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The Profound Complicity of George Bataille's *Blue of Noon*

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Much of George Bataille's *œuvre* can be seen as a perversion of surrealist modes of artistic production extended to various fields of social theory. Whereas André Breton and other surrealists juxtapose sudden and incongruous images and objects in their writing and art, Bataille, in his more theoretical works, does something similar with concepts and categories drawn from philosophy, political economy, and anthropology. *Le bleu du ciel*, or *Blue of Noon*, a short novel first written in 1939, but not published until 1957, brings this technique back into the realm of fiction. The novel recounts the adventures of Henri Troppman and three female characters – Dirty, Xénie, and Lazare -- as their personal lives seem both to announce and to echo the violence of the coming war. Read alongside Bataille's provocative and ambiguous essay from 1934, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," the novel can be said to foreground the "impossible confession" of a series of interrelated crimes, from necrophilia to fascist collaboration. It is, however, in the very act of *exhibiting* a deep knowledge of culpability and complicity, I would argue, that Bataille subverts the ritual of confession and absolution. *Blue of Noon*, then, becomes not only a parody of confession, the text also explicitly revels in the very unconfessability of its transgressions. Indeed, Bataille builds his theory of reading on this parody of the unconfessed and unconfessable crime of complicity with the guilty pleasures of bloodlust, perversion, and the irresponsible trances of Fascist and Nazi tendencies..

Bataille's exploration of fascism's "psychological structure" provides the key theoretical counterpoint for understanding whatever confession *Blue of Noon* may offer. The text argues that fascism is a kind of a return of repressed "heterogeneous" forces, which are both non-functional and non-assimilable within the social structure. Besides the essay's rather ambitious theoretical elaboration of a "description of the social structure as a whole" (137), argued within the confluence of anthropology and Marxism, the text also engages with the specific historical "moment" in which Bataille is writing. The general strike of February 1934 in Paris marks, for Bataille, a certain collaboration of fascism and communism against what he considered to be a dying democracy. Bataille finds support for his thesis that fascism produces a "structural modification" of social relations in his assertion that fascism constructs a social structure based on an "identity of opposites." Not only does this modification put the homogeneous in contact with the heterogeneous, it also brings about a "profound complicity" between communism and fascism in their joining together against the common enemy of homogeneous democratic society (159).

Bataille's apparent conclusion to this double-bind is the affirmation of what he calls "subversive forms of heterogeneity" (as opposed to the "imperative" or "impoverished" forms):

An organized understanding of the movements in society, of attraction and repulsion, starkly presents itself as a weapon -- at this moment when a vast convulsion opposes, not so much fascism to communism, but radical imperative forms to the deep subversion that continues to pursue the emancipation of human lives. (159)

Bataille shifts the terms in his opposition, that of communism and fascism, by replacing "communism" with "deep subversion," a term which he fails to define in the essay, but which he will illustrate vividly in the novel. In brief, the essay suggests that Bataille's "deep subversive forms" of revolt would require an intimate confrontation with the structures of power that they would subvert, and that such forms should also admit complicity with what they aim to destroy. This indeterminate "pursuit" of the emancipation of human lives exists adjacent to the undecidability opened up by Bataille's surreal political theory. Armed with the tools of social anthropology, the very "deep subversion" operative in the essay prisms open the concept of "the sacred," thereby authorizing the identity -- or complicity -- of opposites within his own text. Apparently opposing meanings of "the sacred" -- pure and impure -- exist alongside and within the supposedly opposed political structures of communism and fascism. The result, as in the case of surrealism, is convulsion, but in this case a convulsion of the *social* text.

Blue of Noon begins with a similar spasm. The first image Bataille offers to the reader is that of what he in his essay might refer to as the imperative sovereign figure -- the character Dirty -- in contact with the impoverished atmosphere of a London bar. Drunk in "the most squalid of unlikely places," Dirty, who herself oscillates throughout the text between purity and impurity, is dressed in a "sumptuous evening gown." She stretches out her legs, and begins to suffer "violent convulsions" (11). It requires little effort to read Dirty as an allegory for the vaster convulsions in the social structure at the specific moment in which Bataille writes. The possible allegorical correspondences, however, are both multiple and ambiguous. In her role as pure "imperative sovereign," Dirty can be associated with fascism; in other moments of illness, when she appears "less pure" (130), she is associable with impoverished heterogeneity and the working class. She is also a figure linked to the "deep subversive forms" of revolt that Bataille proposes as a murky solution to the political impasse of fascism.

To reduce the novel to a mere allegory of the political, however, would be to ignore the relevance of Bataille's notion of "general economy" within the realm of his fiction. Any attempt to understand *Blue of Noon* within the framework of a general economy must engage with the idea of a non-allegorical and cosmic complicity between forces, where the energy expended by the individual intermingles in an intimate manner with energy expenditure on a global scale. In *La Part maudite*, or *The Accursed Share*, which Bataille calls a study of "the subject at the boiling point," he affirms that "the ebullition I consider, which animates the globe, is also *my* ebullition" (10). According to this scheme, it would be just as fair to say that Troppman and Dirty operate as allegories for the political, as it would be to suggest that the political is an allegory for Troppman and Dirty. As Troppman admits to the character Lazare, "even if there'd been a war, it would have mirrored what was going on in my head" (42). This identification of the universal with the particular strips rhetorical figures of any symbolic function, whether the transcendent transfer of meaning accomplished by metaphor, or even the assignation of arbitrary and immanent correspondances of the allegorical mode.

