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**FROM RESTRICTED TO
GENERAL ECONOMY**
A Hegelianism without reserve

He [Hegel] did not know to what extent he was right.
(Georges Bataille)

“Often Hegel seems to me self-evident, but the self-evident is a heavy burden” (*Le coupable*). Why today—even today—are the best readers of Bataille among those for whom Hegel’s self-evidence is so lightly borne? So lightly borne that a murmured allusion to given fundamental concepts—the pretext, sometimes, for avoiding the details—or a complacent conventionality, a blindness to the text, an invocation of Bataille’s complicity with Nietzsche or Marx, suffice to undo the constraint of Hegel. Perhaps the self-evident would be too heavy to bear, and so a shrug of the shoulders is preferred to discipline. And, contrary to Bataille’s experience, this puts one, without seeing or knowing it, within the very self-evidence of Hegel one often thinks oneself unburdened of. Misconstrued, treated lightly, Hegelianism only extends its historical domination, finally unfolding its immense enveloping

resources without obstacle. Hegelian self-evidence seems lighter than ever at the moment when it finally bears down with its full weight. Bataille had feared this too: heavy, “it will be even more so in the future.” And if Bataille considered himself closer to Nietzsche than anyone else, than to anyone else, to the point of identification with him, it was not, in this case, as a motive for simplification:

Nietzsche knew of Hegel only the usual vulgarization. The *Genealogy of Morals* is the singular proof of the state of general ignorance in which remained, and remains today, the dialectic of the master and the slave, whose lucidity is blinding. . . . no one knows anything of himself if he has not grasped this movement which determines and limits the successive possibilities of man [*L’expérience intérieure* (hereafter *EI*), p. 140, n. 1].

To bear the self-evidence of Hegel, today, would mean this: one must, in every sense, go through the “slumber of reason,” the slumber that engenders monsters and then puts them to sleep; this slumber must be effectively traversed so that awakening will not be a ruse of dream. That is to say, again, a ruse of reason. The slumber of reason is not, perhaps, reason put to sleep, but slumber in the form of reason, the vigilance of the Hegelian logos. Reason keeps watch over a deep slumber in which it has an interest. Now, if “evidence received in the slumber of reason loses or will lose the characteristics of wakefulness” (*ibid.*), then it is necessary, in order to open our eyes (and did Bataille ever want to do otherwise, correctly certain that he was thereby risking death: “the condition in which I would see would be to die”), to have spent the night with reason, to have kept watch and to have slept with her: and to have done so throughout the night, until morning, until the other dawn which resembles, even to the point of being taken for it—like daybreak for nightfall—the hour when the philosophical animal can also finally open its eyes. That morning and none other. For at the far reaches of this night something was contrived, blindly, I mean in a discourse, by means of which philosophy, in completing itself, could both include within itself and anticipate all the figures of its beyond, all the forms and resources of its exterior; and could do so in order to keep these forms and resources close to itself by simply taking

hold of their enunciation. Except, perhaps, for a certain laughter. And yet.

To laugh at philosophy (at Hegelianism)—such, in effect, is the form of the awakening—henceforth calls for an entire “discipline,” an entire “method of meditation” that acknowledges the philosopher’s byways, understands his techniques, makes use of his ruses, manipulates his cards, lets him deploy his strategy, appropriates his texts. Then, thanks to this work which has prepared it—and philosophy is work itself according to Bataille—but quickly, furtively, and unforeseeably breaking with it, as betrayal or as detachment, drily, laughter bursts out. And yet, in privileged moments that are less moments than the always rapidly sketched movements of experience; rare, discreet and light movements, without triumphant stupidity, far from public view, very close to that at which laughter laughs: close to anguish, first of all, which must not even be called the negative of laughter for fear of once more being sucked in by Hegel’s discourse. And one can already foresee, in this prelude, that the impossible meditated by Bataille will always have this form: how, after having exhausted the discourse of philosophy, can one inscribe in the lexicon and syntax of a language, our language, which was also the language of philosophy, that which nevertheless exceeds the oppositions of concepts governed by this communal logic? Necessary and impossible, this excess had to fold discourse into strange shapes. And, of course, constrain it to justify itself to Hegel indefinitely. Since more than a century of ruptures, of “surpassings” with or without “overturnings,” rarely has a relation to Hegel been so little definable: a complicity without reserve accompanies Hegelian discourse, “takes it seriously” up to the end, without an objection in philosophical form, while, however, a certain burst of laughter exceeds it and destroys its sense, or signals, in any event, the extreme point of “experience” which makes Hegelian discourse dislocate itself; and this can be done only through close scrutiny and full knowledge of what one is laughing at.

Bataille, thus, took Hegel seriously, and took absolute knowledge seriously.¹ And to take such a system seriously, Bataille knew, was to prohibit oneself from extracting concepts from it, or from manipulating isolated propositions, drawing effects from them by transportation into a discourse foreign to them: “Hegel’s thoughts are interdependent

to the point of it being impossible to grasp their meaning, if not in the necessity of the movement which constitutes their coherence” (EI, p. 193). Bataille doubtless put into question the idea or meaning of the chain in Hegelian reason, but did so by thinking the chain as such, in its totality, without ignoring its internal rigor. One could describe as a scene, but we will not do so here, the history of Bataille’s relations to Hegel’s different faces: the one that assumed “absolute rending”;² the one who “thought he would go mad”;³ the one who, between Wolff and Comte and “the clouds of professors” at the “village wedding” that is philosophy, asks himself no questions, while “alone, his head aching, Kierkegaard questions”;⁴ the one who “towards the end of his life,” “no longer put the problem to himself,” “repeated his courses and played cards;” the “portrait of the aged Hegel” before which, as “in reading the *Phenomenology of the Mind*,” “one cannot help being seized by freezing impression of completion.”⁵ Finally, the Hegel of the “small comic recapitulation.”⁶

But let us leave the stage and the players. The drama is first of all textual. In his interminable explication with Hegel, Bataille doubtless had only a restricted and indirect access to the texts themselves.⁷ This did not prevent him from bringing his reading and his question to bear on the crucial point of the decision. Taken one by one and immobilized outside their syntax, all of Bataille’s concepts are Hegelian. We must acknowledge this without stopping here. For if one does not grasp the rigorous effect of the trembling to which he submits these concepts, the new configuration into which he displaces and reinscribes them, barely reaching it however, one would conclude, according to the case at hand, that Bataille is Hegelian or anti-Hegelian, or that he has muddled Hegel. One would be deceived each time. And one would miss the formal law which, necessarily enunciated by Bataille in a nonphilosophical mode, has constrained the relationship of all his concepts to those of Hegel, and through Hegel’s concepts to the concepts of the entire history of metaphysics. All of Bataille’s concepts, and not only those to which we must limit ourselves here, in order to reconstitute the enunciation of this law.

The epoch of meaning: lordship and sovereignty

To begin with, does not sovereignty, at first glance, translate the lordship (*Herrschaft*) of the *Phenomenology*?⁸ The operation of lordship indeed consists in, writes Hegel, “showing that it is fettered to determinate existence, that it is not bound at all by the particularity everywhere characteristic of existence as such, and is not tied up with life” (Hegel, p. 232). Such an “operation” (this word, constantly employed by Bataille to designate the privileged moment or the act of sovereignty, was the current translation of the word *Tun*, which occurs so frequently in the chapter on the dialectic of the master and the slave) thus amounts to risking, putting at stake (*mettre en jeu*, *wagen*, *daransetzen*; *mettre en jeu* is one of Bataille’s most fundamental and frequently used expressions) the entirety of one’s own life. The servant is the man who does not put his life at stake, the man who wants to conserve his life, wants to be conserved (*servus*). By raising oneself above life, by looking at death directly, one accedes to lordship: to the for-itself [*pour soi*, *für sich*], to freedom, to recognition. Freedom must go through the putting at stake of life (*Daransetzen des Lebens*). The lord is the man who has had the strength to endure the anguish of death and to maintain the work of death. Such, according to Bataille, is the center of Hegelianism. The “principal text” would be the one, in the *Preface to the Phenomenology*, which places knowledge “at the height of death.”⁹

