

Comparative Spaces and Seeing Seduction and Horror in Bataille

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Abstract: In his article, "Comparative Spaces and Seeing Seduction and Horror in Bataille," Benton Jay Komins explores Bataille's preoccupation with "seeing": The eye holds a preeminently ambiguous position in Georges Bataille's universe of enucleated priests and scatological window scenes. Komins' comparative examination presents several aspects of Bataille's eyes: Existing between fascination and revulsion, this most Batailleian organ moves between subjective vision and objective blindness. The eye both captures and is captured in episodes of seductive horror. Through the denigration of vision, Bataille's dethroned eye exceeds the confines of visibility. Bataille develops an extraordinary notion of ocularity -- as a metaphor, action, and traumatic fixation -- in his novels, autobiographical notes, and critical writing. His compelling eyes surface between written genres and lived experience, that is to say, in the comparative space between the phantasmatic and the social, inviting psychological and historical analysis.

Benton Jay KOMINS

Comparative Spaces and Seeing Seduction and Horror in Bataille

In Georges Bataille's image universe of enucleated priests and scatological window scenarios, the eye holds a preeminently ambiguous position. Existing on the frontier of fascination and revulsion, this most Bataillean of organs moves between subjective vision and objective blindness. The eye both captures and is captured in episodes of seductive horror; through the denigration of vision, the dethroned eye exceeds the confines of visibility. In this essay, I comparatively examine a few of Bataille's eyes; Bataille develops an extraordinary notion of ocularity -- as a metaphor, action, and traumatic fixation -- in his novels, autobiographical notes and critical writing. Bataille's compelling eyes surface between written genres and lived experience, that is to say, in the comparative space between the phantasmatic and the social (from several informative websites devoted to Bataille's life, fixations, and cultural influence, see *Georges Bataille Centenaire* <<http://www.laboucherie.com/texte/bataille.htm>>[inactive] and "Postérité. Le Legs de Bataille" <<http://www.france.diplomatie.fr/culture/france/biblio/folio/bataille/legs.html>>[inactive], the latter examines Bataille's indelible mark on avant-garde culture in post-1968 France).

I begin with a pivotal scene in the novel *Le Bleu du Ciel* (1957), where real eyes are transfixed before primal windows: "A un moment donné, je suis allé à la fenêtre et je l'ai ouverte ... Dans la rue juste devant moi, il y avait une très longue banderole noire ... Le vent avait à moitié décroché la hampe: elle avait l'air de battre de l'aile. Elle ne tombait pas: elle claquait dans le vent avec un grand bruit à hauteur du toit: elle se déroulait en prenant des formes tourmentées: comme un ruisseau d'encre qui aurait coulé dans les nuages. L'incident paraît étranger à mon histoire, mais c'était pour moi comme si une poche d'encre s'ouvrait dans ma tête et j'étais sûr, ce jour-là, de mourir sans tarder" (57). Before his Vienna window, the narrator Henri Troppmann stands before a momentous historical event. The flapping black streamer which absorbs him marks the assassination of President Dollfuss -- the first "breakthrough" in the Nazi dream of *Anschluss*. I add here that in his book *Vienna and Its Jews: The Tragedy of Success, 1880s-1980s* (1988), the American historian George Berkley asserts that Dollfuss's assassination sealed the fate of an independent, republican Austrian state, ushering in the fascists' dream of a united German empire (Chapters 19 and 20). Oblivious to the historical implications of his gaze, Bataille's peculiar hero Henri "reads" the streamer as the urgent call for death. In his ink-stained mind, the twisted mass of black fabric figuratively introduces a noose. Standing before history, this impassioned reader rips an ominous sign out of its historical context; impassioned Henri uses the banner's language instrumentally to address the impossibility of his own situation with his lover "Dirty" (Dorothea). At this fictional Austrian window, the historical becomes biographical. Does Bataille sweep history to the periphery of Troppmann's lascivious world? Is the expanding tide of Nazism less important than a fictional libertine's failing liaison? What political message resonates between the hidden moment of history and the explicit moment of biography? Both highlighting the tantalizing power of the fascist event and encoding the consequences of fictional creation, Bataille's Vienna window scene represents a moment of fascinated revulsion.

