

ONE

Beyond the Serious

[M]y efforts recommence and undo Hegel's *Phenomenology*.
—Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*

The account of Hegel's reception in the last century is a history unto itself: from being perceived as just another Romantic long since dismissed by the advance of the human sciences, to his resurrection by the revolution-inspired Marxists and their revival of interest in a dialectical world view; from his elevation in the middle of the century as the father of all things modern, to a renewed attempt to bury him under the all-encompassing webs of structuralism.¹ But whether he is being praised or diminished, it is above all his system itself that has posthumously absorbed a barrage of punches. Koyré, just one example, remarks, "the Hegelian 'system' is dead, thoroughly dead"; "the recent efforts to revive Hegelianism have, in our opinion, only managed to demonstrate, once again, the sterility of the 'system.'"² This type of pronouncement is nothing new. Writing about the reception of Hegel's thought only thirteen years after his death, biographer Karl Rozenkranz remarked, "one would have to be astounded by the vehemence with which it is attacked precisely by those who declare it dead."³ His system is often viewed as totalitarian, threatening to depersonalize the individual by turning one into a universal abstraction, to dissipate the concrete individual by absolving one from concern with the existential dilemmas a finite individual must face to assert one's genuine individuality, such as Kierkegaard posits. The system may also be comforting, particularly insofar as it eases the pain of isolation, smoothes the rough oppositions that leave one in a state of alienation, forgives one's faults by explaining them as part of the process of development, and allows one to feel that one is right, for one is a legitimate piece of a larger whole. Yet the voice whispering in the ear of modern humanity will not stop insisting that I, a trifle, am more legitimate than the whole—a tear capable of drowning the ocean. And then the individual subject is but a step away from being

seized with the tormenting feeling of being imprisoned, no doors anywhere, the fluid whole becoming a suffocating swamp.

Are we to assume that Bataille is but another link in the chain of post-Hegelian philosophy—from Feuerbach to Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer to Nietzsche—that affirms the cry of a terrorized subjectivity in the face of its dissolution into the universal? To an extent, this link is inevitable: his thought contests the idealist tendency to anaesthetize the pain of finitude. His is a philosophy of the subject that trembles in anguish before the facticity of death, it is the thought of a profoundly earthbound subject that cannot escape the sting of mortality and singularity. Yet the situation of Bataille's subject is closer to that of a subject that *wants* to lose itself in the whole, to dissolve its singularity, but owing to the nature of its subjectivity, cannot. Or more accurately—at least as concerns the issues in this chapter—Bataille addresses the tension of a subject that fears the inevitable, and acts so as to avoid it, and that same subject nevertheless compelled to look that which it fears in the face—a confrontation that will lead to an altogether different employment of its powers of action.

The first task at hand, however, is to establish the field of play for this confrontation, to see why it is Hegel who has drawn the boundaries. This endeavor shall bear affinity with an insignificant incident Bataille relates to us, that of a ladybug that has alighted on a piece of paper containing the blueprint of Hegelian architecture:

She stopped in the *Geist* column, where you go from *allgemeine Geist* [universal spirit] to *sinnliches Bewusstsein (Einzelheit)* [sensory consciousness (individuality)] by way of *Volk, Staat, and Weltgeschichte* [the People, State, and World History]. Moving along on her perplexed way she drops into a column marked *Leben* [Life] (her home territory) before getting to the center column's "unhappy consciousness," which is only nominally relevant to her.⁴

Wandering from concept to concept with chance as her guide, Bataille posits that this insignificant life—unaware of the compulsory movement of the structure over which it treads—is able to inflict wounds on the completed world of the system.

"Why Hegel?" Because Bataille's method of thought with its wandering ladybug-logic is the experience of life itself, and "I think of my life—or better yet, its abortive condition, the open wound that my life is—as itself constituting a refutation of Hegel's closed system."⁵ Bataille and Hegel, the wound and the suture. The wound, however, is inflicted by Hegel with the sword called "negativity," the blood that flows—"desire." A conflict arises, however, in that for Hegel, the sword that opens the wound is the one that closes it, a miracle-working that Bataille greets with a burst of laughter. But must this laughter be seen to indicate that Bataille did not take Hegel seriously? Or might it betray a deep affinity? Might Bataille's laughter not be one of recognition rather than derision, one that reveals—in the Hegelian ver-

naclar—a “pure self-recognition in absolute otherness”?⁶ For the fact is he took Hegel very seriously—so much so that he could not do without him.⁷ Had the line and the circle of the Hegelian system not been previously elaborated in theory and subsequently realized in modern society, Bataille’s insubordination would have all the significance of a child crying that its immediate wishes were not being fulfilled. What we must see is that, taking it seriously, Bataille was forced to immerse himself in the system, to follow its reasoning to the end in order to watch it explode at the final moment by the force of its own imperative—negativity. He will conclude that if the wound can be closed then the sword did not strike deeply enough. And essentially it is these two elements that provoke Bataille into laughter: the fact that the highest of philosophical achievements may bear within it the force of its own undoing; and the pretension of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* to conceptually master every event it encounters, and thus to recover meaning even in the risible, redeeming the meaningless. Yet we must wait and see if Bataille’s laughter effects a similar sort of redemption, or whether he is in fact laughing at his own failure to stop taking himself so seriously.

To reach this point we must immerse ourselves in Bataille’s writings, just as Bataille realized the necessity of immersion in the Hegelian system, insofar as its organic nature precludes the extraction—the scientific isolation and examination through the microscope—of its concepts from that system. The isolation of a concept would entail the loss of its meaning altogether: “Hegel’s thoughts are interdependent to the point of being impossible to grasp their meaning, if not in the necessity of the movement which constitutes their coherence.”⁸ And it will be principally this movement of the system, *Geist*, or the Concept, that is at issue. Likewise, the movement of Bataille’s interdependence with Hegel is not made of a piece, and the sliding he introduces into Hegel’s coherence is not accomplished with a single blow to its conceptual chains. While their writing is in continual movement, everything is implied in the beginning. This means one thing for Hegel—which we shall arrive at shortly—and something else for Bataille. Yet the connection of the beginning with the end means that the entirety of the Hegelian system must be put in question from the start. This putting-in-question is not, despite appearances, a rejection of Hegel. Nor, as mentioned at the start, must we add Bataille’s voice to the chorus of those who sing the “overcoming” of Hegel. Rather, he seeks to reveal the profound and inescapable truth of Hegel, all the while challenging its sense.⁹ That is, Bataille will propose to reveal Hegel’s truth only to show how it ultimately leads to non-sense.

