

CHAPTER 1

The Philosophy of Laughter

Bataille, Hegel, and Derrida

Historically, philosophers, literary theorists, and ecclesiasts alike have as often as not greeted manifestations of the comic with condemnation. Comedy has been judged as a form of low art, as a genre inferior to tragedy, as appropriate only to the trials and tribulations of the lower classes, whereas the comic has likewise been condemned for expressing taste base enough to warrant the recommendation of abstinence. The admittedly infrequent counter to this broad characterization has championed the comic, arguing that it is indeed worthy of serious scholarly attention. This has usually meant either defining the specificity of the operation of the comic by delineating its techniques—whether irony, parody, satire, slapstick, degradation, jokes, or particular kinds of narrative structure—or focusing on the thematic content of individual works and uncovering the meaningful content buried beneath any number of comic façades.¹ Indeed, those advocates who aim to comprehend the comic in this manner relinquish addressing what is intrinsic to the comic as much as those who seek to dismiss it. To comprehend the comic, therefore, is to risk overlooking the structure of incomprehensibility that is crucial to its operation. Whether for or against it, the theoretical and critical reception of the comic has tended to subordinate it to the demands of meaning and reason. In this chapter, I consider the possibility of avoiding this subordination by pursuing the idea that the comic emerges from a relationship between reason and unreason.

BATAILLE'S PHILOSOPHY OF LAUGHTER

My starting point here is an examination and evaluation of the relevant insights of Bataille, most significantly his philosophy of laughter as a

philosophy of *non-savoir*. One could argue that because Bataille starts with laughter, rather than the comic, he manages to retain the relation between knowing and unknowing crucial to the operation of the comic. Henri Bergson provides an interesting point of comparison in this regard. While Bergson's "Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" is entitled *Laughter*, he is never really able to reconcile fully his identification of the comic as *la mécanisation de la vie* with laughter itself, concluding that:

From time to time, the receding wave leaves behind a remnant of foam on the sandy beach. The child, who plays hard by, picks up a handful, and, the next moment, is astonished to find that nothing remains in his grasp but a few drops of water, water that is far more brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought it. Laughter comes into being in the self-same fashion. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is a froth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter.²

Bataille's contemplation of laughter is itself fragmented across the breadth of his work, being found in his anthropological and sociological essays: for instance, the collection of essays Denis Hollier edited, *The College of Sociology (1937–1939)*; his philosophical essays (those on *non-savoir* and Hegel); and in his works dealing with mystical experience (*Inner Experience* and *Guilty*).³ Each of these treatments of laughter is specific to its context, although a consistency is found in the theorization of it across these works. Thus the sociological essays are concerned with laughter's relation to the sacred and the role it plays in the transformation of repulsive forces into attractive ones, the philosophical essays consider the intersection between laughter and epistemology, and the mystical works deal with laughter and sovereignty. This chapter concerns the comedy that emerges from Bataille's conception of laughter and the implications that such comedy has for philosophy. As the major arguments of the book develop, I also consider the implications of Bataille's work for the study of cinematic comedy.

Bataille, more than any other theorist of laughter, provides the possibility of displacing the lowly status of the comic. He does so not by elevating the comic to the level of art, but by bestowing on the operation of the comic nothing less than the status of sovereignty. For Bataille the 'beauty' of the poetic is still subordinate to the logic of reason and meaning, whereas he perceives laughter to exceed this logic to the extent that it occupies a position outside the system of philosophy, yet nevertheless produces effects within that system.⁴ Bataille's laughter exposes the relationship between reason and unreason—the unknowing that constitutes the essence of the comic—by

reversing the conventional method of inquiry into comedy. Rather than just attempt to philosophize comedy, Bataille treats philosophy as comedy.

As noted in the introduction, comedy and the variety of terms associated with the comic constitute a significant cluster of motifs for poststructuralist thought. This alone warrants and has to some degree effected an expansion of the interpretation of Bataille's oeuvre. Attention to his affinity with surrealism and celebration of cultural forms expressing the irrational, the unthinkable, and the impossible (such as death, ecstasy, ritual, sacrifice, the erotic, the comic, and the sacred) has been extended to theorizations that interrogate both the philosophical underpinning of his work and, indeed, its consequences for philosophical thinking.⁵ I refer here to the work of Nick Land, Joseph Libertson, and Arkady Plotnitsky as well as Derrida. This relatively recent scholarship has deemed Bataille's laughter capable of resuscitating the Kantian noumenon, presenting a radical alterity to philosophy and reinscribing the Hegelian dialectic to the point where the quest for meaning is forsaken.

In his essay "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," Derrida questions the possibility of the comedy of philosophy that Bataille envisages. More specifically, he draws on the breadth of Bataille's writings to consider their relation to the Hegelian project. The impetus for Derrida's analysis of Bataille's laughter no doubt can be located in what Michel Foucault has called the "epoch" which "struggles to disengage itself from Hegel" or what Vincent Descombes has identified as a general preoccupation of post-68 French thinking with the problems arising from the specific nature of the dialectic in the Hegelian project—problems such as the reduction of the other to the same, the all-encompassing imperative of philosophical reason, and the end of philosophy.⁶ Doubtless, Derrida also sees in Bataille's thought the possibility of undermining the concepts of presence and identity that dominate Western metaphysics and to which his work returns again and again. His essay is of interest to us here because of its theorization of Bataille's dispersed comments on comedy, laughter, and unknowing, but also because it evaluates the success and failure of Bataille's endeavor from a poststructuralist perspective. In this respect, Derrida's deconstruction of Bataille is relevant to understanding the operation of the comic in general.