The rigorous and subtle corridors through which the dialectic of master and slave passes are well known. They cannot be summarized without being mistreated. We are interested, here, in the essential displacements to which they are submitted as they are reflected in Bataille’s thought. And we are interested, first of all, in the difference between lordship and sovereignty. It cannot even be said that this difference has a sense: it is the difference of sense, the unique interval which separates meaning from a certain non-meaning. Lordship has a meaning. The putting at stake of life is a moment in the constitution of meaning, in the presentation of essence and truth. It is an obligatory stage in the history of self-consciousness and phenomenality, that is to say, in the presentation of meaning. For history—that is, meaning—to form a continuous chain, to be woven, the master must experience his truth. This is possible only under two conditions which cannot be

separated: the master must stay alive in order to enjoy what he has won by risking his life; and, at the end of this progression so admirably described by Hegel, the “truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman” (Hegel, p. 237). And when servility becomes lordship, it keeps within it the trace of its repressed origin, “being a consciousness within itself (*zurückgedrängtes Bewusstsein*), it will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence” (*ibid.*). It is this dissymmetry, this absolute privilege given to the slave, that Bataille did not cease to meditate. The truth of the master is in the slave; and the slave become a master remains a “repressed” slave. Such is the condition of meaning, of history of discourse, of philosophy, etc. The master is in relation to himself, and self-consciousness is constituted, only through the mediation of servile consciousness in the movement of recognition; but simultaneously through the mediation of the thing, which for the slave is initially the essentiality that he cannot immediately negate in pleasurable consumption, but can only work upon, “elaborate” (*bearbeiten*); which consists in inhibiting (*hemmen*) his desire, in delaying (*aufhalten*) the disappearance of the thing. To stay alive, to maintain oneself in life, to work, to defer pleasure, to limit the stakes, to have respect for death at the very moment when one looks directly at it—such is the servile condition of mastery and of the entire history it makes possible.

Hegel clearly had proclaimed the necessity of the master’s retaining the life that he exposes to risk. Without this economy of life, the “trial by death, however, cancels both the truth which was to result from it, and therewith the certainty of self altogether” (Hegel, p. 233). To rush headlong into death pure and simple is thus to risk the absolute loss of meaning, in the extent to which meaning necessarily traverses the truth of the master and of self-consciousness. One risks losing the effect and profit of meaning which were the very stakes one hoped to win. Hegel called this mute and nonproductive death, this death pure and simple, abstract negativity, in opposition to “the negation characteristic of consciousness, which cancels in such a way that it preserves and maintains what is sublated (*Die Negation des Bewusstseins welches so aufhebt, dass es das Aufgehobene aufbewahrt und erhält*), and thereby survives its being sublated (*und hiermit sein Aufgehobenwerden überlebt*). In this experience

self-consciousness becomes aware that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness" (Hegel, p. 234).

Burst of laughter from Bataille. Through a ruse of life, that is, of reason, life has thus stayed alive. Another concept of life had been surreptitiously put in its place, to remain there, never to be exceeded, any more than reason is ever exceeded (for, says *L'erotisme*, "by definition, the *excess* is outside reason"). This life is not natural life, the biological existence put at stake in lordship, but an essential life that is welded to the first one, holding it back, making it work for the constitution of self-consciousness, truth, and meaning. Such is the truth of life. Through this recourse to the *Aufhebung*, which conserves the stakes, remains in control of the play, limiting it and elaborating it by giving it form and meaning (*Die Arbeit . . . bildet*), this economy of life restricts itself to conservation, to circulation and self-reproduction as the reproduction of meaning; henceforth, everything covered by the name lordship collapses into comedy. The independence of self-consciousness¹⁰ becomes laughable at the moment when it liberates itself by enslaving itself, when it starts to work, that is, when it enters into dialectics. Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. A negativity that never takes place, that never presents itself, because in doing so it would start to work again. A laughter that literally never appears, because it exceeds phenomenality in general, the absolute possibility of meaning. And the word "laughter" itself must be read in a burst, as its nucleus of meaning bursts in the direction of the system of the sovereign operation ("drunkenness, erotic effusion, sacrificial effusion, poetic effusion, heroic behavior, anger, absurdity," etc., cf. *Méthode de méditation*). This burst of laughter makes the difference between lordship and sovereignty shine, without showing it however and, above all, without saying it. Sovereignty, as we shall verify, is more and less than lordship, more or less free than it, for example; and what we are saying about the predicate "freedom" can be extended to every characteristic of lordship. Simultaneously more and less a lordship than lordship, sovereignty is totally other. Bataille pulls it out of dialectics. He withdraws it from the horizon of meaning and knowledge. And does so to such a degree that, despite the characteristics that make it resemble lordship,

sovereignty is no longer a figure in the continuous chain of phenomenology. Resembling a phenomenological figure, trait for trait, sovereignty is the absolute alteration of all of them. And this difference would not be produced if the analogy was limited to a given abstract characteristic. Far from being an abstract negativity, sovereignty (the absolute degree of putting at stake), rather, must make the seriousness of meaning appear as an abstraction inscribed in play. Laughter, which constitutes sovereignty in its relation to death, is not a negativity, as has been said.¹¹ And it laughs at itself, a "major" laughter laughs at a "minor" laughter, for the sovereign operation also needs life—the life that welds the two lives together—in order to be in relation to itself in the pleasurable consumption of itself. Thus, it must simulate, after a fashion, the absolute risk, and it must laugh at this simulacrum. In the comedy that it thereby plays for itself, the burst of laughter is the almost-nothing into which meaning sinks, absolutely. "Philosophy," which "is work,"¹² can do or say nothing about this laughter, for it should have "considered laughter first" (*ibid.*). This is why laughter is absent from the Hegelian system, and not in the manner of a negative or abstract side of it. "In the 'system' poetry, laughter, ecstasy are nothing. Hegel hastily gets rid of them: he knows no other aim than knowledge. To my eyes, his immense fatigue is linked to his horror of the blind spot" (EI, p. 142). What is laughable is the submission to the self-evidence of meaning, to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning, that nothing must be definitely lost in death, or further, that death should receive the signification of "abstract negativity," that a work must always be possible which, because it defers enjoyment, confers meaning, seriousness, and truth upon the "putting at stake." This submission is the essence and element of philosophy, of Hegelian ontologics. Absolute comicalness is the anguish experienced when confronted by expenditure on lost funds, by the absolute sacrifice of meaning: a sacrifice without return and without reserves. The notion of *Aufhebung* (the speculative concept par excellence, says Hegel, the concept whose untranslatable privilege is wielded by the German language)¹³ is laughable in that it signifies the busying of a discourse losing its breath as it reappropriates all negativity for itself, as it works the "putting at stake" into an investment, as it amortizes absolute expenditure; and as it gives meaning to death, thereby simultaneously

blinding itself to the baselessness of the nonmeaning from which the basis of meaning is drawn, and in which this basis of meaning is exhausted. To be indifferent to the comedy of the *Aufhebung*, as was Hegel, is to blind oneself to the experience of the sacred, to the heedless sacrifice of presence and meaning. Thus is sketched out a figure of experience—but can one still use these two words?—irreducible to any phenomenology, a figure which finds itself displaced in phenomenology, like laughter in philosophy of the mind, and which mimes through sacrifice the absolute risk of death. Through this mime it simultaneously produces the risk of absolute death, the feint through which this risk can be lived, the impossibility of reading a sense or a truth in it, and the laughter which is confused, in the simulacrum, with the opening of the sacred. Describing this simulacrum, unthinkable for philosophy, philosophy's blind spot, Bataille must, of course, say it, feign to say it, in the Hegelian logos:

