

introduction

A core principle of the mimetic theory is that violence is something inescapably human, a reality we must inevitably confront because of our extremely mimetic nature. In its treatment of the origin of human violence from the animal world, the mimetic theory considers animal mimesis to be unlike human mimesis in that it is constrained by the natural braking mechanisms of instinct. This opens the question of whether, from the perspective of mimetic theory, nature is essentially non-violent.

Was the origin of human life an implantation of an alien violence into a formerly pristine world? Is the imbalance, the asymmetry of human existence as discussed by mimetic theory matched by a fundamental balance of nature? I think that so far this question has not been specifically focussed on by Girard or other practitioners of the mimetic theory, and so the theme of this year's Colloquium on Violence and Religion seems especially timely. I would like to make my contribution to this discussion in the form of a close reading of two theories of nature, violence and the sacred: the 'sacred sociology' of Georges Bataille, and the critical theory of T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. I will begin and end with the assertion that nature is *not fundamentally balanced*, any more than human nature – although it is possible to argue that the human imbalance is more extreme. Both Bataille and Adorno-Horkheimer argue that humanity's greatest predicament is that its own violent nature is only a transformed form of the elemental violence and excess of nature as a whole.

the harmony of nature and Bataille

It is common, perhaps almost universal, among environmental and ecological thinkers to invoke some idea of the harmony of nature as the basis for their ideas. With the production

of his recent television miniseries, *Sacred Balance*, Canadian popular scientist David Suzuki provides a good example of this way of thinking:

When we have a thought, a way of looking at the world, in which spirit and the sacred are removed then we push ourselves into a terrible imbalance. Because as you well know the current paradigm of progress is economics, and the economic system we live in has to grow forever. That's what it's based on, and no one ever asks: how much is enough? What do I need to be happy? What is an economy for?¹

Spirit and the sacred are inherent in all traditional cultures, which for Suzuki, is to say that they live in harmony with nature. We moderns have pushed ourselves into a terrible imbalance, and what is necessary to correct the imbalance is to look to nature to see the balance in action, and imitate it.

Suzuki's blend of spiritualism and common sense is not as uncommon as his tone – a lament calling for an awareness which is all-too-rare – would suggest. When the question of the environment is raised in Western countries, it has become a commonplace to intone that we are 'out of touch' with the environment, that we need to be more deeply vigilant of our personal habits, and those of others as well. Underlying it all is the positive message, the soft sell of modern liberal environmentalism: you too can commune with nature, can feel at one with all of existence.

Ecological thinker Timothy W. Luke has argued that in fact the modern environmental movement as a whole is dominated on the one hand by the goal of rational resource management, and on the other, the ideals of conservation and restoration. He calls this 'green governmentality,' a general mindset where "ecology gives rational governments all of life's biodiversity to reformat as 'endangered populations,' needing various state

¹ from a transcript of the *Sacred Balance* webcast, "Can we save the Ganges?"
<http://www.sacredbalance.com/web/videoindex.tpl>

ministrations as objects of managerial control ignorant of what is being done to them....”²

Green governmentality has not shaken itself free of the Judeo-Christian heritage of dominion over nature, no matter what the bio-spiritual-friendly packaging says, because it still views animals – our closest relatives in the natural world – essentially as objects to be managed or preserved, rather than as subjects like us. All too often the price for our compassion for animals, as for children, is that they be pleasing, ‘cute,’ which is to say that they should not ever present us with obstacles to our affection. Luke’s critique shows that compassionate feelings for nonhuman nature can be as governmentally-oriented as the most stolid economic approach. However, what the alternative would be to this green governmentality remains unclear in his theory – some unthinkable, or barely thinkable, new way of relating with nonhuman nature.

Georges Bataille, hardly describable as an environmentalist, must I think be given credit for pursuing the full implications of the non-governmentalistic relation with nature to which Luke aspires. In doing so, he also shows *why* the Judeo-Christian tradition involved a separation of humans from nature, which for both Suzuki and Luke can only seem like the height of stupidity. In *Theory of Religion* Bataille says that “every animal *is in the world like water in water*,” and that the “lion is not the king of the beasts: in the movement of the waters he is only a higher wave overturning the other, weaker ones.”³ And while he admits also that animals possess a kind of embryonic individuality that would not be attributable to a body of water he insists that this remains unclear and ambiguous, only an ‘embryo’ of transcendence. It is the stuff of poetry, not science. We must conclude that the world of nonhuman nature is closed to us because it lacks the kind of separation and differentiation which are

² Timothy W. Luke, “Environmentality: Geo-Power, Eco-Knowledge, and Enviro-Discipline as Tactics of Normalization,” *Discourses of the Environment* (ed. Eric Darier, Blackwell, Oxford, 1999): 122

³ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (Zone Books, New York, 1992): 18-19

fundamental to human consciousness and existence. And for Bataille, this situation is given in its fullness when one animal eats its fellow creature. He refers to the apathy of the gaze of the predator after it has killed as evidence of a total lack of differentiation, and says that “this animal that eats the other cannot confront it in an affirmation of that difference.”⁴