The process of looking beyond this fictional Viennese window involves a brief excursion into Bataille's nonfictional work. The psychological definitions in "La structure psychologique du fascisme" bear upon the ambiguous tensions at work within/without Troppmann's Vienna window: "Ainsi sont impliquées simultanément les qualités propres des deux dominations : qualités relevant de l'homogénéité intrajectée, telles que devoir, discipline et ordre accomplis, et qualités relevant de l'hétérogénéité essentielle, violence impérative et position de la personne du chef comme objet transcendant de l'affectivité collective" (363). In Bataille's psychologized version of full-blown fascism, homogeneous ideals -- work, discipline and order -- couple with heterogeneous behavior -- mandatory violence and an active fetishization of the chief as the transcendent object of collective emotion. The soul and body are irresistibly seduced and, then, irrevocably bound: "Le pouvoir fasciste est caractérisé en premier lieu par le fait que sa fondation est à la fois religieuse et militaire, sans que des éléments habituellement distincts puissent être séparés les uns des

autres: il se présente ainsi dès la base comme une concentration achevée" (363). The traditional realm of the military fuses with the religious to create a juggernaut, creating a seamless totality.

While Bataille's notions of "homogeneity" and "heterogeneity" seem far removed from Troppmann's Vienna window, they both work within the scene. Troppmann's transfixed moment lies embedded in retrospective, when he tells his past "Dirty" love story to ugly Lazare, his frightening revolutionary friend. While the literal window stands between history and biography, the "retrospective" window scenario stands between Lazare and Dirty. While the politically engaged Lazare represents the model of homogeneity: "elle parlait lentement avec la sérénité d'un esprit étranger à tout; la maladie, la fatigue, le dénuement ou la mort ne comptaient pour rien à ses yeux. Ce qu'elle supposait d'avance, chez les autres, était l'indifférence la plus calme" (*Le Bleu du Ciel* 41), the "sovereign" Dirty represents the model of heterogeneity -- "Dirty m'entraînait ... Cependant, je n'aurais pu imaginer une créature humaine qui soit une épave plus à vau-l'eau" (28). Troppmann narratively shuttles between Bataille's two theoretical poles of experience. I contend that this retrospective window mimics Bataille's psychological structure of fascism. The text which flanks the scene fictionally reproduces the fascist event which takes place beyond the window. At the Vienna window, Troppmann compares the fateful black streamer to a "stream of ink leaking through the clouds" ("un ruisseau d'encre qui aurait coulé dans les nuages"). This imagined black ink in the clouds triggers "a sac of ink to burst in his head" ("une poche d'encre s'ouvrait dans ma tête"). Within the confines of the original story, the "bursting sac of brain ink" prefigures Troppmann's decision to commit suicide; beyond the confines of the original story, it represents an excess of writing. Interestingly, in this strange Viennese context, the contemporary novel *Le Mal de Vienne* (1992) by the Québécois-Canadian author Rober Racine, develops Bataille's theme of writerly excess. Here, the hero-author Studd suffers from "thomasberhardovite," a disease that compels him to live, think, and write like the Viennese *poète-maudit* Thomas Bernhard. In Racine's novel, the city of Vienna itself (its residents, cultural milieu and repressed history), like Troppmann's black streamer, motivates a new stream of brain ink. But back to Bataille: According to Bataille, an author reaches a wide range of vision through personal ordeal; to plunge into the literary whirl of excess, he must bring experience -- intolerable, impossible, and impassioned -- to the primal scene of writing: "Le récit qui révèle les possibilités de la vie n'appelle pas forcément, mais il appelle un moment de rage, sans lequel son auteur serait aveugle à ces possibilités excessives. Je le crois: seule l'épreuve suffocante, impossible, donne à l'auteur le moyen d'atteindre la vision lointaine attendue par un lecteur las des proches limites imposées par les conventions" (11-12).

