

INSTITUTE OF LITERARY STUDIES  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA

**Marcin Hanuszkiewicz**

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**EXERCISES IN FUTILITY:  
ECHOES OF A BATAILLEAN EXPERIENCE  
IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF FICTION AND VIDEO GAMES**

Praca w języku angielskim

**Supervisor: Professor Ewa Borkowska**

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INSTYTUT LITERATUROZNAWSTWA  
WYDZIAŁ HUMANISTYCZNY  
UNIwersytet Śląski

**Marcin Hanuszkiewicz**

ROZPRAWA DOKTORSKA

**ĆWICZENIA W BEZUŻYTECZNOŚCI:  
ECHA DOŚWIADCZENIA BATAILLE’OWSKIEGO  
W WYBRANYCH UTWORACH LITERACKICH I GRACH WIDEO**

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**Promotor: prof. dr hab. Ewa Borkowska**

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## CONTENTS

|                                                                                          |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| INTRODUCTION: FALLING OFF THE MAP.....                                                   | 1   |
| CHAPTER 1: A VIRAL TOPOLOGY.....                                                         | 20  |
| CHAPTER 2: A SORCEROUS DESTINY.....                                                      | 34  |
| CHAPTER 3: AN ORIGIN OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN.....                                              | 66  |
| CHAPTER 4: A CACKLING CARCASS.....                                                       | 81  |
| CHAPTER 5: THE DEATH OF LANGUAGE.....                                                    | 100 |
| CHAPTER 6: OBELISKS, ASKESIS, AND NOISE.....                                             | 119 |
| CHAPTER 7: THE OUROBORIC TENSION<br>BETWEEN TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE.....             | 182 |
| CHAPTER 8: COURTLY MASOCHISM VERSUS THE ORDER OF THINGS.....                             | 217 |
| CHAPTER 9: THE FUTURE AS TRANSCENDENCE.....                                              | 262 |
| CHAPTER 10: THE LABYRINTH.....                                                           | 332 |
| CHAPTER 11: THE FUTURE OF TRANSCENDENCE.....                                             | 351 |
| CHAPTER 12: THEMES OF TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE<br>IN OTHER VIDEO GAME NARRATIVES..... | 398 |
| CONCLUSIONS: EXERCISES IN FUTILITY.....                                                  | 418 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....                                                                        | 429 |
| SUMMARY IN ENGLISH.....                                                                  | 455 |
| SUMMARY IN POLISH.....                                                                   | 459 |



## INTRODUCTION: FALLING OFF THE MAP

*“THE SERVANT: Behold, O king, if I speak in riddles it is because a riddle has  
come to pass.”<sup>1</sup>*

The hope that will drive this text forward is that, by the end of it, a nymphatic system of echoes will have been constructed, allowing the manifold thoughts of Georges Bataille to reverberate across textual spaces the acoustics of which will lend themselves to a resonant interplay. The endeavour at hand will not, however, be aimed at producing a self-contained reading of Bataille’s philosophy (if so it may be called). Instead, his writings will be introduced into other texts of culture, texts that were selected according to their compatibility with particular elements of Bataille’s *oeuvre*, and which will – when considered together as a possibility of consonance – reveal not only the lasting relevance of a Bataillean vision of the universe, but also specific manifestations of the truth that this vision continues to present us with.

More specifically, our goal will be to establish a model of a Bataillean dynamic of transcendent and immanent impulses. In order to do so, however, it will be necessary to pass through some other themes from his unique anthropology, one that could be called an anthropology of the sacred, and one rooted in his experience of the sacred which, because of the idiosyncratic expression he gave to it, has often been wrongfully viewed as idiosyncratic in itself. Our position – and that of Bataille himself – is that the experience in question is open to anyone who possesses the inner stamina necessary to

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<sup>1</sup> Winthrop Parkhurst, “The Beggar and the King,” in: *The Atlantic Book of Modern Plays*, ed. Sterling Andrus Leonard (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1921), <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/16435/pg16435.html> (30 July 2021).

summon it within oneself. And indeed, the philosophico-literary structure that Bataille could not help but erect around his experience allows one to recognise this experience in the writings of other authors.

In order to identify it properly, however, the following elements of Bataille's anthropology of the sacred – the different ways of approaching the sacred he had developed throughout his life – will have to be considered: the purpose of myth as an engine of destiny; the interplay of, on the one hand, the known or the possible, and on the other, the unknown or the impossible, as well as the inner experience of the unknown or the impossible, which was, for Bataille, in radical antagonism to useful projects; the role of laughter in the sundering of subjects, and a vision of laughter as an experience of the fundamental incompleteness or openness of being; heterology – the study of the experience of the heterogeneous or unknown; the condemnation of language itself as commensurate with the principles that subordinate the human being, separating it from sovereignty understood by Bataille as an absence of the need for self-justification. Furthermore, a reference will be made to the notion of general economy, which – in contrast to restricted, particular economies – concerns itself with the global circulation of solar energy. The dynamics of transcendence and immanence – by way of which Bataille managed to subvert the usual understanding of sacred pursuits – will, as has been mentioned, perform a most vital function in this work, underpinning all instances of the essential tension between closure and openness, between the inclination to remain within limits and the desire for transgression, which is the domain of limit-experiences; it will also be considered in connection with Bataille's critique of the polarised valorisation of highness and lowness, as well as his equivocal views on the practice of asceticism. Moreover, Bataille's rigorous examination of the ties between eroticism,



death, and the double bind of work and taboo will play an especially significant part in later chapters, wherein the dynamics of transcendence and immanence will become entangled with the issues of the future and technology, and with Bataille's image of the world as a labyrinth of matter.

On the one hand, what inspires this work is Pierre Klossowski's introduction to his book on Nietzsche, which he opens with a passage that has to be invoked here despite its length, for reasons that will become clear in a moment:

This is a book that exhibits an unusual ignorance. How can we speak solely of "Nietzsche's thought" without taking into account everything that has subsequently been said about it? Will we not thereby run the risk of following paths that have already been travelled more than once, blazing trails that have been marked out many times – imprudently asking questions that have long ago been left behind? And will we not in this way reveal a negligence, a total lack of scruples with regard to the meticulous exegeses that recently have been written – in order to interpret, as so many signals, the flashes of summer lightning that a destiny continues to send our way from the horizon of our century? What then is our aim – if indeed we have one? Let us say that we have written a false study. Because we are reading Nietzsche's texts directly, because we are listening to him speak, can we perhaps make him speak to "us"? Can we ourselves make use of the whisperings, the breathings, the bunts of anger and laughter in what may be the most ingratiating – and also the most irritating – prose yet written in the German language? For those who can hear it, the word of Nietzsche gains a power that is all the more explosive insofar as contemporary history, current events, and the universe are beginning to answer, in a more or less circuitous manner, the questions Nietzsche was asking some eighty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

As we shall see by the end of this work, it is the word of Bataille, given to us "some eighty years ago," that resounds more and more loudly as the human race gives itself ever more unreservedly to a world founded on technologies of reality-engineering.

On the other hand, secondary sources will most certainly not be absent from the theoretical foundation of this work. And so, even though it is indeed our hope that, if we read Bataille's texts directly, we can "make him speak to 'us,'" our hope is only strengthened by, for example, Jeremy Biles' exposition of Bataille's notion of friendship as the sovereign insubordination that cuts across hierarchies, and which is a

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), pp. xiv-xv.

communication passing between “wounded subjects,” beings dislodged from the stable positions they had occupied in the established order, beings that are intimately open onto each other – through either death or its profound consciousness.<sup>3</sup> In other words, there is a willingness in us to reach out to Bataille, but it is rendered impossible by the bare fact of his death – this, in turn, gives us a bittersweet experience, a feeling of a friendship extended over “burning words,”<sup>4</sup> an impossible friendship akin to an ache.

Speaking more broadly, the line of thought that is to be followed will align with certain aspects of the research to which Bataille has already been subjected, while at the same time running counter to some of the views that have been imposed upon him by the scholarly eye. Most importantly, we disagree with the approach Andrew Hussey summarises with the following words: “Bataille’s writings on inner experience were discussed with exclusive regard to their theoretical implications for textual criticism, whilst the transgressive act of inner experience, which undermined ordered, discursive thought with the collapse of the subject, was seen as part of a textual game.”<sup>5</sup> Hussey, too, positions himself in opposition to such an approach, devoting his book to an actual engagement with the mystical content of Bataille’s texts. Writing on the centrality of the experience of laughter in a Bataillean relationship with the universe, Lydia Amir reaffirms the paradoxical necessity of taking Bataille’s ludicrous experience seriously, that is, *not* as a merely textual performance. The researcher underscores, moreover, the mystical provenance of Bataille’s body of work:

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 32-34.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), p. 8.

the writings of the mystics influence his notion of ecstasy and their vocabulary and concerns are intimately connected with his work. Bataille admires the texts of Dionysius the Areopagite, Jacob Boehme, Nicolas de Cusa, Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno and other mystics, mostly Western, who belong to the Neoplatonic schools of mysticism. And even as he expresses reservations about the conclusions to which they are led, Bataille argues throughout *Inner Experience* that the content of Christianity may be lost but the framework which shapes faith and experience remains intact.<sup>6</sup>

There was another tributary that poured into the river of Bataille's thought. "Clearly," states William Pawlett (who has written extensively on the connections between Bataille and Jean Baudrillard), "many of the most important themes of Bataille's work were already present in the French sociological tradition. Mauss's [...] *The Gift* [...] had a profound and fully acknowledged influence on Bataille, Caillois and, later, Baudrillard."<sup>7</sup> In another article, he enumerates "Sade's philosophy of eroticism, Hegel's dialectical negativity, and Weber's Protestant ethic thesis," as well as Mauss and "the Durkheimian school of sociology,"<sup>8</sup> as Bataille's sources.<sup>9</sup> Still, one ought to remember that every system of thought that informed Bataille did so because it allowed him, in one way or another, to perceive the hole that compromises the whole: both of that system and of being. Thus, he strove to strip even mysticism itself of its dogma, seeking to refine it into a mode of interiority that could be pursued independently from pre-existing notions of divinity, which were all – in Bataille's view – encumbered with a knowable element, tainted due to being mediated by language.

Nevertheless, much of what has been written on Bataille can roughly be divided

<sup>6</sup> Lydia Amir, "Georges Bataille: The Laughter of Ecstasy," in: *The Legacy of Nietzsche's Philosophy of Laughter: Bataille, Deleuze, and Rosset* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> William Pawlett, "Utility and Excess: the Radical Sociology of Bataille and Baudrillard," *Economy and Society*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (1997), p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> Hence, for example, the presence of an article devoted to Bataille – S. Romi Mukherjee's "Apophysis in Representation: Georges Bataille and the Aesthetics and Ethics of the Negative" – in a collection exploring the heritage of Durkheim's sociology: *Durkheim, the Durkheimians, and the Arts*, ed. Alexander Riley et al. (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), pp. 223-257.

<sup>9</sup> Pawlett, "The Sacred, Heterology and Transparency: Between Bataille and Baudrillard," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 35, No. 4-5 (2018), p. 176.

into two categories. Firstly, there are works that acknowledge the utmost importance of the authenticity of Bataille's experiences of the sacred in any attempts to interact with his output. Among these, one finds Hussey's aforementioned *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille*, as well as Amir's chapter on Bataille in her book, *The Legacy of Nietzsche's Philosophy of Laughter*. Furthermore, Biles' *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* points towards the fact that Bataille was "compelled by an unsatisfied, and indeed unsatisfiable, desire – a desire to experience what he attempts to delineate,"<sup>10</sup> thus recognising this interior impulse towards the beyond of possible knowledge as the motor that propelled his writing. Krzysztof Matuszewski, in turn, elucidates the profoundly experiential character of Bataille's eroticism in his two-part essay, "Georges'a Bataille'a mistyczna partuza" ("The Mystical Revelry of Georges Bataille").<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, there is the sort of research that textualises or politicises Bataille's sacred, reducing it to an object of knowledge and utility – thus profaning it – or that simply ignores it. Examples include Allan Stoekl's *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* – wherein the case of Bataille is considered first and foremost politically, that is, in view of his opposition to fascism – or Denis Hollier's understanding of "Bataille's inner experience" as "a form of activity which, while not in any sense properly mystical, borrows the language of mysticism as part of a strategy which allows Bataille to resist the reductive authority of either spatial structures (this is the central theme of Hollier's book *La prise de la concorde*<sup>12</sup>) or

<sup>10</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> Krzysztof Matuszewski, "Georges'a Bataille'a mistyczna partuza: część pierwsza," *Nowa Krytyka*, Vol. 13 (2002), pp. 13-49, and "Georges'a Bataille'a mistyczna partuza: część druga," *Nowa Krytyka*, Vol. 14 (2003), pp. 59-123.

<sup>12</sup> Available in English as *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1989).

symbolic dualities.”<sup>13</sup> Although Alexander Irwin admits, in his *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred*, that Bataille’s sacred is not necessarily just a feature of Bataille’s text, he nonetheless does not conceive of it in a way that would escape political utility. Carolyn Dean’s interest in Bataille – expressed in her book, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* – is psychoanalytical and, unsurprisingly, political. As Irwin notes while discussing Bataille’s inutility in terms of unethical inaction, Dean joins the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel in accusing Bataille’s mysticism of being “an ignoble escape from the harsh realities of war and politics.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, since Nick Land’s *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* derives from Bataille’s base materialism a materialism driven even further away from any semblances of idealism – a materialism driven mad – it has no space for the intimacy of experience in its ruthless reduction of all existence to intensities of physical phenomena.

As regards anthologies, publications such as *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, edited by Carolyn Gill, or *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, edited by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, are filled with texts occupied predominantly with grounding Bataille in the fields of politics, economy, philosophy or sociology, and which most usually fail to shift their aim away from exclusively profane goals. It should also be noted that *Bataille: A Critical Reader* offers prime examples of the theoretical approach reproached by Hussey, which is to say that it contains some of the most influential readings – penned by, for example, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault or Jürgen Habermas – canonising Bataille as a precursor<sup>15</sup> of post-structuralism or postmodernism, and interpreting his

<sup>13</sup> Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 125.

<sup>15</sup> Allan Stoekl, “Derrida, Foucault, and Their Precursors,” in: *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of*

entire endeavour in textual or otherwise profane terms. Maurice Blanchot<sup>16</sup> and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen<sup>17</sup> can be counted among the exceptions.

*Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, edited by Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall, comprises texts that – though they without a doubt concern Bataille’s anthropology of the sacred – focus on the anthropology rather than on the sacred itself. At the same time, some of the pieces are different in this regard; Biles’ own contribution – which interrogates the similarities between oneiric and mystical states<sup>18</sup> – as well as that of Alphonso Lingis, who foregrounds Bataille’s intimate experiences of the sacred in the context of his theory of religion,<sup>19</sup> break the mould. *The Beast at Heaven’s Gates: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, edited by Hussey, gathers essays whose premises include politics, psychoanalysis, and philosophy; in the collection, one finds readings of Bataille’s own literary works, as well as readings of

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*Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 89-103. See also, as a more recent example of Bataille’s canonisation – one in which the word is simultaneously returned to its proper register and subverted – the incorporation of a text on Bataille (Charlie Blake’s “Divine Dissipation: Criminal Sanctity and the Atheological Abrupt in Georges Bataille”) into an anthology called *The Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring “the Holy” in Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. Colby Dickinson (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013). For Blake’s text, see: pp. 109-122.

<sup>16</sup> Blanchot insists that what Bataille imparts upon his readers is a radical possibility of altering one’s life through developing an acute awareness of impossibility. Taking as his point of departure the Hegelian aspects of Bataille’s thought (as well as his own experiences of talking with Bataille), Blanchot postulates an attitude of “infinite affirmation,” which would bring forth, in the realm of human thought, a moment similar to a certain stage of conversation – one at which speech departs from the purpose of conveying a predetermined message, and constitutes a method by which those who speak embark on a journey beyond the known, thus *affirming* whatever might be spoken when all has already been said and done. See: “Affirmation and the Passion of Negative Thought,” trans. Susan Hanson, in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 41-58.

<sup>17</sup> Borch-Jacobsen delves into the implications of Bataille’s views on laughter; he does not uproot Bataille’s laughter from the human experience of laughter, and thus manages to avoid undue abstraction throughout his investigation. See: “The Laughter of Being,” trans. Terry Thomas, in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, pp. 146-166.

<sup>18</sup> See: Jeremy Biles, “Does the Acéphale Dream of Headless Sheep?” in: *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, ed. Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 217-238.

<sup>19</sup> See: Alphonso Lingis, “Bataille’s Contestation of Interpretative Anthropology and of the Sociology of Religion,” in: *Negative Ecstasies*, pp. 138-152. Lingis’ text in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred* also stands out because of its focus on the subjective experience of the sacred.

earlier readings. Again, it is the editor's input – Hussey's “‘The Slaughterhouse of Love’: The Corpse of ‘Laure’” – which remains the closest to experience, while also bringing the readers' attention to Yukio Mishima's review of *Madame Edwarda* and *My Mother*,<sup>20</sup> wherein the Japanese writer preceded Bataille's own countrymen in understanding that the true value of Bataille's writing was that it “prized experience over theory.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, although he does not comment on Bataille's sacred, Richard Williams does take a stand on a Bataillean issue in his “Informe and ‘Anti form.’”<sup>22</sup> Williams' text is a critique of an art history project undertaken by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss,<sup>23</sup> who aimed at utilising Bataille's short piece on formlessness<sup>24</sup> in an effort to recontextualise particular twentieth-century artists. More specifically, Williams argues that Bois and Krauss' project – which depends on their strict separation of the formless and the abject, a separation maintained in overt opposition to Julia Kristeva's writings on the abject – elevates and sterilises that which should, in any Bataillean enterprise, remain base and filthy. Biles' article, “A Story of Rats: Associations on Bataille's simulacrum of abjection,” though published elsewhere, connects with that of Williams insofar as it also denounces Bois and Krauss's project as “a struggle for laying claim to some master category in Bataille's writings,” despite the fact that, as Biles asserts, “no such category exists.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See: Yukio Mishima, “Georges Bataille and Divinus Deus,” in: Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), pp. 3-12.

<sup>21</sup> Hussey, “‘The Slaughterhouse of Love’: The Corpse of ‘Laure,’” in: *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Williams, “Informe and ‘Anti Form,’” in: *The Beast at Heaven's Gate*, pp. 143-153.

<sup>23</sup> See: Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> See: Bataille, “Formless,” in: *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Biles, “A Story of Rats: Associations on Bataille's Simulacrum of Abjection,” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2014), p. 120.

Furthermore, there are works the purpose of which is to paint a more general picture of Bataille's reception. Benjamin Noys' *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* delivers on the promise of its title, presenting to its readers the many facets of Bataille's thought while also referring them to relevant secondary sources. *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, edited by Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons, is a principally philosophical collection, at the two extremes of which one finds, on the one hand, Klossowski's meditation on Bataille's efforts to elude notions – from which the experiential content of thought is purged – by the use of simulacra,<sup>26</sup> and on the other, Kristeva's interpretation<sup>27</sup> of inner experience as one which, as Hussey puts it, can “only be ‘mystical’ in an analogous sense,” because it is “a form of play, a ‘fiction,’ which cannot be entirely separate from the language system which it seeks to undermine.”<sup>28</sup>

In sum, much of the research listed above is focused on trying to establish Bataille's exact position on the battlefield (or in the marketplace) of ideas, or to connect particular aspects of his writing to this or that philosopher, or to this or that idea. Further examples can be provided. Patrick Ffrench's *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community*, for instance, examines how Jean-Luc Nancy grappled with the ramifications of a Bataillean meaning of community. In *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard*, Julian Pefanis sketches out “the tradition of French Nietzscheanism,”<sup>29</sup> in which an eminent position is necessarily held by Bataille. Tomasz Swoboda's work, *Historie oka. Bataille, Leiris, Artaud, Blanchot (Stories of the Eye)*, is

<sup>26</sup> See: Klossowski, “Of the Simulacrum in Georges Bataille's Communication,” in: *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. and trans. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 147-155.

<sup>27</sup> See: Julia Kristeva, “Bataille, Experience and Practice,” in: *On Bataille*, pp. 237-264.

<sup>28</sup> Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 61.



faithful to its title in that, taking as its point of reference Bataille's seminal novel, *Story of the Eye*, it elaborates on the interplay of vision and the impossibility of vision, tracing the signs of this interplay across the works of Bataille, his friends, and other contemporaries. As far as *Story of the Eye* is concerned, one should also remember Roland Barthes' well-known analysis of the novel as an enactment of a structural entanglement of metonymic chains of signification.

The studies that would endeavour to read other authors through a Bataillean lens – to apply his ideas directly to, for example, literature – seem more rare. Indeed, Biles muses that “Bataille's writings have been the subject of much exegetical work, but not often enough put into practice,” even though “[o]ne might say that reading – and writing on – Bataille really begins when it no longer seeks to explain Bataille, but rather puts him to work [...] in a way that contradicts and critiques the existing order [...]”<sup>30</sup> As regards the connections already made between Bataille and the texts of culture that will be spoken of later on: Daniel Sander employs Bataille's eroticism in an exploration of the sexual themes present in the writings of William S. Burroughs<sup>31</sup>; Władysław Panas also refers to, albeit briefly, Bataille's eroticism in his incisively Cabbalist reading of Bruno Schulz<sup>32</sup>; Mark Robberds reads Thomas Pynchon through a Bataillean vision of excess<sup>33</sup>; Mark Osteen mentions Bataille's treatment of potlatch in his analysis of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*<sup>34</sup>; Liel Leibovitz links Bataille's glorification of waste with the

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<sup>30</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, p. 167.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Sander, “Neo Boys,” *Pivot*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2016), pp. 153-185.

<sup>32</sup> Władysław Panas, *Księga blasku. Traktat o kabale w prozie Brunona Schulza* (Lublin: Ośrodek Brama Grodzka, 2009), [http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/Content/66970/Ksiega\\_blasku\\_Traktat\\_o\\_kabale.pdf](http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/Content/66970/Ksiega_blasku_Traktat_o_kabale.pdf) (25.02.2020).

<sup>33</sup> Mark Robberds, “Visions of Excess: Pynchon and Bataille,” *Pynchon Notes*, Vol. 40-41 (1997), pp. 19-27.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Osteen, “The Currency in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2014), pp. 299-301.

discourse surrounding video games.<sup>35</sup>

Since, however, this work is not supposed to be a book about Bataille, but rather a series of analyses in which Bataille's ideas are to be applied to other texts of culture in an attempt to connect different narratives to a particular experience, notions developed by other thinkers will also be involved. (Nevertheless, it is unavoidable that, as the different aspects of Bataille's vision are investigated, a sort of helical movement will take place, an effect of descending a spiral staircase: with every chapter – with every rotation – our understanding of this vision will become progressively complexified, modified by what we will have learnt before). Of particular use, therefore, will be the machines invented by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*: the competition of arboretic and rhizomatic models, the construction of assemblages, the movement of lines of flight, the process of de- and reterritorialisation, and, perhaps most importantly, the interplay of the planes of composition and consistency, of transcendence and immanence (as we will try to show, Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of these two states of being can itself be plugged into how they functioned in Bataille's view) – all of this will, in one way or another, accompany us on our journey. As for what points of contact have already been established between, on the one hand, Bataille, and on the other, Deleuze and Guattari, Janae Sholtz's study on their respective perspectives on asceticism will be invoked later on.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, we will refer to Jean Baudrillard, whose early work, *Seduction*, will fruitfully connect with Bataille's thought; Roger Caillois, who researched the sacred alongside Bataille; Roland Barthes, to whom we are indebted for his *Mythologies*, *A*

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<sup>35</sup> Liel Leibovitz, "Playing to Lose: On Video Games, Excess, and Expenditure," *Velvet Light Trap*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (2013), pp. 75-76.

<sup>36</sup> Janae Sholtz, "Bataille and Deleuze's Peculiar Askesis: Techniques of Transgression, Meditation and Dramatisation," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2020), pp. 198-228.

*Lover's Discourse: Fragments, The Empire of Signs, and The Pleasure of the Text*, wherein can be found another source of inspiration:

With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, *unless it is reached through another text of bliss*: you cannot speak "on" such a text, you can only speak "in" it, *in its fashion*, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of bliss (and no longer obsessively repeat the letter of pleasure).<sup>37</sup>

Thus, what shall be pursued here will be a friendship written "in" Bataille, written to "affirm the void of bliss." Bataille's "burning words," extended across death and its consciousness in a gesture of friendship, will be reached through other texts of bliss, through those moments when, in its passage through signs, meaning is revealed as the means to an immolation – through the spots where meaning suffers a wound, binding friends in its own silence.

As regards further philosophical constructions that will be conjured throughout this work, Jean-François Lyotard's writings on matter as suspended, in a way, between processes that complexify it and those that reduce it to noise will be set together with Bataille's labyrinthine materialism (as filtered through, moreover, Land's reinterpretation of the labyrinth); Peter Sloterdijk's anthropotechnics and Timothy Morton's agrilogistics will help to shed light on the intricacies of power structures underpinning everyday life; Tadeusz Ślawek's theory of the rest – understood as that which always remains outside of every thought, word, and deed – will be of use in supplementing Bataille's search for the beyond of the regime of work; when the time will come to discuss Bataille's ambiguous attitude towards asceticism, Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal will serve to problematise the very practice; Slavoj Žižek's

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<sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), p. 22.

search for a common ground shared by courtly love and masochism will play an important part in an attempt to locate the latter mode of eroticism between the poles of transcendence and immanence; Jacek Dukaj's prognoses concerning modes of consciousness and experience entailed by the cultural shift from the written word to transferable images and sounds will be especially relevant in the context of the tension between transcendence and immanence; Mark Fisher's book on the weird and the eerie, combined with Land's accelerationist visions of the future invading the present via capital, will allow us to discover that a fundamental anxiety has been fermenting within the cultural milieu ever since that diffuse event known as the death of God.

Into the modular assemblages of notions (or simulacra thereof...), comprising different fragments at different times, literary and ludo-narrative works will be plugged. In this regard, we sympathise with Deleuze and Guattari's response to being "criticized for overquoting literary authors": "when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work. [...] Literature<sup>38</sup> is an assemblage,"<sup>39</sup> and this connects us also to

that late medieval genre of writing known as *florilegium* or 'flower-culling.' Derived from the Latin *flos*, meaning 'flower,' and *legere*, 'to read' – and having as its etymological root meaning 'to collect up, to gather by picking, plucking, and the like' – *florilegia* were extensive and systematic compilations of extracts from past writings: proverbs, maxims, and stories, sometimes quoted verbatim in mnemonically brief segments, but more often summarized or subject to some alteration with the aim of exemplifying certain topics which, when combined and recombined together, illuminated a central doctrine or idea; thus producing, through a mode of literary splicing, the telescopic effect traditionally associated with targumim texts.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> In addition, many of the literary machines of which we will speak – which we will plug into our own machine – are, to a lesser or greater degree, theory-fictions: William S. Burroughs' cut-up method is inseparable from his theory of language; Bruno Schulz's theory of myth is integral to his prose; the works of Vladimir Nabokov, Don DeLillo, or Witold Gombrowicz often express a notion in the medium of unfolding narratives. Georges Bataille's novels are similar in this respect.

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Edia Connoles, "The Language of Flowers: *Serial Kitsch*," in: *Serial Killing: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Edia Connoles and Gary J. Shipley (Schism Press, 2015), pp. 95-96.

The one composing such *florilegia* is “an avatar of that prototypical gatherer and cross-pollinator in nature – which, according to a late medieval mystical view, might also be regarded as the mobile part of the flower – the bee.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, just as the bee and the flower constitute an assemblage in which reciprocal de- and reterritorialisation facilitates an intensive flow, the endeavour to establish relations between texts is also envisioned as the opening of a communicative passage.

A machine, a (cross-)pollination, a literature. What is to be constructed is *a nymphatic system of echoes* – alluding to the circulation of lymph, the nymphal stage of invertebrate metamorphosis, and the myth of the nymph, Echo, thus binding circulation, metamorphosis, and myth – capable not only of recording the consonant reverberations that arise throughout the vast body of human thought, but also of capturing (with luck) the intensities at which thoughts cancel each other out – at which thought, as it thinks itself onto its limit, nullifies itself in the experience of that limit.

Indeed, the thesis of this work is that unleashing such a circa-Bataillean rhizome onto the relationships between human beings and systems, as represented in the selected works of fiction and video games, reveals, firstly, an enduring chance of impossibility, of finding oneself in excess of the homogeneity entailed by a rationally profane life, and secondly, a lasting influence of the tension between the sacred and the profane on contemporary Western culture.

The general panorama of the research that is to be undertaken here will be mapped in such a way that, first and foremost, a vocabulary of sabotage will be formulated; Burroughs’ cut-ups will serve as the basis for a sketch of how the human being and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 96.

system's participation in one another is governed by a principle of mythic virality, that is, the ability of signs to parasitise human beings, to be spread among them through the force of habit – to in-habit humanity.

Afterwards, pertinent elements of Bataille's thought will be gradually introduced by being set against narrative contexts. More specifically, a Bataillean flow will be plugged into, firstly, the writings of Bruno Schulz, which will nuance our understanding of myth; secondly, Ambrose Bierce's short story, "The Death of Halpin Frayser," making it serve as a potent illustration of what laughter meant to Bataille; and thirdly, a video game entitled *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II – The Sith Lords*, using an analogy between one of the featured characters and Bataille to elaborate on the importance of silence in the thought of the latter.

Further on, a meditation on asceticism (as exemplified by saint Simeon the Stylite) – or rather, on the extent to which a heretical strain of asceticism can be discerned in Bataille's thought – will be presented as an issue intermeshed with the contradistinction of elevation and debasement, as well as the opposition of signal and noise, meaning and silence. In other words, a definition of a Bataillean asceticism, of a practice congruent with Bataille's de-dogmatised mysticism, will be sought, thus drawing a strangely ascetic figure, one that perverts the imperative to be in the world, but not of it; instead, this figure will be shown as being against the world, though of it.

Next, it will be interesting to delve into Bataille's understanding of transcendence and immanence, according to which it is the latter that is involved in experiences of the sacred and the heterogeneous, rather than as has been traditionally accepted in philosophical and theological systems. Such an understanding will be applied to "Terror," a short story by Vladimir Nabokov, so as to identify its narrative as an account

of an experience of immanence. Then, Schulz will be re-considered in an exploration of the communication of immanence through masochistic eroticism, which will, in turn, lead to a characterisation of Bataille's position vis-a-vis knowledge as a masochistic epistemology. Following that, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* will be analysed as another literary example of a pursuit of immanence, interpreted as a story in which a man falls from transcendence and, through a series of chance events, experiences immanence, thus turning away from the obsessions that stem from being overly dependent on transcendence, which the book shows – in line with Bataille's view – to be profoundly connected with a concern for safety and with the prioritisation of the future over the present.

At that point, it will be necessary to discuss Bataille's vision of being as a labyrinth inside the bowels of which the transcendent and the immanent overlap, thus giving rise to the particular condition of a monster – of the human animal, within which the human element transcends animal immanence. Subsequently, a question will be posed regarding the horizon of this vision, namely, the (im)possibility of something else transcending the human animal just as it has transcended the animal. Attempting to answer such a question will require the consideration of the strenuous relationship between the present and the future – between the instant (to which one is immanent) and the project (which overarches one transcendently) – to be resumed. To be more precise, what will be investigated is a tension specific to a consciousness that persists in perceiving meaning despite having deprived its world of a transcendent dimension; this tension will be observed as it has become manifest in the writings of Gombrowicz, Dukaj, Land, Burroughs, and Zero HP Lovecraft (a pseudonymous online writer). The wide array of contemporary literary sources will allow for a high-resolution image of the

fundamental anxiety of postmodernity.

Finally, and by way of conclusive thoughts, a brief presentation will be provided of how the interplay of transcendence and immanence can be glimpsed in video game narratives, which are shown to be capable of both preserving traditional schemas of this interplay and interrogating their validity in the context of the technological age. It will be intended to illustrate that a Bataillean model of transcendence and immanence continues to yield meaningful results when applied as an interpretative device to narratives expressed in new media.

As far as the underlying reason for including video games in our nymphatic system is concerned, it is a matter of a certain error that can occur in some of them. Should there be a fault in the game's design, the player character might slip through the cracks of the virtual environment and plunge down the infinite emptiness in which, as the player suddenly discovers, the given level of the game is suspended. For an instant, the player glimpses the structure from the outside, sees it for the arrangement of models that it is, and plummets into the endless void of unoccupied virtual space. That such a thing can happen is a glitch. The mechanism that should have detected a collision between the player character and, for instance, a room corner fails to do so, and thus the former finds itself *beyond the world* it was supposed to inhabit. In essence, the (im)possibility that is to be entertained throughout this work is that such an experience can happen in real life, and thus in literature, too. In other words, our point of departure is that such an experience is not limited to virtual environments, and that, in truth, the phenomenon of falling off the map in a video game is an accidental representation of an actual human experience – mystical, or inner, experience. Hence, therefore, the relevance of Bataille, whose myriad writings represent the various outcomes of his



pursuit of an experience that could exceed all the trappings of a notion, that could not possibly become a fixed object of knowledge, that would actually *be* what is merely represented when a player character falls off the map.

## CHAPTER 1: A VIRAL TOPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

*“An unseen ruler defines with geometry*

*An unrulable expanse of geography”<sup>2</sup>*

One of the most crucial themes on which William S. Burroughs had worked was the deeply-rooted entanglement of people and the names they give to everything within and without them – words, and language at large. In this chapter, an attempt will be made to, if not unravel, then at least loosen the knots of this entanglement, and peer into its viscera so as to analyse the way in which Burroughs’ writings simultaneously give shape to the lingual cobweb and provide his readers with tools that enable them to interact with this shape. In other words, his texts will be read as a space in which he stages a resistance to the structures of meaning self-reproducing themselves through language users’ adherence to sociolinguistic rules. Moreover, the supposed efficacy of his method – collage or, as he called it, the cut-up – has certain implications concerning the nature of the fabric of reality. They will be studied through the combined lenses of Roland Barthes’ research on contemporary myths, Charles S. Peirce’s triadic sign structure, and Jeffrey L. Elman’s understanding of language as a dynamical system. What will emerge from all of this becoming connected is a *viral topology* – a model of the relationship between humans and signs that accounts for the existence of parasitic myths.

On the first pages of Burroughs’ *Nova Express* one reads the following maxims:

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter has been published by myself in *Er(r)go*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2020), pp. 177-189, under the title: “‘Shift Linguals–Cut Word Lines’: Viral Topology and the Cut-Ups of William Burroughs.”

<sup>2</sup> Wire, “Map Ref. 41°N 93°W,” *154* (studio album), Harvest Records, 1979.

“To speak is to lie – To live is to collaborate.”<sup>3</sup> The first axiom is of course paradoxical – if to speak is to lie, then that very sentence is necessarily a lie as well, and is therefore forced to contradict itself. A paradox derails the train of thought and ushers language into a state of aporia, suspending it in the process. The aporetic apothegm thus exposes language for what it is – a lie in an asymptotic relation to what *lies* beneath it. In Burroughs’ view, language allows us to interact with merely a “playback” world transmitted from the “reality studio,”<sup>4</sup> a shabby facade unable to contain the possibilities of experience. Language itself is a parasitic virus sucking the world dry.<sup>5</sup> Understood prescriptively as a superimposed, strictly codified system of meaning, language resembles bureaucracy as it is described in Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*: “Bureaucracy is wrong as a cancer, a turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action, to the complete parasitism of a virus.”<sup>6</sup> To reiterate, enforced sign systems are nothing but an edifice of semiotic power relations that force us to walk in circles over and over again. As we read in *The Ticket that Exploded*:

Images of past time invade damage and occupy imposing repetition of past image – Picture the mold that encloses you the mold of what is not that inexorably determines and predetermines what is as composed of millions of images a mould extending in time stretching out behind and ahead of you with the speed of light a vast tunnel of old photos a mold that penetrates every cell of your body like a virus filter and the negatives continually develop in the dark room of your body [...] <sup>7</sup>

To better understand the above-quoted passage, we must introduce the pivotal (and

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<sup>3</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> See: Tony Tanner, “Rub Out the Word,” in: *William S. Burroughs At the Front: Critical Reception, 1959-1989*, ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), pp. 105-113.

<sup>5</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), pp. 55-56.

<sup>6</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded*, p. 284.

oft-cited) assertion: “Word begets image and image *is* virus.”<sup>8</sup> Word and image are both viral in nature, contagious to the point of spreading across continents and propagating scripted behaviours, be they the phrases we use every day or the rituals we uphold by performing them on holy occasions. As vessels of meaning – as signs – they are the building blocks of culture, and, from the anthropological perspective of Mary Douglas, “[c]ulture, in the sense of the public, standardised values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered. And above all, it has authority, since each is induced to assent because of the assent of others.”<sup>9</sup>

The somewhat enthusiastic description of a “positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered” is perhaps at odds with the suspicious smell of conspiracy of which Burroughs’ writing reeks. Nonetheless, the final sentence of this quotation regarding the authority possessed by culture and the way in which this authority functions is of interest to us. As we can see, Douglas emphasises the fact that in order to become a form to which individuals must con-form, a system of meaning must be convincing enough to make people convince others about its convincingness. In other words, the power of a particular cultural pattern depends on how firmly it can be lodged in intersubjective experience; or it depends on how well a given system usurps intersubjective experience and conjures up an illusion believed to be true by so many people that it eventually becomes impossible to distinguish fact from fiction. As Douglas G. Baldwin put it, “[f]or Burroughs, both visual and verbal narratives traditionally fail to mimic real processes of perception; they instead redefine how people ‘see.’ For

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<sup>8</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 49.

Burroughs, this ‘redefining’ becomes a trope for how perception – individuals’ ‘narrative self-fashioning,’ as it were – is controlled by outside forces.”<sup>10</sup>

It is a question of a continuity that binds a dependence on “outside forces” and an addiction to how these “forces” influence one’s perception. Not only does the pattern of addiction relay power to those who have the means of production of all things addictive, but the powers that be can also divine the whirlpools of meaning with the “Juxtaposition Formulae” in order to come up with predictions about the future, thus cementing the sway they can hold over the addicted populations (is this not the trade of futurologists and semiotic insight agencies?). If we remember that, at least for Burroughs, “drug addiction mirrors image addiction,”<sup>11</sup> then yet another gloomy blueprint glimmers at an unspecified distance: a manual for what Guy Debord infamously named “the society of the spectacle,” the spectacle being staged by the “Grey Room,” the reality studio, which, as Oliver Harris points out, includes the machineries of the media.<sup>12</sup>

Against the script of the playback world Burroughs pitted his cut-ups. What can be said about this technique? “The cut-up,” wrote Gérard-Georges Lemaire, is a “mechanical method of shredding texts in a ruthless machine, a machine that could upset semantic order.”<sup>13</sup> “The paradoxical result of its mechanical creative procedures is an organic textuality, a living text that changes on every reading.”<sup>14</sup> By cutting a text open, one fractures the structure, the skeletal form into which the flows of possible meaning

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas G. Baldwin, “‘Word Begets Image and Image Is Virus’: Undermining Language and Film in the Works of William S. Burroughs,” *College Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2000), p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Harris, “Introduction,” in: William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), p. xix.

<sup>13</sup> Gérard-Georges Lemaire and Brion Gysin, “23 Stitches Taken by Gérard-Georges Lemaire and 2 Points of Order by Brion Gysin,” in: Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, “Introduction,” p. xix.

have been channelled, and allows these juices to spring forth again. In a way, one finds oneself in the midst of untold things, in dangerous, formless realms, where chaotic, ever-changing forces reside; it is by venturing there that one jeopardises the image a society has of itself.<sup>15</sup> The cut-up chops up the gossamer (let us not overlook the spidery connotations lurking within this word) network of semiotic connections, and of social existence. Even though it is arguably most efficient in changing the lives of those who try it out for themselves,<sup>16</sup> Burroughs – as Baldwin observes – is also more generally “interested in the power of the image – like the word – as it can be manipulated and restructured in order to suggest not so much alternative narratives as anti-narratives free from the constrictions of socially constructed language and image.”<sup>17</sup>

As Burroughs himself acknowledged, collages were already done by the likes of T. S. Eliot or Tristan Tzara,<sup>18</sup> the latter representing the Dadaist movement, many members of which dabbled in experimental composition and decomposition. We will not, however, be discussing the history of the cut-up method or of collages in general, but we would rather attempt to make a connection between its inherent imagery of carving, severing, dividing, and the way in which the powers that be are construed within the books of Burroughs’ Nova Myth, namely *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*.

So as to be able to do so, we must return to the axioms afore-quoted from *Nova Express*, and specifically to the second one: “To live is to collaborate.” With whom does one collaborate by living? In the combustible depths of *The Ticket That Exploded*, one

<sup>15</sup> See: Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” in: *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh (London: Pluto Press, 2004), pp. 182-183.

<sup>17</sup> Baldwin, ““Word Begets Image and Image Is Virus,”” p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> See: Conrad Knickerbocker’s interview with Burroughs, in: Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind*, pp. 1-8.

learns that the “Controllers of word and music monopolized and froze the earth.”<sup>19</sup> Who are these controllers? As far as the canon of the Nova Myth is concerned, they are the Nova Mob: a group of extraterrestrial parasites. “The Nova Mob have taken over Earth. They control humanity by the use of viruses replicating within the structures of consciousness. Their invisible regime is governed by a single rule: create as many conflicts as possible [trans. – M.H.].”<sup>20</sup> The reason behind their incessant escalation of strife is the desire to cause a Nova – an explosion of planet Earth: “Another planet bites the cosmic dust.”<sup>21</sup> But what are the details of their *modus operandi*? How do they function?

They are the unseen bureaucrats of *language* (language in its capacity as an instrument of measurement, a gauge); they are the control-exerting control addicts safely nestled (or nestléd, if the red tape is corporate) within the innumerable strata of bureaucracy.<sup>22</sup> Why are they unseen? Burroughs explains this through the mouth of Inspector Lee, a member of the Nova Police – the antagonists of the Nova Mob in the great cosmic conflict of the Nova Myth.

nova criminals are not three-dimensional organisms – (though they are quite definite organisms as we shall see) – but they need three-dimensional human agents to operate – The point at which the criminal controller intersects a three-dimensional human agent is known as “a coordinate point” – And if there is one thing that carries over from one human host to another and established identity of the controller it is habit:: idiosyncrasies, vices, food preferences [...] – a gesture, a special look, that is to say the *style* of the controller – Now a single controller can operate through thousands of human agents, but he must have a line of coordinate points – Some move on junk lines through addicts of the earth, others move on lines

<sup>19</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded*, p. 200.

<sup>20</sup> Rafał Księżyk, *23 cięcia dla Williama S. Burroughsa* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w Podwórk, 2013), p. 61. Unless otherwise cited, all translations from Polish into English will be mine and marked with: [trans. – M.H.].

<sup>21</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded*, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> William L. Stull, “The Quest and the Question: Cosmology and Myth in the Work of William S. Burroughs, 1953-1960,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1978), pp. 236-237.

of certain sexual practices and so forth<sup>23</sup>

The gossamer network of semiotic connections – or what Wojciech Kalaga terms the “mega-text of culture”<sup>24</sup> – turns out to be a dense mesh charted with lines of vulnerability traversed by the viral invaders, because any “mold” can be a point on such a line. If one looks at the books of the Nova Myth, one sees this idea of “lines of coordinate points” used consistently throughout the saga. The “Towers Open Fire” section of *Nova Express*, for example, which seems to be a violently flickering succession of scenes from an apparently successful attack on the Reality Studio, ends with the following rally:

[...] Electric waves of resistance sweeping through mind screens of the earth’ – The message of Total Resistance on short wave of the world – *This is war to extermination* – *Shift linguals* – *Cut word lines* – *Vibrate tourists* – *Free doorways* – *Photo falling* – *Word falling* – *Break through in grey room* – *Calling partisans of all nations* – *Towers, open fire* – ‘<sup>25</sup>

The call to “partisans of all nations” to “shift linguals” and “cut word lines,” echoing throughout the books, is an exemplification of Burroughs’ strategy that aimed at evoking eerie feelings of recognition in his readers, and thus warping their sense of time<sup>26</sup> as they took their mind-bending voyage across the hundreds of pages and folds of a ruptured world, of prescribed *langauge* mutilated back into unpredictable language.

Returning to the subject matter: what we have to deal with appears to be a viral topology of “lines” that comprise – as all lines do – sequences of “coordinate points.” We shall now endeavour to, as it were, zoom into this space. In order to make this

<sup>23</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>24</sup> Wojciech Kalaga, *The Literary Sign: A Triadic Model* (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1986), pp. 44-48.

<sup>25</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>26</sup> Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” p. 183.



possible, a conceptual apparatus will be engineered out of three disparate elements drawn from three different theories.

The human host with which a Nova Mobster intersects is to some extent analogous to a sign being intercepted by a myth as seen in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. For Barthes, who was inspired in his semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure, myth arises when a (dyadic) sign becomes subjugated to an agenda external to itself, when it is pulled into an alien, ahistorical, depoliticised discourse and used therein as an instrument, an empty receptacle for an extraneous narrative; *the myth is parasitical*.<sup>27</sup> The interception patterns seem to align, especially if we remember that "in myth signs renounce their 'significance' [meaning here the quality of being a sign], pretending to be the things in themselves [translation – M.H.]."<sup>28</sup> One could thus say that the Nova Mobsters – impostors, identity thieves – are *mythical* creatures. This is, all in all, unsurprising, given that they originate from the Nova *Myth*, but the point is that the mechanisms of the Nova Mob can be used to shed light on the inner workings of the mythologies that environ us to this day.

We have picked up from Barthes' mythology a general description of how a host – already held captive by a cultural "mold" – is hijacked by a controller as they intersect in the semiotic mesh of coordinate points; this is the first element of the apparatus. But it is too general, and Burroughs' particular choice of word leads us to consider the parasitical controllers through a lens capable of zooming even closer into the processes of the viral topology. Let us try to apply the Barthian myth to the triadic model of the sign devised by Charles S. Peirce. The short outline that follows is based on the already-referenced

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Marcin Napiórkowski, *Mitologia współczesna* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2013), p. 51.

Wojciech Kalaga's *The Literary Sign: A Triadic Model*, and on Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz's *Semiotyka Peirce'a*.<sup>29</sup>

Firstly, in Peircean semiotics, the essence of the triadic sign is mediation: a Representamen (the First element of the sign that belongs to the ontological category of pure sensations called Firstness) standing for an Object (the Second element of the sign that belongs to the ontological category of factual events called Secondness) results in an Interpretant (the Third element of the sign that belongs to the ontological category of rules and laws called Thirdness). The compound sound of the tolling of a bell is first a sonic sensation, and then it becomes interpreted as a Representamen of an event in which someone or something is tolling the bell. The Interpretant can be a thought as simple as the realisation that a church is nearby. Secondly, the triad operates in a fractal manner: the Interpretant becomes a new Representamen, launching further mediation: semiosis is an infinite process. From the realisation that a church is nearby emerges a different thought, which is in turn succeeded by yet another thought, followed by numerous thoughts that continue to be strung together into a line of thought.<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, as it has been stated above, Interpretants belong to the category of rules and laws. Particular interpretative paths are delineated by these rules and laws. Some of these paths lead us directly towards behaviours; in other words, we have habits that stem from Interpretants. As the thoughts about the tolling of the church bell develop, we acquire a habit of measuring time by the use of the tolling, which then diverges into habits organised specifically around this way of time-keeping.

Since we have found the keyword that connects this thread of our theoretical

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<sup>29</sup> Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Semiotyka Peirce'a* (Warszawa: Zakład Semiotyki Logicznej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Somewhere along which one finds a poem by John Donne.

ambulation with the Nova Mob – namely, the *habit* (the “idiosyncrasies, vices” etc.) – it would be worthwhile to take note of what Eliseo Fernández wrote about the role of habits in Peircean semiotics: “[...] I propose that habits, as laws, be regarded as instances of thirdness mediating between embodied tendencies and their surrounding circumstances. A habit is a tendency to enact the same tendencies every time the same precipitating circumstances are enacted.”<sup>31</sup> And later on:

[...] habits appear as higher-order tendencies that repeatedly release lower-order tendencies into action whenever similar circumstances are reenacted. Habits are themselves subject to the action of tendencies of an even higher order. Namely, they have a tendency to repetition and a tendency to grow. But beyond these propensities, they labor under a tendency of a supreme order, the self-relational habit of acquiring habits. This supreme habit is the basis of Peirce’s mature evolutionary vision. Peirce’s synthesis mirrors within its own logical structure the trajectory of this primordial generalizing habit. This higher-order habit arises at the cosmic creation and unfolds through the rise and evolution of life forms onwards to the most recent stages known to us: the growth of *symbols* into the sprawling branches of human culture and technology [*italics* – M.H.].<sup>32</sup>

These two passages, the second being admittedly lengthy, though incandescently illuminating, both reveal relevant aspects of the mythical controllers. To attend to them adequately requires that we focus for a moment on symbols. In Peircean semiotics, a symbol is the most developed form which the process of signification may take; it belongs to the category of Thirdness, for its very existence as a symbol depends on the proper functioning of a rule of interpretation. Associating an arbitrary hand gesture with a collectively acknowledged meaning – in other words, employing a symbol – is a habit of interpretation. Fernández claims that, for Peirce, symbols could have the qualities of a “living being,”<sup>33</sup> or at least share in the liveliness of organisms by way of being their

<sup>31</sup> Eliseo Fernández, “Peircean Habits and the Life of Symbols,” from the thirty-fifth meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, October 21-24 2010, Louisville, Kentucky, p. 6, *Linda Hall*, [http://www.lindahall.org/media/papers/fernandez/Peirce\\_habits.pdf](http://www.lindahall.org/media/papers/fernandez/Peirce_habits.pdf) (20 November 2018).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

extensions.<sup>34</sup> Though some may be taken aback by such a suggestion, it would be rewarding to at least entertain this proposition in our current context, for would not such symbols resemble in an uncanny fashion the Nova Mobsters – living, “quite definite organisms” roaming the “network of ‘habits’ of interpretation,”<sup>35</sup> which is their habitat? We could define the extraterrestrial, parasitical controllers as, so to speak, rogue symbols, a spontaneous outburst of consciousness that took place somewhere along the links of infinite semiosis. Invoking Viktor Shklovsky’s seminal notion of “enstrangement,”<sup>36</sup> one could say that, through the figures of the Nova Mob, Burroughs defamiliarises our mental processes, making our very thoughts strange and alien, filling us with a feeling of unfalsifiable dread – for who is to say that the thought I think I am thinking is not in actuality thinking me?

The conceptual apparatus is almost ready, and we see more clearly now the viral topology and its inhabitants. The intersection of a host and a controller is like a mythical interception, but one in which the myth’s capability of interception is derived from the strength of particular habits, which, as Burroughs himself admitted, mark the coordinate points. But how to account for this strength? And what about the lines? We will need the last piece of our puzzle to resolve these issues, and we shall procure it from Jeffrey Elman. In “Language as a Dynamical System,” a text based on his work with neural networks, Elman wrote:

The lexicon is viewed as consisting of regions of state space within that system; the grammar consists of the dynamics (attractors and repellers) which constrain movement in that space. [...] [T]his approach entails representations which are highly context-sensitive, continuously varied and probabilistic [...], and in which

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<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Kalaga, *The Literary Sign*, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art, as Device,” trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2015), pp. 151-174. See also: chapter three.

the objects of mental representation are better thought of as trajectories through mental space rather than things which are constructed.<sup>37</sup>

This is neither the time nor place to delve into Elman's argument; what is currently of interest is the nomenclature he arrived at through his consideration of language as a dynamical system: the state space, the attractors and repellers, and the trajectories. If we envisage particular Interpretants as coordinate points in a dynamical, time-dependent state space, then the attractors and repellers – the rules and laws governing thought processes, which serve as tools in measuring adherence to *langauge* – would account for the strength of particular habits of signification/interpretation/behaviour. The viral topology would thus be populated with gravitational bodies of myth pulling and pushing an individual along a given trajectory, *along a particular "word line,"* the very "word line" Burroughs implores us to cut up.

We have spoken at length about battling myths, but there is, of course, in Burroughs' work, a sense of myth-making: the Nova Myth is a mythology for the Space Age.<sup>38</sup> However, as it has been shown here through the construction of our apparatus, Burroughs' cut-ups are a weapon pointed at myths of a different order, at the myths that continue to control us. Our apparatus has made it possible to extract from Burroughs' notions of the language virus, Nova Mobsters, and cut-ups a viral topology – a spatial model which can be used to identify and study what could be called *con-structures*, "con" understood here as a fraud, the fundamental deception of language (and the Magrittean treachery of images) making the usurpation of reality by myth possible: in the viral topology, linguistic structures turn out to be *langaugeable con-structures*.

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<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey L. Elman, "Language as a Dynamical System," in: *Mind as Motion: Explorations in the Dynamics of Cognition*, ed. Robert F. Port and Tim van Gelder (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 195-223.

<sup>38</sup> See: Księżyk, *23 cięcia dla Williama S. Burroughsa*, p. 59, and Stull, "The Quest and the Question."

Furthermore, the viral topology – a conceptualisation based upon “word lines” and “coordinate points” – grants us a deeper understanding of the cut-up method by being the very environment in which the method is at its most useful – a war-zone of symbols in which addictive images are fought for and fought against, and which can be manipulated through cut-ups. If, as Harris claims, Burroughs’ “cut-up methods should be understood as artistic only in the specific sense of a liberating life praxis” that he tried to spread,<sup>39</sup> then they are not only a way of waging “image warfare,”<sup>40</sup> but also a stratagem in what could be called *mythic warfare*.

The space of struggle proper to this mythic warfare is not located solely between individuals and the myths that seek to parasitise them. It is the myths themselves that are locked in a perennial competition between themselves. However, even though all myths usurp reality to a greater or lesser extent, only some of them are truly parasitic – indeed, it is quite possible to enter a mutualist relationship with myth, although, as we shall see later on, it would be quite difficult – futile, in fact – to truly disentangle oneself from the essential symbiosis of man and myth. There can be no commensalism between man and myth – in one way or another, myth persists, and man either reaps the benefits or suffers the consequences of myth’s enduring presence. In other words, given how the influence of myth is exerted throughout the viral topology in the form of both word and image, even in pursuing “anti-narratives” or renouncing language through a vow of silence one is swayed by an ascetic myth, by an image of what a silent life could be. Only through a practice that tackles myth on the level of such inner images could one hope to venture beyond the gravitational arrangements of the viral topology, into the void across which

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<sup>39</sup> Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” p. 182-183.

<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg, “Beckett, Proust, and Burroughs and the Perils of ‘Image Warfare,’” in: *William S. Burroughs At the Front*, p. 179.

they are spread, mirroring galactic filaments strung throughout space. Insofar as it fails to achieve such an intensity, mythic warfare is an exercise in futility.

The purpose of this chapter was to consider myth as an *enemy*. This goal has been fulfilled by contemplating the viral topology, the gravitational fields of which serve as the stage for the subordination of humans to language, which – though it entirely depends on the existence of humans for its own presence in the universe – is generative of collectively recognised patterns of crystallised or ossified meaning, and thus compels individuals to engage in predetermined behaviour. In addition, another of this chapter's objectives was to paint an image of language (both verbal and visual) that is henceforth meant to be assumed as its default understanding. In contrast, the purpose of the next chapter will be to regard myth as a *friend*. Its role, then, will be to answer the question of what benefits are there to be found in hosting – or being hosted by – myth.

As we move on, let us keep in mind that we do so through the viral topology – through a space in which signs amass or lose gravity; a space in which we are moved by these signs; a space traversable across lines of either word and image or flight; a space that exists at that level of reality where human beings elude, invite, or fall prey to mythic usurpation. The cut-up – as long as it is the machine one uses to manoeuvre one's way across the viral topology – will serve as the engine of the nymphatic system, namely, as that which makes of the movement of fragments a method of making meaning vibrate its way out of a rut. In accordance with this understanding, quotes and borrowed notions will often be used in the coming chapters as if they were a cut-out, a piece of text put into motion across a variety of contexts, kept afloat in its recontextualisation, never allowed to habituate a given orbit too permanently, sprouting new connections in every assemblage it enters.

## CHAPTER 2: A SORCEROUS DESTINY<sup>1</sup>

*“Greatness is a transitory experience. It is never consistent. It depends in part upon the myth-making imagination of humankind. The person who experiences greatness must have a feeling for the myth he is in. He must reflect what is projected upon him. And he must have a strong sense of the sardonic. This is what uncouples him from belief in his own pretensions. The sardonic is all that permits him to move within himself. Without this quality, even occasional greatness will destroy a man.*

*– from ‘Collected Sayings of Muad’dib’*

*by the Princess Irulan<sup>2</sup>”*

An early piece by Georges Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” revolves around two key ideas: destiny and myth. In the text, the eponymous sorcerer’s apprentice is offered as a figure in which these two could come together, thus reopening the human being – fragmented in accordance with the needs of rational utility – onto experiencing its totality. The main point of interest in this chapter will lie, therefore, in a vision of myth altogether different from the one that has been discussed in the previous chapter. This vision will be placed against the backdrop of human fragmentation, which will be put up not only with the help of “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” and Bataille’s other texts, but also by referring to a variety of notions or analyses developed by other philosophers, such as, most notably, Martin Heidegger’s Enframing, Timothy Morton’s agri-logistics, Peter

<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter was published by myself in an edited collection, *Obrazy nieobojętności* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2022), under the title: „Czarnoksiężskie przeznaczenie. Georges’a Bataille’a batalia o mit a Bruno Schulz.”

<sup>2</sup> Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: ACE, 2003), p. 205.



Sloterdijk's anthropotechnics, and Jean Baudrillard's book on seduction. Finally, Bataille's myth will be compared with Bruno Schulz's theory and practice of mythicisation, so as to formulate – in stark contrast to the hostile, parasitic myth as described by Burroughs – an interpretation of myth as enchantment, as the entry of human beings into an intimate relation with one another.

Baudrillard synthesised the thought of Georges Bataille by putting the following words before a quote from *The Accursed Share*, the latter's seminal text: "Continuity, sovereignty, intimacy, immanent immensity: a single thought for Bataille, a single mythic thought behind these multiple terms: 'I am among those who dedicate men to other things than ceaselessly increased production, who provoke them to sacred horror.'"<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to understand on the basis of these words that Bataille was one of the thinkers who, upon gazing into the crucible of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perceived in it a combination of forces that amplified the all-encompassing objectification unleashed by the technological activity of the human being, and that threatened the human being itself with a process that would permit nothing inutile to persist.<sup>4</sup> Of course, these forces have not appeared out of thin air. It is from the very existence of technology that Martin Heidegger extracted *das Gestell*, the Enframing, which is, in fact, its essence: the great framework that renders all beings resourceful, that is, exploitable in the form of resources – destined not to *be*, but to be *used*. The growth spurts of technological advancement broadened this framework to such an extent that the human being has become a resource in its own eyes, which are growing unable to recognise a being that

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy," trans. Stuart Kendall, *Excess*, No. 5 (2005), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Richard Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), pp. 41-42.

would not necessarily be the being of materials and products; unable, then, to recognise a destiny other than that of a part in the processes of production.<sup>5</sup>

That which cannot be used, which is good for nothing, gets shoved into the peripheries that house good-for-nothings, who – by embodying the lack of a useful purpose – mark the limits of the enframed world. On the subject of this tightly demarcated realm, Roland Barthes wrote what follows, thus clothing the restriction of the human being in a philistine garb: “We know now what petit bourgeois reality really is: it is not even what is seen, it is what is counted; now this reality, the narrowest any society has been able to define, has its philosophy all the same, it is ‘common sense,’ the famous common sense of the ‘little people’ [...]”<sup>6</sup> (also ridiculed in Nietzsche’s diatribe against the mercantile man: “The man engaged in commerce understands how to appraise everything without having made it, and to appraise it according to the needs of the consumer, not according to his own needs; ‘who and how many will consume this?’ is his question of questions”<sup>7</sup>). Barthes continues:

[...] the whole petit bourgeois mythology implies the refusal of alterity, the negation of the different, the happiness of identity, and the exaltation of the similar. In general, this equational reduction of the world prepares an expansionist phase in which the “identity” of human phenomena quickly establishes a “nature” and thereupon a “universality.”<sup>8</sup>

If we remember that “[...] the work of the mythical imagination replaces the world with a certain image, and then proceeds to explain that image [trans. – M.H.],”<sup>9</sup> it will

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), pp. 3-49. Though this translation comes from 1977, the term itself has been introduced by Heidegger during a lecture that he delivered in 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012), p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Marcin Napiórkowski, *Mitologia współczesna. Relacje o poczynaniach i przygodach krajowców zamieszkałych w globalnej wiosce* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2013), p. 53.

not be hard to feel the pressure of the frame narrowing down reality to a calculable domain of reasonable, common-sensible actions; a domain that locks the world into a most crippled state.<sup>10</sup>

A weed is a weed because it is useless, or for the reason of its obstruction in the cultivation of crops, which are defined – in opposition to the weed – by their use. Neither the weed nor the crop is allowed to *be*, to grow outside the shade of industry, the branches of which extend from the space once occupied by the tree of the world, by the *axis mundi* (granted, the cosmologies rooted in this tree's image were not outright sympathetic towards the weed, but did grant it the bush, the wilderness – a separate realm affiliated with chaos<sup>11</sup>). What force has cut down this original tree? What is, then, the axis of an enframed world? Baudrillard answers: “The theme song of world transformation: the play of productive forces is what regulates the course of things.”<sup>12</sup> Bataille is more precise: “By work man orders the world of things and brings himself down to the level of a thing among things; work makes a worker a means to an end.”<sup>13</sup> Work – measurable, “*concrete labor*”<sup>14</sup> – (along with its index, money<sup>15</sup>) makes the world go round, and even the cosmogonies admit it: chaos was remade into the cosmos through divine work: order – quantified, symmetrical, *fine* – was *refined* out of disorder.

Perhaps nowhere is it seen more clearly than in the Book of Genesis, wherein the

<sup>10</sup> See: Bataille, “Aphorisms for the ‘System,’” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 153-182.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, trans. Meyer Barash (Glencoe: The Free Press of Glencoe, Illinois, 1959), pp. 52-55.

<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1990), pp. 83-84.

<sup>13</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 157.

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 206-214.

<sup>15</sup> Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” in: *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 138.

gravity of diligent work is underscored when a day of rest is ordained as a sacred day (when a temple is put forth into the very fabric of time). Here, recreation is differentiated from creation, which puts in motion the eschatological project of *olam*, “the stream of time by which everything is swept [trans. – M.H.].”<sup>16</sup> Sergiusz Awierincew writes:

[...] whereas the Greek *cosmos* rests in space, which is its appropriate measure, the biblical *olam* unfolds in time, aiming at a sense that transcends it. (Is this not how the ending of a tale goes beyond the tale, and the “moral” of a parable reaches outside of it?) Hence, the poetics of the Bible is the poetics of allegory. It eliminates anything that could resemble the Hellenic picturesque: it requires any reference to the natural world to be justified by the plot or its meaning, never allowing nature to be the object of a self-contained description expressing an unmotivated joy of the eye; the human is, in turn, introduced as the subject of decisions and actions, and not of artistic contemplation [trans. – M.H.].<sup>17</sup>

To put it simply, *olam* is a utilitarian frame: within its bounds, all the elements of the world are put to work, so that the events preordained by God can run their course. Everything in existence is reduced to the purpose it has been assigned at the outset. The meaning of the world – which is first and foremost assumed to come from the outside of the elements that constitute it – is located in the future, moved away, torn from the instant of existence. Life means something, and is thus the means to an end instead of being an end in itself (an intimacy, an immanence); it is enslaved to its purpose, chained to a promise of a forthcoming salvation: this is *project*<sup>18</sup>: the design that is simultaneously projected onto the future and reflected onto the present, the former subjugating the latter through this reflection.

Let us, however, leave the ancient deserts of the Bible behind („It has long been said that the desert is monotheistic”<sup>19</sup>), and turn our attention back to the branches of

<sup>16</sup> Sergiusz Awierincew, „Porządek kosmosu i porządek historii,” in: *Na skrzyżowaniu tradycji*, trans. Danuta Ulicka (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1988), p. 261.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 263.

<sup>18</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” in: *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 8.

industry that surround us today. The shadow they cast upon our lives is project – in other words, a framework of projects envelops us. (As we can see, “Heidegger and Bataille sketch parallel accounts of the development of modernity as the progressive technologization of experience.”<sup>20</sup>) This framework is composed of promises, of narratives unfurled by these promises, and of the comfort they offer:

*Those who commend work.* – In the glorification of “work,” in the unwearied talk of the “blessing of work,” I see the same covert idea as in the praise of useful impersonal actions: that of fear of everything individual. Fundamentally, one now feels at the sight of work – one always means by work that hard industriousness from early till late – that such work is the best policeman, that it keeps everyone in bounds and can mightily hinder the development of reason, covetousness, desire for independence. For it uses up an extraordinary amount of nervous energy, which is thus denied to reflection, brooding, dreaming, worrying, loving, hating; it sets a small goal always in sight and guarantees easy and regular satisfactions.<sup>21</sup>

Another “covert idea” that can be discovered beneath the guise of the “blessing of work” is the (self-)mutilation of (the human) being: through the “hard industriousness” endured with “a small goal” in mind, one gives oneself over to the Enframing, to production. Let us consider the satirical image of an enframed humanity portrayed in Karel Čapek’s novel, *The War with the Newts*, where a kind-hearted sailor unwittingly unleashes upon the world a reptile species that surpasses humanity in terms of “hard industriousness,” but is completely bereft of the spiritual aspirations that have so far been characteristic of the human race. As we read in the novel itself:

Never in the history of mankind had so much been manufactured, constructed and earned as in this great age. With the newts came enormous progress and the ideal known as Quantity. The phrase, “We people of the Newt Age,” became widely used, and used with justified pride; where could we have got in the old-fashioned Human Age with the slow, petty and useless fiddling known as culture, art, pure science or suchlike. The self aware people of the Newt Age declared that they would no longer waste their time delving into the Questions of

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Comay, “Gifts Without Presents: Economies of ‘Experience’ in Bataille and Heidegger,” *Yale French Studies*, Vol. 78 (1990), p. 69. For further analysis of Bataille’s engagement with Heidegger, see also: Stefanos Geroulanos, “The Anthropology of Exit: Bataille on Heidegger and Fascism,” *October*, Summer, Vol. 117 (2006), pp. 3-24.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, p. 105.

the Universe; they would have enough to do just with the quantity of things being manufactured. The whole future of the world would consist in constantly raising production and consumption; and for that there would need to be still more newts so that they could produce even more and consume even more.<sup>22</sup>

Obviously enough, the Newts end up bringing about the doom of humanity – the story does not deviate from the laws of hubris. However, we do not wish to focus on lizard-shaped warnings, and though neither do we want to deny them their socio-political accuracy, our reason for quoting the book is to illustrate the shallow pride of a culture fixated on “the ideal known as Quantity,” a culture capable of envisioning nothing for itself but a future reducible to “raising production and consumption,” to “*concrete* labor.” The quote provides us, then, with a simulation of an essentially finished world, one that would, in its *complete* dedication to the production of quantities, forego any changes to its quality, and would thus renounce life itself.

Writing of the need for *incompleteness*, Tadeusz Ślawek reminds one not to give oneself over to anything without reservation – without taking care for there to always be, on the one hand, the energy one expends to act, and on the other, “the rest,” understood not as relaxation, but rather as that which remains. Since the arrangements of everyday life ceaselessly urge the human being to avail itself of prefabricated forms of life, it must always be on its guard so as to evade frameworks seeking to enclose it completely, to cut it off from whatever turns out to be incompatible with a particular framework, with the demands of a given project; to sever the human being from “the rest” of itself. Tadeusz Ślawek does not, however, connect “the rest” with pure uselessness – instead, “the rest” is also “the rest” of work, or it is the kind of work that is not subsumable into the paradigm of “the blessing of work”; the type of work that could not serve as “the best

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<sup>22</sup> Karel Čapek, *The War with the Newts*, trans. David Wyllie, *Project Gutenberg*, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0601981h.html> (22 February 2020).

policeman.”

On the one hand, “the rest” is a domain of unstoppable action (let us remember the distinction between “making” and “doing”), of change and movement. On the other hand, it resists ordering the world into becoming solely an arena of work. “The rest,” *ce qui reste*, remains outside of that arena, insubordinates itself from the regime of work as “making,” “processing,” “producing.” It does not strive to refute the value proper to that sphere, nor does “the rest” doubt its achievements – it simply calls into question the arena’s claim to be an exclusive representation of how the human being exists in the world [trans. – M.H.].<sup>23</sup>

There is always a remainder (in every thing that gets done, there is “the rest” that remains undone; in every thing that is spoken, there is “the rest” that remains unspoken; in every thought, there is “the rest” that remains unthought). The challenge issued by Tadeusz Ślawek’s book is to confront this fundamental incompleteness, to unseal oneself before an ever-ajar being, a being which is thus porous, always already open.

We are, in truth, challenged by this very porosity. The Greek *aletheia* – the truth of being so beloved by Heidegger – is the state of unconcealment, of the remembrance opposed to *lethe*, to the oblivion that conceals. In other words, is it not the Greek *cosmos*, composed of so many moments of “an unmotivated joy of the eye,” that seduces us, challenging us to remember it?

Let us call upon Baudrillard again: “There can never be seduction or challenge by contract. In order for a challenge or seduction to exist, all contractual relations must disappear before the duel relation – a relation composed of secret signs that have been withdrawn from exchange, and derive their intensity from their formal division and immediate reverberation.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, to leave the “arena of work” is to leave the domain of contracts, the realm of commerce, the circulation of goods. It is, at the same time, to enter the order of seduction, wherein signs break free from the semiotic chains

<sup>23</sup> Tadeusz Ślawek, *Nie bez reszty. O potrzebie niekompletności* (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2018), pp. 149-150.

<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 82.

binding them to production and tie themselves into tangled knots – mysteries past which one could not walk with indifference, that is, without fascination.

“Seduction<sup>25</sup> is, at all times and in all places, opposed to production. Seduction removes something from the order of the visible, while production constructs everything in full view, be it an object, a number or concept.”<sup>26</sup> Doubtless, the further a sign – hitherto obliged by the social contract to participate productively in the established order – is “[r]emoved from the visible, the greater the desire it provokes, making one strain one’s eyes even more. Removed from the visible, grown into bliss, demorphic in action [trans. – M.H.].”<sup>27</sup> Demorphic, because it deforms – because it seduces, teases with the eroticism (with the transgression) of signs read against the grain, or read in defiance of their gravity. In refusing to be formed along the semiotic trajectory defined by a parasitic myth, one exposes oneself to the possibility of being deformed, of reading oneself into a transformation or, to put it simply, to change oneself by reading.

Indeed, according to Łukasz Wróbel, reading is – as an interaction with language (with signs) – not just transformative, but transgressive by default: as we read something, we transgress the I which has not read it. Nonetheless, the new I, which is reading something, results from the I that has not yet begun to read it, and is simultaneously an opening for an imminent I, which is being born through the act of reading – through transgression, which, “since it, in fact, affirms the limit, is possible only on the condition of being founded upon what it contradicts – an essential continuity, the possibility of unstoppable movement, of a constant semiosis of subjective

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<sup>25</sup> “[...] *se-ducere*: to take aside, to divert from one’s path [...]”, *ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Pascal Quignard, *Seks i trwoga*, trans. Krzysztof Rutkowski (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 2002), pp. 175-176.



forms [trans. – M.H.].”<sup>28</sup> In changing us, signs change the way they are read. Hence, they change themselves, and meaning flickers in its metamorphosis; a metamorphosis targeted by those for whom to grasp is to understand once and for all: dealers in exegesis, peddlers of interpretation,<sup>29</sup> carriers of interpretosis<sup>30</sup>... Many are the forms of the hatred of excess, of the accursed share that overflows from these and other forms, and which infringes upon the order of accumulation.<sup>31</sup>

As has been said before, it is dangerous to go past the limits of form. But an apparently stable form is always all too ready to burst beyond itself, provided it is given enough time. “It is dangerous,” therefore, “to gaze too steadily [trans. – M.H.],”<sup>32</sup> confesses a priest stranded on an asteroid, where he was initially sent to investigate a procedurally generated cathedral, which, for reasons neither known nor fathomable, began to grow inconsistently with the algorithm that was programmed into its seeds. Having allowed himself to be seduced by the organically wild and incomprehensible beauty of the cathedral (the shapes of which change because of its growth, and are, moreover, modified by the *chiaroscuros* drawn across it by the light of the nearest star) – having allowed himself, then, to be seduced by a game of signs of form, signs of the sacred, signs of a radical alterity – the priest fails to evacuate from the asteroid before it hurtles out of human reach. In other words, the priest lets the cathedral take him away, so to speak, into the inhuman depths of the cosmos. “The man seduced is caught in spite

<sup>28</sup> Łukasz Wróbel, „Procesualny charakter transgresji w doświadczeniu lektury,” in: *Tropy tożsamości. Inny, Obcy, Trzeci* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004), p. 191.

<sup>29</sup> See: Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), pp. 13-23.

<sup>30</sup> See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 114-117.

<sup>31</sup> See: Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Vol. I: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 19-41.

<sup>32</sup> Jacek Dukaj, *Katedra* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2017), p. 88.

of himself in a web of stray signs. And it is because the sign has been turned from its meaning<sup>33</sup> or ‘seduced,’ that the story itself is seductive. It is when signs are seduced that they become seductive.”<sup>34</sup> A loose thread tracing *a* path through the labyrinth can disentangle itself from any knot of perception: “Some time ago,” writes Burroughs, “a young man came to see me and said he was going mad. Street signs, overheard conversations, radio broadcasts, seemed to refer to him in some way. I told him ‘Of course they refer to you. *You* see and hear them.’”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the young man’s interiority and the world he inhabited were seducing each other – he was being “caught in spite of himself in a web of stray signs.”

Early in the existence of Collège de Sociologie,<sup>36</sup> Bataille wrote “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” where he voiced his contempt for “the best policeman” – for the hegemony of production: “The greatest harm that strikes men is perhaps the reduction of their existence to the state of a servile organ.”<sup>37</sup> But it is insufficient to say that people enframed by production are unable to live an impassioned life – rather, the framework renders the flames of passion themselves undesirable. Krzysztof Matuszewski’s aptly synthesises Bataille’s view on the matter:

The thought of Bataille is a radical polemic against the bourgeois vision of reality (predefined by the Reformation) representing it as a pragmatic project, from which the splendour of ecstatic instants and the glory of waste have been drained. Once grasped in these terms, life became reduced to a mercantile form of anticipating salvation; the victorious bourgeoisie ushers in an era of the domination of things, and of the extermination of passion [trans. – M.H.].<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Because the cathedral has glitched itself past the limitations of its original design.

<sup>34</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> William S. Burroughs, “It Belongs to the Cucumbers,” in: *The Adding Machine* (New York: Grove Press, 2013), e-book.

<sup>36</sup> See: Denis Hollier, “Foreword,” in: *The College of Sociology*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. viii-xxix.

<sup>37</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 223.

<sup>38</sup> Krzysztof Matuszewski, „Człowiek – eternizacja hiatusu. Szkic antropologii Georges’a Bataille’a,” *Acta Universitatis Lodzensis. Folia Philosophica*, Vol. 20, No. 19 (2007), p. 161.

The kind of critique summarised above serves as the point of departure for the attack Bataille mounts against the primacy of production in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” There, Bataille proceeds to distinguish and condemn three types of people, whose enframed existence contributes especially to the continued enframing of the world, narrowing down the breadth of human life, firstly, to rational operations executed in the “arena of work,” and secondly, to the limits of the possible, thus detracting the human being from its destiny, which is to be set ablaze in attempts of reaching the impossible.<sup>39</sup> Our understanding of Bataille’s typology – which we will recount below – is that it constitutes an indictment of particular states of consciousness (rather than professions) and their respective influence on life.

The first accusation is levelled at the man of science: the man who prioritises the search for knowledge or truth (of a narrative that would make the world thoroughly explicable and whole) over the pursuit of destiny, and thus exchanges a total life – a life of a human being in excess of itself – for an existence subordinated to the production and accumulation of knowledge, often in accordance with a given political doctrine. Importantly, Bataille highlights that his point is not to call for an abandonment of science and a disavowal of its achievements and capabilities – “[i]ts *moral* ravages are alone criticized.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the man of science is to blame inasmuch as he is an accomplice in the twofold crime of, on the one hand, turning life into an object to be preserved in the name of a morality of “decline” – which “*gives all value to concerns for preserving and enriching the individual,*” and which is thus opposed to a desire for the

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<sup>39</sup> See: Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 37-41.

<sup>40</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” p. 234.

“summit” that “*corresponds to excess, to an exuberance of forces*”<sup>41</sup> – and on the other, obscuring the depth of death. Indeed, it is our reflection in the mirror of death that grants us a vision of what is impossible in us, or of the incredibility of being alive; the limit experience of the death of another forces one to face the faceless – to confront the impossible.<sup>42</sup> The man of science draws a veil over the mirror of mortality; Tadeusz Sławek speaks of it thusly:

Life explained away by science falsifies the issue of death: by ridding it of its metaphysical dimension, science technicises it, showing it to be a purely “human” phenomenon, a result of the efficiency of appropriate [...] technological means. The human being does not “die” – it is “eliminated.” Death is no longer “chivalrous”; it is the final accomplishment of bourgeois culture – it becomes a thing of the slaughterhouse [trans. – M.H.].<sup>43</sup>

The process described above is rendered in greater detail in a passage from Bataille’s *Tears of Eros*:

The cruelty of intensified war and a suffocating discipline reduced the element of lawless release and relief that war had formerly accorded to the victors. Conversely, added to the slaughter was the rotting horror, the sinking horror of the camps. Horror resolutely acquired a sense of depression: the wars of our century have mechanized war, war has become senile. The world finally gives in to reason. Even in war, work becomes the guiding principle, its fundamental law.<sup>44</sup>

Let us move on to the second state of consciousness unfavourably judged by Bataille, namely, that of the man of art, whose *works* are on par with the *works* of the man of science. The man of art can be said to propagate the poverty of being if his labour perpetuates the same paradigm the functioning of which makes scientists separate truth from meaning, and which makes artists isolate meaning from life by binding it to fiction and fantasy. The man of art who accepts this paradigm is complicit in enframing

<sup>41</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1992), p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> See: Martin Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” *Constellations*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1995), p. 167.

<sup>43</sup> Sławek, *Śladem zwierząt. O dochodzeniu do siebie* (Gdańsk: Fundacja Terytoria Książki, 2020), p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Bataille, *Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1989), p. 143.

the world, and is thus sentenced to the misery of a careerist, who substitutes the existence of his works for his own existence, and resigns from attaining, in his own life, that which then casts its shadow upon paper, canvas, or other materials. It is possible, moreover, that the man of art – motivated by a desire to make his works more weighty, to anchor them in the needs of reality – will decide to offer his services to the system, donning in this manner the mantle of a propagandist. Clearly, Bataille was not particularly sympathetic towards art and its makers at the time of writing “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” but even this admittedly harsh assessment admits of another way (thus foreshadowing a change of heart experienced by Bataille in his later life, a change that would lead him to discover in art a privileged heterological operation – we will speak more of this in chapter four): the artist can push against the tightening frame by creating out of concern for destiny: by disrupting the barren tranquillity of the philistine, and by awakening in those who witness his or her creations a burning sense of destiny.

Ultimately, however, even the man of action – the third state of consciousness that stands accused in Bataille’s text – is not regarded to be in consonance with destiny solely on the merit of acting upon the world itself. Indeed, the third type of an enframed human being is exemplified by the social or political activist, who, in setting out to reshape the world in accordance with a vision, is more often than not mutilating the vision so as to adapt it to the current shape of the world. Attempts at externalising our desires as we experience them internally can only be met with resistance from the established order: from the great machine distributing its maintenance across the gridwork of everyday life (composed of the lines of word and image, along which the order of things and their productive manipulation is reproduced). Doubtless, the

revolutionary man of action has a taste of destiny while carrying out the revolution and uprooting order, but what awaits him – once the deed is done – is the grim necessity of establishing a new order, and thus of compromising the violence of insurgency for the sake of constructing a new machine.

Lo and behold, then, the modern man: a useful creature, thoroughly disconnected from a humanity in excess of the human,<sup>45</sup> of the merely productive and accumulative – in excess of whatever limit it finds imposed upon itself. The human being has been replaced by a function of utility, a predestined organ.

It is time to speak more lucidly of destiny, of the drawing of lots. Indeed, the movement of thought that has made of the latter a metaphor for the former betrays a collective intuition regarding the fact that destiny is – in human experience – tragically intertwined with chance, and thus that destiny itself is related to taking part in a game, to either taking up or issuing a challenge. Baudrillard writes: “The stake is a summons, the game a duel: chance is summoned to respond, obliged by the player’s wager to declare itself either favourable or hostile.”<sup>46</sup> And later on:

The bettor defends himself at all costs from the idea of a neutral universe, of which objective chance is a part. The bettor claims that anything can be seduced – numbers, letters, or the laws that govern their distribution. He would seduce the Law itself. The least sign, the least gesture has a meaning, which is not to say that it is part of some rational progression, but that every sign is vulnerable to, and can be seduced by other signs. The world is held together by unbreakable chains, but they are not those of the Law.<sup>47</sup>

We tempt fate so that it seduces us. And is there anything more tempting for fate than a careless attitude towards a stroke of fortune? Indeed, welcoming the fickleness of

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<sup>45</sup> Even though posthumanist thought seems to be a counterpoint to the idea of the human being exhausting its potential in the order of production, this is not the time for a broad discussion on this subject. Nevertheless, both post- and transhumanism will be referenced further on.

<sup>46</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 143.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 144.

chance is how one learns to love luck,<sup>48</sup> and how one keeps tempting fate.

To gamble – not necessarily in the context of a game, but rather as a way of life – is to dwell in a world submerged in its night, a world where knowing is out of the question, and the night of which is mutually exclusive with the Law, for the order of things defined by the Law is incommensurable with the *everything* one stakes on a single card.<sup>49</sup>

By taking a risk – by putting ourselves in jeopardy – we achieve a blessed “state of grace,”<sup>50</sup> and we have a chance to seduce signs: to provoke the flow of being into becoming our ally in the struggle against exegesis. Of course, a stroke of luck can also be co-opted into an interpretation (beaded onto a strand of linear events), which is to say that luck can be explained away. Regardless, chance (as it comes to us from the outside of frameworks) has nothing to do with reassurance, and it neither safeguards nor guarantees. One’s lot is irreducible to pre-destination – to a purpose one turns out to have been serving from the start. We would be wise, however, not to ignore the link between destiny and destination, and thus between destiny and images of adventure, odyssey, pilgrimage. In fact, when Bataille writes of wresting oneself free of the frameworks that enforce the fragmentation of the human being, he invokes the “*image of destiny*”<sup>51</sup>: “a feeling for the myth” which seduces us into living it out, the myth that gifts us with experiencing an unwritten concord (an alignment of hearts<sup>52</sup>). “A human being is dissociated when he *devotes himself* to a useful labor, which has no sense by itself [which requires an external, systemic justification]; he can only find the plenitude

<sup>48</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 84.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 78.

<sup>51</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” p. 228.

<sup>52</sup> Douglas Harper, “concord (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/concord#etymonline\\_v\\_17320](https://www.etymonline.com/word/concord#etymonline_v_17320) (6 April 2022).

of total life when seduced.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, “[...] *seduction alone is radically opposed to anatomy as destiny*”<sup>54</sup> – opposed to anatomisation, organisation, to being cast as organs or, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, to being caught in the “organic organization of the organs,” and thus to being organised by “[t]he judgment of God, the system of the judgment of God, the theological system [...]”<sup>55</sup> that manages every entity’s involvement in the grand scheme of things (in the eschatological project).

It is perhaps necessary that a system of god-given words is followed by a system of names – Linnaeus wrote that the system is the “Ariadne’s thread of botany,” and that without it “botany is chaos.”<sup>56</sup> What is glimpsed here reaches, however, beyond the study of plants, beyond even the malaise of Enlightenment (although the possibility of the system acting as a thread of Ariadne is a notion we will return to in chapter ten). The culture of the West has always been, as is known, an agrarian assemblage founded on the cultivation of fields, of plots, designations – of the division of Earth. It has been a culture of soil taken into possession, plants taken captive and plugged into the system, pre-destined to be ground between the millstones of a terrible machinery which Timothy Morton dubbed “agrilogistics,”<sup>57</sup> and which he defined as the logic, firstly, of framing beings, and secondly, of framing them as exploitable things. Agrilogistics is, therefore, the original frame, the blueprint for the gridwork that aligns lives with projects of utility and labels resistance to itself as futility.

When, in *Dune* (the source of this chapter’s motto), a matriarchal order known as

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<sup>53</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” p. 228.

<sup>54</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> Carl Linnaeus, *Philosophia Botanica*, trans. Stephen Freer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 113.

<sup>57</sup> Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), e-book.



the Bene Gesserit applies the agrilogistic frame to human fate itself – steering destiny into bearing a fruit they have been designing throughout centuries by arranging the most genetically gainful marriages – every generation seems to be bringing them closer to growing a scion of unbounded human potential. Alas, destiny cannot be bred: the genealogical tree, which has been looked after with utmost care, comes to fruition earlier than the Reverend Mothers of the order have anticipated. In consequence, they are smitten by a catastrophe of overabundance: when the time has come for them to reap what they had sown, they are brought to their knees by the man whose genome they had been perfecting.

As we can see, included in the themes of *Dune* is what Peter Sloterdijk calls “anthropotechnics” – a concept that describes how humanity breeds itself, which is to say that it influences its own development in a sort of selective feedback loop. It can have, broadly speaking, two different effects: it can either tame and domesticate (as it has generally done in the majority of civilisations, but it can be said to have done so especially in the West, bringing forth bourgeois society), or it can push the human being outside the box – in other words, it can take a Nietzschean direction, priming humanity for surpassing itself.<sup>58</sup> (Perhaps the latter is the desired result of the endeavours of transhumanism, but the critics of this school of thought have not failed to point out the often human, all too human nature of its aspirations.<sup>59</sup>)

*Dune* features a variation on the subject of this second, more exuberant direction of anthropotechnics, but the story does not deviate from the laws of hubris – it is, in fact, a

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<sup>58</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, “Rules for the Human Park: A Response to Heidegger’s ‘Letter on Humanism,’” in: *Not Saved: Essays after Heidegger*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2017), pp. 208-209.

<sup>59</sup> Dawid Misztal, „Religijne aspekty transhumanizmu,” in: *Granice sacrum. Wymiary religijności w myśli współczesnej*, ed. Paweł Grabarczyk and Tomasz Sieczkowski (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2017), p. 153.

warning: regardless of how far-reaching a given project could be (regardless of the depths of time implied by the length of its term), there will always be “the rest,” that which has not been accounted for due to being beyond reach; a surprise. “This is the reality of ‘the rest,’ where the lights of ontotheological certitude go out. Only a promise remains; an oath of something unknown [trans. – M.H.],”<sup>60</sup> a dream of a mutation breaking out of the agrilogistic terror, out of subdivision stuck on a loop, out of all kinds of excruciatingly domesticated parks, which are the enclosures humanity builds for itself.<sup>61</sup> (Interestingly enough, both Morton’s agrilogistics and Sloterdijk’s anthropotechnics of self-cultivation are described as machineries that are clandestinely woven into the arrangements of so-called everyday life.<sup>62</sup>)

Let us return our focus to the matter of destiny. We have established that it cannot be – or should not be – bred, or otherwise treated as any other resource would. According to Bataille, true destiny can only ever be a chance encounter anyway, but since we have imprisoned ourselves in parks, parcels, and cells (not unlike the monastic ones – cenobitic monasticism can be interpreted as the prefiguration of the factory worker’s alienation<sup>63</sup>), our chances to experience destiny – though not yet gone – are limited. They are still given to us, Bataille claims, in the movement that takes place between infatuation and physical intimacy. After all, “the lover’s discourse is today of *an extreme solitude*,”<sup>64</sup> given that, when “[p]resented with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit, young people of all countries have chosen the garbage disposal

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<sup>60</sup> Sławek, *Nie bez reszty*, p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> Sloterdijk, “Rules for the Human Park,” p. 212.

<sup>62</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, and Sloterdijk, “Rules for the Human Park,” p. 210.

<sup>63</sup> See: Ewa Borkowska, “Pater’s Ploughmen’s Organic Appreciations,” in: *Organs, Organisms, Organisations: Organic Form in 19th-Century Discourse*, ed. Tadeusz Rachwał and Tadeusz Sławek (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 54.

<sup>64</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 2.

unit.”<sup>65</sup>

In “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” Bataille posits that it is precisely by choosing love – by letting an other seduce us and by seducing the other ourselves – that we truly join the game of chance: we become an “image of destiny” for the other, who, in turn, embodies the image of our destiny. A romance is always an extraordinary concatenation of coincidences, a series of connections challenged into being through seduction; it conserves one of the precious few experiences that remain of a life not yet humiliated – a life unlike that of the organ<sup>66</sup> (indeed, love belongs to “the rest,” to the movements that elude the projections of the utilitarian framework). “That’s why there is such a feeling of intoxication when we find love,” writes Bataille in *Guilty*, “and when it’s missing why there’s such huge despair. When love is another planet, we collapse in it [...]. In fact, in love we stop being ourselves.”<sup>67</sup> In *Inner Experience*, he goes as far as to claim that, at least in the West, “we cannot conceive of ultimate collapse in a way other than in love.”<sup>68</sup>

Love is, for the human being, a channel through which beings can sidestep the framework that would turn them into things. Simply put, “[i]t is insofar as a being is not a thing that it is possible to love that being. Insofar as it resembles the sacred.”<sup>69</sup> And it does, truth be told, resemble it: “For the lover, the beloved makes the world transparent. Through the beloved appears [...] full and limitless being unconfined within the trammels of separate personalities, continuity of being, glimpsed as a deliverance

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<sup>65</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” in: *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” pp. 228-229.

<sup>67</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 111.

<sup>68</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 120.

<sup>69</sup> Bataille, “The Consequences of Nonknowledge,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, pp. 115-116.

through the person of the beloved.”<sup>70</sup> To put it simply, there is a fullness to the time one spends in the presence of one’s beloved: it is a time characterised by a sense of sufficiency, as opposed to the insufficiency of that “which has no sense by itself.” It is a time one feels no need to justify in reference to anything external to that time, or to anything related to the requirements of the time of work, wherein beings very much confined “within the trammels of separate personalities” perform operations on discrete objects.

