
Bataille and Communication: From Heterogeneity to Continuity

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BATAILLE AND COMMUNICATION: FROM HETEROGENEITY TO CONTIN- UITY BY JOSEPH LIBERTSON

Je ne veux pas réduire, assimiler l'ensemble de ce qui est à l'existence paralysée de servitudes, mais à la sauvagerie *impossibilité* que je suis, qui ne peut éviter ses limites, et ne peut non plus s'y tenir.

Le Coupable

There is a diachronic dimension to the system represented by Georges Bataille's discursive writings. Manifest as a changing theoretical perspective accompanying a stable thematic context, or as the displaced context of a characteristic critical gesture, this diachronic dimension is integral to the architecture of Bataille's system. The system is structured by an array of terms which are posited, often in aphoristic formulations, and subsequently discarded, repositied, or retained and repeated. The term "*dépense*" is an instance of the latter category. The play of these terms, in their totality, is not arbitrary. It is the result of a complex interaction of gestures and contexts, and it describes, over three decades, a trajectory and a momentum. The system of the mature Bataille, with its multiplicity of terms, conditions, and articulations, has a discursive density which is, in large part, the result of this series of displacements. Its beginnings may be perceived in the momentum of a critical gesture which, as early as the essays of *La Critique Sociale*, *Documents* and *Acéphale*, tends to impose upon a mixture of heterogeneous vocabularies a radical ontological force. The trajectory which leads from the early Bataille to the author of *La Part maudite* is defined by the development of a specialized, personal vocabulary whose context is purely ontological, and whose relation to contemporary scientific and philosophical discourses is necessarily problematic.

The purpose of this essay is to describe one index of Bataille's progressive displacement of terms in an ontological direction. This index is the replacement of the system "homogeneity/heterogeneity", as elaborated in "La Structure psychologique du

fascisme" (1933-4), by the system "continuity/ discontinuity" of the mature Bataille.

Affectivity and Subject-object Relations

In early articles such as "Le Langage des fleurs", "Figure humaine", "Chameau", "Abattoir", "Cheminée d'usine", "Les Ecartés de la nature", and "Le Gros orteil", Bataille addresses himself to the study of objects which are given as defying discursive definition. In each case, their defiance is considered to be the result of an affective value which cannot be reduced logically. Most often, this value is the negative value of ugliness. Bataille will note with satisfaction the reticence of science with regard to the horror or hilarity provoked by certain objects, and will speculate upon the human dimensions of such reactions, in rich concrete detail. In the case of "Le Gros orteil" (*Documents*, No. 6, November 1929)¹, for example, he notes that the big toe is the most *human* part of the human body, since it differs most, biologically, from the organs of the ape, and since it assures the rectitude of the vertical human stance. In this very function, however, the big toe is condemned to occupy the lowest sector of the body, to tread in the mud (itself an object of horror), and to be the subject of "grotesque" afflictions such as corns and bunions (I, p. 201). The entire foot is the object of a "secrète épouvante", as well as a historically predominant sexual sanction which, in a country like Spain, could take the form of "l'inquiétude la plus angoissée et ainsi la cause de crimes" (*Ibid.*). This erotic anguish, while not in itself exhausting the problem of "l'hilarité provoquée par la simple imagination des orteils" (I, p. 202), points to a significant coincidence of ugliness and seduction. Bataille relates the tale of a bold courtier who, in the confusion of a fire in the palace, touched the foot of the Queen. The motivation of this gesture is given as "la laideur et . . . l'infection représentées par la bassesse du pied" (p. 203). "Une reine étant *a priori* un être plus idéal, plus éthéré qu'aucun autre, il était humain jusqu'au déchirement de toucher d'elle ce qui ne différait pas beaucoup du pied fumant d'un soudard" (pp. 203-4).

Bataille's allusion to the specificity of "humanity", in a thematic context which will be characteristic of him throughout his life, is made with a hesitation concerning its status in terms of subject-object

¹ References to this essay, as well as to "La Structure psychologique du fascisme" and to "La Notion de dépense", will follow the pagination of Volume I of Bataille's *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

relations. The toe, for instance, is held to have an “aspect hideusement cadavérique et en même temps criard et orgueilleux”, but “la forme du gros orteil n’est cependant pas spécifiquement monstrueuse: en cela il est différent d’autres parties du corps, l’intérieur d’une bouche grande ouverte par exemple” (p. 203). The ugliness of the toe is partly, but not entirely, conferred upon it by an intentionality which is motivated according to the ambiguous index “humain”. Bataille’s contemporaneous texts invariably raise this question and repeat this hesitation. Only with the great beginnings of Bataille’s system, “La Notion de dépense” (1933) and “La Structure psychologique du fascisme” (1933-4) will a theoretical framework be developed for the elaboration of these problems.

Affectivity and Utility

“La Structure psychologique du fascisme” (*La Critique Sociale*, Nos. 10-11, Nov. 1933, Mar. 1934) is, at the outset, an attempt to account for the phenomenon of fascism in an experimental political-economic vocabulary. For this purpose, Bataille invokes a set of terms which is designed to situate, somewhat in the manner and under the influence of Marx, the forces which combine economically and politically to form a society. The homogeneous society, or the homogeneous sector of a given society, is based on an adherence to the concept of utility as manifested in the process of production:

La base de l’*homogénéité* sociale est la production. La société *homogène* est la société productive, c’est-à-dire la société utile. Tout élément inutile est exclu, non de la société totale, mais de sa partie *homogène*. Dans cette partie, chaque élément doit être utile à un autre sans que jamais l’activité *homogène* puisse atteindre la forme de l’activité *valable en soi*. Une activité utile a toujours une *commune mesure* avec une autre activité utile, mais non avec une activité *pour soi*. (I, p. 340)

Homogeneity is defined here as the primacy of utility, considered as a system of reference by which people or commodities are judged to have an interdependent economic relation. The “commune mesure” of which Bataille speaks is given, in the case of modern societies, as money (*Ibid.*). In the quotation above, the value of uselessness is defined as an estrangement from the system of reference regulated by the *commune mesure*, and at the same time, as value *for self*. Uselessness denotes a certain autonomy, with regard to the societal system of reference. This autonomy, considered as the impossibility

of assimilation of a given element to the interdependence of homogeneity, is given the name *heterogeneity*.

Le terme Même d'*hétérogène* indique qu'il s'agit d'éléments impossibles à assimiler et cette impossibilité qui touche à la base l'assimilation sociale touche en même temps l'assimilation scientifique. (I, p. 344)

This quotation is immediately striking, by virtue of its inclusion of science in the "world of homogeneity". In order to account for this, it is necessary for us to refer to "La Notion de dépense", published a year before "La Structure psychologique du fascisme" (*La Critique sociale*, No. 7, Jan. 1933). In that essay, Bataille had noted that in "current practice" (I, p. 302), the "classical" principle of utility governs all discussions of human society. This practice

a théoriquement pour but le plaisir — mais seulement sous une forme tempérée, le plaisir violent étant donné comme *pathologique* — et elle se laisse limiter à l'acquisition (pratiquement à la production et à la conservation des biens d'une part — à la reproduction et à la conservation des vies humaines d'autre part (il s'y ajoute, il est vrai, la lutte contre la douleur dont l'importance suffit à elle seule à marquer le caractère négatif du principe du plaisir introduit théoriquement à la base. (I, pp. 302-3)

The current concept of utility, in Bataille's eyes, is defined by a primacy accorded to the idea of conservation — of goods or of human lives — and is applied reductively, in "current practice", to such specific human facts as pleasure. (Bataille's reference to the problem of pleasure, with its psychoanalytic resonances, is noteworthy here, and will be partially discussed below, in the context of his comments on the unconscious.) Each time a human question is posed in terms of utility, "il est possible d'affirmer que le débat est nécessairement faussé et que la question fondamentale est éludée" (I, p. 302). In "La Notion de dépense", Bataille adduces as evidence of this epistemological reduction a series of human comportments ("le luxe, les deuils, les guerres, les cultes, les constructions de monuments somptuaires, les jeux, les spectacles, les arts, l'activité sexuelle perverse (c'est-à-dire détournée de la finalité génitale)" — I, p. 305) whose obvious end or desire is not acquisition or conservation, but *loss*, a loss which promises no possible subsidiary profit. These comportments "ont leur fin en elles-mêmes" (*Ibid.*). "Or, il est nécessaire de réserver le nom de *dépense* à ces formes improductives, à l'exclusion de tous les modes de consommation qui servent de

moyen terme à la production" (*Ibid.*). The phrase "ont leur fin en elles-mêmes", combined with Bataille's exclusion of comportments toward loss which are subsidiary to eventual profit, serves to situate *dépense* in the context of autonomy and value for self.

