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THE IMPOSSIBLE THOUGHT OF GEORGES BATAILLE: A CONSCIOUSNESS THAT
LAUGHS AND CRIES

by

DREW M. WRIGHT

Under the Direction of Calvin Thomas, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis labors to unpack Georges Bataille's enigmatic statement, "to laugh is to think", treating this "impossible thought" as a paradigmatic expression of Bataille's self-characterized "philosophy of laughter." Overall, this thesis interrogates Bataille's "philosophy of laughter" as an attempt to stimulate an "awakening" of consciousness to the dissolution of consciousness. En route, this thesis argues that such an "awakening" evokes a privileged expression of the movement of "communication" around which Bataille's theoretical writing is structured, positing the "philosophy of laughter" as an effort to solder the movement of "communication" through the domain of epistemology itself.

INDEX WORDS: Bataille, laughter, philosophy of laughter, communication, nonknowledge, the impossible.

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LAUGHS AND CRIES

by

DREW M. WRIGHT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2017

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LAUGHS AND CRIES

by

DREW M. WRIGHT

Committee Chair: Calvin Thomas

Committee: Mark Noble

Paul Schmidt

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2017

DEDICATION

For Samuel, my ace

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | v |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS | vii |
| 1INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF LAUGHTER | |
| | 1 |
| 1.1 An Atheological Awakening | 1 |
| 1.2 On the Contagion of Subjectivity..... | 7 |
| 1.3 The Hybridity of Elementary Forms..... | 11 |
| 1.4 Tragic Reverberations | 15 |
| 2THE REPETITION OF INTIMATE NOISE | |
| | 18 |
| 2.1 The Impossible Divinity of Laughter..... | 18 |
| 2.2 Andronican Automutilation | 26 |
| 2.3 Enjoyment beyond the Pleasure Principle | 31 |
| 2.4 The Cruising Community | 39 |
| 3THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND THOUGHT | |
| | 44 |
| 3.1 The Obscure Intimacy of Consciousness..... | 44 |
| 3.2 Laughter’s Leap | 51 |
| 3.3 Bataille’s Summit | 58 |

| | |
|------------------|------------|
| 4 | CONCLUSION |
| | 64 |
| WORKS CITED..... | 70 |

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AA: *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*. (Hollier)
- AS I: *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I*. (Bataille)
- AS II: *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume II*. (Bataille)
- AS III: *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume III*. (Bataille)
- AFS: “Aphorisms for the ‘System.’” (Bataille)
- BEP: “Bataille, Experience and Practice.” (Kristeva)
- BT: *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. (Nietzsche)
- DL: *Desire in Language*. (Kristeva)
- DM: “The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille.” (Hollier)
- E: *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. (Bataille)
- G: *Guilty*. (Bataille)
- GB: *Georges Bataille*. (Kendall)
- HDS: “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice.” (Bataille)
- IE: *Inner Experience*. (Bataille)
- LE: *Literature and Evil*. (Bataille)
- ME: *Madame Edwarda*. (Bataille)
- MM: “Meditations of Method.” (Bataille)
- MS: “Molloy’s Silence.” (Bataille)
- NL: “Nietzsche’s Laughter.” (Bataille)

NLT: "Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears." (Bataille)

NR: "Nonknowledge and Rebellion." (Bataille)

ON: *On Nietzsche*. (Bataille)

S: "Sacrifice." (Bataille)

TE: *The Tears of Eros*. (Bataille)

TR: *Theory of Religion*. (Bataille)

VE: *Visions of Excess*. (Bataille)

WP: *The Will to Power*. (Nietzsche)

1 INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF LAUGHTER

All the universe is laughing at you.

—Jack Spicer, “The Unvert Manifesto” (1956)

1.1 An Atheological Awakening

In 1920, renegade surrealist and “paradoxicalist” philosopher of “nonknowledge,” Georges Bataille (1897–1962), then a student of medieval paleography and numismatics at the École de Chartes in Paris, traveled to London to conduct research for his thesis on *L’Ordre de chevalerie*, a thirteenth-century didactic poem which prescribed the chivalric decorum and habits of behavior appropriate for Christian knights (GB 23). Despite having been raised without any particular religious affinities, Bataille had been a practicing Roman Catholic since 1914. Bataille’s dalliance with Catholicism, however, his “faith” during these formative years, was driven more by “violent longings” than credulity, a fervor compelled by “a round of unseemly, vertiginous ideas . . . already full of anxieties, rigorous and crucifying,” rather than a resolve to accept the certainties of doctrinal assurances (GB 24-33; IE 34).

While in London, Bataille had the opportunity to meet renowned utilitarian philosopher, Henri Bergson, and in anticipation of the meeting, Bataille read Bergson’s 1900 treatise, *Laughter*. Bataille described this London rendezvous twenty years later as “*the occasion out of which laughter arose*” (IE 66, original emphasis). “[L]aughter was revelation,” Bataille insists in his recounting of the Bergson encounter in *Inner Experience* (1943), though this was not the sort of revelation which may be expected, nor one which Bataille himself could have foreseen, given his dogmatic inclinations at time (IE 66). Firstly, this laugh, though distinctly human, cannot be annexed into the discrete experience of any respective human subject: this laughter “belongs” to no one in particular, not even to Bataille. The “revelation” it “communicates” confirms no

“salvation” for the subject at the mercy of laughter. Rather, this revelatory laugh “opened up the depth of things,” “a roar of irreconciliation” exposing “the extreme limit of the ‘possible’” (IE 66; Borch-Jacobsen 148; IE 42). Laughter intuits the abrogation of the “profane” sphere of the discursive subject, abruptly abolishing all his metaphysical ideals and utilitarian pipedreams of eventual self-sufficiency. Rather than the providential “revelation” which would expectedly affirm, announce, or accompany the subject’s dogmatic deliverance unto an anticipated, presupposed “evasion of the impossible” (i.e., “salvation”), this reverberating revelation shipwrecks the whole horizon of human valuation, effectively relinquishing “revelation” of its holy baggage, having turned “salvation” into “the trampoline of the impossible” (NL 21-3).¹

This iridescent spell, in whose grasp Bataille would remain perennially caught for the next forty years of his obsessive intellectual life, was a “sudden revelation which revealed the relativity of everything” (Borch-Jacobson 148). Bataille avows that his unforeseen deliverance “into a kind of dive, which tended to be vertiginous, into the possibility of laughter” coincided with the alienation of his religious allegiances: “*at first I had laughed, upon emerging from a long Christian piety, my life having dissolved, with a spring-like bad faith, in laughter*” (NLT 139; IE 66, original emphasis). Elsewhere, Bataille maintains that “the first effect” that ensued from his having descended into “the sphere of laughter” was the swift ruin of the precise

¹ “The possible and the impossible are both in the world,” starts Bataille’s essay, “Nietzsche’s Laughter” (18). While “the possible,” in Bataille’s lexicon, refers to “organic life and its development,” “[t]he impossible is the final death, the necessity of destruction for existence” (18). In the context of specifically human reality and experience, the possible also describes the limits of acceptable human behavior and experience through its constitutive attachment to the discursive economy of subject and object, self and other. If this “discontinuity” between subject and object organizes the horizon of human “possibility,” one can imagine how adherence to a system of thought and/or belief that subscribes to a confidence or “truth” of the “possible” imposes a *moral* imperative to abide by the law laid down by reason and discourse. The “impossible,” on the other hand, indicates “the loss of self” (24). Moreover, the notion of “salvation,” or the will to save or be “saved,” “signifies the resolution to escape the impossible” (21). For should “God” truly exist, then truly nothing’s impossible: that is, there is no “impossible,” no “loss of self,” should such a guarantor of “being” truly exist. The “revelation” Bataille experiences in a burst of laughter is the revelation of the “impossible,” the revelation of an accursed arena of human experience in stark contradiction to any system of thought and/or belief that situates human “being” *solely* along the discursive, moral axis of “possibility.”

religious faith which “completely animated” him at the time: “[E]verything that the dogma brought me [was] carried away by a type of diffluvial flood that decomposed it” (NLT 140). Laughter was an *atheological awakening*: “Atheology,” Bataille explains, refers to “the science of the death or destruction of God (the science of the thing being destroyed inasmuch as it is a thing)” (AFS 167). This “science,” as Stuart Kendall observes, elides the objectivity constitutive to scientific inquiry, positing in its place “a science of immediacy,” a “science” that disavows the discursive “discontinuity” between subject and object on which the scientific method of identification, assimilation, and homogenization is wholeheartedly staked (“Editor’s Introduction” xxxviii). Thus, “atheology” is “a science against science, a philosophy against knowledge” (“Editor’s Introduction” xxxviii). A “science” or “system” that resists systematic determination, a system of de-systemization, “atheology” seeks to “create . . . the experience of the instant” by collapsing the externality posited by the mediating interventions of discourse, the subject slipping into the deleterious night of “nonknowledge,” into an unmediated, unmitigated *tête-à-tête* with death that disallows intermediaries between subject and object (TD 122). And yet, as Julia Kristeva explains, unlike Hegel, Bataille refrains from “leaving aside [the moment of immediacy] as an indeterminate nothing, like a simple negation of consciousness and of the presence of the subject,” but rather “he designates its concrete and material determinations” (BEP 254). Such an “awakening” to the materiality of immediacy, in effect, embraces a sudden exposure of consciousness to the death of consciousness, “a consciousness of the absence of consciousness” (NR 129).² Of course, such an “inner experience” cannot be sustained, nor does

² I have borrowed this usage of the term “awakening” from Denis Hollier’s “The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille.” Hollier distinguishes “the exercise of thought”—its habitual, discursive, “profane” mode of operation—from its “awakening.” Hollier’s analysis takes root in Bataille’s consistent association of reason and work (i.e., “the exercise of thought”) with utility and *servility*. Because reason *always* works in the service of utility, and because being useful means *servicing* some further end, some anticipated futurity outside *immediate* experience, reason constitutively reflects a *servility* to useful *means*. Reason, in other words, reflects a conservatism or docility, always conforming to the *work* of its own ideological apparatuses which tout the functional instrumentalization of human

it desire to sustain itself, even less to discipline or enlighten others, for the identificatory integrity of the subject who would presume to sustain it has been spent. Laughter is one among many such distinctly human “inner experiences,” “one among many effusions, one among many deliriums, one among many means to the impossible”—alongside erotic ecstasy, tears, art, sacrifice—that attests to immediacy as that which is “essential to experience” (Kendall, “Editor’s Introduction” xxxix; BEP 254).

In this thesis, I argue that the meteoric “intimacy” of atheological consciousness, of this highly contingent “awakening” of consciousness to the “sovereign instant” of its rifting, finds its privileged presentation and performance in Bataille’s meditations on the “lived experience” of laughter and, more specifically, in Bataille’s fervent efforts to engage this “lived experience” at the level of epistemology (AS III 202). Bataille famously self-characterized his own thought as a “philosophy of laughter,” a modality of thought which allegedly “never proceeds independently of [the] experience” of laughter (NLT cite). This “philosophy of laughter” receives perhaps its most confounding—and, no doubt, *laughable*—articulation in the blunt coincidence of laughter and thought evinced in a laconic aside Bataille delivers in “Meditations of Method”: “to laugh is to think” (MM 90). The *impossibility* of this daft little claim—again, the “impossible,” for Bataille, always indexes “the loss of self”—is glaringly conspicuous, as this claim presumes an

experience as the progressive, providential character of human “being”: “Work is only a means,” writes Bataille in *The Tears of Eros* (1964), and “the search for means is always, in the last instance, reasonable” (TE 19). For Hollier, “the exercise of thought” seeks reasonable, useful means in order to afford itself “a clarity which gives it the impression of mastery” (DM 59). Utility, as such, takes shape as a moral imperative: the exercise of thought, which upholds or *obeys* the law of reason in everything, envisions reasonable means as inherently “good,” and therefore, this “exercise” is bound by “the good toward which it gropes” (DM 59). The “awakening” of thought, on the other hand, runs counter to this routinizing activity because it implies the provocation of aberrant, “insubordinate” thoughts, those which the movement towards clarity and meaning skirt in order to posit a *morality* as thought’s condition of possibility. Thus, the “awakening” of thought “begins with the contradictory and paralyzing consciousness of evil, of something which suspends thought because it cannot be thought and willed at the same time” (DM 59). The awakening of thought, in other words, (re)introduces consciousness to a disquieting heterogeneity, which tends to resist being thought, effectively exposing this now “awakened” mind to what’s “beyond” the good and evil binary “which it would simultaneously bring out” (DM 60).

explicit simultaneity between thought and that capricious spasm that annuls its “exercise” (NL 18). And yet, Bataille’s impossible thought—“to laugh is to think”—insists upon a kind of turbulent awareness at the precise moment in which the temporal mediations and discursive limitations which dialectically divide experience into subject – object relations (and thus make self-consciousness possible) are sundered, at the moment in which “the exercise of thought” *bursts* into the flames of an inappropriable, acephalous experience. It insists upon an “awakening” to the “impossible” (“the loss of self”), to what’s unthinkable or unknowable about experience insofar as it lies beyond the boundaries of possibility circumscribed by dialectical discourse: it insists, in short, upon *an awakening to immediacy*. By peering philosophically (or “reflectively”) into the very “blind spot” of the philosophical gaze, Bataille’s “philosophy of laughter” explores the possibility of “awakening” to the death of consciousness *as we know it*, to the possibility of an “awakened” consciousness emerging in a movement of thought that annihilates it(self)—a consciousness which laughs and cries. Like Mallarmé’s master, or Eliot’s Phlebas, consciousness metamorphoses into something other than itself, “awakening” to the unlocatable whirlpool into which it drowns, consciousness itself becoming nothing if not the very vortex whose riptide floods consciousness with that excess of life which Bataille calls “lived experience” (or “intimate life”) (TR 46).³

³ “Intimacy,” writes Bataille, “is not expressed by a *thing* except on one condition: that this *thing* be essentially the opposite of a *thing*, the opposite of a product, of a commodity—a consumption and a sacrifice” (AS I 132, original emphasis). Intimacy refers precisely to that which “cannot be expressed discursively,” to the feverous domain of passionate heat, “the crucible where distinctions melt” (TR 50, 54). “Intimate life” comes forth in the violent consumption of the world of things, in the destruction of the world of industry and action, meaning and difference. It is a zone of experience that heaves with “the passion of an absence of individuality,” with that which is “not compatible with the positing of the separate individual” (TR 50-1). It is the scene of the scream of a wretch who spots the blade coming for his throat, a formless consumption of energy so immediate that the discontinuity between subject and object cannot be realized or supposed but only *dissolved* and, along with it, the lucid and distinct human order itself (i.e., “profane life”) (TR 50-1).

Bataille's "philosophy of laughter" evokes a necessarily "impossible" effort to transfigure epistemological activity into that incendiary "truth of the universe" which Bataille calls "nonproductive expenditure," an unlimited movement towards unrestrained *loss* epitomized by the solar brilliance whose luminosity interminably boils, void of the purposive presupposition of returns (DM 67). Expenditure (*qua* unending, unchecked loss) is the ungraspable singularity of experience which is radically irreconcilable with the tempering benevolence of reason, morality, and work. Denis Hollier explains, "[S]ince expenditure is ultimately the unthinkable *par excellence*, thought itself is the suspension of expenditure" (DM 67, original emphasis). The "philosophy of laughter," as such, measures up to an "impossible" attempt to conciliate the operation of thought with what this operation constitutively "suspends" and with what, in turn, ruins this operation. It thereby suggests a mode of "reflection" that shares a profound "intimacy" with what remains and, in a sense, *must remain*—"What is hidden in laughter must remain so"—unknown, unknowable, even *unthinkable* about human experience (IE 66). Indeed, in identifying the movement of thought with laughter's compulsive, irruptive bursting, Bataille situates thought at precisely the point of coincidence at which "the exercise of thought" jumps the dialectical rails on which it routinely rides. As such, the mode of "reflection" denoted by the designation "philosophy of laughter" amounts to an epistemological practice whose movement *reflects* (or seeks to reflect) its own ontological catastrophe, its own incessant dissolution into the unthinkable immediacy of experience. My central assertion in this thesis is thus that Bataille's "philosophy of laughter" evokes a privileged, albeit "impossible," effort to convert the acute affective alterity and unreserved explosiveness of "lived experience" into an epistemological condition.