I will speak later about the profound differences between the man of sacrifice, who operates ignorant (unconscious) of the ramifications of what he is doing, and the Sage (Hegel), who surrenders to a knowledge that, in his own eyes, is absolute. Despite these differences, it is always a question of manifesting the Negative (and always in a concrete form, that is, at the heart of the Totality whose constitutive elements are inseparable). The privileged manifestation of Negativity is death, but death, in truth, reveals nothing. In principle, death reveals to Man his natural, animal being, but the revelation never takes place. For once the animal being that has supported him is dead, the human being himself has ceased to exist. For man finally to be revealed to himself he would have to die, but he would have to do so while living—while watching himself cease to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self) consciousness at the very moment when it annihilates conscious being. In a sense this is what takes place (or at least is on the point of taking place, or which takes place in a fugitive, ungraspable manner) by means of a subterfuge. In sacrifice, the sacrificer identifies with the animal struck by death. Thus he dies while watching himself die, and even, after a fashion, dies of his own volition, as one with the sacrificial arm. But this is a comedy! Or at least it would be a comedy if there were some other method of revealing the

encroachment of death upon the living; this completion of the finite being, which alone accomplishes and can alone accomplish *his* Negativity which kills him, *finishes* him and definitively suppresses him. . . . Thus it is necessary, at any cost, for man to live at the moment when he truly dies, or it is necessary for him to live with the impression of truly dying. This difficulty foreshadows the necessity of *spectacle*, or generally of *representation*, without the repetition of which we could remain foreign to and ignorant of death, as animals apparently remain. In effect, nothing is less animal than the fiction, more or less removed from reality, of death.¹⁴

Only the accent on simulacrum and subterfuge interrupt the Hegelian continuity of this text. Further on, gaiety marks the difference:

In juxtaposing it with sacrifice and thereby with the primary theme of *representation* (art, festivals, spectacles), I have wanted to show that Hegel's reaction is the fundamental human behavior . . . it is par excellence the expression that tradition has repeated infinitely. . . . It was essential for Hegel to *become conscious* of Negativity as such, to grasp its horror, in this case the horror of death, while supporting the work of death and looking at it full in the face. In this fashion, Hegel is opposed less to those who "draw back" than to those who say: "it is nothing." He seems most removed from those who react gaily. I am insisting upon the opposition of the naïve attitude to that of the *absolute* wisdom of Hegel, wanting to make the opposition between them emerge as clearly as possible, after their apparent similarity. I am, in effect, not sure that the least *absolute* of the two attitudes is the naïve one. I will cite a paradoxical example of a gay reaction before the work of death. The Irish and Welsh custom of the wake is little known, but was still observed at the end of the last century. It is the subject of Joyce's last work, *Finnegan's Wake*, Finnegan's funeral vigil (but the reading of this famous novel is at least uneasy). In Wales, the coffin was placed *open* and upright in the place of honor of the house. The dead person was dressed in his Sunday best and his top hat. His family invited all his friends, who increasingly honored the one who had left them as they danced on and drank stronger toasts to his health. In question is the death of an *other*, but in such cases the death

of the other is always the image of one's own death. No one could enjoy himself thus, if he did not accept one condition: the dead man, who is an other, is assumed to be in agreement, and thus the dead man that the drinker will become, in turn, will have no other meaning than the first one [Hegel, *la mort*, p. 38].

This gaiety is not part of the economy of life, does not correspond "to the desire to deny the existence of death," although it is as close to this desire as possible. Gaiety is not the convulsion that follows anguish, the minor laugh which melts away at the moment when one has had "a close call," and which is in relation to anguish along the lines of the relationship of positive to negative:

On the contrary, gaiety, tied to the work of death, fills me with anguish, is accentuated by an anguish and, in exchange, exasperates this anguish: finally, gay anguish, anguished gaiety present me with "absolute rending" in an aspic in which it is my joy that finally rends me asunder, but in which abatement would follow if I was totally torn apart, without measure [Hegel, *la mort*, p. 39].

The blind spot of Hegelianism, around which can be organized the representation of meaning, is the point at which destruction, suppression, death and sacrifice constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity—here we would have to say an expenditure and a negativity without reserve—that they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or a system. In discourse (the unity of process and system), negativity is always the underside and accomplice of positivity. Negativity cannot be spoken of, nor has it ever been except in this fabric of meaning. Now, the sovereign operation, the point of nonreserve, is neither positive nor negative. It cannot be inscribed in discourse, except by crossing out predicates or by practicing a contradictory superimpression that then exceeds the logic of philosophy.¹⁵ Even while taking into account their value as ruptures, it could be shown, in this respect, that the immense revolutions of Kant and Hegel only reawakened or revealed the most permanent philosophical determination of negativity (with all the concepts systematically entwined around it in Hegel: ideality, truth, meaning, time, history, etc.). The

immense revolution consisted—it is almost tempting to say consisted simply—in taking the negative seriously. In giving meaning to its labor. Now, Bataille does not take the negative seriously. But he must mark his discourse to show that he is not, to that extent, returning to the positive and pre-Kantian metaphysics of full presence. In his discourse he must mark the point of no return of destruction, the instance of an expenditure without reserve which no longer leaves us the resources with which to think of this expenditure as negativity. For negativity is a resource. In naming the without-reserve of absolute expenditure "abstract negativity," Hegel, through precipitation, blinded himself to that which he had laid bare under the rubric of negativity. And did so through precipitation toward the seriousness of meaning and the security of knowledge. This is why "he did not know to what extent he was right." And was wrong for being right, for having triumphed over the negative. To go "to the end" both of "absolute rending" and of the negative without "measure," without reserve, is not progressively to pursue logic to the point at which, within discourse, the *Aufhebung* (discourse itself) makes logic collaborate with the constitution and interiorizing memory of meaning, with *Erinnerung*. On the contrary, it is convulsively to tear apart the negative side, that which makes it the reassuring other surface of the positive; and it is to exhibit within the negative, in an instant, that which can no longer be called negative. And can no longer be called negative precisely because it has no reserved underside, because it can no longer permit itself to be converted into positivity, because it can no longer collaborate with the continuous linking-up of meaning, concept, time and truth in discourse; because it literally can no longer labor and let itself be interrogated as the "work of the negative." Hegel saw this without seeing it, showed it while concealing it. Thus, he must be followed to the end, without reserve, to the point of agreeing with him against himself and of wresting his discovery from the too conscientious interpretation he gave of it. No more than any other, the Hegelian text is not made of a piece. While respecting its faultless coherence, one can decompose its strata and show that it interprets itself: each proposition is an interpretation submitted to an interpretive decision. The necessity of logical continuity is the decision or interpretive milieu of all Hegelian interpretations. In interpreting negativity as labor, in betting for discourse, meaning, history, etc., Hegel has bet

against play, against chance. He has blinded himself to the possibility of his own bet, to the fact that the conscientious suspension of play (for example, the passage through the certitude of oneself and through lordship as the independence of self-consciousness) was itself a phase of play; and to the fact that play includes the work of meaning or the meaning of work, and includes them not in terms of knowledge, but in terms of inscription: meaning is a function of play, is inscribed in a certain place in the configuration of a meaningless play.

Since no logic governs, henceforth, the meaning of interpretation, because logic is an interpretation, Hegel's own interpretation can be reinterpreted—against him. This is what Bataille does. Reinterpretation is a simulated repetition of Hegelian discourse. In the course of this repetition a barely perceptible displacement disjoins all the articulations and penetrates all the points welded together by the imitated discourse. A trembling spreads out which then makes the entire old shell crack.

In effect, if Hegel's attitude opposes scientific consciousness and an endless ordering of discursive thought to the naïveté of sacrifice, this consciousness and this ordering still have a point of obscurity: it could not be said that Hegel misconstrued the “moment” of sacrifice: this “moment” is included, implied in the entire movement of the *Phenomenology*, in which it is the Negativity of death, insofar as man assumes it, that makes a man of the human animal. But not having seen that sacrifice by itself bore witness to the *entire* movement of death, the Preface to the *Phenomenology* was first of all *initial* and *universal*—he did not know to what extent he was right—with what exactitude he described the movement of Negativity [Hegel, *la mort*, pp. 35–36].

