was happening to me. But I immediately became convinced that the 'deception' was eluding me. And, while I couldn't resign myself to that universal deception, I was not about to let it get away! This is an awkward way to say it (the preceding is not a good account of what I felt) but, as I alternated between sleep and a revelation I couldn't accept, I found consolation... If I were to say now that death is my consolation I would be going too far, at least in the following sense: there was, in that imperceptible shift, a sudden revelation: as long as I simply remember, the revelation remains; but as soon as I write!... (Bataille, 1988a, pp. 114-5)

Epilogue

The Possessed

The reasons for writing a book can be traced back to a desire to modify the relations that exist between a man and his fellow creatures. The extant relations are judged unacceptable and are perceived as an agonizing affliction. (Bataille, 1991, p. 11)

Through the course of this work we have explored the work of Bataille in relation to an idea. Two central notions have been under examination; firstly that the existing relation of individuals to themselves and each other is *insufficient* and secondly that the aim of writing is to enact a modification of those relations through the creation of a traumatic moment. What has become apparent is that the two are not distinct, separate issues, and in truth are intimately connected. We can identify that the ‘extant relations’ of which he speaks are those *restricted* identities of self-consciousness which Bataille’s writing seeks to wound through the mode of affecting trauma. We have also noted however that the very self-conscious relational Identity is formed in such a manner as to protect against and exclude this very trauma, a trauma that Bataille is able to align with those hidden, repressed or forgotten desires which threaten to destabilize restricted Identity, whether it be that of Hegel’s Absolute Knowledge, Freud’s Ego or Lacan’s Subject under the sway of the signifier.

Through examination of Bataille’s notions of Eroticism, Transgression and Taboo alongside analyses of Bataille’s literary works we have identified how the ‘insufficient’ Identity is driven by its desire to seek out those very activities that seek to undo the surety of self that it seeks to maintain. Through the characters of Marcelle and Eponine we have seen how conflict arises between the self that seeks to be master of its own destiny but is unable to understand (as in the case of Marcelle), or unaware (for Eponine) that their actions are throwing them headlong into traumatic episodes which their constructed selves seek to avoid at all costs. It is such a conflict of interest, between the subject that seeks to maintain itself and desire which drives to its destabilization which creates this state of ‘agonizing affliction’, an open space of ambiguity laced with “an empty, mobile, unpredictable extreme” (Barthes, 1975, p. 52). The desire to maintain the distinction of restricted Identity (that the I is autonomous and unique) is at odds with the desire of the self to incorporate all that it is not into this distinct Identity; to be everything but at the same time remain distinct is the conflict that is the agonized ‘whole human being’. This conflict is as much Bataille’s as it is the readers, he is not (or not only) distancing himself from his readership to teach them a truth to which he is privy and we are not, but instead seeks to create through the effect of trauma a moment of intense communication, a visceral, fleshy

communication between himself and the world. It is this moment of trauma that he sees as being able to undo the barriers that are erected between restricted individuals, if only momentarily, and which through externalization (either that of the self as in Freud or through a forgetting of the transgression which generates the taboo) seeks to neuter the power of those moments which produce this unraveling. Within the contested ‘coincidences’ in his *Story of the Eye*, Bataille, evoking the moment of Trauma as the opening of a wound through which communication can flow, tells us:

That utterance, which in a split second annihilated the demoralizing effects of a strict upbringing, left me with a steady obligation, unconscious and unwilling; the necessity of finding an equivalent to that sentence in any situation I happen to be in. (2001a, p. 73)

The mad ravings of a blind, disease riddled father lacerate the young Bataille and show as limited, restricted and poor the Identity of the child tied to this man and the ‘strict upbringing’ he received from him and his mother. The screams resulting from syphilitic delirium rip through and reveal the death of the God-father of stability. His cries of “Let me know when you are done fucking my wife!” (p. 73) in turn sullies the God-mother for she too is base, bodily and human. As the progeny of these two all too human individuals, these statements shatter any illusions of grandeur that we can imagine the young boy held of himself, bringing his burgeoning consciousness crashing down into the mud. It is here in the mud that a moment of communication occurs. Between two or more individuals whose structured identities have been wounded, blood begins to flow and intermingle. Between the cracks of their prisons of consciousness they touch and, by breaking through the barrier of restriction and overcoming the protective mechanisms that keep them isolated (mechanisms which are employed to maintain themselves), a moment occurs, akin to lovers lost in embrace:

Two beings communicate with each other through their hidden rents. There is no communication more profound: two beings are lost in a convulsion that binds them together. But they only communicate when losing a part of themselves. Communication ties them together with wounds, where their unity and integrity dissipates in fever. (Bataille, 1985b, p. 250)

Nobody however can fuck indefinitely, nor can they bleed too much without risking death. Eventually the pendulum will swing, the moment will pass and the decline back into individuated consciousness will happen for exhaustion, the need to work and maintain oneself all “spring from inevitable decline.” (Bataille, 2004, p. 40) It is not however enough for Bataille to ‘explain’ or ‘illustrate’ this laceration – Bataille is more than Kilber’s “imaginative craftsman” (1974, p. 218) – and he must enact it; effect it between himself, the world and the reader. Owing to the protective mechanisms which seek to sublimate (Freud/Lacan) or defer (Girard) the moment of trauma, mere presentation, regardless of how “supremely” (Kilber, 1974, p. 218) it is carried

out is clearly insufficient. To merely describe would, like Nietzsche's madman¹, attract derision, appropriation and misunderstanding which, whilst not seeking to dismiss Bataille's insights, would fail to engage with what he is working towards.

We do not find Bataille with the madman in the marketplace, and although we can conjecture that he felt the Death of God no less keenly than that infamous herald of deicide, he takes another course of action that distinguishes his writing from the actions of the madman (as Richman attests: "The death of God is therefore coeval with access to the impossible... . But once it is dead, what will fill the void?" (1982, p. 71)). Instead, were we to look for Bataille within the pages of another we would instead find him in a small rented room, with an icon and a small rubber ball, living with a man who "rejects morality as such and is in favour of the latest principle of general destruction" (Dostoyevsky, 2004, p. 106). It is with a man whom Camus (providing a characterization that could equally have been about Bataille) described as "childish and irascible, passionate, methodical and sensitive. Of the Superman he has nothing but the logic and the obsession, whereas of man he has the whole catalogue" (2000, p. 97). We are talking here of course of Dostoyevsky's atheistic engineer Kirilov who, for the sake of man, kills himself.

Another Man's Sins

'Stavrogin, you're beautiful!' Verkovensky cried almost in ecstasy. 'Do you know that you are beautiful? What is so fine about you is that sometimes you don't know it. Oh, I've made a thorough study of you! I often watch you without you being aware of it. You're even simple-minded and naive – do you know that? You are, you are! I suppose you must be suffering, and suffering genuinely, too, because of your simple-mindedness. I love beauty. I am a nihilist, but I love beauty. Don't nihilists love beauty? The only thing they do not love is idols, but I love an idol. You are my idol! You don't insult anyone, and everyone hates you; you look on everyone as your equal, and everyone is afraid of you. That's good. No one will ever come up to you and slap you on the shoulder. You're an awful aristocrat. An aristocrat who goes in for democracy is irresistible. To sacrifice life – yours and another man's – is nothing to you. You're just the sort of man we need. (Dostoyevsky, 2004, p. 420)

One would be forgiven for thinking that within this treatment of Bataille's literature, that in him I have sought to found a "crown-prince" (p. 422) to be held up as an example whose teachings can help 'show us the way'

¹ We will recall how Nietzsche's madman, upon entering the marketplace was met with the following response: "Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter" (2001, p. 119)

(Kilber). This however is not the case and, despite the tendency to the contrary that pulls incessantly, I have no intention of making such a claim. Peter Verkovensky's desire to use (and abuse) Stavrogin, to set him up as a "pretender" (p. 422) who he sees as being that Archimedean "lever to lift up the earth" (p. 423), reminds us of Felman's warning against the tendency to find an answer 'for' a text. Just as Peter Verkovensky seeks to appropriate Stavrogin as the 'crown-prince' of his revolutionary movement, to read into Bataille's work the acme of transgressive literature solely as a liberating or subversive exercise will result in a failure to understand the object of our study. Verkovensky fails to read into Stavrogin's character a lack of desire to be party to his 'society's' plots, and instead seeks to shoehorn him into actions which support his own desires, desires which, despite his outward presentation, reveal that he is "a rogue, and not a Socialist." (p. 421) It is not however Verkovensky's Machiavellian plotting that is of chief concern to us here (although we will see that the eventual failure of his machinations has import for our discussion of Bataille's work), but instead it is through the character and actions of the engineer Kirilov that we will be able to find an analogy that allows us to view Bataille's paradoxical thought and the place of his traumatic literature.