Alternatively, we may say that Bataille ‘recommences’ Hegel’s *Phenomenology* to unearth the truth of its foundational concepts and their movement, only to ‘undo’ it in the end to rescue them from Hegel himself, from the sense to which he subordinates them. What this amounts to is in effect pitting “Hegel against the immutable Hegel.”¹⁰ That is, while he follows the internal

movement of the Hegelian dialectic, he continuously challenges its teleology of dialectically self-mediated completion whose horizon is drawn by its eschatological orientation. Yet despite this challenge, we nevertheless find Bataille saying that “he [Hegel] did not know to what extent he was right,” that is, “with what exactitude he described the movement of Negativity. . . .”¹¹ Bataille, taking his Hegel through Kojève without a dose of salt, will never challenge the privileged status of negativity: “[B]ut I know that man is negation, that he is a rigorous form of Negativity or is nothing.” Or perhaps more appropriately, he learns from Kojève that precisely because man is Negativity, he is nothing; he is the freedom of Time opposed to Space (*Sein*), therefore, *Nicht-Sein*; or ultimately, that man is desire, and thus incomplete. His refusal to abandon the movement of negativity, following it to the very end so as to push it beyond its place of rest, will be the crucial element in extending the scope of self-consciousness, and perhaps that of negativity as well.

Our concern in this chapter will be to delineate the fundamental Hegelian concepts which Bataille appropriates and in turn relates back to their Hegelian roots in order to create rips in the system. This appropriation and disorientation is the cornerstone of his method, for as Derrida tells us, at ground level, “[T]aken one by one and immobilized outside their syntax, all of Bataille’s concepts are Hegelian.”¹² In one sense then, our task is to show the extent to which Hegel, for Bataille, was right. But more importantly, we must begin to unfold the manner in which Bataille cuts his concepts loose from their moorings within the system, displaces them or puts them into play—that is, at risk.¹³ This requires that we first step back to view the general outlay of the forest before we start to follow the Hegelian signs (negativity, work, desire, risk, and recognition) posted by Kojève.

1.1 THE INWARDIZING AND THE CALVARY

Hegel, who represented for Bataille the most perfect figure of Western philosophy, the “summit of positive intelligence,”¹⁴ was curiously disturbing to one so oblivious to the demands of academic rigor. Hegel was unsettling I believe not only for the shadow he cast on the possibilities of thought after his realization of the “point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself,”¹⁵ but as well for the internal contradictions revealed between Hegel’s thought and personal experience. For while the *Phenomenology* gives the “icy impression of completion,”¹⁶ the winning of salvation in thought’s satisfaction, Hegel nevertheless “touched upon the extreme . . . believed himself to be going mad,” and perhaps even “worked out the system in order to escape.”¹⁷ His “madness,” according to Bataille, emerged from his realization of the “impossible” yet necessary suppression of subjectivity in the universal. The brand of satisfaction that results is indeed abysmal, for it “is not in any way the

forgetfulness of the impossibility from which it is born,” the impossibility of actually relinquishing one’s subjectivity while alive, “but is rather the image of it: an image of death and completion.”¹⁸ But in what way does this satisfaction differ from the attempts at knowledge advanced by Hegel’s contemporaries?

Hegel’s system is developed as a critique of the one-sidedness of both positivist Enlightenment science and the immediate intuition of the Absolute found in the Identity theories of Romantic Idealism, particularly that of Schelling. But in his own method of Science—which has been described as the search to find a proper unification of transcendental and empirical subjectivity, which is the only proper way to reach the Absolute (Substance)—he dialectically appropriated what he saw as the truth of each.¹⁹ His particular path receives its principle in the following: “In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as Substance, but equally as Subject.”²⁰ That is, the Absolute is to endure a process of alienation and restitutive self-realization in and through its own movement as Subject in the world.

This method, however, leads to complex tensions, perhaps even irrevocable contradiction, which I shall arrive at shortly. But of basic importance is to note that Hegel did not cut the bond between the Absolute and the experience of historical, empirically existing individuals. Not only did he not cut this bond, he posited the irreducibility of a nonidentical moment foreign to traditional Idealism, namely, the negativity that inserts Time into Being, without which Idealism—indeed, the history of metaphysics from Parmenides onward—would be right, as there would be nothing to oppose Thought and Being. Yet Hegel’s historical being is problematic insofar as the living individual (Subject) is in truth the (empirically?) existing Concept which slowly and painstakingly accomplishes the reconciliation between the Absolute and its external manifestations.²¹ The problem, then, as indicated above, is that insofar as the Subject is but the living manifestation of Absolute Spirit, its own internal difference, it can only be seen as a moment of the universal into which its particularity eventually vanishes.

Taking a step back, we must understand Hegel as essentially confronting the Kantian problematic found in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; that of synthetic a priori judgments faced with the irreducibility of experience, the problem of form and content expressed in the well-known formula that sums up the lessons of the Transcendental Aesthetic: “Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.”²² Kantian knowledge supposes both the Category (a priori form, advance knowledge) and intuition (content) without which thought would be vacant. The poles of form and content however are kept separate by Kant so that immediate sensation is indeterminate and unknowable until it receives the forms already existing (a priori) in the mind, in effect giving knowledge a formal and subjective character. Mind making the world conform to mind.