In doubling lordship, sovereignty does not escape dialectics. It could not be said that it extracts itself from dialectics like a morsel of dialectics which has suddenly become independent through a process of decision and tearing away. Cut off from dialectics in this way, sovereignty would be made into an abstract negation, and would consolidate ontologics. Far from interrupting dialectics, history, and the movement of meaning, sovereignty provides the economy of reason with its

element, its milieu, its unlimiting boundaries of non-sense. Far from suppressing the dialectical synthesis,¹⁶ it inscribes this synthesis and makes it function within the sacrifice of meaning. It does not suffice to risk death if the putting at stake is not permitted to take off, as chance or accident, but is rather invested as the work of the negative. Sovereignty must still sacrifice lordship and, thus, the presentation of the meaning of death. For meaning, when lost to discourse, is absolutely destroyed and consumed. For the meaning of meaning, the dialectic of the senses and sense, of the sensory and the concept, the meaningful unity of the word “sense,” to which Hegel was so attentive,¹⁷ has always been linked to the possibility of discursive signification. In sacrificing meaning, sovereignty submerges the possibility of discourse: not simply by means of an interruption, a caesura, or an interior wounding of discourse (an abstract negativity), but, through such an opening, by means of an irruption suddenly uncovering the limit of discourse and the beyond of absolute knowledge.

To be sure, Bataille sometimes opposes poetic, ecstatic sacred speech to “significative discourse” (“But intelligence, the discursive thought of Man, developed as a function of servile work. Only sacred, poetic speech, limited to the level of impotent beauty, kept the power of manifesting full sovereignty. Sacrifice is a sovereign, autonomous way of being only in the extent to which it is not informed by significative discourse.” Hegel, *la mort*, p. 40), but this sovereign speech is not another discourse, another chain unwound alongside significative discourse. There is only one discourse, it is significative, and here one cannot get around Hegel. The poetic or the ecstatic is that in every discourse which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non-)base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of un-knowledge or of play, to the swoon from which it is reawakened by a throw of the dice. What is poetic in sovereignty is announced in “the moment when poetry renounces theme and meaning” (EI, p. 239). It is only announced in this renunciation, for, given over to “play without rules,” poetry risks letting itself be domesticated, “subordinated,” better than ever. This risk is properly modern. To avoid it, poetry must be “accompanied by an affirmation of sovereignty” “which provides,” Bataille says in an admirable, untenable formulation which could serve as the heading for everything we are attempting to reassemble here as the form and torment of his

writing, “the commentary on its absence of meaning.” Without which poetry would be, in the worst of cases, subordinated and, in the best of cases, “inserted.” For then, “laughter, drunkenness, sacrifice and poetry, eroticism itself, subsist autonomously, in a reserve, inserted into a sphere, like children in a house. Within their limits they are minor sovereigns who cannot contest the empire of activity” (*ibid.*). It is within the interval between subordination, insertion, and sovereignty that one should examine the relations between literature and revolution, such as Bataille conceived them in the course of his explication with Surrealism. The apparent ambiguity of his judgments on poetry is included within the configuration of these three concepts. The poetic image is not subordinated to the extent that it “leads from the known to the unknown;” but poetry is almost entirely fallen poetry in that it retains, in order to maintain itself within them, the metaphors that it has certainly torn from the “servile domain,” but has immediately “refused to the inner ruination which is the access to the unknown.” “It is unfortunate to possess no more than ruins, but this is not any longer to possess nothing; it is to keep in one hand what the other gives.”¹⁸ An operation that is still Hegelian.

As a manifestation of meaning, discourse is thus the loss of sovereignty itself. Servility is therefore only the desire for meaning: a proposition with which the history of philosophy is confused; a proposition that determines work as the meaning of meaning, and *techne* as the unfolding of truth; a proposition powerfully reassembled in the Hegelian moment, and a proposition that Bataille, in the wake of Nietzsche, wanted to bring to the point of enunciation, and whose denunciation he wished to wrest from the non-basis of an inconceivable nonsense, finally placing it within major play. The minor play consisting in still attributing a meaning, within discourse, to the absence of meaning.¹⁹

The two forms of writing

These judgments should lead to silence yet I write. This is not paradoxical

(*EI*, p. 89)

But we must speak. “The inadequation of all speech . . . at least, must be said,”²⁰ in order to maintain sovereignty, which is to say, after a

fashion, in order to lose it, in order still to reserve the possibility not of its meaning but of its nonmeaning; in order to distinguish it, through this impossible “commentary,” from all negativity. We must find a speech which maintains silence. Necessity of the impossible: to say in language—the language of servility—that which is not servile. “That which is not servile is unspeakable. . . . The idea of silence (which is the inaccessible) is disarming! I cannot speak of an absence of meaning, except by giving it a meaning it does not have. Silence is broken because I have spoken. Some *lamma sabachtani* always ends history, and cries out our total inability to keep still: I must give a meaning to that which does not have one: in the end, being is given to us as impossible” (*EI*, p. 215). If the word silence “among all words,” is “the most perverse or the most poetic,” it is because in pretending to silence meaning, it says nonmeaning, it slides and it erases itself, does not maintain itself, silences itself, not as silence, but as speech. This sliding simultaneously betrays discourse and nondiscourse. It can be imposed upon us, but sovereignty can also play upon it in order rigorously to betray the meaning within meaning, the discourse within discourse. “We must find,” Bataille explains to us, in choosing “silence” as “an example of a sliding word,” “words” and “objects” which “make us slide” . . . (*EI*, p. 29). Toward what? Toward other words, other objects, of course, which announce sovereignty.

This sliding is risky. But since it has this orientation, what it risks is meaning and the loss of sovereignty in the figure of discourse. It risks making sense, risks agreeing to the reasonableness of reason, of philosophy, of Hegel, who is always right, as soon as one opens one’s mouth in order to articulate meaning. In order to run this risk within language, in order to save that which does not want to be saved—the possibility of play and of absolute risk—we must redouble language and have recourse to ruses, to stratagems, to simulacra.²¹ To masks: “That which is not servile is unspeakable: a reason for laughing, for . . . : the same holds for ecstasy. Whatever is not useful must be hidden (under a mask)” (*EI*, p. 214). In speaking “at the limit of silence,” we must organize a strategy and “find [words] which reintroduce—at a point—the sovereign silence which interrupts articulated language.”

Since it excludes articulated language, sovereign silence is therefore, in a certain fashion, foreign to difference as the source of signification. It

seems to erase discontinuity, and this is how we must, in effect, understand the necessity of the continuum which Bataille unceasingly invokes, just as he does communication.²² The continuum is the privileged experience of a sovereign operation transgressing the limit of discursive difference. But—and here we are touching upon, as concerns the movement of sovereignty, the point of greatest ambiguity and greatest instability—this continuum is not the plenitude of meaning or of presence, as this plenitude is envisaged by metaphysics. Pushing itself toward the nonbasis of negativity and of expenditure, the experience of the continuum is also the experience of absolute difference, of a difference which would no longer be the one that Hegel had conceived more profoundly than anyone else: the difference in the service of presence, at work for (the) history (of meaning). The difference between Hegel and Bataille is the difference between these two differences. This enables one to dispel the equivocality which might weigh upon the concepts of communication, continuum, or instant. These concepts, which seem to be identical to each other like the accomplishing of presence, in fact mark and sharpen the incision of difference. “A fundamental principle is expressed as follows: ‘communication’ cannot take place from one full and intact being to another: it requires beings who have put the being within themselves at stake, have placed it at the limit of death, of nothingness” (*Sur Nietzsche*). And the instant—the temporal mode of the sovereign operation—is not a point of full and unpenetrated presence: it slides and eludes us between two presences; it is difference as the affirmative elusion of presence. It does not give itself but is stolen, carries itself off in a movement which is simultaneously one of violent effraction and of vanishing flight. The instant is the furtive: “Un-knowledge implies at once fundamentally anguish, but also the suppression of anguish. Henceforth, it becomes possible furtively to undergo the furtive experience that I call the experience of the instant” (*Conférences sur le Non-savoir*).