In Bataille's eyes, comportments toward loss, in their specifically human sense, cannot be adequately treated by a logic whose principal axis of pertinence is utility, defined as conservation. Their value is autonomous, with reference to conservation. It is a value, but not a form of utility. Within "La Notion de dépense", which is for the most part an enumeration of these autonomous comportments, Bataille takes note of the theoretical problem of the "current" primacy of conservation, but does not attempt to explain it. In "La Structure psychologique du fascisme", as we have seen, this theoretical problem is inserted into the discussion of societal forces, with the statement that heterogeneity is unassimilable to science. Bataille's context becomes epistemological as well as socio-economic, and *dépense* as heterogeneity becomes a more radical concept.

The idea of a region of society or of human comportment which is unassimilable to the specialized comportment of scientific investigation, leads us again to the context of the subject and the object. Within this context, Bataille's formulations begin to demonstrate the hesitation which characterized his early essays. In the first place, he provides an unclear and tautological definition of "science": "La science, en effet, n'est pas une entité abstraite: elle est constamment réductible à un ensemble d'hommes vivant les aspirations inhérentes au processus scientifique" (I, p. 344). In the second place, instead of explaining these aspirations, Bataille proceeds to situate science by means of the very terms of homogeneity and heterogeneity. In this formulation, science becomes both a *function* and a *foundation* of the homogeneous world:

(L) a science a pour objet de fonder l'*homogénéité* des phénomènes; elle est, en un certain sens, une des fonctions éminentes de l'*homogénéité*. Ainsi, les éléments *hétérogènes* qui sont exclus par cette dernière se trouvent également exclus du champ de l'attention scientifique: par principe même, la science ne peut pas connaître d'éléments *hétérogènes* en tant que tels. (I, p. 344)

Thus, in Bataille's text, an empirical explanation of a common term, "science", in the context of the history and philosophy of science, is not attempted. Instead, the common term acquires a special sense, in an overall Bataillan context which is not yet defined. This proce-

ture, which will be characteristic of Bataille, forces his reader to refer, for the definition of key terms, to the totality of a developing system. In order to understand the function of science within the realm of homogeneity, we must define the function of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the development of Bataille's system.

Science is a function of the world of homogeneity, by virtue of its status as a foundation of that world. The phrase "to found the homogeneity of phenomena" has two possible meanings. Is homogeneity a quality conferred upon phenomena by "science" as a form of intentionality, or is it a quality inherent in objects? Bataille's specific definition of the term clearly shows this ambiguity:

Homogénéité signifie . . . commensurabilité des éléments et conscience de cette commensurabilité (les rapports humains peuvent être maintenus par une réduction à des règles fixes basées sur la conscience de l'identité possible de personnes et de situations définies; en principe, toute violence est exclue du cours d'existence ainsi impliqué). (I, p. 340)

The ambiguity of this formulation is manifest in the phrases "commensurabilité des éléments et conscience de cette commensurabilité", and "l'identité possible de personnes et de situations définies". Commensurable elements are susceptible of measurement or identification by an economic system of reference. Their ontological boundaries may be fixed, and their identity circumscribed, by an intentional gesture of some kind. This reductive mode of identification, which proceeds from a certain susceptibility of phenomena (including persons), is conceived as "science", and its reduction is given as an exclusion of unassimilable "violence" from the field of its identifications. The definitions of "commensurability" as "possible identity" and "violence" as unassimilability are absent from Bataille's formulation.

Bataille's subsequent definitions of homogeneity and heterogeneity, while maintaining the ambiguity we have seen above, demonstrate that the principle of differentiation of the two terms is affectivity.

La réalité des éléments *hétérogènes* n'est pas du même ordre que celle des éléments *homogènes*. La réalité *homogène* se présente avec l'aspect abstrait et neutre des objets strictement définis et identifiés . . . La réalité *hétérogène* est celle de la force ou du choc. Elle se présente comme une charge, comme une valeur, passant d'un objet à l'autre d'une façon plus ou moins arbitraire, à peu près

comme si le changement avait lieu non dans le monde des objets, mais seulement dans les jugements du sujet. Ce dernier aspect ne signifie pas cependant que les faits observés doivent être regardés comme subjectifs: ainsi, l'action des objets de l'activité érotique est manifestement fondée dans leur nature objective. (I, p. 347)

Bataille's terminology tends to safeguard an objective status for these two "realities", but the sole context of his principle of definition of the terms appears to be affectivity. He writes that "il est possible de supposer que l'objet de toute réaction affective est nécessairement *hétérogène* (sinon généralement, du moins, par rapport au sujet)" (I, p. 346), and he specifically re-defines "incommensurability" in terms of affectivity: "(L)'existence *hétérogène* peut être représentée . . . comme *tout autre*, comme *incommensurable*, en chargeant ces mots de la valeur *positive* qu'ils ont dans l'expérience *affective*" (I, p. 348).

The ambiguity resulting from a formulation of homogeneous and heterogeneous "realities" which depends upon the term of affectivity, will not be resolved by Bataille in his essay. Instead, the problem of a heterogeneous "reality" will be subsumed by a series of propositions which are concentrated upon the intentional or perceptual function of subjectivity. The problem of objective reality, considered as an existent comprised of regions, will be subsumed by the proposition that "science cannot know *heterogeneous* elements *as such*", posited as a statement about subjectivity. Homogeneous and heterogeneous realities will become secondary to the duality of science and science's "other" as integral functions of a subject's intentionality. "La Structure psychologique du fascisme" will become an essay on subjectivity.

Bataille declares that "il est possible de parler de la nature violente et démesurée d'un cadavre en décomposition" (I, p. 347). This statement, considered as a description of a necessary relationship between subjectivity and objective reality, functions as a re-inscription of the homogeneous and heterogeneous worlds as functions of intentionality. The term "science" stands for the first of these functions, and the second function will be described by an "other" of science which will have several names: the unconscious ("L'exclusion des éléments *hétérogènes* hors du domaine *homogène* de la conscience, rappelle . . . d'une façon formelle celle des éléments décrits (par la psychanalyse) comme *inconscients*, que la censure exclut du moi conscient" (I, p. 344).); the mystical thought of primitive peoples; and dream representations:

Il est facile de constater que — la structure de la connaissance d'une réalité *homogène* étant celle de la science — celle d'une réalité *hétérogène* en tant que telle se retrouve dans la pensée mystique des primitifs et dans les représentations du rêve: elle est identique à la structure de *l'inconscient*. (I, p. 347)

Bataille's quasi-metaphorical descriptions of two functions of intentionality permit the description of a cultural repression which itself clarifies the need for metaphoricity:

Si l'on admet cette conception, étant donné ce qui est connu sur le refoulement, il est d'autant plus facile de comprendre que les incursions faites dans le domaine *hétérogène* n'aient pas encore été suffisamment coordonnées pour aboutir même à la simple révélation de son existence positive et clairement séparée. (I, p. 344)

