

Fanatics of the Apocalypse: Traces of the End in Bataille and Debord

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Quae conventio luci ad tenebras ?
(What Conformity is there between light and darkness?)
St. Paul, Corinthians.

In a memoir written for *L Infini*, the journal which, in the winter of 1983, succeeded *Tel Quel*, Julia Kristeva (1983: 39) recalls how, some seventeen years previously, Philippe Sollers had introduced her to Georges Bataille's *L'Experience Interieure* and how this text seemed to her to reflect the tensions of the period. Having arrived in Paris with only two modern authors in her suitcase (Maurice Blanchot and Louis-Ferdinand Celine), Kristeva says that the encounter with the *via negativa* of Bataille's inner experience – written, appropriately enough, against the background of war and developed in a series of conversations with Maurice Blanchot over the period 1940–43 – not only influenced her response to the Lacanian model of ego psychology, but also, more appositely, shaped the development of her perspectives on the tension between the margins of language and the limits of the poetic imagination.

In particular, Bataille's inner experience, in which the thinking subject, *ipse*, collapses into the void demonstrated, for Kristeva, not only the instability of language as a total system, but also a transgression which disrupts any attempt at closure. Bataille, for Kristeva, offers a consciousness of the other which realises itself only in self-annihilation; it is, therefore discourse beyond politics, beyond history, beyond time: inner experience is an internal apocalypse which abolishes human particularity in an unemployable negativity.

Debord's *La Société du Spectacle*, written at the same time as Kristeva was reading by Bataille – on its publication largely ignored by the *Tel Quel* group – offers a critique which organises itself around a similar theory of negation. More particularly, like the texts of Bataille's *La Somme Atheologique* (of which *L'Experience Interieure* is the central text) and Bataille's theories on solar economics (*La Part Maudite* and *L'Economie à la Mesure de l'Univers*), Debord

interprets experience as both contradiction and paradox. In his description of the spectacular society, Debord, thus, not only understands reification as, Lukács has it, phantom objectivity, but also presents a reading of Hegel in which History is annihilated in a negative movement away from the possibility of transcendence; the famous Situationist critique of urbanism is rooted in the occupation of cities by historical absence; Obviously, it is precisely because of the liberation of history, which must take place in the cities, has not happened that the forces of historical absence have set about designing their own exclusive landscape there (1992: 171 - all translations by the author and editors).

This is effectively the same notion of historical absence found in the terrorist Hegel promoted by Alexandre Kojève in the course of his famous series of lectures, attended by Bataille at the Sorbonne. Kojève's version of Hegel presents a world without any teleological shape or structure, and who destroys the humanist account of moral history. More precisely, Kojève's Hegel, attacks the nature of objective truth with an extreme form of Pyrrhonism, or epistemological nihilism. This is paradoxically rooted in reason, and a weapon to be wielded against the falsity of Kantian hierarchies of thinking. This is how Debord's theory of the spectacle as a false representation of that which is not lived is related to Bataille's notion of history as contradiction which defies mediation. Unlike Baudrillard, for example, whose thought collapses into stasis, Debord's critique, like Bataille's inner experience, represents an irreducible constitution of non-meaning.

Peter Wollen, comparing Debord to Althusser says that [they] are mirror images of each other, complementary halves of the ruptured unity of Western Marxism ... one, so to speak, abstractly romantic, the other abstractly classical (1996: 430). In the same way, Bataille, in relation to Debord, represents the opposite pole of the same spirit; Bataille's anti-idealism emerges out of the debates around Surrealism (Patrick Waldberg, in conversation, famously described Bataille as 'the Black Surrealist of catastrophe') in much the same way that Debord's theory of the spectacle emerges out of a renegade Hegelianism, the movement of the real into the false which Anselm Jappe calls an inversion of Hegel. Bataille is cited only once in the pages of *L'Internationale Situationniste* (by Franco Floreani, Issue 9:31) as representing, with Klossowski, the work of radical negativity (a distinctly Kojévian negativity, entirely separate from Adorno). Bataille is a lingering presence, however, in the imagination that assaults the society of the spectacle with the weapons of Hegel and Nietzsche. What draws Bataille and Debord together is not only the Hegelianism without reserve which, as Derrida says, unlocks the dialectical process in a negative movement which resists the *Aufhebung*. It is also the Apocalypse as a shared metaphor: Bataille's interest in 'potlatch' as pure

