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## THE CATASTROPHIC JOY OF ABANDONING SALVATION: THINKING THE POSTSECULAR WITH GEORGES BATAILLE

### *Introduction*

This paper explores the question of whether the postsecular, as a term, might name something other than macro or molar formations, epistemic shifts, historical fulfillments, or dialectical movements – whether it could, instead, index a site of subversion of the powers invested in upholding, among others, the binary between the religious and the secular as a strict and unsurpassable one. It suggests a potentiality of transforming the term from naming something as heroic as “an advent of an era”<sup>1</sup> into a site that registers a different constellation of concepts, attending to the effects and shapes of undecidable performances, speech acts, modes of thought, conceptual grammars, and lived experiences that large-scale distinctions efface and make repeatedly untenable, unlivable, and invisible.

In so doing, it seeks to challenge positions that might claim that “postsecularism is inherently *majoritarian* in nature, seeking to normalize *certain* religious and social practices and forms of authority and social imagination as representative of ‘the people.’”<sup>2</sup> I would suggest, quite to the contrary, that both secularism and religion have often been, and continue to be, constructed as majoritarian and normatively authoritarian spaces. By contrast, the postsecular might name a site that experimentally engages with the limits of the category of the secular, its metaphysics, and politics. Concerns about the postsecular too often rely on the invisible equation of the theological and the religious with a simple set of moralizing injunctions, gender oppressions, and regressive responses to modernity. But as we have been repeatedly reminded, the strict alignment of, for example, feminism and secularity itself occludes the way that theological, religious, and a-secular modes of thinking have been imbricated within a diversity of feminisms. As Rosi Braidotti has argued, it is precisely a majoritarian feminism that takes up secularism as its universal flag, while other, non-majoritarian traditions of thought and

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<sup>1</sup> Stathis Gourgouris, “Why I Am Not a Postsecularist” *boundary 2*, 40:1 (2013), 41.

<sup>2</sup> Amir Mufti, “Why I Am Not a Postsecularist” *boundary 2*, 40:1 (2013), 18.

inquiry have had a much more vexed and ambivalent relation with the secular – something that precisely attests to secularism’s less than neutral and innocent power in such matters.<sup>3</sup> Such a perspective offers the other side of the insight, brought to the front by scholars such as Joan Scott, that the secular no less than the religious have had problematically majoritarian proclivities – an insight that suggests that one might have to think against both of them, if one is not to wind up in a majoritarian camp.

This paper proceeds in three parts. The first interrogates the status of the postsecular as a term and suggests the necessity of developing a minoritarian attunement and valence in relation to it. The second turns to explore the usefulness of Georges Bataille for such a reconsideration of the postsecular. It focuses in particular on the way his thought resists the established divisions between theological and philosophical modes of thought, in order to develop a critique of subjection as being enacted by theologico-religious concepts, operations, and structures no less than philosophico-secular ones. In the process, it shows that while his thought targets one of the central pillars of secular ontology, the self-possessed subject, it does so, importantly, not by appealing to transcendence, but by radically rethinking the status of both immanence and transcendence, by decoupling them from their usual semantic associations, which align immanence with secularity and transcendence with religion. It goes on to explore how Bataille’s discourse abandons investments in futurity and salvation (investments displayed across the secular-religious divide) in order to give voice to an impersonal intimacy and a catastrophic joy. The third part of the paper examines Bataille’s catastrophic joy as an affective force that resists the normative pull of any transcendent beyond, be it religious or secular. In so doing, it puts into question the temporal logics frequently operative in discussions of secularization. The conclusion returns to reassess the status of the postsecular and, centrally, the post of the *postsecular*, in the wake of catastrophic joy.

