


6-2008

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Apple Igrek

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Georges Bataille is known for being complex and multifaceted: influenced by Christian mystics as well as Hegelians and Marxists, his work is also linked with that of the surrealists and existentialists of his own mid-20th century France as well as the post-structuralists – in particular the *Tel Quel* collaborators – who followed in his wake. It would be astonishing, then, if Bataille's thinking were *not* conflated with precisely those movements and those ideas with which he has so much in common, despite the fact that we should refuse to expect this. Much of Bataille's work was devoted to the ambivalent overlapping of transgression and its reified containment, and this in part explains why such a large number of his interpreters fall prey to reducing the former category to the latter. This article is therefore an attempt to disentangle, to whatever extent possible, the transgressive from the contained. I will do this on four accounts: postmodern economics, mystical union, sexual degradation, and historical dialectics.

Michael Richardson has proposed that it is today's consumer society, as opposed to the Aztec rituals which Bataille studied, that embodies a principle of extreme waste.¹ Consumption, in the early stages of capitalism, was subordinated to the accumulation and rationalization of wealth. The renewal of profit and its constant reinvestment in the productive apparatus is the ultimate calling for the ascetic bourgeoisie. This implies a worldly activity which eradicates pleasure, extravagance, and irrational spontaneity: "In fact, the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudæmonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture."² Late capitalism, however, is no longer restrained by the values of thrift or self-control. This is true on several fronts: the indeterminacy of need, the spectacle of waste, and the inherent gambling of supply-side economics. For the commodity in its abundance, according to Guy Debord, use-value has ceased to be an issue.³ We do not create products to satisfy our needs; we create products to create the need for those products. An absolute reversal in the restricted economy of bourgeois capitalism has given rise to the renewal and perpetual justification of need in its ongoing destruction. The renewal of need is thus a metaphysical crisis with no end. But this at least supports an economy of chance which dismantles the opposition between luxury and non-luxury: "Clearly, it is only in a regime of luxury, where everything is superfluous, that demand cannot be assigned and becomes open to possibilities that are less and less predictable."⁴ It might therefore be said that post-industrial capitalism has finally turned away from its Protestant beginnings. Weber's analysis cannot be applied to a society which is no longer dominated by utility, prudence, or self-restraint. Bataille's critique, that man has been reduced to an objective *thing*, is equally irrelevant. Most troubling of all, an anti-bourgeois defense of capitalism rests squarely on Bataillean principles: waste, expenditure, unpredictability, potlatch, and risk-taking.⁵

The above assessment is ultimately incorrect. Goux distinguishes himself from Bataille by claiming that political economy has *always* served to undermine the utility of goods. But if this is true, then Bataille's general economics should apply evenly, except for historical adjustments, to all stages of capitalism. We should not say that Bataille's analysis falls short at one stage but not another if anti-bourgeois economics is nothing new. Furthermore, it is simply false to claim that Bataille was oblivious to the radical denormatization of use-value in classical political economy. Besides contradicting Bataille's statements on early capitalism in the *Accursed Share*,⁶ Goux's thesis neglects the fundamental premise of general

economics, that mankind's economic activity necessarily pursues unlimited ends.⁷ The question isn't so much *whether* we squander, but *how* we squander. We might also expect, if Bataille subscribed to an absolute division between the medieval and capitalist economies, that he would portray the religious works of the Middle Ages as devoid of all calculation. But however the glory of God was displayed in the Roman Church, a supernatural efficacy was presupposed.⁸ Indeed, the Protestant critique focused precisely on the value of ceremony, ritual, confession, aesthetics, good deeds, and superstition. The ensuing transformation in the regulation of conduct therefore had much less to do with an introduction to rational utility than with replacing one form of control with another: "It meant the repudiation of a control which was very lax, at that time scarcely perceptible in practice, and hardly more than formal, in favour of a regulation of the whole of conduct which, penetrating to all departments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced."⁹

In all times excess and the management of excess have coexisted. But we should be careful to conclude that one is equivalent to the other from an economic standpoint. Jean-Joseph Goux argues that political economy, and especially postmodern culture, has erased the distinction between the sacred and the profane: "If one remains on strictly economic ground, it is in truth impossible to separate productive consumption from unproductive squandering. Ethical criteria alone could claim to make this distinction."¹⁰ This assumes that the alienation of mankind has finally completed itself. Bataille, however, would never accept this position. Even as he remains on the economic ground which he interrogates, Bataille affirms that the totalizing domination of modern society, the reduction of mankind to a technical activity, is less than complete.¹¹ Should we now believe, in a developed capitalist economy, that the rational administration of social life has been superseded by unlimited, uncontrolled expenditure?¹²