expenditure and the sumptuous gift of the pre-Situationist journal *Potlatch* meet in the quotation from the *envoi* to Celine's famously apocalyptic novel *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (Journey to the End of the Night), detoured by Debord in a collage for the early text *Memoires*: Our life is a journey in winter and night, we look for our way, where no light shines. The loss of vision in the darkness and night, for Bataille and Debord, is not merely a metonymic trope, but also, as Martin Jay puts it a shared distrust of the hegemony of the eye (1996: 430).

Le Monde n est abusion

In his early essay on Hegel, written during his most Marxist period in 1932, Bataille underlines the significance of the negative in the Hegelian dialectic as the beginning of the movement beyond language into experience: this insight, he writes, is in fact what distinguishes the Hegelian mode of thought from Marxism which posits The dialectic as the general law of a fundamental reality (1970: 123). In the total self-clarity of subjectivity which is the Hegelian culmination of philosophy, Bataille asserts that lived experience is what escapes all systems and therefore constitutes, in atheological terms, the central insight which defines all other terms. An atheological method, thus, begins and ends in its own experience of the negative. For Bataille, this movement towards negativity, is itself the inner experience of radical discontinuity which defines atheology as method and principle. That the circularity of the economy of anguish can only be transgressed in the excess of laughter, tears or ecstasy, means that the possibility of a dialectal system is abolished in the need for inner experience.

Stoekl (1985: 32) describes how Bataille, as a medievalist aware of the theoretical implications of allegory, recognises that the fall of the elevated and noble threatens the coherent theory of allegory itself and that, as a result, allegory is not abolished but, rather, replaced by a headless allegory in a incessant and repetitious process which projects a symbolic language as a metonymic substitute for the loss of a stable system of referents; the meaning of language is thus sacrificed in the pursuit of *le bas materialisme* (Low materialism); the negative movement from vision to blindness does not abandon the dialectal process, but overcomes in destructive expenditure: Derrida explains, Man has thus dug out his own eyes, he has blinded himself to grope around in his entrails (1967: 135). The fall of allegory, in determining relations between objects and their subjects, thus denies the stability of an inverse hierarchy such as the replacement of God with excrement: Bataille's gnos̄is, the revelation received in the illumination of the anal sun, is that God is linked to the potential collapse of the poetic image in this case the metonymic chain which proceeds in both directions from excrement to God to the sacrifice of meaning in the fall of allegory: the self-reflecting cogito of the

Cartesian model is here annihilated in the transparency of the object; the self is literally obliterated by the blank eye of the Other.

In the same way, Bataille, not only traces the dislocation of self in inner experience but, at the very level of the text, re-enacts the drama of the sacrifice of meaning into non-meaning. This means, in the first instance, that although Bataille, a medievalist, would have recognised that there is no fixed line between allegory and symbolism, nonetheless in certain of the texts of inner experience language functions at an allegorical level, that is to say that at the level of a Derridean significative discourse which immobilizes meaning in a Hegelian abstract negativity. The individual's struggle against the unemployable negativity, which is the desire for continuity and the recognition of discontinuity, is an open wound in being which cannot be resolved in representation of that struggle in art or religious language. The Hegelian *Vorstellung* is undermined by Absence in the same that *Aufhebung* is transgressed in a moment of communication predicated upon the very negativity Hegel sees as central to the dialectic. Thus, the encounter with Divine Absence, which is the centre of inner experience is, then, a displacement of spiritual language which, although it transgresses all transcendent versions of religious experience, nonetheless remains faithful to the vocabulary of experience which it denies. The Alleluiah, or awakening to laughter, or eroticism, or tears, is a mystical experience which, thus, is as much a displacement of the structures of philosophy as well as being the trial by death.