Words, therefore, we must “find which reintroduce—at a point—the sovereign silence which interrupts articulated language.” Since it is a certain sliding that is in question, as we have seen, what must be found, no less than the word, is the point, the place in a pattern at which a word drawn from the old language will start, by virtue of having been placed there and by virtue of having received such an impulsion, to slide and to make the entire discourse slide. A certain strategic twist must be

imprinted upon language; and this strategic twist, with a violent and sliding, furtive, movement must inflect the old corpus in order to relate its syntax and its lexicon to major silence. And to the privileged moment of the sovereign operation, “even if it took place only once,” rather than to the concept or meaning of sovereignty.

An absolutely unique relation: of a language to a sovereign silence which tolerates no relations, tolerates no symmetry with that which tilts itself and slides in order to be related to it. A relation, however, which must rigorously, scientifically, place into a common syntax both the subordinated significations and the operation which is nonrelation, which has no signification and freely keeps itself outside syntax. Relations must scientifically be related to nonrelations, knowledge to unknown-ledge. “The sovereign operation, even if it were possible only once, the science relating objects of thought to sovereign moments is possible” (*Méthode de méditation*). “Henceforth, an ordered reflection, founded on the abandoning of knowledge, begins” (*Conférences*).

This will be even more difficult, if not impossible, in that sovereignty, since it is not lordship, cannot govern this scientific discourse in the manner of a founding basis or a principle of responsibility. Like lordship, sovereignty certainly makes itself independent through the putting at stake of life; it is attached to nothing and conserves nothing. But, differing from Hegelian lordship, it does not even want to maintain itself, collect itself, or collect the profits from itself or from its own risk; it “cannot even be defined as a possession.” “I hold to it, but would I hold to it as much if I was not certain that I could just as well laugh at it?” (*Méthode de méditation*). At stake in the operation, therefore, is not a self-consciousness, an ability to be near oneself, to maintain and to watch oneself. We are not in the element of phenomenology. And this can be recognized in the primary characteristic—illegible within philosophical logic—that sovereignty does not govern itself. And does not govern in general: it governs neither others, nor things, nor discourses in order to produce meaning. This is the first obstacle in the way of this science which, according to Bataille, must relate its objects to sovereign moments and which, like every science, requires order, relatedness and the difference between the original and the derivative. The *Méthode de méditation* does not hide the “obstacle” (the expression is Bataille’s): “Not only is the sovereign operation not subordinate to anything, but it

makes nothing subordinate to itself, is indifferent to any possible results; if afterward I wish to pursue the reduction of subordinate thought to sovereign thought, I may do so, but whatever is authentically sovereign is not concerned with this, and at every moment disposes of me otherwise" (p. 283).

Once sovereignty has to attempt to make someone or something subordinate to itself, we know that it would be retaken by dialectics, would be subordinate to the slave, to the thing and to work. It would fail for having wanted to be victorious, and for having alleged that it kept the upper hand. Lordship, on the contrary, becomes sovereign when it ceases to fear failure and is lost as the absolute victim of its own sacrifice.²³ Master and sovereign thus fail equally,²⁴ and both succeed in their failure, the one by giving it meaning through subjugation to the mediation of the slave—which is also to fail for having lost failure—and the other by failing absolutely, which is simultaneously to lose the very meaning of failure by gaining nonservility. This almost imperceptible difference, which is not even the symmetry of an upper and a lower side, should regulate all the "slidings" of sovereign writing. It should cut into the identity of sovereignty which is always in question. For sovereignty has no identity, is not self, for itself, toward itself, near itself. In order not to govern, that is to say, in order not to be subjugated, it must subordinate nothing (direct object), that is to say, be subordinated to nothing or no one (servile mediation of the indirect object): it must expend itself without reserve, lose itself, lose consciousness, lose all memory of itself and all the interiority of itself; as opposed to *Erinnerung*, as opposed to the avarice which assimilates meaning, it must practice forgetting, the *aktive Vergesslichkeit* of which Nietzsche speaks; and, as the ultimate subversion of lordship, it must no longer seek to be recognized.²⁵

The renunciation of recognition simultaneously prescribes and prohibits writing. Or rather, discerns two forms of writing. It forbids the form that projects the trace, and through which, as the writing of lordship, the will seeks to maintain itself within the trace, seeks to be recognized within it and to reconstitute the presence of itself. This is servile writing as well; Bataille, therefore, scorned it. But this scorned servility of writing is not the servility condemned by tradition since Plato. The latter has in mind servile writing as an irresponsible *techne*,

because the presence of the person who pronounced discourse has disappeared within it.²⁶ Bataille, on the contrary, has in mind the servile project of serving life—the phantom of life—in presence. In both cases, it is true, a certain death is feared, and this complicity demands consideration. The problem is even more difficult in that sovereignty simultaneously assigns itself another form of writing: the one that produces the trace as trace. This latter is a trace only if presence is irremediably eluded in it, from its initial promise, and only if it constitutes itself as the possibility of absolute erasure. An unerasable trace is not a trace. We would thus have to reconstruct the system of Bataille's propositions on writing, his propositions on these two relations—let us call them minor and major—to the trace.

1. In one whole group of texts, the sovereign renunciation of recognition enjoins the erasure of the written text. For example, the erasure of poetic writing as minor writing:

This sacrifice of reason is apparently imaginary, it has neither a bloody consequence, nor anything analogous. It nevertheless differs from poetry in that it is total, holds back no enjoyment, except through arbitrary sliding, which cannot be maintained, or through abandoned laughter. If it leaves behind a chance survivor, it does so unbeknownst to itself, like the flower of the fields after the harvest. This strange sacrifice which supposes an advanced state of megalomania—we feel ourselves become God—nonetheless has ordinary consequences in one case: if enjoyment is concealed by sliding, and megalomania is not entirely consumed, we remain condemned to make ourselves "recognized," to want to be a God for the crowd; a condition favorable to madness, but to nothing else. . . . If one goes to the end, one must erase oneself, undergo solitude, suffer harshly from it, renounce being *recognized*: one must be there as if absent, deranged, and submit without will or hope, being elsewhere. Thought (because of what it has at its base) must be buried alive. I publish this knowing it misconstrued in advance, necessarily so. . . . I can do nothing, and it along with me, but sink into non-sense to this degree. Thought ruins, and its destruction is incomunicable to the crowd; it is addressed to the least weak [EI, p. 199].

The sovereign operation *engages* these developments: they are the residues both of a trace left in memory and of the subsistence of functions; but to the extent that it occurs, the sovereign operation is indifferent, and defies these residues [EI, p. 235].

or, further:

The survival of that which is written is the survival of the mummy [Le coupable p. 146]

2. But there is a sovereign form of writing which, on the contrary, must interrupt the servile complicity of speech and meaning. "I write in order to annihilate the play of subordinate operations within myself" (EI, p. 242).

The putting at stake, the one which exceeds lordship, is therefore the space of writing; it is played out between minor writing and major writing, both unknown to the master, the latter more than the former, the major play more than the minor play ("For the master, play was nothing, neither minor nor major" *Conférences*).

Why is this uniquely the space of writing?

Sovereignty is absolute when it is absolved of every relationship, and keeps itself in the night of the secret. The continuum of sovereign communication has as its milieu this night of secret difference. One would understand nothing about it in thinking that there was some contradiction between these two requisites. In fact, one would understand only that which is understood in the logic of philosophical lordship: because for this logic, on the contrary, one must conciliate the desire for recognition, the breaking of secrecy, discourse, collaboration, etc., with discontinuity, articulation, and negativity. The opposition of the continuous and the discontinuous is constantly displaced from Hegel to Bataille.

But this displacement is powerless to transform the nucleus of predicates. All the attributes ascribed to sovereignty are borrowed from the (Hegelian) logic of "lordship." We cannot, and Bataille neither could, nor should dispose of any other concepts or any other signs, any other unity of word and meaning. The sign "sovereignty" itself, in its opposition to servility, was issued from the same stock as that of "lordship."