Only if we assume that the total commodity, or the total spectacle, is the final realization of Bataille's immediacy. Goux himself suggests otherwise when he uses phrases like "abstract aestheticization" and "ideology of consumption."¹³ Power is obviously at stake here, and this works against his claim that the postmodern spectacle is a Bataillean transgression of use-value.¹⁴ Transgression, for Bataille, presupposes a limit to be crossed. It is a lived experience in which utility and its violation are in constant tension; they are the maintained tension which Hollier speaks of in his essay "The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille."¹⁵ This tension is itself the result of a hostile relationship to nature, and for this reason it cannot be equated with a fantasy of experience which lifts all prohibitions. If ours is

an age of depthless images, through which the Other is wholly produced,¹⁶ the world and the self are fully assimilated,¹⁷ and the historical has virtually disappeared,¹⁸ then we live without any surpassing of limits, prohibitions, or obstacles.¹⁹ This is why, in his conclusion to "Expenditure and the General Economy," Michael Richardson argues that Bataille's theory of transgression cannot be reduced to an alienating spectacle of waste: "In point of fact, capitalism does not escape the logic of Bataille's dialectic: it does spend and it spends quite as uselessly, quite as prodigally as any other society. What is missing from capitalism is not the fact of expenditure but any sense of a joyous surpassing of limits."²⁰ To the extent that we are drawn to a seductive mingling of opposites, by virtue of which the simulacrum of violence puts an end to violence,²¹ a vital prohibition remains intact. We lose ourselves in the commodity, but a calculating power is still at work; for we do not lose ourselves in the immanence of others. We do not acknowledge, in the production of all things, the passions which unite us in death and dying. If political economy has always encouraged loneliness and isolation, then we cannot argue that Bataille's expenditure is the endorsement of an ahistorical, post-bourgeois aestheticization of social life.²² This is why Roger Caillois, with whom Bataille collaborated, distinguished various forms of excess expenditure.

One form of self-release that cannot be reduced to a simple individuality is the mystical point of communication. In this regard, Bataille is fond of quoting the evangelical law: "Man must die that he may live." It is not our attachment to the self which raises us to the heights of mystical union with God. We are transformed in God, we are in solitude with God, to the extent that we are in submission to His will. We must therefore abandon ourselves to the will of God: "We can ascertain if we are in the right spiritual state by whether we would have bliss and joy in abandoning and taking leave of our own natural will and in going out of ourselves entirely in all those things which God wills us to endure."²³ This Eckhartian doctrine requires an absolute unity of the will. It is by the desires of the flesh, as opposed to the highest powers of the soul, that we are distracted from the divine will of God. In place of these desires we ought to submit to God and love one thing only: His eternal, uncreated goodness. As long as we are motivated by the desires of the flesh, instead of the will of God, we are necessarily divided against ourselves. Hence we are tempted by worldly things even as our essence is constituted by the unchanging love of God. It is unthinkable, then, that we might restore ourselves to God without transcending finite limitations and desires. The will of the flesh, which is given to a multiplicity of transitory, external things, cannot be reconciled to a uni-

fied truth. When we are consoled by God, when we are poor in spirit, we are likewise transformed by His infinite goodness. That is to say, we are necessarily taken outside of ourselves beyond space and time: "Where is my final goal, toward which I should ascend? It is beyond all place."²⁴ To the extent that we are determined by creatures, from which all suffering arises, it is impossible to surrender ourselves to an unbegotten-begetting of love.²⁵ Temporal goods are merely a distraction to this magnificence and beatitude of God. Accordingly, then, the mystics advise that we should not concern ourselves with self-interest but become empty so that we might ascend to His overflowing goodness. As for Silesius, we die so that we may truly live: "Because through death alone we become liberated, I say that it is the best of all the things created."²⁶

God, in weakness, is more powerful than death. Christ upon the cross is the weakness that we should bear within ourselves. It is not so much that the mystics despise life, but in transcending the self to the point of suffering they are bound to God. The Christian mystic suffers for righteousness' sake, which is to say that the meaning of suffering is transformed: suffering for the sake of God is to enter into an exalted state of bliss. Suffering is the will of God, but the will of God remains unaffected by external loss. Detachment from external loss, from the misfortunes of *this* world, is to will suffering without suffering. As much as Bataille was influenced by Hegel, Nietzsche, Weber, Mauss, and the Marquis de Sade, it would be wrong to suggest that his various criticisms of Christian mysticism were unilateral, abstract, or one-sided. His views, to the end, were deeply informed by Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Ávila, and Saint John of the Cross. As Peter Tracey Connor has indicated, many of Georges Bataille's terms have been appropriated from the mystics: the point, abyss, desert, ecstasy, intoxication, nudity, laying bare, incandescence, dramatization, abandonment, meditation. The will to suffering is likewise an important aspect to all of Bataille's thinking: "If one proceeds right to the end, one must efface oneself, undergo solitude, suffer severely from it, renounce being *recognized*: to be as though absent, insane over this, to undergo things without will and without hope, to be elsewhere."²⁷ The will is taken to the limit of suffering which abolishes precisely that which enables this suffering: *the will to power ultimately destroys itself.*²⁸ The subject is overcome and affected by its experience, by its absorption into non-knowledge. In this process the cohesion of knowledge is torn apart: the human intellectual apparatus cannot assimilate, subdue, or explain a shattering of the individual which is pure ecstasy, i.e., the point of suffering which is indistinguishable from divine love. Bataille therefore shares with mystics such as Pseudo-