1.2 On the Contagion of Subjectivity

Bataille laughs at Bergson—“this careful little man philosopher!”—for having “instrumentalized” laughter, turning it into a moral, sociological tool to be deployed for the purposes of adjusting the “mechanical inelasticity” of one’s fellow human, who either slips and falls or otherwise betrays some psychological or bodily breach in established modes of behavior (IE 66; Parvulescu 87; Bergson 16). Such perfunctory transgressions of the accepted order of things, for Bergson, indicate the possibility of potentially dangerous contradiction or crime. Anca Parvulescu explains of Bergson: “Laughter is a useful social gesture, to be used in the formation and reproduction of a group” (87). Laughter (*qua* this “social gesture”) secures a specific sociological, *moralistic* utility and purpose: laughter is the response of a necessarily closed and limited group, a “social gesture” implying a kind of “freemasonry,” whereby the group reinforces a stable identity by correcting the automated eccentricities of the falling other (Bergson 16-7; Parvulescu 4-5). Things could not be more different for Bataille: laughter, along with erotic ecstasy, wrecks the rational foundations and exclusionary operations by which we affirm a group identity. It is not the mechanical slippage of the other which would designate the potentially hazardous transgression in the laughable scenario. Rather, it is the burst of laughter itself which poses the threat to the repressive regularity of established order and civic life. “The *rire* [laughter],” writes Joseph Libertson, “interrupts the profane, conservative motivation of thought” (221). Laughter is “irreducibly opposed” to discourse, conservation, and work; it is “essentially non-conservative,” useless, prodigal, bastard—a privileged expression of what Bataille will call “unemployed negativity” (Parvulescu 81; G 111).

Paradoxically, a kind of “community” emerges from the epistemological wreckage, though a community not recognizable in any conventional sense of commonality (i.e., *de facto*

community). Rather, this community, which Jean-Luc Nancy calls “inoperable” and Maurice Blanchot “unavowable,” can perhaps best be understood as a community of *non-recognition*: “communication” occurs when the boundaries of personal identity are foregone, when all anticipation and hope “*dissolve into NOTHING*” (AS III 208, original emphasis). We “communicate” in the “sovereign moments” in which our discursive dexterity and its productive apparatuses *fold* to the “interrogation” of erotic silence or to the “contestations” erupting through purposeless, excessive outpourings of laughter: “lucidity made of incessant contestations itself, ultimately dissolving in laughter (in nonknowledge)” (G 91). This irrepressible “community,” wherein we experience the lacerating “communication” of “the moment of violent contact, when life slips from one person to another,” is a being-in-common defined by the dissolution of definitions (G 129). An inner violence or mutilation (of self) “communicates” the shared experience of human subjectivity’s profound finitude. Rather than *servicing* as a kind of disciplinary machinery bent on bending bumbling bystanders back into rank (à la Bergson), laughter (*qua* “communication”) “is criminal and suicidal”: “*All ‘communication’ participates in suicide, in crime*” (Lingis 122; ON 26, original emphasis). For laughter (*qua* “communication”) involves the *contagious* release or expenditure of untenable, untamable, *unusable* energies which imperil the porous procedures, projects, and performances by which we seek to affirm our claim to knowledge, self-identification, and self-sufficiency through the construction and reification of the group.

My interrogation of Bataille’s “philosophy of laughter” is rooted in Andrew Mitchell and Jason Winifree’s supposition that “the entire effort” of Bataillean thought is “dedicated” to the demonstration and delivery of “the obscure region [of experience] closed to phenomenology” designated by the term “communication” (1; G 212). This “accursed” arena of experience

corresponds precisely to that which is *incommunicable* with respect to articulated discourse insofar as it involves an experience of consumptive *contact* whose intensity and violence *rupture* the discursive homogeneity of the discrete subject whose differential isolation (*qua* “I”) guards the possibility of the articulable acquisition and exchange of material and conceptual commodities. Critics generally concur that “communication” and the “contagious subjectivity” (*subjectivité contagieuse*) of its nocturnal caress occupy an essential place in Bataillean thought; however, as Nidesh Latwoo accurately observes, spats abound apropos of the question of what kind of human subject “informs and underlies this thought” (73). I contend that the subject (in both senses of the word) of Bataillean thought cannot be dissociated from the heterogeneous subject *emergent* in the crucible of “communication.” Writing on the related subject of the matrix of transgression, Michel Foucault posits “a curious intersection of beings that *have no other life beyond this moment* where they totally exchange their beings” (34, my emphasis). More specifically, the subject of Bataillean thought is the subject caught in the “diffluvial flood” of laughter’s spell, a subject which, in bursting (into laughter) and therein becoming suddenly disengaged from the “profane” world of labor, reason, and discourse, is *nothing but* this oceanic torrent of lightness in whose high tide of consumption the subject is awash: “For the *subject* is consumption insofar as it is not tied down to work” (AS I 58, original emphasis). The Bataillean subject, as such, *is* the contagion of “communication,” and its essential epistemological gesture is to *fall* into the excess of laughter. Head thrown back and mouth irrepressibly agape, the subject of Bataille’s “impossible thought” is the *spitting image* of impropriety: a subject which is, in a sense, *nothing but* the sputtering opening of a mouth that *insists* on itself (i.e., its opening), a subject vehemently exposing its own excesses like the exuberant parting of lips exhibiting fluids, teeth, and tongue. The subject shaken in the spell of Bataillean thought would thus appear a

body bound by alterity, held together by a gesticulating choreography of fragments, an *unrecognizable* voice, full of sound and fury, acousmatically rupturing the soundscape while disfiguring the ordered austerity of the face, body and voice doubling over each other in rabid, ejaculatory waves that foam over the exorbitantly exposed buccal recesses, signifying nothing. “Without any doubt, one who laughs is himself laughable and, in the profound sense, is so more than his victim” (IE 97). And, indeed, the *spectacle* of Bataillean thought (*qua* “philosophy of laughter”), undoubtedly ridiculous and improper, even “ugly,” may seem to lack any trace of an affective threat (in accordance with the Aristotelian model of comedy): that is, this laughing subject (of Bataillean thought) ostensibly fails to arouse our more sympathetic sensibilities.

Bataille’s “philosophy of laughter,” no doubt, results in comedy: in order to accommodate the irreconcilable demands of epistemology and expenditure, this method of meditation would need to embrace a movement simultaneously limited and unlimited. This comic eventuality, however, is not a fate to which Bataille is blind: the inescapable *failure* that awaits such an intellectual practice cannot have eluded Bataille. In fact, it is precisely the *insufficiency* of Bataille’s “impossible thought”—the utter failure of Bataille’s articulated discourse to complete the task of authenticating the substance of what it claims—that energizes this epistemological caprice. It is through the constitutive inadequacy of the reasoned utterance to disclose “the impossible,” to bring “the loss of self” into discursive relief, that that which discourse fails to produce flashes before us: “*impossible, yet there it is*”—a remark not without its comic touch (AS III 206, original emphasis). “Now, to laugh and to be serious at the same time is impossible,” Bataille reminds us. “Laughter is lightness, and we miss it insofar as we cease to laugh at it” (S 73). That Bataille’s discourse on laughter fails, in this sense, reflects the *ontological insufficiency* of the labor of human thought to achieve a consummate state of

absolute realization. It is thus in its failure that Bataille's "impossible thought" *succeeds*, revealing (to us/us to) a moment "where life reaches an impossible limit" (ON 39): namely, when, perceiving this failure, *we laugh!*

1.3 The Hybridity of Elementary Forms

My argument, if I may rehearse once more, is that Bataille enriches the "lived experience" of laughter with a certain privilege in identifying it with the operation of his epistemology, a privilege which we can now characterize as a privileged affinity with the accursed experience eclipsed from the orbit of the dialectical gaze that Bataille calls "communication." As Latwo points out, Bataille identifies laughter as the "specific form of human interaction" and also as the "fundamental phenomenon of human interattraction" (qt. in Latwo 81). Laughter's singularity amongst a range of communicative experiences lies in the fact that unlike the many practices, experiences, and events, both ancient and modern, which embody the contagious circulation of "communication," laughter requires no prescribed, preemptive sociality. There need not be the bed of two (or more) consenting bodies, as in eroticism, nor need there be the staging of a spectacle—an allotted time and venue, as well as, at the very least, a victim, a cleaver, and an executioner—as in ritual sacrifice.⁴ The requisite

⁴ The "communication" experienced in the erotic embrace (viz., "compenetration" or "fusion"), for example, radiates from the accretion and intensification of two lovers' mutual *resistance* to "communication": erotic tension swells towards "the moment of violent contact," in which the two isolated lovers experience "a feeling of magical subversion" (of isolation), through the increasingly violent opposition each lover pits against this moment of fusion (G 129). This gesture of resistance corresponds precisely to the negative action (i.e., labor) by which the individual posits and maintains her isolation by opposing the excess and immediacy of death. Erotic fusion occurs the *moment* in which the intensity of contact, spurred by the growing ferocity of resistance, mutually overwhelms the boundaries of each lovers' discontinuous existence. The intrigue of each lover's respective will is reciprocally flooded by a contagion that exhausts it. Thus two fuse into a heterogeneous one through a delirium of requited lacerations, a coincidence of violent caresses in which each lover lacerates the "discontinuity" of the other and in which each is, thereby, lacerated: "The point at which the lovers meet is the delirium of lacerating and being lacerated" (G 142). But resistance is not exhausted entirely, or at least if it is, then fusion eventually devolves into inertia. For fusion "demands heterogeneity" and, therefore, refers only to the moment of *passage* ("the opposite of a state") wherein "two torrents mix together with a roar" (G 129).

mise-en-scène of sacrifice—and the trace of intent that such structuralizing stage-setting invariably entails—is precisely what is missing from the occasion of laughter’s burst(s).⁵ No necessary intentionality nor initiating realization of difference is required prior to the casting of laughter’s spell. In fact, laughter’s premier precondition is the absence of an anticipatory context. In *Inner Experience*, Bataille identifies laughter as a privileged expression of a sudden apperception of chance, relativity, and randomness:

Laughter arises from differences in level, from depressions suddenly provoked. If I pull the rug out from under . . . the sufficiency of a solemn figure is followed by the revelation of an ultimate insufficiency . . . I am made happy, no matter what, by failure experienced. (IE 89)

Laughter radiates from an unforeseen exposure to the relativity of “being,” an abrupt unmasking of finitude bespeaking the “failure” of “project” and of all our fear and loathing about the future. It is a cachinnating expression issuing from an uncalculated, contingent brush with the ontological *insufficiency* of “being” which lies “[a]t the basis of human life,” and from which “[m]an cannot, by any means, escape” (VE 172; IE 91). Laughing, I fall swiftly into an *unanticipated* suspension of the historical weight of self-consciousness, suddenly sprung from the expedience of self-intention. “Intention is abolished in laughter,” confirms Jean-Luc Nancy, “it explodes there, and the pieces into which it bursts are what laughter laughs—laughter, in which there is always more than one laugh” (“Laughter, Presence” 384). As Nancy’s articulation

⁵ Similar to the scenario of erotic fusion, the spectacle of sacrifice, through which an isolated being comes in self-irruptive contact with a “beyond” of being(s) via her encounter the death of the other, relies on a structuralizing performance of difference, emphasizing “discontinuity” in order that it may be erased. The spectator of sacrifice visually recognizes her “discontinuity,” for example, through the unambiguous hierarchy embodied in the image of the priest with blade in hand standing over the restrained victim. Caravaggio’s painting *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1603), which depicts the precise moment of the angel’s intervention in the biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, lays bare this initiating inequality constitutive to the drama of sacrifice by highlighting Abraham’s domination of Isaac as well as Isaac’s helplessness and terror. In ritual practice, both the sacrificer and the spectators obtain a heightened awareness of their separate existence by virtue of their recognition of the victim as “other.” Sacrifice demands this specific, predetermined social context, for the ritual “communication of anguish” (*qua* sacrifice) ultimately issues from an annulment of the difference it performatively establishes: “[T]here is no sacrifice unless the one performing it identifies, in the end, with the victim. Unless this distance is *sacrificed* as well” (AA 166, original emphasis).

intimates, the constitutive absence of self-conscious intention out of which laughter bursts lends itself to an *immanent repetition* (of bursts)—“there is always more than one laugh”—from which, in the final analysis, a burst of laughter is indissociable.

This immanent repetition suggests that laughter is a “contagious contagion”: the “contagion”—i.e., the “unforeseen transparency from one to the other” that flares up between two beings who share a laugh “as if the same laugh gave rise to a single inner torrent”—becomes “contagious” in the sense that this wave of hilarity gives shape to a laughable *spectacle* whereby the entangled spontaneity of two beings’ shared tide of joy may catch in its contagion a cluster of other beings who witness it (G 130; AS III 242). Thus Bataille writes, “If there is a *contagious contagion*, it is because an element of the spectacle is of the same nature as its repercussion” (G 130, original emphasis). In this way, laughter sonorously hybridizes the two “elementary forms” of “communication” that Bataille identifies in erotic “fusion” (i.e., “[c]ommunication linking *two* beings”) and in the “spectacle” of sacrifice (i.e., “[c]ommunication, through death, with a beyond”): “The passage of the laughter from two people to several people (or one person) introduces into the interior of the realm of laughter the difference that generally separates the realm of eroticism and that of sacrifice” (G 129, original emphasis). Fusion, which finds its characteristic embodiment in eroticism, occurs only in the *moment* in which the feature of *passage* is in play between two hitherto discontinuous beings, referring to “the moment when the waters mix together, the slipping of one into the other,” viz., the moment in which the “discontinuity” of both beings is mutually violated: “Fusion introduces *another* existence in me (it introduces this *other* in me as *mine*, and at the same time as *other*)” (G 129, original emphases). Latwo extrapolates from this passage “an affective locus of *both* dissolution *and* emergence of the subject, of being *oneself* while becoming someone *other*” (81, original

emphasis). In the evental instant of a burst of laughter shared between two beings, these beings undergo such an acute moment of mutually paradoxical self-strangeness, in which the “birth” of the heterogeneous “subject” emergent in “communication” effectively coincides with the “death” of the two isolated, discursive subjects. And this “impossible” coincidence of “birth” and “death” may thus constitute a *spectacle* for another being who either sees or hears these two beings fall into the carnival disorder of laughter. Touched by the contagion, this other would then “participate in [this] emotion from *inside* [herself],” and this other’s fall into laughter reciprocates a spectacle that renews the laughers’ laughter and evokes the “compenetration” of them all (qt. in Latwo 75). This “sovereign” dynamism of a burst of laughter is reducible to its obliteration of anticipatory intent and theoretically suggests that laughter carries the orgiastic potential to carry on *ad infinitum*.

Indeed, much like other “sovereign moments” of communicative experience, most notably sacrifice and eroticism, the “lived experience” of laughter entails the subject’s slippage from the known back into the unknown (G 129). And yet, only in laughter does “consciousness intervene just as suddenly,” an observation Pierre Klossowski extrapolates from what I have identified as Bataille’s “impossible thought”: “to laugh is to think” (153). It is as though the recognition of difference, which prefaces and makes possible both sacrifice and erotic effusion, were condensed into the same movement—the same *moment*—as the erasure of difference through which “communication” occurs. If we take Klossowski’s observation one step further, taking into account the immanent repetition of laughter’s burst(s) to which the lack of anticipatory intent gives rise, we might posit that insofar as consciousness “intervenes just as suddenly” as laughter bursts it into peals and pieces, laughter also bursts consciousness *back into* pieces “just as suddenly” as consciousness intervenes—or had intervened—upon its (initial)

risible rupture. As such, laughter is a cachinnating dance into and out of a dislocation of the mediated system of dialectical consciousness that determines the habitual, historical register of self-consciousness (*qua* “clear consciousness”) (TR 56). Or, rather, laughter suspends dialectical consciousness at the limit between its realization and loss. It is this richly paradoxical relation to “clear consciousness” that gives laughter its singular identification with the movement of “communication” as the theatre in which Bataille seeks to conflate this accursed movement of experience with the operation of epistemology itself.