Considered outside its functioning, nothing distinguishes it from "lordship." One could even abstract from Bataille's text an entire zone throughout which sovereignty remains inside a classical philosophy of the subject and, above all, inside the voluntarism²⁷ which Heidegger has shown still to be confused, in Hegel and Nietzsche, with the essence of metaphysics.

Since the space which separates the logic of lordship and, if you will, the nonlogic of sovereignty neither can nor may be inscribed in the nucleus of the concept itself (for what is discovered here is that there is no nucleus of meaning, no conceptual atom, but that the concept is produced within the tissue of differences); it will have to be inscribed within the continuous chain (or functioning) of a form of writing. This—major—writing will be called writing because it exceeds the *logos* (of meaning, lordship, presence etc.). Within this writing—the one sought by Bataille—the same concepts, apparently unchanged in themselves, will be subject to a mutation of meaning, or rather will be struck by (even though they are apparently indifferent), the loss of sense toward which they slide, thereby ruining themselves immeasurably. To blind oneself to this rigorous precipitation, this pitiless sacrifice of philosophical concepts, and to continue to read, interrogate, and judge Bataille's text from within "significative discourse" is, perhaps, to hear something within it, but it is assuredly not to read it. Which can always be done—and has it not been?—with great agility, resourcefulness occasionally, and philosophical security. Not to read, is, here, to ignore the formal necessity of Bataille's text, to ignore its own fragmentation, its relationship to the narratives whose adventure cannot simply be juxtaposed with aphorisms or with "philosophical" discourses which erase their signifiers in favor of their signified contents. Differing from logic, such as it is understood in its classical concept, even differing from the Hegelian Book which was Kojève's theme, Bataille's writing, in its major instance, does not tolerate the distinction of form and content.²⁸ Which makes it writing, and a requisite of sovereignty.

This writing (and without concern for instruction, this is the example it provides for us, what we are interested in here, today) folds itself in order to link up with classical concepts—insofar as they are inevitable ("I could not avoid expressing my thought in a philosophical

mode. But I do not address myself to philosophers” *Méthode*)—in such a way that these concepts, through a certain twist, apparently obey their habitual laws; but they do so while relating themselves, at a certain point, to the moment of sovereignty, to the absolute loss of their meaning, to expenditure without reserve, to what can no longer even be called negativity or loss of meaning except on its philosophical side; thus, they relate themselves to a nonmeaning which is beyond absolute meaning, beyond the closure or the horizon of absolute knowledge. Carried away in this calculated sliding,²⁹ concepts become nonconcepts, they are unthinkable, they become untenable. (“I introduce untenable concepts,” *Le petit*). The philosopher is blind to Bataille’s text because he is a philosopher only through the desire to hold on to, to maintain his certainty of himself and the security of the concept as security against this sliding. For him, Bataille’s text is full of traps: it is, in the initial sense of the word, a scandal.

The transgression of meaning is not an access to the immediate and indeterminate identity of a nonmeaning, nor is it an access to the possibility of maintaining nonmeaning. Rather, we would have to speak of an *epochē* of the epoch of meaning, of a—written—putting between brackets that suspends the epoch of meaning: the opposite of a phenomenological *epochē*, for this latter is carried out in the name and in sight of meaning. The phenomenological *epochē* is a reduction that pushes us back toward meaning. Sovereign transgression is a reduction of this reduction: not a reduction to meaning, but a reduction of meaning. Thus, while exceeding the *Phenomenology of the Mind*, this transgression at the same time exceeds phenomenology in general, in its most modern developments (cf. *EI*, p. 19).

Will this new writing depend upon the agency of sovereignty? Will it obey the imperatives of sovereignty? Will it subordinate itself to that which subordinates nothing? (And does so, one might say, by essence, if sovereignty had an essence.) The answer is, not at all; and this is the unique paradox of the relation between discourse and sovereignty. To relate the major form of writing to the sovereign operation is to institute a relation in the form of a nonrelation, to inscribe rupture in the text, to place the chain of discursive knowledge in relation to an unknowledge which is not a moment of knowledge: an absolute unknowledge from whose nonbasis is launched chance, or the wagers

of meaning, history, and the horizons of absolute knowledge. The inscription of such a relation will be “scientific,” but the word “science” submits to a radical alteration: without losing any of its proper norms, it is made to tremble, simply by being placed in relation to an absolute unknowledge. One can call it science only within the transgressed closure, but to do so one will have to answer to all the requirements of this denomination. The unknowledge exceeding science itself, the unknowledge that will know where and how to exceed science itself, will not have scientific qualification (“Who will ever know what it is to know nothing?” *Le petit*). It will not be a determined unknowledge, circumscribed by the history of knowledge as a figure taken from (or leading toward) dialectics, but will be the absolute excess of every *epistēmē*, of every philosophy and every science. Only a double position can account for this unique relation, which belongs neither to “scientism” nor “mysticism.”³⁰

As the affirmative reduction of sense, rather than the position of non-sense, sovereignty therefore is not the principle or foundation of this inscription. A nonprinciple and a nonfoundation, it definitively eludes any expectation of a reassuring *archia*, a condition of possibility or transcendental of discourse. Here, there are no longer any philosophical preliminaries. The *Méthode de méditation* teaches us that the disciplined itinerary of writing must rigorously take us to the point at which there is no longer any method or any meditation, the point at which the sovereign operation breaks with method and meditation because it cannot be conditioned by anything that precedes or even prepares it. Just as it seeks neither to be applied nor propagated, neither to last nor to instruct (and this is also why, according to Blanchot’s expression, its authority expiates itself), and just as it does not seek recognition, so too it has no movement of recognition for the discursive and prerequisite labor that it could not do without. Sovereignty must be ungrateful. “My sovereignty . . . gives me no thanks for my work” (*Méthode*). The conscientious concern for preliminaries is precisely philosophical and Hegelian.

The criticism addressed by Hegel to Schelling (in the preface to the *Phenomenology*) is no less decisive. The preliminary efforts of the operation are not within the reach of an unprepared intelligence (as

Hegel says: it would be similarly senseless, if one were not a shoemaker, to make a shoe). These efforts, through the mode of application which belongs to them, nevertheless inhibit the sovereign operation (the being which goes as far as it possibly can). Sovereign behavior precisely demands a refusal to submit its operation to the condition of preliminaries. The operation takes place only if the urgency for it appears: and if the operation does become urgent, it is no longer time to undertake efforts whose essence is to be subordinate to ends exterior to them, whose essence is not to be ends themselves [*Méthode*].

Now, if one muses upon the fact that Hegel is doubtless the first to have demonstrated the ontological unity of method and historicity, it must indeed be concluded that what is exceeded by sovereignty is not only the “subject” (*Méthode*, p. 75), but history itself. Not that one returns, in classical and pre-Hegelian fashion, to an ahistorical sense which would constitute a figure of the *Phenomenology of the Mind*. Sovereignty transgresses the entirety of the history of meaning and the entirety of the meaning of history, and the project of knowledge which has always obscurely welded these two together. Unknowledge is, then, superhistorical,³¹ but only because it takes its responsibilities from the completion of history and from the closure of absolute knowledge, having first taken them seriously and having then betrayed them by exceeding them or by simulating them in play.³² In this simulation, I conserve or anticipate the entirety of knowledge, I do not limit myself to a determined and abstract kind of knowledge or unknowledge, but I rather absolve myself of absolute knowledge, putting it back in its place as such, situating it and inscribing it within a space which it no longer dominates. Bataille’s writing thus relates all semantemes, that is, philosophemes, to the sovereign operation, to the consummation, without return, of meaning. It draws upon, in order to exhaust it, the resource of meaning. With minute audacity, it will acknowledge the rule which constitutes that which it efficaciously, economically must deconstitute.

Thus proceeding along the lines of what Bataille calls the general economy.

Writing and general economy

The writing of sovereignty conforms to general economy by at least two characteristics: (1) it is a science; (2) it relates its objects to the destruction, without reserve, of meaning.