One thing, though, does puzzle me: you want to build our bridge, and yet you say you're in favour of the principle of general destruction. *They won't let you build our bridge.* (p. 107)

Kirilov is a man who is presented to us as a paradox. His thoughts on the "latest principle" (p. 106) are in stark contrast to his occupation as an engineer. This paradox extends to his very mannerisms; he is able to engage someone with his "black, lusterless eyes" whilst simultaneously looking "kindly and affably." (p. 241) Such a description reminds us of Bataille whose obsessive thought is at odds with his life as a librarian, and who is surprised that other people could see his own laughter as "so bitter." (Bataille, 2001f, p. 73) However, the tie that binds the two is Kirilov's suicide, both the thought that founds it and the deed itself which sought to reveal "the secret of the deception." (Dostoyevsky, 2004, p. 126)

Camus contends in his *Myth of Sisyphus* that Kirilov's behaviour places him in good company (notably with Don Juan and Sisyphus himself) as paragons of rebellious virtue. He holds that Kirilov's decision to commit suicide (as a result of logical deduction) in order to free man from his chains, to create a 'man-god' in opposition to the 'god-man' of Christ, encapsulates the desire for rebellion in the face of a meaningless world. Indeed, a superficial reading which glosses over the act of Kirilov's suicide would give the reader that impression. To read Kirilov's Promethean philosophy (where he seeks to steal divinity from the gods) that

'justifies' his suicide divorced from the moment of its completion (and the effect that this has on others) is to misunderstand both the place of Kirilov as one of the 'devils' within the novel (as part of Dostoevsky's critique of atheistic revolutionary movements) and more importantly, to miss the link between the act of Kirilov's suicide and its relation to the standard bearers of the old order (Von Lembke, Stephan Verkovensky et al) and those of the new (Liputin, Peter Verkovensky etc.) Camus here is guilty of Felman's charge as he seeks to sublimate his version of Kirilov (the Kirilov he *wants* to read into the text) into his grander vision of the rebellion of man in the face of absurdity. Applying the model we encountered in the previous chapter, by ignoring the circumstances of Kirilov's suicide but appropriating other factors of his behavior which supports his thesis, we see Camus take the place of Peter Verkovensky (in a process reminiscent of the Prefect->Dupin->Lacan model) who himself sought to appropriate Kirilov's suicide to further the 'society's' aims:

'The idea has occurred to the society,' he went on, 'that I could be useful to them by committing suicide, and that when you get yourself in a mess here and the police are looking for those responsible for it, I should suddenly shoot myself, leaving a letter in which I'd take the blame for everything, so they wouldn't suspect you for a whole year.'

(...)

'Yes, but remember that you undertook to write your last letter with my help and that, on your arrival in Russia, you'd be at my – well, in a word, at my disposal; I mean, for that occasion only, of course. (Dostoyevsky, 2004, p. 377)

Kirilov is not concerned with the 'society's' aims (which are in truth only Peter Verkovensky's) nor with their desire to cover up their activities by using his suicide as cover. Kirilov is so assured of the power that his act of self-immolation contains that he is initially happy to agree to sign a suicide note which implicates him as the distributor of revolutionary pamphlets which would buy Peter time to flee to safety. His desire to kill himself is founded upon the belief that such an act will be so traumatic that upon its completion the impact will break the chains that bind man in servitude: "the only salvation for all is to prove this idea to everyone. Who will prove it? I! (...) I shall begin and end, and open the door. And I shall save." (p. 614)

The shot to the head that he foresees as showing others his new "terrible freedom" (p. 615) is evocative of the traumatic effect that Bataille sought to produce through his writing which comes as a result of that 'steady obligation' he felt to undermine the illusory stability of self. The gunshot which "will save mankind and will transform it physically" (p. 614) aligns with the trauma that is the expected result of Bataille's work (as identified by Crowley and his notion of the 'Tacky Touch'). Just as Kirilov sees within man a stifled "Self-Will" that is the "attribute" of his "divinity" (p. 615) which will be released by his suicide, so too have we

