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FLESH AND CONSCIOUSNESS: GEORGES BATAILLE AND THE DIONYSIAN

*Je regrette les temps où la sève du monde,
L'eau du fleuve, le sang rose des arbres verts
Dans les veines de Pan mettaient un univers!*

— Rimbaud

*Dazu muß ich in die Tiefe steigen: wie du des
Abends tust, wenn du hinter das Meer gehst
und noch der Unterwelt Licht bringst; du
überreiches Gestirn!*

— Nietzsche

FIRST, A TRUE MYTH: *The Zoological Gardens of London*, 1927. Georges Bataille is momentarily blinded by the sun -- like Saint Teresa enraptured by solar emanations that tear the flesh, pierce the soul, and occlude consciousness. But this sun is "shit-smeared" and rests between the red-blue buttocks of a baboon. Bataille collapses, blown apart by the solar rays.¹ In Paris his analyst hands him a photograph: a Chinese man undergoing the "death of a hundred pieces," is lashed to a pole. His arms have been severed just beneath the shoulders and his legs are missing below the knees. The chest has been cut away exposing the ribcage and vital organs underneath. While these wounds are almost unbearable to look at, perhaps the most disturbing gash is the smile on the uplifted face of the victim, Fou Tchou Li, blinded by the sun.² The analyst encourages his patient's own *little death* of a hundred pieces, the self-dissolution that precipitates the more-than-human consciousness of *Apollo-Dionysus*.

¹ Bataille recounts his nervous breakdown — his collapse before "the enormous anal fruit of radial and shit-smeared raw pink meat" — in "The Jesuve," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. A. Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 78.

² Louis Carpeaux's photographs of the *Leng-Tch'e* (cutting into pieces) are reproduced in Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), 204-206. Bataille's analyst, Dr. Adrien Borel, first brought them to his patient's attention.



Georges Bataille believed that self-consciousness was potentially a curse. Though we are condemned to bear it, we are not, however, condemned to suffer its limitations. One can overcome it, finding the energy and resolve to *uplift* it by way of consciousness itself. A dialectical solution overcomes the limits of self-consciousness, a dialectic whose final turn parodies Absolute Spirit in an overcoming that transforms mere consciousness into *superconsciousness*, a dialectic it must be stressed that is consciously pursued, as the mystic pursues *daemonization*,³ and not passively anticipated as an eschatology, as an historical rupture. In superconsciousness alone one finds the resolution of Self and World, of Apollonian self-reflexivity and Dionysian self-loss. Bataille embraced Nietzsche's superhumanism. "Perhaps," Nietzsche has written, "the entire evolution of the spirit is a question of the body... In the long run, it is not a question of man at all: he is to be overcome."⁴

The numenal nature of Bataille's post-humanism becomes clear when viewed in the light of the "Gnostic" idiom that informs his thought. His was a singular kind of Gnosticism, but it had antecedents in Renaissance Neoplatonism and modern German phenomenology. Bataille never explicitly identifies himself as a Gnostic. But when we consider the "onto-poetic"⁵ nature of his discourse in the light of his knowledge of archaic, medieval and Renaissance cosmogony, his preoccupation with "inner experience" and "numinous consciousness,"⁶ and his

³ I write of the mystic's *daemonization* rather than *divinization (theosis)*. The latter term is more appropriate to a theological context in which the mystic induces the "godding" (Jeffrey Burton Russell's term) of the world through union with the godhead. In keeping with the more atheological spirit of Bataille's discourse, however, I have used the former term to denote a union with a numinous force that can be conceived of as other than an anthropomorphic Deity—the sacred experience of, say, a pantheist or a Neoplatonist.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 358 [my edit].

⁵ Allan Megill uses this term to describe the discursive style of modern continental philosophy's most "aesthetic" figures. The "aestheticist" pursues *creation* over *recreation*, engaging philosophy as a mode of evocation and even self-creation rather than as a prolegomenon to a new régime of "truth." See Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). The affinities between the aestheticism Megill describes and the magicoaesthetic conceptions of the Renaissance "Magi" examined by Francis Yates, in her study of Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Neoplatonism, are striking. See Yates, *Giordano Bruno And the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 [1964]). The creative, active nature of consciousness posited in both Gnosticism and aestheticism can be found in Bataille's emphasis on art and aesthetic experience in the evolution of consciousness. This tendency is particularly marked in *Lascaux ou la Naissance de l'Art* (Paris: Skira, 1955), where he suggests an aesthetic catalyst behind the humanizing turn of the late Paleolithic, and in *The Tears of Eros* where he sketches the synergy between eroticism and consciousness from the sacred art of the Paleolithic to the avant-garde canvases of the present age. Indeed, a certain Gnostic conceit like that of Yates' Renaissance Magi seems to have reemerged, after the desacralized Realist detour, in Modernism *tout court*.