Whether we call it Bataille's challenge to Hegel or, as Derrida prefers, the "constraint of Hegel" in Bataille's work, my interest in Bataille's writing is with the manner in which he envisages laughter undoing the tenets of metaphysical philosophy, relating concepts to their own baselessness, subjecting them to "inner ruination," and inscribing a nonteleological method of "backwardation" by referring the known to the unknown.⁷ While the significance of laughter as an affective response to philosophical reason should not be underestimated, such laughter implies very specific operations of the comic,

or as Bataille calls them, operations of sovereignty. An examination of the moments where Bataille invokes laughter reveals the comic operation that it engenders. After elaborating the significance of the comedy of philosophy, of Bataille's "philosophy of laughter," and his response to the Hegelian *Phenomenology*, I turn to Derrida's evaluation of Bataille's endeavor to consider the limits of its success.⁸



In his essay "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears," Bataille audaciously declares that in as much as he is a philosopher, his is a philosophy of laughter.⁹ To make laughter the very basis of philosophy might here be construed as an attempt to further perturb the happy marriage of philosophy and reason that was, until Nietzsche, still in its honeymoon period. In the place of reason, Bataille inserts its very antithesis, neither an enterprise, nor a disposition constitutive of a subject, only barely a mode of behavior. (In his essays on attraction and repulsion, for example, Bataille considers laughter under the rubric of the principle of contagion which constitutes human society around a sacred nucleus, a community whose fusion entails a loss of individual selfhood and thereby intentional agency.)¹⁰ Bataille's self-characterization is further radicalized when one considers that he proposes that the cause of such laughter is both unknown and unknowable: "That which is laughable may simply be *the unknowable*."¹¹ And for Bataille this very unknowability is essential: "*the unknown makes us laugh*."¹² In his efforts to produce a philosophy of laughter, a philosophy therefore of the unknowable, Bataille questions the conventional understanding of the philosopher as the lover or friend of wisdom, of knowledge, learning and erudition, and of soundness of judgment.

Bataille's philosophy of laughter, and the importance of his mobilization of the notion of *non-savoir*, has prompted commentators to relate his work not only to Hegel, but also to Kant. Bataille's laughter and the impact it has on philosophy has thus been described by Nick Land as a "fanged noumenon" and Libertson as an "altering incumbence of exteriority."¹³ These characterizations allow us to grasp what is at stake in Bataille's reinvigoration of the Kantian noumenon—against Hegel's subsequent dismissal of it—and the performative nature of its operation.

Unknowing, such as Bataille invokes, has a philosophical precedent in the Kantian noumenon and, as we will see, a psychoanalytic one in the Freudian unconscious. In the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena, phenomena are appearances in the world of which we have knowledge through sensory experience. Noumena by contrast are things in themselves. They are unknowable because they are ungraspable by sensory experience. Diana Coole notes that Kant conceives noumena both positively and negatively, "In the negative sense, . . . the noumenon is 'a thing so far as it

is not an object of our sensible intuition,' whereas in its positive sense, it is 'an object of a non-sensible intuition.'"¹⁴ For Kant the noumenon in this positive sense is the concept that makes sensible intuition possible, the concept of the object in general before its determination as either "something or nothing."¹⁵ Hence it is an "empty concept without object" (*ens rationis*).¹⁶ Land argues that Bataille's "fanged noumenon" is not the beginning of knowledge but its end; laughter, as the experience of *non-savoir*, has a *destructive* capacity not broached by Kant, constituting the "slide into oblivion," it is a "dissolvent immanence" that can be neither defined nor comprehended.¹⁷

Libertson has discussed unknowing similarly in terms of a philosophy of alterity. Libertson contextualizes Bataille's work at the point of the philosophical impasse where the inadequation between discursive representation and the alterity implicit in communication emerges. The very possibility of communication, Libertson argues, produces an opacity in its economy, which escapes comprehension and manifestation.¹⁸ The spontaneity of consciousness that discourse engenders is limited by "the difference or discontinuity of the exterior thing, of the exterior subject or intersubjective other, and of the generality of existence in its excess over comprehension's closure" (P, 1). The attempt by discourse to register these limits (this alterity) both domesticates them and is necessarily eluded by them. The result, according to Libertson, is that inadequation becomes correlation, "the vicissitude of a larger adequation" (P, 1).

Importantly, however, this is not for Libertson the only experience of the relation of alterity to thought. The great anti-intellectualist thinkers (Nietzsche, Marcel Proust, and Freud, but also the subjects of his book—Maurice Blanchot, Bataille, and Emmanuel Levinas) attest not simply to an inability of formal discourse to represent alterity but also to alterity's "alteration of thought," which "weighs upon subjectivity in a communicational moment which is not yet or no longer comprehension" (P, 2). Libertson calls this experience an "altering incumbence of exteriority" which nevertheless remains subordinate in formal discourse. (P, 2) That is to say, this altering incumbence of exteriority alters the effect of formal discourse, but when represented by discourse is still subordinate to it. According to Libertson, the anti-intellectualists turn the formal (Kantian) and speculative (Hegelian) proposition of the noumenon or the thing-in-itself on its head. They regard alterity neither in terms of a power that nevertheless constitutes the basis of thinking phenomena (the Kantian noumenon), nor negation working toward the achievement of absolute spirit (the Hegelian in-itself). The anti-intellectualists refuse "to characterize alterity as a power or effectivity" and "thematize subjectivity itself as a radical passivity or heteronomy: not a dependence upon another power, but a pure passivity in a reality without power" (2). They heed "the approach of a powerless element over which consciousness

nevertheless has no power—an element which changes and concerns thought on the basis of its very passivity and inactuality” (2).