1.4 Tragic Reverberations

Let us go then, you and I, into the formless domain of Bataille’s “impossible thought.” But let us first heed the admonition regarding our critical investment in Bataille’s “philosophy of laughter” that Stuart Kendall offers in his critical biography of Bataille: Kendall alerts us to the potentially reductive trap of letting Bataille’s frequent appeals to the experience of laughter “lead us to confine his entire thought or experience to the realm of laughter, even its foundational impulse” (GB 33). The feature most important to Bataille’s intoxication with this experience, according to Kendall, is its “capacity for reversal”—a capacity that Lucio Angelo Privitello contends is an “infinite capacity”—namely, its capacity to collapse the discursive limits that experientially separate, for example, repulsion and horror from attraction and ecstasy (GB 33; 179).

Kendall’s warning is especially pertinent when taken in tandem with Bataille’s work on eroticism, specifically the way in which erotic experience facilitates the interaction of prohibition and transgression in order to illuminate the effusive intimacy of life and death. As Bataille points out in the “Preface” to *Madame Edwarda*, laughter “accentuates the pleasure – pain opposition . . . , [and] also underscores their fundamental kinship” (ME 224). Though this

accentuation is not uncommon to erotic experience, the perceived gaiety and lightness of laughter risks transforming the principle of prohibition, “of necessary and mandatory decencies,” “into iron-clad hypocrisy, into a lack of understanding or an unwillingness to understand what is involved” (ME 224). As Foucault explains, transgression does not disavow the seriousness of the limit imposed by the interdiction, nor does it preexists the limit any more than the limit could exist without bringing with it the possibility of being transgressed. Furthermore, transgression does not irredeemably eradicate the limit, but rather involves a necessary play upon crossing the limit and re-crossing itself towards the horizon of the limit:

The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. (27)

The “sacred” emanation that proceeds from transgression must necessarily avoid obliterating the limit entirely: to do so would broach a regression to the undifferentiated slime of “pure animality,” and such a regression forgoes the possibility of the sacred (AS II 92). Thus, the sacred violence of transgression, though it gives “free play to the impulses . . . refuse[d] during profane times,” actually “guards the rigor of the prohibition” rather than doing away with it, just as, reciprocally, the prohibition “guards the possibility of transgression” (AS II 90; AS III 340). Moreover, the greater the transgression’s extravagance, the greater stringency and authority it bestows upon the prohibition it violates; correspondingly, the greater the prohibition’s rigidity, the greater the bloodlust of the transgression that razes it.

When we infer only pure joviality from laughter and, thereafter, assume such an experience to epitomize the “foundational impulse” of Bataille’s thought (or even its entire movement and complexity), we risk trivializing the very real *risks* involved in Bataille’s thinking. We risk neglecting the gravity and violence of the erotic encounter with the limit

without which we would lack the epistemological latitude of levying experience against “the extreme limit of the ‘possible’” (IE 42). In other words, if we’re not careful, if we’re not rigorous in our allegiance to the “awakening of thought” experienced in a burst of laughter, laughter might become a compensatory measure or compulsory aversion to “the underlying truth of eroticism,” which is “an assenting to life up to the point of death” (ME 224; E 11). And yet, Kendall’s reduction of Bataillean laughter to a mere mechanism of reversal neglects to appreciate the deeply *tragic* interpretation of ontological finitude from which Bataillean laughter emanates. Indeed, aside from the caveat he delivers in the “Preface” to *Madame Edwarda*, Bataille adamantly reminds us that the joyousness experienced in a burst of laughter “cannot be separated from a tragic feeling” (NLT 142). Bataille exemplifies this notion of a tragic counterpart to laughter with repeated appeals to its identification with tears. As Bataille writes in *Literature and Evil* (1957), emphasizing the synergy of laughter and tears, “If we laugh or if we cry it is because, as victims of a game or depositories of a secret, death momentarily appears light to us. That does not mean that it has lost its horror: it simply means that for an instant we have risen above it” (LE 68). Cracking open *the worst*—the death that awaits us all and that fuels all our labor, fear and loathing—with lightness, laughter “draws a heightened consciousness of being”: it exposes, for example, the wise man’s flight from the ravages of death as but a pale effort to *preserve life*, as a shrinking back or cowering away from the “intimacy” of human life, reason itself being governed by a central aversion to the blinding radiation of those precipitate and contagious movements of “communication” that endanger the preservation of life but liberate the *living* of it (LE 68). We must, therefore, take into account that, for Bataille, laughter always involves the most excessive, “accursed” domain of experience; it is always an expression of “joy before death” (VE 235).

2 THE REPETITION OF INTIMATE NOISE

No limit to laughter if it is violent enough.

—Bataille, *Guilty* (1944)

2.1 The Impossible Divinity of Laughter

“To see tragic characters founder and *to be able to laugh*, despite the profound understanding, emotion and sympathy we feel: this is divine” (Nietzsche, WP 585, original emphasis). This, the divine dithyramb of the elevating spirit, becomes a *modus operandi* for Bataille, one of Nietzsche’s most radical twentieth century disciples.⁶ What is “divine” for Bataille is “man . . . in the experience of his limits”: “God is not the limit of man, but the limit of man is divine” (G 93). Nietzsche’s invocation of the “divine” as a laugh that disrupts the pity provoked by the pain of anthropomorphisms, silencing the sympathies solicited by tragic spectacles—a burst of joy *in spite of* the spectacle dramatizing “the horror and absurdity of existence”—announces the perspectival possibility of human emancipation from the “profane” world of “discontinuity,” duration, and determinable objects (BT 7). The “divinity” that Nietzsche finds in tragic laughter, rejoicing in defiance of the worldly misery one encounters in the spectacle of the other’s misfortune, strongly informs Bataille’s appreciation for the “divine” freedom of a “sovereign” laugh that not only “physically lacerate[s] the *physis*,” but also liberates the subject, however briefly, from the pool of human woes: “Laughter denies not only nature, in which man is entangled, but human misery, in which most men are still entangled” (G 123, original emphasis, 103). Unlike smiling, which many contemporary ethologists have identified amongst non-humans animals as a spontaneous extension of fear responses (i.e., in

⁶ Bataille cites this passage in a number of texts that span across his entire theoretical career. See NL 22, ON xxxiii, NLT 143.

order to visually demonstrate submissiveness towards the other⁷), laughter discharges a constellation of material convulsions whose epileptic bodily flutters and accompanying acoustic spasms radically contradict the given soundscape and instinctual economy of gestural immanence characteristic of the “natural” world of animality, where each being is intrinsically self-identical with the other and, to some extent, undistinguished from the environment through which it moves (“every animal is *in the world like water in water*”) (TR 19, original emphasis). Simultaneous to its vehement contestation of the ahistorical immanence of nature, laughter swiftly subverts the measured economy of labor and discourse which constitutes the habitual, historical register of human consciousness (viz., “clear consciousness”) and which, notwithstanding the latter’s panoptic optimism for the future, rests at the root of “human misery”: for insofar as “clear consciousness” posits the individual subject’s productive labor and self-preservation as the basic conditions of her worth, it ties the value of human life to a prohibition of the *jouissance* of “an existence without delay” (IE 47).

In proper Nietzschean fashion, Bataille makes laughter—aside from obligatory, feigned, or “complacent” laughter—a matter of *strength*, of the wherewithal to overcome the anguish one feels in encountering (the image of) one’s own ontological finitude: “The most timid laughter absorbs an infinite weakness” (ON 58; G 87). Bataille illustrates this point by juxtaposing the image of a woman who trips and falls on the street to the image of a woman who throws herself from an apartment window to a grisly, crushing death (IE 192). The unfortunate fall of the woman crossing the street may (or may not, depending on our compulsive strength at that moment) instigate the laughter of those of us who witness her fall; however, the spectacle of a woman hurling herself into the void before our very eyes, drowning the sidewalk at our feet with

⁷ See Preuschoft, Signe, “‘Laughter’ and ‘Smile’ in Barbary Macaques (*Macaca Sylvanus*),” *Ethology* 91.3 (1992): 220-36.

a most human gore, would certainly *not* arouse our laughter. Witness to the overwhelming horror of “being,” we would experience *anguish*.⁸ The limits of tolerance in the face of the void can also apply to the former scenario of the falling pedestrian “as soon as you feel the bonds of solidarity which unite you with the victim,” for example, if you share with the falling other “the bonds of a particular affection” (IE 192). If the hypothetical klutz who chews the pavement happens to be my grandmother, I would be less inclined to respond joyously, and, indeed, would be more likely to express concern, if not the full-fledged anguish of witnessing the other’s sudden death.

But Bataille is not offering moral advice: he is not claiming that *you should not laugh at* the other’s suicidal plunge from the window. After all, “we were [all] told, as children, ‘there is nothing to laugh at’” when we witness the pedestrian’s fall, and yet, as Bataille insists, we have all laughed at such a spectacle at some point in our lives (S 68). In Bataille’s view, the fact that one does not laugh when one witnesses the spectacle of another’s “absolute dismemberment” extends not from a sense of moral solemnity, social obligation, or even legitimate concern (HDS 291). Rather, abhorrent as it may sound from a socially conscious point of view, our inability to

⁸ What Bataille calls “anguish” is a sensation akin to a feeling of vertigo, “where fear does not paralyze but increases an involuntary desire to fall” (AS II 100). Anguish is the fear of death mixed with a furtive desire to be consumed by its excess. It thereby discloses the secret of human desire: “[W]hat we want is what uses up our strength and our resources and, if necessary, places our life in danger” (AS II 104). Lacking the intoxicating aroma of decay, an object fails to arouse our desire, for it is human “sexuality’s fragrance of death” that eroticizes desire and, thereby, differentiates human sexuality from the immanent avidity of animals: “This is the meaning of anguish, without which sexuality would only be an animal activity, and would not be *erotic*” (AS II 100, original emphasis). Phaedra’s passion for Hippolytus, her step-son, causes her anguish insofar as its *criminal* nature saturates desire with a scent of the cadaverous surplus of life whose exclusion guarantees the sustainability of the social order and the preservation of the socialized, differentiated human subject. And yet, though the forbidden character of Phaedra’s desire horrifies her, the intensity of her adversity to the virulent movement of death (*qua* the surplus of life) surreptitiously piques the flame of her ardor: “The more difficult the horror is to bear, the more desirable it is,” for, again, “the object we desire most is in principle the one most likely to endanger or destroy us” (AS II 97, 104). The fever of erotic passion, so intimately bound to ruination (of oneself and of the other), cannot absolve itself of the anguishing cocktail of fear and desire in the face of annihilation any more than the spectacle of sacrificial cruelty in which the spectator beholds “the image of [her] own death” as death opens the throat of the other, “*sacrifice being the communication of anguish* (as laughter is the communication of its dispersion)” (HDS 286; S 73, original emphasis).

laugh at the other's suicide, as Bataille would have it, stems from human *weakness*, from an incapacity to conquer the gravity of our anguish. In general, Bataille theorizes that the scenario involving one's laughing in response to one's sudden exposure to the paucity of "being" betrayed by the spectacle of the other's misfortune—if only this "inner experience" could only be sustained—empowers one with the impression of "becom[ing] a god," a conviction that clearly resonates with Nietzsche's characterization of the "divine" as laughing in response to the tragic tableau (S 72). Should one (impossibly) manage to laugh at the spectacle of the other's suicide, one would, no doubt, commit among the gravest of morally reprehensible and socially repulsive offenses, laughing an act of unspeakable violence, comparable to a medieval European laughing at Holy Communion. But what Nietzsche's laughter affirms as "divine" is the experience of "the impossible," the experience of becoming *other* than one's *recognizably human* self via the sudden loss or estrangement of those all-too-recognizably-human conventions of valuation that presuppose appropriate affective responses to certain categories of "lived experience" and, as such, humanize us by arranging our experience according to a predictable trajectory of the self's relation to the other. The truly "divine" laughter would be the laughter that laughs at that for which it is impossible for socialized humans to laugh. It is a necessarily *puerile* laughter, for only one who has yet to accede to anthropomorphic prominence, who has yet to achieve a recognizable degree of self-reliance or self-conscious autonomy and thus yet to develop a consummate faith in (the illusion of) her own self-sufficiency, could mistake such a viscerally tragic revelation of finitude for a joke. For though there are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke, there are few who feel the humorous side of suicide. The divinity of laughter, however, suggests a total identification of the laughable and the tragic, a pathological divinity laughing "a perfect laughter: the laughter that doesn't laugh" (AS III 439).

With regards to the scene of the falling pedestrian, laughter requires the laugher's indifference to the welfare of the other at whom she laughs. Lacking this germ of insouciance, this kernel of coldness or contempt for the other, the subject who laughs may be compelled to perceive the precariousness of her own fragile situation in the other's fall from apparent self-sufficiency. A child who witnesses an adult's fall may, indeed, fall into revelry, for the spectacle of the falling adult, whose habitual austerity and ostensible self-sufficiency tirelessly menace the clownishly clumsy child, unexpectedly parades before the child an image of authority brought low. The unintentionally recumbent posture of the fallen adult suggests a return to the "*despised bestiality*" out of which humans, in achieving relative verticality, arise and, therein, consummate a "decisive reversal of animal existence" which the child is still in the developmental process of mastering (AS II 91, my emphasis; VE 89). The adult's fall suggests a regression towards the horizontality of animal being, which humans endure only in sleep, in erotic couplings, and in death (though death be not endured), and it is the child's sudden exposure to the spectacle of this regression, contrasted by the fact that she remains upright, that makes her laugh. If, however, the fall one were to witness was the other's fall to her death, one has nothing to "profit" from laughing (though perhaps we cannot put it past the child not to laugh a chilling, horrified laugh): the other's humiliation which would bestow a sense of "sudden glory" upon the laugher—insofar as she is the one who maintains the illusion of sufficiency—would be impossible.⁹

⁹ The notion of "sudden glory" comes from Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes was writing in the tradition outlined by the Aristotelian comedic mask, whereby the presentation of the mask—something "ugly" yet "harmless"—incites the risible response, an expression of the laughing subject's self-perceived "superiority" in relation to the ignominy of the buffoon. The Aristotelian archetype calibrates the philosopher's gaze by focalizing on a distinct *object*—extraneous to the laugher and to laughter—as the caustic fuse of laughter. Consistent with Aristotelian comedy, Hobbes argued that the appearance of a "deformed thing" awards a sense of "sudden glory" unto the subject who beholds such vulgarities (47). The experience of this "sudden glory" is precisely what laughter expresses as such. Laughter is a sonorous manifestation of "the conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (19).

The scene of the other's suicide designates the "impossibility" of laughter not because this bloody spectacle fails to betray a "central insufficiency," not because it fails to expose us to our finitude, but because such a lurid exhibition of death is something towards which it is impossible for socialized beings to experience indifference (VE 176). Like the spectator of sacrifice, who must always, in the end, identify with the victim struck dead, she who witnesses the other's self-annihilation trembles before the monstrous manifestation of her own "link to annihilation," struck dumb with eyes and mouth agape (HDS 293). The being who would laugh at the spectacle of the other's suicide is, therefore, not quite (recognizably) human—or, better yet, not in the slightest. Only a dead man could laugh amidst the throes of the intolerable pitch of horror that would beset the witness of the other's sinister self-annihilation (only, strictly speaking, of course, the dead don't laugh). Ultimately, laughing at the other's misfortune always entails the laugher's compulsive consenting to a loss (of face, stability, seriousness, dignity, etc.) that is relatively commensurate to the loss betrayed by the other: "In the consent to loss, as in the loss itself, a given proportion of profit to loss must be observed. If loss be excessive or profit either nonexistent or too small, anguish is not dispelled; acceptance of loss is then impossible" (S 70). To laugh amid the suicidal scenario would require the laugher's indifference or "consent" to his own annihilation, an indifference that disqualifies him, in advance, from the symbolic arena of human socialization and individualization. For humans become individuals and preserve the glass shell of individuality only by virtue of the fear of death that yokes them to the society of labor and calculated results. To laugh at suicide is thus suicidal; it entails the shattering of that glass house of the ego, relinquishing it unreservedly to the intimate noise of death, to the brilliance of a sound as impossible as a crystal palace smashed by lightning. In short, death cannot be a matter of indifference to the individual. He who laughs at the other's total

annihilation is thereby already exiled from the throng of hard-working, upstanding, bona fide individuals. Or, rather, such “impossible” mirth marks the emergence of a *going beyond* what the human order is capable of processing or *recognizing* as internal to its functioning, a going beyond which also manifests a *falling short* of the “presence” of the human *in propria*. Such “impossible” laughter, as such, manifests the mark of *monsters*.