#### *Rethinking The Postsecular*

Can the postsecular index sites that harbor modes of being,

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<sup>3</sup> For a synoptic account of feminism and post-secularity, see Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25: 1 (2008). Braidotti notes: “Developing alongside but in antagonism to the mainstream secularist line, other feminist traditions have been thriving. Various schools of feminist spirituality and alternative spiritual practices have a long and established history in Europe and elsewhere.” (7) She follows this assessment by mapping of an entire terrain of scholarship and writing correlated with the claim.

speaking, and thinking, that subvert at once authorities deemed religious *and* those deemed secular, putting in question their ultimate status as authorities? This would not mean taking religion (once more) seriously – whatever that might entail – but rather, giving theoretical weight to those modes of speech, action, thought, and writing that challenge the seeming naturalness of the secular/religious binary, and, in denaturalizing it, offer a space for “a subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame.”<sup>4</sup> Or, to put it in the terms of François Laruelle, perhaps the postsecular can name a site for minoritarian thought, and also speech, enactment, and lived experience – against the authorities – whatever names they have accrued for themselves and whatever rituals they might deploy to materialize themselves and their power. This would be one way to oppose both the triumphalist theological resurgences *and* the putatively neutral operations of the secular, and thereby also to offer another way to distinguish “between the genuine postsecular event and its misappropriation and misuse at the hands of theologians.”<sup>5</sup>

Here, the postsecular might name not the return of religion nor the longing of some lost or recently recovered and reworked set of inclinations and beliefs, but a site to grapple with those theoretical and lived enactments that precisely no longer allow for clean divisions between the secular and the religious – acknowledging that one as much as the other have acted as authorities, producing domination and oppression as their effects. The hardening of authority and its dominations, its productions of unitary identity and the concomitant expulsions, can arise under banners proclaiming themselves secular no less than those proclaiming themselves religious (though, there is much reason to see secularism’s affirmation of the nation-state form, its imbrication with colonialism, and the constant (re-)production of “religion” as its supposed other as the primary culprits in this logic) and thereby render invisible those elements that would place the decisive cuts elsewhere (between, say, immanence and transcendence, or between those regimes that politically uphold statist violence and moralizing norms, and those political arrangements that struggle against them).

The question, then, is not of choosing sides, but of underdetermining the division between religious and the secular

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), xxxi.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, “What is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?” in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 14

drawn as inevitable, inescapable, and essential. This might require eschewing always having to first make a decision on the secular (is one – one's thought, one's mode of speech, one's mode of being and acting – secular? or religious?) – acknowledging instead that to acquiesce to such a decision is already to have lost something essential.

The postsecular might act as a name for such a maneuver insofar as it abjures the primary axiomatics of the secular, which repeatedly asserts itself by distinguishing itself from the religious. What is secular and what is religious are not pre-given forms, containers, or phenomena with essences, but are repeatedly defined and redefined under the interpretative frames and material powers of secularism. This is one of the reasons why we cannot look away from that very border: it is repeatedly (re)produced as a charged site, something we cannot stop being concerned with.<sup>6</sup>

If so, the postsecular might name neither an exploration of preexisting discursive tradition, nor the reaffirmation of the theological (now not as a forerunner, but supposedly the subversive opposite of the secular), but rather the very troubling and undermining of those borders and the concerns that they endlessly reiterate. It might resist the imposition of such binaries by cultivating a perspective or an attunement in a minor key, which would insist on troubling not only the dominant distributions of the sensible, to use a phrase from Jacques Rancière, but also the regnant distributions of the conceptual that legitimate the world as it is. It would be an attunement that is willing to dwell with those elements that are all too quickly and frequently expelled from both sides of the binary divide, indicating diagonal cuts across false opposites, which nevertheless have been materialized and made real.<sup>7</sup>

What is necessary, then, is to be released from this theoretico-political cathexis that requires a decision to always be made on the distinction between the secular and the religious. This requirement of decision occurs in several modalities, including a discursive-theoretical divide (one that requires an *a priori* separation of religious-theological materials from secular-philosophical ones), a political divide (one that draws the

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<sup>6</sup> For religion as a question perpetually posed by secularism, cf. Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Sovereignty, Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> This might entail, for example, elaborating a kind of counter-archive that resists the secular distribution of concepts, one that would include, among many others, Georges Bataille next to Clarice Lispector, but also alongside Meister Eckhart and mystical forms of antinomianism, heresy, and instances of theological revolt and insurrection.

