

## **EROS AND THE GOOD**

EROS AND THE GOOD:  
THE PORTRAYAL OF EROTIC EXPERIENCE IN PLATO AND BATAILLE

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the portrayal of erotic experience given by Plato in the *Symposium*, and by Georges Bataille in his later theoretical writings, particularly *Erotism* and *The Accursed Share*. As such, this work is a comparison between an ancient and a modern understanding of eros in order to see which provides a more adequate account of erotic experience.

Though Bataille does not directly critique Plato's understanding of eros, there are several passages within the *Symposium* that bear a striking resemblance to the erotic account given by Bataille. This is especially evident in the speech of Aristophanes, where Plato, through one of his characters, provides an erotic understanding that contains many of the same elements that are found in Bataille. The Aristophanic account of eros is directly criticized by Plato through Socrates' erotic speech in the same dialogue. By illuminating the Platonic critique of Aristophanes' erotic understanding, I will extend the critique to Bataille, thus demonstrating the crucial deficiencies within Bataille's account.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS OF THE WORKS OF GEORGES BATAILLE

- AS 1            *The Accursed Share, Volume 1: An Essay On General Economy.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1991.
- AS 2            *The Accursed Share, Volume 2: The History of Eroticism.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1993.
- AS 3            *The Accursed Share, Volume 3: Sovereignty.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1993.
- E                *Erotism: Death and Sensualtiy.* Translated by Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.
- SE               *Story of the Eye.* Translated by Joachim Neugroschel. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987.
- TE               *The Tears of Eros.* Translated by Peter Connor. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989.
- TR               *Theory of Religion.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1992.
- VE               *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939.* Translated by Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

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Now if he whom Love has caught be amongst the followers of Zeus, he is able to bear the burden of the winged one with some constancy: but they that attend upon Ares, and did range the heavens in his train, when they are caught by Love and fancy their beloved is doing them some injury, will shed blood and not scruple to offer both themselves and their loved ones in sacrifice.

-Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 252c-

We are, all of us, in the gutter. But some of us are looking at the stars.

-Chrissie Hynde and the Pretenders, "Message of Love"-

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis shall be an investigation of human erotic experience. The English words "erotic" "eroticism," and "erotica" all derive etymologically from the Greek word *eros* which translates as "love." Eros was often depicted in Greek mythology as the god who accompanied Aphrodite, the Olympian goddess of love, and who struck desire into the souls of gods and humans with his divine arrows. The word *eros* was used by the Greeks to describe the *experience* that grips a person when he or she falls in love with *something other*. I emphasize the words "something other" and "experience." I will speak first of the "something other."

All loves desire something other. Quite simply, *love in general is the experience of incompleteness*. This is to say that we feel a lack within ourselves. The old cliché "no man is an island" signifies this reality; the individual cannot live by him or herself and must turn towards *other* people and *other* things in order to make up, at least partially, for this incompleteness. It is through the love of other things that we extend out beyond the self. The result can be the family and familial affections, or the friendships that form because

of a common love or interest.<sup>1</sup> Eros is often associated with "passionate love" or the desire for another person whom a lover finds beautiful. But eros need not be restricted to this--it may lead a lover beyond the passion for a particular individual to an eros for a more general *divine* reality. This understanding of eros as a desire for a divine transcendence is depicted in Greek mythology and philosophy, in the Arabic mystical poetry that arose in the ninth century, and in European literature especially since the twelfth century.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis shall be a discussion of the *experience* of erotic love in order to see what it reveals about human nature. As such, it is against the spirit of many of the modern discussions of eros. By and large, eros has become synonymous with "sex." This is due mostly to the dominance of the modern natural sciences in contemporary discourse since the Enlightenment. The method of natural science, which studies the *material causes* of physical phenomena, has become the model of how we conduct all investigations into the truth of things. Thus, when attempting to study a phenomenon such as eros, the natural scientist will not deny that humans have "erotic experiences," but he or she may claim that these

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of family affection, friendship, eros, and charitable love see C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Pount, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>For a critical study of eros as the desire for transcendence, and the impact of pagan erotic understandings upon European consciousness, see Denis De Rougemont, *Love In The Western World*, rev. ed., trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

experiences can be explained by, or *reduced* to, strictly material causes. Most of the time these material causes are associated with our sexual behaviour. In other words, human eros is no different from animal sexuality. Like all animals our sexual behaviour is determined by neurochemical reactions within the nervous system that trigger sexual instincts. With this, a scientist may attempt a *total* explanation of human eros by reducing it to entirely physical causes. Such a reductionist may claim that by this method he or she is only studying the "facts."

However, the strict materialist is left with the "fact" that humans do not just experience eros as sex. This becomes manifest in mythology, literature, art, philosophy and in other products of human culture. Quite simply, both animals and humans have sex, but animals do not *represent* the act itself or the desire through words or art as do humans. Furthermore, these human representations do not always depict eros as *only* the desire for copulation. They show it is possible to fall in love with a person's soul as well as with a person's body--the way a person *acts* can generate desire in another. Sometimes, it is true, we may *only* desire to have sex with another, but often desire is portrayed in the complete absence of sex, as was the case in the chivalric love poetry that arose in France in the twelfth century. Other times, desire is not expressed towards a human at all. The

most obvious case of this is in religion, where mystics and other people of intense faith express an enormous desire for God. All of this is to show that for humans, erotic *experience* involves more than just sex; we have countless historical artifacts to prove it. This is impossible to deny, even for the most strict material scientist.

However, all these cultural symbolizations, which demonstrate the polymorphous manifestations of erotic experience, can still be reduced to physical causes if one insists. In a very recent issue of *Time* magazine there was a cover story that provided an account of how contemporary scientists are attempting to prove that the cultural manifestations of love expressed in human societies are the result of physical evolution, "brain imprints," "biological secretions," and so on.<sup>3</sup> According to these scientists, biological causes have determined that we, as opposed to animals, write love poems and celebrate Valentine's Day. Some of the scientists in the article even went so far as to say that genes implant in each individual's biology the ideal type of partner he or she is looking for.<sup>4</sup>

However, the more popular way in this century to reduce

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<sup>3</sup>The cover reads as "The Chemistry of Love: Scientists are discovering that romance is a biological affair." See Anastasia Toufexis, "The Right Chemistry," *Time*, 15 February 1993, 39-41. Another popular magazine printed on its cover "The Science of Romance: Does nature or culture drive our desires?". See Heather Pringle, "The Way We Woo," *Equinox*, December 1993, No. 72. 70-88.

<sup>4</sup>Toufexis, *Time*, 41. Also see Pringle, *Equinox*, 74 ff.

the cultural expressions of eros to physical causes was first started by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, humans are animals that have found it necessary to enter into societies and human associations in order to maintain the comfortable survival of both individuals and the species.<sup>5</sup> Without society, man is too weak an animal to survive in the harsh natural world. However, in order to live in these societies, humans have had to repress their most immediate physical impulses--their *libidos*. This includes the sex drive. Humans are distinguished as creatures who suppress their immediate instincts--instincts which themselves are determined biologically. It was Freud's understanding that humans in society *sublimate* their sexual impulse by directing the energy of this drive into other "cultural" activities. As Freud writes, "Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life."<sup>6</sup> By this understanding, the many cultural expressions of eros are nothing other than the products of a repressed sex drive, or what Freud calls an "inhibited aim."<sup>7</sup> Chaste love

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<sup>5</sup>See *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1961), 49 ff.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

poetry, love of another person's soul, or love of God can all be *totally* explained as the sublimated consequence of repressed sexuality. Thus, everything erotic is ultimately derived from sex; in other words, eros is reducible to sex. Freud explored the way in which society affects this drive, and what this does to human behaviour. Like the material scientist, he investigated what he thought were the reducible causes of erotic experience. These causes were hidden deep within what he called the *unconscious*, which human beings do not directly experience but which is responsible for their experience. Freud looked for the causes of personal experiences and "neurotic" behaviour in the unconscious of his patients. However, the *psychic* unconscious was, for Freud, itself the product of a repressed *physical* instinct.

The language of sublimation and the unconscious has dominated our understanding of eros for most of the twentieth century. Freud's frank talk about sex, and of the varieties of "deviant" forms of sexual behaviour that arise when the libido is suppressed, seemed subversive in its time. It coincided with and contributed to an explosion of popular conversation about sex, even about once taboo subjects such as homosexuality and sadomasochism. In light of the popularity of Freud, there was a sudden obsession with the variety of ways people expressed themselves sexually. Massive studies were conducted gathering data about sexual behaviour. Krafft-

Ebing, the Kinsley Report, and Masters and Johnson are all prominent examples of the massive undertaking in this century that attempted to chronicle the plethora of sexual behaviour in humans. But what we get in these studies is statistics, and seemingly "objective" explanations as to the causes of each form of sexual behaviour. The approach to the topic remains entirely clinical, and what is revealed in the experience itself is left untouched. The massive undertaking of statisticians to provide records of how people behave sexually has not let up to this day.

This explosion of conversation about sexual behaviour has led, in recent years, to a dramatic change in academic and popular discourse about sex. As of late there has been a revolt against the modern clinical-scientific approach to sex. This is a part of the recent larger movement that is challenging the basic categories of Enlightenment reason--a movement often referred to as "postmodernism." In regards to sex, postmodernists challenge the ways in which scientists, social scientists, and psychoanalysts have classified sexual behaviour into the categories of "normal" and "deviant," and the ways in which modern Western rationalism has societally enforced these categories. If anything, the large studies about sexual behaviour have brought to popular consciousness an awareness of the number of people who partake in forms of sexuality that might be clinically described as "abnormal."



The realization that large portions of the population are considered "deviant" has led to a re-evaluation in the West of our sexual "values." This discussion tends to emphasize the cultural influences upon sex, and the ways in which cultural and societal structures determine our "sexual identities." Furthermore, vast efforts are undertaken to show the ways in which society suppresses and marginalizes forms of sexual behaviour that it deems to be abnormal. Perhaps the most famous theorist of this latest explosion of sexual discourse is the late Michel Foucault.<sup>8</sup>

This challenge to the clinical categorizations of sexual behaviour has had far reaching political consequences, especially in the feminist and gay rights movements. Feminists react against what they claim are degrading and "disempowering" clinical terms that are used to describe female sexuality, most notably Freudian terminology. Homosexuals are challenging the way they are treated and perceived at all levels of society, and in so doing demand a re-evaluation of all societal institutions, from the definition of family to the ordination of Christian ministers. In movies, music videos, and popular magazines "alternative lifestyles" are publicly presented, putting into the mainstream what was once considered deviant. But all of this

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<sup>8</sup>See especially *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

exuberant new talk about sex, with its aura of rebellion, has once again produced little discussion about the erotic experience itself. Furthermore, there is hardly any talk about the *quality* of an erotic experience, for to qualify the way people express themselves erotically (i.e. "sexually") is once again to categorize in a hierarchical fashion, and hence to "disqualify," "suppress," or "marginalize" certain forms of erotic (i.e. "sexual") experience. Erotic expression has become relativized.

As we shall see, ancient discussions of eros often concerned themselves with how eros elevated the individual toward a divine transcendent, and with illuminating the character of this transcendence. But in modern accounts of eros there has been an extreme denial of divine reality. If it is true that the divine is absent, then there can no longer be a measure for the quality of erotic experience, nor can sex signify any higher reality beyond itself. Hence, eros in the modern world has become equated with sex, and sexual orientation has become exalted to a point that it defines the identity of the modern "self" rather than taking one beyond the self to a higher transcendence.

Contemporary liberals might claim that this has led to a greater tolerance and acceptance of various ways that people behave sexually, abolishing some the stigmas and bigotry that are directed towards groups such as homosexuals. "To each his

own" they might say. But in their refusal to acknowledge a measure and transcendent end of eros they must be prepared to admit that all erotic experiences are equal. However, even the most open-minded of relativistic liberals are likely to be appalled by certain extreme forms of sadomasochism that advocate extraordinary methods of cruelty, torture, and bodily mutilation. Such forms have achieved a more *public* expression in recent years. What is one to make of these?

Interestingly enough, it is in the discourse of these extreme forms of sexuality that one is most likely to find in the modern world a re-consideration of the erotic experience itself. Advocates of extreme eroticism attempt to justify their behaviour by giving an account of what is "revealed" through erotic experiences that are normally thought to be transgressive. Sadomasochists often give language to the "possibilities" that these transgressive experiences open up--experiences that take one well beyond the restrictions of "bourgeois" existence.<sup>9</sup> Foucault refers to these moments of extreme ecstasy and agony as "limit experiences"--that is, experiences that take one to the limit of what it is humanly possible to experience. It is in the throes of such experiences that the literate sadomasochist will claim that he

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<sup>9</sup>For an account of the experiential possibilities that are said to open up in sadomasochistic practice, see Robert J. Stoller, *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* (New York: Pantheon, 1975). For a discussion of the relation of extreme sexual practices to the thought of Michel Foucault and other thinkers, see James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 262 ff.

enters into a more authentic relation with *being*, taking him outside of the artificiality and boredom of daily life. In this dark transcendence one is most free, most autonomous, most *sovereign*, and perhaps most importantly *most alive*, even as one comes closest to death.

This dark erotic environment, with its frequent emphasis upon the experiential, provides an opportunity for a modern reconsideration of the *experience* of eros. For the most part, the scientific attempt to provide a total reductionist account of the cause of eros has been unsuccessful. This is not to deny that there are not a huge variety of natural factors that are responsible for the character of our erotic experience. However, eros cannot be reduced to these factors. Even the writer of the *Time* magazine article on the biological determinants of romance had to declare in the end that "love will always be more than the sum of its natural parts."<sup>10</sup>

However, almost all modern accounts of eros radically deny the presence of the divine in erotic experience. This denial, as we have seen, has generated theoretical defenses of the most severe erotic behaviour; the so-called death of God, if it is willfully affirmed, is claimed to open up new possibilities. What must be addressed are these modern accounts of erotic experience that advocate an extreme and

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<sup>10</sup>Toufexis, *Time*, 41.

violent form of eros. These must be contrasted with ancient accounts in which the presence of the divine in erotic experience is affirmed. It is only by looking to these ancient accounts that a possible defense can be mounted against the most brutal erotic orientations that exert themselves when the divine is denied. With this in mind I present a thesis that shall be a comparison between the accounts of erotic experience presented in the writings of Georges Bataille and Plato.

Georges Bataille (1897-1962), in his writings, is a highly articulate, brilliant "madman" (AS 1, 197) who took what he said with the utmost of seriousness. His impact on Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other postmodern thinkers of that generation was enormous.<sup>11</sup> His early novels, most notably the surrealist *Story of the Eye*, depict graphic scenes of sexual violence. His early theoretical essays are full of revolutionary language, most notably "The Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade," written in 1929-30. In that essay, Bataille speaks of how after a "social revolution" leading to "the world triumph of socialism" and "human emancipation" there would be two types of public institutions: "the economic and political organization of society on one hand, and on the

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<sup>11</sup>See Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 251-77.

other, an antireligious and asocial organization having as its goal orgiastic participation in different forms of destruction" (VE, 101). These destructive forms would "have ecstasy and frenzy as their goal (the spectacular death of animals, partial tortures, orgiastic dances, etc)" and would "have no other conception of morality than the one scandalously affirmed for the first time by the Marquis de Sade" (VE, 102).<sup>12</sup> His revolutionary tone is softened by the time of his post-war writings, but his general intent remained the same: to demonstrate to popular consciousness the need for more a more sovereign "squander" of our resources through various forms of erotic expression, some of these being bloody and cruel. This is to counterbalance the "accumulative" activity that has dominated the orientation of the modern world, where meaning is found only in useful work that builds up resources. This has created, according to Bataille, a race of "servile" humanity. As Bataille points out, the end of all work is useless expenditure. Bataille shows us how we can best expend our hard earned resources in a way that does not "detract from *humanity's* vigor" which is "entirely made up of violent contrasts" (AS 2, 18). This means that cruel forms of erotic ecstasy must be re-introduced into popular consciousness.

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<sup>12</sup>See especially de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, comp. and trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1966).

His last published work presented a concluding commentary on a horrific set of photographs of a Chinese torture victim (see *TE*, 204-207). Bataille writes of his contemplation of these photographs during a session of yoga:

It was on this occasion that I discerned, in the violence of this image, an infinite capacity for reversal. Through this violence--even today I cannot imagine a more insane, more shocking form--I was so stunned that I reached the point of ecstasy. My purpose is to illustrate a fundamental connection between religious ecstasy and eroticism--and in particular sadism. From the most unspeakable to the most elevated. This book is not written from within the limited experience of most men. (*TE*, 206)

Thus, Bataille provides an account in his writings of erotic experiences that are beyond the limited experiential range of "servile" man, but which each human has the capacity to cultivate. But this is an eros understood in the absence of a truly transcendent divine reality. As the above passage makes clear, the truth of religion--the supposed transcendent "heights" that one goes to in religious ecstasy--coincides with sadism. This is to say that the most intense moments of religious mystic experience are qualitatively no different from those experienced by the sadist, even though the methods employed by the mystic and the sadist to reach extreme ecstasy may differ. As we shall see, the eternal transcendent is, for Bataille, an illusion in human consciousness, but it is an illusion that is "useful" in cultivating extreme erotic experiences in those who affirm it. The sadist reaches the

same extremities as the religious mystic, and goes even further since he does not suffer from these religious illusions.

In the dialogues of Plato one is presented with a different understanding of eros through the character of Socrates. The two most important dialogues that deal with eros are the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. In each dialogue, Socrates delivers a speech that explains how a properly oriented eros leads to an ascent to a transcendent divine reality--an ascent qualitatively different from sadism. This thesis shall deal specifically with the *Symposium*, in which Socrates' eulogy to eros serves as a critique for the other speeches of eros portrayed by Plato in the same dialogue. We should not, however, make the mistake of thinking that Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* is Plato's *complete* account of eros. As we shall see, there are elements that are missing, or parts which are suggestive and can only be understood by looking at the other Platonic dialogues. However, it is through Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* that I hope to provide a critique of Bataille's own account of eros.

My task is slightly complicated by the fact that nowhere in his erotic writings does Bataille provide any extended treatment of Plato. This absence is surprising but also very revealing. Perhaps Bataille did not take Plato seriously--



perhaps he thought Plato was just one example among many of those who "ideally" beautify the whole by tyrannically suppressing the ugly truths of reality. Bataille once referred to his own type of study as "scatology" which literally means "the science of excrement"--a study of the filthy and ugly elements that reveal the truth of reality (VE, 102). Denis Hollier, in his sympathetic deconstruction of Bataille, directly refers to Plato and writes that philosophy as understood by Plato "speak[s] out against scatology, at the same time as it deprives scatology of speech."<sup>13</sup> However, as this thesis shall demonstrate, Plato does not deprive the ugly and excremental of speech. Elements of Bataille's understanding are found throughout the speeches in the *Symposium*. The first link with Bataille is in the first speech of the evening delivered by Phaedrus. However, it is in the speech of the Athenian scatologist Aristophanes that Plato presents us with an understanding of eros that is the same as that given by Bataille over two millennia later. Like Bataille, the historical works of Aristophanes are filled with public demonstrations of "scatological" ugliness, containing innumerable references to bodily processes and filth. The difference between these two men lies in their intents. Aristophanes evoked filth as a warning in order to cultivate

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<sup>13</sup> *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 100, my italics.

piety in his Athenian audience. Bataille highlights the excremental and the violent in order to cultivate impiety in his modern readers.

It is through the character of Aristophanes that Plato comes closest to presenting a "Bataillist" account of eros. Contrary to Hollier, Plato does not "repress scatology" or "deprive" it of speech, but rather gives it a full presentation in the *Symposium*. However, he also provides a critique of it in the speech of Socrates. Thus, it is through Socrates' critique of Aristophanes that a critique can be extended to Bataille. Through the mediation of Aristophanes, the Platonic and Bataillist accounts of eros can enter into an illuminating and articulate conflict. Basically, it is a conflict between an account that affirms the *truth* of a divine transcendent in erotic experience, and an account which denies it. The affirmation or denial of the truth of the divine in erotic experience is crucial because it affects our understanding of what is the true end of human erotic longing, and thus our understanding of human nature in general.

My thesis shall proceed by the following chapter breakdown:

1) The first chapter shall provide an account of the speeches of Phaedrus and Aristophanes in the *Symposium* in order to set up the links with Bataille, and to illuminate

certain themes in the dialogue that shall reappear when we consider Socrates' speech.

2) The second chapter shall present Bataille's erotic understanding in relation to what was discussed in chapter one. The links between Bataille's account of eros and Aristophanes' shall be highlighted. For the most part, I shall discuss Bataille's later theoretical writings in order to present his most complete account of eros.

3) The third chapter shall be an account of Diotima's understanding of eros as delivered by Socrates in the *Symposium*. I shall first of all provide Diotima's critique of the Aristophanic understanding of eros, and then give an account of her own understanding.

4) Finally, in the concluding chapter, I shall provide a critique of Bataille's erotic account in the light of Diotima's speech. With the help of contemporary thinkers such as Mircea Eliade, Martin Buber, and Eric Voegelin I shall argue that fundamental aspects of human experience have been left out by Bataille in his understanding, particularly of the primary experience humans have *at their origins* of a transcendent divine reality. These crucial aspects are accounted for in Plato, leading to a different, more encompassing, and superior understanding of erotic experience.

CHAPTER ONE - EROS AND DEATH IN THE SPEECHES  
OF PHAEDRUS AND ARISTOPHANES

EROTICISM, SEXUALITY, AND DEATH

In the first sentence of the Introduction to *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Bataille writes, "Of eroticism it is possible to say that it is assenting to life up to the point of death."<sup>1</sup> On initial encounter, this might seem to be an odd formulation, especially if we associate the "erotic" with the "sexual." Common sense shows us that it is through sexual intercourse that animals and humans reproduce themselves, making it an activity that ensures the continuance of life. Bataille, however, makes the following distinction:

Sexual reproductive activity is common to sexual animals and men, but only men appear to have turned their sexual activity into erotic activity. Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children....[T]he object of this psychological quest, independent as I say of any concern to reproduce life, is not alien to death. (*E.* 11)

The link between eroticism and death may still strike us as puzzling, but it is clear from the start that Bataille does not reduce human erotic experience to sexual reproduction. It is with these two points made by Bataille, of (1) the distinction between sexual generation and "eroticism," and (2)

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<sup>1</sup>This translation is by Gilles Mayne in *Eroticism in Georges Bataille and Henry Miller* (Birmingham: Summan Publications, Inc., 1993), 19. For the rest of my discussion I rely on Mary Dalwood's translation of *Erotism*.

the association of the erotic "quest" with death, that I wish to begin a discussion of Plato's *Symposium*. In particular, I want to examine the speeches of Phaedrus and Aristophanes in order to give Plato's portrayal of erotic understandings that are similar to Bataille's account, and which serve as links in the conflict between Bataille and Plato. These understandings will be explicitly and implicitly criticized in Socrates' recollection of his erotic lesson from Diotima, and these criticisms can in turn be directed towards Bataille and his dark modern account of eros.

#### THE SPEECH OF PHAEDRUS

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that no one, except Simmias of Thebes, has been more responsible than Phaedrus for causing the generation of discourses.<sup>2</sup> It appears that the presence of the beautiful Phaedrus gives birth to speeches and conversation amongst the men that surround him. In the *Symposium*, it is the physician Eryximachus, the pederastic lover of Phaedrus, who proposes that the topic for the evening be about the poetically neglected Eros. Eryximachus, however, says that the idea for the topic was proposed to him by Phaedrus in their private conversations (177a-d).<sup>3</sup> Hence, it

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<sup>2</sup>242a-b. Also see 238d, 261a.