The means of this “altering incumbence of exteriority” will become clearer when consideration is given to the effects of Bataille’s laughter as rupturing moments for Hegel’s text. For Bataille’s laughter is just such an “altering incumbence of exteriority.” Laughter is that powerless element over which consciousness has no power, that element that changes thought on the basis of its very passivity and inactuality.

HEGEL AND BATAILLE: FROM DIALECTICAL DIFFERENCE TO COMIC COMPLICITY

For our purposes, Bataille’s mobilization of laughter as unknowing finds its most profound relationship when compared with the apotheosis of metaphysical thinking—Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. That Bataille’s understanding of Hegelian philosophy is derived from the lectures Alexandre Kojève gave in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s—and attended by so many of the French intellectuals who would subsequently take issue with the Hegelian dialectic—is nothing new.¹⁹ I am not so much concerned with the correctness of Bataille’s interpretation as with the relation to Hegel that he construes and the implications it has for understanding comedy.

Bataille’s relation to Hegel is both concrete and elusive. To be sure, Bataille, at the outset, appears to make a significant break with Hegel—unknowing and knowing being the respective motifs that inaugurate for each thinker the beginning of philosophy. And many of Bataille’s notions respond specifically to Hegelian concepts. Hegel’s articulation of the relationship between philosophy and knowledge, as well as his concepts of experience or *Erfahrung* (as the movement that consciousness exercises on itself) and the dialectic (as the logical method of such conscious investigation) are the motifs that are transformed in Bataille’s philosophy of unknowledge.

Set against the relationship between knowledge, truth, and consciousness in Hegel’s work, Bataille’s statements about his philosophy of unknowing could easily be misconstrued as glib or perfunctory. But to approach him superficially would be to fail to heed his stance on the anti-intellectualism against which he has been so outspoken.²⁰ Bataille’s philosophy of unknowing is in no way a celebration of ignorance. It is rather a very precise interjection in response to Hegel’s thought in, as Bataille professes, full knowledge of its consequences.²¹

Bataille’s starting point is the unknowing manifest in the experience of laughter, the sacred, ecstasy, and so forth. What is significant here is that while laughter, like knowing, is subjectively experienced, it is experienced as

unknowing. One can be conscious of one's experience of unknowing, but self-consciousness cannot supersede the experience of unknowing. (Hence, Libertson's characterization of the radical passivity of subjectivity.) Bataille's "philosophy" is concerned with "the effect of any proposition the penetration of whose content we find disturbing."²²

The concept of experience provides a point of differentiation between the two philosophers. For Hegel, experience is related to the dialectical movement of self-revelation, the inner movement of the knowing process coincidental with the inner movement and transformation of the object known that constitutes the "becoming" of absolute Spirit. Unlike Hegel's dialectical experience, Bataille's is not developmental or progressive. In proposing that a philosophy of laughter should not confine itself to the object of laughter or its cause, but consider laughter in the context of other experiences of unknowing that form a continuum rather than a dialectic (such as tears, anguish, the feeling of the poetic, ecstasy, and so forth), Bataille writes, "I do believe in the possibility of beginning with the experience of laughter and not relinquishing it when one passes from this particular experience to its neighbor, the sacred or the poetic."²³ Hegel, on the other hand, sees experience as the movement toward the absolute, toward Science, and toward Spirit. While in the *Phenomenology* the trajectory of consciousness' knowledge is from the less well-known to the better known in that a presupposition is refined or shown to be known in some way, Bataille claims that his is a presuppositionless philosophy, that it begins with the suppression of knowledge, with nothing.²⁴ Bataille also at times considers this experience as a regression from the known to the unknown, a movement he calls *backwardation*.

Bataille's interest in Hegelian philosophy is also explicit to the extent that so many of his writings directly address issues that arise from the *Phenomenology*. Bataille engages with the work of the Hegelian dialectic and the logic of its economy and speculates about the implications of the project's success in giving an account of the attainment of absolute knowledge. In so doing he puts forward the unknown or unknowability as the inevitable blind spot of the completion of philosophy. On the one hand, he emphasizes the unknown that the *Phenomenology* must necessarily turn its back on, the poetry, ecstasy, and laughter that provide no satisfaction to self-consciousness, and on the other, he points to the fact that the condition of absolute knowledge, the very completion of the project, coincides with reaching a point where there is nothing else to know, reaching, that is, the unknowable!²⁵

Bataille thus identifies a conundrum in the work of Hegel. While the aim to think through the "totality of what is" and to account for "everything which appears before our eyes, to give an integrated account of the thought and language which express—and reveal—that appearance"²⁶ is without

doubt the noble aim of philosophical thinking in general; for Bataille it is quite another thing to claim success, as Hegel does, to state that the project is complete, to turn in one's badge and close shop indefinitely because the end of philosophy necessarily entails the redundancy of the philosopher himself.