Kant's formal transcendental categories, translating raw sensation into spatially and temporally organized intuitions, are the possibility condition of empirical knowledge, effectively framing and editing experience. But because this epistemology digs a trench between matter and form, the intuition of phenomena does not necessarily correspond with reality, insofar as it is limited to what appears in experience. As he states, "[C]riticism has previously established our unavoidable ignorance of things in themselves, and has limited all that we can theoretically *know* to mere appearances."²³ In more formal Kantian terms: knowledge is tied to the intuition of *phenomena* (appearances), which are "middle terms" between the *noumena* (the things-in-themselves represented by phenomena) and the concepts of the understanding (*Verstand*), which are the empty, formal constructs in need of content. The noumena, however, escape, run from experiential cognition and become the negative boundary of thought. And while the awareness of the noumena behind the phenomena does lead to Reason (*Vernunft*), this as well is unsuccessful in reconciling the apparent and hidden worlds. This limitation, however, leaves a crucial opening, as he states, "I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge* [of God, freedom and immortality], in order to make room for *faith*."²⁴ Or—more relevant for those twentieth-century thinkers who have abandoned their faith—the room Kant left open by limiting the scope of knowledge was in fact a space for reflection on those others of thought: the unknown, the "unthought," or, more generally, transcendence and difference.²⁵

Hegel regarded this limit to knowledge, the gap between thought and the noumena (inner and outer, identity and difference) as well as the dissociation between noumena and phenomena, as intolerable. Which is not to say that he simply eliminates dualistic oppositions and their limits to reason, but rather that he posits them so as to move beyond them. His response to arguments for a limit would be that to recognize a limit is already to be beyond it. More specifically articulated, Hegel posits that the given is always already mediated, pregnant with its form, and hence is known not by imposing determinations but through a progressive dialectical process of unveiling them. This response entails nothing less than abolition of formal epistemology—the separation of the transcendental from the empirical—and the refusal of thought to be intimidated by the matter at hand, to abdicate before the task of knowing the whole of reality, including God. Essentially, Hegel does away with the barrier that is the core experience of Kant's transcendental philosophy, the experience of something that cannot be dissolved in consciousness. He thereby opens the possibility of the adequacy of knowledge to being.

It is precisely on this point that some of the most acrimonious debate surrounding Hegel flares up. *That* Hegel insists on overcoming all forms of incomplete knowledge by thought's mediation of all "apparent" difference, all abstraction, and its discovery of itself in and as the divine comprehension of the totality, is not debated. *How* he does this, and whether or not it is justifi-

able, is the catalyst for interpretive dispute. There are a number of ways to consider this question. One may take a quite measured approach and view Hegel as both part of, and as developing, the specific theoretical concerns of the late eighteenth century in response to what was seen as the damaging influence of the Enlightenment conception of man. As Charles Taylor lucidly analyzes it, at issue was an attempt to reject the objectifying analytic science of the Enlightenment, which not only “isolated the individual from society, and cut men off from nature,” but more fundamentally lost sight of the intrinsic unity of human life itself by viewing man as a mechanistic compound of body and mind, sensibility and reason, which comports itself toward the world as an object there for its use, *à la* Descartes.²⁶ Two ideas were central to overcoming this distorted conception: the first is what Taylor calls “expressivism,” an alternative notion of man developed primarily by Herder which saw life as an intrinsic unity that, like a work of art or Aristotelian form, reached its fulfillment through a process of unfolding or expressing itself—life as an expressive unity; the second is the conception of radically free moral subjectivity as developed by Kant in his second *Critique*. “The hope [of intellectual Germans of the 1790s] was that men would come to unite the two ideals, radical freedom and the expressive fullness [of life],”²⁷ to unite, that is, self-determining thought and the harmony of Greek life without, however, returning to the latter’s unreflective natural unity.

Taylor boils the problem, and the solution, down to the following: “How to combine the greatest moral autonomy with a fully restored communion with the great current of life within us and without? In the end, this goal is only attainable if we conceive of nature itself as having some sort of foundation in spirit. . . . But this is to say that . . . underlying natural reality is a spiritual principle striving to realize itself. [And this] comes close to positing a cosmic subject.”²⁸ The problem, on the one hand, is to posit nature not as a given, but as an intrinsically teleological process of development, and on the other, to posit man as that part of nature by which nature comes to conscious expression, and at the same time retain man’s radical freedom. The only way to do so is to assert that “human consciousness does not just reflect the order of nature but completes or perfects it. On this view, the cosmic spirit which unfolds in nature is striving to complete itself in conscious self-knowledge, and the locus of this self-consciousness is the mind of man . . . spirit reaches self-awareness in man.”²⁹ Man is not just a part of the cosmic whole, but is the “vehicle” for cosmic spirit to come to self-awareness. Consequently, nature’s self-realization is man’s self-expression. As Taylor states, “[A] conception of cosmic spirit of this kind . . . is the only one . . . which meets the requirement that man be united to the whole and yet not sacrifice his own self-consciousness and autonomous will. . . . Now it was a notion of this kind which Hegel in the end hammered out.”³⁰ But unlike his Romantic contemporaries, Hegel strove to realize this “perhaps impossible synthesis” not through an immediate intuition of the

whole, nor by recourse to the “beautiful soul” of infinite striving, but rather through the sober distinctions of rational thought and their reconciliation in reason. If we analyze certain presuppositions lying behind this aim, however, some problems emerge.

Now, it is one thing to view Hegel’s thought as an ennobling, harmonious narrative of nature, humanity, and culture coming to artistically express its internal (Aristotelian) form as it climbs the ladder from raw existence to self-realization; it is another to realize that, as Aristotelian, there is teleological guidance of this raw form to its actualized perfection; and it is still another to claim that this teleology is not one of human self-development, but rather is the working out of a rational cosmic plan underlying the whole of reality, a “designed universe” whose architect—*Geist*, God, or Nature—works out the plan in the world through its “vehicles” who, in all freedom and without knowing the outcome of this plan anterior to its expression, come to realize themselves as the very self-awareness and self-perfection of *Geist*. There is a crucial presupposition at work here, one that Joseph Flay has identified as stemming from the natural, commonsense attitude with which Hegel’s *Phenomenology* begins and that, if incorrect, will put Hegel’s whole system into question.³¹ The presupposition, in short, that there is in fact a “whole [that] also makes sense as a whole,” an Absolute (Being, God) that guarantees that everything “fits together meaningfully,”³² and that there is a possibility for finite being to achieve absolute comprehension of the Absolute to which it belongs, because the Absolute (Being) *fully discloses itself* in and to human thought.³³ Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, which begins with this presupposition and is a reconstructive description of its process of development, is thus—as Heidegger claims—the *parousia* of the absolute, its totally manifest truth.