Bataille insists that human beings have removed themselves definitively from the world of animal intimacy, of guiltless and unconscious predatory violence, and live in a world of duration. The tool, the prototype of all technological manipulation of the natural world, represents the original project, the idea carried forward in time. It is in fact the prototype of the object itself, a ‘thing’ apart from a world like water in water. The world of things is the profane world, the relatively predictable world of everyday activity. But Bataille, never afraid of the paradoxes of the sacred, goes well beyond most environmental thinkers when he makes it clear that at the same time as we have divided ourselves from animal intimacy, this has only made attainment of it more glorious, more exuberant, and above all much more violent. The everyday world of economy, labour, and what might be called the exploitation of nature is, from the earliest moments of human existence, one from which spirituality and the sacred are bracketed. But what a gift this bracketing represents! It is the possibility of acting without perpetual fear of ominous powers, of a degree of independence from the play of unpredictable natural forces – but also the propensity to magnify them monstrously....

Bataille’s depth-anthropological approach to these questions goes beyond the framework of liberal individualism that I think even post-Foucaultian radicals like Timothy Luke still espouse in a ‘greener than green’ form. The meaning of human life, for Bataille, is not just this sense of the isolated individual consciousness which becomes conscious of

⁴ *ibid*: 18

itself. It is also the possibility, the danger, of losing that consciousness in the re-attainment of animal intimacy through sacred violence. Sacrifice calls for the general negation of individuals as such, a wasting, an opening, an experience of the sacred which – paradoxically – *makes possible* a profane world circumscribed only by the demands of utility. Humanity is that which “would cease to exist the day it became something other than what it is, entirely made up of violent contrasts.”⁵

Bataille says that if sacrifice seems distressing, this is because the anxious individual, anxious to remain alive, is linked to the integration of existence into a world of things. The fear of dying is inherently connected with the world of duration – of production and work – and the “individual feels anguish because he experiences his own duration as a thing.”⁶ Intimacy, “in the trembling of the individual, is holy, sacred, and suffused with anguish.”⁷ But death “is the great affirmer, the wonder-struck cry of life.”⁸ Sacrifice, which is to say the attempt to re-attain the animal’s consciousness, calls for the general negation of individuals as such – it is the primary experience of human community. Bataille’s sacred is a ‘dangerously contagious,’ glorious moment, a prodigious effervescence of life that the profane order of durable things holds in check.

So, in a sense for Bataille, as for David Suzuki, the sacred means getting back in touch with nature. But that this re-attunement might imply violence without limit seems lost on the new-age thinkers as well as on the most rugged naturalists. The peculiarity of Bataille’s writing is that his relative lack of anxiety (or more precisely his thought’s transgressions of its own anxieties) concerning human violence, means that it promotes an uncompromised awareness of that which much less radical, less radically violent thinkers

⁵ Bataille, *The Accursed Share (Vols. 2 and 3)* (Zone Books, New York, 1991): 18

⁶ *Theory of Religion*: 52

⁷ *ibid*: 52

remain unaware. The shadow of John Locke's idea of human nature, that we are originally individuals who subsequently enter into society via contractual agreement, colours even the non-governmentalistic green thinkers. In much of the most extreme eco-spiritualism and green radicalism, the truth of human desire, its violence, remains circumscribed by an idea of political life which is based on fundamental ignorance about the nature of what Girard has called 'interdividuality.'

While Bataille shamelessly exposes the sacrificial upshot of a return to 'pure' natural existence, he does not positively and unequivocally validate a return to this intimacy. Much of his writing is really intended to evoke disgust, possibly to the point of violent unanimity in a process of expulsion. At times his work is a vivid demonstration of how it can be very difficult indeed not to scapegoat a presumed scapegoater. Disgust, for Bataille, *is* the experience of intimacy par excellence, and as early as 1938 we find him arguing that "early human beings were brought together by disgust and by common terror, by an insurmountable horror focussed precisely on what originally was the central attraction of their union."⁹ His celebrated-infamous early experiments with secret societies aside, Bataille himself admits that in the end his own violence was first and foremost an inner experience:

Sovereignty designates the movement of free and internally wrenching violence that animates the whole, dissolves into tears, into ecstasy and into bursts of laughter, and reveals the impossible in laughter, ecstasy or tears. But the impossible thus revealed is not an equivocal position; it is the sovereign self-consciousness that, precisely, no longer turns away from itself.¹⁰

What should be obvious from this at least, I think, is that Bataille was not a prime candidate for leading any kind of sacrificial cult. He was good at describing that kind of experience, but doesn't describing it so explicitly already dispel the power of the magic?

