

CARL RASCHKE  
University of Denver

## BATAILLE'S GIFT

**C**AN WE "DEFINE" POSTMODERNISM? Heretofore postmodernism has been defined as indefinable, but that lack of definition is more a rhetorical dodge than a commitment. Let us define it as the lightning storm of the twentieth century that at last became lyrical.

That century is now past, but its atmospheric conditions remain with us. Nietzsche himself prophesied an era of wars and upheavals, climactic shifts in axiology as well as ontology. Postmodernism has given song to those shifts. Like the angel appearing to the apostles in prison, it freed philosophy and culture from what Fredric Jameson has called the "prison house of language." Or it tortured the shape of the prison itself beyond recognition. The era of postmodernism, conceived long before its actual historical parturition by Nietzsche, found its signature in the economy of signs and the fragmentation of discourse, first fully exploited in the style of the aphorism. It is no coincidence that the two "levelers" of the philosophical modern terrain—Nietzsche and Wittgenstein—wrote in aphorisms.

But we cannot truly comprehend the postmodern condition without considering the sublimity of the storm, the harnessing of the power of the aphorism to disclose not difference, but ecstasy and excess. All postmodern "thinking," therefore, begins in a strange sense with Georges Bataille. Bataille should not be read as a "philosopher" by any stretch of the mind. Nor is he merely some belletristic oddity who happened to draw the intellectual attention, like ancient Theravada meditation, to the primordially of body fluids. Bataille's calculated obscenity and brutality is no different from Derrida's marginalia. It is intended to focus on the alterity posed by all writing. In that sense, postmodernism is merely the final flash of the modernist project. If the ultimate aim of modernism was not an aim at all, but pure self-referentiality and total transparency, then postmodernism completes the passage. Language no longer speaks. The text talks to itself. It sheds all pretension beyond itself, and gazes with full clarity at its own

permeability and gaps.

But that is not all that postmodernism has ever been about. Nor what Bataille was about. We must read Bataille's journal of the lightning storm, the strange epic of a scrivener, of poetic self-mortification, which he named *Le Coupable*, or simply *Guilty* in English, commencing with the Nazi assault on Poland. "The date I start (September 5, 1939), is no coincidence. I'm starting because of what's happening, though I don't want to go into it. I'm writing it down because of being unable *not* to."<sup>1</sup> The scribbling is more than some spirit-infested "automatic writing." All that is happening, Bataille writes, "takes place in a fiery penumbra," an utter tangentiality hovering above the landscape of awesome and impending devastation. "I won't speak of war, but of mystical experience."<sup>2</sup> It is "blameless, shameless." For days into the war, and as his nomadism and flight from the encroaching chaos takes on an ethereal familiarity, Bataille meditates upon those themes that have haunted his imagination since he left Catholicism for the avant-garde: the thought of sacrifice and whoredom. These themes struggle toward the very lyricality that will later become the "language" of the postmodern. "Instead of avoiding laceration I'd deepen it."<sup>3</sup> Laceration and ecstasy – the excess of differentiation – are conjugate with each other. The drive of rhetoric all along has emanated from the ecstasy of nihilation, against what Derrida would later term the "logocentrism" of Greco-Christian universalism, the citadels of ontotheology. Libertinism is simply the uncouth stepsister to a metaphysical particularism, Deleuze's univocity or "logic of sense." It all concerns the abdication of language. "A few Christians have broken from the language world and come to the ecstatic one. In their case, an aptitude has to be supposed which made mystical experience inevitable *in spite of Christianity's essential reliance on speech.*"<sup>4</sup>

The death of God is a celebration of incompleteness. Death is not really a finality; it is the imperfection of life, the sovereignty of the unfinished. It does not take mathematics, but rather rhetoric to illustrate Gödel's theorem that the demonstrable is paradoxically incomplete. The very idea of meaning as a "deconstructive" moment first occurs in Bataille's jottings, over two decades before Derrida. "Constant human errors would express the incomplete character of reality – and so of truth. Knowledge proportionate to its object – if that object is incomplete in its very being – would develop in every way. This knowledge would be, as totality, a huge architecture in *deconstruction and construction*, both at the same time, uncoordinated or barely so, but never through and through so

---

<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice CA: The Lapis Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, 37.