The concept of a cultural repression which would not be accidental, but would be the result of a duality inherent in consciousness, is the first significant result of the interplay of Bataille's terms and contexts. The very existence of the heterogeneous world is given as a fact repressed by the culture of productivity. The primacy accorded to the homogeneous world, by a certain intentional gesture of subjectivity, has as an integral part of its constitution a rejection of the affective world of heterogeneity. The traces of this rejection, or repression, have already been mentioned: the bias of "current practice" toward utility as a context for all human behavior; the reductive vision of pleasure as a struggle against pain; the refusal to envisage comportments toward loss. Subjectivity's rejection of its own affective function gives rise to a necessarily reductive form of intellection: "science" or "current practice". The domain to which this form of intellection is blind, is further characterized by Bataille in terms of a fundamental duality:

(L)e monde *hétérogène* comprend l'ensemble des résultats de la dépense *improductive* . . . Ceci revient à dire: tout ce que la société *homogène* rejette soit comme déchet, soit comme valeur supérieure transcendante. (I, p. 346)

The structural duality of the pure and the impure is familiar to any reader of Bataille. Its appearance in the context of heterogeneity is one example of a relatively continuous thematic context, accompanied by a constantly changing theoretical perspective, in Bataille's thought. Thus, the seductive ambiguity of the Queen's foot finds its context in the homogeneous world, as an upsurge of heterogeneity.

Affect opposed to Affect

Affect founds the world of heterogeneity. A reaction against affect, integral to the functioning of subjectivity, represses this world in favor of a homogeneous world. The former world, repressed by the latter, is given by Bataille an ontological priority:

L'étude de l'*homogénéité* et de ses conditions d'existence conduit ... à l'étude essentielle de l'*hétérogénéité*. Elle en constitue d'ailleurs la première partie en ce sens que la première détermination de l'*hétérogénéité* définie comme non *homogène* suppose la connaissance de l'*homogénéité* qui la délimite par exclusion. (I, pp. 343-4).

The study of homogeneity, given the history of the “culture of utility”, has an epistemological priority over the study of repressed heterogeneity. But the ontological priority of heterogeneity is the priority of the repressed to the act of repression.

The context of repression is the stage for a critical gesture which will be characteristic of Bataille: the gesture by which two terms which apparently exclude each other violently are placed in a relationship of mutual conditioning. The world of homogeneity is a world *founded* upon the exclusion of the heterogeneous element. This reductive world requires the priority of that which it reduces. Moreover, the reduction which exploits a “possible identity” of objects is never entirely effective. This fact is testified to by the many instances of *dépense*, and by a perpetual affective “possibility” which characterizes many objects. Thus, the biologically dissected innocence of the big toe is accompanied, in the world of subjectivity, by a certain inescapable “écarquillement des yeux” before the same object. Heterogeneity, as an integral part of intentionality, cannot be banished by the secondary reaction which founds homogeneity. This configuration is roughly analogous to some of the major philosophical distinctions made in the early part of the twentieth century, such as the Freudian “return of the repressed”, the Surrealist vision of objects, or the drawing of attention by Heidegger to a rupture of the objectal relation of utility. But as Bataille compresses his terms into a relation of intimate interdependence in which the very integrity of each is compromised by the proximity of the other, repression develops in his text the status of an inevitability, and his meditation anticipates those of the most advanced contemporary readers of Freud and Heidegger, such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and others. Concentrating his attention upon the

coincidence of homogeneity and heterogeneity in certain persons and objects, Bataille says of the fascist leader that, while he symbolizes and demands the “devoir, discipline et ordre accomplis” of homogeneity, he is also a heterogeneous entity, to the extent that he is an incarnation of violence and an “objet transcendant de l’affectivité collective” (I, p. 363). Similarly, the “God of the theologians”—the God of the modern capitalist society—is given as representing an affective moral imperative brought, through an “introjection” of the structure of homogeneity, to incarnate the values of utility (I, p. 361). Speaking of the fascist army, whose status among the civilian population is similar to that of the leader, Bataille writes:

Le mode de l’hétérogénéité subit explicitement une altération profonde, achevant de réaliser l’homogénéité intense sans que l’hétérogénéité fondamentale décroisse. (I, p. 359)

This sentence, in the context of the overall movement of Bataille’s text, may be understood as an ultimate definition of homogeneity, and this for two reasons. In the first place, the entire homogeneous world is constituted by objects whose “possible” heterogeneity has been partially, but not completely, excluded from consciousness. The priority of heterogeneity is thus a condition for the very homogeneity of these objects. Homogeneity, in this sense, is heterogeneity *altérée*: heterogeneity contaminated, or partially reduced. The homogeneous reduction of objective reality proceeds from the more fundamental “non-assimilability” of that reality, as it is affectively envisaged by subjectivity. In the second place, the “reaction against affect” which we saw to be the constitution of homogeneity, is *itself* an affective reaction. Thus, affect opposes affect, violence outlaws violence, and the homogeneous vision becomes an *intense* vision.

Complementary to the concept of a homogeneity rendered intense by the priority of that which it reduces, is the concept of a heterogeneity whose accessibility to consciousness has the form of an *inevitable* reduction. Since the study of heterogeneity must begin with homogeneity, defined as that which can be known by the “science” of the society of utility, and since all that is known by “science” is necessarily known in the form of a reduction, the cognitive relation of a subject to heterogeneity must be a contamination of heterogeneity. Cognition is defined as an intentionality which represses affect. Affect is defined as a relation to reality which founds

heterogeneity. But cognition *itself* is defined as affect. Thus, with the exception of the dream, the unconscious, and the mystical vision, which are held to be immediate apprehensions of heterogeneity (and it should be noted that these options, suggested by Bataille at this early stage of his career, will be discarded later), there can be no intentional proximity to heterogeneity which will not be contaminated by homogeneity, *and vice versa*. The reductiveness of “science”, considered as a negative term, and the unassimilability of affect, considered as a positive term, are both subsumed by the complementary concepts of intensity and contamination, considered as governing conditions for the functioning of intentionality.

“La Structure psychologique du fascisme” is the first Bataillan text in which the characteristic structure of Bataille’s dialectic may be perceived. This dialectic consists of two terms which oppose each other violently, and simultaneously condition each other so intimately as to compromise the univocity of their opposition. No synthesis of the terms is possible. The ontological context of their compressed proximity is the stage for a violence which subsumes and exceeds the univocal “violence” of the “positive” term — here, the term “heterogeneity”. Within the context of subjectivity, the dialectic describes a subject who imposes a mediation upon his intentional proximity to objective reality, through his “reaction against affect”. This reaction, itself defined as affect, is not effective as an evacuation of violence from perception; but it is effective as a mediating obstacle to the knowledge of that which is “humain jusqu’au déchirement”. At the same time, however, the cognition which is defined as a mediation retains a quantity of the “charge” of heterogeneity, in the form of its peculiar “intensity”. The proposition that “science cannot know heterogeneity as such” is radically conditioned by the fact of this “intensity”.

Although the dialectic is structured with extreme sophistication by Bataille, its context of perception or intentionality is insufficiently grounded. Why, for instance, are some objects more provocative of affect than others? Why is there a coincidence of the pure and the impure in the world of heterogeneity? Why is utility the relation which governs the context of the “reaction against affect”? These questions all concern the *motivation* which creates the specificity of subjective intentionality in Bataille’s text. The intentional act is shown by him to be other than purely mechanical receptivity. That act is always affectively motivated, according to the still-ambiguous index “humain”. The study of this term, and the attempt to ground

it ontologically, will occupy Bataille for the rest of his life, and will determine his sacrifice of the system “homogeneity/ heterogeneity” in favor of another: the system “continuity/ discontinuity”.