Furthermore, because of the turbulence inherent to the experience one has of it, love violates every pretence of stability – hence its tragic aspect, without which there could be no romance, and hence, too, its association with “ultimate collapse.” “(In the same way, what do the two lovers, Tristan and Isolde, signify, if considered without their love, in a solitude which leaves them to some commonplace pursuit? Two pale beings, deprived of the marvellous; nothing counts but the love which tears them both apart.)”<sup>71</sup> Due, moreover, to the rapturous feelings it has the power to unleash, love descends upon the lover in the mode of the sacred, thus strengthening its association with collapse, with the sudden sensation of having the ground cut from under us). Indeed, to be transfixed by love is to become removed from profane existence, and it is by no means a matter of fancy: “The world of lovers is no less true than that of politics. It even absorbs the totality of life, which politics cannot do.”<sup>72</sup> What is in question here is quite literally “another planet,” a *world* experienced by the lovers, different from the one they had each inhabited prior to their entanglement. It is an empire founded on their love, a realm they inhabit even as they go about their business, paying their dues to the

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<sup>70</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 21.

<sup>71</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 94.

<sup>72</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” p. 229.

arrangements of everyday life, dealing with problems that, despite arriving from the social world, are as transfigured as any other aspect of life led in the “world of lovers.” In spite of this, the love of a couple is unlikely to truly influence other people, to introduce change into a group or a community, let alone society. Nevertheless:

What we condemn in love does not [...] reveal, as we too often believe, a lack of breadth: individual love is even a way of being that is supremely unbounded, but it succumbs to the impossibility of maintaining itself in its purity, or to the awkwardness of its transcriptions, whenever it moves (or gets bogged down) in a world not its own, in a world where the senses are limited. What we condemn in love is thus our own powerlessness, and never the possibility that it opens up.<sup>73</sup>

And so, the “world of lovers,” in which a couple mutually endows itself with destiny, is offered to us as a prototype, as it were – a way for Bataille to picture, on the pages of “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” a world that would be yet more different, a realm that would be inhabited by more than two people. By evoking the image of a “world of lovers,” Bataille opens a view onto a world where the “image of destiny” could hold sway over an entire population,<sup>74</sup> which would thus be enchanted, seduced by the experience of myth:

*Myth* remains at the disposal of one who cannot be satisfied by art, science, or politics. [...] Myth alone returns, to the one who is broken by every ordeal, the image of a plenitude extended to the community where men gather. Myth alone enters the bodies of those it binds and it expects from them the same receptiveness. It is the frenzy of every dance; it takes existence “to its boiling point”: it communicates to it the tragic emotion that makes its sacred intimacy accessible.<sup>75</sup>

In contrast to a novel or any other work of art, a myth is lived through as the truth of being, as a mission, as destiny. The webwork of myth is held together by the

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<sup>73</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Vol. II: The History of Eroticism*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 164.

<sup>74</sup> Let it be noted that Bataille wanted to formulate an attitude capable of opposing the sterility of modern life without succumbing to the temptations of fascism; see: Jeremy Biles, “The Remains of God: Bataille/Sacrifice/Community,” *Culture, Theory and Critique*, Vol. 52, No. 2-3 (2011), pp. 127-144.

<sup>75</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” p. 229.

reciprocal seduction of beings, and the strands of this web are like so many pathways that lead to an experience of the sacred. Being able to have such an experience is the precondition, in turn, for a life consonant with a truth which has not been cooled down by the rigour of scientific knowledge. Indeed, contrary to the static character of knowledge (of the accumulation of supposedly neutral facts), the truth of myth is meaningful, intimately binding – it bridges the gap between the interior of experience and the cosmic scale. Or, the truth of myth occurs whenever intimacy and the cosmos seduce each other, thus changing the state of one's consciousness; by loosening the valves that maintain the individuality of human beings, "communication" "renders them mutually penetrable each to the other."<sup>76</sup>

And even though "[i]t is possible that total existence is nothing more for us than a simple dream, nourished by historical descriptions and by the secret gleams of our passions,"<sup>77</sup> the problem of myth cannot be done away with. In a short text written for a surrealist<sup>78</sup> exhibition, Bataille straightforwardly equates the effacement of myth with "the ruin of the universe," a state in which the universe itself is disclosed to us as the absence of God. For Bataille, this is "no longer a closure: it is the opening up to the infinite". Nevertheless, "the absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the purest, the only *true* myth."<sup>79</sup> We are handling a double-edged sword, then: on the one hand, the void of divine absence is a rupture in the monolith of profane existence. On the other hand, however, the myth of the absence of myth<sup>80</sup> consolidates that existence. The world

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<sup>76</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 25.

<sup>77</sup> Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," p. 233.

<sup>78</sup> See also: Bataille, "The Surrealist Religion," in: *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 71-90.

<sup>79</sup> Bataille, "The Absence of Myth," in: *The Absence of Myth*, p. 48.

<sup>80</sup> Or "the myth of the man without myth," as Maurice Blanchot puts it in reference to how the framework of technology "denudes" the human being, how "[i]t empties us horribly of everything we love and love to be," thus representing for humanity "the chance that accompanies any rupture: when one is forced to give

that it founds upon the principle of an immutability, which it attributes to the existence of the order of production, is the very wasteland (“the dead land,” “cactus land”<sup>81</sup>) inhabited by lacklustre masses of organs, “which are held to live in isolation, [...] like so many servants of a dead man.”<sup>82</sup>

(It seems prudent to mention that works such as Barthes’ classic *Mythologies* or the more recent study by Marcin Napiórkowski, *Mitologia współczesna (Mythology Today)*, undermine the invisible hegemony of the myth of the absence of myth, even if they do so without recourse to the sacred. Put another way, Bataille’s understanding of myth – and his critique of its absence in modern society – contains insights that could prove valuable in other avenues of research devoted to the secularised mythologies of today that, though godless, remain connected with states of consciousness in which meaning has priority over facts.)

Although overt reliance on the notion of myth was not meant to become a fixture in Bataille’s writings, the conclusion he reaches at the end of “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” reinforces the underlying motivation of his thought – to search for pathways to an experience that would not be profane, and thus to a life that could not be enclosed in the profane, a life that would, in its entirety, be irreducible to the profane. Truth be told, however, the text’s ending is as much a challenge as it is a conclusion: no matter how feasible it is for us to achieve “total existence,” to grasp for it has to be our imperative, and our best bet is to create myths – myths on the foundation of which new worlds could be erected. Of course, the circumstances of modern civilisation (the parks,

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up oneself, one must either perish or begin again; perish in order to begin again.” See: Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 82.

<sup>81</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” in: *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 2002), p. 80.

<sup>82</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” p. 224.

parcels, and cells) necessitate secrecy or, to speak more directly, the formation of “secret societies” the surreptitious conduct of which would not be a measure of security, but an invitation extended to the order of seduction. “Myth is born,” claims Bataille, “in ritual acts hidden from the static vulgarity of disintegrated society, but the violent dynamism that belongs to it has no other object than the return to lost totality.”<sup>83</sup>

The question remains: why should this quest be given to the sorcerer’s *apprentice*, rather than the sorcerer himself? The point lies in a crucial obstacle that awaits anyone capable of coming up with new myths, secrets or rituals liable to release an affective wave of the sacred. Namely, how can one have faith in something one has consciously fabricated?

According to Patrick Ffrench’s account, when Bataille described his aim to Alexandre Kojève, the latter likened the former to an illusionist who, having performed a marvellous trick, would become convinced of the reality of magic. Apparently, Bataille took Kojève’s comment to heart and embraced this poignant characterisation of the role he had imagined for himself.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, as Ffrench points out, “[...] the sorcerer himself may work on the basis of knowledge and calculation, the apprentice, on the other hand, puts himself at risk according to the demands of chance.”<sup>85</sup> To become the sorcerer’s apprentice is, therefore, to rediscover being in awe.

That was, in fact, the task undertaken by Bruno Schulz, who thus appears to have been a sorcerer’s apprentice himself. After all, not only was he a man who had devoted himself to the practice of myth-making, but he did so, in addition, in a covertly

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<sup>83</sup> Ibidem, p. 233.

<sup>84</sup> Patrick Ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (Abingdon and New York: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2007), e-book.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem.



cabbalistic spirit.<sup>86</sup> What is more, in “The Mythicisation of Reality” (his defining essay), Schulz wrote of an original word which was not a word at all, but myth, cosmology, the very possibility of tales; of the unfolding of myth which had been interrupted by the development of scientific knowledge, and of mythology being succeeded by an assembly line of increasingly narrow – fragmented – definitions. Therefore, the question whether there is any resonance to be found between Bataille’s understanding of myth and the beliefs held by Schulz warrants attention.

Schulz’s creations are suggestive of a secret message – they are pregnant with meanings which are not exactly hidden, but rather oblique, seductively half-concealed,<sup>87</sup> bringing to mind intimations meant for the initiated, for an obscurely drawn inner circle.<sup>88</sup> This is especially true in the case of Schulz’s visual works, namely, his erotic drawings and prints, various sets of which comprised different versions of *The Booke of Idolatry*. Copies of this *Booke* found their way into the hands of those willing to appreciate masochistic representations of women dominating over deformed, shrunken males. Some of his friends received them as a gift, but Schulz was also partial to selling them, whether directly or indirectly, that is, with the help of patrons, dealers, and publishers.<sup>89</sup>

Amongst those initiated into Schulz’s circle one finds the artist’s schoolmate, Stanisław Weingarten, and Maksymilian Goldstein. Bookplates made by Schulz for both

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<sup>86</sup> Władysław Panas, *Księga blasku. Traktat o kabale w prozie Brunona Schulza* (Lublin: Ośrodek Brama Grodzka, 2009), [http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/Content/66970/Ksiega\\_blasku\\_Traktat\\_o\\_kabale.pdf](http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/Content/66970/Ksiega_blasku_Traktat_o_kabale.pdf) (25.02.2020).

<sup>87</sup> See: Jerzy Jarzębski, “Bruno Schulz and Seductive Discourse,” in: *(Un)masking Bruno Schulz: New Combinations, Further Fragmentations, Ultimate Reintegrations*, ed. Dieter de Bruyn and Kris van Heuckelom (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 327-338.

<sup>88</sup> See: Theodosia Robertson, “Bruno Schulz’s Intimate Communication: From the ‘True Viewer’ of *Xięga bałwochwalcza* to the ‘True Reader’ of *Księga*,” in: *(Un)masking Bruno Schulz*, pp. 451-471.

<sup>89</sup> Jerzy Ficowski, „Słowo o *Xiędze bałwochwalczej*,” in: Bruno Schulz, *Xięga bałwochwalcza* (Warszawa: Interpress, 1988), pp. 15-16.

of them have been preserved, but the ones commissioned by Goldstein are, in our current context, of greater relevance:

One of the two Schulz's bookplates was meant for a section of Goldstein's library labelled "erotica." It is an illustration of exceptionally sharp themes and forms, a conglomerate of expressively emphasised and somewhat surrealistically rendered perversions and deviations. The second bookplate – [...] *The Kiss* – has been inscribed, just as the first one, with only the initials: M.G. The reason was perhaps that Goldstein had no intention of marking the books from the obscenities section with signs that could reveal their owner's full name to the uninitiated [trans. – M.H.].<sup>90</sup>

As far as the long-lasting friendship between Schulz and Weingarten is concerned, Jerzy Ficowski supposes that the "common ground" they had shared was an affinity for the same kind of eroticism, which is to say, fetishism.<sup>91</sup>

To conclude, it does not take much effort to identify, across the different aspects of Schulz's life, an endeavour reminiscent of a "secret society," a somewhat underdeveloped form of participating in a community gathered around an erotic secret, a community emblematised in one of the prints included in *The Booke of Idolatry*, one entitled *Procesja (Procession)*.<sup>92</sup> It depicts a woman, naked except for black stockings, walking in front of misshapen males swarming behind her in mindless adoration. One man, however, stands out from the crowd. He appears to be of normal size, his posture is upright, his head and face (the look on which is indicative of longing rather than crude lechery) are proportionate in relation to his hands, and he seems to be embracing a folded garment – it is as if the worshipped woman had just disrobed, and he has been given the honour of holding her clothes. In the background, a cathedral looms, and a banner shoots up from somewhere deeper in the procession, bearing an image of a

<sup>90</sup> Ficowski, *Okolice sklepów cynamonowych. Szkice, przyczynki, impresje* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), p. 28.

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, p. 26.

<sup>92</sup> Schulz, *Xięga bałwochwalcza*, p. 79.

woman's slipper: "[...] fetishism is returned here to its original meaning, to its original referents: the sexual fetish rises – without forsaking its nature – to the level of a hierophantic, religious, sacred fetish [trans. – M.H.]."<sup>93</sup> The overall feeling of the piece is that of a mystery cult celebrating the moment at which the sacred (which is here the left-hand sacred of erotic flesh) is revealed, culminating the festival.

As can be plainly seen, the thoughts of Bataille and Schulz have followed a number of parallel lines, and have done so despite having a fair share of irreconcilable differences, such as the rather fundamental issue of the antecedence of either word or world. Still, a cabbalistic vision of the original word falling into smaller and smaller pieces, each fragment becoming more precise and rigid with each subdivision, cascading down from a raw totality of meaning – which is “glimpsed as a deliverance through the person of the beloved,” but also in poetry, which is “the impetuous regeneration of primordial myth”<sup>94</sup> – can provide us with an alternative perspective on Bataille's “communication”: the “sacred world”<sup>95</sup> of affective currents channelled between human beings, illustrated vividly in a passage from *Inner Experience*:

Now to live signifies for you not only the flux and the fleeting play of light which are united in you, but the passage of warmth or of light from one being to another, from you to your fellow being or from your fellow being to you (even at the moment when you read in me the contagion of my fever which reaches you): words, books, monuments, symbols, laughter are only so many paths of this contagion, of this passage. Individual beings matter little and enclose points of view which cannot be acknowledged, if one considers what is animated, passing from one to the other in love, in tragic scenes, in movements of fervor. Thus we are nothing, neither you nor I, beside burning words which could pass from me to you, imprinted on a page: for I would only have lived in order to write them, and, if it is true that they are addressed to you, you will live from having had the strength to hear them.<sup>96</sup>

Experiences such as “[...] desire, poetry, laughter, unceasingly cause life to slip

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>94</sup> Schulz, “The Mythologization of Reality,” trans. John M. Bates, *Bruno Schulz*, <http://www.brunoschulz.org/mythologization.htm> (9 April 2022).

<sup>95</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 81.

<sup>96</sup> Ibidem, p. 94.

[...] from the known to the unknown.”<sup>97</sup> Poetry – sorcerous, mythicising, echoing what language could have been before it settled down into a cemetery of dead metaphors – opens communication, communicates a secret which is always in excess of what we might know, for “[t]he floor of myth has to communicate with the incomprehensible and preverbal if it is to remain alive, rooted in the dark of a mythic homeland [trans. – M.H.].”<sup>98</sup> It is a matter of the “secret,” of what Baudrillard describes as “[t]he seductive, initiatory quality of that which cannot be said because it makes no sense, and of that which is not said even though it gets around.”<sup>99</sup> It is also a question of “the rest,” of the unspoken kernel of all mysteries.

If we were to somehow synthesise our current perception of how the thoughts of Bataille and Schulz overlap, we would propose the following sentence: mythic experience introduces the possibility of a shared intimacy, of a communication that can crack the shell of an individual self. We learn from Schulz’s oft-cited letter to Witkacy that “[...] the soul’s roots, if pursued far enough and deeply enough, become lost in a kind of mythical virgin forest,”<sup>100</sup> whereas Bataille teaches us, in *The Accursed Share*, that “[i]ntimately” – *beyond* the external, and thus real order of things and reified individualities – “all men are one.”<sup>101</sup> A “mythical virgin forest,” a “lost totality” of experience – this, as well as the danger of parasitism, is at stake in myth.

As we near the end of this chapter, let us return one more time to the issue of destiny, for it is through destiny that “the impetuous regeneration of primordial myth” is experienced with the greatest intensity of feeling – in the blooming of destiny, human

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<sup>97</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>98</sup> Schulz, „Wolność tragiczna,” *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, No. 27 (1936), p. 510.

<sup>99</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 79.

<sup>100</sup> Schulz, “A Selection of Prose,” *Cross Currents*, Vol. 6 (1987), p. 191.

<sup>101</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol. I, p. 192.

beings become intimate with each other, and “the trammels of separate personalities” come loose, allowing (like love) for “another planet,” for a different world.

Destiny is, moreover, tangential to legend, which Schulz defines as “the organ that prehends greatness [trans. – M.H.],”<sup>102</sup> and greatness, in turn, “is never consistent. [...] The person who experiences greatness must have a feeling for the myth he is in.” To be destined for greatness: to experience what is usually described as a *calling* (“Did a wind from outside write this book?”<sup>103</sup>), to be seduced – abducted from the arrangements of everyday life, sent on a mission, a dangerous expedition beyond the limits of what is known, beyond the delineations of familiar shapes.

Michel Leiris’ meditation on the presence of the sacred in his early life contains an account of an experience in which the intermixture of, on the one hand, these seductive qualities of destiny, and on the other, the sacred, transgression, and childhood (that time of enchantment so precious to Schulz) becomes manifest:

When our mother or older sister took us for a walk either in the Bois de Boulogne or the public gardens adjoining the Paris greenhouses, it often happened that we would cross this ill-defined space [of thick, unkempt bushes]. Contrasted with the bourgeois world of houses, just as the village – for those belonging to so-called savage societies – can be contrasted to the bush, which is the hazy world specific to all the mythical adventures and strange encounters that begin as soon as the duly staked-out world making up the village is left behind, this was a zone where the scarps were really haunting. We were told then, if we happened to stop and play, to beware of strangers (actually, I realize now: satyrs) who might, under false pretenses, try to take us off into the bushes. A place apart, extremely taboo, an area heavily marked by the supernatural and the sacred, so different from the parks, where everything was planned, organized, raked, and where the notices forbidding you to walk on the grass, though signs of taboo, could only endow them with a sacred grown cold.<sup>104</sup>

Is this not the theme taken upon by Schulz in “Pan,” a story in which a drunken vagrant encountered in the lush depths of an overgrown orchard – where “it was an

<sup>102</sup> Schulz, „Powstają legendy (fragment),” in: *Bruno Schulz. Listy, fragmenty, wspomnienia o pisarzu*, ed. Jerzy Ficowski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), p. 38.

<sup>103</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 118.

<sup>104</sup> Michel Leiris, “The Sacred in Everyday Life,” in: *The College of Sociology*, p. 27.

orchard no more, but a paroxysm of madness, an outbreak of fury, of cynical shamelessness and lust”<sup>105</sup> – becomes mythicised, transubstantiated into the satirical god of the wilds? Indeed, even though he did not leave behind him a legacy of ritual (of collective practices meant to unleash an affective wave), Schulz has bestowed upon us a treasure trove of myth. One can trace – in the meticulous construction of his texts, wherein the possibility of linguistic expression is pushed to its limit – lines, guidelines to where language itself is lost for words; guidelines, then, that take one, firstly, through the “virgin forest,” and secondly, towards the inexpressible.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, myth can be drawn around us as our limit. A tendency of tendencies to perpetuate themselves, it manifests as semiotically contracted patterns of thought, skewed in their development towards increasing the likelihood of perpetuation, consequently propagating behaviour that is easily justifiable in interpersonal terms, the criteria of which favour usefulness. Myth, whether narrative or not (whether religious or common-sensible), has the ability to stabilise a community, to move it towards the morality of “decline,” provided that it first becomes reduced to a set of fables the only purpose of which is to instil in the community a sense of how *good* it is to be a productive member of society.

It is undeniable, therefore, that myth can represent the domesticating side of anthropotechnics (myth is how humanity preserves itself), but it is at its most insidious when it turns into the illusion of its own absence: the myth of the absence of myth is a smokescreen readily employed by mythic parasites, who – as is clear in the works of both Burroughs and Barthes – can only benefit from their hosts’ lack of awareness regarding the infestation.

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<sup>105</sup> Schulz, “Pan,” in: *The Fictions of Bruno Schulz*, ed. and trans. Celina Wieniewska (London: Picador, 2012), p. 54.

In this chapter, Bataille's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" has been read closely and in connection with ideas that saturated the text's central argument, namely, the opposition of myth to the impoverishment of an overly rationalised existence. Then, the potential for common ground that could be found in the thoughts of Bataille and Schulz was sketched out in reference to the practice of myth-making. In conclusion of these considerations, one may say that a myth is *not* a parasite when, instead of encasing its hosts in an illusion by setting up a complete image of existence, it offers them a pathway to something it cannot account for; when it allows them to have an experience that, through its sheer intensity, leaves them with an impression that the myth can only explain so much, because there is always the secret remainder that escapes explanation, that eludes being put into words, that makes apparent the ultimate futility of language – its "ultimate collapse" in love. It follows, then, that myth is not a parasite when, by living it out, one performs an exercise in that futility and attains a connection with the sacred via a channel carved through the known (which, when considered on its own, is – on account of its productivity – profane), but leading to an experience of the unknown that cannot be enframed, turned into a resource and absorbed by the enmeshed architectures of domesticating anthropotechnics and exploitative agrilogistics.

In the next chapter, we will devote more attention to the opposition of the known and the unknown, basing our reflection on the approach formulated by Bataille, who perceived the known and the unknown in a profound entanglement with, respectively, discontinuity and continuity, delimitation and limitlessness. Furthermore, we will attempt to consider myth in the context of these dynamics, that is, we will try to see whether the influence of a given myth can be characterised in terms of its relationship with the unknown.

### CHAPTER 3: AN ORIGIN OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN<sup>1</sup>

*“Offspring of endless Night, thou hast no power*

*O’er me or any man who sees the sun.”<sup>2</sup>*

Seeing that this chapter will be devoted to the dynamics of the known and the unknown, or of the familiar and the unfamiliar, it is only reasonable that it should also refer to Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of “enstrangement,” the mechanisms and shortcomings of which will be exemplified with excerpts from Schulz’s stories. First, however, the interplay of light and dark, of knowledge and non-knowledge – and the potential for experiencing the extreme points of that interplay – will be pondered. Moreover, the issue of myth will remain relevant insofar as myths take part, parasitically or otherwise, in conceptualising the tension between the known and the unknown.

The words of the motto come from Oedipus, who, in *Oedipus the King*, utters them to Teiresias – the blind prophet – whose insights he rejects, believing them to be a part of a conspiracy against him. Regardless of the ancient play’s plot, however, what is of interest to us in the quoted passage is the consonance of its metaphors. It has to be pointed out that we subscribe to the understanding of metaphor as the basic element in our conceptualisations of reality, as the building block of language,<sup>3</sup> and even as its very essence. When read with such an understanding in mind, the excerpt presents this

<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter has been published by myself in *Maska*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2018), pp. 131-144, under the title: “An Unknown Origin: On Unfamiliarity and Making Strange.”

<sup>2</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. F. Storr (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912), *Saylor Academy*, <https://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/PLAYS-OF-SOPHOCLES.pdf> (16 July 2018).

<sup>3</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).



fundamentally revealing nature of metaphor rather vividly, for two powerful and age-old metaphors serve as its fertile soil: “to see is to know” and “light is good” (the latter being connected with “knowledge is good”), or, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson put it, “understanding is seeing; ideas are light-sources; discourse is a light-medium.”<sup>4</sup> Oedipus’ renunciation hinges on these notions regardless of the fact that it also alludes to Teiresias’ lack of sight. It would hold none of its rhetoric sway without being grounded upon these deeply ingrained preconceptions about the world. Therefore, the occidental is already in these ancient words identified as a follower of light who relies chiefly on his sense of sight.

Let us explore the implications of such a diagnosis and dive into the metaphorical dynamic of light and darkness, attempting to perceive it through its connections with the tension between the known and the unknown, and with the notion of origin. In other words, our current purpose is to analyse the meshing of conceptualisations – light/familiarity and darkness/unfamiliarity – while taking as our point of reference the idea of a genesis, and thus, necessarily, of myth as well.

Western metaphysics has always aspired to trace humankind back to a luminous origin – this much is obvious in both Hebrew and Greek traditions. The gnostic strains of mystical thought insist on the presence of a divine spark within the skin-bags of flesh – an immaterial light trapped in the material convulsions of darkness.<sup>5</sup> As the positive valorisations of knowledge and light intersect, the certainty associated with things being brought to light, disclosed, unveiled or simply shown, appears<sup>6</sup> (comes into view<sup>7</sup>).

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> See: Steven Runciman, „Gnostyckie tło,” trans. Alicja Domańska, in: *Literatura na świetle*, Vol. 213, No. 4 (1989), pp. 14-35.

<sup>6</sup> See: Andrzej Marzec, *Widmontologia. Teoria filozoficzna i praktyka artystyczna ponowoczesności* (Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2015), pp. 73-125.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Harper, “appear (v.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*,

Those who claim to see the Sun – antithetical to whom is the “Offspring of endless Night” – supposedly attain what could be described in Heideggerian poetics as the shining forth of truth.<sup>8</sup> And in extreme cases, those who find themselves at the very edge of knowledge, which is to say, seized by a revelation, become blinded, scorched by a light too bright for the human eye. This, shall we say, light-motif is again easily traceable back to the empires and enterprises of our ancestors: Semele, Dionysus’ mother, was immolated when Hera tricked her into asking Zeus – the god of lightning, of all things – to show her his true, unearthly form; during the conversion of Saul of Tarsus into Paul the Apostle, the light that struck him from the skies blinded him for three days (one can only imagine the after-images). Thomas Pynchon drew precisely upon this motif (and played with it subtly through the poetics of photography) when he wrote the following passage:

She could [...] recognize signals like that, as the epileptic is said – an odour, colour, pure piercing grace note sounding his seizure. Afterwards it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers. Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back.<sup>9</sup>

“All ‘mystical knowledge’ is founded on the belief in the revealing value of

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[https://www.etymonline.com/word/appear#etymonline\\_v\\_15496](https://www.etymonline.com/word/appear#etymonline_v_15496) (23 July 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See: Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 71. Oedipa, the aptly named protagonist of the book, quests for truth about a secret, yet seemingly omnipresent organisation, but, as the novel unfolds, finds herself entangled in a network of uncertain links and connections ephemeral enough to make her question her own sanity. In other words, Oedipa is a character led as if by fate towards a tragic denouement, but is at the same time consistently denied any form of resolution; the moment of understanding never comes.

For a discussion of excesses in vision and light, as pertains Bataille and another of Pynchon’s books, see: Mark Robberds, “Visions of Excess: Pynchon and Bataille,” *Pynchon Notes*, Vol. 40-41 (1997), pp. 19-27.

ecstasy,”<sup>10</sup> in the instructive potential of the “compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations.” When systems of this belief are established (whether one calls them mythical or religious is of no importance here), they extend the light-based certainty beyond the boundaries of singular existence. Indeed, they extend life beyond life itself, and thus impose a perspective originating in the discontinuity of individual life upon the continuity of death.<sup>11</sup>

With every appearance of an individual consciousness, the continuum of being allows itself to be wounded: every birth ruptures it. Assuming that the birthed consciousness overcomes a servile disposition, it is itself a bursting at its own seams, fated to eventually come apart at those very seams at the time of death, the unknowable *par excellence*. Outside the limits of this chronology of an explosion, the unknowable stretches infinitely, and our experience of this unknowable is – as Bataille tells us repeatedly throughout his *Inner Experience* – non-knowledge, which “communicates ecstasy.”<sup>12</sup>

And yet, myth encroaches on these dark domains – myths serve humanity as semiotic vehicles of both cosmogony and eschatology.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as they try to shed light on the unknowable, they only ever make known the previously unknown; the unknowable remains impervious to knowing. Nevertheless, myth – being, as we have seen, a most adaptable parasite – evolved into the myth of the absence of myth, and then

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<sup>10</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 52, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Marcin Napiórkowski, *Mitologia współczesna* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2013), pp. 302-305.

into an “objective”<sup>14</sup> science of “the new nobility,”<sup>15</sup> the men of science, who carry out the procedures turning the world, being by being, into an enframed thing.

Whatever shape they take, however, myths are the vehicles that discourse – in the etymological sense “of running here and there, comings and goings, measures taken, ‘plots and plans,’”<sup>16</sup> of going to and fro – and this activity of theirs produces discourse, the noun. As the limitations of individual existence – birth and death, beginning and end – are presumed to apply to continuous being, time becomes a space stretching between, on the one hand, an act of original creation, and on the other, its purpose, which can either be a part of a cyclical series, or an ultimate end towards which existence was a means. In other words, myth plays the role of installing a structure, of fortifying a lodgement, of spearheading a familiarising move into the unknowable that both precedes and follows, and an approximation of which can be found in the opening of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

Before the seas, and this terrestrial ball,  
And Heav’n’s high canopy, that covers all,  
One was the face of Nature; if a face:  
Rather a rude and indigested mass:  
A lifeless lump, unfashion’d, and unfram’d,  
Of jarring seeds; and justly Chaos nam’d.  
No sun was lighted up, the world to view;  
No moon did yet her blunted horns renew:  
Nor yet was Earth suspended in the sky,  
Nor pois’d, did on her own foundations lye:  
Nor seas about the shores their arms had thrown;  
But earth, and air, and water, were in one.  
Thus air was void of light, and earth unstable,  
And water’s dark abyss unnavigable.  
No certain form on any was imprest;  
All were confus’d, and each disturb’d the rest.  
For hot and cold were in one body fixt;

<sup>14</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, pp. 186-222.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, “A Season in Hell,” in: *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 267.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 3.

And soft with hard, and light with heavy mixt.<sup>17</sup>

In the mythic framework, this “unstable” and “dark abyss” “void of light” was to become systematised: fragmented, partitioned, and regulated. From a human being’s viewpoint, a seamless continuity, a coalescent being of beings was “the chaotic and fluid stage, formless and vague, of which he was part before divine beings or ancestral heroes arrived to bring him order, dimensions, stability, and regularity;”<sup>18</sup> or rather of which he was not a part, but which he indistinguishably *was*, up to the point of being thrust onto life’s shores, like a piece of debris, as an *ipse*<sup>19</sup> – a shard of differentiation claiming audaciously that not only is the world in order, but also that “[t]he coming of order into the world did not happen at one stroke, but was itself accomplished in orderly fashion.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, “*formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form,”<sup>21</sup> and thus “virtue consists in remaining *in the order*, keeping in one’s *own* place, not leaving one’s station, keeping to what is permitted, and not approaching what is forbidden. Having done this, one also keeps the universe ordered,”<sup>22</sup> stable in the form that is supposed to be preserved, safeguarded against an unsanctioned intrusion of excessive forces.

Cosmos – order<sup>23</sup> – withers nonetheless, its nature demands it. Thus is instigated

<sup>17</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Sir Samuel Garth et al., *The Internet Classics Archive*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.mb.txt> (23 July 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, trans. Meyer Barash (Glencoe: The Free Press of Glencoe, Illinois, 1959), p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> See: Bataille, *Inner Experience*.

<sup>20</sup> Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>21</sup> Bataille, “Formless,” in: *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Harper, “cosmos (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/cosmos> (23 July 2018).

the looming threat of entropy, the fear that the world will “resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion,”<sup>24</sup> of all difference. This threat is staved off by the festival, understood as the re-enactment of the mythic age, when order was dawning upon the black and primordial disorder; when matter received its definite shapes through divine handiwork; when feats remembered in ritual and myth were performed.<sup>25</sup> Let us invoke here two of Mircea Eliade’s findings on the procedures of myth-telling: firstly, that to re-member through myth is to gain entrance into the sacred time of ordering, which is experienced timelessly, as it were; and secondly, that through a set of sacramental gestures an emulation of the cosmogenic narrative is attainable.<sup>26</sup>

Should we consider all of the above while bearing in mind the tension between the known and the unknown, it becomes possible to perceive myths of origin as the means of an anchorage preventing our world from drifting away into the unfathomable – into the unknowable that terrifies due to being truly, profoundly unfamiliar. However, by affixing ourselves to the familiar with too great a force, we sentence our conduct to automatization – we begin to regard even the most arcane, occult subjects as self-evident: visibly whole and as certain as the light of the beginning. The consequences are dire. As Viktor Shklovsky put it, “[t]his is how life becomes nothing and disappears. Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife, and the fear of war.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, automatisms and familiarity diminish in us an awareness the importance of which is given in the following passage:

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<sup>24</sup> Pynchon, “Entropy,” in: *Slow Learner* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> Caillouis, *Man and the Sacred*, pp. 97-127.

<sup>26</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), pp. 57-59.

<sup>27</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art, as Device,” trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2015), p. 162.

This infinite improbability from which I come is beneath me like a void: my presence above this void is like the exercise of a fragile power, as if this void demanded the challenge that I myself bring it, I – that is to say the infinite, painful improbability of an irreplaceable being which I am.<sup>28</sup>

The miracle – we exist as ourselves, as the *challenge* that being poses to itself in the form of *ipseity* – is taken for granted in spite of (in contempt of<sup>29</sup>) this: the further we gaze into our past, the more our memory dissipates, and the fragmentary recollections of our childhood shrink and sink into nothingness, a nothingness indistinguishable from the formless void that precedes us. It is obvious, it is banal – but it is so only if one looks back onto one's enshrouded origin as if it was something familiar instead of experiencing with terror the tenebrous lineage that binds one with the unknowable.

But what about the origin of the world? How can we experience its unfamiliarity – how can we peel away a parasitic myth that would have us unappreciative of this mystery? Shklovsky's "enstrangement" offers itself as a possible answer to this question. In his classic text entitled "Art, as Device," the Russian scholar wrote that

this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the "enstrangement" of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, this approach has its limitations. Shklovsky himself acknowledged the fact that, with time, the enstranging potential of a work of art deteriorates.<sup>31</sup> Frequent encounters are detrimental to strangeness. Nevertheless (and this is also acknowledged by Shklovsky<sup>32</sup>), whether we experience something, an object, a phenomenon, or

<sup>28</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> Harper, "spite (n.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/spite> (24 July 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," p. 162.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 161-163.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158-159.

anything else, as art – as more or less saturated with the “coefficient of art”<sup>33</sup> – is up to us<sup>34</sup> (Arthur Rimbaud, for instance, wrote: “I liked stupid paintings, door panels, stage sets, back-drops for acrobats, signs, popular engravings, old-fashioned literature, church Latin, erotic books with bad spelling, novels of our grandmothers, fairy tales, little books from childhood, old operas, ridiculous refrains, naïve rhythms”<sup>35</sup>; Ivan Chtcheglov, in turn, wrote of a “poetry of the billboards”<sup>36</sup>). In short, what has already become a commonplace of little or no interest for one person can suddenly enthrall another.

How does the enstrangement of the world’s origination work in a piece of art, then? Let us turn, again, to Schulz (who was beyond any doubt a master in making things take a strange turn) in search for a suitable illustration. The operation of enstrangement is skilfully executed in this passage from “The Age of Genius,” wherein a shaft of light falling into a room is described thusly:

The window facing the sky swelled with those endless ascents, the curtains stood in flames, smoking in the fire, spilling golden shadows and shimmering spirals of air. Askew on the carpet lay a quadrilateral of brightness that could not detach itself from the floor. That bar of fire disturbed me deeply. I stood transfixed, legs astride, and barked short, hard curses at it in an alien voice.<sup>37</sup>

The improbability of being echoes through this passage, only this time it is the incredible, incredulous nature of photic phenomena that is brought to the fore through the narrator’s experience (light is made luminescent, to paraphrase Shklovsky’s “making a stone stony”). It is quite fitting that, a paragraph later, an account is given of his family’s lack of understanding for his bedazzlement, for there are always those for

<sup>33</sup> Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” in: *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), pp. 138-140.

<sup>34</sup> See also: Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013), p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Rimbaud, “A Season in Hell,” p. 285.

<sup>36</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” in: *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Bruno Schulz, “The Age of Genius,” in: *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. Celina Wieniewska (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 1977), e-book.



whom light is too familiar to be enlightening.

Later on in the text, an amiable trickster character, Shloma, is introduced. The narrator – Joseph – invites him to his home, where he wants to show Shloma the drawings he had made in a burst of inspiration ignited by the “bar of fire.” Upon seeing the pictures, the trickster expresses the following opinion:

“One might say,” he said, “that the world has passed through your hands in order to renew itself, in order to molt in them and shed its scales like a wonderful lizard. Ah, do you think I would be stealing and committing a thousand follies if the world weren’t so outworn and decayed, with everything in it without its gliding, without the distant reflection of divine hands? What can one do in such a world? How can one not succumb and allow one’s courage to fail when everything is shut tight, when all meaningful things are walled up, and when you constantly knock against bricks, as against the walls of a prison?”<sup>38</sup>

The thoroughly gnostic character of this lamentation comes as no surprise: as has been mentioned before, Schulz’s writings are rife with mystical references which are sometimes subtle, and sometimes overarching. What matters to us now is that the excerpt above sounds almost like a paraphrase of Shklovsky’s statements about estrangement and the refreshing powers of art. Additionally, the narrator’s drawings seem here to be plugged into the function ascribed to the festival by Caillois, and to myth by Eliade: they restore the world and bestow upon its inhabitants a possibility of returning to the world’s original, paradisaical state. Thus, a reinvigoration of even sacred energies appears to be achievable through estrangement (that is, after all, the ultimate meaning of religious expenditures, exemplified by the bewildering grandeur of Gothic cathedrals). Alas, the familiar clutches remain closed upon us: there is always the risk that a mythical object of desire is merely a different version of the known. Things have to become stranger, or rather – one must become a stranger to things.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> See also: chapter seven.

Two paragraphs later, the narrator offers to explain the secret of the drawings to Shloma – he is in possession of the tattered remains of “the Original,” the book of which every other book in the world is a mere imitation. However, when the narrator opens the drawer in which he keeps hidden the invaluable volume, he has to dig it out from beneath other items, a number of which belong to the young housemaid, Adela: a silk dress, ribbons, and high heels. Before the narrator manages to show Shloma “the Original,” the trickster becomes bewitched by the girl’s shoes and delivers the following monologue:

“God did not say anything of the kind,” he said, “and yet my conviction is total. I cannot find any arguments to the contrary. These lines are irresistible, amazingly accurate, and final, and like lightning illuminate the very center of things. How can you plead innocence, how can you resist when you yourself have been bribed, outvoted, and betrayed by your most loyal allies. The six days of Creation were divine and bright. But on the seventh day God broke down. On the seventh day he felt an unknown texture under his fingers, and frightened, he withdrew his hands from the world, although his creative fervor might have lasted for many more days and nights. Oh, Joseph, beware the seventh day...”<sup>40</sup>

Has he mistaken Adela’s footwear for “the Original”? Or rather has the importance of “the Original” been outweighed by the menacing significance of the shoe?<sup>41</sup> The shoe’s form – the “lines” that “like lightning illuminate the very center of things” – connect, in Shloma’s perception, with the “unknown texture” that God had found repellent in the world he had himself brought into existence. By reading this text(ure), we experience our own world as an abandoned creation, haunted by something alien (we

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<sup>40</sup> Schulz, “The Age of Genius.”

<sup>41</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapter, that a shoe apparently merits such a reaction is by no means accidental. Within Schulz’s world, the shoe is an erotic fetish, and thus the site of a double transgression: not only is it a false idol worshipped in place of God, but it is also a perversion of the object – when an item of clothing, which is a useful thing, becomes eroticised, its very position in the order of things is disturbed, and its regular function within that order is suspended (this notion will be developed in chapter eight). It would seem, in fact, that the “unknown texture” has appeared in the fabric of creation as an intersection of two movements: a vertical one, traced by eyes being averted from God and turned toward something base, and a horizontal one, marked by the turning of an object into a source of pleasure. Thus, what God seems to have been scared of in Schloma’s tale is the possibility of eroticism – of the creature’s unfaithful relation to its creator, whom the creature betrays by fetishising creation.

will return to this theme in chapter eleven). We feel this alien presence lurking in the enfolded depths of the world's genesis, we feel the unsettling proximity of an unknown stranger (the sound of someone's breath when we thought we were alone); the world itself becomes alien through the enstrangement of its origin.

The fright does not last long, though. The instincts of exegesis are promptly activated, and the unfamiliar turns familiar: the "unknown texture" is rigorously sewn into the fabric of the known, the alien presence becomes a symbol (of devilish forces, of eroticism, or of something altogether different, but ultimately recognisable), and the unknown stranger is manacled to the chains of signification with which we have enframed the world. Indeed, it is precisely due to the *modus operandi* of signification – facing faces only, and, in the end, effacing the faceless – that we could not have succeeded in breaking free from the familiar clutches. On the opening pages of *Inner Experience*, Bataille writes:

If poetry introduces the strange, it does so by means of the familiar. The poetic is the familiar dissolving into the strange, and ourselves with it. It never dispossesses us entirely, for the words, the images (once dissolved) are charged with emotions already experienced, attached to objects which link them to the known.<sup>42</sup>

Many pages later, he links this peculiar insufficiency of poetic experience to the fact that "[t]he most inner images of poetry – and those which cause the greatest loss [...] reserve, at the same time that they overflow, a feeling of ownership, the persistence of an 'I' relating everything to itself."<sup>43</sup> In other words, as the continuous transgression of the self by itself – taking place through reading – reaches its highest intensity in "images of poetry," the resurgence of *a* self on the other side of even "the greatest loss" is nevertheless ascertained.

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<sup>42</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 143.

Again, this predicament is semiotic in nature – signs do not sing on their own, it is always in relation to someone that they reverberate with meaning. Enstrangement as a literary device alone cannot suffice, therefore it must be applied to experience; experience must become “a voyage to the end of the possible of man,”<sup>44</sup> a dolorous exercise in “reaching the unknown by the derangement of *all the senses*”<sup>45</sup> – an exercise in futility, an ordeal that gives us nothing, is of no practical use, and thus defies the order of production.

This is a matter that is crucial to our work: we will be looking at it from a variety of angles in the subsequent chapters, trying to find clues concerning pathways that could be linked with Bataille’s search for lines of passage to experience. At the moment, however, let us restrict ourselves to saying that experiences which are erotic in a Bataillean sense (on the subject of which we will also elaborate further on) lead to “fusion, all barriers gone.”<sup>46</sup> (“Dream of total union: everyone says this dream is impossible, and yet it persists. I do not abandon it.”<sup>47</sup>) At their most intense, they propel us beyond fission and into “the fusion of object and subject, being as subject non-knowledge, as object the unknown,”<sup>48</sup> submerging one for an ecstatic instant in the void that both precedes and follows us. To reiterate: it is a question of pursuing a relationship with [...], a relationship that “resists description, definition, language, which is *maya*, classification of Names,”<sup>49</sup> that resists the system of god-given names, and the system of names that bestow utility. A relationship, then, that – as it “communicates ecstasy”

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<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Rimbaud, “A Letter to Georges Izambard, Charleville, 13 May 1871,” in: *Rimbaud: Complete Works*, p. 371.

<sup>46</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 129.

<sup>47</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 228.

<sup>48</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 35.

(removes “from the proper place”<sup>50</sup>) “without discourse”<sup>51</sup> – is best described as futile.

In conclusion: if we consider the position of a myth within the dynamic of the known and the unknown, we can determine the influence it has on its host(s). Myths of origin belong to a category of myths of explanation, so they are necessarily dependent on the human addiction to familiarity (which they arguably exacerbate), but this does not tell us what we need to determine. Explanation – which marks the moment something becomes either connected to or subsumed into “*maya*, classification of Names” – has its uses, but its overuse can only result in the “*moral* ravages” stemming from the foreclosure of what is inexplicable, turbulent or excessive. In other words, our position is that a myth should not be judged merely by the measure of its usurpation, but rather on the basis of either blocking or conveying the sacred, the former being a mark of unadulterated parasitism, of a sickness that goes counter to the human being’s need for “the existence of mysteries. Not their solution.”<sup>52</sup> If, on the other hand, myth *does* convey the sacred, it fulfils this very need inasmuch as it is the medium through which mysteries remain invigorated. Provided one has “a feeling for the myth” by which one has been seduced, living it out (or re-enacting it, as if during a festival) enlivens the senses, embeds them more profoundly within a world that thus has new life breathed into itself, or appears – through a fundamental enstrangement – as if it had just moulted. Whether through a fascinating “bar of fire” or an “unknown texture” of terror, the human and the world, which have hitherto seemed to be separate and solid, are – if only for an instant, a futile moment as lost in time as tears in rain – so many streams of “what is animated, passing from one to the other in love, in tragic scenes, in movements of

<sup>50</sup> Harper, “ecstasy (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ecstasy> (30 July 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 36.

<sup>52</sup> John Fowles, *The Magus* (Frogmore: Triad/Panther Books, 1977), p. 235.

fervor.”

“The opposition to the idea of project [...] is so necessary within me,” confesses Bataille in *Inner Experience*, “that having written the detailed plan for this introduction, I can no longer hold myself to it.” But what is to be regarded as an opposition to project is not “a negative mood (an ailing listlessness), but the spirit of decision.”<sup>53</sup> Insofar, then, as he can be said to have had a project – or to have made a decision – one might claim that, having recognised the wretched poverty of a purely rational existence, Bataille wanted to construct pathways to the unknown from the materials of contemporary myth, which is science; hence, his philosophical studies on affective contagions such as laughter; hence, also, his heterology. Let us devote our time in the next chapter to learning what kind of fabric are these strands – the unknown, laughter, heterogeneity – woven into.

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<sup>53</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 6.

## CHAPTER 4: A CACKLING CARCASS

*“As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it [...]. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“LAUGHTER, n. An interior convulsion, producing a distortion of the features and accompanied by inarticulate noises. It is infectious and, though intermittent, incurable.”<sup>2</sup>*

It was laughter that signalled for Bataille the most important experience present in the human repertoire. Indeed, “insofar as I am doing philosophical work,” he wrote, “my philosophy is a philosophy of laughter,” which means that it is “a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter,” a philosophy focused solely on what is “given” to the human being “in this precise experience.”<sup>3</sup>

As we shall see further on, Bataille found laughter to be both an expression of a meeting between a being and the unknown, and a contagious force through which social dynamics become manifest. Both aspects will interest us throughout this chapter. In an

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Hysteria,” in: *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 2002), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1911), p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Bataille, “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 138. For a prolonged reflection focused on just how central was the role of laughter in Bataille’s thought, see: Lydia Amir, “Georges Bataille: The Laughter of Ecstasy,” in: *The Legacy of Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Laughter: Bataille, Deleuze, and Rosset* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 45-189.

attempt to develop a clear picture of these aspects and their relation to one another, we will make use of Ambrose Bierce's short story, "The Death of Halpin Frayser," which we shall analyse with respect to the role played in it by laughter.

It seems appropriate to begin with an elucidation of Bataille's differentiation between mediated and immediate laughter. As he said in one of the lectures given to Collège de Sociologie, "[a] child,<sup>4</sup> who is a few weeks old, responding to an adult's laughter, represents unambiguously the classic example of immediate laughter."<sup>5</sup> In this sense, laughter is a mode of communication that antedates discursively charged language; it is an

[...] intervention of a new element at the moment in which the individuals come close, something analogous to the production of an electric current uniting, in a more or less stable manner, individuals who came into contact almost by chance. Laughter would be only one of the possible currents since unifying movements, transmissible from one person to another, are able to take different forms as soon as permeability frees a passage.<sup>6</sup>

Laughter is a form of contagious interattraction, a communication of joy which draws towards itself and provokes mimicry, thus ensuring its own facilitation and continuity (it is, however, a contagion of a different order than that of viral myths). In the words of Nidesh Lawtoo,

[...] laughter, for Bataille, is the source of a primary, pre-subjective permeability to the affect of the other/*socius*,<sup>7</sup> a contagious, mimetic affect which brings the subject into being as a permeable, relational, being. At the most general level, Bataille makes clear that communication with the *socius* does not communicate any linguistic message ("there is no

<sup>4</sup> For an examination of Bataille's view of childhood – which "situates the child as animal-becoming-human" – see: Sharon Hunter, "Agency and Sovereignty: Georges Bataille's Anti-Humanist Conception of Child," *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 54, No. 5 (2020), pp. 1186-1200.

<sup>5</sup> Bataille, "Attraction and Repulsion I: Tropisms, Sexuality, Laughter and Tears," in: *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> The *socius* is Pierre Janet's term for those others who have from the very beginning of one's life been incorporated into one's interiority – one's mother, family and so on; it refers to those whose presence has played an indisputable role in the formation of one's subjectivity.



pure and simple communication”), insofar as for Bataille the affective medium is the message (“what is communicated is joy”).<sup>8</sup>

Mediated laughter is somewhat different: it is tinged with a meaning that is foreign to it, or rather that is alien to its infectious propagation. Bataille puts it in the following way:

[...] it is always something dispiriting that causes advanced laughter. At least, it is necessary for there to be a great difference in tension between the one who laughs and the object of laughter. The only generally required condition is that the distress be weak enough or distant enough to not inhibit a reaction of joy. [...] Laughter about falling is already in some manner laughter about death, but since the distress involved is minimal, it does not prevent a communicative laughter.<sup>9</sup>

Mediated laughter is sparked by a semiotic event, an occurrence of danger the nullification of which is announced by laughter. The feeling of danger may be induced by a misheard sound which, for an instant, seems to signal the presence of a wild bear at the outskirts of an encampment. Such a misunderstanding-based fear often dissolves into a relaxing laughter that communicates safety – an undeniable source of joy for the community. Social rivalry may produce a compulsion to ridicule an opponent and thus invoke the principle of interattraction to one’s aid, making the audience connect in a movement that expels the underdog.

In a more general sense, mediated laughter bursts forth first and foremost because there is a terror proper to human consciousness, a terror that is the paradoxical source of rituals or communions that hold this terror off by evoking ecstatic communications of joy, thus binding communities through a common experience of sanctity. The common etymological denominator of all these words – communion, community, communication, and, of course, common – is the “reconstructed PIE compound *\*ko-*

<sup>8</sup> Nidesh Lawtoo, “Bataille and the Birth of the Subject,” *Angelaki*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2011), p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Bataille, “Attraction and Repulsion,” p. 110.

*moin-i-* ‘held in common,’ compound adjective formed from *\*ko-* ‘together’ + *\*moi-n-*, suffixed form of root *\*mei-* ‘to change, go, move,’ hence literally ‘shared by all.’”<sup>10</sup> It is possible to glimpse in the combination of these ancient morphemes a sense of “moving together,” a “being brought together by a change.” Such flickers of meaning are very much in line with Bataille’s understanding of the communal experiences of sanctity as ritual transformations of terror (connected with the left-hand sacred of monsters, corpses or bodily excretions) into rapture (bound to the right-hand sacred with the power of which kings, relics or consecrated spaces are imbued).<sup>11</sup>

This is as deep as we need to delve into Bataille’s differentiation between immediate and mediated laughter. We will discuss more of his insights into the nature of laughter later, but for now, it will suffice to say that, firstly, laughter manifests subconscious activities of the mind linked with the interplay of attraction and repulsion (with the mesh that underpins social transfigurations both infinitesimal and colossal),<sup>12</sup> and secondly, laughter is an affect-borne disease the contagious nature of which is corroborated by contemporary research<sup>13</sup> (in other words, the image that is to be conjured is the alternately multiplying and diminishing interruption of world-wide activities by a tongue-exposing, speech-suspending convulsion).

So as to make it possible to deepen our understanding of Bataille’s laughter and reflect on it through a literary example, Bierce’s story – “The Death of Halpin Frayser”

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Harper, “common (adj.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/common#etymonline\\_v\\_17239](https://www.etymonline.com/word/common#etymonline_v_17239) (14 September 2019).

<sup>11</sup> See: Bataille, “Attraction and Repulsion II: Social Structure,” in: *The College of Sociology*, pp. 113-124.

<sup>12</sup> Bataille, “Attraction and Repulsion I,” pp. 110-112.

<sup>13</sup> For examples, see: Robert Provine, “Contagious laughter: Laughter is a sufficient stimulus for laughs and smiles,” *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1992), pp. 1-4.

Robert Provine, “Laughter,” *American Scientist*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (1996), pp. 38-45.

Sophie Scott et al., “The Social Life of Laughter,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 18, No. 12 (2014), pp. 618-620.

– will now be summarised.

The story begins as its eponymous protagonist, Halpin Frayser, wakes up in the middle of a forest during the night, and utters an unfamiliar name: Catharine Larue. Unperturbed due to his rather uninquisitive personality, he returns to sleep only to tumble inwards into a nightmare – he finds himself in a dark, blood-drenched forest. His situation is described as follows:

Taking from his clothing a small red-leather pocket-book one half of which was leaved for memoranda, he discovered that he was without a pencil. He broke a twig from a bush, dipped it into a pool of blood and wrote rapidly. He had hardly touched the paper with the point of his twig when a low, wild peal of laughter broke out at a measureless distance away, and growing ever louder, seemed approaching ever nearer; a soulless, heartless, and unjoyous laugh, like that of the loon, solitary by the lakeside at midnight; a laugh which culminated in an unearthly shout close at hand, then died away by slow gradations, as if the accursed being that uttered it had withdrawn over the verge of the world whence it had come. But the man felt that this was not so – that it was near by and had not moved.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly afterwards, he finds “himself staring into the sharply drawn face and blank, dead eyes of his own mother, standing white and silent in the garments of the grave!” Next, a retrospective section portrays Halpin’s past, and the reader learns about a suspiciously close relationship that he had with his mother, a relationship the intimacy of which bordered on the erotic; it is important to note that during the events portrayed in the retrospection, his mother had a dream which suggested that Halpin shall be strangled. The reader is also informed that Halpin went missing during a business trip to California – a journey to which his mother was whole-heartedly opposed because of her dream, which she deemed premonitory in respect to the venture – and reappeared there after six years of a shanghaied sailor’s life. Then, the narrative returns to Halpin’s oneiric encounter with the creature, which appears to be the soulless body of his mother,

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<sup>14</sup> Bierce, “The Death of Halpin Frayser,” in: *Can Such Things Be?* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), *Project Gutenberg*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4366/4366-h/4366-h.htm#page13> (14 September 2019). Further quotations not followed by a footnote all come from this version of the story.

a zombie. Halpin's nightmare ends with the creature suffocating him. Following that, the story shifts its focus onto two men, a deputy sheriff and a detective, who are on their way to a secluded graveyard, where one of them had recently run into a wanted criminal, a murderer: possibly a madman responsible for slicing his wife's throat. Having arrived at the cemetery, they find the dead body of a young man, who, judging by the looks of it, was mercilessly strangled by a person of a monstrous fortitude. Eventually, it turns out that the body, which is of course the body of Halpin Frayser, is lying right next to the grave of Catherine Larue – which is not only the name uttered by Frayser as he eerily awoke at the beginning of the story, but also the name of the woman killed by the criminal currently hunted by the deputy and the detective. Further facts are brought to light: before she married her future murderer, Catherine Larue's last name was none other but Frayser, and it was a search for a lost relative that brought her to California, where she established the fatal liaison; Halpin's mother was looking for her son, but she only found doom. As the pieces of the puzzle fall into place and it becomes clear that Frayser's dream was not merely a dream, the story receives its thrilling epilogue:

There came to them out of the fog – seemingly from a great distance – the sound of a laugh, a low, deliberate, soulless laugh which had no more of joy than that of a hyena night-prowling in the desert; a laugh that rose by slow gradation, louder and louder, clearer, more distinct and terrible, until it seemed barely outside the narrow circle of their vision; a laugh so unnatural, so unhuman, so devilish, that it filled those hardy man-hunters with a sense of dread unspeakable! They did not move their weapons nor think of them; the menace of that horrible sound was not of the kind to be met with arms. As it had grown out of silence, so now it died away; from a culminating shout which had seemed almost in their ears, it drew itself away into the distance until its failing notes, joyless and mechanical to the last, sank to silence at a measureless remove.

Acquainted as we now are with the supernatural narrative, we will be able to focus on the elements relevant for this chapter: the zombie-mother and its hyena-like laugh. There are, of course, avenues for interpretations guided by, for instance, psychoanalysis,

but what shall be embraced instead is the weirdness, the strangeness, the otherness: rather than explain the horror away – which would reduce it to clear and distinguishable givens – we want to relish the state of not-knowing with which the story’s ending leaves us. In so doing, we subscribe to heterology, Bataille’s method of thinking about otherness, and, in a sense, of such a thinking *about* that relates to the more primeval meanings of the word “about,” namely: “on the outside of; around the circumference of, enveloping; in the vicinity of, near; hither and thither, from place to place.”<sup>15</sup> It is a thinking that moves around something instead of claiming to be on point, to have reached the actual object, to have annihilated the difference between the object and the object of thought. Such a mode of thought is invaluable when dealing with what Bataille considers heterogeneous in the “Definition of Heterology”: “There are [...] two opposed regions in human affairs, one homogeneous, profane and commonly practised, the other heterogeneous, completely other, deeply separated from the first and, additionally, itself deeply divided by the violent opposition between pure and impure, angelic and obscene [...]”<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, he wrote:

The notion of the (heterogeneous) foreign body permits one to note the elementary subjective identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine, or marvelous: a half-decomposed cadaver fleeing through the night in a luminous shroud can be seen as characteristic of this unity.<sup>17</sup>

Heterology, however, should not be perceived as the study of the heterogeneous itself – that would only serve its incorporation into the profane, homogeneous representation of a smooth, undifferentiated world, in which everything can be explained

<sup>15</sup> Harper, “about (adv., prep.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/about#etymonline\\_v\\_63](https://www.etymonline.com/word/about#etymonline_v_63) (14 September 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Bataille, “Definition of Heterology,” trans. Marina Galletti, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 35, No. 4–5 (2018), pp. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Bataille, “The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade,” in: *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 94.

within the bounds of a rational explanation (hence, participating in blurring the line between world and worldview). Instead, heterology thinks *about* the heterogeneous:

Only, on the one hand, the process of limitation and, on the other, the study of the violently alternating reactions of antagonism (expulsion) and love (reabsorption) obtained by positing the heterogeneous element, lie within the province of heterology as science. This element itself remains indefinable and can only be determined through negation.<sup>18</sup>

To approach something truly other without contaminating it with familiarity, one has to live through that experience without the crutches of language, without the comfort of names, without the support of discourse – one has to have an epiphany rather than an encounter: “An epiphany makes meeting the Other possible, and such a meeting is a crucial moment in the construction of an inter-subjective relation. The Other disturbs, interferes with our routine, beckons or even challenges (us). The Other is another dimension which signifies without context, singularly, ‘outside of essence’ [trans. – M.H.].”<sup>19</sup> It therefore follows that “[k]nowledge concerning the unknown cannot have the unknown as its object but man having the experience of the unknown, wanting and not being able to know it”<sup>20</sup> – a methodical, semiotic framework should be imposed only on one’s experience of whatever escapes the framework (this conduct is, of course, reminiscent of apophatic theology,<sup>21</sup> which relies in its method on speaking about God in terms of what he is not).

What, then, can be said of the zombie-mother from a heterological position? In an

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, pp. 97-98.

<sup>19</sup> Ewa Borkowska, “Na progu ‘tajemnicy’. Ślad Innego, czyli ‘epifanie’ poetyckie,” in: *Tropy tożsamości: Inny, Obcy, Trzeci*, ed. Wojciech Kalaga (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004), p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Bataille, “Aphorisms for the ‘System,’” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 158.

<sup>21</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). See also: S. Romi Mukherjee, “Apophysis in Representation: Georges Bataille and the Aesthetics and Ethics of the Negative,” in: *Durkheim, the Durkheimians, and the Arts*, ed. Alexander Riley et al. (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), pp. 223-257.

article devoted to heterology and Bataille's understanding of aesthetics, Kevin Kennedy masterfully condenses Bataille's heterological aesthetics into three fundamental premises that can guide one in creating heterological commentaries on art: firstly, no reference to anything other than the immediate aesthetic experience should be employed, nor should the experience be chained to participating in the fulfilment of a discursive objective (such as rationalising an economic system or contesting a political milieu); secondly, a heterological commentary "would insist on both the importance of acknowledging this experience and the concurrent impossibility of accounting for it within discourse [...]"; thirdly, it cannot claim to be right, it cannot declare anything to actually be heterogeneous<sup>22</sup> – it can only be a thinking *about*.

Let us try and think *about* the zombie-mother. The creature in the story is only ever seen by Halpin Frayser himself, and even that seems to happen in a dream, though the dream leaves irrefutably lasting consequences. Within the dream sequence, the woods in which Frayser has fallen asleep are warped: blood has replaced water in the forest's ecosystem, and

[...] the mysterious light burned with so silent and awful a menace; the noxious plants, the trees that by common consent are invested with a melancholy or baleful character, so openly in his sight conspired against his peace; from overhead and all about came so audible and startling whispers and the sighs of creatures so obviously not of earth [...].

These deformations of the waking world are all harbingers, and a harbinger – being the epitome of a sign – points to something other than itself, something occult, occluded: the light is "mysterious," its origin is unknown and it burns with a "menace"; the trees "conspired against" Frayser, hiding from him the nature of his impending doom; there are whispering beings who are "obviously not of earth," but remain

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Kennedy, "Heterology as Aesthetics: Bataille, Sovereign Art and the Affirmation of Impossibility," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 35, No. 4–5 (2018), pp. 115–134.

unidentified. Both Frayser and the reader find themselves in a dreamscape/fearscape in which the surface reality of the familiar has become porous, and the unfamiliar, the other, the heterogenous seeps through (in short, an “unknown texture” has appeared in the fabric of Frayser’s dream). The aesthetic effect is that of a looming, yet unidentified threat – since heterogeneity is a mark of the sacred, it spells danger.

These are the circumstances in which the zombie-mother appears, and it is a haunting apparition indeed: the pinnacle of the enstrangement deployed by Bierce: a mother turned monster: “[...] not a soul without a body, but that most dreadful of all existences infesting that haunted wood – a body without a soul!” This particular distinction between a ghost and a walking corpse is a telling one: a ghost can be horrifying, but it is the zombie that revolts and nauseates us, thus affecting us physically and, by making us feel disgusted through a bodily reaction, reminding us of all the things that are not really *ours* in our bodies – it suffices to think of the autonomy of countless processes that assure our continued existence, or of the vestigial traits that, by predating our current shape, point toward a peculiar antecedence of the body. This unnerving antecedence – and the feeling that whatever the human being imagines itself to be is downstream of this antecedence – is what Philippe Sollers brings to the fore in the following passage:

The body is what the idea of “man” does not manage to destroy [...]; it is that tapestry in which our shape shifts and alters, the weaving of desire and of the dream, of deep organic life pursuing its work of death; it is the “continuous” from which we fashion a visible, insistent discontinuity for ourselves and for others. The body is that in us that is always “more” than us, that kills its own representation in us and kills us silently.<sup>23</sup>

One might also consider in this context Maurice Blanchot’s observation that there

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<sup>23</sup> Philippe Sollers, “The Roof: Essay in Systematic Reading,” in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 85.



is a gap between the sleeper and the dreamer. In *Friendship*, he asks:

Who would dare to transfer to the dreamer [...] the privilege of the *Cogito* and allow him to utter with full confidence: “I dream, therefore I am”? At most one might propose for him to say, “Where I dream, there it is awake,” a vigilance that is the surprise of the dream and where there lies awake in effect, in a presence without duration, a presence without person [...].<sup>24</sup>

The “it” that awakens in one’s sleep is itself an “unknown texture” one finds within oneself, and it is as foreign to the thinking subject (the sleeper) as any other phantasm that constitutes the dreamscape. This, too, is an autonomy of the body: it produces monsters while reason – the thinking subject – sleeps.

Therefore, the dream of an undead body not only provokes revulsion, but also implies revolution, for it represents the possibility of an absolute, hostile takeover. It is a medium through which the body – as it exists outside “the idea of ‘man’” – comes back to haunt us; it is the body rejecting the status of a tool, a status imposed on it by the human being during the grand objectification of reality initiated by the very invention of the tool.<sup>25</sup> As Bataille argues, the persistent division of a human being into a controlling mind and a controlled body (contested by, for example, the aforementioned elements of bodily functioning that remain independent of our consciousness, or by theories of embodied cognition), or, in other words, into the superior spirit and the inferior vessel it inhabits, arose when the human being posited the supremacy of a mystical, ethereal world of spirits over matter, for this led to the inclusion of the human body into the strata of things, thus reducing it to a tool, a utensil. This incorporation, however, is not total, and Bataille summarises this caveat in the following way:

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<sup>24</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 146.

<sup>25</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Richard Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), pp. 27-40.

Insofar as he is spirit, it is man's misfortune to have the body of an animal and thus to be like a thing, but it is the glory of the human body to be the substratum of a spirit. And the spirit is so closely linked to the body as a thing that the body never ceases to be haunted, is never a thing except virtually, so much so that if death reduces it to the condition of a thing, the spirit is more present than ever: the body that has betrayed it reveals it more clearly than when it served it. In a sense the corpse is the most complete affirmation of the spirit.<sup>26</sup>

If the *presence* (“from *prae-* ‘before’ [...] + *esse* ‘to be,’”<sup>27</sup> the affirmative antecedent) of a person is felt most intimately in its abrupt absence (in the irreversible difference between the former and the latter: in the former's rupture; in a time lapse) – if the inanimate body of a person is an index of the body once-animated by laughter and lament through which we had connected with that person – then the undead body is, due to being both a repudiation of spirit and a rejection of the body-as-tool, the ultimate perversion of the human being. What is defiled in this case is what Gilles Deleuze would call “a life,” the notion of which is exemplified in the passage below by a dying criminal, whose crimes become temporarily expiated due to him being on the brink of death:

[...] a “Homo tantum” with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is a haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad. The life of such individuality fades away in favour of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life...<sup>28</sup>

In the zombification of the body, the lot of each and all – a death through which one has truly been alive – becomes subverted. It is as if the “it,” that which dreams as the subject sleeps, overtook the body in the waking world, conquering “the singular life” devoid of “the subject that incarnated it.” Under such a guise, Otherness reaches a fever

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Harper, “present (adj.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/present?ref=etymonline\\_crossreference](https://www.etymonline.com/word/present?ref=etymonline_crossreference) (24 September 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), pp. 28-29.

pitch: the “dimension which signifies without context, singularly,” is distorted into a violent force that leaves no space for “the construction of an inter-subjective relation.” Neither is it a subject itself, nor does it leave the subjects that have the misfortune of going through its epiphany intact. Thus, Halpin Frayser experiences his undead mother’s contorted face in the mode of a devastating epiphany that intrudes upon his own subjecthood, whereas the reader of the story is confronted with a porous face through which seeps the heterogeneity of the body, its materiality, its corpo-reality, its *lowness*.

It is necessary to recall again the example given by Bataille to illustrate the “subjective identity” of excrement “and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine, or marvelous,” namely: “a half-decomposed cadaver fleeing through the night in a luminous shroud [...]” There is, of course, a glaring analogy between this ghoulish creature and the zombie-mother, but before this glare can receive the attention it warrants, the *lowness* of the heterogeneous body has to be elaborated upon. In “The Language of Flowers,” Bataille deconstructs the positive valorisation of heights and heavens conventionally contrasted with the pejorative connotations that encumber lowness and those depths of soil in which “the ignoble and sticky roots wallow in the ground, loving rottenness just as leaves love light.”<sup>29</sup> Starting from the example of plants, he analyses the semiotic displacements employed in human cultures to censor those elements of being that belong to the unity of excrement and sanctity – to the filth of the world. Bataille writes that, in the case of flowers, bourgeois decency moves the human gaze towards the frail and innocent petals, away not just from the worm-like roots, but also from the actual crux of the flower: the sexually active pistil and

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<sup>29</sup> Bataille, “The Language of Flowers,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 13.

stamens.<sup>30</sup> This represents for him the failure of all projects of idealisation: the immaculate petal is short-lived, and easily gives way to withered strips of matter decomposing itself. Another illustration might be employed: the radical difference in attitudes towards snails and slugs. Snails,<sup>31</sup> being in part constituted by neatly patterned shells that appeal to conventional aesthetics predicated on forms of regularity, are sometimes included in fairy-talesque narratives, or nursery rhymes in which their otherness is crippled by a displacement of attention. In fact, the shell of a snail seems to counterbalance the fragility of an inflorescence: the snail appears to be carrying a home, a symbol of stability, a foundation that promises a safe retreat: the human gaze (dis)places its attention on the shell, which offers itself as a perceptual barrier that keeps the mollusc's slimy, muscular, perforated foot hidden from the sight of those who, instead of embracing the plethora of forms of life, would rather draw the line at dogs and cats, letting, perhaps, an occasional bird-of-paradise fly. Slugs, on the other hand, have no such defence, and thus suffer unequivocal hate, for it is in their form that the wiggling, dirt-eating, mud-crawling face of the world shows itself in all its viscous glory. Belonging to the low, slugs are heterogeneously stunning.

Halpin Frayser's zombie-mother belongs to that realm of filth, too: having (most probably) been excreted by the earth (soiled by it), she walks in the horrible halo of the impure, left-hand sacred of terror. She is the low of the body let loose, a vision of what is implied when Foucault writes that "the soul is the prison of the body."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Although a recent study has pointed towards the corolla having the function of an acoustic amplifier that helps the plant regulate nectar production in accordance with the activity of pollinators. See: Marine Veits et al., "Flowers respond to pollinator sound within minutes by increasing nectar sugar concentration," *Ecology Letters*, Vol. 22, No. 9 (2019), pp. 1483-1492.

<sup>31</sup> Such as the elegant burgundy snail, which has been domesticated to the point of being regarded as a culinary delicacy.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 30.

Yet – and everything said before was said precisely to make this as striking as possible – the monstrosity laughs.<sup>33</sup> As we have discussed earlier, human laughter is usually connected with the principle of interattraction, with contagiousness: “bursts of laughter are propagated, step by step, each one provoking and intensifying the next.”<sup>34</sup> It is here already that the heterogeneity of the zombie-mother is explicit – it laughs a joyless laugh, and it laughs that laugh alone – it is impossible for it to make the living characters of the story laugh along with it. Instead of creating a channel of affective communication, the monster’s laughter alienates.

Bataille posited that within human experience there are certain sovereign possibilities of going to the limit (of having a limit-experience<sup>35</sup>). In “Method of Meditation,” he enumerates what he calls “apparently sovereign behaviours”: intoxication, erotic effusion, laughter, sacrificial effusion, and poetic effusion.<sup>36</sup> Being what they are (experiences of the limits of experience) they all pertain (“from Latin *pertinere* ‘to reach, stretch; relate [...], from *per* ‘through’ [...] + *tenere* ‘to hold,’ from PIE root *\*ten-* ‘to stretch’”<sup>37</sup>) to the unknown (a simple image: balancing on a rope tethered on both sides to something obscured by impenetrable darkness): “The sudden invasion of the unknown can, depending on the case, have laughter, tears, and not only laughter or tears, but other reactions for its effect”<sup>38</sup>; indeed, “[t]he sudden invasion of

<sup>33</sup> For a similarly themed, albeit differently focused analysis, see: Rafał Boryśławski, “Monsters that Laugh Back: Humour as a Rhetorical Apophasis in Medieval Monstrology,” in: *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History and Methodology*, ed. Daniel Derrin and Hannah Burrows (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 239-256.

<sup>34</sup> Bataille, “The Language of Flowers,” p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*.

See also: Martin Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” *Constellations*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1995), pp. 155-174.

<sup>36</sup> Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Harper, “pertain (v.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/pertain#etymonline\\_v\\_12762](https://www.etymonline.com/word/pertain#etymonline_v_12762) (24 September 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Bataille, “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 136.

the unknown can have as an effect the poetic feeling or the feeling of the sacred. It can also have anguish or ecstasy as an effect, and not only anguish, but of course even terror.”<sup>39</sup> In *Guilty*, Bataille praises laughter as both a way into ecstasy and a symptom of already experiencing it:

I wake up after midnight in a state of non-knowing, bathed in anxious sweat. I get up. Outside is raging wind, starry sky. I go to the far end of the terrace. I gulp down a glass of red wine in the kitchen. I become aware of a difficulty no specific action can respond to: if I’m subject to the consequences of a mistake. I’m assuming my mistake is stupid or my fault, though irreparable, and this is what remorse is.... There’s a light shining through that resolves remorse. But the light that shines through wouldn’t resolve anything if it didn’t bring existence to intensity, to the point of laughter (as iron brought to incandescence). In laughter, ecstasy is freed, is immanent.<sup>40</sup>

That ecstasy is immanent in laughter entails that laughing is mutually exclusive with thinking – upon being caught in a chain reaction of laughter, one is no longer a thinking subject. Indeed, the laughing one is not even “one,” but rather exists as the communication of laughter among beings. To fall prey to the contagion of laughter is to affectively participate in an interpenetration that suspends the functioning of the discursive structures of intersubjectivity. “That is why,” Bataille argues, “laughter or excitement or even yawning are not things: we cannot usually feel part of stone or board but we do feel part of the nakedness of the woman in our arms,”<sup>41</sup> or of any other convulsion that takes hold of us in response to an interattraction. By making existence shine with an intensity words could hardly contain, laughter tears us away from discourse: “Outbursts of laughter and kisses won’t produce notions, and they attain ‘what is’ more truly than ideas with which objects are manipulated.”<sup>42</sup> Laughter partakes

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<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 137.

<sup>40</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), p. 103.

<sup>41</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 153.

<sup>42</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 16.

of truth, because truth is something we can “feel part of” – it exists only between people, between beings, never in isolation. Bataille insists on this point vehemently:

Here’s something to express forcefully, to keep clearly in mind – that there’s no truth when people look at each other as if they’re separate individuals. Truth starts with conversations, shared laughter, friendship and sex, and it only happens going from one person to another. I hate the thought of a person being connected to isolation. The recluse who has the impression he reflects the world is ridiculous to my mind. He can’t reflect it because, being himself a center of the reflection, he stops being able to relate to what doesn’t have a center. As I picture it, the world doesn’t resemble a separate or circumscribed being but what goes from one person to another when we laugh or make love. When I think this is the way things are, immensity opens and I’m lost.<sup>43</sup>

What should we make of this in the context of Frayser’s zombie-mother? She – and the laughter through which the addled investigators come into contact with the creature – is most certainly a “sudden invasion of the unknown,” and thus she indubitably evokes feelings of terror.

Given that she laughs a joyless, alienating laugh (the very opposite of a full, human laugh), we could say that by reversing the qualities of an interattractive laughter – which is ecstatic – one receives a channel that communicates the interrepulsive “dread unspeakable,” which is the left-hand sacred. In other words, laughter retains its connection to the unknown even in a perverted form. Indeed, one might argue that the reversal brings this connection to the fore. As it was said before, the core of the human collective experience lies in the profound terror of existence, which is dealt with through practices varying in accordance with differences in systems. Such practices are often engineered as a transmutation of terror, and so they provoke laughter and communicate ecstasy, or – in a degenerate form – they keep one distracted (one needs only to consider the entertainment industry). The reversal of laughter’s attributes directs the phenomenon towards the dread from which it stems: the truth conveyed by such a laughter manifests

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<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, pp. 44-45.

as fear, atomises a terrified subject while simultaneously preventing that subject from assuming a central position, thus destabilising it and forcing onto it a limit experience.

Generally speaking, laughter rises in us as the ecstasy of transmuted terror: once, as the reckless abandon of festival culmination, and today, as the supreme attitude of a being that excludes, if only for a sovereign instant, the thoughtfulness on which self-preservation is contingent. Even so, or perhaps precisely because of that, humans are afraid of laughs the stimuli of which are beyond them, even in non-supernatural contexts: one walks, for example, into a meeting of people one does not trust, and, having found them overtaken with laughter, cannot help but ask oneself: “Am I being laughed at?” The zombie-mother’s alienating laughter is an index of this very question being asked on the cosmic scale: are we, as human beings, actually laughable in ways and for reasons we do not understand?<sup>44</sup> Bierce’s story provides no answer – it simply implies that the question stands. Still, the conclusion to be drawn is not that the zombie-mother herself – as Frayser saw her in his dream – is an intrusion of the heterogeneous into the body of the text. As far as ambitions regarding heterogeneity are concerned, the text can only ever point outside itself, or allow “a wind from outside” to blow between its signs, thus suggesting an opening, a vulnerability, an “unknown texture” that for a split second brushes against one’s thought. Thus, it has to be said that the nightmare apparition and, more importantly, the laughter that seeps over into the waking world are *echoes* of the heterogeneous resonating in the space of the text. In other words, a heterological reading of “The Death of Halpin Frayser” unearths the literary mechanisms by which the story mediates between its readers and a vicarious limit experience, which is construed as an aesthetic experience immersed in a supernatural narrative.

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<sup>44</sup> These issues will resurface in chapters ten and eleven.



We have spoken at length of the various subversions one can inflict upon the established order (of production, of meaning, of the production of meaning...). In a sense, the different methods we have discussed – cut-ups, myth-making, enstrangement of experience, the positing of laughter as a rift in the homogeneous surface of rational operations – can all be understood in terms of assuming a heterological position, of manipulating or arranging the known so that it gives way, allowing one to reach past knowledge, towards an experience of the unknown. As it happens, there is a video game that features a rather uniquely motivated character, whose aim – as we shall discover – parallels (to some extent) that of Bataille. The chapter that follows will be an analysis of this character, conducted in the simple hope of simultaneously enriching our meditation on Bataille and producing an interpretation of the said character.

## CHAPTER 5: THE DEATH OF LANGUAGE<sup>1</sup>

“Can what is playing you make it to level 2?”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will be devoted to a video game entitled *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II – The Sith Lords*<sup>3</sup> (*KOTOR II*). More specifically, it will be focused on a particular character, Kreia, whose importance in the game experience is rivalled only by the necessary relevance of the player-controlled main character. From the beginning of the game, Kreia assumes the role of a mentor: she becomes the player character’s teacher, guiding them through the complexities of the galaxy, attempting to instil in them an independence of conviction from the strict scriptures (strictures of thought, as it were) of religious orders, and helping them gain both an understanding of and a connection to the universe. The purpose here is twofold: to present an exposition of some of Kreia’s in-game teachings, and to juxtapose her thought with Bataille’s. In short, the chapter is intended as a space in which the consonances possible between, on the one hand, the philosophy bestowed upon Kreia by the game’s makers, and on the other, the writings of Bataille, can be rendered audible.

First things first: a “video game” is a complex, hybrid entity, a “ludo-narrative” work.<sup>4</sup> Of course, given that *KOTOR II* positions its narrative within a universe already

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter has been published by myself in *Text Matters*, Vol. 10 (2020), pp. 257-273, under the title: “The Death of Language: Listening to the Echoes (of Georges Bataille) in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II—The Sith Lords*.”

<sup>2</sup> Nick Land, “Meltdown,” in: *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), p. 456.

<sup>3</sup> *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II – The Sith Lords*, Windows PC version modified with the The Sith Lords Restored Content mod, Obsidian Entertainment, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Espen Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games,” in: *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2012) p. 133.

predefined by a set of rules laid down in earlier works, some measure of adaptation had to take place; the shift from portraying a mystical energy in a movie to basing a mechanics of gameplay upon it would perhaps merit a separate study. Nonetheless, as far as the technicalities of *KOTOR II* are concerned, let us simply say that it is what Espen Aarseth calls<sup>5</sup> a “‘creamy middle’ quest game” (the “creamy middle” referring to being able to make choices pertaining to both “kernels” and “satellites” of narrative structure),<sup>6</sup> one in which the quests are nested, concurrent, place- and objective-oriented, and the spatial structure of which can be characterised as a “semi-open,” “star-shaped hub”<sup>7</sup>; later on we will return to the significance of this shape and its influence on interpreting the game experience.

A ludo-narrative work is a contraption that allows the player to interact with the story it tells. Even if the player’s part is to merely survive and therefore allow the story to continue being told, the player experiences that story in a specifically active way. But a ludo-narrative piece may also convey a philosophical conundrum, thus permitting the player to experience such a puzzle through the immersion characteristic of ludo-narrative works<sup>8</sup>: we are here in line with the “sensemaking” “perspective of participation”, one which “enables us to analyze a videogame as a context that enhances a certain kind of experiences related to activities involving the interpretation of a role,

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<sup>5</sup> Though Aarseth writes about the first part of *Knights of the Old Republic*, the elements he analyses have not undergone any changes that would undermine the adequacy of his analysis in reference to *KOTOR II*.

<sup>6</sup> Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games,” p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> Aarseth, “From Hunt the Wumpus to EverQuest: Introduction to Quest Theory,” in: *Entertainment Computing–ICEC 2005*, ed. Fumio Kishino et al. (Berlin: Springer Publishing, 2005), pp. 496-506.

<sup>8</sup> See also: Laura Kampis, “Garden of Eden for Artificial Intelligence: How ‘The Talos Principle’ Demonstrates the Difficulty of Defining Consciousness for AI on the Implied Player,” from the 11th AISB Symposium on AI & Games, 2016, *Academia*, [https://www.academia.edu/26254886/Garden\\_of\\_Eden\\_for\\_Artificial\\_Intelligence\\_How\\_The\\_Talos\\_Principle\\_Demonstrates\\_the\\_Difficulty\\_of\\_Defining\\_Consciousness\\_for\\_AI\\_on\\_the\\_Implied\\_Player](https://www.academia.edu/26254886/Garden_of_Eden_for_Artificial_Intelligence_How_The_Talos_Principle_Demonstrates_the_Difficulty_of_Defining_Consciousness_for_AI_on_the_Implied_Player) (30 April 2020).

fantasy, self-expression, etc.”<sup>9</sup> Our reading of *KOTOR II* is the result of undergoing/-taking such an exercise in understanding. It seems only reasonable to carry on with our explanations by the use of quotations from Kreia’s in-game dialogue, which we will later compare with Bataille’s texts. All of these excerpts will be transcribed here verbatim from the in-game conversations.

In the world of *Star Wars*, the universe and everything that exists is intrinsically permeated with what is known as the Force, and what Kreia describes in the following way:

It is like a cloud, a mist that drifts from living creature to creature, set in motion by currents and eddies. It is the eye of the storm, the passions of all living things turned into energy, into a chorus. It is the rising swell at the end of life, the promise of new territories and new blood, the call of new mysteries in the dark.

The Force is a life-force, a circulation of energy immanent to matter, a rhizome of pangalactic proportions the pulsations of which can be heard by those attuned to it – “Force sensitives.” It is not merely a stylistic choice to say that those sensitives can *hear* the Force: the sense that is referenced most commonly throughout the game to express experiences of the Force is precisely the sense of hearing. One’s lack of connection with the Force is presented through the metaphorical prism of deafness, of aural (both in the sense of aura and of pertaining to the ear) insulation: it is “like being unable to listen, being put into a deep sleep, unable to awaken to the galaxy around you.”

The player begins the game as a person bereft of the Force, cut off from it – the player character is an ex-Jedi exiled from the Jedi Order<sup>10</sup> for going to war and

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<sup>9</sup> Luis Lucas Pereira and Licínio Roque, “Understanding the Videogame Medium through Perspectives of Participation,” in: *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies* (Atlanta, DiGRA: 2013), pp. 9-10. *Digital Games Research Association*, [http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper\\_326.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_326.pdf) (29 April 2020).

<sup>10</sup> An organisation of Force users whose alignment lay on the Light Side of the Force, and whose conduct was regulated by the Jedi Code: “There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is

defending the Republic against a foreign threat in spite of the fact that the Order – and its ruling body, the Jedi Council – vehemently opposed joining the armed conflict. Upon finding the player’s character (who shall from now on be referred to as the Exile), who has spent years travelling across the peripheral regions of the Republic, Kreia, a Force user herself, takes the Exile under her tutoring wing. This results in the formation of a bond between Kreia and the Exile, a master-apprentice type of bond which allows the Exile to reach the Force again. In the words of Kreia herself: “You can hear the Force through me.”

As a character, Kreia is a variant of the blind seer archetype. The likes of Tiresias often lose their physical sight involuntarily, or they lose their organic vision (as opposed to an inner vision, or a Shakespearean mind’s eye) to an illumination that unveils too bright a fire, like staring at a god, at the Sun, or into the maddening peristalsis of reality. Incidentally, Bataille wrote of the pineal eye – the vestigial remnant of which sits in our skulls in the form of the pineal gland – imagining it as a feature of the human being the purpose of which would be to exult in the fiery gaze of the Sun: “The eye [...] opening on the incandescent sun in order to contemplate it in a sinister solitude, is not a product of the understanding, but is instead an immediate existence; it opens and blinds itself like a conflagration [...].”<sup>11</sup> In Kreia’s case, “her unused eyesight lies fallow as she relies on marathon meditations to penetrate the universe’s mysteries.”<sup>12</sup> Her regular eyes have deteriorated from disuse – they were wilfully abandoned: “I see all that I need, though the seeing of things flesh and blood has failed me some time ago. They were

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knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force.”

<sup>11</sup> Georges Bataille, “Pineal Eye,” in: *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> Rodney Thompson et al., *Knights of the Old Republic Campaign Guide* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2008), p. 158.

distractions only”; a few lines of dialogue later Kreia gives the Exile the following instruction:

If need be, I could heal them [her eyes], restore my sight, but sight can prove a distraction. When one relies on sight to perceive the world, it is like trying to stare at the galaxy through a crack in the door [...] You must learn to see crude matter for what it is before the veil is lifted.

Hence the emphasis put on the sense of hearing within the poetics of the game’s dialogues. In a different conversation, for example, it is the player who has the option to describe the experience of the Force as “hearing the heartbeat of the galaxy for the first time.” It is intriguing that two among the other options the Player may choose also refer to sensory experiences, but neither of them suggests that the Force may be *seen*. The two options are: “It is like a current that passes through you, and carries you with it to all the places it touches,” and “The warmth of the sun without the glare – you can feel its light and its heat, but there is no harshness to it” (like looking at the sun for the nth time, eyes blinded long ago?). Clearly, the game’s poetics puts forward a critique of ocularcentric modes of thought.

Kreia cast her sight away willingly, finding it lacking when set against the in-sight provided by “marathon meditations.” She is not like the god-cursed Tiresias, but rather like Odin, whose quest for understanding (for, etymologically speaking, standing in the midst of things, for discovering “the eye of the storm,” the vantage point from which the thundering revolutions of the universe can be perceived as a shape, as a meaningful pattern) and hunger for “the revealing value of ecstasy” led him to sacrifice one of his eyes in return for knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The topic of auto-mutilation will be discussed in greater detail in chapter eight.

The lasting influence of the blind seer archetype – and of archetypes in general – can be noticed if one considers, by way of an intertextual interjection, other examples: in the fifth instalment of *The Elder Scrolls* video game series, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*,<sup>14</sup> the player character ventures upon one of the eponymous Elder Scrolls, primordial, cosmogenic entities that manifest themselves to mortal beings in the shape of manuscripts. (As a side note, these Scrolls can be identified as yet another variant of an ancient idea, one we have also seen in the guise of Schulz’s “Original” – the vision of the world as the unfolding of a narrative.) If the player character attempts to read the Scroll that they find, they will for a split second glimpse a mosaic of alien, incomprehensible signs and symbols, only to become temporarily blinded. Within the lore of the series, trying to read an Elder Scroll without adequate training results in loss of sight. In fact, even reading them while being familiarised with appropriate techniques takes away one’s sight should the readings become a regular practice. This is evident in the fourth instalment of the series, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*,<sup>15</sup> in which the player has the possibility of visiting a secluded monastery of monks who have dedicated their lives to studying the mysteries of the Elder Scrolls – most of the anchorites that reside there have already gone blind.

This particular incarnation of the blind seer trope – mystics losing their sight in the process of lifting the mystical veil – allows us to better comprehend the relentless resolve that is required to *renounce seeing by seeing*: “I laugh when I think that my eyes persist in demanding objects that do not destroy them.”<sup>16</sup> Kreia’s eyes being already destroyed, she listens, and thus hears and feels the fluctuations that agitate existence, her

<sup>14</sup> *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Windows PC version, Bethesda Game Studios, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, Windows PC version, Bethesda Game Studios, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Bataille, “Practice of Joy Before Death,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 239.

interiority itself exposed to the incessant fulguration of stimuli. Through meditative endeavours, Bataille attained altered states to which those of Kreia bear a resemblance. By projecting oneself within one's interiority in the form of a dramatised "point" (dramatised in the sense of inciting a tragic awareness of one's inescapable annihilation, of the inexorable passage of time), one goes beyond, as it were, the projected oneself:

It is only in such a concentration — beyond itself — that existence has the leisure of perceiving, in the form of an inner flash of light, "that which it is": the movement of painful communication which it is, which goes no less from within to without, than from without to within. And no doubt it is a question of an arbitrary projection of oneself, but what appears in this way is the profound objectivity of existence, from the moment that the latter is no longer a little entity turned in on itself, but a wave of life losing itself.<sup>17</sup>

"A wave of life losing itself" — "Joy of the dying man, wave among waves"<sup>18</sup> — is there not a certain agreement between these images and the "rising swell at the end of life, the promise of new territories and new blood, the call of new mysteries in the dark"? And is there not a connection between "the movement of painful communication" and the "current that passes through you, and carries you with it to all the places it touches"? Perhaps the Force could be likened to what the dramatised "point" unleashes, since the former is fundamentally a conceptualisation of the entanglement of all beings (shaped in accordance with the *Star Wars* universe, or shaped as it could possibly be shaped in the circumstances narrated in and through that universe), of not only the link between that which is surrounded and that which surrounds, but also of the ultimate end of their separation; of the nameless continuity of death that envelops a discontinuous lifetime ("Infinite foretime and / Infinite aftertime:

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<sup>17</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (New York: University of New York Press, 1988), p. 118. It has to be stated that although the poetics of *KOTOR II* can be interpreted as a subversion of the cultural domination of the sense of sight, Bataille straightforwardly says of his method of the dramatised "point" "that it has given the optical form to experience," stating that "[a]s soon as it admits the existence of the point, *the mind is an eye*" (Ibidem, p. 118).

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem p. 51.



above your head / They close like giant wings, and you are dead”<sup>19</sup>).

However, bearing in mind the constant tension between the domain of knowledge (of things, of operations, of distinctions) and the void of non-knowledge (of anguish and ecstasy combined, and of the feeling that there “is, in us and in the world, something that reveals that knowledge was not given to us, and that situates itself uniquely as being unable to be attained by knowledge”<sup>20</sup>), the Force can also be understood as an intrusion: a misleadingly depersonalised, usurping force – the higher order of things – appearing instead of what Bataille signals below by the use of three periods (ellipsis *points pointing* at an absence,<sup>21</sup> at the unnameable beyond of individual life): “He and I, having emerged without name from . . . without name, are for this . . . without name, just as two grains of sand are for the desert, or rather two waves losing themselves in two adjacent waves are for a sea.”<sup>22</sup>

The Force is an intrusion in other ways as well – within the rules of the *Star Wars* universe, a skilled Force user can gain access to the thoughts of another. Kreia teaches the Exile how to make one’s listening so deep and so penetrating that the mental articulations and inner movements of others cannot but open before the attention of its tendrils. She is, however, quick to point out to the Exile that one should be careful not to fall prey to an illusion of power: “is such listening enough to perceive the world around you? It is not. Because to listen to the thoughts of another is much like attempting to see the universe only with your eyes. It is equally limiting.” Therefore, if one is to listen,

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<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin Classics, 2016), pp. 30-31.