friend/enemy as an inescapable distinction between what is deemed secular and what is deemed religious), and a historical divide (one that upholds *either* a thesis of secularization and thus the overcoming of religion *or* the return of religion – in each case insisting, where there is one, the other is absent or vanishing). Resisting the seeming necessity of such divisions, and the distinct and clear-cut containers of the religious and the secular that they presuppose and reproduce, entails no longer taking that separation as the unavoidable first question of (theoretical, political, temporal) allegiance posed. While to acquiesce to the necessity of those decisions is, knowingly or not, to precisely reproduce the secular – in its persistently demarcated distinction from the religious.<sup>8</sup>

I will not take up the second of these modalities here, but I do want to clarify it briefly, with a hope to develop it elsewhere: The political modality in setting up the friend-enemy distinction through the construction of figures like the fanatic or the terrorist dislocates other political figures and distributions that would perturb the secular/religious divide and organize a politics indifferent to its assertion.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, it acts as a diversion that downplays secularism's own legacies of violence, by purging and projecting that violence onto what it poses as its outside (or, sometimes, its past). This displacement renders invisible its own participation in violent processes such as primitive accumulation, colonialism, slavery, and state-sanctioned violence.<sup>10</sup> The other two modalities, I will explore below: the following section will explore a particular case of resisting the first modality of this decision – the discursive/theoretical divide of materials, archives, and traditions; while the final section will briefly return to the last modality – the question of secularization and the return of religion – under the particular light of catastrophe.

### *The Subjections of Double Transcendence*

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<sup>8</sup> Akeel Bilgrani has offered an interesting example of resistance to such classification by arguing that it is important to not construe the other side of modernity and modern science to be simply clerical reaction. Rather, one must genealogically theoretically trace out the radical formations of knowledge, thought, and politics foreclosed in upholding that very binary. In so doing, one might recover those radical forms of thought that have been eradicated by the ontologization of the secular/religious divide and the purifications that have come with it. "Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment" *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006), 381-411.

<sup>9</sup> Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> On violence and liberalism, see Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

In what follows, I turn to the figure of Bataille as a way of suggesting that he presents a constellation of theoretical concerns and perspectives that may be useful for rethinking the status of the postsecular in the contemporary moment. What makes a figure like Georges Bataille immediately of interest for the reconsideration of contemporary discussions about the postsecular is the way that he rejects the traditions of authorization available as possible supports for his thinking, writing, and theoretical trajectories.

Either philosophy or theology would have offered him – and still very much offers us in the present moment – a stabilizing function, a way of organizing and legitimating questions, textual organization, and conceptual maneuvers, but also in the process (in a less avowed way) of making a decision on who will count as a theoretical enemy or a polemical target. For philosophy repeatedly winds up legitimating modern secularity, even when it might resist or distance itself from explicit political secularism; while theology too often defends a supposedly-clear and clearly-demarcated religious speech, a *logos* on a *theos*, standing in critical relation to secularity.

For Bataille, however, the two are not discursive or disciplinary traditions to uphold or defend, rather each names a set of materials that can be engaged with only once each is dispossessed of their respective organizing and exclusionary principles. In this way, he embodies a modality of thinking and working with texts that is neither secular nor religious, neither properly philosophical nor properly theological – engaging with operations and texts across the established border without heeding warnings about the incomprehensibility that might result from such an approach. It is no wonder that his writing was polemically rejected by both the philosophers (Sartre) and the theologians (Marcel) of his time.

This is an element that can be recovered for the postsecular: a mode of self-authorization against those injunctions that tell us we either deal with and within theology (against the enclosures of the human world) or with and within philosophy (against the supposedly obscurantist theological discourses). To do so is to resist the quarantining of theological operations from philosophical ones (and vice versa), and thereby also to put in question the clean divide between what is deemed religious and what is deemed secular in the realm of thought and text. On this account, the postsecular indexes, gives voice to, and explores those modes of thinking, speaking, and being that confound both sides of the double bind established when what is deemed secular and what is deemed religious (and their respective theoretical compartments and archives) are taken as separate,

distinct, and opposed. This confounding would involve not only undercutting philosophy's proclamations of self-grounding, but also enacting a kind of dispossession that withdraws theological materials from the authorities that claim the monopoly on their legitimate use; for it is important not to be afraid of religious discourses and theological archives, but also to not be afraid of radically repurposing them, because it is precisely such a posture that both the secularists and the various conservative, theological appropriations of the postsecular are afraid of.