<sup>3</sup>All references and quotations from the *Symposium* are cited by line number within the body of the text. References to other Platonic dialogues are given by line number in the footnotes.

is Phaedrus' suggestion to Eryximachus that generates the speeches given at Agathon's symposium.

The associations, however, between Phaedrus and "generation," "giving birth to," or "offspring" end here.<sup>4</sup> Phaedrus, as the father of speeches, gives the first speech of the party, and it is in his speech that we first see explicitly expressed, albeit in an unsophisticated manner, (1) not only the distinction, but the absolute disassociation, between sexual generation and eroticism, and (2) the understanding of erotic longing as a quest towards death. Phaedrus serves as an appetizer for the more substantial accounts we will find in Aristophanes and Bataille.

Stanley Rosen points out that Phaedrus makes a sly and implicit distinction in his speech between "genesis" and "generation."<sup>5</sup> That which has genesis is that which perhaps (but not necessarily) has an origin or a beginning, but is not caused by something temporally previous. Generated things are the begotten offspring of things which existed previously; generation is usually associated with some sort of intercourse between things. Phaedrus is the first spokesman of the evening for a homosexual pederastic eros, without much consideration of heterosexual eros. Since it is impossible

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<sup>4</sup>See *Phaedrus* 261a.

<sup>5</sup>*Plato's Symposium*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 45ff. I am enormously indebted to Rosen's analysis, though I disagree with him on certain points.

for homosexuals to generate offspring, Phaedrus' defense of pederasty displays a lack of concern, and even a hostility, towards things which are generated; not only physical things, but also the offspring of the soul and generated gods. It is Phaedrus' claim that Eros, the god responsible in Hesiod for causation and generation amongst the elements of the cosmos, is itself ungenerated, and therefore worthy of the greatest honours.

Phaedrus starts to make this point right from the beginning of his speech where he claims that Eros is one of the most honoured gods, amongst both gods and humans, because he is one of the oldest. Phaedrus provides the following "proof" for this claim:

the parents of Eros neither exist nor are they  
spoken of by anyone, whether prose author or poet;  
but Hesiod says that Chaos came first-

Then thereafter  
Broad-breasted Earth, always the safe seat of  
all,  
And Eros. (178a-b)<sup>6</sup>

Phaedrus is claiming that popular discourse has taught him that Eros does not have parents and was not generated, and therefore is old because only the oldest things lack parents. The claim that Eros, the god that is the cause of generation in things, is itself ungenerated is not nonsensical. This can

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<sup>6</sup>All quotations from the *Symposium* are taken from the Seth Benardete translation in *The Dialogues of Plato* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1986), 233-286. I have had to transpose the line numbers given in the Loeb Classical Library edition of the *Symposium* (London: Harvard University Press, 1925) to Benardete's translation.

be seen in Hesiod's *Theogony* in the sections that follow the lines quoted above by Phaedrus.<sup>7</sup> As Phaedrus points out, Hesiod says that Chaos comes first, followed by Earth, and then Eros; that is, Eros follows sequentially from Chaos and Earth, but Chaos and Earth are not the parents of Eros, nor is Eros caused by one or the other. Eros' genesis occurred after that of Chaos and Earth, and it is after Eros' genesis that Hesiod speaks of causality, generation, and cosmic intercourse. In Hesiod, immediately following the genesis of Eros, Chaos gives birth to Erebus (the dark), and Night. These are not sexually generated births, but they are the first caused things. It is when Night "lay in love with Erebus," her brother, that Aither and Hemera (the day) were conceived and born.<sup>8</sup> This is the first mention of sexual generation in Hesiod's creation myth, and it is incestuous. The divine incest continues in Hesiod after his account of Gaia, or Mother Earth, conceiving the fatherless Uranus (the sky) and "[w]ithout any sweet act of love she produced the barren/sea, Pontos."<sup>9</sup> It is when Earth lay with her son Uranus that the Titans and the Cyclopes were conceived. The

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<sup>7</sup> *Theogony*, 116 ff. All quotations from Hesiod's *Theogony*, except where indicated, are taken from the translation by Richmond Lattimore in *Hesiod* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959). All references are given by line number.

<sup>8</sup> *Theogony*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> *Theogony*, 131-132.



incestuous manner of the earliest cosmic intercourse is an issue that will return to our discussion in later chapters.

Phaedrus, however, does not give any mention of the activity which occurs in Hesiod after the genesis of Eros. In fact, Phaedrus omits certain things even in what he does quote from Hesiod, as has been observed by several commentators.<sup>10</sup> The following is the complete translation of the passage cited by Phaedrus, with brackets around what Phaedrus omits. After Chaos comes:

Broad-breasted Earth, always the safe seat of all (immortals, who hold the tops of snowy Olympus, and gloomy Tartarus in the recesses of the broad-wayed Earth). And Eros.<sup>11</sup>

The most significant omission by Phaedrus is his refusal to give mention to the Olympian gods, who are themselves the products of causation and cosmic generation, and hence younger and less deserving of honour than that which preceded them. Immediately after his quote of Hesiod, Phaedrus quotes from Parmenides, who, according to Phaedrus, says that Genesis "First of all gods, devised Eros" (178b). Phaedrus cites Fragment 14 from Parmenides' *On Nature*, an account of Parmenides' encounter with a goddess who supplies him with the truth. Parmenides claims that this goddess is responsible for

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<sup>10</sup>See Seth Benardete's footnote in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 239. Also see Stanley Rosen's commentary in *Plato's Symposium*, 45-50. Also see Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, 47 ff.

<sup>11</sup>*Theogony*, 117-120. The translation is by Seth Benardete in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 239.

the creation of Eros, a goddess whom Phaedrus names Genesis. With his quote from Parmenides, Phaedrus changes the status of Eros somewhat: Eros is caused by something previous. However, it is not caused by parents or any sort of sexual generation, and the cause itself is associated by Phaedrus with genesis. Once again, Eros is as close as possible to genesis unsoiled by generation.

The point to be drawn from the earliest part of Phaedrus' speech is his attempt to divorce Eros from any association with anything cosmically generative. This should be contrasted briefly with the beginning of Pausanias' speech, who speaks later that evening at the symposium (180c ff.). Like Phaedrus, Pausanias attempts to defend the pederastic eros, but his account is fuller than Phaedrus' because he at least gives mention to the heterosexual, generative eros, if only to demean it. Pausanias claims that there is not one Eros, but two Erotes. He bases this claim on the two separate accounts given in traditional mythology of the birth of the Olympian goddess of love, Aphrodite. Pausanias says confidently that "[w]e all know that there is no Aphrodite without Eros." Since it is Pausanias' claim that there are two Aphrodites, then it follows that if Eros always goes with Aphrodite, "it is necessary that there be two Erotes as well." The first Eros is associated with the "elder" Aphrodite "who has no mother," and who came into being when the Titan Cronus

castrated his father Uranus, and threw the genitals into the sea. Aphrodite arose from the foam that gathered around the genitals. It is to this older Aphrodite that Pausanias gives the name Uranian. The younger Aphrodite, according to Pausanias, was the generated daughter of Zeus and Dione, and is referred to as Pandemus, which means "common to all the people."<sup>12</sup> The Eros belonging to the Pandemian Aphrodite is the one whom "good-for-nothing human beings have as their love," and such people are "no less in love with women than with boys." The Eros of the Uranian Aphrodite, on the other hand, "does not partake of the female but only of male (and this is the love of boys); and secondly, is the elder and has no part in outrage." It is a strange thing to say that the Aphrodite caused by a son castrating his own father has "no part in outrage," but the reason for Pausanias' preference for the Eros accompanying the Uranian Aphrodite should be clear. The Uranian Eros is associated with the Aphrodite not sexually generated. Heterosexual generation is acknowledged by Pausanias, but as something outrageous because it is not associated with the Eros that "provokes one to love in a noble way" (180d-181c).

This short digression of Pausanias' defense of pederasty

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<sup>12</sup>For the mythological account of the "Uranian" Aphrodite, see Hesiod, *Theogony* 170ff. For references to the "Pandemian" Aphrodite as the daughter of Zeus and Dione see Homer, *Iliad* 3.374, 5.312, 370-71. The translation of "Pandemus" is given by Seth Benardete in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 242 (footnote).

should be contrasted with Phaedrus' speech, in which, as we have seen, there is every attempt to suppress any indication of a link between Eros and generation, a link which Pausanias grudgingly makes. So far, however, the discussion has dealt with generation of the procreative sort, even if in cosmological terms. Phaedrus, like Pausanias, also talks of pederasty provoking nobility *in the soul*. As Phaedrus' speech continues, he unwittingly associates something generative with Eros. Pederastic love can lead to the generation of "great and beautiful deeds" (178d) or "noble deeds" (179c) in both the older lover and the younger beloved. This is a generation not of the body but of the soul. We shall see, however, that by the end of his speech, Phaedrus does his best to dissociate even this type of generation from Eros.

Phaedrus claims that Eros is responsible for the greatest good in human life, which he says is for someone to have a good lover "from youth onward," and for a lover to have a beloved (178c). This is the greatest good given to us, according to Phaedrus, because the lover in the presence of the beloved feels "shame" if he performs a shameful act, more so than the shame felt in the presence of family or friends (178c ff). Hence, the lover could be motivated, in a pederastic relation, to perform actions of greatness and beauty that he otherwise could not do. The same is also true of a beloved in the presence of a lover. For Phaedrus, a city

entirely composed of lovers and beloveds is the best managed since "they would abstain from all that is shameful and be filled with the love of honour before one another." Phaedrus points out that a "real man," that is, a pederastic male lover of a beloved younger male, would "*choose to be dead many times over*" than be seen by his beloved deserting his post or throwing away his arms in a retreat from battle. This is the first explicit reference in the dialogue of the link between eros and death. Phaedrus claims that a lover is "entered" by the god Eros, and once possessed, a lover is capable of "virtue," especially if the beloved is in danger. Hence, Phaedrus states that "*lovers are the only ones who are willing to die for the sake of another*" (178e-179b, my italics).<sup>13</sup>

Phaedrus proceeds to give an example of such a lover willing to die (179b-c), though oddly enough his example is not of a "real man" but of a woman. Alcestis, as Phaedrus points out, died in order that the gods would spare her husband Admetus' life. While a woman demonstrating a real

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<sup>13</sup>It may appear that Phaedrus is espousing the virtue of "courage," especially after his mention of cowardice at 178d. It should be mentioned, however, that Phaedrus does not use the word "courage" once in his entire speech. We have seen that, for Phaedrus, death is preferable and more beautiful than a retreat. However, as Kenneth Dorter has pointed out, it may be recklessness, not courageous, to proceed into battle knowing that annihilation is inevitable. That there is courage in retreat is testified by Alcibiades in his speech where he talks about Socrates' "courage" (219d) in a flight from Delium (220e-221b). See Dorter, "The Significance of the Speeches in Plato's *Symposium*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 2, (Fall 1969), 216-17. According to Alcibiades, Socrates' actions led him and his companion to safety (221b). However, such sensible actions with beneficial consequences cannot be considered "noble" by Phaedrus. To foreshadow, "noble deeds" are done without consideration of consequences, at least according to Phaedrus. Hence, Phaedrus is talking about something different and, in his eyes, more divine than the human virtue of courage.

man's virtue seems to be both possible and favourable in Phaedrus' eyes, the same cannot be said of a male lover of a female. He uses Orpheus' heterosexual love of Eurydice as an example of an inferior love that refused to go all the way to death. Phaedrus claims that the gods did not give Eurydice back to Orpheus because "he was soft" and "had not dared to die for love" (179d). Phaedrus, however, gets something crucially wrong in his brief retelling of the story. The gods in the end did not permit Eurydice to return to the land of the living because Orpheus looked back at Eurydice as he emerged from Hades. This is after he was ordered by the gods not to do so. The important point is that Orpheus had to descend and return from the underworld *alive* in order to bring Eurydice back; it did not depend on his death.<sup>14</sup> Phaedrus ignores this crucial detail in order to emphasize his point that the willingness of a lover to die is the greatest deed. To die for love, to lose oneself in the presence and in the service of the beloved is, for Phaedrus, amongst the noblest of actions. Phaedrus has implicated heterosexual love with Orpheus who attempts to emerge alive from his action for his beloved. This is obviously too selfish and petty for Phaedrus; the self must be sacrificed for love if the deed is to be of the greatest beauty.

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<sup>14</sup>For this point see Kenneth Dorter, "A Dual Dialectic in the *Symposium*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1992, 258.

Phaedrus gives one more mythological example in his speech to bring his argument to a conclusion, but the example modifies the argument somewhat. He refers to Achilles who, unlike Orpheus, was honoured by the gods because he "dared to come to the aid of his lover Patroclus" (179e). Once again, Phaedrus does not give an example of the male pederast sacrificing himself for the beloved. In this example Achilles is the younger beloved, who dies for an older lover. Achilles, however, returns to the Trojan war not to save Patroclus, who is already dead, but to kill Hector in an act of revenge. Furthermore, Achilles returns knowing full well he will die if he kills Hector. It should be easy to see that Phaedrus would regard this as the greatest of deeds, because it is an act which will end in death, and has no beneficial consequences either for Achilles or his lover.

Phaedrus, however, modifies his earlier claims about the lover by admitting that the gods hold a beloved, who has "affection" (180a) for a lover and is willing to die, in higher esteem than a self-sacrificing lover. The reason that Phaedrus gives for this is that the beloved, unlike the lover, is not possessed by Eros (180a-b). It appears that *erotic* affection is impossible for the passive beloved, and any "affection" the beloved has for the lover lacks Eros. Hence, the beloved sacrificing himself for a lover is even more remarkable because he performs these grand gestures of self-

effacement without divine inspiration. In other words, the beloved becomes most like a god because he is not helped by a god. Phaedrus elevates the status of the self-sacrificing beloved to the highest and most excellent human possibility. In doing so he craftily elevates his own status, since he, at this point in his life, is a pederastic beloved. For all of his talk about self-sacrifice for another, Phaedrus turns out to be quite selfish and crafty even though he despises crafty courage concerned with ends and benefits. Regardless of this new twist in Phaedrus' speech, death remains the end result; only the carnage has increased. By the end of Phaedrus' speech both lover and beloved are dead.

Phaedrus' elevation of the beloved can be understood in the light of his dislike for all things generated. In the case of the lover, Eros must "enter" him (179a) in order to cause him to give birth to beautiful actions. In other words, there must be intercourse with the god in order for the lover to generate self-sacrificing actions. In the case of the beloved these self-sacrificing actions appear without such intercourse. This is why, for Phaedrus, the beloved's self-annihilation should be held in greater awe; it is the closest humans can possibly come to autonomous genesis--in other words, to becoming a god. Achilles' actions are not generated by any utility, by the presence of the beloved, or by the inspiration of a god; perhaps they are motivated by revenge,



but Achilles knows this revenge will lead to his death. It is the ultimate example of a useless, uninspired, and ungenerated action of great "beauty" leading to death. Like the god Eros, and like Phaedrus himself, the beloved may cause inspiration in others but is himself ungenerated and unerotic.

Phaedrus' speech, in an unsophisticated but not insignificant way, sets the stage for my interpretation of the conflict between Bataille and Plato. It is Aristophanes, however, who will provide us with a more comprehensive account of eros--an account which is, oddly enough, closest to the one we find in Bataille.

#### THE SPEECH OF ARISTOPHANES

Like Phaedrus, Aristophanes understands eros as a longing that ultimately leads to death, and as something distinct from sexual generation. Aristophanes, however, does not entirely dissociate eros from sexual intercourse, but he does recognize that ultimately eros longs for something different than sex. The physical union experienced in human sexuality is an intimation of a more ultimate and hubristic desire; that is, the desire to be whole and sovereign. In other words, Aristophanes associates eros with the hubristic longing to be a god. We have already seen an example of this hubris in Phaedrus, who attempted to separate himself from the all-too-human characteristic of generation in both body and soul, and

who 'gives the beloved divine status without help from the gods. Phaedrus' erotic hubris leads to a revolt against the Olympian gods in his every effort to associate the beloved with things pre-Olympian and ungenerated. Aristophanes will criticize this hubristic eros and distinguish a proper eros from it.

In Plato's portrayal of Aristophanes, we are given a fully elaborated account of a revolt against the Olympian gods, and how eros in human beings was the result of this ancient struggle. It is this very eros which continually causes human beings to rebel. Aristophanes himself has given an account of a similar revolt in the *Birds*.<sup>15</sup> A brief glance at this play will allow us to see that Plato's portrayal of Aristophanes is not an inaccurate account of the comic playwright's understanding.

In the *Birds*, Peisetaerus and Euelpides, two elderly Athenians, leave Athens because of their dissatisfaction with the imperfection of the city. As Peisetaerus says, "we're wandering in search of a trouble-free place where we can settle and pass our lives".<sup>16</sup> They are seeking to transform themselves, and to find (or found) a city free of the troubles

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<sup>15</sup>All quotations from Aristophanes' *Birds* are taken from the Alan H. Sommerstein translation in *The Comedies of Aristophanes: Vol. 6* (Warminster, Wiltshire, England: 1987), except where indicated. All subsequent references shall be by line number.

<sup>16</sup>*Birds*, 45-46.

and imperfections that characterize humanity and city life. They look for Tereus, a character traditionally associated with adultery and brutality, who was transformed by the gods into a hoopoe.<sup>17</sup> The end result of this transformation, however, is portrayed by Aristophanes as ridiculous and gross; Peisetaerus and Euelpides make fun of Tereus' beak and his featherless body which looks like it is suffering from a disease, though Tereus makes the claim that birds shed their feathers in the winter.<sup>18</sup> Despite the ridiculousness of a human transformed into a bird, Peisetaerus and Euelpides are not deterred from their mission. In fact, they seek the same transformation in themselves. Through the mediation of Tereus, they ask the chorus of birds to revolt against the Olympians and found their own city. Peisetaerus incites rebellion in the birds by pronouncing:

Yes, you, kings over everything that exists, over me here to begin with, and over Zeus himself; you who are senior in birth and antiquity to Cronus and the Titans and to the Earth.<sup>19</sup>

Peisetaerus bases this claim on an old tale he attributes to Aesop, which leads him to conclude that if the birds "were born before the Earth and before the gods, isn't the kingship

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<sup>17</sup>For a summary of Sophocles' lost play *Tereus*, see *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (London: 1898- ), 3013.

<sup>18</sup>*Birds*, 93-105.

<sup>19</sup>*Birds*, 468-470.

theirs by right as the eldest?".<sup>20</sup> This claim is similar to what we have already seen in Phaedrus. Peisetaerus gives the greatest honour and authority to that which is oldest and precedes the sovereignty of the Olympians.

Peisetaerus' rhetoric is persuasive, and the birds begin their revolt. In the process, the chorus leader of the birds gives his own creation story:

In the beginning there was Chaos and Night and black Erebus and broad Tartarus, and there was no earth or air or heaven; and in the boundless recesses of Erebus, black-winged Night, first of all beings, brought forth a wind-gotten egg, from which, as the seasons came round, there sprang Eros the much-desired, his back sparkling with golden wings, Eros like to the swift eddies of the wind. And he, mating by night with Chaos in broad Tartarus, enchicked our own race and first caused it to see the light. But of old there was no race of immortal gods, until Eros blended all things together; then, as one thing blended with another, Heaven came to be, and Ocean, and Earth, and all the imperishable race of blessed gods. Thus we are far the oldest of all the blest ones. That we are the children of Eros is clear by many tokens. We fly, and we associate with those who are in love; and there are many pretty boys, who had sworn they wouldn't, but whom, when they were nearing the end of their bloom, their men lovers managed to screw thanks to our power, one giving a present of a quail, another of a porphyryon, another a goose, and another a Persian fowl.<sup>21</sup>

I have quoted this in full because it provides the clearest link between Phaedrus and Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. In

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<sup>20</sup> *Birds*, 477.

<sup>21</sup> *Birds*, 694-707. I have taken the liberty of changing Sommerstein's translation of "Love" into the more literal "Eros."

this creation myth, Eros, who is like the "swift eddies of the wind," comes into being after Night breaks wind. Eros is once again linked with the earliest of times, characterized by darkness, bottomless pits, and chaos. The birds are the first product of generation, being the children of Chaos and Eros, and it is the birds that associate with those humans who are in love. More precisely, they associate with pederasts, leading to the fulfilment of homosexual desire. Hence, in Aristophanes' bird myth, Eros is that which causes cosmic intermingling and generation, but it is also associated with non-generated love. Pederasts associate with the first children of Eros in order to quench their physical desires. Peisetaerus states early on to Tereus that in a trouble-free city a father of a beloved boy would not chastise a desirous lover, but would ask why he does not kiss his son, or draw his son close and "finger his balls."<sup>22</sup>

The birds, however, do not just associate with those male lovers seeking homosexual gratification. Earlier on in the *Birds* the Chorus Leader asks Tereus what brought Peisetaerus and Euelpides to the birds. Tereus responds by saying "eros."<sup>23</sup> The desire to transform their humanity and the city

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<sup>22</sup> *Birds*, 137-142. It should be noted that in the Sommerstein translation this line is attributed to Euelpides, though it is usually attributed to Peisetaerus. See the William Arrowsmith translation of the *Birds* in *Four Plays By Aristophanes* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 198. Also see Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 137.

<sup>23</sup> *Birds*, 411. Sommerstein has translated this as "A passionate desire."

into something ancient and animal, something associated with the darkness and primordial chaos which existed before the established authority of the Olympians, is what this eros entails. It is an impatience with the imperfection and the erotic tension that characterize human life. Peisetaerus and Euelpides attempt to eliminate this tension for good through action. Aristophanes associates pederastic eros with the eros that strives for perfection, in life and in politics. As the play progresses, it is not so much the birds who are rebelling against the Olympians, but rather a human led revolution that uses the birds in order to fulfil the desire for sovereignty. The smarter pederastic Peisetaerus, ridiculously transformed into a bird, becomes the leader of "Cloudeuckooland." It is a city generated by intercourse between the human erotic longing for perfection and sovereignty, and the primordial fluttering chaos of the birds, an intercourse not unsimilar to that which begot the birds themselves. The new city is, of course, not perfect but a sick deformation. It finally defeats the Olympians when Peisetaerus, after receiving a little advice from Prometheus, successfully gets Zeus' sceptre and marries the Princess who is the keeper of Zeus' thunderbolt and "absolutely everything else".<sup>24</sup> Peisetaerus has "everything" once he marries her, but he establishes a

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<sup>24</sup> *Birds*, 1539.

gross, malformed, and tyrannical disorder over which he is sovereign.

This digression into the *Birds* prepares us for what we shall find in Plato's Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. Once again, we are treated to a tale of a revolt. This time, however, it is the Olympians who win. Before he begins his myth, Aristophanes pronounces that "Eros is the most philanthropic of gods, a helper of human beings as well as a physician dealing with an illness the healing of which would result in the greatest happiness for the human race" (189c-d). Aristophanes' speech is a mythological account of human origins and of the human "afflictions" (189d) that have been with us since our creation. It is these afflictions that are in need of erotic philanthropy; yet they are also in need of Aristophanes' myth-making in order that the disease can be diagnosed. In Aristophanes' myth, human nature has undergone a radical change. In our original human nature there were, first of all, three sexes of human beings; male, female, and the androgynous sex which possessed the physical characteristics of both male and female. Secondly:

the looks of each human being were as a whole round, with back and sides in a circle. And each had four arms, and legs equal in number to arms, and two faces alike in all respects on a cylindrical neck, but there was one head for both faces--they were set in opposite directions--and four ears, and two sets of genitals, and all the rest that one might conjecture from this. (189e-190a)

In other words, in our original nature one individual was the equivalent of two present human beings joined together, making the sexes of the original nature male/male, female/female, and male/female. None of these original sexes came into being through sexual generation, but each finds its origin in the stars: the male is the "offspring" of the sun, the female of the earth, and the androgyne of the moon, since the moon "shares" in both the sun and the moon (190b). It should also be noted, though Aristophanes does not mention it until later, that humans did not originally generate internally. Their genitals were "on the outside, and they generated and gave birth not in one another but in the earth, like cicadas" (191b).