⁶ "Numinous consciousness" is Rudolf Otto's phrase. Bataille's conception of the sacred—particularly its "non-rational" quintessence and its expression in mysticism—was influenced by Otto, although his is a de-Christianized adaptation of Otto's theology. See Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923).

insistence on the active, creative nature of matter, the “Gnostic” orientation of his thought is apparent. The central problematic of Bataille’s philosophy is the ostensible cleft between spirit and matter, between consciousness and flesh, a devirilizing and desacralizing polarity Bataille rejected in favor of the “tumultuous effervescence” of what he called universal existence: “For universal existence is unlimited and thus restless: it does not close life in on itself, but instead opens it up and throws it back into the uneasiness of the infinite. Universal existence, eternally unfinished and acephalic, a world like a bleeding wound, endlessly creating and destroying particular finite beings.”⁷ This is a non-theistic cosmogony, a mysticism without a godhead; nevertheless it is a mysticism that upholds the existence of a numinous Source, a creative agency that manifests itself in the material universe. To engage in “inner experience” is to communicate with this Source—a consummation equally material and spiritual in nature.

Bataille was essentially a Gnostic dialectician in search of a totalizing consciousness that would restore to “discontinuous beings” a sense of *continuity* between Self and World, Self and Nature, Self and Numen. While his thought does not follow, to the letter, the tenets of “orthodox” Gnosticism as it flourished in the ancient world, there is a prevailing “Gnostic” orientation in those aspects of it concerning ontology and the role of consciousness in defining the human condition. This “Gnostic” orientation informs Bataille’s assessment of the symbiosis of flesh and consciousness in terms of sacred experience, and determines his emphasis on the material world in general, and the body specifically, as the loci in which this experience unfolds. My purpose in what follows is to identify these Gnostic elements and demonstrate their role in shaping the “Dionysian dialectic” at the heart of Bataille’s thought.

We may distinguish Bataille’s modern, that is post-Renaissance, “Gnostic” orientation from the heretical theologies of the first and twelfth centuries. Unlike the classical Gnostics, Bataille valorized the material world. The vitalism and creativity he attributed to matter resembled the philosophy of Renaissance Neoplatonists influenced by Hermeticism and Cabballism. Neoplatonic cosmogony upheld an abiding connection between spirit and matter, and those who embraced it, whether they be (more or less) orthodox Christians such as Johannes Scotus Eriugena,⁸ or thoroughly paganized apostates such as Giordano Bruno, evoked the image of a unified, self-generating, self-regulating cosmos that approached pantheism. The mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius, in particular, was instrumental in shaping the monist cosmos of Renaissance “Magi.”

⁷ Georges Bataille, “Propositions,” in *Visions of Excess*, 201.

⁸ Eriugena wrote in the ninth century, but his Neoplatonic cosmology anticipated that of the Renaissance Neoplatonists—Ficino, Pico, Bruno—of the sixteenth century.

In Dionysian mysticism, the “fall” was kenotic—a *fall from Being*—a cosmogonic rather than ethical conception of the postlapsarian milieu. Although there is a clear degradation of spirit as one approaches the basest forms of matter, Dionysius did not conceive of cosmogenesis as the radical “fall” upheld by ancient Neoplatonists and first-century Gnostics. Instead, the erotic thrust of Creation—the Plenum moved by pure desire emptying itself, spilling itself into the world in an act of pure love—was at the heart of mystical cosmology and ontology. The world of matter is an emanation of the Plenum—spirit expanding itself, *worlding the world*. The godhead unfolds the world in a fit of erotic ecstasy: “[T]he Creator of the universe himself, in his beautiful and good yearning towards the universe … is transported outside himself in his providential activities towards all things that have being … and so is drawn from his transcendent throne above all things to dwell within the heart of all things, through an ecstatic power that is above being and whereby he yet stays within himself.”⁹ The magnetic pull of the godhead’s desire draws the mystic into his interiors. This erotic encounter with a numinous source at once *immanent* and *transcendent* is the essence of the mystic’s experience, whose aim is to reestablish *continuity* with the Pleroma. This descent into one’s interiors is not without obstacles; between the mystic and epiphany stands the *psyche*. Indeed, were it not for the psyche the sacred would stand fully and perpetually revealed to consciousness.

Ancient Gnostics and Renaissance Neoplatonists alike upheld a sharp dichotomy between *pneuma* and *psyche*. They privileged the former, conceiving it as a spiritual force pervading the cosmos, an emanation that is at once within us and beyond us, and the origin of the authentic Self.¹⁰ The *psyche*, crystallized in the ego, is the source of the *experience of discontinuity* and the abiding alienation—the “creature-consciousness”—we feel as self-reflexive beings. Continuity has not been lost, but the conscious experience of it has been largely foreclosed to modern minds since the advent of the transcendental subject posited by phenomenology. Descartes institutionalized the virtual self, associating it with the ethereal *Cogito* whose “self”-consciousness is disembodied, hypercathected to the ego. The experience of discontinuity is a psychological state, an epiphenomenon of human existence, not an ontological reality. The *psyche* provides the template for the inauthentic self-experience of normal consciousness. The irony, for modern post-humanists like Bataille, is that the transcendental subject, an unreal exosomatic fragment, is upheld as the epitome of wholeness, as an autonomous entity, when in fact it is the source of

⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius [Deny], quoted in Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 128 [my edit].