In symbolic terms, the transition from imagined cloud ink to bursting brain-ink marks Troppmann's plunge into writing. This writing saves him from the deadly message in the clouds. The notes which constitute the body of *Le Bleu du Ciel* are the results of Troppmann's exploding ink. True to Bataille's dictum, he is only qualified to write about his débauche after abandonment and attempted suicide. The consumed Troppmann writes about his beloved obscene sovereign and his dreaded, engaged confidant. "During the unhappy year he *writes* about two very different women," states Leo Bersani, "the rich, beautiful apolitical Dirty ... whose astonishing excesses seem to have plunged [him] into a kind of anguished ecstasy (the novel's introduction is an account of her drinking, belching, vomiting, passing air, water and stools in a luxurious room at the Savoy in London); and the ugly, revolutionary Lazare" (109). A larger structure of fictional writing contains the events before the Viennese window; through narratological ploys, Troppmann tells the very story of the telling of a story. Within its frame, *Le Bleu du Ciel* fictionally demonstrates Bataille's concept of writing through personal ordeal. Bataille frames Troppmann's experiences around his own at the beginning of the novel: "J'avais, dès 1936, décidé de n'y plus penser. D'ailleurs, entre-temps, la guerre d'Espagne et la guerre mondiale avaient donné aux incidents historiques liés à la trame de ce roman un caractère d'insignifiance: devant la tragédie elle-même, quelle attention prêter à ses signes annonciateurs?" (13).

Troppmann's Vienna window, much like Bataille's novel itself, escapes history through writerly fate. In the transgressive spaces of this novel, fiction neutralizes fascist portents. While Troppmann literarily uses the historical sign to "write away" from the suicide which awaits him, Bataille

escaped historical responsibility through a careful delay in publication. To underscore this notion of a common writerly fate, according to Martin Jay, Bataille himself wrote under the pseudonym Troppmann (18). Mirroring the text's real publication delay, the theoretical structure and inky temptation of the Viennese window move historical threats to the safe periphery of psychology and aesthetics. Beyond the safe contours of Bataille's Viennese windows -- reaching outside of psychologized fascist paradigms and writerly ink bursts -- lies an abbot's primal scene of vision. Where subjective vision belongs to the telling/writing character Troppmann in *Le Bleu du Ciel*, it binds the abbot Robert to a drama of lust in the novel *L'abbé C.* (the novel's title implies an "ABC" of transgression at the same time that it introduces the story of a particular cleric). In the space between these two novels, Bataille's subjective eye moves from a revealed position of interiority to a concealed position of exteriority.

In *L'abbé C.*, Robert visually enters the orgiastic realm of his twin brother Charles through a gob of filth: "Dehors, au petit jour, à mes pieds, je trouvai une saleté devant la maison, sous la fenêtre d'Eponine" (109). Before his brother's lover Eponine's bedroom window, filthy gifts of homage indeed indicate the presence of outside eyes; saleté bears blind witness to an act of voyeurism. This revealing gift could either be feces or semen. On the one hand, masturbation appears to be the "natural" reaction to the untouchable sexual scene; quite possibly, Robert acts like an overly excited consumer of pornography. On the other hand, Susan Suleiman argues, namely that Robert's *saleté* is "feces left behind as a trace of his own jouissance" (131-35; note that Suleiman bases her contention on the similarities between Robert's developmental story and Freud's young Wolf Man narrative). At this fictional window, hungry eyes feast upon other people's sexual excesses; in a vivid sense, the outside filth -- be it semen or feces -- marks participation in the interior events: "Sa soutane aurait-elle été boueuse si Robert n'avait pas erré, dans la nuit, comme il le fit la première fois, le jour où Eponine et moi le reconnûmes? Au surplus, n'avais-je pas eu le sentiment que cette ombre était celle d'un homme en soutane" (124). In his muddy cassock, Robert peers into the thrilling window. He is the third party who visually dances a sexual pas de deux. Behind the transparent border, he takes part in his brother's lusty scenario: "La chose même était d'accord avec un effondrement sans limites" (109). As an excited secretion of the body and a mark of priestly sin, the gob of secretion brings this seduced abbot into his brother's drama of lust. Robert's action of depositing filth -- that is, the fruits of masturbation or defecation -- precludes the moral disintegration which follows. The filthy gift sets the pattern which leads to Robert's dissolution: "Elle [Eponine] avait une fois entendu le bruit léger qu'il faisait, elle s'approcha de la fenêtre et le vit entièrement nu. Il la vit, n'eut pas un mouvement, mais elle s'en alla. Elle revint s'asseoir au bord du lit, et resta sans mot dire, la tête basse. Nous n'entendîmes rien les autres fois, mais, le matin, nous trouvions les traces de son passage" (134). After his flight from the Church, Robert disintegrates to the point that only voyeuristic nocturnal visits take him outside; these obsessional window events finally lead to arrest and deportation: "Apparemment, ces promenades nocturnes d'un homme qui gardait la chambre dans le jour, furent à l'origine d'une arrestation, que d'ailleurs des allées et venues plus anciennes auraient suffi à justifier" (134). The voyeur finally contributes to the drama of lust through the medium of his own tortured and imprisoned body.

