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## **Bataille on mimetic heterology**

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**BATAILLE ON MIMETIC HETEROLOGY<sup>1</sup>***Nidesh Lawtoo*

Virtually unknown during his life, Georges Bataille started to cast a shadow after his death. This long shadow now reaches, via mimetic studies, into the present opening up of new perspectives on homo mimeticus for the future as well. Recuperated from oblivion in the 1970s and 1980s by different thinkers we now conveniently group under the heterogeneous category of “poststructuralism,”<sup>2</sup> Bataille soon became synonymous of an untimely writer whose voluntarily disordered thought slipped through stable linguistic oppositions, transgressed the boundaries dividing the margins and the center, the sane and the insane, life and death, the imaginary and the symbolic, and went as far as anticipating groundbreaking theoretical innovations such as the death of the author, sexual transgressions, the *mise en jeu* of language, the death of the subject, the gestation of inoperative communities, and, we may now add, the birth of homo mimeticus as well.<sup>3</sup>

After Nietzsche, it is in fact Bataille who arguably went furthest in developing a protean thought that investigates the centrality of mimesis in intersubjective forms of non-verbal communication mediated by affective contagion: from laughter to collective effervescence, festivity to expenditure, drunkenness to ecstasy, eroticism to sacrifice, trance to death, all these manifestations of sovereign communication rest on a “mimetic communication” (Lawtoo 2013, 209–280) that traverses his entire corpus. Moreover, Bataille’s focus on what Nietzsche called “inner experience” (1990, § 45) also led him to transgress the boundaries of individuation via Dionysian dramatizations that, as a genealogy that goes from Nietzsche all the way back to Plato made clear, are at the roots of mimetic studies more generally. Strangely, Bataille’s career-long focus on the relation between eroticism, violence and the sacred remained at the margins of mimetic

theories of the past century.<sup>4</sup> It is thus now important to keep foregrounding the centrality of Bataille for mimetic studies in the present century.

For this genealogical operation, the possible starting points in Bataille's corpus are multiple: from "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" to *Inner Experience, Guilty to Theory of Religion, Eroticism* to the trilogy on *The Accursed Share*, among other heterogeneous texts, Bataille insistently returns to what he calls the "gay contagion [*heureuse contagion*]" flowing, like a river, from self to other(s) generating an "intense current of communication" (1954, 112–113; my transl.) that finds in mimetic pathos, rather than rational logos, its primary medium of transmission. Having traced Bataille's general contribution to mimetic studies elsewhere, I now take a genealogical step back to the dawn of Bataille's intellectual career. In particular, I re-turn to the transgressive subject matters out of which his mimetic thought is born. Early on, in fact, Bataille practiced an interdisciplinary thought *avant la lettre*, which, along with Roger Caillois' "diagonal science" already discussed in volume one of *Homo Mimeticus*, inspired mimetic studies. Bataille's simultaneous engagement with the human sciences of his time allowed him to develop, via the productive logic of mimetic agonism, an alternative "science" of heterogeneous subjects that are "totally other," cannot be reduced to rational discourse; yet, in his view, could be studied nonetheless, from the interdisciplinary angle of what he called, oxymoronically, the science of "heterology" or, alternatively, the "science of the *heterogeneous*, that is to say, the science of the *excluded part*" (Bataille 2018, 31)—an accursed mimetic part that now returns to haunt, phantom-like, the contemporary human sciences.

Bataille not only as a thinker who anticipates post-structuralist concerns with difference, language, and mediation, then. Rather, Bataille as a pre-structuralist thinker of sameness, affect, and contagion, a mimetic contagion that is intimately felt in *ek-static* instants of communication that reveal the palpating homology of heterology vital to furthering the mimetic turn or *re-turn*. This is, in a nutshell, the hypothesis that leads me to reopen the "Dossier Heterology" from the angle of mimetic studies.

## “Definition of Heterology:” Reopening the Dossier

The recently translated “Definition of heterology,” which is not included in the 12 Volumes of the *Oeuvres complètes*, appeared in English for the first time in 2018 (Bataille 2018), opening up new perspectives to further the patho-*logies* of homo mimeticus. Originally conceived as part of a project titled, “Dossier Heterology” collected in volume II of the *Oeuvres complètes*, this short, previously unpublished, and impressively dense theoretical “Definition” illuminates sacred, mimetic experiences Bataille never stopped interrogating, in their throbbing movement of emergence. This previously unpublished piece shines like a precious pearl in the formless magma of his unpublished papers. Furthering orthodox disciplines in the human sciences, Bataille accounts for the ambivalent feelings of “attraction and repulsion” at the heart of transgressive experiences whose syncopated movement generates “ecstatic horror.”