For Bataille, the opening to ecstasy is an experience of pure negation which overwhelms the limit, or limits, because it belongs to an economy which renounces meaning and knowledge in the name of an impossible unrestricted negativity. As we have seen, this movement towards the collapse of meaning in *La Somme Atheologique* is often described in terms of the transparency of darkness, la nudité de la nuit. In the language of Bataille's fictions, however, there is a shift from allegory or indeed a collapse, towards a form of symbolic language, or *langage devoyé* as Barthes (1962: 134) puts it, which itself recreates the moment of collapse into inner experience. The darkness of unknowing is also the Hegelian inversion of the night which is a sun, the metonymic shift which Bataille borrows from Nietzsche's Zarathoustra and uses as the *envoi* to *L'Experience interieure*.

Vanishing Point

The notion of an eschatology of lived time, not just the end of history but also the end of sight as experience, is the central Icarian paradox – as Michel de Certeau describes the perspective of high altitude (1984: xxi) – of both inner experience and the degraded vision of the spectator in the society of the spectacle.

The implications of this notion extend beyond the manipulation of mass culture into theology; not only does Debord preface *La Société du Spectacle* with Feuerbach's illusion only is sacred, truth profane ... the highest degree of illusion comes to the highest degree of sacredness (Debord 1992) but, as Sollers (1997:12) writes, 'This world of falsification has a diabolical aspect. Did Debord believe in the Devil? Quite probably. Thought turned back on itself, exchanged contact with the void' (Blanchot 1953:45).

More specifically, this Icarian impossibility also initiates what Stoekl calls the fall of allegory in Bataille's thinking, that is to say the disruption of any hierarchy of meaning which might privilege one object (filth, ruptured eyes, the sun) over another (the head, God, vision). This disruption is not, however, a simple inversion: the world in which disruptive low matter works against any transcendental project is also a world in which, as meaning is destabilised, no new hierarchy can be established.

Like Bataille, the importance of Hegel, for Debord, was not so much that he sought to interpret the world, but that, in the movement of the dialectic, he sought to interpret the world's transformation: thus, Debord (1992: 172) writes, 'The movement of what is properly called history (although it remains hidden) begins with the slow and imperceptible emergence of the true nature of man'. The Bataillean reversal – sun which is night, however, finds its place in Debord's version of negativity as the Hegelian dialectic posits itself as the element which moves the dialectic forward but which also paralyses that movement in non-meaning.

The End of history, for Debord, is thus, subject to the infinite play of contradiction: History has always existed, but not always in its historical form. ... The unconscious movement of time becomes manifest and true in historical consciousness (Debord 1992: 172). For Debord, the simulated presence of historical existence which occludes thought in the false authenticity of the spectacle, is an appropriation which the spectacle has made irreversible. Thus, like Rimbaud (1975: 87), whose whose greatness is to brought poetry to the failure of poetry, Debord valorises the baroque, with its emphasis on adventure

and passage. In the world of the dominant spectacle, however, the subject is consumed, or consumes itself, before the blank eye of the object it desires; the opening of the eye invites obliteration; the dialectal process, either the Hegelian model of knowledge, or the Freudian one of therapy, is wiped away into insignificance. Thus, modern art, attacked by the Situationists for privileging space over time, is a mirage; similarly, modern tourism which deprives travel of its temporal aspect as well as the reality of space is the freezing of life; the technology of separation is a negativity which cannot be overcome in the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. The rupture with the notion of time as object of unalienated existence, for Debord, is a denegation of lived experience.