Past Robert's disgrace and disintegration, the filthy window in *L'abbé C.* opens readerly questions. As a structure, "outside looking in" describes Robert's transfixed pose before Eponine's window as much as it describes our readerly position before the titillating textual fragment. As readers, we stand before the mystery of this filthy window in a concealed, exterior position. Pleasure is ostensibly derived without payment. We savor this transgressive scene without expense, contribution or discovery. Yet, this dynamics of pleasure demands a moment of agony; much like Robert himself, the process of outside -- readerly -- looking carries a threat of disintegration. An editor's note frames the entirety of Robert's disintegrative story: "Je crus devenir fou, si bien que j'allai voir un médecin. Il me demanda sans ambages de publier le manuscrit. Je ne l'évitais d'aucune façon. Je devais rédiger la préface et généralement rapporter ce que Charles m'avait appris de la mort de Robert, et qu'il n'avait pas eu la force d' écrire. Le médecin, du point de vue littéraire, ne voulait rien dire, il n'était nullement qualifié, mais,

médicalement, l'histoire était des plus jolies" (30). Through reading, this Editeur becomes a character in the textual drama -- as an acquaintance of Robert and Charles, the Editeur has more at stake in the text than the lay reader. In this respect, the *récit* of the "Récit de l'Editeur" describes a bizarre encounter with Charles and his wife. But only the text itself immobilizes; the Editeur only deals with his contagion after Charles commits suicide. Trying to control the text, he is contaminated by it; the only way to fight this "textual contagion" is, quite literally, releasing it. In effect, the diseased editor avoids the threat of disintegration by giving the text other victims. As the Editeur becomes implicated in Robert's (and his brother Charles's) story, the text symbolically invites its readers to receive the mixed blessing of voyeuristic pleasure. Through the logic of Robert's filthy window, subjective vision which conceals itself condemns itself to objective blindness; the eye which surreptitiously possesses becomes objectively possessed.

Beyond the writerly promise in *Le Bleu du Ciel* and the voyeuristic destruction in *L'abbé C.*, the score of eyes and eye equivalences in Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil* outline the sliding potential which exists between subjective vision and objective blindness. At one level, *Histoire de l'œil* is a veritable eye compendium: The eye moves from subjective encounters to moments of gruesome objective manipulation. In this novel of the eye, everything from transfixed, seeing eyes to mutilated object eyes exist. The erotic thematic frontier of the novel opens with an irresistible visual scene: "Simone mit l'assiette sur un petit banc, s'installa devant moi et, sans quitter mes yeux, s'assit et trempa son derrière dans le lait. Je restai quelque temps immobile, le sang à la tête et tremblant, tandis qu'elle regardait ma verge tendre ma culotte" (90). The young narrator and the wanton heroine Simone share an ocular encounter. Unabashedly facing her young friend, Simone dips her vagina into a cat's saucer of milk. In a chain of passion, eyes subjectively seize one and other; pleasure is derived by both performer and audience: "Nous restâmes longtemps immobiles, aussi rouges l'un que l'autre" (90). This theatrical, lascivious squatting immobilizes both the performer and the audience. While Simone stages her titillating performance, the narrator consumes it visually; the theatrical structure of the scene -- or, reciprocal gazes -- implies that each participant is both subjectively in control and objectively controlled. In circular configuration, one subjective gaze objectifies an other. As if irrevocably bound by the intensity of each other's gaze, the youthful duet begins a horrific adventure which includes every conceivable excess -- namely, torture, mutilation, and murder. Even with its first erotic episode, *Histoire de l'œil* problematizes the eye. The intensity of the shared subjective gaze results in a level of objectification; in a Gordian knot, the eye which captures is captured; subjective vision is bound to objective blindness.