A singular trait, for instance, that unites nearly all modern, Western representations of the “supervillain” archetype, from whose despotic grip the helpless human order must be interminably *saved*, is the characteristic “maniacal laugh,” a harrowing explosion of mirth epitomized in the character of the Joker from the *Batman* series. Cackling maniacally at the hecatomb the world has become at his behest, the Joker does not possess the full criteria for membership in the human order nor for participation in the “project” of constructing and preserving an ordered future for humanity. His terroristic allegiance to anarchy and consequent assault upon the homeostasis of human society and upon the future it imagines for itself is inherently self-destructive, and his mad hilarity only confirms that he is entirely unfit for the productive society of human labors and law-abiding, taxpaying citizenship. The Joker’s mutinous, ungovernable laughter, echoing even as he falls deathward from a high-rise building (only to be caught by Batman) in Christopher Nolan’s 2008 film, *The Dark Knight*, is either too little or too much to be absorbed into the meaningful economy of purposive human activity. This irrepressible laughter, excessive to the point of self-destruction, exposes laughter as a convulsive locus of *loss*, as the unleashing of a symbolic surplus which threatens the operative stability and homogeneous hum of civilized human life, and which, incidentally, lends the character of the Joker his imprimatur of attraction. For, notwithstanding the inhumanity and violence of the Joker’s “impossible” laughter, laughter is never more nor less than a sign of

human passion: “Man,” says Aristotle in *Parts of Animals*, is “the animal who laughs” (III 10). Passion is in itself excessive: it flares up at the limits of our self-preservative impulses. By no accident is the Western literary and cinematic canon—from Helen and Paris to Winston and Julia—saturated with installation after installation dramatizing the ruinous risks of human passion. But laughter *makes light* of passionate risk, bursting at the limit of the human and the non-human “divine” as it breezily cedes to a passion that jeopardizes life in duration. Charles Baudelaire, in his essay “The Essence of Laughter,” captures the ambiguous character of this passion apropos of (in)humanity and divinity in identifying laughter as “satanic” yet “profoundly human” (149).

On the one hand, by dint of being a phenomenon peculiar to humans, laughter must necessarily indicate, if not express, the finitude from which no mortal may escape, the insufficiency which steeps us in our common misery. As such, laughter is not a trivialization or evasion of the tragic weight of human finitude. *But laughter is also a compulsive refusal to experience the reality of finite existence as such.* It entails a recognition of finitude in all its heaviness and yet compulsively refuses to abide the tragic temperament that the revelation of finite being conventionally instills in the apprehensive foreground of consciousness. Peals of laughter, in short, refuse to capitulate to the gravity of finitude. If all laughter can ultimately be reduced, in some way, to laughing at oneself and at one’s finitude, then when one laughs, one rejoices *in spite of* the anguishing revelation that the order of things (and the “salvation” this order promises) hangs but on the hooks of chance. I rejoice, that is, in spite of the revelation that the symbolically-organized grid that subtends my survival (as a discrete subject) as well as the future possibility of my self-conscious freedom is, in the final instance, entirely at the disposal of accidents. Thus, insofar as laughter celebrates the sudden exposure of a nothingness to which

finite existence is inescapably sentenced, joyously affirming the all-too-human horror of “being,” laughter also traverses the limitations of the latter (i.e., the horror of “being”) in *divine revolt* against the tragic weight anchored onto the meaninglessness of finite existence and against the impotence of language and “clear consciousness” to harness this meaninglessness in the lucidity of discursive form.

Eventually, Bataille even posits “a fundamental accord between our joy and an impulse to self-destruction,” suggesting a congruence between the “lived experience” of laughter and what, in psychoanalytic discourse, we know as *the death drive* (to which all drives ultimately refer) (S 70). “When you laugh,” Bataille asserts, “you perceive yourself to be the accomplice of a destruction of what you are” (IE 192). When the subject’s ontological insufficiency suddenly becomes “externally manifest,” she experiences either anguish (as in sacrifice) or the lifting of anguish in a compulsive burst of joy in the face of death (IE 89). Which affectation takes hold depends upon the intensity of the subject’s contact or confrontation with the nauseating void of “being,” as well as on her *strength*, on her compulsive capacity to conquer her anguish by rendering herself complicit in her own annihilation, or, in short, on her capacity to make light of (her own) finitude, to make merry in the face of death. Thus, in its identification with laughter’s bursting, Bataillean thought (*qua* “philosophy of laughter”) violently strives to turn the anguishing gravity of this sudden revelation—that, as a finite being, I am but “the plaything of nothingness”—into *its plaything* (VE 177).

2.2 Andronican Automutilation

And now for something completely different: towards the close of Act 3.1 of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, a strange thing occurs. At this point in the drama, Titus’s daughter, Lavinia, has been raped and mutilated, her tongue torn out and both of her arms hacked

off; Titus himself has sacrificed his own hand in an effort to free two of his sons from the clutches of his fiendish adversaries; and *now*, in this very moment, Titus receives his own dismembered hand returned to him along with the decapitated heads of the sons he had hoped to rescue. Needless to say, Titus has little occasion for joviality—and yet he laughs:

Marcus:

Ah, now no more will I control thy griefs;
 Rend off thy silver hair, thy other hand
 Gnawing with thy teeth, and he this dismal sight
 The closing up of our most wretched eyes.
 Now is a time to storm; why are thou still?

Titus:

Ha, ha, ha!

(3.1.258-263)

What is going on here? What kind of laughter is this? How, for example, might an actor perform this laugh? As Manfred Pfister observes, it seems as though no matter how one chooses to dramatize it—“long and drawn out or spasmodic, full-throated or stifled, high and thin or deep and hollow, excessively gestural or with subdued body language”—this laugh completely undermines the gravity and seriousness of the tragic scenario (185). And yet, when Marcus, bewildered by the striking unseemliness of his brother’s laughter, questions Titus about this laugh (“Why dost thou laugh? It fits not the hour”), Titus’s response does not fail to suggest that something grave may be at play: “Why, I have not another tear to shed” (3.1.264-5). Pfister expounds:

This is neither a laughter occasioned by some comic stimulus nor a liberating or remedial laughter that would help to put [Titus’s] trauma at a distance; neither the laughter of superiority nor of *Schadenfreude* and even less an abundance of vital spirits. It is a laughter beyond, or at the far side of tears, a pathological laughter. (185, original emphasis)

Brian Cox, who played Titus in a 1987 production of the play directed by Deborah Warner, discusses how the horror that saturates so much of *Titus Andronicus* is actually enhanced by a

“terrible laughter” that balances the play precariously along a “very slender, but strong, tightrope of absurdity between comedy and tragedy,” imbuing the drama with an uncanny trace of “the absurdity of man’s existence” (qt. in Pfister 185). No doubt, Titus’s “pathological laughter” confounds “orthodox understandings of the registrations of joy and grief” (Steggle 131). This laughter, that is, expresses a consummate hopelessness vis-à-vis the horror of an incommensurable reality. And yet, on the other hand, responding to something irredeemably lost to signification, this perverse laugh is also a *joyous affirmation* of the failure of language, the “communication” of incommunicability. In other words, Titus’s “pathological laughter” responds to an intolerable pit of despair which also reverberates in its peals, and *at the same time*, by virtue of its perversely *joyous* affirmation of the *unspeakable* depths of the horror of “being,” it unleashes a “most radical protest against the horrors of existence” that ring out in its peals and against language’s incapacity to render this horror in the clarity of a discursive articulation (Pfister 185).

If we are to follow Nietzsche’s “divine” imperative, must we laugh *at* Titus? Shakespeare provides us with just such a “divine” laugh in Act 5.1, a scene in which Titus’s “pathological laughter,” in a sense, reappears, re-focalized through the retroactive point of view of the villainous Aaron as he self-effacingly confesses a misanthropic bloodstorm of gratuitous malfeasances to Lucius (Titus’s last living son). Among the catalogue of “dreadful things” committed “[a]s willingly as one would kill a fly” (5.1.141-2) to which he self-sacrificially incriminates himself, Aaron confesses to having watched from behind an aperture in a wall as Titus looked upon the disembodied heads of his sons—*and to laughing*:

I played the cheater for thy father’s hand,
 And when I had it drew myself apart,
 And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter.
 I pried me through the crevice of a wall

When for his hand he had his two sons' heads,
 Beheld his tears, and laughed so heartily
 That both mine eyes were rainy like his;
 And when I told the Empress of this sport
 She swooned almost at my pleasing tale.
 And for my tidings she gave me twenty kisses

(5.1.111-19)

Aaron's is an explicitly *criminal* laughter, celebrating the imposition of a monstrous violence upon the other. But Aaron's laughter not only attests to the laugher's complicity in the performance of an act of violence, but rejoices in a sundering of self whereby the subject who laughs (at the victim's expense) falls victim to the very violence that laughter imposes upon the fallen other. So replete is Aaron's disequilibrium that "he cannot even read the signs that he hopes to react against": his mind glides seamlessly from laughter to weeping to the Empress's erotic swooning, the laughing tears that well up in Aaron's eyes acting as both lens and cataract as they facilitate an identification with his victim even as he misreads Titus's laughter for weeping (Steggle 131). Moreover, the language with which Aaron describes his taking leave after duping Titus into sacrificing his hand echoes Titus's self-amputation (an act Aaron himself actually performs for Titus), heightening Aaron's identification with the victim of his crimes: "I played the cheater for thy father's hand, / And when I had it *drew myself apart*, / And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter" (5.1.111-12, my emphasis). Aaron's "extreme laughter" exults in the triumph not of the criminal but of the *crime*, in the crime made *sacred* by the celebration of its violence over the criminal himself. This laugh consummates "the pinnacle of crime," "at the peak [where] unlimited denial of others is a denial of oneself" (E 174-5).

Such violent extremes of laughter expose the laughing subject to a compulsive, ecstatic aberration of individual homogeneity, to a "projection *outside the self* of a part of oneself" whereby inside and outside *fuse* in an incessant identification between the subject and object of

violence (VE 66-8, original emphasis). The *automutilation* of Titus's "pathological laughter" and of Aaron's "extreme laughter" is precisely what is at stake in Bataille's meditations on human joy:

[G]aiety, connected with the work of death, causes me anguish, and in return, exacerbates that anguish: ultimately, gay anguish, anguished gaiety causes me, in a feverish chill, 'absolute dismemberment,' *where it is my joy that finally tears me apart* (HDS 291, my emphasis).

Laughter "assumes the absence of true anguish," Bataille explains, "yet it has no other source than anguish" (IE 96). If I laugh at the spectacle of the falling pedestrian's *loss* (of face, of dignity, of meaning, of stability, of the illusion of human form, etc.), I laugh, in one sense, insofar as I escape the other's fate. Or, say, as in the example Bataille provides in "Sacrifice," I reach an uncontrollable speed while driving down a mountainside road with some "pretentious old lady"—someone "wholly antithetical to the world of intense motion"—in the passenger's seat, and I cry out in joy as she protests to the dangerous speed which is my pleasure (S 70). In either scenario, it is not *my* anguish being dispelled so much as peals of my laughter shatter the *possibility* of my anguish, specularized through the anguish or distress of the other. But this formulation holds even if we subtract the other from the equation: I may burst into laughter even if there is no one in the passenger's seat as I plunge recklessly down the mountainside. The element that counts, that sends me into a frenzy of joy, is the feeling of groundlessness that stems from my engaging in a treacherous behavior to which I am unhabituated and which may otherwise provoke my anguish. Laughing, I am "spasmodically shaken by the idea of the ground giving way beneath [my] feet" (VE 177). Without any trace of anguish, or, rather, its *possibility*, laughter has nothing to scatter: "Obviously, anguish does not release laughter, but anguish in some form is necessary: *when anguish arises, laughter begins*" (S 70, original emphasis). In laughter, we find the advent of anguish bursting into its immediate evacuation, an emergent

sensation of intolerable fear mingled with irrepressible desire suddenly encountering its sonorous diffusion in a torrent of lightness: “When I laughed, what was communicated to me by the laughter of others was the canceling of anguish” (S 73). But why is it that this “communication” of “the canceling of anguish” “tears me apart”? In order to provide a satisfactory response to this question, we must return to laughter’s nullification of self-conscious intention and to the immanent repetition that flows forth from this necessarily *compulsive* nullification.

2.3 Enjoyment beyond the Pleasure Principle

Jean Luc-Nancy recognizes the inextricable character of repetition with respect to laughter in surmising that there “is never *one*, never an essence of laughter, nor the laughter of an essence” (“Laughter, Presence” 368, original emphasis). Nancy elaborates:

[Laughter] bursts only in its own repetition: what, then, is laughter—if it “is”—if not repetition? What it presents (which can consist of a multitude of meanings, all possible and actual at the same time) is not presented by signification, but somehow purely, *immediately*—yet as the repetition that it is. The “burst” of laughter is not a single burst, a detached fragment, nor is it the essence of a burst—it is the repetition of its bursting—and the bursting of repetition. (384, my emphasis)

How can repetition be immediate? In short, only in the absence of self-conscious intention. Intention is rooted in productive “action” and, thereby, in “discontinuity” and “clear consciousness.” To intend something implies an awareness of a future which one seeks to cultivate and toward which one’s action gestures. Indeed, the self-conscious subject’s concatenation in linear time cannot be dissociated from intentionality: intention employs the subject in incessant temporal assessment, compelling her to engage in constant (re)negotiations of moments remembered and moments to come, a forward-backward temporal dialectic through which the subject of “clear consciousness” sustains herself (i.e., her isolation) in duration. And the entire scene of intended action(s), where individual subjects not only labor to produce

calculably desirable results but where individual subjects come into being *as such* through this labor, is overdetermined by an effort to neutralize *anguish* (viz., the anguish engendered by our originary encounter with death). “Action,” explains Bataille, “is an effect of anguish and suppresses it” (G 81). Action alienates an “intimacy” that the immediate encounter with negativity inspires, suppressing the “beclouded consciousness” of the anguished mind—a mind transfixed with ambivalence, struck by a mortal fear crossed with an overwhelming desire to be devoured by what it fears—in favor of the “clear consciousness” whereby the subject secures her differentiated identity and durable separation, the principles of profanation (TR 57). “Profane life,” the domain of acquisition and duration wherein isolated subjects practice self-preservation in the production and conservation of material and ideational commodities, requires the quelling of intimate passions in order that they may be replaced with “the *thing* that the individual is in the society of labor” (AS II 90; TR 47, my emphasis). The intentionality subtending the dispassionate arena of the “I” *voluntarily* compromises the unreserved fury of “intimate life” in favor of a life of discontinuity and duration secured through labor and the lucidity of discourse.¹⁰

¹⁰ Hence Bataille’s insistent relegation of self-conscious knowledge to a form of enslavement: “I think that knowledge enslaves us, that at the base of all knowledge there is servility, the acceptance of a way of life wherein each moment has meaning only in relation to another or others that will follow it” (NR 129). The active suppression of anguish through material and intellectual labor amounts to a process of sublimation, a distillation of desire from the fear of death, making possible the objective acquisition of knowledge by virtue of disentangling the contradictory impulses that combine to form the morbid delectation of anguish. Or, rather, the active suppression of anguish obeys a logic of castration: it gives the lie to our “profane” faith in the hygienic distance between subject and object and, thus, enfranchises the possibility of objective knowledge and truth by ensuring the separation of the knowing subject, vaccinated from contaminating contact with the venereal object - (m)other. As such, the objective world, the historical world of self-conscious knowledge and self-identification organized by the penetrating drift of the signifier, the socio-symbolic world of interpellation, is a world of suppressed anguish. Consequently, the “profane” sphere in which “I” come into being, the sphere inhabited by the discrete subject’s thriving and surviving, is a world in which anguish must always be *a priori*. Anguish—the fear of death mingled with the clandestine desire to abandon oneself to its yawning abyss—is the emotive precondition of the I’s articulation: if “I” come into being via the suppression of anguish effectuated by the exercise(s) of discourse, reason, and work, then my differential existence is a contingency of suppressed anguish. Anguish thus constitutes the formative condition of the “I”: it is precisely in the encounter with the anguish of negativity, for instance, that the exigence of Hegelian phenomenology derives its imperative to develop a philosophy of the *work* of dialectical self-consciousness. In the master-slave dialectic, it is the slave’s self-conscious intentionality, his conservative denial of the will to risk annihilation—a suppression of anguish—that sets him on the dialectical path towards “absolute knowing.”