Like their parents, the original humans were "globular" in nature, and moved in a circular fashion. They were also "awesome in their strength and robustness, and they had great and proud thoughts"--so proud that "they attempted to make an ascent into the sky with a view to assaulting the gods." According to Aristophanes, the problem for Zeus and the other Olympians was how to stop the revolt without killing humans, for if they annihilated humanity, the god's "own honours and sacrifices from human beings would vanish." Zeus decides to stop the revolt not by killing humans but by dividing them in half, making them weaker but also greater in number, thereby causing them to be more "useful" to the gods. This is the



first of three operations. The second is performed by Apollo who first of all turns each human head around to see the cut so that "the human being might be more orderly." Apollo then proceeds to heal the cut by drawing all the skin together toward "what is now called the belly." In doing so he shapes our bodies, and smooths out our wrinkles, except for our belly where the navel is left. The navel is the round hole in our bodies to remind us of our ancient punishment for hubris (190b-191a).

After this second operation, each half, now on two legs, desired the other half from which it had been separated:

throwing their arms around one another and entangling themselves with one another in their desire to grow together, they began to die off due to hunger and the rest of their inactivity, because they were unwilling to do anything apart from one another.

Apollo has done nothing to change the human genitals to allow for internal generation, and the desire of each half for the other without activity causes generation to stop, leading to death. It is at this point that Zeus "took pity" on the severed humans and rearranges the genitals in order to allow for internal sexual intercourse. If the male and female halves of the original androgynous whole come together, they can generate and allow the race to continue. If, on the other hand, "male meets with male, there might at least be satiety in their being together; and they might pause and turn to work

and attend to the rest of their livelihood." Aristophanes seems to associate heterosexual love with natural generation, whereas he associates homosexuality with work and civilization. He will make this association later in much greater detail. It is after his description of how the human genitals were rearranged, and of the internal sexual activity that follows, that Aristophanes says:

So it is really from such early times that human beings have had, inborn in themselves, Eros for one another--Eros, the bringer-together of their ancient nature, who tries to make one out of two and to heal their human nature. (191a-d)

Thus, it is only after the genitals were rearranged by Zeus that eros in humans, as it exists presently, becomes manifest. Certainly the circle-beings express a perverse eros to be sovereign by revolting against the Olympians. Eros is also present in the divided humans before their genitals are rearranged, since they passionately cling to one another. Internal sexual eros completes the creation of present human eroticism. However, our new sexual organs, which allow us to temporarily become one with another person, are located directly below the navel, which is a shameful reminder of our ancient punishment for hubris. When we glance at our genitals we also see our navel, which is to say that we look at our genitals with a sense of shame. Thus, humans engage in sexuality shamefully. The experience of shame is an indication of how present human eros cures us of our ancient

hubris. However, as shall become clear, present eros still contains the elements of impiety.

As already noted, the creation of our present genitals leads to the generation and sexual pleasure we know. The men who are sliced from the original androgynous human become lovers of women, and the women of the androgynous human become lovers of men. Aristophanes unflatteringly associates both male and female heterosexual love with "adultery" (191d). However, Aristophanes does acknowledge that the continuance of the human race depends on heterosexual generation. Lesbians arise from those women who were sliced off from other women (191e). This is the only mention and the only detail that Aristophanes gives of female homosexuality. It is on the topic of pederasty, that is, male homosexual love arising in those men sliced-off from their other male halves, that Aristophanes is most forthcoming.

We have already seen that according to Aristophanes the "satiety" that results after homosexual intercourse allows these same men to "turn to work and attend to the rest of their livelihood." That is, sexual satisfaction that does not ultimately result in the burdensome consequence of children gives pederasts a greater degree of freedom to attend to politics. Thus, the pederasty so often criticized and lampooned by characters in Aristophanes' own plays is

portrayed in a more favourable light in Plato's Aristophanes.<sup>25</sup> The passive young boys who lay with men should not be ridiculed, according to Aristophanes, because they are actually the "manliest." It is "only" such boys who, when they are fully grown men and active pederasts themselves, "go off to political affairs." Pederasts are responsible for the law and order of the city, and it is within the polis that piety is generated. Aristophanes associates pederasty with the generation of virtue; since homosexuality cannot generate physically, it can generate virtue in the soul through the community of men in politics. It is within the political community that a pederast can meet with his other half and be "wondrously struck with friendship, attachment, and love." Such men, of course, must be compelled "by law" to attend to "marriage and procreation" though they have no "natural" inclination to do so. Since "only" those who are male slices go into politics it would appear that this law was written by the pederasts themselves. Such laws must exist because the city cannot continue to exist without natural generation. The family becomes the institution that embodies physical generation, and is the natural foundation of the city. The pederasts, however, that Aristophanes associates with political activity spend as little time as possible burdened

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<sup>25</sup>In regards to pederasts in politics, see especially *Knights*, 878-881. Also see *Wasps*, 1023-8; *Birds*, 138-43.

by the natural family. Their longing is for something distinct from sexual generation (191c-192b).

Aristophanes talks about the inexpressible longing found in the pederastic relationship:

here you have those who continue through life with one another, though they could not even say what they want to get for themselves from one another. For no one would be of the opinion that it was sexual intercourse that was wanted, as though it were for this reason--of all things--that each so enjoys being with the other in great earnestness; but the soul of each plainly wants something else. What it is, it is incapable of saying, but it divines what it wants and speaks in riddles. (192c-d)

Aristophanes, who had formerly closely associated sexuality with eros, now distinguishes between the two. Sexuality is merely a physical expression of a much greater but inexpressible longing. What we truly desire, according to Aristophanes, is "conjunction and fusion with the beloved, to become one from two. The cause of this is that this was our ancient nature and we were wholes. *So love is the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole*" (192e-193a, my italics). There is something unbearable about our life as individuals, and we long for the wholeness that was lost when humanity originated. Sexuality is one expression of the individual longing to lose the self into a oneness. Family, friendship and the political community are other expressions of an unendurable incompleteness that causes the individual to seek others. None of these things, however, can entirely reconcile

us and make us whole. Each is an occasionally satisfying but ultimately imperfect attempt to reach wholeness. Human nature is such that each individual must experience this tension of never experiencing wholeness, though often coming close.

However, as we saw with the characters of Peisetaerus and Euelpides in the *Birds*, impatience can cause humans to try to eliminate the tension and seek perfection; like the circle-beings, we may ascend to the sky and associate with beasts such as birds in order to fight the gods. Such an action, however, is to seek to escape from our humanity, a humanity characterized by erotic incompleteness. The attempt to escape from our erotic nature and to make ourselves whole and complete like a god is, for Aristophanes, the most impious of actions. He says, "Let no one act contrary to Eros--and he acts contrary whoever incurs the enmity of the gods" (193b). Aristophanes tells us that if humans attempt such an impious action, Zeus has threatened to saw us in two again, so that we will be "sawed through our nostrils, like dice" (193a) and "will go hopping on one leg" (190d). Once again, as in the *Birds*, the human attempt to defeat the gods leads to gross deformations.

Aristophanes concludes that the human race would be most "blessed and happy" if our desires were to reach their "consummate end," which is for us to return to our original wholeness (193d). Since under present conditions this is

impossible, the best we can do is "to get a favourite whose nature is to one's taste" (193c). Aristophanes concludes:

And were we to hymn the god who is the cause of all  
' this we should justly hymn Eros, who at the present  
time benefits us the most by leading us to what is  
our own; and in the future he offers the greatest  
hopes, while we offer piety to the gods, to restore  
us to our ancient nature and by his healing make us  
blessed and happy. (193d).

We return to the theme of philanthropy. Naturally we achieve temporary union with our "own" beloved through sexual intercourse. Politically we achieve union through friendship and community. Eros is the cause of our seeking political associations, and it is in such associations that piety can be cultivated. Piety is good because through it we can escape from the darkness, chaos and violence that was so characteristic of the cosmos before the existence of present erotic humanity. Eros partially satisfies some of the symptoms of our disease of incompleteness if, in a pious way, we are led to lovers and political associations. However, it is eros itself that is the cause of our experience of incompleteness, and this longing is responsible for our greatest impieties in our drive for wholeness. The "boldness" Aristophanes mentions that leads young beloved men into politics (192a) is the same boldness that may lead them to seek completeness like Peisetaerus. Aristophanes calls on his listeners to be pious. If we are pious towards the gods, if we accept our incompleteness, if we attend to procreation, and

if we find another who is *like* us, we will be most happy in this life, and in the "future"--a future that appears to be death. It will be in death that the gods will repay us for our piety by restoring us to our original lost wholeness.

With this last point it has become apparent that for Aristophanes, eros is a quest whose ultimate end is death. If we attempt to achieve wholeness in this life through action, Zeus will divide us in two again, leading to the death of humanity as it presently exists. If we are pious and accept the limitations in this life, piety becomes an expression of our longing for a "future" when each of us will shed the unbearable burden of our individuality and become whole again. In other words, each individual is annihilated and merges with something else. Once eros reaches its end, eros ceases, and where eros ceases so do human beings. The ultimate end of eros, as Aristophanes has implicitly made clear, is death which is the only way we can achieve the completeness we so desperately yearn for in this life.

In Aristophanes we end up in the same place as we did with Phaedrus. The generative, or philanthropic, aspects of eros that Aristophanes discusses, and that were sorely lacking in Phaedrus' speech, become overshadowed by the violent origins of Eros and the desire for death. The portrayal of eros as a longing for death becomes clearer in Aristophanes' portrayal of the offer of Hephaestus (192d-e). Hephaestus,



the Olympian god of techne, extends a proposal to lovers through the voice of Aristophanes:

For if you desire ... I am willing to fuse you and make you grow together into the same thing, so that--though two--you would be one; and as long as you lived, you would both live together just as though you were one; and when you died, there again in Hades you would be dead together as one instead of as two.

It is Aristophanes' claim that if any lover heard this offer he would not refuse because "it would be self-evident that he wants nothing else than this." But is this as self-evident as Aristophanes claims? The mention of the bonds of Hephaestus that ensnare lovers together is a reference to the song of Demodokos in the *Odyssey*, which is sung to Odysseus in the house of Alcinoo.<sup>26</sup> The song tells of the adulterous love affair between Ares and Aphrodite, the wife of Hephaestus. When Hephaestus finds out about the affair, he secretly devises a net within which he will trap them, forcing them to be tied together. He reasons thus:

Now look and see, where these two have gone to bed and lie there/ in love together. I am sickened when I look at them, and yet/ I think they will not go on lying thus even for a little,/ much though they are in love, I think they will have no wish/ for sleeping, but then my fastenings and my snare will contain them.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Homer, *Odyssey* 7.266-366. All quotations are taken from *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965). For a fuller discussion of Aristophanes' use of Homer's Hephaestus see Arlene Saxonhouse, "The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*," *Interpretation*, 13 (1985), 15-32.

<sup>27</sup>Homer, *Odyssey* 7.313-17.

This reasoning proves correct. Once separated from their bonds, Ares and Aphrodite immediately spring apart from one another and go their separate ways. The story demonstrates that once we are unified with something we desire we no longer desire it. The merging of the lovers in a union leads to the death of eros. In the story, Hephaestus presents the bound Ares and Aphrodite to the gods for all to see, a sight which causes the gods to roar in outrageous laughter. Apollo asks Hermes if he would be willing to lie with Aphrodite in bonds, to which Hermes answers, "I wish it could only/ be, and there could be thrice this number of endless fastenings,/ and all you gods could be looking on and all the goddesses,/ and still would I sleep by the side of Aphrodite the golden."<sup>28</sup> This supports Aristophanes' point that lovers would not turn down Hephaestus' offer. However, Aristophanes seems to be aware that we really do not want to achieve wholeness--or what he understands to be "wholeness"--since the myth of Hephaestus' net demonstrates that we flee from the object of desire once we possess it. But as will become clear in Socrates' speech, there is something missing in Aristophanes' account of wholeness.

Before we get to Socrates, however, we must descend even further into the bleakness of Bataille, where the association

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<sup>28</sup>Homer, *Odyssey* 7.399-42.

of Eros with death receives its fullest treatment with an impious modern slant.

## CHAPTER TWO - BATAILLE AND THE EROTICISM OF NEGATION

### CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

It is perhaps best to begin this chapter on Bataille by restating his formulation of "eroticism:" eros is "assenting to life *to the point* of death" and "*even in death*" (*E*, 11, my italics). Bataille's texts are as much an attempt to describe eroticism as they are an attempt to evoke and cultivate extreme human experiences. That is, as much as it is possible for words to say, the writings of Bataille are an evocation of the assent, or approval, to life that leads to death.<sup>1</sup>

We have already seen the links made between eros and death in the encomiums of Phaedrus and Aristophanes in the *Symposium*; we have also seen the separation made between sexual generation and eros, especially by Phaedrus. Bataille, like Phaedrus, makes the separation between eros and reproduction clear from the beginning of *Erotism*. At one point Bataille states that "the fuller the erotic pleasure, the less conscious we are of the children who may result from it" (*E*, 102). At another point he writes, "Eroticism is a sterile principle" (*E*, 230). The sterility of eros becomes clearer the further one travels into Bataille's writings. However, Bataille's understanding of eroticism begins with

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<sup>1</sup>I shall be dealing mostly with Bataille's post-war writings, especially *Erotism*, *Theory of Religion*, and the three volumes of *The Accursed Share*. These texts do not represent so much a departure from the early Bataille as they are his most comprehensive theoretical expositions.

sexuality. He writes, "If a precise definition [of eroticism] were called for, the starting point would certainly have to be sexual reproductive activity, of which eroticism is a special form" (*E*, 11). The meaning of reproduction is the "key to eroticism" (*E*, 11). Hence, it is from reproduction that Bataille begins his account of eros in *Erotism*, an account which, except for intentions, is remarkably close to Aristophanes'.

Bataille states, "Reproduction implies the existence of *discontinuous* beings" (*E*, 12). By "discontinuous" he means beings who are distinct and *separate* individuals, and who are separated from one another by what Bataille calls a "gulf" (*E*, 12). That is, you are not me, and I am not you, and I am not a stone or a bird. The only way my separateness from things can truly be abolished, the only real way to bridge the gulf that separates my distinct, individual, discontinuous existence from other objects, is to die. Through death, the matter of which I am made is consumed by the plethora of life that surrounds me; that is, I rot and my matter is transformed into other things. In other words, I become "*continuous*" with the world that I, as a distinct, discontinuous, individual, separated myself from while I lived. This "separation" is partly an illusion; we cannot entirely separate ourselves from the processes of the cosmos which demand that each of us must die eventually. However, this does not change the fact that my individuality is lost when I am consumed by these forces.

In death my discontinuous existence becomes continuous. As Bataille writes, "*death means the continuity of being*" (*E*, 13, my italics).

Bataille attempts to make the link between eroticism and death through his identification of reproduction with both "discontinuity" and "continuity." In order to make this identification, Bataille distinguishes between the two forms of reproduction in living organisms; "elementary organisms through asexual reproduction, complex ones through sexual reproduction" (*E*, 13). Bataille uses two examples from the cellular level in order to make his point clear. In the case of asexual reproduction, a cell grows to a point where it divides into two new cells. Though the two new cells may contain the material that made up the original cell, they are distinct from the original cell as well as from one another. In order for the two new cells to come into existence, it was necessary for the original cell to die. This original cell "does not decompose in the way that sexual animals do when they die," but rather it just "ceases to exist" because it cannot survive the separation (*E*, 13). Bataille states, however, that there is "continuity" at one moment in the reproductive process. He writes,

There is a point at which the original *one becomes two*. As soon as there are two, there is again discontinuity for each of the beings. But the process entails *one instant* of continuity between the two of them. The first one dies, but as it dies there is this moment of continuity between the two new beings. (*E*, 13-14)

At the cellular level, Bataille has described a separation analogous to the separation of humanity in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*; an asexual (and unerotic) reproduction causing two to come from one, with the original one disappearing. Discontinuity arises out of continuity.

Bataille provides an example of sexual reproduction, once again at the cellular level. When sperm and ovum unite they create a new being. However, this new being is created at the expense of the sperm and ovum; these two separate discontinuous beings must become continuous with one another in order for the new life to begin. That is, the death of the sperm and ovum is what is responsible for life in sexual creatures. Bataille writes that this "new entity is itself discontinuous, but it bears within itself the transition to continuity, the fusion, fatal to both, of two separate beings" (*E*, 14). It should be pointed out, although Bataille does not say so explicitly, that before there was any sort of sexual reproduction in either animals or humans, it was necessary for there to be cellular asexual division. Somehow, the continual division of cells led to the creation of organisms which reproduced sexually. In sexual reproduction, however, the process is the reverse of asexual reproduction; sexually, continuity arises out of discontinuity.

Bataille uses the example of the sperm and ovum in order to illuminate the nature of complex sexual creatures beyond the cellular stage. Sexual intercourse between male and

female organisms is an imitation of the fatal fusion of the sperm and ovum, except that in the case of the complex organisms both parties emerge from the fusion alive. There is a difference here, but the general feature of the two discontinuous beings becoming continuous with one another remains.

This is a yearning for continuity, and as Bataille has made clear, the yearning to be "continuous" is ultimately a yearning for death. As one of the libertine heroes of Bataille's *Story of the Eye* says, "[I]t struck me that death was the sole outcome of my erection" (*SE*, 33). The desire for continuity is summed up in the following crucial passage:

On the most fundamental level there are transitions from continuous to discontinuous or from discontinuous to continuous. We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is. (*E*, 15)

The yearning for our "lost continuity" which links us with the cosmos is referred to by Bataille as a "nostalgia," and it is this nostalgia which is responsible for eroticism in man (*E*, 15). This nostalgia becomes manifested sexually when we look for another person with which to become continuous. But the act of sex with another discontinuous person only approximates or mirrors the final goal. As the French phrase for orgasm--*la petite morte*--indicates, sexual climax is only a "little



death" (*E*, 170). Bataille writes:

eroticism which is a fusion, which shifts interest away from and beyond the person and his limits, is nevertheless expressed by an object. We are faced with the paradox of an object which implies the abolition of the limits of all objects, of an *erotic object*. (*E*, 130)

In other words, even though our erotic desire may be for a *particular* person, the real object of our desire is to become continuous with the *whole*, within which all particulars are contained and with which we seek to lose our particularity. In volume two of *The Accursed Share* Bataille writes, "[I]n the embrace the object of desire is always the totality of being ... the totality in which we lose ourselves insofar as we take ourselves for a strictly separate entity ... In a word, the object of desire is the *universe*" (*AS* 2, 116). Or again, in *Story of the Eye* the hero remarks, "[I]f Simone and I were killed, then the universe of our unbearable personal vision was certain to be replaced by the pure stars ... without human delays or detours, something that strikes me as the goal of my sexual licentiousness." (*SE*, 33).

All of the above citations, which may initially strike us as odd, must be understood in the light of our discussion of Aristophanes. We should remind ourselves that Aristophanes states that "love is the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole" (193a). In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes presents the same account of discontinuous beings who cannot stand their individuality; they find their separateness hard to bear and long for a fusion to become whole with a beloved.

However, if this fusion were to be successful they would lose themselves--their individuality--in the process. Hence, this is another way to understand Aristophanes' pronouncement that eros is the longing for the whole; that it is a desire for union with the *totality*, for the *universe*. This longing leads to the death of the discontinuous individual, as both Aristophanes and Bataille make very clear. In our desire for the whole we become lost in the whole. In our yearning to be united with the universe, to be whole, we begin to lose our discontinuity. We cannot achieve communion with this "object" and emerge alive, as we can with a particular object. The immensity of the totality consumes us. Yet, as we have seen, we can approximate this ultimate erotic longing through other expressions, through other discontinuous erotic objects, which may take us *to the point* of death, but from which we return. We should also remember that Aristophanes' circle-beings, who were whole creatures, revolted against the Olympians in order to have sovereignty. As we shall see in more detail, Bataille attaches the term *sovereignty* to those extreme moments of human experience which in some way approximate the whole. As with Aristophanes, the link is made between erotic striving and sovereignty.

#### THE NATURAL GIVEN: ANIMALITY AND THE GENERAL ECONOMY

Bataille's account of our ultimate erotic end needs to be clarified with reference to Bataille's anthropology. Once

again, we shall see that Bataille's anthropology, based upon some of the findings of modern archeology, ethnography, and social science, is not that much different from Aristophanes' myth-making. In the light of the above discussion, which is Bataille's primary account of what the erotic experience entails, we must ask the question of what makes human beings distinct from animals. So far, we have only discussed erotic yearning in association with sexual intercourse. It may be pointed out that animals also partake in sexual activity, and it would appear that they too become temporarily continuous during intercourse. However, it is Bataille's claim that only humans are "erotic." As he writes, "Human sexual activity is not necessarily erotic but erotic it is whenever it is not rudimentary and purely animal" (*E*, 29).

Quite simply, eroticism in Bataille is, as in Aristophanes, the result of a revolt:

I submit as a principle the incontestable fact that man is an animal who does not simply accept the natural given, who negates it. In this way, he changes the natural external world; he derives from it tools and manufactured objects that form a new world, the *human* world. Concurrently, man negates himself; he refuses, for example, to give to the satisfaction of his animal needs that free course on which the animal placed no restraint. (*AS* 2, 52-3)

It is this double "negation" of both himself and the world around him that, as we shall see later, makes man an "erotic" animal. Bataille writes, "A revolt, a refusal of the offered condition, is evinced in man's attitude at the very beginning" (*AS* 2, 77). But what is the "offered condition" that our

evolutionary ancestors refused? Bataille describes it as the "world of violence" (*E*, 40). Violence is the character of the world that surrounds us. Bataille gives the most descriptive account of his cosmology in *The Accursed Share, Volume 1*. However, it is a limited cosmology because it describes only the terrestrial organic sphere, or "to be exact, the *biosphere*" (*AS 1*, 29). There is no mention of the heavens or the movements of the stars. As we shall see much later, this is a crucial absence. For the time being we remain within Bataille's violent biosphere, which he describes in economic terms: he calls it the "general economy" (*AS 1*, 19-41).

The general economy he speaks of is "the play of living matter in general" (*AS 1*, 23) which is not a static equilibrium but a violent state of disequilibrium. This disequilibrium is created, according to Bataille, by an excess of energy in the organic world. In the general economy, part of this energy is used for *accumulation*; that is, for the *productive* growth of the organism. However, due to the superabundance of energy in the organic world, there is a continual *expenditure* of energy; that is, energy is "luxuriously" squandered. This tendency towards squander is the *general* movement of the natural world as a whole, even while *particular* creatures strive to produce and accumulate for survival. Thus, certain species of plant or animal life, and certain individuals within the species, will use energy in a productive and accumulative way, leading to their growth.