Read within this framework of a non-allegorical complicity of opposites, Bataille's treatment of compulsion and hypnotic trance in the novel suggests numerous difficulties and complications for those seeking to extract confessional treasure buried in the text. Throughout the novel, Bataille presents Troppman as someone who has surrendered his will to inexplicable forces, and who merely suffers what befalls him. "I was incapable of wanting anything," Troppman tells Lazare at one point (40), in a statement that may serve as a general motto for Bataille's narrator. Bataille links Troppman's general impotence of volition with his sexual impotence, which appears to be inextricable from the act of necrophilia that he apparently performed on his own mother's body. The text does not emphasize the causal link between Troppman's grief over his dead mother, his transgressive act, and his sexual impotence; rather, all three elements simply seem to exist simultaneously in the text, outside any teleological relationship. His excessive and apparently uncontrollable sobbing fits occur "for no particular reason" (31), Bataille writes, and have "no point at all" (49). His tears are deprived of all use-value in a "work of mourning," which would, according to Freud, allow him to move beyond the mechanical compulsion that perpetuates his melancholy. Bataille thus positions grief and mourning as two more irredeemable forms of loss within the general economy of the novel.

Bataille contrasts these impotent forms of individual mourning, with vital, transgressive forms of interaction. In the *avant-propos*, written twenty-two years after the novel was first completed, he reaffirms the specific importance of narrative, explaining that only certain stories, "read sometimes in a trance, have the power to confront a person with his fate" (153). Just as Troppman transfers his guilt to the women who hear him confess his act of necrophilia, so, too, does the text force the reader vicariously to "confront" the horror of his own guilt, which rehearses the "trance" of the transgression enacted by the writer in the very act of writing. The *avant-propos* can be added as a short self-critical chapter to *La littérature et le mal, Literature and Evil*, where Bataille expounds his theory of reading as a kind of Nietzschean "hypermorality." The ethics of reading, Bataille argues, implicate both the reader and the writer in a "complicity in the knowledge of Evil." Reading becomes a transgression that restores the sovereignty of the reading subject, but only in the very transgression of that sovereignty ("Preface," *Literature and Evil* vii).

Such moments of restorative transgression only occur, Bataille claims, when the writer has been "driven" or compelled to write. Troppman's two confessions of his necrophilia, the first to Lazare, the second to Xénie, illustrate the difference between a narrative to which the narrator has been driven, and one to which the narrator has not. To both Lazare and Xénie, Troppman admits that the crime occurred while he was in a trance, and that the sight of the naked deceased woman set his own body "quivering" (38, 77). Bataille frames the version Troppman tells Lazare, however, as a mere explanation for Troppman's impotence. Troppman keeps insisting that the event was "nothing extraordinary," amounting to "nothing much" (37); he even omits the fact that the dead woman was his mother, and claims that "it" -- apparently referring to his orgasm -- "just came out of nowhere" ("*c'est arrivé de loin*" (48)) as he gazed at her corpse. Troppman underplays the transgressive nature of his act, hides his mother's identity, and clears himself of all responsibility by denying his own agency in his crime. Lazare's response is rather lackluster. Lazare, "calm as a priest hearing confession," finds Troppman's tale

to be an unsuitable explanation for his sexual predicament. This confession parallels those writings, mentioned in Bataille's 1957 avant-propos to *Blue of Noon*, "to which their authors have manifestly not been driven" ("*contraint*") (153).

The version of this transgression that Troppman recounts to Xénie, on the other hand, is not a failed attempt to logically explain away the irrational drives of the subconscious. Troppman's impetus to narrate -- Xénie's frantic demand for a narrative that will bring her own anxieties to crisis -- contrasts with Lazare's calm inquiry. In this second confession, Troppman, consequently, seems "driven" to narrate his crime by a sudden fetishized vision of maternal terror. As he is caught between confession and silence, Troppman recounts this vision: "In a flash, all that I had loved during my life rose up like a graveyard of white tombs, in a lunar, spectral light. Fundamentally, this graveyard was a brothel. The funeral marble was alive. In some places it had hair on it" (76). This morbid vision leads him suddenly to see a "motherly" quality in Xénie. Thus inspired, he admits that the necrophilic victim was his mother, but instead of finishing the story, he leaves Xénie in a kind of neurotic suspense: "I was frightened and aroused," Troppman says, "Aroused to the limit. I was in a kind of trance. I took off my pajamas. Then I -- you understand..." (77). Whereas Lazare responded to Troppman's calculated confession in the guise of a calm confessor, Xénie responds to this compulsive retelling with a vicariously obtained orgasm: "It was with a spasm, after a few interminable seconds, that she gave in, let herself go, and her body slumped limply down" (77). In this second confession, the text both de-emphasizes the vicarious quality of the act of confession (as Troppman leaves the conclusion to his tale unfinished), and re-inscribes it (as Xénie vicariously relives the orgasmic convulsion that Troppman's narration fails to utter). The urgency of his disclosure thus marks it as analogous to the compulsion that drove Bataille to write the novel.