This double movement is, indeed, characteristic of the pathos of distance that distinguishes *homo mimeticus*; it is also the beating heart of Bataille’s heterogeneous thought and animates his major theoretical preoccupations, including preoccupations with fascist leaders endowed with the will power to horrify and hypnotize individual bodies, as well as the entire body politic. True for fascism and Nazism a century ago, this lesson remains valid for “aspirational” (Connolly 2017) or “(new) fascism” (Lawtoo 2019) in the present century that still benefits from a Bataillean lens.<sup>5</sup> As William Connolly puts it in diagnostic terms Bataille would have appreciated and that are now central to mimetic studies, “there is never a vacuum on the visceral register of cultural life”—hence the urgency to pay attention to “bodily stresses” and mimetic modes of “affective communication” (Connolly 2022, 689, 891) that continue, via new media, to galvanize the body politic.

At the same time, the implications of “Definition of Heterology” cannot be restricted to Bataille’s well-known political preoccupations with monocephalic leader figures in 1930s still relevant a century later. Rather, they immediately transgress the boundaries between politics and religion, anthropology and psychology, and open up heterogeneous questions that inform the general economy of what he calls “heterology” and continue to inform what we call mimetic patho(-)logies. For instance: how can what is “totally other” and, thus, “heterogeneous,” become the object of a discursive “*logos*” that, by definition, belongs to the sphere of the “homogenous”? How can we know, or feel, the *pathos* of an “other” whose distance, Bataille says, is “absolute,” yet is intimately experienced nonetheless? Above all, why do heterogeneous matters that are “holy and

unclean” (Bataille 2018, 30) both hypnotically attract us and physically repel us, in a double movement that animates what Bataille calls “ecstatic horror” (34)? These questions cut through the heart of Bataille’s heterogeneous thought. They directly inform his conception of the sovereign subject “whose *exterior objective* aspect is always inseparable from the *interior*” (VIII 284),<sup>6</sup> as he puts it in *Sovereignty*. In particular, the early Bataille helps us understand the complex interplay between the *inside* and the *outside* of the subject essential to follow the transgressive dynamic of mimetic communications that have been neglected during the linguistic turn but are central to both the affective and mimetic turn.

“Definition” reveals more clearly and succinctly than any other writings the theoretical foundations of Bataille’s thought by making visible the continuities and discontinuities between heterology and emerging human sciences now internal to mimetic studies. Bataille, in fact, relies on the insights of pioneering figures such as Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud in order to cast new light on the fundamental “ambivalence” sacred experiences generate. Hetero-logy is thus as much an anthropo-logy (*logos* on man) as a psycho-logy (*logos* on the soul). But it is not only that. For Bataille, in fact, these scientific disciplines are, *volens nolens*, complicit with a long-standing idealizing trend in western philosophy that can be traced back to Plato and whose tendency is to exclude the obscure subject matter they attempt to illuminate, freezing the movement of heterology in unitary, ideal, and transcendental forms. Furthering a mimetic line of inquiry in Bataille studies<sup>7</sup> now informing mimetic studies, I argue that the laws of attraction and repulsion that animate heterology find their polarized foundations in the patho-*logies* of imitation (*mimesis*) understood in its heterogeneous—anthropological, ontological, and psychological—manifestations. Mimesis, for Bataille, was never restricted to a visual and stabilizing economy of ideal representation. Instead, it entails a destabilizing form of bodily communication he will later call “sovereign” for it introduces a general movement of affective participation with privileged others introducing a troubling sameness at the heart of difference. In his “Dossier on Heterology,” Bataille, following the French psychologist and philosopher Pierre Janet—a key and so far, largely unacknowledged precursor of mimetic studies—will call this heterogeneous other who is indistinguishable from the self, a “socius” (II, 287).

Paradoxically, then, heterology, while being the “science” (*logos*) of the “totally other” (*hetero*) may actually point toward an abyssal mimetic experience of homology, an ecstatic, transgressive, yet sacred homology that escapes homogeneous definitions, but has nonetheless the mimetic power to transform pure spirits into impure matters, abject horrors into loving angels, thereby bringing Bataille’s mimetic heterology into being.