Bataille does not, however, embody an empty hybridity or mixing of materials. Rather, his approach stems from a particular theoretical insight that he traces throughout his oeuvre. For Bataille, the world and God are both mechanisms of subjection that offer life a phantasmatic salvation as the ruse through which that subjection is enacted. This is to say, the world and the secularity with which it is correlated are not simply opposed to the oppressive transcendence of God, as critics of postsecular engagements might suggest.<sup>11</sup> Nor must we, by contrast, see in that transcendence a way of freeing us from the nihilistic enclosures that stifle modern humanity, as theologians of various conservative guises might insist. In these debates, one side (be it the world or God) is always defended in order to fight against the other, which is constructed as a theoretical enemy, in a move that underwrites a broad array of narratives and political operations.

Bataille's discourse suggests we do something other than choose sides in this perpetual internecine warfare, suggesting instead the necessity of becoming detached from the entire field structured by the opposition between the secularity of the world and divine transcendence. The two might seem to be in fundamental opposition to each other, but this appearance is itself a product of the way each repeatedly reproduces its identity through polemics against the other. What such mutually beneficial hostilities render invisible is precisely the complicity detectable in the fact that both the world and God are forms of transcendence: both subject life and make it labor for a future they project for it, which displaces and forecloses the immanence of the now, forms of impersonal intimacy, and processes of desubjectivation entailing joy and delegitimation.<sup>12</sup>

Before exploring these foreclosures, it may be useful to dwell with the theoretical diagnosis found in Bataille's discourse: that

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<sup>11</sup> Among many other examples, see: Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism* (New York: Fordham, 2013)

<sup>12</sup> On the immanence of the now, see: Daniel Colucciello Barber, "The Immanent Refusal of Conversion," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* (Winter 2014), 142-150.

of the structure of double transcendence, a structure rendered invisible by the more common distributions and interplays of the categories of immanence and transcendence. To make the difference clear, one might contrast this diagnosis to the basic conceptual bedrock found frequently in narratives of secularization – the positioning of immanence as the defining characteristic of secular modernity, against transcendence as the shibboleth of theology and religion. The permutations can certainly take complex forms, but repeatedly transcendence *qua* religious remains opposed to immanence *qua* worldly and the secular.<sup>13</sup> It is this distribution, which underwrites and reproduces, oftentimes in quite sophisticated ways, the polemics of theology and philosophy, that the diagnosis of double transcendence seeks to dislodge. For it asserts, in contrast to such distributions, that both God and the world, as well as the operations and discourses attached to them, revolve around transcendence, to the occlusion of whatever real immanence might name.

Bataille's *Theory of Religion* is revealing in this regard, for despite being a theorization of religion as the title suggests, it powerfully articulates the process through which the subject is produced into the world as subjected, of being rendered individuated and human through the subordination to the logics of instrumentality and futurity. Bataille theorizes the way being projected forward – in time through utility and mediated by labor and, ultimately, via hope for salvation – reduces the now in relation to a transcendence that promises meaning and fulfillment. This is a promise whose real effect is the subjection the only life that exists – useless, inoperative, bare, joyful life – one that is in itself neither secular nor religious, for in itself it is not appropriated, subjected, or classified.