they overlap.”<sup>5</sup>

Although postmodernism as a recognizable theory of truth and signification begins with Derrida's "grammatology," it is Bataille's writing that makes possible the deconstruction of writing. Bataille, who dies just as Derrida begins to write and publish, seeks the holiness of excess that transfigures writing as something *more than* writing. *Guilty* is the writing of excess, the excess of war, the Second World War. The Second World War did not, unlike the first, purport to end all wars, but abolished the illusion that war can be ended. The end of the illusion of the end of war is what postmodernism really means in the philosophical domain. The Orwellian dictum can now be reversed as a kind of a paralognism that surreptitiously pries apart the truth—that peace is always a hidden war, even if war is never peace. The "peace of God" is the metaphysical lie that language must always be grounded in the surety of substance. When Nietzsche wrote that the denial of God's death has been aided and abetted by the confidence in "grammar," he was giving voice to a prolepsis concerning the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Twentieth century thought is commonly demarcated by what has been called "linguistic turn," which might be better characterized as a dogmatism of representational coherence, of the regimen of sentences, of *linguisticism*. The linguisticism of early twentieth century philosophy, like a snorting barbarian chieftain laying claim to the smoking ruins of the shattered Roman *imperium*, replaced the speculative idealism that had infected the universities in the late nineteenth century and come crashing down with the disillusionment of the Western world following the Great War. Nietzsche's prolepsis is much more profound than we ever realized.

The ascendancy of grammar and the strategy of language analysis was, as Nietzsche foresaw, the shroud laid over the sheet of the corpse in order to hide its unpleasant deformations, if not its exhalations. In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche had made his well-known distinction between "active" and "passive" nihilism. Active nihilism is the job of the philosopher qua Zarathustran prophet. It is the assault on the citadels of conceptual certitude, on the cultural and moral platitudes which remain tenacious, but unexamined—the work of philosophy in its classic operation, the critique of belief and value Socrates first undertook. Active nihilism, which Nietzsche could only push forward as a project by abandoning the "argument" and perfecting the aphorism, runs the risk of transforming reasoning into rhetoric, mainly because it applies the philosophical "hammer" to grammar.

But, as those who have repeatedly corrected the popular misreading of Nietzsche

---

<sup>5</sup> Bataille, *Guilty*, 42. Italics mine.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §354.

understand, philosophizing with a hammer does not amount to the smashing of visible idols. Hammering is an act of semiotic intelligence gathering; it is a discernment of the substancelessness of substance, of the emptiness of the construct, of the unreason of the rationality that is circumscribed within the "limits of reason alone." Active nihilism reveals the passive, or unacknowledged, nihilism of the "architects" of pure reason. In that respect the postmodern project cannot truly be called "nihilistic," as its uncritical critics have been murmuring for decades now. For the project discloses the *nihil* that insinuates itself into every *ens*, a realization which Heidegger dubbed the "end of philosophy" and which applies to theology as well. The active "nihilism" of postmodernism is, as Bataille first described, is the "deconstruction" that belongs to the mobile and morphing architecture of signification. The death of God and the baring of the *nihil* inside of civilization require a "writing" that amounts to what Nietzsche described as the "hardness" of creation. Bataille is neither an artist nor a philosopher, but a writer/creator.

Writing is for Bataille, as desire becomes for Lacan, a flowing "signature" that both deconstructs the "grand narrative" of Western theo-grammatology and reconstructs for an instant at least its uncharted signifying possibilities. Like all signatures, it is unique, a rhythm and a kind of "fractal geometry" of projections and eruptions, of intricate breaks and flows along the lines that Gilles Deleuze characterizes as the "conceptual persona." *Logos* becomes *rhetor*, the flux of intimations and signs. Bataille writes as much about the reddening sunrise or a woman's sensuality as he does about the role of philosophy. Postmodernism is the "alternative universe" of the pure writer. But it is a universe into which we diehard "grammarians" are slowly fading, inexorably but blissfully and triumphantly. It is our retreat from the advancing armies of scientific, cognitive, and discursive precision.

Postmodernism is the great escape from the prison house of language. More precisely, it is the confession of the false transcendence that "modernism" has bestowed as our legacy with its metaphysics of the sovereign subject. The idol of the sovereign subject is nothing more than an historical monument signaling the "mirror stage" of an increasingly conscious strategy of collective desire. Bataille maps out the originary strategy in his discussion of the prehistoric cave art of Lascaux, in the engineering of art and sacrifice. The birth of art coincides with the overflow of "life" beyond its forms and boundaries. That was Nietzsche's point. Art is always "overcoming." The difference between Nietzsche and Bataille is that the former understands the moment of overflow, or superfluity, as a transition beyond the human, the "all too human," as the advent of the mysterious symbolic asymptote, the trope of tropes, that Nietzsche names *Übermensch*, or "overman." The overflow is a prolepsis; it is futuristic. For Bataille, it is aboriginal. The human has not yet comprehended its own intrinsic

eschatology.