Before we arrive at the contested implications of this double presupposition which leads to the total comprehension of the absolute, let us restate its conditions of possibility. First of all, nature, even in its most indeterminate form, is permeated by the absolute, and humanity is the locus of development of the ‘cosmic’ principle of intelligibility. Thus, even in its raw, natural state humanity has access to, and is a moment of the self-conceiving intelligibility, despite the inability to recognize and fully articulate it. However, should it achieve the proper perspective, the ‘absolute standpoint’, it would realize that every rung on the ladder that bridges natural consciousness and absolute knowledge, every moment experienced as alienation, every object experienced as an opposed other, are actually the result of an inability to grasp the larger picture, a result of fixation on its finite perspective that separates it from the whole. Thus, failure to recognize every moment as a moment in a larger plan can only rest on an insufficient level of comprehension on the part of consciousness, because Being fully discloses itself in every moment of its worldly appearance. However, as Werner Marx suggests, “[I]f what is shown to knowledge . . . is merely a side of Being permeated by hiddenness, or actually ‘with-

drawing' itself from truth proper, we then have a thought running radically counter to the possibility that the self-conceiving concept, the self evolving toward true knowledge, should be able to rediscover itself in the complete movement of thought-determinations, *qua* systematic truth."³⁴ We have, in short, the view presented by Heidegger. Herein lies the locus of debate, and this debate concerns Heidegger's infamous "ontological difference" between Being and beings, the driving force of thought itself.

Heidegger's highly influential confrontation with Hegel rests precisely on this point. It would take us too far astray to fully develop his critique, so we will confine our remarks to the results. In short, both Hegel and Heidegger are ultimately concerned with the manner in which transcendent Being crosses over the ontological divide and discloses itself in and to beings in the world. Hegel is thus a profound thinker of 'the difference'. But, as the criticism goes, he thinks the difference through in order to "eliminate" it, to "absolve" absolute knowledge from dependence on anything other than itself in assuring itself of truth.³⁵ The Absolute, as absolute, permits nothing outside it, so "difference" is no real difference, but is merely a difference *derived* from prior unity. The Absolute *produces* difference in order to reconcile its own differences in the absolute self-production of knowledge:

Consequently the task of the *Phenomenology* is to deconstruct the myth of the given. . . . With the collapse of the transcendent thing-in-itself into immanence . . . transcendental knowing is totally productive of the object, and has therefore absolved itself from any reference to or dependence on any given. The *Phenomenology* therefore deconstructs all forms of otherness and shows them to be immanent aspects or elements in a single overreaching thought, or absolute knowledge.³⁶

It is precisely such a formulation of the issue, however, that comes under fire from the recent trend to provide a "holistic" reading of absolute knowledge which emphasizes not only the cancellation, but the preservation of difference in the absolute. Under this view, the absolute is not an 'absolute other', as this would imply an unacceptable dualism, but neither is it a transcendental subjectivity that simply produces its other. Rather, it *relates* thought and Being in manner that will not simply collapse their difference. To hold this view, however, requires a rejection of Hegel's assertion of the identity of thought and Being, preferring to see Hegel as holding them apart in an intrinsic relation.³⁷

A choice is required on these matters, but in effect our present context—namely, Bataille's reading of Hegel—decides this for us: we must side with the Heideggerian reading. Having said this, we need not go to the point where we entertain the notion that this reading implies that there is simply no 'otherness' or difference, no alienation or its accompanying anxiety in the Hegelian Absolute, for otherness, alienation, and anxiety drive the *Phenomenology* forward, and constitute a number of its crucial moments. Yet neither

will we claim that Hegel does anything else than attempt to dissolve difference and opposition through the very movement of thought itself, and that there is thus, for the philosopher, a certain predetermination of experience. How are we to arrive at this claim, the one that will assure the philosopher that the thing-in-itself, with which this debate began, can indeed become available to knowledge?

To do so requires an analysis of certain elements intrinsic to his method: the entrenching of consciousness in its object using the dialectical tool of determinate negation; the notion of reflection particular to Hegel; and the belief that the real is in fact rational. This analysis will eventually lead us to Kojève. Briefly stated, determinate negation is a response to mechanistic theories of knowledge which apply their criteria from above and subsume their object under a concept, thereby keeping its hands clean of the dirty particulars. Hegel, rather, dives into the particular, giving it a lift and raising it into its own maturity. But as this is a progressive maturing, equally implied is that the thing is not yet what it is, that it is but an indeterminate shadow of its future reality. Determinate negation thus goes hand in hand with reflection, for if consciousness is directly immersed in its object then there is a likely probability that—lacking a standpoint from which to view the action—consciousness will erroneously become lost in its own involvement. The correction of error therefore requires reflection, a doubling of consciousness: the one (empirical consciousness) engaged directly in the world and the other (transcendental consciousness) relentlessly examining and correcting the knowledge of the former. The striving for knowledge of the former thus becomes the “highway of despair”³⁸ that is self-reflective experience, as each particular conclusion is criticized, proven false, and reversed, demanding that consciousness continue its seemingly endless work of determinate negation until it agrees with the real. Or until—which the same thing for Hegel—thought no longer contradicts itself.

The third presupposition is the most controversial and problematic. By assuming the rationality of the real from the start, his method appears more as a justification than an examination of reality, and seemingly even contradicts its experience. For the motor of the process is contradiction, a dehiscence between subject and object. Reflection has the task of dissolving this split through knowledge, the inwardization of the object by Spirit—Spirit being the total movement of self-mediation, which first creates the difference between subject and object only to negate it and consolidate all the particular moments into a whole. As we shall see, it is the validity of dissolving the split between subject and object *in knowledge* that Bataille, among others, continuously calls into question, thereby questioning Hegel’s claim to grasp the whole of reality.

If we follow Adorno, for example, who frequently claims that “the whole is the false”—not only because of the falsity of the notion of a closed totality

but because he finds that Reason exerts an irrational hegemony over the non-identical—then Reason cannot grasp all of reality because that reality is not Reason. This problem does not emerge for Hegel, for if something has come to be—come to be known that is—it was necessary and finds its place in the whole wherein nothing is irrelevant or gratuitous. Indeed, more than a few evils may be justified, in fact necessitated, in this manner. But above all we must see how the previous conditions of Hegelian knowledge take their place with respect to his system's ultimate condition of meaning—circularity.