Meanwhile, in *compulsively* casting aside the *coming* of anguish and in abolishing intention, laughter repeatedly shatters the possibility by which productive realities are realized. Laughter unexpectedly releases its subject from whatever “profane” neuroses preoccupy her mind in the moment(s) preceding the moment of its bursting. Without warning and without restraint, laughter relinquishes the historical pathologies of “clear consciousness” along with the anxiety and anticipation that accompany the constraints of historical self-consciousness. Laughing, we involuntarily bail out on the cult of reason and the laborious force of its despotic logic. As such, laughter is a compulsive emancipation from the restrictive morality of historical self-consciousness and tradition, a necessarily involuntary abandonment of that hallowed spirit “for which patriots and parents have lived and died” (Kimmel 178). It is a bursting coincidence of necessity and freedom, a “wonder-struck” explosion of “the interstices between freedom and compulsion” (TR 46; Kimmel 183). A cachinnating “repetition compulsion,” laughter celebrates, repeatedly in its peals, the phenomenological project’s *foreclosure in advance*. A burst of laughter is a material manifestation of the death drive denied by every step in the phenomenological march towards a self-conscious escape from the nightmare of history. It unexpectedly materializes a phenomenological surplus and, in its compulsive repetition, attests to this surplus as that which, by way of its impossibility or exclusion, is essential to the phenomenological organization of historical self-consciousness *and* as that which, at the same time, devastates the system to which it lends possibility *from within*. Laughter illuminates the “impossible” *night* preceding and exceeding the diurnal presence of “clear consciousness,” an unanticipated, exuberant *revelation* of the drive that the *revelations* of dialectical thought labor to

destroy.¹¹ Bataille thought's epistemological *identification* with the epistemological *ruination* of the drive *insists* on a mode of thinking that endangers the subject of the stable, human order, but which gestures towards a *liberation* of thought from the conservative, utilitarian demands of reason *in the very experience of self-risking* (*qua* thought).

Ultimately, though the apperception of some form of “profit,” some kind of awareness of one’s “superiority” in relation to the fallen other, is in some ways necessary for laughter to arise amidst the scene of the other’s fall, this awareness can no longer operate as such once laughter escalates to a “giddy intensity” (S 71). The laughing subject “ceases to feel more serious than the objects of his laughter” (S 72). Hence, “Laughter has the quality of provoking laughter” (S 69). Even if one “arrives late” to the spectacle of impropriety or error that provoked an initial burst, one may nevertheless become entangled in the communal spontaneity of shared laughter. Moreover, the sudden sense of “divine” glory awarded the subject who maintains her erect posture in the face of the other’s fall can no longer be taken seriously by others nor by the laughing subject herself, for she has become nothing but the vehicle for the compulsive repetition of loss (e.g., of seriousness, stability, control, etc.). Only in ceasing to laugh can one cease to consider one’s laughter—its “divinity”—a ridiculous, “inferior mode of being” (S 72). That laughter should endow a “superior” or “divine” mode of “being” upon the laugher is a laughable proposition, for laughter, like the subject caught in its convulsion, is just as much a spectacle that spontaneously betrays human finitude as any spectacle of ignominy presumed to provoke its initial bursting.

¹¹ Here, I have cribbed, recycled and, admittedly, misappropriated an idea Blanchot posited in relation to literature in his classic (anti-)Hegelian essay, “Literature and the Right to Death” (1949). Blanchot writes: “By turning itself into an inability to reveal anything, literature is attempting to become the revelation of what revelation destroys” (328).

The apotheosis of laughter is, rather, a consequence of the fact that when I laugh, I “draw myself apart,” tearing myself away from myself in an automutilating movement—“Impalement is laughter”—that bursts through me (ON 66). It is the laceration of the physiological and epistemological equilibrium of the laughing subject that lends laughter its “divinity.” In the repetition of bursts, *laughter itself*—not the subject whom it shakes—celebrates the “divine” limit of human possibility, achieving a kind of *autonomy* from the will of the subject through whom it radiates. Were it not that laughter, once bursting, will continue to burst forth and dissipate the coming of my anguish, this anguish may have the effect of paralyzing my frenzy and, thereby, through its subsequent suppression, of restoring me to “proper” form, i.e., of restoring me to “myself,” as it were. The “divine” self-estrangement of laughter’s uncontrollable burst(s), however, lingers in the fact that the very feeling of imminent anguish that the compulsive repetition of laughter disperses derives from a rupture occurring *within* the laughing subject. If, for example, I burst out laughing in a situation whose solemnity requires that I not laugh—say, at a funeral—my awareness of my laughter’s vulgarity, my recognition that my laughter violates the limits of ethical standards of behavior prescribed by the given social scenario, may cause me to experience an imminent sensation of acute shame, embarrassment, or inhibition bordering upon anguish. And yet, the arrival of this secondary anguish may perpetuate my laughter in spite of the intolerably dizzying awareness that I must, without a moment’s further delay, suppress my laughter.

In “Sacrifice,” Bataille delivers a risible episode that testifies to the automutilating power of the repetition of bursts. Reminiscent of the scene of Titus’s “pathological laughter,” this passage describes the “funereal laughter” of a young Englishwoman who has just learned of the loss of her loved ones:

The young woman's laughter was, I should think, directed less at the deaths announced than at the anguish caused by the idea that she must, at all costs, stop laughing, when she was utterly unable to do so. In the same way an actor can, against his will, begin laughing in a way that is intolerable on stage. This second anguish, which in stifling laughter intensifies it, is stronger than the first. It may suffice that the young woman at first not wholly realize the overwhelming meaning of death. On perceiving it, she has begun to laugh, and a laugh already begun has, even more than a beginning laugh, the power to dispel anguish. (S 70-1)

The inner injunction to stifle one's laughter and the corresponding effort to do so only condition laughter's continuation and intensification. Thus truly excessive, uncontrollable laughter "increases in proportion to anguish," becoming more and more excessive and uncontrollable "if some dangerous element supervenes and if we laugh even though at all costs we should stop laughing" (AS II 101). As long as some error betraying the finitude of "being" is renewed—in this case, laughter itself—laughter may propagate and intensify. "In laughter, the moment of release lies not so much in its beginning as in its increase to the point of a wonderful intensity" (S 70). The violence of laughter lies not so much in the "origin" of laughter's spell as in its repetition, whereby the anguish whose paralyzing vertigo makes action possible galvanizes the fury of an intoxication before which the will of the laughing subject becomes effectively powerless.

Take, for example, the scene of a child being tickled by her mother and the laughter that reverberates from this disfiguring *contact*: the physical agitation elicits the raving response that ruptures the homogeneity and isolation of the ticklish child thrown into a frenzy by the touch of the (m)other. Meanwhile, the "puerile grimaces" and strange, unintelligible noises the mother makes for the child betray a "central insufficiency" which only intensifies the child's laughter insofar as this *mask*—or, rather, this removal of the mask of sufficiency—intimates the adult's fall from rigid, disciplinary seriousness and austere stability of form (VE 176). The mother,

moreover, may increase the intensity of her tickling the more the child laughs, such that the two become entangled in a shared, albeit disproportionate, convulsion. The contact may become so acute that it begins to become painful, and, indeed, the limits demarcating suffering from elation begin to dissolve, and the closer the child comes to calling out in distress, the more she laughs, and thus, the more her mother tickles her.

If laughing is a “pleasurable” experience, it is the perverse pleasure of *going beyond* the pleasure principle (i.e., the diminution of displeasure), of going recklessly towards a pleasure *in excess* of the principle of homeostatic moderation that insures the coherence and endurance of the “I” who thinks (it knows itself). Laughter, when taken to its emotive extremes, when appreciated as the excess that it is, cannot be reconciled with the subject’s self-preservative impulses. Hence, popular and clinical notions of laughter’s restorative qualities, notions which posit laughter as a kind of “natural” prophylactic for psychic tension, epitomized by doxa like “laughter is the best medicine,” betray a most impoverished understanding of laughter by *laughably* mistaking this insuppressible insurgency upon the stability of the self as a panacea for the anxious stimuli that rack this rigid little residue onto which (the) “I” hang(s) for dear human life. For the involuntary, uncontrollable nature of laughter ultimately prevents our deployment or remodeling of its conditions and experience so as to accommodate the reasoned demands of utilitarianism, whether those demands be in service to a therapeutic agenda or to a corrective, sociological project (à la Bergson). In effect, we lack the *strength* necessary to alter the phenomenon of laughter, comparable to the lack of strength that bars the socialized individual’s laughter amid the scene of the other’s suicide: “We can neither eliminate the weight of gravity nor modify the conditions under which we laugh” (S 72). Should some “being” manage to

transform the conditions of this laughable phenomenon, “we could no longer quite say of him that he is a man – he would then differ as great from man as bird from smoke” (S 72).

Here Bataille diverges from Nietzsche, the latter having nourished a hope for a (superhuman) future that would hold the possibility of a *willed* laughter. Bataille realizes that laughter is nothing if not a kind of inexplicable, indomitable reflex, and, in contrast to Nietzsche, that it can never be anything other than something entirely *insubordinate* to the reflective deliberations of self-conscious intention. The event-repetition of coming *loss*, laughter can only ever be a liquidation of the practical will and its products. The paradox of laughter is that it is this involuntary loss—this effusive emission of loss discharged without our self-conscious consent or deliberation—that, at least in Bataille’s strange universe, is our *freedom*. Only in blithely shattering self-conscious will, diffusing its ethico-intellectual scruples along with the heaviness of the world, do we experience (or approach) autonomy: “Only an insistence on the leap, and a nimble lightness (the essence of autonomy and freedom), give laughter its limitless dominion” (ON 66). Only in bursting forth “innocently,” without pretext or motivation, indifferent to the future and to the fantasy of coherence and stability it hawks, does laughter illuminate, in an incandescent instant, the “divine” summit of finite existence, a momentary breach into “the beyond of the specific existence that we are,” a beyond which is, however, wholly incompatible with the axis of transcendence: “Autonomy . . . , inaccessible in a finished state, completes itself as we renounce ourselves to that state . . . which is to say in the abolition of someone who wills it for himself. It cannot therefore be a *state*, but a *moment* (a moment of infinite laughter, or of ecstasy . . .)” (ON 55; G 127, original emphases).

2.4 The Cruising Community

Bataille's effort to fuse the movement of thought with the self-disruptive field of "the moment that counts, the moment of rupture, of fissure"—of which "[w]e know nothing absolutely"—ultimately gestures towards a "dissolution of every object" of thought *as such*, the objects of thought suddenly becoming, like bubbles in a champagne flute, "no longer anything but the occasion of a subjective play" (AS III 202-3, 324). Striving to transform thought into the "lived experience" of a "sovereign moment" that playfully negates the linear, discursive unfolding of "the exercise of thought," Bataille attempts to bring consciousness to a boiling point at which it comes into being (i.e., *thinks*) "impossibly," "awakening" to a kind of ardent objectlessness wherein the anticipation and hope that keep our eyes and ears attuned to the progress of the future "dissolve into NOTHING" (AS III 210). The upshot of this sudden point of objectless, epistemological play can perhaps be clarified if we refer it to the capricious itinerary of the *object* of laughter, rather than to the burst itself.

In contrast to Bergson, who, following Aristotle's paradigmatic representation of comedy, had imagined laughter as a *response* to an encounter with a necessarily *external* object or spectacle of impropriety that does not risk arousing psychic pain, Bataille reverses the conventionally presupposed cause and effect relation between a comic object and a burst of laughter. He problematizes our presumption of a causative link between a comic object and the phenomenon of laughter, recognizing that the comic object ultimately assumes its humor (*qua* comic object) from the emotive disposition of those who laugh at it (Trahair 162). If, for example, I witness some other stumble over a crack in the sidewalk, my reaction—whether I step over her, help her to her feet, or laugh in her face—will not change the event of her fall as an objective fact: neither my indifference, my concern, nor my joy will alter the fact that she fell.

And yet, my response may determine the *subjective* disposition of the experience (both for the falling other and for me), which may, in turn, affect, however marginally or significantly, the series of events that follow from this encounter. The point is that the other's fall *only* takes on the contours of a comic object or event insofar as *laughter puts it in play as such*: "The comic here does not precede laughter," explains Lisa Trahair, "it is rather an effect of it" (163).

Perhaps surprisingly, then, Bataille asserts that the heterogeneity that floods the "profane" precinct of human consciousness when the gates of laughter fly open actually flows from an alterity egressing from "the movement of the comical *object*" (G 129, my emphasis). In the opening section of Volume III of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille elaborates:

It's not so much that the burst of laughter or tears stops thought. It's really the *object* of the laughter, or the *object* of the tears, that suppresses thought, that takes all knowledge away from us. The laughter or the tears break out in the vacuum of thought created by their object in the mind. (AS III 203, original emphases)

The "object" to which Bataille refers here is not exactly an "object" in any conventional, "scientific" sense: this "object" is not one which can be clearly apprehended from *afar*, i.e., from an instrumentally disaffected vantage that presupposes the observing subject's extraneous relation to the object under scrutiny. It is not an object that can be engaged along a flat, two-dimensional trajectory of reality whereby objects unfold according to a meaningful, horizontal procession of causal appearances. Properly speaking, the object of laughter, like the object of tears, cannot assume a determinably objective reality: it fails to satisfy the discursive criteria with which we isolate, identify, classify, and deploy the objects of consciousness. Bataille explains, "The object of tears or of laughter – and of other effects such as ecstasy, eroticism or poetry – seemed to me to correspond to the very point at which thought vanishes" (AS III 208). When Bataille affirms the alterity of the *object* of laughter as that which effects the raid on "clear consciousness" characteristic of the "lived experience" of laughter, the "object" to which he

refers can be thought of as an “object” only insofar as it is essentially that which violates the possibility of clear and distinct “objects,” viz., a consumption or expenditure. As such, the object of laughter is a quintessentially *impossible* object, where “impossible,” once more, refers specifically to “the loss of self.” Even the model of shared laughter cannot avail the effort to identify a common object of laughter: “In laughter, there is not one object that independently determines the same effects in different laughers” (AS III 242). Though we may assume that we laugh in response to the same object or event when we burst into a shared laugh, we can never really *know* that the caustic fuse of “my” laughter and “your” laughter is identical because such an object-cause has no demonstrable existence outside of our laughter. Ultimately, in order to behold this object, we must *touch it*: dissolving ourselves, our isolation—in laughter!