found within Bataille's obscene writings the desire to undo the binds of restricted, 'insufficient' consciousness through the introduction of the "demand for violent gratifications implied by social life" (Bataille, 1985d, p. 97). There is here a great hope – ultimately a false hope – that is bound up with Kirilov's desire to commit suicide. This hope is founded upon his belief that his action will transform the extant structures which he perceives as holding man back from realizing his potential. One can be forgiven for reading into Bataille's work a self-same desire where engagement with the bodily and base aspects of human existence would lead to the establishment of a new man, freed from the restrictions of an inherited Christian morality. However, to do so would be to fall back into the trap that caught Lacan (and catches Peter Verkovensky within Dostoyevsky's work) and we must remain mindful that while the drive towards the summit that typifies the erotic moment of communion is underway, the decline is from the outset inevitable, and indeed, to speak of this summit at all is "in reality, speaking in the name of the morality of decline." (Bataille, 2001f, p. 59) This trap of which we speak is to infuse Bataille's writing with the power to undo the 'insufficient' restricted subject without acknowledging the ultimate failure of this undertaking – particularly at the stage of trying to speak about it. Such a blindness, however, to the eventual failure of the attempt is not avoidable and, returning to Kirilov, at the moment of suicide we will see (unlike Camus it should be noted) the paradoxical mixture of possibility and failure that is contained within the moment where the trigger is pulled and trauma unleashed.

Kirilov, on the night of his death, is met in his lodgings by Peter Verkovensky who comes to ensure that he holds to his word and agrees to sign the note that implicates him in the recent occurrences within the province. Initially, upon hearing of the death of Shatov he refuses to honour his word and during a stand-off with Peter tells him that "I won't write that I killed Shatov and – I won't write anything now. There won't be any document!" (Dostoyevsky, 2004, p. 608). Such an outburst does not however catch Peter off-guard; he was expecting Kirilov to back out of his agreement to sign the dictated suicide note and perhaps the very idea of committing suicide itself: "I've foreseen everything, and I shan't go before I've blown your brains out with this revolver, as I did that swine Shatov's, if you get frightened and decide to put it off, damn you!" (p. 609) The argument between the two flows back and forth and eventually Kirilov is engaged in a soliloquy (in which he returns to the ideas he expounded earlier within the novel to Stavrogin), the effect of which is to work him up into a state of frenzy:

His face was unnaturally pale and his look unendurably melancholy. He was like a man in a high fever.

For a moment Peter thought that he would collapse.

‘Give me the pen!’ Kirilov cried unexpectedly in a sudden onrush of inspiration. ‘Dictate! I’ll sign everything. I’ll sign that I killed Shatov, too. Dictate while I’m amused. I’m not afraid of the thoughts of supercilious slaves! You’ll see for yourself that all that is secret will be made plain. And you’ll be crushed. I believe! I believe!’ (p. 615)

Kirilov is gripped with delirium by his idea, his anger with Peter and the vertiginous feelings that accompany his approaching suicide. He feels that despite Peter’s best efforts to appropriate his suicide for his own ends that the power of his act will ‘open the door’, will contain such a truth that will rip through the ruses and deceptions of ‘supercilious slaves’ and that what has been hidden (both the ‘devils’ plots and the revelation that will ‘save mankind’) will be brought into the light. He sees his impending demise as containing such power as to be able to violate the integrity of the edifices which maintain the ‘deception’ which he sees as being obliterated, along with his temple, by the bullet that will spiral out of the chamber of his revolver: “It makes no difference. *Deception will be killed*. Everyone who desires supreme freedom must dare to kill himself. *He who dares to kill himself has learnt the secret of the deception*.” (p. 126) His frenzy intensifies and he becomes intoxicated with the form of the final flourish that his signature upon the letter will take, initially wanting to draw “a face with the tongue out on the top”, but rejecting this in favour of dictating the anger of his “tormented spirit... with the tone!” (p. 615) He then writes the letter according to Peter’s specification subsequently deciding to add a postscript in French to his letter:

‘Wait, a little more. I’ll sign again in French, you know. “*de Kiriloff, gentilhomme russe et citoyen du monde*.” Ha, ha, ha!’ He burst out laughing. ‘No, no, no, Wait! I’ve found something better. Eureka! “*Gentilhomme séminariste russe et citoyen du monde civilise!*” That’s better than any – ’

He jumped up quickly from the sofa and suddenly snatched up his revolver from the window with a quick gesture, ran out with it to the other room and shut the door tightly behind him. Peter stood still thoughtfully looking at the door. (pp. 616-7)

Here we see Kirilov taken to the summit of ecstasy and spiraling into a manic episode where the power of his idea has carried him outside of himself, and out of the door. An uneasy silence follows Kirilov’s departure and Peter, with an observation that is reminiscent of Bataille’s comment that to start talking of the summit is to speak in the name of the decline, he notes: “If he does it now, he will shoot himself, *but if he starts thinking, nothing will come of it*” (p. 617) No shot comes however, and Peter flying into a “blind rage” (p. 619) puts down the suicide note that he was mulling over and follows Kirilov into the other room, to facilitate the final encounter. Entering the room he finds Kirilov in the corner in a “very curious attitude – rigid, erect, with his arms held stiffly at his sides, his head raised and pressed hard against the wall in the very corner, as though he wanted to hide and efface himself.” Things at this stage are suspended momentarily; Kirilov looks as if made