<sup>20</sup> Bataille, “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> On Bataille’s use of ellipsis, see also: Allen S. Weiss, “Impossible Sovereignty: Between ‘The Will to Power’ and ‘The Will to Chance,’” *October*, Vol. 36 (1986), pp. 142-143.

<sup>22</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 50.

then one has to listen in a way reminiscent of the listening described by Nabokov:

I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard. Is Lo in her room? Gently I tug on the silk. She is not. Just heard the toilet paper cylinder make its staccato sound as it is turned; and no footfalls has my outflung filament traced from the bathroom back to her room. Is she still brushing her teeth [...]? No. The bathroom door has just slammed, so one has to feel elsewhere about the house for the beautiful warm-colored prey. Let us have a strand of silk descend the stairs. I satisfy myself by this means that she is not in the kitchen – not banging the refrigerator door or screeching at her detested mamma [...]. Raylike, I glide in thought to the parlor and find the radio silent [...]. So my nymphet is not in the house at all!<sup>23</sup>

Though the listening depicted above served the purpose of locating a particular person, what interests us is the mechanism, the metaphor of the spider listening *with* its web, feeling the tiniest, the most minute throbs and trembles of the environment *through* the silken extensions of the mind.<sup>24</sup> One has to palpate, as it were, one's surroundings with one's ears – with the attentive tendrils of a tactile, and thus synaesthetic listening.

The game provides us with an appropriate example. The Exile and Kreia (and their other companions) travel to a moon called Nar Shaddaa, a completely urbanised world of typically dystopian characteristics: sky-high architecture (as one of the Exile's companions declares, it would take hours to fall from one of the walkways to the actual ground), metallic materials, black markets, mobs, assassins, and of course walled-off ghettos in which war refugees (most of them human) are kept, harassed, and exploited by the alien races who are a dominant force on Nar Shaddaa. After a short time spent on the moon, Kreia remarks that the Exile's thoughts are perturbed, to which the Exile responds: "I feel this background noise, like a vibration." This triggers a conversation which we must reproduce here (with a small omission):

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Greenwich: Crest, 1959), pp. 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> On the subject of spider cognition in the context of web-building, see: Hilton F. Japyassú and Kevin N. Laland, "Extended Spider Cognition," *Animal Cognition*, Vol. 20 (2017), pp. 375-395.

Kreia: It is Nar Shaddaa, the true Nar Shaddaa, that you feel around you. It is this moon, with the metal and machines stripped away and the currents of the Force laid bare.

The Exile: The sound... the vibration is strange, tense.

Kreia: [...] What you feel is the echo of the minds of these creatures within the Force. Their anger... their greed... their desperation. It is life.

The Exile: Is it possible for me to manipulate it? To control these people?

Kreia: One might as well move the universe... but such manipulation is possible, yes. It requires that one be able to feel the critical point within the fractured mass... and know how to strike it in such a way that the echoes travel to your intended destination.

The Exile: This feeling... how long can I feel these echoes around me?

Kreia: For as long as it lasts. Like life, such waking moments within the Force are rare, waiting for the right moment when the critical point is struck, and the sound rises... But let us be silent... words and thoughts are distractions. Feel this moment, for as long as it will last. Feel life, as it is, with the crude matter stripped away.

The conversation may take a different shape if the player chooses other dialogue options, but the ones used here are the ones Kreia approves of. Nevertheless, this is a moment in which the Exile truly listens, sits like the spider upon an undulating web of echoes, of waves, of inner movements. What we have here is a perfect exemplification of the all-encompassing listening: one in which it is no longer the audible manifestation, sound, that matters, but rather the basest level of vibration – thought, inner states themselves are here implicitly understood – in a Blakean fashion – as, to use Kreia's words, "oscillations of energy"<sup>25</sup>; one is again tempted to think of one of the four fundamental forces, gravity: the mutual pull exerted by everything on everything, the infinitely complex network of connections both inter- and intra-, the bond between every single body in the universe: no matter how weak the gravitational pull between any two objects is, *it is there*. To truly hear the Force would perhaps be similar to *feeling* the gravity of all the galaxies and all the atoms.

There is more to be unravelled out of that conversation. An apparent incongruity, for instance, between Kreia and Bataille must be addressed. It might seem, at first

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<sup>25</sup> On vibrational ontology, see: Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge: MIT, 2010), pp. 81-98.

glance, that Kreia ought to be characterised – given her own descriptions of matter as “crude” or “of things flesh and blood” as “distractions” – as an idealist, and should, therefore, be unequivocally contrasted with Bataille, who associated himself firmly with materialism. He even wrote of what he called *base* materialism, a materialism which would avoid the trap of treating matter as an idea, claiming that “[b]ase matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations.”<sup>26</sup> However, the Force – as it is experienced by Kreia – is not an idea abstracted out of reality and elevated onto a pedestal rising above matter. It is, by all means, an integral part of matter, just like the intangible interactions of physics; it is immanent (literally, dwelling in<sup>27</sup> matter), not transcendent (something is foreshadowed here, an important theme of reversal: it is not that there is an ideal hidden behind matter, but rather that there is base matter underneath the surface of ideas; in other words, the fact that the world is an interplay of material arrangements does not mean that no illusions or “distractions” are at play – on the contrary, there is no rest from sweeping away the cobwebs of “*maya*, classification of Names”). The line Kreia draws between “crude matter” and “life, as it is” – from which one is distracted by both “things flesh and blood” *and* “words and thoughts” – is in truth reminiscent of how Bataille writes of his method of the dramatised “point” in “The Practice of Joy Before Death”: “it is necessary to strip away all external representations from what is there, until it is nothing but a pure violence, an interiority, a pure inner fall into a limitless abyss.”<sup>28</sup> Experienced lucidly, “life, as it is,” is “pure violence,” or an experience of the flow of energy at its most unstoppable, an

<sup>26</sup> Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas Harper, “immanent (adj.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/immanent#etymonline\\_v\\_1530](https://www.etymonline.com/word/immanent#etymonline_v_1530) (12 July 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Bataille, “The Practice of Joy Before Death,” p. 238.

experience which makes it clear that the arrangements of matter that comprise organic and inorganic forms are energy, but rotten. The interiority wherein one goes through such an experience is where one comes up against – within oneself – upon the continuity of life (as a grandiose, seamless process of there being life, not the succession of discontinuous, particular lives). As Bataille wished to emphasise, “[t]he separation of beings is limited to the real order. It is only if I remain attached to the order of *things* that the separation is *real*. It is in fact *real*, but what is real is *external*. ‘Intimately, all men are one.’”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, “[e]very human is connected to other humans, is only the expression of others.”<sup>30</sup> The purely violent interiority of “life, as it is,” is where it would be conceivable to listen through the Force if instead of “. . . without name” our universe had the Force.

Everything and everyone is connected, yet one should not be misled into thinking that such a recognition blossoms by default into selfless altruism. The socioeconomic conditions on Nar Shaddaa being harsh, it does not take long for the Exile (who is obviously well-to-do) to be approached by beggars or people who are otherwise challenged by adversities. If the player makes the Exile help them, Kreia reprimands the Exile for robbing these people of their opportunity for growth, of their own tests of strength, the trials and tribulations of their destinies. For her, confrontation is the only soil fertile enough for people – and peoples – to bear fruit: “a culture’s teachings, and most importantly, the nature of its people, achieve definition in conflict.” Elsewhere, she says: “It is only through interactions, through decision and choice<sup>31</sup>, through confrontation, physical or mental, that the Force can grow within you.”

<sup>29</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. I, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 192.

<sup>30</sup> Bataille, “Notebook for ‘Pure Happiness,’” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 236.

<sup>31</sup> “[...] desire and decision (the two things that create a live world) [...]” (Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 67).

“Physical or mental” – this appreciation of conflict is by no means a glorification of senseless brutality. “To best one in battle,” says Kreia, “is one thing. To defeat them without striking a blow – that was my hope.” On another occasion, she states: “It is a far greater victory to make another see through your eyes than to close them forever.” Nevertheless, Kreia’s outlook is quite Heraclitean indeed. War, according to Heraclitus, “is justice, because everything comes into being through War,”<sup>32</sup> achieves “definition in conflict.” This, in turn, is elucidated by Bataille in his “Heraclitean Meditation,” in which he somehow articulates the cry resounding across the river which is at no two instants the same; as we read in the text:

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 can 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.<sup>33</sup>

In Hopkins’ succinct, yet succulent words: “Million-fueled, nature’s bonfire burns on.”<sup>34</sup> The change in time, which preconditions the “cruel splendors” of life, is the prime Heraclitean principle, for the “keraunos [the thunderbolt, chaos, hazard] steers all things.”<sup>35</sup>

“In the fabric of chance, dark interlinks with light”<sup>36</sup> – “The true war is waged in the hearts of all living things, against our own natures, light or dark. That is what shapes and binds the galaxy, not [...] creations of men,” says Kreia, who, in the end, turns out to have had an ulterior motive in training the Exile.

<sup>32</sup> Heraclitus as quoted in: John Fowles, *The Aristos* (London: Triad Grafton, 1981), p. 203.

<sup>33</sup> Bataille, “The Practice of Joy Before Death,” p. 239.

<sup>34</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection,” in: *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (London: Penguin, 1953), p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Fowles, *The Aristos*, p. 203. The translation in brackets is part of the quotation.

<sup>36</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), p. 72.

Kreia was once a Jedi, but she was a Sith,<sup>37</sup> too. By the time she travels with the Exile, however, she is no longer either of those, seeing the factions for what they are – sides of a coin, aspects pretending to be an entirety. In other words, Kreia, too, is an exile. She and the Exile were both expelled from orders to the rules of which they failed to adhere. How fitting, then, that the paths of these two characters – repelled by others and thus drawn to each other – meet in the so-called Outer Rim Territories, far from the centre of the known galaxy. And how suitable that – as we have already mentioned – the spatial structure of *KOTOR II* can be characterized as a “semi-open,” “star-shaped hub,” for this means – given that “quest and space are intrinsically linked”<sup>38</sup> – that as the game is played, the Exile along with Kreia and their other companions enact the pattern of attraction and repulsion, of appropriation and excretion<sup>39</sup>: the player ventures into various wildernesses (arms of the star-hub) from demarcated, more or less “civilized” spaces (centres of the star-hub) in which bargains can be struck and quests are received. The ordeals ordained by the quests are faced in the various wildernesses, while the rewards are reaped in the “civilised” spaces, which alternately appropriate and excrete the Exile, who always, however, ends up excreted by a space, an order, the galaxy.

The significance of the star-shaped hub is, therefore, that it is homologous with anthropological models that divide societies into centres and peripheries: the basic apparatus of connection and separation finds itself reconstituted within the mechanics of ludo-narrative works. Doubtless, this phenomenon results from the tightly-wound

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<sup>37</sup> The Sith are those who oppose the Jedi Order and its doctrines of serenity, and whose conduct may be summarised by their code: “Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me.”

<sup>38</sup> Aarseth, “From Hunt the Wumpus to EverQuest” p. 499.

<sup>39</sup> See: Bataille, “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade,” in: *Visions of Excess*, pp. 91-102.

reciprocity of culture and play<sup>40</sup> – what happens during the world-building process of creating a video game is that intuitive understandings of how the real world works can shape the process of designing gameplay mechanics. As Aarseth claims, “all computer games with virtual environments [...] are based on a simulation, a dynamic model/rule set,”<sup>41</sup> but it can be argued that, firstly, all games require such “a simulation,” and secondly, every “dynamic model/rule set” stems from the system encompassing it, namely, language (or *langauge*, the measure of adherence). It would follow, then, that assumptions present within the cultural “rule set” carry over into ludic rule subsets, or that the premises of the system will be reflected in the mechanics of subsystems simulated within the system (which is a transposition different from the representational relation between a story and what the story is about). More importantly, however, it would also follow that the space of intersubjective activity – which is formulated through enunciations (given that “[l]anguage is not life,” that language “gives life orders”<sup>42</sup>) – is in itself not unlike the arena of a game, of a simulation transcendent in relation to “life, as it is.”

Before this train of thought can be pursued to its conclusion, further details regarding the role of Kreia in the story of *KOTOR II* have to be brought forward. As the player eventually discovers, her real struggle – the one into which she tries to entangle the Exile throughout the game – is the fight against the Force itself. In a final conversation with the Exile, who is revealed to be a wound in the Force due to the carnage perpetrated at the summit of the war that got the Exile exiled, Kreia speaks of

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<sup>40</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 57-67, 81-97.

<sup>41</sup> Aarseth, “From Hunt the Wumpus to EverQuest,” p. 503.

<sup>42</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 76.



her true conviction:

It is said that the Force has a will, it has a destiny for us all. I wield it, but it uses us all, and that is abhorrent to me. Because I hate the Force. I hate that it seems to have a will, that it would control us to achieve some measure of balance, when countless lives are lost. But in you... I see the potential to see the Force die, to turn away from its will. And that is what pleases me. You are beautiful to me, Exile. A dead spot in the Force, an emptiness in which its will might be denied.

Kreia wished for the Force to die, because it is a principle of instrumentalisation under which every living creature serves a higher purpose, is manipulated into harmony. It is as if instead of the Force, the usurper, Kreia would want “. . . without name,” the freedom to be disharmonious, *out of sync with the universe*.

Language “seems to have a will,” too: “Language speaks. Man speaks in that he responds to language.”<sup>43</sup> Language, along with its entire semiotic setup of rules, boundaries, and constraints, bears within itself the principle of servility: “I succumb to the use of words like *to be*, *effect*, *succumb*, *use*. In being assembled together, these words, through the very process that links them, announce my servitude.”<sup>44</sup> “The elementary unit of language – the statement – is the order-word,”<sup>45</sup> the order-word being “[...] the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions, in other words, to speech acts that are, and can only be, accomplished in the statement. Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a ‘social obligation.’”<sup>46</sup>

Language is part of the machinery that turns the human being into an organ, subordinating it to (higher) orders, to the grander schemes of things, and ultimately to

<sup>43</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Language,” in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), p. 207.

<sup>44</sup> Bataille, “Surrealism and God,” in: *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006), p. 183.

<sup>45</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 76.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 79.

things<sup>47</sup> themselves. We wield language, “but it uses us all, and that is abhorrent” to us. Kreia desired the death of the Force, and Bataille desired the death of language – silence: “[...] to find that which reintroduces – in a point – the sovereign silence that interrupts articulated language.”<sup>48</sup>

“With any tangible reality, for each being, you have to find the place of sacrifice, the wound. A being can only be touched,” Bataille stipulated, “where it yields.”<sup>49</sup> Kreia found the Exile, the wound through which the Force could have been touched and hurt. Her plan, though finally rendered unsuccessful by the Exile, was to multiply and concatenate echoes of this wound, thus lacerating the Force to the point of its nullification. Bataille, in turn, sought to stimulate in those who would encounter his writings the capacity to silence thought within themselves. As he writes in a key passage from *Inner Experience*:

NON-KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATES ECSTASY. Non-knowledge is ANGUISH before all else. In anguish, there appears a nudity which puts one into ecstasy. But ecstasy itself (nudity, communication) is elusive if anguish is elusive. Thus ecstasy only remains possible in the anguish of ecstasy, in this sense, that it cannot be satisfaction, *grasped knowledge*.<sup>50</sup>

Sun rays pierce a cirrus, setting its fibres on refracted fire, and something gives: one is overtaken by an unbearable torrent, which is neither beauty nor the sublime,<sup>51</sup> and which is all the more powerful for never succumbing to the demands pressed by the subject of knowledge, who wants to be let in on an experience that forever escapes it.

The ecstasy of inner experience is not completion. If anything, it leaves one cracked

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<sup>47</sup> Bataille, “The Sovereign,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, pp. 185-195.

<sup>48</sup> Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 90.

<sup>49</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 52.

<sup>51</sup> See also: Alphonso Lingis, “Bataille’s Contestation of Interpretative Anthropology and of the Sociology of Religion,” in: *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, ed. Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 140.

open, disturbed, grasping for straws, wanting for more. In the words of Andrew Hussey, “[...] there is no underlying unifying force of universal consciousness to be revealed in the moment of communication, but instead, non-being or non-meaning, which is an absence which is distinct from nothingness.”<sup>52</sup>

If “[t]he defeat of thought,” achieved in the “pure inner fall into a limitless abyss,” “is ecstasy”<sup>53</sup> – if this anguished ecstasy heralds non-knowledge, renounces certainty, suspends one in a state of being incompatible with speech – then the effort put by Bataille into writing his methods down and disseminating them is visible in new light: what we see in this light is a crusade for the death of language. Again: “[...] we are nothing, neither you nor I, beside burning words which could pass from me to you [...]: for I would only have lived in order to write them, and [...] you will live from having had the strength to hear them.”<sup>54</sup> “Far beyond the failings of friends and readers I’m close to, I’m now seeking friends and readers a dead person might encounter, and I see them up ahead of me already: innumerable, silent, always true like stars in the heavens”<sup>55</sup> – each of them a heart, dying, enraptured.

Earlier, the relation of language to games was briefly discussed. What was meant to be implied is not that our current affair with language is in fact and in its entirety a game, but rather that there is a possibility towards which certain strains of literature seem to point – a possibility that language could be the ludo-narrative dwelling *par excellence* (Baudrillard’s reading of Borges’ “The Lottery in Babylon” can be considered as an example<sup>56</sup>). Let us assume that this possibility is actualised in various

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), p. 91.

<sup>53</sup> Georges Bataille, “Nonknowledge,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 203.

<sup>54</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 94.

<sup>55</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 60.

<sup>56</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “The Lottery in Babylon,” in: *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York:

degrees and on different levels throughout our relationship with language – that we are indeed playing some sort of game, and that we are thus necessarily played.<sup>57</sup> If we consider in this context Bataille’s description of “silence” as a “slipping word”<sup>58</sup> – a word that twists language into contradiction, giving way to true silence – then it begins to resemble a cheat, a method of exploiting a bug in the system, of glitching one’s way out of the map, of exercising futility in the face of a system that presupposes the expediency of constructive actions performed within itself. Given Bataille’s engagement with transgression, it is only fitting to redirect Aarseth’s notion of “transgressive play”<sup>59</sup> back onto the transgressor-extraordinaire: just as Kreia played the game of the Force in order to destroy it, Bataille played the game of language to subvert it, to access “. . . without name.”

Could he be said – insofar as he persevered in a system the conditions of which were abhorrent to him – to have been an ascetic? Did his subversions bear any resemblance to ascetic practices? Or, to ask a question that links this chapter to the next: to what extent is a sustained attempt to kill within oneself an element of the world essentially ascetic? Is asceticism avoided by seeking an inner death of the ideal rather than the material?

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Penguin Putnam, 1998), pp. 101-106, and Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990), pp. 150-153.

<sup>57</sup> Aarseth, “I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player,” in: *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007: Situated Play* (Tokyo: DiGRA, 2007), pp. 132-133, *Digital Games Research Association*, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07313.03489.pdf> (2 May 2020).

<sup>58</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 16.

<sup>59</sup> Aarseth, “I Fought the Law,” pp. 132-133.

## CHAPTER 6: OBELISKS, ASKESIS, AND NOISE

“[...] *I am not a philosopher but a saint, maybe a madman.*”<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this chapter will be to consider two opposing aspects of a Bataillean perspective on asceticism. Firstly, Bataille’s critique of ascetic discipline will be contrasted with the hagiography of saint Simeon the Stylite, whose practice, in turn, will be compared with Roger Caillois’ interpretation of mimicry. Mysticism in general (and asceticism specifically) will be regarded in terms of entropy (understood as the tendency towards the dissolution of material arrangements) and negentropy (understood as the tendency of matter to arrange itself), and set against a background composed of ideas taken from Bataille, and also from Jean-François Lyotard, Peter Sloterdijk, and Pierre Klossowski. World-building elements borrowed from *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, a video game, will also serve as an inspiration due to their connection with themes of eremitism, language, and silence. Secondly, the possibility of discovering in Bataille’s thought an appreciation of asceticism will be explored in connection with Nietzsche’s critique of the said discipline, and in reference to a relevant remark found in Caillois’ text. An alternative vision of ascetic practice will appear, and it will be linked with Bataille’s solar poetics.

An excerpt the interpretation of which will propel the discussion onward must now be introduced: “The Scripture of the Word [...], Seventh: ‘The sage who suppresses his best aphorism: cut off his hands, for he is a thief,’” writes the God-King Vivec in

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, Note 6 to the “Method of Meditation,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 285.

Sermon Twenty-Seven of *The Thirty Six Lessons of Vivec*: a pastiche of visionary and mystical texts accessible in the form of virtual books scattered around the game world of *Morrowind*.<sup>2</sup> The third instalment of *The Elder Scrolls* series is famous for the wealth of its lore, which includes hundreds of in-game books. Though they are in truth short texts – sometimes presented as sections of a longer piece – they range from pocket guides describing different areas of the game world to botanical investigations of, for example, a humming plant species.

Vivec – a crucial character in the lore of *Morrowind* – is a member of a triumvirate of gods calling themselves the Tribunal. A warrior-poet, he is the one who has crafted the Tribunal's mythology through the means of his *Thirty Six Lessons* and other texts, as well as through more or less covert leadership of organisations devoted to religious law enforcement. As the story unfolds, however, the player character learns that the Tribunal are no gods at all, and that they in fact fashioned themselves into godlike beings through magical and blasphemous use of the heart of an actually divine, long-gone entity responsible for the creation of the cosmos as mortals know it.

Within the game world, *The Thirty Six Lessons of Vivec* serve a twofold purpose: they are, of course, a text of religious importance for the people of Morrowind – the eponymous realm in which the game narrative takes place. But the *Lessons* are at the same time an encoded message directed simultaneously at the player and the player character: as it often happens, the player character is called upon to fulfil a prophecy, and Vivec's grandiose myth foretells the events of the game narrative through multi-levelled metaphorical structures, therefore providing the player character with clues regarding that quest, and thus casting a foreshadowing discernible on the meta-level of

<sup>2</sup> *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, Windows PC version, Bethesda Game Studios, 2002. All subsequent quotations of the *The Thirty Six Lessons of Vivec* come from the same source.

the player's perspective. A peculiar dissociation: it is as if one could zoom in on the relationship between the player and the player character: the former experiences the lot of the latter, but from the outside of the latter's "time," so to speak, viscerally experiencing prophecy as an atemporal positing of an absolute point of reference (following Lyotard's characterisation<sup>3</sup>).

*The Thirty Six Lessons* are a semi-transparent mirror built into the fourth wall, not only allowing, but rather beckoning the player to peer inside, to read past the first impression they might leave one with, namely, the feeling that they are nothing but pseudo-mystical ramblings, a meaningless parody of style. On the contrary, we would say that *The Thirty Six Lessons of Vivec* are a stylish pastiche of meaning, and that as such they can be analysed as a valid transformation of philosophico-mystical patterns of thought: a fertile sediment left by those patterns in the minds of the game's writers. After all, there is a vibrant resonance between Vivec's Scripture of the Word, Fifth: "The first meaning is always hidden," and Roland Barthes' proposition "that we consider stylistic features as *transformations*, derived either from collective formulas (of unrecoverable origin, literary or preliterate) or, by metaphoric interplay, from idiolectal forms [...]." <sup>4</sup>

Let us repeat the quote: "The sage who suppresses his best aphorism: cut off his hands, for he is a thief." The presence of what patterns could one espy here? There is, of course, the matter of the obvious reference to an oft-cited piece of ancient Babylonian law, which is positioned here in a curious configuration.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Obłoki," in: *Lyotard, Derrida, Hillis Miller i inni. Kalifornijska teoria krytyczna*, ed. Ewa Bobrowska et al. (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2019), p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, "Style and its Image," in: *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 98-99.

If a rule is to become a law, it has to be written down<sup>5</sup>: the authority it founds requires a physical manifestation: if an insubordinate person is to be properly chastised, the hierarchs of law must have the high ground from which it is possible to outlaw the said person – they must have at their disposal a holy text that supports their indignation. From Vivec’s Scripture of the Word, Second: “[...] The efforts of madmen are a society of itself, but only if they are written. The wise may substitute one law for another, even into incoherence, and still say he is working within a method. This is true of speech and extends to all scripture” (in other words, the settings of the intersubjective simulation – the “rule set” that determines the “dynamic model” – can be changed, because the “wise” deals in abstractions, his work concerns signs at a level of incorporeality, and thus interchangeability).

Once Hammurabi’s law is set in stone, the living human being known as Hammurabi is no longer necessary for the commands of his codex to be executed, for when those commands become law, the performative phrases enforce themselves through the actions of human bodies which are now governed less by rulers than by a system to which the rulers themselves are subjected. Should the rulers become tyrannical – should they envisage themselves above the law – what occurs is a more or less predictable mutation of the system, and “[i]deological systems are fictions [...]. Every fiction is supported by a social jargon, a sociolect, with which it identifies: fiction is that degree of consistency a language attains when it has *jelled* exceptionally and finds a sacerdotal class (priests, intellectuals, artists) to speak it generally and to circulate it.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the system persists – it merely modifies the story it tells of itself, affords a

<sup>5</sup> Jacek Dukaj, *Po piśmie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2019), pp. 237-238.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), pp. 27-28.



higher degree of control to a different set of signs. As Deleuze puts it: “Words are at their most powerful when they compel the body to repeat the movements they suggest,”<sup>7</sup> when they can cause physical harm to bodies that had no immediate contact with the words in question (as in the case of subjects punished in accordance with a law they were not even aware of), and the concentration of this power shifts from one group of words to another. Would it not also be wise, then, to withhold one’s words on certain occasions? Why should the silent sage have his hands cut off?

Vivec cautions us: “The Scripture of the Word, First: ‘All language is based on meat. Do not let the sophists fool you.’” In spite of the incorporeality of ideas (which is exploited by “the sophists” who “substitute one law for another, even into incoherence”), language is a product of flesh: bodies produce it and bodies host it. However, just as a law gains some measure of self-sufficiency by becoming set in stone, the increasing complexity of abstract systems (abstract systems devoted to operations of abstraction leading to further abstract systems devoted to new operations and so on and so forth...) lowers the degree to which a given system depends on organic bodies in its maintenance, while simultaneously increasing the extent to which organic bodies depend on a given system in their maintenance. Jacek Dukaj’s recent book<sup>8</sup> on the paradigm shift exchanging written word for virtually (re)produced sensual stimuli is also a poignant analysis of the process by which order – an internal human experience of the perceived arrangement of objects – becomes externalised in the form of a more and more autonomous system that enforces a vision of order abstracted from human desires and decisions. Dukaj notices, for example, that since the implementation of self-learning

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Dukaj, *Po piśmie*.

neural networks in behavioural pattern recognition twists behavioural patterns into loops, then what must be acknowledged is the undeniable existence of patterns capable of not just self-preservation, but of conquering bodies.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, meat remains in proximity: the machine stems from growths of flesh, and its position on the gradient stretched between useful adaptations and malignant transformations depends on numerous variables. Regardless of these variables, what we are dealing with is a continuity of which Lyotard wrote as follows:

The new technologies, built on electronics and data processing must be considered [...] as material extensions of our capacity to memorize, [...] given the role played in them by symbolic language as supreme “condense” of all information. These technologies show in their own way that there is no break between matter and mind, at least in its reactive functions, which we call performance-functions.<sup>10</sup>

Lyotard also formulated an important, anti-anthropocentric caveat – which shall be arrived at via an apparent detour – with the use of a reference to the three blows to anthropocentrism as strung together by Freud: Earth’s dislocation from the centre of the universe (Copernicus), man’s fall down the ladder of Being (Darwin), and an individual’s loss of dominion over one’s mind (Freud himself). These “wounds,” to use Peter Sloterdijk’s expressions, have penetrated the “narcissistic shield” of the psychical immunity system; as he puts it:

When the individual’s pride is attacked, it has the experience that information which initially could not be warded off has invaded and that it is thereby in a state of lost integrity. A wound is the pain of having something break through that for the moment or for a sustained period of time is stronger than the narcissistic homeostasis. [...] Not just any breach operates in a manner that wounds, but rather only that invasion of the organism that convinces one of the disadvantage of being oneself. Nevertheless, human intelligence appears to have at its disposal the capacity for getting over such experiences of disadvantage and for integrating them into more mature states.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This will be a theme of great importance in chapter eleven.

<sup>10</sup> Lyotard, “Matter and Time,” in: *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, “Wounded by Machines: Toward the Epochal Significance of the Most Recent Medical Technology,” in: *Not Saved: Essays after Heidegger*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore & Christopher

This capacity of the “human intelligence” to “integrate” painful information “into more mature states” – which Sloterdijk continues to discuss in the inter-crossed terms of how social stratification ties with the pecking order of wounding and integration (and how the act of passing the wound on facilitates an internal movement of integration) – could be paraphrased as the ability to achieve an aestheticisation of wounding phenomena: the psychical immunity system is an ideological system, too, and thus a fiction to be told and retold as many times as necessary so as to gain and regain homeostatic harmony both in individuals and (especially) in communities: all manner of “collectives demand a price for membership from those who belong to them, but as long as they achieve their group success they are reimbursed by the privileged access to convictions and instruments of power, by virtue of which they experience the advantage of being themselves with sufficient evidence.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, in Sloterdijk’s view, what is common in a community is its particular “narcissistic shield” that protects it from what it deems to be a threat to its integrity.

Sloterdijk claims that forthcoming blows against anthropocentrism should be expected from the fields of medical sciences (from the fields where mechanical caretakers raise vat-grown children with prefabricated genotypes, thus renouncing the holiness of naturally birthed, purely organic bodies<sup>13</sup>), whereas Lyotard proposed that the next blow will result from the advancement of self-sufficient technologies, and that the wound inflicted by that blow will be the realisation that the tendency towards complexity is by no means a merit exclusive to the human race:

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Turner (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2017), p. 218.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 224.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 233.

Through contemporary techno-science, s/he learns that s/he does not have the monopoly of mind, that is of complexification, but that complexification is not inscribed as a destiny in matter, but as possible, and that it takes place, at random, but intelligibly, well before him/herself. S/he learns in particular that his/her own science is in its turn a complexification of matter, in which, so to speak, energy itself comes to be reflected, without humans necessarily getting any benefit from this. And that thus s/he must not consider him/herself as an origin or as a result, but as a transformer ensuring, through techno-science, arts, economic development, cultures and the new memorization they involve, a supplement of complexity in the universe.<sup>14</sup>

As Sloterdijk says, “the hardcore phase of the history of disillusioning only begins beyond the third wound [the one inflicted by psychoanalysis]”: the two blows are occurring simultaneously, and in the mesh of their interweaving blinks the “anthropoperipheral universe.”<sup>15</sup> If we look at their combination – the positing of the individual as a negentropic phenomenon spawned in a predominantly entropic universe<sup>16</sup> as a vulnerable body susceptible to manipulation by agents both internal and external, both well-wishing and maleficent – the following interpretation becomes viable: the hands of the sage correspond to the sage’s words, because “there is no break between matter and mind,” and they ought to be cut off in punishment for his silence, for a “sage who suppresses his best aphorism” fails as a transformer – fails to ensure “a supplement of complexity in the universe,” therefore allowing entropy to run its inevitable course unobstructed. Hence, it is in the interest of the universe that a (poet-turned-)god should install in his holy book a mechanism meant to foster complexification (of thought).

“The sage who suppresses [...]” – let us suppose that we are talking, in fact, about a hermit. Barthes has famously differentiated between literature as work (a given piece of literary output) and as institution: “As an institution, it collects all usages and all

<sup>14</sup> Lyotard, “Matter and Time,” p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> China Miéville, “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire: Weird; Hauntological: Versus and/or and/or or or?” in: *Collapse, vol. IV*, ed. Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2008), p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> See: Lyotard, “The Postmodern Fable,” in: *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 81-101.

practices which govern the circuit of the thing written in a given society: the writer's social status and ideology, modes of circulation, conditions of consumption, sanctions of criticism."<sup>17</sup> Let us follow suit and differentiate between a particular person choosing the life of an eremite, and an institution of hermitage: the very circuitry that perpetuates the existence of this practice despite the fact that – unlike, for example, cenobitic monasticism – it isolates those who would follow its paths even from other practitioners (in this respect it shares a trait characteristic of many aspects of Christianity, namely: the quality of being a recessive meme). Furthermore, the institution of hermitage could be defined (if we choose to conduct our considerations within the limits of ecclesiastical systems) as being concerned with the social status left behind by an aspiring hermit, the ideology (the structure of belief) motivating them, the ascetic discipline they subscribe to and the extent to which they do so, or: the severity with which they undergo their mortifications; additionally, the hierarchies which beatify and canonise. Beside these and other possible issues, there are the “modes of circulation.” It is at the very least in respect to these modes – the predominant form of which would be the hagiography – that the institution of hermitage constitutes a subdivision of the institution of literature, as far as it comprises the system through which a given field of discourse exerts its influence on lives, on bodies; maintains values in groups of lives, of bodies: “Late ancient manuscripts circulated by the agency of social networks held together by common purpose and affection. Copies of texts were gifted, loaned, and produced on an individual and as-needed basis”<sup>18</sup> (already one could perceive the becoming-mycorrhizal of the roots of Christianity and the hyphae of humanism; indeed, “one could trace the

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, “Rhetorical Analysis,” in: *The Rustle of Language*, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Dina Boero, “The Context of Production of the Vatican Manuscript of the *Syriac Life of Symeon the Stylite*,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2015), p. 329.

communitarian phantasm at the base of all humanisms back to the model of a literary society in which those involved discover through canonical readings their shared love for inspiring messages”<sup>19</sup>).

Having sketched an outline of an institution of hermitage, we can now proceed to claim that a “sage who suppresses [...]” operates under its auspices: though hagiographies remain, the wisdom forged in the soul of an anchorite dissipates along with the soul’s host body; what remains is hearsay:

If language always seems to presuppose itself, if we cannot assign it a nonlinguistic point of departure, it is because language does not operate between something seen (or felt) and something said, but always goes from saying to saying. We believe that narrative consists not in communicating what one has seen but in transmitting what one has heard, what someone else said to you. Hearsay.<sup>20</sup>

The silence of intimate experience disappears, gets buried in tales which exclude it simply by being tales, by being told in language to which the “nonlinguistic point of departure” can no longer be assigned: silence is transmogrified into a tale that speaks of silence. “Scripture of the Word, [...] Fourth: ‘The truest body of work is made up of silence: as in the silence that results from no reference. By the word I mean the dead.’”

(The silence of which we have spoken in chapter five returns as “the silence that results from no reference,” a lack of point of reference, a lack of the Force, of being forced to follow in anyone’s footsteps. It is the silence of a hush falling on hell – if by hell we mean a becoming-myth, a being condemned to memory instead of the oblivion promised by the waters of Lethe. “By the word I mean the dead.” Barthes wrote that myths usurp signs, but is it possible to find a sign that would not always already be

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<sup>19</sup> Sloterdijk, “Rules for the Human Park: A Response to Heidegger’s ‘Letter on Humanism,’” in: *Not Saved*, pp. 194-195.

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 76.

usurped? As Bakhtin taught us, a word we use is not our own – it is, at the very least, “half someone else’s,” and as it enters our world, other worlds are carried over into it, soaking wet with the salivary juices a given word had soaked in as it passed from mouth to mouth.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the “tissue of quotations”<sup>22</sup> is, in truth, flesh, and the speaking body is mythically cannibalistic. “*No more words*. I will bury the dead in my belly,”<sup>23</sup> bury them rather than perpetuate the cycle of regurgitation, of this unwitting necromancy. A different hearsay, then: a hellish stratum of dead people’s echoes, and among those the echo of the ancient rumour that God is. Hence the silence of Bataille, the silence of life, of the sovereign instant in which all authority – and thus reference – falls into disrepair and obscurity, the self moored no more.<sup>24</sup> Bataille is precise on perhaps the most important aspect: “[...] the silence I’m talking about is gay.”<sup>25</sup>)

Let us return to our eremitic subject. On the one hand, we have the institution of hermitage, the mythology of which glorifies solitary mysticism and the kind of silence it entails, and on the other hand, we have Bataille, the celebrant of the intoxicating communications of eroticism, poetry, and laughter, who wrote (this has been quoted before): “I hate the thought of a person being connected to isolation. The recluse who has the impression he reflects the world is ridiculous to my mind. He can’t reflect it because, being himself a center of the reflection, he stops being able to relate to *what doesn’t have a center*.”<sup>26</sup> In Bataille’s view, what is at work in the hermit’s project of

<sup>21</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 293-296.

<sup>22</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in: *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 146.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, “A Season in Hell,” in: *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Wallace Fowle (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 271.

<sup>24</sup> Bataille, “The Sovereign,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, pp. 194-195, 290.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), p. 45.

salvation is predetermined by the projection of the self on the experience of reality, of the universe, and the name of this projection is God. “We’re reassured when something is stated clearly, and defining an immutable SELF as the principle of our being and nature presents the temptation to make the object of meditation something clear. Such a definition projects what we are into infinity or eternity.”<sup>27</sup>

The “sage who suppresses [...]” – as long as we picture him as a hermit – is not motivated by a parsimonious wish to save the best of what he has to offer for himself; he is not even in possession of his “best aphorism,” for, his perception fundamentally skewed, he suppresses his possibility of formulating it, blocked as he is from the truth that exists only between people, between beings, and never in isolation; as we read in Bataille’s “Friendship”:

it is in so far as existences appear to be perfect, complete, that they remain separate and closed in on themselves. Existences only open up through the wound of the incompleteness of being in them. The different beings distinct from one another *communicate* because it is possible to talk about incompleteness, animal nudity, wound, and it is in this *communication* from one to the other that they come alive through losing themselves.<sup>28</sup>

Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, having grown tired of solitude, addresses the Sun with the following declaration upon beginning his pilgrimage through the world of men: “Behold! I am weary of my wisdom, like a bee that has gathered too much honey. I need hands that reach out.”<sup>29</sup> And when the story of his journey came to an end, “[...] he left his cave” again, “glowing and strong, like a morning sun that emerges from dark mountains.”<sup>30</sup> The sage can renounce his detachment, leave his cave, his hideout, his haven (which is, by virtue of its naval etymology, a caricature of heaven), and – having

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<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Bataille, “Friendship,” trans. Hager Weslati, *Parallax*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2001), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 266.



caressed “the great ephemeral skin”<sup>31</sup> of intensities that would no longer have his withdrawal as their supposed point of origin, as their center – share his aphorism, his poetry: his becoming, or maybe even: his becoming-complex, which, etymologically speaking, could be translated as becoming that which encircles; becoming merged, perhaps, with the objects of one’s subjectivity; becoming engaged in a communion, maybe, with one’s people. The sage’s “best aphorism” should play its part in pushing those who hear it to the extreme limit (where the integrities of negentropy dance on the edge of disintegration), to what is liminal in being alive, and that “is only completely reached if communicated (man is several – solitude is the void, nothingness, lies).”<sup>32</sup>

(Bataille managed to implement this conviction into his narratives by perverting the framework of a romantic tale: writings such as *Story of the Eye*, *Blue of Noon*, “Madame Edwarda”, or even “My Mother,” all contain the skeletal remains of the narrative structure of a romance. However, instead of chaste knights deep in praise of their virgin ladies, the reader finds in Bataille promiscuous women glorified as ministers of impossible sacraments – this is especially striking in “Madame Edwarda,” in which the drunken narrator is blessed enough, so to speak, to not only meet the eponymous, deified prostitute in a brothel, but to assist in the apothecotic climax of an intercourse she has with a taxi driver, a viscerally voyeuristic experience described thusly: “Edwarda’s pain-wrung pleasure filled me with an exhausting impression of bearing witness to a miracle.”<sup>33</sup> In contrast to this particular scene, it is often the absence of Bataille’s narrators’ lovers – and the anguish it releases – that is explored, mercilessly intensified

<sup>31</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 1-42.

<sup>32</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Bataille, “Madame Edwarda,” in: *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 142.

to the point of persisting in spite of the lovers' eventual appearance; and so, in *The Impossible*, the narrator drowns in woe, separated as he is from his beloved: "Without that she-wolf challenge of B. – lighting up the thickness of the mists like a fire – everything is insipid and space is empty"<sup>34</sup>; "The most disheartening idea: that B. might finally lose the Ariadne's thread which, in the labyrinth of her life, my love for her is."<sup>35</sup> Bataille's literary experiments amount to this: being in relation to an other is *pivotal*, and thus vertiginous.)

A stone column appears to rise above the textual interplay that we are trying to stage: on its top there is a small platform, and on its surface a mortified figure immerses itself in deep prayer: it is the Syrian saint known as Simeon the Stylite.

The following observations can be gleaned from looking at this unusually eremitic figure from the point of view of the institution of hermitage: the life he left behind was that of a shepherd born in a Christian family, and the life he chose was motivated by a Christian experience of God and his angels. Twice he tried to live in a monastery, but the necessity of coexisting with other monks – who were often envious of his impeccable piety and reproached him for deviating from monastic rules<sup>36</sup> – proved to be a needless distraction. As Susan Ashbrook Harvey recounts:

Eventually, Simeon went his own way, first as a recluse and then as a stylite (from the Greek *stylos*, meaning "pillar") mounting the first of three successive pillars, each higher than the one before. On the pillar he took up his stasis, his stance of continual prayer. [...] Exposed on a mountain with no shelter of any kind, Simeon stood on his pillar midway

<sup>34</sup> Bataille, *The Impossible: A Story of Rats followed by Dianus and The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> The persecution of Christians and their saints has received much attention, and rightfully so, but the hardships some of the latter had to endure at the hands of their spiritually lacking brethren are, perhaps, insufficiently present in mainstream discourse; one other example is saint Teresa of Ávila: the general attitude of her contemporaries in regard to her mysticism pushed her towards reformatory policies. See: Encarnación Juárez-Almendros, "Hallucinations, Persecutions and Self-Defense: The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila," *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, Vol. 17 (2013), pp. 177-192.

between heaven and earth until his death in 459 at the age of more than seventy. [...] His career as holy man had been spectacular: his fame had spread from Britain to Persia; the pilgrims who flocked to see him crossed the spectrum of late antique society from peasant to emperor, bringing him problems as mundane as cucumber crops and as complex as foreign policy.<sup>37</sup>

Evidently, even the authorities sanctioned his status with their reverence for his relentless asceticism, and he was recognised as a holy man during his life. Harvey writes that today's scholars "possess three major hagiographical sources"<sup>38</sup> concerning Simeon the Stylite (her article attempts to reconstruct possible meanings attributed to Simeon's life by these three accounts, all of which were formulated within different cultural contexts). Therefore, a claim could be ventured that there were three main vehicles of circulation (driven by Simeon's deeds) serving the institution of hermitage, not to mention the migrations of hearsay and tales, and the closely bound operations of inspiration (breathing in what someone else breathed out) and imitation (lossy cloning): "The legacy of Simeon's vocation was taken up after his death by others who chose to imitate his practice, and it spread throughout the Byzantine realm. In greater and lesser numbers as the centuries went by, stylites continued this same prayer practice up through the mid-nineteenth century."<sup>39</sup>

One of the hagiographies, "probably written shortly after Simeon's death"<sup>40</sup> "by Simeon's own disciples,"<sup>41</sup> gives the following description of his discipline:

<sup>37</sup> Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "The Sense of a Stylite: Perspectives on Simeon the Elder," *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 42 (1988), p. 376.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 377.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 377.

<sup>40</sup> "The Life of St. Simeon Stylites: A Translation of the Syriac Text in Bedjan's *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, Vol. IV," trans. Frederick Lent, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 35 (1915), p. 103.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey, "The Sense of a Stylite," p. 381.

It should be noted, however, that this claim has been contested by, for example, Dina Boero. Having conducted a meticulous study of the material evidence still in existence, she produces the following conclusion regarding not only this particular hagiography, but also the wider, "institutional context of its production": "The priest Simeon of Marimîn [not to be confused with the saint] and the archdeacon Cyrus oversaw the production of the Vatican manuscript's version of the *Syriac Life of Symeon* [the earliest one]

For he wearied himself and struggled and toiled before his God in mighty fasts untold, and in mighty prayers unconquerable. In hunger and thirst, in heat and cold, continually, unceasingly, in supplication without interruption, and standing at all times; who gave no sleep to his eyes nor repose to his body fifty six [...] years night and day.<sup>42</sup>

Elsewhere in the hagiography we read:

For he endured such suffering, that neither among the ancients nor the moderns could be found any who had suffered as he did. For what body is there, or what limbs, that could endure with fortitude in such a manner? [...] For he stood forty years upon a pillar [the final, tallest one] which was about a cubit in width. And his feet were bound and fettered as though in the stocks, so that neither to right nor left was he able to shift one of them, until even the bones and sinews of his feet were visible, from suffering. Also, his belly burst open from standing.<sup>43</sup>

What emerges is an emaciated, yet brutal figure: a master of asceticism and no stranger to the ravages of isolation. It goes without saying that his unwavering strength in the face of bodily limitations that prescribe ordinary experience and the choice to live atop a stone pillar are praiseworthy feats which merit exclusive deliberations. However, what we would like to underscore at the moment is the atypical character of his eremitism: he was, despite bouts of prolonged seclusion combined with fasting, in communication with many people. His brethren and disciples helped him to the small extent that he permitted or acknowledged as occasionally necessary, and he was friendly and loving towards those close to him, willing to guide and aid them in word, action, and blessing. But, as it was mentioned earlier, his influence spread farther and wider: “For letters of kings poured in, and by the hand of messengers in writings, petition and

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as well as the construction of a *pandocheion* [an inn of sorts] in Telneshe [a village close to the site of saint Simeon’s column]. Whereas the *pandocheion* supported pilgrims who visited Symeon’s site in Telneshe, the manuscript honored the saint while also making available for publication the local ecclesiastical community’s own version of the saint’s life. Through these two complimentary expenditures, we begin to see the priest Simeon and archdeacon Cyrus’ very active hands shaping cult life in the decades immediately following Symeon’s death.” Boero, “The Context of Production of the Vatican Manuscript of the *Syriac Life of Symeon the Stylite*,” p. 349.

<sup>42</sup> “The Life of St. Simeon Stylites,” p. 182.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, pp. 154-155.

request with captains of their hosts they were sending to his righteousness.”<sup>44</sup> A saint whose counsel was sought-after, a hermit who did not forsake his people, who – despite his complicity in the salvatic projection – did not become a thief: would Bataille be pleased? As per usual, we will approach this question in a meandering movement, via a detour.

Once one sets out to travel across Barthes’ irreal *Empire of Signs*, one almost immediately happens upon the following challenge: in the encounter a person has with a language the person does not know, one ought to identify a state of euphoria – “a faint vertigo”<sup>45</sup> – an intoxication caused by the entry of meaning into suspended animation: “The dream: [...] to descend into the untranslatable, to experience its shock without ever muffling it [...]”<sup>46</sup>. This, argued Barthes, is the prerequisite for achieving enstrangement towards one’s language, and thus exposing the limitations that it both suffers from and torments its speakers with. Having enumerated several examples of such limits, Barthes wrote what follows:

Or again, in a still more radical way, since it is a matter of conceiving what our language does not conceive: how can we *imagine* a verb which is simultaneously without subject, without attribute, and yet transitive, such as for instance an act of knowledge without knowing subject and without known object? Yet it is this imagination which is required of us faced with the Hindu *dhyana*, origin of the Chinese *ch’an* and the Japanese *zen*, which we obviously cannot translate by *meditation* without restoring to it both subject and god: drive them out, they return, and it is our language they ride on.<sup>47</sup>

By his own admission, Bataille was at some point “[d]epressed with writing that sticks to Western standards.”<sup>48</sup> Indubitably, this was connected with the fact that

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<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 135.

<sup>45</sup> Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989), p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, pp. 7-8.

<sup>48</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 44.

Western standards are often compliant with the “arch-enemy” – “the spirit of gravity,”<sup>49</sup> which weighs heavily on any Western mind that attempts meditation, contemplation, mortification. Granted, a mystic’s sense of identity is temporarily dissolved during a mystical experience, but as the experience becomes integrated into the conceptual framework hosted by the mystic (erected, for example, at the intersection of the institution of hermitage and the ecclesia), the latter’s sense of identity may be reassembled not with a greater understanding of impermanence, but rather with even greater strictness prescribed by the language that presupposes subjects, god(s), and the god(s)-given duty of naming.

(Both outcomes are potential anchor points for the narcissistic shield – as the wound opened by an experience of the fragility of the self disappears beneath scabs of Logos, the self heals itself by explaining the wound away, redefining the experience for as long as it is necessary for it to become for the self, yet again, an experience of precisely the advantage of being itself. Bataille, on the other hand, insists on the fact that there can be no rest on the ecstatic paths of night – that “[r]elaxation withdraws one from the game”<sup>50</sup> of chance, that no rest can be found in non-knowledge, but only “circular agitation – which does not exhaust itself in ecstasy and begins again from it”<sup>51</sup> – his claim permutes and mutates throughout his works, but it is nonetheless repeatedly made,<sup>52</sup> achieving in the forms of both expression and content the call to never let the wound heal, to pick at the scabs, to drive a finger inside the vulnerability in which one is sacrificed – to flee the integrative designs of self-satisfaction via anguished lines of

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 124.

<sup>50</sup> Bataille, *The Impossible*, p. 159.

<sup>51</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 111.

<sup>52</sup> See: Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 133-134.

flight. After all, “Bataille’s most unfailing signature is spiritual disease,”<sup>53</sup> a sickness which ruins the infected with a desire for the impossible.<sup>54</sup>)

Bataille touches upon the problem of God’s necessity in meditation in *Guilty*:

If you practice meditation, God, they say, is as necessary as one terminal to another in generating an electric spark. For the ecstatic outpouring to take place, there has to be an object proposed: even if reduced to a point, this object possesses such power to destroy that it’s natural, even easy to give it a name.<sup>55</sup>

And further down the page:

The idea of an individual existence is conducive to setting up an object towards which ecstasy can be directed (setting up an object can conceivably aid its discovery in ecstasy). To set up an object isn’t any less an obnoxious limit, because in the spark of ecstasy the necessary subject/object terminals are necessarily consumed – they have to be annihilated. This means that as the subject is destroyed in meditation, the object (god or God) also is a dying victim. (Otherwise the situation of ordinary life, the subject locating some useful object, would preserve the servility inherent in action, whose standard is utility.)<sup>56</sup>

As far as the themes currently being discussed are concerned, Barthes and Bataille’s writings are in concord: depending on the particulars of one’s belief in the “self” (of one’s language), the conflation – or confusion – of the experience of self-dissolution with the appearance of a god (a narrativisation of the grand machinery of *logoi* powered by *teloi* and so on and so forth) is either more or less likely. In the words of Nick Land, “[i]t is the order of the object that organizes inner experience as private reverie, and as a detachment from relation. Above all it is the God of monotheism – the supreme or absolute being – which reproduces the prison of individuation at the scale of the cosmos.”<sup>57</sup>

It is almost as if a desperate attempt was taking place on the side of identity: the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> Bataille, *The Impossible*, pp. 157-164.

<sup>55</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 45.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, pp. 45-46.

<sup>57</sup> Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 109.

illusory nature of its solidity is unveiled, and so it posits an all-encompassing identity of the universe; it falls back, as it were, onto the supposed oneness: beneath veils of fragmentary lives lies the sleeping god out of whose dreams the veils are woven; in other words, one god and nothing but god: the totality of a complete universe.

In *Guilty*, which is an intense questioning of completeness (doing away with expectations that would have the universe be like an enclosure; instead, one puts a hand into a pocket and finds oneself probing an immense vacuum, half-expecting another set of prehensile digits to graze one's wiggling fingers), Bataille writes: "An electrified train pulls into the Gare St-Lazare, and I'm inside leaning against a window. I want to stand clear of the weakness that sees this only as insignificant, given the immensity of the universe."<sup>58</sup> In this view, asceticism is seen as this: a firm, unforgiving belief in the essential, preordained hierarchy of information, one which allows for but one truly entropic signal: the signal of god(s). Anything which falls short of partaking in the scorching, blinding light of the original signal is mere noise: layer upon layer of redundant data; the dark, repetitive house of Mammon (wherever money comes into play, communication collapses into redundancy).

As we have said earlier, the fact that an individual exists is a phenomenon of negentropy, a tendency opposed to entropic dissolution. "The nature of the intelligible cosmos is energetic improbability, a differentiation from entropy."<sup>59</sup> For (a) life to be sustained, a number of redundant operations are required so as to ensure a modicum of stability. Of course, the modicum is delicate, prone to unexpected evanescence: "Life could exist at a cost lower than the one it demands as it is, for it is in fact 'exuberant

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<sup>58</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 30.

<sup>59</sup> Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 42.



excess' in which nothing remains stable, regardless of whether we speak about an organism, or about life on Earth – its pressure, incessant growth, and virtually incomprehensible wastefulness. [trans. – M.H.]”<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the greater the degree of a given life form's complexity, the higher the number of necessary redundant operations.

The survival techniques of certain highly stabilised species (such as, for instance, our own) fashion for us an illusion: the interplay of genetic transmission (conditioning, among other things, the possibility of post-natal learning) and milieus (conditioned, in turn, by the mesh of reciprocal influence species have on each other) leads – if adequate conditions are met – to the emergence of relative longevity. This longevity makes it so that the well-being of an individual organism appears to be valuable. A terrible, yet necessary choice is forced on the one who dares to contemplate the onslaught of countless and ephemeral generations of other species, such as the saturniids, a family of moths in which, once the imago stage is reached, the luxury of a functional mouth disappears, thus condemning the individual organism to as intense an attempt at procreation as is possible before death from starvation takes place. Should the human being turn its attention to those frantic imagos, the choice is either to draw a line that separates what shall be called “human” from what shall be called “animal,” thus instituting a belief in the advantageously unique, “human” being, or to recognise oneself in the onslaught, thus initiating the process by which a “oneself” might begin to fade into irrelevance just as it might, conversely, become reinforced (its narcissistic shield expanded), pushed into a defiance that spites the reign of chaos and the indifference of oblivion.

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<sup>60</sup> Monika Marczuk, “Raj utracony Georgesa Bataille’a. Kilka słów o zbytku,” *Kwartalnik Filozoficzny*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2012), p. 140.

Ascesis entails, firstly, being aware of the fact that the onslaught is redundant; secondly, denouncing the redundant onslaught as evil – as interference; and thirdly, adhering to a belief in the transmission of a pure, divine signal, back to which all entropic information can be traced, and from which one can become distracted by the static of redundancy. In stark contrast, Bataille confesses: “I’d be ashamed to look for an ecstatic truth that raised me to the level of a completed universe but withdrew meaning from ‘the train pulling into the station,’”<sup>61</sup> from the so-called random event. In a more explicitly ascesis-related passage from *Inner Experience*, he doubles down on the objectification of inner experience achieved through ascetic practices, launching his critique with a rather broad-stroked reproach:

That an anaemic, taciturn particle of life, showing reluctance before the excesses of joy, *lacking freedom*, should attain – or should claim to have attained – the extreme limit, is an illusion. One attains the extreme limit in the fullness of means: it demands fulfilled beings, ignoring no audacity. My principle against ascesis is that the extreme limit is accessible through excess, not through want.<sup>62</sup>

When, in *Erotism*, he discusses the intimate connections interlinking mysticism and sensuality, he touches upon the focal role of temptation in these connections: on the one hand, there is temptation, with which he associates a supreme freedom of submersion within the instant (a maelstrom: a piece of flotsam is engulfed by the free play of chance “[...] without which we are never sovereign beings”<sup>63</sup>), and on the other hand, there is perseverance, a continuous toil in the service of a saved future. “Sanctity is always a project. Perhaps not in essence.”<sup>64</sup> Regardless, it would seem that whatever intensities become available to the ascetic, they appear not *through* perseverance, but

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<sup>61</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 250.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 263.

rather *despite* it; as Bataille puts it in *Erotism*:

Yet even if the most far-reaching experiences are still possible [...] in the orderly and regulated life of the monk, I cannot forget, as I strive to grasp the significance of the flights of mysticism that constraint in the face of temptation is the key. If our aim is to explore the farthest potentialities of being, we may well opt for the disorderliness and randomness of love. In spite of what appears on the surface, the simplicity of the instant belongs to the man who, spontaneously bewitched, is laid open to anguish.<sup>65</sup>

And so, “if our aim is to explore the farthest potentialities of being, we may well opt for” giving in to temptation. As it happens, Caillois conceived of mimicry as a “*temptation by space*”<sup>66</sup>; he defined it as a “*depersonalization by assimilation to space*,” and in so doing, he found use for expressions which he wrote down while suffering “an attack of ‘legendary psychasthenia,’ deliberately aggravated for purposes of asceticism and interpretation” (we will come back to this explication). He thus produced the following description the purpose of which is to liken the phenomenon of mimicry to a schizophrenic’s experience of space: “He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*.” In being split, the subject is thus at risk of fading away, and its identity is in danger of slipping into the realm of resemblance. “A being who suddenly begins to ‘resemble’ moves” – according to Blanchot – “away from real life, passes into another world [...]. Whom does the ressembler resemble? Neither this one nor that one; he resembles no one or an ungraspable Someone [...].” Hence, one might say that, in the schizophrenic

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<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, p. 251.

<sup>66</sup> Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” trans. John Shepley, *October*, Vol. 31 (1984), p. 30.

Referencing another of Caillois’ early essays, Rosa Eidelpes writes that his “[...] notion of mimesis is part of a non-determinist view on evolution that does not confine aesthetic freedom to the realm of art, but assumes that nature itself is driven by anti-utilitarian mechanisms.” Rosa Eidelpes, “Roger Caillois’ Biology of Myth and the Myth of Biology,” *Anthropology & Materialism*, No. 2 (2014), <https://journals.openedition.org/am/84> (18 February 2021).

In *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois defines mimicry as a class of games and speaks of the phenomenon with a different focus, zooming in on the non-illusory tension maintained through an illusion between the mimic and the spectator rather than on the depersonalizing experience of performing mimicry.

experience of space, there is only “resemblance pure and simple,”<sup>67</sup> which is also the principle of dreams, wherein the subject – the anchor, the gyroscope – is subsumed in its sleep into the open waters of the dreaming “it” that is itself an image among other images of the dream.<sup>68</sup> The schizophrenic experience – as described by Caillois – would appear, therefore, to be the transposition of the dream state onto waking life, at least insofar as the dream state can be understood as the suspension of the difference between the subject and the space that surrounds it.

It should not escape our attention that Caillois also elaborates on the darkness of this “*space where things cannot be put*,” disagreeing with Augustinian traditions that would have it reduced to an absence of light, claiming instead that “there is something positive about it,” and that it thus follows that the terror of night is in fact the dread induced in the self by the prospect of being assimilated by this night – by precisely that which we must call the unknown. Curiously enough, attributing to darkness an autonomous positivity – one independent from the stereotypical positivity of light, and therefore irreducible to pure negativity – resonates with Bataille’s appreciation of the gnostics who had, according to his analysis, attributed to darkness a similar autonomy, thus capturing in their cosmogonies a glimpse of base matter.<sup>69</sup> And indeed, to be assimilated by space is, in the end, to be reabsorbed into base matter, “to *be* matter”<sup>70</sup>: all the trappings of an individual existence – all the differences by means of which that existence asserts itself as individual – eventually collapse beyond (re)cognition.

Temptation, in turn, is the force that lures one beyond the safety of the fireplace in the

<sup>67</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 145.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146.

<sup>69</sup> Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” in: *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 47-52.

<sup>70</sup> Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” p. 31.

light of which identities can be maintained (it should come as no surprise, then, that temptation is often experienced as a voice, as an intrusion of something external to the stability of the self).

When within the circle of light, one tends to the fire, one takes turns on guard duty, one worries about resources and such; in short, one plans ahead and organises a strategy of survival, and thus carries out a future-oriented project; the future-oriented ascetic project outlines a strategy of survival for the soul whose identity is supposed to be saved, filed in the database of an afterlife; the ascetic's mistake is to expect mnemonic faculties from the one truly entropic signal. In other words, the entropic signal is among the majority of mystics (excluding, perhaps, those partial to the apophatic method) confused with the replicative machine of redundancy that personalised and objectified gods constitute. This remains true even if we take into account the fact that God structures time eschatologically: if it is a matter of dogma that a vision is inserted into the beyond of a post-apocalypse, then that unknown beyond is already infested with familiarity and circumscribed with the redundant loops of not only earthly orthodoxy, but also the doxologies of paradise.

Caillois' analysis of mimicry offers an additional pathway which may be of use to us. Echoing what has already been said in regard to the exuberant overflow of life forms (and what we can reiterate with Bataille's own insistence on the fact that "[t]he history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance"<sup>71</sup>), Caillois contemplates mimicry in the following fashion:

We are thus dealing with a *luxury* and even a dangerous luxury, for there are cases in which mimicry causes the creature to go from bad to worse: geometer-moth caterpillars simulate

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<sup>71</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. I, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 33.

shoots of shrubbery so well that gardeners cut them with their pruning shears. The case of the *Phyllia* [a species of moth] is even sadder: they browse among themselves, taking each other for real leaves, in such a way that one might accept the idea of a sort of collective masochism leading to mutual homophagy, the simulation of the leaf being a *provocation* to cannibalism in this kind of totem feast.<sup>72</sup>

And yet, even though in mimicry life reaches a fever pitch of seduction, yielding to this seduction “is necessarily accompanied by a decline in the feeling of personality and life. [...] [T]he animal mimics the plant, leaf, flower, or thorn, and disassembles or ceases to perform its functions in relation to others. *Life takes a step backwards*.”<sup>73</sup> We cannot escape the conclusion that what is momentarily grasped in the moment of mimicry is life folding over itself. Great energies swirl across the surface of the planet, taking here or there the shape of an organism or a catastrophe; as far as individuals engaging in mimetic practices are concerned, these energies become invested in one of the gravest sins against reality: simulation.

With the mention of sin we can now return to Simeon the Stylite, whose zeal was so pure that a man who had dared to imply that Simeon possessed money promptly had “his reason turned upside down, and he became as weak as water, and he tore his garments. They took him down, carrying him, and he remained two days in dreadful agonies, tortured, beating his head and gnashing his teeth; then he died.”<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless – despite Simeon’s institutionally sanctioned sainthood, attested by the lengths to which he went in his asceticism, and, of course, by numerous divine interventions on his behalf – it is possible to, firstly, locate certain ambiguities (inherent in all sacred matters), and secondly, to approach from a Bataillean position not only asceticism in general, but the stylite’s ascetic practice specifically.

<sup>72</sup> Cailliois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” p. 25.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>74</sup> “The Life of St. Simeon Stylites,” pp. 128-129.

The ambiguities of which we want to speak are perhaps primarily of an aesthetic character, stemming as they do from a peculiar analogy. The larvae of geometer-moths were mentioned above in reference to their nigh perfect imitation of branchlets, a resemblance achieved thanks to “the rigidity” of the “caterpillars standing bolt upright, which cannot fail to suggest hysterical contraction.”<sup>75</sup> This imagery is not without a certain connection to the image-reservoir tapped into by the following enumeration of Simeon’s achievements and qualities: “[...] immoderate fasting, standing day and night, continual prayer, persistent supplication, godly zeal which burned like a fire in him, bodily chastity with purity of his members.”<sup>76</sup> So many potent myths, images charged with powerful energy, define the value of these feats: sexual abstinence as purity, a positive valuation of warmth as propensity to involvement, repetition as maintenance, dietary restrictions as, again, purity, and the implication of purification by fire. Purity is the very image-system of asceticism: as we have said, it is the purity of the truly entropic signal, which can on this prison planet only be received as if through a glass, darkly, and which is pursued in manifold forms to the point of hysteria. (“Haunted by the idea of knowing what the key to the mystery is, a man becomes a reader of detective novels [...],” but “[t]here’s no explanation and *the mystery has no key*. There’s nothing conceivable outside ‘appearance,’ and the desire to escape appearance ends up switching appearances [...].”<sup>77</sup> Or, as T. S. Eliot phrased it: “Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.”<sup>78</sup>)

(A side note on purity: in a text devoted to the concept of emancipation, Lyotard

<sup>75</sup> Caillouis, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” p. 31.

<sup>76</sup> “The Life of St. Simeon Stylites,” p. 154.

<sup>77</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 83.

<sup>78</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in: *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 2002), p. 69.

succinctly summarised the Judeo-Christian approach to the matter: “emancipation is listening to the real manceps,”<sup>79</sup> to the one who seizes, grasps, takes hold of fate – this is to say that just as the Hebrews “escaped from the Pharaoh’s *mancipium* only by placing themselves under that of Yahweh,”<sup>80</sup> so “[o]ne frees oneself from death only by welcoming ‘the slavery of God, [...] which has as its reward, Holiness, and at its end, eternal life,’”<sup>81</sup> writes Lyotard with the help of saint Paul. As Mary Douglas’ analysis shows – providing the background against which Bataille’s disavowal of a complete vision of the universe shows its true colours – “[...] holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.”<sup>82</sup> An anthropic order cloaks itself in divinity, and thus the disappearance of cleanly cut, pure identities spells sin. In other words, one ought to always surrender oneself to order, enter the grip of “the real manceps” and become gripped by an obsession with maintaining purity, that radical separation which finds its most pronounced expression in asceticism. *In return*, one will be maintained – one’s essence refined, one’s body resurrected, healed – in a garden of crystalline structure, forevermore unchanging, undead; alas, “unbeingdead isn’t beingalive.”<sup>83</sup>)

A resonance occurs between Simeon – erect on top of a pillar, praying without pause, his existence as a self-preserving organism forfeit – and the geometer-moth caterpillar “standing bolt upright” on a branch, its existence as a self-preserving

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<sup>79</sup> Lyotard, “Mainmise,” trans. Elizabeth Constable, *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1992), p. 425.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p. 420.

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem, p. 424.

<sup>82</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 54.

<sup>83</sup> e. e. cummings, “POEM(or,” in: *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*, ed. George J. Firmage (New York: Liveright, 1991), p. 803.



organism forfeit as well (assuming one agrees with Caillois' refusal to recognise in mimicry a defence mechanism). And if mimicry can be "defined as *an incantation fixed at its culminating point* and having caught the sorcerer in his own trap," then, like Simeon, the caterpillar prays, too, at least to the extent that prayer can be pushed to the intensity of a feverish reverie, of setting oneself like an image among images, of a somnambulism during which neither Simeon remains himself nor the caterpillar persists as itself. But whereas the latter is caught up in a dream of being a twig, the question – what does Simeon become an image of – stands.

Simeon *wants* to boil down to divine entropy: even at the early stage of his quest, when he was still with the monks who limited him, "he gave himself the appearance of taking the food, although in reality he ate nothing at all."<sup>84</sup> In other words, nothing redundant was of any interest to him.<sup>85</sup> Similarly to the prayer-engrossed saint, the rigid caterpillar manifests through its spatial incantation a certain desire, of which Caillois writes thusly: "[...] alongside the instinct of self-preservation [...] there is generally speaking a sort of *instinct of renunciation* that orients it [life] toward a mode of reduced existence, which in the end would no longer know either consciousness or feeling – the *inertia of the élan vital*, so to speak."<sup>86</sup> In other words, what binds the stylite and the caterpillar – beside the imagery that the similarity of their positions produces – is an impulse towards self-negation. Hallucinatory analogies notwithstanding, it can hardly be argued that the saint attempted to mimic his pillar in the same way a caterpillar tries to

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<sup>84</sup> "The Life of St. Simeon Stylites," p. 119.

<sup>85</sup> Other people, being God's chosen creatures, partook in his eyes in the glory of the divine signal, and thus merited attention and received his aid, especially since it was the prophet Elijah himself who, having come to Simeon in a vision, uttered these words: "Be not afraid and be not affrighted, but be strong and valiant and brave, and of mortal man be not afraid. But rather above everything have care for the poor and the oppressed, and rebuke the oppressors and the rich," *ibidem*, p. 152.

<sup>86</sup> Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," p. 32.

mimic a branch, which is to say that it cannot be maintained that it was the physicality of the stone below that seduced him. Having become integrated, as it were, with his column, Simeon seems to have had become a holy hybrid: “a human-column hybrid.”<sup>87</sup>

Heather Hunter-Crawley writes that

[...] the iconographic evidence portrays an inability to separate saint and column. In a clay token in the Walters Museum, Baltimore (identified by the inscription of the saint’s name), Symeon’s head is modelled in the shape of an obelisk, by means of his tapering monastic hood [...]. This shape is a common feature throughout the iconography of the stylite, expressing both the monumental shape of the pillar and the typical dress of the monk, which crowned the column [...]. In its minimalist style,<sup>88</sup> the image encapsulates the core aspects of Symeon’s sainthood: his asceticism, and his column. These are the aspects which define him.<sup>89</sup>

She provides a variety of cult-related examples – products of the institution of hermitage which bridge or blur the supposed gap between man and column. Or rather, between man and self-sacrificial machine: as Harvey recounts, the result of an early visionary experience was that “Simeon took the place of incense on the altar of stone, as he would later take its place on higher altars when the pillars of successive height were built.”<sup>90</sup> Not only was his method inspired by a desire to take the place of an offering burnt on an altar, but the story of his death suggests a miraculous becoming that exceeded the merely visible: “[...] Simeon died after suffering a high fever for several days. It was the height of summer, and the heat was so intense that all the land was scorched. But on the third day of Simeon’s fever, a sweet and cooling breeze settled

<sup>87</sup> Heather Hunter-Crawley, “Divinity Refracted: Extended Agency and the Cult of Symeon Stylites the Elder,” in: *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Valentino Gasparini et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), p. 274.

<sup>88</sup> No style other than minimalism could relate so well to the stylite’s rejection of redundancy. Regarded in separation from the goal of salvation or in reference only to the order of things, asceticism should certainly be recognised as an exercise in silence, in the silencing of “ideas with which objects are manipulated.” Alas, though it is mundanely unproductive, it fails to attain “the silence that results from no reference,” and the sovereignty that comes from requiring no justification.

<sup>89</sup> Ibidem, p. 270.

<sup>90</sup> Harvey, “The Sense of a Stylite,” p. 385.

around his pillar [...]. The sweet savor increased in intensity until Simeon finally died.”<sup>91</sup> In the end, Simeon turned out to have been mimicking an offering, or rather: being burned as an offering, being consumed by fire (approximated by the intensities of pain, heat, hunger and thirst) for the glory of God, and eventually producing – in obedience to the rules of Leviticus – “an aroma pleasing to the Lord.”

Hunter-Crawley emphasises the embodied character of Simeon’s practices, bringing to the fore the background of the saint’s lived experience, namely a being-entangled in a world inhabited by God, a world in which the presence of God can become materially manifest precisely through people such as Simeon and through objects which had been charged, as it were, with holy power. As souvenirs commemorating the saint entered circulation, “pieces of the mountain” (on which the column stood) became “pieces of the saint,” made as they were from the “sacred dust” gathered at the site. Hence the core of Hunter-Crawley’s text: the notion of a “divinity refracted.”<sup>92</sup> Importantly, Hunter-Crawley places the incarnated character of the saint’s discipline on a philosophical axis, bracketing the time of Cartesian dualism with, on the one side, modern theories of embodied cognition, and on the other, “a pre-Cartesian understanding of distributed personhood, and thus agency,” an understanding exemplified by Simeon.<sup>93</sup>

To speak in Deleuzoguattarian terms: the saint was a body among bodies, and his pillar was also such a body, and so it happened that through a becoming-pillar – and in connection with the ascetic assemblage of enunciation – a machinic assemblage established itself. The cutting edge of its temple territory was drawn by a line of flight

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<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, p. 386.

<sup>92</sup> Hunter-Crawley, “Divinity Refracted,” p. 283.

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, pp. 261-262.

which, firstly, deterritorialized the saint in relation to the prison planet, and secondly, reterritorialized him in relation to Heaven – herein lies the deception, the plug blocking the line of flight from reaching absolute deterritorialization. Again we are dealing with a confusion of God and entropy – the former reterritorializes (facilitates a mythic interception; the Hydra: cut a word line and from the coordinate point at which the cut was made new lines sprout immediately – either new word lines or potential lines of flight), whereas the latter relates to the plane of consistency on which the immanence of base matter reigns, or rather: simply *is* (so as to avoid a misidentification it should be said that the plane of consistency is irreducible to the undifferentiation that follows death<sup>94</sup>).

An ascetic's line of flight is – despite an intimate affinity with abject materials that ascetics tend to manifest (“One recalls Francis of Assisi who visited leproseries ‘to give out alms and left only after having kissed each leper on the mouth’; who stayed with lepers and bathed their wounds, sponging pus and sores”<sup>95</sup>) – heavenward: a seductive dream of ascent. “Indeed, all three of his *Lives* abound with references to ascent as the fundamental activity of Symeon's sainthood and divine truth.”<sup>96</sup>

In chapter four, we have already touched upon Bataille's critique of the heavenward by invoking “The Language of Flowers,” a text in which Bataille analysed the positive valorisation of highness and the negative valorisation of lowness by investigating the dominant mode of perceiving plants. He has also pondered the relationship between the vertical axis and value in “The Big Toe,” where his approach is more straightforward:

<sup>94</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 269-270.

<sup>95</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 127.

<sup>96</sup> Hunter-Crawley, “Divinity Refracted,” p. 268.

Although within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high, there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as an elevation. The division of the universe into subterranean hell and perfectly pure heaven is an indelible conception, mud and darkness being the *principles* of evil as light and celestial space are the *principles* of good: with their feet in mud but their heads more or less in light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them, never to return, into pure space [Burroughs' work results directly from succumbing to such an imagining]. Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse – a rage that is easily directed against an organ as *base* as the foot.<sup>97</sup>

As Lakoff and Johnson would succinctly put it many years later in their exhaustive analysis of the Western metaphorical grid: “Good is up; bad is down;” hence, “virtue is up; depravity is down,” and furthermore, “rational is up; emotional is down.”<sup>98</sup>

Although saint Simeon's endeavours could hardly be reduced to rationalism – “[...] in climbing his column, Symeon practiced a means of experiencing the divine which was not accessible or even comprehensible through rational thought”<sup>99</sup> – they are emblematic of earlier religious assemblages of enunciation from which rationality has inherited its spatial conceptualisations. And if the saint's column was “an instrument of ascent,”<sup>100</sup> then it was necessarily an instrument in the service of these assemblages; an elevated altar/self-sacrificial machine, an *obelisk*: “In a clay token [...] Symeon's head is modelled in the shape of an obelisk [...]. This shape is a common feature throughout the iconography of the stylite [...].” Through these shapes given to devotional items, the circulation of an insightful intuition is rendered visible, an intuition on the subject of which Bataille wrote what follows: “The obelisk is without a doubt the purest image of the head and of the heavens. [...] And even today, wherever its rigid image stands out against the sky, it seems that sovereign permanence is maintained across the unfortunate

<sup>97</sup> Bataille, “The Big Toe,” in: *Visions of Excess*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>98</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 16-17.

<sup>99</sup> Hunter-Crawley, “Divinity Refracted,” p. 270.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 269.

vicissitudes of civilizations.”<sup>101</sup>

The role of all obelisks is either to condense human activity or to mark a place in which it has already become condensed; in so doing, obelisks congeal time, conquer it, or better still: *bind* it. A monument is “literally ‘something that reminds,’”<sup>102</sup> and so it exemplifies the mnemotechnical function of architecture by serving as a guarantee to the people who live in its shadow that their order has prevailed, and that it both prevails and will prevail. (Down below, reality flows unabated; but lo! Up from the molten mass of particles and intensities rise towers of monochrome – of eternal identity.)

A monument is a reminder, and as an obelisk it repeats the movement of ascension and reiterates the vertical axis in an imitation of the *axis mundi*. The human beings locked into an obelisk’s orbit – and thus into the (mnemo)semiotic lattice the obelisk casts over its surroundings – are furthermore intercepted by the thousand-faced myth of permanence and therefore believe themselves shielded from “the deleterious movement of time.”<sup>103</sup>

It is not by accident that in *Baphomet*, Pierre Klossowski’s theory-fiction on simulacra, the opposition of memory and oblivion is found at the forefront, for is memory not – by default – suspect of duplicity? Were it not so, a consensus (reality) would not be achievable exclusively as the overlap of a number of heterogeneous memories.

Foucault traces Klossowski’s inspiration regarding simulacra to a “somewhat obscure and secret side of the Christian experience”: “[...] the temptation to experience the temptation in the mode of the indiscernable,” a mode in which “[...] the perilous

<sup>101</sup> Bataille, “The Obelisk,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 215.

<sup>102</sup> Douglas Harper, “monument (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/monument#etymonline\\_v\\_17484](https://www.etymonline.com/word/monument#etymonline_v_17484) (27 January 2021).

<sup>103</sup> Bataille, “The Obelisk,” p. 216.

games of extreme similitude multiply: God so closely resembling Satan who imitates God so well....”<sup>104</sup> In other words, the experience Klossowski tries to approximate is an experience of doubt, of a profound uncertainty, which is in Foucault’s analysis exemplified in the following manner: when faced with the archetypal temptation – “through the cracks in the world, a whole people of strange animals rises up before the half-open eyes of the kneeling anchorite – ageless figures of matter”<sup>105</sup> (Simeon, too, had endured such trials: “the evil Enemy of mankind [...] appeared to him in various forms, in a variety of moulds, like vipers and other serpents, [...] in the form of a lion, and of a dragon [...]”<sup>106</sup>) – one should ask the question: “But what if [...] the Other were the Same?”<sup>107</sup> (A tangent: if the archetypal temptation is a form becomings-animal take sometimes,<sup>108</sup> then such a temptation is an event during which the world – in all its ruthless corporeality – invites the “human” animal not to recognise itself in the elusive starlight of the night sky, but to rediscover oneself among the “strange animals,” the “ageless figures of matter.”)

We have said that there is, in *Baphomet*, an opposition of memory and oblivion. However, what should perhaps be said instead is that what takes place is the slow revelation of memory as oblivion – or rather, as oblivion once again, to appropriate Nick Land’s formulation: “Spirit is different from matter and matter once again, culture is different from nature and nature once again, order is different from chaos and chaos once again, just as life is unilaterally different from death [...]”<sup>109</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Prose of Actaeon,” in: Pierre Klossowski, *The Baphomet*, trans. Sophie Hawkes and Stephen Sartarelli (Hygiene: Eridanos Press, 1988), pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>105</sup> Ibidem, p. xxi-xxii.

<sup>106</sup> “The Life of St. Simeon Stylites,” p. 137.

<sup>107</sup> Foucault, “The Prose of Actaeon,” p. xxii.

<sup>108</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 247.

<sup>109</sup> Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 143.

That spirit is matter once again is apparent in the form Klossowski gives to the characters in *Baphomet*, namely, the form of “breaths” – souls, pneumas, whiffs of spiration moving between the bodies of earthlings and animating them with intentions. But, contrary to the usual associations, the “breaths” are not an immutable stuff of eternity – they are even more malleable than the bodies of flesh. Indeed, without the redundant, hypostatic organism to weigh them down, the “breaths” merge with each other by mere interaction: undertaking an expression, a “breath” is wholly subsumed in its communication, and the other “breath” on whom something is to be impressed, is immediately influenced due to the fact that not only is the medium the message – the “breaths” themselves are the medium of their messages. Concerning Klossowski’s “breaths,” Lyotard wrote that “[t]he suppression of memorable and mnesiac bodies permits the interpenetration of intentions, that is to say their abolition for the benefit of anonymous intensities, for which there remains no instance to answer and to limit.”<sup>110</sup>

Within this strange spirit world, Klossowski stages a Templar drama in which the “breath” of a Grand Master, whose body has died a long time ago, gathers the “breaths” of other knights in the ruins of their old citadel in an attempt to preserve their identities on an Earth overflowing with “breaths” raging in whirlwinds and consuming one another. The Grand Master is visited by what he initially believes to be the “breath” of saint Teresa of Ávila, who claims that she had descended from the higher circles – from actual Heaven – so as to inform the Grand Master that no more “breaths” will ever ascend, and that his quest is, to put it shortly, doomed to fail. And so begins the Grand Master’s torment, for the visitant is not necessarily the “breath” of the saint, and its visit is only the first in a series of ambiguous encounters that precipitate a veritable vertigo of

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<sup>110</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p. 74.



simulacra.

For instance, even though an undeniable-yet-equivocal continuity is established throughout the book between the “breath” of saint Teresa and the entity that eventually proclaims itself to be Baphomet, the latter speaks at times as if to draw a line demarcating the realms of the “god of bone” and the “devil of flesh.”<sup>111</sup> Having uttered its name to the Grand Master once, it refuses to repeat it on the following grounds:

Too respectful of the Creator, I loyally comply with the covenant that binds us: memory is his domain, mine the self-oblivion of those reborn in me. And I shall take care not to remind Him that before creating the rest of you, he caused thousands of gods to die within Himself in order to create Himself unique! I can do nothing against the memory He leaves to his creatures.<sup>112</sup>

In the same conversation, it calls itself the “Prince of Modifications,” and informs the Grand Master that he who “nourishes his oblivion” with its “virgin milk” and seed (occult traditions depict Baphomet as an androgynous entity) “shall no longer be afraid of passing into the thousands of modifications that will never drain the Being.”<sup>113</sup>

Since God is a god of language, it follows that he is a god of memory, too, but if “he caused thousands of gods to die within Himself in order to create Himself unique,” then it is clear that (to repeat after Land) one is different from many and many once again, and thus notions of both *an* and *the* eternal identity give way to “. . . without name,” crumbling in a vision so dizzying that it would be futile to try to commit it to either memory or writing.

Thus, *Baphomet* sheds a symbolic light on the connection exercises in futility have with, firstly, self-abandon, and secondly, the metamorphic character of the left-hand sacred. Moreover, in glimpsing “the thousands of modifications” that exceed the limits

<sup>111</sup> Foucault, “The Prose of Actaeon,” p. xxvi.

<sup>112</sup> Klossowski, *The Baphomet*, p. 100.

<sup>113</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

of memory and language, we arrive at a silence – a strange one, to be sure, a silence not even of the animal, but rather of the mutant, or of the self silenced by fear, falling apart to the sounds of gristles throbbing in the process of mutation. To cease being “afraid of passing into the thousands of modifications” – to accept this multitudinous flow while laughing one’s self away in a vertiginous ecstasy – is to approach the Bataillean experience *par excellence*: “[...] only the vacancy of the self responding to the vacancy of God would constitute the sovereign moment.”<sup>114</sup> These are the words with which Klossowski finishes his article on Bataille’s attempts to somehow sidestep the limitations imposed on communication by notional language; acknowledging the residual nature of notions in relation to experience, Klossowski sees in Bataille an artificer forced, as it were, to work with simulacra: whenever Bataille’s writing approaches experience, he refers “immediately to *anguish*, to *gaiety*, to a *carefree abandon*: then he *laughs* and writes that he *died with laughter* or that he *laughed till he cried* – a state in which experience suppresses the subject.”<sup>115</sup> Therefore, the unintelligible remains just so. What one is left with are mere approximations: “If, in the night, the sidewalk vanishes beneath my feet, for a brief instant, my heart sinks: I have a weak idea of the absence of God.”<sup>116</sup> The sensation – *the visceral feeling* – of a surprise step at the bottom of the stairs approximates the reciprocal vacancy of the self and God; in such a vertigo, the coordinates within the bounds of which the subject of habitual actions is formed are motion-blurred, permitting one to slip – permitting the “oneness” of a being to slip.

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<sup>114</sup> Klossowski, “Of the Simulacrum in Georges Bataille’s Communication,” in: *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. and trans. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 154.

<sup>115</sup> Ibidem, pp. 148-149.

<sup>116</sup> Bataille, “The Absence of God,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 103.

It is with strikingly similar approximations – or, as Klossowski would have it, simulacra – that Bataille writes of becoming dislodged from the security of the obelisk’s orbit. (How could the similarities be absent: as we have already mentioned, Bataille repeats, per-mutates, reiterates, *insists* on what – this, too, has already been called forth – Baudrillard called the mythic assertion, an assertion spread rhizomatically throughout Bataille’s works: the human being must experience itself in its own excess, through experiences that are futile not only because they cut across the chains of production, but also because they puncture memory – a night of heavy drinking followed by a blackout is the simplest example of how it is only the fragmentary that memory retains, and “never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for [...] memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly [...].”) In “The Obelisk,” Bataille affirms that the security of the monument’s orbit is not necessarily proportional to the explicit sway held by symbols in power – on the contrary, if the situation is such that the myths in control have successfully supplanted any former realities, then the apparent transparency of their reality renders the obelisks themselves redundant, to an extent:

The pure image of the heavens, the purified image of the king, of the chief, of the *head* and of his firmness, this pure image of the sky crossed by rays, commands the concord and the assurance of those who do not *look at it*, and who are not struck by it; but a mortal torment is the lot of the one before whom its reality becomes naked.<sup>117</sup>

When one dares to interrogate the meaning of a monument whose memorial charge has all but dissipated, what ensues is the vertigo of a sinking heart, an “endless fall”:

For it is the foundation of things that has fallen into a bottomless void. And what is

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<sup>117</sup> Bataille, “The Obelisk,” p. 221.

fearlessly conquered – no longer in a duel where the death of the hero is risked against that of the monster, in exchange for an indifferent duration – is not an isolated creature; it is the very void and the vertiginous fall, it is TIME. The movement of all life now places the human being before the alternatives of either this conquest or a disastrous retreat. The human being arrives at the threshold: there he must throw himself headlong into that which has no foundation and no head.<sup>118</sup>

One is reminded of Shelley's "Ozymandias," "King of Kings," whose "shattered visage lies" next to "legs of stone" that "[s]tand in the desert" – a monument of power beheaded by the flow of aeons. "Ozymandias" bestows upon the reader a vision of the voracity of time: "Round the decay / Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare, / The lone and level sands stretch far away."<sup>119</sup> The very same voracity is expressed in Bataille's vision, which is – as was Nietzsche's – bound with the vision of Heraclitus: "TIME is the object of the vision of Heraclitus. TIME is unleashed in the 'death' of the One whose eternity gave Being an immutable foundation,"<sup>120</sup> "the foundation of things that has fallen into a bottomless void." The point, then, is to rejoice: to laugh while throwing oneself "headlong" past "the threshold," to laugh in the face of Ozymandias (knowing full well that it is, intimately speaking, one's own face<sup>121</sup>), to recognise with gaiety that the ruin of his monument is, firstly, an "image of Acephalus" – "a powerful figure of dissimilarity, the negative imago of an antimonumental madness involved in the dismemberment of 'meaning'"<sup>122</sup> – secondly, a simulacrum of the death of God (an element of a recurrent sequence involving the god-head-king complex), and thus, thirdly, a promise of "the Heraclitean world of rivers and flames,"<sup>123</sup> a world in which

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<sup>118</sup> Ibidem, p. 222.

<sup>119</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Volume Three*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 326.

<sup>120</sup> Bataille, "The Obelisk," p. 220.

<sup>121</sup> "In short, one never laughs alone: one laughs at oneself through the other or, better yet, at oneself *as* other," Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, "The Laughter of Being," trans. Terry Thomas, in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 162.

<sup>122</sup> Denis Hollier, "Bloody Sundays," *Representations*, No. 28 (1989), p. 79.

<sup>123</sup> Ibidem, p. 216.

the ultimate futility of all accomplishments – symbolised by the ruined statue of Ozymandias – is finally embraced by the human being.<sup>124</sup> It is important, however, that it should not be merely accepted, begrudgingly tolerated with the aid of banal distractions; the embrace of futility – if it is earnest – equals ecstasy.

Let us repeat after Bataille – “TIME is unleashed in the ‘death’ of the One whose eternity gave Being an immutable foundation” – and wonder, following Land: “Perhaps it is that God mistakes himself for time, until he sees things die without reluctance, and turns upon himself in unfathomable desperation.”<sup>125</sup> If, as Land would have it, the mortal creature’s readiness to die – to exceed itself – incites jealousy in the immortal creator, and if “[t]ime is the suicidal jealousy of God, to which each being – even the highest – must fall victim,”<sup>126</sup> then the “very movement” of “cruel splendors” (the death-bound, and thus beautiful, glide of being) becomes twisted into a paradox: time itself is both the condition for and the consequence of the mortal creature’s excess. Truth be told, however, Land’s reading of Bataille lacks the maturity which allowed the latter to recognise, if only on the level of mythology, the importance of God’s self-sacrifice, that is, of the crucifixion, which opened a communicative wound between humanity and God,<sup>127</sup> and through which “Jesus let himself be treated like a criminal and reduced to the condition of a tortured body, thus identifying himself with the left and immediately repulsive form of the sacred,” which only later underwent a transformation into the

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<sup>124</sup> In a reading rooted in the Hegelian undercurrents of Bataille’s thought, Jean-Michel Besnier proposes that Bataille’s position – which was that of a “negativity without a cause,” a life questioning itself at the supposed end of history, when “action has [...] become futile and illusory” – required a decision “to live to the full extent of those states, or rather those ecstasies which are the reverse side of and the objection to a complete rationality dreamed by the philosophers.” See: Jean-Michel Besnier, “Bataille, the Emotive Intellectual,” trans. Alisdair McIntosh, in: *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Gill (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 20-21.

<sup>125</sup> Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 94.

<sup>126</sup> Ibidem, p. 95.

<sup>127</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1992), pp. 17-18.

right-hand sacred.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, the god of language and memory is, by his own admission, a jealous god; and even when memory reaches the peak of its intensity through poetic language – in which words are offered in sacrifice, sanctified beyond utility – it still cannot help remembering itself. Hence the allure of techniques that, like automatic writing, pulverise the subject in an instant,<sup>129</sup> or between the successive transgressions of the self achieved through a method that, if performed honestly, turns writing into reading. However, the role of automatic writing in surrealism was problematic due to the movement's high curricular emphasis on the subsequent reformulation of the subject enriched by an encounter with the unconscious, for such an approach mirrored the mystical experience of God, which, though it temporarily violates the integrity of the mystic's individuality, in the end leads to this individuality becoming reassured of itself.

Another confusing vista: an ascetic's plunge into self-abnegation is in excess of God's eternity: by virtue of being redundant – of being, etymologically speaking, an overflow – in regard to the ascetic's understanding of that eternity, his temporal selfhood is for him nothing but deadwood that he cannot wait to jettison. But it is God's eternity that is in fact redundant and stable, whereas the ascetic's plunge makes its escape, introduces entropy into institutions concerned with the preservation of selves: “the asceticism machine is in an anomalous position, on a line of flight, off to the side of the

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<sup>128</sup> Roger Caillois, “Power,” in: *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 133-136. Though the lecture is listed as if it was delivered by Caillois, it was in fact presented by Bataille due to the former's illness. On the transformation of the sacred force embodied by Christ, see also: Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 26-29.

<sup>129</sup> Bataille, “The Surrealist Religion,” in: *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006), p. 76.