The *Méthode de méditation* announces la Part maudite in this way:

The science of relating the object of thought to sovereign moments, in fact, is only a *general economy* which envisages the meaning of these objects in relation to each other and finally in relation to the loss of meaning. The question of this *general economy* is situated on the level of *political economy*, but the science designated by this name is only a restricted economy, (restricted to commercial values). In question is the essential problem for the science dealing with the use of wealth. The *general economy*, in the first place, makes apparent that excesses of energy are produced, and that by definition, these excesses cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning. It is this useless, senseless loss that *is sovereignty*. [*EI*, p. 233].³³

Insofar as it is a scientific form of writing, general economy is certainly not sovereignty itself. Moreover, there is no sovereignty itself. Sovereignty dissolves the values of meaning, truth and a *grasp-of-the-thing-itself*. This is why the discourse that it opens above all is not true, truthful or “sincere.”³⁴ Sovereignty is the impossible, therefore it is not, it is—Bataille writes this word in italics—“this loss.” The writing of sovereignty places discourse in relation to absolute non-discourse. Like general economy, it is not the loss of meaning, but, as we have just read, the “relation to this loss of meaning.” It opens the question of meaning. It does not describe unknowledge, for this is impossible, but only the effect of unknowledge. “In sum, it would be impossible to speak of unknowledge, while we can speak of its effects.”³⁵

To this extent, we do not return to the usual order of knowledge-gathering science. The writing of sovereignty is neither sovereignty in its operation nor current scientific discourse. This latter has as its meaning (as its discursive content and direction) the relation oriented from the unknown to the known or knowable, to the always already known or to

anticipated knowledge. Although general writing also has a meaning, since it is only a relation to nonmeaning this order is reversed within it. And the relation to the absolute possibility of knowledge is suspended within it. The known is related to the unknown, meaning to nonmeaning. "This knowledge, which might be called liberated (but which I prefer to call neutral), is the usage of a function detached (liberated) from the servitude from whence it springs: the function in question related the unknown to the known (the solid), while, dating from the moment it is detached, it relates the known to the unknown" (*Méthode*). A movement that is only sketched, as we have seen, in the "poetic image."

Not that the phenomenology of the mind, which proceeded within the horizon of absolute knowledge or according to the circularity of the *Logos*, is thus overturned. Instead of being simply overturned, it is comprehended: not comprehended by knowledge-gathering comprehension, but inscribed within the opening of the general economy along with its horizons of knowledge and its figures of meaning. General economy folds these horizons and figures so that they will be related not to a basis, but to the nonbasis of expenditure, not to the *telos* of meaning, but to the indefinite destruction of value. Bataille's atheology³⁶ is also an a-teleology and an aneschatology. Even in its discourse, which already must be distinguished from sovereign affirmation, this atheology does not, however, proceed along the lines of negative theology; lines that could not fail to fascinate Bataille, but which, perhaps, still reserved, beyond all the rejected predicates, and even "beyond being," a "superessentiality;"³⁷ beyond the categories of beings, a supreme being and an indestructible meaning. Perhaps: for here we are touching upon the limits and the greatest audacities of discourse in Western thought. We could demonstrate that the distances and proximities do not differ among themselves.

Since it relates the successive figures of phenomenality to a knowledge of meaning that always already has been anticipated, the phenomenology of the mind (and phenomenology in general) corresponds to a restricted economy: restricted to commercial values, one might say, picking up on the terms of the definition, a "science dealing with the utilization of wealth," limited to the meaning and the established value of objects, and to their circulation. The circularity of absolute knowledge

could dominate, could comprehend only this circulation, only the circuit of reproductive consumption. The absolute production and destruction of value, the exceeding energy as such, the energy which "can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning"—all this escapes phenomenology as restricted economy. The latter can determine difference and negativity only as facets, moments, or conditions of meaning: as work. Now the nonmeaning of the sovereign operation is neither the negative of, nor the condition for, meaning, even if it is this also, and even if this is what its name gives us to understand. It is not a reserve of meaning. It keeps itself beyond the opposition of the positive and the negative, for the act of consumption, although it induces the loss of sense, is not the negative of presence, presence maintained or looked on in the truth of its meaning (its *bewahren*). Such a rupture of symmetry must propagate its effects throughout the entire chain of discourse. The concepts of general writing can be read only on the condition that they be deported, shifted outside the symmetrical alternatives from which, however, they seem to be taken, and in which, after a fashion, they must also remain. Strategy plays upon this origin and "backwardation." For example, if one takes into account this commentary on nonmeaning, then that which indicates itself as nonvalue, within the closure of metaphysics, refers beyond the opposition of value and nonvalue, even beyond the concept of value, as it does beyond the concept of meaning. That which indicates itself as mysticism, in order to shake the security of discursive knowledge, refers beyond the opposition of the mystic and the rational.³⁸ Bataille above all is not a new mystic. That which indicates itself as interior experience is not an experience, because it is related to no presence, to no plenitude, but only to the "impossible" it "undergoes" in torture. This experience above all is not interior: and if it seems to be such because it is related to nothing else, to no exterior (except in the modes of nonrelation, secrecy, and rupture), it is also completely exposed—to torture—naked, open to the exterior, with no interior reserve or feelings, profoundly superficial.

One could submit all the concepts of general writing (those of science, the unconscious, materialism, etc.) to this schematization. The predicates are not there in order to mean something, to enounce or to signify, but in order to make sense slide, to denounce it or to deviate

from it. This writing does not necessarily produce new conceptual unities; and its concepts are not necessarily distinguished from classical concepts by marked characteristics in the form of essential predicates, but rather by qualitative differences of force, height, etc., which themselves are qualified in this way only by metaphor. Tradition's names are maintained, but they are struck with the differences between the major and the minor, the archaic and the classic.³⁹ This is the only way, within discourse, to mark that which separates discourse from its excess.

However, the writing within which these stratagems operate does not consist in subordinating conceptual moments to the totality of a system in which these moments would finally take on meaning. It is not a question of subordinating the slidings and differences of discourse, the play of syntax, to the entirety of an anticipated discourse. On the contrary. If the play of difference is indispensable for the correct reading of the general economy's concepts, and if each notion must be reinscribed within the law of its own sliding and must be related to the sovereign operation, one must not make of these requirements the subordinate moment of a structure. The reading of Bataille must pass through these two dangerous straits. It must not isolate notions as if they were their own context, as if one could immediately understand what the content of words like "experience," "interior," "mystic," "word," "material," "sovereign," etc. means. Here, the error would consist in taking as an immediate given of reading the blindness to a traditional culture which itself wishes to be taken as the natural element of discourse. But inversely, one must not submit contextual attentiveness and differences of signification to a system of meaning permitting or promising an absolute formal mastery. This would amount to erasing the excess of nonmeaning and to falling back into the closure of knowledge: would amount, once more, to not reading Bataille.

On this point the dialogue with Hegel is again decisive. An example: Hegel, and following him, whoever installs himself within the sure element of philosophical discourse, would have been unable to read, in its regulated sliding, a sign like that of "experience." In *l'Erotisme*, Bataille notes, without explaining any further: "In Hegel's mind, what is immediate is bad, and Hegel certainly would have related what I call experience to the immediate." Now, if in its major moments, interior experience breaks with mediation, interior experience is not, however,

immediate. It does not pleasurable consume an absolutely close presence, and, above all, it cannot enter into the movement of mediation, as can the Hegelian immediate. Immediacy and mediacy, such as they are presented in the elements of philosophy, in Hegel's logic, or in phenomenology, are equally "subordinated." It is thus that they can pass one into the other. The sovereign operation therefore also suspends subordination in the form of immediacy. In order to understand that it does not, at this point, enter into work and phenomenology, one must exit from the philosophical logos and think the unthinkable. How can mediacy and immediacy be transgressed simultaneously? How can "subordination," in the sense of the (philosophical) logos be exceeded in its totality? Perhaps through major writings: "I write in order to annihilate the play of subordinate operations within myself (which is, after all, superfluous)" (*Méthode*). Only perhaps, and this is "after all, superfluous," for this writing must assure us of nothing, must give us no certitude, no result, no profit. It is absolutely adventurous, is a chance and not a technique.