However, although Debord (1992: 120), like Bataille, (apparently quoting Kojève's *Hegel*) conceives of the human as that negative being who is solely to the extent that he abolishes being, he nonetheless – unlike Bataille who describes inner experience as a-historical and mystical – understands the temporalization of man as a negativity which mediated through society means that the domination of the spectacle, in present conditions, has destroyed history in the movement towards a perpetual present. In Debord's final film, *Guy Debord, son Art, son Temps*, the passage of time has been paralysed. The film starts with a quotation from Baudelaire's poem *Le Cygne* (The Swan 1961/1861:81), which presents the image of a swan cut adrift by the linear modernity of Haussmann's boulevards and lost in the modern world;

Le vieux Paris n'est plus [la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas, que le cœur d'un mortel.]

Old Paris is no more [The form of a city
Changes more quickly, alas, than the human heart]

In another final scene immigrant schoolchildren, reading Zola, do not know what century they are living in; the central metaphor of the film is a cancer eating away at the heart of twentieth century France: The destruction of history is the contemporary event which immediately recedes into an imagined distance (Debord 1998:31).

Debord returns to the Middle Ages to explain present conditions. Specifically, he is fascinated by the pre-Renaissance world – an era which corresponds to end of lived time and during which an individualistic art of negation had chosen life as opposed to eternity. In Debord's translations of the poetry of Jorge Manrique, for example, the themes of the Medieval, and in part Classical, traditions expose generalised reality with private pain: no communication remains possible, however, says Debord (1988), in the present era wherein the prerequisites of communication in general have vanished.

Pues si vemos lo presente
 como un punto se ido
 e acabado
 si juzgamos sabiamente daremos lo non venido por pasado

Seeing the present time
 in the instant which has gone
 and is no more
 If we judge wisely the future is as the past

For Klossowski (1962: 45), the central point of the instant of possible communication in Bataille's inner experience is the emptiness which awakes in the Other (*l'autrui*) the complicity preliminary to the sacrifice of meaning. Klossowski thus uses the term *simulacrum* to describe the risk of inner experience, which is a simulation of death, and is predicated upon the potential failure of communication. But if the project of inner experience is a *simulacrum*, a way of experiencing the fall without actually falling, asks Klossowski, how can the object of atheological mysticism, communication, be possible, as Bataille asserts is the case (*Immense alea*, writes Bataille in *Methode de Meditation*), in the instant of sovereignty?

Similarly, for Debord, as communication in the society of the spectacle is dispersed into fragments of undifferentiated being, the very movement into communication is an experience of *aporia*, a blind spot, which renounces death as it risks itself in the subversion of all potential systems; this is the vanishing point at which Debord's Hegelianism recognises itself as a system beyond all systems: this moment of vertigo is also the moment of potential collapse (Baudrillard 1994:12).

The Middle Ages

In an early essay, Bataille develops the notion of matter as living principle in allegorical terms borrowed from the Gnostic theologians and which re-occurs in Medieval mysticism. In particular, he posits the autonomous existence of darkness as an active principle in the Medieval imagination; darkness is not simply absence of light but also radical heterogeneity, which opposes the imperatives of homogeneity as pure negativity. In specific terms, as in the early essay for *Documents*, *L'Apocalypse de Saint-Sever*, this means an immediate expression of unintelligible metamorphoses which, even more significantly, are the result of certain fatal inclinations (Bataille 1970: 254).

For Breton, however, Bataille's anti-idealism was simply an inverse hierarchical system and this is, according to Breton, to fall prey to the snare of the poetic imagination. Thus, although, for example, the meaning of the word

mystic has its origins in words which describe hiddenness, closed doors, and until the sixteenth century at least, Christian usage of words deriving from the Greek *muo*, to close up or conceal, stayed close to this sense, the mystical aspects of inner experience are first of all defined by Bataille (1954: 132) as a response to the necessity to question all. In the movement of inner experience, **ipse** is annihilated in a parallel manner; the authority of inner experience, however, undermines the separate existence of the one and the other; inner experience receives its authority as gnosis -from the Greek knowledge in the sense of interior certainty. Bataille (1975: 128) sees this form of mysticism, originating in the irrecoverable form of low materialism, as having *une valeur capitale* (capital value).