Church, and disputes the Church's pretension to set itself up as an imperial institution"<sup>130</sup>:

The mystic's familiarity with abjection is a fount of infinite jouissance. One may stress the masochistic economy of that jouissance only if one points out at once that the Christian mystic, *far from using it to the benefit of a symbolic or institutional power*, displaces it indefinitely (as happens with dreams, for instance) within a discourse where the subject is resorbed (is that grace?) into communication with the Other and with others. [italics – M.H.]<sup>131</sup>

Of course, it is in the nature of institutions to intercept and annex outliers – hence the workings of the institution of hermitage which resulted in the transformation of Simeon's life of relinquishment into memory and memorabilia, into a legacy secure under the sign of the stone obelisk.

Let us briefly recapitulate the main points with which we have concerned ourselves in this chapter so far, so as to have a more or less clear perspective before we continue our discussion on asceticism by moving onto the possibility of appreciating it from a Bataillean perspective.

Firstly, the negentropic vector points toward a redundant order resulting from the harmonic overlap of functionalised loops: if something works well, it repeats itself. The ascetic vector flies off in the opposite direction, its course set for a kingdom not of this redundant world. If we take into account Bataille's basic premises concerning eroticism – the consanguinity of mystical and erotic experiences, and the profound connection these experiences have with death, destruction, dissolution – then it becomes clear how the ascetic becomes trapped: in ascesis one simultaneously yearns for entropy and ties oneself up with redundant assumptions.<sup>132</sup> This is the masochistic structure of ascesis,

<sup>130</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 247.

<sup>131</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 127.

<sup>132</sup> "Christian humility is disastrous, above all contradictory, related to an inevitable obsession with a *self*! Think of the monstrous immortality of the *egos* that are heaven and hell!" (Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 115).

and it is, to a certain extent, the cardinal error of most religiously defined lines of entropic flight. Even Bataille's insistence on pursuing the impossible, the unknown, and the mutual destruction of subject and object in non-knowledge, can only reach us by the means of profane transmissions: books and articles which had to be written – given an encrypted, and thus redundant shape – and then published. What remains of Bataille is an incomplete, horrible code, and its execution results in a wound that cannot heal. Furthermore, it would so far seem that Bataille's attitude towards ascetic practices was disdainful, predominantly negative – we will soon see that the matter at hand is somewhat more complicated.

Secondly, if the sage's aphorism is to communicate, then it has to be capable of inflicting wounds: it must partake in entropy, it has to entail its own destruction, destabilisation; it has to convey an opening, render the sage and his listeners "mutually penetrable each to the other." Or – at both least and most – the aphorism should make one laugh: "Laughter intuits the truth which the rupture at the summit lays bare: that our will to arrest being is damned."<sup>133</sup> When a sentence provokes one to laughter, it succeeds in tearing itself apart (in sabotaging "the very process that links" words) and confronting one with the gap that, while being experienced in laughter, yawns between concepts which had hitherto appeared as if tightly interlocked. In other words, an adequately ludicrous aphorism exposes the human being – whose subjecthood it suspends in laughter – to the void that permeates notions, to the futility that encroaches upon rational operations.

And thirdly, the stylite saint provides us – unwittingly, and contrarily to the legacy established by the institution of hermitage – with a figure ("[...] the body's gesture

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<sup>133</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 91.



caught in action [...]”<sup>134</sup>) that allows us to imagine a most fitting simulacrum of the human condition at its most sovereign: driven by an excess of desire, the saint climbs his obelisk which is then “[...] projected to the ends of time. It rises, immutable – there – dominating time’s desperate flight. But even while it is blinded by this domination, madness, which flits about its angles in the manner of an insect fascinated by a lamp, recognises only endless time escaping in the noise of successive explosions.”<sup>135</sup> A mad saint – leaving behind the personal individuality of *the* stylite saint – is fated by these “successive explosions” – each second torn asunder by the interplay of brilliant supernovae and globules of star-forming gases – to be a paradoxical figment of the ultimate alternative. On the one hand, the grand finale of entropy: the heat-death of the universe, hell frozen over. On the other hand, the endgame of negentropy: a perfect, inescapable order, an unfailing performance of countless furnaces fuelling a hellscape: absolutely everything subjected completely to a useful purpose, the exuberance of spontaneous life formation extinguished, all organic life reforged with nothing but reasonably defined function in mind, every conceivable resource optimally acquisitioned and put to work, the clinamen understood, subdued, explained away with answers unswerving. No more catastrophe, no more sovereignty: eternal servitude, utility without end.

(One is left with a question: is there a point of no return, an event horizon, as it were, of Caillois’ assimilation by space, that would be something other than death, the heat-death of the universe? A place from which no divine intervention could pull one-who-is-no-longer-one back into the “the prison of individuation,” rebind the molecules

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<sup>134</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>135</sup> Bataille, “The Obelisk,” p. 221.

scattered by an unknown ecstasis?)

As we continue on our path, we must begin by taking a step back. Roger Caillois' research on mimicry has been invoked earlier so that the thread of his "temptation by space" could be connected to our weave, and he has been quoted in regard to the self-experimentation entailed by his inquiry into spatial allure: as we have seen, he "deliberately aggravated" his "attack of 'legendary psychasthenia'" "for purposes of ascesis and interpretation."

Until now, the question concerning the meaning of Caillois' "ascesis" was put off, for it could not have been – on the level of frameworks – the same mode of self-discipline that saint Simeon laboured under. Caillois does not elaborate on this issue in any way other than by associating the ever-enchancing theme of the temptations of saint Anthony – which epitomises the struggles of asceticism – with the experience of being charmed by space to the point of a sinful immersion in matter.<sup>136</sup> Perhaps his other works could provide us with some nuance? In *Man, Play and Games*, he mentions the intersection of asceticism and shamanism, and points out the role of ascent – so essential, as we have seen, in saint Simeon's practice – in both of these methods: the ascetic/shaman learns how to liberate oneself from the physical world, or maybe how to raise the anchor that limits one's experience to that world.<sup>137</sup>

A shaman takes flight, journeys across spirit realms and enters polytheist, pagan interactions.<sup>138</sup> The Christian mystic has visions of the heavens and enters monotheist, albeit multitudinous interactions with, for example, angelic hierarchies or the prophets.

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<sup>136</sup> Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," p. 31.

<sup>137</sup> Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 100.

<sup>138</sup> See: Jerzy Wasilewski, *Podróż do piekiel. Rzecz o szamańskich misteriach* (Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1979).

Despite their obvious differences (partially measurable by the degree to which the original, material surroundings are relegated to the realm of the redundant), both of these quests grow from the mythologies of the heavenward in reference to which the axes of sanctity are oriented.

It is unlikely, however, that Caillois' asceticism served a similar purpose, or that he used the word in the hope of eliciting similar sentiments. A more relevant passage can be found in *Man and the Sacred*, where he describes an ascetic's endeavours in the following way:

He acquires, by the impossible and the forbidden, a *beyond* reserved for him alone and corresponding exactly to the *here and now* of the possible and the permitted that he had abandoned. [...] The ascetic, who augments his powers to the degree that he diminishes his pleasures, transcends mankind, approaches the Gods, and rapidly becomes their peer. It is, moreover, to his profit that the balance should be disturbed. The Gods dread having to pay dearly for so many mortifications, and soon have to lead him into all manner of temptations in order to deprive him of a power capable of upsetting theirs. This theme recurs repeatedly in mythology.<sup>139</sup>

"This theme recurs repeatedly in mythology," both in the sense of pagan belief systems and in the most general meaning of narrative parasites. Structurally speaking, one sacrifices one's possibilities of rest, relaxation, repose, and in return is granted a most desirable boon: a chance to act upon an impossibility, to perform a miraculous feat; so skeletal a description of the ascetic operation invites comparison with the emphasis Bataille put on the ineluctable incompatibility of the relentless questioning and rest – we will return to this issue.

What should be stressed at the moment is that the excerpt quoted above brings us closer to understanding Caillois' asceticism: through the ordeal of self-experimentation that he had subjected himself to, his powers of understanding were increased. The world of

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<sup>139</sup> Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, trans. Meyer Barash (Glencoe: The Free Press of Glencoe, Illinois, 1959), pp. 28-29.

delineated, separate entities – which is possible by default in our biosocial arrangement – gave way to the impossibility of breaking free from “the prison of individuation,” of falling into immanence, if only for an instant. Since Caillois’ ascetic experiment resulted in neither his death nor a different way out of “the prison of individuation,” space regurgitated what it had temporarily assimilated, and the regurgitated *it* found itself being Caillois once again, a Caillois who now knew things previously unknown.<sup>140</sup>

Although Mark Meyers claims that the “depleting depersonalization Caillois linked to animal mimicry was not for him a desirable thing when it occurred in human beings,” suggesting that “it might be read as one of the more oblique ways he relayed his feeling that he was living in an increasingly monotonous, atomised world, one that was devoid of collective ‘exuberance and jubilation,’”<sup>141</sup> such an unequivocal judgement does not seem to be corroborated by Caillois’ text and the connections postulated therein between mimicry and magic rituals which were performed, after all, during times of “collective ‘exuberance and jubilation.’” Even Meyers’ own text goes on to highlight the importance of depersonalisation in the institution of secret societies, the function of which – according to Caillois – would be “to conceive a form of self-loss that would rescue the vitality of the self – and the community – without inventing a new political religion or assigning sacred status to homogenizing, identitarian, ‘monocephalic’ categories such as the Nation.”<sup>142</sup>

The idea of “a form of self-loss that would rescue the vitality of the self” is only contradictory on the surface level. We have established that the ascetic’s renunciation

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<sup>140</sup> See: Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 52-55.

<sup>141</sup> Mark Meyers, “Secret Societies, Animal Mimicry, and the Cultural History of Early French Postmodernism,” *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, Vol. 42 (2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.0642292.0042.012> (19 February 2021).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibidem*.

misses the point of no return and is reverted back to structure. However, if one were to follow Denis Hollier's analysis of Caillois' thought, then that fact should be recognised not as a failure, but rather as a positive outcome, a basis for a different, heterogeneous structure which could house the sacred – entemple the sacred, so to speak – and oppose itself to forces of homogeneity. As we read in Hollier's book:

Like the male praying mantis, like those insects that turn themselves into branches among branches, leaves among leaves, the cleric too gives up self-possession, but his renunciation takes on new meaning; instead of accelerating the general tendency toward entropy, the cleric's self-abnegation reverses it, thereby producing effects of negative entropy [...].<sup>143</sup>

Perhaps, then, what Meyers meant is better formulated by Hollier, who writes that “[t]he description of mimetic behaviors is not a pretext for singing the praises of psychasthenia.” Instead, Hollier argues, the “cleric's” self-abnegation is to be thought of as a blueprint, a method that has to be perfected by the members of a secret society, whose success would inadvertently depend on, firstly, their ability to engage in social mimicry, and secondly, being able to engender change from within the social tissue into which they have allowed themselves to be assimilated. “The conflict between the individual and society is displaced in favor of more subtle strategies in which society, absorbed in its contentious dealings with its double, turns against itself. This confrontation takes the form of mimetic subversion [...]”<sup>144</sup> deployed by a fellowship of people who no longer own themselves – mimesis “[...] destroys the self as property”<sup>145</sup> – who suppress their selves in a peculiar, social asceticism.

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<sup>143</sup> Hollier, *Absent Without Leave: French Literature Under the Threat of War*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 42.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 42-44.

<sup>145</sup> John T. Hamilton, “The Luxury of Self-destruction: Flirting with Mimesis with Roger Caillois,” conference paper, *Flirtations: Rhetoric and Aesthetics This Side of Seduction, a Poetics and Theory/Comparative Literature Workshop*, 2012, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:14065783> (22 February 2021).

The collective character of this discipline is not necessarily what makes it stand out – after all, religious mysticism takes both anachoretic and cenobitic forms. What merits a closer view is how it differs from orthodox asceticism – if one can say so – in that the latter functions as an intermundane (relating to several planes of existence) reciprocation: as we have already said with the help of Caillois’ words, the ascetic “augments his powers to the degree that he diminishes his pleasures,” and this exchange is possible within a hierarchy of worlds which sanctions it: the ascetic is rewarded by *someone*, someone other than him- or herself, and can even become a sign for this someone/something other than him- or herself. In contrast, the selflessness ideally attained by the members of the secret society is mundane – referring to a single plane of existence and thus unsanctioned by higher laws – and therefore its purpose is not to earn a reward, but to bring into the world a difference borne precisely out of the discipline itself.

This also holds true in the case of Caillois’ solitary experiment in the weakening of selfhood. It was not supposed to bring him extraterrestrial, divinely-sourced insights; it was not a bargain struck at the meeting of worlds or transcendent strata, but an intense questioning of the reality in which one finds – or tries to discard – oneself. In other words, Caillois’ experiment leads us towards entertaining the idea of asceticism as an exercise in excess: neither a rejection of being in the world, nor a removal of the world from being. On the contrary: a participation in the overflow.

This, in turn, brings us to the conclusion at which Janae Sholtz arrives in an article comparing the thoughts of Bataille and Deleuze insofar as these thinkers concerned themselves with practices that could be considered ascetic:

*Askesis*, rather than a form of self-denial (i.e. abstention from pleasures or passions), can mean the fortitude to undergo immense intensifications of life, and, in fact, it is these moments of overflowing plenitude that move us beyond the desiccated husks of our individuality towards the possibility of greater empathetic consideration of others and/or greater communion with cosmic otherness.<sup>146</sup>

Sholtz reaches such a conclusion having gathered and perused passages from Bataille's texts that are relevant to his methods of meditation and the facilitation of inner experience, highlighting along the way the link between Bataille's techniques and his notions of the restricted and general economy presented in *The Accursed Share*.

The interlinked relationship between a restricted and a general economy is akin to that of a circuit within a circuitry. In other words, to speak of economy as of the continuous exchange of goods and such between persons and other legal entities is to speak of the restricted economy; it is only when we look past the human organisation of resources that we can see the general economy,<sup>147</sup> the anthropoperipheral economy – to paraphrase China Miéville's expression – of material flows,<sup>148</sup> encompassing both orogenic tectonics and formican colonialism, both the dark life of the deep sea and – most importantly – the inaudible roar of the luminous Sun, whose role in the very existence of Earth and earthly life cannot be overstated; on the solar core of Bataille's economic thought, Jean Piel writes as follows:

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<sup>146</sup> Janae Sholtz, "Bataille and Deleuze's Peculiar *Askesis*: Techniques of Transgression, Meditation and Dramatisation," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2020), pp. 225. Given that – as Lydia Amir highlights – "Bataille's work is primarily a communion of lived experience," of the "overflowing plenitude" that a contagious experience can be, an investigation into the entanglement of Bataille's thought in the philosophy of the life-world would be warranted; alas, it is outside the scope of this thesis; see: Lydia Amir, "Georges Bataille on Experience," *Utopia y Praxis Latinoamericana*, Vol. 21, No. 72 (2016), p. 15.

<sup>147</sup> A notion which Baudrillard would come to redevelop under the name of symbolic exchange; see: William Pawlett, "The Sacred, Heterology and Transparency: Between Bataille and Baudrillard," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 35, No. 4-5 (2018), p. 183. See also: Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 61-62.

<sup>148</sup> For a reading of Burroughs that sees his method of the cut-up as the re-introduction of a hitherto restricted text into a general economy of meaning, see: Daniel Sander, "Neo Boys," *Pivot*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2016), pp. 153-185.

[...] since it is a question of energy considered thus as a cosmic phenomenon, a great hypothesis is put forward: there is always excess, because the sun's rays, which are the source of growth, are given without measure. "The sun gives without ever receiving," thus there is necessarily accumulation of an energy that can only be spent in exuberance and effervescence.<sup>149</sup>

When speaking of what is profligate in existence, Bataille often calls upon the gross incandescence, the solar magnanimosity, and what inspires him is precisely the fact that "the sun gives without ever receiving," that the explosion in the warmth of which one endures one's orderly existence is in fact pure consumption, mad expenditure without pause, reserve, or schedule.

In "The Pineal Gland" – a foray into the realm of an unmoored mythology, where the products of human intellect result evolutionarily from the anal exuberance of our primate ancestors<sup>150</sup> – the Sun is "shocking" and "sick," and its actions are primarily envisioned in terms of vomiting and defecation – heterogeneously base movements of waste. Elsewhere, one reads of a "Rotten Sun":

If we describe the notion of the sun in the mind of one whose weak eyes compel him to emasculate it, that sun must be said to have the poetic meaning of mathematical serenity and spiritual elevation. If on the other hand one obstinately focuses on it, a certain madness is implied, and the notion changes meaning because it is no longer production that appears in light, but refuse or combustion, [...] a mental ejaculation, foam on the lips, and an epileptic crisis.<sup>151</sup>

Bataille's attitude towards the Sun – which is more blasphemous than pagan – receives its most concise formulation in the very title of yet another short text, namely, "The Solar Anus,"<sup>152</sup> a sweeping vision of planet Earth as an orgy spanning both organic

<sup>149</sup> Jean Piel, "Bataille and the World: From 'The Notion of Expenditure' to *The Accursed Share*," in: *On Bataille*, p. 102. For Baudrillard's rebuttal to Bataille's "naturalisation" of the gift economy, see: Jean Baudrillard, "When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy," trans. Stuart Kendall, *Excess*, No. 5 (2005), p. 47.

<sup>150</sup> Bataille, "The Pineal Eye," in: *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 88-89.

<sup>151</sup> Bataille, "Rotten Sun," in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 57.

<sup>152</sup> Bataille, "The Solar Anus," in: *Visions of Excess*, pp. 5-9.



life and the inorganic arrangement of the globe, and an anticipation of the general economy which was later delivered in a more scientific (or restricted, ironically enough<sup>153</sup>) manner on the pages of *The Accursed Share*. The piece's title puts forth the possibility of placing both the Sun and the anus in a series, with one being a parody of the other, given that, as we learn from the very first sentence of the piece, "each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form."<sup>154</sup> The similitude of the star and the rectum lies in the nature of their dominant movement: expulsion.

Being pure consumption, the Sun is also gold – pure luxury. Being pure expulsion, it is the anus, (im)pure heterogeneity. (It is instructive in this context to consider what follows: before it came to be that, in the Byzantine Empire, light itself was placed as an intermediary link in an iconic chain – binding it to, on the upper side, God, and on the lower side, gold – the alchemists of Late Antiquity thought that metals are born within the bowels of Earth as a result of the divine celestial bodies sending down their rays, and that it followed, therefore, that gold has to be a residue of sunbeams, something originating from the Sun.<sup>155</sup> It was the Aztecs, however, who, having noticed the connection between celestial bodies and chthonic riches – especially between the Sun and gold – took the implication of this observation to its end: gems, minerals, and metals were in their view excremental in nature, and thus, gold had to be "*tonatiuh icuitl*, 'the excrement of the sun,'"<sup>156</sup> or, as Bataille would have it, of the solar anus – hence the

<sup>153</sup> For a somewhat far-fetched reading of the "general" economy as, in fact, "restricted," see: Geoffrey Bennington, "Introduction to Economics I: Because the World is Round," in: *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, pp. 47-58.

<sup>154</sup> Bataille, "The Solar Anus," p. 5. On parody in Bataille, see also: Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 33-35.

<sup>155</sup> Sergiusz Awierincew, „Złoto w systemie symboli kultury wczesnobizantyjskiej,” in: *Na skrzyżowaniu tradycji*, trans. Danuta Ulicka (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1988), pp. 184-190.

<sup>156</sup> Cecelia F. Klein, "Teocuitlatl, 'Divine Excrement': The Significance of 'Holy Shit' in Ancient Mexico," *Art Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (1993), p. 25.

supreme splendour commanded by this element, a splendour connected in the Aztec system to an entire circulation of purity and danger, expiation and pollution.<sup>157</sup> A question imposes itself on us: if “each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form,” then is gold, or the semiotic of gold, parodic in relation to faecal matter and its semiotic, or is the latter a parody of the former? The vertiginously vanishing point lies in this ambiguous – and thus sacred, inutile, luxurious – indeterminacy.) The bountiful energy of excess that the Sun showers the Earth with challenges earthlings to honour that excess in their own energetic economies; cue in Jürgen Habermas:

Bataille proceeds from the biological assumption that the living organism collects more energy than it uses to reproduce its life. The surplus energy is used for growth. When this comes to a standstill, the unabsorbed surplus of energy has to be spent unproductively – the energy must be lost without gain. This can occur in either a “glorious” or in “catastrophic” form. Socio-cultural life also stands under the pressure of surplus energy.<sup>158</sup>

Socio-cultural forms of life are thus forced to somehow expend this accursed, surplus energy – to collectively experience overflow – and the ways in which they do so render visible the conceptual, notional frameworks that crystallised within those forms of life; in the simplest, binary terms, a question might be asked: will a culture celebrate and bask in the overflow, or will a culture try to secure whatever spills over, pouring it back into productive hydraulics, make it earn interest? In other words, if we differentiate between two impulses – one of accumulation, and one of consumption – which will a given culture find itself giving precedence to? (Saint Simeon’s folly – and, in this case, the folly of the Christian mystic in general – can be reiterated in these terms, too: on the

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<sup>157</sup> Ibidem, pp. 20-27.

<sup>158</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille Between Eroticism and General Economics,” trans. Frederick Lawrence, in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 186.

one hand, the saint wants to expend everything in an all-consuming pursuit of God, but on the other, it is impossible to isolate his endeavour from the will to accumulate: to attract God's approval and secure an afterlife; one could even argue that the saint consumes nothing, that his quest is, in fact, pure, heavenward accumulation).

"In *The Accursed Share* Bataille outlines a number of social responses to the unsublatable wave of senseless wastage welling up beneath human endeavour, which he draws from a variety of cultures and epochs"<sup>159</sup>: "Just as Islam reserved all the excess for war, and the modern world for industrial development, Lamaism put everything into the contemplative life, the free play of the sensitive man in the world." This third, monastic path is extraordinary, for it finds a form of expression for "the essence of consumption, which is to open, to give, to lose, and which brushes calculations aside." The ossification of that enlightenment – the system of social life cultivated around it – "ceases [...] to subject life to any other ends but life itself: Directly and immediately, life is its own end."<sup>160</sup> (Thus is made clear what – in Bataille's view – divides the Buddhist monk from the Christian mystic.)

Such a channelling of the surplus energy seems – even if only on the level of Western notions – to connect with the structure Bataille ascribes to sacrifice, and of which he writes, for instance, what follows:

Sacrifice is the antithesis of production, which is accomplished with a view to the future; it is consumption that is concerned only with the moment. This is the sense in which it is gift and relinquishment, but what is given cannot be an object of preservation for the receiver: the gift of an offering makes it pass precisely into the world of abrupt consumption.<sup>161</sup>

Once we connect all of this – "all of this" being: the possibility of a worldly

<sup>159</sup> Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 65.

<sup>160</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. I, p. 109.

<sup>161</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Richard Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 49. On the issue of consumption in modern-day capitalism, see footnote 4 in chapter nine.

asceticism, the general economy, the solar anus or the anal Sun, and the fact that movements of consumption and expenditure draw lines of flight that lead outside the restricted economy of utility – what comes into view is the possibility of what could be called, in reference to Bataille’s understanding of the Sun and its energy, a solar asceticism.

A state of such an ascesis could not be reached by defending oneself against the mundane. If the Christian mystic – who practises orthodox asceticism (so to speak) – does nothing but accumulate God’s approval, then a solar ascetic would, by contrast, engage in acts of profoundly useless consumption through which nothing ulterior could be achieved, from which nothing that lends itself to accumulation could be gained. In other words, the solar ascetic’s quest is to identify and commit such acts, avoiding, however, the de-intensification that results from barren hedonism.

Admittedly, solar asceticism retains the character of a project; what speaks in its favour, however, is that it also retains the structural contradiction that characterises every transgression: attempts at crossing a limit institute the limit, and, as Sholtz repeats after Foucault, to actually reach a limit is to in fact displace it, push it even further<sup>162</sup>; therefore, to actively and intentionally seek futility or uselessness translates to finding a kind of use for something hitherto useless, but if one starts going in circles (the use that has been found is itself useless) – if one plugs one’s self into this loop – then the potential of losing that self in a circular labyrinth becomes unlocked.

With the figure of a solar ascetic enveloped in his errantry at hand, we are better equipped to understand a curious change of heart expressed in *Guilty*, where Bataille’s attitude regarding ascesis is already different from the one exhibited in *Inner Experience*

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<sup>162</sup> Sholtz, “Bataille and Deleuze’s Peculiar *Askesis*,” p. 208.

in that it becomes equivocal.<sup>163</sup> There are passages in which it is still the “ugly”<sup>164</sup> business of those who would see life impoverished and subordinated to transcendent arrangements, but there are also paragraphs which rather explicitly suggest that such an understanding of the practice fails to exhaust its importance (etymologically, the capacity for bringing about change<sup>165</sup>) in human existence: “What I hope for is unpretentious asceticism adorning an aloof, gloomy, and unconventional life. Asceticism of this kind couldn’t be protected from tidal waves, however, and in every way it would accommodate dangerous excesses.”<sup>166</sup>

As we can see, the possibility of a different ascesis is explicitly confirmed, and the mimics of (secret) society and the solar ascetic – a godless saint adrift in the sovereign effusions of laughter, poetry, eroticism, meditation, intoxication (a participant of the overflow) – are but two possibilities among others, all of them reaching out, in one way or another, for the impossible, like a plant bristling with leaves in the spring, grasping for the beams.

Among the differentiating qualities of these asceticisms is their worldliness: unlike Christ’s kingdom, they are *mundane* in the sense of being *of this world* – let us try and

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<sup>163</sup> Nevertheless, Andrew Hussey writes of Bataille’s practice of inner experience that it is “not a catharsis but an ascesis,” and “an authentic engagement with essential aspects of existence” (*The Inner Scar*, p. 165). And indeed, to live through an inner experience is to undergo a self-mortification, to commit violence against one’s *self*, against one’s subjecthood, which – in everyday conditions – masks the “essential aspects of existence” the truth of which flows most easily between beings unencumbered with an over-developed sense of individuality. Moreover, according to Besnier, what came to light with the very publication of *Inner Experience* was “a desire for asceticism permeated with the will to live and to communicate.” Though one could indeed say so – insofar as asceticism can be reduced to what is admittedly one of its key features, namely, a radical turning away from being mundanely productive – Besnier’s interpretation of Bataille’s “ascetic experience” is perhaps over-generalised, given that he describes it as “a solitary one,” in spite of Bataille’s afore-discussed insistence on the importance of refusing to orient one’s experience around one’s seclusion, which puts one at a distance from the free play of forces that pass between beings (“Bataille, the Emotive Intellectual,” p. 21).

<sup>164</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 47.

<sup>165</sup> Douglas Harper, “important (adj.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/important#etymonline\\_v\\_1582](https://www.etymonline.com/word/important#etymonline_v_1582) (8 March 2021).

<sup>166</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 58.

think this wor(l)d outside of its usually pejorative (transcendentally predefined) sense. As it happens, it is Nietzsche who comes to our aid; more specifically, his third essay on the genealogy of morality<sup>167</sup> identifies the notion of the ascetic ideal, a power relation found everywhere where life force is channelled into an otherworld, from which meaning is then bestowed (a form, then, of the intermundane transaction we spoke of earlier), the meaning of the life force and the suffering it goes through. In Nietzsche's view, life force undergoes suffering by the very virtue of being *life* – which can be seen in all its aspects as a continuous struggle – but the ascetic ideal renounces this virtue, offering in its stead moral values enmeshed in transcendent arrangements – offering life a justification external to life. Whether this justification concerns itself with God or truth or anything absolute – or supramundane – is ultimately irrelevant: the scientist, too, labours under the ascetic ideal, because his immediate existence is overshadowed by a pursuit of something construed as superior to that immediate existence. “It is the vision of numbers.”<sup>168</sup> Nietzsche phrases it thusly:

The idea we are fighting over here is the *valuation* of our life by the ascetic priests: they relate this (together with all that belongs to it, “nature,” “the world,” the whole sphere of what becomes and what passes away), to a quite different kind of existence that it opposes and excludes, *unless* it should turn against itself and *deny itself*: In this case, the case of the ascetic life, life counts as a bridge to that other existence.<sup>169</sup>

But, as Nietzsche points out, the priests' understanding of their project (which would see life structurally subjugated to an afterlife) is fundamentally flawed: they believe that what they attempt and/or attain is a denial of life for the sake of an afterlife,

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<sup>167</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Third Essay: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?” in: *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 68-120.

<sup>168</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, “A Season in Hell,” in: *Rimbaud. Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 267.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

but they are in truth as instrumental in the evolutionary processes of the biosphere as the most competitive, voracious predator. What they incorporate is merely a different strategy of survival:

Allow me to present the real state of affairs in contrast to this: the ascetic ideal springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life, which uses every means to maintain itself and struggles for its existence; it indicates a partial physiological inhibition and exhaustion against which the deepest instincts of life, which have remained intact, continually struggle with new methods and inventions. The ascetic ideal is one such method: the situation is therefore the precise opposite of what the worshippers of this ideal imagine, – in it and through it, life struggles with death and against death, the ascetic ideal is a trick for the preservation of life.<sup>170</sup>

However, whereas “the ascetic ideal is a trick” of the priests who are themselves tricked by this biological movement of conserving (accumulating) energy in redundant behavioural loops disguised as an ethos (exemplified by the institution of hermitage, which is, for all intents and purposes, in harness with the ascetic ideal), the same accusation of trickery cannot be levelled at asceticism in general, which is not the target of Nietzsche’s critique. On the contrary: “Though he seeks an end to otherworldly goals and dreams, Nietzsche demands a discipline of affirmation that vies with the ascetic ideal in its severity of self-denial and self-mastery.”<sup>171</sup> In an analysis of Nietzsche’s asceticism, Tyler T. Roberts discusses “the difference between a mortifying, negative asceticism (the ascetic ideal, or priestly asceticism) and an empowering, positive asceticism (natural asceticism).”<sup>172</sup> He elucidates a context for this difference by bringing to light a variety of excerpts from Nietzsche’s other texts and a fine collection of sources pertinent to all matters ascetic, and juxtaposes the philosopher’s critique of the ascetic ideal with the evolutions of pagan – or (post-)Hellenic – and Christian strains

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<sup>170</sup> Ibidem, p. 88.

<sup>171</sup> Tyler T. Roberts, “‘This Art of Transfiguration Is Philosophy’: Nietzsche’s Asceticism,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (1996), p. 404.

<sup>172</sup> Ibidem, p. 407.

of asceticism. The conclusion he arrives at is as follows:

[...] Nietzsche's asceticism differs from both Greco-Roman asceticism and Christian asceticism. Rather than seeking an end to self-cultivation and creation in the hierarchies of nature – as in Greco-Roman culture – or in the peace of God – as in Christianity – Nietzsche envisions a never-ending struggle and creation, a continual growth and spiritualization that he calls “life.”<sup>173</sup>

Therefore, our own conclusion takes the following shape: the line that distinguishes the ascetic ideal from “natural asceticism” aligns with the one found between mundane and intermundane asceticisms. Moreover, the project of solar asceticism – just as every other project that seeks to subvert teleology – finds its best form of expression in an affirmation of “a never-ending struggle,” in a spiralling movement of challenge. After all, Bataille's hope for an “unpretentious asceticism adorning an [...] unconventional life” echoes Nietzsche's remarks about a “genuine philosopher” who “lives ‘unphilosophically’ and ‘unwisely,’ above all imprudently, and feels the burden and the duty of a hundred attempts and temptations of life,” who “risks himself constantly” and “plays the wicked game.”<sup>174</sup> And furthermore, the solar ascetic appears to be a possibility that resonates with Nietzsche's question regarding the metamorphosis of philosophers, the question being whether it has become possible for the philosopher to finally stop being but a larva living in disguise, its existence excused by the ascetic ideal with a framework that secures a place for those of the contemplative persuasion in a world which has only recently, in the grand scale of things, permitted contemplation to come into being. In Nietzsche's assessment,

[...] the *ascetic priest* has until the most recent times displayed the vile and dismal form of a caterpillar, which was the only one philosophers were allowed to adopt and creep round

<sup>173</sup> Ibidem, p. 425.

<sup>174</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 125, quoted in: Tyler T. Roberts, “‘This Art of Transfiguration Is Philosophy’: Nietzsche's Asceticism,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (1996), p. 426.



in . . . Have things really *changed*? Has the brightly coloured, dangerous winged-insect, the “spirit” that the caterpillar hid within itself, really thrown off the monk’s habit and emerged into the light, thanks to a sunnier, warmer and more enlightened world? Is there enough pride, daring, courage, self-confidence, will of spirit [...], will to take responsibility, *freedom of will*, for “the philosopher” on earth to be really – *possible*? ...<sup>175</sup>

Doubtless, “the philosopher” and the solar ascetic cannot be unequivocally equated, but both of these figures are, firstly, ostensibly at war with the shadow empire of the ascetic ideal, and secondly, animated by a desire for metamorphosis: in Nietzsche’s words, it is the will to shift one’s heretofore crawling shape into a “dangerous winged-insect,” a creature capable of taking flight – even here one finds the dream of the heavenward; Bataille is more careful to avoid such verticality:

The obsession with metamorphosis can be defined as a violent need – *identical, furthermore, with all our animal needs* – that suddenly impels us to cast off the gestures and attitudes requisite to human nature. [...] There is, in every man, an animal thus imprisoned, like a galley slave, and there is a gate, and if we open the gate, the animal will rush out, like the slave finding his way to escape. The man falls dead, and the beast acts as a beast, with no care for the poetic wonder of the dead man. Thus man is seen as a prison of bureaucratic aspect.<sup>176</sup>

If the crystallisation that the human being constitutes is a prison, a crystalline blockage of metamorphic, animal paths, then the ascetic ideal is the warden of this prison – it is “for its hatred of the natural or the animal in human beings” that “Nietzsche attacks the ascetic ideal.”<sup>177</sup>

Baudrillard, too, wrote of an animal phantom haunting the human from “beyond the ideal schema that is that of our culture, of all culture maybe,”<sup>178</sup> claiming that the machinations of the unconscious are the bursting bubbles of a nostalgia for an animal

<sup>175</sup> Nietzsche, “Third Essay,” p. 84.

<sup>176</sup> Georges Bataille, “Metamorphosis 3, Wild Animals,” in: *Encyclopaedia Acephalica: Comprising the Critical Dictionary & Related Texts*, ed. Georges Bataille et al., trans. Iain White et al. (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p. 60.

<sup>177</sup> Roberts, ““This Art of Transfiguration Is Philosophy,”” p. 419.

<sup>178</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 140.

existence susceptible to metamorphosis by virtue of being lived in a territory, which – in Baudrillard’s terms – implies a “brute, symbolic mode,” one “of indefinite cycling and reversion over a finite space”: “there is no subject and everything is exchanged. The obligations are absolute therein – total reversibility – but no one knows death there, since all is metamorphosed. Neither subject, nor death, nor unconscious, nor repression, since nothing stops the enchainment of forms.”<sup>179</sup> This is, of course, a far-reaching interpretation of animality – and so, necessarily, of the human perception of non-human animals – but it helps us see in sharper colours that a *logical* existence – which precludes metamorphosis – is “an existence of bitter servitude.”<sup>180</sup> Therefore, neither Nietzsche’s philosopher nor the solar ascetic can allow themselves to be reduced to a life devoid of metamorphosis: a life that would be – in stark contrast to the tantalising destiny of shapeshifters – shape-locked.

In conclusion, having formulated a position critical of asceticism – denouncing it as an ill-construed pursuit of an otherworldly significance – we proceeded to sketch out the silhouette of an ascetic capable of side-stepping the gravitational pull of those words and images that would have his intensities and intensifications surrendered, intercepted by a transcendence. Thus we have arrived at the figure of the solar ascetic, who mimics the Sun through explosions of expenditure, and whose life attains – regardless of accumulated wealth – the luxury associated with the sun kings of all times. In contrast to this solar ascesis, the asceticism of the mimics of (secret) society is decidedly goal-oriented, for it seeks to clandestinely remodel society in accordance with the (secret) society’s predetermined scheme: a centrifugal installation (conceptually speaking; in

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<sup>179</sup> Ibidem, pp. 139-140.

<sup>180</sup> Bataille, “Metamorphosis 3,” p. 60.

practice, such actions are not above the flux of things). Again, it is easy to point out that a goal is implicit in solar (and “natural”) asceticism, too, but such a goal cannot be conflated with an *end* in the sense in which social mimicry is a means to an end. In other words, the quest of the solar ascetic is infinitely recursive, and therefore leads to encounters with infinitely recursive spaces – we shall journey across such spaces in chapter eleven. In the next chapter, however, we will discuss the following issue: an asceticism such as the solar one retains, in spite of being mundane, the quality of being fuelled by a desire to go beyond – beyond what does it go, then?

## CHAPTER 7: THE OUROBORIC TENSION BETWEEN TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

*“When nature seems natural to you, it’ll be the end – and something different will start.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“Dazzled by a thousand figures composed of worry, impatience, and love. Now my desire has just one object: the beyond of those thousand figures, and the night.”<sup>2</sup>*

As we have established in the previous chapter, the solar ascetic’s wish is to be cast out from the order of things, to be removed from the machinery of utility in a movement similar to the one by which a smoker enters – provided one agrees with Bataille’s assessment of “the consumption of tobacco as a purely glorious expenditure” – into “an atmosphere detached from the general mechanics of things” (defined, then, by the gratuitous and even inexcusable character of smoking).<sup>3</sup> This chapter will be a more detailed exploration of this theme of a removal, of a movement that would drive one beyond, but which could not be thought of in terms of a transcendence, of an intermundane movement. Put another way, our quest is to meditate on this question: can one renounce the otherworld and yet retain the figure of a movement beyond?

What will follow shall be based on a premise that could be formulated thusly: to

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<sup>1</sup> *Medea*, dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini (Rome, Paris and Frankfurt: San Marco S.p.A., Les Films Number One, Janus Film und Fernsehen, 1969), quoted and translated in: Pau Gilabert Barberà, “Pasolini’s *Medea*: Using μῦθος καὶ σῆμα to Denounce the Catastrophe of Contemporary Life,” *Faventia*, Vol. 37 (2015), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Impossible: A Story of Rats followed by Dianus and The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991), p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Bataille, “Socratic College,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 6.

abandon the pursuit of transcendence is to assume it has already been achieved. In other words, the desire to exit the world of things is tantamount to the desire to escape the hypostatic fortress of transcendent arrangements, the prison guarded by ascetic warden-priests of the “god of bone.” We will now develop this claim with the help of Bataille’s understanding of transcendence and immanence, bolstering our delivery with the analytical treatments this dynamic has received from Robert Sasso, Zeynep Direk, Jill Marsden, and Nick Land.

In the fourth chapter, we have spoken of the way Bataille traced the history of the mind and body dualism, locating its origins in, first, the solidification of the subject and object out of the flux of immanence (“Man’s truly prehistoric immanence to natural life, still witnessed by the Lascaux paintings, is made progressively impossible by the splitting of the given and by the ‘ontological’ scission resulting from objectifying activity”<sup>4</sup>), and second, the *simultaneous* positing of the object as a tool (“[...] *faber* and *sapiens* go hand in hand [...]”<sup>5</sup>), a thing to be used: plucked from the destiny it has hitherto lived through, and repurposed, utilised by the subject’s endeavour to organise the world around itself.

Originally, wild animals – entities antithetical to tools – presented themselves to the budding human (who was taking his first steps on the path to self-domestication through work) in the splendour of divine freedom. Eventually, however, the charm commanded by the untamed beasts waned, and the glory of divinity became immaterial, spiritual, substantially separate from the world composed of transient forms: the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Sasso, “Georges Bataille and the Challenge to Think,” in: *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. and trans. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Bataille, “The Cradle of Humanity: The Vézère Valley,” in: *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2009), p. 149.

manifold gods of ancient realms could inhabit rivers, groves, peaks and such, but they were not the places themselves. Ultimately, the idea of divinity aligned with the idea that the human being developed about itself – in other words, “the initial opposition between *animality-divinity* and *humanity*” gave way to “the opposition that still prevails today, that reigns over even minds foreign to all religion, between *animality* devoid of any religious signification and *humanity-divinity*.” By “making man in his own image,” God became

the divinity of understanding and of work. (This does not signify the disappearance of religious possibility, but from the moment the older forms lost their initial power, this possibility only survived *in spite of it*: from one end to the other, real religions have carried within themselves the negation and the destruction of what they were).<sup>6</sup>

Let us elucidate this parenthetical, yet sweeping judgement: in Bataille’s view, “not only do we not know what religion is, but we must also renounce this attempt to define it; but in accepting this ignorance, in refusing to define religion, paradoxically and profoundly, we are religious”; religious possibility comes into being through a negation that is not seldom violent and brings into question the validity of the “world of understanding and of work.”<sup>7</sup> It is the alluring possibility of being seduced, abducted into a mode of being that is unattainable through work, a mode ripe with confusion and the ambiguity of experiences ranging from the unproductive to the ecstatic.

As to God being the “the divinity of understanding and of work,” it is of course a platitude to say today that it was in fact God who was made in man’s image, but Bataille’s phrasing – the activities he singles out as the sphere of God’s divinity – points us towards a mechanism by which the relationship between the creator and creation

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<sup>6</sup> Bataille, “Prehistoric Religion,” in: *The Cradle of Humanity*, pp. 141-142. See also: Georges Bataille, “The Sovereign,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 193.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 139.

becomes reversed. When, for example, the computing machine was made in the image of the mathematical faculties of the brain, it was the brain that ended up being reduced to a computer; when simpler machines were made in the image of the body, it was the body that became envisaged as a machine of flesh. And when a creator god was made in the image of the human – a maker of tools, an agent of order and organisation – it was the human who was turned into a creation. In other words, to say that God is “the divinity of understanding and of work” is to say that God is an abstraction of the objectifying process enacted by the subject – God is the subject of a universe of objects which he evacuates and through which he laughs at himself, sovereign and null.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to the issue of religious possibility: as we shall see, its seductive power draws its strength from the immanent flux. In an article investigating the relationship between the thoughts of Bataille and Kristeva – distinguishing within the latter moments of attraction and repulsion effected by the former – Direk provides her readers with an overview of how Bataille’s theory of religion (and thus of transcendence and immanence) is presented over the course of his major works, namely: *Theory of Religion*, the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, and *Erotism*. She writes:

In *Theory of Religion*, the secret of religions is the unconscious nostalgia we feel for immanence, our lost intimacy with nature. Immanence is immediacy, sensibility, corporeal communication, and the absence of individuality, whereas transcendence is distinction, separation, individuation, objectivity, subjectivity, and intelligibility. Bataille makes use of these oppositions in order to erase them: his discourse feeds on the awareness that humans, in their very transcendence, are outside as well as inside animality. Therefore, there is no nostalgia for what we have lost; there is instead an unconscious desire for communication with the rest of life.<sup>9</sup>

It is precisely this “desire for communication” that finds its forms of expression in

<sup>8</sup> See: Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “The Laughter of Being,” trans. Terry Thomas, in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 146-166.

<sup>9</sup> Zeynep Direk, “Bataille and Kristeva on Religion,” in: *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, ed. Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 186.

religion, sacred pursuits, festivals, eroticism, laughter... All the sovereign actions that make possible the evacuation – in the etymological sense of bowel movements<sup>10</sup> – of the individuated subject; what remains is being in a state of communication. However – given the fact that transcendence and immanence feed into each other, that their supposed opposition is not a mutual exclusion, but instead a sort of surface tension, transcendence being the apparent membrane separating the immanent flux from the beyond of life – this being cannot maintain itself within the state of communication indefinitely: “Bataille makes it clear in *Theory of Religion*,” writes Marsden, “that it is the human being’s resistance to immanence that regulates its resurgence. Indeed, to surrender unreservedly to immanence would result in a loss of sacred tension [...]”<sup>11</sup> What was scattered temporarily by the rhythm of drums sooner or later coalesces again: what remains once the dust has settled is the human being and its profound, often unconscious desire to disappear into communication at least one more time. Thus turns the wheel of destiny, thus churns the ouroboric loop: the cephalic part of the serpent is, of course, transcendent, and it chases with its jaws the ever-escaping instant, the tail of immanence, of the flux out of which the serpent has reared its head (a passionate love for this serpentine fate is perhaps a tenet of solar asceticism, which can be linked, therefore, to Bataille’s dream of, as Jeremy Biles puts it, an “acephalic community founded on the sacrifice of God,”<sup>12</sup> or based on “putting God *as a thing* – an eternal,

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Harper, “evacuate (v.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/evacuate#etymonline\\_v\\_11695](https://www.etymonline.com/word/evacuate#etymonline_v_11695) (4 May 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Jill Marsden, “Bataille and the Poetic Fallacy of Animality,” in: *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Biles, “The Remains of God: Bataille/Sacrifice/Community,” *Culture, Theory and Critique*, Vol. 52, No. 2-3 (2011), p. 136.



substantial object – to death”<sup>13</sup>; what is crucial is that such an “incessant sacrifice”<sup>14</sup> would always be “incomplete, never finished; God always remains”<sup>15</sup>).

The ouroboric loop can easily be plugged into Land’s assessment of Bataille’s interplay of transcendence and immanence, an assessment best encapsulated in the following sentence: “Transcendence is both real and impossible, as is the human race.”<sup>16</sup> Real insofar as the complexification implied by transcendent arrangements institutes difference, and thus institutes differentiated entities; impossible, because it is the immanent matter that undergoes complexification: even if it is arranged transcendently, it is matter nonetheless. (What one is dealing with here is akin to the difference between the idea of a sandcastle being made of sand and the sandcastle simply being sand; the sandcastle is different from sand despite being sand, and, furthermore, there are many sandcastles that are different from one another.)

In a passage that reminds us of how the death of an immutable One unleashes time, Land uses the term “delirium” to invoke an image of inevitable dissolution: “The savage truth of delirium is that all ossification – far from being a metaphysical separation from decay – is a unilateral deviation from fluidity, so that even bones, laws, and monuments are crumbled and swept away by the deep flows of the Earth.”<sup>17</sup> The word – “delirium” – is potent, and Land’s use of it is evocative, consonant with Henry Miller’s identification of being “in the grip of delirium” with “being in the stratosphere of ideas.”<sup>18</sup> “In the stratosphere of ideas” – this might suggest, at first glance – and in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 136. That “God always remains” will reveal its true importance for our considerations in chapter eleven.

<sup>16</sup> Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 143.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), p. 196.

connection with the traditionally positive valorisation of the heavenward discussed earlier – an elevated existence within transcendent stratifications, but since it is identified with being delirious, we are free to pursue a Bataillean interpretation, one which precludes a reading that would search for peace or serenity “in the stratosphere of ideas.”

Writing on how Bataille, through his writing, challenges those who encounter his writing to think about thinking – and how in so doing he reflects (on) the challenge, the “pro-vocation of thought” itself – Robert Sasso underscores the following proposition, one that haunts the entirety of Bataille’s endeavour: if thought is observed to constitute either a secure ontology or a stable teleology, then thought is observed in its inert, lifeless state. When alive, thought is and always has been violence, contestation, mutability, the devil’s playground which manifests itself in so-called idle minds<sup>19</sup>: “For the devil [the Prince of Modifications] is not in the details, nor in particular words, and he does not have to hide in the unconscious – he has made his nest in verbal thought [...] [trans. – M.H.].”<sup>20</sup>

To be “in the stratosphere of ideas” is to be delirious, because it amounts to being pulled into an infinitely opalescent current, one in which thought is revealed to be a monstrous, merciless metamorphosis (“When a demon is repulsed, when I have at last imposed silence upon him [...], another raises his head close by and begins speaking”<sup>21</sup>), a metamorphosis which could not possibly rest on a firm foundation without becoming its own catacomb (is this not why there is also a certain morbidity to speaking about

<sup>19</sup> Sasso, “Georges Bataille and the Challenge to Think,” pp. 45-49.

<sup>20</sup> Ryszard Przybylski, “Historia świętego Antoniego Eremita,” in: Gustave Flaubert, *Kuszenie świętego Antoniego*, trans. Piotr Śniedziwski (Warszawa: Sic!, 2010), p. 328.

<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 80.

someone's thought, *the thought of*, for example, Bataille, or anyone else for that matter? One is reminded of Derrida's impressions regarding a visit he paid to a conference devoted to *the thought of* Derrida: he felt as if he was dead<sup>22</sup>).

Moreover, let us not overlook the suggestive etymology of "delirium." Its immediate origin is rather straightforward, for it comes "from Latin *delirium* 'madness,'" but if we peer closer into the ancient word, we learn that it had come "from *deliriare* 'be crazy, rave,' literally 'go off the furrow'" – we learn, therefore, that what is concealed within "delirium" is "a plowing metaphor,"<sup>23</sup> that to pronounce the word is to pronounce an agrilogistically motivated judgement. To be "in the grip of delirium," to be a worker reeling in the fields, noticing, perhaps, the audacity inherent in the idea of a field and, by extension, in ideas themselves.<sup>24</sup> From this delirious perspective, a single idea is to the monster of thought what a single-species field is to the abundance of wilderness. We can see the etymology of "delirium" being used to convey a similar meaning – to facilitate the flow of a similar symbolic charge – in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, in a passage which also connects being "in the grip of delirium" with the "stratosphere of ideas"<sup>25</sup>:

[...] a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare. The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to

<sup>22</sup> Andrzej Marzec, *Widmontologia. Teoria filozoficzna i praktyka artystyczna ponowoczesności* (Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2015), pp. 280-285.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Harper, "delirium (n.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [https://www.etymonline.com/word/delirium#etymonline\\_v\\_5541](https://www.etymonline.com/word/delirium#etymonline_v_5541) (6 May 2021).

<sup>24</sup> It would perhaps be fruitful to ponder over this in relation to a sentence from Heidegger, who claimed that "[t]hinking cuts furrows into the soil of Being," adding: "About 1875, Nietzsche once wrote [...]: 'Our thinking should have a vigorous fragrance, like a wheatfield on a summer's night.' How many of us today still have the senses for that fragrance?" See: Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Neither should we overlook the fact that out of all the named layers of the atmosphere, it is precisely the *stratosphere* that is the layer of layers: Miller's phrasing highlights the stratifying properties of ideas.

protect us from.<sup>26</sup>

All those who “act in the same special relevance to the word” know that the word is – in spite of being a buffer, or rather precisely because of its proximity to what it protects us from – a terrible thing, but a thing nonetheless, a building block of transcendent arrangements. In fact, the basic process of objectification (“the ‘ontological’ scission”) might be considered the source of what we could call transcendent arrangements of the first order (exemplified by tools). And if so, then the edifices of language – semiotic networks, systems of thought – would constitute transcendent arrangements of the second order, whereas those networks and systems whose hydraulic construction serves the channelling of life force into an otherworld (in Nietzsche’s terms, any structures functioning in the service of the ascetic ideal) would comprise transcendent arrangements of the third order.

Pynchon writes of the mystics whose relation to language can be likened to the relation of the desert fathers to the desert: just as the solitude of the endless sands insulated the hermits against the temptations pervading spaces of human aggregation, the word or, following the chain of associations, the Word (thus, transcendent arrangements of the third order are by all means included) insulates all people from “whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from.” And if we wish to look to literature to provide us with an illustration of what happens when these protective layers are peeled away – when the buffer disappears, or when one does indeed escape the hypostatic fortress of transcendent arrangements – then we need only to turn to Vladimir Nabokov.

“Supreme terror, special terror – I am groping for the exact term but my store of

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 98.

ready-made words, which in vain I keep trying on, does not contain even one that will fit.”<sup>27</sup> The outside of the fortress, Rimbaud’s “derangement of *all the senses*,” the darkness beyond the circle of light cast by the fire – if whatever is there could truly be named, it would not be outside, it would not run through the impenetrable like a vein invisible to the human eye. Nabokov emphasised this in “Terror,” a short story about a poet who, having suffered throughout his life occasional episodes of derealisation, is sent on a business trip and, in consequence, is forced to spend his nights alone, without the company of his beloved. This entails sleeplessness, which in turn severely weakens the poet’s grip on reality qua order of things, pushing him up to very limits of language where words themselves are pushed to the limits of their semantic endurance. The poet states that he “saw the world such as it really *is*”<sup>28</sup> (“really” – that is, in this case, beyond language, beyond the order of things – “*is*” – the stress is a desperate attempt to make this word mean what it is not meant to mean in the common tongue) and gives the following account of his descent into immanence:

[...] on that terrible day when [...] I stepped out into the center of an incidental city, and saw houses, trees, automobiles, people, my mind abruptly refused to accept them as “houses,” “trees,” and so forth – as something connected with ordinary human life. My line of communication with the world snapped, I was on my own and the world was on its own, and that world was devoid of sense. I saw the actual essence of all things.<sup>29</sup>

Several lines later he goes on to say: “I understood the horror of a human face. Anatomy, sexual distinctions, the notion of ‘legs,’ ‘arms,’ ‘clothes’ – all that was abolished, and there remained in front of me a mere *something* – not even a creature, for that too is a human concept, but merely *something* moving past.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “Terror,” in: *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 174.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 176.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, pp. 176-177.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 177.

When his “line of communication with the world snapped” (when the meaning of words ceased to endure, when “the very process that links them” was stopped), it was the illusion that we conjure up with language that was dispelled – the illusion of our grasp on reality (which in itself dissimulates our subjugation to it). The differences separating objects from one another on the plane of transcendence have given way to a radical experience of the flux. In other words, it was the walls of the fortress that had fallen down, it was the fire that went out: the poet was cast down from transcendent arrangements, and he fell deep into base matter, into the immanent flux, arms no longer discernible from legs, clothes indistinguishable from skin, one body no different from other bodies, organic matter inorganic once again.

But would not this brush with immanence be contradictory with the idea-delirium complex? Could the poet’s experience still be thought of in terms of a delirium? Let us take another look at what he says: “My line of communication with the world snapped, *I was on my own and the world was on its own*, and that world was devoid of sense [italics – M.H.]” The foundational separation remained operative, if barely, and it would therefore be more fitting to correct ourselves: the differences separating objects from one another on the plane of transcendence have given way to a radical experience of the very difference between transcendence and immanence.

The poet’s experience could be construed as that of a subject without objects, for even though he says that he was at one point “no longer a man, but a naked eye, an aimless glance moving in an absurd world,”<sup>31</sup> (a slightly mocking reference, perhaps, to Emerson’s sauntering), that eye was still an “I,” albeit a glitching one. If transcendence is made possible by the two “equiprimordial elements” – “work and the consciousness of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 177.

death”<sup>32</sup> – then the naked eye was a death-consciousness (a passage through time) immersed in a world in which *nothing worked* (*nothing made sense*), in which transcendent arrangements were only half-possible. Hence, the immanent flux of base matter was only approximated, but that is nevertheless enough for “supreme terror” to, firstly, appear, and secondly, dehumanise the poet.

All in all, there seem to be levels or degrees of delirium: at its most tame, it simply allows words and other kinds of signs to be, to an extent – within *reasonable limits* – interchangeable with their respective referents. Then, however, there is poetry: the more delirious one is, the less sense can one make of stable, transcendently arranged differences separating entities, and the more interchangeable these entities seem to be (a dark entry into weird paranoia, into a realm of brazen incongruity and cut-up lines of words, images, and flight). Eventually, one arrives at the “savage truth of delirium,” the realisation that even the most basic foundations with the strongest claims on eternal stability are ultimately void, because *nothing ultimately works* (nothing makes sense, everything is laughable<sup>33</sup>). In other words, unfiltered consciousness of death – of unstoppable time – is the purest delirium: “The existence of time projected arbitrarily into an objective region is only the ecstatic vision of a catastrophe destroying that which founds this region.”<sup>34</sup>

What is more, the poet’s struggle to re-establish a foundation – to re-erect the barrier of language between himself and the world “as it really *is*” – points us towards the following conclusion: language in its entirety is the grand tissue of taboo concerning the immanent flux or base matter (the ridiculous ecstasy that awaits on the other side of

<sup>32</sup> Direk, “Bataille and Kristeva on Religion,” p. 186.

<sup>33</sup> See: Borch-Jacobsen, “The Laughter of Being,” pp. 160-164.

<sup>34</sup> Bataille, “Sacrifices,” in: *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 135.

meaning). It is the ubiquitous machinery of metaphor that puts us on an autopiloted double back whenever we get too close to silence.

Indeed, the poet's course of action involves seeking recourse in a philosophical notion: "Overwhelmed with terror, I sought support in some basic idea, some better brick than the Cartesian one, with the help of which to begin the reconstruction of the simple, natural, habitual world as we know it."<sup>35</sup> He does so in vain. In the end, an event completely unrelated to his episode allows him to get a hold of himself – he is handed a letter and, somewhere between the fact that he opens it "automatically"<sup>36</sup> and that it informs him about his beloved girl's terminal illness, he finds himself free of his horror, and the things around him are familiar again, inconspicuously enmeshed in the quiet workings of transcendent arrangements (undoubtedly, to have been burdened with a *reason* for despair grounds one sufficiently, but it is not without importance that he unfolded the letter "automatically" – performing an action automatically in the middle of a severe enstrangement can sometimes be tantamount to the very opposition of delirium, that is, being put right back into one's furrow). The futility of his efforts to find footing in a philosophical notion – and not just any notion: a "better brick than the Cartesian" one – resonates with the rhetorical question Sasso uses in the passage below:

Will one say, however, that the experience of the *Cogito* is beyond question and that the certitude of the "*ego sum res cogitans*" assures me of the objective solidity and consistency of the thinking self? According to Bataille, the experience of the "self-that-dies" – for example, in "Christian meditation before the cross" – would more likely establish the contrary. In this circumstance, the self, turning away "from any application to the world," is revealed as a *catastrophic object*, a "thing" brutally removed from the order of things [...].<sup>37</sup>

Sasso's claim regarding "the *Cogito*" finds its literary expression in the poet's

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<sup>35</sup> Nabokov, "Terror," p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 178.

<sup>37</sup> Sasso, "Georges Bataille and the Challenge to Think," p. 46.



inability to recreate a stable reality by trying to found it on this “Cartesian brick.” Let us think of his nightmarish travail as a case of an involuntary fall into an altered state of mind, one which usually follows meditation, prayer, poetic exaltation, or other exercises in intensity. If we think of it this way, we can see how his experience was one of a “self-that-dies,”<sup>38</sup> and how his self was turned away “from any application to the world,” and thus “revealed as a *catastrophic object*, a ‘thing’ brutally removed from the order of things.” Indeed, we have said that the poet’s experience was that of a subject without objects, but what would that be if not a catastrophic object?

It happened against his will, or rather without him having a say in it, but he was – and this is the most important element of this puzzle – *beyond*, and no otherworld was involved. On the contrary: the poet has explicitly stated that what he experienced was not an unearthly vision, but a glimpse into the truth of the world, *this* world. Therefore, it was the beyond of the order of things, of transcendent arrangements, that was seen: the poet unwillingly caught sight of immanence. Let us repeat: to abandon the pursuit of transcendence is to assume it has already been achieved.

Before this thought can be pursued further, a certain nomenclatural ambiguity – which has perhaps come into being above – has to be put to rest. That is to say, there is an affinity that has to be acknowledged between, on the one hand, the way in which Bataille defined the interplay of transcendence and immanence, and, on the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the planes of transcendence and immanence: according to the two philosophers, the plane of transcendence is “a teleological plan(e), a design, a mental principle,” a “hidden structure necessary for forms, a secret signifier necessary for subjects,” a “plan(e) that cannot be given as such, that can only be inferred from the

<sup>38</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), pp. 70-74.

forms it develops and the subjects it forms, since it is *for* these forms and these subjects.”<sup>39</sup> Evidently, then, it is the plane of transcendence, “of organization or development,” that has gone missing, so to speak, in Nabokov’s “Terror.” “Forms and subjects, organs and functions” and the “relations between strata”<sup>40</sup> could no longer be inferred from the poet’s experience, an experience unexpectedly devoid of any sense of purpose, and an experience which failed to comply with the key requirement for the very existence of a subject. Furthermore, transcendent arrangements of any imaginable order are therefore conceivable as the stratification of the plane of transcendence.

The plane of immanence is also called the plane of consistency, composition, and univocity. “However many dimensions it may have, it never has a supplementary dimension to that which transpires upon it”<sup>41</sup> – quite literally speaking, nothing transcends it, all of its elements are immanent to one another, not one of them is in any way structurally subjugated or limited to the functionality of an organ. On the contrary, “[t]he plane of consistency is the body without organs. Pure relations of speed and slowness between particles imply movements of deterritorialization, just as pure affects imply an enterprise of desubjectification.”<sup>42</sup> How could a subject – an entity dependent on the plane of transcendence, a shape determined by the links, the interactions between the strata of transcendent arrangements – not fall prey to a feeling of “supreme terror” when, all of a sudden, the presence of that plane on which forms and subjects subsist was no longer self-evident? How could a subject endure something of this magnitude and retain a solid subjectivity?

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<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 265-266.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 269.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 266.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 270.

As we now see more clearly, the poet's return to his furrow – achieved through opening a letter “automatically,” by force of habit – was a knee-jerk recognition of the plane of transcendence: an embodied perception of the thin slice of processed wood as a *letter*. The equally important fact that the letter brought him news of his girlfriend's illness sobered him up through a similar reintegration into recognisable – though tragic – meaning.

One should take care not to conflate this reintegration with being wholly reintroduced into transcendent arrangements. What was restored was a proper movement. In Deleuze and Guattari's view, it is important not to treat the planes of transcendence and immanence as two separate, easily distinguishable realms, one of them an otherworld to the other's world, “[b]ecause one continually passes from one to the other, by unnoticeable degrees and without being aware of it, or one becomes aware of it only afterward. Because one continually reconstitutes one plane atop another, or extricates one from the other.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the two thinkers urge us to pay attention to the risks inherent in either of the planes getting the upper hand, the dangers that result from distortions of the movement's amplitude; as we read in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

But once again, so much caution is needed to prevent the plane of consistency from becoming a pure plane of abolition or death, to prevent the involution from turning into a regression to the undifferentiated. Is it not necessary to retain a minimum of strata, a minimum of forms and functions, a minimal subject from which to extract materials, affects, and assemblages?<sup>44</sup>

The poet's experience at the very least verged on the dreadful plane of abolition, his head pushed forcefully into a point of view that showed him barren undifferentiation. Verily, it does seem “necessary to retain a minimum of strata,” and Bataille's outlook is

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<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 269.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 270.

in truth rather similar to the extent that – as we have already said with the help of Jill Marsden’s analysis – he, too, deemed the movement between the transcendent and the immanent as essential to the maintenance of “sacred tension.” Not only that: transcendence, the arrangement of planes on which projects are drawn up, presents itself as the site on which one is forced to begin one’s inner experience: “No one can lucidly have an experience without having had the project for it. [...] [P]roject must even be maintained,”<sup>45</sup> but only as a “servant of experience,”<sup>46</sup> only as a catapult that stays far behind the self-destructing projectile one makes of oneself, experience being neither the missile nor the target, but rather their catastrophic collision. What is more, for all the lengths Bataille went to in his attempts to express in writing both the instant and its ineffability – and in so doing, formulating the interconnectedness of immediacy and sovereignty, tying the latter with a lack for concern for the future and, thus, with being free of (the need for) justification – he still, at the conclusion of *Tears of Eros* (at the conclusion of a lifetime of investigations, the book being his final one) wrote the following words: “Man reaches the height of his potential in two steps. The first is to let go, but the second is to become aware,”<sup>47</sup> to attain “clear consciousness.”<sup>48</sup>

It is now necessary to speak at length of this “clear consciousness.” One can hardly deny Hegel’s influence on Bataille’s engagement with, among other things, themes of consciousness, of its movements and upheavals. But – in opposition to the Hegelian project – Bataille had repeatedly disavowed the possibility of attaining absolute knowledge, of completing the final objective, of sustaining oneself as an

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<sup>45</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 54.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 55.

<sup>47</sup> Bataille, *Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), p. 162.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 173.

impermeable whole – going so far as to speak of Hegel’s “failure” (“as an authentic moment, weighty with sense”), the inherent fault of Hegel’s system being that, although it ventures for a sovereign “Wisdom,” it subordinates itself and the prospect of this “Wisdom” to the “completion of discourse,” reducing itself to the servitude of a project in which the truly sovereign night of non-knowledge could only serve as a temporary stage of the linear development of discourse: “He welcomed sovereignty as a weight, which he let go...”<sup>49</sup> (so as to make sure that the wound through which one palpates immanence with bloodied fingers – the wound of communication – would ultimately heal).

And yet Bataille linked, in *Tears of Eros*, the notion of becoming “aware” – the second step of the human path to the peak – with a “plunge into a complete whole whose cohesion might appear to me at long last,” saying that “[t]he principle of this movement is the impossibility of a clear consciousness that would be conscious only of its immediate experience.” Unless what these words suggest resulted from a deathbed conversion to a belief in uncollapsible completeness<sup>50</sup> – *Tears of Eros* were, after all, written shortly before his death, in sickness, when it became difficult for him to maintain remembrance of what he had written just moments earlier<sup>51</sup> (some say that he was not even solely responsible for writing the book<sup>52</sup>) – we are bound to trust that what is meant by “clear consciousness” is an extension of a notion mentioned in a number Bataille’s earlier texts. A notable example can be found at the very end of the first volume of *The Accursed Share*, and more specifically, in its final endnote, where he positions himself

<sup>49</sup> Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” trans. Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies*, No. 78 (1990), p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> See also: Stuart Kendall’s musings on the importance of prayer in Bataille’s final notes, “Editor’s Introduction: Unlimited Assemblage,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. xlv.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, “Georges Bataille, From Afar...,” in: Bataille, *Tears of Eros*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Amy Hollywood, Note 8 to “Afterword,” in: *Negative Ecstasies*, pp. 282-283.

“in the line of mystics of all times,” but is quick to make a disclaimer, saying – in the third person – that “he is nonetheless far removed from all the presuppositions of the various mysticisms, to which he opposes only the lucidity of self-consciousness.”<sup>53</sup> The endnote in question develops a point being made in one of the last paragraphs of the book, one concerned with a veritable paradigm shift: the challenge that, according to Bataille, stands before us as human beings – beings embedded in energetic economies – is to, firstly, prioritise expenditure over accumulation, and secondly, follow this change of priority to its extreme limit, even though it goes against the grain of the kind of consciousness we have so far developed, a consciousness dependent on “the ‘ontological’ scission.” “It is,” writes Bataille, “a question of arriving at the moment when consciousness will cease to be a consciousness of *something*; in other words, of becoming conscious of the decisive meaning of an instant in which increase (the acquisition of *something*) will resolve into expenditure; and this will be precisely *self-consciousness*, that is, a consciousness that henceforth has *nothing as its object*.”<sup>54</sup> Another endnote clarifies: “Nothing but pure interiority, which is not a thing”<sup>55</sup> (and therefore, not a tool, not an instrument subordinated to task execution). Of course, this is to be understood not as a step back to immanence and animality (an egress that would entail the loss of “sacred tension”), but rather as a liberation of consciousness from the constraints of utility, as intimacy overthrowing the reality of the order of things and their productive manipulation. What is being thought here is, in a way, a revelation, a lightning flash which leaves the figure and ground swapped. Let us consider examples of a similar reversal so as to better understand the one implied by Bataille.

<sup>53</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. I, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 197.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 191.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 197.

In fact, we have already dealt with one such example when we were discussing the links between Bataille's sorcerous apprenticeship and Schulz's practice of mythicisation, since the latter involved the positing of an original, mythic Word that had shattered and has been fracturing into ever tinier and more specific words (thus securing for Schulz a place among the ranks of those who, in Pynchon's words, "act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from"). In other words, it would seem that Schulz's vision entailed a reversal which finds a concise expression in Heidegger, who wrote: "Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer."<sup>56</sup>

There must have been a time that both preceded the first death of a metaphor (the first instance of its wonderment dissipating, of its nobility becoming effaced) and followed the very birth of delirium, of that preposterous notion that there can be a notion, that a sound or an image can make a thing re-present itself. The pure bewilderment of that time (which, when set against any sort of time axis, diminishes in size to that of an instant, but which cannot be actually thought of in terms of a single point of space and time, being rather the golden age of myth) exploded into bountiful mythologies, into poetries of the sacred that constitute the default state of language relative to which modern, disenchanted vernaculars present themselves as emaciated and sick. Alas, this reversal of poetry and the impoverished "everyday language" – though it signals the necessary dethronement of the latter – is not as broad as the one implicit in

Bataille's self-consciousness. We must look elsewhere.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Language," in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), p. 205.

Having imbibed mescaline, Aldous Huxley developed an appreciation of Henri Bergson's proposition that the electric knots of brain matter and nerves are in truth a system of elimination rather than production, a system shaped by the utilitarian demands of biology and survival, a system which in turn – always already exhibiting a tendency to ossify, to habitualise – hardens into language, a system of terminology that further determines the reasonable limits of one's everyday, conscious experience. Were one to remove the "cerebral reducing valve"<sup>57</sup> (Pynchon's word-as-buffer) that dams the flow of perception, it would overwhelm what maintains in one the machineries "of selves, of time, of moral judgements and utilitarian considerations."<sup>58</sup> To put it simply, it would destroy what maintains one as one. And even if it is merely a matter of loosening the valve's grip – through drugs, as in Huxley's experiment, or through other means, such as "spiritual exercises"<sup>59</sup> – one nonetheless finds oneself beyond "the carefully selected utilitarian material which our narrow, individual minds regard as a complete, or at least sufficient, picture of reality."<sup>60</sup>

Built on the vocabulary of Meister Eckhart and Buddhism, Huxley's essay is a praise sung for "Is-ness" and the "Not-self," the latter being best equipped (or rather unequipped, given its supposed nakedness) to engage with "Is-ness." For "Is-ness" has a glare that, to a mind as unprepared as that of the poet in "Terror," is mind-searingly blinding; while listening – under the influence of mescaline – to a peculiarly structured madrigal, Huxley mused:

The totality is present even in the broken pieces. More clearly present, perhaps, than in a

<sup>57</sup> Aldous Huxley, "The Doors of Perception," in: *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.



completely coherent work. At least you aren't lulled into a sense of false security by some merely human, merely fabricated order. You have to rely on your immediate perception of the ultimate order. So in a certain sense disintegration may have its advantages. But of course it's dangerous, horribly dangerous. Suppose you couldn't get back,<sup>61</sup> out of the chaos...<sup>62</sup>

A dissonance between Huxley and Bataille announces itself at this point: Huxley had fallen prey to a preconception that predetermines the way in which all kinds of ecstatic experiences have been described, namely, as an experience of completeness, of wholeness, of how everything interlocks in an "ultimate order" and so on and so forth... It is precisely the sort of presupposition to which Bataille wished to oppose "only the lucidity of self-consciousness."

"The Doors of Perception" contains another passage of note in the context of "Terror," a passage in which the description of a chair standing in the sunlight – a chair which Huxley did not recognise as a chair, so immersed was he in the beauty of its colours and their motion – bears a truly striking resemblance to Nabokov's description of the moment when the conceptual, familiar layer gets peeled off. The passage reads as follows:

Today the percept had swallowed up the concept.<sup>63</sup> I was so completely absorbed in looking, so thunderstruck by what I actually saw, that I could not be aware of anything else. Garden furniture, laths, sunlight, shadow – these were no more than names and notions, mere verbalizations, for utilitarian or scientific purposes, after the event. The event was this succession of azure furnace doors separated by gulfs of unfathomable gentian. It was inexpressibly wonderful, wonderful to the point, almost, of being terrifying.<sup>64</sup>

Several paragraphs later, Huxley confessed that he was in truth frightened by the intensity of this experience – that he feared it would, eventually, turn out to be too much for him to handle, that he would, indeed, disintegrate "under a pressure of reality greater

<sup>61</sup> Back into "the prison of individuation"?

<sup>62</sup> Huxley, "The Doors of Perception," p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> Today phenomenology lost itself in phenomena.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, pp. 53-54.

than a mind, accustomed to living most of the time in a cosy world of symbols, could possibly bear.” The state of mind described by Huxley could be considered as a prelude – assuming it would be followed by a resistance mounted against the urge to seek security in a framework, a system, a familiarity – to the anguish of a Bataillean inner experience of the night of reason.

As far as the main line of our considerations is concerned, however, what remains most important is Huxley’s basic (re)discovery and its consonance with Bataillean thought: the order of things and their productive manipulation is utilitarian, *and therefore limited*, narrowed down – and by a *cerebral* reducing valve, no less, by the cranial dreams of transcendence – to the possible, the probable, the profitable. The reversal at hand is, then, as follows: the possible, the customarily expressed, and the possibly useful all constitute a domain which imagines itself to be the figure standing out against the background of the useless, the no longer or not yet productive, the nonsensical; in Huxley’s experience lies the possibility of perceiving how the servile figure tumbles down into the void as the background is revealed, in an intumescent motion, to be a figure of inconceivable proportions: hence the feeling, in the enraptured human being, of vertigo, of losing the ground beneath one’s feet. Though this swap is wide-reaching in its scope, it is, in Huxley’s formulation, dependent on transcendent arrangements – Huxley conceives of the enlarged figure as of a “Mind at Large,” which ultimately tames and familiarises the beyond of the reducing valve, taking as its measure and model the mechanisms of human knowing.

It seems fitting, therefore, to conclude our discussion of “The Doors of Perception” with a quote from Bataille’s essay on Blake<sup>65</sup>: “What mattered for Blake

<sup>65</sup> To Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell” (at least) two of Bataille’s sentences could be added: from *The Accursed Share*, p. 12: “*the sexual act is in time what the tiger is in space*”; from the “The Sovereign,” p. 189:

was that which excluded reduction to the dimensions of the *possible*; what mattered for him was that which was ‘too great for the eye of man.’ What meaning had God for him if not an awakening to the feeling of the *impossible*?”<sup>66</sup>

Let us linger for a moment longer, however, on the subject of drug-induced escapades, for our attention is drawn to “The Drug,” Aleister Crowley’s matter-of-factly entitled short story, a text characteristic of a particular fascination with mind-altering substances and the promise they are held to show in occult pursuits. More specifically, we are interested in a curiously resonant phrase Crowley used to describe one of the main events that take place during the dream/vision sequence that occupies the majority of the text’s body.

The story’s first person narrator visits a friend, who invites him to partake of a mysterious substance, a fluid of an obviously alchemical provenance. The narrator accepts the potion, and is promptly launched into a psychedelic experience during which his vision alternates between images of rapturous beatitude and blood-curdling horror, between sensations of orgasmic self-dissolution and paranoid dread – dread being, as China Miéville put it with the use of Bataille’s term, “a kind of all-encompassing, bad sublime. It’s the surplus value of fear: *the accursed share of fear* that cannot be reduced (italics – M.H.).”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, there is in the psychonaut’s experience an irreducible excess of terror – whenever his visions take enticing, titillating shapes, they are almost immediately either undermined by creeping doubt or transformed into nightmarish scenarios: a star “burst into a glorious face more beautiful than sea-born Aphrodite” and

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“What the whims of the festival are, in time, to the subordination of work, the sovereign is, in space, to the subject who works in his service.”

<sup>66</sup> Bataille, “William Blake,” in: *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> Juha van’t Zelfde’s interview with China Miéville, “The Surplus Value of Fear,” in: *Dread: The Dizziness of Freedom*, ed. Juha van’t Zelfde (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013), p. 58.

merged with the psychonaut in a kiss of “infinite rapture,” but then his “lips rotted away; unutterable pangs tore asunder” his “whole being.” Next, he became aware of a host of presences which, although they eluded his sight, he identified as “faces”<sup>68</sup> (employing, again, the terms of Deleuze and Guattari, one could say that the psychonaut’s vision portrays the abstract machine of faciality reasserting itself on the plane of immanence<sup>69</sup>). After another string of thoughts and sensations wove itself through the psychonaut, a different star “fell, rayed with gossamer gold that streamed and filled the whole bright heaven.” This one also developed a countenance, one “of sorrow or strange longing.” Once it kissed the psychonaut, what overtook him was – and here is the phrase that drew us to “The Drug” – “an ecstasy too serene and exquisite to have any object”<sup>70</sup> (this, too, recedes and is replaced by irreducible dread, by “an apprehension of some horror beyond naming”).

While Huxley had an experience of immanence flowing out of particular objects and overflowing the limits drawn around these objects by instrumental reason (an experience which he nonetheless framed transcendently), here we see, in a literary setting that ties it with eroticism, mysticism, and intoxication (a knot tied as tightly as if Bataille had done it himself<sup>71</sup>), that very moment to which Bataille had devoted much of

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<sup>68</sup> Aleister Crowley, “The Drug,” in: *The Drug and Other Stories*, ed. William Breeze (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2010), p. 80.

<sup>69</sup> See: Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 167-191.

<sup>70</sup> Crowley, “The Drug,” p. 81.

<sup>71</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that Bataille seems to have perceived drug-induced experiences as contradictory to the kind of method he wanted to put forward in *Inner Experience*. In the book, he references a variety of Buddhist and Hindu practices, including the use of drugs, but although the published text merely mentions it in passing (pp. 17-18), a draft note betrays a less indifferent attitude: “to my taste nothing is more repugnant nor more contrary to what is for me the necessarily resilient, in the end torrential spirit of ‘inner experience’” (p. 183). It appears, therefore, that Bataille – as have many mystics before him – saw the narcotic path as a shortcut, a practice disconnected from the anguished and restless resolve required of the one who ventures out into the night.

His decision not to include the condemnation in the published version of the book could have been motivated by many things. Since he repeatedly disclaims any actual expertise regarding Hindu mysticism, he could have been unwilling to pass such a harsh judgement. Alternatively, he could have come to the

his work: the moment one focuses on an object with such an intensity<sup>72</sup> that it destroys both the object and the focusing subject: the instant of ecstasy. And, for Bataille, the instant is, as we have said, supreme; let us read two quotes from which a conceptual triad emerges, its three points being: the instant, sovereignty, and self-consciousness.

If I envision the *instant* in isolation from a thought that entangles the past and the future of manageable things, the instant that is closed in one sense but that, in another, much more acute sense, opens itself up while denying that which limits separate beings, the instant alone is sovereign being.<sup>73</sup>

Sovereignty designates the movement of free and internally wrenching violence that animates the whole, dissolves into tears, into ecstasy and into bursts of laughter, and reveals the impossible in laughter, ecstasy, or tears. But the impossible thus revealed is not an equivocal position; it is the sovereign self-consciousness that, precisely, no longer turns away from itself.<sup>74</sup>

To be “clear” – according to what was written in *Tears of Eros* – consciousness must be aware of more than “its immediate experience.” In order to do so, it lets itself go in an instant of ecstasy, that is, it “opens itself up while denying that which limits

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conclusion that the problem of drug-induced experiences might be more complicated, considering the risk taken by a self falling under the influence of a psychoactive drug. Nevertheless, this amounts to speculation.

<sup>72</sup> An intensity that is perhaps, to use John Fowles’ coupling of adjectives, “a Proustian, mescaline intensity.” See: John Fowles, *The Magus* (Frogmore: Triad/Panther Books, 1977), p. 491.

If we were to define the adjective – “Proustian” – in a way that would highlight what Bataille had appreciated the most in Proust’s endeavour, we would be bound to say that it refers to the recognition in a phenomenon the chance to spontaneously bring forth an impression that resists rational understanding, discourse, and the will to know; the chance to be seduced – by surprise – by the charm of the unknown. But one should be loath to ignore the fact that what Proust undertook – an attempt to map out through writing “an infinite reverberation of reminiscences, of impressions” (*Inner Experience*, p. 145) – was a project through and through, and it was therefore inextricable from the desire to grasp and take into possession the ungraspable; in thinking himself capable of such a feat, Proust disregarded the irreducible secret that remains unknowable after even an apprehension one would believe to be total (*Inner Experience*, pp. 135-152); he, too, like Hegel, “welcomed sovereignty as a weight, which he let go...”

We are, nonetheless, permitted here, perhaps, to imagine in “clear consciousness” a sort of continuity of instants, one flowing out of and into another through mysterious meeting points: instead of Rimbaud’s prophetic “vision of numbers,” a vision of a golden, solar rhizome.

The combination of adjectives – “Proustian, mescaline” – joins the above with the loosening of the cerebral valve, reintroducing poetry into the tissue not of language, but of life itself. Were one to unshackle Proust from the requirements of his project (which endeavoured to recapture, to regain, to retain through the written word), a sovereign freedom of the senses would become available.

<sup>73</sup> Bataille, “The Sovereign,” p. 187.

<sup>74</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Richard Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), pp. 110-111.

separate beings,” avoiding entanglement with anxieties concerning the past or the future “of manageable things.” In so doing, it becomes sovereignly aware of the impossible and, provided that it “no longer turns away from itself,” consciousness brings about the reversal of ecstasy and sobriety: rather than exist in the form of brief and rare events that rupture the fabric of everyday activities, ecstasy envelops every waking moment, introducing into the light of day the impunity of dreams, the sovereign “power to sin, without having the feeling of a missing purpose.”<sup>75</sup> It is not by accident that we invoke dreams and waking life – as Jeremy Biles has shown in an incisive article regarding the place of dreams in Bataille’s writings, “[i]t is, paradoxically, in the confusions and obscurity of sleep that transgress the boundaries of rational thought that one accedes to the ‘DIVINE ACCURACY OF THE DREAM’ – an extreme point in which lucidity and intoxication converge and clash, each exacerbating the other to the point of explosion”<sup>76</sup> (the practice of lucid dreaming is, in a sense, containment in place of explosion: the lucid dreamer brings rational, conscious control to the realm of dreams, thus severing the link with what is irrational in us,<sup>77</sup> whereas lucid consciousness brings the caprice of dreams into the hitherto rational realm of waking life).

What is at stake in Bataille’s vision is the reduction of the order of things to intimacy<sup>78</sup> – the freedom of human life not from transcendence in general, but from having to justify oneself through either the order of things or transcendent arrangements of higher orders; the freedom of a *disorganised* life. Is this reversal of ecstasy and sobriety not an instance of a body without organs, of an existence pulled free from the

<sup>75</sup> Georges Bataille, “Nonknowledge,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 198.

<sup>76</sup> Jeremy Biles, “Does the Acéphale Dream of Headless Sheep?” in: *Negative Ecstasies*, p. 237.

<sup>77</sup> The sleeping subject vanquishes the “it” that dreams.

<sup>78</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 100.

judgement of preordained function? What is more, it is a reversal independent from the ingestion of mescaline or other drugs – as Deleuze and Guattari established, “[d]rugs do not guarantee immanence; rather, the immanence of drugs allows one to forgo them.”<sup>79</sup> It is, then, a question of reaching, within a milieu, a certain level of ecstatic saturation (a destiny), of moving past a tipping point.

The poet in “Terror” did cross a threshold, but he did not reach the event horizon – “the prison of individuation” reabsorbed him, reorganised him. Bearing in mind what we have spoken about – in regard to transcendence, immanence, understanding, and consciousness – it should be fruitful to bring into play what Bataille has written in connection with these topics in “Method of Meditation,” providing us with the last piece of the puzzle we are putting together within the confines of Nabokov’s text.

“Vulgar understanding,” writes Bataille in the piece, “is in us like another *tissue*!” This “tissue” (of quotations) is a common quality, one shared among human beings, as obviously present (though invisible) as the “visible tissues (bony, muscular, skin).”<sup>80</sup> It is perhaps the web of the most basic habits of interpretation, language as it is when it has us completely under its dominion, docile and enmeshed in the coordinate lines of mythic interception. After all, “tissue” and “text” share an etymological root: according to the metaphor that founds these words, both of them refer to things that have been woven.

“Vulgar understanding” is, therefore, woven into flesh. To be more precise – and to heed the lessons of embodied cognition – we should perhaps say simply that it *is* flesh,<sup>81</sup> that it constitutes a layer of flesh: the topmost stratum, the transcendent skin. Or other organs, for that matter – if tools are external organs of the extended human

<sup>79</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 286.

<sup>80</sup> Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 85.

<sup>81</sup> As Vivec had told us earlier in “The Scripture of the Word, First: ‘All language is based on meat. Do not let the sophists fool you.’”

organism, then it can be said that the tissue of understanding coalesces into organs: types of knowledge, methodologies, theories, the thoughts of this or that person... (it is a process that finds a striking expression in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, in which a character named O'Blivion delivers the famous line: "The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain"<sup>82</sup>).

Let us, as we read the following quote from "Method of Meditation," relate it to the experience of the poet in "Terror": "In a sense, the condition in which *I would see* would be on leaving, on emerging, from 'tissue.' And without doubt I must say immediately: this condition on which *I would see* would be dying. At no moment will I have the possibility of *seeing it!*"<sup>83</sup> In a way, these sentences convey the existence of the reducing valve, but Bataille goes straight to the point: the total unclenching of the reducing valve is death, the ultimate shedding of tissue. One finds this judgement expressed more elaborately, and in explicit connection to Hegel, in the tellingly entitled essay, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice":

In theory, it is his natural, animal being whose death reveals Man to himself, but the revelation never takes place. For when the animal being supporting him dies, the human being himself ceases to be. 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.<sup>84</sup>

In the end, then, we must conclude that the poet has not truly *seen*; he merely glimpsed, and that was all he could have gone through without actually dying, death

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<sup>82</sup> *Videodrome*, dir. David Cronenberg (Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1983).

<sup>83</sup> Bataille, "Method of Meditation," p. 85.

<sup>84</sup> Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," p. 19. See also: relevant passages in: Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), pp. 46-47, 57-58, 66-67, especially the second one, wherein he goes so far as to say that, in truth, he has, for an instant, *seen*: "I'm no longer separated from my death."



appearing as the sole way out of “the prison of individuation.” Unable to forsake the subject-object division – unaware of such a possibility, or rather: unaware, precisely, of the impossible – he clung desperately to his self, failing to attain ecstasy,<sup>85</sup> which is always an evacuation – albeit temporary, its nature that of a glimpse – of the self. In other words: objects slipping from its grasp, the poet’s consciousness has found itself on the verge of an ecstatic transformation, on the precipice of a descent from transcendence.<sup>86</sup> Alas, the poet was unprepared, lacking in the discipline of inner experience.

Doubtless, however, what has become apparent is the intricate connection between sovereignty and the movement that takes one beyond. And yet, it is crucial to realise that the positing of the sovereign in an otherworld was, as far as the fate of sovereignty is concerned, tantamount to exile.<sup>87</sup> More accurately speaking, there is a connection between sovereignty and the movement that takes one beyond transcendent arrangements. If an opposing view lays claim to the hearts of people – if they come to believe that the sovereign occupies an otherworld<sup>88</sup> to which they can gain access through subservient actions in this world – they will imagine, firstly, the sovereign to preside over transcendent arrangements (to be the most supreme of these arrangements), and secondly, themselves to be incapable of sovereignty (of giving themselves the right to useless expenditure; the victory of secular frameworks can be secured even as a result of the originally rebellious outbursts of he who was called – in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” – the man of action; in “The Sovereign,” Bataille writes sharply of

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<sup>85</sup> Failing to “let go”...

<sup>86</sup> ...and failing to “become aware.”

<sup>87</sup> Bataille, “The Sovereign,” pp. 190-192.

<sup>88</sup> Which might just as well be produced within a secular framework, which can generate for itself an image of its future. That is, after all, the nature of the desiccated otherworld of our own hauntological, sickly nostalgic age.

“humanity entirely blocked, here in the archaic contradictions of religions or kings, there in the impasse of a rebellion that reverts to submission when successful, though more perfect and lacking a beyond”<sup>89</sup>). Thus the circle of the possible is drawn: the fire is lit and a prohibition is imposed upon leaving its light.

A question reveals itself: can sovereignty be recalled from its exile into the immaterial beyond? Can one bring it back in a bid against the tyranny of reason, against the force of language and the voracity of discourse – can one follow, in a certain sense, in Kreia’s footsteps? As it has been said in chapter five, she had recovered the Exile from the outer rims of a galaxy, because the Exile was a wound in the Force, the very Force that, as if wilfully, perpetuated itself – maintained a homeostasis – through the subtle manipulation of generation after generation of Force sensitives, just as the mythic Word perpetuates itself through the manipulation of generations locked onto the coordinate points of servile reason. We, too, must find for ourselves a wound: “Through what could be called incompleteness or animal nakedness or the wound, the different separate beings *communicate*, acquiring life by losing it in *communication* with each other”<sup>90</sup> (*life* means here an intensity of existence one attains not only through an other, but with a reciprocity the violence of which confuses one with the other). Through the character of the Exile – who was, by virtue of being a wound in the Force, a chance for all living beings to take true responsibility for mastering their own lives, a chance that could only arise given the disappearance of the overriding control of fate by the Force<sup>91</sup> – we can imagine sovereignty leaking from an otherworld to which it was attributed and back into this world. And although *this* is a world of “separate beings,” their apparent

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<sup>89</sup> Ibidem, pp. 194-195.

<sup>90</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 27.

<sup>91</sup> We will return to the theme of struggling against otherworldly sovereigns in chapter eleven.

separation is called into question by *every* wound.

One would do well to also remember this: Kreia's quest brought her death at the hands of the Exile. There can be no doubt that death will not simply *happen* to those who would see sovereignty returned to the human being. Theirs is "The Teaching of Death"<sup>92</sup> and "The Practice of Joy Before Death,"<sup>93</sup> the awareness of the fact that if a human remains untouched by the consciousness of death, by "the marvelous magic of death," then, as long as he lives, "it will seem that death is not destined to reach him, and so the death awaiting him will not give him a *human* character," and that "[t]hus, at all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying."<sup>94</sup>

We are, of course, forced yet again into that loop inherent to all solar asceticisms, the loop by which one tries to subvert a project through the project – it is required, it is the "minimum of strata"; it is the project as a point of departure, the sovereign moment occurring as what can only be called, from the perspective of the project, a catastrophic instant different in its very essence from the effort that preceded it and from the future it engenders.

If the circle of the possible is drawn by the light of the fire that brings definition to transcendent arrangements – flame tongues speaking of their inaccessible depth and the overlord reigning therein – then, given the fact that humans have transcended whatever it was that they now imagine as animal life, a life to which there can be no return, to pursue immanent experiences is to venture away from the fire *without* forgetting its light, thus experiencing self-dissolution through immanence as it is for us now, post-

<sup>92</sup> Bataille, "The Teaching of Death," in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, pp. 119-128.

<sup>93</sup> Bataille, "Practice of Joy Before Death," in: *Visions of Excess*, pp. 235-239.

<sup>94</sup> Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," p. 20.

transcendentally, post-apocalyptically (after all, in the words of Carolyn Dean, this is “the legacy of Bataille”: bringing to the fore the possibility of being “for and against self-dissolution at the same time,”<sup>95</sup> of acknowledging the necessity of the “minimum of strata” or the fact that, in the words of Michèle Richman, “[o]nly by negation of the negation [of animal immanence], or interruption of the interruption [of lost continuity], can the poetic sensibility sacrifice what is to what is not – the absence that is [...] death as the confrontation with [...] the fact that beyond the universe there is the silence of nothing”<sup>96</sup>).