“of stone or of wax” (p. 619), the air is taut with suspense and Peter reaches out and grabs him by the shoulder:

Then something so horrible happened, and so quickly, too, *that Peter could never afterwards get a coherent picture of it*. As soon as he touched Kirilov, the latter quickly lowered his head and knocked the candle out of Peter’s hands... At the same moment he felt a terrible pain in the little finger of his left hand. He screamed, and all he could remember was that in his fury he had struck three resounding blows with his revolver on the head of Kirilov, who had bent down and bitten his finger. At last he tore his finger away and rushed headlong out of the house, groping his way in the dark. He was pursued by terrible shouts from the room...

(...)

As he ran into the entrance hall, he suddenly heard a loud shot. He stopped there in the darkness and stood thinking for five minutes. (p. 620)

There are here, both following Kirilov’s final moments and before the bullet which pierces his skull leaves the floor covered in “splashes of blood and brains” (p. 620), several salient issues which we must acknowledge. These issues will allow us to align Bataille’s traumatic literature with the death of the engineer by recognition of the tortured paradox that comes to the surface at this moment. Within the scene leading up to and including Kirilov’s suicide we find a stark illustration of various strands that we have identified previously in this work that show themselves as aspects of the irruption of traumatic eroticism. Recalling Eponine’s ambiguous dissolution following the revelation of Robert’s true nature, we see parallels between her desires to bring about his collapse and the ensuing effect that this has upon her, with the frightened Kirilov who, when literally backed into a corner, is unable to escape the oblivion in front of him that ultimately was of his own making. His faltering at this moment similarly reminds us of poor Marcelle who, after indulging in her carnal desires, imprisons herself in the wardrobe, unable to face what has ultimately come from within her. On the reverse side of this coin, we also can draw parallels between the ecstatic Kirilov who wants to poke fun by drawing a face ‘poking out its tongue’ at the top of his suicide note and Robert subtly pinching his brother Charles following his collapse at the altar. What we see within Kirilov’s behaviour is the ever increasing velocity as the subject collapses inwards, with the structure of reason, Identity and knowledge becoming destabilised in the face of the impending death of the individual. Death threatens and hangs over the integrity of his individuality, piercing that ‘protective shield’ (Freud) that was the logic that underpins his desire to commit suicide, leading him to recognise concurrently the ridiculousness and gravity of his actions. This moment of the summit of eroticism is acknowledged by Bataille:

On entering into nonknowledge, I know I erase the figures from the blackboard. But the obscurity that falls in this way isn’t that of annihilation, it is not even the “night when all the cows are black.” It is the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of the night. It is only slow death, death that it is possible to enjoy. And I am *learning*, slowly, that the death at work in me wasn’t missing only from my knowledge, but also from the depths of my joy. I learn this only in order to die. I know that without this annihilation already within my thought, my thought would be servile babble, and I will not know my ultimate thought as it is the

death of thought. I would not delight in my deliverance and I won't ever have dominated everything: I will delight in the moment of my freedom. And I will never know it! In order to know it, it would have been necessary for this joy, this fulguration of joy, not to be the death of my joy and of my thought. But one cannot conceive of the filth wherein I founder, the divine and voluptuous filth, *behind* all thought and everything of this world that raises thought, so that all representable horror is heavy with the possibility of my joy. The death of thought is the voluptuous orgy that prepares death, the festival held in the house of death. (2001d, p. 205)

It is this, the moment suspended in front of the void that threatens to 'erase the figures on the blackboard', that drives Kirilov into the dark room. His conviction that he is in fact God (and thus *all*) we can infer is shaken by the irresistible movement which Liberton attributes to the paradoxical desire that is at the root of Bataille's thought: "This abolition of exteriority is continuity: being without limits. To want to be all is to want to lose the limits of one's particularity, and at the same time to want to enclose all within the limit of one's particularity." (1995, p. 216) Kirilov is unable to maintain himself as the man who has the notion of becoming God with the requirement that he must kill himself to become that very God. Such an idea is an absurd one, a fact recognised by Kirilov himself when he states that this paradoxical idea is "an absurdity" (Dostoyevsky, 2004, p. 214), the ultimate destination of which is death. This paradox necessarily leads to the failure of the suicide, a failure that one can read into Kirilov's behaviour by dint of the fact that he swings wildly from anger to agitation and excitement up to the point of his composing the suicide note, contrasted with the specter that greets Peter upon entering the room. Recognising the ultimate failure of his attempt, we find Kirilov 'hiding' with his face taking on an 'unnatural' aspect. The recognition of this inevitable failure is one shared by Bataille, where the ascent to the summit is always followed by the descent into the morality of decline. This however does not preclude the importance that the act of trauma (in this case, Kirilov's suicide) has for the other actors within the drama, and if we recall the characters within Bataille's writings, we will recognise that the trauma that affects each individual draws in and wounds others around them, being as they are intimately "bound by what happened" (p. 621).