Let us take reflection, for instance. With the doubling of consciousness, we know that knowledge does not depend solely upon the relation to an object, but rather on consciousness of consciousness of the object. In effect, the object of consciousness is consciousness itself. It becomes an object to itself (self-differentiation) but with the aim of returning to itself. The obvious question is whether Hegel remains faithful to his imperative of thinking reality or whether it devolves into the divine self-enclosure of thought-thinking-itself (Aristotelian *noesis noeseōs*). This is one possible conclusion of positing the Absolute as Spirit (Science or system) as given in the formula that Substance is also Subject—or, more specifically, that Substance becomes Subject to become Substance, a movement that constitutes Truth:

Further, the living Substance is being which is in truth Subject, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself. This Substance is, as Subject, pure, simple negativity, and is for this very reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis [the immediate simplicity]. Only this self-restoring sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself . . . is the True. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual.³⁹

What first comes to attention is the reduction of difference implied in the self-bifurcation and subsequent self-restoration implied in the notion of Substance as Subject. But if we read carefully, this passage points as well to the possibility of the irresolvable schism within Hegelian thought which we encountered above, a tension between two different notions of History (of Time), based on two different negativities, and implying two opposing desires.

The developmental process, the Becoming of Substance, is none other than the “unrest” that is free, contingent, and finite historical living being.⁴⁰ This “restlessness” is negativity as the desire that drives the subject out of itself, giving human existence an ecstatic, transcendent, futurizing character—the openness of time. The meaning (*sens*) of this movement however is not free but has been decided in advance (its *arche*) and is guided toward its point of realization (its *telos*) by the unseen hand of Reason. The *telos* is

reached when historical negativity yields to logical negativity which internalizes the finite manifestation of Spirit in the world, fulfilling itself in knowing itself as having completed the process of Becoming, thereby canceling the very negativity that drove the process onward, and canceling time along with it. For Hegel, the essence of history—contingent, temporal change—in a sense emerges through the annulment of its essence—in its completion or closure. And the meaning of finite life is gained through its service to the infinite Concept.

Yet this ambiguity within Hegelian Science has its traps. Kojève, as we have noted, after having read Heidegger, was lured by Hegel's admission of history and temporality into the Absolute—the finite becoming of the infinite—into offering his “anthropological” interpretation of Hegel with its emphasis on desire, death, and finitude. And while he clearly acknowledges the necessary circularity of the system—the teleological orientation that inserts becoming within an anticipative horizon of closure relative to which every moment derives its meaning—he nevertheless denies that the Hegelian narrative transcribes anything other than *human* becoming. Against the interpretation of Hegel by, for instance, Hyppolite, who endeavored to awaken the post-Kojévians from their Marxist disavowal of God in Hegel, Kojève sees in his Hegel a resolute atheist. And he asserts this specifically because of the circularity of the system, because knowledge is not related to an eternal Concept, to something outside of Time that will serve as an exterior criterion for truth. Rather, he sees that Hegel identifies the Concept (God) with Time (Man, negativity), and therefore with History, so that Being (God) reveals itself to itself through discourse in the world.⁴¹ Alternatively, we could say that Kojève advocated a Christian view provided that the criterion for truth is not granted to a transcendent God, but rather to human existence in the world.

Bataille however, in one of the few instances that he directly challenges Kojève, states, “I do not believe that Hegel was entirely the atheist that Alexandre Kojève saw in him.”⁴² Now, this is hardly a daring statement considering that its referent (Hegel) is the one for whom philosophy was *Gottesdienst*, the one for whom the content of religion and the content of philosophy were one and the same.⁴³ Yet the very need for such an assertion tacitly points to the grip that Kojève's anthropocentric interpretation had on his followers. Bataille nevertheless affirms Hegel's theism for two interrelated reasons: the first is his acute awareness that the movement of the Absolute found in the *Phenomenology* mirrors the “life of God [Spirit],”⁴⁴ and thus that the phenomenology of absolute knowledge is not strictly the science of finite human being; secondly, he believes that if the movement of the *Phenomenology* is followed to its end, it reaches a state of satisfaction that could only belong to God—namely, absolute knowledge—or a satisfaction that could perhaps only be granted by God—namely, universal recognition—both of which are as unknowable to humanity as God is.

The first reason is made explicit through the manifestation of Absolute Spirit (God) through the incarnation and death of Christ: the Absolute dividing or negating itself in becoming finite existence/Jesus (Subject), dying (the Calvary), and being sublated (the *Aufhebung*, or the Inwardization) into the original unity with the Absolute. First, a word on the incarnation. Hegel thoroughly opposed any notion of a narcissistic *Deus Incurvatus*, an abstract, self-enclosed (or jealous) divine which would set itself in dualistic opposition to finite life. For reasons both theological and conceptual, he rejects the Scholastic tradition of the divine as *summum esse*, stating that the life of God so conceived as self-enclosed love “sinks into mere edification, and even insipidity, if it lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative.”⁴⁵ Hegel prefers to view God as more of an Aristotelian actuality (*energeia*), a dynamic process of self-revelation that involves development in and through the finite. For the adequate self-revelation of God there must be differentiation and alienation: God must have a representation to overcome abstraction and become actual. Christ is this finite representation of the Absolute, its self-alienation, but this alienation cannot remain, or we would have a God with an unhappy consciousness. The Dasein of Christ must be overcome so that the meaning of Christ can be appropriated. Thus, the true meaning of Christ does not lay with his incarnation or actual existence—which is in fact a dialectically surpassable moment—but rather with his death. The absence of his actuality permits the presence of Spirit.