¹⁰ For the sake of simplicity, I have adopted the lower-case *self* to refer to the self of normal consciousness (a.k.a the *Cogito*), and the upper-case *Self* to refer to the pneumatic, or “deep” Self, of mysticism.

our alienation and inauthenticity. Hence humanity's nostalgia for lost continuity: "We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is."¹¹

Since Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the evolution of a transcendental self-consciousness has defined the process of *humanization* itself.¹² Post-Hegelian phenomenology in Germany, while accepting the Hegelian ontogeny of the human condition, has struggled to salvage or reconstitute an authentic mode of experience that will re-world the estranged individual, and in so doing invoke Gnostic conceptions of a pneumatic rather than psychic Selfhood.¹³ In this vein Bataille denounced the Hegelian phenomenon of "individuation."¹⁴ Yet Bataille accepted as incontrovertible the Hegelian account of "Man's" emergence from Nature, the first act in the drama of individuation. Bataille nuanced Hegel's dualism; i.e., he did not accept the Man/Nature dichotomy posited in the *Phenomenology*, though he did not believe it was possible, or even desirable, to return to animality. Indeed, self-consciousness is a powerful form of experience, much richer and *interiorized* than the unreflective experience of an animal. Yet it entails a paradox: the human condition is, in its quintessence, the *consciousness of this loss*. Humanity struggles against a profound despair *it cannot exist without*. "The regret that I might have for a time when the obscure intimacy of the animal was scarcely distinguished from the immense flux of the world indicates a power that is truly lost, but it fails to recognize what matters more to me. Even if he has lost the world in leaving animality behind, man has nonetheless become that *consciousness* of having lost it which we are, and which is more, in a sense, than a possession of which the animal is not conscious."¹⁵

Alexandre Kojève, whose lectures Bataille attended in the 1930s, emphasized the value of self-consciousness, which humanity attains through an "anthropogenetic desire" to actualize itself. The advent of self-consciousness uplifted

¹¹ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 15.

¹² G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹³ Hans Jonas, *Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 320-40.

¹⁴ Here, I use the term "individuation" – after Nietzsche's phrase "*principium individuationis*" – negatively, denoting the development of the *Cogito*, or "self," the "discontinuous being" lamented by Bataille. This should not be confused with the positive denotation given the term by the Jungians, in which *individuation* signals a stage of self-awareness not dissimilar to the mystical cultivation of the "deep Self." Where Jung writes of achieving "completion," Bataille writes of attaining "continuity."

¹⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. I, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1988), 133.

humanity from the circumscribed experience of the animal ("Sentiment of self"); emerging into History proper, the human agent was no longer "a 'thingish' I, a merely living I, an animal I."¹⁶ Humanization is a *fait accompli*, but it is not humanity's final "ontological mutation."¹⁷ Bataille was a Nietzschean as well as a Hegelian. For Nietzsche humanization is merely a preliminary step toward *overhumanization*. In a sense, we have become estranged from our material origins only in order that we may recoup them as an experience *in consciousness*, at which point consciousness realizes itself, "cosmizes" itself—lives itself as *world*. "[B]ecoming conscious," Nietzsche writes, "is obviously only one more means toward the unfolding and extension of the power of life."¹⁸

If Hegel has overstated humanity's estrangement from nature, an alternative to a purely transcendental and alienated experience of self obtains. Consciousness is embodied but it is not necessarily imprisoned if spirit and flesh are one, issuing symbiotically from the same numinous source. Bataille often invoked science to bolster his metaphysical speculations. Consciousness, for Bataille, combined matter and energy, a kind of pneumatic *cum* corporeal discharge—a force unleashed, moreover, through its own willful striving, a vitalistic conception of consciousness that owes more to Bergson than Hegel.¹⁹ Consciousness is, at once, metaphysical and metabolic, continually drawing its potency from—in Bataille's mythopoetic and heliotropic idiom—a sacred solar disc, much as a plant continues to derive nourishment from the soil even as it reaches for the sun.²⁰

Spirit is not imprisoned in clay; it animates it. The apparent duality between matter and spirit—a psychological chimera rather than an ontological reality—can be resolved through a mystical experience that ends with Bataille's "solar deliquescence."²¹ Through the ecstasies of "inner experience (life in play beyond the separate operations)"²² we arrive at the matrix where spirit and matter converge.

¹⁶ Alexandre, Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 4-5.

¹⁷ Mircea Eliade's term. See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1959).

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 376 [my edit].

¹⁹ See Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998).

²⁰ Bataille compared the "vertical movement" of the plant to that of the pineal gland or "eye." See Bataille, "The Jesuve," 74-78.

²¹ Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (San Francisco: City Lights, 1987), 60. This novella, which functions as an immanentist parable, tropes the Pleroma, in "feminine" terms, as a kind of Great Mother *à la* the Jungian school. Bataille's narrator seeks to penetrate the Pleroma through the conduit of Simone's body, a form of penetration that transcends the satisfactions of genital finality in a polymorphous expenditure that operates as pure cosmic desire—which is to say, it is never exhausted. For more on the Jungian conception of the primeval Pleroma as the "Great Mother," see Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

²² Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 24.