The way both transcendences act as the nexus for the subjection and subjugation of life is likewise at the heart of Bataille's texts such as *Inner Experience*. They trace the multiple maneuvers through which transcendence, whether divine or worldly, puts life to work, by rendering it delimited, enclosed, individuated, and subjected. The secular part of the logic that Bataille critically outlines lies in the ontologization of projective temporality for the human. He offers a critique of project (of, as he puts it, "putting existence off until later"<sup>14</sup>) as temporal narrativization

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<sup>13</sup> This story is told in a variety of ways. For a sophisticated recent example, see Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015). See my review of the book at: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2016/05/26/invisible-hands/>

<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 51.

that ascribes primacy to futurity – for it is in relation to the future that useless life is rendered useful, subjected and made to work across a temporal deferral. Importantly, this secular logic of subjection in relation to a temporal transcendence is not undermined but is ultimately redoubled and intensified in the theological register of hope and salvation. This is why, for example, one of the first axioms that Bataille proposes in *Inner Experience* for his atheological thought, for his “new theology,” is the abandonment of hope and salvation, “the most odious of subterfuges.”<sup>15</sup> Salvation is the ultimate manifestation of projective futurity, the ultimate investment in the future that sacrifices the now: “Salvation is the summit of every possible project and peak in the matters of project.”<sup>16</sup> Hence the tight imbrication of the two in a single mechanism: the divine promise of salvation and the hopeful investments it produces as its affective effects only intensify its seemingly opposite, the projective temporality of secularity – the two collaborating to render the useless, free, impersonal life a subjected agent.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, in life becoming subjected, it is not only put to work and made useful, but it also, in that very gesture, vitalizes the discourses and structures that interpellate it into subjecthood. That is, in being put to use on their behalf, life vitalizes them, gives them life, each time a new life, at the expense of its own, useless one. The diagnosis of double transcendence – of the world and God, and their mechanism of subjection that create the subject as a site of mediation for their future – is, then, not an end in itself. Rather, it is a theoretical tool to resist those apparatuses and the affects they engender; a way to contest the forced choice between different authorities of subjection that foreclose desubjectivation, uselessness, joy in the face of nothingness. Indeed, Bataille develops a veritable theoretical lexicon attempting to index the inverse of those subjections and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 104 and 19; For an elaboration of a secular investment in the future as salvation, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 52

<sup>17</sup> What is important in the speculative undertakings found in *Theory of Religion* is not its quest for an “essence” of religion, but the way taking religion’s essence to be “search for lost intimacy,” which “cannot be expressed discursively,” allows Bataille to pose the world as transcendent, and reveal its imbrications with theological transcendence. Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 57, 50. In other words, Bataille does not construct “religion” on the model of Protestantism nor does he inscribe into its essence the primacy of elements such as faith and interiority, but uses it instead to reveal the double operations of transcendence. On relation between Protestantism and the concept of religion, see, among others: Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom & Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1-67.

thereby to withdraw the theoretical primacy accorded to them. This lexicon is an attempt to avoid the reduplication and legitimation of those subjections in the realm of thought. Its theoretical task is not only to show that life is never exhaustively subjected, but also that what persist as foreclosed in the subjected life – understood as a mechanism for the mediation and reproduction of reality in relation to a worldly futurity or a salvific transcendence – is an impersonal joy, a useless life without a why and without a self.

The impersonal intimacy of life may be foreclosed in subjection by the logic of deferral and instrumentality, but it is never fully annihilated. What is foreclosed in the constitution of the subject, in its subjection through a perpetual projection into a future, a projection only redoubled in relation to a theological transcendence, is an inoperativity and uselessness that can assume the name of immanence in a novel way. Here, then, is not a secular immanence of the world posed against a theological transcendence, but an immanence that resists both the transcendence of God *and* the subjugating transcendence of the world and its self-perpetuation in time through the site of the subject.<sup>18</sup> One might put the contention as one of radically different conceptual grammars or schemas. In one, the world and the subject-in-the-world together are taken to index immanence in opposition to transcendence, which is imbricated or associated, however variedly, with the divine. Taken broadly, this schema is widespread, for example, in much of the debates about the return of religion in continental philosophy.<sup>19</sup> In the second schema, one that more seriously tarries with the postsecular, the subject itself is taken as produced through its relation to the world and the future, which makes it fundamentally imbricated in transcendence – and this