Dionysius a will to suffering, a will to self-destruction, and a will which cannot be recognized or apprehended by the human intellect: "For the truth is that everything divine and even everything revealed to us is known only by way of whatever share of them is granted. Their actual nature, what they are ultimately in their own source and ground, is beyond all intellect and all being and all knowledge."²⁹

There is, nonetheless, a knowable horizon. The seal of God is complete goodness, and as such is the supreme cause of all things. This implies a real existence. It is possible that the reality of God transcends every category of being, but this is not to say that God is equivalent to non-being. By creating all things it is inevitable that God cannot be explained in terms of being or non-being, but only as a kind of superabundance which is infinitely good. For this reason the passing things of this earth should not affect us. The goodness of God is beyond space and time, but it is no less a supreme power which consoles us in everything: pain, affliction, disappointment, emotional distress, and hardship. We are the creatures of God, we belong to God, and we participate in His goodness whensoever we abandon ourselves to his unchanging will. Bataille, as might be expected, will argue that the unknown has been surreptitiously linked to the known. A fundamental identification has likewise been formed, and the self is demolished in order to be reconstituted on a higher level; that of timeless perfection. In this respect inner experience and mystical experience diverge: the latter is a category of thought or subjectivity which ultimately satisfies our will to knowledge.³⁰ One experience, as opposed to the other, provides us with a calculated answer to passion, a hidden obstacle to the unknowable depths of nature and ourselves: "By *inner experience* I understand that which one usually calls *mystical experience*: the states of ecstasy, of rapture, at least of meditated emotion. But I am thinking less of *confessional* experience, to which one has had to adhere up to now, than of an experience laid bare, free of ties, even of an origin, of any confession whatever. This is why I don't like the word *mystical*."³¹

The difference formulated here isn't merely epistemic. The good person who participates in the eternal reproduction of goodness is emptied of creatures and filled with a pure light. In this way the will of man and the will of God are united in a timeless fashion, distinct from the internal struggles of flesh, embodiment, temptation, and suffering. The mystical experience is divine agony, undoubtedly, but is moreover the relinquishment of self to the point of an absolute separation between good and evil. All of the evils of this world do not reach or penetrate the divine heavens.³² God does not suffer. God is not afflicted by pain or evil, but eliminates fear and anguish

in His followers. For this reason Bataille's theory of transgression should not be confused with a transcendence of being which is strictly demarcated from worldly imperfection. The sacred realm, for Bataille, is not distinct from that which horrifies us. Hypostatizing the good as a transcendental power is a calculated renunciation of self: "At some moment or another I must either abandon myself to chance or keep myself under control, like the religious vowed to continence. The intervention of will, the decision to keep clear of death, sin, and spiritual anguish, makes nonsense of the free play of indifference and renunciation. Without such free play, the present instant is subordinated to preoccupation with the time to come."³³

The Marquis de Sade's philosophy is dominated by a single principle: *affirm sovereignty*. There are no moral limits to sovereignty because all limits, from a demythologized perspective, are illusory. It might therefore be argued that sovereignty is the overcoming of boundaries, especially those which have themselves been determined by human weakness. Morality, religion, and social regulation are each derived from the human disposition which cowers before Nature. Their inventions are purely fantastic, and the sovereign individual seeks to undermine them at every opportunity. It should come as no surprise, then, to observe the most extraordinary tastes put on display and defended in the writings of de Sade. For every desire arises from the inner constitution of an individual person, from a combination of the senses and the imagination. To satisfy one's desire is a purely subjective phenomenon; it is the fulfillment of those drives and impulses which have been provided to us by Nature.³⁴ In a certain sense, sovereign pleasure is nothing else than the consummation of desire regardless of moral restrictions. But the libertine is not interested in *all* pleasures: he seeks out only the depraved, immoderate, horrific ones: "If 'tis the filthy thing which pleases in the lubricious act, then certainly the more filthy the thing, the more it should please, and it is surely much filthier in the corrupted than in the intact and perfect object."³⁵

It follows from this that nothing is so degrading or repulsive that it might hinder a sovereign's taste for criminal passion. There are absolutely no boundaries to pleasure. It is not uncommon for the Sadean hero to drink urine, swallow excrement, or have his anus sewn tight with a sharp needle and spool of cobbler's thread. The filthiest sexual acts are recommended, profanation is ineluctable, and the infliction of pain, to either victim or libertine, is omnipresent. We mustn't suppose that these aberrations in taste are intrinsically vile, for they depend upon our individual constitutions, our faculties and affections, which are themselves perfectly natural. It is likewise a fallacy to infer moral consequences from the majority perspective: if an object is found to be disagreeable to the largest number of peo-

ple, and it is only a few individuals who are attracted to it, this tells us nothing about its inherent goodness.³⁶ In the Marquis's universe, everything is permitted. The rightness of an action is made acceptable by its very existence: there is not a single thing, object, or action which is contrary to Nature. But are we thus any closer to explaining why it is that the libertine is attracted to crime, murder, rape, and all things repulsive? This question leads us to the heart of sovereign debauchery and what Jean Paulhan has described as the Marquis de Sade's inexplicable secret.