A Homogeneous Element

Consequent to the problem of a ground for statements about subjectivity is a change in Bataille’s thinking, which extends over a decade or more. One fleeting example of the displacements caused by this development may be perceived in the pages of *L’Expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943)². In a section significantly entitled “LA ‘COMMUNICATION’”, the terms “homogeneity” and “heterogeneity” reappear with entirely new meanings:

D’une particule simple à l’autre, il n’y a pas de différence de nature, il n’y a pas non plus de différence entre celle-ci et celle-là. Il y a *de* ceci qui se produit ici ou là, chaque fois sous forme d’unité, mais cette unité ne persévère pas en elle-même. Des ondes, des vagues, des particules simples ne sont peut-être que les multiples mouvements d’un élément homogène; elles ne possèdent que l’unité fuyante et ne brisent pas l’homogénéité de l’ensemble.

Les groupes composés de nombreuses particules simples possèdent seuls ce caractère hétérogène qui me différencie de toi et isole nos différences dans le reste de l’univers. Ce qu’on appelle un “être” n’est jamais simple, et s’il a seul l’unité durable, il ne la possède qu’imparfaite: elle est travaillée par sa profonde division intérieure, elle demeure mal fermée et, en certains points, attaquable du dehors. (V, pp. 110-11)

Although the context of these two paragraphs, like that of all the fragments which make up the *Somme athéologique*, resists precise definition, the reader may clearly perceive two basic aspects of Bataille’s perspective. In the first place, the individual subject is being envisaged ontologically. The “unity” of a “being” — the intentional subject included — is here being directly grounded and described. In the second place, the terms “homogeneity” and “heterogeneity”, in this perspective, have changed places with each other hierarchically. In his earlier system, Bataille had described what he saw as a reductive vision of objects which repressed a certain non-

² References to this book will follow the pagination of Volume V of the *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), as will references to *Le Coupable* (originally published in 1944). The following abbreviations will be used: E.I. (*L’Expérience intérieure*); C. (*Le Coupable*); E. (*L’Erotisme*: 10/18, 1970); P.M. (*La Part maudite*: Minuit “Points”, 1967).

assimilability inherent in them. This was the “homogeneous” vision. Now Bataille is suggesting that, beyond the “unity” or particularity of any “being”, there is a “homogeneous” element, of which this being is merely a fleeting movement. A living individual, in this context, is constituted by a group of such particles — an uncertain closure which gives the illusion of a differentiated whole. But the closure — the illusory “heterogeneity” of this whole — is “mal fermée”. The isolation of the individual is open to penetration from the outside.

Analogically, the homogeneous “element” which transcends the particularity of the individual corresponds, by virtue of its very transcendence, to the non-assimilation of the earlier “heterogeneity”. Conversely, the “caractère hétérogène” of the integral, differentiated individual, in the new context, corresponds to the “homogeneous” unity of the partially-reduced object, in the older context. Roughly speaking, the category of integral unity as illusion or reduction has been re-named “heterogeneity” instead of “homogeneity”, and the category of transcendent non-assimilability (that which escapes the unifying reduction) has been re-named “homogeneity” instead of “heterogeneity”.

From the context of the reductive closure of subjective intentionality, with its affective motivations and its solidarity with the category of utility, Bataille has displaced his terms. They now refer directly to the *being of the subject*. This being is described as an illusory integrity whose closure is in reality not complete, or whose “unity” is “imperfect”. Bataille’s critical gesture, which had previously operated in an un-grounded perceptual or intentional context, now repeats itself in a most basic context. It posits a continuous element which transcends a moment of its own movement. The category “imperfect closure”, which had previously described the object of a reductive intentionality, has now reappeared as a possible ground for an entire theory of the being of “humanity” in its totality. This theory, whose essential structures may be perceived throughout the three volumes of the *Somme athéologique*, becomes explicit in the complementary essays entitled *La Part maudite* (1949) and *L’Erotisme* (1957).

The Concept of Discontinuity

The notion of imperfect closure, characterized as “heterogeneity” in the quotation above, is a major Bataillan concern through the

1940's. It is opposed, momentarily, to the term "continuum", in *Méthode de méditation* (V, p. 195), and it forms the background for the elaboration of *dépense* in *La Part maudite*. With *L'Erotisme* (1957), the dialectic "continuity/discontinuity" is developed for the elaboration of this central concept. In this essay, Bataille's characteristic multiplicity of vocabularies will include that of biology. "Discontinuity" will initially be a biological description of the individuality, unity, particularity, or integrity of a living being:

La reproduction met en jeu des êtres discontinus.

Les êtres qui se reproduisent sont distincts les uns des autres et les êtres reproduits sont distincts entre eux comme ils sont distincts de ceux dont ils sont issus. Chaque être est distinct de tous les autres. Sa naissance, sa mort et les événements de sa vie peuvent avoir pour les autres un intérêt, mais il est seul intéressé directement. Lui seul naît. Lui seul meurt. Entre un être et un autre, il y a un abîme, il y a une discontinuité.

Cet abîme se situe, par exemple, entre vous qui m'écoutez et moi qui vous parle. Nous essayons de communiquer, mais nulle communication entre nous ne pourra supprimer une différence première. Si vous mourez, ce n'est pas moi qui meurs. Nous sommes, vous et moi, des êtres discontinus. (E., p. 17)

Thus discontinuity as a category stands for the logical domain of identity to self, or ipseity. Or more specifically, within the biologically oriented context of Bataille's demonstration, it stands for a characteristic of that domain which, while not exhaustive, is held to be irreducible. Ipseity, whatever its predicates and possibilities may be (including, as Bataille writes, a form of communication), has a character of isolation or separateness. Whatever the individual subject may be — *ipse*, *animal rationale*, the unity of an experience, ego, or even *être-pour-soi* — he is also "discontinuity".

If a discontinuous creature depends for its existence and sustenance upon the "fact of life" or "energy of life", then it may be said that this basic energy transcends the particularity of the individual. In other words, "living being" as an economy of energy has a certain priority over the fact that this being is invariably incarnated in the form of individuals. For Bataille, the "fact of life" is a *continuity* of living being. This continuity passes through the individual creature during its life span, and is in turn passed on to other living beings, through death and reproduction. This "fact of life" as a continuity transcending ipseity may actually be perceived at certain moments. One such moment is the moment of conception. Two gametes fuse

to form an egg; or a one-celled individual splits to form two new individuals. At these moments discontinuity — particularity — becomes, for an instant, continuous. There is a passage from discontinuity, to continuity (and then to discontinuity again) at the conception of each new discontinuous being.

Le spermatozoïde et l'ovule sont à l'état élémentaire des êtres discontinus, mais ils s'unissent, en conséquence une continuité s'établit entre eux pour former un nouvel être, à partir de la mort, de la disparition des êtres séparés. Le nouvel être est lui-même discontinu, mais il porte en lui le passage à la continuité, la fusion, mortelle pour chacun d'eux, des deux êtres distincts. (E., p. 19)

Similarly, the splitting of a one-celled individual involves “un *instant* de continuité. Le premier meurt, mais il apparaît *dans sa mort* un instant fondamental de continuité de deux êtres” (E., p. 18). Conception, then, is a momentary passage from discontinuity to continuity, a passage which returns to discontinuity in the form of a new being. The new creature is founded by the disappearance of the gametes, or the disappearance of the one-celled progenitor, or, in the case of sexual reproduction, the implied eventual death of the parents. Death is therefore immediately associated with the moment of continuity, or with the idea of continuity as life transcending particularity.

The physical fact of death has the same economic status as the moment of conception. When an individual ceases to live, the energy which animated it passes, in a moment of continuity, to another or several other discontinuous beings. This biological exchange sustains life, and is in a sense the “fact of life” which passes among particular beings.