In "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," Bataille argues for the general comicality of the task Hegel set himself. He sketches a double caricature, claiming that Hegel usurps the sovereignty of the divine and at the same time downgrades God to the status of regent. God as eternal and unchangeable becomes "merely a provisional end, which survives while awaiting something better."²⁷ It is the Sage, Hegel, who is rightly enthroned as sovereign because he is the one to whom "history revealed, then revealed in full, the development of being and the totality of its becoming."²⁸ Bataille, presuming to identify with Hegel, briefly imagines the despair he must have felt on realizing that the consequence of his insight was that there would be nothing else to know, but cannot help see the comic side of it: "In order to express appropriately the situation Hegel got himself into, no doubt involuntarily, one would need the tone, or at least, in a restrained form, the horror of tragedy. But things would quickly take on a comic appearance."²⁹

Bataille claims the issue of death to be decisive for Hegel and he in turn subjects it to various comical interpretations. The fact that Bataille invokes laughter at the moment of death is consistent with his more general conception of the community being bound by the interattractive force of laughter that encloses the sacred nucleus of death.³⁰ Paul Hegarty notes that whereas Hegel and Heidegger argue that awareness of death is constitutive of humanity as such in that it "drives us to react against this initial negativity, by creating society as protection," Bataille on the other hand sees this "as a defense mechanism that allows itself to fail at certain points (in the festival, eroticism, laughter, drunkenness, sacrifice)."³¹

Bataille argues that the comic significance of death in the Hegelian system directly parodies the equally comic death of Christ. Death and eternal divinity, he points out, are irreconcilably contradictory: "to pass through death is so absent from the divine figure. . . . The death of Jesus partakes of comedy to the extent that one cannot unarbitrarily introduce the forgetting of his eternal divinity—which is his—into the consciousness of an omnipotent and infinite God."³²

Bataille surmises that in Hegel's conceptualization of death, the attempt made by self-consciousness to achieve independence duplicates the implausibility of the merely rhetorical death of Christ. Death is dramatized by Hegel in consciousness' acquisition of a sense of self, a disposition only fully realized when consciousness obtains the recognition of the other. The demand for recognition of self-consciousness by another self-consciousness entails the infamous fight to the death, the duel that institutionalizes the

relationship between self-consciousnesses as that between master and slave. In this duel, Hegel sidesteps the issue of mortality in exactly the same manner as the Christian myth of the death of Christ. That is to say, the outcome of the drama is predetermined: the stakes are bogus; in each case no possibility of death exists. The necessity of both risking death and staying alive are irreconcilable.

Derrida has argued that in laughing at this point of the Hegelian text Bataille focuses on the duplicity of Hegel's concept of death. In the dialectic of the master and slave, self-consciousness realizes that it cannot negate everything—that it is theoretically possible to be independent of everything but the life that is necessary in order to be.³³ Hegel writes “self-consciousness learns that *life* is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness.”³⁴ The difference between real death and theoretical death is conceptually represented in the difference between abstract negativity and sublative negation. Hegel argues that the outcome of real death “is an abstract negation, not the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession.”³⁵ The risk of actual death would thus appear to be overcome, being superseded by the anticipation of the idea of death. At exactly this moment Hegel, Bataille implies, overextends himself. He fudges his logic by drawing a distinction between the abstract negativity that lies beyond consciousness and the negation that consciousness uses as a tool to further its quest for truth.

Just as the eternal divinity of God turns the sacrifice of Jesus into a sham, so too does self-consciousness' putting at stake of life rely a priori on the condition that it continues to live—hence, Bataille's analogy between the comedy of the death of Christ and the risk of death undertaken by self-consciousness. Although the dialectic of the master and slave would seem to dramatize a shift from materiality to conceptuality, Hegel purports to have no interest in pure materiality as the unknowable in-itself. The opening claim of the *Phenomenology* is that the truth of consciousness' knowledge of an object is not dependent on its relation to a world beyond cognition. How, then, within a single diegesis can Hegel make the distinction between real death and conceptual death, between abstract negativity and sublative negation? This is precisely what Bataille laughs at.

What does Bataille's scorn of one of the necessary stages of Hegelian self-consciousness' pursuit of the absolute tell us of laughter and its epistemological status as unknowing? Bataille's laughter is not based so much on a material figure exceeding a conceptual figure as on the simultaneous invocation and denial of the noumenon, the in-itself. If we follow Bataille's thought a bit further we find that his laughter at the master-slave dialectic is not simply a response to an isolated moment of the journey toward Spirit. He

does not refuse to buy Hegel's argument at this particular point, laugh it off and move on. For Bataille, the master-slave dialectic is not merely one dialectic among others. He takes it to be *the* model for the dialectic in general. Whether rightly or wrongly, for him it defines the nature and role of negativity throughout the entirety of the *Phenomenology*. Hence the seriousness of his laughter; its object is both specific and fundamental. Beyond the relation between domination and servitude, it goes to the very heart of Hegelian negativity, undermining the success of the dialectical method and its ability to institute reason, truth and meaning.

