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Our paper will attempt to explain how the concepts Alexandre Kojève was developing during his seminar on the Phenomenology of Spirit and his proximity to Georges Bataille may have left their mark on the latter's withdrawal from any militant political initiative after dissolution of the revolutionary movement Contre-Attaque. *Indeed, Kojève's teaching on the Master-Slave dialectic and on the role of the intellectual seems to have nourished the vocabulary of* Contre-attaque, *but the coldness that he displayed towards this movement produced in Bataille — and here lies our working hypothesis — a feeling of disaffection that the thinker of expenditure sought to counter by founding* Acéphale. *Finally, we will try to show how certain ideas about the political function of violence in view of a "terrorist" revolution could have determined this disinterest on the part of Kojève, a disinterest that could only be partially buffered by the foundation of the* Collège de Sociologie.

Keywords

Bataille ; Kojève ; Counter-attack; Contre-attaque; Acéphale; Imperative Violence; Marxism; Revolution.

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I. 1934-1936: From *La Critique Sociale* to *Contre-attaque*

The intellectual trajectory that links Georges Bataille and Alexandre Kojève presents a complexity that it would be difficult to resolve and unfold once and for all, but whose issues are crucial to understanding under what sign Bataille resolved to place his production from the mid-1930s until his death. At the same time, Kojève's thought can shed new light on how Bataille's ideas were constructed both in opposition and through "seduction," leading to possible deviations from their initial projects.

The encounter between Bataille and Kojève, likely at Alexandre Koyré's seminar on Nicholas of Cusa and Hegel's religious philosophy at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris in the early 1930s, sparked a friendship. And this friendship, despite paradoxical outcomes relative to their initial theoretical positions, profoundly influenced Bataille's work. It can be argued that Bataille's work exists in both sovereign opposition to and absolute consonance with Hegelian-Kojèvian teachings.

Bataille was a faithful listener to Kojève's famous seminar on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the *École Pratique* from January 1934 until its end in 1939, a period of great political effervescence which for him resulted in a series of attempts at associationism and even communitarianism (*Contre-Attaque*, the secret society *Acéphale*, the College of Sociology) in

which he tried to solicit — without much success — the participation of the Russian philosopher. Subsequently, as the Second World War unfolded, Kojève's Hegel became increasingly important, becoming a major critical reference in the triptych of Bataille's *Summa atheologica*; from then on, the name of the master of German idealism — and all that he represented in Bataille's eyes — never left his toolbox, and he reserved a place of honour for him in all subsequent projects.

The years that accompanied Bataille's discovery of the Hegelian system through the teaching of Alexandre Kojève were marked by a significant shift towards the field of *praxis*, understood first as a revolutionary offensive (as in the case of the *Contre-Attaque* movement) and then as a sacrificial instance in which the notion of the sacred guided both the constitution of an elective community (*Acéphale*) and that of a research group aiming to extract "communal movements" from society (the College of Sociology). It is important to see how the encounter with Kojève determined Bataille's openness to previously neglected regimes of thought, but it is above all necessary to consider the way in which Bataille was able to integrate the Kojèvian reading of Hegel through the years without his reflections being hampered by the urgency of the situation and distorting what was said at the seminar.

After the experience of *La Critique sociale*,[1] 1934 was to be an *annus horribilis* for Bataille: his health worsened (rheumatisms and the first symptoms of tuberculosis); he separated from his wife to devote himself entirely to Colette Peignot (known as Laure), Boris Souvarine's partner during the adventure of the "*Cercle communiste démocratique*"[2] and a genuine femme fatale who embodied Bataille's notions of excess, expenditure and the impossible more than anything else; his frequentation of brothels and nude women's clubs intensified, as did his consumption of alcohol. It was also a year punctuated by short stays abroad, which provided the material for the most dramatic and intimate novel he ever wrote, *Le bleu du ciel* (*Blue of noon*), completed on Wednesday 29 May 1935 but not published until 1957 at the urging of friends and, presumably, out of a need for money.[3]

The dark and disillusioned nature of *Le bleu du ciel*, which is eminently critical and derisive of political aspirations, was a poor preparation for the initiative Bataille was to embark on from October 1935, in which he was to attempt to involve Kojève for the first time.

This next stage in Bataille's political commitment took the form of a movement of "revolutionary intellectuals" called *Contre-Attaque*. The name already suggested the basic thrust of the desired programme of action: it was a matter of responding to an offensive, and the use of military lexicon indicated that the need had arisen to confront a specific enemy with a force capable of defeating it, without resigning oneself to a simple defensive strategy. This enemy went by many names — nationalism, capitalism, parliamentarianism (incarnated by the

[1] The journal *La Critique sociale* was founded in 1931 by Boris Souvarine, a heterodox communist who was excommunicated from the French Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Français* / *PCF*). The purpose of this publication was to set up a left-wing apparatus able to question the stumbling blocks of communism, whether they were due to Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky or even Marx. In addition to Bataille, its contributors included a number of ex-Surrealists (Raymond Queneau, Michel Leiris, Jacques Baron) and former contributors to the official theoretical newsletter of the PCF, the *Bulletin communiste* (notably Pierre Kaan and Lucien Laurat), all of whom were united by an oppositional stand against the "State capitalism" engineered by the USSR and the ideological sclerosis of the PCF.

[2] A political think-tank promoted by Souvarine, of which *La Critique sociale* was the "exoteric" appendix.

[3] See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'œuvre* (Paris : Gallimard, 2012), 239 ff.

left-wing coalition *Front Populaire*). In the movement's inaugural manifesto (leaflet of 7 October), we can read:

> Violently hostile to any tendency, whatever form it takes, to capture the Revolution for the benefit of the ideas of nation or fatherland, we address ourselves to all those who, by all means and without reservation, are resolved to bring down capitalist authority and its political institutions.[4]

The rather vague phrase "by all means and without reservation" is immediately elucidated: "We are aware that the present conditions of struggle will require of those who are resolved to seize power an *imperative violence* which is second to none, but, whatever our aversion to the various forms of social authority, we will not shrink from this inescapable necessity."[5] And further on:

> The constitution of a government of the people, of a leadership of public salvation, requires an uncompromising *dictatorship of the armed people*.
> It is not a formless insurrection that will seize power. What decides social destiny today is the organic creation of a vast composition of forces, disciplined, fanatical, capable of exercising pitiless authority when the day comes.[6]

We have here the same lexicon introduced by Bataille in the article "The Psychological Structure of Fascism"[7] in relation to the functioning of totalitarianisms governed by the heterogeneous fanaticism of the charismatic leader who, in order to assert himself, requires a homogenisation expressed through the sadism of military acts of oppression and expulsion of impure forms of this same heterogeneity. If, in that article, the Bataillian analysis of the master-slave dialectic could suggest a debatable fascination with fascist forms of rationalisation of excess, with *Contre-Attaque* there is no longer any doubt that this is the only conceivable way of overthrowing the established order:

> The time has come for *all of us* to become masters and to physically destroy the slaves of capitalism.
> We have seen that nationalist reaction has been able to make use in other countries of the political weapons created by the working class: we intend in our turn to make use of the weapons created by fascism, which has been able to make use of man's fundamental aspiration to emotional exaltation and fanaticism.[8]

Unlike fascism, this exaltation "must be placed at the service of the universal interest of mankind" to remove it from "nationalists enslaved to social conservation and the egoistic

[4] Georges Bataille, "'"Contre-Attaque" : Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires", in *Œuvres Complètes* (*OC* from now on), vol. 1, ed. Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 379. My translation.
[5] Ibid., 379. My emphasis.
[6] Ibid., 380.
[7] See Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (*VE* from now on), ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 137-60.
[8] Bataille, *OC*, vol. 1, 382.

interests of homelands."[9] This shift from a logic of generalised expenditure to the crystallisation of a universal and universalist destiny ("Everything that justifies our will to rise up against the slaves who govern, is of interest, without distinction of colour, to men all over the world")[10] is nonetheless suspect if we consider Bataille's coherence with regard to the use of notions that inform his entire production.

Indeed, although the inaugural manifesto of *Contre-Attaque* had thirteen signatories in its first version[11] — which tells us that it was not written by Bataille alone — the fact remains that he was its main instigator.[12] He was joined by a number of Surrealists, including André Breton, his old enemy at the time of the *Second Surrealist Manifesto*, where he was deeply criticised for his obscene tendencies. We don't know what prompted the two men to renew their friendship, but we do know that the help of the Surrealists was crucial to the successful formation of the movement: the *Contre-Attaque* manifesto appeared in Breton's publication *Position politique du surréalisme*[13] and all the group's activities took place under the aegis of his acolytes, who were joined by the "Souvarinites" (i.e., the followers of Boris Souvarine) who had followed Bataille after the dissolution of the "*Cercle communiste démocratique*" and by a few independents (notably Maurice Heine). It should also be pointed out that within the movement, members had polarised into two geographically designated groups: those on the Parisian right bank (the "Marat" group) and those on the left bank (the "Sade" group, of which Bataille and Breton were the real driving force).

Nevertheless, despite all its good intentions, the *Contre-Attaque* adventure lasted less than a year: tensions between members of the Surrealist "old guard" and those close to Bataille were bound to erupt, and they took the form of a generic accusation of "superfascism" made by the former in a note to the press after the publication, in May 1936, of the only *Cahier de Contre-Attaque* to come out.[14] In fact, *Contre-Attaque* combined militant action in the streets (especially participation in popular demonstrations) with the distribution of leaflets, which should have been integrated with programmatic notebooks ("*cahiers*") describing the movement's activities and including theoretical notes. Apart from the texts in the first issue of this publication, all we have are the leaflets and a prospectus announcing the successive *cahiers*, arranged by theme.

Several critical considerations emerge from an analysis of these materials. Firstly, the "imperative violence" that calls for the use of "the weapons created by fascism" echoes statements Bataille made to Pierre Kaan in 1934. In a letter dated 14 February, at the time of the "Cercle," we can read:

> I have no doubt as to the ground we should be standing on: it can only be that of fascism itself, in other words, the mythological ground. It's a question, then, of positing values that are part of a living nihilism, commensurate with fascist

[9] Ibid., 382.
[10] Ibid., 382.
[11] Pierre Aimery, Georges Ambrosino, Georges Bataille, Roger Blin, Jacques-André Boiffard, André Breton, Claude Cahun, Jacques Chavy, Jean Delmas, Paul Éluard, Maurice Heine, Pierre Klossowski, Benjamin Péret. The second version bears the signatures of thirty-eight members. For the complete list, see *OC*, vol. 1, 670-71.
[12] According to Henri Dubief, who was part of the organisation. See H. Dubief, "Témoignage sur *Contre-Attaque*," *Textures* 6 (1970) : 52-58.
[13] See André Breton, *Position politique du surréalisme* (Paris : Fayard/Pauvert, 1991).
[14] See Bataille, *OC*, vol. 1, 672-73.

> imperatives. These values have not yet been posited, and it is possible to pose them, but it is perhaps still impossible to know how to do so.[15]

The tone of this plea for the dynamics of a fascist ordering of heterogeneous imperative forces which are to be metamorphosed into the position of a "living nihilism" fits in well with the Bataillian proposals contained in his articles in *La Critique sociale*. As for the theoretical support for a Nietzschean transvaluation of values and a mythological plan, these will have no place in *Contre-Attaque* but they will be central to the formation of *Acéphale*. The bracketing of these revolutionary tendencies, which could be described as "catastrophist," in favour of a determined ideological horizon that sees the populace as the eschatological agent of a new era in which slaves will be the masters of an Earth governed by abundance and production according to actual needs, signals a change of perspective that should not be underestimated. What has happened in the meantime?

My hypothesis is to see in Kojève's teaching the premises of this Bataillean appeal to the rationalisation of the affective resources of the exploited social classes. There is no doubt that Bataille wanted to associate the Russian philosopher with the activities of *Contre-Attaque* from the outset. There are at least three accounts that point in this direction. These are three letters dating from the period October-December 1935, which it is worth reporting in full:

> Dear friend,
>
> Corbin[16] has told me that your course will resume around 20 November and we will certainly meet then.
> I am sending you in this envelope a text which has little more than a "Hegelian" correlation with what I said a few months ago.
> I would be very interested to know what you think of such an attempt (which will obviously only make sense insofar as words are translated into acts in the street). What particularly interests me in addressing you is the fact that many of us are, in short, Marxists aspiring to go back to "Marx's spiritual sources." There is something that situates us as those who are primarily interested in your attempt to interpret Hegel.
> I would be eager to meet you on this subject because it does not seem impossible to me to envisage something that might interest you. First of all, we are organising a union of combat, but everything that concerns doctrine, even in its philosophical aspect, is of essential importance to all of us.[17]
>
> ***
>
> Dear friend,
>
> I am sending you this invitation in the belief that the talk I will be giving at this meeting (the only one planned) may be of interest to you as a Hegelian. What I will be trying to explain is closer to the surrealist tradition than to the Marxist tradition, and it would not be entirely misleading to say that I would like to show how it is

[15] Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres 1917-1962*, ed. Michel Surya (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 79. My translation.
[16] Henry Corbin, first French translator of Heidegger and contributor to the journal *Recherches philosophiques*.
[17] Letter dated October-early November 1935, in Bataille, *Choix de lettres*, 119-20.

possible to move from the plane of the *Communist Manifesto* to that of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[18]