What remains uncertain is where to situate the initial step from prohibition to transgression; that is to say, at what moment did transgression, given free rein in an outburst of festivity, first obtain the decisive role it had in human behavior ever since? Such a principle does not contradict the specific interpretations every work separately inspires. A work of art, a sacrifice contain something of an irrepressible festive exuberance that overflows the world of work, and clash with, if not the letter, the spirit of the prohibitions indispensable to safeguarding the world ... a work of art in which this desire cannot be sensed, in which it is faint or barely present, is a mediocre work. Similarly, there is a specific motive behind every sacrifice: an abundant harvest, expiation, or any other logical objective ... every sacrifice has its cause in the quest for a sacred instant that, for an instant, puts to rout the profane time in which prohibitions guarantee the possibility of life.<sup>7</sup>

The ubiquity of sacrifice among "primitive" humanity betokens this urge toward self-transcendence. It is a point Nietzsche himself made obliquely. The "idea" of God is something extraordinarily different than the will to power that invents gods and plays God. Theology is to art as taxidermy is to the procreative process. Art is the surging of life into its ocular alterity. The "representations" in the flickering torches of the cave chamber at Lascaux have little to do with the craft of imitation. They are the ceremonial production of the "animal-human" that drives toward its most "lifelike" configuration.

But this lifelikeness is paradoxically non-figurative, at least not in its intent. The anonymous Lascaux painters aim to inhabit the vitality they limn with ochre. Their art is "deconstructive" in the measure that it becomes an exhibition of excess. Bataille's "sacred instant" is achieved only through a sensual transgression of workaday routines that must somehow be put aside and, if only for a while, left behind. Bataille notes that the act of *mimesis* in the primitive aesthetic of the kind discovered at Lascaux is quite different from the stylized and formalized "naturalism" that served as the spark of the early modern art. In the spirit of Nietzsche, Bataille remarks that the first works of art "were something new: out of nothing, they created the world they figure."<sup>8</sup> "Man" begins, rather than ends, as overman. Only later does humanity settle into a regime of emulating and replicating the past which we call "tradition." Civilization thus is more a fall than an advance. Humanism is not exaltation; it is decadence. The civilizing process amounts to an ordering of the sacrificial impulse, which slowly turns "sacramental" and religious. The ecstasy of the esthetic transgression

---

<sup>7</sup> George Bataille, *Lascaux: The Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse, 38-9.

<sup>8</sup> Bataille, *Lascaux*, 130.

vanishes into the normalization of sacred forms, rites, and symbols.

The familiar furniture of the sacred becomes Durkheim's "collective representations" out of which language and thought spring. As Nietzsche understood, Greek philosophy is the progeny of Dionysus. The Dionysian is prior to the "Apollonian." Philosophy is the Dionysian consciousness expanding beyond the mere furor of the instincts. "What then is it that brings philosophical thinking so quickly to its goal? Is it different from the thinking that calculates and measure only by virtue of the greater rapidity with which it transcends all space? No, its feet are propelled by an alien, illogical power—the power of creative imagination."<sup>9</sup> The dawning of culture is synchronous with the "birth of tragedy" which is intimately entwined with the frenzy of the blood sacrifice. And it is the tragic destiny of thought that it must seek its origins in the moment of transgression, in the nocturnal excesses of the sacrificial rite. Like Pentheus sidling up to the Bacchae in their ecstatic celebration, thought always runs the risk of coming too close to the chaos it is compelled to contemplate. The question is not what Athens has to do with Jerusalem so much as what Königsberg has to do with Lascaux. For Bataille, the two are much closer than we realize.

Bataille, not Nietzsche, signals the birth of postmodernism. Nietzsche may aptly be regarded as the harbinger of the "end of philosophy" in Heidegger's—not Hegel's—sense. For Nietzsche, philosophy ends in the apocalyptic self-implosion he terms nihilism. "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism ... For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect."<sup>10</sup> But Bataille's prose is one that contains the most exacting reflection. In a sense it supersedes philosophy. The very concept of a "postmodern philosophy" amounts to a strange sort of catachresis. The postmodern is also post-philosophical, as Bataille's writings illustrate. Bataille's "general economy" in which the calculus of exchange gives way to a grandiose, "solar" potlatch—a festival of sacrificial exuberance—prefigures the turn of philosophy to writing, where all discursive restraints are now lifted and where the "gift" of being—Heidegger's *es gibt*—is now iterated as the word untethered. Bataille's writing is beyond writing to the *pure mobility of the sign*.