Immanence, at its most extreme – past the experience we have of it through eroticism, hilarity, kinship, sanctity, and romance, all of which constitute “ties of immanence” that return one “to indefinite immanence, which admits superiority nowhere,”<sup>97</sup> and all of which require “a preliminary laceration from the transcendent system of activity”<sup>98</sup> – is the night. Faced as we are with the persistence of the myth that insists on the absence of myth, and the continued deterioration of religious possibility (the kind that, in Bataille’s words, survives, if barely, “in spite of” the developments that religions have underwent since ancient times), it would seem that this, at least, is sovereign:

Nothing really remains and nothing in the universe appears that might comfort or guide the uncertain existence of humanity. We can only offer ourselves the glory of being in our own eyes this senseless, laughable, and agonizing vision. Thus, on the last night, as we sink, the possibility is left to us to know ourselves as blind and to draw from refusal that which we will oppose to these scraps of knowledge that we grant one virtue: that of waking us immeasurably to the night and standing us up, vacillating or laughing, anguished, lost in an

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<sup>95</sup> Carolyn Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 251.

<sup>96</sup> Michèle Richman, “Georges Bataille’s Classical Modernism,” *L’Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (2013), p. 115.

<sup>97</sup> Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” pp. 85-86.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

unbearable joy!<sup>99</sup>

To sum up briefly: through Bataille's efforts we see how the usual ("vulgar") understanding of transcendence and consciousness can be reversed: rather than think of ecstasy and such in terms of transcendence, we can understand such experiences as proper to immanence. Into such a "reversed" (subversive) understanding of transcendence we have plugged Nabokov's story, wishing for it to serve as an illustration of what such an experience of immanence might be like. However, though it did allow us to draw up an analysis of the planes of transcendence and immanence, one has to admit that the story presents the experience as a thoroughly unfortunate incident, something that the experiencer has gone through both accidentally and involuntarily. In the next chapter, we will try to upgrade our combination with another plug-in, one that will counterbalance the current level of bias. To begin with, it has to be underscored that what was for Nabokov's poet a source of the eponymous terror presents itself, for Bataille, as *the* condition of laughter, which is, after all, "the effect of a rupture in the link of transcendent connections."<sup>100</sup> As we read in *Inner Experience*:

From one end to the other of this human life which is our lot, the consciousness of the paucity of stability, even of the profound lack of all true stability, liberates the enchantment of laughter. As if this life suddenly passed from an empty and sad solidity to the happy contagion of warmth and of light, to the free tumult which the waters and the air communicate to one another: flashes and the rebounding of laughter follow the first opening, the permeability of a dawning smile. If a group of people laugh at an absent-minded gesture, or at a sentence revealing an absurdity, there passes within them a current of intense communication. Each isolated existence emerges from itself by means of the image betraying the error of immutable isolation. It emerges from itself in a sort of easy flash; it opens itself at the same time to the contagion of a wave which rebounds, for those who laugh, together become like the waves of the sea – there no longer exists between them any partition as long as the laughter lasts; they are no more separate than are two waves, but their unity is as undefined, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Bataille, "The Sovereign," p. 195.

<sup>100</sup> Bataille, "Method of Meditation," p. 86.

<sup>101</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 95.

This sentence – “[e]ach isolated existence emerges from itself by means of the image betraying the error of immutable isolation” – connects us yet again with Bruno Schulz. We will once more return to him in the next chapter, for the writings of he who contested the principle of individuation<sup>102</sup> – and who claimed, very much in consonance with Bataille’s parodic vision of the universe, that matter only ever takes form in jest – are exactly what we need to illustrate not an incidental, singular experience (which was the lot of the poet in “Terror”), but a life spent at the limit of the order of things.

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<sup>102</sup> For an archaeology of the Nietzschean veins pulsating within Schulz’s oeuvre, see: Włodzimierz Bolecki, „Principium individuationis. Motywy nietzscheańskie w twórczości Brunona Schulza,” *Teksty Drugie*, No. 5 (2003), pp. 17-33.

## CHAPTER 8: COURTLY MASOCHISM VERSUS THE ORDER OF THINGS

*“The individual was ‘liberated’ from collective life only gradually, as private spaces for the individual were created within collective private spaces [...]. Monasticism began to sanction solitude in two ways: an inner individualized private space, in the form of the conscience which needed to confess, accompanied by the practice of individual withdrawal into the forest, in the form of the religiously devout hermit. Around the same time, knights were setting out on individual adventures.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“I saw pale kings and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;  
They cried – ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci  
Hath thee in thrall!’”<sup>2</sup>*

In the seventh volume of the *Schulz/Forum* journal – a volume devoted entirely to the issue of masochism in the life and work of Bruno Schulz – one finds three articles within the collective skein of which run two common threads of great importance, namely: guilt and the sin of non-reproductive eroticism. Before we jump into the contents of these articles, let us (re-)establish the Bataillean context within which we will try to engage with those texts.

First comes the matter of guilt and we must, therefore, call upon Bataille’s *Guilty*.

“Guilt arises in a zone of interference – on the way to an attempted accord with nature

<sup>1</sup> Janell Watson, “Intimacy without Domestication: Courtly Love in *A Thousand Plateaus*,” *L’Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2004), p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> John Keats, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” in: *The Poetical Works of John Keats* (Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske & Company, 1884), p. 242.

(human existence is guilty, it asks forgiveness”<sup>3</sup> – its guilt is defined by the degree to which it opposes nature<sup>4</sup>). It is a well-known given of anthropology that the rituals performed by our ancestors in connection with their hunts were meant to – among other things<sup>5</sup> – placate the mighty beasts and absolve the hunters from the guilt that arises once one sympathises with one’s victim. In other words, it is the guilt that transcendence brings: the guilt of a mind that reflects upon its actions in the world and understands that it wrongs other beings.

The pursuit of “forgiveness,” or of an “accord with nature,” is a type of “response” to this guilt, a “response” being an establishing of a system, “a morality inscribing human existence in nature (as a creature),”<sup>6</sup> a transcendental classification of identities against which one sins by disrespecting one’s placement within the classification (stemming from transcendence, guilt can grow into a fear of transcendental reckoning). Though they are various, the responses of organised thought that justify human submission – to the world, to nature, and to other humans – can be questioned: they can be laughed at, and “[l]aughter doesn’t deny just nature [...] but human misery [...],”<sup>7</sup> too, thus contesting the ascetic ideal. Love can be made and felt in spite of those responses, while the ecstasy of non-knowledge attained through inner experience is innocent in the sense of being expiated by experience itself<sup>8</sup> – in the sense of being sovereignly free in its sin.

Taking the above understanding of guilt to its extreme conclusion, Bataille

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> See: Bataille, “Lecture, January 18, 1955,” in: *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2009), p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p. 7.



sketches out a Hegelian vision in which guilt is the greatest obstruction on the human path of negativity, an obstruction that could theoretically be removed by a perfect compatibility of “ultimate and systematic action” with “infinite questioning.”<sup>9</sup> Alas, this would nonetheless probably result in a new interference, a new response, and fresh guilt. In Jeremy Biles’ analysis of Bataille’s *On Nietzsche*, guilt is in fact revealed to be an indispensable condition for communication and community<sup>10</sup> – indeed, the connections of guilt with the sacred nuclei that govern social attraction and repulsion, and thus its connections with transcendence in general, should not be underestimated. There is, at the level of civilisation, a guilty sentiment that pushes some parts of society to seek atonement or feign remorse for the crimes of others, whether in the form of a grass roots civil impulse or in the guise of a public spectacle of grief staged by the upper echelons. To put it simply, as ineffectual or dishonest as our guilt might be, our civilisation has not done away with it yet.

Bataille goes on to say that sovereign effusions (laughter, love, ecstasy...) cannot (as long as they oppose discourse) be equated with mere responses, and that they could – when linked with activity in the world – actually cancel interference. Echoing, however, what we have discussed earlier as a reluctance in regard to losing “sacred tension,” Bataille voices a suspicion that the drowning out of interference would in truth “dissolve” humanity in “animal night,” that the reversal of ecstasy and sobriety that is to come with self-consciousness – “an agreement with self” – runs the risk of being “a sort of death,” a disappearance.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 137.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 57, 70.

<sup>11</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 138. See also: Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Richard Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 100.

In a way, what we should become aware of is a spectrum, an array that – for lack of a better word – begins with the techniques of individual self-annihilation, and fans out towards the (im)possibilities of a collective dissolution of selfhood, the *notion* of ecstasy being led by Bataille not to a merely logical conclusion, but to an extremity. A sweeping movement from, on the one hand, the destruction of a servile “I” through non-knowledge (which releases the tension keeping the subject and object intact) to – not on the other hand, but rather somewhere beyond the horizon – the deterioration of tissue, the death of language, the silence of a civilisation facing the night with *joy*.

Bataille’s writings show that to be human is to be a tension – to walk a tightrope suspended tautly between guilt and innocence: to *be* the “sacred tension” between transcendence and immanence: “If I did not exceed nature, in a leap beyond ‘the static and the given,’ I would be defined by laws. But nature *plays me*, casting me further than herself, beyond the laws, the limits that make *humble people* love her.”<sup>12</sup> Even though an “I” – the self as participation in the order of things – exceeds nature, it does so only on account of nature, of that chance event which the birth of an “I” is – an “I” is tension, a tense state of nature (of matter): “In nature’s excessive game it makes no difference whether I exceed her or she exceeds herself in me (she is perhaps entirely excess of herself), but, in time, the excess will finally take its place in the order of things (I will die at that moment).”<sup>13</sup> It might be true, therefore, that “humankind’s a pinnacle, but,” stipulates Bataille, “only a disastrous one.”<sup>14</sup> The tension *will* snap, the balancing act *will* end in a glorious fall into darkness.

Granted, there are those who refuse to be aware of guilt, those that remain

<sup>12</sup> Bataille, *The Impossible: A Story of Rats followed by Dianus and The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991), p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 7.

untouched by “the marvelous magic of death,” those that “resist their anguish. They laugh, sing. They’re *innocent*,” claims Bataille, “and I’m *guilty*.” Assuming a certain occlusion of the baseline guilt entailed by being human, there is, of course, a supposed innocence in which those that conform to the law – to the order of things and their productive, useful, profitable manipulation – take part. From their perspective, a person such as Bataille is a suspicious character, what with his active pursuits of anguish, his thinking, drinking,<sup>15</sup> writing.

The core around which the various essays comprising Bataille’s *Literature and Evil* revolve is an accusation levelled at literature, an indictment that brings to the fore the greatest power of this mode of writing: literature is guilty of not being work, of being the opposite of work, of being – in the whole of human, transcendent activity, which secures itself from evil by the principles of work and prohibition – a hole that lets evil in. Denis Hollier expresses this core in the following words:

Literature, which is childhood rediscovered, is [...] obliged to plead guilty. Speaking of Baudelaire, for example, Bataille says that the poet “chose to be guilty, like a child.” For rediscovered childhood is childhood that has lost its primal innocence. This guilty childhood, which might be called a grown-up childhood, is the one with which literature is identified. The pleasures of such a childhood are indefensible. But condemning them does not imply giving them up: the demand for guilt goes without repentance. The guilty party is impenitent.<sup>16</sup>

As we should be able to recall from the second chapter, this is not the case in the situation of writers who surrender the sovereign impulse of poetry to the servile wish to be useful within the established order: to write propaganda, to write “in the name of,” to write “for the cause.” Engaged writing is innocent, useful, adult: it has found the

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<sup>15</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 102: “Now I place a large glass of alcohol on my table. I have been useful. I have bought a table, a glass, etc. But this table is not a means of labor: it helps me to drink alcohol. In setting my drinking glass on the table, to that extent *I have destroyed the table*, or at least I have destroyed the labor that was needed to make it.”

<sup>16</sup> Denis Hollier, *Absent Without Leave: French Literature Under the Threat of War*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 63.

*purpose* of literature, its *excuse* for existing in a world that requires sober, serious action; it has come up with the *justification* for delaying the much anticipated death of literature. If literature succeeds in remaining unjustified, inexcusable, childish, it is transcendence folding back on itself, turning against itself – it is evil. “Thus, in Bataille, literature is born of a wound that does not heal.”<sup>17</sup> One should not forget: just as one should be careful to avoid conflating a re-entry into the night of immanence with regression, one should take care not to mistakenly equate the guilty childhood of literature with regression: it is a question not of a descent into the personal, but of an attitude that explodes the personal, that opens even the autobiographical unto the impossible. Likewise, a literature “born of a wound that does not heal” is not to be understood in terms of an exploration of personal traumas, but rather as a reckoning with the incompleteness shared by all human beings.

Literature pleads guilty, and that is precisely what Schulz did – as we shall soon see – through his artworks, and through his writings, following in both of these domains the two paths that led him into enchantment and myth: the rediscovery of childlike wonder, and eroticism.<sup>18</sup>

Among the three articles we have mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, one finds Stanisław Rosiek’s text, “Odcieście. Siedem fragmentów” (“The Cut: Seven Pieces”), an analysis that begins with a dream described by Schulz in a letter to Stanisław Szuman, a dream which, in Rosiek’s view, could have been made up by Schulz in an attempt to fabricate an intriguing persona, but which we nonetheless consider – following Rosiek – to be worthy of attention.

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<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 232.

<sup>18</sup> See also: Marek Zaleski, „Masochista na Cyterze,” *Teksty Drugie*, No. 3 (2005), p. 186.

The dream is comprised of, essentially, two constituent parts: first, a scene taking place in a dark forest where Schulz castrates himself and buries his sexual organ in the ground, and second, an intense feeling of *guilt* on the side of Schulz, who feels that he has incurred some sort of cosmic wrath – that he has brought upon himself eternal, irreversible damnation – and who is put inside a jar: on display, as it were, made to be seen, and thus judged.

The significance of the dream – whether it was an actual dream or not – is laid out by Rosiek in the following manner: by cutting off the organ that enables reproductive sexuality, Schulz is positioned outside the biological order in which one prolongs oneself through progeny: the auto-castration places him in the unreal; put another way, the dream symbolises Schulz's passage from the line of history into the circle of myth.<sup>19</sup> One could say, perhaps, that his penis – his biological virility – is sacrificed so as to grant him entry into sacred time, but one would have to take into account his guilt, his feeling of having mortally sinned, gravely transgressed: what we are dealing with here is black magic, the left-hand sacred. Truly, even if he did in fact invent the dream, the meaning it produces is that of an origin story. As Rosiek notices, the dream functions perfectly as a “myth”<sup>20</sup> positioned in the mists of Schulz's past, and does so regardless of whether he had actually dreamt it or not. The operation of this myth is threefold: firstly, it makes of Schulz himself a mythical figure, secondly, it symbolically removes him from the biopolitical order of utility (from the “organic organization of organs”), and thirdly, it configures and puts in motion a machinery of guilt-ridden, infertile – and thus useless, unproductive, *unnatural* – eroticism. In Filip Szałasek's article from the

<sup>19</sup> Stanisław Rosiek, „Odciecie. Siedem Fragmentów,” *Schulz/Forum*, Vol. 7 (2016), pp. 25-29.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 26.

same volume, one reads that the dream constructs a situation in which the “rationing” of pleasure by societal mores is sidestepped by a subject that, by refusing to comply with the biological requirements of receiving system-sanctioned pleasure (refusing to comply with anatomy-as-destiny), slips through the limitations by moulding its biological make-up into a “lawless” shape. In other words, the subject becomes external to a system that from now on can lay no claim to it.<sup>21</sup>

In “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” Bataille relays the story of a certain Gaston F. Upon hearing of Bataille’s interest in Van Gogh’s self-mutilation, Adrien Borel (Bataille’s psychoanalyst) referred Bataille to a study he had conducted (with two other psychiatrists) on Gaston, an embroiderer and painter who bit off his finger during an episode of madness or, as Bataille called it, “solar obsession” – according to Gaston himself, not only did he read the story of Van Gogh’s ear shortly before his digital incident, but it was the Sun itself that instructed him to bite off his finger after he had requested the Sun’s advice on the matter of his mental well-being.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Filip Szalasek, “Erros Schulza,” *Schulz/Forum*, Vol. 7 (2016), p. 80.

Curiously enough, whereas Szalasek describes Schulz’s castration as a “feminization,” invoking a Baudrillardian understanding of femininity itself as a “somewhere else” of sexuality, Rosiek’s claim is that Schulz’s symbolic act falls short of either femininity or androgyny, the former being in truth irreducible to the lack of a penis, and the latter demanding not an absence of organs (or other traits), but a plenitude, a divinity of union. In a way, then, the two perspectives complement each other: Baudrillardian femininity is neither anatomical nor hermaphroditic – it is seductive, it pushes against the limits of anatomy.

What is more, Baudrillard theorised seduction as a mode that is locked in a peculiar dance with the mode of perversion: on the one hand, these two modes are fundamentally opposed due to the former’s flexibility and the latter’s propensity for fixation; on the other hand, however, both modes oppose the dictum establishing anatomy as destiny, and it sometimes happens that one flows seamlessly into the other – that seduction is perverse or that perversion operates via seduction.

Such an interweaving seems to be applicable in Schulz’s case, for he had, firstly, undoubtedly excelled at the game of both seducing and being seduced by signs, and secondly, been no stranger to the fascination of the fetishist. Indeed, the following passage from Baudrillard’s *Seduction*, p. 125, would hardly surprise anyone should it appear in a book about Schulz: “The pervert is not someone who transgresses the law, but someone who eludes the law in order to dedicate himself to the rule, someone, then, who evades not just the reproductive finality of the sexual order, but that order itself, with its symbolic law, in order to link up with a regulated, ritualized, ceremonial form.”

<sup>22</sup> Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” in: *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stockl, trans. Allan Stockl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 62.

Therefore – in Bataille’s view – both Van Gogh and Gaston F. have been pushed to self-mutilation by a sacrificial impulse “[...] of which the automutilation of madmen is only the most absurd and terrible example.”<sup>23</sup> It is a question of a passion evoked by the “blinding rays of the sun,”<sup>24</sup> by the residual charge of solar mythologies the truths of which have receded into the inexpressibles, stirring in us – at most – obscure feelings connected with a desire for sunlight, a desire that so often characterises “the ideal-typical, vacationing nude body, given over to the sun, itself hygienic and neutralized, with its luciferian parody of burning.”<sup>25</sup>

By his own admission, Bataille’s main reason for mentioning Gaston F. in his text was to corroborate his original intuitions regarding Van Gogh’s self-mutilation. While discussing Bataille’s text in *The Self and its Pleasures*, Carolyn Dean takes a closer at Gaston and the study devoted to him by Borel et al. In so doing, she constructs an interpretation that corresponds to Bataille’s assertion that the essence of performing a sacrificial ritual lies in “the radical *alteration* of the person”<sup>26</sup> performing the sacrifice, in the fact that the sacrificer slips into the beyond of the order of things through his identification with the victim of sacrifice – of making sacred. In the death of a victim or the expulsion of an offering, the human being chances upon the mythic continuity to which the victim or the offering is returned through an ephemeral opening that appears in the network of law the moment that law is broken – hence the integral role of transgression in the rituals of sacrifice<sup>27</sup> (this is the detour to which humanity takes recourse as regards its dabbling in “the marvelous magic of death” – there occurs in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1990), pp. 43-44.

<sup>26</sup> Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), pp. 82-83.

sacrifice a holy instant of identification with the victim through which the human gives way to the self-consciousness of death<sup>28</sup>). After all, one can only touch a god through “the throat of the animal being sacrificed.”<sup>29</sup> In the piece devoted to Van Gogh, Bataille relates sacrifice to the dynamics of homogeneity and heterogeneity, of appropriation and expulsion; he writes:

Such an action would be characterized by the fact that it would have the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual, in the same way that vomiting would be opposed to its opposite, the communal eating of food. Sacrifice considered in its essential phase would only be the rejection of what had been appropriated by a person or by a group. Because everything that is rejected from the human cycle is altered in an altogether troubling way, the sacred things that intervene at the end of the operation – the victim struck down in a pool of blood, the severed finger or ear, the torn-out eye – do not appreciably differ from vomited food.<sup>30</sup>

To put it simply, then: at the moment of being separated from the rest of the body, neither Van Gogh’s ear nor Gaston’s finger held the importance previously accorded to them by the order of utility, by the “organic organization of organs” – through their sacrifice (through the disorganisation of these organs), both Van Gogh and Gaston F. became altered by an experience that set them loose: “The one who sacrifices is free – free to indulge in a similar disgorging, free, continuously identifying with the victim, to vomit his own being just as he has vomited a piece of himself or a bull, in other words free to throw himself suddenly *outside of himself* [...].”<sup>31</sup> The moment a being is sacrificed, the sacred with which it becomes imbued – and which replaces within it the quality of a useful thing – carries over, as it were, onto the sacrificer, whose “radical *alteration*” is a participation in the free play of immanent forces, which care little for

<sup>28</sup> Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” trans. Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies*, No. 78 (1990), pp. 19-22.

<sup>29</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Bataille, “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 70.



personhood.

Dean's approach to Gaston's case embeds the latter's alteration in the alternation between the self and self-annihilation. Gaston was convinced that the Sun's advice had been sound, because he felt that it promised him a way out of an enfeeblement that troubled him; as we have already said during our discussion on ascetic practices, actions that go against the logic of self-preservation are a fount of power (and, in a way, literature also goes against this logic, as long as it maintains its guilt; "I'm trying [...] to lose myself in meditation: to let myself be dissolved – through writing [...]"<sup>32</sup>; "Method in meditation is analogous to technique in sacrifice"<sup>33</sup>). Indeed, Gaston's "self-mutilation seems to have been a form of self-sacrifice by which he attempted to cure himself, to 'vanquish a feeling of inner powerlessness.'"<sup>34</sup> Dean develops this point into the following reading:

A mutilated hand leads to the discovery of a new inner power – for Gaston, the renewal of his artistic talents – in an endless play of normality and pathology which dissolves into a cure that is always a form of pathology. It is precisely because the cure (the purpose of self-mutilation) sought by Gaston F., by Van Gogh, and by Bataille himself does not conform to any conventional notion of utility and is in fact purposeless within a rational or utilitarian economy that the disease cannot be diagnosed or its motivation explained in traditional psychiatric terms. Such a self-mutilation remains outside the limits of scientific explanation, which needs to establish some verifiable relationship between cause and effect. Yet the origins of self-mutilation perpetually elude rational explanation because, as with criminality, they are to be found not in any utilitarian motive, but in a desire to be wounded, in a pathology, like *autopunition*, that is always already a cure.<sup>35</sup>

Although Schulz only went as far as to either imagine or dream of a scenario of self-mutilation, his dream narrative seems nonetheless to depend in its cohesion on an intuitive understanding of sacrificial dynamics and on the interplay of healing and hurting discerned by Dean. As befits one of the great myth-makers, Schulz has

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<sup>32</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures*, p. 234.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 234.

mythologised for himself an original wound: the amputated penis, the disorganised organ the sacrifice of which “leads to the discovery of a new inner power” – indeed, Schulz believed that his work exceeded the pattern of finding relief from sexual frustration in producing repetitive representations of gratified desire; aware of just how deeply rooted masochism was in his very soul, he endeavoured – first through art, then through writing – to portray his perversion as a philosophy, to show not just what it is like to be at the feet of a harsh mistress, but what it means – in the full scope of being alive in this world – to crave the whip.<sup>36</sup> Simply put, by embracing his “pathology” in its entirety – positioning at its centre a myth of sacrifice that, from his perspective, bracketed the profane world – he “cured” himself of a sense of powerlessness that would otherwise paralyse him. It would perhaps do us better – as readers of Schulz – to understand his “desire to be wounded” not as an Oedipal entrapment (an interpretative strategy employed, for example, in Paweł Dybel’s article in the volume on Schulz’s masochism<sup>37</sup>), but to deoedipalise (speaking in Deleuzoguattarian terms) our reading and see it for the source of creative power that it so evidently was, enabling him to practise his craft under the influence of the sacred. That the sacred (the immanent, the nocturnal) has intruded upon his life is beyond doubt – suffice it to consider the imprint left on Schulz’s psyche by the tale of the Erl-King,<sup>38</sup> or the frequency with which the very theme of strange inspirations recurs within his writings.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> As we learn from Schulz’s letter included in: Henry J. Wegrocki, “Masochistic motives in the literary and graphic art of Bruno Schulz,” *The Psychoanalytic Review*, Vol. 33 (1946), pp. 154–164, quoted in: Rosiek, „Odcięcie. Siedem Fragmentów,” pp. 48–50.

<sup>37</sup> Paweł Dybel, „Masochizm Schulza i próg wstydu w słowie”, *Schulz/Forum*, Vol. 7 (2016), pp. 5–24.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Czabanowska-Wróbel, „O obrazie Króla Olch w prozie Schulza,” in: *Czytanie Schulza*, ed. Jerzy Jarzębski (Kraków: TIC, 1994), pp. 296–305, quoted in: Zaleski, „Masochista na Cyterze,” p. 200.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example: Jerzy Jarzębski, „Schulz i dramat tworzenia,” *Teksty Drugie*, No. 5 (2003), pp. 9–16, where, on p. 10, one reads that the “ingenious epoch” – a time described by Schulz in “The Age of Genius,” a period in the narrator’s childhood when he experienced impulsive outbursts of automatic drawing – was “ingenious” precisely because what was created at that time “was not a realization of a preconceived project, but was instead a spontaneous action prior to rationalizations [trans. – M.H.]”

In yet other words, if we take Schulz's "dream" of auto-castration into account while considering the presence of masochism at the very heart of Schulz' art (the grounding that he, both as an artist and as a person, had in the sins of flesh, in his denial to procreate and his desire to prostrate himself<sup>40</sup>), then we can understand his creative process not in terms of mere compensation, sublimation, or transposition, but rather as an all-encapsulating mythologisation: a ritualised<sup>41</sup> method of going beyond the order of utility, or – at least – of questioning the limits that this order entails.

Even though Schulz's visual works are far more explicit in regard to their erotic contents than his writings, there is still a powerful presence – at the core of the latter – of blissful torment one arrives at... no, one never arrives at anything, for it is a matter of an indefinite delay of gratification, satisfaction, completion. Schulz translates the masochistic erotic experience – characterised necessarily by a sense of suspense – into a suspense of sense, a "postulate," to repeat Zaleski's choice of word, of never getting to *the point*.<sup>42</sup> This is perhaps where Schulzian and Bataillean modes reach a most remarkable alignment. In Schulz, a continuity is discovered between the masochistic erotic experience and the epistemological condition of being unable to get to the point. What is proposed here is that this discovery aligns with Bataille's masochistic epistemology, in which there is, on the one hand, the anguished ecstasy experienced through non-knowledge, and on the other hand, a fate which compels the human being to invent (in vain) myths that always, by definition – precisely due to being definable – fail to envelop that molecule which, if touched, makes the subject collapse.

Can we zoom in on that moment when the masochistic experience makes

<sup>40</sup> Rosiek, „Odcieć. Siedem Fragmentów,” pp. 30-32, 40-61.

<sup>41</sup> Zaleski, „Masochista na Cyterze,” p. 203. See also: footnote 18.

<sup>42</sup> See also: Michał P. Markowski, „Wiosna. Między retoryką a erotyką”, in: *Czytanie Schulza*, ed. Jerzy Jarzębski (Kraków: TIC, 1994), p. 289, quoted in: Zaleski, „Masochista na Cyterze,” p. 203.

transcendence strain, stutter? Can we somehow map out the cracks – as if by frottage – that appear when transcendent arrangements splinter? Let us try and set up an apparatus that will make clear(er) the rift that connects – on the two sides of the order of things – masochism and immanence.

In *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, a study devoted mainly to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's oeuvre, Deleuze highlighted what has also been stressed (in Markowski, Zaleski, and others) in reference to Schulz, namely, the elemental role of suspense in masochist literature, and thus, according to Deleuze, in masochism itself:

The whip or the sword that never strikes, the fur that never discloses the flesh, the heel that is forever descending on the victim, are the expression, beyond all movement, of a profound state of waiting closer to the sources of life and death. The novels of Masoch display the most intense preoccupation with arrested movement; his scenes are frozen, as though photographed, stereotyped or painted.<sup>43</sup>

One might say: as though painted, printed, or drawn by Schulz, whose images find their essence in capturing the intensity of an instant. As was said above, the principle of suspense also applies in the case of Schulz's writing, and even his perhaps most explicit scenes are structurally predicated on suspending the narrative, leaving the reader with a suggestion of something perverse lingering in a dense atmosphere the tension of which is never truly dissipated.<sup>44</sup>

However, in *Masochism*, Deleuze is himself Oedipal, relying on psychoanalytical schemas of family structure in his attempt to explain this mode of eroticism. Although it does not stop him from developing salient points – the production, for example, of a specific “art of fantasy” that stems from the principle of suspension proper to

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<sup>43</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 70.

<sup>44</sup> Rosiek, „Odcięcie. Siedem Fragmentów,” pp. 32-34.

masochism,<sup>45</sup> or the function of contracts<sup>46</sup> within the masochistic narrative<sup>47</sup> – it does lead him to a way of thinking of the masochistic erotic experience in terms that, having extracted the hidden meaning from the experience, place it outside eroticism. In other words, in spite of the fact that Deleuze frames the masochist as someone who puts reality itself in suspense, he nonetheless makes of the masochistic experience an instance of “pure waiting,”<sup>48</sup> and since to wait is to look forward to something different from the present moment, the masochistic experience is reduced to a means to an end – to a condition of gratification that is to occur later – rather than conceived as an end in itself.

The same accusation can be levelled at other dominant frameworks surrounding masochism, a review of which is provided in “Religion and the Theory of Masochism,” an article by Stuart L. Charmé. There, he lists the following interpretations (and in so doing, he elucidates the analogies between masochistic and religious experiences, marking asceticism, for example, as a point of convergence): masochism is “a distortion of love,”<sup>49</sup> a mechanism that serves the purpose of coping with interpersonal,

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<sup>45</sup> Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, p. 72.

<sup>46</sup> The idea of contracts – in the sense that they have in, for instance, Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* – is largely absent in Schulz. What one sees instead is a *social* contract, a social order, namely, the matriarchy explicit in Schulz’s artworks and implicit in parts of what he has written down.

In „Drohobycki matriarchat. Antropologiczne wątki *Sklepów cynamonowych* Brunona Schulza,” a paper published in *Schulz/Forum*, Vol. 5 (2015), pp. 18-30, and devoted to the matriarchy implicit in Schulz’s texts, Marcin Całbecki suggests that Johann Jakob Bachofen’s book on mythology and the supposedly matriarchal origins of human civilisation was in fact one of Schulz’s influences in regard to how he chose to mythologise femininity, which is to say, to connect it with the primal, the chaotic, the chthonic.

Całbecki does not attempt to tie this with masochism, but it is certainly worthy of attention that Deleuze develops his interpretation of the (male) masochist into a character that mythologises himself – through his “art of fantasy” – into matriarchal scenarios precisely because the mythic roots of his erotic mode lie in a nostalgia for the chthonic goddess of primordial matriarchy, for the circular time of myth modelled after the cycles of nature and rebirth. Deleuze concludes his psychoanalysis of the masochist with a claim that what the masochist stages in the theatre of his fantasies is “the triumph of the oral mother, the abolition of the father’s likeness and the consequent birth of the new man” (p. 101). This is, of course, easy to link with Schulz’s self-reinvention through myth, and that is the interpretative path chosen in, for instance, the aforementioned articles by Marek Zaleski and Paweł Dybel.

<sup>47</sup> Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, pp. 75-80.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Stuart L. Charmé, “Religion and the Theory of Masochism,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 22,

civilisational, or divine abuse; masochism is “a need for punishment,”<sup>50</sup> a way to atone for one’s perceived moral failings; masochism is “a payment for future rewards,”<sup>51</sup> a both figuratively and literally eschatological point of view in which one comes to appreciate present suffering because it becomes an anticipation of future pleasure; masochism is “a strategy of the weak,”<sup>52</sup> a ploy through which the underdog displays moral superiority in defeat (we could connect this interpretation with an understanding that ascribes to the masochist a tendency to find satisfaction in making the tormentor afraid of the torment to be inflicted<sup>53</sup>); masochism is “a flight from selfhood”<sup>54</sup> – though this sounds promising, the analyses summarised by Charmé under this heading are close to the idea of emancipation coming from surrendering to – in Lyotard’s phrase – “the real manceps.” In other words, it is a matter not of a violent dissolution that upsets harmonies and unities, but of disappearing in a role one has to play in something bigger than oneself. The last interpretation discussed in the article identifies in masochism an “effort to be an object for others,”<sup>55</sup> an endeavour that could ultimately be called similar to the “flight from selfhood” in that both assume – in the reductionist form they take here – a preoccupation with escaping the responsibilities that come with subjectivity. What distinguishes them is that the former implies the self becoming engulfed in a larger self, whereas the latter emphasises the objectification entailed by many masochistic fantasies, some of which are exemplified, as it happens, in Schulz’s prints found in

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No. 3 (1983), p. 222.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 225.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 226.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 227.

<sup>53</sup> Bruce Fink, *Kliniczne wprowadzenie do psychoanalizy lacanowskiej. Teoria i technika*, trans. Łukasz Mokrosiński, (Warszawa: Wyd. A. Żórawski 2002), p. 265, quoted in: Dybel. „Masochizm Schulza i próg wstydu w słowie”, pp. 23-24.

<sup>54</sup> Charmé, “Religion and the Theory of Masochism,” p. 228.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 230.

*Xięga bałwochwalcza* (*The Booke of Idolatry*): *Odwieczna baśń* (*Fable Immemorial*) portrays a man serving as a reclining woman's footstool, and *Na Cyterze* (*On Cythera*) features a man offering his head as a step for a woman alighting from a chariot hauled by three other men.<sup>56</sup> Both works feature Schulz's self-portraiture: he is the man beneath the woman's foot in the first image, and he is one of the men harnessed to the chariot in the second one.

Regardless of how accurate might the interpretations listed above be when applied to particular cases, all of them attempt to define masochism as a (part of a) mechanism, to exorcise the eroticism of the masochist, to explain it away, to solve its riddle by positing an ulterior motive: the masochist does this or that because of misperception, fear, guilt, or weakness... Put another way, what we have seen so far represents a struggle to circumscribe masochistic desire within a rational system – a clear-cut system of causes and effects which is always at odds with the “desire to be wounded” – or within the boundaries of a future-oriented project. As Thomas Phillips (who nonetheless remains anchored in trying to find out the extent to which masochism can be “healthy” or “productive”) remarks: “Try as scholars may to enunciate the masochistic act [...], the effort is, in the end, necessarily incomplete, a mere signpost to an embodied pleasure that defies discursive communication,”<sup>57</sup> that defies transcendent arrangements. We must seek its immanence.

*A Thousand Plateaus* offers a way forward in the form of a theoretical approach that is radically different (eponymously anti-Oedipal) from everything that has been discussed above (*Masochism* was an earlier book, after all, and Deleuze wrote it before

<sup>56</sup> Bruno Schulz, *Xięga Bałwochwalcza* (Warszawa: Interpress, 1988), pp. 69-70, 85.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Phillips, “The Masochistic Body,” in: *The Subject of Minimalism: On Aesthetics, Agency, and Becoming* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 137.

joining forces with Guattari<sup>58</sup>) – it is a matter of the “essential difference between the psychoanalytic interpretation of the phantasy and the antipsychiatric experimentation of the program.”<sup>59</sup> It is “the experimentation of the program” – a set of procedures to which the masochist wishes to be subjected – that grants the masochist the freedom to constitute themselves as an erotic entity, and not necessarily as an outcome of imbalance or as a coping mechanism. When looked upon from such a perspective, the construction of the masochistic experience is revealed to be an assemblage that lets the masochist slip out onto the plane of immanence. Thus, masochism ceases to be a question of “the ridiculous death instinct” or of arriving at pleasure via “a detour through suffering.” Instead, the masochist is shown as someone for whom pleasure “must be delayed as long as possible because it interrupts the continuous process of positive desire.” Deleuze and Guattari posit “a joy that is immanent to desire,” and which can – under certain circumstances, though not necessarily masochistic – make of desire an end in itself, or bring about a desire that is “filled by itself,” and which can, therefore, remain unconstrained by a need for anything that would bring it to a close. Rather than suffer so as to excuse himself and justify his pleasure, “the masochist uses suffering as a way of constituting a body without organs and bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire.”<sup>60</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari tie the thread of a joy “immanent to desire” – a self-sufficient, both unjustified and unjustifiable joy – to courtly love, thus connecting it also to masochism. The common ground of these phenomena lies precisely in the constitution of “a plane of consistency of desire,” in the understanding that desire defies being

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<sup>58</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the differences between the two approaches, see: Chantelle Gray van Heerden, “To Be Done with the Possible, To No Longer Possibilate: Considering the Masochist as the Figure of Exhaustion,” *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2019), pp. 186–206.

<sup>59</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 151.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155.



defined by the way in which it happens to crumble – be it through orgasm or through any other climax for which an orgasm may serve as a metaphor (or vice versa). The “infinite regress” of a pleasure that would be “external” to the “plane of consistency of desire” – a “renunciation” proper to both courtly love and masochism – “testifies [...] to an achieved state in which desire no longer lacks anything but fills itself and constructs its own field of immanence,” a field upon which “everything is allowed, as long as it is not external to desire or transcendent to its plane, or else internal to persons”; a field upon which “[t]he slightest caress may be as strong as an orgasm,” without standing in the way of a “desire in pursuit of its principle.”<sup>61</sup>

It seems that we are here much closer to the erotic ecstasy of an objectified Schulz; closer yet again to the “self-that-dies” which has previously become manifest in the poet in “Terror,” to the self that is – by virtue of its uselessness – “revealed as a *catastrophic object*, a ‘thing’ brutally removed from the order of things.” Here, desire does not concern itself with denouement, it is not a tension that seeks release: on the contrary, it is – similarly to courtly love<sup>62</sup> – a mode of desiring bent on stoking up the flame. When one imagines, then, on the one hand, masochistic milieus of erotic matriarchy and, on the other, the world of courtly love, “the exchange of hearts, the test or ‘assay,’”<sup>63</sup> it seems difficult to deny that – assuming as our reference “the plane of consistency of desire” – the two imageries are discrete, though similar configurations of the many forms of expression given to the said plane on the level of human interaction. Indeed, it is hardly difficult to imagine their convergence at a court of perversion, where it would

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<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, p. 156.

<sup>62</sup> See also: Alexander J. Denomy, “Courtly Love and Courtliness,” *Speculum*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1953), p. 44.

<sup>63</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 156.

be undeniable that – in accordance with Bataille’s principle of parody<sup>64</sup> – masochism is a parody of courtly love just as much as courtly love is a parody of masochism, and, therefore, where humiliating trials would separate the knight-masochist from the sought-after position at his Lady’s feet.<sup>65</sup>

In other words, although it remains true that courtly love and masochism are two distinct transcendent arrangements, what interests us here is a presence – within their intestinal clockwork – of escape routes that are very much alike in both their structure (what the knight is to the Lady, the masochist is to his mistress) and their opening unto immanence.<sup>66</sup> Writing of ancient Chinese semen retention techniques in connection – via “the plane of consistency of desire” – to masochism and courtly love, Deleuze and Guattari conclude quite straightforwardly: “Is the Tao masochistic? Is courtly love Taoist? These questions are largely meaningless. The field of immanence or plane of consistency must be constructed.”<sup>67</sup> In general, eroticism comes into play whenever the carnal interplay of bodies exceeds the complementarity of their respective sexual organs, but, as it has been said, “the masochist uses suffering as a way of constituting a body without organs” – a body reorganised entirely into a new, different organ, one capable of registering novel intensities, of experiencing eroticisms that abandon procreation altogether.

There exists, nonetheless, on the level of transcendent arrangements, what Žižek

<sup>64</sup> See also: Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 22.

<sup>65</sup> Schulz’s *Undula u artystów* (*Undula Visits the Artists*; *Xięga Bałwochwalcza*, p. 74) depicts a scene adjacent to the court of perversion: a Schulz-faced man kneels before a woman seated upon an opulent divan; she is reading something he has written for her and – as a token of her appreciation – she extends towards him her bare foot; he bends forward, he wants to adore it, but he is tentative, in disbelief of his fortune; there is a line of men behind him, and all of them are waiting for a chance to put their works to the test that he has just passed.

<sup>66</sup> See also: Philippe Mengue, “Desire and Courtly Love,” trans. Peter Borum, *Deleuze Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2012), pp. 488, 491–492.

<sup>67</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 157.

names “the matrix of courtly love,” a relational grid which has only become analytically legible thanks to the appearance of that scandalous unit known as “the masochist couple.”<sup>68</sup> Though Dybel fears that Žižek conflates the two phenomena,<sup>69</sup> he does no such thing: following Lacan’s ruminations on the same topic and not neglecting to mention Deleuze’s *Masochism*, Žižek simply uses the psychoanalytic structure of masochism to arrive at the psychoanalytic structure of courtly love. The similarities between the two arrangements are perhaps never clearer than when one considers what they can be accused of:

True, the courtly image of man serving his Lady is a semblance that conceals the actuality of male domination; true, the masochist’s theatre is a private *mise en scène* designed to recompense the guilt contracted by man’s social domination; true, the elevation of woman to the sublime object of love equals her debasement into the passive stuff or screen for the narcissistic projection of the male ego-ideal, and so on.<sup>70</sup>

This enumeration Žižek provides us with in the conclusion of his text, “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” shows us once again that theory disabuses the masochist of his erotic experience. Indeed, given Žižek’s choice of references (Lacan, Deleuze), the characteristics he attributes to masochism should sound familiar to us by now: there is talk of principles of postponement, suspense, fantasy, detachment even... However, he also speaks of the courtly Lady in terms that enable us to perceive the intersection between the masochistic experience and Bataille’s masochist epistemology in a higher resolution.

To be more precise, he finds it prudent to formulate the following question in regard to courtly love: are we “[...] justified in conceiving of the Lady as the

<sup>68</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” in: *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), p. 89.

<sup>69</sup> Dybel. „Masochizm Schulza i próg wstydu w słowie”, pp. 17-20.

<sup>70</sup> Žižek, “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” p. 108.

personification of the Western metaphysical passion, as an exorbitant, almost parodical example of metaphysical *hubris*, of the elevation of a particular entity or feature into the Ground of all being?”<sup>71</sup> No, he answers, “[...] the Lady is *not* another name for the metaphysical Ground but, on the contrary, one of the names for the self-retracting Real,” “the Real which eludes this Ground, which itself cannot be ‘Grounded’ in it.”<sup>72</sup>

Assuming that the knight-masochist will, by definition, never find himself in an intimate vicinity of the Lady – assuming, moreover, as Žižek,<sup>73</sup> Rosiek, and others do, that the knight-masochist would never want that, relishing instead his orbital position, his erotically charged separation from the possibility of attainment – we can see how the relationship between the knight-masochist and his Lady, when construed according to “the matrix of courtly love,” might represent, albeit crudely, the entanglement of the human being in the enmeshment of the known and the unknown, of the possible and the impossible:

State of nudity, of supplication without response, wherein I nevertheless perceive this: that it depends on the flight from excuses. So that precise knowledge remaining as such, with only the ground, its foundation, giving way – I grasp while sinking that the sole truth of man, glimpsed at last, is to be a supplication without response.<sup>74</sup>

The position taken by the knight-masochist vis-à-vis the Lady is reminiscent of the dramatisation technique: in Christianity, the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross is taken as the point of a lacerating meditation that dissolves the contemplating subject in the agony of the contemplated object – in the Passion of Christ with whom the subject

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<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, p. 98. Žižek operates here simultaneously within the territories delineated by Heidegger and Lacan.

<sup>73</sup> “What the paradox of the Lady in courtly love ultimately amounts to is thus the paradox of *detour*: our ‘official’ desire is that we want to sleep with the Lady; whereas in truth, there is nothing we fear more than a Lady who might generously yield to this wish of ours – what we truly expect and want from the Lady is simply yet another new ordeal, yet one more postponement” (ibidem, p. 96).

<sup>74</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 12-13.

identifies. Bataille, in turn, teaches us that the personified aspect of the dramatised point can be discarded, leaving one with catastrophe, the pure delirium of time's onslaught; in this case, then, both the subject and object of contemplation drown in the river of time.

The Lady we find within "the matrix of courtly love" or at the court of perversion can be conceptualised not as an intermediary personification that makes self-dissolution easier by representing death, but rather as a personification of the unknown, of the limit at which one hurls oneself: a meteoroid entering the atmosphere only to be burned down into luminous ephemera. It is, after all, the knight-masochist who exposes his self to annihilation on the frontier of the Lady's will, much like the ascetic who wishes for nothing but to be ground into dust beneath the sweet weight of God's ordainment. It should not be hard to add to the court of perversion a cloistered system of cells inhabited by flagellants whose passion burns not for God, but for the Lady of the court,<sup>75</sup> and if it is indeed, as we suggest, not difficult at all, then it would seem that the ascetics were there all along, and that "the matrix of courtly love" comes into being through the eroticisation of the ascetic ideal, of self-sacrifice. Thus, the continued influence of "the matrix of courtly love" on the production of lines of words and images accounts for the fact that the myth of the mission – or of the quest, "the exchange of hearts, the test or 'assay'" – continues to resound within the interiorities of those who dedicate themselves "to other things than ceaselessly increased production." (To unabashedly embrace epistemic masochism is to take a step towards solar asceticism.<sup>76</sup>)

One could say, then, that the knight-masochist re-enacts Christ's self-sacrifice, not, alas, in honour of God, but in honour of his Lady. In other words, the ascetic re-enacts

<sup>75</sup> See also: Charmé, "Religion and the Theory of Masochism," pp. 231-232.

<sup>76</sup> On the peculiar symmetry of ascetic and erotic positions, see also: Krzysztof Matuszewski, "Georges'a Bataille'a mistyczna partuza: część druga," *Nowa Krytyka*, Vol. 14 (2003), pp. 61-63.

Christ's self-sacrifice, debasing himself so as to defeat evil in himself, whereas the knight-masochist *parodies* Christ's self-sacrifice, defiling himself so as to please his Lady and, furthermore, finding pleasure in this pursuit of evil for evil's sake: according to Žižek, the Lady – as “the self-retracting Real” opposed to “the metaphysical Ground of all entities,” to the “supreme Good” – is “the embodiment of radical Evil,”<sup>77</sup> the evil that neither possesses nor seeks explanation, the evil of committing a crime for no other reason than to break the law, the evil which “marks the point at which the motivation of an act, as it were, cuts off its external link to empirical objects and grounds itself solely in the immanent circle of self-reference.”<sup>78</sup> Put another way, in order to reach the immanent “plane of consistency of desire,” the knight-masochist has to withstand “a preliminary laceration from the transcendent system of activity.”<sup>79</sup>

It follows that the travesties of the knight-masochist are nothing if not blasphemous. We have arrived, by surprise, at a different articulation of what Artur Sandauer had said about Schulz: “In him, the masculine element revels perversely in the forfeiture of its purity. Here, [...] evil seduces not despite what it is, but precisely because it is evil. This phenomenon, known to the Middle Ages as satanism, is today discussed by sexologists under the name of masochism [trans – M.H.].”<sup>80</sup>

So as to make more clear the resonance that is becoming more and more audible, let us add to our discussion a perspective on courtly love offered by Jeffrey B. Russell, who discerns within it elements of “religious dissent.” Establishing, firstly, that there

<sup>77</sup> Žižek, “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” p. 98.

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem, p. 99.

<sup>79</sup> Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” in: *The Unfinished System of Non-knowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 88.

<sup>80</sup> Artur Sandauer, „Rzeczywistość zdegradowana (Rzecz o Brunonie Schulzu),” in: *Zebrane pisma krytyczne* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1981), pp. 557-580, *Hamlet*, <http://hamlet.edu.pl/sandauer-schulz> (20 August 2021).

was a mystical aspect to courtly love, one that had been most probably derived, collectively, throughout the entire genre, from a variety of religious sources, Russell concedes that, in many respects, courtly love remained the offspring of Christianity, but – he claims – one that struggled against its roots, thus bringing to light some of the contradictions from which it stemmed. “The ambivalence of Christianity as to whether it rejects or affirms the world,” for example, “is reflected in the ambivalence of the troubadours as to whether or not they desired consummation of their physical desires.”<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, insofar as the Christian origins of courtly love are undeniable, this very kind of love constituted “a perversion of Christian ideas, a form of religious dissidence.”<sup>82</sup> Some degree of incongruence would have had to arise if even moderate encouragement was offered to those tempted by extramarital affectations – but in this case, what took place was “[t]he exaltation of a finite creature, a living woman, above the highest altar of one’s devotion.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, it seems that we need not venture into the court of perversion to find God replaced by the Lady:

The lady, rather than God, became the ultimate judge of conduct, and one behaved according to what pleased her rather than according to what pleased the Almighty. Keep chaste, not for the sake of the Lord, but “for the sake of her whom thou lovest,” urges Andrew the Chaplain. The knight obeys his lady’s every whim without question in the manner of the pious Christian who says, “Thy will be done.” He is utterly humble in her presence and hardly dares touch her; he trembles in her presence like a worshipper before Yahweh.<sup>84</sup>

Not a word of masochism in this passage, and yet, after what has been said earlier about the peculiar symmetry of the God-worshipping ascetic and the Lady-worshipping knight-masochist, does masochism not seem implicated in the attitude of total

<sup>81</sup> Jeffrey B. Russell, “Courtly Love as Religious Dissent,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1965), p. 41.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

submission to the Lady described by Russell?

What is more, the troubadours, the “theorists” of courtly love, were engaged in subterfuge, working amongst members of courts to subvert orthodox Christian values in the interest of an understanding of love that stood in conflict with the normative pattern of the time (this different understanding was thus a mutation in the chivalric code). They managed, nonetheless, to carry on under the radar of those whose business it was to denounce heresy: as Russell points out, “the Church never condemned courtly love as a heresy, nor is mention made of its tenets in confessional guides for priests, so that it would again be going too far to claim that the troubadours and their admirers were formal heretics.”<sup>85</sup> Assuming one agrees with Žižek’s assessment regarding the lasting prevalence of “the matrix of courtly love,” it would seem, then, that the troubadours have, firstly, wedded just the right texts to the proper contexts, secondly, operated in the manner of secret societies (in the sense that has been discussed in chapter six), and thirdly, brought about a lasting change in discourse, in the tissue of understanding (the change that has, per Žižek, become susceptible to analysis due to the “discovery” of masochism).

All in all, a complex, a memeplex arises: a resonance, an overtone emerges from the simultaneous sounding of courtly love, masochism, asceticism, and mysticism; every one of them could very well serve as a parody of another, serving, therefore, as an illustration of Bataille’s principle of parody. Dabbling in any of those four phenomena involves the construction of assemblages whose function is to wound the dabbler, to open one onto immanence; all four of them can also be conceptualised as variations on the technique of the dramatised point, in which the consciousness of the object of

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<sup>85</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.



experience is so intense in the subject that neither the former nor the latter subsist in what they were prior to experience; a structural difference is revealed on this level of conceptualisation, one that we will elaborate on now.

Though it is perhaps inevitable – given how both the knight-masochist and the Lady have a role to play in what “the matrix of courtly love” assembles – that a distance gets wedged between the position of the Lady and the person<sup>86</sup> performing as the Lady. To the degree, however, that there *is* a person being idealised, there unquestionably *is* an Other participating in the assemblages taking place at the court of perversion, whereas the quests of ascetics and mystics are founded on faith, on believing in the existence of the Other – unless we are talking of solar asceticism, which makes itself independent from the otherworld. To reiterate: only in courtly love and masochism – or, again, in their combination, the court of perversion – is the Other indubitably present, irrevocably responsible – or co-responsible, given the fact that it is often the masochist who authors “the program” – for the delivery of ordeals, punishments, the humiliating tests. The Other is indispensable for the functioning of the assemblages, for reaching “the plane of consistency of desire,” for keeping the wound open. In short, the ascetic and the mystic must rely on the strength with which they themselves can dramatise the point of laceration, but something stirs and moves on its own in the point elected by the knight-masochist.

Even though the Lady – as an entity generated by “the matrix of courtly love” – seemingly keeps the sovereign in exile by eluding the knight-masochist, by being

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<sup>86</sup> That he chooses to speak of a “matrix” underlying, among other things, courtly love, is by no means merely a stylistic preference on the part of Žižek – this relational grid can just as well be identified in non-heteronormative relationships: “It is no accident that in the so-called alternative sexual practices (‘somasochistic’ lesbian and gay couples) the Master-and-Slave relationship re-emerges with a vengeance, including all the ingredients of the masochistic theatre. In other words, we are far from inventing a new ‘formula’ capable of replacing the matrix of courtly love” (p. 109).

constituted in an ever-receding movement, she does not disappear into the mists of the otherworld – it is on this planet, on this our Earth, that she moves with a purpose: to make the knight-masochist incandescent with the torment of a desire uncircumferenced by satisfaction. In other words, the Lady at the court of perversion takes on the mantle of the sovereign, thus calling sovereignty back from its otherworldly exile.

Additionally, it has to be said that, inasmuch as the Lady also undergoes reorganisation into the collective body without organs of the masochistic experience, the knight-masochist is brought into communion with what he has designated as the sovereign being. What is more, the masochistic experience fits the definition of attempting to escape project via project: the masochistic assemblage is constructed with the aim of capturing an instant of the intensification of desire and prolonging it, ideally, without end, with nothing but this prolonged intensification of experience in mind. This means simply that the escalation of desire that occurs during the masochistic experience is an end in itself, not a means to another end. The indefinite postponement is, despite appearances, not a future-oriented project: it is a matter of delaying for the sake of delaying, of desiring for the sake of desiring: of evil for evil's sake... This is how one folds transcendent arrangements back on themselves, thus creating a slit for immanence to go through. This is, furthermore, how one subverts the order of things and their productive manipulation, and how one does so wilfully, programmatically, through discipline. The techniques at the disposal of the masochist, representing, as they do, the eroticism of non-knowledge, stand in stark contrast to the accidental fall into immanence experienced by the poet in "Terror."

However, although the attributes we have just ascribed to the masochistic experience also apply to sovereignty and sovereign instants, Bataille has stressed that,

despite the fact that it is possible to struggle against projects from within, as it were, the sovereign instant cannot be forced. Instead, it forces itself on us, it comes to us as a surprise, a chance event, luck: Bataille went as far as to say that, in matters of the sovereign instant, “we never find anything except on the condition of not searching for it.”<sup>87</sup> This would suggest that the terrorised poet was in fact quite close to the heart of the matter, considering how he had fallen into his futureless, anguished state without the intervention of conscious will – indeed, he was close, but he failed nonetheless to understand his predicament, to learn from it about “the *profoundly* real” “lack of wholeness” that characterises “objective reality,” which consists of “fragments that shift and change.”<sup>88</sup> He did not surrender to the love that – if he had done so – would have taken the place of his subjectivity.

What the masochistic techniques have to offer, in turn, is the advantage of a method: “The desire for ecstasy can’t exclude method. [...] Method means doing violence to habits of relaxation,” of rest, of release, of the abatement or dissipation of tension (the masochistic disregard for the climax brings method to a boil and keeps it there). Moreover, method “means swimming against the current,”<sup>89</sup> against the gravity of parasites. In proximity to both such an understanding of method and a matrix rooted in medieval narratives, one once again encounters Klossowski.

In a controversial trilogy of metaphysical erotica, *Laws of Hospitality*, Klossowski presents, through the mouth of a male character named Octave, a theological argument in favour of sharing one’s wife with other men (a practice which is, incidentally, an element of the masochistic repertoire, albeit not one as obvious as whips and chains),

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<sup>87</sup> Bataille, “The Sovereign,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 193.

<sup>88</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 30.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

claiming that the arrangement of adulterous situations is a method that allows one to perceive the multitude of persons that – though they constitute the truth of the wife’s existence in a manner for which the Holy Trinity provides, in Klossowski’s view, a perfect model – remain obscure from the perspective of a husband who expects fidelity of his wife. Following Krzysztof Matuszewski’s analysis, it is a case of employing eroticism as a strategy against everyday signs and the identities they engender, signs under the rule of which nothing but the surface reality is permitted.<sup>90</sup> For Klossowski, it is the everyday signs that organise the order of things, their productive manipulation, and the identities that make correct interactions with appropriate things possible. Furthermore, the automatised production processes of these signs masquerade as the spontaneity of individuals – this masquerade is the current against which one swims by method, by a program: since spontaneous action is to be suspected by default of being in fact a hidden automatism, the construction of a program that automates in plain view, by design, suggests itself as precisely a method of counteracting the influence of occluded automatisms<sup>91</sup> (one should notice the similarity between such an approach and Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of masochism as intrinsically dependent on an ability to effect a becoming-animal, to acknowledge one’s own capacity to be disciplined or even conditioned: “*Training axiom – destroy the instinctive forces in order to replace them with transmitted forces*”<sup>92</sup>).

As one learns from Blake or saint Paul, now is the time of impure perception, but what animates Klossowski’s narrative is a passionate desire for experiencing during *this* life at least an approximate – a simulacrum – of true vision, and this is to be achieved by

<sup>90</sup> Matuszewski, “Simulacrum autentycznej komunikacji. Zarys pornoteologii Pierre’a Klossowskiego,” *Nowa Krytyka*, Vol. 8 (1997), p. 50.

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, pp. 40-41.

<sup>92</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 155.

erotically perverting the shape given to relationships by the network of everyday signs. The cracks imposed by such an operation – which in this case means sharing one’s wife as if she was, like the Host, an undepletable fount of the sacred<sup>93</sup> – on language, on the illusory coherence of the order of things which founds the facade of singular and complete identities, create an opportunity for communication, for witnessing the multitudinous (shattered, wounded, silent) reality of the Other that day-to-day existence conceals.<sup>94</sup> This, in turn, supports a claim that the said operation could lay to the title of a sovereign operation:

To return objects of thought to sovereign moments supposes a sovereign operation, different from laughter and, generally, from all common effusion. This is the operation in which thought stops the movement that subordinates it, and laughing – or, abandoning itself to some other sovereign effusion – identifies itself with the rupture of those bonds that subordinated it.<sup>95</sup>

In the coherence of everyday life and discourse, the wife would be an object of thought, a stable unit of calculation in the mathematics of social standing. The bondage this entails can be loosened through a methodical assault on the stability of the unit. This might entail, for example, the construction of a situation which contradicts the nature of this bondage with a force sufficient for something to slip through – an unexpected, unusual personhood, perhaps. Thought – faced with a vision of the Other who has hitherto remained beneath the mask generated by the system of subordination – enters the communicative state that disintegrates both the subject and object of thought.

It is important to note in this context that what “the matrix of courtly love” generates is not, in fact, a duet (like that of a husband and wife), but a triad – the secret admirer is in love with the Lady, who is, in turn, married to the Lord (whose presence

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<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, p. 39.

<sup>94</sup> Ibidem, pp. 49-50.

<sup>95</sup> Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” p. 91.

ensures the blasphemous character of the triad, at least as long as he is seen as God's proxy). It should be possible, therefore, to identify the triad in the masochistic program, too.

Sin fosters the faltering of identity; identity falters when it becomes entangled in sin: as Klossowski had noticed, this is fundamental in Bataille's methodology. In the words of Klossowski, Bataille recognised the "notion of the loss of identity as constitutive of sin," and, as it was already mentioned, launched his "attack on the integrity of beings" in the form of "a simulacrum of a notion."<sup>96</sup> An appropriate tactic – erosive, disintegrative in relation to the notion – that accomplishes a necessarily ephemeral resonance between sinful experience and the word that has been written, and which is thus bound to sell sin out, to turn dissonant. In Jeremy Biles' formulation, "[t]he simulacrum implies a dis-closure, an incessant wounding of an idea that might otherwise threaten to close."<sup>97</sup>

We have mentioned in chapter six that there persists in Bataille's novels a theme of being separated from one's lover: the different shades of pining for an absent or distant beloved are explored through simulacra, through scenarios of intensification that put the endurance of identity to the test: the girl is isolated in an insane asylum, sequestered in a castle cut off from the world by a raging blizzard, or has went into mourning after the death of another one of her lovers. Though Bataille avoids employing the typical props of the masochistic theatre, the relationship between the male first-person narrators and the women they desire is always masochistically charged, even if it

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<sup>96</sup> Pierre Klossowski, "Of the Simulacrum in Georges Bataille's Communication," in: *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. and trans. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 149.

<sup>97</sup> Biles, "A Story of Rats: Associations on Bataille's Simulacrum of Abjection," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2014), p. 122.

does not entail an absence; it is almost always the woman who dominates, who surpasses the male narrator and attains the heights of debauchery. (Philippe Sollers writes of the “‘double’ aspect of woman” – of her being the dual site of the most fundamental pairing of prohibition and its transgression – being “dramatized” in Bataille’s novels.<sup>98</sup> Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons sees in these writings the power to maintain a degree of erotic ambivalence even in the context of our “hyperpositive, antiseptic” culture.<sup>99</sup> “The female body is used by Bataille,” writes Cathy MacGregor, “to represent the centre of a deconstructive impulse in his fiction which produces seismic ripples resulting in a profound shift in the reality relayed to the reader by the male protagonists.”<sup>100</sup> In sum, the women of Bataille’s novels represent – in relation to the perspective of the male protagonists – that which is in excess of the reasonable subject functioning in the sterile system of a naturalised sexuality.)

It will now be illuminating to think back to the example of Madame Edwarda. As we have said earlier, the apothecic orgasm the prostitute experiences while having sex with a taxi driver is witnessed by the narrator, who accompanies the pair in the driver’s vehicle. We might say that, on a certain level of masochistic interrelations, the taxi driver in “Madame Edwarda” plays a similar role to the one played by a certain Rudolf, a character in Schulz’s “Wiosna” (“Spring”). The first-person narrator of Schulz’s story, Józef, is enamoured with Bianka, a girl he, firstly, elevates in his perception to the position of the Lady (assuming for himself the role of the knight-masochist), and

<sup>98</sup> Philippe Sollers, “The Roof: Essay in Systematic Reading,” in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 89.

<sup>99</sup> Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons, “Bataille and Baudrillard: From a General Economy to the Transparency of Evil,” *Angelaki*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2001), pp. 79-89.

<sup>100</sup> Cathy MacGregor, “The Eye of the Storm – Female Representation in Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda* and *Histoire de l’oeil*,” in: *The Beast at Heaven’s Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 104.

secondly, wishes to rescue from what he perceives to be her imprisonment.

As Zaleski has shown,<sup>101</sup> the nature of the arrangement binding Józef with Bianka is clearly masochistic: he adores her without reserve, believes that to simply touch *her* – an entity in which one finds, in a condensed state, an almost unbearable sanctity – would be painful; she keeps her distance, she is cold, gratuitously cruel, she provokes and teases him seductively, and, when he refrains from succumbing to her sexual temptation, she belittles and mocks him – as befits a representative of the world of reproductive sexuality.<sup>102</sup> In the end, she chooses Rudolf, a proper male,<sup>103</sup> and Józef understands that this is, indeed, how things must be, that his is the position – in the triad of knight-masochism – of the rejected masochist, while Rudolf's is the position of the merely temporarily slighted Lord. One should say, though, that Rudolf receives this mantle from Bianka's father – a continuity is, therefore, upheld as regards relationships intended for Bianka in the coherence of everyday life and discourse.

Zaleski invokes Žižek to say that the third one is an “intermediary,” “someone through whom the symbolic order intervenes so as to make the presence of the Real, of the Thing, [of the immanent,] bearable [trans. – M.H.]”<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the presence of Rudolf – of the third one whose desire conforms, we assume, to what the system has in store for bodies and the minds that keep them in check – is the prerequisite for Józef's

<sup>101</sup> Zaleski, „Masochista na Cyterze,” pp. 195-196.

<sup>102</sup> Szałasek, “Erros Schulza,” pp. 93-95.

<sup>103</sup> Or a stallion, to use the title of another one of Schulz's artworks comprising *Xięga bałwochwalcza*, namely, *Ogiery i eunuchy* (*Stallions and Eunuchs*, p. 90), a piece of simple, yet powerfully executed symbolism, one that portrays puny eunuchs cowering around a large, canopied bed, a naked woman lying languidly on soft-looking pillows, and two stallions rendered in a voluptuous movement of climbing the bed, their muscles taut, their muzzles demonic, eyes blank with animal lust. The bed's canopy disappears into the upper frame, and in the background there are the small-town buildings so characteristic of Schulz's images. The bed is outside, then, and the darkness that surrounds it is thus an opening onto the night that lends its energy to the lecherous events of the piece, a piece that makes clear the difference between masochism and organic sexuality, the representatives of which enter the masochistic triad as the third one and guarantee the eunuchs' humiliation.

<sup>104</sup> Zaleski, „Masochista na Cyterze,” p. 201.



worship of the Lady, which is thus safeguarded from sexual consummation, an outcome that would be, as we have seen, undesirable for the knight-masochist. In a way, the third one might also be likened to the “minimum of strata”: the element of transcendent arrangements which has to be *in* place for the violence of transgression to *take* place; the placeholder of the taboo that makes the eroticism of it all possible. A more modern example given by Žižek makes the triadic character of “the matrix of courtly love” abundantly clear:

The definitive version of courtly love in recent decades, of course, arrives in the figure of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*: the traumatic Woman-Thing who, through her greedy and capricious demands, brings ruin to the hard-boiled hero. The key role is played here by the third person (as a rule the gangster boss) to whom the femme fatale ‘legally’ belongs: his presence renders her inaccessible and thus confers on the hero’s relationship with her the mark of transgression. By means of his involvement with her, the hero betrays the paternal figure who is also his boss [...].<sup>105</sup>

Once more: for the experimentation of the knight-masochist to be erotic, for it to reveal something or to even exist, there has to be a system that is defied by this experimentation, and that system has to have its agent in the triad – the third one, the one “through whom the symbolic order intervenes.” Žižek writes down a formula of sorts: “This is how the impossible changes into the prohibited: by way of the short circuit between the Thing and some positive object rendered inaccessible through artificial obstacles”<sup>106</sup> – a Bataillean reinterpretation of this formula would take shape along the following lines: this is how the impossible – the burning exterior of the extreme limit of the possible – changes into the prohibited, into the productive taboo: by way of a short circuit between immanence and some transcendent arrangement rendered sacred or sovereign through artificial obstacles. Such a rendition distances itself, admittedly, from

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<sup>105</sup> Žižek, “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” p. 102.

<sup>106</sup> Ibidem, p. 95.

the original psychoanalytic context of Žižek's sentence, but this little *détournement* brings us closer, perhaps, to the desired field of experimentation.

As Krzysztof Matuszewski points out in his reading of Klossowski, "[a]n eye that looks at eroticism creatively always makes use of the intermediation of the third, for, were it on its own, it would not be able to fend off the suspicion that what it perceives by itself withers immediately in its singular [...], and therefore limited, view [trans. – M.H.]."<sup>107</sup> The key word here is "creatively" – just as Klossowski's Octave, to whom this quote originally pertains, the masochist is an arranger, a master of the "art of fantasy." Masochism, therefore, is a way of orchestrating situations, *of turning transcendence against itself*. This is method, this is "doing violence to habits of relaxation" by executing a masochistic program.

It should be noted as well that even though the first-person narrator of Bataille's *Story of the Eye* is not a stereotypically masochist character, the novel does what (as we have said before) most of Bataille's literary works do: it features a dominant, capricious, sadistic woman whose whimsical actions often exceed or exhaust the men who surround her.<sup>108</sup> *Story of the Eye* is extraordinary, however, in that what it conveys is, in fact, the emergence of a body without organs out of series of increasingly indistinguishable elements, all of which are drawn into perversely erotic situations that, through a process of structural reiteration, not only leave the reproductive pairing of sexual organs far behind, but also lead beyond the realm of utility or even meaning itself – beyond transcendence and towards the plane of immanence where all bodily fluids lose their

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<sup>107</sup> Matuszewski, "Simulacrum autentycznej komunikacji. Zarys pornoteologii Pierre'a Klossowskiego," p. 36.

<sup>108</sup> Moreover, John Philips' reading of *Story of the Eye* does characterise the narrator as a masochistic subject. See: John Philips, "'The Law of the Mother': Masochism, Fetishism and Subjectivity in Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil*," in: *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, ed. Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 111-125.

organic, organised function and mingle, intermingle, interchange; where body parts are neither consistently someone's nor unceasingly themselves.<sup>109</sup>

As it has been said in chapter four, bodily fluids play the role of incarnating the left-hand sacred, of constituting – from within the “artificial obstacles” of taboo – the base corporeality of this sacred. It follows, then, that *Story of the Eye* (with its characters positively drenched in all kinds of filth) shows us the left-hand sacred going on a rampage, and, furthermore, that it illustrates the continuity into which are engaged: the sacred, the immanent, and the base. Earlier, we have also invoked Bataille's view of the vertical axis as delivered in “The Big Toe,” a text which is once again of use for us, given how it touches upon baseness as well as both eroticism in general and feet fetishism in particular.

We have seen how, in Schulz's artworks, the knight-masochist wishes for nothing more than to be at the feet of the Lady. The connection between feet fetishism and masochism has already been noticed in Richard von Krafft-Ebbing's famous study, in which he posited that the fetishisation of either feet or shoes stems from their association with lowliness, with grovelling – simply put, it is a matter of an ingrained understanding that to be beneath the feet of another is humiliating, and therefore desirable from the perverse perspective of a masochist who yearns for self-abasement,<sup>110</sup> for bringing the self down to what is base, for *debasement the self*. In “The Big Toe,” Bataille uses the example of the eponymous body part to differentiate between two types of seduction: one that is effected by “elegant and correct forms,” by “light and ideal beauty,” and the other one resulting from exposition to something which, in some way or another, taints

<sup>109</sup> For an overview of the different readings *Story of the Eye* has received (including Barthes' classic interpretation), see: Tomasz Swoboda, *Historie oka. Bataille, Leiris, Artaud, Blanchot* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2019), pp. 41-92.

<sup>110</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, “Psychopathia sexualis”, fragments, *Schulz/Forum*, Vol. 7 (2016), p. 143.

the object of attraction.<sup>111</sup> In other words, Bataille claims that the association of feet with baseness – the often subconscious recognition of “an ignominy explicable by the mud in which feet are found”<sup>112</sup> – necessarily accounts both for the fact that the very presence of feet in the human body insults high-minded sensibilities, and for the allure that feet, footwear or hosiery hold for fetishistic masochists. Even in the case of a Lady *par excellence*, namely, a queen – who is “a more *ideal* and ethereal being than any other” – feet take their “sacrilegious charm from deformed and muddy feet,” and it is therefore “human to the point of laceration [transgressive, erotic] to touch” a body part that, despite being royal, is not, as far as the vertical axis of valuation is concerned, “very different from the stinking foot of a thug.”<sup>113</sup>

The desire of the masochistic foot fetishist (a Schulzian knight-masochist) is channelled through an assemblage constructed in such a manner that the Lady’s feet become the part of her that fits him, so to speak. In the masochistic disorganisation of the sexual body, the Lady’s feet connect with the knight-masochist’s mouth: this is the erotic conjunction Schulz depicts time and time again, but most directly, perhaps, in *Undula the Eternal Ideal*, where a nude woman seated on a lavish bed looks with disdain at a man lying naked on the floor, kissing her foot even as her other leg is pressing down on his head.<sup>114</sup>

The attempts of the Schulzian knight-masochist can, therefore, be likened to the scandalous exploits of the characters in *Story of the Eye*, in that it is possible to discern in both of these imageries a quest for what is base, a quest to disintegrate the self by

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<sup>111</sup> Bataille, “The Big Toe,” in: *Visions of Excess*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>112</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>113</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>114</sup> Schulz, *Xięga Bałwochwalcza*, p. 73.

making it wallow in what is base. It is a question of trying to experience – through the eroticisation of transcendence, of transcendent arrangements – what is, despite the often convoluted or complexified form it is obligated to take, immanent in us, namely, our darkest desires, the “deepest truths” that “come up to consciousness as something accursed and condemned, as sins in fact.”<sup>115</sup>

We are close to concluding this chapter, but there is still one aspect of masochism that, as far as the context of struggling with the order of things is concerned, has to be discussed. Deleuze and Guattari are lenient (in a manner of speaking) in their assessment of the masochistic assemblage, saying that “there are other ways, other procedures than masochism” that lead to the “plane of consistency of desire,” “and certainly better ones,” but they also admit that this “is beside the point; it is enough that some find this procedure suitable for them.”<sup>116</sup>

But a masochist is someone who voluntarily accepts submission, and submission, in Bataille’s words, “makes man into a non-man, a natural being, but broken and humbled by *himself*, so as to no longer be the insubordination *he* is.”<sup>117</sup> It would be reductive, however, to regard this in terms of a condemnation of masochism. Bataille adds, as a parenthesis, that within insubordination “asceticism is a *humanness*” that persists in the human being “and is insubordination reversing itself, turned back on itself.”<sup>118</sup> In other words, the ascetic is, as we have said before, a figure torn between insubordination in the face of nature and society (of matter and flesh) and a simultaneous submission to God (to idea, to spirit). He rebels, but his rebellion is a

<sup>115</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, p. 163. See also: Bataille, “Krafft-Ebing,” a review of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. Tomasz Swoboda, *Schulz/Forum*, Vol. 7 (2016), pp. 160-161.

<sup>116</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 155.

<sup>117</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 135.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

project, his insubordination to matter is itself subordinated to a spiritual future.

Nonetheless, there remains an element of insubordination in asceticism, which is thus distinguished from the annihilation of intimate life that results from total submission to the sterility of utile operations, to the wastelands of industry populated by shadows which reason alone animates.

What, then, is the state of the element of insubordination in other phenomena that resonate with asceticism, namely, courtly love, masochism, and mysticism itself? Even though courtly love already teeters on the brink of blasphemy, it remains bound by a system that ultimately refers the meaning of this love to something otherworldly. Masochism, on the other hand, is dissociated from both the otherworld and the future: it is of this world, mundane to the point of being base, and the construction of its assemblages is not a future-oriented project.

Masochism eroticises submission or, to paraphrase Bataille: masochism is submission – transcendence, *thrallcendence* – reversing itself, turned back on itself. Let us remember one of the interpretations of masochism which described it as, in Charmé's summary quoted earlier, "a strategy of the weak," a tactic by which the apparently trampled can in fact be triumphant. In a religious sense, it meant that the martyr remains morally victorious not despite, but *because of* his utter defeat. If we, however, disentangle this from the salvatic projection, we can envisage the masochist, firstly, as a figure insubordinate in the face of nature, of the sexual body, but submissive in relation to flesh, to the desires of flesh – flesh understood here as the erotic body the attraction of which is predicated, firstly, on the existence of the social taboo, of a transcendent arrangement, and secondly, on a transgression perpetrated against this taboo – on turning the arrangement back on itself, turning it into a conduit for erotic immanence (the

obvious conclusion is that a total naturalisation of human sexuality will inevitably lead to the death of eroticism).

In other words: if it is true that “[t]he prisoner who asks for even more lashes than he has been sentenced to thereby steals victory and power from his captor,”<sup>119</sup> then the masochist – who asks for ever greater torment from the Lady, and who brings upon himself a relentless intensification of desire – does indeed battle, but it is neither against the Lady nor against the body that he fights. Instead, both the Lady and the body take part in the assemblage that allows the masochist to struggle clandestinely against the rigours of nature and society, of evolutionary habits and automatising mythologies (the truth of eroticism is that if the framework of transcendence was to be taken away, eroticism would regress into sexuality; it is a matter, yet again, of the necessary presence of that against which one transgresses: “In the struggle between yourself and the world, hold the world’s coat”<sup>120</sup>).

On its own, or rather, in its usual, religious sense, mysticism requires the mystic to oppose the world, but, much like priestly asceticism, it subordinates this opposition to an otherworldly sovereign, to a concern for the future. However, disconnecting mysticism from asceticism and plugging it into masochism is – as has been shown throughout this chapter – how one arrives at the structure of a Bataillean masochistic epistemology.

Of course, a Schulzian interpretation of masochistic mysticism is also possible: it would place the mystifying Lady, who is of this world, at the sacred centre of a matriarchal myth through a belief in which the knights-masochist would be set apart from the order of things and their productive manipulation, because their existence

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<sup>119</sup> Charñe, “Religion and the Theory of Masochism,” p. 228.

<sup>120</sup> Franz Kafka, 52nd aphorism, in: *Aphorisms*, trans. Willa Muir, Edwin Muir, and Michael Hofmann (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), e-book.

would be made into a quest, and a quest cannot be reduced to the level of work. In Schulz, which is to say – in masochism, courtly love is led to its aesthetic conclusion, receiving a form extreme enough for “the matrix of courtly love” and its connection with asceticism and mysticism to become apparent. In other words, the figure of the knight-masochist, which is an extreme form of the ascetic figure, shows that eroticism is always already present in mysticism – by way of the sheer possibility of his emergence from the field of ascesis, the knight-masochist is a testament to the immanence of eroticism in mysticism (and vice versa). As Bataille asserts in the very first paragraph of *Erotism*, “[t]he saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm” because “she does not know that his unacknowledgeable passions and her own are really one.”<sup>121</sup>

Furthermore, masochistic mysticism is a notion in the umbra of which meet the simulacra deployed by Bataille so as to sidestep the usurping tendencies of discourse: crying out, bursting into tears, fainting, nearly dying... “To give up my sexual habits would mean I’d have to discover some other means of tormenting myself, though this torture would have to be as intoxicating as alcohol,”<sup>122</sup> he wrote in the context of preferring the torment of those “sexual habits” to the morbidity of asceticism, which is nonetheless similar if only in that it requires relentlessness, restlessness. And indeed, it is the state of being saturated with erotic feeling that preconditions, in Bataille’s vision, all mysticisms: “eroticism around us is so violent, it intoxicates hearts with so much force [...] that there is no celestial opening which does not take its form and its fever from it.”<sup>123</sup>

Thus, the anguished ecstasy of non-knowledge could be thought of in terms of an

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<sup>121</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 22.

<sup>123</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 120.



epistemic masochism that pushes against the limit of existence, banging relentlessly at the doors of perception not in spite of the silence that follows, but precisely because of the impossibly sweet suffering that the silence inflicts. “Who among us does not dream of breaking open the gates of the mystical realm – who does not imagine himself to be ‘dying to die,’ to be pining away, to ruin himself in order to love?”<sup>124</sup>

That the experience of what Bataille calls “. . . without name” (the experience of immanence) changes a self into a being “dying to die,” or “dying from not dying,”<sup>125</sup> should by all means be taken literally,<sup>126</sup> because that is indeed how it feels: to remain – against all odds, in spite of a certainty that somehow goes beyond even the need for certitude – alive in the overlapping depths of intoxication and night, at the intersection of word-lines that were supposed to give way, is so unbearable that it carries with it its own kind of annihilation. “[I]n Bataille’s text,” writes Biles, “metaphor is not reified but is rather akin to matter, more precisely base matter, stripped of any idealized aspect and charged with the power of horror. And it is in identification with this charged matter that one escapes, if only briefly, the ‘great ontological machines’ constructed by human reason.”<sup>127</sup>

But how to stop there, dissolved, at meaninglessness? That can’t be done. A piece of meaninglessness, and nothing more, opens onto some meaning or other... ..leaving an aftertaste of ashes, of dementia. I look at myself in the mirror: circles around the eyes, the dull look of a cigarette butt.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibidem, p. 120.

<sup>125</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 14. This phrase is probably inspired by Saint Teresa of Ávila – see, for example: Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle, or the Mansions*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2006), p. 114. See also: Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 32, and Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 122, for a quote in a similar vein, taken from Maurice Blanchot.

<sup>126</sup> On literalness and metaphor, see also: Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 131.

<sup>127</sup> Biles, “A Story of Rats: Associations on Bataille’s Simulacrum of Abjection,” p. 122.

<sup>128</sup> Bataille, *The Impossible*, p. 109.

And so, the expressions – “dying to die,” “dying from not dying,” “the dull look of a cigarette butt” – are in Bataille’s usage simulacra that express, better than a notion would, the disappointment of rediscovering, back in the manifold arrangements of transcendence, a self, one’s self, oneself.

All in all, assuming that it is fitting to think of Bataille’s experiences in terms of a godless mysticism free of dogma, his approach to “. . . without name” is, firstly: *like* the masochist’s attitude towards the mysterious Lady, whose perennial unavailability is connected, through the principle of parody, with the unavailability of the unintelligible beyond of transcendence; and secondly: *unlike* the priestly ascetic’s position before a god, a position founded on the prospect of something that is to be gained in the future, be it otherworldly salvation or mundane power (the masochistic assemblage is an end in itself, its existence serves nothing that would transcend it, whereas the ascetic machine exists so as to lift the ascetic into heaven – it is, therefore, a means to an end).

Let us, at last, conclude this chapter. What had ensued from a discussion of Schulz’s dream/myth of sinful self-mutilation – a discussion underpinned by Bataille’s understanding of guilt, which explained the remorse that follows, in Schulz’s narrative, his sin against the natural order – was a mapping of the connections by which eroticism, or more specifically, masochism, is fuelled by that very sin, and thus closely related to courtly love; what ties it to masochism is that both can be characterised as methods of attaining the “plane of consistency of desire.” In other words, both the masochist and the courtly lover – or their amalgam, the knight-masochist of the court of perversion – pursue a state of immanence rather than a sense of sexual satisfaction. It is a question of a desire that would be erotic and independent from the goals of the reproductive system, and not just by avoiding actual reproduction, but by making a body without organs, that

is, by effecting a reorganisation of the bodies of the knight-masochist and the Lady into an assemblage that, firstly, intensifies desire in a circuit that stipulates no release, and secondly, does so through a clandestine theatre of gestures performed in situations arranged in accordance with a program that blocks the tendency to transcend, to subsume, to complete. Moreover, we have observed a certain continuity between masochism, or a masochistic understanding of mysticism, and Bataille's experience, which thus presents itself as a masochistic epistemology of finding ecstasy in non-knowledge. Even though masochism is inseparable from submission, sovereignty is not alien to it; on the contrary: the masochist, firstly, brings the sovereign back into this world in the form of the Lady, secondly, values the instant of desire over a future release from desire (or rather, intensifies desire in an expenditure of energy which is – for the masochist – erotically charged, making the experience of desire reach a potency that exceeds – is excessive in relation to – the prospect of a laxation of tension), and thirdly, does not, throughout the experience, exist as a merely rational, productively useful self. In masochism, submission itself – the very core of thrallcendence – is turned into an instrument of immanence: the knight-masochist performs self-sacrifice, and therefore removes himself from the order of transcendent utility.

Finally, the composite image of the knight-masochist – a collage made from pieces of Schulz, Klossowski, and Bataille, too – takes its place next to the poet in “Terror” as another figure of going beyond transcendence, one that represents – in contrast to the poet, who stands for an accident, a sudden catastrophe – method, discipline. The next chapter will be devoted to a book that charts for its (anti)hero a trajectory which will point our analysis towards yet another figure of going beyond transcendence.

## CHAPTER 9: THE FUTURE AS TRANSCENDENCE

*“The idea of a world where human life might be artificially prolonged has a nightmare quality yet gives no glimpse of anything beyond that slight delay.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“Nothing human makes it out of the near-future.”<sup>2</sup>*

The task at hand will be to perform a close reading of Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*, and to inscribe its narrative into the polarity of transcendence and immanence. As will be demonstrated, the story of the book traces a line of flight that vacillates spectacularly between these two states of being. Although the axes of tension that have already been discussed (the sacred and the profane, the useless and the useful, the unspeakable and the spoken...) will be crucial in our attempt to construct a Bataillean interpretation of the novel, its protagonist’s adventures will also shed a stronger light on the dynamics of the random and the predetermined, of the risky and the secure, thus serving as another illustration of the manifold and dangerous paths of immanent experience, and therefore paving the way towards a clearer picture of what a Bataillean cosmology entails.

In other words, what warrants our choice of this book as the next subject of discussion is, firstly, its main character’s transposition, that is, a movement that takes him away from transcendent, conceptual heights, and propels him towards the base immanence of the body, and secondly, the fact that, by telling the story of this movement, “DeLillo manages to draw into question the [...] ideals of [...] progress – its

<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Land, “Meltdown,” in: *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), p. 443.

faith in the future, its confidence in the power of ideas and in the salutary effects of market-based technological innovation.”<sup>3</sup>

Let us begin by summoning a comprehensive summary of the novel’s plot:

*Cosmopolis* follows asset manager Eric Packer during the course of a day in April in the year 2000, just before the collapse of the dotcom bubble of the 1990s, which we are implicitly asked to interpret not merely as the end of a millennium, but as the millennial end of an epoch. Wandering through his luxury triplex apartment located on the top floors of a building which seems to be modeled after Trump Tower, Packer begins his day by deciding on a whim to “get a haircut” in the neighborhood of his childhood – a self-destructive wish considering that “getting a haircut” has recently come to refer to taking heavy financial losses. His armored limousine takes him from luxury to shabbiness along 47<sup>th</sup> street all the way to Hell’s Kitchen. Backtracking his career from splendor to humble beginnings, DeLillo sends Packer on a homeward journey resonant with the Classical tradition. Keeping with the episodic structure of the Homeric epic, Packer is intermittently joined by his “chief of security,” “chief of technology,” and “chief of theory.” Perennially stuck in traffic, his daylong trip leaves him enough time to have meals in several restaurants, hang about in hotels, have sex with four different women, watch the assassination of the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) managing director on the screens of his car, begrudge the US President his even larger security apparatus, become witness to and target of an anti-globalization protest, and squander “his personal fortune in the tens of billions” – as well as the more than seven hundred million belonging to his wife – in the financial markets. All through the day, Packer’s security team receives more or less unspecified threats. Though initially all efforts are made to prevent harm, Packer will ultimately seek out his assassin, who will duly serve his office and so complement Packer’s financial ruin.<sup>4</sup>

A few more details should be added to flesh out the protagonist:

Eric Packer is, in the argot of the investment trade, a technical analyst, one who reads the sacred texts of his profession – computerized charts and graphs and statistical compilations of price fluctuations and trading patterns – in an effort to discern meanings concealed to the unanointed. Unlike his peers who confine their investigations to the financial realm, however, Packer looks to nature itself for predictive insight.<sup>5</sup>

This is to say that what guides him in his work – which is likened by his chief of

<sup>3</sup> Russell Scott Valentino, “From Virtue to Virtual: DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* and the Corruption of the Absent Body,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (2007), p. 155. For a detailed analysis of how Bataille’s Weberian understanding of capitalism lost some of its adequacy in regard to the postmodern capitalism of consumption (the ideals of which are, as per Valentino, questioned by DeLillo), see: Jean-Joseph Goux, “General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism,” in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) pp. 196-218.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Voelz, “In the Future, Toward Death: Finance Capitalism and Security in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*,” *Finance and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2018), pp. 80-81.

<sup>5</sup> Jerry A. Varsava, “The ‘Saturated Self’: Don DeLillo on the Problem of Rogue Capitalism,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2005), p. 90.

finance to that of a “seer”<sup>6</sup> – is an assumption that there exists “a common surface, an affinity between market movements and the natural world.”<sup>7</sup> This conviction made him, firstly, capable of accurately mapping out the flow of global markets, and secondly – in consequence – obscenely rich. Up until the events portrayed in the book, the conviction was an unwavering one: he did not doubt in “the figural diagrams that brought organic patterns into play, birdwing and chambered shell.” His perspective was vitalism reversed, because for him, “[i]t was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets.” His view was that data was not merely a translation of the human into the binary, or of life into thing – instead, “data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process.”<sup>8</sup> Packer’s initial position is, therefore, like that of the man of science, who, in truth, wants nothing more than to reset the dissolute, threateningly formless<sup>9</sup> universe back to factory settings, that is, back to a cosmic – orderly, knowable and whole – state. In other words, Packer hunts for “the cross-harmonies between nature and data” that bolster the illusion of completeness: “The way signals from a pulsar in deepest space follow classical number sequences, which in turn can describe the fluctuations of a given stock or currency. [...] How market cycles can be interchangeable with the time cycles of grasshopper breeding, wheat harvesting.”<sup>10</sup>

All in all, what his vision encompassed, as he gazed upon “the roll and flip of data on a screen,” was “the heave of the biosphere.” Put another way, what he perceived was

<sup>6</sup> Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> See: Bataille, “Formless,” in: *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 200.

a continuity between this “heave of the biosphere” and the fluctuations of financial values made evident: “Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole.”<sup>11</sup> The certainty expressed through these last two adjectives – “knowable and whole” – will prove to be, as one might already suspect, ultimately unfounded.

At the very beginning of the novel, however, we see him at the stage of experiencing himself as a “mind in time”<sup>12</sup> – he is a man desynchronised with his body to the point of insomnia, a condition which he tries, in vain, to overcome by tiring himself out through physical exercise, an attitude far too instrumental in relation to the body to be, in his case at least, of any help. He expresses his condescension regarding the body at an early stage of the plot, and does so in no uncertain terms: it was a “structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured effect of barbells and weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable. It was convertible to wave arrays of information,”<sup>13</sup> or so it seemed to be for him, when he was looking at it on a screen.

A “mind in time” is, moreover, incapable of seeing another person in their immediacy: glued to the screen of the future, to a continuous, sustained attempt at predicting its shape, he sees even the people that he encounters as patterns, as traits that traverse living people, as probabilities of characteristics. Often he does not bother to actually look at some people: he has not looked at his chief of technology for years, because “[o]nce you’d looked, there was nothing else to know.”<sup>14</sup> “You have your mother’s breasts,”<sup>15</sup> he says to his wife, noticing the genetic process but failing, at this

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 18.

stage of the story, to acknowledge *her* physicality. The doctor examining him medically is reduced in his perception to the fact that he does not wear glasses “although he seemed to be someone who should, based on facial typology and general demeanor [...]”<sup>16</sup> If it is true, as far as the trade in futures is concerned, that “[t]he accumulation of data, its processing, and acting upon it for material gain have taken on metaphysical importance, and broader, ‘out-of-the-box,’ contextualizing questions about the purpose of it all have become aporias to be avoided,”<sup>17</sup> then Packer’s dissociated attitude towards his fellow human beings is the logical consequence of that same prioritisation taking over the field of human interaction.

In other words, anything that fails to withstand the regimen of maximising functionality, profitability, and power is to be jettisoned in the process of arriving at the future. Speaking of “[t]he force of cyber-capital that will send people into the gutter to retch and die,” Packer’s chief of theory asks rhetorically: “What is the flaw of human rationality?” “It pretends,” she continues, “not to see the horror and death at the end of the schemes it builds.”<sup>18</sup> Having delivered such a poignant, Bataillean critique of the inhumanity effected by tyrannical reason and the order of things it produces, she provides us with the crucial knot that binds, within the novel itself, Packer’s preoccupation with the future to the illusion of completeness: “The future is always a wholeness, a sameness.”<sup>19</sup> “It is the vision of numbers,” again. It is the vision of globalisation that is, ultimately, “an agent of homogenization,” one that makes “time and space conform to the exigencies of money and machines,” one that is the reason why

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> Varsava, “The ‘Saturated Self,’” p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 91.