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Dear friend,

I couldn't wait until the end of the course yesterday. I am sending you — a little late, I'm afraid — an invitation to a meeting.
Last time I had to give up talking about the master-slave question. All in all, the meeting went badly and was a partial failure compared with the previous ones.
I would be very happy if it were possible for me to meet you at some length, both from the point of view of librarianship and from that of Hegelian politics ...[19]

The text to which Bataille refers in the first letter is the inaugural manifesto of *Contre-Attaque*, and it is clear from it what "Hegelian" correlations are involved: the dialectic of master and slave is at the heart of this "disciplined" revolution (and no longer "formless," as he had once hoped). Admittedly, we have no precise information about what Bataille had said "a few months [earlier]," perhaps during the meetings that usually took place at Jacques Lacan's house and to which Kojève was also invited,[20] but we can assume that the primary reference point was the discussions on the need to unleash a fundamental aggression with a view to overthrowing the democratic order, now weakened and threatened by the scale of the fascist rhetoric that was permeating the entire social structure. If, in his letter to Pierre Kaan, Bataille seems to recognise a partial impasse as to how to deal with the imperative forces of heterogeneous origin tamed by fascism — and the violence they entail — there can be no doubt that the question now is to understand how this violence can be rationalised in such a way as to effectively organise a line of attack that is not reduced to a purely symbolic or even provocative construction, as in some of the contributions to *La Critique sociale*. This emphasis on rationality is part of an innovative discourse which, in my opinion, is propelled by Kojève's lesson. It should not be forgotten that, between 1934 and 1935, Kojève had already built his interpretation of the Master-Slave dialectic around the notion of Desire (*Begierde*) and Negativity, which translates into Action (Fight and Work).[21] If the Bataille of the years of *La Critique sociale* combined a sulphurous and provocative attitude with the seriousness of political discourse, we are now witnessing a change of perspective in which the historicity of revolutionary action takes on a dimension that is less psychological than moral. Although the words of the inaugural manifesto of *Contre-Attaque* are dedicated to the solicitation of raging fanaticism and emotional exaltation — the "instincts of men who bow their heads to

[18] Ibid., 120. Letter dated November 1935.
[19] Letter dated 21 December 1935. Previously unpublished (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Correspondance Kojève*, NAF 28320).
[20] See, for instance, the letter to Michel Leiris dated 21 January 1935, in Bataille, *Choix de lettres*, 104-05, and the five letters from Lacan to Kojève published in *La Cause du Désir* 93 (2016): 150-52. It was also at Lacan's house that Roger Caillois met Bataille. See Gilles Lapouge's article "Entretien avec Roger Caillois," *Quinzaine littéraire* 97 (1970) : 6-7.
[21] All the concepts Kojève uses to highlight his reading of Hegel are presented here with the capital letter.

nothing"[22] — leading to the elaboration of "a doctrine *resulting from immediate experience*,"[23] the work leading to a "Resolution" (the title of the first part of the manifesto) could not be less a-dialectic and immediate. Indeed, while not underestimating the value and role of "acts in the street," what is put forward here is at the same time an archaeology of Marx's "spiritual sources"[24] and an elucidation of the universalist and moral scope of the desired revolution. We see, then, an attempt to renew the lexicon of insurrection in favour of the introduction of Hegelo-Marxian categories as revised by Kojève.

Bataille now seemed to recognise the need to stop insisting on the reservoir of negativity constituted by the proletariat in the face of its masters, and to concentrate instead on the dynamics of social struggle and the reversal of roles with a view to "*an uncompromising dictatorship of the armed people*," which would also express a moral revolution. If we take as decisive the admission that Kojève made in a letter to Tran Duc Thao in 1948, his seminar was to have the appearance of a "work of propaganda intended to grab people's attention [*frapper les esprits*]."[25] Consequently, we should not be surprised by the place given in his teaching to the struggle for recognition ("a fight for pure prestige," in his words) with a view to History's dialectical advance towards the universal and homogeneous State in which all citizens are equally recognised. This concern for universality is expressed on several occasions in *Contre-Attaque*. For example, the inaugural manifesto states: "Everything that justifies our desire to rise up against the slaves who govern is of interest, without distinction of colour, to men all over the world";[26] and, in the *Cahiers* flyer, the summary of a contribution to be given by Pierre Kaan and Georges Bataille ("*La Patrie ou la Terre*") proclaims that "what we love, even though we are French by origin, is not to any degree the French community, it is the human community; it is not in any way France, it is the Earth."[27] If, on the one hand, such statements mark the dividing line between nationalism and the idea of a human community where all could freely dispose of their desires, on the other hand they herald the passage from individual consciousness to universal consciousness, which reproduces the trajectory of the Slave who makes his personal history — at the end of the fight for pure prestige which has given him an identity — the premise of universal History realising at its end the Mastery of Absolute Knowledge, that is to say, Wisdom. Now, the universal and homogeneous state that Kojève was aiming for as the culmination of History had as its political model Robespierrian Bonapartism and its paradoxical contemporary extensions, notably Stalin's Russia, from which he himself had been exiled because of his bourgeois origins. The only problem was that this State was to emerge at the end of a "terrorist" (or "totalitarian") revolutionary period: "the post-revolutionary Government cannot be a party Government, of only a part of the Whole: it must suppress itself or it will be suppressed. But as long as it is revolutionary, it

[22] See Bataille, *OC*, vol. 1, 382.

[23] Ibid., 379.

[24] "Une source spirituelle de Marx" is also the title of a draft translation of chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that Kojève intended to publish, the introduction to which can be found in folder C, 1 of box 11 (2) of the *Fonds Alexandre Kojève* at the French National library. The draft dates from 25 July 1934.

[25] See Kojève's letter to Tran Duc Thao dated 7 October 1948, in Dominique Auffret, *Alexandre Kojève. La philosophie, l'État, la fin de l'Histoire* (Paris : Grasset/Fasquelle, 1990), 344-345. My translation.

[26] Bataille, *OC*, vol. 1, 382.