Hans Jonas argues that what Heidegger calls onto-theology and what Nietzsche calls metaphysics rehearse the cosmic nihilism of Gnostic alienation—a “stark foreignness” they attributed to the advent of self-consciousness.²³ For Jonas the source of this alienation originates with Descartes’ valorization of the *Cogito* over other modes of experience. Gnostic phenomenologists like Heidegger and Nietzsche spurned this fragment of experience.²⁴ Bataille, then, adds to the roster of disaffected phenomenologists. The explicit mysticism of his dialectic, however, distinguishes him from his precursors. When the *Cogito*’s boundaries are transgressed through mystical, or Dionysian self-dissolution and is once again intimately enveloped in the body, a process begins which ideally culminates in genuine Selfhood and the advent of superconsciousness, or consciousness of continuity. Superconsciousness is not limited to the self-consciousness of the mere “individual,” but informs the Self-consciousness of the Overman, spirit recognizing itself as matter, a Self-consciousness that reflects on itself as firmly worlded. It is a Self that feels at home in its own skin. I apply the Nietzschean term Apollo-Dionysus to this avatar of consciousness on the grounds that it is the most transparent and economical way to convey the essence of a dialectical consummation that owes more to a dithyrambic than a teleological resolution, more to the operations of desire than to those of history, more to libido than *Cogito*.

Bataille’s valorization of matter echoes the “optimist gnosis” of Renaissance Neoplatonists, although he goes much further in privileging the body than the least dualist among them.²⁵ His conception of the mind-body corresponds in essentials with the doctrine of Plotinus, who wrote of a “blending” or “composite” of body and spirit through the agency of Eros; but there the agreement ends. While Bataille saw this erotic synthesis as the source of spiritual entelechy, Plotinus—in terms truer to orthodox Platonism—insisted on freeing the spirit from its bodily prison.²⁶ Bataille’s notion of “base materialism” inverts Plotinus’ cosmogony. For Plotinus, matter was a postlapsarian emanation that degrades as one descends from the numinous Source. For Bataille, on the other hand, in the lowest stratum of matter we find the purest emanations; that is, paradoxically, in the wasted sphere of “base matter” we come closest to the original Source.

One descends to the fundament of Being during the first moment of overcoming, at which point he arrives at an ontological singularity whose “baseness” is

²³ Jonas 1958, 323.

²⁴ 320-340.

²⁵ Francis Yates differentiates between (1) the dualism of a “pessimist gnosis” in which the world is seen as corrupt and evil—the view of what we might call “orthodox” Gnosticism—and (2) the monism of an “optimist gnosis” wherein the world is viewed as an emanation from the One. The latter, she argues, was the prevailing belief of Neoplatonic Renaissance “Magi” (128-29).

²⁶ Plotinus, “Love,” in *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin, 1991), 177.

irreducible.²⁷ "Base matter" rests at the primal node where spirit initially unfolded itself, becoming world, and therefore provides the purest link between body and spirit, flesh and consciousness. The deeper we penetrate materiality, the more we reveal of our human origins -- origins that at once attract us and repel us: the moment of numinosity. In the squirming detritus of life and consciousness, precisely as expressions of spirit, we encounter their ignoble beginnings.²⁸

Bataille contrasted his hylozoist materialism with the vulgar variety promulgated by empiricists and Marxists. "Base matter"—which is alive and vital, a numinous and phenomenal substance—must not be confused with the "dead matter" of science and scientism.²⁹ Paradoxically, from the standpoint of traditional theology and philosophy, Bataille insists that the most nauseating detritus is *less corrupt* because it is closest to the original Source. Putrescence, too, as if by daemonic fiat, emits a source of light. Thus ancient pantheism is updated with modern "biocentrism."³⁰ Bataille called it *heterology, the science of filth*.³¹ The heterologist, at least, "can anticipate and live in expectation of that multiple putrescence that anticipates its sickening triumph in my person."³²

Bataille rehearses the Gnostic conception of matter as a creative force, "matter as an active principle," particularly in its decomposition: at the moment of metabolic meltdown all the daemonic, cosmogenetic force contained in the flesh is discharged in a dialectical expenditure that reworlds the world.³³ In the cosmogonies of "optimist" dualists, as we have seen, the world is worlded as a pneumatic emanation, as a palpable form of energy. This Neoplatonic *cum* Gnostic idea has, in Bataille's mysticism, analogues in astrophysics and cellular biology. Bataille appropriated scientific discourse, appealing to contemporary research in microcellular biology and astronomy to bolster an emanationist philosophy of *communication*.³⁴ This amounted to putting the *meta-* back in to physics without undermining the lucidity of a phenomenological approach, an effort to acquire an unlikely objective verification for pneumatic forms of inner experience.³⁵ Bataille, like many Modernists troubled by the loss of "authentic"

²⁷ Georges Bataille, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," in *Visions of Excess*, 45-52.

²⁸ Bataille's metaphysical conception of evolution owes more, of course, to Bergson than Darwin.

²⁹ Georges Bataille, "Materialism," in *Visions of Excess*, 15-16.