Now, it should be remarked that while Bataille as well affirms the transformative aspect of death, Hegel’s spiritual treatment of the sensuous, tragic crucifixion of Christ may well be seen as a dividing line in their thought, similar to the one that Nietzsche posed between “Dionysus and the Crucified.” That Hegel added a “speculative” to the Good Friday sacrifice implies that the negative is already a positive, that the death of Christ is the “death of death,”⁴⁶ *the death of finitude itself* insofar as through this death the finite being attains universal significance in the eternal life of Spirit.⁴⁷ The death of Christ, like every moment put to death in the system, is inseparable from his recuperation by the Spirit, for Christ’s death is in fact God’s “return from the state of estrangement,” which is “His return to Himself. . . . Negation is consequently surmounted, and the negation [death] of the negation [Christ] is thus a moment of the Divine nature.”⁴⁸ That death is an integral moment of the Spirit receives perhaps its most widely cited expression when Hegel claims, “[B]ut the life of the Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death . . . but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it.”⁴⁹ But if life is maintained in death then nothing is truly lost. In fact the situation is quite the contrary. For while Spirit undergoes “utter dismemberment,” it as well has the “magical power” that “converts [death] into being,”⁵⁰ or as stated elsewhere, converts death into *knowledge*.⁵¹ This realization prompts Bataille to comment—leaving the obvious theological problems aside—that the tragic view of the death

of Jesus partakes in comedy, insofar as it implies an arbitrary introduction of the notion that an infinitely powerful God has somehow forgotten His eternal divinity—has forgotten, that is, that finite death is but a step toward eternal life.⁵²

The dialectic that drives this sublimating conversion is an essential facet of Hegelian thought that Bataille calls into question. For if the force animating the dialectic is negativity, the very force that leads Bataille to claim, “[M]an always becomes other. Man is the animal who continually differs from himself . . . ,”⁵³ Hegel uses the same force to claim, “[T]he power of Spirit lies rather in remaining the selfsame Spirit in its externalization [negation].”⁵⁴ The divine both wounds and heals itself simultaneously. Therefore, while Spirit’s trajectory follows a path of dialectical differentiation and alienation of self in otherness, the mediation in and through the other is in the end the mediation of the self in the form of its own otherness. Spirit attains its truth through dialectical self-mediation, including a moment of otherness but ultimately subordinating that moment to the self-realizing movement of the Whole. That it remains the same, however, is only revealed at the end of the process, its internal structure consisting in a continuous process of alienation and change (History).

Bataille recognizes both of these factors as necessary: that along with differentiation into the finite (self-othering), closure or completion is a necessary constituent of meaning. He states, “[I]t was Hegel’s greatness to see that knowledge depends on completeness,”⁵⁵ and further that “imagining an ingathering at the end of time (Hegel) or outside time (Plato) is surely a mental necessity. This necessity is real: it’s the condition of meaning. . . .”⁵⁶ This necessity presupposes an anticipatory and closed structure, for as noted above, meaning (*sens*) implies having a sense of direction, a *telos* that gives the journey its sense—and thus its meaning. And the predetermined end of Hegel’s journey is the realization of Absolute Knowledge, a “satisfaction” that “turns on the fact that a project for knowledge, which existed [from the outset], has come to fruition, is accomplished, that nothing . . . remains to be discovered.”⁵⁷ Hegel knew no other aim than knowledge and it is to self-mediating knowledge that he reduced the entirety of existence, effectively crushing the distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-myself. If Being consists in being-known, and being-known is equivalent to being-mine, then all of Being is reduced to the meaning it has for knowing subjectivity. Again, an outcry from Bataille—not against the necessity of closure for meaning, but *against the necessity of meaning itself*.

The protest on this point is varied and complex, and shall guide us through the remains of our discussion. The first issue raised is Bataille’s claim that it is possible to view Absolute Knowledge as simply one knowledge among others, as simply a higher, more voracious form of the common knowledge which seeks to make the unknown known.⁵⁸ Taking this principle to the extreme,

Hegel's philosophy—intending to finish the job Kant started—freely proceeds in “speculations that more or less have as a goal . . . ; the sufficient identification of an endless world with the finite world, an unknowable (noumenal) world with the known (phenomenal) world.”⁵⁹ This identification, however, which essentially affirms the identity of Being and Knowledge, and which Hyppolite calls “the decisive point of Hegelianism,”⁶⁰ is what Bataille rejects.

Following Hyppolite for a moment, he points to that “through which we are able to think the unthinkable, to what makes Hegel simultaneously the greatest irrationalist and the greatest rationalist who has existed,”⁶¹ which is the positing of the intrinsic, indeed internal, relation between sense and non-sense that delineates non-sense as merely the self-contradiction of thought, its mute double. And if non-sense (Nature, matter, immediacy) is mute, it is not for being without its proper *logos*—and thus nonexpressive—but rather that it is merely pre-expressive, and will come to speak itself in the *logos* of knowledge. The movement of thought is thus not from non-sense to sense, but rather from sense to sense: in short, there is only sense; and non-knowledge is the internal difference of knowledge.

Now, the main targets here are those philosophies that posit the limit of articulate knowledge (Kant) and those that yield to this limit and posit the direct apprehension of an inconceivable and ineffable content (Jacobi, Fichte, and Schelling). Yet Kojève, despite his adherence to Absolute Knowledge, but because of the positing of an ontological dualism between Being and Thought, must be added to this list. The essential factor here is Kojève's humanization of negativity and nothingness, his denial of negativity, and thus dialectic, to Nature.⁶² Negativity, thus history, and in fact all of reality is the prerogative of the human being alone, without which Nature (non-sense) is mere Identity, an immobile rock incapable of self-differentiation. Now, Kojève does not much concern himself with non-knowledge, but one may assume that two of Bataille's critical ideas arise insofar as he adheres to Kojève's position that humanity is negativity and that it is only thanks to that negativity that Being is revealed in human discourse.

First of all, Bataille will reject the discursive ‘knowability’ of the sensuous, immediate unknown, the notion that the unknown is simply in the process of becoming known, that it gives itself of itself to knowledge—that it is the unknown *of* knowledge—and thus is not unknowable. Thus, with respect to a claim such as Hyppolite's—that the “phantom” of the unknowable must be “exorcised” in the name of Absolute Knowledge—Bataille will respond with the claim that it is possible to view Absolute Knowledge as merely an interpretive necessity of logic. In his view, Hegel logically coerces negativity into collaboration with the constitution of meaning through the *Aufhebung* that converts every negative into a positive, generating sense from the senseless.