⁸ *ibid*: 46

⁹ Bataille, "Attraction and Repulsion 1" in *College of Sociology 1937-39* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988): 106

Bataille's most forceful and coherent expressions lie in his later books, *Theory of Religion* and *The Accursed Share (Vols. I-III)*. In these texts he is not advocating a reversion to the archaic sacred in any form, because he knows full well that it isn't possible. In his later texts, what Bataille is pursuing first and foremost is what he calls *clear consciousness*, a consciousness that has only become possible in a world where that sacred has all but disappeared. In a world without the sacred, sacrifice and sacrificial institutions – for example festivals, potlatch, the gift-marriage – either disappear or are industrialized. Where they are permitted, or even encouraged, these experiences have become commodities, and exist first and foremost as ways of producing economic growth. But sacred violence, the accursed share, has in no way *really* disappeared. Bataille always insisted that modern war, the irrational, useless consumption of human lives, and destruction of entire communities, is concomitant with a way of life in which everything is subordinated to the demands of utility. We might add to this another kind of war: the wholesale war against human and nonhuman nature which rages even when the nations are at peace. Time and time again both of these excesses have been named and condemned by progressive thinkers, and then the demand has been made that 'we' need to control our lifestyles more effectively, not only by renouncing our obscene automobiles, but by enacting regimes of austerity in our households, recycling, reusing, and saving all possible resources with maximum efficiency. At the most general level, planetary catastrophe is blamed on the wastefulness of a few, rather than a regime of performance and austerity imposed on all.

nature, economy and the *general economy*

In *The Accursed Share Vol. 1*, Bataille argues that the 'economy' that is studied by mathematical and social sciences, by most economists, is viewed in a restricted sense, as if it

¹⁰ *Theory of Religion*: 110-111

were an isolatable system of operation. For conducting restricted forms of economic and technological activity, this is a powerful and useful way of thinking. Changing a tire, ploughing a field, or opening an infected sore are all limited operations that are only infinitesimally affected by the larger environment in which they take place. However, the wonderful power and utility of this way of thinking for understanding and controlling restricted systems of operation has led to a widespread, we might even say hegemonic error. Operations like total automobile production in the United States, or world trends in oil consumption, or solving ‘environmental’ problems, are treated as if they were also limited, isolatable systems of operation. Given this socially prevalent misconception, Bataille asks,

[I]sn’t there a need to study the system of human production and consumption within a much larger framework? ...Should we not, given the constant development of economic forces, pose the *general* problems that are linked to the movement of energy on the globe?¹¹

The problem Bataille poses has been traditionally understood to go beyond science’s restricted ambit, if it is considered to be a problem at all. It also goes beyond fashionable holistic thinking, which again and again treats the natural whole as something *apart* from the human world, even if it is not aware it is doing so. Bataille wants to treat this problem with a kind of systematicity and rigorousness that has traditionally been denied to it, only because it cannot be solved by calculation and control.

The problem begins with the sun. In relation to the earth as a whole, the sun gives without receiving. It is not a resource that needs to be conserved, because it gives endlessly. Bataille sees a kind of knowledge in the solar cults of archaic religions which has been lost in the modern world. The glory of the victim of the human sacrifice reflected the propensity of the sun to burn without reason and without taking in return. He grants that the

¹¹ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. 1* (Zone Books, New York, 1991): 20

institutions of sacrifice were mired in duplicity, were the product of ‘clouded, puerile consciousness,’ and that the glory was often partly fraudulent. But these institutions also reflected something inherent in the natural world as a whole, including the world of human nature.

Bio-cosmologically speaking, life is always essentially an effervescence, not the self-preserving organ of accumulation that Darwin reduces it to. The living organism is always receiving more energy than is necessary for maintaining life, which means that part of the energy needs to be lost without profit and without gain. The origin of life itself partakes of this mystery which confounds mainstream evolutionary thinking: how did the flowering of life itself, which always implied its death, represent an evolutionary advantage over inert matter which would never die? Life from the beginning has been a wasting of energy, a primarily unnecessary and excessive development. At the level of the surface of the entire earth, for living matter in general, “...the question is always posed in terms of extravagance...”¹²

It is true that living matter, when it is growing, is accumulating energy within the space available. At some point, following some stage of growth, it radiates or squanders this energy, for example in the form of fruit from a plant. Of course it is true that “before devoting an appreciable share to this radiation it makes maximum use of it for its growth.”¹³ Most absolute limits to this growth are relative to the individual organism, only make sense from the perspective of a limited part of the whole. Because, considered as a totality, life always fills available space, life exerts a kind of continuous pressure in all directions, wherever it can exist. A path cleared by a gardener will soon be covered again with weeds and bushes which swarm with life: “Without exploding, its extreme exuberance pours out in

¹² *ibid*: 23

a movement always bordering on explosion.”¹⁴ The only *absolute* limit of its growth as a whole is the size of the earth itself, and “as a rule the surface of the globe is invested by life to the extent possible.”¹⁵

Considered within Bataille’s general economy, eating, death, and sexual reproduction are not necessities, but rather are great *luxuries* of nature, which waste thousands of calories of potential energy. Photosynthetic vegetation is always less burdensome, in terms of energy use, than animal life: “If one cultivates potatoes or wheat, the land’s yield in consumable calories is much greater than that of livestock in milk and meat for an equivalent acreage of pasture.”¹⁶ On the other hand, the wild beast is at a summit in terms of energy expenditure: “Its continual depredations of depredations represent an immense squandering of energy... the cruel pressure, at the limits of possibility, the tiger’s immense power of consumption of life.”¹⁷ And death is always the greatest luxury in any form of life, the greatest and most immense expenditure. In forms of life that reproduce sexually, death has a kind of wastefulness that it does not have in the less-highly evolved forms, which due to their mode of reproduction, are in a sense immortal. Bodies of animals and the higher plants are fragile and complex, and therefore wasteful, and death is a culmination, a clear sign of this fragility and complexity.