Thus penetrating, traversing, or *transversing* the bursting subjects who laugh at it, the object of laughter contorts the laughers themselves into a spectacle worthy of arousing the subjective experience that shakes them, the spectacle of an impersonal “community” of beings engaged in and diffracting a radiant current of lightness “*communicated from subject to subject through a sensible, emotional contact*” (AS III 242, original emphasis). This notion of the traversing effect which the object of laughter puts in play infuses the movement of this object with an explicitly *queer* itinerary. In short, the object of laughter *cruises*. “Cruising,” as Leo Bersani sees it, is a form of utopic “sexual sociability” permeating many public, albeit subterranean, haunts of homoerotic intimacy (e.g., bathhouses). Bersani’s use of the term “sociability” derives from his interpretation of the sociology of Georg Simmel, where “sociability,” in general, refers to “relationality uncontaminated by desire”; therefore, “cruising” (*qua* “sexual sociability”) involves an eroticized relationality “uncontaminated” by the eagerness to acquire and possess that overdetermines any enterprise spurred by desire (*qua* lack) (9).

Bersani's understanding of "cruising" as "sexual sociability" emphasizes encounters with "an otherness that cannot be named, defined, known, understood, controlled, or domesticated" (Brintnall 70). Similarly, in *Unlimited Intimacy*, Tim Dean understands "cruising" as comparable to the male homoerotic practice of "barebacking" in that cruising "involves [an] intimacy with strangers" which elides "knowledge or understanding of the other—that is, without the subtle violence that usually accompanies epistemological relations" (205). Rooted in "impersonal intimacy," cruising deconstructs established understandings of intersubjectivity and desire. "Its most significant feature," as Kent Brintnall explains,

is its capacity to prevent the self's acquisitive, appropriative, aggressive relation to the world by short-circuiting desire's longing to understand and possess the other. Cruising—in the ideal form Bersani and Dean endorse—promotes contact with the other that impedes the self's instrumental, purpose-driven, goal-oriented relation to the world, contact resulting from happy accidents with unknown objects of desire. (70-1)

No doubt, shared laughter can be pregnant with erotic overtones, a burst flushed with a mutual blush, faces suddenly alight with the colored touch of libidinal winks. But what I am suggesting, by way of imagining the object of laughter's trajectory as one which follows the *unmotivated* itinerary of cruising, is that the object of laughter forges an impersonal space in which an ever-widening "community" of beings invests in an eroticized relation void of the acquisitive quest to possess or comprehend an object that gives desire its structure (*qua* lack).

In a sense, it is precisely such an unmotivated space of shared subjectivity (*qua* the sharing of self-loss) that Bataille seeks to generate with *his reader* in identifying the movement of his thought with laughter. Bataille's "impossible thought," as such, aims to rope the subject of thought (*viz.*, the reader) into a mode of thinking that drifts along such impersonal, risky, groundless terrain that the thinking subject's "getting its drift" means surrendering to an opening up to a dissolution of isolated subjectivity. And here, finally, we come upon the consummate

paradox emergent in this Bataillean “drift” towards the dislocation of the *episteme* that sustains the self-conscious subject as a subject *who knows* (itself): namely, this sliding of thought, this turning of thought’s very movement onto the death of the thinking subject *as we know it*, circuitously enables the epistemological occasion for a reimagining of the vehicles and vectors of relationality and “community” formation—that is, *insofar as we laugh at it*.

3 THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND THOUGHT

I am a cry of joy!

—“Meditations of Method” (1947)

3.1 The Obscure Intimacy of Consciousness

In light of all this (laughter), who am I? What am I? I am, in short, this (being) questioning the nature of (my) being—*who am I? what am I?*—that is, this “absence of agreement with [myself]”: “I am, man is, the interrogation of what is, of being wherever it is; limitless interrogation, or *the interrogation of being by being itself*” (G 85, 79, my emphasis). Human, all-too-human is the spirit of revolt: “This existence that I am is a revolt against existence and is indefinite *desire*” (ON 187, original emphasis). Human “being,” as such, enlists “being” in an interminably renewed gesture of *insubordination* to given conditions, an unrelenting assault upon the existential limits of a life bound by finitude: to “be” (human) is to “go beyond what [being] is”—a movement raging towards a traversal of finite existence that is tantamount to being human (ON 187). To be human is to be *in the storm*, striving towards the extreme limits of possibility: the human’s is “the lot of a conditioned being who bears within him not only the conditions of being, of the particular being he is, but a general aspiration of beings to be free of their conditions, to negate them” (AS III 343). Human beings are, of course, organic existences and, therefore, must fulfill biological needs of subsistence. But the fundamental *condition* of being human is a refusal of the given *conditions* of nature: “A revolt, a refusal of the offered condition, is evinced in man’s attitude at the very beginning” (AS II 77). I am “nature” insofar as I am an organic existence entangled in the seething cesspool of living and dying; and yet, at the same time, I am nature contesting nature, “revolting intimately against the fact of *dying*” (AS II 91, original emphasis).

Now, the negation of nature, according to Bataille, “has two clearly and distinctly opposed aspects: that of horror and repugnance, which implies fever and passion, and that of profane life, which assumes the fever has subsided” (AS II 93-4). From the get-go, human life is hailed *into the breach*, into the *disequilibrium* of a thrust and counterthrust between “movements that destroy one another” (AS III 342). Bataille ultimately reduces the entire claptrap of human history, culture, activity, and interaction to an “impossibility of being human,” to the impossibility of schematizing a stable, self-sufficient system of equilibrium and compatibility out of the *mélange* of incompatible impulses—viz., the mutually-intransigent impulses of prohibition and transgression—that describes the specifically *human* world as a constitutively undecided crucible of experience: “The human world is finally but a hybrid of transgression and prohibition, so that the word *human* always denotes a *system* of contradictory impulses” (AS III 342, original emphases). In the final analysis, “the human quality” shines wherever it sparks the flame of *revolt against the given*, “whatever this may be, provided it is given” (AS III 343).

The *given*, as such, has two distinct “instances” or “stages” in the historical course of human experience: “For man, the given was originally what the prohibition refused: the animality that no rule limited. The prohibition itself in turn became the given that man refused” (AS III 343). In the first instance, what is given is the biological condition(s) of animal existence, “the model of life without history,” whereby the world is experienced immanently and immediately in the ahistorical absence of *qualitative* limits and difference (AS II 94). “Profane life,” which assumes a differential life in duration and a coherence of things relatively immune to the continuity of nature, emerges out of “a deep mistrust of what is accidental, natural, perishable” (AS II 91). But the “profane” labor of denying the human animal’s existential dependence on the loathsome bed of its carnal origins is ultimately “fictitious” (AS II 92). For,

in the final instance, how can I deny *the undeniable*—the *fact* that I will die and rot away in the labyrinthine guts of the nature that I so despise? The “failure of the [profane] negation of nature,” Bataille speculates, “could not fail to appear inevitable from the beginning” (AS II 92). In its resistance to “violent and destructive changes” (e.g., revolutionary change), its opposition to historical fluctuations that threaten to capsize the *reproduction* of a familiar and recognizable order of things, the prohibition eventually reifies the narrow utilitarian limits of “profane life” *as given* (AS II 94). A transgression of the conditions introduced by the prohibition thus “becomes irreplaceable in human life” (AS III 340).

The transgressive movement of *sacred revolt*, violently overflowing the dikes sustaining “profane life,” unleashes repressed animal rumblings in a renewed gesture of insubordination to the given; however, rather than obliterating the limit established by the prohibition, this transgressive burst “consecrates and completes an order of things based on rules” insofar as it “goes against them only temporarily” (AS II 90). In this way, transgression paradoxically obeys the limit which it violates, or, rather, its condition of possibility is predicated on embracing a refined limit:

A profound difference results from the fact that the “nature” that is desired after being rejected is not desired in submission to the given, as it may have been in the first instance, in the *fleeting* moment of animal excitation: it is nature transfigured by the *curse*, to which the spirit then accedes only through a new movement of refusal, of insubordination, of revolt. (AS II 78, original emphases)

The “sacred,” a term Bataille “reappropriate[s] from the more domesticated modern forms of religion” and recasts as a recovery, albeit fleetingly, of “a sense of the primal immanence that Hegel had argued was characteristic of pre-cultural experience,” is “precisely what is *prohibited*” from “profane life” (Hayes 230; AS II 92, original emphasis). Its creeping emergence ignites “a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is

ordinarily stifled” (VE 242). The return of this accursed remnant of animal disorderliness does not, however, simply introduce “the return of man to his vomit” (i.e., to the pure immanence and primal avidity of animality) (AS II 92). Rather, the sacred movement of transgression signals the “transfiguration” of “animal form” into something “divine”: “Something unfamiliar and disconcerting [comes] into being, something that [is] no longer simply nature, but nature transfigured, the *sacred*” (AS II 92, original emphasis). “As such, relative to profane life this *sacred* animality has the same meaning that the negation of nature (hence profane life) has relative to pure animality” (AS II 92, original emphasis). Denis Hollier argues that the “opposition” between the profane and sacred spheres constitutes “the matrix of Bataille’s thought,” and indeed, Bataille affirms, “Simultaneously—or successively—[human life] is made up of the profane and the sacred” (DM 65; E 67). But this “opposition” is not, strictly speaking, an opposition: for it is the same movement—the all-too-human movement of revolt—which had established the discontinuity of the profane world that ultimately obliterates this discontinuity. Whereas profane life emerged out of the utilitarian denial of animality’s “natural” servility to the contingencies of nature, the sacred emerges out of a sumptuous denial of profane subjectivity’s *voluntary* submission to the lucidity of discourse. Whereas the profane produces separation and discursive discontinuity, subject and object, the sacred fuses the obverse relations which the profane labors to establish. *The movement of negativity that initially introduced the establishment of limits now shatters those limits.*

The deadlock arising from the mutual incomplicity of the two fundamental stadiums (viz., prohibition and transgression) through which unfurls the movement of human life—a medley of the possible and the impossible—finds its “limited solution” in what Bataille calls “the festival” (TR 53). Bataille describes the prodigal festival of primitive, “naïve” societies as a

communal unleashing of an “internal violence” (i.e., “the moral principle of consumption”) which expressed itself in the “unrestrained consumption of [the society’s] products and the deliberate violation of the most hallowed laws” (TR 61; AS II 90). In the darkest, faraway reaches of human civilization and consciousness, this conflagration reached its feverish summit with the community’s gratuitous sacrifice of its chief, the community rendering itself *headless*: “[The chief’s] immolation – consented to by the people he embodied, if not by him – could have given the rising tide of killings the value of an unlimited consumption” (AS I 63). The chief’s annihilation by his own people actualizes a collective *automutilation*, a self-inflicted schism in the integrity of the community reflecting the rift in the undifferentiated tapestry of nature out of which all things human come into being. But eventually, as Christopher Gernerchak explains,

this practice was condemned, the king being replaced by the “carnival king,” a slave temporarily assuming a sovereign status. And while the sacrifice of the slave was an internal violence insofar as the slave could be made to serve the community, in effect this substitution, this refusal to gloriously expend their own king, to make their community *acephalous*, was a rejection of internal violence. (106, original emphasis)

This substitution corresponded to a progressive exporting of the community’s violent energies, directing these energies outward towards other communities through the “external violence” of warfare, which is so often mobilized with the aims of acquiring territory and accumulating resources (TR 57). The festival, in turn, would become increasingly “confined to the limits of a reality of which it was the negation” (TR 54).

But this intrusion of profane limits into the limitless sphere of consumption introduces a pivotal effect that will lead Bataille to posit the festival as “the culmination of a movement toward autonomy, which is, forevermore, the same thing as man himself” (AS II 91). Namely, the festival becomes a space of experience both “measureless and measured at the same time” (AS II 108-9). Rather than a return to “true immanence,” the festival seeks “an amicable

reconciliation, full anguish, between the incompatible necessities” of self-preservation and consumption, prohibition and transgression (TR 55). In order for humanity to truly experience autonomy over the organic existence to which it is bound (by its very “being”), it would have to somehow synthesize the limits that define it—that affirm its asymmetry apropos of animality—with the limitless violence of expenditure. Expenditure, as we have seen, is fundamentally incompatible with thought insofar as thought constitutes an *exercise* bent on the acquisition of knowledge and/or power. The festival takes shape through an all-too-human effort to introduce the value of the limit—out which thought comes to light—to the boundless play of energy. It is the movement whereby the human subject struggles to “grasp what eludes him” (AS I 70). The festival thus involves a subject overcome by the infinite movement of an ungraspable giving away (i.e., a movement of loss and destruction) while, at the same time, engaging the subject in a languishing attempt to grasp the ungraspable, “to somehow bring our going-beyond back within our limits” (AS I 69). On the one hand, the festival permits, in some cases even *requires*, its subject to let loose the contents of a bottomless reservoir of loss he knew not that he had, surpassing the limits of isolation and profane necessity in the unbinding of this intimate, solar drift towards unrestrained loss. And yet, at the same time, the subject is spurred towards the possibility of appropriating the very movement of this surpassing so as “to combine the limitless movements of the universe with the limit that belongs to him” (AS I 70).

Difficulties arise from the fact that the ungraspable resides not simply “outside” the life of the human mind; it is not simply an ecological reality that can be observed “out there” in the universe and, thereby, assimilated into a meaningful economy of events. It is rather “the obscure intimacy of consciousness itself,” that which consciousness had to cast aside or *excrete* (the opposite of assimilation) in order to become *clear* and which, therefore, induces the *loss* of

“clear consciousness” as the latter draws near its consumptive flame (TR 57). As Hollier rightly observes, the Bataillean festival, thereby, differs crucially from the Bakhtinian carnival in which participants undergo an experience of liberating profundity and abundance in the vanishing of the “I” that carnival supposes. The Bataillean festival is not a scene of enjoyment delivered via some temporary reprieve from the pang of discontinuity. It takes place in the beclouded hour in which “the I lives its loss, lives itself as loss” (AA xxiii). “This is not a time of plenitude,” explains Hollier, “it is, on the contrary, the time when time’s emptiness is experienced” (AA xxiii). It evokes not the primordial innocence of the brute but the “bottomless guilt” of this figure at odds with itself that, therefore, I am (guilty!) (AA xxiii). The festival is, finally, a celebration of loss in which the subject struggles to *acquire loss*, to make loss her power.

And is this not the very field of Bataille’s “impossible thought”? That is, in the final analysis, inasmuch as “the festival” which Bataille explores refers to an actual anthropological practice, historical experience, or cultural event, does it not also describe the very “matrix” of that composite and contradictory movement of thought whereby one retreats from nothing yet somehow manages to escape an outright absence of limits that would escort one into an undifferentiated realm of unintelligible nonsense? Hence Bataille’s identification of his thought with laughter: according to Bataille, it is “the marriage of power and loss” which a burst of laughter consummates (G 93). That is, if Bataille’s “philosophy of laughter” evokes an effort to overcome the incongruity of epistemology and expenditure (if only for a “sovereign moment”), it is because such a moment of surmounting this impasse is *already internal* to bursts of laughter.

3.2 Laughter's Leap

Of course, laughter is not in itself synonymous with the festival: “[Y]et in its own way it indicates the festival’s meaning – indeed, laughter is always *the whole movement of the festival in a nutshell*” (AS II 90, my emphasis). Although Bataille never crystallizes his meditations on laughter as such, I submit that we might extrapolate from this comparison with the festival the notion that, in the repetition of bursts, laughter *suspends the spatial-temporal difference* that conventionally separates the impulses of prohibition and transgression.¹² In the evental instant of its kairotic burst—more specifically, its *repetition*—laughter sonorously hybridizes these “contradictory impulses,” such that, in the immanent repetition of animated peals of human joy, the mutually-destructive movements of prohibition and transgression *dynamize each other*.