Between these moments of conception and death, living beings are incarnated as discontinuous. Their being is separation, isolation, identity to self. The *only* incarnation of continuity is discontinuity. Against this background, there is a fundamental necessity felt by the discontinuous being to prolong its existence *as* discontinuity. The need to live is the need to remain separate, since death is the destruction of separation. But for the general economy of life on earth, there is no category of “necessity”. The “fact of life” is a continual economy of destructions or “dilapidations” of living creatures. Its transcendence of discontinuity is described in *La Part maudite* as a basic *excess* of energy:

A la surface du globe, pour *la matière vivante en général*, l'énergie

est toujours en excès, la question est toujours posée en termes de luxe, le choix est limité au mode de dilapidation des richesses. C'est à l'être vivant particulier, ou aux ensembles limités d'êtres vivants, que le problème de la nécessité se pose. (P.M., p. 62)

The movement of energy in the general economy is a play of destructions: birth, growth through consumption of life, and death. "Necessity" has no logical place in this general economy of exchange. But from the point of view of the living individual, necessity is the condition of life itself. In this context, we can see that the problem of utility as an essential relation in the subject's intentionality has not ceased to concern Bataille, since "La Structure psychologique du fascisme". He is here grounding that relation, through his description of survival as the primary necessity confronting the living individual. In subsequent demonstrations, Bataille will situate utility against the background of survival. The *raison d'être* of an intentionality based on utility will be survival. And the derivation of the concept of survival as a necessity which influences intentionality is, as we have seen, the concept "discontinuity".

We may note, in the context of survival, another example of a characteristic Bataillan critical "gesture": the gesture by which a term is made to condition the term opposed to it. Such a condition operates in the case of survival. For the struggle to survive, as a necessity, is a comportment relative to continuity, considered as the fact or eventuality of death. Survival envisages death. This relation, which characterizes all life, implies a certain awareness of death, on a pre-conscious level. Prior to the complexities of a subject's intentionality, Bataille sees a primary comportment which is already "intentional" and which will condition *any* configuration of consciousness. In addition to this, survival also functions as an example of the dependence of discontinuity upon continuity, a dependence analogous to that of homogeneity upon heterogeneity. Discontinuity, even if considered as closed and integral, comports itself in opposition to continuity, which transcends it. The closure of discontinuity, therefore, is already defined in terms of a "tension" analogous to that of homogeneity. Just as homogeneity was a difficult, partial containment of heterogeneity — an incomplete reduction — discontinuity is an isolated state conditioned by continuity, even in its opposition to the latter.

But this condition in the form of opposition is not the only one. A study of the total system represented by *La Part maudite* and *L'Erotisme* reveals an extraordinary dialectical tension between con-

tinuity and discontinuity, and a structure of mutual conditioning which leaves each term radically dependent upon the other. One example of this structure is a second, more radical formulation of the concept of excess as a relation of continuity to discontinuity. This formulation is the primary logical principle of *La Part maudite*. In Bataille's terms, the metaphorical model for the "energy of life" which animates all discontinuous creatures, is the energy of the sun. This energy is always in excess, with relation to the necessarily limited capacity of containment represented by discontinuous life forms. Thus, "l'organisme vivant, dans la situation que déterminent les jeux de l'énergie à la surface du globe, reçoit en principe plus d'énergie qu'il n'est nécessaire au maintien de la vie" (P.M., p. 60). The concept that the organism "contains too much energy" is the basis upon which Bataille will build a series of empirical consequences, the most important of which will be *dépense*. But before we consider these consequences, it is necessary to take note of a decisive paradox which is already established by Bataille's basic definitions.

The struggle to survive envisages death by opposition to it. This struggle is essentially a struggle of conservation. It is opposed to a general economy of excess, an economy which continually *exceeds* the particularity of the discontinuous being, through death. But the struggle to survive is animated — provided with its own energy — precisely by that energy of continuity which the struggle is intended to oppose:

Mais l'homme n'est pas seulement l'être séparé qui dispute sa part de ressources au monde vivant ou aux autres hommes. Le mouvement général d'exsudation (de dilapidation) de la matière vivante l'anime, et il ne saurait l'arrêter . . . (P.M., p. 62)

It is important to read this quotation rigorously, in order to avoid a misunderstanding of the precise relation of discontinuity to continuity. The opposition of these terms does not exhaust their relation. Bataille will describe two basic, opposite tendencies in the discontinuous being: a tendency toward self-conservation, and a tendency toward loss of the integrity of self. But prior to these two tendencies, there is a more radical intimacy of the terms of continuity and discontinuity. When Bataille writes that the general movement of energy *animates* man, it must be understood that it animates him in *all* his compartments. It animates, specifically, his desire for self-preservation. Death threatens the discontinuous being "from the outside", but the desire to live takes its urgency from

the same continuous energy whose violent play constitutes the general destruction of all individual beings. The many analogues of self-preservation which structure Bataille's system in its totality, such as prohibition, knowledge, the profane world, the prosaic world, etc., will all be conditioned by the fact that continuity is the animating energy of the comportment of self-preservation. Concomitantly, the opposed comportments, which tend toward loss of self, such as transgression, eroticism, sovereignty, *dépense*, etc., will be radically conditioned by the fact that *life* is defined as discontinuity. This mutual conditioning will have a decisive priority at all the key moments of Bataille's demonstrations. The overall context "communication" in particular, will follow a pattern which takes its force from this priority.

We saw above that homogeneity was defined as "heterogeneity-reduced", and that the primary, violent term of heterogeneity was of less concern to Bataille than the human experience of "violence-limited". The same structural configuration operates in the case of discontinuity. Death, for the discontinuous being, is a final, instantaneous contact with continuity. It is an utter loss of the limit of ipseity: an end to isolation. It is the moment of unmediated communication, *par excellence*. But it is not the moment which ultimately concerns Bataille. His system, which begins by envisaging the general economy of life and death in terms of continuity, concentrates its energy and develops its force by concerning itself with the *point of view* of the discontinuous being, that is to say, with *life*. Life is discontinuity. It is violence (the non-assimilable: excess) experienced within limits. It is what Maurice Blanchot, writing on Bataille (in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, No. 118, August 1962), has aptly called "L'Expérience-limite". Life is the experience of the ineluctability of ipseity, as separation.

But the system "continuity/discontinuity" demonstrates that ipseity, like homogeneity, is intense, and paradoxical. Death is a passage of discontinuity to continuity. But discontinuity itself is a constant, intimate contact with continuity, in the form of a tenuous, diachronically circumscribed enclosure of continuity. This contact is paradoxical, because discontinuity opposes the violence of continuity, in the struggle for survival, but at the same time *incarnates* and expresses that violence through its very desire to survive. Continuity is excess. Survival is a paradoxical mobilization of excess in the direction of self-conservation. The comportment which seeks to maintain isolation, is itself *excessive*. Self-protection is solidary with

destruction, in spite of its ostensible opposition to destruction. Non-violence, conceived as the effort to avoid death, is itself violent. Thus, the critical movement which established the violence of the homogeneous “reaction against affect” is reproduced in the later system. But now the context of this movement is much more basic, and it will provide, as we shall see, an ontological background for the comportments which most interest Bataille. This background, structurally homologous with the “reaction against affect” itself defined as affect, may be termed *dis-continuity*. It represents an ontological coincidence of two opposing tendencies, or the coincidence of two modes of being which invade each other as absolute conditions. As a category, it will have a priority over all other categories in Bataille’s system. In all his major demonstrations, Bataille will return to the structure of mutual conditioning, even if the return is momentary and apparently marginal. The structural dualities which characterize Bataille’s discourse will always be subsumed by a term of “violence-limited” which takes precedence over an initial term of “violence”, such as “heterogeneity” or “continuity”.