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<sup>18</sup> This insight is shared with a thinker like François Laruelle. On this, see: Alex Dubilet, “Neither God, nor World”: On the One Foreclosed to Transcendence.” *Palgrave Communications* (2015). Special Collection: *Radical Theologies*. Available at: <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/articles/palcomms201527> In numerous works, Anthony Paul Smith has most lucidly and rigorously explored the relation of Laruelle’s thought to questions of secularity and the postsecular. See, among others, Anthony Paul Smith, “What Can Be Done with Religion? Non-Philosophy and the Future of Philosophy of Religion” in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern*; and Anthony Paul Smith, “Against Tradition to Liberate Tradition,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 19:2 (2014), 145-159. For a broader introduction to Laruelle’s thought, see Anthony Paul Smith, *Laruelle: A Stranger Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> For an attempt to outline this schema for the purpose of dislocating it, see: Alex Dubilet, “Speculation and Infinite Life: Hegel and Meister Eckhart on the Critique of Finitude,” *Russian Journal of Philosophy & Humanities* (1:2), 2017.

imbrication is only redoubled and intensified (but not ultimately opposed) in relation to divine transcendence. It diagnoses the collusive interplay of secular and theological transcendences to uncover a non-secular and non-worldly immanence linked with the impersonal, the inoperative, the without a why.

Bataille's discourse attempts to subvert the self-possessed subject – one of the pillars of the ontology of the secular – but does so without tethering that operation to any form of transcendence, resisting a tendency frequently found in theological critiques of the subject. The connection between the subversion of the subject and transcendence, which Bataille seeks to sever, explains why certain theological discourses can appear (but only appear) as a critical opposition to secular ontologies: they trouble the subject at its core, but do so only in relation to yet a greater, divine transcendence. This is one of the reasons why when Bataille recovers articulations of desubjectivation from mystical and theological archives, he insists on decoupling them from all their transcendent links, making them index not a possible salvation, but rather a dispossessed life of exposure. Here, the subversion of the subject in relation to the world and to God is a way to reveal life detached from its specular enclosures, and to think it outside of the primacy of the interpellative authorities and the metaphysical chain of subject-world-God that they establish. This also entails a certain fundamental ethical practice – one that is not properly secular or religious – that of self-dispossession that tarries with radical immanence, as well as a thought that traces rather than renders invisible such an ethical practice. The question posed here, one might add, does not concern alternative (non-secular) modes of subjectivation, but rather concerns the paths of desubjectivation that reveal a set of affects, states, and impersonal comportments that might scramble our established knowledges of what even constitutes the secular and the religious.

It is through such a set of moves that Bataille instantiates a position and a set of theoretical dispositions that has the power to reject at once secularism and the triumphalist, conservative positions that have appropriated the postsecular for their use. The importance of Bataille's writings lies in the way they reject theological affirmations of transcendence as ruses of legitimation and subjection, no less than the subjecting offerings made by the secular world and its norms for the human subject. They do so in order to disclose an impersonal life, a desubjectivated intimacy, a certain joy without salvation, which seek to decenter the subject's self-possession no less than any possible ethical self-formations the subject might undertake in relation to the divine.