¹² Even though both prohibition and transgression bear in their movements the trace of the other’s possibility, they generally do not penetrate each other *directly*. Each movement is quarantined from the other by a system of spatial-temporal difference: the dialectic interaction of prohibition and transgression receives its organizational instrumentation in the partitioning of these “movements that destroy one another” into mutually-exclusive hours reserved respectively for the profane activities of hard labor and science and for the sacred madness of violence and play. Indeed, “sacred communication,” for example that experienced in the “elementary forms” of sacrifice and eroticism, requires not only an initiating realization or performative articulation of difference in order that this difference may be disarticulated, but it also necessitates a particular spatial and temporal milieu which is demonstrably “removed” from the prosaic world of labor and discourse. This designated milieu is, indeed, indispensable, for obviously neither acts of ritual murder nor those of erotic effusion can be practiced “out in the open,” or at least not amidst the routinized machinations and productive activities of everyday life. Not only would an unrestricted admission of such practices threaten society’s sustained existence with the epidemic levels of violence and hygienic hazards such an unlimited fever of lawlessness would surely unleash, but should these events that facilitate the movement of “sacred communication” lose their designated milieu “outside” the everyday, then such events would lose their lavishness and transgressive intensity. It is, indeed, the very fact that such acts are prohibited from the everyday spheres of consciousness and experience that lends them the wicked glow of “communication,” and their degree of seductive vigor grows in proportion to the gravity of the prohibition. Consequently, the sacred play of “communication” experienced in these “elementary forms” always necessarily obeys a system of spatial and temporal difference separating the sacred twilight of carnival madness from the scheduled hours of the workday hump. The society of labor simply cannot function, thrive, nor survive if such forcefully “nonproductive” movements are not exiled from the time and place of the consciousness and experience of the human subject hard at work—a lonesome schmuck enclosed in a cubicle and possessed by erotic daydreams is but an idle set of hands, indeed. Hence, the inversion of profane, utilitarian values evinced in the play of “communication” is only ever a temporary affair, no matter the particular inversion’s transgressive enormity or ferocity. All such vehicles of “communication” must abide by a statute of limitations, and this temporal modicum of control ensures not only that such *sacred* events *stay sacred*, but also that they may be effectively monitored and moderated, contained by the law and consigned to secrecy, truncated to a certain admissible period of time, confined to certain designated venues, limited to holidays and anniversaries, and, if need be, outlawed altogether.

For one, in contrast to sacrifice and eroticism, and notwithstanding all its “sovereign” incandescence as a form of “communication,” laughter is an utterly quotidian experience, an aspect of routine reality: “Now, of all sorts of intense communication, none is more common than the laughter which stirs us in (each other’s) company” (S 68). But let us not let the ordinariness of laughter fool us: its prevalence amidst the unremarkable realities of “profane life” does not indicate the impoverishment of its transgressive violence and play. Rather, I submit that its regularity amongst the more mundane comings and goings of human activity affirms our inability to satisfactorily control and regulate it and the consumptive play it discharges. Though we may at times succeed in silencing its convulsive clamor, this “lived experience” cannot be sufficiently enclosed by the prohibition nor by a sanctioned interplay of prohibition and transgression whereby the latter is constitutively “removed” from the practice of everyday life. Though we may try to “civilize” laughter, eschewing the impropriety of excessive, extravagant, vulgar laughs and shunning laughter amid occasions whose solemnity or seriousness deem laughter unseemly, the limits of moderation and the forums of propriety that we prescribe to laughter can never contain this disruptive experience entirely. Laughter could never suffer the fate that sacrifice has in the modern world, for prohibitions against laughter—for example, when nineteenth century physiognomist George Vasey offered his vision of utopia as a world without laughter¹³—so frequently and so unwittingly render themselves vulnerable to the consumptive burst they seek to deny. Thus, we can never fully insulate the civilized, ordered domain of “profane life” from the disrepute of laughter. For laughter is intimately bound to our “pathological psychology” (VE 67). It is a definitive feature of humanity, and yet, it is a feature

¹³ See George Vasey, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*. London: J. Burns, 1877.

of the “lived experience” of humans that is—to humans and to humanity—compulsively unknown, even unknowable.

In his essay “An Extravagance of Laughter” (1985), Ralph Ellison reproduces a vernacular joke, known as the “laughing barrel” joke, that elucidates the contagion of laughter as mobilizing “the most vicious of vicious circles” in the context of racial inequality in America (192). The joke interrogates the dangers of African American laughter presupposed by the paranoia and prejudice of the dominant white class. It introduces us to a small town in the American South in which the rights of African Americans are so suppressed that their right to laugh in public places has been expressly forbidden, the dominant whites fearing the potentially threatening contagion of black laughter, alleging that blacks lack the fortitude to master their emotions. On the one hand, this widespread prejudice, espousing the notion that blacks cannot control their baser impulses, underscores an imperative of racist white society to prohibit black laughter; however, such a prohibition, apropos of the very content that emerges from the racist logic of the town’s whites (viz., that blacks cannot control themselves), necessarily destines itself to failure. In an effort to circumvent this impasse, the town devises the ludicrous idea of placing large wooden barrels bearing the label “For Colored” on street corners and at all the major thoroughfares. Should a black person fall into convulsions of laughter, he or she is to place his or her head inside one of these designated barrels. Here the peculiar coincidence of prohibition and transgression comes alive: when, for example, a laughing black man places his head upside-down in the barrel, his laughter may intensify, propagate, and redouble as he perceives the ridiculousness of his own image, inverted in a barrel on the street, his feet dancing about where his head should be. The laughter reverberating from the barrel may also catch passing whites in the contagion of its convulsion, such that figures of authority, such as politicians and priests,

along with blue collar members of the white working class, such farmhands, and even bootleggers and criminals may all fall into a kind of volatile “community” with the laughing black man. The hierarchic class gradations internal to white society as well as those marking racial boundaries become *suspended*. And yet, notwithstanding this relaxation of established social boundaries, the whites shaken in the hilarity echoing from the barrel occupied by the black man’s laughing head may come to realize or suspect, amidst peals of laughter, that the black man in the barrel laughs not solely at himself, but also *at them* and at their laughter. White paranoia about the alleged unruliness of African American behavior and psychology is relaxed or suspended in a cross-cultural convulsion *yet simultaneously concentrated, reinforced, magnified*. White anxiety about black laughter and the threat it poses to the racially-stratified order of things seems to quicken and intensify: whites’ attitudes towards blacks becomes even more obstinate and petulant even as this quickening of splenetic, racist angst emerges out of a experiential moment in which the established limits that subordinate African American life (and laughter) to the moral proprieties of whites *bursts*, a moment in which racial and class-oriented societal limits fall away in the opening of a reverberating space inhabited by a syncopated community of laughers. Not only do the measures taken to ensure that the laughter of the town’s black denizens does not disrupt the comings and goings of town-life fail to prevent such a disruption, but the prohibition against blacks’ laughter is precisely what leads to this disruption and to its intensification. The prohibition itself sets the stage for laughter to ensnare both blacks and whites of all classes in a convulsive communal unity in which the racial paranoia underpinning the prohibition both unhinges and (re)asserts itself, abolishing and renewing itself—almost (if not) simultaneously—amid the repetition of laughter’s bursts. The prohibition’s intensified

(re)affirmation and renewal effectively *coincides* with the repetition of a compulsive transgression of the ordered, racial boundary it outlines.

Bataille intimates a comparable *coincidence* of the laying down and lifting of the limit when he writes, “Laughter is an eviction of moral servitude. It implicates these limits at the same time” (G 237). Moreover, in the section of *Guilty* entitled “The Divinity of Laughter,” Bataille aphoristically captures—or, rather, exacerbates—the coincidence of laughter’s “suspension” by thematizing laughter as a “leap”:

Laughter is a leap from the possible to the impossible—and from the impossible to the possible. But it is only a leap: maintaining it would reduce the impossible to the possible—or *the inverse*. (G 90, original emphasis)

The feature of laughter that entails a slippage from “the possible to the impossible,” a movement of “backwardation” from the known back into the unknown that describes the movement of “sacred communication,” has not gone unrecognized by critics invested in Bataille’s work. Gerhard Poppenberg, for example, puts this aspect of the “leap” into most exact terms: “Laughter is the experience of the loss of the self” (n.p.). Indeed, the affinity laughter shares with an eruption of the imagined self-sufficiency of the subject and with a neutralization of the moral scruples that accompany the subject’s isolation and “clear consciousness” is what’s *most understandable* about Bataillean laughter. *That laughter disrupts understanding suits our understanding most*. But what of the leap’s curious, ostensibly coincident doubling back “into the possible”?

Perhaps, simply by asking this question, I am guilty of attempting to “maintain” the “leap,” risking the reduction of either the impossible to the possible or the possible to the impossible. But this is a risk that I am willing to take. For only in asking this question can we approximate what Bataille means when he writes, “In laughter, the limits are overcome in a

single point. But the condition of laughter is that their networks remain” (G 237). Despite laughter’s ostensible explosion of the limits that define “the possible” and that make possible “the exercise of thought,” Bataille’s insistence on laughter’s concurrent “leap” “from the impossible into the possible” suggests that consciousness might *come into being the moment of its collapse* into “unknowing,” though the latter, strictly speaking, cannot be “known,” for the appropriation of this flash of consciousness into the developmental kingdom of knowledge would betray the prestige of this experience *as unknowing*. Bataille returns to similar territory in “Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears”:

In fact, someone who laughs, in principle, does not abandon his science, but he refuses to accept it for a while, a limited time, he lets himself pass beyond it through the movement of laughter, so that what he knows is destroyed, but in his depths he preserves the conviction that, just the same, it isn’t destroyed. Someone who laughs preserves, deep within in him, what laughter suppresses, but that it only suppressed artificially if you will; likewise, laughter has the ability to suspend a closed logic. In fact, when we are in this domain, we are just as able to preserve our beliefs without believing in them, and reciprocally we can know that which we simultaneously destroy as known. (NLT 144)

It is as though, amidst peals of laughter, one were to abruptly espy one’s own fall into the night of “unknowing.” If upon awakening to the experience of unknowing one attempts to assimilate it, one loses one’s intimate access to this “lived experience,” forfeiting one’s awakening in the cessation of laughter which the active drive towards the acquisition of knowledge demands: “The laughter is suspended; it leaves the one who laughs in suspense. No one can sustain it; maintaining laughter is ponderous. Laughter is suspended, *affirms nothing, appeases nothing*” (G 90, my emphasis). One cannot bring anything back from the obscure realm of unknowing into which laughter delivers us; there are no blessings nor benefits, no souvenirs nor memorabilia, nothing to be salvaged nor “saved” from this amorphous night trembling out beyond the diurnal horizon that yields to the phenomenologist’s discerning gaze: “Short of dying

of [laughter], one leaves [it] like a thief (or as one leaves a girl after love), dazed, thrown back stupidly into the absence of death: into distinct consciousness, activity, and work” (IE 111).

Laughter simply illuminates *for an instant* this “riant spaciousness” (to borrow from Kristeva) suffused entirely by the *vacuum* of consciousness into which all consciousness finally devolves (in death), a sudden, unanticipated irradiation of consciousness amidst the formless space of an excess of consciousness (DL 283).

Insofar as its repetitive burst displaces the “closed logic” of prohibition and transgression, laughter bears witness to the notion that the speculative coherence of the discursive subject always already transgresses the limit of its differential identity, that the transgression of the limit of individuation instantiated by the prohibition *inheres* in the articulation of the limit. The “birth” of the subject of Bataillean consciousness, as such, emerges *in simultaneity with an originary “death” of consciousness*. The Bataillean subject, in one sense, would thereby appear radically opposed to the more established Lacanian subject whose primordial matrix arrives through an imaginary *méconnaissance* (misrecognition) of itself in the physically coordinated and psychically unified mirage of its mirror image, which the fragmented and uncoordinated human infant uses as a developmental “prosthesis” (Fink 71). Human subjectivity à la Bataille, on the other hand, originates in a contagious moment of *disequilibrium* “communicated” to the child via a moment of shared laughter with the mother: “Laughter is reducible—in general—to the laughter of recognition in a child—that evokes Virgil’s verse: *incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem*” (G 128, original emphasis).¹⁴ “For Bataille, then,” as Nidesh Latwo explains, “in the beginning was laughter” (80). The Bataillean subject comes into being in a moment of heterogeneous identification with the (m)other, paradoxically recognizing the limits

¹⁴ The translation of this verse that Bataille provides is as follows: “‘Begin, young child, to recognize your mother by your laughter’ but also ‘by her laughter’” (G 128).

of individuation in a moment of affective permeability or *fusion*.¹⁵ Rather than “assuming” the imaginary ideal-ego reflected in the mirror, the Batailleian subject originally emerges in a contagion which *defaces* the stable, coherent mien of this ideal, in a joyous compulsion which rails against the libidinal impulse to equate oneself with the uniform, masterful *other*. The stage of the subject’s eventual achievement of a discrete, differential identity in discursive, dialectical relation to the other is thus, according to Bataille’s understanding, prepared by a moment of originary “openness” to the heterogeneity of “communication,” or, as Latwool describes, the Batailleian subject “is ‘always already’ open to the experience of transgression, insofar as it is precisely through such an originary transgression of limits that the communicative subject – ticklish as it is – emerges into being” (80).

3.3 Bataille’s Summit

The ultimate paradox of Bataille’s “philosophy of laughter” is that Bataille posits laughter at both “ends” of “the human pyramid,” inscribing the “lived experience” of laughter in the beginning *and* in the summit of human experience: “[A] burst of laughter is the only imaginable and definitively terminal result—and not the means—of philosophical speculation” (VE 177, 99). Indeed, in his return to the Bergson encounter in *Inner Experience*, Bataille confesses to having imagined, from the very inception of his obsessive interrogation of “the puzzle of laughter,” that a resolution to the eternal mysteries of this curious, ostensibly innocuous burst “*would of itself solve everything*” (IE 66, original emphasis). Bataille will even go so far as to claim—quite laughably yet not without an awareness of his claim’s risibility—a synonymy between bursts of laughter and the heights of human ontology itself: “What happens

¹⁵ We might do well here to recall Bataille’s rather astonishing depiction of fusion in *Guilty*: “Fusion introduces *another* existence in me (it introduces this *other* in me as *mine*, and at the same time as *other*)” (G 129, original emphases). The child’s originary recognition of itself would thus correspond to a recognition of its own heterogeneity apropos of its contradictory recognition of the other as simultaneously “me” and “other.”

in laughter is precisely the existence of man, it is the essence of man, that in man which escapes nature and challenges it” (G 238). This seemingly ludicrous claim crops up again and again in Bataille’s theoretical writing (though especially in his earlier works): “I’ve always recoiled before expiration: I’ve always been afraid of *what I was*: LAUGHTER ITSELF!” (G 80, original emphasis). Or, as Bataille writes in “The Labyrinth” (1936), “Laughter is . . . assumed by the totality of being” (VE 177). Mind you, in the latter instance, Bataille is not speaking simply of individual “beings,” neither “his” being, “my” being, nor “yours,” but “being itself, to the extent that it is the sum of existences at the limits of the night, [being] spasmodically shaken by the idea of the ground giving way beneath its feet” (VE 177). Such extravagances of thought appear to be but mad intoxications with the experience of laughter—which they are!—and yet, they also touch upon, as does the mad intoxication which is the “lived experience” of laughter itself, the very substance of Bataille’s ontology, laughable though it is.

Indeed, according to Bataille, laughter is what is “most human” about our experience: “Roughly, even, *nothing is less natural than laughter.*” (G 237, original emphasis). The paradox of this formulation of human ontology lies in the fact that, as a cachinnating contestation of transcendence (“To destroy transcendence there has to be laughter”), laughter may appear to be a “*natural fact*” (ON 55; G 237, original emphasis). “[I]n appearance,” writes Bataille, “[laughter] returns man to nature and deprives him of his autonomy—normally assimilated into the exercise of reason” (G 237). In particular, immoderate, uncontrollable laughter, exalting feral cries rather than meaningful articulations, may seem especially bestial in the lack of rational composure and control over repressed, disorderly stirrings it implies. Excessive laughter’s enmity with the operations of reason and productive labor would, thereby, seem to suggest that this experience delivers the subject caught in its convulsive grasp back into the serpentine night

of animality. As Denis Hollier affirms, “What it utters is not a phenomenon of reason but a material emission charged with the heterogeneous insubordination of base matter” (AA 81). Laughter must, therefore, be thought of in a long series of excretions, including vomit, drool, afterbirth, sperm, spit, piss, shit, etc. (AA 81). And, indeed, Bataille draws an explicit connection between bursts of laughter and baser bodily functions:

Laughter as a spasmodic process of the oral orifice’s sphincter muscles, analogous to that of the sphincter muscles of the anal orifices during defecation, is probably the only satisfying interpretation—in both cases taking account of the primary role in human existence of such spasmodic processes with excretory function. When it comes to outbursts of laughter, we must thus admit that the nervous discharge that could have been normally released by the anus (or by the adjacent sexual organs) is being released by the oral orifice. (qt. in Menninghaus 355)

Like the excremental fluids of abjection, laughter, without question, menaces “the world that creates and preserves”: its burst seizes upon its subject(s) like an overwhelming urge, abandoning them to the unleashing of a storm of wild roars which threaten the antiseptic world of acquisition and duration, giving free play to unproductive drives constitutively refused by workday regulations (TR 49). But notwithstanding laughter’s manifest affinity with the fluids of abjection and thus with the excremental emblems of animality, Bataille assures us that “there is nothing more contrary to animality than laughter” (AS II 90).