At the same time, whole species and individuals are squandered, killed off, *expended*, due to the superabundance of energy in a limited amount of space. The limited space causes pressure and resistance for the plethora of organisms in the general economy. Some will grow and occupy new space, whereas others are squandered in order to make way for the new and growing organisms. Hence, within the limits imposed by the biosphere there is a plethora of life caught in the grips of a violent agitation.

If we look at a particular economy we see that part of the energy that an animal consumes when it eats a plant or another animal will go towards the accumulative growth of the organism. However, the organism "ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life" (AS 1, 21). Thus, "if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically" (AS 1, 21). Willingly and gloriously, an animal might expend or use up excessive energy in other *necessary* activities, such as urinating, defecating, eating another animal, or in sexual activity. Unwillingly and catastrophically, the energy it has accumulated will be squandered when the animal is itself eaten or dies. For Bataille, it is the absurd lesson of the natural world that every living thing must eventually die. Accumulation itself depends upon the death of something previous, as for instance when an animal accumulates nutrition

by eating another animal. Hence, it is out of death that every living thing comes and into which it goes. It is against these parameters, against the *general* movement towards squander and death, that the *particular* animal tries to preserve itself. But this accumulative activity is in vain because eventually all that work will be "luxuriously" expended by the demands of the *general* economy (AS 1, 33-5)

I have provided this detail of Bataille's "general economy" in order that it is perfectly clear what the "offered condition" is and why human beings refuse it. Humanity rebels against the luxurious squander of the natural external world. But we should recall that Bataille speaks of a double negation. That is, humans do not only refuse the conditions offered to them by the external world, they also refuse their animality. This is to say that humans negate themselves. Thus it becomes necessary for us to discuss what Bataille means by animal.

In his *Theory of Religion*, Bataille proposes a "narrow" consideration of animality that "seems questionable" to him, but that has a "value" in order that he can make his general point (TR, 17). Bataille writes that "animality is immediacy or immanence" (TR, 17). By this Bataille seems to mean that an animal is *immediately* related to the environment. It does not understand itself as a "self" or a "subject" opposed to external "objects." Thus, there is no clear distinction in the consciousness of the animal between the "I" and the "Non-

I," which is to say that it is not completely aware in any significant conscious way of its existence as a "discontinuous" being. It appears that, for Bataille, the animal lives by vital drives and instincts which allow it to feel resistance and to sense "attractive or distressing phenomena" (*TR*, 25). This primal awareness of resistance and attraction is what allows for the survival of both the individual creature and the species. Another prime characteristic of animals is that they live entirely in the *present*. They are not aware of the duration of objects through time, nor do they conduct their activity towards long term future achievements. "For the animal, nothing is given in time" according to Bataille (*TR*, 18). In the consciousness of the animal "nothing is posited beyond the present" (*TR*, 18).

With this description, it should be somewhat clear what Bataille means by an animal's immediacy or immanence. Animals live in an immediate and continuous relation to the realm of violence. This does not mean that the animal is dead; it too must contend with the environment in order to give itself nutrition and maintain an equilibrium. But since it cannot in any clear way distinguish itself from the world around it, the animal's consciousness is closer to the continuity that characterizes death. They experience the world directly without self-consciousness, objectification, or the awareness of time. They do not in any way attempt to oppose or

transcend the general economy, but are completely subject to its general laws. With this meaning in mind, Bataille writes, "every animal is *in the world like water in water*" (TR, 19). Some animals are bigger waves than others, but all are caught within the general ebb and tide, causing all of the animal waves to lose themselves indistinguishably into the continuous oceanic whole. Humanity, as it were, builds a boat within this ocean.

#### THE HUMAN REVOLT

Bataille's account of the pre-human state of nature and animality should be contrasted with the pre-Olympian, pre-human cosmological accounts we have seen. In Hesiod and Aristophanes the cosmos before the sovereignty of the Olympians and the emergence of humanity is portrayed as a place of chaos and darkness, full of immediacy, wholeness, war, struggle, animality, mutilation, castration, patricide, and (specifically in the case of Hesiod) incest. This same basic understanding characterizes Bataille's realm of "violence," or the "general economy," which is always described in a bloody and tumultuous vocabulary. Bataille specifically refers to a "*genesial violence*" (AS 2, 48, my italics); that is, the violence that seems to be the mark of genesis. It is out of genesial violence, a violence within which an animal is immersed like water in water, that humanity arises. There was in the dark and distant past an "event" (AS



2, 52) that led to the transition from animal to man, and since then "humanity has never had a more astounding, more glorious moment" (AS 2, 73). As we shall see, Bataille's writings are in part an attempt to inspire a change within humanity that is almost as great as the first step, a step which lifted man out of his animality.

The "event" Bataille is referring to occurred in the Middle Palaeolithic era when our evolutionary ancestors, the Neanderthals, first began to use the *tool*. The actual use of "tools" perhaps dates earlier in our ancestry, but it is in Neanderthal man--the *homo faber* (tool-making man)--that this feature becomes most evident. It was with tools that Neanderthal man began to "work," to use tools with a future end in mind. With tools, human beings "negate" the world as much as possible to suit their purposes. At the same time, man establishes *taboos* which restrict some of his immediate carnal desires. This further separates him from the filth and violence which characterizes animality.

The "event" of the tool is marked by two important changes that occur within the consciousness of early man. First, there is the beginning of objectification. Bataille writes, "Insofar as tools are developed with their end in view, consciousness posits them as objects, as interruptions in the indistinct continuity. The developed tool is the nascent form of the non-I" (TR, 27). We should recall that the "non-I" is not in the consciousness of the animal who

cannot clearly distinguish between himself and the external world. With the tool early man started to become aware of himself a discontinuous being; as separate from the world which surrounds him. With the awareness of his discontinuity, he is no longer "immanent" in the world like water in water. The tool is distinct from the "I," and this tool cuts into the continuity of the general economy in which animals are lost. With the tool, man begins to work, and this work leads to the creation of his own objectifiable world and places him in opposition to the realm of violence.

The second change in consciousness that accompanies the event of the tool is the awareness of the future. We should recall that the animal, according to Bataille, always lives in the immediate present. The tool is used to create something that is not in existence in the present but that could be in the future. The use of tools takes us out of the present and focuses our attention on a future time when our ends will be realized through work. The awareness of the future leads to our awareness of objects existing through time.

The use of the tool and the shifts in consciousness that go with it historically coincide with the time that early humanity became conscious of death. Bataille writes, "What marks us so severely is the *knowledge* of death, which animals fear but do not know" (AS 2, 82). The use of tools and the knowledge of death go hand in hand for Bataille. He claims it is impossible to determine which of the two is more primordial

and may have caused the other (AS 2, 82-4). It could be that knowledge of death and the anguish that comes with it led to an ingenuity in the consciousness of early man. Tools are the consequence of man attempting to escape temporarily from the clutches of violence and death--work increases our chances of staying alive longer. Or it could have been exactly the opposite: the tool creates an awareness of death. With the tool we attempt to complete a project sometime in the future, and we anticipate the result. But as Bataille writes, "death threatens to forestall me, and to steal away the object of my anticipation ... one may die too soon and so one's expectation will remain forever disappointed" (AS 2, 83). The sense of an interruption in the process towards a future result leads to the knowledge of death. Regardless of which explanation one accepts, Bataille is arguing that there is a coincidence between work and the awareness of death. This claim is based upon the archeological evidence which shows that Neanderthals began to bury their dead in an almost ritualistic way towards the end of the Middle Palaeolithic era. This directly follows the first use of tools (E, 42-5). Hence, the first taboos are established in regards to the dead; they are not allowed to rot in the open.

It was with the emergence of the being called *homo sapiens* (man endowed with knowledge) that man became conscious of something different from, but inextricably linked, to death. That is, man became aware of himself as a sexual

being:

There are Middle Palaeolithic burial sites but evidence of the sexual activity of the first men goes no further back than the Upper Palaeolithic. Art (representation) does not appear with Neanderthal man but begins with homo sapiens, and such images of himself as he has left are rare anyway. These images are generally ithyphallic. Hence we know that sexual activity like death was early on a subject of interest to man....Ithyphallic pictures obviously show a relative freedom. Nevertheless they cannot prove that those who traced them believed in unlimited freedom in this field. All we can say is that as opposed to work, sexual activity is a form of violence, that as a spontaneous impulse it can interfere with work. (E, 49)

Like death, the immediacy of the sexual impulse can interfere with the completion of the work project. In order for projects to be completed it requires that immediate desires be held in abeyance. Work requires that humans be absorbed in rational, useful activity which negates the immediacy of the present. The result of this work is, ultimately, the human constructed order. But for this order to come into existence, and to continue to exist, strictly enforced taboos need to be established amongst humans that limit and control their primordial, immediate, sexual, and violent urges. The earliest carvings and cave paintings show an obsession with sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Bataille concludes from this evidence that man had come to *represent* sexuality because he was separated from the immediacy of the sexual impulse. This separation led to

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<sup>2</sup>For Bataille's commentaries on this very early art one should see *The Fears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 22-53, and *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Geneva: Skira, 1955).

the consciousness of sexuality as such, a consciousness that linked sexuality and death as those things which threaten the ordered and rational world of work. Sexual behaviour had become regulated, and the regulations separated humans from the immediacy that sex has for animals. This separation led to the representation of sex in the earliest homo sapiens. Hence, part of early man's time was spent making these mostly useless objects which show a yearning for what Bataille calls a "lost intimacy" (*AS* 1, 57).

Thus, early man felt himself separated from something--a separation that resulted from his rebellion against nature. This revolt began with the tools that negate the natural given, and resulted in the taboos that separate humans from the genesial violence of animality. These early taboos thus make clear for Bataille the association between sexuality and death. He writes:

If we view the primary taboos as the refusal laid down by the individual to co-operate with nature regarded as a squandering of living energy and an orgy of annihilation we can no longer differentiate between death and sexuality. Sexuality and death are simply the culminating points of the holiday nature celebrates with the inexhaustible multitude of living beings, both of them signifying the boundless wastage of nature's resources as opposed to the urge to live characteristic of every living creature. (*E*, 61)

Bataille always attempts to show the coincidence of death and the reproduction of new life. The awareness in the consciousness of the individual of his own mortality may, in part, lead to the biological desire to biologically

immortalize himself in the only way that is possible for sexual creatures: through reproduction and the continuation of the species. The death of one generation is what gives room for the next generation to take its place. Each generation arises from the mortality of the previous generation; or as Bataille writes, "would there be a young generation if the cemeteries did not fill up to make room for it?" (AS 2, 99). Bataille also continually emphasizes that the death and decay of organic material is what allows for new life to proliferate. The swarm of life that overtakes a decomposing corpse is the image Bataille constantly evokes in order to convey the impression this reality had on early man.<sup>3</sup> The transition in sexuality from discontinuity to continuity, the way that sexuality, like death, threatens the structured accumulative order, and the way that death brings about new life all caused early man to link reproduction and death, and hence to ban it from the world of work.<sup>4</sup>

Humanity's "No" to the immense squander of nature results in what Bataille calls the "profane world," which is man's attempt to become sovereign over primal violence, over the "ridiculous way" (E, 232) in which nature behaves. In the

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<sup>3</sup>See especially *Erotism*, 45-6, and *The Accursed Share, Volume 2*, 79-83; 97-9.

<sup>4</sup>For Bataille's commentaries on the artistic representation of the links between sexuality and death in the earliest men, one should consult his writings on a famous cave painting at Lascaux, France. The painting shows a man with a bird's head and an erect penis having been struck dead by a bison which he has just killed in a hunt. See *Lascaux, or the Birth of Art*, *Erotism*, 75, and *The Tears of Eros*, 34-38; 50-53. I will mention in passing the coincidence of the "bird-man" in the Lascaux painting who seems to be entering into a lost continuity through his merging with animality and death, and the bird-men of Aristophanes' *Birds*, who attempt to become whole and sovereign through a gross reacquaintance and merging with animality.

profane world, man accumulates instead of squandering; through work, he accumulates goods that entail an existence in the future. This is Bataille's basic understanding of political association: the world in which men establish rules--taboos--which lead to the creation of an organized community working towards the accumulation of goods and combating the primal violence of nature. Some of the earliest taboos related to sexual reproduction, such as the prohibitions against nudity and menstrual blood. But perhaps the earliest and most significant taboo, the enforcement of which led to the creation of the human social order, is the taboo prohibiting incest.

Bataille addresses his modern audience, who live in "extreme relaxation," and writes that "we cannot envisage the tension that is inherent in life in small groups often separated by hostility" (AS 2, 39). Within these small groups there is sexual intercourse between brother and sister, father and daughter, and mother and son. Outside of these incestuous tribes there may be other hostile incestuous groups that threaten the family peace. Following the tradition of Hobbes, Bataille writes that this extremely hostile and incestuous situation creates the need for the "guarantee of rule" (AS 2, 39). Rules become established when the men within an incestuous group agree to forego their immediate sexual gratification with either their daughters or sisters, and trade these women as a "gift" to the men in a group that is

outside of the immediate bloodline. The group that receives this gift may attempt to return the favour by offering another woman gift in exchange.<sup>5</sup> This early event of female exchange set up a network of contact and a system of communication outside of the immediate bloodline. These extended ties were what led to the earliest societies; that is, a network of association that extends beyond the immediate extended family. Bataille directs us to Levi-Strauss, who concluded that though the specific regulations of the earliest incest taboos vary, they tend to be set up in ways that are most favourable to a generalized and open exchange, continually extending the number of alliances.<sup>6</sup> But these associations were only possible because the men agreed to renounce their immediate animal gratification through the gift. As Bataille writes, "The renunciation of one's close kin - the reserve of the one who forbids himself the very thing that belongs to him - defines the *human* attitude that is contrary to animal voracity" (AS 2, 57). This reserve, enforced by taboo, allows

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<sup>5</sup>I realize this account of primitive exchange needs more detail which I do not have the space to give. However, for Bataille's account of the rivalry created in exchange, see *The Accursed Share, Volume 1*, 63-77. His account is based upon the research of Marcel Mauss in *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1967). For an extensive reading of Bataille in relation to Mauss, see Michele H. Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup>Thus, according to Levi-Strauss, there is a tendency in the variety of incest taboos for a preference for matrilinear, cross-cousin marriages--that is, a marriage with the child of the mother's brother. This marital arrangement, according to Levi-Strauss, leads to the most open, generalized exchange that extends alliances. The full details of this cannot be given here. See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmes and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).



the organized profane realm to exist.<sup>7</sup>

#### TRANSGRESSION, EROTICISM, AND SOVEREIGNTY

The revolt against nature was not completely successful. Bataille writes, "in their own way men recognized long ago the failure of the negation of nature" (AS 2, 92). Throughout his writings he attributes two reasons for this failure. First, Bataille claims that the denial of "sexuality, filth, [and] death" is "fictitious" (AS 2, 92). He writes, "I finally have to tell myself that the carnal origin of which I am ashamed is my origin nonetheless" (AS 2, 92). The reality remains that the profane world is constructed *within* the realm of violence. The profane realm can be negated or put aside temporarily, but it cannot be done away with. Humanity continues to be swept along by the primal violence that is its origin. The disruptive sexual urge continues to intrude upon the ordered world of work; and no human being can escape from death, the ultimate end. The second reason for the failure of man in his attempt to negate nature is that it once again leads to his enslavement. The revolt against the natural given was an attempt by humanity to free itself from limits imposed by nature; it was an attempt to be *sovereign* over the realm of violence. But as Bataille points out this led to another enslavement:

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<sup>7</sup>For Bataille's full account of the incest taboos, based upon the research of Levi-Strauss and Mauss, see *The Accursed Share, Volume 2*, 27-58.

Let us recall that humanity stands opposed in us to the dependence of which animality is the sign, but that the calculations and labours of *profane* life, in which man hoped to find *independence* with respect to nature, soon became revolting in that they ensured man's subordination to *means*. (AS 2, 149-50)

In the profane world, humans are enslaved to work which anticipates a goal in the future. Authentic being is placed in the future. Instead of living in the present, we live in anticipation of the future and we must work usefully towards this future. Thus, we become enslaved to means. This enslavement, according to Bataille, was also recognized by early man.

This twofold failure led to the recognition of the need occasionally to *transgress* the taboos that became established in the profane world. The establishment of the profane world caused a nostalgia for the lost intimacy that work and taboos have denied. It led to the *desire* for what was prohibited. According to Bataille the denial of nature gave nature a "different value" so that "it was no longer simply nature, but nature transfigured, the *sacred*" (AS 2, 92). Thus, "the sacred is precisely what is *prohibited*" (AS 2, 92). In the earliest societies work took up a good portion of human time. However, institutions, festivals and rituals were arranged so that *temporarily* and *within certain limits* transgression could take place. Marriage is, in relation to incest, a highly regulated institution. It is established, however, to counteract the randomness of sexual interaction; but it is

within the institution of marriage that the transgressive act is permitted which, if left to itself, would threaten the stability of the profane world. By allowing what is normally not permitted, marriage is a sacred institution. There are to this day "sacred" festivals that celebrate marriage. In archaic societies there were other sacred festivals that temporarily allowed transgression: the ritual orgy, animal and human sacrifice, the violence of initiation rites, and the chaos that ensues in some societies after the death of a king are all examples.

However, when we transgress the taboos we do not simply become animals again; as Bataille aptly puts it, the transgressive festival "is not just a return to one's vomit" (AS 2, 90). Once taboos become established they change the nature of the forbidden act itself. When animals engage in sex or wallow in filth they are not transgressing any rules they have set up, but when humans engage in these same acts a limit has been passed. The act itself is committed with a *consciousness* that a rule is momentarily being transgressed. Thus, sexual intercourse is committed with *shame*. Sexuality mediated by taboos is what makes human sexual activity specifically *erotic*. Thus, by way of a long discussion, we have arrived at the answer to the question we asked long ago about what distinguishes human sexuality from animal sexuality. Animals are not restricted by taboos and never feel shame in sexuality. Their engagement in sex is

immediate--that is, without mediation. In order for sex to be erotic it must first be restricted, which is to say that human taboos must put a stop to the immediacy of sex. The taboos, however, cause a fascination in us for the object they forbid. Once this object is fully encountered, human inner experience is characterized by both attraction and repulsion; attraction because, like animals, we are caught up in the natural force that draws us towards things, and repulsion because the taboo has caused human consciousness to understand sexuality as forbidden and hence shameful. This repulsion is not enough to stop the activity in humans altogether. However, the activity is accompanied by a certain sense of vertigo, or a "feeling of topsy-turvydom" (AS 2, 131), which comes when there is the awareness that a taboo has been broken. Animals do not experience this same vertigo. According to Bataille, they are caught up in the desire by instinct, but they are neither conscious of it nor do they experience shame.

There is a second characteristic to erotic transgressions that is distinctly human. We must recall that, for Bataille, the human attitude is characterized by *negation*. Our origin is found in our negation of the natural given in order that we may become *autonomous* and *sovereign* over the nature that enslaved us. However, the first negation leads to our enslavement to work. The transgression of the taboos is thus a secondary attempt at sovereignty. This second revolution is a negation of the profane world, with its limits and

usefulness. Thus Bataille writes:

Life *beyond utility* is the domain of sovereignty....in other words ... it is *servile* to consider duration first, to employ the *present time* for the sake of the *future*, which is what we do when we work. (AS 3, 198)

Furthermore:

Let us say that the sovereign (or the sovereign life) begins when, with the necessities ensured, the possibility of life opens up without limit. (AS 3, 198)

With these passages, the character of Bataille's understanding of "sovereignty" becomes clear. Traditionally, a sovereign had his material conditions satisfied through the useful work of slaves. The slave's work led to the accumulation of wealth and material, a good portion of which went to the sovereign. It was the sovereign who consumed this wealth in ostentatious expenditures. The wealth provided to him through the work of the slave opened up "possibilities" for the sovereign, which could take him to the limits of human experience. These extreme experiences were for the most part denied to the slave because he was caught up in work. In a revolutionary manner, Bataille claims that these moments of limitless experience are not restricted to the ancient sovereigns, but can also be experienced by the most common of human beings, though the objective conditions at present may be such that these experiences are harder to attain for a commoner. Regardless, when the basic necessities in life are met and there is at least a little extra wealth or energy to be expended, a human being reaches an experience beyond the "realm of utility." It

usually comes in a moment of transgression, when a human goes beyond the limits of what is normally thought to be acceptable.

The most intense moments of sexuality are in this sovereign realm. Although this activity may lead to the generation of children and may thus be seen as "useful," during sexual intercourse there is usually little thought given to the children that might result from it. In the "heat of the moment," progeny are not in the forefront of consciousness. The moment is usually enjoyed without the thought of consequences.

#### BATAILLE AND ARISTOPHANES

Bataille has given an account of the origin of humanity, and of the origin and character of eros, similar to that given by Plato's Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. Bataille bases his understanding of the origin of man and eros on the "proof" of archeological and ethnographic evidence, whereas Aristophanes provides a mythological rendering of the same understanding. But this is of no consequence, because the modern social science upon which Bataille depends has in no way improved upon Plato's Aristophanic account. As in Plato's Aristophanes, Bataille gives an account of an original wholeness, a wholeness that was characteristic of animality. Animals live in immediacy or immanence, like water in water, in an intimate and continuous relation with the violent world

around them. But like Aristophanes' circle-beings, early humans in Bataille's account revolted against the given order so that they could be sovereign. This revolt led to the division of man from his ancient animal wholeness. The division caused both the orderly profane realm--a realm Aristophanes refers to as "political"--and eroticism in humans, which is the desire for ancient wholeness.<sup>8</sup> The same is true in Aristophanes: the awareness of our discontinuity led to the civilized order and to our deepest erotic yearnings.

The nostalgia for the lost intimacy created by man's revolt brings us back to the Introduction to *Erotism*. As we have seen, the awareness of our existence as "discontinuous" creatures makes us yearn for the lost "primal continuity."

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<sup>8</sup>It should be noted that as opposed to Aristophanes and the other speakers in the *Symposium*, there is almost no mention of homosexuality in any of the writings of Bataille. This is certainly a bizarre absence, since Bataille appears to speak so freely about the various forms of erotic expression. The most explicit mention I could find was in a footnote to his discussion of "individual love" in *The Accursed Share, Volume 2*, where he writes that homosexuality "contributes only odd variants, of secondary importance, to the general picture" (437). Perhaps it could be claimed, following Aristophanes' exaggerated assertion that only male homosexuals go into politics, that homosexuality, like profane politics, is a negation of the rules of the natural world. As the political world counteracts the primordial violence of nature, so homosexuality refuses to abide by the rules of reproduction, rules which if followed lead to the useful, servile activity of raising children, and to the continued squander of these human generations by nature. Hence, it is a further revolt by man, both against the reproduction that nature commands so that it can consume the children, and the servility which raising children and family life entails.

Homosexual intercourse itself is characterized perhaps by a greater violence than heterosexual intercourse. However, the lack of progeny in homosexuals eventually puts a stop to the violence. It would be a sovereign joke on humanity's part if everyone were to become homosexual. Nature would enjoy the luxury of the immediate squander of the entire human race, killing it for good, but the complete refusal to abide by the servile *necessity* of heterosexual intercourse would deny nature the luxury of squandering future generations. In this way we become sovereign over nature by becoming most like the nature that "apathetically" squanders us. This last point is certainly propagated by the Marquis De Sade. This is a bizarre understanding of homosexual eros that does not receive treatment in Bataille, but as we shall see, the need for complete negation is the final end of Bataille's erotic understanding. It is strange that Bataille does not link homosexual eros with "limitless eroticism." The above comments will be expanded when limitless eroticism is discussed at the end of the chapter.

