

Visions of Excess: Pynchon and Bataille

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In Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, the two protagonists conclude their escalating series of transgressions with the murder of a priest, the narrative effectively ending with the subsequent removal of the corpse's eye. A similar incident occurs in Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, when a group of Maltese children discovers a priest trapped in the ruins of a bombed building. The children remove several of the priest's body parts, including one of the eyes. The rudimentary elements of this coincidence—that in both Bataille's and Pynchon's stories the moral character of the priest is dubious, and that in both cases the murder/mutilation is carried out by children—warrant investigation. Beyond these primary concurrences, however, Pynchon and Bataille share a much broader intertextual space.

One apparent point of divergence between these two episodes is the prosthetic quality of Pynchon's priest: "the children peeled back one eyelid to reveal a glass eye with the iris in the shape of a clock. This, too, they removed" (V 343). Commenting on the pervasiveness of the prosthetic in *V.*, Alec McHoul and David Wills suggest that Pynchon consistently locates the animate/inanimate dualism within the body: "Either the body is synthetic to a small or large extent . . . or the body is partial, part to a larger machine" (171). The confusion of the animate with the inanimate played out in the body is reiterated in sexual relations in the novel as a confusion of the biological and the mechanical. McHoul and Wills point out the mechanical register used in the descriptions of sex in the novel, a conflation even more evident in the less conventional love scenes of *V.* Rachel Owlglass makes love to her MG. Esther Harvitz, while undergoing plastic surgery, discovers that "[s]he was sexually turned on . . . as if Schoenmaker had located and flipped a secret switch or clitoris somewhere inside her nasal cavity" (109).

The structures explicated by Pynchon's prosthetic are also present, though they are less apparent, in Bataille's text. In chapter 5 of *Story of the Eye*, the narrator and Simone, on a nighttime journey to visit Marcelle at the asylum, somehow lose their clothes and are forced to cycle back to the villa naked. According to the narrator: "We soon found our bicycles and could offer one another the irritating and theoretically unclean sight of a naked though shod body on a machine"

(29). The phrase "theoretically unclean" seems to suggest that the sight of a clothed cyclist would present a hierarchical, and hence theoretically correct image of the man/machine dualism; on the other hand, the image of the naked cyclist disrupts the hierarchy and breaks down the distinction between animate and inanimate. In fact, as the episode continues, precisely this breakdown occurs: "the rear wheel vanished indefinitely to my eyes not only in the bicycle fork but virtually in the crevice of the cyclist's naked bottom" (30). This interrogation of the traditional humanist hierarchy of animate and inanimate forms part of the paradigmatic link between Bataille's and Pynchon's work.

Pynchon explores this duality most explicitly through Benny Profane, one of V.'s two main protagonists. Profane finds himself constantly at odds with the object world. He longs for an ideal world of pure animateness, and is affronted by the affection some other characters display toward objects:

Profane had wondered then what it was with Da Conho and that machine gun. Love for an object, this was new to him. When he found out not long after this that the same thing was with Rachel and her MG, he had his first intelligence that something had been going on under the rose, maybe for longer and with more people than he would care to think about. (23)

Profane, too, sees human integration with the inanimate as theoretically unclean; however, the state of pure animateness he yearns for is eventually disclosed as a fiction. The critique comes about when Profane takes a job at Anthroresearch Associates, a company which uses manikins to measure the effects of car crashes and of radiation. While on night shift, Profane talks to one of the manikins:

On the way back to the guardroom he stopped in front of SHROUD.
 "What's it like," he said.
 Better than you have it.
 "Wha."
 Wha yourself. Me and SHOCK are what you and everybody will be someday. (The skull seemed to be grinning at Profane.) . . .
 "You don't even have a soul. How can you talk."
 Since when did you ever have one? What are you doing, getting religion? (286)

Profane's humanism relies on the notion of the soul, an essentially Platonic concept which posits an origin external to material reality. Having planted doubt in Profane's mind, SHROUD demonstrates in a

subsequent conversation the disparity between the ideal of humanism and its historical reality:

Remember, Profane, how it is on Route 14, south, outside Elmira, New York? You walk on an overpass and look west and see the sun setting on a junkpile. Acres of old cars, piled up ten high in rusting tiers. A graveyard for cars. If I could die, that's what my graveyard would look like.