The second notion—more significant for us here—is that negativity will not disappear when thought reaches its goal. That is, the notion that Being

and Thought are not identical will lead Bataille to the conclusion that there is a residue of Being beyond Thought. And if this stain on thought is indelible, then the subject of negativity—who thinks—and Being do not fall together in Thought. Thought, stemming from an unsatisfied negativity, can thus no longer be “Absolute,” for “if nonsense is sense, the sense which is nonsense . . . becomes nonsense once again (without possible end) . . . [thus] knowledge is access to the unknown. *Nonsense is the outcome of every possible sense.*”⁶³ Denis Hollier has identified the problematic—which has far-reaching implications that we shall certainly not exhaust here—much more succinctly, claiming: “All of Bataille’s reading of Hegel takes as its main line that the subject and knowledge are mutually exclusive. This exclusion is implicit everywhere, in every project for knowledge, but only the ambition to absolute knowledge brings it out into the open.”⁶⁴ The subject—negativity—does not come to a halt in absolute knowledge.

Perhaps the first real attempt to take this problem seriously on Hegel’s own grounds is found in Bataille’s 1937 letter to Kojève, and more importantly, the second draft of the letter which appeared in 1944.⁶⁵ This letter is written with the assumption that Kojève’s hypothesis of the end of history is valid, which is in fact the starting point for all of Bataille’s subsequent reflections. The completion of history can be interpreted in different ways. In Kojève’s terms it signifies the end of opposition: the passage into homogeneous society through the dissolution of the class conflict that drove the historical process, leaving only a resignation to the monotonous treadmill of reasonable pursuits which effectively change nothing; and the mastery of nature by the laboring hands of humanity, so that nature is no longer alienating, posing no resistance—which is one of the notions that earned Kojève’s interpretation the title of “Cartesian theology.”⁶⁶ In Hegelian terms it signifies that human consciousness has in fact become Reason (or the Concept), concluding the movement through which consciousness has sought to overcome its difference (its object), thereby completing knowledge in the identity of thought and being. And in general terms it signifies that humanity—negativity—no longer has anything *to do*.

This final implication is what most concerns Bataille. And what is of concern is that, given the end of resistance to human knowledge and endeavor, the human being should be satisfied—but this is not the case. For even if action (negativity) has vanished, and philosophy along with it, the existence of humanity as negativity has not. The question Bataille asks is simply this: what becomes of negativity? His answer—it remains, but is “unemployed.” At the end of history the human being is “unemployed negativity.” And then further questions arise, namely; what is to become of this “unemployed” or “useless” negativity—if in fact it becomes something—and can it be recognized for what it is once it no longer manifests itself in action? And if there is nothing to do with this negativity, does our existence become a question without doors

or windows, with no way out? Does Hegel's "triumph of meaning" in the final reconciliation with all forms of otherness simply leave us at the gates of non-meaning, aimless, with only absurd pursuits to fill our time, discontented with everything because even absolute wisdom was insufficient?

Two potential solutions are offered in art and religion. We shall take these up at a later point, but for the moment we find that at least when first formulating the problem Bataille believed that neither of these solutions offers negativity the possibility to be "recognized as such," for in both it still receives an objective form, allowing it to be "introduced into a system that nullifies it, and only the affirmation is recognized."⁶⁷ As with the life of Christ, the recognition of negativity through the positive value it receives in fact precludes the recognition of the negative loss itself. Therefore, the paths available for "objectivization of negativity" that remain "at the end" are fundamentally different from those available while the gears of the Hegelian system were still in motion. The only option left at the end of History is for the man of "unemployed negativity" to become the man of "recognized negativity"—to be "recognized for what it is: negativity without content."⁶⁸ But what is "negativity without content" if not a definition of desire?

Even more precisely, it is the desire for nothing, the nothing that something or object can never satisfy, and which will become in Bataille's view the desire to lose rather than gain. Or as Bataille coins it, desire becomes "supplication without response"—the pleading with an object or God to hand itself over to the subject, a prayer that can never be answered because the object desired is no object. In fact, then, "unemployed negativity" does not become something, but rather becomes the nothing of pure desire. This too has its manifestations, found in what Bataille terms the "sovereign operation," the remaining possibility for negativity once it no longer has anything to do. With this in mind, if it manifests itself it nevertheless does not objectively present itself, does not command any action, but rather occurs as an "inner experience" which is not inner, but is rather a movement toward an infinitely withdrawing 'object'.

Negativity, desire, recognition; these notions are unmistakably Hegelian. If we are to see how Bataille subverts their meaning—or more precisely, how he shows the double sense of negativity and its vicissitudes—it is necessary to enter the dialectic in which this meaning is most evidently constituted. That is, we must enter the dialectic of Master (*Herr*) and Slave (*Knecht*), alternatively named the dialectic of desire, or of recognition.⁶⁹ For it is truly by traveling the path of this dialectic that Bataille will open upon the clearing of sovereignty.

1.2 THE SOVEREIGNTY OF SERVILITY

Hegel's most notorious dialectic, returned to the forefront of philosophical thought in France by Kojève's teachings, had a profound impact on Bataille's

thought. Indeed, traces of Kojève's interpretation of this dialectic—which he inflated into the foundational moment not only in the *Phenomenology* but as well in the movement of History—can be found throughout Bataille's works, in effect serving as a point of orientation. Indeed, Bataille posits that “the dialectic of the master and the slave . . . is the decisive moment in the history of the consciousness of self and . . . no one knows anything of *himself* if he has not understood this movement which determines and limits man's successive possibilities.”⁷⁰ Thus, even if Kojève's anthropomorphic and Marxist account too heavily accents the importance of this dialectic, we are obliged to follow its path to the letter. Now, the pathways of the Master/Slave conflict are generally known to the point of being self-evident, even if its place in history is not.⁷¹ Its evidence, however, does not necessarily imply an awakening to it. Rather its undeniable presence is like that of an unconscious residue that—when kept buried—seemingly alleviates its gravity. Perhaps this is why many readers of Bataille take Hegel so lightly. Yet it is necessary to bring this residue to the surface, to bring it to self-consciousness, for that is really the only way to lighten the load.

The Master/Slave dialectic is situated in the transition between (natural) consciousness and (human) self-consciousness, the movement toward which—for Hegel—is the path to self-certainty. In this process the subject comes to explicitly realize that which was implicitly established in the forms of consciousness (sense-certainty, perception, and understanding), as the subject comes to see itself in and behind, and thus independent of objective reality. That is, consciousness comes to see itself as the unity of the Concept which in fact creates the multiple distinctions it previously understood to be objective. The inner world of the mind and the inner being of things—previously dissociated by appearance—gradually merge together, a process which begins the dissolution of the Kantian thing-in-itself (noumena) referred to above.