The secret – if I may say so – is that the Marquis is a masochist. What is broached here is a point of convergence: the laws of pleasure ultimately yield to a cessation of feeling, to an absolute egoism which is unrestrained in its destruction of limits. Insofar as the ego is its own concrete limit, it must be destroyed. Absolute egoism is just that process of negation enjoined by the sovereign attitude: “[I]t is the act of a soul which, having destroyed everything within itself, has accumulated an immense strength which will completely identify itself with the act of a total destruction which it prepares.”³⁷ This act or process of annihilation culminates in a philosophy of indifference. It is, perhaps, the attitude of indifference which finally realizes the sadistic impulse: the victim's torment coincides exactly with the voluptuary's pleasure. To the extent that sadistic crimes take pleasure in absolute egoism, in the confines or freedom of solitude, it is essential that the sovereignty of pleasure remains numb to the suffering of others. The libertine affirms a perpetual state of warfare in which all of us are born “isolated, envious, cruel, and despotic.”³⁸ Under these conditions it would be impossible, without a lessening of pleasure, to have empathy for those who are tortured and persecuted. A moral deception, such as guilt or human solidarity, is a mediated comfort which lacks the intensity of crime, blasphemy, and erotic cruelties. The scream of a victim only proves her abject isolation in a world of disorder. The pain, however, is not unbearable. As Roland Barthes writes in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*: “The scream is the victim's mark: she makes herself a victim because she chooses to scream; if, under the same vexation, she were to ejaculate, she would cease to be a victim, would be transformed into a libertine.”³⁹ This explains why the victim's frenzy is necessarily conjoined to the criminal's: they are each reacting, albeit differently, to the same monstrosity of a world. The sovereign embraces that which most of us, as victims, decry. To the extent that absolute egoism is a mode of apathy which embraces the isolation of all individuals, it will always be viewed as a principle of sadistic violence by those who are its victims. But how is it that sadism merges with masochism? And why is such a phenomenon, at least for the Marquis de Sade, dependent upon a

dialectical relation with abject eroticism?

It is certain that the Sadean hero is self-centered. It is equally certain that his heroes exceed, or attempt to exceed, the preliminary demarcations of self-centeredness by an explosion of barriers. Absolute egoism is the rationalistic method to such an explosion. This entails the destruction of empathy, for every moral affection is a consequence of weakness. Individuality is affirmed to the point of breaking off all mediated ties with others, and sexuality is viewed as sadistic in precisely this manner. What is essential is the meaning of pleasure qua criminal: it is its rationality which counts for everything. The transformation of the self in this process of becoming sovereign indicates a denial of others as well as oneself: the sadistic voluptuary eliminates every feeling which is a sign of losing control or being affected from the outside. "Never in his stories does sensual pleasure appear as self-forgetfulness, swooning, or abandon," writes Simone de Beauvoir. "The male aggression of the Sadean hero is never softened by the usual transformation of the body into flesh. He never for an instant loses himself in his animal nature; he remains so lucid, so cerebral, that philosophic discourse, far from dampening his ardor, acts as an aphrodisiac."⁴⁰ The absence of shared pleasures in the Sadean network of eroticism is the direct result of this rationalized self-control. The autonomy of the self-enclosed subject obviates any kind of debauchery which is vulnerable to outside affections: every point of contact with the other is a manifestation of strength, superiority, and dominance. Such dominance, however, is exercised over the sovereign as much as the victim. Despite the fact that neither of them share in common pleasures or experiences, they are equally determined by a systematic exploitation of the emotions. The inside is transformed into something dead, unfeeling, and criminal. While the victim's scream is one response to such a horrifying situation, the sovereign's ejaculation is another.

This implies that the sovereign undergoes the same torture as the victim, and that his cruelest pleasures are fundamentally sadomasochistic. The one who is powerful is set ablaze by an impersonal crime: we are all victims of Nature, but the affirmation of sovereignty transforms a passive sacrifice into the rationality of pleasure. To the extent that pleasure is derived from pain, from the affirmation of solitude, it is impossible to separate an erotic charge from its abject, impersonal circumstances. The form of crime is dialectically related to that which it overcomes and subsumes. If passion is the epitome of crime, it shows its defiance by an affirmation of the aged, ugly, hideous, foul, and detestable. The difference between moralists and voluptuaries, then, is structured by their respective constitutions: the former are attracted to moral pleasures while "the opposite is the

case for vigorous spirits who are far more delighted by powerful shocks imparted to what surrounds them than they would be by the delicate impressions the feeble creatures by whom they are surrounded inevitably prefer."⁴¹ At the pinnacle of crime the libertine becomes insensitive to all shocks. When this stage has been reached there is nothing to fear: the greatest sensual satisfactions are contingent upon radical transformations of being. To be enslaved is to act according to the impulsions of fear; to be liberated is to overcome every anxious state, to affirm the perpetual motion of Nature which culminates, for each of us, in the absurdity of death.