[27] Georges Bataille, "Les Cahiers de "Contre-Attaque," in *OC*, vol. I, 389.

must be a party government, and therefore act through the Terror."[28] I do not think it is too far-fetched to suggest that the venture outlined by Bataille and the Surrealists in *Contre-Attaque* is dedicated to advocating for a revolutionary government of an armed faction which, in the absence of viable alternatives to the arrogance of the Right and the wait-and-see attitude of the opposition forces, would impose the will of the people by means of "imperative violence," a formula which in many ways recalls the virulence of the Terror. However, Bataille does not hide the possible danger that such an approach could lead to the establishment of a fascist logic, since the seizure of power by heterogeneous forces could well catalyse their *pure*, imperative and therefore *sadistic* aspect (as Bataille had clearly shown in "The Psychological Structure of Fascism."). Nevertheless, what should prevent the proletarian revolution from drifting into fascism is the absence of nationalist demands that could be based on "latent rage"[29] to be exploited for imperialist war (this was the case in Germany and Italy). Bataille contrasted this anger with the "anxiety linked to the threat of war,"[30] an anxiety that would promote the need for a "universal consciousness" capable of urging people to move from a state of depression to that "ardent, unpredictable, highly [contagious] character of the great religious movements which have in the past overwhelmed all peoples with the revelation of the universal value of existence."[31] This formulation, introduced at the end of Bataille's last contribution to the only issue of *Contre-Attaque* that was published, announces and, in a certain sense, denounces the inadequacy of political analysis when it has to confront phenomena that conceal a core whose composition is very close to, if not overlapping with, that of religious experience. It is no coincidence, then, that out of the ashes of *Contre-Attaque* came first *Acéphale* — in both its exoteric and esoteric aspects (review and secret society, respectively) — and then the College of Sociology, both of which revolved around the notion of the sacred and its mythographic ramifications. Particularly iconic in this sense is the quotation from Kierkegaard that Bataille puts at the beginning of "*La conjuration sacrée*" ("The Sacred Conspiracy"), the programmatic text contained in the first issue of *Acéphale*: "That which presented itself as politics and supposed that it was politics, shall one day be unmasked as a religious movement."[32]

II. *Contre-Attaque*/*Acéphale*/Kojève: A Blind Dialectic?

The reasons why Bataille so abruptly distanced himself from political praxis[33] to take refuge in the cherished domain of *unproductive expenditure* and sacrificial myth are not easy to clarify, since a certain nuance of commitment is always present, if only to advocate the constitution

[28] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1968. *ILH* from now on), 143. When the English translation is not available, I will refer to the French version. — Otherwise, see Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel. Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1980. *IRH* from now on).

[29] Goerges Bataille, "Towards Real Revolution," trans. A. Michelson, *October* 36 (1986): 40.

[30] Ibid., 40.

[31] Georges Bataille, "Additional Notes on the War," *October* 36 (1986): 31. The translation by Annette Michelson conflates "contagious" with "courageous."

[32] Georges Bataille, "The Sacred conspiracy," in *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, ed. Marina Galletti and Alastair Brochie (London: Atlas Press, 2017), 123.

[33] The inaugural text of *Acéphale* was written on 29 April 1936, even before the *Contre-Attaque* issue appeared in May. It should be pointed out, however, that the movement had already died out in April.

of a community-communion of men unsubdued to the contingencies of history, particularly with regard to the prospect of war. Michel Surya puts forward the hypothesis that André Masson (a long-time friend of Bataille's but, since the journal *Documents*, a stranger to the latter's political activities) was responsible for the gradual disillusionment with the hopes of the Marxist *doxa*. The latter was said to be based "on a false idea of humanity" that excluded myths and failed to accord "first place to mankind, its impassioned nature, and the mysteries of life and death."[34] Now, while there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that Masson's suggestions may have played a decisive role in the emergence of a feeling of political "abulia" in Bataille, it is possible to find the premises of this posture in the coldness that Kojève displayed towards the *Contre-Attaque* initiative (a coldness that would continue throughout the *Acéphale* experiments and, in part, the College of Sociology).

To justify my argument, it is necessary to analyse the hidden intentions behind certain Bataillian speculations contained in his interventions within the movement in their relation to Kojève's teaching between 1935 and 1936. The first part of this year's course is devoted to a commentary on chapter V of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (entitled Reason) and, in particular, to "the description of the existential attitudes of the 'bourgeois' Intellectual."[35] It turns out that the sections on the dialectics of sentimentality and virtue transpose, in other terms, problematics with which Bataille was grappling at the same time.[36] If what Kojève refers to as the Man-of-pleasure — the man who enjoys *Besitz* (property), i.e. goods that have been worked on by others[37] — is similar to the "slaves of capitalism" in terms of his "pseudo-Master attitude"[38] ("he neither kills nor steals; he only wants to obtain the consent that will allow him to enjoy objects without doing anything, like a Master"),[39] his "active"[40] inclination, the "tender hearted" Man who becomes a Man-of-virtue as a result of an increase in awareness, can tend to be superposed on the figure of the *Front Populaire* socialist who still believes he can rely on parliamentary democracy to transform the existing relations of production. Kojève, following Hegel's development (and departing from it in the same process), describes the curve followed by the man who verbally criticises — denies — Society

[34] Excerpts from two letters from Masson to Bataille, dated October and November 1935; quoted by M. Surya in *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, epub version, 324-25.
[35] Kojève, *ILH*, 108.
[36] What allows us to introduce a parallelism between the first part of Kojève's teaching in 1935-1936 and Bataille's contributions to *Contre-Attaque* at the beginning of 1936 is an approximate datation that can be drawn from a source outside the lecture notes. In fact, in the yearbook of the *École Pratique* and, more precisely, in Kojève's account of the year 1935-1936, we can read that Lacan "interpreted the passages relating to *Madness* (*Wahnsinn des Eigendünkels*)"; these passages relate to the dialectic of sentimentality, and we know from a letter Lacan wrote to Kojève on 27 December 1935 (*Fonds Alexandre Kojève*, NAF 28320, box 12, E) that this intervention must have taken place in early 1936, probably at the same time as the final drafting of the leaflet *Front populaire dans la rue* (although it is true that this text echoed a speech Bataille made at the *Contre-Attaque* meeting on 24 November 1935, the published version is undoubtedly a later reworking). It should also be remembered that Bataille was a regular attendee at that year's seminar.
[37] He is opposed to the Man-of-the-*Begierde* (of desire), who immediately enjoys natural objects or the products of his own labour.
[38] Kojève, *ILH*, 87.
[39] Ibid., 87.
[40] The Man-of-pleasure does not act, because he neither fights nor seeks to deny (transform) the world.