In an informative essay, Roland Barthes asserts that *Histoire de l'œil* is an event in the manipulation of metaphors. According to Barthes: "*L'Histoire de l'œil* est donc, pour l'essentiel une composition métaphorique ... : une terme, l'Œil, y est varié à travers un certain nombre d'objets substitutifs, qui sont avec lui dans le rapport strict d'objets affinitaires ... et cependant dissemblables ... les substituts de l'œil sont effectivement déclinés, dans tous les sens du terme" (239). Beyond the horrifying excesses of its erotic material, the novel explores the possibility of metaphoric conversion. In Barthes' sense, the "Story of the Eye" is as much a tale of lascivious exploitation as it is an exploitation of metaphorical chains. In this metaphor mill, the eye itself functions as generating grist. At one level ("celle de l'Œil") eyes are linked to eggs, testicles and the sun; at another level ("celle des pleurs") its salty secretions are linked with everything from egg yolks to sperm. Within this two-pronged metaphor system, no single term is given priority over another. According to Martin Jay, "The egg in the first chapter is simply the earliest version of the eyeball plucked from the Spaniard in the last" (18). In this veritable metaphor mill, all terms are equivalent; the generating eye simply sets the chaining pattern. As the erotic frontier opens with an irresistible visual scene, it closes with an act of ocular destruction: "Simone cependant s'amusait, glissait l'œil dans la fente des fesses. Elle s'étendit, releva les jambes et le cul. Elle tenta d'immobiliser le globe en serrant les fesses, mais il en jaillit -- comme un noyau des doigts -- et tomba sur le ventre du mort" (167). The ever resourceful and theatrical Simone lustily inserts a dead eye into her orifices. The enucleated eye of a hapless priest becomes her erotic playtoy; slipping over skin, anus and vagina, the visual organ loses all contact with visibility. Bataille fully unleashes this last eye from all categories of ocularity. This hideous final eye breaks asunder "the

time-honored function of the penetrating gaze, able to pierce appearances to 'see' essences beneath" (18).

Just as Bataille interjects a model of writing in *Le Bleu du Ciel* and a model of reading in *L'abbé C.*, he introduces a model of pathology in *Histoire de l'Œil*: "DIS DONC, DOCTEUR, QUAND TU AURAS FINI DE PINER MA FEMME! Il riait. Cette phrase, ruinant l'effet d'une éducation sévère, me laissa, dans une affreuse hilarité, la constante obligation inconsciemment subie de trouver dans ma vie et mes pensées ses équivalences. Ceci peut-être éclaire 'l'histoire de l'Œil'" (177). In "Réminiscences" (a chapter after Simone's last horrific scene), Bataille introduces a new character into the novel's erotic economy. Much like the excessive writerly avant-propos in *Le Bleu du Ciel*, "Réminiscences" brings an autobiographical moment into the realm of fiction. "Bataille's deeply charged summoning of blindness had a likely source," according to Martin Jay, "which has been remarked by virtually all of his commentators: His blind and paralyzed father, who died insane in November 1916" (17). The youth who hears his blind father bellowing obscenities is the future author who "unconsciously submits" to a life of finding fictional equivalences to primal acts of blind humiliation. Bataille even explains the eye's metaphorical movement through an autobiographical source: "Or c'est l'image de ces yeux blancs que je lie à celle des œufs; quand, au cours du récit, si je parle de l'œil ou des œufs, l'urine apparaît d'habitude" (176). The incontinent escapades of the blind, syphilitic father foreshadow the fictional metaphor chains; Bataille's metaphor experiment -- and perhaps the transgressive story itself -- remains pathologically rooted in "real" blindness. Beyond the confines of the novel, the formative experience of living with another's blindness functions as a constant obligation which struggles to dethrone subjective vision. The outcome of this struggle is the fictional enthronement of objective blindness.

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