³⁰ Margot Norris' term. See Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, Lawrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

³¹ Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)," in *Visions of Excess*, 91-102.

³² Bataille 1989, 57.

³³ Bataille 1985, 47.

³⁴ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 93-8. Bataille's conception of communication, it must be stressed, was mystical as well as semiotic.

³⁵ Even Freud's biocentrism served Bataille's numinous view of evolution. Freud grounds human consciousness in the emergence of the cerebral cortex from a central nervous system that had itself

experience, but also convinced of the materiality of the world as revealed by modern science, tried to solve the dilemma: on the one hand, he insisted on the *singularity* of inner experience, wherein one approaches a veritable Self estranged from the external world—a Self that is authentic precisely because of its estrangement; on the other hand, he pursued a phenomenology that would corroborate—with scientific authority—a numinous conception of the universe. Bataille's universe is alive; it is a “Chaldean” cosmos, an “astrological space” as imagined by D. H. Lawrence, where the numenal supersedes the merely astronomical.³⁶ The mystery religions of antiquity served as a precedent for Bataille's scientism. The history of mythopoeic thought includes a tradition of appropriating science for mythic ends, a tendency particularly marked by Mithraism, an ancient cult that often figured prominently in Bataille's investigation of sacred experience. As Franz Cumont has demonstrated, “Mithraism … borrowed from science its fundamental principles.”³⁷ In the cult of Mithra astrology was simply astrophysics by other means.

Bataille appropriated the ideas of scientists whose unorthodox speculations were available for a mythopoetics of matter. He was particularly drawn to astronomical theories that advanced a biocentric cosmogony; such theories bolstered his conception of Eros as a universal (pro-)creative force, and inspired him to imagine the origin of the cosmos in analogues of sexual reproduction. Bataille observes a sultry and lubricious universe through his glass, evidence for what he saw as the hierogamic unity of all matter.³⁸ As the history of science has shown, the leap from astronomy to Neoplatonism is seductive. And avant-garde science upheld, in Bataille's view, the cosmos permeating power of Eros—a hot current of metacoital energy worlding the world. “Movement,” Bataille writes, “is the figure of love, incapable of stopping at a particular being, and rapidly passing one to another.”³⁹ Here we discover the ontogenetic essence of the *copula*, of the verb *to be*, which sustains an “amorous frenzy,” an erotic effervescence that attests to the continuity of all being in the face of a glaring and demoralizing discontinuity.⁴⁰ Continuity abides in the biorhythms of “astrological space,” perpetually renewed in an amorous eternal return. Writing in a familiar pantheist idiom, Bataille saw the cosmos as engendered by a “great

evolved from the ectoderm of primitive organisms. See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1961), 20.

³⁶ Lawrence: “[T]he sense of astronomical space merely paralyses me. But the sense of the living astronomical heavens gives me an extension of my being, I become big and glittering and vast with a sumptuous vastness. I am the macrocosm, and it is wonderful.” In *Apocalypse* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 46-7 [my edit].

³⁷ Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (New York: Dover, 2001), 106 [my edit].

³⁸ Bataille quotes the astronomer Émile Belot: “Hence, there exists in our universe a unity of genetic plan for all cosmic or living beings.” See Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, “Sacred Sociology and the Relationships between ‘Society,’ ‘Organism,’ and ‘Being’,” in *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 78.

³⁹ Bataille 1985, 7.

⁴⁰ (5).

coitus with the celestial atmosphere" that "is regulated by the terrestrial rotation around the sun.⁴¹ The rotations of the Milky Way, the cycles of the seasons, the movements of the tides and, finally, the piston-like rhythm of the penis in coitus—all signal an effervescent cosmos engendered by Eros. In this numinous sense, ultimately, Bataille's discourse is erotic, a discourse that resacralizes sex on a cosmic scale, a *numenology* of eroticism.⁴² The cosmos undergoes a constant metamorphosis, perhaps even a metempsychosis, through the eroticized eternal return of a supersexed and universal "polymorphous coitus." "Thus," Bataille writes, "one notes that the earth, by turning, makes animals and men have coitus, and (because the result is as much the cause as that which provokes it) that animals and men make the earth turn by having coitus."⁴³ Cosmos depends on the effervescence of an amorous and chaotic energy that inundates it, sustains it, perhaps even *exhausts* it—the bittersweet fatigue of an incessant little Big death. The universe according to Bataille is in constant creative turmoil, its constituent elements part of one vast and ceaseless frenzy in which everything appears as a "parody" of everything else. The universe is mutable, being is becoming, and "the verb *to be* is the vehicle of amorous frenzy."⁴⁴

The spirit appears metabolic, immanent in the matrix of flesh and consciousness which, motivated by a cosmogonic *desire*, transcends individual experience. Yet, we are in and of this world by virtue of a cosmodynamic desire that is within us and without us, that is Absolute and particular. The Self is a *singularity*—a compressed unfolding of the spirit. Here the God Eros is incarnated. The embodied spirit is a constant mediator of desire that undermines (or threatens to undermine) the integrity of the *Cogito*—the false self. Viewed as a numenal force, the desire that compels the spirit is not goal-directed toward the pleasure of genital finality, or the instinctual demands of reproduction—the "animal simplicity" of profane existence. As a sacred manifestation, desire entails the ontological suspension of the teleological. The sustaining of a state of Self-pleasuring, a numinous *jouissance* pushes us to our ontic frontiers: the body-as-world, that recapitulates, at the level of the microcosm, the ontogenetic raptures of the macrocosm. Being does not suffer from a lack that must be compensated for by a representizing psyche; instead there is an overflowing which threatens to undo the psyche; hence those well-fortified psychic frontiers—the ego, id and superego—each jealous of its own restricted domain. These psychic boundaries, which delimit the world of profane experience, must be transgressed if the spirit and its desire are to be set-free to *reworld* the world.