*Immanence Without a Future: On Catastrophic Joy*

Amy Hollywood has offered an important interpretation of Bataille and his writings (especially those comprising *La Somme Atheologique*) as a prefiguration of the mysticism of not all/whole outlined in Lacan's Seminar XX – as a mysticism of the feminine *jouissance* that seeks to break with fantasies of mastery, wholeness, and plenitude.<sup>20</sup> What Hollywood finds in Bataille is a mysticism that articulates the recognition that one is not all and that arrests the desire to be everything – or, as I would put it in the above terms, a type of discourse that articulates a desubjectivation freed from transcendent, salvific ruses, affirming a foreclosed immanence that is no longer correlated even with the site of the subject. The power of Hollywood's interpretation lies in the way it shows how such a discourse is not one that escapes or avoids history, but one that engages with it differently.<sup>21</sup> In rejecting history's projective elements, its absorption in salvific schemas of teleology and progress, it explores the way the real is irreducible to such logics of redemption: the unassimilable part of history, the real, remains outside of history as salvation, be it religious or secular. Although I will not discuss here the attribution of mysticism as relates to Bataille, it is useful to note that Bataille's imbrication of mystical speech with catastrophe and the abandonment of salvation powerfully echoes a deeper genealogy of mystical speech and writing. As Michel de Certeau has shown, mystical language and speech have often proliferated at scenes of catastrophe: they have indexed the catastrophe of history, rather than playing a part in its onto-theological fulfillments, its teleological deferrals, or its progressive developments.<sup>22</sup> At stake is a grappling with the revelation of the catastrophe of history, which discourses and authorities deemed religious no less than those deemed secular repeatedly overwrite, using a variety of paradigms to do so – ranging from theologies of eschatological deferral to the temporal homogeneity of secular progress.

One might say that Bataille asks us to partake in a double displacement: from the agency of the subject to its immanent desubjectivation and from history as salvific narrative to its revelation as catastrophe. Taken together, the two challenge the secular distribution of concepts – a fact that is made clear when one remembers that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, secular history presumes and institutes a human subject at the center of

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<sup>20</sup> Amy M. Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> "Bataille does not desire to escape history and temporality but to engage with them differently." *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Michel de Certeau, "Mystic Speech," in Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 80-100.

history.<sup>23</sup> Bataille's rejection of the primacy of projective temporality and the history that it engenders is precisely a critique of secularity, but it is also, in his critique of salvation *tout court*, a giving up on the complementary temporal structure that is all too often used to critique it. History as catastrophe stands as much against empty homogenous time central to secularity as against eschatological deferral central to more than a few theological imaginaries. Here, then, another mode of complicity, masquerading as polemical opposition between structures deemed secular and those deemed religious, is revealed. Both the putatively "empty homogenous" time of progress – the time of project, mediation, and instrumentality – the time of secular modernity,<sup>24</sup> and the salvation history oriented around possible eschatological fulfillment – displace life towards a future, thereby enacting its subjection. Apprehending history as catastrophe is a retort to such double binds. In Bataille's affirmation of catastrophe against all possible projection of hope and recuperation, he registers a truth detected at nearly the same time by Walter Benjamin – the affirmation of the catastrophe of history or of history as catastrophe against all narratives of progress or salvation, propagated by well-minded secularists and theologians alike. In this, it stands in opposition to both sides of the secularization debates – those that, following Karl Löwith, see a continuity between theological and secular theories of temporality, and those that, following Hans Blumenberg, assert a discontinuity between the two in order to affirm the legitimacy of the modern age. Against both, the question remains of being attuned to the lives and fragments of archives that have been lived under the sign catastrophe and are repeatedly overwritten through divergent secularization narrative frameworks.<sup>25</sup>

Catastrophe, however, also indexes an impersonal joy, a joy without salvation. This joy is akin to that of the mystics,<sup>26</sup> one that is precisely no longer a hope for or the promise of

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<sup>23</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> See among others, Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> One of the most interesting but underappreciated works on the debates of secularization is Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001).

happiness, but rather the inverse of all projects of salvation.<sup>27</sup> Yet joy construed in this way is ambivalent. As Bataille writes: "If I expressed joy, I would fail myself: the joy that I experience differs from other joys. I am faithful to it in speaking of a fiasco, endless collapse, an absence of hope. Yet ... fiasco, collapse, despair are in my eyes light, laying bare, glory."<sup>28</sup> One could say that what joy indexes is the breakdown of narrativity, of a future that propels one towards possible meaning and salvation – appearing in a variety of guises, from secular progress to theological eschatology. Joy does not tarry with the future, but rather with the nothingness and uselessness of life out of which it emerges and which is rendered invisible when life becomes subjected. "'Joy before death' means that life can be glorified from root to summit. It robs of meaning everything that is an intellectual or moral *beyond*, substance, God immutable order, or salvation."<sup>29</sup> Joy is made real through the corrosive abandonment of all transcendence, all *beyonds*, whether secular or religious, whether metaphysical or temporal. Instead of a promised future, what remains with the renunciation of hope and salvation is the ethical practice of joyful desubjection that carries with non-being. This joy is an index of the impersonal intimacy that affirms every being as shattered and cracked, as only becoming individuated and isolated through its subjection to transcendence – through the materialized misrecognition that occurs when the subject is interpellated in relation to God or to the world. We might call what is at stake an impersonal affective under-determination of the subject: not as an abstraction, but as what is foreclosed once life is subjected and made to work, in the infinite labor of mediating what is taken to be real.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> It thereby stands against the kind of promise for a future described in Edelman, *No Future*.