Dépense and the “mise en jeu”

The notion of *dépense*, retained from Bataille’s earlier system, is, in the context of excess, the principal concept of *La Part maudite*. We have seen that the priority of excess over conservation is the inherence of continuity in discontinuity. Self-conservation is violent. In addition to this primary dilemma, however, there is a movement of discontinuity toward greater violence. This movement approaches the extremity, or the limit, of the uneasy containment which is *dis-continuity*. In the form of a “nostalgia for lost continuity” or an “obsession with a primary continuity” (E., p. 20), it will have an essential place in the subjective context of transgression. In its first elaboration, though, the concept “*dépense*” functions in a physical context, without reference to consciousness.

Dépense (“expense”, “loss”) is invoked by Bataille as a fundamental consequence of the excess of vital energy, with relation to the limited nature of its incarnation. This concept is introduced in two ways. In the first place, the multiplication of living beings at the surface of the earth requires a limit, since their expansion in space causes an economic “pressure”. The economy of this limit is death. “(L)’inégalité de la pression dans la matière vivante ouvre constamment à la croissance la place laissée par la mort” (P.M., p. 73). Death is an economic fact for life in a limited space. But from the point of

view of the discontinuous being, death is also a violent loss of energy. As opposed to the self-conserving expenses of energy which form an individual's activity in life, this final loss does not contribute to the individual's growth or integrity. It is without "profit" to him. "Perte sans profit" is the definition of *dépense*. Death is the instance of "pure" *dépense*, because, as the destruction of discontinuity, it is a loss which is absolutely non-recuperable.

In the second place, as we have seen, each living being contains within its limits more energy than is necessary for its continued existence. The organism "reçoit en principe plus d'énergie qu'il n'est nécessaire au maintien de la vie" (P.M., p. 60). The first result of this excess of energy is the physical growth of the individual. However, "si le système ne peut plus croître, ou si l'excédent ne peut en entier être absorbé dans sa croissance, il faut nécessairement le perdre sans profit, le dépenser . . ." (*Ibid.*) The reader will note here that *dépense*, which in 1933 was a comportment invoked but not explained by Bataille, is now given a context and a *raison d'être*, in the form of the general economy and the notion of excess. Here, as in the case of discontinuity, an ontological perspective is developed through an empirical terminology as a ground for the study of specific comportments. The primary instance of *dépense* in this second formulation is sexual reproduction, which, like death, is simultaneously a necessity for the conservation of life in general, and a violent loss of energy for the individual. This loss is, firstly, a physical paroxysm disproportionate to its reproductive end:

C'est pour l'animal l'occasion d'une soudaine et frénétique dilapidation des ressources d'énergie, portée en un moment à l'extrême du possible . . . Cette dilapidation va bien au-delà de ce qui suffirait à la croissance de l'espèce. (P.M., p. 76)

and, secondly, a loss which has an intimate affinity with death, by virtue of its status as a giving of life by a mortal being:

(D)ès l'abord, la sexualité diffère de la croissance avare. Si, envisagée quant à l'espèce, elle apparaît comme une croissance, elle n'en est pas moins le luxe des individus. Ce caractère est plus accusé dans la reproduction sexuée, où les individus engendrés sont clairement séparés de ceux qui les engendrent — et leur *donnent* la vie comme on *donne* aux autres. (P.M., pp. 75-6)

Thus, on the level of the individual, the mathematics of reproduction become violent paroxysm, loss of energy, and "luxe" (excessive sumptuousity, prodigality). For the individual, reproduction radi-

cally exceeds its conservative end. Here we have another example of the general economy which takes leave of its own generality to concentrate its attention upon the individual and his “point of view”.

This movement from the general to the particular is also a fundamental movement from the context of death to that of life. Discontinuity is the incarnation of continuity, prior to the moment of death. Death is the “pure” form of *dépense*: an absolute loss of energy. But the forms of *dépense* experienced by a living creature are fundamentally different from death, in that they do not constitute a destruction of the limit that is discontinuity. They are *limited* forms of *dépense*. *Dépense* is therefore, firstly, an inevitability for the discontinuous being (in the form of death); secondly, an eventuality or possibility against which the struggle for survival is directed; and thirdly, a constant inner orientation or possibility of discontinuity, considered as a limit which contains too much energy. This last formula is reminiscent of heterogeneity, which was, in the earlier system, a constant affective possibility for an otherwise reductive intentionality.

The moment of sexuality is a privileged movement of the “tendency” of *dépense* to its extreme. It is a movement of violence (discontinuity as containment of continuity) to its limit. The phrase “à l’extrême du possible” clearly delineates the particular violence of the moment. The moment of *dépense* — *in life* — in no way alters or destroys the essential nature of discontinuity. This condition operates specifically for the human experience of eroticism, which is not a “sortie hors des limites”: “Mais dans l’érotisme, moins encore que dans la reproduction, la vie discontinue n’est pas condamnée . . . à disparaître: elle est seulement mise en question” (E., p. 23). The erotic moment of *dépense*, defined as the sexual paroxysm of animality, experienced by the conscious and self-conscious human subject, is a moment at which discontinuity is “placed in question” or “mise en jeu”. At this moment, discontinuity is brought into an intense proximity with its opposite, the fact of its life and death: continuity. An individual’s particularity is brought into contact with all that transcends particularity. Here the limit of discontinuity is “mise en jeu”. But the limit is not destroyed. There is no liberation of the individual from its constraint, short of death. Eroticism is the experience of the limit at the extremity of the possible: the experience of violence at its limit.

We have seen that discontinuity, as an incarnation of continuity, is a paradoxical containment. The struggle for survival is also a

paradoxical moment. *Dépense*, considered in the context of these other formulations, is not a new “kind” of violence. It is a movement of the basic violence of dis-continuity (i.e. the violence of “violence-contained” or “violence-limited”) to its own limit, in a moment of great intensity. It is a movement from violence to greater violence, within a consistent logical context. The discontinuous being cannot take leave of its limits. Its only *possibility* is discontinuity, as the isolation of ipseity. It is clear that “communication”, which will be the overall context of Bataille’s descriptions of living beings, cannot be defined as communion, and that there is no “mystical” dimension to Bataille’s system. Effective escape from the isolation of discontinuity, short of death, is an *impossibility*. However, the discontinuous being is animated by continuity, contains continuity, and has a constant experience of continuity, in the ontological dilemma which is survival. Bataille calls this overall experience the *impossible*, and, by extension, he calls humanity itself the *impossible*: “la sauvegarde impossible que je suis, qui ne peut éviter ses limites, et ne peut non plus s’y tenir” (C., p. 261). To be a living individual is to feel one’s limits (one’s integrity, one’s ipseity) incessantly endangered by the energy they contain — an energy closely associated, logically and even pre-consciously, with death (the destruction of limits). But the limits, in life, are indestructible. To be alive is therefore to experience a continual, *impossible* destruction of limits. This impossible but incessant destruction is dis-continuity as *mise en jeu*. Its extreme form is *dépense*.

Communication: the Law of Isolation and Loss

Les contenus se perdant les uns dans les autres des diverses formes de dépense (rire, héroïsme, extase, sacrifice, poésie, érotisme ou autres) définissaient d’eux-mêmes une loi de *communication* réglant les jeux de l’isolement et de la perte des êtres. (E.I., p. 11)

The *économie générale*, as a theory of discontinuous identities and the exchange which constitutes their economy, is for Bataille a law of communication. The concept “communication” refers, on a primary level, to (1) the highly problematized idea of identity to self as isolation, and (2) the relation of this idea to the equally problematized concept of loss. The paradigm toward which Bataille’s discussions of communication will tend is the unmediated communication of death. Death is an end to isolation, a triumph over alterity. But since it abolishes the subject of communication, death

will not have a central function among Bataille's concepts. It will be a logical presence at the margins of his system, and, in a sense, the formulas of the theory of communication will have a constant reference to it. Communication "en-deçà de la mort" or, in a sense, "communication *unto* death", will be the actual subject of the system. In the absence of death as resolution, communication will be the theory of dis-continuity's particular violence: the violence of "violence-limited".