⁴¹ (7).

⁴² Rudolf Otto has argued that erotic experience is "analogous" to numinous experience (46-7). For Bataille, the world is worlded in a cosmic hierogamy.

⁴³ (6).

⁴⁴ (5).

The mythopoetics of desire we find in Bataille's Neoplatonic metaerotism echo Renaissance Cabalist doctrine positing an *intelligible* world of angelic (or daemonic) creativity that descends—compelled by desire—to the *elemental*, emptying itself into it in a kenotic rapture. As Francis Yates shows, an erotic relationship links the ostensibly exclusive and hierarchized "worlds" of Hermetic thought. Pseudo-Dionysus wrote of the connection between the supercelestial and the elemental worlds in terms of an "erotic current" (Yates' term) that linked the One to the All.⁴⁵ Desire creates and recreates eternally transmuting the material world; this creative, daemonic force stokes the imagination of the artist, who himself transforms the world through his art. Moreover, through the inherent aesthetic orientation to phenomena and experience that animates his consciousness, the restless, avaricious, archangelic consciousness of the Renaissance Magus—the consciousness too of the Modernist aesthete. While most phenomenologists, like ancient Gnostics and contemporary psychoanalysts, describe desire as symptomatic of an essential lack, Bataille followed his Neoplatonic Renaissance precursors in upholding its life affirming and creative energies.

We must reevaluate desire through the principle of the *eternal return*, a richly nuanced mythopoetic image that signals first and foremost the biocentric cycle of the seasons, the process of biocreative repetition. In the spirit of the eternal return Nietzsche writes of his "Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my 'beyond good and evil,' without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal."⁴⁶ And Bataille echoes Nietzsche's biocentric and cosmic view of creativity: "I picture nature as a play of forces expressed in multiplied and incessant agony ... I imagine the earth turning vertiginously in the sky ... Everything that exists destroying itself, consuming itself and dying, each instant producing itself only in the annihilation of the preceding one... Before the terrestrial world whose summer and winter order the agony of all living things, before the universe composed of innumerable turning stars, limitlessly losing and consuming themselves, I only perceive a succession of cruel splendors whose very movement requires that I die: this death is only the *exploding* consumption of all that was, the joy of existence of all that comes into the world; even my own life demands that everything that exists, everywhere, ceaselessly give itself and be annihilated."⁴⁷ Here we have a principle of creativity that suspends *telos*. "Beyond our immediate ends," Bataille writes, "man's activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfillment of the universe"⁴⁸—pursues, that is, the endless

⁴⁵ Yates quotes Cornelius Agrippa: "For such is the concordance of the world that celestial things draw supercelestial things, and natural things, supernatural things, through the virtue running through all and the participation in it of all species" (Yates: 1991,132-33).

⁴⁶ Nietzsche 1968, 550.

⁴⁷ Bataille 1985, 237-39.

⁴⁸ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. I, 21.

jouissance of the circle.

When we submit to the self-loss of inner experience we encounter being in its purest, which is to say basest condition. In this uncanny experience approach an otherness within our own interiors, a Not-Self that is at once material and spiritual. Mysticism is the outing of the authentic Self from this otherness that is at once pure and base. "It is necessary to become *wholly other*," Bataille argues; which is to say, one must achieve a numinous consciousness, that of Apollo-Dionysus—the conscious embodiment of *spirit as creature*.⁴⁹ The pursuit of this creature-consciousness begins with a descent into Dionysian oblivion, into self-loss. One does not remain at the *singularity*, the liminal point where flesh and spirit articulate, where Self encounters Not-Self, for long. The Dionysian descent is immediately followed by an Apollonian ascent that culminates in superconsciousness. The Dionysian descent has, like all mysticisms of experience, affinities with the rite of passage of mystery-religion initiations. First, there is a *breaching* of endopsychic frontiers, similar to the breach that signals the beginning of the end of the initiand's old life in the cultic ceremony. As a catalyst for achieving this breach, Bataille advocated a form of self-induced delirium, a "dislocation of thought," the psychological violence of which would compel one's mind to "the breaking point of the conscious." Second, an epiphany brought about by the mystic's encounter with his singularity obtains; this parallels the symbolic death—the vertiginous encounter with continuity—that marks the transition point of the cultic rite. Finally, the initiand is *reborn* into a new life—the numinous reincarnate—the moment in the Dionysian dialectic marked by the attainment of superconsciousness.