The awareness of ourselves as discontinuous creatures, as "subjects" *opposed* to objects, began when we separated ourselves from nature and *opposed* it with tools that attempted to transform it. But we have found the consciousness of our discontinuous existence "hard to bear" (*E*, 15) in the same way that Aristophanes' divided circle-beings found their discontinuous individuality intolerable. It is in the sovereign moments of transgression that we approximate this lost continuity.

It is here, however, that the difference between Bataille and Aristophanes becomes apparent. The difference is in their intentions. Aristophanes intended his account to cultivate piety in his listeners. Bataille, on the other hand, intends his account to cultivate impiety. He is addressing a modern audience from a scientific, utilitarian civilization. The old archaic festivals have almost been entirely lost in the accumulative usefulness of modern humanity. Hence, for Bataille the modern world is marked by the proliferation of a "servile" humanity enslaved to usefulness instead of a sovereign humanity that squanders. Bataille is attempting to awaken his audience to the sovereignty of transgression, while at the same time acknowledging that the massive accumulation of the modern world has laid the material conditions within which sovereign humans can arise.



### THREE FORMS OF EROTICISM IN BATAILLE AND PLATO'S ARISTOPHANES

Bataille writes that the nostalgia for the lost continuity is responsible for the "three forms of eroticism in man ... [the] physical, emotional and religious," all of which attempt "to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity" (*E*, 15). Once again, these same forms of eroticism were discussed by Plato's Aristophanes. Bataille also discusses fourth form of eroticism that he calls "limitless." This form is related to Bataille's understanding of the future of humanity.

#### i) Physical Eroticism

Physical eroticism was certainly recognized by Aristophanes in his association of eroticism with the creation of our present genitals (191b-d). This type of eroticism has been predominant in our account of Bataille. It is of fundamental importance for him because most of the history of eroticism depends upon it. Taboos such as incest have largely dealt with sexual reproduction and behaviour. Similarly, throughout societies there is a universal taboo against nudity, though the regulations of this taboo have a wide degree of variance, because "[s]tripping naked is the decisive action" in physical eroticism (*E*, 17). Bataille writes:

Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a

possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable personality. (*E*, 17-18)

As in Aristophanes, where the naked belly button just above the genitals is a shameful reminder of our lost wholeness, nakedness for Bataille reveals the desire to go beyond the self and become lost in continuity. Our discontinuous existence, however, does not cease in the sexual union as it does in the union of the sperm and the ovum. Our existence "is only jolted" (*E*, 18). For "the general run of normal men" the sexual union might indicate "fearful excesses," but most choose not to cultivate these excesses (*E*, 18). Thus, the "stirrings" aroused in the act of sex, leading to the creation of life, are seen by Bataille as reminders of death. It is in the grip of such stirrings that humans experience a limited sovereign moment.

Physical eroticism cannot be the highest human expression of eroticism, both because it is the most common, and because it is closest to the animality that is enslaved to nature. Furthermore, regardless of its links with death, the act itself does have the living consequence of children. The raising of children involves one in family and in society, and hence in practical and useful behaviour to ensure the future survival of the children. In other words, one becomes servile, even though the children themselves are the result of

an act of sovereignty. There are more advanced, more *negative* forms of eroticism for Bataille that open up greater "possibilities."

## ii) Emotional Eroticism

"Emotional love," or as Bataille calls it in the *Accursed Share*, "individual love," was also discussed by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. Aristophanes mentions those who meet their other half. We should recall that passage:

they are wondrously struck with friendship, attachment, and love, and are just about unwilling to be apart from one another even for a short time. And here you have those who continue through life with one another, though they could not even say what they want to get for themselves from one another. For no one would be of the opinion that it was sexual intercourse that was wanted ... but the soul of each plainly wants something else. (192b-c)

That unspeakable "something else" is the desire to be "whole" again, a desire which if carried to extremes leads to the greatest impieties against the gods and ultimately to death. In the same way, Bataille understands the passionate love for another individual as a displaced love for the cosmos. He writes, "the beloved object is for the lover the substitute for the universe" (AS 2, 161). Though this "may appear to be nonsense," the experience of authentic emotional love, as distinct from but often in conjunction with physical love, can be so strong that "the subject is unable thenceforth to conceive of itself without the object" (AS 2, 161). In this way the beloved becomes "everything" for the lover and takes

on the status of the universe; life is impossible to imagine for the lover without the beloved. If the love is reciprocated then "in desire nothing else counts any more, and the object [the beloved] gives the subject [the lover] what it lacks in order to feel replete with the totality of being, so that it no longer lacks anything" (AS 2, 161-62). Reciprocated love *temporarily* opens up a world of "possibilities" for the lovers that would have been unimaginable previously. This makes them feel whole, complete, boundless and sovereign. The "limitlessness" they experience places them beyond the limits and restrictions imposed upon them by the social structure. Nothing else counts any more. They are "on top of the world." Passionate love is beyond good and evil. In this way they feel like gods. It usually entails a vast expenditure of resources, as both of the lovers squander energy and materials on one another, and this assumes an abundance of resources. All of this, according to Bataille, sets up a "fundamental opposition" between individual love and the "State" for whom passionate love lies outside of its immediate control.

Unbounded love cannot maintain its purity for very long, especially if this love is consummated in sexual union or marriage. Thus, the "incompatibility of individual love and duration is so general" that it has become one of the central concerns of European fiction, especially since the twelfth

century (AS 2, 164).<sup>9</sup> Even at its moments of greatest intensity, individual love cannot be the most sovereign form of eroticism because, according to Bataille, it entails a *concern* for the beloved object. One must look out for the welfare of the beloved, and this involves one in useful, practical work that will lead to a stable world. Concern is already outside the unstable, unlimited, unendurable world of the passionate lovers. Furthermore, the "state" may force the "Lover's Society of Consumption" to submit to the "Married Couple's Society of Acquisition" (AS 2, 163). There is a conflict between marriage and passionate love; like Aphrodite and Ares trapped in the net of Hephaestus, the passion of the lovers is sure to die if it is bound lawfully bound by the state. However, passionate love "*opens up*" possibilities that, if taken up, lead to what Bataille calls "extreme eroticism" (AS 2, 167).

### iii) Religious Eroticism

The last of the erotic forms discussed in the introduction to *Erotism* is "religious eroticism," which in volume two of *The Accursed Share* Bataille calls "divine love." Plato's Aristophanes also identified this form. Although he did not have the term "religious" to describe it, he provides

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<sup>9</sup>For a comprehensive examination of European passionate love in literature and in history, one should consult Rougemont's *Love In The Western World*. Like Bataille, Rougemont understands passionate eros as ultimately a longing for death, an understanding he arrives at through a study of European literature, such as the myth of Tristan and Iseult. However, Rougemont, unlike Bataille, chooses not to pursue the "possibilities" which this understanding of eros opens up.

an account of the phenomenon the word "religious" is often used to signify.

In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes begins his speech by mentioning that if human beings were aware of the philanthropic powers of Eros "they would have provided the greatest sanctuaries and altars for him, and would be making him the greatest sacrifices" (189c). The reason for this is simple: only through Eros can human beings in some way satisfy their longing for wholeness. Furthermore, at the end of his speech, Aristophanes points out that only if we "offer piety to the gods"(193d) do we have any hope that eros will restore us to our original nature in death. The point to be drawn from these comments is that sacrifice and ritualistic observance, which we today call "religion," are expressions of our longing for wholeness. This same understanding is put forth by Bataille in his account of religion.

The "sacred" is understood by Bataille as that which is prohibited, and the rituals that are considered sacred are those in which the taboos of the profane world are temporarily lifted. It is in these sacred times that humans are once again reacquainted with the realm of violence; that is, an attempt is made to recapture some of the intimacy that was lost in the establishment of the profane world. The most basic expression of this is the *sacrifice*. In ritualistic sacrifice a creature is killed. The audience watches a bloody display in which a being with a discontinuous existence is

"brought back by death into the continuity with all being, to the absence of separate individualities" (E, 90). The shock of the murder opens up the abyss of continuity, of wholeness, for the spectators.

In its most advanced or intense form, religious eroticism is expressed in the extreme possibility of mysticism. Mysticism begins where individual love reaches its limits. In passionate individual love the beloved object is bound by vulgar contingency, and the lover becomes entangled in servile activity that looks out for the welfare of the beloved. If this servility is accepted, then the boundlessness that was revealed at the height of the passion ceases. If this servility is not accepted then it could lead in the direction of mysticism. The failings of the beloved could lead to "the idea of replacing her [the beloved] with the *imaginary* object that mythology proposed to us and theology elaborated" (AS 2, 168, my italics). This imaginary object is a transcendent God, an "imaginary" being not bounded or soiled by the filth and contingency of both the natural and profane worlds. The desire for the "other" becomes transformed into the desire for God, "which alone might yield us the totality of being" (AS 2, 169).

Two points should be mentioned in association with mystical eroticism. First of all, the transference of the love for an individual person to an eternal, transcendent, creator God is, for Bataille, peculiar to the mystic

traditions of the Jewish, Christian, and Moslem religions. No such God is imagined in the Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism (*E*, 16). However, Bataille says that the various mysticisms of these traditions "all have the same significance" (*E*, 246), regardless of whether or not a transcendent God is posited. This significance is a "non-attachment to ordinary life" and an "indifference to its needs" (*E*, 246). Such needs create an "anxiety" that causes "a spontaneous surge of life that is usually kept under control but which bursts forth in freedom and infinite bliss" (*E*, 246-7). Jewish, Christian and Moslem mystics might imagine they are becoming continuous with a transcendent god. Regardless of their claims, according to Bataille their experiences are not different from those of other forms of mysticism.

Secondly, Bataille claims that with Christianity the understanding of the "sacred" changes. In archaic societies, filthy, animalistic, and carnal things--which Bataille calls "*heterogeneous elements*" (*VE*, 140-44)--were regarded by archaic man as sacred. This was because they stood in opposition to the "*homogeneous*" ordered cleanliness of the profane world. Thus, archaic festivals might include sacrifice, orgies, and violence. In Christianity, these once "sacred" things are de-divinized and linked to the profane world. They become "profanity." This "merging of sacred uncleanness and the profane seems to have been for some long



time contrary to the feeling about the true nature of things persisting in man's memory, but the inverted religious structure of Christianity demanded it" (*E*, 123). Archaic man created order, and in his sacred festivals returned to the chaotic filth that characterizes the cosmos. Christianity moves, according to Bataille, in a contrary direction. For Christians, only the entirely pure is sacred. Only the transcendent God is sacred because he transcends *both* the natural and the societal "profane" realms. The refusal of Christians to associate the filthy with the sacred means for Bataille that the Christian religion is "the least religious of them all" (*E*, 32).

The problem for the mystic is that he does not have the "sensible presence" of God (*AS* 2, 169). For Bataille, "positive theology" is discourse about God that describes his attributes. But language limits that which is limitless. The mystic, according to Bataille, does not arrive at extreme experiential moments through the "poverty of language" (*AS* 2, 169), but rather through a "negative theology"--a theology that negates the world in order to transcend it and embrace the absolute transcendent God in silence. In order to "negate" the world the mystic must detach himself from material conditions. Bataille writes that the mystic "has set his face against the genital order, meaning life, and he is seduced by a form that spells death" (*E*, 231). The mystic must renounce the material temptations, including sexuality

and all other things that involve the mystic in the perpetration of life. Instead, the mystic must "reencounter horror, anguish, death" (AS 2, 169). The "experience of God is kept alive in the throes of sacrifice," an experience perpetuated for Christian mystics by the sight of Christ's extreme suffering on the Cross (AS 2, 169-70). The mystic offers himself as a sacrifice. This reencounter with death leads to the merging of the mystic with a "formless and modeless God." Bataille calls such a state "theopathy," and he provides a brief description:

In the theopathic state there is no more desire; the subject becomes passive and suffers what happens to him with a kind of immobility. In the inert beatitude of this state, when each object and the whole universe have become utterly transparent, hope and dread have both vanished. The object of contemplation becomes equal to *nothing* (Christians would say equal to God), and at the same time equal to the contemplating subject. There is no longer any difference between one thing and another in any respect; no distances can be located; the subject lost in the indistinct and illimitable presence of the universe and himself ceases to belong to the passing of time. He is absorbed in the everlasting instant, irrevocably as it seems, with no roots in the past or hopes in the future, and the instant itself is eternity. (E. 249)

In reality, for Bataille, the mystic's merging is not with an absolute transcendent object, but with a real object of desire: the universe, the totality, the immanent whole. The experience cultivated by the mystic is that of a sense of extreme continuity with the whole. The extreme discontinuity of common material existence is negated. In these states, the mystic comes closest to death; he goes to the point of death

where eros ceases. In this unerotic state of near death, where for an instant the mystic *becomes* the continuous whole, we reach what Bataille calls "complete sovereignty" (*E*, 249). However, Bataille further claims that even such divine love ultimately gets mired in servility. The mystic returns from his instant of living death, and in his return, God is reduced to utility. Bataille writes that such a God is "the creator, the guarantor of the real world and the real order; he is the preeminent utility. Whether he transcends it or not, he is still the very reality of this world which is not of itself the betrayal of God but rather the expression of God" (*AS* 2, 173).

For Bataille, there is only one thing "that *in the very moment* transcends a series of acts subordinated to their results" (*AS* 2, 174). Not mystical religious eroticism, but rather, a final form of eroticism that he does not discuss in detail in his Introduction to *Erotism*. In *The Accursed Share*, it is presented as the ultimate and most sovereign form of eroticism: limitless eroticism, or *sadism*.

#### THE EROTICISM OF NEGATION

Like divine love, limitless eroticism begins with the failure of individual love: the limits that a particular beloved places on the lover are recognized. However, in limitless eroticism, the sadist does not transfer sovereign authority to an imaginary, absolute, transcendent God.

Instead, the sadist claims for himself what Bataille calls an "impossible human authority" (AS 2, 183). This human sovereignty is not characterized by a mystic theopathy, but rather by a sadistic *apathy*. And such extreme apathetic eroticism is, for Bataille, most clearly laid out in the writings of the Marquis de Sade.

Bataille claims that man's attitude is characterized from the start by "negation." Humanity begins when man negates what is naturally given to him. Negation continues when man negates his own taboos. Negations are how we express our desire for sovereignty. If negation is what describes the most central human characteristic, then Sade's sovereign apathetic man is the ultimate realization of the essence of humanity. Perhaps he even takes us beyond humanity. "[T]he negation of partners opens up a last domain of eroticism" (AS 2, 174). A sadist refuses to be limited by the interest of the "other" and does with the other as he pleases. Furthermore, the sadist attempts not to have any kind of solidarity with men. Concern for a partner's interests, concern for other human beings, limits what the sovereign man may do. Thus, Bataille writes of Sade's "established truth"-- "the paradox of crime's being a condition of sensual pleasure" (AS 2, 176). Crime is committed whenever a given rule or taboo is negated. This is what leads to human erotic pleasure, even at the most kind and gentle level. But at the most ferocious level, it is expressed in a complete lack of

concern for anyone. Sensual pleasure, according to Sade and Bataille, is heightened in the most barbarous act of violence, where the most *inhuman* disgraces are committed against a partner. The sadistic man is isolated from those who surround him, and this isolation leads to an autonomous and sovereign apathy for other human beings. This causes the most ultimate transgressions of the taboos that create solidarity with other humans. Bataille writes, "human beings' respect for one another draws them into a cycle of servitude where subordinate moments are all that remains" (AS 2, 179). For the truly sovereign man, this must be avoided at all costs.

Extreme negation requires a great deal of energy. According to Bataille, the sadist finds this energy in ways similar to the mystic's pursuit of the sovereign state of theopathy. The simple, common, sensual pleasures are resisted by the mystic and sadist alike. When the basic pleasures are held in check, an energy is created that allows the sadist to commit the most horrendous crimes. Holding common sensual pleasures at bay creates a callousness within the sadistic man, destroying everything within him and causing a "destructive explosion"--an ultimate negative drive that seeks to negate the universe itself (AS 2, 180). The mystic and the sadist differ because the sadist *actively* negates what surrounds him. For Bataille, their subjective experiences are similar in that desire ceases. The most intense sadistic experience is characterized as "apathy," the absence of

desire. Through this sort of activity, the sovereign sadist achieves the wholeness, the apathy, that characterizes the unerotic being.

This enormous act of complete negation ultimately negates the negator himself. A weak human being, with his limited erotic experiences, wants to "know [autonomy] without dying" (AS 2, 184). Bataille writes, "The sovereign is he who *is*, as if death were not....He is not a man in the individual sense of the word, but rather a *god*" (AS 3, 222). The sovereign man, autonomous because he is not enslaved to other human beings and to useful ends, is also not enslaved to the fear of death. As long as he *is*, he gets as close to death, to wholeness, to divinity, as is possible. He is living death. In an earlier text, Bataille writes;

I AM joy before death.  
Joy before death carries me.  
Joy before death hurls me down.  
Joy before death annihilates me

I remain in this annihilation and, from there, I picture nature as a play of forces expressed in multiplied and incessant agony. (VE. 237)

The experience of joy before death is the mark of the sovereign man who is not filled by servile fears. This "joy" is expressed through negation of what surrounds him, leading to the negation of himself. In this way, the so called "death of the subject" occurs; the sadistic sovereign man leads a discontinuous existence, always at the very borders of continuity. Like the universe, he squanders and consumes; through limitless negation he becomes the universe.

This is what Aristophanes feared and warned against. The limitless form of eroticism described by Bataille is also suggested by Aristophanes when he warns that if we try to be gods again, Zeus will again divide us in two (190d). Such extreme punishment would be the death of humanity. We would be "sawed through our nostrils like dice" (193a) and would "go hopping on one leg" (190d). What is more, our genitals would be cut in half as well. As with Bataille, Plato's Aristophanes is aware that the drive for cosmic sovereignty leads to torturous massacres. Bataille, however, celebrates the fact.

### CHAPTER THREE - DIOTIMA'S EROTICISM

#### THE USE OF "HETEROGENEOUS" ELEMENTS IN ARISTOPHANES, BATAILLE, AND SOCRATES

The erotic accounts of Phaedrus, Aristophanes, and Bataille each have their own peculiar features and agendas, but they all share the following two characteristics: 1) each account understands eros as the human experiential longing to be an autonomous, whole, sovereign god, and 2) each understands that this longing, if carried through to its ultimate end, leads to death. This account is given an intentionally unsophisticated rendering by Plato in Phaedrus' speech, but Plato provides an entertaining, compelling, and refined version of it in Aristophanes' speech. The main difference between Aristophanes and Georges Bataille is that Aristophanes feared the dangerous excesses of erotic yearning. Bataille, on the other hand, is living in the modern world where the drive for free, autonomous sovereignty, in all of its plethora of forms, is a commonplace. Bataille, however, goes further in his thought than most moderns are willing to follow, and provides us with a blunt account of where the drive for sovereignty ultimately leads. In thought, at least, Bataille accepts these consequences.

It is rather ironic that the same understanding of eros leads, in the case of Aristophanes to a call for piety, and in the case of Bataille to a call for the most "godly"



transgressions of sacrifice and murder. The irony is increased if one recalls that Bataille and Aristophanes share a certain taste for vulgarity. The comedies of Aristophanes are filled with ugly references to filth, farts, belches, and other grotesque bodily processes and afflictions. Even in the *Symposium*, Aristophanes' speech is delayed due to his hiccups, which he cures with a sneeze. In an early essay entitled "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," Bataille refers to the ugly filth resulting from bodily processes as "*heterogeneous elements*" and claims they are opposed to the "*homogeneity*" of ordered, civilized, clean, and beautiful society (VE, 142). Aristophanes evokes these "heterogeneous" things in order to show to his audience the barbarity and squalor that coincides with the breakdown of the traditional civil order. By publicly displaying such ugliness in a comic fashion, Aristophanes hopes to inspire virtue and piety in the Athenian people who come to see his plays. They are a people who have begun to lose their piety towards the Olympian gods, and such impious hubris, according to Aristophanes, is leading to the decline of Athens.<sup>1</sup> The ugly elements are evoked as a warning to the people of the disgusting and filthy decadence that results from impiety.

But is a comic poetry that demands the re-establishment of ancient virtue through a public display of ugliness compelling enough to achieve its end? Obviously these same

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<sup>1</sup>See especially the debate between Just and Unjust Speech in the *Clouds*, 890-1104.

"heterogeneous" elements can be evoked by Bataille, not as a warning to inspire virtue, but as a symbol of our deliverance from the servility that "homogeneous" society imposes on the individual with its "virtuous" demands. Reacquaintance with heterogeneous filth, after such filth has been declared taboo by society, is what leads to sovereignty. Thus the writings of Bataille--from the surreal porn of early novels like *Story of the Eye* and *Madame Edwarda*, through to the later theoretical writings such as *The Accursed Share* and *Erotism*--seek to evoke the extreme impiety that immerses itself in heterogeneity.

The Aristophanic fear of the "heterogeneous," or of what lies outside the laws of the city, is evident both in his plays and in Plato's characterization. Before the establishment of the city, the cosmos is portrayed by Aristophanes as a disordered and chaotic place, characterized by filth and violence. The city comes into being when the sovereignty of the immortal Olympian gods is recognized by humans. The recognition of this authority limits the human hubristic longing for sovereignty. The laws of the city are what enforce these limits, and any attempt to transcend the city's laws is an attempt to return to genosial violence. Aristophanes demands that we be content with the limits because the hubristic longing for wholeness is impious. The only way that Aristophanes says we can be restored to any wholeness is by suppressing our ambitious longings through

piety to the Olympians. Piety is thus instrumental. Wholeness is the reward from the gods in the next life to those who are meek in this life.

There is something unsatisfactory and incomplete about Aristophanes' account. The dogmatic demand for traditional piety in the presence of a dark and chaotic universe is not as persuasive as Aristophanes might think. It will certainly be unsatisfactory advice for those hubristic types who seek to reclaim the sovereignty that they believe has been wrongly transferred to the gods. Alcibiades and Bataille are two such people. When Aristophanes tries to say something in response to Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*, he is interrupted by the entrance of the drunken Alcibiades and his noisy crew (212c): he is dramatically silenced by the tyrannical and decadent Alcibiades, a man full of political and spiritual hubris and infamous for his impiety and lawlessness. Aristophanes' understanding of eros and piety is defenceless, at least in speech, against those who are unwilling to recognize traditional piety. Aristophanes' calm objection is suppressed by Alcibiades' drunken abandon. Bataille, in the spirit of Alcibiades, would agree that piety is servile and that the humanly constructed "divine" order is enslaving. The highest human possibility is reached through a reacquaintance with the primal chaos that the city with its common pieties attempts to negate and deny--a chaos similar to, but darker than the disorder Alcibiades brings to the symposium.

Socrates would agree with Bataille that once the city is established our highest *human* aspirations can only be fulfilled outside of the city. However, Socratic transgression is not a call for lawless tyranny or a *sovereign* "return to vomit." Socrates provides an account of how our deepest erotic longings can best be satisfied in this life. If these longings are properly oriented they can make a human *most like a god*. This account, unlike Aristophanes but like Bataille, dares to transgress limits into "heterogeneous" territory. The transgression, however, does not lead to ugliness, chaos, and violence, nor is it necessarily at the expense of law and virtue. To use Bataille's language, Socrates speaks of "heterogeneous elements" that are not ugly, disordered, and close to death; he speaks of the reality of a *beautiful divine heterogeneity* that is not a human construction. In fact, he shows that virtue *within* the homogeneous city depends in part upon this divine heterogeneity that *transcends* the city and does not *depend upon the recognition of humans for its reality*. Thus, like Aristophanes, Socrates wants to preserve and give birth to virtue. However, unlike Aristophanes, he does not attempt to promote virtue through a comic and dogmatic poetry that demands piety toward anthropomorphic gods. Rather, he proposes an ambitious philosophic orientation that ascends to the "heterogeneity" that is the measure of the law of the city and of virtue in humans--a divine ordered reality. It is the

properly oriented eros of the philosopher that is able to witness this beautiful and divine heterogeneity.