"I wish you would. Look at you, masquerading like a human being. You ought to be junked. Not burned or cremated."

Of course. Like a human being. Now remember, right after the war, the Nuremberg war trials? Remember the photographs of Auschwitz? Thousands of Jewish corpses, stacked up like those poor car-bodies. Schlemihl: It's already started.

"Hitler did that. He was crazy."

Hitler, Eichmann, Mengele. Fifteen years ago. Has it occurred to you there may be no more standards for crazy or sane, now that it's started? (295)

SHROUD's argument leads to a collapse of the animate/inanimate distinction. He maintains that SHOCK (a crash-test dummy) and he are what we will all be someday. Animate and inanimate become continuous rather than discrete, thus destroying Profane's ideal animate origin.

McHoul and Wills suggest that Profane's fear of the sexual is a further symptom of his teleological neurosis:

Any form of coupling be it covenant or intumescence, will fall within the structure of the prosthetic. If the supplement is possible, then the supplement of another nature is possible, and nature is no longer simple nature. Sex, where Benny Profane is concerned, demands the addition of one nature to another. Thus it is necessarily anxiety-producing for him who fears contamination by the inanimate. (174)

This passage bears all the hallmarks of Derrida's examination of Plato in his essay "The Pharmakon" (appropriately for McHoul and Wills's project to match the texts of Pynchon and Derrida). Supplementation requires the admission of a matrix which eventually threatens the sovereignty of the subject.

Unlike the humanist tenets which construct Profane's character, the metanarratives implied in V.'s are somewhat harder to locate. Chapter 14, "V. in Love," gestures toward a source.

As for V., she recognized—perhaps aware of her own progression toward inanimateness—the fetish of Mélanie and the fetish of herself to be one. As all inanimate objects, to one victimized by them, are alike. It was a variation on the Porpentine theme, the Tristan-and-Iseult theme, indeed, according to some, the single melody, banal and exasperating, of all Romanticism since the Middle Ages: “the act of love and the act of death are one.” Dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other. (410)

It is also the melody of Bataille’s *Erotism*. Opening with a quotation from Sade, “There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image” (11), *Erotism* attempts to justify this apparently paradoxical notion. The argument is a mixture of philosophy and biological science. According to Bataille, our radical subjectivity as discontinuous beings goes hand in hand with our capacity for sexual reproduction. Conversely, asexual reproduction involves a nexus of continuity:

There is a point at which the original one becomes two. As soon as there are two, there is again discontinuity for each of the beings. But the process entails one moment of continuity between them. . . . The same continuity cannot occur in the death of sexual creatures, where reproduction is in theory independent of death and disappearance. (13)

It follows that the erotic impulse is born of a nostalgia for continuity: “We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity” (15). Bataille argues that the sexual act, and the dissolution it produces, is a way of discarding our discontinuous individuality and experiencing a taste of the continuity only death can finally deliver.

Profane’s fear of sex thus has another dimension. Not only is the sexual act a form of supplementation, as McHoul and Wills suggest; it also, according to Bataille, gives the participant a sense of progressing toward the inanimate, which is precisely what Profane fears. V. is aware of her progression toward the inanimate, and actively takes part in it via prosthesis. The anti-prosthetic characters, on the other hand, struggle to protect their subjectivity from the inanimate, Profane through his notion of the ideal animate, and Herbert Stencil through his habit of referring to himself in the third person. Despite Profane’s defenses, his strict segregation of animate/inanimate and biological/mechanical continually breaks down: “To Profane, alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine” (40). In chapter

11, Fausto Majstral displays a similar aversion to the possibility that the body and the mechanistic world are in cahoots, here in pregnancy:

Their babies always seem to come by happenstance; a random conjunction of events. Mothers close ranks, and perpetrate a fictional mystery about motherhood. It's only a way of compensating for an inability to live with the truth. Truth being that they do not understand what is going on inside them; that it is a mechanical and alien growth which at some point acquires a soul. They are possessed. Or: the same forces which dictate the bomb's trajectory, the deaths of stars, the wind and the waterspout have focussed somewhere inside the pelvic frontiers without their consent, to generate one more mighty accident. (321-22)

Before the early seventies, what Pynchon does in *V.* may have been referred to as parody rather than deconstruction. Bataille's use of the term parody in 1927 captures the mechanics of Pynchon's first novel: "It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form" (VE 5). So it is with the animate and the inanimate in *V.* Profane's search for an ideal origin or generative principle becomes untenable in the novel's essentially parodic environment. Bataille's parodic vision transmutes the medieval device of allegory, a controlled flow between macrocosm and microcosm, into a parodic world of semblance flowing multifariously among the personal, political and cosmic spheres:

[I]f the origin of things is not like the ground of the planet which seems to be the base, but like the circular movement the planet describes around a mobile centre, then a car, a clock, or a sewing machine could equally be accepted as a generative principle. . . . Thus one notes that the earth, by turning, makes animals and men have coitus, and that animals and men make the earth turn by having coitus. (VE 5)

While there is a hint of humor in extrapolations like this one, many of Bataille's other writings, especially his essays on history and political economy, demonstrate the serious intent of his vision. Steven Shaviro locates the essays on political economy within the broader framework of Bataille's thought. He argues that Bataille's political economy is essentially anti-Hegelian: it explains the disruptions of capitalism, not in terms of class conflict, but as manifesting an underlying need for excess and expenditure. Beyond the dialectics within our historical concepts lies a larger dialectic between our very notions of history and a ceaseless movement toward sacrifice and excess: "The accidents that

violently extricate us from historical context and linear order are themselves arbitrary waste products of the most overdetermined historical movements" (Shaviro 38). Bataille holds that "human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation" (VE 118), and suggests that these processes are in fact secondary to expenditure.

According to Bataille's parodic concept of the universe, the spheres of subjectivity and political economy mimic each other. Both display a loathing of and an attraction to a radical ulterior, manifest in the body as eroticism, with its approach toward the inanimate, and in capitalism as excessive production, inherent violence, and sacrifice. Stability and internal cohesion are secondary functions of the very processes which disrupt them and which they are unable to include or take into account. No representation, no ordering of power relations is thinkable without reference to an unthinkable outside. Even subjectivity is generated only by the "contagion" of outside elements (Shaviro 46).

In Bataille's work, the crisis of the subject is mirrored by the crisis of history; similarly, the two alternately play text and subtext in *V*. The crisis of the body's contagion with the inanimate is featured through *Profane*, while the novel's historical paradigms envelop Stencil. "Born in 1901, the year Victoria died, Stencil was in time to be the century's child" (V 52). The implications of this peculiar birthright are such that Stencil's character serves as a crystallization of twentieth-century Western consciousness. The inheritance of his quest by way of his father's secret service memoirs mimics the movement from the Victorian age to the modern:

Stencil reached his majority three years after old Stencil died. Part of the estate that came to him then was a number of manuscript books, bound in half-calf and warped by the humid air of many European cities. His journals, his unofficial log of an agent's career. Under "Florence, April, 1899" is a sentence, young Stencil has memorized it: "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer. (53)

Stencil's search for *V.*, like the project of modernism, as Brian McHale suggests, is predominantly epistemological. Old Stencil's journal entry indicates that *V.* is an unknown principle. Stencil relies on his search for definition in the same way the Western construct of the subject relies on the pursuit of knowledge: "Finding her: what then? Only that what

love there was to Stencil had become directed entirely inward, toward this acquired sense of animateness. Having found this he could hardly release it, it was too dear. To sustain it he had to hunt V." (V 55).