Bataille's laughter at the master-slave dialectic focuses on the two kinds of negativity that operate in the Hegelian system. The first is the productive negation of sublation, the interiorization of material death into conceptual death and its transcendence. The second is abstract negativity, which Hegel, according to Derrida, freely admits is a "mute and non-productive death, this death pure and simple" ("FRGE," 255). In making this distinction between sublative negation and abstract negativity, Hegel attempts to remove abstract negativity from the endless interpretation of the system, even while including it as a concept ("FRGE," 257).³⁶

RESTRICTED AND GENERAL ECONOMY

Derrida also shows us that the difference between these two forms of negativity structures Bataille's concepts of restricted and general economy. In restricted economy, to all appearances coincident with Hegel's economy in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the negative works toward the production of meaning. Restricted economy is geared toward production and expenditure for the return of profit. It is an economy of determinate meaning and established values where the dialectic, through sublative negation (the *Aufhebung*), provides its rule of exchange. General economy is not an economy of exchange but of waste, of expenditure without return, of sacrifice, of the destruction without reserve, of meaning. It bears witness to the mode of functioning of abstract negativity. Bataille's laughter therefore repudiates the economy of the *Phenomenology*—that is to say, the structure of evaluation and exchange that occurs in the dialectic, the expenditure of intellectual currency on defunct concepts provided the returns are worthwhile, on a real death, a mute and nonproductive death, for example, returned as a conceptual death. Just as self-consciousness needs the other and the recognition of the other, to end the cycle of the meaningless negation of nature, Hegel needs discourse to ensure the meaning of life. Bataille therefore contrasts between the restricted economy that characterizes the circulation of meaning in the *Phenomenology* and the general economy that envisages meaning exposed to its comic underside, wasted, destroyed without reserve.

Bataille treats the distinction between sublative negation and abstract negativity, and Hegel's use of the former to institute meaning and relegation of the latter to the beyond of reason and meaning as simultaneously comic and significant. In the first instance, one can draw from Bataille's laughter a technique well known in the world of comedy—the conceptual bifurcation between the two forms of negation has the structure of the pun or joke. In the second instance, abstract negativity, “death pure and simple,” is not simply what Hegel discards, it is, Bataille's writing seems to suggest, the condition of the possibility of sublative negation.

SOVEREIGNTY AND THE OPERATION OF THE COMIC

In proposing the philosophy of laughter as a philosophy of *non-savoir*, Bataille links an affective response to an epistemological condition. Indeed, he situates laughter at the limit of epistemology. But Bataille's philosophy of unknowing is neither systematic nor systematizable. It is not found in a given book that can be picked up, read, and understood. It rather amounts to a process of backwardation; a writing of transgression; and a submission to the ecstasy, death, and sacrifice that can be glimpsed in the isolated moments of already received ideas. In this regard, Bataille's response to the *Phenomenology* exemplifies many of the broader concerns we find in his writing. Although Bataille chastises Hegel for failing to thematize the significance of laughter, for refusing laughter a place in his reputedly all-encompassing tome (laughter, he argues, should have been considered first), he also enjoys its exclusion.³⁷

For all that Bataille's stance turns this traditional conception of philosophy on its head, importantly he does not presume a synonymy between the laughable and the comic. Although Bataille speculates that the laughable is the unknowable, he makes the qualification that we can nevertheless know the comic; “define the various themes of the laughable,” subject it to both methodological and epistemological investigation, devise ways to provoke laughter and even make objects of laughter.³⁸ Indeed, between Bataille's laughter and the meaning of the *Phenomenology*, I have sought textual incidents that justify his amusement, incidents that are comic no less. We have witnessed Bataille's caricature of Hegel the philosopher, his attribution of a parodic dimension to the completion of the philosophical project and his attempt to turn the Hegelian dialectic into a joke. And whereas Bataille's emphasis is on laughter rather than comic technique and whereas comic technique is simply something that we have retrospectively inferred from his laughter, a more explicit interpretation of the comic can be gleaned from his linkage of the comic to sovereignty.

In his collection of Bataille's writings, Michael Richardson argues that sovereignty is an ongoing problem for Bataille in as much as he is concerned with

how “human beings exist integrally for themselves while living in society with others upon whose existence their own depends.”³⁹ Certainly Bataille’s writings are replete with references to the “concept” of sovereignty. The caricature of sovereignty performed by rulers, the rebel’s inevitable loss of sovereignty in the satisfaction of his aims, the near attainment of sovereignty by poetry and sovereignty’s relation to beauty are all habitually revisited in Bataille’s writings.

But for Bataille, the term *sovereignty* is much more complicated than is conveyed in its everyday usage. It is not just an issue of the individual’s freedom and rights in society. Nor does it simply define the status of the monarch. What we see in Bataille’s conceptualization of the confrontation between the two self-consciousnesses is an emptying out of sovereignty as it is exoterically conceived and the emergence (if only for an instant) of another notion of it.

In *Inner Experience*, Bataille writes “*sovereign operation* is the most loathsome of all the names: in a sense, *comic operation* would be less deceptive.”⁴⁰ In his essay on Bataille, Derrida demonstrates how Bataille’s conceptualization of sovereignty as the operation of the comic both relies on and undertakes the destruction of two of the central concepts of Western metaphysics—identity and presence. In other words, as the comic operation, sovereignty puts an end to determinate meaning. Bataille’s laughter at self-consciousness’ feigned risk of death is the condition that instantiates the emergence of sovereignty as a simulacral doubling of lordship. I would suggest that Bataille thus laughs at Hegel’s concept of lordship in the name of an *other* to which it might be compared. In this instance, sovereignty is conceived by Bataille as a non-present other that provides the basis for comic comparison and justifies his laughter at the Hegelian dialectic.