It should be noted that Alcibiades, later that evening, admits it is only the speeches of Socrates that put him to shame (216b). He cannot refute what Socrates says, yet he chooses to live in a manner that is contrary to what he must accept in Socrates' speech. In order to live his corrupt public life he must flee from Socrates (216a-c). Alcibiades does not silence Socrates in the way that he silenced Aristophanes. He simply flees. Even to a soul as hubristic and impious as Alcibiades', Socrates' speech is persuasive. And if it does not cultivate virtue, it does cause him to experience shame. We must see if Socrates' speech can address the modern impiety of Bataille in the same way that it addressed the ancient impiety of Alcibiades.

What follows, then, is a discussion of Diotima's erotic account as given through the person of Socrates in the *Symposium*. The analysis will not go through Socrates' speech in the order in which it is delivered. Rather, the following outline will be observed:

1) I shall begin in the middle of Socrates' encomium at section 205d-206a, where the Aristophanic account of eros is directly mentioned and criticized. A brief commentary will follow on the general themes that arise from this passage.

2) I shall turn to the beginning of Socrates'

presentation where he enters into an argument with the tragic poet Agathon. What follows from this debate is an *experiential* account of eros in relation to beauty, ugliness, immortality, and the good, as it is given by Socrates and Diotima in certain sections up to the end of 206a.

3) After this experiential account, I shall next turn to Diotima's *mythological* account of Eros given at 203b-204c, which compliments what is given experientially, and emphasizes the generated nature of Eros.

4) The discussion of Socrates' speech will conclude with a look at Diotima's account of the "perfect revelations," beginning at 210a. This section of the speech attempts to provide an account of the highest and most proper end of erotic longing.

#### **THE ABSENCE OF THE GOOD: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN DIOTIMA AND ARISTOPHANES**

Quite simply, Aristophanes' understanding of eros is inadequate because he fails to provide us with an adequate account of the *good*. It might be possible to deduce from the speech what Aristophanes thinks is good: the good is piety towards the gods through "orderly" behaviour (193a). Such behaviour is "good" because through it we may be restored to our original wholeness in death. The "consummate end" of our erotic longing is wholeness, and we want to be whole because it will make us "happy" (193c). Happiness is a good without

question. However, not once within his speech does Aristophanes use the word "good." The word is used twice immediately before Aristophanes begins his speech, once by Eryximachus when he refers to the comic poet as "My good Aristophanes" (189a), and again by Aristophanes himself when he says that Eryximachus makes "a good point" (189b). But the word is never used within the encomium itself.

The absence of even the mention of the word is intentional on Plato's part. This becomes obvious during Socrates' speech when he claims that, during his youth, the priestess Diotima told him the following:

there is a certain account ... according to which those who seek their own halves are lovers. But my speech denies that eros is of a half or of a whole-unless, comrade, that half or whole can be presumed to be really *good*; for human beings are willing to have their own feet and hands cut off, if their opinion is that their own are no good. For I suspect that each does not cleave to his own (unless one calls the good one's own and belonging to oneself, and the bad alien to oneself) *since there is nothing that human beings love other than the good.* (205d-206a, my italics)

This direct reference to Aristophanes' account refutes his claim about the *final* end of erotic longing. The ultimate end is not wholeness but the good. Wholeness by itself is neutral. If we seek to be whole it is because being whole is thought to be good. The good becomes the measure of wholeness. Aristophanes, however, has not provided an account of this measure.

The lack of this measure leads Aristophanes to make the

following mistaken claim at the end of his speech: "[W]e should justly hymn Eros, who at the present time benefits us the most *by leading us to what is our own*" (193d, my italics). The Socratic experience of eros reveals something different than this. Eros is an experience of incompleteness, a desire for something *other* and a striving towards completeness. In Aristophanes' myth, each half of the divided circle-beings desires its *own* other half; each desires what was once part of itself. When the halves cling to one another it is not necessarily an expression of love for something other, but perhaps the love of *like for like*, a form of self-love. As Aristophanes says, eros leads us to what is *our own*. But as Diotima points out, humans are willing to undergo amputation of their own body parts if they think the loss of what is *one's own* is good. Thus, eros is linked too closely by Aristophanes to love of one's own. This is different from the experience of eros as the love of something *other*, something "heterogeneous." Acquiring more of oneself, if such an acquisition is possible, will not quench the erotic thirst. Even a man as in love with himself as Alcibiades still needs something other--the adulation of the masses--in order to feel somewhat satisfied (see 216b).

True satisfaction, or happiness, can only be found in the presence of the good. Diotima, however, makes the following observation: it may be possible to err in defining the good as that which belongs to oneself and the bad as that which is



"alien" to oneself. In this case the self, or what is a part of oneself, becomes the measure of the good. In order to refute this error we must turn to the beginning of Socrates' presentation where, in his dialogue with Agathon, he begins an experiential account of eros ultimately demonstrating that the self cannot be the measure of the good.

#### THE DESIRE FOR WHAT ONE LACKS: AN INTRODUCTORY ACCOUNT OF BEAUTY, IMMORTALITY, HAPPINESS, AND THE GOOD

##### i) The Encomium of Agathon

Socrates' turn to speak comes after that of the tragic poet Agathon at whose residence the drinking party is being held. The party is in celebration of the great success of a performance of one of Agathon's plays the day before (see 174a, 175e, 194c). Agathon also achieves a great success at the symposium by dazzling his guests with a rhetorically pleasing speech and causing everyone present to applaud "vigorously" (198a). It is in this atmosphere that Socrates must speak.

Agathon's claim is that Eros is the youngest of the gods, and also the happiest, the best, and the most beautiful (195a-b). Furthermore, it is these very qualities to which Eros is attracted, for "like to like always draws near" (195c). Thus Eros, being young and beautiful, desires that which is young and beautiful. Like Aristophanes, Agathon understands eros as love of like for like, or self-love. This attraction of like

for like, according to Agathon, is what brings peace and harmony into the world. Before Eros there were "castrations and bindings of each other, and many other acts of violence among the gods" (195c), but the coming to be of Eros changed this. Being the youngest and the most beautiful of the gods, Eros brings peace by inhabiting young, beautiful, and "soft" souls (195a-196b). Only the softest of souls can be penetrated by Eros (195e), those of young and beautiful humans--for "there is no eros present in ugliness" (197b)--instilling in them the love of beautiful things. This love generates beautiful things in the soul, including virtue and the arts (196b-197b). The most important art is Agathon's own, poetry, for "everyone whom Eros touches proves to be a poet" (196e). The ability of Eros to generate such children of the soul leads Agathon to make a claim about the good: "[S]ince the birth of this god, all good things have resulted for gods as well as for human beings from the loving of beautiful things" (197b). In other words, Eros the beautiful is the "cause ... of fair and good things" (197c).

There are two points in Agathon's account that Socrates criticizes. The first is Agathon's claim that Eros is the love of like for like, or the love of one's own. The second is Agathon's claim that all the good things Eros causes, including virtue and justice, are solely the result of the loving of beautiful things. This is to say that the good finds its origin, or "cause," in the beautiful. The beautiful

is thus more fundamental, or is the measure of the good.

## ii) Eros as the Desire for One's Own

Socrates first contests Agathon's claim that eros is the desire of like for like. After receiving permission from Phaedrus to delay his eulogy in order to question Agathon, Socrates begins his dialogue with an cryptic reference to incest:

is Eros the sort that is love of something or of nothing? I am not asking whether he is of a mother or of a father (for the question whether Eros is love of mother or father would be laughable), but just as if I asked about this very word, *father*--is the father father of someone or not? You should doubtless tell me, if you wanted to give a fair reply, that the *father* is father of a son or a daughter. (199d)

Incest is a subject that is so unbearably ugly that none of the other previous speakers, even the most devout pederasts, dared to mention it. Socrates brings up the subject seemingly only to laugh it off--strange behaviour, given that incest was a topic of grave seriousness in the Greek tragedies. Even Bataille, who provides an extensive account the incest taboo, treats the subject with the greatest of sobriety; though Bataille might recommend sacrifice and murder, he never suggests the breaking of the incest taboo. Socrates, however, treats it as comedy. He brings it up partly in order to provide an analogy to Agathon: in the same way that a father is a father of a daughter or a son, so Eros is the love of something other. But the brief mention of incest also serves

to illuminate the incestuous nature of Agathon's account of Eros. This becomes clearer from the discussion that follows.

Since Socrates and Agathon agree that Eros is the love of something, Socrates asks Agathon if Eros already possesses the thing that it desires. Agathon responds that it is "at least likely" that Eros does not have what it desires (200a). With this, Agathon has contradicted his account of Eros as the youthful and beautiful god who is father to youthful, beautiful and good things and who also desires these very things. By desiring youth and beauty, he is longing for what he already has; but, furthermore, Eros is desirous of his own children by this account. Socrates finds this laughable. As Stanley Rosen writes, "Agathon's entire argument is 'laughable' because it amounts to a defense of incest, or a love of one's own productions."<sup>2</sup>

The simple understanding that it is only possible to long for what is lacking provides an insight about why incest is so universally despised. An incestuous family would appear to be a whole, self-contained, and self-sufficient entity; the love of like for like makes the family autonomous without the need for what is alien. However, such incestuous "wholeness" is obviously insufficient. The love of one's own of this sort is either a direct or indirect form of self love; and any self-contained entity, whether an individual or an incestuous family, is incomplete. The incompleteness inherent in incest

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<sup>2</sup>*Plato's Symposium*, 214.

reveals an underlying desire for something *other*, for something *alien* or *heterogeneous* that is outside of the family. The universal human experience of such incompleteness motivated the massive effort early in history to avoid incest. This effort resulted in the creation of human societies that extended human ties beyond the family. Humans extended their love beyond what is their own in order for the community to be established and continue to exist. Neither Agathon nor Aristophanes escape from the shadow of incest since both agree that eros leads us to what is our own. Socrates demonstrates that eros leads us to something other. After his laugh over incest, Socrates continues his experiential account of what humans truly desire in dialogue with Agathon. He anticipates a possible objection to their agreement that eros is the desire for what one lacks by stating that it is possible for a person who is healthy, wealthy, or strong to desire these same things even though he possesses them "at the moment" (200b-c). With the mention of the "moment," Socrates has introduced *time* into the discussion of eros. He points out that humans who *presently* possess something that they have desired may also desire to possess this something in the future, and even perpetually through time, or *immortally*. Immortality is manifest in human experience through our desire perpetually to possess our lovable possessions. Since only gods possess desirable things immortally, the human desire for the immortal possession of good things is the desire to be

like a god. Socrates associates this yearning for immortality with the desire for perpetual health, wealth, and strength--in other words, for good things that are very vulnerable to the ravishes of time and that most assuredly pass away. This suggests that our immortal longings are perhaps better fulfilled elsewhere. Be that as it may, Socrates' main point is that by longing for immortality we are longing for something that we are not, which is to say once again that we long for something other, something heterogeneous, something not our own.

### iii) Beauty as the Measure of the Good

In Agathon's eulogy to Eros, moderation, courage, justice and order are said to belong to both the gods and humans through Eros. Eros introduces beauty into the world, and the desire for beauty is what gives birth to every good thing. Beauty is the origin and measure of the good. This understanding is assumed by Socrates when he asks Agathon, towards the end of their conversation, "Are the good things beautiful as well in your opinion?" (201c). Of course, this is Agathon's opinion. However, it is not necessarily the case that all good things are beautiful. Diotima subsequently points out that humans are willing to undergo ugly and deformative operations because they are good. Such operations may not be beautiful, but they may be good. There are numerous instances in life of things that are ugly, but good:

Socrates himself is an example.

Instead of immediately proclaiming to Agathon that the good must be the measure of beauty, Socrates temporarily accepts Agathon's opinion that the good things are necessarily beautiful. This leads Socrates to conclude that since Eros "is in need of beautiful things, and the good things are fair, he would be in need of the good things as well" (201c). Agathon grudgingly agrees. Immediately after this Socrates ends his dialogue with Agathon and begins his eulogy proper. The debate between Agathon and Socrates over the sovereignty of beauty does not reach its proper conclusion until well into Socrates' recollection of his discussions with Diotima (204c ff.).

The argument is revived when Socrates recalls asking Diotima what "use" Eros is for human beings. Diotima proceeds to answer by asking Socrates, "He who loves beautiful things loves--what does he love?" Socrates responds, "That they be his." The point Socrates makes with this answer is that eros wants to possess the beauty that he lacks. Diotima, however, seems unsatisfied with this answer and says that it leads to her next question, "What will he have who gets the beautiful things?" Socrates is unable to respond. Diotima then changes her query from beauty to the good and asks what a human desires when he desires good things. Once again, Socrates responds by saying, "That they be his." Diotima asks Socrates what a person has when he possesses good things. This time

Socrates is able to answer "he will be happy." With this answer, Socrates makes clear that happiness is what all humans seek. As Diotima points out, there is no need to ask for what further consequences human beings want to be happy. Happiness is not instrumental; nor does not have a "use" for some further end. It is a useless end in itself that all other useful human activities strive to achieve.<sup>3</sup> There is nothing abstract or dogmatic about this assertion; it is a primary and universal characteristic of lived human experience. The youthful Socrates was unable to associate happiness with the possession of beautiful things, but he was immediately able to associate happiness with the possession of good things. With this association the sovereignty of the good is established. The good, not the beautiful, is the measure of happiness. If we are to be happy with the possession of beautiful things, it is only insofar as these beautiful things are good. Hence, the good becomes the measure of beauty and happiness. Agathon's hierarchy is reversed (204c-e).

#### iv) The Polymorphous Character of Eros

Diotima and Socrates agree that the eros for the perpetual possession of good things is "common to all human beings"; this is how all humans attempt to find happiness (206a). But if this is a universal characteristic of human nature, then there are certainly many ways that humans pursue

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<sup>3</sup>See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a15 ff.



happiness. Although each way has its own object of desire, all of them, according to Diotima, are erotic because they all ultimately seek the good:

we detach from eros a certain kind of eros and give it the name eros, imposing upon it the name of the whole; while in other cases we employ several different names. (205b)

Diotima refers specifically to "money-making," "gymnastics" and "philosophy" as erotic activities, since each desires the immortal possession of something good (205d).

Two of these three activities had been mentioned before by Socrates in his discussion with Agathon (200b-d). He had mentioned how we want perpetually to possess "wealth," which is the object of money-making, and "health" and "strength," which are sought in gymnastics. We had noticed the mortal character of these objects, even though they were mentioned in association with immortality. Furthermore, though it is not explicitly stated by Socrates, it may be possible to possess good things such as health and wealth and still not be happy, since the happiness that they provide is only partial and contingent. This raises the question of whether there are other good objects that better satisfy our longing for immortality and happiness. Socrates did not mention "philosophy" in his initial conversation with Agathon, as Diotima does later. This pursuit may be able to go further than the other pursuits mentioned.

The difficulty of determining which pursuit best satisfies our erotic longing, especially given the countless

ways in which people pursue happiness, reveals an aporia in Diotima's account. It might be possible for a person to pursue something bad in the opinion that it is good; in other words, the bad might be done for the sake of the good. Since eros is so incredibly polymorphous, Diotima must go further in her account in order to show which erotic pursuits *actually* lead us to what we truly desire--that is, immortality, happiness, and the good.

#### DIOTIMA'S EROTIC MYTH

Our discussion to this point has focused on the parts of Socrates' speech that attempt to illuminate the most basic and common characteristics of the human *experience* of eros. We now shift from experience to myth. Quite simply, myth is the attempt, through symbols, to provide an account of the *ground*, or the *origin* of our experience of reality.<sup>4</sup> It endeavours to tell how something came to be. It is always necessary to resort to myth when describing origins simply because we do not have immediate experience of the origins we seek to know. It is through myth that the priestess Diotima attempts to explain to the youthful Socrates the ultimate ground of his experience of eros.

Diotima first informs Socrates that Eros cannot be a god since a god already possesses the good and the beautiful things that Eros desires. However, Diotima also asserts that

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<sup>4</sup>See Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 5-8.

Eros is not a mortal. He is, rather, in-between the mortal and the immortal. Diotima calls such a being "*daemonic*." Daemons mediate between humans and gods, relaying the "requests and sacrifices" from human beings to the gods, and communicating "the orders and exchanges-for-sacrifices" from the gods to human beings. They bind the whole together. Furthermore, "daemons are of many and of all kinds; and one of them is Eros." It is after this discussion of daemons that Diotima begins her myth about the origins of Eros. In her myth, Eros originates "between" a mother and a father (202c-203a).

According to Diotima, Eros was conceived at a party held by the pre-Olympian gods in honour of the birth of Aphrodite. She provides no details about the genesis of Aphrodite. As we saw in Hesiod, Aphrodite was the consequence of the ugly occurrence of patricide and castration. None of this ugliness is recounted by Diotima. She skips immediately to the story of the generation of the daemonic Eros. According to Diotima, one of the gods present at the party was Poros, meaning Resource. Resource is the son of Metis, or Intelligence. The party is crashed by Penia, or Poverty, who stands by the door to beg for something. Resource becomes very drunk on nectar, and "heavy of head" goes into the garden of Zeus to sleep. At this point the following occurs:

Penia [Poverty], who because of her own lack of resources was plotting to have a child made out of Poros [Resource], reclined beside him and conceived Eros. It is for this reason that Eros has been the

attendant and servant of Aphrodite, as he was conceived on her birthday; for he is by nature a lover in regard to the beautiful, and Aphrodite is beautiful. (203b-d)

Diotima ironically makes the male Resource the passive partner. The whole episode seems to be a rape perpetrated by the cunning and aggressive Poverty upon the drunk and helpless Resource. But Diotima once again keeps her account beautiful by never referring to Poverty as a rapist. Furthermore, like Agathon, she refers to Eros as the lover of the beautiful. Socrates never disagreed with Agathon on this point--he referred to it as "reasonable" (201a). But in Diotima's myth, the look of Eros himself is somewhat less than beautiful. Like his mother, he is not "tender and beautiful," but rather "tough, squalid, shoeless, and homeless," sleeping on the filthy ground and in doorways. This is because Eros partakes of the nature of Poverty, who is "always dwelling in neediness." Like his father, however, Eros "plots to trap the beautiful and the good, and is courageous, stout, and keen, a skilled hunter, always weaving devices, desirous of practical wisdom and inventive, philosophizing through all his life, a skilled magician, druggist, sophist." Given this combination of Poverty and Resourcefulness, Diotima says:

[Eros] is neither immortal nor mortal; but sometimes on the same day he flourishes and lives, whenever he has resources; and sometimes he dies, but gets to live again through the nature of his father. And as that which is supplied to him is always gradually flowing out, Eros is never either without resources nor wealthy, but is in between wisdom and lack of understanding. For here is the way it is: No one of the gods philosophizes and

desires to become wise--for he *is* so--nor if there is anyone else who is wise, does he philosophize. (203c-204a)

As in Bataille's account, Eros squanders his resources. But unlike Bataille's account, the daemonic Eros of Diotima's myth is *also* resourceful, accumulating the very abundance, the same superfluity that he eventually spends. Furthermore, Diotima refers to Eros as a philosopher in-between wisdom and ignorance. As Poverty lacks Resource, and so desires it, so the philosopher lacks wisdom, or knowledge of the whole, and so desires it. In this way the philosopher is erotic. However, predicating resourcefulness and philosophy to Eros is anathema to Bataille. So too would be the most important feature of Diotima's myth: her understanding of eternity.

Diotima's myth discusses what I will refer to as the *incompleteness of immortality*. We long for immortality because we are incomplete, and it would appear that immortality makes us complete; however, in the myth there is very clearly an incompleteness about immortality. The immortal things themselves are in need. Most immediately there is an *apparently* immortal goddess named Poverty who is always in need. The status of Poverty is very unclear, especially since her son Eros is in-between the mortal and immortal (202d) because he "partakes" of both parents. Moreover, Eros, "in accordance with his father," (203d) who definitely is a god (see 203b) "plots to trap the beautiful and the good," and is "a skilled hunter, always weaving

devices" (203d). If these attributes describe the immortal Resource, then Poverty also possesses them: she proved herself to be a most skilful hunter and device weaver when she successfully plotted "to have a child made out of Poros [Resource]" (203b). Thus, a link between poverty or incompleteness and immortality is established. The incompleteness of immortality is also obvious when we reconsider that the immortal god Resource passes on to his son the desire for the beautiful, the good, and wisdom. Eros, like his father, is "philosophizing through all his life" (203d). But Diotima has said that gods do not pursue the good and the beautiful since they already possess these things (202c-d); nor can any god be a philosopher since all gods already have wisdom (204a). There seems to be a paradox.

The lack within immortality is also apparent if we look at the behaviour of Resource and Poverty at the party. Resource, for all of his cunning and practical intelligence, displays an obvious lack of stoutness and practical wisdom in the drunkenness that left him vulnerable to be raped by Poverty. The very need for a god to get drunk suggests there is something incomplete about immortality, since through drinking one seeks momentarily to lose oneself. Paradoxically, Resource temporarily squanders himself. There is the further paradox of Resource and Poverty having erotic generative intercourse before the birth of Eros. Such intercourse suggests an incompleteness, and since Resource and

Poverty felt the need to partake in erotic activity, this suggests that they are incomplete.

Immortality taken by itself may have the same difficulties as wholeness taken by itself. It may even be synonymous with "wholeness." Regardless of which term we use, neither signifies a reality that is complete. As we saw in Diotima's critique of Aristophanes, wholeness is incomplete without the presence of the good. Later on, Diotima speaks of honour-seeking human beings who want to set up their own "*immortal fame for eternity*" (208c, my italics). This is a significant remark. In the same way that the good is the measure of wholeness, so too the eternal is the measure of the immortal. The immortal and the eternal must be differentiated: the immortal is that which has being and persists unchanging *through* time; the eternal transcends time. In the *Republic*, we find that the eternal and the good are the same. Socrates speaks of the good that is the cause of "existence and being"--of the good that "isn't being but is still *beyond being*, exceeding it in dignity and power."<sup>5</sup> The good that is the ground of being and transcends all being is beyond not only mortal being that comes to be and passes away, but also immortal being that has a beginning and yet persists forever. Only that which is eternal is beyond being, without a beginning or an end.

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<sup>5</sup>*Republic*, 509b. All translations from the *Republic* are taken from *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed., trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

Socrates' remarks in the *Republic* are somewhat beyond the teaching of the *Symposium*. Diotima speaks of the good, but she does not speak of the good beyond being. However, the eternity of the good is certainly suggested by the obvious incompleteness of immortal things in the myth. And as we shall see, there will be another cryptic mention of the eternal at the very height of her account.