Necessary loss or luxury has always been obscured in the economic imagination because, “Economic activity, considered as a whole, is conceived in terms of particular operations with limited ends. The mind generalizes by composing the aggregate of these

¹³ *ibid*: 29

¹⁴ *ibid*: 30

¹⁵ *ibid*: 29

¹⁶ *ibid*: 33

¹⁷ *ibid*: 34

operations.”¹⁸ Darwin incorrectly extended the problems of necessity and scarcity from individual organisms to life as a whole. Necessity or scarcity only present themselves as problems to a *particular organism or group*. At this level, the economic need for growth via energy retention is usually paramount, at least insofar as it supports the survival of the individual. Economics usually works within the limits of the survival and growth of an economic individual; if it is desirable to gain information about society as a whole, the data for a given individual are simply multiplied linearly. While this reduction is useful, it remains a reduction, and does not take into account the excessive nature of life at the general level. Bataille insists that the problem for life as a whole, including human societies dominated by the demand for economic growth through energy retention, is always how to expend surplus received energy.

In the most general possible sense, a definition of economy would be the production and use of wealth. But this is still a reduced expression of a larger, cosmic phenomenon:

A movement is produced on the surface of the globe that results from the circulation of energy at this point in the universe.... [T]he economic activity of men appropriates this movement....¹⁹

Men appropriate the movement, but the very act of economic appropriation – the human cultural activity of integrating things into the economy, giving them value – is part of the larger cosmo-biological movement in its tendency to growth. A special kind of ignorance, an unwillingness to acknowledge the excessive quality of the larger movement, a tendency always to ignore the unbounded whole from which anything is removed when it is appropriated for human ends, causes many problems for human beings:

Man’s disregard for the material basis of his life still causes him to err in a serious way.... [I]t assigns to the forces it employs an end which they cannot have. Beyond our

¹⁸ *ibid*: 23

¹⁹ *ibid*: 21

immediate ends, man's activity pursues the useless and infinite fulfillment of the universe.²⁰

Bataille insists that the relation between one's own ends and the movement that surpasses them must be conceived without favouring the former. If there is a pressing need for the two terms to be reconciled, it is for the sake of the whole – not just a particular individual or group: “[I]f these two terms are to be reconciled we must cease to ignore one of them; otherwise our works quickly turn to catastrophe.”²¹

What is most important for Bataille, and what separates him from new-age holism and the Gaia myth, is that the extravagance of life is not simply an ecological being ‘out there.’ The extravagance of living matter in general finds its most ‘sovereign and glorious’ expression in human existence:

But man is not just the separate being that contends with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption.²²

We literally cannot, in spite of all our economic effort, hold on to this excess energy: “eventually, like a river into the sea, it is bound to escape us and be lost to us.”²³ Our ignorance, our refusal to admit the principle of excess into, or even as a boundary to, our economic calculations, “causes us to undergo what we could bring about in our own way, if we understood.... [It] deprives us of the choice of an exudation that might suit us.”²⁴

The excess of life force built up in the development of productive power always becomes an *obstacle* that needs to be removed by living beings. In pre-civilized²⁵ societies,

²⁰ *ibid*: 21

²¹ *ibid*: 21

²² *ibid*: 23

²³ *ibid*: 23

²⁴ *ibid*: 23-4

²⁵ ‘Civilized’ refers in one sense to a society devoted to productive gain. Bataille aims to introduce a different sense of what the term could mean.

festivals and the building of monuments were a means of luxuriously expending the excess. In modern societies, we multiply services and conveniences and products for leisure consumption, but none of these are enough, because they are not removed, as were the old rites, from the circuit of production – in fact, like planned obsolescence, they only serve to bolster the growth of that production. The real obscenity of consumerism is its utility.

Bataille argues that the absence of an effective and conscious means of useless expenditure has, of course, only meant that the expenditure happens anyway (it is a *fact* of physio-biological existence) – but unconsciously, in the catastrophic and explosive divisions of warfare. He points out that between 1815 and 1914 large scale martial activity was more or less restrained by the diversion of excess resources to the development of the productive apparatus (for example, in the recently colonized territories of North America). Immense productive energy needed to be expended to create ‘civilized’ human habitation in territories that had been inhabited by cultures more deeply attuned to useless consumption, to open sacrificial violence. Eventually, this growth became difficult to sustain: the surplus needed to be expended without return, and this manifested itself in battleships, tanks, machine guns, and the violent destruction of millions of lives, and whole regions near the fighting.