The denial of humanity implicit in our most destructive instincts is shared by the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille. A fear of death may prevent us from seeing any validity or universality in these instincts, but we are no less implicated by their devastating consequences.⁴² A total destruction of human limitations is foreshadowed by our own existence, and in this regard humanity is haunted by its inexorable disappearance. The Sadean lawbreaker is enticed by the obliteration of social barriers, and thus, paradoxically, affirms his own death. In this way a practice of indifference toward death, as well as any transformation of being, is conceived as a political weapon. The sovereign attains freedom by transcending his concrete relations with others. For Bataille, however, this transcendence cannot be self-consciously realized. We are apathetic, in a variety of senses, but we are also human, which is to say that we are necessarily anxious:

The figure of de Sade is certainly unsympathetic to people moved by need and by fear. The sympathies and the dreads – the cowardice too, one must add – which determine men's usual behaviour are diametrically opposed to the passions responsible for the sovereignty of the voluptuary. But this sovereignty is significant because of our wretchedness, and one would be mistaken not to see in the reactions of an anxious man – an affectionate and cowardly man – an immutable necessity; to put it precisely, pleasure itself demands dread as a proper reaction.⁴³

Sovereignty is therefore marked by failure.⁴⁴ We do not transgress the law without first giving it an objective content, and it is just this content which is motivated by fear and disgust. To overcome fear is to acknowledge its real negativity, which implies, at least for Kojève, a dynamic notion of history.

Kojève's reading of Hegel emphasizes the result of self-consciousness as a revelation of being which cannot be predetermined. This revelation is a synthesis of space and time, nature and history. On this model, history is founded upon the notion that spirit is nothingness: the subject is a temporal

nonbeing which is itself the nihilation of space, nature, and being. Hence, the revelation of being is mediated by its absence: history is a dynamic process of sublimating that which does not exist. Human desire is not a thing; it is a non-natural object which transcends the given reality of nature. But for self-consciousness to realize itself as a permanent lack of being, as a completely free individual to be recognized by others, it must first of all risk its biological existence in a life and death struggle.⁴⁵ It is only through this struggle that immediate self-consciousness overcomes itself and experiences the fear of death in a humanizing fashion. For Kojève,

Man became a Slave because he feared death. To be sure, on the one hand this fear reveals his dependence with respect to Nature and thus justifies his dependence with respect to the Master, who *dominates* Nature. But on the other hand, this same fear ... has a positive value, which conditions the Slave's *superiority* to the Master. Through animal fear of death the Slave experienced the dread or the Terror of Nothingness, of his nothingness.⁴⁶

Servile consciousness, in other words, is the beginning of actualized freedom. After having glimpsed his nothingness, the slave channels his fear into the concrete action of work. It is by means of this concrete action that the slave is able to understand himself in relation to others. Knowledge and action are therefore historically situated: the transformation of subjective certainty into human reality depends upon the concrete negations of both space and time.⁴⁷ Although it is true that nothingness is at the basis of history and time, self-consciousness, or spirit, is realized through its objective determinations.⁴⁸ By working on nature, self-consciousness reflects itself outside of itself in a historical progression which ultimately yields universal recognition. This final stage of absolute knowledge, which is perforce real and concrete, is a maintained form of nothingness, that is to say, of freedom. It is born from desire and reflected in work. But to the extent that work is work for another, in conformity to an idea which is hostile to the worker, the end of history which finally surpasses work cannot be predetermined.⁴⁹

For Kojève, human desire is structured by a value which raises it above simple, undivided immediacy. Freedom, the object of human desire, is mediated through action. The first action which distinguishes human nothingness from biological necessity is the fight for recognition. It is precisely this fight which marks the advent of deliberate evolution, that is to say, of historical self-consciousness. The project of human desire is thus conditioned by risk, confrontation, and struggle: "In other words, man's hu-

manity 'comes to light' only if he risks his (animal) life for the sake of his human Desire."⁵⁰ Without a doubt, this risk of immediate life for human life is teleological: it is done for the sake of creating something new, something which doesn't yet exist. Man's humanity is developed by an action which is itself the annihilation of present being in favor of future being. The fight for recognition, in this case, desires a fundamental substitution of values whereby animal life is subordinated to the establishment of autonomous existence. The risk, nevertheless, is real.⁵¹ It may also be intentional, but for exactly this reason it is related to an ideal: the teleological action which determines the risk is based upon a future goal which has yet to be created, and therefore cannot be said to exist in a predetermined fashion. For Kojève, since "Spirit is the identity of Being and the Subject, one can deduce from it the earlier opposition of the two and the process that overcomes that opposition. But starting with the initial opposition, one can deduce neither its being finally overcome, nor the process that leads to it."⁵²