For the novelist Cecile Guilbert in a book, ironically enough, written for *L'Infini* a year after Debord's death in 1994 Debord and Bataille are both millenarians in the sense that they both throw lived experience beyond present conditions. The fact that Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium* (translated into French as *Fanatiques de L'Apocalypse*) was a key book for the Situationists is matched by Bataille's reduction of metaphysics to language which occludes the mystery of God in syntax. Similarly, the spectacle, as an exercise in pure self-consciousness, gives meaning to experiences only to the extent that the subject negates itself in a moment of pure expenditure. This is, for Debord, the movement of **ipse** into an affirmation of pure negativity in which the object is abolished and replaced by **ipse**'s consciousness of itself as unrestricted, subjectivity. The simulacrum collapses into pure irrecoverable negativity; the Bataillean experience of *le non-savoir* and the Debordian motif of negation of the false consciousness of time both have in common; the abolition of their own subject; the collapse of meaning into discontinuity which annihilates thought and abolishes the possibility of fixed referents.

For Bataille, as it is for Debord, the blinding moment of communication is also a blind spot; the Hegelian movement comes to a standstill. Thus Bataille and Debord can concur with Aquinas' argument about the distinction between substance and experience in the *Summa Theologica*, *Utrum opponantur unum et multa* - Nothing is composed of its opposite. Thus, although the impossible which Bataille meditates upon is enclosed, at least for the most part, within the textual drama of the Hegelian system, Derrida speaks of the way in which Bataille laughs at philosophy and says that this movement into excessive awakening both undermines Bataille's Hegelianism and the discipline of his method of meditation.

Similarly, Kojève (1947: 345) points out that Hegel uses the word reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) to describe the way in which two terms can

remain, but that their opposition is overcome: it is this reconciliation which allows God, for Hegel and Bataille, to be desacralized (*entgoettern*: literally, the taking away of God) as part of the essential movement towards sovereignty rather than, as in classical atheism, discarded. The absent God, is thus, a negation which overflows from discourse, as does erotic experience, for example, into an existential constitution of non-meaning. Bataille's transgression of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* into the circularity of an unrestricted negativity is, therefore, not only the desacralization of God, which links God to non-meaning in a movement which constitutes excess, but also, more importantly, an erotic meditation upon the vacant space of *Deus Divinus* in which the object gazes back in a moment of communication and rapture: the headless allegory is a moment of reversal wherein subject and object exchange places: *-Tu vois, ... je suis DIEU...* (You see ... I am God) says Madame Edwarda... Vision and blindness are interchangeable experiences in a system in which, as Kojève explains, opposes the Hegelian exigency to sidestep the logic of historical temporality in angelic timelessness: [...] *tu dois regarder: regarde*, (You must look: look) says Madame Edwarda to Pierre Angelique, the communicant in the acephalic mass, as she exposes the open wound of her cunt (see Bataille 1975: 341).

The notion of blindness as a reversal which leads to revelation, thus offers Bataille neither a dialectal nor a poetic resolution to the meaning and nature of the experience of transgression. This is how the central point of separation in the movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence, described by Debord (1992: 171) in *La Société du Spectacle*, matches Bataille's description of the end of experience as *ce miraculeux négatif* (this miraculous negative). However, in the original sense of the Greek *apokalipsus*, the end of lived time is also a revelation which unmasks the nature of the world. It is, therefore, as Debord's friend Michel Bounan points out in *Le Temps du Sida* (1996), both future and present apocalypse: the dynamic of a historical movement which has not yet finished.

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