The discontinuous being contains the energy of continuity, according to the model of "tension", or uncertain containment, described above. At the moment of death, this being loses its content of energy, and becomes part of the general economy of life and death, isolation and loss. This economy, as we have seen, is a basic system of communications or exchanges which involve the loss of identity. Before death, however, a multi-cellular discontinuous being contains *within itself* the violent play of destructions of the general economy, since its own cells are continually being born and dying:

Ce que tu es tient à l'activité qui lie les éléments sans nombre qui te composent, à l'intense communication de ces éléments entre eux. Ce sont des contagions d'énergie, de mouvement, de chaleur ou des transferts d'éléments, qui constituent intérieurement la vie de ton être organique. (E.I., p. 111)

On a purely biological level, then, the discontinuous being is constituted by communication. In this sense, Bataille can already say that "la communication est un fait qui ne se surajoute nullement à la réalité humaine, mais la constitue" (E.I., p. 37).

Communication as the constitution of discontinuity is another condition of the paradox of the isolated being. We have already seen that continuity makes possible the life of the discontinuous being, and therefore paradoxically conditions the limit which is opposed to it. At the same time, communication constitutes discontinuity. The very limit which forbids (until death) the communication of discontinuity with continuity, is already constituted by that communication. In addition, the economic life of the discontinuous individual, who eats, grows, de-composes and re-builds himself, is a constant process of exchange with other beings in his environment: a play of isolation and *dépense* as death. Against this background, the very limit "identity to self" has the status of an illusion:

Seule l'instabilité des liaisons (ce fait banal: quelque intime que soit un lien, la séparation est aisée, se multiplie et peut se prolonger)

permet l'illusion de l'être isolé, replié sur lui-même et possédant le pouvoir d'exister sans échange. (E.I., p. 100)

Communication, considered as a system of absolute and essential "links" among beings which constitute a continuity of exchange, transcends the "illusory" integrity of these beings. But from the "point of view" of an individual, ipseity precedes such communication absolutely. In other words, autonomy precedes composition. "Ces deux principes — compositions transcendant les composantes, autonomie relative des composantes — règlent l'existence de chaque 'être' " (*Ibid.*) The two parts of this formula may be interpreted in two separate ways, according to the logic of dis-continuity: (1) From the point of view of the inner communication which constitutes discontinuity, composition (the whole, isolated discontinuous being) transcends its parts (biological entities in a constant process of exchange and autonomy, isolation and destruction, life and death). (2) From the point of view of outward communication, the part (the isolated discontinuous individual) has a relative but crucial autonomy, compared to the play of exchanges which makes up its biological life.

This paradoxical condition has the form of the *glissement*, a concept which will be central to Bataille's theories of knowledge and intersubjectivity. At the biological level, "où tu voudras saisir ta substance intemporelle, tu ne rencontres qu'un glissement, que les jeux mal coordonnés de tes éléments périssables" (E.I., p. 111) The experience, as well as the concept, of dis-continuity, is a *glissement*, a slipping or sliding between two states, continuity and discontinuity, which condition each other both logically and existentially.

The priority of continuity and communication as foundations of the "illusion" of discontinuity, does not constitute a resolution of the *dilemma* of discontinuity. The "relative autonomy" of the discontinuous being as separation or isolation, is essential to that being's self-awareness in the struggle for survival. The "illusion" of ipseity is therefore a privileged illusion, constitutive of self-awareness in general. The self, in general, is this illusion. Its privilege will inform all human comportments with regard to intersubjective communication, and will condition all subsequent meanings of the word "communication" in Bataille's texts.

Communication and the Impossible

"Communication" is the domain of the general economy, which

envisages limits (isolation) and their destruction (loss and exchange) globally. On this level, communication is a fact, a law of the “fact of life”. But the domain of the general economy, in Bataille’s works, functions as background for certain ontological statements about subjectivity. These statements form a theory of *human* communication, considered as an elaboration of the problem of radical isolation and of the possibility of an “opening” within that isolation. The multiple conditions and articulations which are applied to this “possibility” define the architecture of Bataille’s system in its totality.

Dis-continuity is continuity within the limit of discontinuity. It is communication within the limit of isolation. This is the twofold paradox of the discontinuous being. Continuity founds this being as discontinuous. Communication founds it as isolated and therefore non-communicative. The only un-mediated outward communication between this being and continuity, or even objective reality, will be death.

Against this background, a second formulation of communication appears in Bataille’s system. This formulation is inserted into the context described by the key terms “tension” or “intensity”, “excess”, and the *glissement*. In this context, all possibility of non-mediated communication as communion or unity or coincidence has been sacrificed, and what remains is a communication based on the paradox of dis-continuity. The conditions of this communication must be elaborated according to a concept of humanity as *lived paradox*. In order for this to be done, the “empirical” framework of Bataille’s original formulations about biological life must give way to a much more difficult ontological framework. The terms of this new context, attempting as they do to delimit a paradoxical experience, will in many cases appear to defy any logical discourse based on the principles of identity and non-contradiction. They will be paradoxical terms. Although Bataille’s invocation of such terms is particularly difficult, because of the aphoristic nature of his writings, he is not alone in his recourse to them. Many of the most important contemporary thinkers find it necessary to make similar gestures. One thinks, for example, of the formulas of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Gilles Deleuze, in the realm of ontology and communication, or of Maurice Blanchot in literary studies. Deleuze, for instance, is led, in a study of Proust, to posit the concept of “distances without intervals” in order to account for the famous Proustian “vases clos”; Levinas, to the concept of a “pre-voluntary” passivity as

an ontological condition for the concept of free will; Derrida, to the concepts of the “trace” and “différance” as “pre-originary” conditions for the concept of identity itself; Blanchot, to a concept of “impossibility” similar to that of Bataille.³ Such difficult concepts as these have come to occupy central positions in the texts of contemporary philosophy.

In Bataille’s case, the study of dis-continuity leads to a situation in which communication requires an “opening” on the part of the isolated being. And there is such an opening, but such is the paradox of dis-continuity that this opening can only be defined according to the model of closure. Specifically, the opening will be defined as the insufficiency inherent in a complete, ineluctable closure. Bataille will say, for instance, that “nous sommes des êtres discontinus, individus mourant isolément dans une aventure inintelligible”; and then he will add that “nous supportons mal la situation qui nous rive à l’individualité de hasard, à l’individualité périssable que nous sommes” (E., p. 20). There is a sense, as we have seen, in which the ineluctable limit of individuality is intense — a sense in which the limit trembles. This tension is implied in another Bataillan definition of dis-continuity:

Ce n’est pas en tant que chose définie que l’homme se heurte à la nature . . .

C’est comme effort d’autonomie. (C., p. 376)

In the empirical context of survival, we have already seen this “effort d’autonomie”. Survival is a state in which limits are intensely defended. But at the same time, the “effort d’autonomie” has the status of an uneasy supporting of limits by a being whose inner energy (continuity) tends toward the destruction of those limits. The “effort d’autonomie” is ultimately a description of the total paradox of dis-continuity. The limit is defended, but the limit itself is constituted by intense communication in the form of continual destruction. The limit which attempts to fortify itself, is itself continuity: that which ultimately destroys all limits. Violence opposes violence in an effort at autonomy which is the specific experience of human violence. The limit of discontinuity, unto death, is indestructible. And yet, in a sense, it is incomplete. It is vulnerable. It is *inachevée*.