The transgression of the neutral and the displacement of the *Aufhebung*

Beyond the classical oppositions, is the writing of sovereignty blank or neutral? One might think so, because the writing of sovereignty can enounce nothing, except in the form of neither this, nor that. Is this not one of the affinities between the thought of Bataille and that of Blanchot? And does not Bataille propose a neutral knowledge? "This knowledge, which might be called liberated (but which I prefer to call neutral), is the usage of a function detached (liberated) from the servitude from whence it springs. . . . It relates the known to the unknown" (cited above).

But here, we must attentively consider the fact that it is not the sovereign operation, but discursive knowledge that is neutral. Neutrality has a negative essence (*ne-uter*), is the negative side of transgression. Sovereignty is not neutral even if it neutralizes, in its discourse, all the contradictions and all the oppositions of classical logic. Neutralization is produced within knowledge and within the syntax of writing, but it is related to a sovereign and transgressive affirmation. The sovereign

operation is not content with neutralizing the classical operations in discourse; in the major form of experience it transgresses the law or prohibitions that form a system with discourse, and even with the work of neutralization. Twenty pages after having proposed a “neutral knowledge”: “I am establishing the possibility of neutral knowledge? my sovereignty welcomes it in me as the bird sings, and gives me no thanks for my work.”

Also the destruction of discourse is not simply an erasing neutralization. It multiplies words, precipitates them one against the other, engulfs them too, in an endless and baseless substitution whose only rule is the sovereign affirmation of the play outside meaning. Not a reserve or a withdrawal, not the infinite murmur of a blank speech erasing the traces of classical discourse, but a kind of potlatch of signs that burns, consumes, and wastes words in the gay affirmation of death: a sacrifice and a challenge.⁴⁰ Thus, for example:

Previously, I designated the sovereign operation under the names of *interior experience* or *extremity of the possible*. Now, I am also designating it under the name of *meditation*. The change of words signifies the bothersomeness of using any words at all (*sovereign operation* is the most loathsome of all the names: in a sense, *comic operation* would be less deceptive); I prefer *meditation*, but it has a pious appearance [El, p. 237].

What has happened? In sum, nothing has been said. We have not stopped at any word; the chain rests on nothing; none of the concepts satisfies the demand, all are determined by each other and, at the same time, destroy or neutralize each other. But the rule of the game or, rather, the game as rule has been affirmed; as has been the necessity of transgressing both discourse and the negativity of the bothersomeness of using any word at all in reassuring identity of its meaning.

But this transgression of discourse (and consequently of law in general, for discourse establishes itself only by establishing normativity or the value of meaning, that is to say, the element of legality in general) must, in some fashion, and like every transgression, conserve or confirm that which it exceeds.⁴¹ This is the only way for it to affirm itself as transgression and thereby to accede to the sacred, which “is presented in

the violence of an infraction.” Now, describing “the contradictory experience of prohibition and transgression,” in *L'erotisme*, Bataille adds a note to the following sentence: “But transgression differs from the ‘return to nature’: it dispels the prohibition without suppressing it.” Here is the note: “It is useless to insist upon the Hegelian character of this operation, which corresponds to the moment of dialectics expressed by the untranslatable German verb *Aufheben* (to surpass while maintaining).”

Is it “useless to insist”? Can one, as Bataille says, understand the movement of transgression under the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*, which, we have seen often enough, represents the victory of the slave and the constitution of meaning?

Here, we must interpret Bataille against Bataille, or rather, must interpret one stratum of his work from another stratum.⁴² By protesting against what, for Bataille, seems to go without saying in this note, we will perhaps sharpen the figure of displacement to which the entire Hegelian discourse is submitted here. In which Bataille is even less Hegelian than he thinks.

The Hegelian *Aufhebung* is produced entirely from within discourse, from within the system or the work of signification. A determination is negated and conserved in another determination which reveals the truth of the former. From infinite indetermination one passes to infinite determination, and this transition, produced by the anxiety of the infinite, continuously links meaning up to itself. The *Aufhebung* is included within the circle of absolute knowledge, never exceeds its closure, never suspends the totality of discourse, work, meaning, law, etc. Since it never dispels the veiling form of absolute knowledge, even by maintaining this form, the Hegelian *Aufhebung* in all its parts belongs to what Bataille calls “the world of work,” that is, the world of the prohibition not perceived as such, in its totality. “And the human collectivity, in part devoted to work, is just as much defined by prohibitions, without which it would not have become the world of work that it essentially is” (*L'erotisme*). The Hegelian *Aufhebung* thus belongs to restricted economy, and is the form of the passage from one prohibition to another, the circulation of prohibitions, history as the truth of the prohibition.

Bataille, thus, can only utilize the empty form of the *Aufhebung*, in an analogical fashion, in order to designate, as was never done before, the

transgressive relationship which links the world of meaning to the world of nonmeaning. This displacement is paradigmatic: within a form of writing, an intraphilosophical concept, the speculative concept par excellence, is forced to designate a movement which properly constitutes the excess of every possible philosopheme. This movement then makes philosophy appear as a form of natural or naïve consciousness (which in Hegel also means cultural consciousness). For as long as the *Aufhebung* remains within restricted economy, it is a prisoner of this natural consciousness. The “we” of the *Phenomenology of the Mind* presents itself in vain as the knowledge of what the naïve consciousness, embedded in its history and in the determinations of its figures, does not yet know; the “we” remains natural and vulgar because it conceives the *passage* from one figure to the next and the truth of this passage only as the circulation of meaning and value. It develops the sense, or the desire for sense, of natural consciousness, the consciousness that encloses itself in the circle in order to know sense; which is always where it comes from, and where it is going to.⁴³ It does not see the nonbasis of play upon which (the) history (of meaning) is launched. To this extent, philosophy, Hegelian speculation, absolute knowledge and everything that they govern, and will govern endlessly in their closure, remain determinations of natural, servile and vulgar consciousness. Self-consciousness is servile.

Between extreme knowledge and vulgar knowledge—the most generally disposed of—the difference is nil. In Hegel, the knowledge of the world is that of the first comer (the first comer, not Hegel, decides upon the key question for Hegel: touching upon the difference between madness and reason: on this point “absolute knowledge” confirms the vulgar notion, is founded on it, is one of its forms). Vulgar knowledge is in us like another *tissue*! . . . In a sense, the condition in which *I would see* would be to get out of, to emerge from the “tissue”! And doubtless I must immediately say: the condition in which *I would see* would be to die. At no moment would I have the chance to *see*! [E1, p. 222].

If the entire history of meaning is reassembled and represented, at a point of the canvas, by the figure of the slave, if Hegel’s discourse, Logic, and the Book of which Kojève speaks are the slave(’s) language, that is,

the worker(’s) language, then they can be read from left to right or from right to left, as a reactionary movement or as a revolutionary movement, or both at once. It would be absurd for the transgression of the Book by writing to be legible only in a determined sense. It would be at once absurd, given the form of the *Aufhebung* which is maintained in transgression, and too full of meaning for a transgression of meaning. From right to left or left to right: these two contradictory and too-meaningful propositions equally lack pertinence. At a certain determined point.

A very determined point. Thus, the effects of ascertaining nonpertinence would have to be watched as closely as possible. One understands nothing about general strategy if one absolutely renounces any regulation of ascertaining nonpertinence. If one loans it, abandons it, puts it into any hands: the right or the left.

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Thus, there is the vulgar tissue of absolute knowledge and the mortal opening of an eye. A text and a vision. The servility of meaning and the awakening to death. A minor writing and a major illumination.

From one to the other, totally other, a certain text. Which in silence traces the structure of the eye, sketches the opening, ventures to contrive “absolute rending,” absolutely rends its own tissue once more become “solid” and servile in once more having been read.