It is often denied that the plethora of accumulated industrial wealth is a proximate cause of either of the two world wars, but Bataille argues incisively that “it was this plethora that both wars exuded; its size was what gave them their extraordinary intensity.”²⁶ To avoid a new war, or more accurately, a future of unending war, “we must divert the surplus production, either into the rational extension of a difficult industrial growth, or into unproductive works that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case.”²⁷ Bataille admits that to identify or indicate what these unproductive works would be, if they

²⁶ *ibid*: 25

were not warfare, involves one in exhaustingly complex problems. Instead of following such a detour,

I will simply state, without waiting further, that the extension of economic growth itself requires the overturning of economic principles – the overturning of the ethics that grounds them. Changing from the perspectives of *restrictive* economy to those of *general* economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking – and of ethics.²⁸

If anything is positively required, it can only be clearly expressed in the negative sense – a rejection of the exclusive conclusions and demands of restricted economy. It goes without saying that the ambiguity of the requirement means it will likely continue to be ignored by the warring interests of development, who remain unaware that their activity in itself reflects a general economy of catastrophic violence and excess. Nevertheless,

...[t]he industrial development of the entire world demands of Americans that they lucidly grasp the necessity, for an economy such as theirs, of having a margin of profitless operations.... Woe to those who, to the very end, insist on regulating the movement that exceeds them with the narrow mind of a mechanic who changes a tire.²⁹

This situation, it should be clear, is not easily calculable, because there is no one point of interest from which calculations could be made. Its implications reverberate all the way down to the level of the would-be calculator himself. Bataille's exuberance raises the question of how to respond at all. It cannot all be *used*. So, it "is only a matter of an acceptable loss, preferable to another that is regarded as unacceptable: a question of acceptability, not utility."³⁰

It should be vibrantly clear by now that Bataille does not believe in any 'harmony of nature.' The difference between nature and humanity is not between balance and the lack of it. It is between two different kinds of imbalance, the human one only more extreme. The

²⁷ *ibid*: 25

²⁸ *ibid*: 25 It is worth noting that T.W. Adorno described the intention of the final part of his book *Negative Dialectics* as being "to give the Copernican revolution an axial turn." (Continuum, New York, 1973, p. xx)

²⁹ *ibid*: 26

problem in general economy, much as in physics after general relativity, is how to find an acceptable balance when there is no standard of ‘true’ balance to refer to, when it becomes clear that the foundation of nature itself is imbalance, violence. Perhaps the highest truth of the Judeo-Christian tradition, that all nature is fallen after the original sin, fits remarkably well with Bataille’s vision of a world under the curse of the excess, the accursed share of the general movement which exceeds control, which challenges self-preservation.

But where Bataille parts ways with Judaism and Christianity, and probably with all organized religions,³¹ is the way he treats of death and violence, with a kind of aesthetic approach. There are things which simply cannot be put into words, but Bataille makes a project out of uttering them.³² Consistently in all his writing, Bataille shows an unusual openness to the ‘incomparably rich’ forms of sacred violence. Connected with this is his unique position on justice, which he argues is “a guarantee against the risk of servitude, not a will to assume those risks without which there is no freedom.”³³ With regard to these risks, and the anxiety they must inspire, Bataille says that solving political problems “becomes difficult for those who allow anxiety alone to pose them. It is necessary for anxiety to pose them. But their solution demands at a certain point the removal of this anxiety.”³⁴ A tall order! It immediately raises anxious the question of whether the removal of the anxiety caused by violence, crime and death is really worth the risk. Bataille himself never really escaped from this anxiety, which lends his entire *oeuvre* the literary character that only deepens to the extent that he is interpreted as a theorist of literature or art, and not of the sacred – which is to say, of the real human community. I am left caught between Bataille’s

³⁰ *ibid*: 31

³¹ another title of Bataille’s book *Inner Experience* (trans. Leslie Anne Boldt, SUNY Press, 1988) is *Summa Atbeologica*

³² Bataille’s book on the mass-murderer Gilles de Rais (*The Trial of Gilles de Rais*, trans. Richard Robinson, AMOK books, 1991) would be a case in point here.

powerful warning about how justice can be, in fact is usually reduced to the universal project of economic growth (which only brings on worse violence) and René Girard's uncompromising exposure of the falsity and violence of myth and sacrifice, which may claim the whole earth as only their last victim in history. Nowhere in Bataille's theory is the idea unambiguously expressed that unjustifiable pain and suffering could ever be overcome, or radically minimized, because for Bataille pain and suffering are such intensely creative forces.

Odysseus, reason and the renunciation of sacrifice

In relation to this problem, I think T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's rather esoteric text *Dialectic of Enlightenment* needs to be read, and read as an extended meditation on the contradictory impulses of justice and liberation which drive what they call 'enlightenment' – the liberation of the human mind from myth and fantasy, and the establishment of its sovereignty over and independence from the blind cyclic power of nature. Adorno and Horkheimer are no less aware than Bataille of the blindness of modern contractarian justice, based on the accumulative logic of capitalism. But they insist that clear consciousness of this violence not mean the abandonment of the dream of a world without suffering.³⁵

Among other things, this book examines Homer's epic *Odyssey* as 'prescient allegory' of what they call the 'dialectic of enlightenment': it shows how the epic myth was already enlightenment in something not unlike our modern sense. All mythic narrative reports, names, and explains origins – it has a didactic function. The influence of magic in the mythic process is already pre-technological discipline, a form of operational power, know-

³³ *The Accursed Share Vol. 1*: 38

³⁴ *ibid*: 14

³⁵ Lambert Zuidervaart of Toronto's Institute for Christian Studies has pointed to the role suffering plays in T.W. Adorno's philosophy as radically differentiating his work from that of 'second-generation' Frankfurt School thinkers like Jurgen Habermas (see <http://www.icscanada.edu/faculty/lzuidervaart.shtml>).

how. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the motivation behind the modern western *break* with myth, the abrogation of sacrificial institutions, is perfectly defined by Francis Bacon's mantra-wish about nature, that "if we would be led by Her in invention, we should command her by action."³⁶ So enlightenment is not only a break with myth; enlightenment *produces* myths. For Bataille, the ideal of economic utility brings with it an accursed share, the useless expenditure of war. In Adorno and Horkheimer's formulation, economic utility itself *is* that accursed share, only in another form. The most utilitarian thinking, the purest quantitative rationality applied to nature or the economy represents an epistemological violence which is as unnecessary and as fraudulent as any other myth.