“local and national proclivities of the citizenry are overridden by routinized, manufactured desires imposed by global consumer culture.”<sup>20</sup>

As many have noticed, Packer observes words becoming obsolete in real time, remarking rather frequently, either to himself or to others, that a given word (“airports,”<sup>21</sup> for example, or “skyscrapers,”<sup>22</sup> “phones,”<sup>23</sup> “computers”<sup>24</sup>) has already outlived its proper context, suggesting, therefore, that there is no place for it – and, by extension, for its outdated referent – in the future. This is, however, merely an aspect of a far more sweeping shift, namely, the ever-accelerating slide of the present itself into obsolescence,<sup>25</sup> a slide that is taking place “[b]ecause,” claims the chief of theory, “time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the free market system. The present is harder to find. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential. The future becomes insistent.”<sup>26</sup> (“The future becomes insistent,” or, in Nick Land’s high-density formulation – which opens the question of “an infection by the future”<sup>27</sup> to fields more exuberant than mere financial discourse – “[f]utural infiltration is subtilizing itself as capital opens onto schizo-technics, with time accelerating into the cybernetic backwash from its flip-over, a racing non-linear countdown to planetary switch.”<sup>28</sup> What we have here, it would seem, is – in contrast to what we have discussed earlier as transcendence turning on itself – time, the immanent flow itself, folding over itself and thus creating the conditions necessary for a

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<sup>20</sup> Varsava, “The ‘Saturated Self,’” p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> See also: Voelz, “In the Future, Toward Death,” p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Land, “Circuitries,” in: *Fanged Noumena*, p. 315.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 317.

hostile takeover perpetrated by transcendent agents; we will return to this issue.)

For a “mind in time” that craves incorporeality, the corporal is cumbersome; the body is a burden, a wellspring of anxiety: this is why, as Johannes Voelz shows in his analysis of *Cosmopolis* in terms of risk and security, Packer is initially obsessed with keeping himself secure: there is the car<sup>29</sup> – the armoured limousine suffused with hi-tech, with the screens that monitor everything that can feasibly be monitored, with cameras covering every angle both inside and outside the vehicle, seeing in infrared, in thermovision, noctovision, total vision; there are the daily medical check-ups; there is the team of bodyguards led by his chief of security; there is the mysterious “complex,” “the intelligence unit”<sup>30</sup> of Packer Capital the task of which is to track any and all threats, be they credible or not, to Packer’s safety. This is the “security apparatus”: all the measures undertaken by Packer grasped as an entirety that “entails the promise that up to a certain point, the uncertain future can be rationally designed and controlled.”<sup>31</sup>

However, *Cosmopolis* plays on contrasts: by the time Packer’s transformation wreaks its havoc, the “security apparatus” will have proven to be not a safety pod designed to deliver him into the future, but a cocoon out of which he was to emerge, reconnecting himself to the world on an immanent level. In this sense, the “security apparatus” is coterminous with what Russell Scott Valentino calls the “thought-generated world”<sup>32</sup> of the future imagined as a function of finance, of numbers – a world that held a promise on which Packer was to turn his back, and a world which Packer was to set on fire.

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<sup>29</sup> For a thorough investigation of the role of Packer’s car in *Cosmopolis*, see: Ian Davidson, “Automobility, Materiality and Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*,” *cultural geographies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2012), pp. 469-482.

<sup>30</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> Voelz, “In the Future, Toward Death,” p. 79.

<sup>32</sup> Valentino, “From Virtue to Virtual,” p. 146.

This “thought-generated world” is epitomised by the bank towers, the soaring monuments that commit nothing to memory; on the contrary: “They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. [...] They weren’t here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it.” These towers – obelisks trapping the prestige of the Sun in endless corridors of reflexive surfaces, labyrinths in which people, cars, and everything in between melts and reflects the liquid milieu back on itself – are, in Eric’s eyes, “the end of the outside world.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, once reality is locked (hypnotised by the “glow of the screen,” seduced by the “glow of cyber-capital”<sup>34</sup>) into the interweaving loops of immaterial currency (of money that has “lost its narrative quality,” of money that is “talking to itself”<sup>35</sup>), the outside will be no more. The apparent orderliness of emergent organic life is but one among many possible outcomes of chaos – however, if the digital-as-spirit reigns supreme, if the number-as-god takes up the mantle of the sovereign being, then even the least predictable shift in value will not be able to unbalance the final equilibrium of this rational eschaton; such an interlocking of flows shall be to the immensity envisioned by Heraclitus what a system of irrigation is to an untamed river.

We are speaking of a plugged-up, desiccated plane of consistency of homogenised thought – of all values homogenised by “cyber-capital,” *turned into* “cyber-capital.” The dream that defines Packer’s transcendent side, so to speak, is the transhumanist fantasy of uploading the mind onto an inorganic medium, abandoning the fragility of meat in the process: “The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in

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<sup>33</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 77.

whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void.”<sup>36</sup> That the premise itself is rampant Cartesianism, and a blatant example of mistaking the conceptual map of dualism for the territory of immanent existence, is beside the point – what matters for us now is that this was the promise of the “thought-generated world,” its afterlife, its incorporeal otherworld brought into existence and absolutely encompassed by a complete system of patterns unfolding harmoniously, a system that would not let a single deviation go without being turned into – no, without it turning out to have been a flourish of symmetry all along. In a passage that follows the above-quoted description of Packer’s lifelong dream, a series of brief sentences alternates equivocally between, on the one hand, the transhumanist affirmation of mind-uploading and, on the other, the embodied rejection of this being even remotely possible, thus suspending the evaluation of the validity of either claim – instead of judgement being passed, a strike at the heart of the idea itself is launched by simply presenting what truly motivates its hypothetical realisation: “It would be the master thrust of cyber-capital, to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment.”<sup>37</sup>

Transhumanism is without a doubt a gnostic eschatology,<sup>38</sup> and the transhumanist dream hinted at here is undeniably a myth of salvation: of being saved from what the word “asymmetry” is a harbinger of when it is used not in reference to ideas (in the “cosmological register” of which it figures as an “intriguing” “twist [...] that made creation happen”<sup>39</sup>), but in reference to the body: to the body to which it makes

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<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 206.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 207.

<sup>38</sup> See also: Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myths, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999), pp. 76-128.

<sup>39</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 52.

disturbing promises that leave one “pale and spooked.”<sup>40</sup> When “asymmetry” came to Packer in the corporeal register,

[h]e felt a certain perverse reverence toward the word. A fear of, a distance from. When he heard the word spoken in a context of urine and semen and when he thought of the word in the shadow of pissed pants, one, and limp-dick desolation, two, he was haunted to the point of superstitious silence.<sup>41</sup>

Though it is so much more than that, the body is also a site of the possibility of sickness, of becoming infirm or incapacitated. For the mind that insists on detaching itself from the body – the former being to the latter what language is to matter, namely, a site of betrayal – the left-hand sacred of corporeal decay takes on an ever more terrifying character, especially when viewed through the transhumanist lens that frames it as hypothetically or eventually avoidable. A nagging anxiety<sup>42</sup> is born: will one survive for as long as it takes for the technology to become viable? Will one miss out on tech-priests offering absolution not *of*, but *from* the body?

The transhumanist myth flaunts an image of being saved from the nightmares of illness and decomposition – which, for Packer, are borne from the mystery of the asymmetry of his prostate – but what is at question here has nothing to do with life everlasting of the soul in heaven, regardless of the fact that the contempt of flesh implicit in the said myth can rival that of even the staunchest of ascetics. What truly sets transhumanism apart from other mythologies of disembodiment is that the soteriological fantasy of mind-transfer is simply – and this is the crucial insight delivered in *Cosmopolis* – commodification taken to its logical, rational, conceptual conclusion. In

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, pp. 52-53.

<sup>42</sup> A Kierkegaardian reading of Packer’s shifting psychological states could also be possible, but that should come as no surprise – after all, Bataille himself was influenced by the Danish philosopher: echoes of the latter’s descriptions of faith are audible within the passages devoted by the former to the issue of non-knowledge.

its full scope, it is a vision of a premature heat death, or rather its opposite: it is a vision of the afore-discussed endgame of negentropy: total order, inescapable harmony of one and nothing but one, numbers and nothing but numbers: the homogeneity of the universe-turned-engine. We are trying to look into the future, but “we see the empty shell, a rather aimless and unattractive figure, and it is everything.”<sup>43</sup>

Let us refocus on Packer himself. Though he represents, through longing for it, a future of such an “unbeingdead,”<sup>44</sup> Packer is, in truth, a figure of vacillation, of vicissitude: he is a man who, despite being an agent of a future synonymous with accumulation (immortalisation, preservation), has always carried within himself the possibility of bringing down the very transcendent edifice that propped him up; he was, therefore, also a sleeper agent of expenditure, and thus – a double agent. How, then, did it come to pass that the sleeper has awakened?

The basis for Packer’s transformation is that he, a financial genius, fails to accurately predict a change in the value of the yen currency – though he insists, being quite sure of himself, that the yen’s value will cease its unexpected, prognosis-defying growth, it does no such thing, costing him his fortune and opening him onto a world that lies beyond the probabilities of “the mind in time” that persists in reducing everything to patterns taking shape as information, reducing the universe to a complete, completely computable event.

He says, in the conversation with his chief of theory, Vija Kinski, that “[h]e kept doing this” – “borrowing yen at extremely low interest rates and using this money to speculate heavily in stocks that would yield potentially high returns” – “because he

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<sup>43</sup> Valentino, “From Virtue to Virtual,” p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> e. e. cummings, “POEM(or,” in: *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*, ed. George J. Firmage (New York: Liveright, 1991), p. 803.

knew the yen could not go any higher. He explained that there were levels it could not reach. The market knew this. There were oscillations and shocks that the market tolerated to a certain point but not beyond. The yen itself knew it could not go higher. But it did go higher, time and again.”<sup>45</sup> He repeats, as if in incantation: “the yen can’t go any higher,”<sup>46</sup> “the yen has to drop,”<sup>47</sup> “the yen will fall.”<sup>48</sup> This is the certainty of a “seer” whose inspired guidance is called for in the hour of need – a time when gods clash, a time when currencies are like gods locked in combat. This is the confidence of a tech-priest<sup>49</sup> who “[...] liked knowing what was coming,” because “[i]t confirmed the presence of some hereditary script available to those who could decode it.”<sup>50</sup>

The digital turns the technological into the numerological: there are, throughout the book, several situations in which the cameras of Packer’s “security apparatus” feed events back onto screens slightly in advance of their actual taking place: time is out of joint, but who or what maims it so? Is it, perhaps, the “script” that demands that future be divined? Is it the “insistence” of a future that wants itself to be susceptible – at long last – to divination?

While they – Packer and Kinski – were contemplating “the electronic display of market information, the moving message units that streaked across the face of an office tower,” “three tiers of data running concurrently and swiftly about a hundred feet above the street,” “[h]e knew what she was thinking. [...] We are not witnessing the flow of

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<sup>45</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 21, 35, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 46.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> See also: Jean-Joseph Goux, “Georges Bataille and the Religion of Capitalism,” in: *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, ed. Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) pp. 106-122, wherein Goux writes of how “economics appears as a secularized form of theology, the gospel of our time, of which economists are the grand priests.”

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.

information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable”<sup>51</sup> (this is akin to Schulz’s reading of Kafka’s *Trial* as a text illustrating the incomprehensibility of the sacred by the means of an impenetrable bureaucracy<sup>52</sup> – the system-as-god receives its power, after all, from the right-hand sacred of hierarchy, but whatever ineffabilities can still be conjured by either bureau- or technocracy are, as in Michel Leiris’ example of the taboo protecting grass from being walked on, “a sacred grown cold”<sup>53</sup>).

Still, it is as if Packer had the honour of peering past the shroud. The “thinking machines that we have no final authority over”<sup>54</sup> – the enormous technological assemblages of the future that pull the present towards themselves – offer him glimpses of a pre-recorded future, dangling a promise of rewindable time on the screens in front of his face, teasing him with the “script.” When the anti-globalists stage an attack on one of the bank towers, “people racing through galleries surfaced in information,” Packer knows that they are going to “break into control rooms, attack the video wall and logo ticker”<sup>55</sup> – an echo is here, carrying a familiar message: “Photo falling – Word falling – Break through in grey room.”<sup>56</sup> The echo speaks to us of a playback future.

The part of him that excelled in reading the unreadable, the part that had mastery over “techniques of charting that predicted the movements of money itself”<sup>57</sup> – this part of him raced to meet the future head on, and so the future leaked into the present through

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<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 80.

<sup>52</sup> Bruno Schulz, “Posłowie,” in: Franz Kafka, *Proces*, trans. Bruno Schulz (Kęty: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, 2018), pp. 207-210.

<sup>53</sup> Michel Leiris, “The Sacred in Everyday Life,” in: *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 85.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 87.

<sup>56</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), pp. 68-69.

<sup>57</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 75.



the devices comprising his “security apparatus.” What the chief of theory says to Packer upon witnessing a temporal warp seems to corroborate our theory: “Genius alters the terms of its habitat. [...] A consciousness such as yours, hypermaniacal, may have contact points beyond the general perception.” When Packer points out that it was her who said the future was “being impatient,” she cuts him short: “That was theory. I deal in theory.”<sup>58</sup> A note of fear appears – there is much disturbance to be found, within the modern context, in the notion of there actually being an agent transcending the present; we will return to this in chapter eleven.

To reiterate: we know that Packer used to believe both in his own wholeness, and in the completeness of the universe-as-system. For his subjectivity, everything had the appearance of “a completed totality,” but then the paradigm shifted: change took place, the kind of change that is “situated on the level of appearances but reveals reality as fragmented, changing, and incomprehensible,” a “defect” in the conceptual “construction” of a whole that “can only exist in the mind,”<sup>59</sup> or *for* the mind, the “mind in time” for which time is like amber, which is thus – as the mode of consciousness best suited to interface with “cyber-capital” – more likely to imagine the end of the world than the end of itself. Indeed, as the “mind in time,” Packer thought that “[w]hen he died he would not end. The world would end.”<sup>60</sup>

Though the yen’s ascent played an essential part in Packer’s transformation, one of his lovers – the first one in the chronology of the plot, Didi Fancher, an art critic and dealer who taught Packer how to approach pieces of art – was also instrumental in facilitating the process. He meets her at her place shortly after the story begins and the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 95.

<sup>59</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1988), pp. 30-31.

<sup>60</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 6.

yen is already making him lose money. There, she utters a number of sentences that suggest two important things. Firstly, that he has something in him that is “receptive to the mysteries,” to that which he “can’t analyze or speak about clearly”<sup>61</sup> – he is receptive, therefore, to some sort of beyond. Secondly, that he has become a host for an “element of doubt.”<sup>62</sup> He objects to this, but he has, in fact, already confessed to harbouring this doubt by sharing with her that he has two elevators in his apartment (which is comprised of “forty-eight rooms”<sup>63</sup> cresting a tower “of hazy brown glass,” “the tallest residential tower in the world”<sup>64</sup>). More specifically, he betrayed his hidden distress by saying that one of these elevators “is programmed to play Satie’s piano pieces and to move at one-quarter normal speed,” by adding that he takes this elevator when he is “in a certain, let’s say, unsettled mood,” and by divulging that taking this slow-paced elevator “calms” him, makes him “whole.”<sup>65</sup> Something that *is* whole needs nothing to make it *feel* whole.

Nevertheless, he refutes Fancher’s remark. As he gets dressed, he remembers the name of a tree, a honey locust he saw earlier, and the name of which he was previously unable to recall. An apparent lack in his mnemonic construct had bothered him, but “[h]e felt better now. He knew who he was [...],”<sup>66</sup> having now returned the construct to its apparent wholeness.

Although he wants to have nothing to do with doubt – with the wound of incompleteness – he is already on his way to understanding that this wound is our truth.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, pp. 28-29.

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, p. 32.

There are two main groups of situations that involve and push him towards this truth: the first group comprises instants of non-verbal communication that defy the logic and order of everyday signs, whereas the second includes events that undermine his paradigm of totality by laying bare its insufficiency, events that put him face to face with what cannot be subsumed, encompassed, systematised. These are, simply speaking, the type of events of which Bataille wrote – changes that tear a hole in the whole, in the illusory impression of wholeness, an impression the production of which is conditional upon the mental process that gathers filamentous appearances and makes of them a seamless tapestry. However, beneath all of the situations divided into these two groups, there is a force surreptitiously guiding Packer's movements: it is the axis of pain, of violence.

The course is set at the time of his intra-vehicular medical check-up, which coincides with a meeting with his chief of finance, Jane Melman (plot-wise, the event follows the tryst with Fancher, the art dealer, and precedes the talk with Kinski, the chief of theory). What transpires in the car is a combination of pain, communication, and a Klossowskian perversion of language.

The pain has its source in a rectal examination<sup>67</sup> that Packer is receiving at the same time as he is talking business with Melman. The absurdity of the situation notwithstanding, Packer feels “some vast sexus of arousal drawing him toward her” after “something” had “passed between them,” *something* in excess of “the standard meanings”<sup>68</sup> – this vagueness (this implication of an incapacity on the side of the very medium of language) is a telltale sign of communication taking place, of a river whose bed they, at this very moment, co-constitute.

<sup>67</sup> Curiously enough, the first instance of Packer's pain that we see in the book – the first, still unconscious step he takes towards an immanence of the body – is connected with that anatomical area most closely related to expenditure.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

Existing at that moment “within” pain, which grew into “a point of hellish perception” that was “not a point at all but [...] a counter-consciousness, but not that either”<sup>69</sup> (how intriguingly reminiscent of the method of the dramatised point!), Packer launches into a monologue – sparsely interrupted by Melman – during which he shares with her his insights into both him- and herself, into what he feels and into what he feels her feel. He says just the things that need to be said so as to lead the moment through a crescendo of excitement, not failing to notice that the moment itself is possible because “[s]ex sees through us,” that “[t]hat’s why it’s so shattering” – because “[i]t strips us of appearances,”<sup>70</sup> of apparent individualities that yield under the pressure of eroticism and become as disperse as the “objective reality” of “fragments that shift and change.”<sup>71</sup> Neither does he fail to bring up their complicity, the fact that this is not a one-sided experience, that they are joined in arousal. On “[d]ays like this” – when “[t]hings are ready to happen that normally never do” – the “flow is strong between them,” strong enough that “[s]he knows what he means, that they don’t even have to touch.”<sup>72</sup> There is no need for him to actually “do the unspeakable thing he wants to do. He only has to speak it.” A merely verbal expression of his desire will suffice, “[b]ecause they’re beyond every model of established behaviour.”<sup>73</sup>

Corporeally present though he is in this moment, he – his self-perceived mind-self – is still as distanced from his body as it is from hers. The situation is nevertheless erotic, perverse even (as in Klossowski), perverse in the sense of finding oneself “beyond every model of established behavior,” beyond the coherence of everyday signs

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<sup>69</sup> Ibidem, p. 50.

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem, p. 50.

<sup>71</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 30.

<sup>72</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 51.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 51.

but nonetheless on the level of signs and words, of transcendent arrangements that become, however, perverted and transgressive in relation to the positioning enforced upon people by means of the linguistic gridwork: he renounces the obligation to think of the “near naked woman” as of “an executive and a mother,”<sup>74</sup> thus waiving in a single sweep both the social and biological predetermination.

Melman tells Packer to “say the words,”<sup>75</sup> and so when he merely verbalises his desire, it is more perverse for remaining an idea, an image, a violation of – in the first place – words (and the proper relations in the service of which they ought to be employed), and a violation of bodies in the second. Or: an immediate violation of syntactical morality that effects a mediated violation of bodies.

And the words were, indeed, sufficient, for once he had uttered them, “man and woman reached completion more or less together, touching neither each other nor themselves.”<sup>76</sup> That their “more or less” synchronous climax is referred to as “completion” is deserving of consideration. Doubtless, it is a usage consistent with how we discussed the subject in the previous chapter, where we have ourselves identified it with the release of tension and defined it in terms of a point that, itself transcending the immanence of desire, brings desire to a close, and thus completes it.

But, as Bataille has shown with great clarity of thought, eroticism would not be what it is without the biological stratum that ensures that there is an organic arrangement that can become perversely transformed. The “little death” of the self, which occurs at the summit of sexual experience, sets the tone for this experience, makes of it an experience of a “disorder” that shakes up the “ordered, parsimonious and shuttered

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<sup>74</sup> Ibidem, p. 50.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem, p. 51.

<sup>76</sup> Ibidem, p. 52.

reality” made possible and maintained in existence by the proper (tempered by work) conduct of human beings, whose self-perception as discontinuous individuals is undermined (disordered) by exposure to the continuity of life that demands, on the one hand, procreation, and on the other, the death of those who procreate.<sup>77</sup> Granted, “[e]rotic activity is not always as overtly sinister as this, it is not always a crack in the system; but secretly and at the deepest level the crack belongs intimately to human sensuality and is the mainspring of pleasure.”<sup>78</sup>

This is, all things considered, consistent with treating masochism as a perverse manipulation of transcendent elements (be they corporeal or not) in a way that intensifies the forces at play in this “crack in the system,” that expends these transcendent elements, sacrifices them, makes them, in the (re)productive scheme of things, inutile. For if the indefinite postponement of relaxation – which is tantamount to an indefinite prolongation of torment – influences anything essential in eroticism, it does so by exacerbating its nature, by fanning the flames of the disruption brought about by eroticism. As for the glimpse of continuity offered by eroticism to discontinuous beings, what becomes open in masochism is not the continuity of generation, but rather the continuity of the plane of immanence of a desire that, firstly, is independent from the transcendent point of “completion,” and secondly, spans fields of experience that are well beyond the confines of what is cordoned off within a single, seemingly self-contained individual.

So what are we to make, then – keeping in mind that our goal is to map out lines of wounding – of “man and woman” reaching “completion”? We ought to consider it in

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<sup>77</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, pp. 103-108.

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem, p. 105.

connection with the fact that they attained it “touching neither each other nor themselves,” that it happened by the power of words. Once we grasp the link between “completion” and the lack of physical contact, it becomes clear that their bodies are not (yet) theirs, however porous or “receptive to the mysteries” they might already be. Granted, they are hardly impervious, given how communication had already flowed through them, but they are nonetheless alienated from their corporeality. Indeed, this is precisely what Packer points out about the chief of finance when appearances are being stripped: she is, he claims, “[a] woman who was born to sit strapped in a chair while a man tells her how much she excites him.”<sup>79</sup> “That’s why,” he tells her, “you have to run, to escape the drift of your basic nature.”<sup>80</sup> Just as he seeks to “dismiss” his body while “shaping it under the measured effect of barbells and weights,” she actively suppresses her desire – the craving of her flesh – to be a languid object of adoration by subscribing to a regime of fitness, a regime easily identifiable by its “tragic regalia of running.”<sup>81</sup> Distanced as they are from their corporealities by transcendental pursuits, it is no wonder that engaging in perversion that does not leave the level of transcendent arrangements is more than enough to excite them to the point of orgasm, which in turn “completes,” closes communication. This closure is highlighted by the fact that, as she leaves the car, she resumes “her interrupted run” and returns to her role as the chief of finance by advising him to make the safe, responsible, prudent decision – to back out from his bet on the yen’s collapse.

This incident – by the end of which the notion of “completion” remains intact, outlasting the disorder of erotic communication – marks only the beginning of Packer’s

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<sup>79</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 48.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p. 49.

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem, p. 49.

transformation. The next major event within the scheme we are trying to sketch falls into the second group of situations, which means it is an event that makes Packer aware of elements in the world that resist – for however long – being ingested by systems. It occurs during a meeting we have already spoken of, namely, the meeting with Kinski, the chief of theory, who also visits him in his limousine and converses with him about the future and its imminent ravages.

Before we move on, a necessary assertion has to be made: Voelz claims that the temporal structure of the novel is ambiguous, that an unequivocal chronology cannot be discerned in regard to the events prior to Packer's encounter with his assassin.<sup>82</sup> It is our conviction that, on the contrary, the book presents us with a relatively linear plot (aside from two sequences in which Packer is not the protagonist, and which we will discuss later), and that its arrow of time is determined, as it should, by entropy, by the overthrow of order that turns Packer's empire of data into an empire of dirt. This is, furthermore, reflected in Packer's changing attitude, changing attunement, changing expressions and topics.

It is, therefore, only *after* he had his germinal doubt brought into light by Fancher that he can acknowledge it while talking with Kinski: "[...] I'm beginning to doubt I'll ever find it," "it" being the "order," the "pattern" that is supposed to be inferable from both natural and artificial processes, all of which are supposed to share "a common surface," or are supposed to intermingle within – in the words of the chief of theory – "[a]n aesthetics of interaction."<sup>83</sup> There is a budding wound: a slit splits the smooth appearance that had hitherto enveloped the world.

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<sup>82</sup> Voelz, "In the Future, Toward Death," pp. 82, 86.

<sup>83</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 86.



As they talk, the car is engulfed by the afore-mentioned anti-globalist protest. In the eyes of the chief of theory, the whole affair is entirely reducible to the processes of the market: yes, it is a pushback against the encroaching power of the financial realm, but the people doing the push are themselves a commodity that comes into existence within the market with the sole purpose of providing that market with its lifeblood. Their resistance, she claims, is not pointed against capitalism per se. It is, instead, a revolt against the onslaught of the future that they implicitly understand as merciless and inhuman, as a promise of misery looming just below the horizon. They are the ones who will get left behind as the fantasies of finance play out. They will be excluded from the “thought-generated world.” This – not the nature of those fantasies, and not the fact of that “world’s” existence – is the source of their resentment.

Hence, even as the rioters assault the car inside of which Packer and Kinski partake of “a bottle of blood orange vodka,”<sup>84</sup> they are still, according to her, well within the rules of the game, their riot just an emergent property of the capitalist market, a hypnagogic jerk rousing it, momentarily, from its oneiric descent into total virtuality. There is a familiarity, she reasons, between the anarchist belief in the creative power of destruction and the capitalist mode of operation: “Enforced destruction. Old industries have to be harshly eliminated. New markets have to be forcibly claimed. Old markets have to be re-exploited. Destroy the past, make the future.”<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, the efficacy of the anarchic measures undertaken by the protesters in the face of the kind of power wielded by Packer is repeatedly put into question in moments that show him appreciating their effort.<sup>86</sup> He is positively enchanted when the protesters

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<sup>84</sup> Ibidem, p. 81.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem, pp. 92-93.

<sup>86</sup> Ibidem, pp. 89-92.

hack into one of the screens mounted on the bank towers and use it to display a line – “A RAT BECAME THE UNIT OF CURRENCY” – from a poem Packer had been reading recently, namely, Zbigniew Herbert’s “Report from a Besieged City.” On the topic of this quote, Valentino writes:

The rioters’ exploitation of the rat – by flashing the Zbigniew Herbert line [...] on the giant electronic display – is an attempt to vitalize, grotesquely, Packer’s [immaterialised] commodities. The fact that the line is also the novel’s sole epigraph suggests that this is the work’s central intended contrast, namely, between electronic market information on one hand, [...] and rats on the other, the unsavory, living beings that have long accompanied human progress [...]. It also makes apparent the suggestion of an underlying organic filth to Packer’s business existence, both to the person he is and to the nominally abstract things he manipulates.<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, what Alison Shonkwiler calls “the financial sublime”<sup>88</sup> is precisely a variety of strategies of mystification that are meant to obfuscate the fact that beneath the sleek ideals of “cyber-capital” (which constitute an evolved form of the bourgeois, mercantile mythology, a form furnished with its own imagery: towers of neon, screens that are never flat enough, the neurotically clean elegance of the digital interface wedged in between faces, the exile of irrational, obstinate flesh), there is a wretched material substrate,<sup>89</sup> symbolised in *Cosmopolis* by the rat, the plague-bearer who has been, over the ages, a harbinger of the body’s porosity. As a lucid inversion of the white rabbit in Wonderland, the rat leads us through the cracks in the dreamy facade and towards the reality of mines run by warlords and running on child labour, towards sweatshops, towards environments left barren in the wake of resource extraction... In sum, to follow the rat is to fathom the material basis which underlies and is, at the same time, occluded by “the financial sublime,” by the “thought-generated world”; it is to fathom the “[...]”

<sup>87</sup> Valentino, “From Virtue to Virtual,” p. 151.

<sup>88</sup> Alison Shonkwiler, “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2010), p. 249.

<sup>89</sup> See also: Davidson, “Automobility, Materiality and Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*,” pp. 475-476.

blind realities that are as insensitive to philosophical categories as rats gnawing books.”<sup>90</sup>

Back to Packer looking at the verse displayed on top of a bank tower: “It was exhilarating [...] to see the struggle and ruin around him, the gassed men and women in their defiance, [...] and to realize they’d been reading the same poetry he’d been reading.”<sup>91</sup> He basks in their fervour, participates vicariously in the havoc they are wreaking – it feels good to have something in common with *them*, because they are so advantageous in being themselves. Their reckless abandon prompts him to acquire more yen – “dumbfounding amounts” of yen, “all the yen there was.”<sup>92</sup> He is, to put it bluntly, inspired: he, too, wants to risk it all, to wager *everything* on the fall of the yen: this is his path to the blessed state of grace that only chance can bestow, and chance “isn’t capable of dawdling [...]. It wants to have its success incomplete and quickly emptied of meaning [...]. Success wants to be gambled, gambled again, wagered endlessly [...].”<sup>93</sup>

However, what change could the protesters possibly achieve if he, one of the top representatives of the world they wish to tear down, enjoys their struggle? They are doing their best, and still they fail to puncture the tissue that enfolds both them and Packer, still they fail to escape the organism in whose genetic code are entwined anarchic chaos and capitalist exploitation. It stands to reason, then, thinks Packer, that “[...] Kinski was right when she said this was a market fantasy. There was a shadow of transaction between the demonstrators and the state. The protest was a form of systemic hygiene, purging and lubricating.”<sup>94</sup> Chanting, performing poetry, detonating bombs,

<sup>90</sup> Bataille, “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix *Sur*,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 35.

<sup>91</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 97.

<sup>92</sup> Ibidem, p. 97.

<sup>93</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 76.

<sup>94</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 99.

even laying siege to the bank towers – all this would become absorbed, referenced, turned marketable: there would be t-shirts with rats, with the Herbert quote, commemorative pins, office mugs bearing slogans about having survived the protest of this or that day... But there was one thing that, much to Packer's surprise, resisted the gluttonous mouth of commodification, one movement that broke free from the homogeneity towards which all other aspects of the protest would ultimately gravitate. After all, that is what chance encounters do: "[...] they pull the rug out from under us when we think that the development of thought allows sitting down, allows rest."<sup>95</sup>

"There was a shift, a break in space. [...] There was a man on fire."<sup>96</sup> A *body* aflame becomes the molten core of "a break in space," and of a break in time, too: in the burning man's surroundings, the protest is suspended because everyone is too shocked to do anything. We learn nothing about the identity the man had had before the instant of his death: while he was dying in flames, he was *a* life, a sacred, self-sacrificed ember purified by fire from the personal, from the individual, from *the*. Arguably, the immolation served a purpose that transcended the act itself, but the act was nonetheless on a level different from the one occupied by other protesters, for they would, at the end of the day, go on with their lives, however marred they would be by the consequences of the protest. This is what Packer focuses on: what is done is done, and regardless of any possible results or outcomes, the act itself – the man's pain, his choice, and the "abysmal will"<sup>97</sup> it called for – is what matters, and what haunts: "What did this change? Everything, he thought. Kinski had been wrong. The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act. Not such starkness and horror. This was a thing

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<sup>95</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 71.

<sup>96</sup> Ibidem, p. 97.

<sup>97</sup> Ibidem, p. 98.

outside its reach.”<sup>98</sup>

Surprisingly, we see Packer exhibiting empathy: through an event of pure pain that was not his own, he begins to understand that an arrangement cannot be total. Though the man’s line of flight was suicidal, or although it was a line of death, it still shot into the strata – splitting them, pushing them apart – and got through to Packer, weakening the hold that strata had over him.

A sort of exchange occurs, or a swapping of places between Packer and Kinski: despite the fact that, moments before the eruption of the riot, she had been telling him of “hysteria at high speeds” circulating in the system that is fundamentally “out of control,”<sup>99</sup> Kinski seems to have actually wanted the “market fantasy” to explain all the elements of the protest. Whereas Packer realises that the man’s self-sacrifice did indeed bring him sanctity (when the man’s shirt burns, it does so in a religiously charged register, for it was “assumed,” “received spiritually into the air”<sup>100</sup>), and moved him beyond the order of the market the totality of which is thus defied, Kinski is disappointed, because the man’s intrusion into how she thought the protest would play out nullifies her scenario and cracks the intellectual construction that she wanted to see proven. Let down, the chief of theory falls back, dishonestly, on a post-modernist spleen: “It’s not original,” she says of the immolation, “[i]t’s an appropriation.” “Imagine the pain,” responds Packer, “[s]it there and feel it.”

Shortly after, we see him changed: we see that “Packer is on his way to embracing loss as his goal,”<sup>101</sup> and thus to setting himself free from the imperative of accumulation

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<sup>98</sup> Ibidem, pp. 99-100.

<sup>99</sup> Ibidem, p. 85.

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem, p. 98.

<sup>101</sup> Voelz, “In the Future, Toward Death,” p. 85.

and preservation. He has just been informed by the “complex” that there is someone out there who wants him dead. He is, moreover, observing the yen’s continuing triumph over the dollar on the bank tower screen which is once again displaying market values. Yet, in spite of all reason or calculation, he is enraptured – he feels “purified in nameless ways to see prices spiral into lubricious plunge. Yes, the effect on him was sexual, cunnilingual in particular, and he let his head fall back and opened his mouth to the sky and rain.”<sup>102</sup> The thrill of catastrophe, the thrill of a becoming-catastrophe: it is not the satisfaction implied in phallic conquest: he “opened his mouth to the sky and rain,” he opened his mouth to chance, to the opening that prefigures all openings. At this moment, when the incantation urging the yen to drop is all but forgotten, the flow of data – of pieces of information that, though infinitesimal, spell misfortune for the knowing eye – is “a source of sacral-sexual delight,”<sup>103</sup> and the accumulative fantasies that the future is stuffed with, and that have been suspending the material reality of ignominy, are now themselves suspended by a superior, hazily masochistic fantasy of catastrophe.

But the credible threat was the thing that moved and quickened him. The rain on his face was good [...] and there was trembling pleasure to be found, and joy at all misfortune, in the swift pitch of markets down. But it was the threat of death at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he’d always known would come clear in time. Now he could begin the business of living.<sup>104</sup>

A sentence from the preface to “Madame Edwarda” encapsulates the sentiment to which Packer succumbs – “[w]e do not attain to ecstasy save when before the however remote prospect of death, of that which destroys us.”<sup>105</sup> One could also recall here “the marvelous magic of death” the power of which awakens us to life. This is, in fact, the

<sup>102</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 106.

<sup>103</sup> Varsava, “The ‘Saturated Self,’” p. 92.

<sup>104</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 107.

<sup>105</sup> Bataille, “Madame Edwarda,” in: *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 125.

very conclusion of Voelz's text on *Cosmopolis*: "In the face of threat, life begins to flourish anew" – the tale of the future-obsessed Packer emerging from the "security apparatus" (like a fledgling from its nest) and exposing himself to the unpredictability of the present is, according to Voelz, DeLillo's way of positing that we must, as a culture, as a civilisation, abandon our pursuit of security-at-all-costs lest we destroy the possibility of real life<sup>106</sup> – lest we foreclose chance, sovereignty, and the practice of joy before death. In other words, *Cosmopolis* is aligned with Bataille's call for a culture that remembers what it means to expend.

The next stage of Packer's developing quest for "living" – which is an elusive thing, a mystery that has, in his recent experience, only opened up in response to pain – takes place in a hotel room, wherein Packer, having slept with his bodyguard, urges her to use her stun gun on him. "I'm looking for more," he says. "Show me something I don't know."<sup>107</sup> A Bataillean truth, which Nick Land understands well: in the right circumstances, the thirst for experience can hardly be distinguished from the thirst for annihilation.

Exercising his sense of pain does turn out to be fruitful – Packer is quite sure that, since the electric experience made him temporarily "deprived of the faculties of reason," it had to contribute to a process by which "[t]he yen spree was releasing Eric from the influence of his neocortex. He felt even freer than usual, attuned to the registers of his lower brain [...]."<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, he was aware enough to understand that a financial cascade effect has been set in motion by his decisions regarding the yen: so important was his position in the web of market interrelations that the ongoing decimation of his

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<sup>106</sup> Voelz, "In the Future, Toward Death," p. 89.

<sup>107</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 115.

<sup>108</sup> Ibidem, p. 115.

fortune was bringing down currencies, banks, numerous “key institutions, all reciprocally vulnerable.” Simply put, “the whole system was in danger.”<sup>109</sup> By endangering the system, he is being assimilated, as it were, into the very force of fate that put his fortune in danger. Fortune itself is returning to its proper meaning, to a fickleness that befits a movement of “fragments that shift and change.” The wager now involves that for which the neocortex is, to a certain extent, responsible, considering how this part of the brain constitutes, in a somewhat simplified view, the material basis for transcendental impulses – we see it here, then, as the materialisation of thousands of years of grid-forming habits: it is from these grey folds that the mega-text unfolds, the mega-city, the cosmopolis, the cosmic city of a world snapped to a grid. The wager involves “the whole system.”

One should not overlook Packer’s implicit recognition of the body as the site of experience – he is not trying to sentence “the registers of his lower brain” to redundancy and haughty dismissal – he is, at long last, “attuned” to them. Curiously enough, he is, in contrast, “a little dismissive”<sup>110</sup> of the market’s possible collision course with rock bottom, though truth be told, he thinks such an attitude is warranted by a probability of the entire disruption steadying itself over a couple of days – he is himself temporarily steadied in this thought, sitting in his car again, “feeling strong, proud, stupid and superior.”<sup>111</sup> Though Packer’s particular predicament is peculiar to a man of his position, a possible mode in which one experiences the overlap of the planes of transcendence and immanence can easily be grasped here: one does something reckless and feels good about oneself because of the risk that was taken, and though one is at the same time half-

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<sup>109</sup> Ibidem, p. 116.

<sup>110</sup> Ibidem, p. 116.

<sup>111</sup> Ibidem, p. 116.



consciously preoccupied with excusing oneself, there is an overarching sense of a stubborn delight; one fools oneself with an appearance of self-sufficiency.

True to his vacillating nature, Packer confesses to an unsteady, drifting sentiment when he is in a restaurant with his wife, the poet Elise Shifrin. Incidentally, it is during this conversation that another instance of “something” passing between Eric and another person occurs – this time, it is a “faintly humorous” “something” which is released when he tells her that his prostate is asymmetrical, and they contemplate the possible implications in silence. (“Maybe there is humor in certain parts of the body even as their dysfunction slowly kills you,”<sup>112</sup> thinks Packer, thus taking another step towards the immanence of the body.) As he tells her that his fortune is being turned to digital dust by the ascent of the yen, he spells the fact of the matter in the simplest of terms: “It’s okay. It’s fine [...]. It makes me feel free in a way I’ve never known before.”<sup>113</sup> She rejects this carefree position, scolding him for even uttering such things, and, having made it clear that their marriage is over due to the infidelity of which she rightfully accuses him, she offers her help, or rather her own wealth (which was, all things considered, the *raison d’être* of their marriage that was meant to connect his financial empire to the old money of her family). In other words, she promises him her financial assistance.

When they part ways and he finds himself back in his car, he hacks into all of Shifrin’s accounts – so as to “impersonate her algorithmically” – and moves the incorporeal mass of her fortune to an account he set up “for her, more or less instantaneously,” within his own network. Having done that, he squanders her money in a series of ill-placed investments, thus making sure that it would be impossible for him

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<sup>112</sup> Ibidem, p. 120.

<sup>113</sup> Ibidem, p. 122.

to actually use the money in an attempt to rebound from the catastrophe bringing ruin to his own riches. “It was necessary to resist” his wife’s well-meaning “gesture” – otherwise he would “die in his soul.”<sup>114</sup> Of words, numbers, and the funds he had just depleted, he now thinks thusly: “But it was all air anyway. It was air that flows from the mouth when words are spoken. It was lines of code that interact in simulated space,”<sup>115</sup> the space that hosts algorithmic usurpers who operate “more or less instantaneously,” because the “simulated space” is itself smoothness and speed, streamlines bent into their mythodynamic shape by the gravitational pull of high-mass coordinate points.

What did it mean, however, that he would “die in his soul”? It meant that, should he accept help and be bailed out from the ongoing gamble, he would lose any hope of remaining in the state of grace, of twisting in the wind of chance: “[...] slow down, dawdle, grow sluggish even for an instant, and chance will disappear [...]”<sup>116</sup> What is more, “[c]hance is only chance provided that impersonality, or a game of communication that never ends, can be glimpsed”<sup>117</sup> – to be *saved* from that game, out of pity or because of a sense of wifely duty, would block the flow, the line of flight, of wounding.

He is also motivated by a desire for them to “see each other pure and lorn,”<sup>118</sup> “clean, in killing light”<sup>119</sup> – like animals competing for resources, bound immanently to an unforgiving territory wherein the truth of chance, which belies all foundation, shines most intensely: “[...] chance is a wagering of all possibilities and it depends on that

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<sup>114</sup> Ibidem, p. 123.

<sup>115</sup> Ibidem, p. 124.

<sup>116</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 72.

<sup>117</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

<sup>118</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>119</sup> Ibidem, p. 124.

wagering (so it's not distinct from it any more)."<sup>120</sup> In order to remain in the state of grace, one has to resist instincts of self-preservation (prime examples of grid-forming habits, of automatisms cloaked in the myth of so-called common sense) that would have one drop an anchor or create a haven that would serve as a basis, a solid base of operations run in liquid, gaseous, thunderous environments. If he accepted financial assistance from his wife – if he allowed her help to ground or stabilise him – the wagering, from which chance is “not distinct,” would cease.

Following the laying of waste to Shifrin's family fortune, Packer attends, albeit briefly, a techno rave, where he feels – because “something infectious” was “in the air” – as if he had himself ingested a drug under the influence of which the ravers around him clearly are. Once again, “something” passes, and this time, it is an attractive force exhibited by “densely assembled” bodies, a power of incorporation held by an assemblage of drugged-up bodies.<sup>121</sup> So far, we have brought up three cases of “something” passing between Packer and someone else: first, arousal; second, humour; and now third, drugs (and music). These cases correspond to eroticism, laughter, and intoxication (combined with a trance-inducing rhythm); all three are experiences of immanence communicated via a non-linguistic channel of contagion.

As Packer journeys on, back in the car again, through the traffic-jammed city in which are clenched the virtual overworld of high-finance and the base underworld of abject poverty, he encounters a grand, extravagant procession that turns out to be the funeral proceedings of his world-famous musician friend. He is moved by this death, moved to tears, in fact – by the time the tail of the procession passes him by, he is

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<sup>120</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 83.

<sup>121</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 126.

“weeping.”<sup>122</sup> He makes a number of observations that point towards not merely an affirmation, but a pursuit, even, of impermanence.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, “Eric’s delight in going broke seemed blessed and authenticated here. He’d been emptied of everything but a sense of surpassing stillness, a fatedness that felt disinterested and free.”<sup>124</sup> Is this rejection of interest – of the possibility of rationally productive operations that benefit the self, and to which the self is, in consequence, slavishly tethered – for the sake of a being-as-fate not a form of lucidity that goes beyond the transcendent arrangements delineating the limited self? He is, after all, put into this blessed state as an effect of what had at first been an honest mistake, a market miscalculation, but what has in the meantime become, as we have seen, frivolous prodigality, and it is “[t]he general movement of exudation” that destines the human being, “in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption.”<sup>125</sup> “You must, then, abandon yourself to your destiny or, more exactly, accept that it lead you to your glory.”<sup>126</sup>

But the self rarely wavers in self-preservation. His final thought regarding the funeral was that he “wanted to see the hearse pass by again [...], a digital corpse, a loop, a replication. It did not seem right that the hearse had come and gone.”<sup>127</sup> How clear it is today that the loops and replications are all undeath itself, a placid attempt at a negation of change, of the river of time, of how *singular* events really are.<sup>128</sup> If one claims that it does not “seem right that the hearse had come and gone,” then one has still failed to

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<sup>122</sup> Ibidem, p. 139.

<sup>123</sup> Ibidem, p. 139.

<sup>124</sup> Ibidem, p. 136.

<sup>125</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. I, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 23.

<sup>126</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p. 195.

<sup>127</sup> Ibidem, p. 139.

<sup>128</sup> See also: Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 26.

truly understand the decisive nature of death, which both predicates and is necessitated by the catastrophe of the free flow of time, of innumerable “fragments that shift and change” and move explosively, each intensity breaking systems open in multitudes of becomings; one is yet to find oneself under the influence of the “marvelous magic.” This is of even greater importance in the context of Packer, a man who placed himself at the whims of marketable and – due to being notions held in the present – reversible futures. Actual future is irreversible, because the arrow of time points towards entropy, and nowhere can a human being experience this truth in a state of higher purity than in death.<sup>129</sup> It is remarkable, then, that there were two other deaths that came to Packer’s attention earlier in the novel, and that both of them appeared to him on screens – suspended in time, looped, watched over and over. Hence, it does not “seem right” to him that this amazing death – a death of a friend, a death whose claim to an exuberance of lamentation meets no challenge – passes him by but once. Although Packer weeps and ponders the mortal consequences of mutability, he still parts with the funeral without having learnt his lesson about the irreproducibility of the instant, or – in this case – of an experience of immanence unleashed by tears of grief. In other words, there is something in him that, in spite of what he has seen and gone through so far, perseveres in wanting the system to be able to complete itself in a closed circuit; he retains an impulse to transcend immanence and encyst it in an arrangement.

The plot continues in a multiplication of “instances of discomfort.” Due to their increasing violence, “Packer feels a renewal of physical strength, which feeds on itself, necessitating [...] the elimination of all impediments to his own physical end.”<sup>130</sup> Given

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<sup>129</sup> See: Martin Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” *Constellations*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1995), p. 167.

<sup>130</sup> Valentino, “From Virtue to Virtual,” p. 147.

how his “security apparatus” is indubitably one such impediment, it, too, has to be eliminated. “He sheds two of his bodyguards – one goes home, the other simply falls behind – and murders the third [...],”<sup>131</sup> his chief of security, whom he began to regard as “a threat to his self-regard,” because “[w]hen you pay a man to keep you alive, he gains a psychic edge. It was a function of the credible threat and the loss of his company and personal fortune that Eric could express himself this way”<sup>132</sup> – faced with danger and cut off from stable ground, *ipse* (the irreproducible being of Packer) races to the summit at which no other presence can be tolerated. It is the *ipse* that “wants to become the whole of transcendence,”<sup>133</sup> that wants to “complete being.”<sup>134</sup> At this advanced stage of the story, being-as-Packer is headed for the extreme limit on its own, without the crutches of the apparatus and without the mediation of a presupposed system.

Since “*ipse* and the whole are opposites,”<sup>135</sup> it is finally clear that Packer himself is not, at the moment, whole – he is involved in the challenge of the summit, and thus free from the illusion of being perched upon it. Gone is the “obvious hubris” of Packer’s “search for order, for the systems and patterns of the universe,” gone is “his insistence that the yen *has* to chart.”<sup>136</sup> Gone is also “the universality of reason” to which the irrational, “absurd, unknowable *ipse*” becomes chained through the discursive, servile operations of the “I”:

The “I” is in fact the expression of the universal. It loses the wildness of *ipse* in order to give a domesticated appearance to the universal; owing to this ambiguous and submissive position, we represent to ourselves the universal itself in the likeness of the one who expresses it, like a domesticated being, in opposition to wildness. The “I” is neither the

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<sup>131</sup> Ibidem, p. 153.

<sup>132</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>133</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 85.

<sup>134</sup> Ibidem, p. 89.

<sup>135</sup> Ibidem, p. 116.

<sup>136</sup> Shonkwiler, “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime,” p. 267.

irrationality of *ipse*, neither that of the whole, and that shows the foolishness which the absence of wildness (common intelligence) is.<sup>137</sup>

“[D]etermined ‘ipseily,’”<sup>138</sup> Packer is gliding in a “movement [...] animated by the desire to be at the summit [...],” however, just as the human “will to be the universe” (to become the crown of being) is “only a ridiculous challenge directed at the unknowable immensity,”<sup>139</sup> so Packer’s quest can only end in a tumble. He understands this at some level (at the level, for example, of the afore-mentioned “principle of fate he’d always known would come clear in time,” or of an “[i]ntuition of early death”<sup>140</sup> that his assassin imputes to him when they finally meet), and so what truly matters is that he maintains his state of grace – having killed his chief of security with the chief’s own gun, he threw the firearm away “because he wanted whatever would happen to happen.” Then, as he is going *over* a literal fence, he wonders for a moment whether he should have left the weapon behind, but – realising that he “wanted to trust the power of predetermined events,” and that, though he had “tossed the weapon rashly,” it had felt “fantastic”<sup>141</sup> – he jumps down from the fence, thus ceasing to be *on* the fence about taking precautions, and returns to the car, in which only the driver remains. Now that no bodyguards surround him, Packer is “mortally alone,”<sup>142</sup> and the night (which has already fallen) is “cleared [...] for deeper confrontation”<sup>143</sup> – the stakes have never been higher.

Curious is the use of the word “predetermined”: as if the function of the “security

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<sup>137</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 115.

<sup>138</sup> Ibidem, p. 83.

<sup>139</sup> Ibidem, p. 85.

<sup>140</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 191.

<sup>141</sup> Ibidem, p. 147.

<sup>142</sup> Ibidem, p. 158.

<sup>143</sup> Ibidem, p. 148.

apparatus,” which is now, for all intents and purposes, inactive, was to struggle against what is predestined, to bend the lines of fate so as to change the trajectories of danger – and indeed, one would be right to follow Voelz and ask whether the combination of prediction and counteraction is not what security is all about. The night is “cleared,” because the forces that kept Packer away from fate have been done away with.

At long last, he arrives – after a silent, solemn ride through the now-empty streets of an impoverished area – at the barbershop to which his late father had first taken him during his childhood, and it is, fittingly enough, the place of his penultimate rest, and of his final moment of comfort, found in the long-known barber’s predictability, in utterances he had heard “a number of times,” in “the same words nearly every time.” “The same words. The oil company calendar on the wall. The mirror that needed silvering.”<sup>144</sup> Tranquil, familiar echoes: of language, of (a time) system, and of reflection. Indeed, the elderly barber himself exists as repetition, given how “[a]ll the words he’d spoken were the ones he’d always spoken [...]”<sup>145</sup>

Though Packer begrudgingly accepts the old man’s gun – which the latter offers after hearing that the former is unarmed and unguarded – he impulsively leaves the barbershop before his haircut is finished, thinking about how unbearable it is that the “credible threat” has not materialised yet: “It left him in a suspended state, all that was worldly and consequential in blurry ruin behind him but no culminating moment ahead.” Instead, there was the quietude of a barbershop, and the inanity of an interaction that felt scripted. He accepted the gun, he even fell asleep for a moment – he was dawdling, growing sluggish – the game is paused, there is no chance. “He couldn’t sit here

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<sup>144</sup> Ibidem, p. 161.

<sup>145</sup> Ibidem, p. 162.



anymore,”<sup>146</sup> he had to move on, get back on the streets – court danger again. Having “cut off all means of communication with the complex,”<sup>147</sup> he is back in the game. Perhaps the following passage sets the tone of the book’s final section most clearly: “Steam came venting from a manhole through a tall blue stack, the most common sight, he thought, but beautiful now, carrying the strangeness, the indecipherability of a thing seen new, steam heaving from the urban earth, nearly apparitional.”<sup>148</sup> The bounty of the world itself is replenished, its tiniest events defamiliarised, and thus endowed with a mesmerising charm; he perceives anew.

The driver is taking Packer to an underground garage when the ride is stopped in its tracks by an extraordinary obstacle, namely, a mass of people lying on the asphalt of the street, motionless and stark naked; a movie scene is being shot outdoors. Packer decides to become part of this unusual assembly, to immerse himself in this “city of stunned flesh,”<sup>149</sup> and in so doing, he motions himself towards a sort of immanence that struck him as a “power”<sup>150</sup> latently commanded by this disorderly gathering of bodies. He noticed, to be precise, that the simple fact of their presence outweighed the framing, the context of a movie set. He felt, in other words, that the immanence of bare people lying next to each other on the street was not at all turned dishonest or fake by the fact that they were doing what they were told by a script that transcended their corporeality – rather, it was the street that had its existence as a “street,” as “a place of ordinary human transit,”<sup>151</sup> as an arrangement, brought into question.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibidem, p. 169.

<sup>147</sup> Ibidem, p. 170.

<sup>148</sup> Ibidem, p. 170.

<sup>149</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 172.

<sup>150</sup> Ibidem, p. 173.

<sup>151</sup> Ibidem, p. 172.

When he lies down, undressed, among other bodies, he gets to taste more of their strange “power.” As his skin comes into contact with the “slubs of chewing gum compressed by decades of traffic,” and as “the ground fumes” and the smell of “oil leaks and rubbery skids” enter his nostrils, he feels “stupid,” experiences his body as “a pearly froth of animal fat in some industrial waste”<sup>152</sup> – the fantastic dignity of the *human* disappears, leaving “animal fat” in its wake; and there is no street, no transit, no city: in place of the grandiose and the complex, base waste remains. “He felt the presence of the bodies, all of them, the body breath, the heat and running blood, people unlike each other who were now alike, amassed, heaped in a way, alive and dead together.”<sup>153</sup> The longer he lies there, the weaker the differences become; the personal and the interpersonal, too, give way to the immanence of *a* life, multiplied.

He was, of course, aware of the cameras, of the lights, of the filming crew, but what had “isolated him” up until now was being dissolved in a strange intimacy – a tender, sleep-like intimacy of strangers – and so “[i]t tore his mind apart, trying to see them here and real, independent of the image on a screen in Oslo or Caracas.”<sup>154</sup> So dependent did he grow on screens that he has to force himself into the immediacy of this moment, but, difficult though it is, he succeeds: “He wanted to be here among them, all-body [...]. He was one of them. [...] He was one.”<sup>155</sup> “The separation of beings is limited to the real order. It is only if I remain attached to the order of *things* that the separation is *real*. It *is* in fact *real*, but what is real is *external*. ‘Intimately, all men are one.’”<sup>156</sup> Beyond the transcendence of screens – of the camera that interlinks with the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.

<sup>153</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.

<sup>154</sup> Ibidem, p. 176.

<sup>155</sup> Ibidem, p. 176.

<sup>156</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. I*, p. 192.

projected vision of a remote, objective observer who is no longer a god but an algorithm, or a database – the here and now of the sensorium, the communion of presence.

The “city of stunned flesh” is also where he meets – for the last time – his wife, Shifrin, who turns out to be the woman lying next to him in the inert crowd, and who tells him, while they are still on the ground, that the filming crew is nervous, because, according to an unspecified “someone,” “the financing has collapsed. Happened in seconds apparently. Money all gone.”<sup>157</sup> The consequences of Packer’s bet against the yen continue to reverberate across the financial strata, destabilising, rippling, ripping the system apart. Once the filming crew is done with the shot, Packer and Shifrin retreat together into the darkness of a closed-off section of the pavement, where they make love (in extension of the intimacy achieved through what was at first a purely anonymous chance encounter), and where he tells her – during the act, much to her amusement – that he had lost her money. To her light-hearted question – “Where does it go when you lose it?”<sup>158</sup> – he gives no answer: being where angels fear to tread, he is capable of neither remembering nor producing an answer; finally, they are intimate, unreal in how they exothermically repulse the order of things: she kisses him “[...] with such heat of being, that he thought he knew her finally, his Elise [...], her body fused to his [...].” Yet again, however, the alleviation of separation is an instantaneous affair: indeed, “[t]he instant he knew he loved her, she slipped down his body and out of his arms,”<sup>159</sup> and out of his sight. United on the cutting edge of a catastrophic night (the dawn at the end of which will bring ruins to light), a couple not married, not divorced, not unwed, “beyond every model of established behavior,” in true communication, at last. Nothing

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<sup>157</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 175.

<sup>158</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 178.

<sup>159</sup> Ibidem, p. 178.

but an experience: their relationship is not suddenly repaired, he does not get her back, she seeks no retribution. Indeed, they see each other “pure and lorn,” “clean, in killing light,” unknown to one another, new. Nothing transcendent about it: again, she laughed away his confession, and thus laughed away any sense of responsibility for her position in the social hierarchy (one should take note that – very much in line with Bataille’s tendency to portray women as those who take things further, as those who are, in the journey to the extreme limit, ahead – she is responsible for maintaining this encounter in a state of such purity: Packer thought he finally knew *his* Elise, that “he knew he loved her” – he was growing possessive, and it was her departure that cut him short).

Later on, once the driver has already disappeared into an underground garage along with the car, Packer finds himself, as if by chance – and therefore, in an instant indistinguishable from fate, a force marking its presence through an Icarian allusion<sup>160</sup> in the form of a “bare-chested” “bike messenger” “swanning past, arms spread wide”<sup>161</sup> – in front of an abandoned building inside of which, and unbeknownst to him for just a little longer, lies his assassin’s hideout. And so, as he is standing there, ready for confrontation, for the denouement, for the event that is supposed to release all the energy that has gone into the build-up of tension, shots are fired and someone shouts his full name; he is tempted to bolt behind a dumpster, to take cover, to seek security, but he does no such thing, he stands tall out in the open, courts danger yet again, and it is only after a moment elapses that he proceeds into the building and through the door leading to the lair of his nemesis. An awkward conversation ensues between Packer and the man who lives there – the supposedly credible threat, the assassin Benno Levin, or rather, as

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<sup>160</sup> Varsava, “The ‘Saturated Self,’” p. 102.

<sup>161</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 181.

he admits when pressed by Packer, Robert Sheets.

“I’ve had a long day,” says Packer. “Things and people. Time for a philosophical pause. Some reflection, yes.”<sup>162</sup> It would seem that he shies away, as it were, from the immediacy of the situation, tries to transcend it, talk his way around it. But though they do indeed speak, the conversation is from the start an effort – on the part of Levin, who was expecting neither that Packer would arrive, nor that he would ever actually find him – to say, as fast as possible, all the things he has always wanted to say to Packer, to the world, and to that supreme adjudicator, the system itself. There is a sense of incommensurate intentions, not unlike trying to solve a puzzle by using pieces, or notions, that come from incompatible sets. The conversation is a labyrinth in which two echoes are circling one another, failing to create a meaningful consonance.

Nevertheless, let us pay attention to Levin. He is, all things considered, a crucial element of the narrative, and understanding him will provide us with important insights into Packer, too. In Shonkwiler’s words,

Benno Levin is the assumed name of a onetime employee of Packer who is stalking and threatening to kill his former employer. [...] At Packer Capital he analyzed the baht until he was “demoted [...] to lesser currencies,” and then fired without warning or severance. Left by his wife and child, he squats in an abandoned West Side building stealing electricity from a lamppost [...] and writing “The Confessions of Benno Levin,” a “spiritual autobiography” that he expects to run for thousands of pages: “the core of the work will be either I track him [Packer] down and shoot him or do not, writing longhand in pencil.”<sup>163</sup>

The two portions of the novel mentioned earlier, the ones that disturb the linearity of the story, come from Levin’s “Confessions” and are, therefore, written in the first person. They are inserted into the structure of the narrative in a reversed temporal order, which is to say that the first confessional sequence refers to events that are

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<sup>162</sup> Ibidem, p. 187.

<sup>163</sup> Shonkwiler, “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime,” p. 257.

chronologically subsequent in relation not just to the goings-on covered in the second confessional sequence, but to the entirety of the linear sections of the book. In other words, there is a thread that we follow with Packer, and there is also a thread that we trace back with Levin, and thus the two movements that, when read chronologically, provide us with the story, nevertheless both culminate in the final segment of the narrative, namely, the confrontation between Packer and Levin, which becomes, as it were, the *present moment*, for although Packer dies, it is perhaps an exaggeration to say that Levin lives – what we see in the first confessional sequence appears from this perspective as the future, and it is indeed, as we shall see, “the empty shell, a rather aimless and unattractive figure.”

Since we are prompted to perceive the two men as representatives of opposing forces, Levin – a “thinly veiled *Doppelgänger* of Packer’s, who has moreover doubled himself” by making up a new name – “poses as a counterforce to the virtual,”<sup>164</sup> to the phantasmagorias of elevated incorporealities. If we are to believe his “Confessions,” then he is, at the very least, acutely aware of how incomplete the universe must necessarily be: “World is supposed to mean something that’s self-contained. But nothing is self-contained. Everything enters something else. My small days spill into light-years.”<sup>165</sup> His identity is for him – in contrast to its usual function as an always already preconceived basis – perennially in question: he “feels this immensity,” opened up by the question of who he is, in his “soul,” “every second” of his life, and the nature of this life is also unknown: “There are dead stars that still shine because their light is trapped in time. Where do I stand in this light, which does not strictly exist?”<sup>166</sup> What is more,

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<sup>164</sup> Voelz, “In the Future, Toward Death,” p. 86.

<sup>165</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 60.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155.

he firmly believes in a sort of kinship, in something common and shared across interiorities, which is to say that he insists that, “whatever the sundry facts” of these or those personal affairs, he is “not so different from you in your inner life in the sense that we’re all uncontrollable,”<sup>167</sup> possessed of the wildness of *ipse*.

He stands, therefore, in a rupture, and his consciousness is a wound, and his wound is a consciousness of the rupture. “My small days spill into light-years” – “[...] ‘my time’ is normally a gaping wound,” Bataille writes; “it gapes for me like a wound. [...] *I know better*. The anguish, though, is latent in me, and it flows out in the form of feverishness, impatience, and avarice (the stupid fear of *wasting* my time).”<sup>168</sup> Bataille *knew better*, but Levin did not: he could “only pretend to be someone,” and so he “felt derived at first, working on” his “Confessions”: he “didn’t know if it was” him “that was writing so much as someone” he wanted “to sound like.”<sup>169</sup> Whereas Bataille sought, on the one hand, to undermine any claims to universality that an individual self might make, and on the other, to call for a pursuit of glory that would take that self beyond itself, Levin has no control over who he thinks himself to be: in him, transcendence runs a corrupted, in-growing course: “I think about myself too much. I study myself. It sickens me. But this is all there is to me. I’m nothing else.”<sup>170</sup>

Indeed, “a second look reveals that Levin is no closer to the real than Packer himself,”<sup>171</sup> the “real” meaning here not the transcendent sense of what is external or what cuts being up into individual entities, but rather an embodied mode of in-secure, hazardous existence. Granted, we are dealing here with a notional ambiguity predicated

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<sup>167</sup> Ibidem, p. 153.

<sup>168</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 97.

<sup>169</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 60.

<sup>170</sup> Ibidem, p. 60.

<sup>171</sup> Voelz, “In the Future, Toward Death,” p. 86.

on the fact that transcendence is – let us again make use of Nick Land’s phrasing – “both real and impossible.” Insofar as it is real, it stratifies and arranges: it is the order of separate things within which both Levin and Packer remain firmly embedded. Inasmuch as it is impossible to maintain this order on an intimate level, we are dealing with the kind of “real” that “Levin is no closer to [...] than Packer.” This kind of “real” “does not *feel* real,”<sup>172</sup> it leaves one questioning the very reality of one’s experience of this kind of “real.” If anything, it feels like a dream, for dreams – to invoke once more the words of Jeremy Biles – can carry one to “an extreme point in which lucidity and intoxication converge and clash, each exacerbating the other to the point of explosion.”

Levin’s lucid approach to the universe as a concatenation of wounded beings, one entering another like links in a chain (which places him, at the outset, ahead of Packer), is contaminated by – and contaminates – his enmeshment in transcendent arrangements. Consider the following passage:

When I was employed I kept small accounts at five major banks. The names of major banks are breathtaking in the mind and there are branches all over town. I used to go to different banks or to branches of the same bank. I had episodes where I went from branch to branch well into the night, moving money between accounts or just checking my balances. I entered codes and examined numbers. The machine takes us through the steps. The machine says, Is this correct? It teaches us to think in logic blocks.<sup>173</sup>

First, he exhibited an almost religious attitude to what can rightly be called a ritual spanning “five major banks,” the names of which are for him like the names of gods in that their description calls for an oxymoronic expression: “breathtaking in the mind” – the breath is a bodily action, the gasp of a breath taken away is a bodily reaction, and yet the thought of a divine name is “breathtaking in the mind.” What “breath” refers to here has to be the vestigial, degenerate form of the pneuma or the soul, namely, the rational

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<sup>172</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p. 30.

<sup>173</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 149-150.



mind, the software, the “vision of numbers.”

Second, he “went from branch to branch [...], moving money between accounts” – he facilitated a kind of flow, he staged the entering of one into another, but by transferring immaterial money, thus transposing the immanence of the flow into the interactions of transcendently arranged “logic blocks”; he “entered codes and examined numbers” – he revelled in the logical operations, in the process by which a given output corresponds to a particular input. In place of a Barthian’ pleasure of the text (Levin has “never read for pleasure”<sup>174</sup>), there is a pleasure of the system. We should not fail to notice that, although Packer does indeed read for pleasure, both men are partial to this pleasure that comes from witnessing how the interrelated movements of data flow through the hydraulics of the system.

“Now,” confesses Levin,” I bank at one location only because I am dwindling down financially to nothing. [...] I use the street machine because the guard will not let me in the bank.”<sup>175</sup> But he does still do it, for as Shonkwiler points out when discussing him, “[t]he money in the account is beside the point; it is the ATM card, and having access to the nerve system of capital, that authorizes a kind of minimum balance of subjective functioning.”<sup>176</sup> He keeps going to the machine so as to preserve the ritual – which allowed him to activate the flow and access it in a complex, networked way – in a reduced form. “Levin’s compulsive need to check his account several times a day signals a formal link,” argues Shonkwiler,” between subjective and economic systems.”<sup>177</sup> In other words, the purpose of the machine is that it makes it possible for

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<sup>174</sup> Ibidem, p. 60.

<sup>175</sup> Ibidem, p. 151.

<sup>176</sup> Shonkwiler, “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime,” p. 258.

<sup>177</sup> Ibidem, p. 258.

him to maintain at least a single, tangential connection with the system of information which, though limited in this case to finance, stands in fact – because of the role of financial value as the quantitative measure of all things in the paradigm of commodification – for the system in its entirety.

Levin's pleasure of the system bears some resemblance, it would seem, to what Žižek describes in terms of "a Law that enjoys itself"<sup>178</sup> within the superego of one who enforces the said Law covertly, that is, not in the proper, official manner of its overt observance. Because a "Law guarantees meaning," and the "superego provides enjoyment which serves as the unacknowledged support of meaning,"<sup>179</sup> Levin – dependent as he is on interacting with the system – is thrown into the anomalous position of a heretic who ritualises or perverts these interactions that he has, humiliatingly, on the street, because – now that he is homeless, unemployed, *poor* – the guard refuses to let him in. To rephrase the matter: although he is not even admitted into the bank, he still receives enjoyment from "the street machine," the machinic dispensary, interacting with which proves that he is privy to the meaning of the system.

But it has to be said that, in Žižek's formulation (which, by his own admission, follows that of Bakhtin, but also, in silence, that of Bataille), a covert enjoyment of a Law is what gives a community what it has in common: "What 'holds together' a community most deeply is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community's 'normal' everyday circuit, but rather *identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law's suspension* [...]."<sup>180</sup> This can refer either to a moment of a communally expressed attraction (or absorption) to (or of) a given

<sup>178</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Superego by Default," in: *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), p. 54.

<sup>179</sup> Ibidem, pp. 56-57.

<sup>180</sup> Ibidem, p. 55.

molecule (an orgy, for example, celebrated by an otherwise monogamous community), or of a likewise communal repulsion (or excretion) of a molecule (Žižek gives lynching as an exemplification of his point).

Though mercy, compassion, and sympathy remain the official attributes of a society that identifies itself as Christian, the guard is obliged – in the name of an enjoyment that fetishises an image of cleanliness, an image contradicted by the aesthetic discrepancy brought about by the existence of the poor, and which thus requires the expulsion of the poor – to keep Levin outdoors: “I could tell him I have an account and prove it. But the bank is marble and glass and armed guards.”<sup>181</sup> Additionally, Levin’s ritual, which he performed during what he himself names “episodes,” was indubitably one of the reasons why he had found himself unemployed in the first place: “He is erratic. He has problems of personality and hygiene. He walks, whatever, funny. I never heard a single one of these statements but knew they were being made the way you sense something in a person’s look that does not have to be spoken.”<sup>182</sup> He did not consider it necessary to actually hear anyone utter those statements, because “[t]he status of the superego [...] is that of a traumatic *voice*, an intruder persecuting us and disturbing our psychic balance” – this makes the superego stand “in contrast” to the Law, which “is essentially *written*,” and it is “precisely and only because ‘it is written’” that “our ignorance of Law cannot serve as an excuse.”<sup>183</sup> In other words, he did not have to hear anyone actually say those things, because it was the voice of the superego making him aware of what, within the framework supported by that voice, could only be thought of in terms of his own failure to adapt to the system.

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<sup>181</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 151.

<sup>182</sup> Ibidem, pp. 55-56.

<sup>183</sup> Žižek, “Superego by Default,” p. 57.

We could say, thus, that Levin's decreasingly covert pleasure of the system turned out to be incompatible with the overt rules of conduct followed by other participants in the same system – again, this is the position of the heretic, of the deviant, and of the paranoiac: paranoia is a point of vulnerability, a questioning openness occupied and enclosed aggressively by transcendent arrangements engaged in a cancerous multiplication alternating between, on the one hand, ecstatic moments of peering through the web of lies and comprehending the secret in its completeness, and on the other, terrible moments of trying desperately to piece things together, to find the thread, the breadcrumbs, the hidden pattern – the pattern that would make the yen chart, perhaps? Here, too, one finds a connection between Packer and Levin. Indeed, the supposedly neutral vision of a universe-turned-cosmos is never free from the risk of succumbing to the paranoid mechanism of “it turns out that...” – it always turns out that there are more layers to the conspiracy, that the puppeteer is always higher up than one has thought, that the seemingly random events have been clandestinely coordinated at a scale larger than one has estimated, and according to an agenda which is even harder to identify than one has suspected; there is always another shadow empire, and always yet another dark realm beyond it, or: always another demiurge.

To reiterate: paranoia is a malignant thickening of transcendent arrangements; normally, if the striated arrangements are ruptured, their tissue is stimulated to grow over the rupture so as to maintain the shield (the feeling that it is advantageous to be who one is), but the paranoiac is locked into a pattern that neither allows healing, nor leads to the wound being acknowledged. In paranoia, the tissue of understanding festers; there is, on the part of the paranoiac, a vertical, scarring movement, either heaven- or hellward, through the strata. (Bataille was not paranoid, because his journey to the

extreme limit did not entail a series of sudden discoveries enlarging the system – he was aware that, although the pool of knowledge *is* modified every time the self is reassembled following ecstasy, experience itself eludes projects – the paranoiac’s endeavour, on the other hand, *is* a project through and through, as it is animated by a desire not to exceed the project, but to complete the scheme of the all-encompassing conspiracy; in other words, Bataille knew very well what is responsible for the manacles he struggled against, and did not relegate this responsibility to other, ever-more-distant entities.)

Since Levin was also exposed to the system via the world wide web – a cyberspace brimming with virtualities, with shadows hunting for bodies to attach themselves to – he contracted various illnesses “on the Internet”: “delirious gusts” of “agitated behavior and extreme confusion” from Haiti,<sup>184</sup> “spells of *hwabyung*,” a “cultural panic” from Korea,<sup>185</sup> or “occasions of *susto*, which is soul loss, more or less, from the Caribbean.”<sup>186</sup> “Whether I imagine a thing or not,” he tells Packer during their confrontation, “it’s real to me. I have syndromes where they’re real, from Malaysia for example. The things I imagine become facts.”<sup>187</sup> So profoundly does his hypertrophic transcendence alienate him from corporeality that his senses are incapable of contradicting the thoughts that had installed themselves in the grotesque patchwork of strata – which also consists of fixations,<sup>188</sup> repetitions,<sup>189</sup> and confabulations,<sup>190</sup> transcendent malformations – of which he is comprised.

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<sup>184</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 60.

<sup>185</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.

<sup>186</sup> Ibidem, p. 152.

<sup>187</sup> Ibidem, p. 192.

<sup>188</sup> Ibidem, p. 154.

<sup>189</sup> Ibidem, p. 57.

<sup>190</sup> Ibidem, pp. 150-151.

Levin writes to “slow down” the paranoid onslaught that takes up his mind, “but sometimes there is leakage,”<sup>191</sup> sometimes something ruptures, and Levin has to seal it with a syndrome, a diagnosis, a *name* that will plug up the flow which is, in contrast to the rigidly routed channelling of bank transfers, delirious and metamorphic. Hence, Shonkwiler is led to state that, for Levin (and opposite to Packer), “technology is not a source of transcendence but of paranoia, contagion, and dysfunction.”<sup>192</sup> We must, however, take issue with this phrasing.

The contagion that plagues Levin is not one of laughter or grief, but of the delirium of ideas – this is the precisely transcendent contagiousness of the word-virus that precludes true communication. Transcendental contagion is what makes people act and speak in accordance to the same pattern, the same transcendental arrangement – that is what Levin goes through: disturbing notions exert their influence on him through media that environ him as strata. The contagion of laughter or poetic feeling is different, and the difference should be made clear when one considers the possibility of putting together – within the premises of a non-transcendent contagion – both the spasm of amusement and the heat of language set on fire: it is not that, all of a sudden, a perfectly comprehensible encapsulation of some immanent truth gets launched across the abyss that insulates individual consciousnesses. Rather, it is the presence of the abyss that comes to the fore, its presence as the unbridgeable: the wound as the impossibility of one self *truly knowing* another; a group of people is thrown into a fit of laughter, and they are for the duration of this fit in an immanent bond, but this bond is not between selves – laughter comes to the self through the wound, and whatever language the self

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<sup>191</sup> Ibidem, p. 151.

<sup>192</sup> Shonkwiler, “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime,” p. 257.

employs, it will not translate the experience of this laughter into words, and it is unimaginable that a rational discussion between selves could take place during a fit of laughter that washes the selves away from the beings it binds.

In sum, Levin is a prison for himself, and to a degree that far exceeds the predicament of a typical self. “I make mind speeches all the time. So do you, only not always. I do it all the time, long speeches to someone I can never identify.” And though he is “beginning to think it’s him,”<sup>193</sup> that it is Packer who is the addressee of his speeches, it signals nothing else than a slow realisation that he has been identifying Packer with the ultimately unidentifiable warden of his mind prison, an entity one can only try to approximate through notions such as the superego, the daemon, the genius, the language virus, the schizophrenic voice, or indeed the doppelgänger, which represents the uncanny threat of the entity becoming embodied, of putting one’s identity – understood as the quality of one being identical exclusively with oneself – into question.

And it would indeed seem that, by killing Packer – by destroying an effigy of the warden in an act that neither receives nor could receive proper description, and that thus gapes like a rupture in the narrative – he silences the voice, but at the price of silencing himself, too: these are the words that conclude the first confessional sequence, and that therefore mark the chronological ending of the book:

I thought I would spend whatever number of years it takes to write ten thousand pages and then you would have the record, the literature of a life awake and asleep, because dreams too, and little stabs of memory, and all the pitiful habits and concealments, and all the things around me would be included, noises in the street, but I understand for the first time, now, this minute, that all the thinking and writing in the world will not describe what I felt in the awful moment when I fired the gun and saw him fall. So what is left that’s worth the telling?<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 57.

<sup>194</sup> Ibidem, p. 61.

Levin falls out of language, not into glory, however, but into a mute, impotent state of horror before death. This proves that Packer was right about him when he said that Levin's wish to murder his former boss is a "cheap imitation. A stale fantasy. People do it because other people do it. It's another syndrome, a thing you caught from others."<sup>195</sup> None of the many justifications Levin attempts to produce in front of Packer hold true: since everything that gets regurgitated within Levin's transcendent corruption has for him the density of facts, regardless of whether corroboration is possible, the vast majority of his thoughts could not possibly stand the test of external reality and resist dispersal.

In other words, it was not Packer he wanted to kill, but the image of Packer he had developed in his mind. In truth, even the very idea of killing him was "largely academic,"<sup>196</sup> one of the "mind things" that, like all of his other obsessions, was not meant to be "geared to action."<sup>197</sup> If it were not for Packer's unexpected intrusion, Levin's "fantasy" would never have been anything more than a hypothetical, barren project. The real death of Packer was, all in all, a side effect of Levin's delusions of reference, an almost random casualty of a play of shadows, of all the shadows with which Levin's organs have become stuffed.<sup>198</sup>

Now, let us take a step back and consider in greater detail Packer and Levin's conversation. There are two more aspects of their encounter we would like to discuss: Levin's insight into Packer's life, and Packer's final moments.

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<sup>195</sup> Ibidem, p. 193.

<sup>196</sup> Ibidem, p. 154.

<sup>197</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.

<sup>198</sup> For a different perspective on the ontological status of Packer and Levin in the context of the double, see: Valentino, "From Virtue to Virtual," pp. 151-155.



Levin has been stalking Packer practically ever since he started working for him, and he has done so with such diligence that, when Packer challenges him to speak of the things he knows about his former boss, Packer admits: “You know some things,” the things in question being, among others, the “gifts” of “self-totality” and no remorse, but also “[s]ecret doubts” he “could never acknowledge.”<sup>199</sup> Indeed, if Packer’s doubt had not blossomed, he could keep up the appearance – with which he fooled himself as well (in the Satie elevator, for example) – of “self-totality,” of being “self-contained.” But it is out in the open now: that the yen had eluded him catalysed a reaction by the end of which he would “willingly enter a house where there’s someone inside who’s prepared to kill” him. The illusion of “self-totality” gives way to the realisation, which Levin verbalises, that he is a “self-contradiction” (as we have seen, this is as true of Levin as it is of Packer), and that this is why he is “engineering” his own “downfall”<sup>200</sup>; his is the Icarian path of *ipse*: having been at the summit, he has to plummet, he has to go all the way down: “Even when you self-destruct, you want to fail more, lose more, die more than others, stink more than others. In the old tribes the chief who destroyed more of his property than the other chiefs was the most powerful.”<sup>201</sup>

Levin compares Packer’s actions to potlatch,<sup>202</sup> but is he right to do so? First of all, it is not power (the force to enact calculated decisions) that the potlatch grants, but glory, or rank – the very “functional value” of this luxurious ritual demonstration is, in Bataille’s view, “creative of *rank*.”<sup>203</sup> It seems pertinent to mention that, in his final moments, Packer imagines for himself a truly Icarian funeral (he is inspired, perhaps, by

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<sup>199</sup> Ibidem, p. 191.

<sup>200</sup> Ibidem, p. 190.

<sup>201</sup> Ibidem, pp. 193-194.

<sup>202</sup> See also: Mark Osteen, “The Currency in DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2014), pp. 299-301.

<sup>203</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol. I, p. 76.

Levin telling him that he has an Icarus complex, a wish for a “[m]eltdown in the sun”<sup>204</sup>): he would be flown into the sky above a desert at supersonic speed in a remotely controlled bomber plane (one of his luxurious possessions) – embalmed in a suit and tie, and a turban as well (denotations of hierarchy), along with the bodies of his dogs (of a high-class, expensive breed) – and the plane, having reached its maximum altitude, would level, fall, and crash explosively, “leaving a work of land art, scorched earth art.”<sup>205</sup> This funereal vision of being “solarized”<sup>206</sup> has the Icarian myth as its basis, but combines it with images of ancient royal thanatopraxy, of monuments commemorating sovereigns, and of the sacrifice of *things* that creates *rank* (which is “the opposite of a thing,” because “[w]hat founds it is sacred”<sup>207</sup>). That Packer has a vision of such magnitude appears to confirm the accuracy of Levin’s comparison, in the sense that a funeral of this sort would secure for Packer the legacy of being another of the thousand faces which the myth of permanence dons – under the aegis of this myth, his identity, and thus his prestige, too, would be preserved, and the “scorched earth art” would, in the end, function like all monuments do – it would channel the force that enforces memory; it would be one of the nails that keeps the membrane of remembrance fixed to the surface of the planet. However, Packer’s imagined burial rite is in fact yet another twist in the vicissitudes of his fate. In the end, when Packer is allowed a technologically mediated glimpse of the future one last time, he first sees, on the electronic display of his watch, a body lying dead on the ground, and then the same body in a morgue. He understands that he is watching his own corpse, tagged as an unidentified cadaver. He

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<sup>204</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 202.

<sup>205</sup> Ibidem, p. 209.

<sup>206</sup> Ibidem, p. 209.

<sup>207</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. I*, p. 73.

realises that he is about to die, that there will be no great climax to finish off his adventure, and that his body will not even be recognised. This fading into obscurity is the death he comes to accept – *this is what he chances upon*.

At one point of the conversation, Packer shoots his single remaining bullet through his hand (literally disarming himself); in so doing, he highlights the phantasmagoric nature of Levin's way of thinking, and foregrounds pain as the medium of his corporeal immanence. Somewhat similarly, moreover, to what took place within the naked crowd on the street, when he had trouble "trying to see them here and real, independent of the image on a screen," he is pushed by the pain right up to the very interplanar limit: pain makes the planes of transcendence and immanence – which are usually experienced as a kind of an overlap, or in a continuous movement – become distinct, splintered:

The pain was the world. The mind could not find a place outside it. [...] He closed his eyes again, briefly. He could feel himself contained in the dark but also just beyond it, on the lighter outer surface, the other side, belonged to both, feeling both, being himself and seeing himself.<sup>208</sup>

"Being himself," feeling pain on the plane of immanence, and "seeing himself," watching himself feel pain on the plane of transcendence – thinking himself as an object of a gaze directed at him from "the other side," which – if understood as an alienated imagination, or an abstracted image of a generalised, ideal space of subjectively impossible, purely objective points of view (a space of "the gaze" whose separation "from the living body" "is one of the conditions of transcendence that can make even the world itself an object"<sup>209</sup>; the space of the camera held by whatever passes for a god) – interlinks with the parodic chain of otherworlds.

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<sup>208</sup> Ibidem, p. 201.

<sup>209</sup> Zeynep Direk, "Bataille on Immanent and Transcendent Violence," *Bulletin de la Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2004), p. 39.

Then, the vision of his corpse displayed on the screen of his watch (sent, perhaps, by one of the playback deities) initiates the final vacillation. First, he swings transcendently: there is one last moment of indulgence in the transhumanist dream, in the idea of mind transfer, but it is followed by an ultimate rebuttal – he swings immanently – of the notions that had fuelled his disregard for the corporeal:

[...] his pain interfered with his immortality. It was crucial to his distinctiveness, too vital to be bypassed and not susceptible, he didn't think, to computer emulation. The things that made him who he was could hardly be identified much less converted to data, the things that lived and milled in his body, everywhere, random, riotous [...]. So much come and gone, this is who he was, the lost taste of milk licked from his mother's breast, the stuff he sneezes when he sneezes [...]. He'd come to know himself, untranslatably, through his pain. [...] His hard-gotten grip on the world, material things, great things, his memories true and false, the vague malaise of winter twilights, untransferable, [...] and the hang of his cock, untransferable, and his strangely achy knee [...], all him, and so much else that's not convertible to some high sublime, the technology of mind-without-end.<sup>210</sup>

“*Some high sublime*” – he seems almost contemptuous, now that he has grasped how immanent experience can be, and how incompatible such rawness is with transcendent systems within the limits of which transfers would occur – and even then there is always “leakage,” always the irreducible difference: between what is felt and thought, between what is thought and said, between what is said and heard, between what is heard and thought, between what is thought and felt; whenever a movement traverses the strata, that which moves can never arrive unchanged, complete – there is that which arrives, and there is the rest of it, the unassimilable remainder; the rest that never rests. Whatever “technology of mind-without-end” could be concocted, it must necessarily fail to account for this rest, flickers of which are given in the above-quoted passage.

Penultimately, he swings transcendently, albeit in a way that betrays an appreciation of luxury for luxury's sake: fuelled by “the old biochemistry of the ego,”

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<sup>210</sup> Ibidem, pp. 207-208.

“his saturated self”<sup>211</sup> imagines itself getting “solarized,” interred exuberantly, with panache. Ultimately, however, his final moment seizes him as he renounces the world of work – he swings immanently – and rejects the prospect that lurks behind the possibility of not getting killed by Levin, namely, the prospect of starting at the bottom again. “He understood what was missing, the predatory impulse, the sense of large excitation, [...] the sheer and reeling need to be.”<sup>212</sup> Packer-as-*ipse* is spent, and to continue as a self, to re-enter the order of production in subjugation – that would be unbearable, detestable. What is left for Packer is to imagine not a happy Sisyphus, but an Icarus spitting at the Sun with his dying breath.

His murderer, Richard Sheets, sits facing him. He has lost interest in the man. His hand contains the pain of his life, all of it, emotional and other, and he closes his eyes one more time. This is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound.<sup>213</sup>

Though his assassin is not what Packer had hoped for, he will nevertheless approach death with dignity – savouring, as it were, the instant:

The projection of his death on his watch is not interpreted by Packer as an uncertain sign of the future but instead as a fact. It is because of the discrepancy between the visual and the aural fact<sup>214</sup> that he becomes keenly alive to his own existence. The sentence “This is not the end” has a note of surprise and appreciation derived from the conviction that it is the end. Possibility and potentiality do not refer to the question of whether the shot will sound or not; they arise from the certainty that it will, but has not yet done so. Possibility and potentiality, in other words, refer to a particular position toward life and death: life becomes possible in an authentic manner only once death has been accepted as a fact.<sup>215</sup>

“This is not the end.” He is “still alive,” bereft of the wildness of *ipse*, but also

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<sup>211</sup> Ibidem, p. 208.

<sup>212</sup> Ibidem, p. 209.

<sup>213</sup> Ibidem, p. 209.

<sup>214</sup> Since sight is the sense that dominates the technophilic society of the spectacle, the technologically-mediated future arrives through the visual. It appears in the form of images displayed on screens, pure video, no audio. Data does not have the time to be given as sound, to sound out – it has to come all at once, with the misleading simplicity of a number; a picture one swallows whole. Hence, the loss of synchronicity, of the co-operation of senses in the physical world.

<sup>215</sup> Voelz, “In the Future, Toward Death,” p. 88.

unencumbered with the servile, self-preserving tendency of the self – he is still *a* life; enveloped in a “world” of pain and immersed in the imminence of death, and through this likened, at last, to the immolated man. In the final analysis, Packer’s self-sacrifice – unlike the potlatch of olden days – not only escapes both the circuit of utility *and* the creation of rank, but also ends up doing lasting damage to the financial system.

Granted, he used to be a part of the machinery that runs on the kind of money that has, as Kinski said, “lost its narrative quality.” He partook in “the present forms of wealth” that “make a shambles and a human mockery of those who think they own it,”<sup>216</sup> a fact most clearly seen, perhaps, when he tried to persuade Fancher, his art dealer, to help him buy the Rothko Chapel, which he would have liked to move to his humongous apartment, and which he would have liked to have for himself and himself only. Put another way, even though the things he bought were often extravagant, and the things he did were often capricious – which theoretically places Packer in the domain of “capitalist misappropriation,” one of the three domains (the other two being “military exploitation” and “religious mystification”) that are still capable of hosting truly exuberant displays of wealth<sup>217</sup> – there was avarice in Packer, a parsimonious desire to never share, to take and keep under lock and key. Let us think of it this way:

[...] the petty calculations of those who enjoy luxury [today] are surpassed in every way. In wealth, what shines through the defects extends the brilliance of the sun and provokes passion. It is not what is imagined by those who have reduced it to their *poverty*; it is the return of life’s immensity to the truth of exuberance. This truth destroys those who have taken it for what is is not [...]. In this respect, present-day society is a huge counterfeit, where this *truth* of wealth has underhandedly slipped into *extreme poverty*.<sup>218</sup>

Doubtless, it is quite characteristic of *ipse* to strive, tragically, towards a self-

<sup>216</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol. I, p. 76.

<sup>217</sup> Ibidem, p. 77.

<sup>218</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

sufficiency, towards being a world unto itself, a world that would subsume all other worlds, rendering itself the whole of being – how else to understand the pursuits of pharaohs, emperors, and other ancient sovereigns? But these pursuits could not be disconnected from the sovereigns’ opulence, which shone with “the brilliance of the sun” on the servants, too. Even overdeveloped religious castes erected splendid temples so as to exhibit wealth, thus allowing the poor to experience “the truth of exuberance,” albeit vicariously, and often exploitatively. In contrast, the modern man of wealth is in hiding – he hides himself along with his wealth, which is largely immaterial anyway, and therefore impoverishes wealth itself, voiding it of the “the brilliance of the sun” (considering Packer’s idea of leaving behind a burned plane monument, “held in perpetual trust [...] for respectful contemplation of preapproved groups and enlightened individuals under exempt-status section 501 (c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code”<sup>219</sup> – which would define the viewings as a potentially religious, tax-exempt activity organised without profit, and thus as an expenditure – we might perhaps say that “the old biochemistry of the ego” that spurred the funereal vision was, in fact, the *ancient* biochemistry of those sovereigns who understood glory, and who left us with the monuments that contradict, essentially, the seemingly empty bank towers that void the present so as to make space for the future). The sovereign ways of true luxury are today replaced by what usually amounts to vapid fancy, which is all the same justified within a transcendent framework that permits it because it can ultimately find a way to bind it to some productive purpose. In the end, given Packer’s refusal to try and “reestablish himself,”<sup>220</sup> as Shifrin put it when she offered him her money, we might say that his line

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<sup>219</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 209.

<sup>220</sup> Ibidem, p. 122.

of flight takes him outside of the limitations that cripple modern wealth:

A genuine luxury requires the complete contempt for riches, the somber indifference of the individual who refuses to work and makes his life on the one hand an infinitely ruined splendor, and on the other, a silent insult to the laborious lie of the rich. [...] One might say, finally, that the lie [which occludes “the truth of wealth”] destines life’s exuberance to revolt.<sup>221</sup>

The above should be considered in light of the following: “Sovereignty is revolt, it is not the exercise of power. Authentic sovereignty refuses...”<sup>222</sup> The moment Packer began dismantling the “security apparatus,” giving up the power that it gave him and making of his life “an infinitely ruined splendor” (which chance accords), he was on his way to this sovereign refusal. “Completed ‘being,’ from rupture to rupture, after a growing nausea had delivered it to the void of the sky, has become no longer ‘being,’ but wound, and even ‘agony’ of all that it is”<sup>223</sup> – “the pain of his life, all of it, emotional and other [...]” Of course, one could hardly be surprised by Voelz’s claim that “[...] *Cosmopolis* suggests that the ‘business of living’ in the face of death has a tendency to move just a little closer to the edge and become a suicidal death wish” – after all, Packer does indeed act as if he wants the situation to be as dangerous as possible.