while failing to act to actually transform it ("In order to preserve his value, then, he actually wants to preserve the society he criticises, since it is this criticism that matters to him").[41] This is the "tender-hearted"-Man[42] who, in opposing a utopia to Society, does not behave like a revolutionary but ends up going *mad* because the gap between his ideal of the World and the real World cannot be bridged by any action. He does not act, but that does not stop him from dreaming big and displaying presumption: "In his isolation, he opposes himself to the whole world, he is 'better' than the world: *folie des grandeurs*."[43] As soon as this man recognises that the Society in which he lives is made up of individuals who are similar to him, he becomes the Man-of-virtue (*Tugend*). Here virtue is to be understood in the sense of "party": an "unfulfilled ideal, a ghost society"[44] that aims at social reform through a moral reform that can operate in the *Weltlauf* (Kojève translates: the "World-as-it-goes") [45] to suppress Individuality (egoism). It is important to stress the word "reform," which is equivalent to saying "no fight" and "no revolution, except in words."[46] However, Kojève goes even further and calls this position "pseudo-socialism,"[47] because the Man-of-virtue believes that the ideal society will be achieved by the "reform" of all individuals, and therefore by a sacrificial act similar to that of the Stoic. He neglects the role of revolutionary social conflict, which alone can lead to the realisation of the Citizen (a synthesis of the particularity of the individual and the universality of the State). Consequently, the socialism of this man is in fact a "bourgeois individualism"[48] that indicates the desire to maintain capitalism so that "there will (always?) be a proletariat and a Socialist Party: 'reformist socialism'."[49] It therefore does not seem incongruous to me to compare the position Bataille adopts towards the *Front Populaire* — a defensive, retro-guard position — with that of the Man-of-virtue, a slave who cannot cease to be one until he has considered the possibility of placing himself on a par with the fight to the death for recognition (by the revolutionary State). *A fortiori*, the solution Bataille proposes to get out of this impasse is modelled on the subsequent dialectical step that the Man-of-virtue, according to Kojève-Hegel, can take, namely the mutation into the Man-of-*Weltlauf*. This is the man who has "perverted"[50] the ideology of Virtue, who has thwarted it ("realised it," in the Hegelian vocabulary) by acting in the real order of things, behaving as a Master. This action, fundamentally revolutionary, is embodied by Napoleon and his contemporary avatars,[51] but Bataille — hostile to any form of personal authority — can only delegate it to the body of the proletariat in revolt.

What of the "tender hearted"-Man, the first figure in this dialectic? Given the antecedents of *La Critique sociale*, it would be easy to suspect Bataille of complicity with this weakening of the utopian spirit; yet, within *Contre-Attaque*, his priority seems to be social revolution to the detriment of moral revolution. Nevertheless, the intrinsic Fourierism of the "tender hearted"-

[41] Kojève, *ILH*, 87.
[42] The expression comes from Kojève (or, alternatively, one might suppose that it comes from Lacan himself). Hegel simply refers to the man who follows the *Gesetz des Herzens* ("the law of the heart").
[43] Kojève, *ILH*, 88.
[44] Ibid., 88.
[45] Ibid., 88.
[46] Ibid., 88.
[47] Ibid., 89.
[48] Ibid., 89.
[49] Ibid., 89
[50] Ibid., 90.
[51] Kojève would think of Stalin on several occasions.

Man is not entirely absent from the movement he formed. It was Pierre Klossowski who was to tackle this aspect in an unpublished issue of the *Cahiers de Contre-Attaque* which was supposed to focus on the place of the free play of passions in Fourier's theorisation. This paper should have followed Maurice Heine's contribution on Sade and preceded the one devoted to Nietzsche by Georges Ambrosino and Georges Gilet. Fourier, Sade and Nietzsche were therefore to act as precursors of the moral revolution desired by the group. On the other hand, it is surprising that another issue of the *Cahiers* was to be devoted to "sexual questions," on the pretext that they "run the risk of escaping their revolutionary solution if the proponents of the Revolution persist, against all logic, in ignoring them,"[52] because of their alleged characterisation as capitalist perversions doomed to disappear along with social classes. On the contrary, "sexuality raises, in an acute way, a social problem, which it is important to remove from the pernicious consequences of contempt and constraint: an urgent task, which amounts to stripping religion of its mask of morality."[53] Nevertheless, Bataille did not seem to want to take on the task that should have fallen to Maurice Heine and Benjamin Péret. Even though he had examined Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis* in *La Critique sociale*, he no longer dared to tackle this heterogeneous subject, the stakes and political implications of which he had mastered so well. Why this sudden repression?

First of all, we need to emphasise how Bataille had, at that time, decided to channel his despair and his darkest, most "perverse" impulses into writing *Blue of noon*,[54] a novel that reflected both the crisis that had arisen with his wife Sylvia and the ravages of the affair with Colette Peignot. If it is a question of repression, it is up to writing to make it tangible and operative, since all repression is the result of a logical operation that also creates the condition for the return of the repressed. The fact that Bataille did not want to publish this work in 1935 says a lot about the ethic of sublimation or, rather, of dialectical metaphorization that he had set himself in order to enter the order of praxis: the urgency being to act to counter the horror into which the world seems to be sinking, this action should assume the contours of a work primarily theoretical and secondarily material (historical materialism...) where the instances of idleness (perverse affectivity) and the pursuit of social transformation would be condensed through revolutionary violence into which this excess of unemployed negativity could be injected so that (political) strategy would take precedence over (erotic) heterology.

Secondly, Bataille's political action also seems to have been caught up in a game of seduction of which Kojève was the unconscious promoter. This desire for recognition, the ramifications and impasses of which he had repeatedly laid bare, eventually ensnared Bataille in a dialectical exchange in which the Master — in this case Kojève — was called upon to recognise him as an autonomous self-consciousness. However, as the Russian philosopher had shown very well, this dialectic is initially hampered by the fact that mutual and reciprocal recognition between Master and Slave cannot take place until the Master sees the other as one of his peers (a supposedly free man), which implies that at the beginning he will be recognised without recognising the one who recognises him. For this full recognition to take place, the Slave must deny himself as such and realise himself as Master, which is made possible by the Work he does in the world. Since he is gripped by the anguish of death, it is thanks to this affective tonality that he proves to be the agent of historical becoming, as this allows him not to remain fixed in his condition. To speak in terms of a Master-Slave dialectic

[52] Georges Bataille, "Questions sociales et questions sexuelles," in *Les Cahiers de "Contre-Attaque," OC*, vol. I, 389. My translation.
[53] Ibid., 389.
[54] The novel often bathes sexual encounters in a sordid atmosphere in which every waste product of the human body is represented.

about the relationship between Kojève and Bataille (who would rather occupy the place of the Student) may seem forced, but what constitutes its essence is the logic that governs its interactions:

> Man is human only to the extent that he wants to impose himself on another man, to be recognized by him. In the beginning, as long as he is not yet actually recognized by the other, it is the other that is the end of his action; it is on this other, it is on recognition by this other, that his human value and reality depend; it is in this other that the meaning of his life is condensed.[55]

Since an element of Mastery and an element of Servitude are involved in any truly human relationship, it would not be inconceivable to see in Bataille a quest for recognition and social sanction in relation to his Master Kojève, like a "dependent"[56] existence seeking to make itself worthy in the eyes of the autonomous existence represented by the man who emerged victorious from the deadly fight for pure prestige. Was Kojève not the exile capable of rising to the challenge of death in order to survive in the intellectual world? His escapades in Europe, his involvement in the black market and the short stay in prison that followed, the altercations with the Communist police, finally the idleness and the prestige of a chair at the *École Pratique* at a premature age.[57] Would not all this be the mark of Mastery? For his part, was not Bataille affected by a permanent feeling of anguish in the face of the ravages of death? Were not all his fictions and articles, even the most political, placed under the sign of an anguished expenditure? At the same time, and apparently contrary to the Hegelian-Kojèvian Slave, the preservation of life did not seem to be a priority in his approach. In this respect, it should be noted that his debauched and self-destructive existential style was not in itself a strategy for social recognition, and therefore could not be likened to a fight for pure prestige against the deadly other: it was primarily a metaphysical gesture (what was targeted was the closure of being, its alleged arrogance in believing itself to be an I) and not a political one.