The future is a phenomenological opening only to those who desire it, to those who seek to change the world. It is the result of a dialectical, historical negation (or set of negations), as opposed to being a given reality. The revelation of being therefore presupposes the very time which it supersedes. As a monument to its historical past, the reconciliation of space and time preserves their opposition: it is the concrete realization of nothingness which is embedded in nature, or static being. The overcoming of time is concrete, which is to say that it maintains exactly that which it annihilates: the destructive, unforeseeable consequences of history. If these consequences were fully determined in advance, from the beginning, then space and time could never be reconciled, for they would not have been opposed to one another. It is thus only by risking his life, by opposing himself to his natural, immediate instincts, that man achieves self-awareness and rises above "mere animal sentiment of self."⁵³

Kojève's phenomenological anthropology is one of action, history, and desire. It is a theory of dynamic change motivated by existential nothingness. Self-consciousness is no longer based upon a model of the understanding which is passively taken up by its object of contemplation.⁵⁴ To the contrary, human desire is an action which creates itself in opposition to the given reality of being: "[I]n order to *realize* itself, Desire must be related to a *reality*, but it cannot be related to it in a *positive* manner. Hence it must be related to it *negatively*. Therefore Desire is necessarily the Desire to *negate* the real or present given."⁵⁵ Human desire is a transformative absence, which is to say that it is related to being as the negation of being. For Kojève, the presence of absence is only realized to the extent that it re-

lates itself to its other, to that which serves as an obstacle to human self-consciousness. *There is no time without space.* There is no self-consciousness without the immediacy of being which is negated, transformed, and sublimated via work. Time exists for us, that is to say, by means of an action which creates the future, past, and present.⁵⁶ It is for this reason that Kojève argues that the real endures in time as its own remembrance: “[T]he *historical* movement arises from the Future and passes through the Past in order to *realize* itself in the Present or as temporal Present.”⁵⁷ To negate the real is to preserve it as memory. The actualization of time is the result of a humanizing process: man creates the future by transforming a given-reality into a recognizable concept, meaning, or essence. But at the end of history man’s concept of himself, and concept of the world, is finally completed: the abstraction of meaning from concrete reality is no longer determined by human negativity. Henceforth it is the comprehension of negativity which surpasses negativity. One might therefore contend that post-historical consciousness has regressed to the passive, contemplative stage of understanding; but in fact there is a critical difference between the first and last stages of human desire: the abstraction of meaning which completes history presupposes the radical negativity which it overcomes.⁵⁸ All action is the remembrance of a thing which ceases to be a thing: it is the transformation of being, or given-reality, into the real past. The object of post-historical consciousness is therefore a process of absorbing and assimilating historical action. The eternal truth is the absorption of history.

Nevertheless, a subterfuge remains and resides in the fact that post-historical negativity is useless.⁵⁹ The free activity which is a kind of destruction without destruction, or negation without negation, is the abiding recollection of nothingness. It is the remembrance of time. But this implies a collapse of the past and present into a constant, unrelenting awareness of one’s own mortality. Hence the subterfuge: “In order for man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living – watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-) consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being.”⁶⁰ Perpetual awareness of dialectical finitude is either a subterfuge or it requires one: it is merely an abstract ruse to the extent that it claims to exist as both consciousness and the death of consciousness. It is more than a ruse if it is not simply the consciousness or philosophy of death, but likewise the negativity which exceeds itself as the necessity for useless action, a necessity which is better described as a “malaise” when it reconciles truth and desire.⁶¹

The malaise that afflicts us at the end of history, when all things have been finished or performed, can only be explained by the urgent need to act even in a world which is fully assimilated to our humanizing, collective desires. We are not satisfied by satisfaction alone. The man of recognized negativity, who has everything to lose, will subject his negativity once more to the unforeseeable possibilities of death and nothingness: "Thus, once again, he discovers something "to do" in a world where, from the point of view of actions, nothing is done anymore. And what he has "to do" is to satisfy the portion of existence that is freed from doing."⁶² It may be true that the past is formed by the future and thereby determines the real quality of the real present.⁶³ The present, however, is no less revealing than the past: at each and every step it is the manifestation of time as a dialectical result.⁶⁴ Bataille writes that Hegel "did not know to what extent he was right," which means in this context that the real present, including that of post-historical consciousness, is conditioned by the very negativity from which it is derived.⁶⁵ There is no limit, human or otherwise, to the overcoming of man in favor of space, nature, and being. In every way possible the life and death of mankind will be forgotten, and at the end of history the revelation of being, or the coming together of space and time, will occur at precisely the moment when it is released from time altogether.