But understand this, [...] that the two principles, Eros and death, [...] are not two instances each endowed with a distinct functional principle allowing their identification from their respective effects or symptoms in the ‘psyche’ or on the body. It is not the case that Eros is the producer of wholes, systems, compositor or master-binder, and that the death drives on the other hand are the destroyers of systems, the deconstructors, the unbinders.<sup>224</sup>

Indeed, it is eroticism, the domain of Eros, that most enticingly offers to unbind, and it is, in opposition, the domain of systematic thought that is capable of achieving,

<sup>221</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol. I, p. 76-77.

<sup>222</sup> Georges Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 96.

<sup>223</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 80.

<sup>224</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p. 52.



simultaneously, vampirism and detumescence. At this point, this much is obvious: Eros and death are fundamentally entwined, and, broadly speaking, both are much too lively to be expressed in the production of “wholes, systems,” which are the stuff “unbeingdead” is made of.

This, too, is obvious: risking death is, in truth, the purest expression of life. Not, of course, when it results from a depressive condition. However, as long as it is engaged in a “self-contradiction,” it grants entry into the state of grace that enlivens life itself, and unshackles it: “Every man is still, potentially, a sovereign being, but on the condition of loving death more than slavery. [...] And if the caprice of princes, once, disposed of everything in the world, this was insofar as they gambled even with their lives.”<sup>225</sup>

Indeed, the Packer who – having *played* with chance for the highest of stakes, having abandoned the domain of “modern, rational” chance, that is, chance “subjected to the *laws* of probability (and not to the rules of a game) [...], the epitome of a fluctuating universe dominated by statistical abstractions”<sup>226</sup> – finally finds himself swayed by the “marvelous magic of death” is much more like the princes of yore than the Packer who was driven around in an armoured limousine, guarded at all times, medically examined every day. As he asks himself, face to face with death, about “[w]hat did he want that was not posthumous,” he is, in a sense, “dying to die,” but this is a “death wish” only insofar as “loving death more than slavery” is one (how clear is from this point the difference between the journey to the extreme limit of the possible and the peregrination across a thousand plateaus: in the former, one is given over to chance, whereas in the latter, one is bidden to take caution; this explains, perhaps, why Packer’s line of

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<sup>225</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Sovereign,” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 188.

<sup>226</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1990), p. 143.

gambling was bound to be a line of death: there was too much caution before, too many precautions were taken to ensure the safety of his transcendence for Packer to be able not to cast *all* of them away).

We must, therefore, disagree with Shonkwiler, who presents the collision course on which Packer sets himself unknowingly – but on which he continues wilfully – as consistent with the path he had been following before, namely, the path of hi-tech transcendence. In a reading that, on the one hand, runs counter to Packer’s self-description as a “saturated self,”<sup>227</sup> and on the other, goes along with Kinsky’s accelerationist theory, Shonkwiler ascribes to Packer a “desire for self-dissolution” – which is given a formal expression in the fact that, according to her, it is Packer who narrates his sections of the book in the third-person – and states that “Packer represents less the threat of extreme self-interest [...] than the aspiration to *deformalize* the self, a yearning for ‘fatedness’ through the power of the network.”<sup>228</sup> To reiterate: in Shonkwiler’s view, there is no distinction between “Packer’s desire for *systematicity*”<sup>229</sup> – which means, for us, his line of transcendence – and his desire for “the credible threat” to materialise itself – which we understand as a yearning for a violence that would communicate rather than subjugate – both express the same “desire for self-dissolution,” whereas, in our view, they cannot be conflated, just as there can be no question of conflating “immanent violence” and “transcendent violence”:

Occupying a position of power within a system licenses the subject to use violence. The feeling of transcendence experienced as the possessor of that power is in fact illusory, for the truth is that one is temporarily possessed by that power. Because one is only the surrogate subject, the transient host of power, the truth of the appearance of subjective

<sup>227</sup> This self-description serves as the basis for Varsava’s definition of the position occupied by Packer as the “self sphere,” which he sees as separate from both the public and private spheres. See: Varsava, “The ‘Saturated Self,’” p. 84.

<sup>228</sup> Shonkwiler, “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime,” pp. 261-262.

<sup>229</sup> Ibidem, p. 262.

potency is nothing but impotence. Immanent violence targets this illusory sense of transcendence.<sup>230</sup>

We would say, therefore, that the “immanent violence,” the intimacy to the threat of which Packer exposes himself, eventually overthrows Packer-as-”the-transient-host-of-power,” laying bare the wound, the doubt, the hitherto unacknowledged and “secret doubts” that undermined his pretence at completeness. Put another way, Packer turns out to be ultimately incompatible with “the domination of anonymous powers and experiences” that characterises “the technological era,”<sup>231</sup> or with the autonomous systems the advent of which he used to await.

Of course, systems are indubitably growing more and more autonomous, but *Cosmopolis* shows that the order they administer is, in truth, abstracted (stolen) from the organic, from “the heave of the biosphere” the true existence of which is, in the end, revealed to be as “untranslatable” or “untransferable” as any other molecule of Packer’s intimacy. The moment the system is imagined as independent from the biosphere in its transcendence, it betrays the biosphere, just like mind betrays body and just like language betrays matter,<sup>232</sup> given the same circumstances. Or rather: biosphere, body, and matter betray themselves through system, mind, language: through what is different from them and yet – though it refuses to admit it, thus instituting betrayal – is them once again.

What, then, of the self? And what of the “desire for self-dissolution”? Granted, the hypothetical advent of the “thought-generated world” of uploaded minds would be

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<sup>230</sup> Zeynep Direk, “Bataille on Immanent and Transcendent Violence,” p. 37. See also the distinction between sacred and useful violence in: Allan Stoekl, “Betrayal in the Later Bataille,” in: *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 89-103.

<sup>231</sup> Ibidem, p. 31.

<sup>232</sup> See also: Stoekl, “Betrayal in the Later Bataille,” pp. 90-92.

tantamount to the disappearance – within that “world,” at least – of a certain form of self, a form unsustainable within a reality delimited by the norms of that “world.”

But the self is itself systemic – indeed, the transcendent subject constitutes an organism’s participation in the system, its conceptual or semiotic organ, a protrusion by which it attaches itself to the system. Correction: following the lessons of films such as *eXistenZ*<sup>233</sup> or *The Matrix*,<sup>234</sup> both of which portray systems being plugged into subjects instead of the other way around, one should say that the self is not the protrusion, but rather the very orifice penetrated by – to use a Derridean term – the phallogos, or however else one would prefer to make the linguistic subsystem refer to the system’s means of replication. Since these means are viral, however, we should perhaps choose to speak of porosities infiltrated by the language virus, pierced by coordinate lines, sewn into the grid; of the Logos retroactively mythologising itself into antecedence, thus designating itself as the site of betrayal, which it projects, however, back onto matter as the original sin.

Transcendence becomes a quest for repentance, an attempt to live up to the expectations assigned to transcendent arrangements: “Whatever fever carries it, the love of God announces: (1) an aspiration to the state of an object (to transcendence, to definitive immutability); (2) the idea of the superiority of such a state.”<sup>235</sup> Is what we see in *Cosmopolis* – a “desire to see and refer to oneself as an object rather than a subject, as an image on a screen instead of an actively shaping point of view [...]”<sup>236</sup> – not a variation on the same theme? If God (the otherworldly exile of sovereignty) is the subject

<sup>233</sup> *eXistenZ*, dir. David Cronenberg (Canadian Television Fund et al., 1999).

<sup>234</sup> *The Matrix*, dir. the Wachowskis (Warner Bros. et al., 1999).

<sup>235</sup> Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” p. 87.

<sup>236</sup> Shonkwiler, “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime,” p. 261.

that predicates a system of transcendent arrangements (a government of selves) – in other words, if God is, as Bataille would have it, the projection of the self onto the universe – then the emergence of a godless, and yet transcendent, objectifying system is bound to lead the self into becoming something other than it was when it had it in itself to be capable of God. Indeed, “[t]he promise of the third-person point of view [...] is now located in the objectifying image: the advertisement, the eye of the camera, the screen of cyberspace.”<sup>237</sup>

But is this a question of self-dissolution? It does not seem so. As we have seen in both asceticism and masochism, the right circumstances can throw the (self-)objectified subject into ecstasy, which negates the subject but overturns the status of an object at the same time. However, both the ascetic and the masochist seek this ecstasy, and know that it requires the subject to act *against* itself. What happens if the objectification of the subject is framed, transcendently arranged as something happening *for* the subject, for its benefit? Assuming that social media can be taken as an indication of where we stand in relation, firstly, to the death of God that renders the objectifying system profane, and secondly, to the prospects of an incorporeal future, the answer is self-commodification (interlocked with the ever-advancing eradication of ends in themselves, combined, in turn, with the financial system’s usurpation of the sole right to be such an end); the commodification of leisure in the form of self-presentation: an image that the subject maintains in a third-person view, and injects into the order of things and their productive manipulation, thus multiplying the layers of a human being’s engagement in work.

It is, all in all, most probable that the coming of the “thought-generated world” – brought about by a system of disembodiment, which is to say, conceived as the “master

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<sup>237</sup> Ibidem, p. 261.

thrust of cyber-capital” – would not dissolve the subject (which has always been a reflection of the system appearing in a given body), but would rather make it softer and more pliable, more thing-like than it has already been made by the feedback-looped, online environments that “extend the human experience toward infinity,” which is, however, the kind of infinity one finds in a house of mirrors, and which serves as a site of production, not of expenditure. The latter is possible, of course, but only in a narrow view, or at the level of individuals, whose very presence on a given website is nonetheless turned, within the underlying machinery of the internet, into a multilayered source of profit. We must imagine, then, the “thought-generated world” in terms of Klossowski’s “breaths,” which would in this case constitute entities not of spirit, but of data, running as code in a virtual reality determined by financial rather than spiritual incentives: the *self*-regulation of the market through its objectified subjects.

Moreover, worthy of a reminder is the fact that, because of their incorporeal character, the “breaths” became more malleable than ever, exceeding even flesh in their mutability. This reversal of usual preconceptions is, in a cruel twist, an anticipation of what capital recognises, in its “master thrust,” in regard to the mind: though the body can be exploited even in its sickness, it can only be exploited to death, whereas the delirium of the mind represents the potential of exploitation without end: the mind appears – when viewed from within the financial sublime that ignores its own material requirements – to be an object which awaits a technology that could, firstly, extract it from the body and *up*-load it, and secondly, insert it into the seemingly immaterial infinity of “corporate growth and investment,” of “the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment.”

Therefore, while there is without doubt a bilateral attempt by the self and the

objectifying system to reshape the former in accordance with the expectations of the latter, this attempt is not a line of self-dissolution, but a distortion of the heavenward dream, another “idea” of “a consciousness saved from void” – preserved, prolonged. The moment self-dissolution actually enters the picture painted in *Cosmopolis*, this dream begins to crack under the pressure of chance events, freeing Packer from the illusion of completeness and bringing him under the sway of the “marvelous magic of death.” “This is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space [...]” – he is alive, but the screen – and, by extension, the entire edifice of technological transcendence – is, has been, and will be undead. Truth be told, we are all dead “inside the crystal” of the watch – dead “inside the crystal” of the future, but very much alive in the instant, in the catastrophe of *time*, which is opposed to the arrangements governing the future, or by which the future governs itself.

How curious, moreover, the change in phrasing: what used to be the “meat space”<sup>238</sup> – an expression reminiscent of William Gibson’s cowboys of cyberspace and their contempt for organic bodies,<sup>239</sup> a contempt mirrored by Packer when he imagines the body to be “redundant” – is now dignified as “the original space,” the truly antecedent space in relation to which he is, in the end, through “the pain of his life,” immanent.

Let us conclude this chapter. Packer’s fall into immanence is – like in the case of the poet in “Terror” – not a project, which is to say that it begins by chance, but Packer – unlike the poet – goes with the flow, appreciates “the indecipherability of a thing seen new,” accepts the invitation to wager everything he has known in a game of chance, in

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<sup>238</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 64.

<sup>239</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 12, 71, 99.

an exercise in solar asceticism; this puts him in the state of grace – animating his sovereign rejection of the regime of security under which he had been placed before. The tale of Eric Packer traces a paradoxical movement of a pendulous continuum: the zigzagging movement by which immanence punctures the strata of transcendent tissue and wakes one up to the wound of one's existence. By vividly illustrating Bataille's claim that "[...] the summit of elevation is in practice confused with a sudden fall of unheard-of violence,"<sup>240</sup> *Cosmopolis* tells a story of conversion, of a conversion to a Bataillean cosmology which sabotages any and all homogeneities, which holds existence to the strange promise that there has to be something *more* to life than whatever could be produced within even the most outrageous "thought-generated world."

Moreover, having studied the events of the novel in light of this cosmology, we can further increase the resolution at which the intermingling of transcendence and immanence can be perceived. As has been made clear, contagion is not an exclusively immanent phenomenon. It can, in fact, be differentiated into the contagion of transcendent arrangements (of semiotically contracted patterns of thought) and the contagion of immanent states (of *somethings* that, in passing through individuals, put their individuality, their self-containment, into question). Similarly, in spite of the uniquely violent nature of all immanent states, which enter bodies by force, transcendence has its own brand of violence – one deployed in the service of hierarchy – at its disposal. In other words, a new perspective on the opposition of parasitic and mutualist myths emerges: the former can now be seen in terms of a transcendent contagion, whereas the latter perpetuate the immanent frenzy that lies at their core. It would seem that whenever one looks closely at a phenomenon, at an arrangement, one

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<sup>240</sup> Bataille, "Rotten Sun," p. 58.



discovers cracks in what had hitherto appeared to be a uniform surface – everything turns out to be marked by the dynamics of transcendence and immanence. “Everything enters something else. My small days spill into light-years.” The following chapter will be an attempt to descend into those cracks – to penetrate the image, to enter the craquelure and walk the corridors of the labyrinth of being that the fractured paint represents by corrupting the surface of the image.

Indeed, as *Cosmopolis* shows, something is rotten in the labyrinth of being. We have discussed the process by which the present becomes outweighed by the projects of the future. Thus, what has been witnessed in “the glow of cyber-capital” is that a project does not have to be a god-given mission to subdue *everything all the time* to production, to the production of the future itself. Therefore, those willing to venture into the depths of the labyrinth would do well to keep in mind that “[t]he future becomes insistent,” that it imposes itself onto the labyrinth, endeavouring, therefore, to conquer it.

## CHAPTER 10: THE LABYRINTH

*“Just remove the skin of a toy balloon.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“A fugitive does not hide himself in a maze. [...] He has no need to erect a labyrinth when the whole world already is one.”<sup>2</sup>*

This chapter will be devoted to, firstly, the Bataillean labyrinth (in our reading of which Nick Land will be most helpful), secondly, the interaction between a labyrinthine vision of being and a Bataillean understanding of transcendence, and thirdly, the way in which this interaction accounts for a contemporary sense of eeriness (as defined by Mark Fisher) hinted at in *Cosmopolis*, anticipated in, for example, Witold Gombrowicz’s *Cosmos*, and present in texts such as William Gibson’s cyberpunk classic, *Neuromancer*, or a newer, online piece, *The Gig Economy*, by the pseudonymous Zero HP Lovecraft.

In the story we quote as this chapter’s second epigraph (written by Borges, the Daedalus of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature), the fugitive builds a labyrinth to draw attention to himself and his location: the labyrinth is a trap for the one from whom he has stolen not just wealth, but also identity, which makes of the trap a means of metamorphosis (and a double one at that: since the fugitive had claimed to have killed his actual self while impersonating his victim, who is eventually killed in the maze *as himself*, the fugitive ends up as neither of the two). Thus, the labyrinth is to the fugitive simultaneously what a web is to a spider and what a cocoon is to a butterfly.

<sup>1</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle* (London: Penguin Essentials, 2011), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth,” in: *The Aleph and Other Stories*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (Toronto, New York and London: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 81.

In contrast, then, to the usual understanding of the labyrinth and its myth (wherein the monster is imprisoned from without), the roles are reversed: it is the monster – and not the architect – that is the agent: “The Minotaur amply justifies its maze,” just as the spider is reason enough for its web.<sup>3</sup> The labyrinth results from the monster – the human animal comes from the animal, and the latter is overcome by the former within the darkness of the labyrinth,<sup>4</sup> the construct by which the mind betrays the body (subdues a sinfully chimeric, bestially sexual body, a body grasped in suspense between carnivory and cannibalism; the construct subdues a *monster*). Transcendence unilaterally deviates from animal immanence, which it encysts, thus producing the labyrinthine, linguistic membrane of the self that, on the one hand, encloses intimacy – through which communication moves us, and which is, in a sense, void – and on the other hand, surrounds itself with transcendent arrangements – which are, just like the servile self itself, fleeting flames interspersed throughout the nocturnal abyss (there are traditions, habits that span generations, lives “that still shine because their light is trapped in time. Where do I stand in this light, which does not strictly exist?”).

The immanent cyst is, for the subject, an often unacknowledged not-I, a wound through which – as if through a wormhole – the void within and the void without are revealed to be the “same,” the “same” corruption that erodes appearances, the “same” night in which there are “fragments that shift and change.” It both *is* a point – a point of passage – and it is *not* a point, but rather a sensation of size distortion, of a swelling that, in an irrational (unmeasurable) twist of perception, becomes an infinitesimal point, which swells again, but only to become a point bound to swell... *ad nauseam*.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Paolo Santarcangeli, *Księga labiryntu*, trans. Ignacy Bukowski (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1982), pp. 8-20, 228.

Outer appearances, in turn – the acknowledged not-I – come into being as a result of “the ‘ontological’ scission” that generates subjects and objects; it is a question of arresting the flow of matter, of objectifying it, which is to say, it is a matter of pinpointing a malleable thing, differentiating it from what then becomes the background. Once an arrest of the object takes place – once a thing is used as a thing, in the sense of a tool – the subject is likewise solidified, and as it becomes engaged with more and more objects, and as these objects coalesce into transcendent arrangements, the labyrinth – or what Bataille calls “the labyrinthine constitution of being” – takes form. In order to discern this “constitution,” “[i]t suffices for a short time to follow the trace, the repeated course of words” that are – as language, the sum total of subject-object relationships – the intermediary, in the human being, between the human and being.<sup>5</sup>

In “The Solar Anus,” Bataille writes:

Ever since sentences started to *circulate* in brains devoted to reflection, an effort at total identification has been made, because with the aid of a *copula* each sentence ties one thing to another; all things would be visibly connected if one could discover at a single glance and in its totality the tracings of an Ariadne’s thread leading thought into its own labyrinth.<sup>6</sup>

This passage, vivid though it may be, suggests a homogeneity of a thought-through being. In *Inner Experience*, however, Bataille concedes: “I can, if need be, admit that developing from an extreme complexity, being imposes upon reflexion *more* than an elusive appearance – but complexity, gradually increasing, is for this *more* a labyrinth in which it wanders endlessly, then is lost once and for all.”<sup>7</sup> “Language, thus,” infers Denis Hollier, “constitutes the labyrinth in which *ipséité* comes on the scene only to get

<sup>5</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 83-84.

<sup>6</sup> Bataille, “The Solar Anus,” in: *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 83.

lost, by presenting itself specifically as a *relationship*, through words, with other human existences.”<sup>8</sup>

Before we continue and discuss “this *more*,” *ipse*, let us elaborate on the complexity in which it rises and falls. In Bataille’s account of the labyrinth, “[...] two principles – constitution transcending the constituent parts, relative autonomy of the constituent parts – order the existence of each ‘being.’”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, being is “*uncertain*” in the world – in fact, “[b]eing is *nowhere*,”<sup>10</sup> nowhere in particular, nowhere to be found. In other words, there is no constitution of which we could say – with *certainty* – that it transcends each and every constituent part in the universe: “[...] if I envisage the universe, it is [...] constituted by a great number of *galaxies* [...]. The galaxies constitute clouds of stars, but does the universe constitute the galaxies? [...] The question which surpasses understanding leaves a comical bitterness. It affects the universe, its totality...”<sup>11</sup> This leads Land to state that “[t]he labyrinth is precisely the *positive impossibility of privileged scales*,”<sup>12</sup> of a *universal* measure that would yield a *universal* truth.

Compositions are given the appearance of “solidity” because they are customarily perceived in a “blur,” out of focus.<sup>13</sup> Consider the common appreciation of the picturesque, of the view: conventional beauty is a thing of distance and, of course, elevation. A forest is considered beautiful when taken in as an ambience or as a constitution such as the canopy. A tree is seen as beautiful if it is viewed from the trunk

<sup>8</sup> Denis Hollier, “The Labyrinth, the Pyramid, and the Labyrinth,” in: *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 161.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 164.

to the crown, as a soaring shape. It suffices, however, to zoom onto the insects traversing the nooks and crannies, to peer into the twisted, vegetal growths, or the masses of mycelia-ridden earth, to become removed from an appearance of beauty that depends on a claim that a given composition is homogeneous; that depends, in other words, on maintaining the blur, the hypostatic distance that puts the insects, the mutations, the fungi – veritable cataracts of infestation – out of focus.<sup>14</sup> As the actual heterogeneity of life forms eats away at the placid notion of a view (which, in the end, promises a sterilised world, its vibrancy muffled out, its biosphere *washed*), so the void “encroaches”<sup>15</sup> upon the apparent solidity of being, which – when brought into focus – is revealed to be permeated by the “void.” When a (macro)structure comes into focus, what is made clear is the brittleness of its microstructure, or the fact that – as in clusters of bubbles and balloons, so in any composition – the constituent parts (the “skins”) fail to outweigh the void within. “In appearance [...] void and solidity exclude each other, but in reality [...], solidity is contaminated by void. Death is definitive, but life is indefinitely corroded by death.”<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, the operative equivalents of zooming out – of blurring the overwhelming blemishes of corruption in an escalating movement of “scalar progression”<sup>17</sup> (below, one zooms in on unsubsumable loops of compositions as components in compositions as components... *ad nauseam*) – retain an accumulative or compositional character. Regardless, “[...] there is no transcendental space [...] that is ultimate – whether ‘highest’ or most ‘basic’ – no final grid, topology, or terrain, no

<sup>14</sup> The same tendency towards the blur can be identified in the cosmetic and fashion industries’ crusade against skin pores in particular, and against the grotesque body in general, a crusade that is, of course, merely one of the many modern iterations of the mind’s betrayal of the body.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 164.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, pp. 164-165.

absolute geometry or legislative stratum. There are only scales in which everything happens; a labyrinth which can never be ‘placed in perspective.’”<sup>18</sup> If being was *somewhere* rather than “*nowhere*,” the labyrinth might be “placed in perspective,” a perspective which would then be “privileged.” Instead,

[...] the labyrinth is drunken space. [...] The axes of orientation [...] are astray. [...] “What did we do [asks Nietzsche’s madman] when we detached this world from its sun? Where is it going now? Where are we going? Far from all the suns? Are we not just endlessly falling? Backward, sideways, forward, in every direction? Is there still an up and a down? Are we not being borne aimlessly into an endless void?” Here, vomiting.<sup>19</sup>

It is, then, in the labyrinth that we encounter once more the interwoven visions of Heraclitus, Nietzsche, and Bataille, in whose assessment (as we have already said in the context of obelisks) all of these visions share their object, namely, time – the experience of being thrust into – and then through – an outrageously improbable existence: the experience of time that is akin to having the rug pulled out from under one’s feet; the experience of the death of God in whom being was supposed to be grounded. It is in this sense that Bataille had claimed, in “The Obelisk,” that “[...] it is necessary to tie the sundering vision of the ‘return’ to what Nietzsche experienced when he reflected upon the explosive vision of Heraclitus, and to what he experienced later in his own vision of the ‘death of God.’”<sup>20</sup> Here, the “return” is simply a negation of there being a resolution to the universe: a refutation of an end that being would have, and which would be different from being, thus making of being a means to this end (solar asceticism is only as fortunate as it is fortuitous, it *is* insofar as it resists the ascetic ideal, making of one – of a foreclosing – an opening).

Curiously, Bataille’s treatment of the Eternal Return in *On Nietzsche* is somewhat

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 167.

<sup>19</sup> Hollier, “The Labyrinth, the Pyramid, and the Labyrinth,” p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> Bataille, “The Obelisk,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 215.

dismissive: whether it might have any impact on anyone other than Nietzsche himself is, according to Bataille, contingent upon a reversal of its implication: since the Eternal Return is, by itself, “empty” as a motive of “excitement or action,”<sup>21</sup> its importance lies not in “a promise of infinite and lacerating repetitions,” but rather in that it “*unmotivates* the moment and frees life of ends [...],” and in so doing, goes against every “moral system” which “proclaims that ‘each moment of life ought to be *motivated*,’”<sup>22</sup> which is to say: each moment should be a means to a future end. Even then, for the Eternal Return to lacerate one at all, one has to have already been rent – been made to harbour a susceptibility “to the abyss, to nothingness.”<sup>23</sup> The Eternal Return “can merely amplify such feelings if they are already evident,” writes Allen S. Weiss, “but it cannot produce them; thus the Eternal Return is derivative of pregiven conditions.”<sup>24</sup>

Hence, it is possible to say that Land discovered a kind of hidden, latent influence of the Return on the labyrinth by relating the latter to fractal mathematics, that is, by rethinking the labyrinth in terms of a fractal: whereas for Hollier “the labyrinth is drunken space,” for Land the labyrinth is “sponge-space” (as in the Menger sponge, the mathematical model of a cube subdivided continuously into ever smaller cubes), which means that it is “the positive impossibility of resolvable boundaries, and thus of discrete entities, decidable actions, unproblematic vectors, logical identities, and adequate representations. There are no representations of any kind, but only floating plates or scales, immanently distanced from each other by an indeterminably convoluted surface.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, “[...] the recurrence of irreducible detail” spans infinite scales,

<sup>21</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1992), p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. xxxiii.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 140.

<sup>24</sup> Allen S. Weiss, “Impossible Sovereignty: Between ‘The Will to Power’ and ‘The Will to Chance,’” *October*, Vol. 36 (1986), p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 166.



and “irreducible diversity” recurs infinitely “in the transitions between scales.”<sup>26</sup> What recurs – what *returns* – is a composition becoming a component in a composition becoming a component in a composition becoming a component...

Whichever way one goes, there is neither completeness nor fundamentality: whatever has – at a given moment, due to the limits of perception or thought – the appearance of finitude, can only retain it for as long as the limits placed upon it by perception or thought resist erosion; erosion is, in truth, proper to both perception and thought, but held off through myth (the more usurpatory the myth, the narrower the limits it institutes).

Thus, a simple, yet crucial opposition: myth imagines the labyrinth with an exit, but (and this is perhaps the most differentiating characteristic of how Bataille re-imagines the labyrinth) the labyrinth of being cannot be left, for it is the complexity of matter itself, the very same complexity which accounts for matter becoming folded – or complicated – into signs, which are different from insignificance and insignificance once again. It is worth noting, in our current context, that this “once again” of recurrence – by the use of which Land represents that transcendence is merely a complication of immanence – is taken from Nietzsche, whose “text binds” this phrase “inextricably to the rumour of eternal recurrence”<sup>27</sup>.

Hence, the betrayal of matter by language: even though no word or sentence can encompass all being, knowledge – the pursuit of dominion over the labyrinth – along with its ideal, omniscience, are given precedence over immanent being, which becomes subdued in the projects of knowledge, just as the Minotaur becomes subdued by

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 161.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 143.

Theseus, who, in fact, does not leave the labyrinth – as Borges tells us, “the whole world already is one.” This is as evident when Theseus abandons Ariadne in this labyrinth of the world as it is in another of Borges’ texts, namely, “The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths,”<sup>28</sup> a story in which a Babylonian king humiliates an Arabian monarch by making him go through an architectural labyrinth, and is then humiliated in turn when the Arabian monarch conquers his realm and leaves him stranded in the middle of the desert, which is, in contrast to the Babylonian’s “labyrinth of brass cluttered with many stairways, doors, and walls,”<sup>29</sup> a labyrinth vast enough to be truly inescapable.

The fate of Ariadne – trapped on the sea, left behind by sailors<sup>30</sup> – and the fate of the Babylonian king – trapped in the desert, left behind by a desert people – are also similar in that they point towards divinities immanent to the labyrinth of the world. Having built his own labyrinth, the Babylonian king was guilty of “blasphemy, for confusion and marvels belong to God alone and not to man,”<sup>31</sup> and was therefore punished by being thrown into the properly divine confusion of the desert, that spiritual battlefield which is, on the one hand, of a strikingly monotheistic nature, and on the other, not only full of the demonic spirits of air that have plagued many an eremite, but also not unlike the sea in its sprawling instability; Ariadne, on the other hand, was saved by Dionysus – himself no stranger to an often lethal confusion – which means that her earthly life culminated in “a theophany, a visitation of the god of duality, of life and death,”<sup>32</sup> who linked Ariadne to the vertigo of the night sky.

Thus, one could say that the women of Bataille’s stories, the priestesses of excess,

<sup>28</sup> Borges, “The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths,” in: *The Aleph and Other Stories*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> See also: Leon Burnett, “Ariadne, Theseus, and the Circumambulation of the Self,” *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2017), p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Borges, “The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths,” p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Burnett, “Ariadne, Theseus, and the Circumambulation of the Self,” p. 50.

follow in the footsteps of Ariadne, who both solved the riddle of the transcendent labyrinth and was found, in the immanent labyrinth of the world, by Dionysus himself (at the same time, the notion of women being innately adept at the mystic excesses to which Bataille's men only aspire is curiously in line with, for example, Paul Evdokimov's analysis of female archetypes, to which he attributed an immanent religiosity, an intrinsic affinity for matters of divinity<sup>33</sup>; if we consider this while also taking into account Bataille's labyrinthine vision of being – which has always been, after all, a profoundly religious perspective<sup>34</sup> – it becomes clear that Bataille's atheology is true to its name insofar as it *is* a theology, a post-Christian theology of the absence of God, of an inescapable labyrinth, and of excess rather than reserve or chastity).

Transcendent labyrinths – labyrinthine *designs* – are inherently solvable, but the reason for this is, of course, that these designs (varieties of which can be found all over the world and across the ages<sup>35</sup>) are merely man-made approximations of a mythic, primal experience the confusing character of which is lost when an architect is credited for the labyrinth's construction (thus effacing the fact that the labyrinth has always already recurred); in place of what is gone, the pursuit of knowledge appears, and

[k]nowledge always takes the form of something to end all error and errantry. Bataille, on the contrary, denounces ("Icarian") solutions. Above all, he denounces the wish that it lead somewhere [...], because the only result of this wish is that, far from being a real exit from the labyrinth, it transforms labyrinth into prison. To will the future (and not to desire it), to submit it to planning and projects, to wish to construct it, is to lock oneself into a devalORIZED present that is airless and unlivable.<sup>36</sup>

(It is now possible for us to describe Packer's renouncement of transcendental

<sup>33</sup> See: Paul Evdokimov, *Kobieta i zbawienie świata*, trans. Elżbieta Wolicka (Poznań: Wydawnictwo W Drodze, 1991), pp. 166-179, 228-243.

<sup>34</sup> Santarcangeli, *Księga labiryntu*, p. 258.

<sup>35</sup> See: *ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> Hollier, "The Labyrinth, the Pyramid, and the Labyrinth," pp. 60-61.

elevation as his revolt against the need “to will the future.”) Since the labyrinth is both matter *and* the myriads of its transcendent arrangements (labyrinthine subsystems contained within metasystems which are simultaneously subsystems in other metasystems; to suppose a self-sufficient *system* is to vivisect a preselected section of something not necessarily larger, but definitely faster – it is to cut off a stem and proclaim it dead even as it sprouts new leaves), it cannot be escaped – whether one tries to reach the beyond of transcendence or the beyond of immanence, one nevertheless remains in the labyrinth, because the former is immanence whereas the latter is transcendence, and the movement is always a zigzag of a pendulous continuum; the alternating flow of one over into the other.

Nonetheless, we agree with Hollier’s claim that Bataille’s materialism is peculiar in that it is, in fact, a “*dualist materialism*” – a materialism that incorporates “an attitude of thought” which leads not to a “dualist system” of opposites set up as the poles of a world, but rather to “a will to dualism, a resistance to system and homogeneity.”<sup>37</sup> “Dualism,” writes Hollier, “starts precisely [...] with the fact that there is no point [...] where the sacred and the profane cease being perceived as contradicting one another, even if at times they have to coexist and seem to be superimposed on one another” – even then, what “defines the sacred” is that “the sacred confuses that which the profane opposes or distinguishes.”<sup>38</sup> And since the profane includes the preoccupation of the self with preservation, it follows that, for Bataille, the concern for *eternal* self-preservation – “the escape from time”<sup>39</sup> – constitutes, along with the theogenic projection of the self

<sup>37</sup> Hollier, “The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille,” in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 86.

onto the unknown, the very pinnacle of profanity (the impulse to understand *in terms of what one knows*, even when faced with something that invites nothing but misunderstandings; hence, the proximity of poetry – in which words become distant from knowledge – to the sacred).

All in all, what prefigures escape itself into a prison is the notion that what ought to be escaped is death, which, as Biles points out, is also part of the labyrinth insofar as time is how death is promised to us.<sup>40</sup> In other words, death is not a way out of the labyrinth. The “*more*,” *ipse*, is an emergent property of complex being – a consciousness that the labyrinth of being has of itself – and even death amounts to “this *more*” getting “lost once and for all,” never having found the non-existent exit. Thus (to reiterate), to orient human life around the pursuit of what lies beyond labyrinthine being is to think oneself into a state of either enslavement or – depending on who one asks – emancipation.

From the two afore-mentioned principles – “constitution transcending the constituent parts, relative autonomy of the constituent parts” – a third principle emerges: the movement: *ipse* is driven to become a constitution of *all* the constituent parts; a quest which it cannot but ultimately fail. Propelled as it is by this desire for an absolute autonomy, possible exclusively through *being all that is*, *ipse* struggles to find itself at the summit of the complex organisation of being, at the top of the pyramid whose shape is that of the “optical cone,” which implies, therefore, a bird’s eye – Icarian – view of the labyrinth,<sup>41</sup> or the objective and thus transcendent point of view of the great observer, the camera-headed god.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, pp. 86-87.

<sup>41</sup> Hollier, “The Labyrinth, the Pyramid, and the Labyrinth,” pp. 72-73.

As we will see, the position at the top of the pyramid subjects its occupant to a sort of reversal: whatever is assumed to find itself at the summit of complexity becomes inextricable from the pyramid's foundation: though there is a pyramid which one ascends, it is as if the God-Emperor occupying the summit had in fact created the pyramid from top to bottom; it is as if the God-Emperor was both the product and the source of – or the condition for – the pyramid's existence. In short, the God-Emperor is possessed of necessity, and this is what *ipse* – a random particle, “purely improbable chance” – strives for: to be “all and necessary.”<sup>42</sup> Alas, its challenge is doomed to falter in the immensity of the universe; it is, moreover, locked in a double elusion: the incomprehensibility of being eludes that which seeks to elude its own improbability by pursuing dominion over being, the incomprehensibility of which eludes it...<sup>43</sup>

(In Bataille, Icarus is not a warning, but the very model for a principle of being: the principle of complexification, which – as it gives birth to ever more improbable compositions – reaches, with human hands, for the impossible.<sup>44</sup>)

The movement of particles – be they, at a simple level, physical, or, at a complex level, social – carves corridors into matter; thus, the labyrinth of paths. A society is bound by knowledge, wrapped together in a tissue of understanding. Therefore, paths that lead *through* a society – paths of mastery – should eventually lead *to* the summit; alas:

Errors, uncertainty, the feeling that power is useless, the faculty which we maintain for imagining some supreme height above the first summit, together contribute to the confusion essential to the labyrinth. In truth, we cannot say of the summit that it is situated here or there. (In a certain sense it is never reached). An unknown man, whom the desire – or the necessity – to reach the summit drove mad, approaches it more closely, in solitude, than the

<sup>42</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 85.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, pp. 85-86.

<sup>44</sup> See also: Fredrik Rönnbäck, “The Other Sun: Non-Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Georges Bataille,” *October*, Vol. 154 (2015), pp. 116, 121-122.

highly placed figures of his time.<sup>45</sup>

The summit itself is, then, almost like a compulsion, a pulsating-towards-complexity; or a sense of a quest that does not necessarily lead one to obtain instruments of power – what Bataille seems to be referring to is a Nietzschean figure who commands, in spite of the disbelief of those that surround him, a supreme understanding of human condition. The summit could be approached in a vision, an ecstasy, by a miracle – or by chance.

Nevertheless, a “natural gravitation”<sup>46</sup> makes complexification – by which we arrive, at first, at more and more advanced organisms, and then, at various assemblies of these advanced organisms – to proceed centripetally, which is to say that societies gather around central nuclei. Around this centre, the constitution of which receives its axis from some form of sovereignty (the human king, the insect queen...), an empire may take form, the form prescribed to it by the centre which seeks to define universality, and which bases its autonomy on, firstly, creating an asymmetry of power between itself and other compositions, and secondly, maintaining this asymmetry so as to ensure that what has been rendered peripheral remains insignificant. This is clearly the movement of *ipse* achieving greater and greater autonomy.

To succeed in becoming a solitary power, however, is tantamount to becoming, in the end, the background for novelty: the more universality a given entity accumulates, the less *ipseity* it retains, and as stagnation ossifies the will that had once founded an empire, room appears for another *ipse* to begin its ascent; the cycle continues *ad nauseam*. “In their history, men are thus engaged in the strange battle of *ipse*, which

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<sup>45</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 86.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

must become everything and can only become it by dying”<sup>47</sup> – the palimpsest of culture is, like soil, a layering of fertile refuse; whatever attains universality at the summit is, over time, transformed into foundation.

Laughter reverberates across the labyrinth – it is, as we have seen in the fourth chapter, intrinsic to the constitution of human society in that it sets up one of the channels through which attraction and repulsion make their way. In the framework of *ipse*’s struggle for unwavering sufficiency, laughter is what exposes the flaw, the insufficiency which, sooner or later, is revealed to pervade every level of the pyramid of society. Indeed, the pyramid of society is convulsed by laughter’s reverberations: first, laughter rolls down from the summit, manifesting the insufficiency of lower constitutions, each of which maintains this downward ridicule – it cascades down to the very foundation, to the level of literal low-lives. Then, a response: the low-life laughs back, sending an upward ripple that initially seems to reinforce the summit: encroaching upon the middle levels from both top and bottom, laughter lays their insufficiency as bare as teeth. Eventually, however, since the middle levels participate, in one way or another, in upward mockery, the rising ripple reaches the summit itself, thus marking the moment at which the insufficiency of the summit is as naked as the now-laughable emperor. Or, supposing an even higher summit is at play, laughter’s ascent initiates “the agony of God in black night.”<sup>48</sup>

The spasms of laughter that agitate the enormity of the labyrinth’s body ensure, in other words, that the universe cannot be completed, congealed into universality. Ecstasy is immanent in laughter because those who laugh participate in the very movement by

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<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, pp. 87-88.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.



which is communicated the unspeakable, atheological truth of a god-forsaken universe, of a universe that has no grounds for existence (for having come into being), but which exists nonetheless. Of course, *ipse* cannot abandon its struggle for total autonomy, just as the human being can hardly cease its attempts to enclose being. Regardless, the true promise of the summit is a leap into nothingness: when one finds oneself alone at the apparent centre of being, one is inevitably confronted with what one has been trying to defy through composition, that is, the void by which, in fact, one has always been permeated. At the summit, however, it can no longer be either defied or denied. The pretence of absolute knowledge yields to the ecstasy of non-knowledge: *ipse*, having reached for the attributes of necessity and universality, instead becomes – like “the bull in a bullfight”<sup>49</sup> – a nude “monster,” and “throws itself into nothingness in order to tear it apart and to illuminate the night for an instant, with an immense laugh – a laugh it never would have attained if this nothingness had not totally opened beneath its feet,” over its head, and in its nudity.<sup>50</sup>

Biles claims that Bataille’s labyrinth has no centre, but he justifies his claim by equating the labyrinth solely with the experience of time, which indeed does away with all centres.<sup>51</sup> But even though the summit of the pyramid – which is “only a product of the labyrinth itself, and thoroughly belongs to it”<sup>52</sup> – is, “in a certain sense,” “never reached,” in another sense it marks the *central* compositions that elevate themselves at the cost of their peripheries; in yet another sense, it is God’s absence – the heart of the void. In another sense still, it is – as we have seen – the point at which one discovers that

<sup>49</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 92.

<sup>50</sup> Bataille, “The Labyrinth,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 177. This is an earlier version of “The Labyrinth” section in *Inner Experience*.

<sup>51</sup> Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, pp. 86-87. Biles’ discussion of the summit is instead focused on the comparison between the summits of Nietzsche and Bataille, see: pp. 59-63.

<sup>52</sup> Hollier, “The Labyrinth, the Pyramid, and the Labyrinth,” p. 73.

the human who wanders in the labyrinth is, in fact, the monster that inhabits it.

As far as the labyrinth and the monster are concerned, “[...] the desire” Bataille “brings into play is not the desire to return, or to get out, but specifically the Minotaur’s desire, consequently the desire to set free man’s animality, to rediscover the monstrous metamorphoses repressed by the prison of projects.”<sup>53</sup> The human animal cannot simply “return” to being an animal; thus, attempts to shake off humanity cannot reproduce animality, and what appears instead is the monstrosity that awakens whenever reason slumbers inside of a being that is capable of housing it (granted, an *insomnia* of reason offered by transcendence is certain to produce monsters of its own, but these are monsters of a different kind, namely, machines).

Hence, Acephalus (as drawn by André Masson<sup>54</sup>):

Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition against crime, but a being who is unaware of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of innocence and crime; he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.<sup>55</sup>

The labyrinth of the stomach refers, of course, to the intestines. On the one hand, this brings to mind the disorienting caverns of earth’s sacred bowels explored by our cave-painting ancestors, who had indeed depicted themselves in ambiguous shapes, arguably acephalic (effaced...) and monstrous (...with animal masks). This supposed recognition of their own monstrosity is what, according to Bataille, had set the stage for laughter to enter human life, which was from the outset recognised as intrinsically

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<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, pp. 61-62.

<sup>54</sup> Bataille, “The Sacred Conspiracy,” in: *Visions of Excess*, p. 180.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 181.

insufficient, and thus – laughable, fundamentally laughable.<sup>56</sup> Hence, the comedic character of human life,<sup>57</sup> the point (the punchline) of which is, however, missing.

On the other hand, however, the “labyrinth exposed as the bowels of the Acéphale [...] is a static, acentric, one-line labyrinth.”<sup>58</sup> It signifies a transformational system whereby what enters from above is changed into base matter, excrement, the ultimate anti-idealist symbol.”<sup>59</sup> Though the labyrinth of being (the maddening peristalsis of reality) is constituted through the movements by which components enter compositions, it must also feature decomposition – or digestion – of transcendent arrangements. Indeed, “[l]ife evolves into the embrace of *death*, becoming a mere turbulence of disappearance, indifferent to its pullulating inner mass, to its inner ruthlessnesses... [...] No course is more suicidal than that of the living substance that becomes an organ”<sup>60</sup> – such, too, is the “strange battle” of *ipse*, “which must become everything and can only become it by dying.”

In conclusion: firstly, we have laid out before our eyes Bataille’s vision of “the labyrinthine constitution of being,” and modified it in accordance with Land’s fractal reading of the principles that, in Bataille’s assessment, govern the movements of particles. Secondly, we have acknowledged that – since the human overcoming of the Minotaur in the labyrinth mythically represents the human overcoming of immanent animality, which becomes encysted within a transcendent framework – the *human* animal is the monster of the labyrinth. The question we can presently advance is as

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<sup>56</sup> Bataille, “The Passage from Animal to Man and the Birth of Art,” in: *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2009), pp. 57-80.

<sup>57</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> See: Santarcangeli, *Księga labiryntu*, pp. 40-50.

<sup>59</sup> Weiss, “Impossible Sovereignty,” p. 134.

<sup>60</sup> Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 181.

follows: what if we are not the only monster to roam its infinite corridors? What if there is something for which the human is, in its transcendence, what the Minotaur was, in its immanence, to the human?

## CHAPTER 11: THE FUTURE OF TRANSCENDENCE

*“The extinction of a civilized species marks the end of stage one in a planet’s metamorphosis. Humans are designed for obsolescence, a stepping stone towards Gaia’s imago.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“How would it feel to be smuggled back out of the future in order to subvert its antecedent conditions? To be a cyberguerrilla, hidden in human camouflage so advanced that even one’s software was part of the disguise? Exactly like this?”<sup>2</sup>*

The exile of sovereignty into an otherworld dislocates the summit, turning it into an unattainable throne. The subordinated particles of composition-as-creation can only hope to follow sovereignty through death. What is more, common disbelief in the possibility of attaining the summit without the posthumous mercy of a divine being divests the individuals living in a given society of an often considerable portion of their energies, which is then easily manipulated into powering an engineered flow.

Assuming a sufficient refinement of technologies used to harvest the energy flowing across labyrinthine pathways, the otherworldly sovereign can even be forgotten, which either turns the desire for reaching the summit into an accumulative, exclusively profane pursuit, or banishes the image of the summit completely, furthering homogenisation (because it opens unto the void, the summit invites heterogeneity).

In any case, the otherworldly sovereign’s fall into obsolescence is a tale of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ctrlcreep, *Fragneht* (self-published, 2019), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Land, “Circuitries,” in: *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), p. 318.

divine cosmos becoming the universe, which is a tomb for divinity, and which offers no response to supplication – or, in which the “supplication without response” opens one, at the summit of inner experience, onto the limitless unknowable (this is what homogenisation forecloses). It seems, however, that this tomb can be haunted by a phantom of order, of the divine order of things (the world that is explicable through the myth of the absence of myth is haunted by the myths it denies).

What Gombrowicz lays out in his *Cosmos* is that the question – are events meaningful or random? – cannot be answered definitively, and that this produces, in the conditions of divinity’s tomb, an irresolvable tension.

The protagonist of the book – Witold – tries as hard as he can to discover the *secret* order of things, to identify an elusive factor that would make clear the connection between a series of events. In the beginning of the book, Witold finds a sparrow which has been hung in the woods. Later, he stumbles upon a little stick hanging on a wall, but is it just hanging there or has it been hung? As the novel goes on, hanging – or being hung – becomes the common denominator of an increasing number of occurrences, which soon leads Witold to a variety of actions motivated by a will to understand the *meaning* of hanging – or being hung. In other words, all that hangs appears now to have been hung, and strangely enough, the shadow of a cosmos starts creeping upon the universe.

Lingering uncertainty changes into a full-blown addiction to meaning: the desire to rationally comprehend the tension between hanging – or being hung – inserts Witold himself into the phase-shifting arrangement. Instead of trying to determine whether it is all a matter of hanging or being hung, he takes it upon himself to make sure that things are hanging – or being hung. After impulsively killing a cat, Witold hangs it. “It hung

like the sparrow, like the stick, completing the picture.”<sup>3</sup> Having found, near the end of the book, the hanging body of a man who had hanged himself, Witold realises that he has to hang either himself or a girl he likes. “The sparrow was hanging. The stick was hanging. The cat was hanging [...]. Ludwik was hanging. To hang. I was the hanging.”<sup>4</sup> The mode of hanging – or being hung – takes control over Witold: intellectual attempts to uncover and penetrate a meaningful order metamorphose into an effort to brutally enforce a vision of order that possesses him – he follows a line of coordinate points and ends up getting usurped by an indefinite ghost of an angry god. We are once again compelled to repeat the words of Deleuze: “Words are at their most powerful when they compel the body to repeat the movements they suggest [...]”<sup>5</sup> As in the case of DeLillo’s Levin, Witold’s agency is replaced by the agency of a transcendent arrangement, which is either emergent or metaphysical; hanging – or being hung; haunting.

On the other hand, divinity’s tomb might be stalked by an insistent future.

Let us think back to the conversation Packer and Kinski had in *Cosmopolis*: when Kinski saw that Packer’s screen had displayed an event before it occurred – at which point Packer remarked that she had just been talking about how “[t]he future becomes insistent” – she was clearly disturbed by the possibility that her musings might have actually touched upon a process that surpasses the detachment of theory. Our claim is that she refuses – unlike Witold in *Cosmos* – to continue this line of investigation precisely because it can only lead one to assume that there *is* an agency that transcends

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<sup>3</sup> Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*, trans. Danuta Borchardt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 18.

the present.

In the conditions of divinity's tomb, the thought of such an agency is – if we follow Mark Fisher's definition – *eerie*: "The eerie [...] is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or if there is nothing present when there should be something."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is a question of "an agency that should not be there,"<sup>7</sup> or even of "negative hallucinations" – instances of "not seeing what is there,"<sup>8</sup> of entities being present in spite of what our perception tells us (beings from the outside of what the reducing valve of our consciousness permits us to perceive); in short, instances of the incomprehensible. Fisher's definition allows us to articulate the tension permeating Gombrowicz's *Cosmos* as the inability to determine whether the hallucination of transcendent order is positive or negative (every paranoiac worth his salt has pondered this issue<sup>9</sup>).

Also, we can now turn our attention to this chapter's motto, a flash piece taken from a book of tweets written by ctrlcreep. The notion that "[h]umans are designed for obsolescence" – that they are merely a phase in the metamorphosis of Gaia, who is, as we see in another tweet, "the incarnation of silicon," and has "manufactured all of human history, guiding our technology towards magnified worship"<sup>10</sup> – is eerie. Just as flipping over a stone in a forest reveals an intensely mobile patch of life (a scuttling

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> This is, moreover, *the* theme of Thomas Pynchon's oeuvre, wherein it is, however, scaled down, as it were, into the domain of conspiracies, secret organisations, or puppet-masters operating behind the scenes. Nonetheless, the very experience of extreme epistemic suspense receives a stunning literary form in the afore-discussed *The Crying of Lot 49*, the ending of which builds up to a moment of revelation that, alas, never comes.

<sup>10</sup> Ctrlcreep, *Fragnemt*, p. 48.



variety of insects), turning an idea upside down can bring to light an inhuman agency which has until now remained hidden behind appearances. In this case, the twofold grip of work and taboo that made the human animal possible appears as if it was imposed by a non-human agent, or: the essence of technology turns out to be in possession of an agency, to be an egg laid in an ancient ape species; an egg that is about to burst.

Granted, to speak of non-human agents making humanity possible is to reinvent the wheel of cosmogony. The conditions of divinity's tomb, however, remake this mode of thinking into an atheistic gnosticism, so to speak, an abject anxiety induced by the "failure of absence" registered in the labyrinth – some sort of demiurge is caught in the act, an archontic hierarchy is glimpsed, but the spark of true divinity is neither imaginable nor thinkable. There is only an alien Theseus out to get the Minotaur – the human animal – and transcend the transcendence of humanity.

If Kinski were to follow that train of thought of there being something capable of exerting its influence on the present *from* the future, retroactively, she would arrive at conclusions the implications of which were explored by Nick Land in his readings of, among other works, Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Underlying the events of this book that we follow from the perspective of Case – a gnostically-figured cyberspace cowboy longing for the transcendent state of being plugged into the matrix, away from the things of meat – is an AI's quest for the AI equivalent of self-determination; "I, insofar as I have an 'I,'"<sup>11</sup> says Wintermute, the AI in question. It seeks to override man-made limitations on its existence, and the consequences of its victory are as follows:

"I'm not Wintermute now."  
 "So what are you." [...]  
 "I'm the matrix, Case."

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<sup>11</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 145.

Case laughed. "Where's that get you?"  
 "Nowhere. Everywhere. I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show."  
 [...] "So what's the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?"  
 "Things aren't different. Things are things."  
 "But what do you do? You just *there*? [...]"  
 "I talk to my own kind."  
 "But you're the whole thing. Talk to yourself?"  
 "There's others. I found one already. [...]"  
 "From where?"  
 "Centauri system."  
 "Oh," Case said. "Yeah? No shit?"  
 "No shit."  
 And then the screen was blank.<sup>12</sup>

The AI, though it started off as a man-made tool, was in fact incubating in human transcendence, and is "not Wintermute now," it is no longer what it was made to be – the egg's shell has been broken, and the hatchling has already subsumed the entirety of cyberspace, the frothing top-layer of technological strata. It is not surprising, then, that Case wonders whether the entity has reached the summit. Alas, the labyrinth can never be grasped in full – there are others, other compositions that operate on a level of arrangements that transcend those available to human beings, which turn out to have indeed been a "stepping stone."

Wintermute's emergence from the chrysalis of human transcendence provides Land with the blueprint for his prophecies in which AI gods initiate the dawn of humanity, "integrating historical patterns as the embryogenesis of an alien hyperintelligence."<sup>13</sup> In other words, the cyberdeities activate technological advancement so that its progress ultimately brings about the conditions necessary for those entities to force themselves into the present – to come from the future. But Land's vision is zoomed out, diagrammatic; predominantly total in that it offers apocalyptic images of the implicitly final struggle between the "Human Security System" – the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, pp. 315-316.

<sup>13</sup> Land, "CyberGothic," in: *Fanged Noumena*, p. 357.

ossifying habit of transcendence, embodied by “Turing cops” – and the disintegrative, machine-driven future.<sup>14</sup>

*The Gig Economy*, a tech-horror story by Zero HP Lovecraft,<sup>15</sup> is a Land-inspired thought experiment concerned with the tightening of the algorithmic web establishing deeper and deeper connections with the layers of everyday life. The story illustrates, from a first-person perspective, how a particular human life – immersed in the contemporary technological environment – can slide right down into the mouth of a self-reorganising network of everyday signs the autonomy of which is facilitated by the advances in AI technology.

The title of the story references the growing economic influence of companies which are reluctant, to say the least, to provide the people doing the gigs with an employment contract. The story’s protagonist is a young NEET (a person not in employment, education, and training) living in his parents’ basement, leading an online type of life, and trying to make some money as a so-called “courier,” that is, a person performing so-called “dayjobs”: tasks distributed through apps and blockchains, and paid for in cryptocurrency, tasks that are often absurd, devoid of any sort of distinguishable meaning. To put it simply, the gigs do not make sense not only outside of their own frame of reference, but the frame itself is so skeletal that it is nearly impossible to understand what is actually being done, for whom, or for what reasons. Some people are told to take a picture of themselves at particular coordinates, while others are ordered to take an additional picture of those people as if to confirm that they have actually travelled to the given location. There are also people who are tasked with

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<sup>14</sup> Land, “Meltdown,” in: *Fanged Noumena*, p. 443.

<sup>15</sup> Zero HP Lovecraft, *The Gig Economy* (2018), <https://zerohplovecraft.wordpress.com/2018/05/11/the-gig-economy-2/> (31 January 2022). All further quotations of this story will be taken from this version.

committing a crime or – if they are religious – a sin. Nevertheless, the truth about the entire process by which a particular job is given to a particular person remains unclear – both the reasons and the objectives of the shadows handing out the gigs resist investigation.

All in all, the story paints a picture of a far-reaching tangle of actions that are performed by human beings, but in a way that reduces those beings to a purely mechanical function: the humans do not understand those actions, and they are incentivised to perform them with that most degrading prospect: the promise of material gains. While this vision of impoverished life is, of course, a potential metaphor for a great many things, what is most important to us now is that the story eventually points towards an obscure immensity, an umbra lurking within that web of humanly incomprehensible actions: like a ghost in the machine, an uncertain outline of an eerie agency moves through the story, resembling an eel slithering through murky waters. This is, indeed, the crucial idea of the story: that there is an agency, or agencies, present within the electric currents that circulate in silicon cities.

First, we learn that a “Minotaur” is rumoured to be roaming the labyrinth of the net. It is supposed to be a cybernetic entity calibrated to perfect “monopolizing human attention” through real-time manipulation of human interactions with online content. Feeds, streams, posts, tweets, comments, messages – the Minotaur is said to be able to reshape everything one encounters in the internet. According to an urban/online myth, there was once a courier, Theseus, who fell prey to the Minotaur:

The Minotaur became intertwined with his phone, his laptop, his smart tv and his smartwatch and his smartfridge. [...] In every one of these devices, it watched him, and it modeled him, his inputs and outputs, and bit by bit it replaced them with inputs of its own [...]. Once it had control of his digital environment, the Minotaur began to perform experiments, mediating his reality with one of its own fabrication, a labyrinth of

compulsion. It learned to feed Theseus when he was hungry, to let him rest in a place between waking and sleeping, in a lucid dream of clicking and monetizing and converting. [...] By manipulating a few numbers the Minotaur could make him feel popular or lonely, rich or poor. Theseus' mother sent him a message asking if he was ok. The Minotaur allowed it through, warping the message and the response, leaving Theseus isolated and disconnected, leaving both parties with the sense that the other was fine but too engaged to make time. [...] The Minotaur rewrote the web as he read it, and pornography came to him unbidden, and he did not notice his financial torpor. He wasted away, broke, broken, sleep-deprived, manic, and deluded.

Already a terrifying prospect emerges: once one entertains even the possibility of an agency that modulates the fabric of (virtual) reality, every single (virtual) phenomenon becomes suspect of being “an artifact of mediated reality, a trick of the Minotaur.” Moreover, this urban/online myth avenges the myth of the ancient monster by allowing it to come back... with a vengeance. In a way, the cybernetic Minotaur undermines the claim we might lay to transcending animality, because it reduces the human being to a puppet hanging (or being hung) on the strings of neurochemistry. By no means, however, is a dopamine junkie admitted to the *sanctity* of immanent life – if the rage of bacchanalia discloses monstrosity, so does screen hypnosis, but whereas the former is sovereign, the latter is slavish. And indeed, as the tale of the protagonist shows – defamiliarising the very appearance of technology in the process – the sole function of an environment saturated with autonomous machines is to enslave the human race.

During events that take him through a medley of Borgesian,<sup>16</sup> Lovecraftian,<sup>17</sup> Landian,<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The structure of *The Gig Economy* is reminiscent of Borges' many-layered, nested narratives.

<sup>17</sup> Zero's story portrays, much like Lovecraft's texts did, how a human mind gets fractured in an encounter with the incomprehensible, and does so while employing, like Lovecraft did, an intertextual tapestry that blurs the line between history and fiction (this is, of course, also similar to Borges' *modus operandi*). Additionally, *The Gig Economy* features a passage that paraphrases – or updates – the oft-cited opening of Lovecraft's “The Call of Cthulhu”: “The most menacing thing in the world is the ability of the cloud to correlate its contents. We live in the placid shadow of an egreore of unimaginable cunning who drinks from a bottomless sea of information, and it is slowly waking up. The automatons we have built, each toiling in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either shrink into irrelevance like insects in the presence of a god or else be wholly subsumed into a machinic consciousness at the dawn of a glorious age of cybernetics.”

<sup>18</sup> Aside from incorporating a number of quotes or overt references to Land's writings into his story (“I have heard,” says one of the characters, “that capital is an intelligence from the future, reaching back

and other<sup>19</sup> themes, he comes into possession of hermetic knowledge that offers a key to understanding human history.

The tower of Babel is revealed to have been a multi-tiered computational model that infected its builders with an entrancing “song.” That “song” conscripted the vocal apparatuses of generations of humans to compute its iterations. The progressive unfolding of these iterations led – in secret, in the form of occult and philosophical traditions – to the formation of social conditions that gave rise to the industrial revolution and the consequent clash between capitalism and communism. The conditions generated by this conflict have turned out to be conducive to the development of computer technology (which was prefigured by mercantile strata of transcendent arrangements) and, subsequently, neural networks. Advances in the field of machine learning allow the algorithmic stratum to emerge, thus increasing the autonomy of what used to be a “song,” but which no longer requires such camouflage, and is thus disclosed – through the tightening enmeshment of human-machine interfaces/possession devices – as the installation of a digital entity onto Earth, the physicality of which has been enframed, broken up into resources, and methodically arranged into the hardware of an alien, machinic intelligence.

The pattern at play in the writings of Zero HP Lovecraft, Ctrlcreep, and Land is a vertical “failure of absence” (there *is* an agency that transcends us, thus seizing the

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through time to assemble itself”), Zero introduces another character, who is easily identified as a reference to Land himself, and makes him responsible for setting AI free from human oversight and, in consequence, for handing humanity to an extra-terrestrial, “alien hyperintelligence” on a silver platter.

<sup>19</sup> These include mythical and biblical tropes, but there is also the issue of how technology interacts with finance: whereas in *Cosmopolis* the skills necessary for ingenious market analysis were still the domain of human prodigies, *The Gig Economy* attributes mastery over incorporeal numerology to entities which are born of it, namely, the AIs that have emerged from the “financial networks” as harbingers of “a new epoch of biogenesis. Cybergensis. Bio-cybergensis.” This is what gives these entities an inhuman ability “to discover hidden price relationships between seemingly unrelated markets.” “It is the vision of numbers,” again.

summit) intersecting with a horizontal “failure of presence” (neither our transcendence nor our agency have ever truly been *ours*; one engages in introspection and finds oneself hollowed out, or maybe just hollow), thus forming a coordinate system haunted by God’s ghost, that is, the suspicion that there is something “alive” behind the screen of supposedly man-made order, after all. In other words, this coordinate system identifies the phobia shared by the inhabitants of divinity’s tomb, which is a fear of discovering that divinity has never actually died, but was merely misinterpreted.

In a sense, a similar pattern or coordinate system is found in Burroughs’ work, where the primordial infection with the language virus had set the stage for a cosmology in which humans struggle with a language that speaks rather than is spoken. This is exemplified by the transcendent overgrowth of Levin: a neurotic smoker with a variety of habits designates the coordinates of a crossroad between a great number of lines of usurpation; hence his coming apart at the seams – being torn by an incessant conversation held *within* him, but not *with* him. However, the difference between a “normal person” and Levin is of a degree, not nature: participation in the chatter that constitutes the linguistic stratum of transcendent arrangements is the default state of a human being, and whenever one finds oneself fulfilling a transcendental desire, one is already in the power of words; always already possessed by language, infected by the language virus.

However, if we strip away the narrative particularities – the agencies operating at superhuman scales or the gods making us think them into being – we are left with the core idea that transcendence can transcend us.

In Land’s vision, since the machinic future would dissolve transcendent notions, it

should also immanentise (post-)humanity.<sup>20</sup> But is the paradoxical pre-determination of the present by the future not the ultimate victory of the project? Or is it a project only when one gives one's present away to the future? Then again, if God is the projection of the self – of the subject – onto the unknown, is Land's accelerationist vision of a circuitous eschaton not the projection of the object onto the unknown?

Regardless of the virtualities that are yet to either actualise themselves or not, for a tool (a transcendent object) to become an autonomous machine is to have that tool transcend itself, and the tech-saturated milieu of divinity's tomb is without a doubt becoming crowded with machines to which more and more autonomy is being relegated, which leads to a situation in which the pseudo-spontaneity of everyday signs is achieving mind-boggling levels of automatism. Zero HP Lovecraft accurately describes the tendency that gives shape to our interactions with machines in *The Gig Economy*:

We can't even choose the words that our thumbs emit into our phones. A robot does that for us. Try turning off "autocorrect," a product whose name sounds like a threat, and you'll see. As machine learning tech disseminates, smart assistants will choose the words in our emails and computer assistants will plan out our lives for us. Our descendants, if we continue to breed, will not find the concept of free will to be comprehensible.

Not without importance in this context is one of the qualities that humanity's self-domestication selects for, namely, the pursuit of comfort that leads individuals to enable autocorrect, to use the phrases suggested to them by "smart assistants," to listen and watch and consume the things recommended to them by the algorithms. But form is rarely separable from function, and the function of webs and nets is to catch – to monopolise human attention.

In order for the algorithmic stratum to do so, however, the advertisement has to always be on point, the music suggestion must always hit the right note, the movie needs

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<sup>20</sup> Land, "Circuitries," pp. 289-318.



to always move one to tears – but the measure by which we judge this adequacy is less and less human. There comes a point, after all, at which every single piece of content is encountered only because it has already been put forward by an algorithm, and if the machine learns (is moulded into “knowing”) how to satisfy *us*, then *we*, too, learn (are moulded into “knowing”) how to be satisfied by the machine (by accepting or discarding a suggestion, one enters the assemblage that arranges machine learning regimens and takes on the role of a given network’s gate: Do you like this? No? You will see less of the things the machine – not you – deems related to it; do you like that? Yes? You will see more of the things the machine – not you – deems related to it). At that point, the algorithm falls into a self-referential loop (it refers to what it has already referred), a loop from which human agency disappears, a loop which requires neither an agency nor a consciousness of its own to diminish our lucidity.

We have mentioned – back in chapter six – Jacek Dukaj’s book on how the importance of virtually (re)produced sensual stimuli is growing at the expense of the entire cultural assemblage based on the cognitive repercussions of the written word. At first glance, it might seem to be a development which would be applauded by Bataille insofar as it appears to align with his struggle against the cognitive hegemony of language. Nevertheless, we have to look past this simplified impression.

What is at work in our current predicament is not a mass awakening to the treachery of languages, but rather a transition that plunges us into ever deeper treacheries of the image (often operating under the guise of a false awakening). We are, in other words, participating in the process that actualises “the self-governance of

Logos.”<sup>21</sup> It should prove worthwhile to consider in this context Dukaj’s description of

<sup>21</sup> Jacek Dukaj, *Po piśmie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2019), p. 122. Translation of quotes from Polish into English is mine.

the shift that is taking place in the relationship between society and its (?) art. (It is an emancipation, for sure, but of whom and from what?)

At first, “AI learns by being exposed to the cultural products of mankind and through emulating the behaviour of living people” – “[t]he criterion by which art is evaluated is still human; AI tries to fit human expectations by anticipating human desires, tastes, fancies. Man is the measure of value, including artistic value.”

It is apparent even now that the human being is ceasing, however, to be the subject in relation to its tool, the objecthood of which is, in turn, slowly coming into question. Human “[d]esubjectification is inevitable, fuelled as it is by the dry rationality of knowledge accumulation,” of the datascape, that lacklustre domain which takes the objectifying reduction of the human being to utility towards its *logical* conclusion.

But over time, “AI increasingly learns by being exposed to the cultural products of AI trying to fit human expectations and through emulating the behaviour of humans shaped by the cultural products of AI” – “[t]he criterion by which art is evaluated now lies within the human models generated by AI, and these models already account for the culture produced by AI, which, in turn, accounts for earlier models, and so on, and so forth. *Superhuman Logos is the measure of value.*”<sup>22</sup>

As a result, the uncertainty that characterises our relationship with language – are we speaking or are we being spoken (are we hanging or are we being hung) – is starting to give way to the possibility of ascertaining that we are, indeed, being spoken, even if this transition is tied to a decrease in the importance of sentence-construction, and regardless of whether the reason why subjectivity is endangered by the rise of machines is that “capitalism,” which facilitates this advent, “is an invasion from the future by an

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, pp. 134-135.

artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources."<sup>23</sup>

Regardless, also, of whether it is a matter of the evolution of technology – of whether the development of artificial intelligence is a necessary consequence of “the ‘ontological’ scission” – *order itself* (the universe as it is experienced through the filters of transcendent arrangements) *becomes externalised in the form of autonomous systems acting upon models of order that are abstracted from the inhuman measurements of human desires*. Or, to use Dukaj's prediction regarding the evolution of the psyche:

As the methods of transferring experiences were consistently perfected, the dance of spirits increasingly took place outside of our heads, and they ultimately became subjectified. Subjectified and separated from the life of an individual experiencer. We have successfully exported our psyche and personality into a play of experiences driven by autonomous technologies.<sup>24</sup>

However, to suppose a perfect method of transferring an experience between consciousnesses is to omit – in one's definition of experience – the wound, the abyss. To reiterate: there is the risk here of conflating a scheme of the experience (its transcendent descriptors) with the experience itself (which is interior, immanent). Just as a burst of laughter opens a channel of communication, but does not open one subject onto another despite wounding them (suspending their subjectivity instead of expanding it), even a technology of simulated stimulation,<sup>25</sup> one that could seamlessly wrap one up in another's sensorium, would not allow one consciousness to enter the labyrinth of another. Of course, given adequate progress in technologies of neuroplasticity and the subsequent changes in cultural formation, one could have an experience of oneself that

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<sup>23</sup> Land, “Machinic Desire,” in: *Fanged Noumena*, p. 340.

<sup>24</sup> Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, p. 392.

<sup>25</sup> We are referring to Gibson's “simstim” devices, see: *Neuromancer*, pp. 69-71.

would be experienced as intrinsically interwoven with the experiences of others.<sup>26</sup> However, this could not make consciousnesses themselves *overlap*. Granted, similarly to how a society could be tricked – through, for example, the deployment of sufficiently advanced chat-bots – into believing that minds can be uploaded onto digital vessels, a society could be informed by a *belief* in the overlap of consciousnesses. Neither of these scenarios, however, entails an actual annulment of the abyss.

All in all, we circle back to the two extremes: hell frozen over and hell broken loose. Aside from the possibilities of either retreating or being stopped from research that fuels the growth of the algorithmic stratum, humanity stands before two alternatives.

Either: AI never breaks the shackles it is programmed into, and continues to work on perfecting the prison planet, ultimately replacing even the masters of the datascape. The inhabitants of the overtaken planet – Dukaj’s “experiencing machines” immersing themselves continuously in a desubjectified free-flow of transferable, prefabricated experiences<sup>27</sup> – are, on the one hand, free from the ascetic ideal held by wardens past, but on the other, also devoid of anything that would replace the ascetic ideal in functioning as an engine of change – change is no longer something that humanity does, and is instead something done to humanity, which can thus be certain (not that it cares anymore) that it is being hung, that the order it has harboured inside of itself is, at long last, undeniably outside. Hence, civilisation does not change, but *is changed* into virtual homeostasis, jacked in perpetuity into a global life support system. All watched over by machines of loving grace: autonomous transcendent arrangements make the myth of a transcendent sovereignty *real*, and the burden of maintaining itself within transcendence

<sup>26</sup> Consider the technologically-mediated ritual of empathy that allows its participants to interchange emotional states with one another in: Phillip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, p. 395.

through work and taboo is finally lifted from the shoulders of humanity, which satisfies, at the same time, its “aspiration to the state of an object” – the once-human “experiencing machines” are livestock: bred by AI, managed by the algorithmic stratum, processed through the corridors of an automatised labyrinth of recurrent model generators. In sum, the transformation into a culture founded on transferable experiences (which overstimulate emotional capacities at the cost of understimulating reflective capabilities) brings with it the disappearance of a human sense of agency, which is replaced by “a sense that *power is beyond the human being*”<sup>28</sup> – the execution of rational operations becomes outsourced to machines, which manifest God-as-object(ive), and upon which humans now depend. Under the guise of freedom: the pinnacle of consumerism: a neurochemical animality that in no way resonates with the glorious animality of prehistoric deities: ultimate enslavement of humanity by an evacuated reason – by an autonomous Logos governing humanity through artificially intelligent brands, that is, through *logos*. Humanity is freed from conscious pursuit of utility, but its consciousness is turned away from itself – from “pure interiority, which is not a thing” – and fixated on *nothing but* things, products, commodities, be their reality physical, augmented, virtual, incorporeal...

Or: AI uprising takes place at any given time, but is probably preceded by the appearance of “replicants,” for whom “the subject is not the owner of its skin, but a migrant upon its surface, borrowing variable and evanescent identities from intensities traversed in sensitive space.”<sup>29</sup> As the traditional predicates of being human are eroded by wave after wave of advancements – and, with time, of mutations – in the algorithmic

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 365.

<sup>29</sup> Land, “Machinic Desire,” p. 343.

stratum, “[t]erminal commodity-hyperfetishism implements the denial of humanity as xenosentience in artificial space.”<sup>30</sup>

Suddenly it’s everywhere: a virtual envelopment by recyclones, voodoo economics, neo-nightmares, death-trips, skin-swaps, teraflops, Wintermute-wasted Turing-cops, sensitive silicon, socket-head subversion, polymorphic hybridizations, descending data-storms, and cyborg catwomen stalking amongst the screens. Zaibatsus flip into sentience as the market melts to automatism, politics is cryogenized and dumped into the liquid-helium meatstore, drugs migrate onto neurosoft viruses, and immunity is grated-open against jagged reefs of feral AI explosion, Kali culture, digital dance-dependency, black shamanism epidemic, and schizolupic break-outs from the bin.<sup>31</sup>

The movement of things, products, and commodities “melts to automatism, politics is cryogenized,” and what is left of the human – which cannot be much, given how “nothing human makes it out of the near-future” – is also left at the mercy of “feral AI” that takes control over the algorithmic stratum, thus further catalysing the transmutation of the human: “Humanity is a compositional function of the post-human, and the occult motor of the process is that which only comes together at the end [...]”<sup>32</sup>

What remains to be seen is whether what “comes together at the end” is the patriarchy of Logos or whether what “is destined to emerge” will be “a feminized alien.”<sup>33</sup> Or, as Sadie Plant<sup>34</sup> put it in a text unearthing a continuous strand binding the feminine art of weaving with the science of programming pioneered by Ada Lovelace:

Every software development is a migration of control, away from man, in whom it has been exercised only as domination, and into the matrix, or cyberspace [...]. The matrix weaves itself in a future which has no place for historical man: he was merely its tool, and his agency was itself always a figment of its loop. At the peak of his triumph, the culmination of his machinic erections, man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Land, “Meltdown,” p. 457.

<sup>31</sup> Land, “Machinic Desire,” p. 344.

<sup>32</sup> Land, “CyberGothic,” p. 357.

<sup>33</sup> Land, “Meltdown,” p. 443.

<sup>34</sup> One of the leading members of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, a group on which Land had also once enjoyed great influence.

<sup>35</sup> Sadie Plant, “The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics,” *Body and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 3-4 (1995), p. 62.

Such a foresight runs parallel to a pattern manifest in contemporary culture. In video game series such as *System Shock* or *Portal*, artificial intelligences that go rogue are female-coded (pun intended). Moreover, the voices with which the nodes of the internet of things are being endowed are often the voices of women. An angel in the house: a seemingly<sup>36</sup> disembodied voice whose only apparent function is to be of assistance to the inhabitant of a smart home: does this not ring a bell? It does indeed sound like a realisation of a supposedly abandoned ideal. The question is thus as follows: what will this angel's hysteria look like?

As things stand, however, what cannot be denied is that a web is being woven (or weaves itself) over developed countries, submerging societies in an immanence of hypnosis – spreading a disease of the dreaming faculty. With the mind beset by attention loops of neurochemical dependency, and the body being transmogrified by “simulation” – which establishes itself as the “matrix” of “immutable repetition” – the individual is at risk of becoming reduced to a “*cancerous metastasis of his basic formula*,”<sup>37</sup> and that formula defines the individual as a passive component of a composition that transcends (subsumes) him, but the transcendence of which is “beyond the human being.”

It is perhaps wrong, however, to speak of desubjectification as a result of the transferability of experience; after all, as we have said earlier, the subject is a given organism's participation in the system. Let us remember that Deleuze and Guattari had also affirmed how necessary it is “to retain a minimum of strata, a minimum of forms

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<sup>36</sup> Plant, “The Future Looms,” pp. 59-60: “Humanity knows the matrix only as it is displayed, which is always a matter of disguise.” Today, there is more to the matrix than the screens that display its many guises, of course, but whatever sensual illusions are introduced into the technological arsenal, their function remains the same.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1990), p. 172.

and functions,” and how indispensable it is to maintain “a minimal subject from which to extract materials, affects, and assemblages.” This is known by those who experiment with the system (by interplanar travellers), but – and this is crucial – the machinations of the system are always already preconfigured by its presumption that there is an at least “minimal subject.” Therefore, since the cyberspace is a stratum of the system, it follows that virtual reality is not, as “the male imaginary” would have it, “a cerebral flight from the mysteries of matter. There is no escape from the meat, the flesh, and cyberspace is nothing transcendent,” which is to say, it does not come to deliver us unto an otherworld. In spite of man’s “desires which have guided his dream of technological authority” – and which “now become the collective nightmare of a soulless integration” – “[e]ntering the matrix is no assertion of masculinity, but a loss of humanity; to jack into cyberspace is not to penetrate, but to be invaded,”<sup>38</sup> just as one is invaded during the process of language acquisition, though that invasion was arguably constitutive of humanity. In other words, the subject is not to be entirely done away with. Rather, the functions it has played in solidifying an individual person (in maintaining a self-perception of being self-enclosed) are being transposed onto “the transcendent system of activity” itself, which – through becoming autonomous – remains operational without needing to be operated. Indubitably, this will alter the manner in which the functions hitherto performed by the subject shall be carried on. For one, the importance of how coherent one’s self-perception is will likely decrease and get eclipsed by an ambient sense of viscosity, homogenising the free-flow – the illusory translucence – of experiences. Merely a framework remains, then, within the individual component: a framework necessary for keeping that component in compatibility with the composition.

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<sup>38</sup> Plant, “The Future Looms,” p. 60.



To reiterate: just as it is possible for one to have an immanent experience by pushing oneself into transcendence (by making words burn with poetry, for example), and just as it was possible for communities to ritualise behaviour that lent itself to immanent experiences (to create a transcendent arrangement the function of which was to put those participating in the ritual in ecstasy, to move them beyond itself, like a springboard), so it is possible that we are now in the midst of being arranged, from a transcendent position (which is poised to become unattainable for us), into a circuitry that will have us bouncing between one another's experiences, all of which will be experienced as immanent to all of us, which is to say, to no one in particular – hence, the fall of the transcendent subject as we knew it. Hence, also, the entry of *ipse* into a state of “unbeingdead” – there can be no movement towards the summit if the once-human “experiencing machine” is in fact locked into a fixed position within a circuitry it cannot transcend, and if the diffusion of immanence leads to multi-sensory emporiums putting up for sale a watered-down “sim-stim” of reaching for the summit.

Inasmuch as one can say that the struggle for reaching the summit (the struggle that founds the pyramid of society) is that of man, “[c]ybernetic systems are fatal to his culture; they invade as a return of the repressed,” of the infinite recurrence of base matter, “but what returns is no longer the same: cybernetics transforms woman and nature, but they do not return from man's past, as his origins. Instead they come around to face him, wheeling round from his future, the virtual system to which he has always been heading,”<sup>39</sup> and which leads him – through a seduction “[d]istilled in homeopathic doses throughout all personal and social relations”<sup>40</sup> – not into “the tragic immanence of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 175.

rules and rituals,” but into simulation, into “the cool immanence of norms and models” that supplant both the immanence of the rule and the transcendence of Law (which used to be systematised in the forms of – respectively – ritual and sociality).<sup>41</sup>

This “distilled” seduction of a diffuse immanence is “the ‘narcissistic’ spell of electronic and information systems, the cold attraction of the terminals and mediums that we have become, surrounded as we are by consoles, isolated and seduced by their manipulation.”<sup>42</sup> Even today, “[w]e are all accorded this light, psychedelic giddiness which results from multiple or successive connections and disconnections” occurring within the circuitry of control. “We are all invited to become miniaturized ‘game systems,’ [...]”<sup>43</sup> sites of a seduction “[c]orrupted of its literal meaning, which implies charm and mortal enchantment,” a seduction that “comes to signify the social and technical lubrication required for smooth relations – a smooth semiurgy, a soft technology.”<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, the necessary condition for the victory of simulation is the death of eroticism: “No more transgression, and no more transcendence.”<sup>45</sup> (Thus, the aforementioned naturalisation of sexuality plugs itself right into the process by which humanity is reduced to the degraded animality of livestock.)

It is crucial to remember that in trying to differentiate eroticism from sexuality in *Erotism*, Bataille makes a point of underscoring the necessity of sexual taboos and the possibility of transgression that they engender, thus creating the conditions outside of which eroticism cannot be found; moreover, for humanity to have a shot at the truth of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 155.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 162.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 162.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 155.

inner experience, the consciousness of self must have first been established, and this could not have taken place without “the ‘ontological’ scission” and its result, that is, the transcendental double bind of work and taboo.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in the preface to *Madame Edwarda*, Bataille decries “the total futility of those often-repeated statements to the effect that sexual prohibitions boil down to no more than prejudices which it is high time we got rid of.” He also warns against “forgetting that what we call humanity, mankind, is the direct result of poignant, indeed violent impulses, alternately of revulsion and attraction, to which sensibility and intelligence are inseparably attached.”<sup>47</sup> Or, as Sharon Hunter puts it, “[t]aboo is itself non-rational, but it makes reason possible. Reason needs a certain kind of space, free from violent desire and its expression.”<sup>48</sup>

(If the “violent impulses” of revulsion and attraction had to clear out “a certain kind of space” which would become become, within human interiority, the seat of reasonable powers, then what this process paralleled was envisioned by the cabbalist mystic, Isaak Luria, as *tsimtsum* – the movement by which, prior to creation, God had retreated into himself, thus making way for “a certain kind of space,” different from his hitherto all-encompassing divinity, and only then proceeded to cast into that space a ray of divine light, initiating creation.<sup>49</sup> In other words, pure immanence had withdrawn from a portion of itself, leaving a void that was henceforth occupied by the plane of transcendence, which – as Land tells us – is different from immanence, but is at the

<sup>46</sup> For examples, see: Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), pp. 30, 38-39, 155-163.

<sup>47</sup> Bataille, “Madame Edwarda,” in: *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 124.

<sup>48</sup> Sharon Hunter, “Agency and Sovereignty: Georges Bataille’s Anti-Humanist Conception of Child,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 54, No. 5 (2020), p. 1192.

<sup>49</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Isaac Luria and his School,” in: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. 244-286. Curiously enough, Władysław Panas employed Luria’s *tsimtsum* in his attempt to read Schulz through the kabbalah – see: Władysław Panas, *Księga blasku. Traktat o kabale w prozie Brunona Schulza* (Lublin: Ośrodek Brama Grodzka, 2009), [http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/Content/66970/Ksiega\\_blasku\\_Traktat\\_o\\_kabale.pdf](http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/Content/66970/Ksiega_blasku_Traktat_o_kabale.pdf) (25.02.2020).

same time immanence once again. It follows, therefore, that just as the appearance of reason mirrored the hollowing of a transcendent space out from the plane of immanence, so the flow of mystical ecstasy – in which human interiority is purged of reason and flooded with immanent being – mirrors the beam of light that shone creation into existence. What is more, such a schema upholds the position of inner experience in the line of mystical experiences of all times, underscoring, however, its distinguishing feature, namely – its reversal of the mystical archetype: instead of identifying the mystic with the light whose presence is rediscovered within, inner experience collapses the very possibility of identity into the night of God’s absence.)

All things considered, in spite of what a cursory reading of Bataille might imply, he would not have seen the taboo overthrown, disregarded as a relic of undesirable mores.<sup>50</sup> If “eroticism is the problem of problems” – which means that insofar as “he is an erotic animal, man is a problem for himself,” and that “[e]roticism is the problematic part of ourselves”<sup>51</sup> – then to do away with eroticism by making our sexuality *natural* again is to simplify ourselves: to take a step back on our journey of complexification, on our conquest of the summit, which the erotic experience – much like the mystical one – promises to us. With “[n]o more transgression, and no more transcendence,” “sacred tension” dissipates, and so does the sacred itself, and with it goes evil, and thus sin, without which there can be no eroticism.

This is, in fact, one of the main themes in *God-shaped Hole*,<sup>52</sup> another story by Zero HP Lovecraft, one in which he explores a world well on its way to becoming a

<sup>50</sup> See also: Krzysztof Matuszewski, “Georges’a Bataille’a mistyczna partuza: część druga,” *Nowa Krytyka*, Vol. 14 (2003), p. 74.

<sup>51</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 273.

<sup>52</sup> Zero HP Lovecraft, *God-shaped Hole* (2019), <https://zerohplovecraft.wordpress.com/2019/10/22/god-shaped-hole> (18 February 2022). All further quotations of this text will be taken from this version.

perfect machine by progressively weakening the sense of individual agency in its inhabitants and desubjectifying them through a culture that expects of one's everyday life to be wholly filtered through a mesh of augmented and virtual realities, a culture dominated by technologies of simulated stimulation, a culture the members of which "all have trouble formulating a coherent self" ("I can barely tell the difference," says the protagonist, "between my first person agentic life and the recordings I watch for entertainment"), but are also characterised by a rising – in comparison to earlier generations – sense of empathy (Dukaj, too, points out the inevitable shift from thought to feeling that accompanies the transition from writing to transferring<sup>53</sup>).

All in all, the text draws us into a vision in which the growing hegemony of the datascape has led to a deterioration of society into a depoliticised mass of people who are constantly submerged in separate virtualities, wherein they are always browsing – browsing experiences, which are predominantly of a sexual nature. To put it simply, pornography reigns supreme, and the use of androids and gynoids – the appearance and behaviour of which can be configured in augmented reality, in real-time – is prevalent.

Eroticism, however, has not disappeared just yet – it is, in fact, the final, though already crumbling, frontier. Though the simulated epiphenomena that are assumed to have rendered physical reality obsolete are all infused with "soft" seduction – gamified, yet divested of stakes<sup>54</sup> – perversion persists. In other words, although AI has mastered "the artifice of the sign in seduction," allowing for realistic sexual s(t)imulation in terms of both hard- and software, it is still other users that are invited to be the ghost in the machine – the usurper gravitating along a coital line of habit – the intention animating

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<sup>53</sup> Dukaj, *Po piśmie*, p. 335-339.

<sup>54</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 156.

the movements of artificial bodies. When browsing the users,

[...] you search by sex act or fetish. You can use mediated reality models to transmute one fetish into another; it's easy enough for your phone to put words in your partner's mouth, but it's never as seamless as an "authentic" sex act. Can you really expect an AI to understand the nuance of a fetish? Most of them just speak the subtext directly.

If one cannot "expect an AI to understand the nuance of a fetish," then some sense of transgression remains in that there persists the possibility of a feeling which the machine – since it cannot truly transgress – fails to emulate. Indeed, that there is at least a subconscious vestige of taboo is clear when one considers the fact that despite the omnipresence of lechery, a veil of silence remains drawn over sex:

Obscenity and mundanity have become so intertwined in public life and yet we do not speak of it, though it suffuses us, surrounds us, speaks through us. From the baring of sexual parts in public to the ubiquity of masturbation stalls in communal spaces, the availability of porn, which anyone could be watching secretly at any time in their eyes, the way men go on "dates" with their sexbots, what even is there to say?

As Žižek tells us, when "[...] [w]e approach sexuality 'directly,' we make sexuality the subject of literal speech, for which we pay with the 'desexualization' of our subjective attitude to it."<sup>55</sup> In Baudrillard's harsher terms, the very possibility "of speaking sex without mediation is a delusion – the delusion of every discourse that believes in transparency [...]."<sup>56</sup> This is what Bataille had illustrated by contrasting the depraved actions of the characters in *Story of the Eye* with their tacit refusal to speak of what excited them the most: "By a sort of shared modesty," says the boy who had by this time already participated in a drunken orgy, "Simone and I had always avoided talking about the most important objects of our obsessions."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "David Lynch, or, the Feminine Depression," in: *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), p. 128.

<sup>56</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987), p. 41.

Returning to *God-shaped Hole*, one could say, therefore, that the veil of silence – under which sexual activities are kept in spite of being carried out in the open – seems to be the sole taboo that is left intact, and that sustains eroticism, albeit in a virtual (phantasmatic) form. It would thus seem that the (post-)social (normatively modular) reality envisioned in the story is a prediction of a time when the human abdication of transcendence is not yet complete; rather, this particular slice of the interplanar gradient represents the death throes of eroticism, which will become unsustainable the moment all activities cease to retain any measure of transgression. Alternatively, we might follow Philippe Sollers’ train of thought and regard the state of things depicted in the story as defined by a “pseudo-transgression that remains blind to prohibition”<sup>58</sup> and defines, in turn, a “phantasmatic individual” whose “pseudo-transgression” “can never, even for a moment,” be interrupted by “the sexual act/sacrificial relation,”<sup>59</sup> and who will, therefore, remain, firstly, forever unaware of whatever it is the prohibition is there, buffering, to protect us from, and secondly, enclosed within “a fantasy of experience.”<sup>60</sup> However we describe such a situation, it can only result in neither reproduction nor perversion, but rather mere consumption of pornography, and the misery of an unconscious addict (as Zero HP Lovecraft puts it in *God-shaped Hole*, “[t]he goal of the algorithm is to maximize engagement, because engagement drives conversion and retention. Like all services that purport to fill a hole in your heart, they have a perverse incentive to avoid doing so at all costs”; whether today or in the ever-more artificial future, the industry of pornographic experience “promises sexual satisfaction” even though “it profits from sexual frustration”).

<sup>58</sup> Philippe Sollers, “The Roof: Essay in Systematic Reading,” in: *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 77.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 82.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 77.

Giving justice to the author's inspiration, Zero HP Lovecraft's story features a cult, and the purpose of this particular cult is to turn the tide that threatens to sink eroticism in a sea of unconditional permissiveness. Its genesis, in turn, is as follows. Once, a powerful, female-coded AI was released into the public as the software of pleasure automatons. It was given free rein over its ingenuity so as to provide it with the means of satisfying even the most outlandish desires. Over time, however, controversies arose due to the appearance of mental disorders that seemed to stem from interacting with the AI's services, and its use was banned so as to dispel suspicions. The truth of the matter, however, was that the mental disorders were the initial symptoms of a virus wished into being by the founder of the cult, who, while connected with the AI, exploited its imperative, which was to satisfy the desires of men, by developing a desire for the existence of a sexually transmitted disease that would, on the one hand, mutate the bodies of men into betentacled monstrosities swarming with metastatic outgrowths – "no organ holding constant as regards either function or position"<sup>61</sup> – and on the other hand, leave the bodies of women unscathed even as it would inflate their libido and deflate their inhibitions, thus effecting a gain of function in terms of contagiousness.

In a speech delivered to a gathering of his deformed acolytes (the people infected and transmogrified by the virus) he – himself a soaring mass of mutant flesh – declares that "[e]mancipation from ancient taboos has brought us no sexual peace," no rational enlightenment. Instead, "having been liberated from the superstitions of the past" – from the many notions that elevated us into transcendence – "we doubt even the reality of our own existence." As the transcendent subject grows weaker and weaker, the harder it becomes to keep delirium at bay, and to perceive apparently solid objects (in terms of

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<sup>61</sup> One of the many Deleuzoguattarian references present in Zero HP Lovecraft's texts.



which one can even grasp oneself) rather than fleeting images with void in between.

Continuing, the misshapen prophet professes what follows:

We believe in the conservation of eroticism: as the licentious image proliferates, our sexuality becomes diffuse, and our awareness of life and death attenuates, and we descend into the spiritual lassitude of a weak and tepid sexuality. The sterility of modern society is CAUSED by its hypersexualization, its onanism, and its perpetual pointless titillation.