Faced with this rising anguish in the world, the time had come to act, to fight for the advancement of History, and this required an effort aimed at capturing the attention of the Master in order to *impose himself*.[58] The strategies adopted by Bataille involved first of all intimate solicitation (the three letters quoted above bear witness to this) and then explicit appeal: in the prospectus of the *Cahiers de Contre-Attaque*, a prestigious place was reserved for a contribution on "The Hegelian dialectic of Master and Slave, keystone of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and of Marxist doctrine".[59] We do not know who should have written this text, but everything points in the direction of an exclusively Bataillean editorship — Bataille being the

[55] Kojève, *IRH*, 13.

[56] In the 1930s Bataille was not yet a recognised and autonomous "presence" in the French intellectual panorama. Admittedly, he had published a few articles and works under a pseudonym, but this had not enabled him to cross the threshold of those who were just one name among many. His inclusion on the Surrealist group's "proscription list" also played a part in this.

[57] Among other things, Bataille was five years Kojève's senior.

[58] "The Master, unable to recognize the Other who recognizes him, finds himself in an impasse. The Slave, on the other hand, recognizes the Other (the Master) from the beginning. In order that mutual and reciprocal recognition, which alone can fully and definitively realize and satisfy man, be established, it suffices for the Slave to impose himself on the Master and be recognized by him." Kojève, *IRH*, 21.

[59] Georges Bataille, *Les Cahiers de "Contre-Attaque"*, 388.

only one, among the members of *Contre-Attaque*, to take part in Kojève's seminar —which would probably have flattered the Master. The transition "from the plane of the Communist Manifesto to that of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*" was one of Bataille's major preoccupations, and we have seen how much this hermeneutical transition seemed to overlap with Kojève's attempt. However, Kojève would turn a deaf ear to these calls. Why should the exegete of the historical role of the Slave not have wanted to support the front of the revolution of the oppressed?

To answer this question, Dominique Auffret proposes a hypothesis which, although it relates to the connection between Kojève and the Russian Revolution, seems to shed light on the philosopher's position regarding the political commitment promoted by *Contre-Attaque*. Auffret maintains[60] that Kojève, despite his Stalinism, refused to set foot in revolutionary Russia again because the Bolshevik regime did not seem to him to accomplish History sufficiently. Indeed, the democracy that achieves absolute freedom, that is, the post-revolutionary State, could not take root as long as a communist "terrorist" or "totalitarian" regime (government of a part — of a party — for the whole) persisted. Since the dictatorship of the Marxised proletariat was still a governmental form of party (as was the French bourgeois revolutionary faction) whose historical necessity was to abolish itself, Auffret concludes that "from the point of view of a declared communist ethic, Kojève would therefore not have been hypocritical when he fled Bolshevik Russia. For the communism of war was neither the accomplishment of the Revolution, nor effective communism."[61]

In this respect, Kojève's indifferent reaction to *Contre-Attaque* mimics the course of action he might have envisaged with the Russian Revolution and its communist state extension: a necessary but insufficient step, in itself, towards the establishment of a Marxist socialist regime. Kojève lived in anticipation of this advent, hoping to be able to practise this promised freedom "body and soul,"[62] and it seems clear that the attitude of *Contre-Attaque* was still in the direction of pushing for a terrorist revolution, a stage prior to that coveted by the man who wants to be truly free. Kojève would therefore have wanted to remain a discreet, silent observer of the activities leading to the adaptation of societal institutions to the ideals inaugurated by the French Revolution and first realised by Napoleon. "*Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, / e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem; / non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas, / sed quibus ipse malis careas / quia cernere suavest*," as Lucretius would have said…[63]

A later and decisive gesture in capturing the Master's appreciative gaze is represented by an article Bataille gave to the journal *Recherches philosophiques* in 1936, entitled "*Le labyrinthe*" ("The Labyrinth").[64] This journal had already served as a sounding board for the critical scope

[60] Auffret, *Alexandre Kojève*, 93-97.

[61] Ibid., 96.

[62] "Until this very moment (of the Terror), man (still a slave) still separates soul from body; he is still a Christian. But through the Terror, he understands that to want to achieve abstract ('absolute') freedom is to want his death, and he then understands that he wants to live, body and soul, here below, because that alone is what really interests him and will be able to satisfy him." (Kojève, *ILH*, 144)

[63] Titus Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura*, proem of book II, verses 1-4 ["'Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds / Roll up its waste of waters, from the land / To watch another's labouring anguish far, / Not that we joyously delight that man / Should thus be smitten, but because 'tis sweet / To mark what evils we ourselves be spared", trans. William Ellery Leonard (Delphi Classics, 2015, epub).

[64] See Georges Bataille, "The Labyrinth," in *VE*, 171-77.

of Kojève's thought, where he had published a number of reviews of books edited in Germany. The 1935-1936 volume was no exception, and the philosopher contributed four texts. Bataille's choice to include an article at this time is less random than indicative of a concern for intellectual non-exclusion: seven years later, when he took up "The Labyrinth" again to integrate it into *Inner Experience*, he removed all the parts where the spectre of Kojève was tangible and accompanied it with a bitter first-person commentary:

> I become irritated when I think of the time of "activity" which I spent — during the last years of peacetime —[65] in forcing myself to reach my fellow beings. I had to pay this price. Ecstasy itself is empty when envisaged as a private exercise, only mattering for a single individual. Even in preaching to the converted, there is, in its predication, a distressful element. Profound communication demands silence. In the end, action, which predication signifies, is limited to this: closing one's door in order to stop discourse (the noise, the mechanics of the outside).[66]

The irritation of which Bataille writes seems to strike at the undoubtedly naive conviction that discursive communication, "preaching," could suffice to found a homogeneous community, immutable in its own flawless *ipseity*[67] ("closing one's door"). In fact, in its first draft, "The Labyrinth" merely relativises man's aspiration to feel that he is an *ipse*, a universal to which everything can be related, in order to be able to measure its extent in terms of *mastery* of the organised world. It is not by chance, in fact, that the article opens with a quotation from Hegel ("Negativity, in other words, the integrity of determination"),[68] which refers to man as a force capable of shaping his symbolic universe. Yet this man is an inherently insufficient being who acts to appropriate a *surplus of existence* that would make him worthy of inhabiting the world. Bataille uses Kojève's "fight for pure prestige" to illustrate this "tragic and incessant combat for a satisfaction that is almost beyond reach."[69] All in all, his effort to "reach [his] fellow beings" translates into a sudden and literal transposition of the master-slave dialectic in terms of the oscillation of the *quantum* of existence, as we can read in the first sub-section of the text:

> In the first movement, where the force that the master has at his disposal puts the slave at his mercy, the master deprives the slave of a part of his being. Much later, in return, the "existence" of the master is impoverished to the extent that it distances itself from the material elements of life. The slave enriches his being to

[65] Before the Second World War. The original text of "The labyrinth" dates from February 1936.
[66] Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 92.
[67] Bataille tells us about the use of this term, which he employs several times in *Inner Experience*: "I would have ...taken the word ipseity from a translation by Henri Corbin, but this translation (the manuscript of which I never had in my hands) came out after the publication in the journal (*Recherches philosophiques*, 1936) of the text in which the word is found." See Georges Bataille, *La Souveraineté (notes)*, in *OC*, vol. VIII, 666. Elsewhere, he traces the use of this word back to André Lalande: "For my part, I wrote ipseity in the sense of Lalande's dictionary, because of an ambiguity about individuality — identical in all respects, this fly is nonetheless not that fly." Georges Bataille, *Méthode de méditation (notes)*, in *OC*, vol. V, 474.
[68] Bataille, "The Labyrinth," 171.
[69] Ibid., 171.

> the extent that he enslaves these elements by the work to which his impotence condemns him.
>
> … The fundamental separation of men into masters and slaves is only the crossed threshold, the entry into the world of specialized functions where personal "existence" empties itself of its contents; a man is no longer anything but a part of being, and his life, engaged in the game of creation and destruction that goes beyond it, appears as a degraded particle lacking reality.[70]

This is merely the pretext for introducing a notion that he calls the "principle of insufficiency" and which is supposed to underlie human life: it is the "awareness of the vanity and the emptiness of our fellowmen."[71] Once again, Bataille makes surreptitious use of a Kojèvian argument (Man being an empty Desire that focuses on another Desire in order to gain its recognition), but he does so here in order to introduce a fundamentally comic conception of being as bewilderment,[72] as a *labyrinth* where only words, language, provide a means of orientation and mediation to shape the relationship with others. The network that this being constitutes is nothing other than what Hegel, through Kojève, described as discursive Reason (*Logos*), which is Spirit revealing itself as Absolute. Yet Bataille tends to reject any determinant and definitive stability, believing that existence is always exposed to the risk of decomposition, which manifests itself violently in *ridiculous* ways: "Laughter casts a glance, charged with the mortal violence of being, into the void of life."[73]

This was Bataille's first —still stammering but already significant —— critique of the closed Hegelian-Kojèvian system, which nevertheless remains a way of thinking that is repeatedly called upon. The emergence of laughter, which would later become a recurrent motif in Bataille's work, organises the first steps in a new strategy for destructuring the supposed omni-comprehensiveness of Reason. This illusion, this madness of the imaginary, would be what Bataille decided to fight against once his political commitment came to an end. If "profound communication demands silence," there are other paths to follow from now on, and in particular *paths that lead nowhere*.

III. Epilogue

The failure of *Contre-Attaque* gave rise to the short-lived review *Acéphale*. Founded by André Masson, Pierre Klossowski and Bataille, it published only five issues between June 1936 and June 1939. Based on this experience, Michel Leiris, Roger Caillois and Bataille organised a "College of [sacred] Sociology," which operated from November 1937 to July 1939. These two projects constituted the "manifest" aspect of an "occult" community, also called *Acéphale*, which, in the intentions of its members, was to be based on sacrifice.

Caught between the apology of unbridled violence and that of a "pitiless authority," Bataille was probably aware of the futility of a calculated use of political language: both the register of analysis and that of a passionate exhortation to combat must have seemed insufficient to him in the face of the seductive grandiloquence of fascism and the omens of a new war. As we have seen, Masson's reticence and Kojève's indifference had something to do with this, which led him to renew his acquaintance with Masson in order to get on better with Kojève. Indeed, there is no doubt that Bataille's major preoccupation at the time, namely

[70] Ibid., 171-72.
[71] Ibid., 172.
[72] "Being in fact is found NOWHERE." Ibid., 173.
[73] Ibid., 176.

the identification of a truly effective agent for coagulating rebellious spirits, overlapped with one of the key notions in Kojève's teaching: Man as "death living a human life."[74] This announces the fact that the Negativity embodied by the human being has as its outlets Fight and Work, both of which can only be given in the consciousness of Death. The struggle between a being who has no fear of dying (the Master) and a being gripped by the anguish of disappearing (the Slave) leads to a relationship of work involving two self-consciousnesses in which the latter *acts* on Nature by negating it in order to produce the objects that the former enjoys. This negation of the natural given parodically mimics the killing of the animal that man is in the first place. This means that an immediacy such as death produces a mediation represented by the human being, who fully assumes his finite temporality and, more importantly, reveals it through Discourse.

Now, according to Bataille, this Discourse should bear within itself the trace of this symbolic killing and, to do so, it would have needed to be "mutilated" and thus deprived of the elements of power that could exert a mystifying hold on the insubordinate demands of the human being. From then on, the mutilation in question takes the form of a ritual decapitation that organises a founding myth capable of rallying around a *symbolic sacrifice* a community that claims to be *universal*, non-exclusive and founded on crime. However, it may seem inconsistent for such a task to be entrusted to a small group of people who had disavowed any form of politically ordered association, but there is no doubt that Bataille was aiming less at the constitution of a collective of action than at that of an "unemployed" society. However, the new Bataillian enterprise seemed to take as its starting point a universalist and transformative Marxism — which he had seized upon throughout the first half of the 1930s — only to overturn it and empty it of all its elements of direct action on the world. The terms "destruction" and "decomposition" as well as "establish," "affirm," and "achieve" which appear in the *Programme*[75] are no longer the watchwords of an *effective* struggle to be waged everywhere (in the streets, in the factories, in the countryside...) but the principles of a new human community which, while claiming to be universal, will only lead to the negation of the Aristotelian *zôon politikòn*. By reaffirming the value of crime and violence, *Acéphale* dedicated itself to sacrifice and thus to a sacred reinvestment in any act that was supposed to bind (*religio*) citizens into a community. Although ideologically very left-wing, this secret society wanted to resolve itself into a conspiracy in which everyone would be both executioner and victim, sacrificer and sacrificed. To achieve this, Bataille and Masson believe it is necessary to reduce to formlessness everything that could be reduced to a jubilant organisation of power, a real risk when it comes to forming value-creating communities. How can the constitution of a new axiological order be achieved without becoming entangled in the claim to an authority that is the foundation of this very order?