Bataille does not invent the theory of the sign by any means. But he transforms

---

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962), 40.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 3.

thought into signification through the evocation of all extremes of eroticism, obscenity, cruelty, and violence. Thought can only accomplish its task when it ponders the unspeakable. Until the idea of the "postmodern" became the whipping boy for rationalists and constructivists of all stripes, modernism—particularly in art—was regularly singled out for its drive toward the dissolution of culture. But that is exactly the point, according to Bataille. The dissolution belongs to the entropy of civilization as a whole. Civilization is the "river that wants to reach its end." Bataille's "heroism," as contrasted with nihilism, seeks to transform pure decadence into thought, thereby redeeming it. Bataille's critics have repeatedly speculated to what degree he either participated in, or longed to participate in, the gruesome horrors he limned with the fantasy brush of his essays and *pensées*.

But Bataille's perversions, real or conjectured, are in themselves tropes for something far more subtle and consequential. They are the effort to make our notions fluid, even if it requires a preoccupation with orgies and body fluids. This fluidity is the "gift" of language and ontology taken to excess. It is transgression with a global and epochal strategy, a latter day Lascaux.

What we might call the "post-ontology" of postmodernism has its signature in the esthetics that emerged at the time of the First World War. Just as classical art and classical philosophy go together with their supreme valuation of proportionality (*ratio*), representation, and form, so the conclusion of classicism coincides with the Nietzschean "transvaluation," the transit from pure being to pure becoming. The sign is the apotheosis of "creative destruction," the sacrifice. As Bataille writes of art in his day, "the image of sacrifice is imposed on our reflection so necessarily that, having passed the time when art was mere diversion or when religion alone responded to the desire to enter into the depth of things, we perceive that modern painting has ceased to offer us endearing or merely pretty images, that it is anxious to make the world 'transpire' on canvas. Apollinaire once claimed that cubism was a great religious art, and his dream has not been lost. "Modern painting prolongs the repeated obsession with the sacrificial image in which the destruction of objects responds, in a manner already half-conscious, to the enduring functions of religions."<sup>11</sup> Postmodernism is a religious act.

Postmodernism is Bataille's gift. The theory of the "gift" which becomes so prominent in French postmodernism from Derrida to Marion does not originate with Heidegger. It is seeded with Bataille. Bataille read closely Marcel Mauss' analysis of the potlatch, of the sacrifice as *donum gratiae*, of the exuberance of

---

<sup>11</sup> Georges Bataille, "The Cruel Practice of Art," trans. Supervert32C Inc. (1993), originally published as *L'Art, Exercice de la cruauté*, in *Médecin de France* (1949).

excessive giving which has no "economy" in the strict sense, but which calls into question all discourses and signifying economies. These economies, with their logical and syntactical architectures, had to be "deconstructed" in the track of the German guns. Bataille's metaphor of the "solar phallus" signifies all plenary force in the sense Hegel uses it in his *Phenomenology*. It is both the overture to, and the climax of, the symphony of spirit. Hegel's spirit must drive itself into night. Nietzsche's Zarathustra must "go under." German thought is the Golgotha of the ministry of Enlightenment. Postmodernism is its silent Sabbath, the time of putative abandonment, the parenthesis between the glory of thought and its still unthought greater glory. What Bataille seems to have given us is something exceedingly strange, Nietzsche's "strangest of guests." Postmodernism is the "stranger" (*l'étranger*) whose "strangeness" means that it is ungrounded and without a home (*unheimlich*). We can imagine Bataille's flight from the Nazi occupation forces, a solitary, animal-like restlessness and wantonness confronting the cold, collectivist rationality—and wantonness—of the *Dritte Reich*. The stranger bears a gift, the gift of a "subhuman" freedom that perishes in its own nocturnal excess and yet crafts the primal stutterings of a new philosophical and theological rhetoric. The subhuman confronts the inhumane. Lascaux versus the Blitzkrieg. From this "gift" of *disiecta membra* the new millennium comes into existence.

We stand at the mouth of Zarathustra's cave gaping at the daystar. Now is time to bring fire into the valley.

CARL RASCHKE is professor of religious studies at the University of Denver and senior editor of the *Journal for Religious and Cultural Theory*. His most recent books are *The End of Theology* (The Davies Group, 2000) and *Fire and Roses: Postmodernity and the Thought of the Body* (SUNY 1996).