More generally, Bataille’s method of backwardation is significant because it means he reverses the relation between cause and effect. In this case, laughter does not emerge on the basis of comic sovereignty; the comic is rather constituted in the instant that laughter bursts out and in that instant alone. The comic here is not something that precedes laughter; it is rather an effect of it. Therefore, in spite of Bataille’s claims that the techniques of the comic can be produced at will—much as we can define the conventions of comedy by considering its opposition to tragedy or account for the joke in terms of condensation and displacement—the temporal precedence that Bataille gives to laughter emphasizes the priority of the unknowable that conventional theories of the comic so often forget about but which Bataille argues is nevertheless the single cause of laughter.

That this laughter has no place in the Hegelian text is fundamental. Derrida explains:

Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute

risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. A negativity that never takes place, that never presents itself, because in doing so it would start to work again. A laughter that literally never *appears*, because it exceeds phenomenality in general, the absolute possibility of meaning. (“FRGE,” 256)

This laughter “that literally never *appears*” does so on the basis/baselessness of abstract negativity and in so doing gives rise to the doubling of the Hegelian text. Whereas laughter would be a moment that exists outside the Hegelian text, an alterity that has no place in dialectics, the manner in which it gives rise to sovereignty allows us to see precisely that “altering incumbence of exteriority” that Libertson describes. This is evident in Derrida’s careful ascription of the burst of laughter to that which “makes the difference between lordship and sovereignty shine, without *showing* it however and, above all, without saying it” (“FRGE,” 256).

If the laughter that gives rise to sovereignty and, indeed, if sovereignty itself is an “altering incumbence of exteriority,” laughter and sovereignty would each constitute a “passivity” that nevertheless has “effects.” With regard to laughter, this passivity is evident in the fact that it never takes place, that it is outside of dialectics, while its effects are evident in sovereignty and the inflection of comicality it imposes on reason. As a nonpresent simulacrum of mastery, sovereignty puts the concept of identity into question. Sovereignty does not itself have an identity but exists in the relation between laughter and death (“FRGE,” 256). Derrida writes, for instance, “differing from Hegelian lordship, [sovereignty] does not even want to maintain itself, collect itself, or collect the profits from itself or from its own risk” (“FRGE,” 264) and that “sovereignty has no identity, is not *self*, for *itself*, toward *itself*, near *itself*. . . . It must expend itself without reserve, lose itself, lose consciousness, lose all memory of itself and all the interiority of itself” (“FRGE,” 265). Lordship and sovereignty are thus related to Bataille’s concepts of restricted and general economy. In the restricted economy of the Hegelian dialectic, lordship has a meaning, lordship seeks meaning and makes meaning; whereas in the general economy sovereignty sacrifices meaning: “it governs neither others, nor things, nor discourses in order to produce meaning” (“FRGE,” 264).

COMEDY AND THE TRANSGRESSION OF MEANING: THE EMPTY FORM OF THE *AUFHEBUNG*

In “From Restricted to General Economy,” Derrida interrogates the possibility of getting beyond the powerful mechanism of the dialectic, not by directly deconstructing the logic of the Hegelian enterprise, but by examining the

success of one of the most strategic and incisive treatments of it. Although Derrida begins and ends by demonstrating that Bataille does not so much oppose Hegel as manifest a complicity with him, and he argues that if Bataille's work is to some extent "free" of Hegelianism, it is also paradoxically constrained by it, in the course of his essay Derrida reinscribes their relationship within the thematic of Hegel's two self-consciousnesses. In fact, he sets the scene for the two philosophers to engage in a duel. Yet he envisages not so much a struggle to the death as a metamorphosis—of Bataille into Hegel and vice versa.

The turning point is Derrida's evaluation of the transgressive potential of Bataille's complicity with Hegel where he gestures toward the limits of Bataille's laughter:

For at the far reaches of this night something was contrived, blindly, I mean in a discourse, by means of which philosophy, in completing itself, could both include within itself and anticipate all the figures of its beyond, all the forms and resources of its exterior; and could do so in order to keep these forms and resources close to itself by simply taking hold of their enunciation. *Except, perhaps, for a certain laughter. And yet.* ("FRGE," 252, my emphasis)

In focusing on the issue of transgression, Derrida's argument has relevance beyond evaluating Bataille's relation to Hegel because the transgressive capacity of the comic has precipitated its denunciation by moralists and its celebration by more anarchistically inclined critics. Derrida's critique of Bataille is instructive in this regard. Through Bataille's work he demonstrates quite precisely the limit condition of transgression; that is, the manner in which it becomes bound to what it negates.

Derrida brings the issue of transgression to the fore when he questions Bataille's claim that sovereign writing is able to neutralize the effects of discourse. Bataille, for instance, claims that such writing neutralizes meaning because it is neither this nor that, it destroys discourse, proceeds by means of backwardation, and so forth. Derrida says both yes and no. Yes, because sovereignty enunciates nothing ("FRGE," 274), but no because *discursive knowledge is neutral*. Discourse, for instance, neutralizes the real death that is put at risk in the dialectic. Language neutralizes the alterity of the other. Derrida argues that sovereignty's destruction of discourse is not an "erasing neutralization," but a multiplication of words, a process of "baseless substitution," a "potlatch of signs" ("FRGE," 274). Whereas the words and concepts subjected to the sovereign (comic) operation might well neutralize each other by canceling each other out, as is the case with lordship and sovereignty, they nevertheless, Derrida argues, affirm "the necessity of transgress-

ing . . . discourse" ("FRGE," 274). Transgression consequently affirms a kind of negation.