This process of descent and ascent is quintessential to all mysticisms, even those of orthodox Christianity. Bataille's differs from the latter primarily in his insistence on the embodied nature of the experience, and the pantheist rather than hierophantic singularity one encounters at the zero degree of self-loss. Furthermore, where the Christian emphasizes the lack of will involved in what amounts to an election, or a dispensation, Bataille's mysticism entails the willful and conscious relinquishment of self-control. Bataille prescribes an *ascesis of consciousness*, a hyper-expenditure of consciousness through concentration on the unthinkable.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, a strong resemblance between the inner experience of the Dionysian dialectic and the Christian mystic's encounter with the godhead

⁴⁹ Georges Bataille, "La conjuration sacrée," *Oeuvre Complète*, vol. 1, *Premiers écrits, 1922-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 443 [my emphasis]. My translation. Cf. "The Sacred Conspiracy," in *Visions of Excess*, 179. Rudolf Otto introduced the term "wholly other" [*ganz Andere*]. Bataille's phrase "tout autre" is a transliteration of Otto's German, and therefore carries a more numinous connotation than the translation "completely different" would suggest.

⁵⁰ For instance, Bataille chooses to focus his attention on the baboon's anus long after the initial encounter in London; in this way the "solar anus" continues to serve as a catalyst for "the dislocation of thought" leading to self-loss.

is apparent. "By *inner experience*," Bataille writes, "I understand that which one usually calls *mystical experience*: the states of ecstasy, of rapture, at least of mediated emotion."⁵¹ Writing of self-dissolution in terms similar to those of Christian mystics, medieval and modern, Bataille describes the experience as "a pure inner fall into a limitless abyss" that conveys one to a "pure interiority." And again, in lines that echo the mystic's preternatural raptures:

*I slowly lose myself in unintelligible and bottomless space.
I reach the depths of worlds.
I am devoured by death.
I am devoured by fever.
I am absorbed in somber space.
I am annihilated in joy before death.*

As we have seen, the Dionysian descent of the mystic—sublimated by the Christian saint—is analogous to erotic rapture. Bataille is insistent on this point: "flights of Christian religious experience and bursts of erotic impulses are ... part and parcel of the same movement."⁵² Erotic experience is sacred experience. The aim of eroticism is precisely a mystical self-loss: "to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity."⁵³ Bataille did not so much renounce Catholicism as embrace a medieval strain of the religion that emphasized the idea of Creation as a divine outpouring of love rather than of reason. In the prevailing Neoplatonic idiom of the High Middle Ages, divine illumination is not the product of the Logos, but of Divine Eros. And just as God created the universe through an outpouring of desire, it is desire that compels the mystic toward the Divine Light. Desire is not the product of a *lack*, but an active creative agent, a force that compels movement toward union with the One. Bataille was not so much an apostate as a Gnostic heretic. If Nietzsche functions as Bataille's philosophical father, St. Teresa of Avila serves as his theological mother—for the passions of the voluptuary and the saint are one.⁵⁴

The resemblance of Christian mysticism notwithstanding, the Dionysian dialectic had ends rather dissimilar to Christian apotheosis. Indeed, the goal of the dialectic was to *uplift* the fragmented and insulated consciousness of the transcendental subject. If the latter is the ultimate mark of "Man," then it is "Man" that must be superseded. The overcoming of "Man" involves an "ontological mutation" that is restorative rather than regressive and in turn ultimately looks forward to the Overman rather than backwards to the

⁵¹ Bataille 1988, 3.

⁵² Bataille 1986, 9 [my edit].

⁵³ (5).

⁵⁴ Bataille's actual words: "The saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm; she does not know that his unacknowledgable passions and her own are really one" (7).

primitive.⁵⁵ Even Nietzsche did not advocate a sustained Dionysian rapture, nor a simple return to Nature. The Overman is not a new and improved animal, or a kind of updated noble savage.⁵⁶ The point of the Dionysian dialectic is not to sustain self-loss as an end in itself, but to liberate consciousness from its disembodied psychic limitations. The advent of Apollo-Dionysus signals a reconciliation between "Man" and Nature, the latter entering into conscious experience for the first time. Clearly Bataille, unlike Hegel or Kojève, believed Man could revisit—through the Dionysian descent—his roots in Nature. One part Dionysian oblivion, one part Apollonian light, the superconsciousness evoked in his mystical dialectic recognizes no boundaries between Self and World, Self and Nature, Self and Numen. Superconsciousness includes everything formerly foreclosed by consciousness, the best of the postlapsarian world: animal, human, nature, body and mind united in one conscious experience.

The Dionysian dialectic evokes at one remove Renaissance Neoplatonism, which itself owed much to High medieval mysticism; at another remove it recapitulates the credo of the mystery cultist; and at still another that of the Median Magus. At its most distant remove it rehearses the "*mysterium tremendum*" of the earliest religions of the Near East. As Thorkild Jacobsen demonstrates, in the most ancient Mesopotamian religions the numinous is "immanent"; it was seen "as a revelation of indwelling spirit, as power at the center of something that caused it to be and thrive and flourish."⁵⁷ Similarly for Bataille the wholly other unfolds deep in one's interiors, wherein one encounters "the pure immanence of the

⁵⁵ Mircea Eliade's phrase for the changes that occur in an initiate's existence after the "second birth" of a rite of passage. See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 181.