The juxtaposition of these two forms of confession reveals an obvious parody of both Catholic confession and psychoanalysis. In emphasizing a convulsive non-cure, Bataille also rehearses objections to psychoanalysis similar to those that Breton articulates in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*. Both Breton and Bataille would seem to agree that by ridding the subject of his neuroses and anxieties, the psychoanalyst strips him of the rich mythic landscape that represents the major part of his psychic reality. Breton makes the "future resolution" of these contrary states the founding principle of surrealism, affirming a certain use-value in dream-states for resolving what he terms "life's fundamental questions" (Breton 22, 24). *Blue of Noon* argues against the use-value of the irrational affirmed by Breton, seeking, rather, to keep the two in painful irresolution. Bataille's anti-analysis implicates both parties in an intimate performance of these terrors. Anxiety, neurosis, and guilt, without the possibility of resolution or absolution, become additional key forms of expenditure in the novel.

Bataille's representation of a non-useful form of confession also raises numerous problems for the problematic of confession in general. He implies that the call for a virtuosic reader who will bear witness for another seriously implicates that reader in a general movement of transgression, of a shared sin without origin. Bataille shows how the acknowledgement of inexpiable guilt on the part of the one making the call, and the complicity of the apologetic reader who answers it, both represent forms of non-reciprocal expenditure and loss. By making both the guilt of complicity and the grief of mourning forms of non-recuperable loss, Bataille radically subverts the traditional

economy of confession. In the context of a general economy of expenditure and infinite loss, grieving, guilt, and confession are deprived of any reciprocal exchange value, and apology and absolution can only ever serve as the parodies of their own empty forms.

As the novel comes to a close, Troppman waits at a train station in Frankfurt, watching the performance of a military orchestra of Hitler Youth: "All these Nazi boys (some of them were blond, with doll-like faces) seemed in their sticklike stiffness, to be possessed by some cataclysmic exultation" (151). Troppman himself becomes entranced by their performance, both recognizing and disavowing his own complicity with this scene which announces the coming catastrophe:

Their leader . . . held his stick obscenely erect, with the knob at his crotch, it then looked like a monstrous monkey's penis . . . he would then jerk the stick level with his mouth; from crotch to mouth, from mouth to crotch . . . It was terrifying -- if I hadn't been blessed with exceptional composure, how could I have stood and looked at these hateful automatons as calmly as if I were facing a stone wall? (151)

This scene makes explicit the double trance of the fascist leader and the observer mutually spellbound by the power of the militaristic spectacle. The extreme irony of Troppman's apparently "exceptional composure," which occurs nowhere else in the text, is all that allows him to continue witnessing the horrific performance. While it can not be said that Troppman *learns* anything at the end of novel, Bataille does have him *suffer* an extreme state of being: "As I found myself confronting this catastrophe, I was filled with the black irony that accompanies the moments of seizure when no one can help screaming" (152). Troppman's ironic "exceptional composure" permits him to confront intimately what Bataille's essay on fascism called society's movements between "attraction and repulsion." An "organized understanding" of such movements would then, according to Bataille, "present itself as a weapon." Troppman's "black irony" is this weapon, a weapon which makes Troppman's and Bataille's fascist tendencies both "paradoxical" and "deeply subversive" of fascism itself.

Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" seeks to craft a similar weapon against fascist art, by showing how fascism dedicates itself to "the production of ritual value," and how the related "cult value," crucial to the fascist project, is made to "recede into the background" of the work of art (241). While Bataille's texts seem to come dangerously close to Benjamin's definition of such fascist art -- depicting, in a sense, mankind's "own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (Benjamin 242) -- Bataille does not easily fit into either of the categories defined by Benjamin. For one thing, Bataille does not allow the sacred or cultic elements so crucial to his own project to "recede into the background" of his texts; rather, he explicitly foregrounds them, stripping off the covers that normally keep them in a state of occultation. It is in this exhibition of cult value as such that Bataille avoids charges of "processing data in the fascist sense." In *Blue of Noon*, Bataille both "aestheticizes politics" and "politicizes art," suggesting that both modes of "processing data" are complicit with each other in a general movement toward catastrophe. Both "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" and *Blue of Noon* represent his attempt at an "organized understanding" of the great pendulum swings of social sympathies and social controls enacted not only by fascism and communism, but also by "the social structure as a whole." Such a weapon would, as Bataille comes to acknowledge in *The Accursed*

Share, allow mankind to lucidly engineer the necessary destruction of its own excesses, rather than suffer catastrophe in ignorance.

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