If consciousness ignores itself through its immersion in the world, self-consciousness—becoming aware of (reflecting) its projection of itself in and through the appearing beings of the world—in essence returns out of the otherness of the world to grasp itself. Yet the world's otherness is, to an extent, irreducible. Consciousness is never actually separated from its object, but simply perceives it improperly, that is, in opposition to consciousness. Therefore, self-consciousness (desire)⁷² brings both the awareness of self as alienated from the world and the desire to overcome this separation or dependence on externality. This dual situation is corroborated, for example, in Freud's theory that an object comes into existence at the point where being (Substance) is lost. Were Bataille to translate this theory, it would read, “[Desire] kindles desire for being at the point where being is lost.”⁷³ In this sense, desire is both a sign of internal differentiation denoting that we have lost our ‘natural’ sense of wholeness, and is the source of alienation, an awareness of the external differentiation of “I” from the “non-I,” the dissatisfied feeling of being-at-a-lack.⁷⁴

Yet insofar as desire is that force that drives us from lure to lure in search of satisfaction, for Being, then it cannot simply be pure lack. Rather, as we must consider as we continue, desire may betray an overdetermination that, from the perspective of clear consciousness, may be perceived as a lack insofar as it is indeterminate, or in excess of determination. But to the extent that desire-as-lack is placed at the forefront of the investigation, a tension emerges from which escape is impossible: the inviolable feeling of human life is insufficiency. We are beings lacking Being, and are driven by a quest for sufficient, complete being, yet Being is nowhere that we could grasp it. Nevertheless, we cannot renounce the search. There is no way out.

For as we know all too well, immediate satisfaction—sexual or otherwise—is fleeting. No sooner is desire satisfied and the subject restored to itself than another lure comes around the corner and one is beside oneself once again. To truly begin the process of reconciling self and world therefore requires a specific object, one that reflects the truth of self-consciousness—a truth that is, as Hegel tells us, nothing other than Desire.⁷⁵ Desire must find its proper object for, “generally speaking, the I of Desire is an emptiness that receives a real positive content only by the negating action that satisfies Desire in destroying, transforming, and ‘assimilating’ the desired non-I.”⁷⁶ As Desire, the subject is pure negating-negativity without content, and the object desired and subsequently negated determines the nature of the desiring subject.

Should that which is desired be a thing or a given natural object (itself), the subject will remain at this level. Such is the case with animal desire, which dissolves self-awareness through the immediacy of its negation of the object, plunging it back into darkness upon satisfaction. In killing, eating, or fleeing an external object, the object in which one may recognize oneself is removed—which is no problem for the animal that simply wants to stay alive. But if desire is to lead to self-consciousness, it must be directed toward a non-natural object, something capable of transcending its given reality, capable of negating itself, dying to itself. It must be directed, that is, toward another desire, toward an other which is the manifestation of the desiring consciousness itself in an external guise. Furthermore, if desire is to find itself in this other, and be recognized by the other, it cannot kill or eat it (negate it). Rather, the other must stay alive and at the same time negate itself, thereby *revealing itself* as another emptiness, another desire, a *manifestation* of the truth of the subject—negativity. In this abstract description we have found that “*second self*”⁷⁷ which is the slave.

The situation establishing the positions described above is in fact not an abstract one, but, rather, occurs in a fight to the death between the two players—a fight that Bataille obliquely, yet significantly refers to as “The game” (*Le jeu*).⁷⁸ Conflict is the first step on the path to intersubjectivity, the sphere of recognition, for without this conflict, “the conscious subject would remain in its routine of self-certainty and subjective knowledge.”⁷⁹ And this “fight”

occurs precisely because each subject involved views itself as the essential reality, independent from all otherness, a view which is then challenged by the other who holds the same attitude toward himself. What is then essential to realize is that the positions of this intersubjective relation are established by the combatant's respective attitudes towards life and death, for it is above all the disregard for life that confirms an end to otherness and dependence.⁸⁰ More specifically: the one who becomes the slave, when confronted with the possibility of death and propelled into anxiety at this prospect, chooses not to take the risk of dying and opts for a life of servitude and dependence. The horror of death and subsequent flight from it is the origin of slavery in particular, and is the precondition of conscious individualization in general.

The slave's shying away from death shows that he prefers to remain tied to the given world, which amounts to a choice for servility over freedom, dependence over self-sufficiency. This is negatively established through Hegel's principle—one that is essential for Bataille—that "it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won."⁸¹ The slave does retain a certain freedom in the ability to negate and transform the given world, even if this is accomplished under compulsion of fear, but in truth the freedom of negativity is hollow if it loses the strength to risk life itself. Indeed, the fundamental condition of possibility for genuine self-consciousness is the willingness to freely risk one's life. And the refusal to squander one's vital resources represents for Bataille nothing less than an abdication from the possibility of realizing one's ultimate truth.

It therefore seems that we should look to the other side of the equation, to the one who accepts the possibility of death for a nonvital, essentially useless end—for pure prestige—to find the representation of freedom that Bataille is seeking. It is the master who represents for Bataille the sovereign attribute in Hegel's dialectic, which is "the fact of a man's having staked his whole being" through the "reckless expenditure of vital resources."⁸² And it is this expenditure—which we will later encounter in one of Bataille's privileged paradigms, the potlatch—that carries the connotation of sovereign freedom, whereby one shows that one is "not attached to any specific existence . . . is not tied up with life."⁸³ Or as Bataille repeatedly states; the master, the sovereign existence, escapes the anguish of death, treating death "as if it were not."⁸⁴ We will examine this in greater detail below.

What we must note here, however, is that Bataille could not be more clear about the derivation of his notions of "sovereignty" and "servility" from Hegel. He states: "In the Hegelian dialectic, the sovereign share of man has indifference to death, the risk of death confronted, for its foundation, the servile part proceeds from the fear, or moreover the horror of death."⁸⁵ At first glance, Bataille's "sovereignty" indeed seems identical to Hegel's mastery (*Herrschaft*), for both are established through risking or putting into play (*mettre en jeu*) the entirety of one's existence. And even though Bataille again states that "the