Inasmuch as sensuality and prohibition, luxury and non-luxury, are categories of human existence which cannot be separated, which necessarily overlap, there is a nearly invisible line which unites and distinguishes them. This does not imply, however, that transgression is fully explained by the historical context from which it arises. We are torn by the sensuality of a moment which amplifies self-identity to the *point* of overcoming itself: "I matter insofar as I am in the world, not as a stranger in closure and self-isolation, but as a particle of energy blending into the light. Thus I see that if I am to live, it is on the following tragic condition: that, relinquishing this life of mine, I give myself to that which knows nothing of me, to that which is exterior to myself."⁶⁶ Bataille's thought is counter-intuitive to those post-structuralists who privilege the reversibility of social categories by deconstructing the myth of an absolute outside.⁶⁷ By positing an exterior world indifferent to the exigencies of human action, and which can be used to consolidate the foundations of autonomous subjectivity, it would appear that Bataille has foreclosed the possibility of a politically informed critique of self-identity.⁶⁸ In his writing, however, it is precisely the tragic condition of self-sacrifice which opens up the self to its own impossibility, to its inexorable overcoming. The metaphysics of death, for Bataille, ensures the precariousness of self-identity which is never complete, never still, never

closed. I have elaborated four strategies of containment in relation to this precariousness, none of which should be confused with Bataillean principles of loss, expenditure, or excess. The basic form of containment, in each of the four strategies, is constituted by a leveling down of the outside world to an objectified presence. But this is not to argue, in conclusion, that Bataillean transgression is merely negative or reactive. It is opposed to the processes of containment on a singular condition, and this condition is fulfilled in the affirmation of energy which can never be reduced to a closed economy of signs. It is impossible to affirm transgression apart from its prohibitions, apart from the very categories of reactionary politics which it seeks to rupture, but it is equally impossible to affirm values without likewise affirming their unequivocal dissolution. Transgression is precisely this affirmation.

Central Washington University
igreka@cwu.edu

NOTES

- ¹ Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 85.
- ² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 53.
- ³ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 43.
- ⁴ Jean-Joseph Goux, "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism," in eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 203.
- ⁵ See Goux's discussion of George Gilder in "General Economics," pp. 200-7.
- ⁶ Located in the second section of part four: "The Bourgeois World."
- ⁷ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Urzone, 1989), p. 21.
- ⁸ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 120.
- ⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 36.
- ¹⁰ Goux, "General Economics," p. 208.
- ¹¹ This is also why, once again, he refuses to long for a bygone medieval world of

immanence (*The Accursed Share*, p. 133).

¹² I am not here intimating that the Calvinist work ethic is still the defining feature of capitalism. Goux is right: Benjamin Franklin's purity of spirit no longer prevails. But he misses a subtle point: the corpulent desires of our culture, and that of many cultures, are dominated by excess and waste in a *specific* manner. Our grand spectacle of waste is an appropriation; it is today's version of a thing, an object, or an absolute God. Certainly, then, play and work coincide in a unique historical moment; but it is also valid that nonproductive expenditure, generally speaking, exceeds all of its concrete historical instantiations, thereby indicating that play cannot be reduced to its objectifications.

¹³ Goux, "General Economics," p. 207.

¹⁴ I speak as if there were a single power structure. This idea may stem from Debord's way of putting the point, since his is an argument of dialectics and ideology. I am more inclined to accept a Foucaultian notion of power which rejects the language of ideology, but I use Goux's voice for the sake of argument.

¹⁵ Denis Hollier, "The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille," in eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 60.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), p. 51.

¹⁷ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 153.

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 20.

¹⁹ Philippe Sollers's elucidation of pseudo-transgression in neo-capitalist society is pertinent: our glut of consumption is the crossing of nonexistent boundaries, and therefore a sign of redoubled repression ("The Roof: Essay in Systematic Reading," in eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 76-7).

²⁰ Richardson, *Georges Bataille*, p. 95. Although Richardson's conclusion is technically correct, it doesn't follow from his own premises. He claims that Bataille should have a fitting response to advanced capitalism, but fails to make this response since he posits the generation of energy and excess independently of work. It's true that there is a mode of primary excess stipulated in the text, but this is never perceived as ahistorical for humans. His reading of Bataille, on this score, is a gross mischaracterization.

²¹ Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, p. 93.

²² Bataille writes that we cannot overcome our intrinsic isolation; but this isn't to suggest that all communication takes the form of a purely simulated exchange of signs.

²³ Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 82.

- ²⁴ Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, trans. Maria Shradly (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 1:7.
- ²⁵ Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, pp. 68-9: "If you wish to be filled with God and divine joy, then you must pour the creatures out of yourself."
- ²⁶ Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, 1:35.
- ²⁷ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p. 155; *OC*, V: 179.
- ²⁸ We can see, in this formulation, the convergence of many elements. In his thinking on inner experience Bataille is reworking all of the influences which were designated above: sacrifice in Mauss, death in the Marquis, the will to power in Nietzsche, and so on.
- ²⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in trans. Colm Luibheid, *The Complete Works* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1987), 645A.
- ³⁰ Bataille formulates this criticism not only in relation to neoplatonic mystics, but also those who stress the *sensuous* aspects of fusion (*Inner Experience*, p. 5).
- ³¹ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 3; *OC*, V: 15. The language deployed here seems to indicate that Bataille is referring only to Catholic mysticism; but I think his general point is applicable to any form of self-release or transcendence which equates that experience with a higher, indisputable authority.
- ³² This elucidates why we are consoled by God: his reality is a full presence of being. Evil is the absence of being, and therefore we only suffer to the degree that we are removed from goodness.
- ³³ Bataille, *Erotism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), pp. 250-1.
- ³⁴ Maurice Blanchot sums up the Marquis de Sade's philosophy as simplicity itself, for it is none other than absolute egoism which motivates the criminal freethinker ("Sade," in trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 40).
- ³⁵ Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 233; *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, p. 55.
- ³⁶ Sade, *Justine*, pp. 599-601.
- ³⁷ Blanchot, "Sade," p. 68.
- ³⁸ Sade, *Justine*, p. 494.
- ³⁹ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 143.
- ⁴⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?" in eds. Austryn Wainhouse and