The revelation of Robert's masquerade as a priest and Marcelle's debasement binds the other characters together in a moment of *crime*, where the violation that accompanies and follows the traumatic moment breaches the boundaries of the stable, fictive selves (whether Eponine's 'authentic' sensuality or Marcelle's piety) and generates a moment of communication. This binding through crime is the express aim of Peter's request to Kirilov to sign his name to the atrocities he took no part in, along with his implication of others in his plot. Talking to his relation Erkel, Peter remarks that "Not one of them would betray us. Who will run the

risk of utter ruin unless he's lost his reason?" believing as he does that by their complicity in the crimes they would be bound to silence², to which Erkel replies, perhaps acknowledging the pressure that the successive moments of trauma (for Kirilov's suicide is only the final act in a series of increasingly tumultuous episodes) have built up, that "they will lose their reason" (p. 621)

Like the characters explored previously in Bataille's works, the 'Devils' within Dostoyevsky's work actively carry out actions which seek to bring about circumstances which, as time goes on, catch them within what Girard terms "a whirlwind of increasing velocity and narrowing circumference." (1980, p. 249) They are all aligned to that 'latest principle' of 'general destruction' and work to bring about its fruition. However, as becomes apparent, they are unprepared for the results of their machinations, and with pressure building to its 'boiling point', they, like Eponine and Marcelle, are torn asunder by the fallout. The ensuing reactions of each of the participants (some fold and go willingly to the police, some do not, some flee) are all carried out within an atmosphere of desperation. The final act of Kirilov's suicide, carried out to 'show others the way' ends in the inevitable failure of both his intended aim and that of the wider group. Kirilov's intensity of thought that led him to suicide leads him instead to be branded a 'madman', echoing the trajectory of the movement of thought from knowledge to nonknowledge, where the logical basis of his desire to die cohabits with Bataille's recognition; 'my ultimate thought as it is the death of thought.'

The gunshot that spilled 'blood and brains' across the floor of that dank room extends out beyond the confines of those four walls and signals the collapse of the revolutionaries' plot. He sought to free man from the chains that bind him but, instead, just as the decline is inevitable from the summit of suicide, he succeeded in nothing more than loosening the chains of dogma that bound those devils together. That single gunshot, a traumatic explosion of the structure, sends ripples emanating out from Kirilov's shattered temple and impacts all involved. They are indeed bound together as Peter foresaw but, it will not keep them quiet, nor will it succeed in freeing them as Kirilov hoped. Failure is inevitable from the outset here, just as aiming for the summit is bound to fail. This failure however does not mean that we cannot unintentionally reach a moment of

² It is interesting to note a biographical similarity between the thought of Peter here and the supposed plot by the Acephale group to murder one of their members, an act which sought to bind the group through a voluntary sacrifice. According to the myth that surrounds this group, a willing victim could be found, but no one would agree to commit the murder itself.

communication, but recognises that the communication that occurs, that lacerates those touched by it, will also be the one that binds them together in failure.

Communication is borne of this laceration; it cuts through the walls erected through fear, piety and exhaustion. Between the bleeding wounds the blood intermingles and the impossible flows, a momentary, inconsistent, ambiguous touch enjoins these partners in crime. 'We touched each other just now, you and I' and that is all that remains. A tacky residue of communion lingers unspoken and is unable to be removed; it remains to attest to the dissolution of self that occurred in the moment:

As I was staring at the void in front of me, a touch – immediately violent and excessive – joined me to that void. I saw that void and saw nothing, but it, the void, was embracing me. My body was tense. It contracted as if, by itself, it might've had to reduce itself to the expanse of a point. One lasting flash was going from this inner point, to the void. I was grimacing and laughing, lips wide apart, teeth naked. (Bataille, 1998, p. 99)

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