The *Odyssey*, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is frequently misinterpreted because of its ambiguous relation to the Ionian mythic heritage. In a sense, the *Odyssey* is just a well-organized collection of the old pagan myths, the folktales of monsters and gods which always surround sacrificial institutions. However, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the divergence of the organized epic *form* of these stories from their more primitive content marks "two phases of an historical process, which are still visible at the joints where editors have stitched the epic together."³⁷ Odysseus, the mythic hero of the ancient world, is also the prototype of the modern, enterprising, bourgeois individual, and the unified world he makes his journey through is the achievement of classifying reason. The traditional mythic contents of the *Odyssey* are dissolved by the same rational narrative order which has preserved them.

The world of Odysseus is populated by the old magic and monsters, but the "adventures bestow names on each of these places, and the names give rise to a rational

³⁶ Francis Bacon, quoted in Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, 2002): 1

³⁷ *ibid*: 35

overview of space.”³⁸ The myths have degenerated into mere poetry, having lost their primitive religious authority. But their power is still required to form a foil for Odysseus’ project of self-realization. They remain as “dangerous temptations deflecting the self from the path of its logic.”³⁹ The knowledge and memory that constitute Odysseus’s nascent identity is that of digression and salvation, loss and return, of encounter with the mythic forces and overcoming them. Odysseus gets lost in order to find himself, and alienates himself from nature in the very process of being abandoned to and abandoning himself to its power.

The duality, or duplicity, of Odysseus’s character is reflected by the cunning deceptions that Odysseus employs to outwit the various deities and powers he meets. As is the case in Homer generally, the gift he offers “falls midway between exchange and sacrifice.”⁴⁰ What appears to represent a gratuitous acknowledgement of power, a sacrificial gift to the deity-demon, is also a cunning way of undermining its power. The sacrifice offered to Poseidon in Ethiopia restricts the god’s power to that locality, and is used by Odysseus’ companions as an opportunity to escape. Odysseus believes in the gods, but every act of reverence is at the same time an act of self-assertion. Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of the epic at times comes very close to Bataille’s argument about a social order based more and more purely on utility, self-preservation and aggrandizement. But they emphasize the sacrificial side of the bourgeois civilization which has renounced open sacred violence. Odysseus’ cunning is that he tricks the demons and devils, by simulating his participation in the mythic scene, and, much like a lawyer, finding an ‘escape clause’ in the contract. Like Jesus, Odysseus is an advocate, but first and foremost in the defense of

³⁸ *ibid*: 38

³⁹ *ibid*: 38

⁴⁰ *ibid*: 39

himself and those like him. Adorno and Horkheimer would ask how many times in the history of Christianity, people who said they worshipped Christ were actually imitating Odysseus.⁴¹

But Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize more than Bataille, and closer to Girard, that this duplicity in wily Odysseus' behaviour is not something restricted to a 'fallen' post-mythic, Christian world.⁴² It is only as fraudulent as the institution of sacrifice has been from the very beginning:

If exchange represents the secularization of sacrifice, the sacrifice itself, like the magic schema of rational exchange, appears as a human contrivance intended to control the gods, who are overthrown precisely by the system created to honour them.⁴³

From the beginning he offering was sacrificed to the gods in order to master them, and the surrender of the individual to natural forces, to the murderous collective, was already a form a calculation, the moment of fraud in sacrifice which "is the prototype of Odyssean cunning."⁴⁴

The crucial difference is that with Odysseus, the deceptive aspect of sacrifice becomes a character feature in a self with depth. This character is that of the cunning powers of self-preservation which underlie his apparent physical weakness before the primitive powers – 'mind over matter.' Odysseus's brute physical strength only appears where it has been removed from the life and death struggle, in athletic feats where "the strength which is detached from self-preservation benefits self-preservation."⁴⁵ In the real

⁴¹ They might also refer to Eusebius's report of Constantine's great vision of the cross emblazoned over the sun (a symbol of his conversion from the cult of Apollo), with the inscription below: "conquer by this." (See <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/conv-const.html>)

⁴² Adorno and Horkheimer take issue with Rudolf Borchardt's critique of the bourgeois-liberal aspects of Odysseus's character, which he opposed to the 'authentic' myths of the Germanic past

⁴³ *ibid*: 40

⁴⁴ *ibid*: 40

⁴⁵ *ibid*: 44

struggle the weaker party, the traditional victim of myth, overcomes the primitive, 'idiotic' ritual of the mythic power by actually following the letter of its law, gaining control over nature by consciously adapting itself to nature for this purpose. It "renders to nature what it hers and thereby cheats her."⁴⁶ This reason which represses natural mimesis is not simply its opposite: "It is itself mimesis: mimesis of death."⁴⁷ The break from nature is a break from a world of undifferentiated violence, and enlightenment has taken humanity beyond the sacred violence which re-established contact with that world. But the despiritualization of natural power has only been accomplished in class-history by imitating nature's rigidity, its most destructive forces.