We can approximate Bataille’s meaning here if we return to the issue of human verticality, that “decisive reversal of animal existence” which is so instrumental to the development of a recognizably human world (VE 89). This alienation of the bestial fury of animal being, an alienation which undergirds the entire historical development of a “spiritual” modality of being, is, according to Bataille, reducible to an “inversion of the anal orifice” (VE 89). The origin of our “spiritual” capacities lies in a radical metamorphosis of the hominid hindquarters: the hideously expressive rear-ends of our simian ancestors becomes secreted away

deep within the flesh as we raised ourselves from all fours. In this suppression of “the decorative riches of the excremental extremity of apes,” we gave up sniffing each other’s nether regions and repressed our aggressive drives and baser bodily functions (VE 89). As Freud conjectured in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, this “organic repression” of the baser functions of physiology introduced distance between such functions and the more dignified functions of epistemology through the concurrent elevation of ocular perception to the point of primacy given unto smell amongst most mammalian species. But Bataille is not willing to let go of the obscene, delirious forces discharged from the ape’s anal protuberance. Rather, he speculates that the “obscure vital thrusts” blossoming from the ape’s ass “were suddenly thrown back in the direction of the face,” which had acquired something of the ape’s excretory efflorescence and expressivity in “the strange faculty of sobbing and bursting into laughter” VE (89). Thus, laughter testifies to the endurance of repressed animal energies, while, nevertheless, remaining indissociable from the all-too-human achievement of verticality. The whiff of anality unleashed in laughter’s burst(s), thereby, speaks to the human subject’s incapacity to roundly authenticate a “*utilitarian* justification for his actions” (VE 117, original emphasis).

The trace of animal excess that lingers in our laughter ultimately testifies to Bataille’s supposition that laughter entails the dynamic power to identify with what it denies. If laughter is a sonorous laceration of natural existence, its association with the nonproductive drives of an alienated animality attests to a disorienting accordance with what laughter lacerates: “To relate to what one denies is precisely laughter, it is dislocation, dissolution” (G 232). Or, rather, “Relating *what I am* to what I deny, I can only laugh, break myself apart, dissolve myself” (G 103, my emphasis). If “what I am” is a questioning of what I am and “what I deny” in so questioning is the given condition of my “natural” existence, then laughter—in *relating* the

questioning of my own nature that *I am* to the very “nature” called into question by my “being”—would seem to enlist nature in the questioning of nature. In bursts of laughter, *nature interrogates itself*: “I don’t know what it is that is gaping and mortally wounded in in laughter; the violent suspension that nature does to itself” (G 92). Laughter is the intimate echo of *nature contesting nature*. What we hear in the reverberating “presence” of laughter’s peals is nature’s self-questioning, nature’s calling-into-question nature’s continuity and, as such, nature’s self-rending laceration of nature: “Nature opposes nature through me. I only question nature on the condition of being *nature*” (G 93, original emphasis). Such an *intimate* contestation of nature is something that profane consciousness cannot avow, for such an unchecked, compulsive pursuit of autonomy requires a contestation of nature that does not presuppose the exemption of the isolated subject from the interrogation. Thus the “inextricable nature” of laughter cannot be dissociated from the involuntarity from which its burst(s) necessarily issues: the intimate contestation of nature must be commensurate with a contestation of *one’s own being* (G 130). It materializes only via a gesture whose consumptive fury *insists* upon itself with the intensity of such *immediacy* that the possibility of self-consciously presuming enduring distinctions between the subject and object (of contestation) is vehemently disavowed: “If I want to contest nature, I must lose myself in it, not isolate myself in my function (like a ‘service’ or a tool)” (G 93). Laughter is the intimate sound of this loss, this losing-oneself in the entropic viscera of nature that is, paradoxically, commensurate with a human triumph over nature: “Nature vanquished, the man that dominates it has the power to relate to that which he dominates: he has the power to laugh” (G 103). When we burst into peals of laughter, we become *nothing but* this bursting sound of nature *denaturalizing itself*. It is thus only insofar as *I am reduced to nothing* (but this

meaningless, reverberating sound) that the “being” formerly known as “I” experiences—for an inappropriate moment—*the autonomy that I am*.

And so Bataille raises laughter to the summit of human thought and experience. In laughter, however, the conquering of the summit becomes indistinguishable from *falling*: far from a final state of absolute quiescence achieved via the resolution of difference between the subject and its object, the experience at the summit entails a blaring osmosis of obverse determinations. The distinction between ascension and decline *fuses*, whereby, “demand[ing] heterogeneity,” each movement is introduced into the other with which it identifies at the same time as the other remains *irreducibly other*. Laughing, we “suddenly [arrive] at a harrowing fall into heaven” (qt. in AA 133). Indeed, a whole science of sequenced, objective realities and reliable, discursive oppositions—life vs. death, high vs. low, up vs. down, self vs. other, subject vs. object, depth vs. surface, pain vs. pleasure, assimilation vs. excretion, and, finally, *arche* vs. *telos*—*sinks*. If, as Lucio Angelo Privitello contends, “[a]nimality and laughter make up the poles of self-consciousness that do not steal away at the limits when faced with the restoration of intimacy,” and if animality describes a world of being in which each being is “*in the world like water in water*,” then the summit of human “being” (*qua* bursts of laughter) is a world of being in which beings suddenly sink, like sugar in water. What Privitello misses, however, is that this sinking at the summit of Bataillean “being” is also inscribed in the origins of this “being” as its *sinking into being*. Such is the laughing, laughable ontology that shrieks, “*I am a cry of joy!*”, derived from the “impossibility” and excess of a “festival” of thought that claims to do nothing more nor other than *burst* (into laughter) (MM 80, original emphasis).

4 CONCLUSION

A child stands beside his grieving mother above the sepulchered earth, spellbound by the putrid remnant of his father lying supine in a grave before his feet as larva writhe about the body's insides and the maggot's insatiable kiss licks seething life from the entropic excess slipping away from the rank brow of the vanishing face (of the human order). Surrendering to the overwhelming contagion of an asphyxiating horror, the child laughs:

Laugh and laugh
 at the sun
 at the nettles
 at the stones
 at the ducks

at the rain
 at the pee-pee of the pope
 at mummy
 at a coffin full of shit

(qt. in Land xvi)

As Nick Land observes, this puerile laughter, whose excess and reverberation constitute the motivating energy and dramatic kernel of Bataille's poem "Rire," draws out an explicit association between bursts of laughter and the experience and psychology of mourning (xvi). Such an idiosyncratic convergence of conventionally disparate, emotive experiences might receive a helpful dose of clarification through reference to the paradigmatic characterization of mourning that Freud delivered in "Mourning and Melancholia" by contrasting it with melancholia. Mourning, according to Freud, is an emotive state of psychic deprivation resulting from the loss of a specific object of emotional and/or libidinal investment, such as a loved one. The work of mourning functions as a normalizing psychic process whereby the subject incrementally develops the ability to confront and eventually accept the reality of loss by virtue of the ego's libidinal reinvestment in the world of external objects. The point of Freud's

relevance to Bataille's "Rire," however, is the point at which the mourner passes from a state of psychic deadlock into a "mania" whereby the "total amount of counter-investment" resultant from the suffering of loss "become[s] available" (321). Freud writes, "The manic person also unmistakably demonstrates his liberation from the object from which he had been suffering by pouncing on his new object-investments like a ravenous man" (321). It is through the movement of such a profuse voiding of affective energy that the ego must conquer the emotional impoverishment left behind by the loss of the object.

Bataille's "Rire" suggests a comparable trajectory "from inhibition to mania" (Brennan 53). But whereas Freud's manic mourner voraciously invests her libidinal energies in a new object, Bataille's poem represents mourning as a "lived experience" of "ecstatic self-loss" unfettered from all psychic investment in discrete objects whatsoever: the child's laughter glides over the surface of an ostensibly arbitrary series of disparate objects—many of which, being inanimate, lack entirely in any kind of potentiating comic value—whose interrelation emerges only as a consequence of the laughter which traverses them (Brennan 53). Doubtless, however, the principle "object" of interest in the poem is the one represented by the concluding image, which comically renders the synonymy of corpses and turds that perennially (re)appears in Bataille's writing: "It is clear . . . that the nature of excrement is analogous to that of corpses" (AS II 79). After all, the occasion of the poem is the coincidence of the funerary and risible occasions.

Like the fluids of abjection, the corpse, heaving with virulent colonies of grubs and eggs, confronts us with "the luxurious truth of death": namely, that death is "the youth of life," the latter being made possible only insofar as the graveyard swells, only insofar as "the spent organisms give way to new ones which enter the dance with new forces" (AS II 79-85). The

corpse exposes “the repulsive condition of life,” whereby life corresponds to an interminable movement of upheaval indistinguishable from the movement of death that annihilates it: “[L]ife is a product of putrefaction, and it depends on both death and the dungheap” (AS II 80). A “perpetual explosion” or constant passage (“the opposite of a state”), “life is effusion; it is contrary to equilibrium, to stability” (AS II 84-5; G 129). *Life is disequilibrium*—a continuous movement of alterity and flux, an infinitely open gap alive with immutable mutability, a “luxury of which death is the highest degree” (TR 47).

Confronted with the horrifying continuity of life and death, the child of “Rire” laughs: “It is because life is pure surplus that the child of ‘Rire’ . . . is gripped with convulsions of horror that explode into peals of mirth, as uncompromising as an orgasm” (Land xvi). But the revolting “truth” of life is not simply the object of the child’s laughter, for just as the child’s uninhibited encounter with this “truth” incites the child’s bursting (into laughter), this bursting is itself an expressive exudation of “pure surplus.” Thus, as Land observes, the child does not laugh at death (i.e., his laughter does not take death itself as its object), but rather “[l]aughter is communion with the dead, since death is not the object of laughter: it is death that finds voice when we laugh” (xvi). Peals of laughter burst forth an eventual instant reminiscent of a last gasp before the void, where life greets the imperceptible imminence of its exhaustion and *death speaks through the mouth of the living*. Meanwhile, the human body, its stable figure set ablaze in a rictus verging on paralysis, becomes marked by the convulsive insignia of a life-in-excess whose undying inscription is worn paradigmatically by cadavers. In laughter as in death, the body *embodies* the *living stain* of a “pure surplus” to which all life is always already, always and forever fated.

Bataillean laughter laughs *at* this stained fate. In “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” Bataille elucidates this profoundly tragic dimension of laughter:

It is a question of the death of an other, but in such cases, the death of the other is always the image of one’s own death. One can take delight in this only on one condition: the dead man, who is another, supposedly agreeing, the dead who the laughing drinker will one day be in his turn, will have no other meaning than did the first one. (HDS 291)

Bataillean “delight,” in the final instance, arrives through an unreserved confrontation with one’s own inescapable fate. It is, indeed, at the profoundly tragic condition of his own human finitude that Bataille laughs. In an illustrative analysis of the passage quoted above, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen delivers a stunning articulation of the tragic, existential ramifications of Bataillean laughter that rivals Land’s stylized representation of the laughter of “Rire” as a “communion with the dead”: “We do not laugh . . . because we are not dead. We laugh, very much to the contrary, because we are dead, because we are, laughing, ourselves the dead man – namely, no one who constitutes an *ipse*, a ‘oneself’” (164, original emphasis). Nancy offers a comparable idea in describing the head through which laughter laughs as a laughing skull: “[T]he laughing head could be a skull’s, and it must be The skull is not laughing at anything . . . ; rather it should be stated in the transitive mode: the skull laughs immortality, it confers upon immortality the burst of a presence that slips away from it” (“Laughter, Presence” 377). A burst of laughter is itself nothing if not the unforeseen presentation of a slipping away (of presence), a sudden becoming-present of a de-presentation of presence, like the incarnation of a “nocturnal flame,” where shadow and flame are one (“Laughter, Presence” 379). The “lived experience” of this sudden bursting, thereby, forecloses our capacity to assign (it) absolute value, whether positive or negative: “Laughter is neither presence nor absence,” explains Nancy. “It is the offering of a presence in its own disappearance. It is not given but offered: suspended on the limit of its own

presentation” (“Laughter, Presence” 383). Laughter is an irruptive “presentation” of loss—of control and stability, of futurity and duration, of gravity and ground: its very event, its bursting, loses itself in its coming, the event of (in)coming loss, “the *coming* preceding all presence, beyond all presence” (“Laughter, Presence” 384, original emphasis). Like the silence of being struck dumb with awe, laughter presents the unrepresentable, manifesting what language is powerless to identify, offering its burst *qua* the unrepresentable withdrawal of presence that is either too little or too much to be harnessed by the ostensibly illimitable sweep of the signifier.

Can we even say with assurance that laughter (positively) *exists*? Nothing is less certain. Just as the claim “silence exists” denies the substance of what it claims, the claim “laughter exists” requires that one not laugh, that one not be laughing, that laughter be *in absentia*. Laughter’s burst is the oblivion of the discursive apparatus that enfranchises the possibility of existential valuation—the oblivion which every meaningful, productive human gesture, which the entire economic exercise of human posturing—the economy of language, labor, and thought—struggles to suppress or, at the very least, sublimate into an operative grid or socio-symbolic reality. Thus, in the final instance, we can say nothing definitive of this “lived experience. We can only “let it present—lose—itself” (“Laughter, Presence” 383).

What presents—loses—itself in peals of laughter is, first and foremost, the sound of a voice. More specifically, it is the sound of a voice of heterogeneity, a voice heterogeneous to itself: it is the sound of a voice *unhinged* from the voice of which it is the sound, the sound of a voice syncopating the vanishing of the voice that it is. As Nancy writes, “Laughter laughs a voice without the qualities of a voice” (“Laughter, Presence” 388). Laughter’s burst is the voice’s passage into the vacancy of voice, an offering of voice to the fall through the nothingness of voice. *The voice of which laughter is the offering is the evanescence of the voice.* Laughter is

nothing but an offering of this voice of loss, the offering of the voice in its loss, and the subject caught in its spell is *nothing but* this giving voice to loss. Or, as Maurice Blanchot enigmatically writes, in laughter bursts “*the very space of dying*” (“The Laughter of the Gods” 182, my emphasis). One can, indeed, *die laughing*, so they say, choking on one’s very own irrepressible joy—a possibility that illuminates laughter’s burst as a furtive instant in which living and dying *coincide*, an instant in which the living share voice with the dead. Laughter’s bursting offers space to the shared diffraction of a dying voice, for a sharing of the voice of dying. *Laughing, we speak the incomprehensible glossolalia of dying women and men.*

In the final instance, the “impossible thought” (“to laugh is to think”) bears witness to the fact that this “I” who is thinking—i.e., who is engaging in an activity whose “exercise” corresponds to a “suspension” of loss or expenditure, a suspension, in short, of death—is, in spite of its thinking, the *plaything* of what thinking suspends. But the power of the “impossible thought” is in the reversal: laughing at its own inevitable fate (*qua* thought), it “breathes in the power of death” (qt. in DM 71). And thus in the intimate instant of this last breath of thought, it is as though “I”—laughing—“commune” with the laughing dead, with this dead man whom we *know* only in a laugh, yet whom we think we know in a name: “Bataille,” at the end of whose labyrinthine line of thought *I now laugh* “as perhaps one ha[s] never laughed . . . laid bare, *as if I were dead*” (IE 34, my emphasis).

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