³ See esp. J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967); G. Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: P.U.F., 1972), *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969); E. Levinas, *Humanisme de l’autre homme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1973); M. Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955).

Dans la mesure où les êtres semblent parfaits, ils demeurent isolés, refermés sur eux-mêmes. Mais la blessure de l'inachèvement les ouvre. Par ce qu'on peut nommer inachèvement, animale nudité, blessure, les divers êtres séparés *communiquent*, prennent vie en se perdant dans la *communication* de l'un à l'autre. (C., p. 263)

This paragraph, taken from the most difficult semantic zone of Bataille's system, describes a triple confrontation of opposites. It describes what one might call a conciliation of terms, based on the model of non-toleration. Discontinuity is an *inachèvement* conceived as, or conditioned by, *achèvement*. It is an integrity of surface whose logical condition is "nudity". It is a "wound" conditioned by imperiousness.

These conciliations, in common logical terms, are impossibilities. Yet, against the background established by the structure of discontinuity, they are necessary conciliations. The limit of discontinuity is a tenuous limit, even in its solidity. The limit is constituted by violent communication. In a sense, it is constituted by the play of continuity. This very continuity inclines the isolated creature toward *dépense*, and ultimately toward the final *dépense* of death. Still, from the point of view of the individual himself, the fact of individuality is felt as an *opposition* to violence, which itself is felt as exterior. This "feeling", this "self-awareness", in the struggle for survival, commands the life of the discontinuous being, until death.

The intensity of limits which contain more than they can contain is *inachèvement*. Continuity, incarnated for a violent moment as discontinuity, is *inachèvement*. But it is *inachèvement* as the *impossible*: "la sauvage *impossibilité* que je suis, qui ne peut éviter ses limites, et ne peut non plus s'y tenir" (C., p. 261). Thus, for Bataille, the *impossible* is an authentic logical condition, an articulating principle. It is "possible" to conceive *achèvement* as *inachèvement*, or a closure as a wound, or an integral surface as nudity. These conceptions are possible according to the condition that they are *impossible*. The concept of nudity, in particular, draws our attention to the idea of the impossible, through its common usage. How is it possible to ascribe primary vulnerability to an integral surface? It is not "possible", but the everyday concept of nudity implies such an attribution, which would be a necessary recourse for the description of a *human* surface. Emmanuel Levinas has mobilized this common implication of the word "nudity" in order to describe subjectivity as "a nudity before it is a surface which would receive an impression".⁴ Bataille

⁴ See "Sans identité" and "Humanisme et an-archie" in *Humanisme de l'autre homme*.

will specifically equate communication with nudity — “la nudité, la communication” (E.I., p. 66) — in an aphoristic context. In any case, such basic distinctions or conditions as we see in Bataille’s paragraph are only possible in the context of humanity, or subjectivity, or communication, as paradoxes which are not *thought*, but actually *lived*. Maurice Blanchot, addressing himself to the concepts of *inachèvement* and the *impossible* in Bataille’s thought, correctly describes a logical recourse which Jacques Derrida has called “nécessaire et impossible”:

Quel est cet excès qui fait que l’achèvement serait encore et toujours inachevé? D’où vient ce mouvement d’excéder dont la mesure n’est pas donnée par le pouvoir qui peut tout? Quelle est cette “possibilité” qui s’offrirait après la réalisation de toutes les possibilités comme le moment capable de les renverser ou de les retirer silencieusement? A ces questions, lorsque Georges Bataille répond en parlant de *l’impossible* — l’un des derniers mots qu’il ait rendus publics —, il faut l’entendre rigoureusement; il faut entendre que la possibilité n’est pas la seule dimension de notre existence et qu’il nous est peut-être donné de vivre chaque événement de nous-mêmes dans un double rapport, une fois comme ce que nous comprenons, saisissons, supportons et maîtrisons (fût-ce difficilement et douloureusement) en le rapportant à quelque bien, quelque valeur, c’est-à-dire en dernier terme à l’Unité, une autre fois comme ce qui échappe à notre pouvoir même d’en faire l’épreuve, mais à l’épreuve duquel nous ne saurions échapper: oui, comme si l’impossibilité, cela en quoi nous ne pouvons plus pouvoir, nous attendait derrière tout ce que nous vivons, pensons et disons . . . (“L’Expérience-limite”, p. 585)

Blanchot correctly situates the *impossible* as part of a “double rapport” which regulates the ontology of dis-continuity. When he describes the *impossible* as that which awaits the subject *behind* the univocity of the possible, he suggests that the prefix “*im-*” has the status of a *condition*. For dis-continuity, the *impossible* is that tension of non-conciliation or non-toleration which surrounds and conditions the *achèvement* of the possible. *Inachèvement* conditions *achèvement*, as heterogeneity conditioned homogeneity; as continuity conditions discontinuity; as communication conditions isolation; as excess conditions containment; as violence conditions integrity.

The limit of discontinuity is an excess which contains excess. It is a

communication preventing communication. It is the impossible containment of that which cannot be contained: continuity. The incarnation of continuity is itself the *impossible*. Survival is what Maurice Blanchot has called “le devenir sans fin d’une mort *impossible* à mourir” (*Ibid.*, p. 588). Dis-continuity is an incessant “mouvement d’excéder” within an indestructible limit. It is a movement without resolution, but nevertheless a movement “à l’épreuve duquel nous ne saurions échapper”. In the Bataille quotation above, the expression “prennent vie en se perdant dans la *communication*” mimes this continual movement, through its present participle. Dis-continuity is that which “comes to life losing itself” in the “endless becoming of a death *impossible* to die”. This movement toward the limit, this excessive movement of violence *at the limit*, this perpetual extremity, is communication.

The general problem of intentionality and knowledge leads, in Bataille’s thought, to the overall problem of subjectivity. This larger problem is elaborated by Bataille within the context of “communication”, considered as a posing of the question: “How is communication possible among separate, isolated beings?”. Bataille’s manipulation of empirical contexts leads him to an ontological answer to this question. He describes the category “communication” as, firstly, an exigency, defined as the containment within limits of too much energy, and the ubiquity of *dépense* as the extreme form of a “mouvement d’excéder”; and, secondly — *as* exigency, an impossibility. Communication is a movement which is other than “possible” (“falling or lying within the powers of an agent or activity”); and other than “impossible” (“incapable of being or occurring”). Communication is the experience and the concept of a continual, imminent, inescapable, but im-possible destruction of limits: a destruction whose violence is the result of an absence of resolution.

The development of a dialectic whose specificity is its sacrifice of a term of synthesis or resolution, is the Bataillian gesture which structures the system of “La Notion de *dépense*” and “La Structure psychologique du fascisme”. The early contextual incarnation of this gesture is a problematization of the statement that “science cannot know heterogeneity as such”, in the direction of the assertion that homogeneity is an intense vision. The displacement of this gesture which appears in the system “continuity/discontinuity” is problematization of the concept “discontinuity”, whose principal axis is an ontological structure described by the terms “tension”, “excess”, “*dépense*”, “*mise en jeu*”, “*glissement*”, “*effort d’autonomie*”,

“inachèvement”, *“impossible”*. Within Bataille’s system, many other terms will be derived, around this axis, for the elaboration of his questions: *“sacré”*, *“expérience intérieure”*, *“transgression”*, *“souveraineté”*, *“non-savoir”*, etc. No such term will function without a conditioning relation to that zone of non-synthesis represented by the early *“humain jusqu’au déchirement”*, the later *“intensity”*, and the *impossible*. In no case will a term whose predicate is *“violence”* be free from the conditioning proximity of a central term whose predicate is *“violence-limited”*. The unicity of the *“possible”* will always be the stage for a Bataillan *sacrifice* whose momentum and trajectory will lead to the domain of the im-possible. This domain, and with it Bataille’s system in its totality, will be given the name *“la communication”*.

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