As bearers of enlightened consciousness, Odysseus' men no longer perform the human sacrifices which the priests of the prehistoric world often demanded. However, for Adorno and Horkheimer the abrogation of such open sacrificial violence comes at a price – self-renunciation: "Odysseus acts as sacrifice and priest at one and the same time. By calculating his own sacrifice, he effectively negates the power to whom the sacrifice is made."⁴⁸ If the principle of sacrifice has disappeared because it was irrational and unnecessary, "at the same time it survives through its rationality."⁴⁹ The abandonment of sacrifice by the enduring, identical self is "hard, petrified sacrificial ritual in which the human being, by opposing its consciousness to its natural context, celebrates itself."⁵⁰ Enlightenment brings the deception at the heart of sacrifice – that its victim is a bearer of the divine substance – to light, but in doing so constitutes a new one. Odysseus' unified ego is only made possible by the sacrifice of the present moment. His self-sacrificial character,

⁴⁶ *ibid*: 57

⁴⁷ *ibid*: 44

⁴⁸ *ibid*: 40

⁴⁹ *ibid*: 42

⁵⁰ *ibid*: 42

and his survival in spite of it, causes many to refer to him as a god, or as godlike. But the substantive ego he becomes “is as illusory as the immortality of the slaughtered victim.”⁵¹

Adorno and Horkheimer point out that in a history of class domination, opposition to primitive sacrificial violence has always implied a sacrifice of the self, a denial of nature in man for the sake of power over nature and other men. As man discards all awareness of himself as a natural being, all the aims of enlightenment – social progress, greater spiritual and material power, and consciousness – nullify themselves, and the technological means is enthroned as an end in itself. Utility becomes the universal standard of righteousness. In short, the history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice: “All who renounce give away more of their life than is given back to them, more than the life they preserve.... All the superfluous sacrifices are needed against sacrifice.”⁵²

Adorno and Horkheimer are distinguishable from Bataille to the degree to which they *explicitly show* the identity between myth and scientific thought, where Bataille seems to be trying to enact it. They trace the continuous evolution from worlds of local spirits and demons to heaven and its hierarchy, from the magician’s ritual to hierarchical gradations of sacrifice, from spirits identical with natural elements to spirits *signifying* those elements, to a purely quantitative science. Nature, in this development, increasingly becomes a mere substratum of domination. In the old animistic world, the mimetic power was exercised in ritual and sacrifice as the direct domination of nature and other men through imitation of nature, in ritual’s polysemic cultic masks: “The rites of the shaman were directed at the wind, the rain, the snake outside or the demon inside the sick person, not at materials or specimens.”⁵³ Enlightenment implies progressive distantiation from this naked mimetic

⁵¹ *ibid*: 40

⁵² *ibid*: 43

⁵³ *ibid*: 6

violence, but in the form of regression behind one impenetrable mimetic mask: logical unity. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the establishment of the world understood by science to be a finite quantum of matter and energy is the supreme mythical achievement, the myth to end all myths, and the ultimate sacred violence, “more metaphysical than metaphysics.”⁵⁴ Naked domination turns into domination as the implicit logical ground of all truth.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, sacrificial substitution already represents a first step toward discursive logic, the ability to view things as exchangeable elements of a system, in thought or in the economy.⁵⁵ But they also emphasize that the sacrificial victim was shrouded in the holiness of the ‘here and now’, and was unfit for any exchange other than the one that had been consecrated. As it transforms of the old magical practices, modern experimental science becomes as rigid and inflexible as its object: “The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and its accidental bearer.”⁵⁶ The object of experimental science, from the laboratory animal to the human subject of psychological testing, is a mere specimen of a type, following the logical laws of nature. Any specific view of this object which goes further succumbs to the logical criticism that it is merely a belief: ‘spirit,’ ‘truth,’ even ‘enlightenment’ itself all become forms of animistic magic for the modern scientific cynic, in Adorno and Horkheimer call a “permanent twilight of the idols.”⁵⁷ But in all this, the ancient principle of fate really continues to reign, as “wrath against those of insufficient [scientific] righteousness.”⁵⁸ Enlightenment “seeks to escape the trial of fate and retribution by itself exacting retribution

⁵⁴ *ibid*: 17

⁵⁵ Their theory here bears a striking similarity to Girard’s envisioning of the birth of human language and culture in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer, The Athlone Press, London, 1987)

⁵⁶ *ibid*: 7

on that trial.”⁵⁹ And while they seem exotic and terrifying, the old sacrificial powers could never dominate the world as scientific enlightenment has, because it was unable to establish the rigid distance from nature that science can.⁶⁰

With progress in civilization the fraudulent magic has faded and the veil of myth has been lifted from sacred violence. But in the process, repetition and identity – the old principles of imitative magic – have been installed at the level of natural laws.