#### THE PERFECT REVELATIONS

The incompleteness of immortality does not change the fact that all humans, and indeed all mortal things, long for immortality. Diotima says, "Mortal nature is capable of immortality only in this way, the way of generation, because it is always leaving another behind to replace the old" (207d). Thus, it is through pregnancy and giving birth that animals actively strive for immortality. Giving birth does not preserve the individual animal, but it does preserve the species. Humans and the "beasts" share physical generation in common. However, humans also actively seek *individual* immortality through fame. This fame is sought through giving birth to children of the soul, such as "speeches" (209b-c), poetry, "laws" (209d), and "beautiful deeds" (209e)--children that outlast the parent, yet also serve as a perennial reminder of the individuals who produced them. Societal recognition of these children gives the parents fame and individual remembrance after they die, providing them with an



ephemeral type of personal immortality. Sanctuaries and monuments are built in honour of great deeds and great artists to remind future generations of the individual significance of certain people (209e). Diotima says, in regards to the poets:

if one looks at Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets, one envies them: 'what offspring of themselves they have left behind! For as these offspring are in their own right immortal, they supply the poets with immortal fame and memory. (209d)

But unlike the eternal, "immortal fame" is based upon many contingencies that make it fragile and mortal. The sanctuaries fade, the libraries within which the great poems are stored burn down, and whole societies are destroyed. Remembrance fades with each progressive generation. If the species should ever die out it would be as if these great and beautiful "children of the soul," and the humans who produced them, had never existed. In the final section of Diotima's speech, the active erotic pursuit of immortality is replaced by an erotic passivity that perceives true immortality, or eternity.

Diotima says that the young Socrates "might be initiated" into the active pursuit of immortality, but she doubts whether he will be able to be initiated into what she refers to as "the perfect revelations" (210a). The active pursuit concerns the beastly erotics of sexual generation, and the erotics of recognition within human societies. With the perfect revelations, Diotima takes an "initiate" outside the active realm and into the "heterogeneous" territory that Aristophanes

feared. For Aristophanes this would be hubris. Diotima will be daring; she must be if she hopes to escape from the historical relativity of virtue that results when the city and its opinions become the measure of virtue. She recognizes as does Aristophanes that virtue is cultivated in the city. However, for her the ground of true virtue is outside of the opinions within city. The erotic initiate of the perfect revelations gets a glimpse of this ground.

Diotima gives an account of an ascent that leads to the "perfect end" of eroticism, which she describes as the "correct practice of pederasty" (211b-c). In the ascent the initiate is led by a "guide." "If the guide is guiding correctly" the initiate will first be made to love one beautiful body and generate beautiful speeches. Physical beauty is what initially gives birth to "children of the soul," such as beautiful speeches. The initiate then comes to see that there are many instances of beautiful bodies, causing him to realize that "he must be a lover of all beautiful bodies and in contempt slacken this [erotic] intensity for only one body in the belief that it is petty." Diotima provides no reason why this progression is necessary. Her purpose, however, is to emphasize how beauty manifests itself throughout many particulars. Our desire for particular beautiful things must be directed toward a more general beauty if we are to reach the highest end of our desire (210a-b).

The next step of the ascent is to move from the love of

all beautiful bodies to the belief that "the beauty in souls is more honourable than that in the body." Hence, the initiate must come to love a "decent" soul, even if such a soul is contained in a body with "only a slight youthful charm." Once again, Diotima provides no necessary reason why one must move from the love of general physical beauty to the love of one decent soul. However, her purpose in moving from the particular to the general, and from the mortal to the immortal, becomes clearer when she explains what the love of a decent soul engenders. At this point the initiate becomes the "correct pederast" who, through "speeches" that "will make the young better," impregnates the soul of a younger beloved and causes him to give birth to beautiful "pursuits and laws." This is not done for entirely practical reasons. The initiate causes his beloved to give birth to beautiful pursuits and laws in order that he may "behold" them, and see how the beauty of the body "is something trivial." From pursuits and laws, the initiate impregnates his beloved with the sciences. The passive character of the enterprise is emphasized:

[The lover] must lead [the beloved] on to the sciences, so that he [the lover] may see the beauty of sciences, and in looking at the beautiful, which is now so vast, no longer be content like a lackey with the beauty in one, of a boy, of some human being, or of one practice, nor be a sorry sort of slave and petty calculator; but with a permanent turn to the vast open sea of the beautiful, behold it and give birth -- in ungrudging philosophy--to many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts.

The lover himself, by beholding the beauty born of the

beloved, also becomes impregnated and gives birth (210b-d).

The account has moved beyond the particular loyalties of politics into more general scientific studies of human and cosmic realities. Science is the search for truth regarding the nature of the various realms of being. It arrives at general understandings through the observation of various particulars.<sup>6</sup> Such reflection is only possible within a society where there is the leisure to reflect. However, through the general study of the beautiful one transcends one's particular society. Aristophanes feared that such a shift could lead to the loss of virtue, since humans might be consumed with passion to know the whole like gods instead of cultivating their civic responsibility. Diotima, however, keeps going further.

The initiate, once "strengthened and increased" through his generation and beholding of science, "may discern a certain single philosophical science" (210d). The general beauties revealed through science in each individual realm of being come to intermingle. The philosopher recognizes the interconnectedness of the various realms of being, and how the beauty of each is related, causing him to see the highest sort of beauty. Through "beholding successively and correctly the beautiful things," the initiate arrives at the "perfect end of erotics," where he "shall suddenly glimpse something wonderfully beautiful in its nature--that very thing ... for

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<sup>6</sup>See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 4-5 and ff.

whose sake alone all the prior labours were undertaken" (210e-211a). It is in beholding this beauty that Diotima says "it is worth living" (211d). Beholding this beauty is the true end of all actions, and in this state human beings are truly happy. Diotima provides an extensive account of this most wondrous beauty:

[It] is something that is, first of all, 'always being and neither coming to be nor perishing, nor increasing nor passing away; and secondly, 'not beautiful in one respect and ugly in another, 'nor at one time so, and at another time not--either with respect to the beautiful or the ugly--nor here beautiful and there ugly, as being beautiful to some and ugly to others; not in turn will the beautiful be imagined by him as a kind of face or hands or anything else in which body shares, nor as any speech nor any science, and not as being somewhere in something else (for example, in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else) but as it is alone by itself and with itself, always being of a single form.

(211a-b)

It is this divine beauty that all other beautiful things "share in." All particular manifestations of beauty are an impermanent reflection of this permanent beauty.

Diotima's description of the beautiful itself initially appears to be an instance of what Bataille calls a "negative theology." For the most part, Diotima says what this beauty *is not*, beginning each predication with a "not" or a "nor," ruling out any possible confusion of this beauty with something physically or psychically mortal. In Bataille's language, she negates the world of common experience in her speech. However, she begins and ends this description with a positive theology; she says that "first of all" this divine

beauty is "always being," and she concludes by saying that it is always by itself and with itself. Her negative theology is placed in between two positive accounts. Furthermore, the perception of divine beauty is not attained through an active negation of material and spiritual particularities, but rather through the passive "beholding" of particular beautiful things. It is not through a radical denial of things, but through a contemplative affirmation of the beauty in particulars that one can catch a momentary, instantaneous, and "sudden" vision of the divine.

In other forms of eroticism the subject may lose himself in a particular mortal object. Such a squandering does not lead to true immortality but rather to death. Diotima describes such squandering at the height of her account when refers to those who are "thunderstruck" by "beautiful boys and youths," and who "neither eat nor drink" when they behold their particular beloved (211d). To lose oneself entirely in the love of a particular body may cause the malnourishment which leads to death. Diotima does not deny the reality of the beauty of particular bodies, but the true immortality that eros desires is not to be found in them.

Diotima continues her account of the positive and generative nature of the highest eros when she asks Socrates what he "believe[s] happens to one, if he gets to see the beautiful itself." She asks if he "believe[s] ... that life would prove to be a sorry sort of thing, when a human being

gazes in the direction of the beautiful and beholds it with the instrument with which he must and is together with it." Diotima herself makes clear with her next sentence that such a belief would be misguided; the vision of the beautiful does not lead to an apathy, a depressed affectation, or an active negation of "life." Socrates must not "believe" this, but must "realize" the following:

only here, in seeing in the way the beautiful is seeable, will he get to engender not phantom images of virtue--because he does not lay hold of a phantom--but true, because he lays hold of the true; and that once he has given birth to and cherished true virtue, it lies within him to become dear to god and, if it is possible for any human being, to become immortal as well.

At the end of her speech, Diotima refers to virtue. The sight of immortal beauty does not lead to an escape from life, or a negation of virtue, but rather impregnates the beholder with true virtue, allowing him to give birth to virtue in others. The vision of immortality that is outside of politics is the ground upon which the possibility of true virtue within the regime depends. Without a glimpse of true immortality, without an experienced tension towards divine reality, only "seeming" virtue can manifest itself in politics. To attain true virtue is to live as much a humanly possible in tension towards the divine reality that is heterogeneous to the city, but of which the city partakes. To deny this reality and to attempt to make oneself a god in ultimately mortal ways is impious hubris (211d-212a).

Earlier in her account Diotima claimed: "it is *necessary*

to desire immortality with good, provided eros is of the good's always being one's own" (207a). At the end of her account, Diotima does not speak explicitly of the good, but she does speak of what is truly immortal, and it is "necessary" that the truly immortal is good. Diotima's several indications of the incompleteness of immortality revealed that only the eternal good is the measure of true immortality. Similarly, true virtue can only be cultivated in the presence of the good. To speak of the good beyond being, as Socrates does in the *Republic*, is to go beyond what Diotima says even at the end of her account. However, she does give a cryptic reference to "god," to whom the initiate becomes "dear" after he has "given birth to and cherished true virtue" (212a). Immortality, "if it is possible" for humans, is only possible in this way--through the recognition of personal virtue by "god." Diotima does not say "a god," nor does she refer to beauty as a god. There seems to be something much more ultimate about the god she mentions at the end of her speech; and human immortality is dependant upon the love of this god. A similar account is given in the *Laws*, when the Athenian Stranger says that in a properly ordered regime, "the god would be the measure of all things in the highest degree, and far more than some 'human being.'"<sup>7</sup> Immediately after this statement, the Stranger speaks in a way that recalls the

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<sup>7</sup>*Laws*, 716c. All translations from the *Laws* are taken from *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).



language of Diotima:

He who is to *become dear* to such a being must necessarily do all in his power to become like him; and according to this argument the moderate man among us is *dear to god*, because similar, while the man who is not moderate is dissimilar and different and unjust.<sup>8</sup>

In Diotima's argument, moderation is acquired through the perception of divine beauty, which, by her own description, is similar to itself and never different. The sight of such order produces a similar order in the human soul.

We are left with a mystery. If we become most like the god through the generation of virtue, and if this virtue makes us "dear" to the god, this means that even the god beyond all being is capable of love. However, love is an experience and an expression of incompleteness. Diotima and the Athenian Stranger both leave us with the mystery of an eternal god upon whom everything depends, who is the measure and origin of all being including immortal being, and who loves virtuous human beings--the mystery of the friendship of God.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 716c-d.

## CONCLUSION: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN PLATO AND BATAILLE

### THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF THE DIVINE

In Socrates' account of eros, the divine becomes luminous to human consciousness: the beauty in things leads one to the passive perception of true immortality. In Bataille's account, on the other hand, the divine is radically absent. In the absence of the divine one's eros is led ultimately to active negation and death. Though Bataille might speak of "divine love" as a sovereign form of existence, in the end such an eros becomes servile because it submits itself to a non-reality; for Bataille, the divine has no reality, except as a comforting, but misleading human creation. The illusion of the divine, though it may lead to a secular continuity, nevertheless limits the sovereign experience. Humans must reclaim the sovereignty that they have transferred to imaginary gods, and they must assert this sovereignty radically through a sadistic negation of everything. Such a sovereignty may be "impossible" to attain in the fullest extent, but it is the *telos* towards which we must strive, according to Bataille.

At times, Bataille writes about the human condition lucidly, but the results of his account are horrifying. Our repugnance is either a sign that our "servile" mentality will not accept a full, sovereign responsibility, or a sign that Bataille's account is at odds with what humans really are and

what they truly desire. Diotima argues for the later: 'a wholeness without the good is not what humans truly yearn for. If her account is correct, that means the divine is the *truest* reality, not an illusion made to beautify the ugliness of base human longings. We will criticize Bataille's account from Diotima's understanding. We will attempt to demonstrate that divinity is not a human construction that finds its origin in an anxious human consciousness, but rather a reality that presents itself to human perception.

Such a demonstration is not a matter of asking the question, "Does God exist?" and then attempting to "prove" that he does through a set of logical propositions. The "god," the "eternal," or the "good beyond being" discussed by Plato does not exist as an object in space and time. We cannot "prove" that God exists in the same way that we can prove the existence of apples or cars. The God beyond being is not an object of human consciousness because he does not possess "being" or "thing-hood" in the same sense that a particular existent object has being. This is made clear by Eric Voegelin:

If you have the term *existence* in these three senses - if there is existence of an object in time and space, if there is existence in the sense of a consciousness of human existence in tension towards the Divine ground, and if there is the contingent existence of things in relation to God, ... what about the Divine ground himself? I cannot do anything but say that the Divine ground is then a sort of non-existent reality, a *reality* but not in the mode of being of existence of an object in the spatio-temporal world (which nobody would insist on

anyway).<sup>1</sup>

If one insists that this means God does not "exist," Voegelin replies "you don't have to prove his existence because you never said he existed. You have him in consciousness *already present, already there*."<sup>2</sup> Voegelin is claiming that there "exists" in the human soul a consciousness of our existence in tension towards the divine ground. This is another way of saying that we erotically desire God; Voegelin's understanding is thus similar to Diotima's.

Bataille would certainly not disagree that a desire for divine reality exists in human consciousness, but he would argue that the "reality" of the divine ground that we think we desire is illusory--this "reality" is not "real" outside of human consciousness. The only reality that humans "know" is "objective reality," the "world of things on which distinct reality is founded" (TR, 45), or the reality "of a profane world, of a world of things and bodies" (TR, 37). In such a world, the gods "are simply mythical spirits, without any substratum of reality" (TR, 37). Voegelin claims, on the contrary, that the reality of the divine is present in the cosmos even before the existence of human consciousness, and that it becomes present to human consciousness through our *interaction and relation with the world*. Thus, it is not through proving the existence of God, as if god were a

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<sup>1</sup> *Conversations With Eric Voegelin*, ed. R. Eric O'Connor (Montreal: Thomas More Institute, 1980), 51-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

"thing," that we can demonstrate the reality of the divine, but rather through an account of how we *experience* the divine in our relation to the world that the *reality* of the divine can be illustrated. Diotima provides one such an account, and it is in the light of her account that we will reassess Bataille.

#### A RECONSIDERATION OF THE "SACRED" AND THE "PROFANE"

##### i) The "Sacred" and "Profane" in Diotima and Bataille

When Socrates asks "what kind of power" the daemon Eros possesses, Diotima responds:

Interpreting and ferrying to gods things from human beings and to human beings from gods: the requests and sacrifices of human beings, the orders and exchanges-for-sacrifices of gods; for it is in the middle of both and fills up the interval so that the whole itself has been bound together by it. Through this proceeds all divination and the art of the priests who deal with sacrifices, initiatory rituals, incantations and every kind of soothsaying and magic. A god does not mingle with a human being; but through this occurs the whole intercourse and conversation of gods with human beings while they are awake and asleep. And he who is wise in things like this is a daemonic man; but he who is wise in anything else concerning either arts or handicrafts is vulgar and low. These daemons are many and of all kinds; and one of them is Eros. (202e-203a)

It is through their "daemonic" openness that humans are able to have "intercourse" with the gods. Such intercourse occurs through rituals and sacrifices, and also through dreams. The universal manifestation in human societies of ritual and sacrifice--to say nothing of dreams--is for Diotima a

demonstration of the human desire for immortality. Towards the end of the above passage she makes a distinction between two orientations towards reality that have come to be called the "sacred" and the "profane." In regards to the "sacred," she refers to the "daemonic man" who intermingles with immortality through a daemonic mediation she associates with sacrifice and ritual. In contrast, those who are wise in "either arts or handicrafts" are "vulgar and low"; this seems to indicate the profane realm. As we shall see, the distinction between sacred and profane is not as absolute for Diotima as it is for Bataille, but it does suggest a similar sort of differentiation of human activities.

For Bataille, as for Diotima, the profane world is the realm of *work* where human beings use tools and develop "arts" and "handicrafts." Through the use of tools, humans negate the natural given and create a new and distinctly human world. The human desire for freedom from chaotic and violent nature creates new and seemingly unlimited possibilities. However, in Bataille's account, human's become enslaved to the limitations imposed on them by the taboos of the profane world. If the profane world is vulgar and low for Diotima, it is "servile" for Bataille. Regardless of how it is named, Bataille and Diotima agree that the profane world is unsatisfactory in itself.

It is in the sacred world that the human desire for something else becomes manifest, beginning with the rituals

and sacrifices of the archaic humanity. For Diotima, these sacred rituals express a longing for immortality. For Bataille, they express a longing for death. He writes, "sacredness is the revelation of continuity" (*E*, 22). Do the words "immortality" and "continuity" signify the same reality? They seem to be similar in meaning, but they can be differentiated if we take a close look at the different accounts provided by Plato and Bataille of humanity's given experience of the world. Both Plato and Bataille give an account of the *origin of the sacred* in human consciousness. Through comparing them, the deficiencies in Bataille's understanding will become apparent.

In Bataille's account, the primary experience that humans have of reality is of its *essential* violence. Bataille writes, "Nature herself is violent" (*E*, 40). Nature *demand*s abundance from living creatures in order that it may destroy them. Nature is experienced by humans "as a squandering of living energy and an orgy of annihilation" that is "opposed to the urge to live characteristic of every living creature" (*E*, 61). In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille writes of the *particular* living creature who is concerned only with the continued existence of itself and its species. It can partially secure its existence through abundance, or by attending to what Bataille calls "necessity." However, if the *particular* movement is toward the continuance of life, the *general* movement of nature is towards death. Particular beings create

a necessary abundance so that nature can enjoy the "luxury" of destroying it. This is the basic law of Bataille's "general economy." The direction of the general movement is always towards *luxurious squander*--there is "[t]he general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter" (AS 1, 23, my italics). This leads Bataille to conclude: "*it is not necessity but its contrary, 'luxury,' that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems*" (AS 1, 12). It is a problem for human beings because their primary experience of this *luxurious squander* leads to a revolt against it; humans experience an anxiety in the face of squander when they become conscious that it will consume them personally. In other words, unlike other animals, they become conscious of death. Their revolt leads to the creation of the profane world whose purpose is to accumulate. However:

The general movement ... impels [man], and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption. (AS 1, 23)

The realm of useless consumption is the realm of the sacred. And it is through useless consumption or "transgression" that human beings reacquaint themselves with the realm of violence. Although they had alienated themselves from it in their profane revolt, they now imitate and partake of it in their sacred rituals.

One of the most basic forms of sacred reacquaintance with violence is the animal sacrifice. All animals, according to



Bataille, are perceived by archaic humanity as being "helpless": they are permanently under the "sway" of "the excessive domination of death and reproductive activity (of violence, that is)" (E, 83). Humans eventually become envious of the animal's "intimacy" with natural violence--an intimacy not restricted by taboos. Bataille writes, "In his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is *in search of a lost intimacy*" (AS 1, 57). For such a man, the sacrificial animal is "divine" due to its close proximity to squander, to violence, to death. Thus, it is slaughtered:

The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the sacramental element. This sacramental element is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite....Only a spectacular killing carried out as the solemn and collective nature of religion dictates has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice. (E, 82)

Such sacred rituals are a microcosm of the general movement of nature towards chaos, violence, destruction, expenditure, and ultimately death. For Bataille, the experience of order, permanence, and *immortality* is not a part of man's primary experience of the cosmos. Human beings are conscious of the movement of nature as primordially destructive and chaotic; it behaves in a "ridiculous way" since it insists upon bringing disorder and death to the accumulative striving of all living beings (E, 232). Order is a *distinctly human creation* that negates the disorder of the natural world; and consciousness of immortality only arises through the profane work by which

we attempt to immortalize ourselves in opposition to the mortality that the general economy demands. The attempt, however, is futile, since death is the telos of the world. Sacred festivals are a reacquaintance with this cosmic movement towards death.

Strangely absent from Bataille's understanding of early man's relation with the natural world is any account of humanity's consciousness of the *heavens*. This is a crucial absence, since archeological evidence demonstrates that for archaic man the sun, the moon, and the stars were among the first, if not *the* first divinities.<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade writes, "What is quite beyond doubt is that there is an almost universal belief in a celestial divine being."<sup>4</sup> The general movement of the heavens played a central role in archaic man's mythology and sacred festivals. The stars, however, are absent in Bataille's account of the sacred. In two of his early pieces, "The Solar Anus" and "Rotten Sun," Bataille does briefly mention to the heavens (*VE* 5-9, 57-8), but to no consequence. In the former, he speaks only of how "terrestrial life moves to the rhythm" of the rotation of the stars (*VE*, 7). Nowhere in his accounts of the consciousness of early man in *The Accursed Share* or in *Erotism* does he speak

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<sup>3</sup>See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: New American Library, 1958), 38 ff. In the book Eliade gives a catalogue and account of divine cosmic gods in civilizations around the world (see 41-185) as well as providing extensive bibliographies of the anthropological studies done on the impact of the heavens on archaic consciousness. See 112-123, 152-3, 186-7.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

explicitly of the heavens.<sup>5</sup> The absence of the heavens in Bataille's account proves to be very significant in our evaluation of his understanding of the "sacred," especially when compared to Plato's cosmology.

## ii) The Perception of the Divine in the Heavens

In Plato's *Laws*, it is the awareness and wonder of the stars that first makes man aware of divine order. The Athenian Stranger says there are "two things that lead to belief concerning the gods."<sup>6</sup> One of these is "the orderly motion of stars ... which intelligence is master of, having arranged the whole in an order. For no human being who has looked at these things in a way that is not low and amateurish has ever been by nature ... atheistic." The same understanding is evident in Martin Buber's psychological account of how archaic man first became conscious of the heavens. I quote the following passage in full:

The elementary, spirit-awakening impressions and stimulations of the "natural man" are derived from relational processes--the living sense of a confrontation--and from relational states--living with one who confronts him. About the moon which he sees every night he does not think much until it approaches him bodily, in his sleep or even while he is awake, and casts a spell over him with its gestures, or, touching him, does something wicked or sweet to him. What he retains is not the visual notion of the migratory disk of light nor that of a

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<sup>5</sup>He only gives a cursory mention in *Theory of Religion* of divine "[m]en, animals, plants, heavenly bodies, meteors" (TR, 34). Furthermore, Bataille's extended account of nature in the first volume of *The Accursed Share* remains restricted to the "terrestrial sphere," or "to be exact, the biosphere" (AS 1, 29).

<sup>6</sup>966d ff.

demonic being that somehow belongs to it, but at first only an image of the moon's action that surges through his body as a motor stimulus; and the personal image of an active moon crystallizes only very gradually. Only then *is the memory of that which was unconsciously absorbed every night kindled into the notion of an agent behind this action.*<sup>7</sup>

This vivid description makes clear that even at the earliest moments of human history, human consciousness became aware of a *natural order*, one which it did not create but to which it was related. The consciousness of the persistence of this order, of the seemingly undying regularity and permanence of the cosmic cycles is how human beings became conscious of immortality. The heavens appear to exist in perpetual, undying motion.

Buber's account is supported by Eliade:

The phrase "contemplating the vault of heaven" really means something when it is applied to primitive man, receptive to the miracles of every day to an extent we find hard to imagine. Such contemplation is the same as a revelation. The sky shows itself as it really is: infinite, transcendent. The vault of heaven is, more than anything else, "something quite apart" from the tiny thing that is man and his span of life. The symbolism of its transcendence derives from the simple realization of its infinite height.