Richard Seaver, *The 120 Days of Sodom* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 21. Because she further argues that the opacity of experience disappears once it is intellectualized, Bataille would disagree that there is such a strict division between representation and its other, as if the anger of one moment is divorced from its positional representation in another.

41

Sade, *Justine*, p. 661.

42

This brings us back to the question of simulated values in a post-industrial society: is it too much to say that postmodern consumption is a thoroughly sadistic practice? By cultivating indifference toward the suffering of others, by mediating our exchanges according to rules of separation implicit in our excess commodities, are we not ourselves entirely sadomasochistic? Or is the ubiquity of the spectacle only a shadow of a deeper violence which ruptures history by implicating rationalistic sadism in its excluded other: trepidation, fearfulness, and panic?

43

Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 178.

44

Blanchot and de Beauvoir have cited this fact as one reason for the endless repetition in de Sade's texts: criminal voluptuaries are never satisfied; every crime deserves another.

45

According to this scenario man's lack of being only fulfills itself at the end of history, when man is no longer man.

46

Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 47-8; *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 175.

47

That is to say, knowledge is arrived at through a historical praxis, i.e., through work.

48

Bataille's use of the term 'nothingness' is not exactly the same as Kojève's. Static being, for Bataille, is a kind of nothingness because it exists without meaning. Time is the annihilation of being and consequently the creation of limits, definition, and meaning. But since all of these limits are ultimately sacrificed to nothingness, the distinction that arises between the value of freedom and the meaninglessness of being is scarcely recognizable.

49

It is important to keep in mind that this is Kojève's reading of Hegel. Marx Warfotsky was the first to warn me of its idiosyncratic blending of the master/slave dialectic, realism, atheism, existentialist freedom, anthropology, death, post-historical animalism, and Marxist revolution.

50

Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 7; *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 14.

51

This helps us to clarify a distinction between the Divine Marquis and Hegelian dialectics. The mastery of death, in the former, is attained without fear, without a genuine risk. In dialectical recuperation, however, mastery comes into being – not through a mechanical repetition of discourse and discursive acts – but through a

progressive repetition which is only progressive to the degree that it confronts real, objective opposition to its subjective certainty.

- ⁵² Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 154; *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 430.
- ⁵³ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 254; *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 523.
- ⁵⁴ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 37; *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 166.
- ⁵⁵ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 135; *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 368.
- ⁵⁶ This order is important as a counterpoint to linear temporality (p. 134).
- ⁵⁷ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 136; *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, pp. 368-9.
- ⁵⁸ This final stage of post-historical consciousness is described by Kojève as “Man’s perfect understanding of his death (p. 258).” It would thus appear to us that for Kojève a complete understanding of one’s being is equivalent to a paradoxical memory of death.
- ⁵⁹ Such negativity is the freedom which post-historical mankind enjoys in the realms of art, love, and play (p.158n6). The disappearance of man properly so-called, for Kojève, is influenced by Marx’s distinction between the realms of necessity and freedom (p.158n6).
- ⁶⁰ Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” in ed. Allan Stoekl, *Yale French Studies 78: On Bataille* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 19.
- ⁶¹ Bataille’s 1937 letter to Kojève, composed in response to a lecture given at the College of Sociology, is thus an important contribution to understanding some of the causes of boredom, apathy, malaise, and the role of art in rupturing “recognized negativity.”
- ⁶² Bataille, “Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel,” in ed. Allan Stoekl, *Yale French Studies 78: On Bataille*, p. 89.
- ⁶³ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 136; *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 368.
- ⁶⁴ The point being that every result is a concrete reality which is, qua reality, susceptible to further movements of change, historicity, and violent dismemberment.
- ⁶⁵ Keep in mind that Bataille’s scrutiny of Hegel is heavily influenced by Kojève’s lectures.
- ⁶⁶ Bataille, “Sacrifice,” in trans. Annette Michelson, *October*, 36 (1986), p. 66.
- ⁶⁷ I am thinking here of Mark C. Taylor, Baudrillard, and Butler.

⁶⁸ Butler's remarks are trenchant and insightful on this point: the outside becomes inscribed within certain power relations underpinning the fragmented conditions of autonomy installed as natural, legitimate, and unified.