Enlightenment dissolves arbitrary authority, only to replace it with the total regime of exchangeability: “Whatever might be different is made the same.”⁶¹ In fact, the distance from the object which is required for the principle of rational equality was derived from mastery over the mastered, the triumph of a more dominant social order over the nomadic natives and chieftains – expressed in religious terms as the drive to establish gods among gods, and then a God among false gods. For Adorno and Horkheimer, what links mimetic magic and reason is conceptual domination, the taboo on knowledge which really concerns the individual, the object.

With the realization of enlightenment, the profane world, eclipsing the sacred world of myths and faeries, takes on the character the medicine men had revealed in demons – a totality with enormous, threatening destructive power. The liberation from myth itself turns into mythic fear, a taboo on any unclarified assertion, any statement not oriented toward self-preservation. All impulse is repudiated, while body and soul are shaped, under compulsive power, according to the demands of the technical apparatus. At the same time, the old mythic panic is inescapable, and the fear of sacred violence persists in the pervasive

⁵⁷ *ibid*: 8

⁵⁸ *ibid*: 8

⁵⁹ *ibid*: 8

⁶⁰ J. Robert Oppenheimer: “I am become death, shatterer of worlds.”

⁶¹ *ibid*: 8

expectation that the world is about “to be set ablaze by a universal power which they themselves are and over which they are powerless.”⁶² The compulsive character of the imperative of self-preservation is magnified into the choice between survival and doom – the lethal upshot of Aristotle’s logic of the excluded middle.

Adorno and Horkheimer show, referring to the stories of the Sirens and of the Lotus-Eaters, that self-abandonment was an inherent part of the process of the formation of the self, a temptation that needed to be resisted. Subsequent enlightenment thinking has ultimately anathematized self-abandonment, whether in ascetic thought or in pleasure, as a useless waste. But the total comprehension of the self by the powers of civilization finally brings out in the self the very element that has always wanted to eradicate both the self and civilization. Pure natural existence has always represented an absolute danger for the self emerging from mimetic animism into myth, from myth into metaphysics and eventually into positivism. Progress through these stages has only been accomplished by striking terror of what it once was into the self that emerges, so that the memory of the nomadic or pre-patriarchal stages of human life is extirpated from consciousness. The new postmodern pagans want to set pleasure free, but, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s bitterly acute judgement, ‘pleasure has learned self-hatred,’ and remains in the grip of the urge of self-preservation. Bourgeois hedonism has always been a philosophy of moderation, steering “between the Scylla of a return to mere reproduction and the Charybdis of unfettered fulfillment.”⁶³ The choice has always been between being subject to nature and subjecting nature to the self. Labour, under pressure of domination, strives to move away from myth, but under this pressure, always returns to it in the end:

⁶² *ibid*: 22

⁶³ *ibid*: 24

With the spread of the bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating.⁶⁴

negative dialectics and the disharmonious object

But while they are unflinchingly critical of what they see as the fraudulence of progress, Adorno and Horkheimer are unwilling to relinquish the promise enlightenment, the sacrifice of sacrifice, has always borne. In what is really a fall-back position for revolutionary radicalism, they argue for an *epistemological* – rather than directly ethical or moral, as in Bataille – openness to violence and excess. Adorno would later devote his longest philosophical treatise, *Negative Dialectics*, to what he came to call a ‘non-identitarian’ way of thinking which shifts from subjective reason to the ‘priority of the object.’⁶⁵ A key principle is that concepts (for examples we could use ‘sacrifice’ and ‘myth’) cannot exhaustively describe the objects they purport to subsume under categories. So there is at least this inevitable violence or imbalance in human and nonhuman nature: the object always violates the concept. But another key principle of negative dialectics is that it is possible to use the concept to bring its own shortcomings to light, and in doing so foster awareness of the objective suffering at the heart of identity-thinking, of both the mythic and the scientific varieties.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the argument is that without dissolving it, theory can see the restricted ‘either-or’ logic of quantitative rationality (and the restricted economic and scientific understanding which accompanies it) which was required to secure the emancipation from nature “*as that same nature, unreconciled and self-estranged.*”⁶⁶ Thought becomes delusion, or maybe poetry, whenever it attempts to eliminate its separating,

⁶⁴ *ibid*: 25

⁶⁵ One of Adorno’s observations: it is possible to imagine an object without a subject, but not to imagine a subject without objects.

⁶⁶ *ibid*: 31

objectifying function, but for dialectical thinking the dichotomy between subject and object it requires becomes the index of the untruth of that very dichotomy, the indication of a different kind of truth. When it acknowledges itself as a form of necessarily repressive control, it retreats into nature, but simultaneously abandons the claim to domination that makes it the slave of nature.

Adorno and Horkheimer's epistemological break is radical enough that it may mean what we often think of as knowledge needs to be forfeited. But in this we would at least no longer mistake "the ramparts [knowledge] has constructed against necessity, the institutions and practices of domination which have always rebounded against society from the subjugation of nature, for guarantors of the coming freedom."⁶⁷ The problem is not individuals' inability to manage themselves and their resources. "The fault lies in a social context which induces blindness."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *ibid*: 32

⁶⁸ *ibid*: 41

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