Thus:

even before any religious values have been set upon the sky it reveals its transcendence. The sky "symbolizes" transcendence, power and changelessness simply by being there. It exists because it is high, infinite, immovable powerful.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 70-1, my italics.

<sup>8</sup> *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 38-9.

As Eliade makes clear, the apparent immortal order came to be contrasted in consciousness with the coming-to-be and the passing-away of living things, including man with his short "span of life." Living things come and go, but the cosmic cycles within which they are contained persist. This is, quite simply, the first and most basic conscious experience that humans have of an immortality in contrast to given mortality.

Similarly, the human social order, which through work tries to delay death, did not arise for no good reason as Bataille claims; it is an image, or microcosm of the natural order of the cosmos. To this day, the fact that we are awake during the day and sleep during the night, that we celebrate annual festivals during the seasons, that we measure time by the measure of heavenly bodies, and that we may even superstitiously cling to astrology for advice, are all examples of how we order our lives in imitation of the cosmic order. Bataille gives no account of this: his "order" is created out of a "nothingness" since humans, for him, have no *natural* paradigm of order that serves as a model.

Buber and Eliade present us with an understanding comparable to Diotima's account of sacred rituals and sacrifices as expressions of the human longing for immortality. This understanding of the sacred is given an extended treatment in Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return*. According to Eliade, the ceremonies and rituals of early man,

and the very way in which his society was organized, were microcosms of the cosmic cycles and the activities of the gods who were responsible for these cycles. Eliade refers to these divine things as "celestial archetypes"--the immortal and perennial actions and movements in which humans participate through simulation. Eliade writes:

If we observe the general behaviour of archaic man, we are struck by the following fact: neither the objects of the external world nor human acts, properly speaking, have any autonomous intrinsic value. Objects or acts acquire a value, and in so doing *become real*, because they participate, after one fashion or other, in a reality that transcends them.<sup>9</sup>

This transcendent reality is the immortality that humanity lacks, an immortality that becomes manifest through certain objects in the *natural* world. Thus, like celestial movements, "a rock reveals itself to be sacred because its very existence is a hierophany: incompressible, invulnerable, it is that which man is not. It resists time; its reality is coupled with perennality."<sup>10</sup> Only things that possess this perennality are *real* for archaic man. Thus, his every action is understood in relation to this immortality, and his activities and ceremonies are the ways in which he attempts to make this reality present in his life. Eliade writes, "both the orgy and marriage constituted rituals imitating divine gestures or certain episodes of the sacred drama of the

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<sup>9</sup>In *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 4, *my italics*.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

cosmos--the legitimization of human acts through an extrahuman model."<sup>11</sup>

Archaic man is aware, however, that he disrupts the immortal flow of the cosmos through some of his actions. His agriculture, his hunting, his use of natural objects to make tools, boats, and shelter are all interruptions of the natural state. Man is, as it were, cutting a straight line into the cycle of immortality--the profane line of "history." This line in Eliade is referred to as "history," which is the realm of the profane. Even so, for archaic man, it is the repetition of cosmic events that is *real*, that has *meaning*. History, as Eliade writes following Hegel, is "'free' and always 'new,' it does not repeat itself."<sup>12</sup> It is not like nature "in which things are reproduced *ad infinitum*."<sup>13</sup> Thus, history is not real due to its lack of perennial repetition; for archaic man, history "is the 'unreal' *par excellence*, the uncreated, the nonexistent: the void."<sup>14</sup>

This is in sharp contrast to Bataille who claims that "reality" is only to be found in the profane world, and that nature is the void. By Eliade's account, archaic man has a "terror of losing himself by letting himself be overwhelmed by

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 92.

the meaninglessness of profane existence."<sup>15</sup> With this terror of nothingness, archaic man resists history. Even his profane activities--"hunting, fishing, agriculture; games, conflicts, sexuality"--are given a "definite meaning" because they are understood to be imitations of divine activities.<sup>16</sup> It is in this way that early humanity "legitimizes" its profanity.

For Eliade, the sacrifice is an essential aspect of most archaic societies, not because it is an expression of our longing for death, but because it "exactly reproduces the initial sacrifice revealed by a god *ab origine*, at the beginning of time."<sup>17</sup> Sacrifice is an imitation of the primal divine sacrifice that was responsible for Creation. This understanding arises out of the observation that through death, new life is possible. Such an observation led archaic man to formulate a myth of the first divine sacrifice that was responsible for all life. The sacrifices made by humans reacquaint them with the divine, with immortality or perpetual life. This is described by Eliade in the following passage:

The abolition of profane time and the individual's projection into mythical time do not occur, of course, except at essential periods ... on the occasion of rituals or of important acts....The rest of his life is passed in profane time, which is without meaning: in the state of 'becoming.' Brahmanic texts clearly bring out the *heterogeneity* of these two times, the sacred and the profane, of the modality of the gods, which is coupled with

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 35.



immortality, and the modality of man, which is coupled with death. Insofar as he repeats the archetypal sacrifice, the sacrificer, in full ceremonial action, abandons the profane world of mortals and introduces himself into the divine world of immortals. He himself, indeed, declares this, in the following terms: 'I have attained Heaven, the gods; I am become immortal!' (*Taittiriya Samhita*, I, 7, 9).<sup>18</sup>

Eliade portrays the sacrifice as an encounter with a heterogeneous immortality that is profoundly different from Bataille's heterogeneity of disorder.

It might be objected that there is really no difference between what Bataille identifies as the longing for "continuity" and what Diotima and Eliade have understood as the eros for "immortality." It might be said that the symbol "immortality" is just a way of "beautifying" the ugly truth that what archaic man is doing in his sacred ceremonies is reacquainting himself with the violence, death, and continuity of his origin. Furthermore, Bataille himself might object that the stars are "divine" because they manifest the silent continuity that discontinuous living things lack. However, the divine is "unreal" for Bataille. Anthropological evidence shows that the stars were "real" for archaic man because they made transcendent order manifest to the understanding. According to Eliade, humans experience this transcendent order along with a sense of their own impermanence. Mortality is understood in relation to the perennial repetition of the seasons and the cosmic cycles. The consciousness of this

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 35-6, my italics.

relation gives birth to mythology, ritual, and society. In opposition to Bataille's claims, man does not only experience the violence and squander of the terrestrial sphere; he also perceives permanence and order via the perception of the heavens, the paradigm of both his sacred and profane orders.

### iii) Eros As Both Accumulation and Squander

Diotima and Bataille agree that through eros humans partake of the general movement of the whole. They disagree, however, as to what this general movement is. For Bataille, eroticism is how humans imitate and partake of the *essential* disorder that characterizes the movement of the general economy towards death. It has become apparent from Eliade and Plato, however, that humans actually experience the *general* movement of the cosmos towards perpetuality and life. *Particular* living elements are destroyed, but this squander is what is necessary to ensure the continued existence of living things. Even in squander the tendency is towards order and immortality. Eros, as a microcosmos of the *general* movement, is the tendency towards immortality.

This helps us to understand Diotima's mythological account of how eros participates in both abundance and squander. Diotima's daemonic Eros is the child of Resource and Poverty. Because of the inheritance of his mother, "that which is supplied to him is always gradually flowing out"; but because of his father, Eros is "never ... without resources,"

since he partakes of his father's profane talents such "hunting" and "weaving devices" (203d-e). Hunting and tools create abundance. This is clearly at odds with Bataille's account in which eros was simply understood as squander. Due to Bataille's refusal to acknowledge the reality of the divine, his account of eros is incomplete. Eros is less restricted and more *general* than Bataille understands. It actually exhibits *both* resourceful accumulation and destruction. The untenability of his account becomes clearer if we consider Diotima's discussion of eros in beasts.

If the movement of the universe as a whole is towards perpetuality and immortality, then beasts are properly erotic when they manifest their desire for immortality through sexual intercourse and the care of their young. Beasts are caught up in the general, mysterious movement in the cosmos that demands the continued existence of life. They might squander energy during sexual intercourse, but the children that result cause an "erotic disposition" in the parents "concerning the nurture of what is generated" (207a). They must be resourceful and create an abundance in order to nurture their young and ensure their continued existence. But their erotic disposition toward their young also leads to squander. Diotima mentions how parents are willing to starve themselves, and to fight to the death for the sake of their offspring (207b). Such animals squander themselves in order to preserve the species; in other words, the squander is for the sake of continued life

which the general movement of the cosmos demands.

The same dispositions are found in humans. But whereas animals are caught up instinctually in the general movement of the cosmos towards immortality, humans are conscious of this immortality. This is what distinguishes human eros from animal eros.

### BEAUTY AND THE COSMOS

In Diotima's account, a human comes closest to achieving the immortality he desires by ascending to a vision of the beautiful itself, giving birth to virtue, and being "dear to god." This account of the experience of immortality is perhaps slightly different from the experience of archaic man who reacquaints himself with immortality through the imitation of celestial archetypes. The ascent to beauty, however, is not entirely different from archaic man's consciousness of permanence; Diotima's account of the highest eros is an advancement upon this early experience of divinity. More specifically, her account suggests an *eternal divine reality* that transcends the intracosmic gods.

The lack inherent in the intracosmic gods became apparent in Diotima's myth, and this seemed to indicate the need for something more ultimate. In the *Republic*, Socrates himself points out that the motions of the heavens are not unchanging and immortal, though they may have appeared that way to the earliest men. He speaks to Glaucon of an "astronomer" who

looks "at the movements of the stars."<sup>19</sup> Such an astronomer "will hold that the craftsman of heaven composed it and what's in it as beautifully as such works can be composed," but he will "consider strange" the person who holds that these heavenly movements "are always the same and deviate in no way at all." In one sense, this is a demystification of the archaic cosmic divinities by the scientist astronomer who perceives that heavenly movements are not as unchanging as archaic man thinks. However, Socrates still speaks of the "craftsman" who made the cosmos as beautifully as he could.<sup>20</sup> If the Stranger in the *Laws* claims that the perception of the heavens is what leads to belief in gods, Socrates in the *Republic* shows how even an awareness of the changing character of the cosmos can lead to a more radical theism--the presence in consciousness of an eternal, transcendent, creator god. The Athenian Stranger and Socrates agree that the presence of the heavens is what causes the awareness of divine reality, both intracosmic and eternal.

It is through the perception of immortality, of immanent divinity, that humans enter into the most immediate relation with the transcendent God beyond being. In the *Symposium*, we are introduced to such an immanent divinity--the beautiful itself. By the time Diotima begins to speak of the beautiful itself, she is no longer speaking of the gods in

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<sup>19</sup>7.530a ff.

<sup>20</sup>For a more detailed account of the divine craftsman in Plato see *Timaeus* 29e ff.

anthropomorphic or bodily terms, as she had earlier in her myth. As she says, a person who sees the beautiful itself will no longer "imagine" such a divinity as possessing a "face or hands or anything else in which the body shares" (211a). However, it is through the perception of celestial bodies that we become conscious of beauty. Once again, in the *Republic*, Socrates says to Glaucon that even though the stars fall short of immortality, the "decorations in heaven, since they are embroidered on a visible ceiling, may be believed to be the fairest and most precise" of the things that change.<sup>21</sup> Since the heavens are the fairest, or the most beautiful, of material things that are perceived, Socrates concludes that "the decoration in the heaven must be used as patterns for the sake of learning ... other things." By "other things" Socrates means those things that truly are, that are immortal and unchanging. It is through the perception of the permanence, order, regularity, and beauty of the cosmos that humans come to learn about the true divinities, of which the heavens present an image. In Diotima's account, similarly, before one ascends to the beautiful itself one will "see the beauty of the sciences" in which the beautiful becomes "vast" (210c). Astronomy is one such science.

This understanding of beauty is somewhat different from Bataille's. In his account, beauty is a human creation that results from the effort to negate the violence, or the

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<sup>21</sup> 7.529c ff.

ugliness of the natural world. After this negation, human beings find the sexual organs and the sexual act unbearably repugnant. They are associated with the animality from which humans attempt to escape. For such humans, "[t]he further removed from the animal is their appearance, the more beautiful they are reckoned" (E, 143).

Diotima makes a similar point when she distinguishes beastly eros from human eros. She states that human beings are "incapable of giving birth in ugliness, but only in beauty, for the being together of man and woman is a bringing to birth" (206c). Animals, on the other hand, do not need to perceive beauty to procreate. Bataille would agree with Diotima that humans are only able to procreate in the presence of beauty. He twice quotes a passage from Leonardo da Vinci's Notebooks: "The act of coition and the members employed are so ugly that but for the beauty of the faces, the adornments of their partners and the frantic urge, Nature would lose the human race" (E, 144-45; AS 1, 5). Bataille expands this observation:

Beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled: not for its own sake, but for the joy brought by the certainty of befouling it....The face and its beauty must be profaned, first by uncovering the woman's secret parts, and then by putting the male organ into them. No-one doubts the ugliness of the sexual act....Tastes and customs vary, but that cannot prevent a woman's beauty (her humanity, that is) from making the animal nature of the sexual act obvious and shocking. For a man, there is nothing more depressing than an ugly woman, for then the ugliness of the organs and the sexual act cannot show up in contrast. (E, 144-45)

But this account of beauty, though it might contain certain truths, is as insufficient as it is shocking.

Bataille himself is aware that "this section [on beauty] is incomplete" (*E*, 142). First of all, Bataille only provides an account of female beauty. He writes "Here I am concerned with feminine beauty in particular. There are many gaps in this book; this is only one of them" (*E*, 142). Bataille never speaks in any of his erotic writings of the relation of female eros to male beauty. He only speaks of the female as the beautiful *object* of desire, never as the desiring subject. In other words, he makes the female unerotic; she merely possesses the beauty that the male desires. The male strips, befouls, and penetrates her, destroying her beauty once he possesses it. For Bataille, the "profanation" of beauty is another way we assent to life to the point of death. Beauty is just a sweetener, or a "cheating" (*E*, 146) that allows a man to partake in the "anguish" experienced in the "ugliness of the sexual union" (*E*, 145). This anguish is another intimation of the "final sense" of eroticism--squander, befoulment, and death (*E*, 144). Like most of the males at the *Symposium*, Bataille banishes the female from the discussion, diminishes the relation of eroticism to generation, and thus arrives at a profoundly incomplete understanding of eros--an error which Diotima corrects.

Bataille also fails to provide an account of the origins of human manifestations of beauty. It is not enough to say



that they are attempts to be as un-animal as possible since the human perception of beauty does not come from *nothing* or from a negation. Bataille himself is "prepared to admit that animals are more or less beautiful as they more or less resemble the ideal specimen of their kind" (*E*, 142-43). However, Bataille explicitly says he "shall avoid referring to," and "shall not discuss" what he admits is "beauty in general" (*E*, 142).

As we have learned from Plato, consciousness of beauty itself can only arise through the perception of natural beauty. Natural beauty includes the beauty of animals, but the more permanent and overwhelming natural beauty is to be found in the heavens. On this understanding, beauty is not a simply a negation of the ugly natural given. It is perceived in our most basic experiences of the cosmos. This does not mean that we may not, as Bataille claims, find the sexual act repulsive. However, as Diotima has made clear, sex is the way that *mortal creatures immortalize*. As such, it is the form of immortalizing that is the closest to mortality. Since humans are neither mortals nor immortals, but experience a daemonic tension in-between these two poles, they too properly partake of mortal sexuality.

It is through the experience of beauty, beauty *inherent to the cosmos*, that we attempt to transcend the disorder, the violence, the ugliness, and the death which are characteristics of mortal life. For Bataille, we transcend

our animality through *negation*. For Diotima, we transcend our mortality and become daemonic through a radically *positive* perception of the beauty in the world. This is not a beautification of the whole. Ugliness and death remain, but our consciousness of them is only made possible by our consciousness of that which is beautiful and does not die. Once the beautiful itself is seen, even the most beautiful things of this world suddenly appear ugly. In a sense, Diotima's account, for all of its beauty, makes the cosmos seem ugly. Yet at the same time we must see how mortal things *partake* of divine beauty. In Diotima's account of the ascent to the beautiful itself, one does not get to that destination by negating or befouling particular manifestations of beauty. Only through a positive recognition of mortal beauty that partakes of the divine is the ascent possible. To not recognize and desire beauty, including its mortal instances, is pathological and ultimately inhuman.

#### THE END OF EROS

In Bataille, one reaches the end of "divine love" only through an asceticism that negates all of the impurities of the natural world, leading to state where the mystic *becomes one* with an object that he *imagines* is divine and transcendent. He writes, "mystical experience reveals an absence of any object" (*E*, 23). Bataille would demystify any mysticism that, through positive language, posits a

transcendent divinity. He claims that in an extreme state the mystic is not at "one" with a transcendent divinity, but rather is nearly continuous with the immanent cosmos. Mystic experiences are *in truth* entirely secular and negative, though the mystic returns to his individual discontinuity to speak of them positively. Bataille writes, "We ought never to forget that positive theology is matched by a negative theology founded on mystical experience" (*E*, 23).

For Diotima, however, one erotically ascends to the object of divine love not by an asceticism that negates, or that creates a "non-attachment to ordinary life" (*E*, 246), but through a "correct pederasty" that positively recognizes the beauty in the world. Furthermore, when the initiate approaches divine beauty, Diotima never says that he "becomes one with," or "continuous" with the beautiful itself. Rather, one perceives it, yet remains separate from it. The initiate is most whole in this state, and most happy, yet remains discontinuous from the "object" of divine affection. The initiate remains *human* when he is most *like* a god because eros does not cease even at the heights. When he returns from such a state, the result is once again not indifference or negation, though Diotima recognizes that this might occur (211d-e). Rather, if one truly ascends to the beautiful itself, one generates "true virtue." The person is truly virtuous who lives in the tension towards divine reality, unlike those, like Bataille, who attempt to eliminate the

tension.

Bataille is an example of a person who attempted to suppress and deny radically the *reality* of divine transcendence in the experienced human tension towards the divine. Such a tension for him is a fiction. To sustain his own denial, however, he has left out, failed to mention, or consciously suppressed the basic human experiences of order, permanence, and beauty which stem from our perception of the heavens. The denial of transcendent order, even at the most basic level of archaic man's perception of the stars, leads Bataille to deny that there is a transcendent divine reality. And this, in turn, causes him to assert the divinity of the self, to which he gives the name sovereignty.

By sovereignty, Bataille does not mean we make the self sovereign through an individual "will to power" that asserts its "values" and its order upon the primary chaos of the world. Rather, the self becomes sovereign by partaking in the general movement towards death. Bataille realizes that any attempt to immortalize oneself through the imposition of a humanly created order will fail simply because that order will be squandered by the ravishes of time. For the most part, any such attempt would be caught up in "useful" work that would enslave the sovereign to servile activity. True sovereigns are those who engage in useless activity, who are not busy working towards profane immortality, but who participate in the general movement of nature towards death. He is sovereign

only because he is willing to face death and ugliness.

The irony of Bataille's sovereign man is that at the most "sovereign" moments, he loses his subjectivity in the continuity of the whole. As Michel Foucault once said, Bataille teaches us the "dissolution" of "the erotic subject" through "the experience of eroticism."<sup>22</sup> The sovereign man goes to *the point* of death, but this means he returns to himself. The longing for death is the longing to be whole, to be the whole, *to be the universe*. The trick is to get to this point and return alive. In other words, even though Bataille is aware that the self disappears when it becomes completely whole, his understanding remains a radical affirmation and love of the self. If we want death, it can be found easily enough. Bataille demands that we continue to live but go as close to death as possible. For Bataille the highest possibility of this sort of life, which he admits is an "impossibility," is the sadistic man, the man who feels nothing but apathy, and whose eros is as dead as possible. The sadist does not feel obligations towards other humans or things that bind him and make him servile. Thus, he destroys everything; he completes the movement of negation that Bataille claims is at the origin of man. Through apathetic negation, the self comes closest to being the whole; but in order to truly be whole, the sovereign man must lose himself-- he must cease to be an erotic human and become an unerotic

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<sup>22</sup>See James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 409.

god. The sovereign man must go to the point of death, destroying everything in his path, but he must not destroy himself just yet. This, for Bataille, is the highest eros. For the faint of heart, such a sovereign experience can be *simulated* through an organized and consensual sadomasochism.<sup>23</sup> However, such a consensual contract is surely a *limit* to the true sovereign. The true human-god massacres at will, experiencing a sovereign limitlessness.

Such a shocking conclusion is the consistent result of an understanding that completely denies the reality of the transcendent. Without a divine sovereign, without the sovereignty of the good, humans make themselves sovereign. But as Bataille has made clear, the only way that human sovereignty can most fully assert itself in the absence of the divine is through negation. Bataille is perfectly aware that we cannot be sovereign all the time; for him, human life is a tension between those useful activities that create abundance, and those sovereign useless moments in which abundance is squandered--where death is intimated and perhaps reached (AS 2, 18). In his writings, Bataille hopes to re-introduce the tension towards expenditure, a tension that has been lost in the useful, servile, accumulative activity of the bourgeois and communist worlds. This tension, however, is between a

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<sup>23</sup>For an account of consensual sadomasochism in relation to the thought of Bataille and Foucault see Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, especially pp. 88-89, 262 ff. It would appear from Miller's account that such extreme *consensual* practices that simulate a true sovereignty are examples of, as he writes, "What it might mean, after Auschwitz, to live thoughtfully 'beyond good and evil'" (ibid., 9).

nothingness and a nothingness. History, with its useful struggle and work for abundance, leads to nothing--to death--because it cannot deliver on its promise to help humans escape from the squander of nature. Eros is what re-introduces the squander towards death that work, taboo, and history deny. That is, Bataille proposes a tension where humans exist between the poles of death and death. Such an undesirable position, if believed with enthusiasm, can only lead either to ferocious sadism or to despair.

Diotima also gives an account of the tension of human existence. It is described as the daemonic tension between mortality and the divine. Eros is one of the ways in which human beings express the desire for this reality of the divine good. It is through the perception of true immortality that the good becomes luminous in consciousness. The vision of true immortality is what gives birth to virtue, which becomes manifest in our associations with other humans. It is insofar as we perceive other human beings as participating in the divine, that love and community are possible. Eric Voegelin makes this clear in the following remarks:

since every man participates in love of the transcendent *nous*--out of which he exists, every man can, by virtue of this noetic self, have love for other men. In theory, this is a secondary phenomena--in theory, not in practice. In practice we love others right away without having a theory for it. But in theory that is secondary because there is no particular reason--reason, I say now--to love other men unless they also participate in the same divine *nous* and have such a noetic self...Nietzsche, for instance, on one occasion said, 'If I did not love other men because they also are an image of God, I would have no particular reason to love them because they are just horrible.' So you see why differentiation of that

point is of considerable importance.<sup>24</sup>

Though all humans are aware of and participate in the divine ground they can deny it. In such a denial, eros is left on its own and will accept no limits, especially those imposed on it by the community. Such an eros may lead to the destruction of the community, to the destruction of love itself, and ultimately to death.

Bataille rejects Diotima's tension. He claims that an erotic "life dedicated to Good, to Good and to God at the same time" (*E*, 122), makes the divine a "preeminent utility" (*AS* 2, 173) to which we enslave ourselves. Bataille only understands the good in "practical terms" (*E*, 122). It is true that in the perception of immortality we encounter limits. However, it is our highest possibility, our best "limit-experience." If we deny the divine, our frustrated incompleteness manifests itself in a sterile and impotent violence. The more proper way to live an incomplete existence is to perceive completeness uselessly. As Socrates and Diotima agree, happiness is useless since it is the final end of all of our erotic striving.

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<sup>24</sup>From *Conversations With Eric Voegelin*, 10.



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