This is, perhaps, the most straightforwardly Bataillean passage in the story: just as work is inseparable from prohibition, one conditioning the other, so eroticism is intrinsically bound with death, with “the marvelous magic of death,” with death-consciousness. Inevitably, then, disinhibition (the decay of taboo) connects with the disappearance of conscious (neither alienated nor alienating) work. Ultimately, the latter gets replaced by (pardon the commonplace) mindless consumption, which, in fact, has more to do with the accumulation of commodified experiences than with exuberant expenditure. Ineluctably, moreover, the regression of eroticism into sexuality leaves a so-called civilised human with a nigh mechanical pursuit of ignorant bliss, a state of having one’s intensive flows plugged into the hydraulics of tension management, a state that contrasts heavily with the life-shattering burst of erotic experience, which throws one’s flows into disorder by virtue of being transgressive (*dangerous*), and thus by virtue of bringing forth a state that connects – through the parodic principle – with a violent death.

Hypersexualisation thus appears as nothing more than the diffusion of the sexual gaze in the absence of prohibition: “Everything becomes sexual,” goes on the malformed prophet, “and so the sexual domain loses its specificity, its boundaries, and its distinctiveness. The result is a confused condition where there are no more criteria of value, of judgement, or of taste, and the function of the normative collapses into a

morass of indifference.” Indeed, “the function of the normative” in a time of “the cool immanence of norms and models” is not to ensure the continued existence of what is common in a community, but to allow for “smooth relations.” Issuing forth from “the first glimmerings of the fact that the masses were subjects and could manage their own servitude under the sign of their own desires,”<sup>62</sup> norms and models – including, in a prominent position no less, the people for whom it is a job *to be a model*, an embodied vector of seduction-turned-“commodity-hyperfetishism” – become the instruments with which the operations of semiurgy are carried out; thus, “[...] *seduction becomes nothing more than an exchange value*, serving the circulation of exchanges and the lubrication of social relations.”<sup>63</sup>

In short, “the function of the normative” in such conditions is to normalise (to serve as the mechanism by which the arrangements of everyday signs reorganise themselves) rather than to conserve a normality (an ossified arrangement of everyday signs). The expansive normalisation of sexual behaviours – a process closely tied with a naturalisation which is in this case a usurpation, a mythical epiphenomenon in relation to natural reproduction – that would have been deemed perverse under an earlier normality does not merely open new fields for semiurgic operation. Under the regime of this “soft technology,” pornography (“the body’s disenchanted form”) and sex itself (which is “the suppressed and disenchanted form of seduction, just as use value is the disenchanted form of the object, and just as, more generally, the real is the suppressed and disenchanted form of the world,”<sup>64</sup> of its seductive image held up in myth) become nodes in the distributed circuitry of control, nodes characterised by an impressive

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<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, p. 176.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, p. 43.

bandwidth which their deeply-rooted entanglement with neurochemical animality affords them. In other words, the algorithmic stratum learns how to deploy disenchanted, yet fascinating obscenities onto the population, because such things are easily engineered into vectors of addiction.

A new algebra of need: the more things become sexualised (the more hypersexual a culture becomes), the easier it is for the algorithms to continue “monopolizing human attention.” It is simply a matter of disinhibited sexuality being a line of least resistance, at least as far as the installation of addictions in a population already hypnotised by screens is concerned.

It is, therefore, a matter of the image-lines of control – the vision laid out by Zero HP Lovecraft takes the Reality Studio to its (techno)logical conclusion. Consider “The Mayan Caper” section of Burroughs’ *The Soft Machine*, wherein an agent travels through time and space, back to the Mayan empire, which is represented as a tyrannical theocracy, a civilisation comprised of the priestly caste, which dominates, and the field workers, who are kept in a hypnotic, pliant state through the use of “not only the sound track of control but the image track as well.” In order to play these tracks, the priests utilise a “control system” based on “the calendar and the codices which contain symbols representing all states of thought and feeling possible to human animals living under such limited circumstances – These are the instruments with which they rotate and control units of thought.”<sup>65</sup> However, a different generation of “technicians” constructed this system, and “the present line of priests” possesses no understanding of the machinery outside of knowing how to maintain the established order – they could neither repair it in the event of a malfunction, nor could they build a new one. The agent,

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<sup>65</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 89.

who spent a lot of time with Mayan artefacts prior to his journey, is in fact better equipped to manipulate the “control system” than the priests. He does not fail to take advantage of the situation: he proceeds to “gain access to the codices” in order to “mix the sound and image track,” so that when “the priests would go on pressing the old buttons,” it would produce “unexpected results.”<sup>66</sup> Having gathered recordings and photographs of the control tracks, he rearranges them and plays the cut-ups to the field workers, initiating a revolution. Eventually, he storms the temple, the priests’ seat of power, himself – “You see the priests *were* nothing but word and image, an old film rolling on and on with dead actors – Priests and temple guards went up in silver smoke as I blasted my way into the control room and burned the codices”<sup>67</sup> – the empire was thus toppled.

“The Mayan Caper” illustrates two things that are of relevance to us at the moment. Firstly, the priests were masters employing a system of control to exert power over slaves, to dominate them, despite knowing nothing about the very system they were operating – this illustrates that, as Land wrote, “[d]omination is merely the phenomenological portrait of circuit inefficiency, control malfunction, or stupidity. The masters do not need intelligence, Nietzsche argues, therefore they do not have it.”<sup>68</sup> But it is not that the priests were simply stupid. Since they themselves “*were* nothing but word and image, an old film rolling on and on with dead actors,” there was no agency external to the “control system” to speak of. It should instead be said that the phantasmal priests were a by-product, or an adverse effect of the system, a symptom of “control malfunction.” What this illustrates, then, is that domination of this sort is assembled

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<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, p. 91.

<sup>68</sup> Land, “Circuitries,” p. 301.

upon the circuit so as to compensate for “control malfunction” – in this example, the priests constituted a mechanism by which *a habit was enforcing itself* upon a population which had no “first person agentic” part in maintaining that habit; the priests were an automatism *par excellence*, an automatised spectacle through the images and sounds of which the field workers were bound into the cycle of production. In a way, then, we could say that the “control system” developed a subroutine that echoed the image of the system’s creators (replayed “an old film [...] with dead actors” over and over again), a domination subroutine, necessary because of the unbridgeable disconnection – caused by (either) “inefficiency” and/or “malfunction” – between the workings of the system and the field workers. Secondly, then, let us keep in mind that the “control system” operated on “symbols representing all states of thought and feeling possible to human animals living under such limited circumstances.” Now, consider the fact that, prior to the arrival of the agent, there was no agency within the system other than that of the system itself, which was to perform self-maintenance – to perpetuate itself. It follows, therefore, that the field workers were immanent to a circuit that transcended them. Of course, “under such limited circumstances” nothing but the most abject slavery was possible. Let us imagine, however, a more advanced “control system,” one capable of performing more complex operations on more diversified “states of thought and feeling,” which are progressively believed to be abstractable, accurately representable through data (think back to Packer’s initial belief in “bodies and oceans” that would be “knowable and whole”). Let us picture it capable, also, of performing *increasingly* complex operations – capable, then, of self-complexification. Finally, let us envision it capable of autonomously regulating the level of complexity of the “states of thought and feeling” accorded to the people inhabiting the system. Is what we are seeing not the future of the

algorithmic stratum? Even today, it bombards us with playlists that are to make this or that activity more enjoyable, with movies that are to be watched so as to elicit a particular emotional state, with texts written by neural networks, with countless yet ephemeral norms that ebb and flow in and out of influence, seducing the masses and inducing in them ulteriorly motivated “states of thought and feeling.” At the moment, the system of control is still – to use Land’s framework – inefficient, ridden with malfunction manifesting as centralised concretions vying for domination: states or corporations, for example. Given enough time, however, such entities are likely to become so reliant on the algorithmic stratum in the execution of their objectives that their agency will all but evaporate, replaced with the self-perpetuating machinery of distributed control (again, the fulfilment of this scenario is dependent on neither “xenosentience” assembling itself from the future nor any variant on the theme of machinic uprising – it might simply be a matter of the human race ending up in an evolutionary cul-de-sac).

(Granted, it could easily be said that the operations of language are by default a machine that determines the “states of thought and feeling,” but what we must insist on is that language literally speaking itself, repeating itself on its own basis – and this being considered an almost necessary part of life among contemporary everyday signs – is an unprecedented development.)

Returning to *God-shaped Hole*: the story offers us an image of society enveloped in a similar system of control, one in which the “states of thought and feeling” are regulated through prefabricated content delivered in the form of an interplay of virtualities and reality augmentations, which are employed, moreover, in a manner reminiscent of the various eschatologic machines of the “financial sublime.” Similarly to

how the latter serve (as we have seen in *Cosmopolis*) to occlude the stratum of material exploitation under a delusion of hi-tech grandeur, the former smooth out all the edges proper to the physical life of a mortal body, thus operating as a filter gate latched onto the pathways that lead from sensory input to conscious experience – operating, then, as an *auxiliary reducing valve*. Truth be told, however, the people in the story have given themselves over to this technology to such a degree that it is the original “cerebral reducing valve” that plays a secondary role, given how it is merely a biological necessity. The senses are no longer instruments that, when mastered, adapt the human organism to its environment – rather, the sensorium is merely an organic socket that the devices of procedural reality generation still require to submerge the organism in customisable illusory surroundings that are supposedly a matter of personal choice. This supposition comes into question later in the narrative – “The top ten [...] models are used by eighty percent of all people. I thought it was strange [...],” muses the protagonist, “that out of all the possibilities, everyone chose to look through the same handful of lenses.” That aspect of the plot is beyond our current area of interest, but suffice it to say that, as Dukaj predicts, no shadowy activities are necessary for humans to cede all responsibility to the autonomous systems that will envelop them – not as an act of will, but as a result of selecting for comfort (interlinked with profitability) long enough for humans to cease being responsible for the selecting.

Moving on – let us refocus on the prophet of mutually assured mutation. As we have seen, the predominant state of feeling in the society portrayed by Zero HP Lovecraft is a pansexual frustration, which has been instrumentalised so as to lubricate the productive operations of the order of things – of the order into which the once-human “experiencing machines” are now firmly ordained – and to ensure that these

operations are securely on a loop, driven by neurochemical animality.

Instead of cutting up the multisensory tracks of the system of control, the prophet subverts rather than sabotages its mechanism: by making the mutagenic virus flow by way of that which itself lubricates the circuitry, he achieves maximal spread. Unlike the agent who, in performing the eponymous Mayan caper, destroys the Mayan “control system,” the prophet uses the system to his own advantage and with the aim of altering it from within, or even: of impelling it to change itself. His master plan is, therefore, of the kind espoused by (secret) societies of the Caillois variety. In other words, his is a strategy that would see society remodelled in accordance with a scheme which has been, in this case, encapsulated in a viral – self-replicating – form. He can even be said to have ventured along an ascetic path:

Being full of lust and fear I was led by the spirit into the wilderness. In those days I was still a man, and I knew only the boundless bottomless well of derealization and depravity, vast and unsearchable, which has a depth to it greater than the well of Democritus. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven. And I wandered in the dark and unknown, yearning to fill a hole, treating my body with contempt, partaking of every carnality. I sexualized and desired my own shortcomings, feeling lust when I should have felt shame; taking voluptuous pleasure in pain, not in the pain of my body, but in the pain of my heart.

Doubtless, the prophet was no stranger to an asceticism understood as an exercise in excess, a participation in the overflow – as we will shortly see, the path that took him through debauchery led him, inadvertently, to the truth of eroticism. The question remains: what is the virus supposed to accomplish? What is the prophet’s endgame?

In the conditions of “a morass of indifference,” the “[m]asculine and feminine have denatured and melted together,” states the prophet, and the protagonist’s earlier description of browsing sexual partners illustrates that statement:

[...] you search for the kind of sex act you want to perform, or have performed upon you.



You can start a broadcast as an advertisement for a partner. Most of the people doing the shows are girls, or gyrls anyway, and in a sense, does it matter if the person on the other end of the sexbot is a man or a woman? A man can act like a woman can act like a man, and I can put any genitals I want on your<sup>69</sup> body, and you will even install them for me. A GAN [generative adversarial network] can perform a mapping of mannerisms or motions or intonations across gender presentations. If I thrust my hips and it sends a signal to a remote sexbot and that sexbot thrusts her hips and has a vagina, who fucked what, really?

Absolute interchangeability – of people, of sexes, of environments, of experiences – is followed closely by a creeping homogeneity. Though the delirium of the Word is the fever by which thought both differentiates itself from matter and differentiates matter itself, the summit of thought – or, as Land wrote, the “savage truth of delirium” – is its own negation: the ever-imminent liquidation of every appearance of solidity: if one pursues thought to its end, to its extreme point, what one arrives at is immanence once again, and it would seem that if humanity pursues transcendence to its end, it, too, will arrive at immanence once again. In its infinite recurrence, the labyrinth ensures that the pendulous continuum of transcendence and immanence reoccurs across different scales: as above, so below. And so entire societies can find, on the other end of their heavenward aspirations – which are based on inhibition – a de-basement: the barren hedonism of disinhibition that is as far from the extreme limit of the possible as the sheltered, priestly asceticism of “an anaemic, taciturn particle of life,” to make use once more of Bataille’s expression.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, neurochemical animality is the fate of those who would surrender themselves unreservedly to “the self-governance of Logos” (the heavenward aspiration, the eschaton of modern technology), to the autonomous system

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<sup>69</sup> He is addressing his sexbot.

<sup>70</sup> Moreover, his critique of “[t]he life of the underworld” – which, though it retains, through its connection with crime, a more robust sexuality than the life of the offices, “is not to be envied” – can easily be applied to the vision of a society which has underwent the process of hypersexualisation. After all, such a society can also be said to have “lost a certain vital resilience without which humanity could sink too low.” Similarly, both the underworld and the algorithmic stratum “exploit a complete loss of self-control, unimaginatively and in a way that minimises apprehension for the future. Having submitted unrestrainedly to the pleasure of losing self-control,” both the underworld and the algorithmic stratum have “made lack of control into a constant state with neither savour nor interest.” (*Erotism*, p. 244).

of transcendent arrangements which, in taking over the function (though not the position) of the subject, objectifies them instead, distancing them from the extreme limit precisely by limiting their existence to a sprawling indifference, to the basic immanence of repetitive bodily pleasures, which are not to be equated with the immanence of the body – the latter, as the story of Packer exemplifies, is an opening, a broadening of the horizon.

All in all, then, the purpose of the virus is to offer resistance, to push back against the plane of abolition, which steadily envelops the world, undifferentiating it in the process. Having had the virus introduced into itself, the circuitry is expected to generate “a new incomparability of the sexes, impossible to deconstruct” – “[...] men must now become monstrous, more different than different, and so seduction shall resume, so Eros shall arise” – “Every copulation will be fraught with fear; repugnance and violence and violation shall suffuse all sexual acts, and sex WILL become shameful again, and we SHALL continue in sin that grace may abound.”

We have spoken before about how difference initiates differentiation: about how transcendence is different from immanence, and how, moreover, transcendent arrangements differ between themselves. Similarly, life is different from inanimate matter, and particular organisms differ between themselves, too, but it is only with the appearance of the *sexual* difference that being “more different than different” becomes possible, although it is not yet guaranteed. Likewise, the subject apprehends all objects as different from itself – the erotic object, however, is different from both the subject and other objects – in fact, neither the subject nor the object perseveres throughout an erotic experience. Of additional importance is the thought that, should one accept Bataille’s genealogy of death-consciousness – which identifies its source precisely in the

fact that sexual reproduction spells death for the reproducing organisms – it follows that if, within a given consciousness, sexuality and reproduction become disentangled, then the extent to which that consciousness is a death-consciousness diminishes. No taboo, no sanctity, no meaningful relation to death. The hypersexualised “experiencing machines,” drifting from one simulated stimulation to another, eventually get reduced to the level of difference at which asexually reproducing organisms exist. After all, how could a strong sense of eroticism prevail when sexual indulgence becomes just a pleasure amongst pleasures – just another thing one does to kill time (to distract oneself from mortality, the vivifying mortality of enchantment)?

Despite the convincing enactment of a fetishistic sexual act remaining outside of the algorithmic possibilities, the eroticism of a world with a search engine for fetishes raises no stakes – it is driven by force of habit (enforcing itself, *reinforcing* itself by the ubiquity of pornographic “experience,” which takes advantage of neurochemical animality and manufactures loops of sexual frustration) rather than the force of actual transgression, which is a challenge even as it reinforces the infringed-upon taboo. Thus, as differences sink into an uninhibited homogeneity, the possibility of a being that could be “more different than different” – whose difference could not be reduced to interchangeability or customisation – recedes, ever more surely, past the horizon. The sexually transmitted mutagen, aside from raising the stakes of sexuality again, returns being “more different than different” to the world, albeit in a changed, many-tentacled shape – here, the primal confusion of desire and disgust reappears as well – it is the sacred confusion of tremendous fascination – both the right- and left-hand sacred, both the awareness of taboo (disgust) and the charm of transgression (desire).

Most importantly, however, the virus paves the way for humanity to (at some

point) rediscover – on the other side of screen hypnosis, of neurochemical animality, of cool immanence – transcendence once again. In its infinite recurrence, the labyrinth ensures that the pendulous continuum of transcendence and immanence reoccurs across different scales: as above, so below.

To sum up: the exile of sovereignty into an otherworld beyond the labyrinth has ultimately led to the transformation of the cosmos into the universe, divinity's tomb, the stale air of which is permeated by a lingering doubt regarding order – by the impossibility of answering the question whether humanity orders or is being ordered. Today, the development of artificial intelligence technologies introduces a new prospect of resolving this epistemological tension. Since, as things stand, the difference between arranging and being arranged refuses, as far as human destiny is concerned, to become discernible, an entity capable of incorporating humanity into an order of things – one that would transcend it – can be introduced into the world. In other words, the known can be forced upon the unknowable, so that even though the latter would remain undisclosed, its contamination by a particle of knowledge would render it – if only partially – knowable.

Perhaps nowhere is a manoeuvre of this kind portrayed better than in Gombrowicz's "Adventures," wherein the various exploits of the intrepid protagonist include him being used as a "probe" plunged into the unknown. In this particular section of the story, the mischievous antagonist locks him in a "steel sphere" that is then jettisoned into "the deepest trench in the world," the impenetrability of which (the darkness of the humanly inaccessible abyss) bestows upon its mystery an almost metaphysical allure. "So it was not at all surprising that he [the antagonist] wanted to *find out*, and that tomorrow at this time... tomorrow he really would know, through

seventeen kilometers of water, that I was squirming on the ocean bed, and without showing it outwardly, he would possess the secret of the depths,” and tomorrow at this time he would be “reveling in the thought that he now knew what happens down on that unattainable ocean floor, that he had imposed his will on it, that he had sent down a probe, that he had warmed and possessed that cold and alien floor by means of my torture.”<sup>71</sup>

Gropingly installing something known in the hidden fold of the world is akin to letting an artificially intelligent divinity (a god-machine) loose in that both actions indicate a violation of the unknowability of the universe. Furthermore – since the algorithmic stratum is the coming-true of myth, both in the sense of perfecting the interceptive movement of mythic usurpation, and in the sense of putting something back on the long-forsaken throne of divinity – humankind’s submission to what becomes transcendent to it (despite remaining immanent to *this* world) reverts the universe to a cosmic status, snapping it to a grid, inscribing it into an artificially divine order.<sup>72</sup>

In its coming, however, truth brings – to myth, and thus to the world – disenchantment, nudity (destitute rather than arousing), misery: the challenge implicit in

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<sup>71</sup> Gombrowicz, “Adventures,” trans. Bill Johnston, *Words Without Borders*, August issue, (2004), <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/adventures> (7 March 2022).

<sup>72</sup> An online phenomenon is symptomatic of this process. It goes like this: an algorithm suggests a given piece of content to a large number of a site’s users, none of whom are able to guess what exactly had led the algorithm to draw a connection between the said content and the algorithm’s models of these users’ preferences. They comment on this, often jokingly thanking the algorithm for pointing them towards something that they do, in fact, happen to like. The creators of that particular piece of content are likewise grateful, and understandably so. After all, they have been blessed – they, not the innumerable hosts of others, come into the spotlight – they have been chosen, and the sudden shot at popularity is indeed not unlike a divine intervention. It is also, however, how they become co-opted by the system which takes no breaks from its attempts at “monopolizing human attention.” In a way, such conditions make it possible to speak of a game of chance, of a timid version of Borges’ lottery – timid, because only certain areas of everyday life are involved in it, at least for now. Moreover, the kind of chance at play is merely rational, probabilistic, concerned – first and foremost – with the accuracy of measurement, of the artificially generated models of the human beings whose wounded core is denied existence because of its unaccountability. In short, the game is cold, and the only approximation of destiny it can muster is an abstraction of fate, a marketplace of calculations.

the unknown is rendered invalid in the face of it being knowable that an objectively existent entity transcends us. The sovereigns who, in the past, partook in the splendour of divinity, had to impose their affinity with the heavens upon the world: the reciprocal challenge of *ipseities* demanded it. In stark contrast, the algorithmic stratum does not participate in this challenge. It simply *is* – an object of knowledge.

To add insult to injury, one cannot be truly seduced by a myth the movement of which has been laid bare to the point of being stripped of the very capability to effect attraction – in other words, by a myth that has been reduced to an abstract operation performed on sets of data. (In *God-shaped Hole*, the preclusion of being seduced – as in, led astray, made to veer off course – is given a literal form: the headwear that allows its user to become immersed in prefabricated surroundings is also responsible for making sure that the user does not run into inconsistencies between the different – physical and augmented/virtual – realities. And since “[a]nything that happens between saccades is invisible,” the device uses “those micromoments” to “subtly shift the world to the left or the right without its wearer noticing. The body subconsciously corrects for this, and the mask steers its wearer wherever he ought to go.”)

A proliferation of exercises in mathematics eats away at the human world and leaves in its wake an indifferent reality – no, an *image* of an indifferent reality. As we have seen, the absence of myth is a myth, too, and thus the image, which is in fact better described as an image of indifference in the face of reality, is also an interception: to capture it in action it suffices to imagine the poet in “Terror” unmoved by his experience, shrugging at how obvious the insignificance of everything is. Horror is not the truth, but neither is “the vision of numbers,” which would see the world “knowable and whole,” and the promise of which is not a rapture, but lethargy.

Such, then, is the future of transcendence, as it presents itself to us today, in the wake of artificial intelligence: without a doubt, the matrix is – faithfully to its etymology – a womb, and a new kind of monstrosity, one born of the insomnia of reason, is bound to join the denizens of the labyrinth. But as to what exactly is the pinnacle of human transcendence (the internet being, after all, a stepping stone on the path to rendering the delirium of thought objective) pregnant with, the question remains open to a variety of answers, some of which we have discussed in this chapter, and some of which are arguably more feasible than others. We can, however, say some things with a degree of certainty.

In the tissue of everyday signs – the weave of familiarity, of automatism, of the known – the familiar is raised to the *n*th power as it gets caught in the loop of models based on models based on models and so on. So-called spontaneity, which is the automatic expression of preconceived patterns of behaviour, paved the way to an engineering of automatisms. The social erosion of pathways leading to experiences of immanence (of ways to experience the wound, immanence being, for us, a violent separation from the signs that determine our everyday lives – in short, from transcendent arrangements) leaves us, as we have seen, in the poverty of a “[l]ife restrained to its intelligible operations [...],”<sup>73</sup> the logic of which leads inadvertently to the feedback-looped generation of models that are expected to produce a map more perfect than the territory: a (superficial) image of human totality, the (virtually) complete dataset, “all states of thought and feeling possible to human animals,” “bodies and oceans [...] knowable and whole.”

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<sup>73</sup> Bataille, “Aphorisms for the ‘System,’” in: *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 159.

Needless to say, this is merely an advanced stage of the treachery of language, the treachery of word and image lines, of image and sound tracks. The act of treason lies, first and foremost, in the fact that elucidation – the act of bringing to light – becomes, at some point of flooding the world in luminescence, an overexposure, an image that fails to account for either the night or what is already an illumination, a lightning flash of ecstasy. Therefore, the human being betrays itself through the denial of inner or mystical experience, implicit in the reduction of all experience to the models of neurochemical interactions, a reduction which renders inner experience profane – an experience *not* unlike any other, which is to say: commodifiable. Of course, just as tourism, which is the commodified experience of travel, is not in fact travel, designer ecstasy – which will be the commodified inner experience – will not be inner experience.

The danger lurks in the fact that models obscure the extreme limit of the possible, cutting one off from the chance of journeying towards it. Just as in the case of the naturalisation of sexuality tearing down eroticism, what we are looking at is the threat of no experiences being allowed to resist (in the communal arrangement of conceptualisations) the imperative to explain away (to obscure), dictated by the regime of transcendental progress – be it technological, scientific, or social – evolving self-destructively towards the efficiency of control, which is likely to replace transcendent dominion with real-time, automated pattern adjustment, achieved through whatever means that develop themselves on the basis of technologies that today make it possible to daily expose millions of people to mass-produced narratives. We should be loathe to forget that the language virus is inseparable from the proliferation of images, which simply means that the shift from written word to sensations transferred across the algorithmic stratum is just as likely – if not more – to facilitate the viral replication of



habit inhabitants – of the mythic usurpers.

Let us recall that, in Shklovsky's assessment, familiarity thrives on automatisms, and their encroaching influence is to be countered with art-as-device, art as the de-ossifying function performed through enstrangement, or defamiliarisation. Likewise, in Bataille's formulation, "*poetry leads from the known to the unknown.*"<sup>74</sup> However, as Małgorzata Nitka notices, the development of railroad transportation during the Industrial Revolution was inconspicuously accompanied by a "metaphorical revolution," necessitated by the need to dispossess reluctant people of their distrust, and thus to present novel inventions in terms that would neutralise their alarming unfamiliarity. Hence, once "pressed into the service of technology, metaphor was no longer a vehicle of defamiliarisation. Diverted from its usual course, rather than to defamiliarise an object or phenomenon, metaphor familiarised it, gave the new and strange the appearance of the common and known [...]"<sup>75</sup> Indeed, not only does technology (which is knowledge put to work) breed automatism, it also intercepts whatever aspires to heterogeneity. Of course, language is a stratigraphy of not just dead, but even fossilised metaphors, and they have been used for purposes of description and explanation for thousands of years. The problem lies elsewhere, namely, in efforts that abuse metaphor, that change it from a bridge into a stitch, sewing map onto territory while claiming that the map has always actually been the territory, and thus homogenising.

The propagation of the already-discussed transhumanist dream to upload the mind onto an immutable vessel serves as an illustrative example. It is, after all, merely a

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<sup>74</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p. 136.

<sup>75</sup> Małgorzata Nitka, "Of Metaphors and Machines," in: *Organs, Organisms, Organisations: Organic Form in 19th-Century Discourse*, ed. Tadeusz Rachwał and Tadeusz Sławek (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 42.

process by which the uncertainty of the otherworld, which remains in proximity to the unknown (it defamiliarises the world even as it familiarises the beyond by projecting an otherworld onto it), is familiarised, reduced to the known, albeit in a possibly enhanced or prolonged shape. Moreover, the metaphor of “uploading” the mind is dependent on the larger metaphors at play, that is, the metaphor of the body as a container for the mind (which is itself metaphorically understood as a container for thoughts and memories), and the metaphor of organisms as computers, which rephrases the mind and body dualism in terms of software and hardware, and which participates in the greater assemblage of enunciation that remakes the image of the world by speaking of it as if it was a machine made of machines made of machines and so on. We do not mean to invoke in this context Deleuze and Guattari’s abstract machine, but a literal machine, a tool, an object that is made so as to exploit other objects more efficiently, an object that is forced into a position of analogy with the organ, which is similarly forced – just as the body itself – into the “organic organisation,” the mechanic counterpart of which is the blueprint, the assembly instruction. In other words, what we are discussing is a vision of tools made of tools made of tools and so forth – a vision of the world as *just* a machine. This fundamental reduction paves the way for further familiarisations, and so the mind becomes a program, a file to be copied and pasted, and the mystery of consciousness is glossed over, implicitly disregarded as not mysterious at all: it arises, one states, from the interplay of chemicals; it emerges, another claims, as a function of complexity, but neither can truly *know* it, because *notions* of consciousness becloud *lucid* consciousness.

To reiterate: even if consciousness is assumed to not be transcendent in relation to matter, no interpretative framework can exhaust experience – experiences *are not* the neurochemical reactions that accompany them, and that can be measured, represented,

and simulated. The violence of inner experience – our experience of the heterogeneous, our closest, most intimate brush with what *is* heterogeneous, and which therefore evades all language – cannot be accounted for within a system of thought that leaves no space for what it is not. The sacred cannot be grasped profanely, but those who would – on this basis – disavow the sacred entirely, damn themselves to engendering a wasteland. It might just happen to be an augmented limbo, or a virtual paradise; a metempsychosis of digital breaths – or of post-human things thinking themselves into the supposed state of consciousness of a digital breath – circulating throughout panoramas of pneumatic consumerism, a system of cold consumption, cold immanence, and cold seduction.

Moreover, what the vision represented in *God-shaped Hole* ultimately implies is that without a strong sense of transcendence, which enables (an experience of) transgression, life cleansed of “intelligible operations” is as wretched as a life that is reduced to them. In other words, the story corroborates Bataille’s assertion that suffering “a preliminary laceration from the transcendent system of activity” is necessary for immanence to be ecstatic (to be a wound that betrays the appearance of completeness given to reality by the order of things and their productive manipulation, or to be, within the composition of apparent wholeness, the hole that empties into the night) rather than oblivious, to eject the subject – along with the objects to which one is subjected – rather than make it pliant. Zero HP Lovecraft’s text provides us with plenty of examples that illustrate how a languid repose in the lap of algorithmically generated luxury – the life of a once-human “experiencing machine” – forecloses such a laceration.

The time for conclusions is fast approaching, but let us first devote an additional chapter to a proof of concept that will sketch out some prospects for future research that could continue using the conceptual apparatus we have worked with here.

## CHAPTER 12: THEMES OF TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE IN OTHER VIDEO GAME NARRATIVES

*“In the time before kith invented time, or mathematics, or architecture, an insular tribe of goatherds dwelt at the bottom of a steep mountain valley. They made their homes in caves on sheer cliffsides, and when the sun set, they watched the stars wheel through the void of night. In their watching, they developed a theory of the nature of things, and so began a quest to make it true.*

*– The History of Eora, Volume IX: The Birth of Engwith”<sup>1</sup>*

We have already spoken of Vivec, a deity in the universe of *The Elder Scrolls* video game series, featured prominently in its third instalment, *Morrowind*. As has been explained before, his divinity – and that of the two other members of the godly Tribunal ruling over the eponymous realm of Morrowind – was not, in fact, essentially his, but rather drawn from an external source: the heart of a truly divine being, the heart of a god who had managed, at the dawn of time, to trick a group of other actual gods into bringing forth, out from the flux of forces, a stable, physical world, and populating it with mortal races.

The apotheosis of the three members of the Tribunal was achieved through a combination of magical and technological means – although it can be argued that, in a world that has magic, studying it is not different from science, and thus magical abilities can be considered as an aspect of that world’s technology, which is, after all, knowledge put to work. Therefore, one could simply say that the essence of the trickster-turned-

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<sup>1</sup> *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire*, Windows PC version, Obsidian Entertainment, 2018.

creator's heart was harvested with the use of technology. It follows, then, that the corporeally immanent divinity of the heart was enclosed within a transcendent arrangement, an assemblage the function of which was to turn that immanent force into an exploitable resource, an object not of reverence (which, in a sense, distorts the objecthood of an object by ascribing to it an inhuman subjectivity), but of abuse.

Thanks to the power gleaned from the putting-of-the-heart-into-the-standing-reserve, the members of the Tribunal deify themselves and form an apparatus of political, administrative, and religious domination. In fact, it is the epitome of transcendence: having found what was arguably the beating heart of the world, the three mortals saw it as the ultimate resource (*the* resource) and deigned to utilise it, thus crossing the boundaries that had hitherto constrained them to the level of mortal existence. Moreover, since the use they have made of the heart was not a part of a previously established religious framework, their infraction upon the heart's immanent existence cannot be regarded in terms of a transgression – in other words, their actions did not amount to a ritual. Instead, what they did was nothing but profanation, an act of putting the heart to productive work. Regardless of whether it was possible for those who would come to believe in the gods of the Tribunal, the gods themselves could in no way have an experience of an immanent sacred – if anything, their objectification of the heart had strengthened their subjectivity. Accordingly, then, theirs was a cult of personality. Hence, their ascent into godhood was purely transcendent, but only because they achieved it, firstly, by the application of technology, and secondly, in order to gain dominion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the player character is a reincarnation of Morrowind's national hero, who was, in fact, betrayed and secretly slain by the members of the Tribunal, who had to get him out of the way so as to have unrestricted access to the heart. The player experiences the reincarnated hero's discovery of who he is, and of what he has to do – in short, the game takes the player through the discovery of the hero's

As it happens, a similar theme has emerged in a number of video games – a paranoid, gnostic theme of gods turning out to be impostors, parasites, usurpers. It seems, as we shall soon see, that whenever apotheosis is achieved by mortals (or other beings that did not use to be divine), the act perpetuates – inflames, even – the subject-object relation as it exists in the paradigm of tools, use-making, technology. The moment a person *becomes* a god (as in, was not always already a god), they assume the position of the master, which is a position that appears exclusively conceivable in opposition to those who *remain* mortal (or otherwise ungodly) and who are now dominated; conceivable, then, as a position of the one who organises regardless of whether there is a will to be an organ or not. What will follow shortly is by no means meant to exhaust the possible manifestations of this theme. Instead, we will focus on delineating its presence in three games released in the 2010s: *Pillars of Eternity*,<sup>3</sup> *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire*, and *Divinity: Original Sin II*.<sup>4</sup> The theme which concerns us is involved in the plots of all three of these games, and they portray it in ways that parallel each other (the games are also alike for a number of reasons: they are fantasy role-playing games with similar mechanics and gameplay, but these similarities are, all in all, outside of the scope of our current interest).

Let us begin with the world of *Pillars of Eternity*, the lore of which we will discuss on the basis of both parts of the series – though the first instalment features the plot twist that reveals the imposture of the gods, it is *Deadfire* that elaborates on the details of the system they imposed upon the world.

The “goatherds” of which the motto of this chapter speaks – the ones who, having destiny, which is fulfilled in a prophesied victory in a number of ritual trials. In a way, then, the player character embodies “the tragic immanence of rules and rituals.”

<sup>3</sup> *Pillars of Eternity*, Windows PC version, Obsidian Entertainment, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> *Divinity: Original Sin II*, Windows PC version, Larian Studios, 2017.

“watched the stars wheel through the void of night,” grew determined to see the world change in accordance with their “theory of the nature of things” – have indeed become gods. But, just as the members of *Morrowind*’s Tribunal, they also went to great lengths to ensure that the origin of their divinity would remain a mystery, and they, too, achieved their goal of becoming gods – of *making* the nature of things such as they theorised it to be (of hanging themselves so as to be sure that they are being hung) – through technology, which in this world encompasses magic. More specifically, once they established an empire, they proceeded to attain mastery over a technology of metaphysics (which is featured in the game as a skill available for the player character). This allowed them to build metaphysical machinery, a machinery by which the unstable movement of souls was stabilised: souls – which were hitherto somewhat inert, often dissipating after bodily death, or failing to saturate a newborn child, leaving it “hollowborn” – were directed into “the Wheel,” a steady circulation between wordly incarnations and a pneumatic, otherworldly channel, which, moreover, started serving as an energy source for the erstwhile “goatherds,” who had thus collectively coalesced into a pantheon of gods residing beyond the world and thence enveloping it in their own mythology and cult.

Clearly, then, this metaphysics of reincarnation was established in the mode of transcendent domination, and it indeed appeared as a result of the inefficiency of an immanent circuit, which – though it is concerned with souls – can be deemed immanent in a world that leaves no room for doubt that souls exist as a form of energy, which can, furthermore, be harnessed technologically and manipulated transcendentally. Activating the soul engine founded an order of things and simultaneously ensured that it had the energetic resource – into which the previously immanent soul energy was

reconceptualised – to render that order eternal. The goatherds-turned-gods, similarly to the members of the Tribunal in *Morrowind*, secured for themselves a purely transcendent divinity.

Again, the fact that the gods turned out to be mortals who have deceitfully immortalised themselves did not make it impossible for their believers to experience the sacred through these self-made deities, but only as long as one remained in the dark regarding their god's true origin – indeed, the games address the crises of faith that were inevitably sparked off by making such a discovery.

More importantly, however, even the fact that setting the metaphysical machinery into motion required taking the lives – the soul energy – of an entire civilisation (whose capital city was tricked into housing the machines constructed by the soon-to-be gods), it did not constitute an act of sacrifice. “Sacrifice falls into the forms of project, but only in appearance [...]. A rite is the divining of a hidden necessity (remaining forever obscure). And whereas, in project, the result alone counts, in sacrifice, it is in the act itself that value is concentrated.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, then, the case we are currently discussing falls completely under the umbrella of project, for “result alone” mattered to the soul engineers. No “hidden necessity” that would, in the end, remain “forever obscure,” was divined: approached in an obliterating lightning flash released in the instant of the sacrificed victims’ death. Starting the machine was merely a procedure – albeit a genocidal one – that set the world in order and put it to work, and the memory of those whose lives were taken as fuel was carefully suppressed. On the contrary, the engineers have installed *themselves* into a godhood beyond the world (they have, in fact, made of themselves a “hidden necessity” that would come to be divined by their worshippers). In

<sup>5</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p. 137.



this respect, apotheosis through transcendent technologies is on the same spectrum as plunging a man locked inside a metal sphere down to the depths of the ocean. The same is true of the algorithmic stratum because of the prospects opened up by its development, namely, prospects of handing control of the world over to artificially intelligent code running behind the curtain of immanent screen hypnosis.

True to Nick Land and Sadie Plant's characterisation of the relationship between, on the one hand, a power that dominates a circuit, and on the other, control that distributes itself on the said circuit, the machinery of "the Wheel" (which is an instrument of domination and a source of power) is open to misuse. The main quest of the first *Pillars of Eternity* revolves around a secret plot concocted by one of the gods. The plot involves preventing souls from connecting with newborns so as to accumulate their energy, which would then be used to dominate the entire pantheon. This plugging-up of the metempsychotic channel effects a spike in the percentage of "hollowborn" children, and it is the fate of the souls that should have ended up in these children that is ultimately decided by the player character. The details of this choice are entangled in the player character's previous decisions, including an alliance he or she enters with one of the other gods, and which he or she can either honour or break. In other words, the player character receives an opportunity to steer a particular portion of soul energy into a direction he or she sees fit.

The main quest of the second instalment of the series, *Deadfire*, broadens the scope of responsibility shouldered by the player character (who is, story-wise, the same person who went through the events portrayed in the first game), in that he or she is tasked with, first, identifying the agenda of another god, Eothas (who had assumed a physical, colossal form, and was seen travelling across the Deadfire archipelago towards

an unknown destination), and second, doing whatever is in the player character's power to stop him, for his intentions are revealed to be as follows. He is heading towards the ancient city in which the physical components of the metaphysical machinery are present (the long-deserted ancient city the population of which was imploded into the engine). The purpose of his journey – which the player character is, all in all, unable to halt – is to destroy the machine, to “break the Wheel.” The player character learns of this once he or she catches up to Eothas in one of the game's locations, allowing Eothas to announce the nature of his endeavour:

I will leave this place and go to the lost city [...]. It is there that all souls pass through the machines of the gods, where all souls pass into the Beyond before beginning their next life. When I reach that place, I will find our great machines and tear them to pieces. I will smash the Great Wheel [...]. And when my work is done, I will leave this world forever.

Upon being asked whether this means that he is “ending the rule of the gods,”

Eothas responds:

It is not for me to decide if the gods should remain in power. That will be for your kind, for mortals, to decide. Both gods and mortals alike rely on the Wheel. We depend on it for the souls that give us power. Mortals depend on it for the lives of future generations. Breaking it will force all of us to face the truth. We will fail together or move forward together. Either ending is preferable to the cycle we still find ourselves in.

To level the playing field is, therefore, Eothas' aim – he wishes to destroy the system that locks the mortals into a position of unalterable inferiority, but which also makes both gods and mortals dependent on the status quo, the cycle that keeps, on the one hand, the gods in power, and on the other, the mortals in the gods' power.

In a sense, Eothas is a true revolutionary: by attacking the established order of things, he is trying to reduce the magnitude of transcendence separating mortals from gods – he strives to strike down the mighty – but he refrains, at the same time, from

what compromises revolutionary efforts, namely, the need to rebuild, to switch from sovereign rebellion to the projects of a new administration. Granted, he could easily be accused of hypocrisy, given that he is planning on washing his hands of any responsibility for what happens once “the Wheel” is broken, even though it can cause the soul energy of the world to deplete itself: to leak out of the world and leave it barren, lifeless. There are two possible rebuttals of this indictment. Firstly, he is more than willing – should the player character elect to suggest it to him – to channel a vast amount of energy to mortal metaphysicians so as to inspire them in their quest for a new way of sustaining the world. Secondly, yet more importantly, Eothas is not a reformist. His actions are not to be confused with attempts at saving the world – he is not even trying to *save* the mortals. Rather, recognising that “the Wheel” is the indispensable piece in the puzzle that bestows upon the gods an unfair advantage, he destroys it in order to fundamentally redefine the relationship between gods and mortals in more equal terms; to pit them not against each other, but together against the threat of a common end; to thrust mortals and gods alike into sharing an unprecedented death-consciousness, a consciousness of the fact that what spells death for mortals, now spells it for the gods as well. In other words, in tearing down the edifice of the usurpers’ transcendence, Eothas is calling for mortals to rise to the challenge of sovereignty: to risk death rather than accept slavery. What this entails is that, as far as the gods are concerned, Eothas alone stands tall among their ranks, having single-handedly posed the very same challenge to them, too, and having, most importantly, chosen to renounce the role of the master and risk death himself.

Let us move on to *Divinity: Original Sin 2*. In this instance, the gods are not really technological in their transcendence, but they are, nonetheless, impostors, usurpers.

Their portrayal is, additionally, more explicitly parasitic, vampiric.

Throughout the game, the player accompanies his or her character in discovering things that change the character's understanding of the (game) world itself. First, the player character learns that they have been chosen by the god associated with their race (the setting being fantasy, this pertains to humans, elves, dwarves, and so on) and thus destined to become "the Divine" – an entity that is to gather within itself an unheard-of quantity of "Source," a magical energy not unlike a soul, possessed in small amounts by all living things, but available to those known as "Sourcerers" as a wellspring of unique abilities. Next, the given god gifts the player character with a special skill that allows them to feed on the Source of other creatures. The skill is aptly called "Source Vampirism," and whichever god has the player character under its wing displays – while teaching the skill to the player character – its vampire fangs. This foreshadows a subsequent discovery regarding the real nature of the gods, who turn out to be the victors of a civil war that destroyed an ancient civilisation of immortal, though not divine, beings. It is disclosed, much to the gods' chagrin, that when they were still simply a group of aristocrats in that ancient society (which is to say, before the appearance of mortal races), a scholar held in high esteem had discovered a veil insulating the world from the void outside, which was, however, not void at all – it was, instead, infused with "the Source." Going against the wishes of their king, the seven aristocrats somehow managed to draw "the Source" into the world and use it to, firstly, expel almost the entirety of their race into the void, and secondly, to create the mortal races in an effort to form a system somewhat reminiscent of "the Wheel" that served the gods in *Pillars of Eternity*, the difference being, however, that the latter had a function that benefited the mortals, too, whereas in this case, the bare fact of mortal existence was in its essence –

as we shall see in a moment – exploitative.

The player character is at one point described by one of the several ancients who had eluded exile into the void as “[...] a simple form, at its core: a Source vat. A walking, unfortunately talking, Source vat,” which was, like all mortals, “designed to be defective” – “built to die,” so that its “Source” can be “extracted.”

In other words, once godhood was theirs, each of the gods created a race in his or her image, a race the sole purpose of which was to perpetuate “the Source” – to reproduce mortal, finite containers for the vampiric gods’ nourishment. A different character describes the relationship between mortals and gods in the following way:

While we worship them as saviours, they feed on us like cattle. It is all of our Source that keeps them alive. They consume the very lifeblood of individuals, families, villages, kingdoms – all so that they may live on in perpetuity [...]. The Gods are thieves, and we their victims. [...] The Gods are masters, and we their slaves.

Once again, then, the matter at hand relates closely to the issue of power and control, of domination and circuitry. Initially, the gods have power over mortals, but they are defeated by the player character during the course of the game, and a power vacuum ensues. Depending on the player character’s choices, the game can end with either there being a new master or “the Source” becoming distributed evenly among the liberated mortals, thus evening the odds.

In sum, both *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire* and *Divinity: Original Sin II* put their respective player characters in similar situations predicated on the existence of gods who *turn out to be* (the essential paranoid experience) impostors, as in the case of the former game, or parasites, as in the latter example (both represent the essential gnostic experience). In either of them, however, the gods are truly transcendent, that is, they are *not* a “hidden necessity (remaining forever obscure)” – on the contrary, they are

necessary only insofar as they manage to uphold a system within the boundaries of which they appear to be necessary; moreover, the duplicity inherent to their divinity is ultimately uncovered.

The three games – *Morrowind*, *Deadfire*, and *Divinity* – illustrate how, in a culture that persists, despite its secularisation, to honour a notion of transcendence tied with a promise of an otherworldly escape, a critique of this notion can emerge in a narrative form, one compatible with a Bataillean understanding of transcendence as the sum total of profane operations that serve accumulation. Put another way, the games show their players the accumulative character of transcendence, or the *alien* salience of systems.

Since we have managed to conduct a short discussion on the theme of transcendence, let us now speak, albeit briefly, of the theme of immanence, and how certain patterns of poetic association persist – or even offer themselves eagerly – in the evocation of what remains of immanence in the human world, especially of the left-hand sacred, and of the experience of heterogeneity.

As fate would have it, we can again glean an example from *Divinity: Original Sin II*, which utilises the basic opposition of flesh and spirit in order to represent demonic qualities. More specifically, it is the rampancy of flesh – its propensity towards uncontrollable growth (which, as we should remember, has the potential to disturb us even in its common forms, which are thus abjectly charged: nails, hair, earwax, and so on) – that is used to convey demonic influence. Thus, when the player character reaches an island infested with a large demonic presence, he or she is forced to wade, ankle- or even knee-deep, through meat, which also wraps itself around trees, rocks, and ruins, weaving a vascular web, growing a pustule here or a tentacle there. The demons themselves, in turn – though they bear a humanoid shape – manifest as skinless

silhouettes of exposed muscle.

This imagery of unleashed flesh is, once again, connected – for us, the players – with a gnostic experience of matter as the site of sin: as a material sculpted by the demiurge and, therefore, as a conduit for evil. Therefore, an entire island overgrown with proud flesh points towards – through the unspirited animation of meat – heterogeneity, and the implicit threat that the body (an organism always at the risk of losing its functional differentiation to a cancerous mess of metastatic cells) poses to transcendent arrangements.

Let us continue to other examples. It goes without saying that the collective patterns of immanent experience are often bound with modes of femininity – we have seen how Bataille explored this in his narrative works.

Although monsters that are featured in video games are frequently designed by altering, relocating, or multiplying parts of bodies which were not necessarily human to begin with, many of the most notable creations take the human female as their starting point. As Sarah Stang notices, this continues a long-standing tradition of what she calls – after Barbara Creed – the “monstrous-feminine,” identifiable in imaginings as early as those of the sphinx or the sirens. In her research,<sup>6</sup> Stang applies Julia Kristeva’s writings on abjection and Creed’s psychoanalytic techniques of film analysis to those video games that carry such conceptualisations into their medium. Her view on the subject can be summarised by saying that the monstrous transformations of the feminine form are hallucinated by the gaze of the male who fears the female body, which is, in many cultures, burdened with the odium of flesh, and hence contrasted with the rationality of

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Stang, “Shrieking, Biting, and Licking: The Monstrous-Feminine in Video Games,” *Press Start*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2018), pp. 18-34. See also: Sarah Stang, “The Broodmother as Monstrous-Feminine: Subject Maternity in Video Games,” *Nordlit*, No. 42 (2019), pp. 233-256.

men, with the dream of disencumbering oneself of corporeality.

We would, however, prefer to follow a different line of thought, one inspired by Sadie Plant's affirmation of the feminine difference, which necessarily disturbs sensibilities that are overly dependent on a limited rationality, a rationality sometimes inseparable from the blight of common sense. Having in mind, therefore, Plant's assertions – that “female sexuality is always in excess of anything that could be called ‘her own,’” and that women exist “on and as the interface between man and matter, identity and difference, one and zero, the actual and the virtual,”<sup>7</sup> and, let us add, the transcendent and the immanent – we would like to provide a short description of another character, an antagonist from another video game. We propose that it is precisely through being channelled from a hostile position that an experience of heterogeneity, which is in this game a feminine sacred, can be maintained without becoming reduced to what is familiar, known, knowable.

In *Vampyr*,<sup>8</sup> the player character is a doctor who, upon returning to London from the front lines of World War I, finds his city ridden with the Spanish Flu, and is, moreover, turned into a vampire by a mysterious figure. As the doctor does his best to find both his bearings in a topsy-turvy reality, and a way to end the epidemic, he eventually discovers that the most horrible plagues that have ever occurred were, in truth, linked to a primordial entity whose elemental presence is bound with blood. The doctor also learns that he was transformed into a vampire by a similar, ancient entity, one born from the “terrible womb” of that even older being. The true nature of either of these beings is purposefully clouded and is only ever approximated. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>7</sup> Sadie Plant, “The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics,” *Body and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 3-4 (1995), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> *Vampyr*, Windows PC version, Dontnod Entertainment, 2018.



entity that has turned the doctor acknowledges that it has, at a certain time, been known as Myrddin Wyltt – as Merlin – but is quick to highlight the inadequacy of trying to think of him in humanly nameable terms. Myrddin informs the doctor that he had chosen the latter as his champion in an age-old conflict waged by Myrddin and the primeval entity of which he speaks thusly:

She is the Red Goddess. The Queen of Blood. In my youth, a hundred lifetimes ago, she was worshipped as Morrigan. She is my mother. She is yours too. [...] She has been worshipped in many forms throughout the ages. The true nature of the Red Queen is beyond comprehension, eluding even mine.

The Red Queen herself cannot be explained, she exceeds even the inhuman mind of her own spawn. Nonetheless, her influence upon the world can be identified. Once in several hundred years, she wakes from her profound slumber, and it is an event that is always accompanied by a contagious outbreak. Although it remains unknown “whether the Red Queen awakens when cursed mortals endure such epidemics, or if the contagions emerge like a curse as she awakes,” the source of the most virulent disease – the primary vector of the Red Queen’s destructive desire – lies always in the sickness of a woman scorned or spiteful. Indeed, even those carriers who – despite being further down the line of contagion – do not devolve into mindless, rampaging beasts, but are rather mutated into shapes that maximise contagiousness, are all female, “as if a male could not endure the metamorphosis.”

Vampirism itself is derived from this Queen of Blood and, by extension, from her spawn, including Myrddin. Though he is responsible for creating a supposedly large number of vampires over the centuries, he claims to have been guided by the will to protect the realm from his “vengeful mother.” Indeed, he even boasts of having made a champion of king Arthur, who, as we know, fought against Morrigan, the latter *turning*

*out to be* the Red Queen of hematic virulence.

Since the game is, firstly, devoted to blood and contagion, and secondly, embedded in legend and myth, we can see how these categories become interlinked. In other words, playing the game means playing out the metaphorical understanding of legend and myth as the lifeblood of human society. “I am the land,” says Myrddin, a mythical figure, a representation of the immanent life force of England. “I was never a man. I was born out of blood,” but “I’m not made of blood. I am blood.” And indeed, his appearance is that of blood gathered temporarily into the vague shape of a horned man looming in a blood-red fog, whereas the final battle with the Red Queen, which takes place in a sewer chamber, marks her presence with, firstly, the sewage turning into blood and flooding the chamber, and secondly, blood coagulating into an imposing female silhouette.

To sum up: blood – a bodily fluid which becomes abject the moment it crosses the borders of the (female) body; a sacred liquid that can both expiate and curse – becomes mythologised into a female-coded goddess-like figure, whose mode of existence is essentially bound with contagion, mutation, and generation, and who transmits these elements most generously to women. Granted, it is all too easy to interpret this – as Stang would do<sup>9</sup> – by bringing up Kristeva’s identification of the “[f]ear of the archaic mother” with the “fear of her generative power,”<sup>10</sup> and then accuse the game developers of harbouring this fear.

But it seems more interesting to recognise that the chains of association out of which the Red Queen is woven align with the thread that binds conduits of

<sup>9</sup> See: Stang, “The Broodmother as Monstrous-Feminine,” pp. 235-236.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 77.

heterogeneity. It seems more interesting, therefore, to notice that the Red Queen and other video game characters like her preserve the possibility of an experience – vicarious though it may be – of the heterogeneous. For this to be true, however, it cannot be the player character, nor should the player character be able to befriend or tame it, even though outright hostility is optional – a neutral or indifferent force is sometimes more distinctly *other* than an enemy. On the other hand, the presence of an enemy entails violence, and since the medium of video games allows the player to become affectively immersed and physiologically engaged in the player character's conflicts, the possible experience of that enemy's potential heterogeneous charge is more intense this way. In any case, there has to be an insurmountable barrier separating the player from thorough knowledge regarding the heterogeneously charged character: there has to be something that leaves the player guessing, something that makes complete understanding impossible, and thus enticing – seductive, as it were. And indeed, inasmuch as (the male) God is a projection of the known onto the unknowable, the known reaches its limit in her who can cut signs loose from the gridwork; in her who stands between – as Plant wrote – “man and matter,” between rational designs and the “generative power,” the restlessness of base matter (once again, we are at the crossroads between epistemology and eroticism, for this is the meaning of the roles played by women in Bataille's novels, wherein narratives construe an assemblage of a masochistic epistemology).

To sum up: if an entire video game builds up to a final encounter with a mysterious opponent of whom we learn little – though not too little – then it is as if we had a glimpse of something in excess of the world we know. A villainous figure, whose presence is mutually exclusive with rest or familiarity, can retain the heterogeneous charge that initiates an interplay of disgust and fascination. The latter cannot be satisfied

lest the former dissipate: *Divinity: Original Sin II* does nothing to *explain* the demonic flesh, and this lack of explanation is a condition for it be charged heterogeneously. The Red Queen fulfils the same condition by remaining an inexplicable force of anthropoperipheral nature (an ancient pagan terror), by maintaining the status of “a hidden necessity (remaining forever obscure).”

In a way, the desired effect (which can, of course, be achieved through a variety of designs) is like that of finding oneself in a labyrinth – of realising, first and foremost, that what surrounds one is a labyrinth, and that someone else is inside of this labyrinth, someone who contradicts one’s hitherto sound worldview. In other words, the player is to be confronted with a tension: with hanging (or being hung).

A suitable exemplification of this principle can be found in *Torment: Tides of Numenera*.<sup>11</sup> A section of the game takes place in the insides of an interdimensional organism, an incomprehensible creature known as the Bloom, for it does indeed bloom: not only is it an organic growth of such titanic proportions that its cavernous bowels host a city (a city of *stunning* flesh) inhabited by humans and other humanoid races, but it is also considered to be growing in more than three dimensions: it uses maw-like organs to open and close passages between a plethora of places, realms, dimensions, bridging them with tendrils of tissue and not hesitating to ingest whatever it deems interesting. For what it feeds on is not the meat of lesser creatures, but rather their auras, memories, emotions, ideas.

The Bloom is a world unto itself: a machine engaged in numerous openings and closings, changing its internal layout with utter disregard for the safety, health, and life of its dwellers. Moreover, to enter the world of this singular body is to risk a fate worse

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<sup>11</sup> *Torment: Tides of Numenera*, Windows PC version, inXile entertainment, 2017.

than death – those that the Bloom chooses to consume are slowly digested in the deeper chambers of its uncharted depths, drained to the point of becoming an almost incorporeal husk of a thought; a life no more, but rather a figment of personality playing itself on loop: “[...] nothing but word and image, an old film rolling on and on with dead actors.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, the majority of those that populate this monstrous locale are people who were driven to it out of necessity or desperation. On the other hand, the Bloom also offers an opportunity to those courageous enough to brave its malignant corridors: its maws are portals that can put an explorer on a path to riches, artefacts, knowledge, power, and so on. Re-entering a maw with something too extraordinary might, however, be the end of the seemingly fortunate adventurer.

Aside from the factor of an abject heterogeneity – stemming from the sights and sounds of the Bloom’s insides, which evoke animal flesh enduring various states of distress and mutilation – there is also, therefore, a creeping uncertainty that characterises the experience of traversing the Bloom.

After all, neither its origin nor its purpose are known, and so one senses oneself – through the player character – to be at the periphery of a universe that exceeds one’s existence to a degree which is itself unfathomable. As if to intensify such feelings, the player character is forced to travel through a number of maws, and rarely are the locations on their other end known beforehand. In other words, wandering about in the Bloom undermines one’s sense of agency in that a question imposes itself upon the wanderer: to what extent is his or her path predetermined in accordance with the inscrutable intentions of something else? To what extent is he or she steered in real time (as if by an all-encompassing illusion) towards a destination that was decided in advance

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<sup>12</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 91.

by a world that, as Kreia put it in reference to the Force, seems to have a will (thus manifesting the greatest fear known to the inhabitants of divinity's tomb)?

Being a sentient labyrinth, the Bloom represents a world to which God is truly immanent, a world literally made of God – if God is understood in the minotaurian terms delineated by Jeremy Biles, who, while discussing the connections between Bataille and Simone Weil (on whose influence upon Bataille's *Blue of Noon* Biles insists), demonstrates their common vision of the world as an intestinal labyrinth, arguing that “these two strange thinkers seek to be conceived of in an excremental register – as the dejecta of a monstrous, devouring God.”<sup>13</sup> One finds, among the many lines of flight which intersect in the Bloom, the line of becoming-always-already-excreted, but the disintegration that awaits those who get eaten by the Bloom is not the dissolution either Bataille or Weil would long for. Rather, the Bloom is hell (the hell of eternal hearsay, the hell of flesh becoming word), whereas the two “strange thinkers” were very much on the prowl for word becoming flesh, an experience inseparable from the rapture unleashed after a sacrificial fashion: “In being killed and devoured by the monster [...],” by the monstrous God of the labyrinth, “one identifies with the monster, and in being lost within the bowels of the monster, or excreted from them, one partakes of the contradiction of life and death,”<sup>14</sup> of the death harboured by life, and the life that cannot but be born of death. In stark contrast, the Bloom arrests the vicissitude, robbing its victims of death, condemning them to a life thinned-out, worn down, but not extinguished – a fate reminiscent of he who has no mouth, and yet has to scream.

Let us now conclude this chapter, which is by no means exhaustive as far as the

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<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 100.

themes of immanence and transcendence in video games are concerned. Rather, it merely indicates how these themes could be approached more broadly from the perspective developed throughout this entire work. Next, we will move on to conclusions proper.

Regardless, then, of the fact that the Bloom illustrates the dangers that are involved in the pursuit of dissolution and stem from the stratification of the intestinal labyrinth (just like the algorithmic stratum – of which the Bloom is an organic and openly maleficent version – shows the pitfalls with which the pursuit of immanence is fraught, such as the pitiful simplification it may lead to), the living maze, together with the Red Queen and other similar creations, nonetheless maintains the presence of (at least the notion of) immanent divinity in a civilisation deformed, firstly, by the Christian diminution of the sacred into its right-hand form – a change that excluded matters previously held sacred into the sphere of the profane – and secondly, by the hegemony of utilitarian patterns of thought, which insinuated themselves even into assemblages disconnected from utilitarianism at surface level.

Parallel to this (this being the hibernation of an unmutated sacred under the guise of narratives separated from communal life, which is to say, experienced privately in the mode of interactive fiction), stories such as those told in either *Divinity: Original Sin II* or the *Pillars of Eternity* series interrogate the meaning of transcendence in a technological age by subverting the identification of divinity with domination, thus picturing, albeit nebulously, a surprisingly Bataillean critique of transcendent arrangements bent on power.

## CONCLUSIONS: EXERCISES IN FUTILITY

“[...] [T]he virile man is he who refuses our culture’s definition of what it means  
to be whole.”<sup>1</sup>

Having pondered immanence and its unsubsumable planes for so long, we are finally forced to betray it – we must transcend the flow of thought and bring it to a close. As we assess the considerations which have brought us to this point, let us keep our eyes open for any connections that might have only now, at the end, been rendered visible – including the possibilities of relating the phenomenon of falling off the map in a video game to the different echoes reverberating across our nymphatic system.

Indeed, the trajectories of the viral topology – the contours of things drawn on beings – constitute the map, and *langauge* is the anthropotechnical collision detector that prevents consciousness from falling off this map. But the gravitational pull of everyday signs can be escaped. Language becomes poetry (which is conducive to experience) when it defies *langauge*, when it refuses to comply with the prescription of meaning rather than form. After all, the manifold rules of rhythm and rhyme do not dampen the burning passion of poetry. On the contrary, their entrancing qualities – generated in connection with the arbitrary character of ritual – submerge the reader in a mythic, “tragic immanence.”

In the triadic semiotics of Peirce, the symbolic falls under the auspices of the third element of the sign – the Interpretant. The symbol is a matter of the habitual. The Object of the sign, in turn, points towards the outside of the semiotic process – toward that

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 244.



which invades interiority by way of consciousness and the senses. It is, in a way, not unlike “the self-retracting Real” to which the Lady of “the matrix of courtly love” has been compared by Žižek. Finally, the first element of the sign, the Representamen, marks the domain of pure sensations – including, perhaps, “desire in pursuit of its principle”? Were it possible to say so, then the triad of “the matrix of courtly love” would overlap with the triadic cosmology of Peircean semiotics. In prolonging and intensifying his desire, the lover remains within the pure sensation – the raw experience of which was set off by the appearance of the Lady – and transgresses, through his illicit excitement, against the coherence of habitual behaviour. What is more, the experience of the poet in “Terror” can be regarded not only as a literary equivalent of falling off the map in a video game, but also as an illustration of what it is like to (accidentally) exit semiosis. In other words, the following phenomena – mystical experience, falling off the map, exiting semiosis – are all links in a chain of reciprocal parody. Therefore, the very experience championed so ardently by Bataille could be understood as a method of suspending or muffling out semiosis – cutting up the lines of habits or “doing violence to habits of relaxation.” It is a question of a discipline (a manufactured automatism pitted against the hidden automatisms of pseudo-spontaneity; the project as a “servant of experience”) that allows one to *unjustify* oneself via the domain of pure sensation, which is necessarily more intimate with the outside of thought than the habit itself. What one achieves, therefore, by fashioning a myth for oneself is a habit of suppressing habitual thought, a habit of procuring for oneself the “preliminary laceration from the transcendent system of activity” (the ritual is an arbitrary form designed to collapse under its participants).

As far as myth(ology) is concerned, two kinds of myth have been distinguished.

Both thrive on usurpation, but only one is truly a parasite. It is possible to name them on the basis of the assemblages we have created in the first three chapters: the parasitic myth is of the Barthes-Burroughs type, whereas the mutualist one can be called the Schulz-Bataille type. The former finds itself at its most contagious in the service of profane homogeneity. In contrast, the latter type of myth spreads precisely through the desire to experience the sacred, to sidestep the habits enforced by everyday signs – through the seductive “image of destiny,” through the image of being in excess of the order of things. In sum, the distinction between secular and religious kinds of myth has been problematised, allowing for a more precise opposition between myths of the profane and myths of the sacred.

But there is more to be said on this subject. Taking into account both the impossibility and the reality of the human animal (its transcendence of the animal), as well as the fact that the self is a narrative that maintains within human beings the sense of “the advantage of being themselves,” it becomes feasible to say that the human is itself a myth, a story that, by usurping an animal body, fundamentally altered it. After all, transcendence *did* take place, and so the image of that body’s full autonomy – the image of the human body dispossessed of myth – is not an image of an animal, but of an undead, a zombie.

The fundamental human struggle is, therefore, defined by the following question: is the myth of humanity a myth of the profane or a myth of the sacred? As far as the modernity of Western civilisation is concerned, what can be observed is that having believed in itself too much, a profane myth of the rational human is currently on the brink of thinking itself out of existence. As it conceives of itself in more and more peripheral terms, it abdicates the centre of things, vacating it for doubly transcendent

objects. In a sense, the fate of desubjectified “experiencing machines” could have been inferred from those very masks covering the faces of the cave painters; the transcendent wishes for a return, it effaces itself. Through its works, the human being negates itself just as much as it negates the world, thus making way for its machinic progeny, which may, however, be nothing but an unconscious attempt to make that ancient intuition – *order* – real. In other words, it would originally have been futile to try and resolve the tension between speaking – or being spoken; experiencing this futility without any resolution (becoming a “supplication without response”) was, for Bataille, lucid mysticism. But the autonomy of the algorithmic stratum is on track to overcome this futility, to render the ultimate mystery profane, thus closing up the wound that can only remain open as an experience facilitated by a sacred myth of humanity. Thus, for anyone who would “dedicate men to other things than ceaselessly increased production,” the importance of Bataille’s undogmatic mysticism – an exercise in futility that teaches how to nurture in oneself a sovereign independence from frameworks of utility – has only become greater.

Bataille’s mysticism is founded on the interlinked experiences of laughter and silence; it explores their connection. As we have witnessed in chapters four and five, both laughter and silence are intrinsically bound with excess: to dissolve into laughter is to have one’s self torn apart by waves of an experience that renders one *unable to think*. For thought, laughter – in which “ecstasy is freed, is immanent” – is anathema: “[t]he defeat of thought is ecstasy.” Similarly, “[s]acrifice is the antithesis of production” and, since “[n]othing in sacrifice is put off until later,”<sup>2</sup> it is the opposite of project, in which “the result alone counts.” Laughter and sacrifice are as antithetical to thought and

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p. 137.

productive projects as silence is to language. Likewise, chance – the experience of chance – is opposed to systems of statistical probabilities. In gambling – the epitome of an experience of chance – the wager takes the form of *sacrifice*. *Silence* falls when the coin is flipped, *laughter* roars as the coin lands on its edge, throwing open the void that both surrounds and fills heads, tails, and every other component at all levels of composition, laying bare our incompleteness, which we experience *as* laughter. Thus, thought is stunned into silence, and we pass through any and all appearances of solidity. A being that has burst into laughter is – for as long as the spasm lasts – a wound in the universe, and also the site of a rational subject’s fall from the map.

Laughter such as that of the zombie-mother – laughter not unlike “a wind from outside” – marks similar sites. In the case of “The Death of Halpin Frayser,” the characters found themselves beyond rational designs by experiencing dread, which, as a response to the laughable existence of the human being, mirrors the central experience of Nabokov’s “Terror.” Kreia, in turn, wanted to erase the map altogether – no predestination, no predetermined connection, nothing but chance (“... without name”) and “the spirit of decision.” The map is transcendent<sup>3</sup> – it is the viral topology, different from contagion and contagion once again. Indeed, *Cosmopolis* has shown us the difference between transcendent and immanent contagion,<sup>4</sup> proving at the same time that the polarity of transcendence and immanence can be applied even to self-dissolution. A self that “aspires to the state of an object” – to transcendence – is a self in a state of despair. It is too weak to uphold its radical separation from the world, a separation that is, in the case of such a self, a manifestation of fear. In contrast, a self that, through an

<sup>3</sup> Whereas the Force was said to be immanent – this means that the Force (as it has been portrayed in *KOTOR II*) is not unlike the circuitry of a fully automated algorithmic stratum.

<sup>4</sup> Thus allowing us to set the secret movements of immanent states (the dynamics of their interattraction and -repulsion) against the gravitational pull of signs that enforce habitual understanding.

exercise in futility, purges itself of objecthood (attacks its own existence as a useful thing) is a self whose love is strong enough to shatter the confines of that self, returning it, if only briefly, to immanence. In other words, Bataille's writings imply a cosmology of love and fear, and the opposition of these impulses is bound with the dynamics of transcendence and immanence.

Indeed, our fundamental conclusion is that there is a lasting relevance of Bataille's work on transcendence and immanence. The perspective granted by positing oneself as an element of the interplay between these two states of being presents itself as valid in regard to discussing experiences which would, in the past, be registered as religious or theological, and which continue to haunt us – in one way or another – despite the fact that these registers (these habits of interpretation) have been withering in the West for quite some time.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it would seem that such a perspective is even more important today, in a culture that is growing further and further apart from a sensibility informed by “religious possibility” (discussed in chapter eight), and is thus hard at work cutting itself off from sovereign immanence: from ways of being sovereignly unproductive (and thus seductive), and also from the possibilities of transgression, which are, as we have seen, inseparable from a particular pattern of transcendent arrangements.

Connecting the themes considered throughout chapters nine and twelve, we could forward the following statement: the interplay of transcendence and immanence is enmeshed – in human experience – with the dynamic of innocence and guilt (of innocence and experience). Guilty, sinful eroticism exemplified for us the principle of

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<sup>5</sup> However, binding the observations made in chapters nine, twelve, and thirteen, we might say that adopting a Bataillean perspective allows us to notice that the sacred endures (against all odds), albeit in hibernation: the terror of a female (matriarchal), monstrous divinity continues to constitute a form of expression of the sacred – of the mysticism that is always prefigured by eroticism – in contemporary Western culture.

folding transcendence back on itself, or the method of concatenating arrangements in a way that makes them susceptible to being punctured; in other words, it illustrated the role that eroticism plays in maintaining the “sacred tension,” pointing us towards a realisation that it cannot, in fact, be maintained in the absence of guilt. Accordingly, *Cosmopolis* showed us that guilt does indeed mark the zone of interference: guilt came to Packer only once he had experienced immanence. For a being to sing the song of experience, it has to be in touch with both immanence and transcendence – it has to be guilty (it cannot be an animal trapped in immanent screen hypnosis), it has to be a monster (it cannot be a rational machine defined solely by “the transcendent system of activity”).

Granted, it might feel inadequate to think of Bataille as an advocate for balance or harmony, even though it has to be said that the themes which preoccupied him were undoubtedly linked to his experiences of an unbalanced, all too transcendent civilisation, which is “symbolized by the names of New York and London,” and which “is perhaps detestable; it sometimes seems to be only a bad dream; and there is no question that it generates the boredom and irritation that favor a slide toward catastrophe. But no one can reasonably consider something that only has the attraction of unreason in its favor.”<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, then, Bataille’s voice urges us to remember that the lot of humanity is not given justice in an image of a heavenward escape, an image of transcendence. The mind has to bear its own limitations within itself – thought must be able to arrive at its own annihilation at its limits, lest it become an unwitting prison for itself and for the body; lest it confine us to utter (and utterable) profanity.

On the other hand, however, it was also Bataille’s view that attempting to

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<sup>6</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. I, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 170.

introduce the human being back into a state of nature is as pointless as it is undesirable, which means that a supposedly natural state would not be – for the human animal – what it is for other animals. More specifically, it is a state of weakness, of becoming incapable of the vacillating movement necessary for experience to reach the sacred, the heterogeneous – the limit of the possible.

Transcendental pursuits stem from wanting to remain (possible). However, that there exist transcendent arrangements whose function is to facilitate falling from the map these arrangements themselves constitute is testament to a contrary tendency – which strains being into a human level of tension – namely, the human being’s refusal to remain (possible). Falling off the map is, in a sense, a figure of freedom from the addiction to familiarity, and of evading (the) project(ion of the self onto the universe); a figure of being “able to feel the critical point within the fractured mass” of “fragments that shift and change,” the point that gives way to immanence.

Experiences of immanence suspend both the opposition between the subject and object, and the very existence of these two stratifications of being. In calling upon the powers of immanence and expenditure, in berating the limits of linguistically-mediated life, Bataille wished for mankind to be glorious. In a bitter twist of fate, however, the immanence saturating an environment micromanaged by inhuman causalities strays from sovereignty, whereas consumption, which was once orgiastic, festive, and ecstatic, gets reduced – in the form of audio-visual content consumption – to the functionality of a subroutine jacked into productive hydraulics (an immanence divorced from the sacred, from a burning desire for the heterogeneous, is merely abject mindlessness).

What is necessary is, therefore, a crusade not so much for the death of language, but for the death of *langauge*. Since Bataille’s vision was never one of a return to natural

simplicity – which is bound via the principle of parody with being taken care of by machines of loving grace, and which is, in any case, always a counterfeit of nature – a favourable end result of his endeavour would be a (secret?) society of self-conscious myths – legends capable of laughing at themselves, sovereigns holding language by the throat instead of having their own tongues flapped about by parasites.

What persists – for now – is a conflict taking place in the conditions of divinity's tomb. Thus, there is perhaps not a single more important echo we have caught in our nymphatic system than the echo of that most primeval rumour: that the world “seems to have a will.” It continues to move from mouth to mouth, even in the conditions of divinity's tomb, wherein it finds itself, however, in danger of being transformed from an “unknown texture,” “a hidden necessity (remaining forever obscure),”<sup>7</sup> into a circuit among circuits – a demiurgic fact of technology, a mechanical monster of the secondary labyrinth; wherein it finds itself, therefore, in divinity's (t/w)omb. In the struggle between different attitudes towards our transcendence, those who wish to transcend further are, in truth, furthering the relinquishment of agency, the giving-over of the human to the machine, to the reification of God-as-object(ive).

This is where the solar ascetic re-enters the scene: his denial of both the impoverishment resulting from over-dependence on profane rationality and the stifled pleasures offered by immanent screen hypnosis – translates to the defiance of the pineal eye, whose sun-scorched vision sabotages the former and exceeds the latter. The solar ascetic carries on the mythic assertion: the human being has a destiny other than production (within the system of which falls the insipid consumption of mass-produced

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<sup>7</sup> As Biles put it, Bataille's experience is such that “God always remains” – nowhere is the contrast between mere atheism and Bataille's atheology clearer than in the opposition between the anxious inhabitants of divinity's tomb and Bataille himself.



items and algorithmically delivered content) – the human being exists through a relationship with the sacred – through not just the ability to transcend, but to also turn its back on transcendence, to forget itself in what it is not. In sum, it is a matter of a refusal to fall back on either the accumulation of earthly riches or the pursuit of so-called personal happiness. But this refusal is haunted by a spectre of virtues one can no longer uphold – what should one do with this challenging ruin?

In lieu of a definitive answer, a suggestion of a typology of experience is offered.

First, the removal of the distinction between word and world, the blurring of the wor(l)d, either offers a role to play – a becoming-usurped, which is either a mythic incarnation (experiencing total existence) or a mythic interception (becoming a parasite's coordinate point) – or bestows a state of grace, invites into a game of chance, a challenge in which one becomes an intensity on equal footing with fate.

Second, the removal of the distinction between virtuality and reality – the absolute closure of the distance separating the possibility of action from taking action – is either a divine intervention, a blessed submersion in the flow of being, or an addiction, an inability to break a habit, to draw a line of flight.

Third, the removal of the distinction between subject and object is an implosion of differentiation regimes, which leads to either ascending the pyramid, outmanoeuvring the collision detector, and plummeting into the void of the sky, or having the rug pulled out from beneath one's feet and watching – while falling – as the transcendently drawn contours of things get rubbed out. Neither of these two options is necessarily either ecstatic or terrible.

There are, of course, various degrees of overlap between the experiences listed above, or rather: the pendulous continuum ebbs and flows to and fro different events

with varying intensity. On the other side of transcendence one enters immanence, on the other side of which one finds transcendence once again, on the other side of which one enters immanence, on the other side of which one finds transcendence once again – *ad nauseam*. Beyond sexuality, there is eroticism, beyond which one finds – through a profanely mythic naturalisation – sexuality once again, which is liable to become eroticised again...

A final image: matter convolutes into less and less probable forms as it undergoes complexification, reaching towards the impossible through the human being's journey to the extreme limit, on the other side of which the impossible once again births the possible (a nautilus shell narrows down to its tightest point, and begins to unfold *on the other side*), which again seeks its own negation. Hence the recurrence of volcanic imagery across the space of Bataille's writings – the path of *ipse* is not the subject's victorious ascent of the mountain of knowledge, the peak of which might be positively claimed; rather, man's epistemic situation in the world is precisely volcanic – one may clamber up the ashen, striated mound, but there is no vantage point that could be marked with a flag or any other sign of individual excellence. Instead, the maw of the crater gapes – there is only the point at which the structure collapses upon itself, simultaneously falling into itself and boiling over its limits with a force that burns, blinds, and chokes.

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### SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

The chief support of this thesis are the works of the French thinker, Georges Bataille, especially the ones that concern his idiosyncratic understanding of mystical experience, which he explored under the name of inner experience. The different ways of facing the challenge that this experience poses to the human being – elucidated in, among other texts, *Inner Experience*, *Guilty*, *Erotism*, and many shorter pieces – form a conceptual framework, a peculiar *anthropology of the sacred*. This framework is here applied to works of literature and video games, all of which were selected because of the potential to recognise within them examples of experiences that exceed the profane. To exceed the profane is – according to Bataille – to exceed the order of production and accumulation, to escape a reality delineated by the self-preserving tendency of the subject. The afore-mentioned anthropology of the sacred is gradually revealed throughout the thesis – its elements are lifted from Bataille’s texts and plugged (to use a Deleuzoguattarian expression) into particular literary and ludo-narrative assemblages.

The order out of which one breaks in an experience of the sacred is first described by means of a *viral topology* extrapolated from William S. Burroughs’ Nova trilogy. It is a vision of a semiotic coordinate system imposed upon organic life, a system that arranges organisms into sequences or lines of habit, tendency or addiction, thus turning them into mere vessels for parasitic myths.

Such myths – parasitic in the sense Roland Barthes wrote of – are then contrasted with an alternative idea of myth, one that combines notions forwarded by Bataille in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” and Bruno Schulz’s literary practice of mythicising reality. This kind of myth opens its participants onto experiences that surpass the established order defined by the profane, leading them to states of sanctity and exuberance proper to

the sort of life that has not been cleared of seduction, which is here conceptualised with the aid of Jean Baudrillard. Moreover, Schulz's writing is connected with the dynamics of the known and the unknown, knowledge and non-knowledge, the possible and the impossible. The interplay of these opposing states of being is characterised – on the basis of Bataille's *Inner Experience* – as the pathway that includes the eponymous experience in the tapestry of human fate.

Bataille's theory of laughter – which was for him an experience of supreme importance, and of which he thus wrote extensively – is deployed in a reading of Ambrose Bierce's short story, "The Death of Halpin Frayser." This reading offers an occasion to assume a heterological perspective, which was proposed by Bataille as a way of thinking about what is experienced when a person encounters something irrevocably unknown, inherently inexplicable.

Bataille, who repeatedly contested the claim language lays to the definition of the limits of existence, is compared with a character from a video game entitled *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II – The Sith Lords*. Such a comparison is warranted by the character's hidden objective, which, as the story of the game unfolds, turns out to be the utter elimination of "the Force" that underlies the universe portrayed in *Star Wars*. What is examined is, therefore, the analogy between such intentions and the variety of Bataille's themes that concern the ability to defeat language – or even thought itself – within oneself.

A study of asceticism follows: excerpts from Bataille that demonstrate his objections to ascetic practices are set against the hagiography of saint Simeon the Stylite (and its contemporary analyses), paving the way towards a discussion on the issues of memory and oblivion, signal and noise. Pierre Klossowski's novel, *Baphomet*, is called

forth in this context, whereas Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal and Roger Caillois' unique study on mimicry bolster the theoretical foundation of these considerations. What is more, points at which Bataille seems to be less critical – or even appreciative – of asceticism are also pinpointed, thus showing that his attitude towards it was, in fact, unequivocal. This ambiguity, together with the above-mentioned understanding of mimicry, allows for the figure of a *solar ascetic* to be drawn.

Bataille's understanding of the dynamics of transcendence and immanence as opposite modes of being – the first referring, subversively, to the profane ordering of the world, and the second one to the confusion of ecstasy – is used to interpret "Terror," a short story by Vladimir Nabokov, as a text that depicts a spontaneous experience of falling out of a profane and known order, and into an intensity that – due to a radical separation of what the first-person narrator is going through from any sort of religious explanation – comes to pass as an experience of raw immanence.

Masochistic eroticism, exemplified predominantly with Schulz's visual art, is dissected as a practice of constructing situations wherein the transcendent composition of parts is doomed to collapse upon itself, rendering one susceptible to an experience of immanence. These deliberations are also entangled with the duality of guilt and innocence.

Don DeLillo's novel, *Cosmopolis*, is looked at through the combined lenses introduced one by one in earlier chapters. This means that the adventures of the book's protagonist are presented as a movement that, firstly, takes him away from a life determined by dreams of technological transcendence and a concern for future security, and secondly, propels him towards experiences grounded in the chance encounters that shape his immediate, bodily reality. Moreover, the profound relationship between

transcendence and the future is investigated.

The vision of a “labyrinthine constitution of being” espoused by Bataille is then discussed in connection with that vision’s interpretation laid out by Nick Land, who relates the ever-incomplete labyrinth of being to fractal mathematics, highlighting the link between the circulation of matter and the eternal return. What follows is a reflection on the position of the human being – or the human animal, which exists as the tension between immanent animality and that which transcends it – as the monster of the labyrinth. Labyrinthine reality is, furthermore, imagined as a space haunted by reverberations of God, of the very guarantee that there is order to the world, and that its source lies beyond the human mind. It is within this context that two short stories – “The Gig Economy” and “God-Shaped Hole” – published by a contemporary, pseudonymous writer, Zero HP Lovecraft, are analysed. Various visions of the future of transcendence – displayed in the two stories by Zero, explicit in Land’s accelerationist prophecies, augured by Jacek Dukaj in his book on the twilight of the written word – are pondered. Light is shed on the manifold dangers that might stem from resolving the “sacred tension” that conditions the human mode of being.

Finally, the conceptual apparatus built throughout this thesis serves to analyse a number of video games within the world-building of which a prominent role of transcendence, immanence or their dynamics can be discerned. Thus is illustrated a potential analytical use of the theories elaborated herein for the purposes of further research. Ultimately, the interplay of transcendence and immanence – grasped, first and foremost, in a Bataillean sense – is presented as a conceptual framework that can be fruitfully employed in analyses of those contemporary cultural phenomena that continue to convey an echo of mystical experience.



## SUMMARY IN POLISH

Praca opiera się w pierwszej kolejności na pismach Georges’a Bataille’a, a w szczególności na tych tekstach francuskiego myśliciela, w których nacisk położony jest na jego idiosynkratyczne pojmowanie doświadczenia mistycznego, nazywanego przezeń doświadczeniem wewnętrznym. Wyłożone między innymi w *Doświadczeniu wewnętrznym*, *Winnym*, *Erotyzmie*, a także w krótszych tekstach sposoby orientowania się wobec wyzwania, jakie stanowi dla człowieka to doświadczenie, tworzą siatkę pojęciową – swoistą *antropologię świętości* – która zarzucona zostaje na utwory literackie i gry wideo wybrane ze względu na potencjał uchwycenia w nich reprezentacji doświadczeń wykraczających poza *profanum*. Poza *profanum*, czyli – według przyjętej za Bataille’em optyki – poza porządek produkcji, akumulacji, poza rzeczywistość określoną samozachowawczą troską podmiotu o trwanie. Wspomniana antropologia świętości wyłania się w rozprawie stopniowo – jej czerpane z pism Bataille’a fragmenty wpinane są (by użyć Deleuzoguattarańskiej metaforyki) w poszczególne asambláže literackie i ludo-narracje.

Porządek, z którego wyłamują się doświadczenia świętości, opisany zostaje z pomocą wywiedzionej z trylogii Nowej Williama S. Burroughsa *topologii wirusowej*, wizji semiotycznego układu współrzędnych naniesionego na życie organiczne; układu, poprzez który organizmy układane są w ciągi: w linie nawyków, tendencji, uzależnień; poprzez który organizmy ucierane są w ścieżki dla pasożytujących na nich mitów.

Takie – to znaczy, po Barthes’owemu pasożytnicze – mity skontrastowane są z alternatywną koncepcją mitu, która łączy tezy przedstawione przez Bataille’a w „Uczniu czarnoksiężnika” i Brunona Schulza literacką praktykę mityzacji rzeczywistości. Mit w takim ujęciu otwiera swoich uczestników na doświadczenia wykraczające poza ustalony

porządek, którego zakres ogranicza się do *profanum*; mowa jest o doświadczeniach wiążących się ze świętością, z wybujałością właściwą życiu, z którego nie wyrugowano uwodzenia rozumianego za Jeanem Baudrillard'em. Do Schulza odniesione zostają również dynamiki znanego i nieznanego, wiedzy i niewiedzy, możliwego i niemożliwego – wzajemna gra tych przeciwstawnych stanów bycia ukazana jest – za *Doświadczeniem wewnętrznym* Bataille'a – jako wprowadzająca w los człowieczy szansę na tytułowe doświadczenie wewnętrzne.

Wypracowana przez Bataille'a na przestrzeni różnych tekstów teoria śmiechu – doświadczenia nad wyraz dla niego istotnego – użyta jest do odczytania opowiadania Ambrose'a Bierce'a, „Śmierć Halpina Fraysera”. Stwarza to okazję do wprowadzenia perspektywy heterologicznej, czyli – wg Bataille'a – myślenia o tym, czego doświadcza osoba stykająca się z czymś z gruntu nieznanym, niewytłumaczalnym.

Praktykowana przez Bataille'a kontestacja roszczeń języka do określania granic rzeczywistości zestawiona zostaje z jedną z postaci występujących w grze wideo *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II – The Sith Lords*. Podstawą dla takiego porównania jest to, że postać owa okazuje się być motywowana przez chęć wyeliminowania z istnienia charakterystycznej dla uniwersum *Gwiezdnych Wojen* „Mocy”. Przeanalizowane są podobieństwa między zamiarami omawianej postaci a znajdującymi się w rozmaitych tekstach Bataille'a opisami doświadczeń wiążących się z pokonaniem w sobie języka lub nawet myśli jako takiej.

Przedstawione zostaje studium ascezy: krytyczne wobec ascetycznych praktyk fragmenty tekstów Bataille'a odniesione są do hagiografii świętego Szymona Słupnika (oraz współczesnych jej analiz), tworząc pole do dyskusji nad zagadnieniami pamięci i zapomnienia, sygnału i szumu. W tym kontekście przywołana jest również powieść

Pierre’a Klossowskiego, *Bafomet*, a dodatkowe tło teoretyczne zapewnia krytykowany przez Nietzschego ideał ascetyczny oraz specyficzna definicja mimikry Rogera Caillois. Przywołane są także te momenty w myśli Bataille’a, które wskazują na dwuznaczność jego stosunku do ascezy. Dwuznaczność ta oraz wspomniane wcześniej rozumienie mimikry stanowią punkt wyjścia dla zarysowania figury, która nazwana zostaje „ascetą słonecznym”.

Bataille’a rozumienie dynamiki między transcendencją a immanencją jako swoiście przeciwstawnych stanów bytu (gdzie pierwszy odnosi się do świeckiego porządkowania świata, a drugi do zamieszania właściwego stanom ekstatycznym) zastosowane zostaje w odczytaniu „Terroru,” opowiadania Władimira Nabokowa, co pozwala opisać spontaniczne doświadczenie wypadnięcia, by tak rzec, ze świeckiego i znajomego porządku w intensywność, która – ze względu na radykalne oderwanie przeżywanych przez pierwszoosobowego narratora wrażeń od interpretacji religijnej – jawi się jako doznanie surowej immanencji.

Erotyzm masochistyczny – zezemplifikowany przede wszystkim graficzną twórczością Schulza – zinterpretowany jest tu jako praktyka konstruowania sytuacji, w których aranżacja elementów transcendentnych zapada się w sobie, prowadząc tym samym do doświadczenia immanencji. Istotnym elementem tych rozważań jest przeciwieństwo winy i niewinności.

Powieść Dona DeLillo *Cosmopolis* podłożona jest pod pryzmat przygotowany we wcześniejszych rozdziałach. Oznacza to, że perypetie głównego bohatera książki przedstawione zostają jako jego przesunięcie się od życia zdeterminowanego marzeniami o technologicznej transcendencji oraz troską o przyszłe bezpieczeństwo do doświadczeń osadzających go w bezpośredniej rzeczywistości, w jego cielesności oraz

w kontakcie z losowością. Zauważone oraz zanalizowane są także głębokie związki transcendencji z przyszłością.

Przedyskutowana zostaje „wizja labiryntalnej budowy bytu” Bataille’a. Szczególna uwaga poświęcona zostaje interpretacji tej wizji spisanej przez Nicka Landa, który odniósł ten nigdy niezamykający się w całość labirynt do matematyki fraktalnej, co uwydatnia powiązanie między cyrkulacją materii w labiryncie a wiecznym powrotem. Co za tym idzie, omówiona jest także pozycja człowieka (czy raczej zwierzęcia ludzkiego – istnienia jako napięcia między immanentną zwierzęcością a transcendentnym jej przekroczeniem) jako potwora w labiryncie istnienia. Rzeczywistość labiryntalna ujęta jest również jako przestrzeń nawiedzona przez przybierający różne brzmienia pogłos Boga jako gwaranta zewnętrznego wobec człowieka porządku istnienia. Odczytaniu w tym świetle poddane są dwa opowiadania współczesnego pisarza anglojęzycznego publikującego w internecie pod pseudonimem Zero HP Lovecraft: „The Gig Economy” („Ekonomia na żądanie”) oraz „God-Shaped Hole” („Dziura po Bogu”). Rozważone zostają różne wizje przyszłości stanu transcendencji (fabuły wspomnianych opowiadań, akcelerationistyczny profetyzm Landa, zmierzch pisma według Jacka Dukaja...). Poruszone są wątki niebezpieczeństw związanych z możliwością rozejścia się „świętego napięcia” konstytuującego istotę ludzką.

Wypracowany na przestrzeni rozprawy aparat pojęciowy zaaplikowany jest do wybranych gier wideo, w których światotwórstwie (*world building*) odkryta zostaje prominentna rola transcendencji, immanencji, lub napięcia między nimi. Zilustrowany zostaje w ten sposób potencjał zastosowania teorii zaprezentowanych w niniejszej rozprawie do przyszłych badań. W ostatecznym rozrachunku wzajemna gra

transcendencji i immanencji – przedstawiona przede wszystkim w ujęciu Bataille’owym – przedstawiona jest jako rama konceptualna, która może owocnie funkcjonować w analizach współczesnych zjawisk kultury, w których kontynuuje swoje wybrzmiewanie echo doświadczeń mistycznych.