<sup>28</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 60

<sup>29</sup> Georges Bataille, "The Practice of Joy before Death" in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985), 237.

<sup>30</sup> Although I have focused on Bataille here, it is important to note that he is hardly the only instantiation of such a postsecular grammar. Convergent iterations may be found, for example, in the literary works of writers such as Clarice Lispector. There too we find elaborations that resist at once the enclosures of the humanized world and any soteriological salvations that may be opposed to them. Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*, for example, provides a powerful critical diagnosis of temporal projection, in both its secular or theologico-soteriological guises, that reveals it to be a mechanism for the displacement of the unbearable joy and uselessness of life that in itself always occurs without deferral or displacement. I have tried to offer a short interpretation of *The Passion* in relation to related questions of immanence and joy in Alex Dubilet, "(Non-)Human Identity and Radical Immanence: On Man-in-Person in François Laruelle's Non-Philosophy" in *Superpositions: Laruelle and the Humanities*, eds. Rocco

*Conclusion*

Yet, if there is no transcendence, nothing to hope for and nothing to work for, how do we think of the status of the post in the *postsecular*? Does it not, in the very term, produce yet another salvific arc, yet another step in a temporal process oriented towards a future? To think through the problem, one might understand the seemingly temporal marker as indicating a structural element in excess of that temporality, on the model of Chakrabarty's use of the term "precapital":

The prefix *pre* in "precapital," it could be said similarly, is not a reference to what is simply chronologically prior on an ordinal, homogeneous scale of time. "Precapitalist" speaks of a particular relationship to capital marked by the tension of difference in the horizons of time. The "precapitalist," on the basis of this argument, can only be imagined as something that exists within the temporal horizon of capital and that at the same time disrupts the continuity of this time by suggesting another time that is not on the same, secular, homogeneous calendar (which is why what is precapital is not chronologically prior to capital, that is to say, one cannot assign it to a point on the same continuous time line). This is another time that, theoretically, could be entirely immeasurable in terms of the units of the godless, spiritless time of what we call "history"...<sup>31</sup>

To think the postsecular along these lines is to take it as a marker of incommensurability, as a way of disrupting the epistemological and ontological presumptions of the secular. There is no getting anywhere, no machine of mediation that interpellates the subject into being so as to have a site for its perpetuation. The post is not somewhere to get to or something to achieve, a new afterlife. Rather, it might come closer to indexing the inoperative, impersonal, desubjectivated life, a life without a why (and thus without a future) that corrodes the established coordinates produced by authorities, their discourses, their interpellative subjections.

One could say, perhaps, that this is as much a *postsecular* as an *asecular* attunement or perspective, one that would be "uninvolved in the distinctively modern game by which secularity and religiosity [are] defined and redefined in relation

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Gangle and Julius Greve (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 93; see also p. 65 on thinking the "not yet" structurally, rather than temporally.

to identifying and securing fundamental rights and liberties.”<sup>32</sup> In the end, what is decisive is not finding a new term or label – and certainly, the postsecular may well be excessively overburdened with other connotations to be redeployed in the way I am proposing. What is important, rather, is to become indifferent to the primacy of the divide asserted and maintained between the secular and the religious, no longer allowing it to be held as the primary and unavoidable axis of organization for thought, life, and struggle.

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<sup>32</sup> Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 187; on asecurarity, see also p. 230-3.