Acéphale's approach is based on the double register of ritual killing and self-mutilation. Such an approach finds a rather poignant antecedent in a text that Bataille and Masson had conceived before the start of Kojève's seminar. In fact, in the summer of 1933 they had worked together on a booklet entitled *Sacrifices*, containing five etchings by Masson and a short text by Bataille. It was not published until December 1936 by the same publisher of the review *Acéphale* — whose first issue appeared on 24 June of the same year — with a print run limited to 150 copies.[76] The text of *Sacrifices* poses a number of hermeneutical problems, since the language used by Bataille skims the depths of philosophical thought — "being," "nothingness," and "time" are terms that recur — as well as the smooth, unfathomable spaces

[74] Kojève, *ILH*, 550.
[75] See *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 137.
[76] See Bataille, *Sacrifices*, in *VE*, 130-36.

of poetry. Nonetheless, it is possible to extract from these pages the premises of a conception of subjectivity that would structure the *Acéphale* adventure and that Bataille would never abandon. His position with regard to the ego (in Hegelian terms: self-consciousness) is all the more fundamental in that it will find in Kojève a critical support capable of guiding him both towards the *dispossession of the self* and towards *sovereignty*. At the beginning of *Sacrifices* we find the sentence: "Me, I exist — suspended in a realized void —suspended from my own dread — different from all other being and such that the various events that can reach all other being and not *me* cruelly throw this *me* out of a total existence."[77] The singularity of the self (the *me*) gives rise to a feeling of anguish that accompanies the emptiness that the existence of a being totally detached from the set of representations that make up the world has been able to engender. Indeed, the irreducibility of subjectivity — the property of being "completely other" in relation to what exists — can only be resolved by an awareness of the aberration of perspective that constitutes it:

> The *me*, completely other due to its constitutive improbability, has been rejected in the course of the normal search for "that which exists" as the arbitrary but eminent image of non-existence; it is as *illusion* that it responds to the extreme demands of life. In other words, the *me*, as an impasse outside of "'that which exists" — and in which are found reunited, without any way out, all the extreme values of life — even though it is constituted in the presence of reality, does not belong in any way to this reality, which it transcends. It neutralizes itself (ceases to be completely *other*) insofar as it ceases to be aware of the total improbability of its coming into the world, and consequently of its fundamental lack of relations with the world … [78]

This self, wandering through the world with the heaviness of those who have only to bear the weight of their constitutive emptiness (the *me* has no content assigned *ab ovo*),[79] endlessly shaken by anguish, reveals itself only as an *illusion*, that is to say that it is no different from all the appearances from which it would seek to rid itself in order to find a point of anchorage in existence. It should come as no surprise, then, that Bataille sees death as the only possible way out of the abstraction proper to the *me*: the non-existence it introduces into the reality of "that which exists" announces a truth that is more significant than all the certainties advanced by the statements of logic. Once we are tired of searching in vain in the representations of the *me* for proof of the foundation of the data of experience, "it is only at the boundary of death that laceration, which constitutes the very nature of the immensely free me, transcending 'that which exists,' is revealed with violence."[80]

From then on, the liberating value of what, following Kojève's teaching, would be called *Negativity*, becomes clear. This human reality, which finds meaning only in the void and whose most authentic faculty is that of denying the reality of the external world while at the same time denying its own natural support (the self is above all a thing among things), finds its first prefiguration here. However, Bataille refers to it by using the formula "*moi* qui meurt" ("*me* that dies"):

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[77] Ibid., 130.

[78] Ibid., 131.

[79] It should be remembered, incidentally, that the theme of the self as a radical void will be treated by Kojève in terms of self-consciousness, which is a desire deprived of all content; it can only focus on another desire that would constitute the only object of true fulfilment.

[80] Bataille, *Sacrifices*, in *VE*, 132.

> The me accedes to its specificity and to its integral transcendence only in the form of the "'*me* that dies."
> But this revelation of the me that dies is not given each time simple death is revealed to dread. It supposes the imperative completion and sovereignty of being at the moment it is projected into the unreal time of death. It supposes at once the exigency and the limitless breakdown of imperative life, the consequence of pure seduction and the heroic form of the *me*; it thus attains the rending subversion of the *god* that dies.
> The death of the god is produced not as metaphysical alteration (concerning the common denominator of being), but as the absorption of a life avid for imperative joy in the heavy animality of death.[81]

In these two paragraphs, all the issues at stake in the Bataillian critical interpretation of the categories attributed to self-consciousness by Kojève seem to take shape, and this well before the beginning of his seminar. If we can assume that the late publication of *Sacrifices* was not unrelated to the decision to back up the birth of *Acéphale* with a booklet explaining its theoretical premises, we would be blind not to recognise a certain concern for correspondence with what Bataille had heard during lectures at the *École Pratique*, as if his attempt to seduce the master after the failure of *Contre-Attaque* was not limited to immediate reactions, and could also draw on a clear-sighted earlier production.

If, on the one hand, Bataille's use of the anguished sacrifice of the self is akin to the "acephality" of the god that dies, on the other hand it seems to parody the dialectic of the master and the slave at the moment when the latter, supposed to flee death as a result of the anguish he experiences, unexpectedly assumes the risk of dedicating himself to the complete loss of self in order to rediscover this vertigo, the only way capable of ensuring him any kind of sovereignty. The "imperativeness" and sovereignty of the being who lives at the height of death — without, however, exercising a hierarchical power — will represent Bataille's main form of "heterodoxy" in relation to the logical development of the Hegelo-Kojèvian slave, destined for a reversal of the balance of power that makes him the historical agent of the achievement of the universal and homogeneous state where all citizens will be free and equally recognised. As we can see here, Bataille is interested in the transhistorical overcoming of the struggle for recognition of the 'me's (*les moi*), since there can be no salvation outside the renunciation of the claims of a being who refuses crime (sacrifice being a ritual form of murder) in order to guarantee social improvement. It is astonishing to see how, as early as 1933, the Bataillian lexicon took up Hegelian terminology, disregarding the consequences it entailed when used conveniently: "In the fact that life and death are passionately devoted to the subsidence of the void, the slave's subordinate relation to the master is no longer revealed, but life and void are confused and mingled like lovers, in the convulsive movements of the end."[82]

The worn-out dialectic of "subordination-insubordination" does not satisfy the need to give an account of the extremes of the possible, of the limit-experiences of life when confronted with everything that robs it of the coordinates of effective action to be taken in human space. That is why, in the mid-1930s, the anguishing political situation in Europe, according to Bataille, called for a renewal of the means of bringing communities together, not shying away from the "convulsive movements of the end." From now on, the idea is to embark on a process in which death and ecstasy form a mythical-religious model for the

[81] Ibid., 132.
[82] Ibid., 133.

palingenesis of values, a model that Kojève somehow triggered but could not dare to fully support, even when he was persuaded to deliver the famous lecture on "Hegelian Concepts" at the College of Sociology in 1937,[83] the only evidence of his actual collaboration with Bataille during these tumultuous and anguished years.

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[83] See *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 85-93.

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