⁵⁶ Margot Norris has advanced a "biocentric" reading of Nietzsche that overemphasizes the role of unmediated instinct in his critique of consciousness. Nietzsche, she argues, "writes as the animal." See Norris, op. cit. "Biocentrism" is a valuable concept for rethinking the role of the body in the human condition. Nietzsche's philosophy did much to further the anti- or post-Cartesian turn of twentieth-century thought. And Norris is correct to cast Nietzsche's critique of humanism as an assault on the Symbolic Order. She overstates the case, however, when she suggests that Nietzsche's philosophy left no room at all for conscious experience. In *The Aesthetics of Excess* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) Allen Weiss demonstrates, in a more nuanced way, how a bodily "rhetoric" advanced by Bataille (following Nietzsche) challenges classic dualism. Norris' argument marginalizes the dialectical nature of Nietzsche's anti-humanism and thus elides the subtle interplay of body and mind at the heart of it. Weiss, on the other hand, emphasizes the dialectic between flesh and consciousness that informed Bataille's Nietzschean assault on humanism.

⁵⁷ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 5-6. It is interesting to speculate that Bataille's emphasis on eroticism as the means for *unbecoming*, for de-individualization, can perhaps also be explained by the affinity between his cosmogony and that of ancient Mesopotamia. As Jacobsen demonstrates, the phase of Mesopotamian religion in which the wholly other was experienced as immanent coincided with the period in which gods and goddesses of fertility—of the fecund creative power inherent in nature—were the objects of worship: the worship of a divine force that was also within and belied the discontinuity of the individual (20-21). Bergson called the (divine) force in inner experience *élan vital*; Nietzsche called it the *will to power*. Both emphasized this inherent force's potential for resisting the debilitating effects of individualization and hyperrationalization.

return to [S]elf" – "the theopathic state."⁵⁸

Mythopoetic thinking comes closest to capturing the pre-logical speech of this lost mode of sacred experience. Bataille utilized a mythopoetic discourse that effaces the dichotomy between the literal and the figurative, the mythic and the real. Hence his pneumatic phenomenology, a *numenology*, if you will, that turned to myth to express "living *truth* ... in solidarity with *total* existence, of which [myth] is the tangible expression."⁵⁹ Myth is "true" because it is *an experience*. "In experience, there is no longer a limited existence. There a man is not distinguished in any way from others: in him what is torrential is lost within others."⁶⁰

To gaze directly into the sun invites rapture. To focus on the "solar anus" produces a trance-like madness, an epiphany. "The sun," Bataille writes, "has ... been mythologically expressed ... by an anthropomorphic being *deprived of a head*,"⁶¹ that is, deprived of the mere self-consciousness of the transcendental subject. In Bataille's numenology the sun figures as a metaphorical and literal catalyst for the superconsciousness of Apollo-Dionysus. Before one can become this sun, he must experience the delirium of Dionysian rapture, only to return brighter than a thousand suns – a *solar self*. Herein one sustains consciousness in a permanent state of agitation and *dépaysement* – a rapt attention without cease, a "fructile chaos."⁶² To return to the virile rudiments of primal consciousness, to return to base matter and to the first sunburst, is to overcome endopsychic frontiers; it is to experience a cerebral decomposition of form. There is no serenity in the light, only combustion: the ecstasy of Fou Tchou Li – his gaze directed at the sun – as he dissolves into a hundred pieces.

Bataille's nervous breakdown in London was a kind of psychological violence, an epiphany that initiated his quest for "ontological mutation." He emerged from this experience as from an initiation, with an occult *gnosis*: the intimacy between flesh and consciousness. Encouraged by the renegade psychoanalyst Adrien Borel, he pursued the self-loss initiated by this experience as a solar apotheosis,

⁵⁸ Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 140; 141 [my edit].

⁵⁹ Bataille 1985, 232.

⁶⁰ (27).

⁶¹ Bataille, "Rotten Sun," 58 [my edit]. In the 1930s Bataille adopted a headless figure (drawn by André Masson) as the mascot for his "secret society" Acéphale. See Georges Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," in *Visions of Excess*, 178-81. Bataille writes, the symbol "reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death." The pomegranate = the heart of Dionysus. The acephale's "stomach is the labyrinth," Bataille writes, "in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster."

⁶² Victor Turner's term for the liminal moment in a rite of passage that teems with creative potential. See Turner, "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience," in Victor Turner and Edward M. Bruner, eds., *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 42.

an unorthodox method of *working-through* one's neuroses, where deindividuation rather than individuation is the ultimate goal. Bataille insisted that consciousness must be eclipsed if it is to be reborn, if it is to become a new star—brighter, more intense, than the half-light cast by the transcendental subject. Only then do we see that this is no cave we inhabit, no world of shades and shadows, but a world of light. Only then are we remade—delirious.

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