McHoul and Wills concisely sum up the structures which support Stencil's quest: "Stencil's plotting of the chronology of V-events assumes that the odd, off-chance occurrences of her bits and pieces, her random incidences, once plotted, will lead back to a single controlled event" (171). Like Profane's, Stencil's construction of the universe requires him to posit a pure point of origin, a principle which will provide an explanation of the series of seeming accidents otherwise known as history. If V. cannot provide this explanation, then we are left with a situation the narrator describes empirically after listing a page of disasters from around the globe that occurred in the space of one month: "It happens every month in a succession of encounters between groups of living and a congruent world which simply doesn't care. Look in any yearly Almanac, under 'Disasters'—which is where the figures above come from. The business is transacted month after month after month" (290-91).

The signifier V. is a manifestation, a *vision*, of excess. The irony of Stencil's positing her persona as the origin of various historical catastrophes is that she exists only as a manifestation of excess and expenditure. On the one hand, V. portrays the progression toward the inanimate which characterizes Bataille's concept of eroticism; on the other, she represents those incursions which disrupt our notion of history. Profane and Stencil converge on these two dimensions of Bataille's writing in the same way they converge on the novel's geographical center, Malta.

Late in the novel, Stencil persuades Profane to travel to Malta with him in a final attempt to track down V., and to investigate his father's disappearance. Despite its promise of resolution, the journey offers little more than another link in Stencil's chain of clues, and he soon leaves for Stockholm in pursuit of V.'s glass eye. For Profane as well, the trip to Malta proves yet another meaningless episode in a dissolute life; his last piece of dialogue acts as a summation: "'offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing'" (454). This lack of resolution is not really surprising: Pynchon's plots are hardly known for their sense of closure. Yet the trip does provide one brief moment of illumination. A curio dealer tells Stencil of a woman who may possess the glass eye. When Stencil approaches the woman, she claims she threw the eye into the sea; however, the clue does not lie with the woman or the object, but with the appurtenances surrounding Stencil's visit to her apartment:

She lived in a tenement. Stucco walls, a row of balconies on the top floor. Light that afternoon produced a "burn" between whites and blacks: fuzzy edges, blurrings. White was too white, black too black. Stencil's eyes hurt. Colors were nearly absent, leaning either to white or black.

[Inside] . . . Light angling through the window fell across a bowl of fruit—oranges, limes—bleaching them and throwing the bowl's interior to black shadow. Something was wrong with the light. (446)

And later, Stencil tells Maijstral, "'One feels [V.] in the city. . . . In the light. It has to do with the light'" (447).

A certain intolerable brightness of light is also evident in Bataille's work. According to Nick Land, Bataille criticizes the traditional notion of light in Western philosophy, arguing that, since the time of Plato, the sun has been equated with truth, eliding its darker aspect as pure combustion and waste: "Incandescence is not enlightening, but the indelicate philosophical instrument of presence has atrophied our eyes to such an extent that the dense materiality of light scarcely impinges on our intelligence" (Land 29). Light in this negative sense also pervades *Story of the Eye*, where the narrator complains, "Little by little, the sun's radiance sucked us into an unreality that fitted our malaise" (52), and also notes a "sort of urinary liquefaction of the sky" (54).

It is impossible for Stencil to find V. because she refuses to be reconstructed within the traditional framework of Western thought. Her character exists in the excesses of the novel, in that which exceeds our sense of self and our sense of history, not within the dialectic boundaries of good and bad and light and dark. Pynchon characterizes such excesses through Bataille's notion of blinding illumination. The epilogue of *V.* explains the senior Stencil's disappearance in a passage noteworthy for its details of the incident's disastrousness and apparent randomness, and for the unusual severity of the light:

Draw a line from Malta to Lampedusa. Call it a radius. Somewhere in that circle, on the evening of the tenth, a waterspout appeared and lasted for fifteen minutes. Long enough to lift the xebec fifty feet, whirling and creaking, Astarte's throat naked to the cloudless weather, and slam it down again into a piece of the Mediterranean whose subsequent surface phenomena—whitecaps, kelp islands, any of a million flatnesses which should catch thereafter part of the brute sun's spectrum—showed nothing at all of what came to lie beneath, that quiet June day. (492)

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