This affirmation of negation leads Derrida to ponder Bataille's conclusion that transgression has the character of the *Aufhebung*, that it operates like the sublative negation found in the Hegelian dialectic. According to Bataille, the transgression of those laws of discourse that prohibit meaningless play and baseless substitution previously described "dispels the prohibition without suppressing it" ("FRGE," 275). A reader familiar with Derrida's moves might at this point expect him to perform his characteristic about-turn, that is, affirm Bataille's position, emphasize once again the immense enveloping capacity of metaphysics ("FRGE," 251) and lament Bataille's inability to elude it. But surprisingly Derrida does not make such a move. He heeds Bataille's acknowledgment that the operation of transgression here has the character of the *Aufhebung*, but rather than interpret this as more evidence of the complicity between Bataille and Hegel, Derrida argues the opposite—that "Bataille is even *less* Hegelian than he thinks" ("FRGE," 251, my emphasis). Certainly, the character of such transgression is sublative to the extent that it must affirm (that is, preserve and maintain) that which it negates. But Derrida indicates a fundamental difference between dialectical sublation and sovereign transgression:

The Hegelian *Aufhebung* is produced entirely from within discourse, from within the system or the work of signification. A determination is negated and conserved in another determination which reveals the truth of the former. From infinite indetermination one passes to infinite determination, and this transition . . . continuously links meaning up to itself. The *Aufhebung* is included within the circle of absolute knowledge, never exceeds its closure, never suspends the totality of discourse, work, meaning, law, etc. ("FRGE," 251)

On the other hand, transgression does not maintain itself entirely within discourse and the circle of absolute knowledge, but in simulating the figure of the *Aufhebung*, "links the world of meaning to the world of nonmeaning." The distinction between real death and conceptual death only has meaning by recourse to a diegetic *mise-en-abîme*. Derrida writes:

Bataille, thus, can only use the *empty* form of the *Aufhebung*, in an analogical fashion, in order to designate, *as was never done before*, the transgressive relationship which links the world of meaning to the world of nonmeaning. This displacement is paradigmatic: within the form of writing, an intraphilosophical concept, the speculative concept par excellence, is forced to designate a movement which properly constitutes the excess of every possible philosopheme. ("FRGE," 251)

Derrida suggests here that whereas dialectical sublation is composed of determinate meaning and continually links the world of meaning up with itself, sovereign transgression uses the “empty form” (the noumenal form) of the *Aufhebung* in an analogical fashion, thereby linking the world of meaning to the world of nonmeaning. Transgression (the nonpresent doubling of the sublative negation of the *Aufhebung* by laughter, for example) does not proceed from a determinate form to a more determinate form but produces an excess that cannot be incorporated into the restricted economy of determinate negation and that, moreover, renders the concepts of restricted economy indeterminate. This excess would be either the simulacrum or a “laughter, which constitutes sovereignty in its relation to death” (“FRGE,” 256), both empty forms, empty concepts without objects. Their nondeterminateness, far from restricting the economy of meaning, opens it to its beyond. In other words, the empty form of the *Aufhebung* Bataille uses engenders comedy by transgressing meaning and engenders comedy to transgress meaning.

This difference between dialectical sublation and sovereign transgression is crucial to understanding the operation of the comic—not simply in Bataille’s work, but in general. The operation of the comic simulates dialectical sublation and produces an excess that lies beyond classical logic. In general, this simulation, this unreason buried and exposed in the heart of reason and vice versa constitutes the comic, makes the text funny, and makes us laugh. The comic in sum opens restricted economy to the effects of general economy.

But lest one think that Derrida ultimately sides with Bataille, consider the closing remarks of his essay. Having established that Bataille is less Hegelian than he thinks, Derrida nevertheless ends by insisting that the *Phenomenology* is by no means left in tatters by Bataille’s laughter. In the duel that Derrida stages for us, it becomes less and less clear who has the advantage. If the Bataille in Derrida’s scenario seems livelier than Hegel to begin with, in Derrida’s mind’s eye his laughter reanimates the Hegelian text. The statue comes to life, not to fight with him directly, but rather to deny the stability of representation Bataille had supposed to be Hegelian. Derrida argues that given the form—the empty form—of the *Aufhebung* that operates in transgression “[i]t would be absurd for the transgression of the Book by writing to be legible only in a determined sense. It would be absurd . . . and too full of meaning” (“FRGE.,” 276–7). Derrida thus draws a distinction between the book and writing as though the former were a determined form, the *énoncé*, governed by the conditions of restricted economy and the latter were something like the writing of *différance*, overdetermined, and operating under the conditions of general economy:

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

From one to the other, totally other, a certain text. Which in silence traces the structure of the eye, sketches the opening, ventures to contrive “absolute rending,” absolutely rends its own tissue once more become “solid” and servile in once more having been read. (“FRGE,” 276–7)

Interestingly Derrida’s reading of Bataille’s relation to Hegel, particularly with regard to the emphasis placed on the master-slave dialectic, has come under fire by Joseph C. Flay and Judith Butler in an anthology edited by William Desmond, *Hegel and His Critics: Philosophy in the Aftermath of Hegel*.⁴¹ Both authors criticize Derrida for limiting his focus to the master-slave dialectic, and mastery in particular. Flay argues that this is to the exclusion of other instances of the *Aufhebung* and on this basis rejects the claim that the master-slave dialectic is the model for the operation of the dialectic in general. Flay’s argument assumes that Derrida’s essay is a deconstruction of the Hegelian *Phenomenology*. Yet, Derrida’s project in “From Restricted to General Economy” is arguably not so much a deconstruction of Hegel as a deconstruction of Bataille. The title of the paper uses concepts—“restricted and general economy”—first elaborated by Bataille rather than Hegel, and the subtitle—“a complicity without reserve”—far from suggests that Derrida is arguing that Bataille is simply opposed to Hegel. Moreover, we will come to see that “without reserve” suggests that the complicity between the two thinkers is in accordance with the operation of general economy.

As a means of clarifying the subtlety of Derrida’s argument here we can examine the terms in which Flay and Butler also call Derrida to account for failing to see the comicality that operates in the *Phenomenology*. Flay isolates a couple of moments of comic irony, whereas Butler goes much further, claiming not only that the structure of the *Phenomenology* mimics the comic style of Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, but also that interpreting the speculative concept of the *Aufhebung* as a comic device is possible. Butler’s work is indebted to the Hegelian scholar Jacob Loewenberg who has argued that the successive conceptions of self that natural consciousness passes through in its journey toward spirit and the absolute are retrospectively revealed to be outrageous caricatures.⁴² Flay criticizes Derrida for assuming that Hegel remains “with the seriousness of the negative, within the framework of a dialectic chained to the *Aufhebung*, rather than taking up the issue of sovereignty and its laughter with the rejected ‘abstract negativity.’”⁴³ Yet, the very proposition that Derrida is suggesting that the Hegel of the

Phenomenology should have taken on abstract negativity, sovereignty, and laughter lacks feasibility because he goes to such pains to show that these “concepts” can be thematized only in relation to the death and mastery of the *Phenomenology*. Were they interiorized by the discourse of the *Phenomenology*, they would become indistinguishable from their counterparts in restricted economy.

Contrary to Flay’s and Butler’s accusation that Derrida maintains a narrow conception of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, that he takes its operation in the master-slave dialectic to be paradigmatic and moreover paradigmatically appropriative and restricted in its economy, Derrida’s comments here indicate that he is willing to admit different forms of the *Aufhebung*; in this instance, one that functions through determinate negation and the other through analogy. Furthermore, it cannot be emphasized enough that once Derrida has acknowledged the empty form of the *Aufhebung*, attributing to the *Phenomenology* a fully determined sense becomes nearly impossible. Plotnitsky furnishes us with some insight here by arguing that general economy is *in principle* one of unusable excesses: “*in principle*, rather than only in practice. Such losses in practice would be recognized within many classical or philosophical frameworks—*restricted economies*—specifically in Hegel and Marx, to which Bataille juxtaposes the *general economy*.”⁴⁴ Following Plotnitsky, we might say that, practically speaking, the *Phenomenology* produces and indeed might rely on unusable excesses but that Bataille’s laughter does so as a matter of principle. For Derrida, it is the necessary iterability of the Hegelian text that makes it powerless to prohibit Bataille’s laughter and unable to resist the operation of the comic that wends its way through it, changing everything and nothing at the same time.

Derrida thus takes up one aspect of the thematization of death in Bataille’s philosophy of laughter, marks the place where Bataille inscribes its relation to the Hegelian dialectic and the difference between sublative negation and abstract negativity, and shows how restricted economy is doubled by general economy. Derrida’s formulation here, one could argue, suffices for the comic in general because it heeds the meaningless element that resides in comedy. Does Derrida here define the comic as just another formal mechanism? Yes and no. Yes, because he provides a rule for it; and no, because in indicating its meaninglessness he invokes the possibility of contagion that undoes formal constraint.

Bataille’s laughter at the *Phenomenology* wreaks havoc with determinate discourse, letting loose in it a certain nonrelation to what is variously designated as the sovereign operation or the comic operation. By examining the points at which Bataille’s laughter bursts out, we get a sense of the specificity of some of these operations and find that what constitutes the comic is the disruption of discourse, or, to put it another way, the subjection of meaning

to a certain nonmeaning. In this sense the comic is essentially transgressive. The story, however, does not end here. Derrida's scrutiny of the sublative character of this transgression indicates that the transgression has a limit and that thinking such transgression either as a form of absolute negation or abstract negativity is not possible. In as much as transgression is affirmed, prohibition is sublated; the prohibition negated is also maintained in transgression. From a particular perspective, sovereignty likewise interiorizes mastery and the comic interiorizes meaning. Thus, the transgressive affirmation of the general economic operation of the comic needs a restricted economy of determinate meaning. The comic is not nonsense as such, but the relation of meaning to nonsense. Because of the inseparability of these two economies and the intimacy between sense and nonsense that defines the comic, the destruction of reason can itself be given a reason. That the comic is so easily reinscribed in the order of meaning explains why theorists of the comic so efficaciously illuminate its meaning for us. But that such theorists so often fail to reflect on the implications of their practice means that in the process of taking the comic seriously they demonstrate neither more nor less of an understanding of it than those who deem it to be a worthless or dangerous enterprise.