## Polarized Anthropology: Recharging the Sacred

In “Definition,” Bataille immediately places the movement of his emerging thought in an impossible position, generating a double movement that will animate the entirety of his career. In the opening paragraph, in fact, Bataille defines heterology as “the science of *the excluded part*” (2018, 31), by which he means an “accursed” (*maudite*) part that includes “sacred elements,” “objects of disgust” and “erotic life” (30). This is, indeed, an oxymoronic definition; if only because “excluded” matters (that is, the heterogeneous) are, by their very essence, inaccessible to the sphere of objectifying “science” (that is, the homogeneous). Just as light cannot illuminate a shadow, so science cannot cast light on the heterogeneous. The material *objects* of Bataille’s project and his scientific *objective* are thus radically at odds, generating a methodological oscillation toward/away from heterogeneous matters that will continue to animate Bataille’s account of sacred experiences. Whether his focus is on object objects in the 1930s, on mystical subjects in the 1940s, or on the experience of sovereign communication in the 1950s, Bataille’s thought follows as much what he calls “the path of work” as “the path of transgression” (1986: 261). Hence, this double-path sets up a tension between intellectual distance (*logos*) and affective proximity (*pathos*); it also generates a polarized oscillation that reproduces, shadow-like, the double movement sacred matters themselves produce. This paradoxical methodological position informs influential human sciences concerned with the ambivalence of sacred emotions, such as anthropology of religion and psychoanalysis. Bataille is thus not naïvely in search of originality. Rather, his thought emerges from a mimetic, sometimes agonistic, but always productive relation with these neighboring discourses (*logoi*) whose conceptual limits Bataille will test first and, eventually, transgress.

Bataille’s general debt to anthropology of religion is well known. Heterology in particular has often been approached from a Durkheimian Perspective (Richman 2002) that is attentive to the “contagious” (French, 2007, 38) and in our sense “mimetic” experiences the sacred generates. And yet, Bataille also relies on mimetic agonism to mark his distance from his anthropological predecessor. Thus, he specifies that Durkheim did not go far enough in his exploration of the polarization of the sacred: “Although Durkheim did not neglect the polarized nature of the elements of the sacred, he did not feel able to assign them an important role in his theory” (Bataille 2018, 33). Consequently, he claims that Durkheim is partially responsible for “a classic confusion between *impure* and

*profane*" (33), a confusion later accentuated by members of Durkheim's school. As Bataille makes clear, anthropology is a scientific *logos* in line with a "purifying development" (34) that excludes impure, magical elements from the sacred, relegating them to the profane. In an emancipatory, agonistic move, then, Bataille outlines a fundamental *différend* between heterology and anthropology. And he does so to reintroduce a base, material impurity into an idealizing, anthropological tendency that freezes the movement of the sacred in pure, ideal forms.

In a way, Bataille's heterogeneous thought comes into being precisely in his attempt to regenerate a polarity, which, for him, is missing in the science of anthropology but functions as the beating heart of the sacred itself. He argues for the return of unclean, heterogeneous matters on the theoretical scene, emerging from the shadow of a purifying, homogenous tradition that sought to exclude them as he writes:

The confusion between the impure and the profane, writes Bataille, is one of the fundamental principles of any purifying development, seeking to remove religion of the original cesspool [*cloaque*], in which the sludge [*boue*] itself was sacred. It gradually becomes necessary to devalue the mud and that is why we call it profane. (2018, 34)

The language here is already characteristically Bataillean, and so is the movement of his thought. Bataille, in fact, counters an idealizing confusion that purges the idea of the sacred from impure, abject matters. As this passage indicates, these excluded, "accursed" (*maudite*) parts, comprise "mud," and "sewers," but he also adds: "the leftovers, the litter, nail clippings and cut hair, faeces, foetuses, garbage" (34)—the latter being "ingredients used by witches" (35) in their magical participations.

The reason Bataille wants to include these abject matters and the magic that animates them within the sphere of the heterogeneous is clear. For him, the double movement of attraction and repulsion at the heart of the heterogeneous depends precisely on the systolic and diastolic interplay between right and left sacred, pure and impure matters. Without the experience of rejection heterogeneity generates, there is no polarity within the sacred; and without polarity, there is no possible "transmutation" between high sacred and low sacred, or, as he also says, between what is "pure and impure, angelic and obscene" (2018, 36). Bataille's theoretical operation that will drive his entire thought is already present in embryo here. It consists in repolarizing the sacred so as to render it *sacer* again, that is, both holy and accursed. And by doing so, he sets in motion a

palpitating double movement between high and low sacred, generating a circulation of affective energy whereby impure matters turn into pure spirits, loving angels into obscene bodies.

But Bataille's operation touches deeper. In fact, his recuperation of the impure within the sphere of the sacred entails an immanent move that brings human beings back in touch with the muddy origins from which they stem, introducing a sacred continuity at the heart of profane discontinuities. Paradigmatic examples of heterogeneity such as "nail clippings and cut hair, faeces, foetus" (2018, 34) and so forth are, indeed, *excluded* in disgust, and subjected to different forms of social taboos in profane periods of homogenous stability. And yet, at sacred times, these abject elements are nonetheless materially *included* in heterogeneous, destabilizing ritual practices that recognize them as constitutive of the human subject itself. Notice in fact that these abject products are not only originating from accursed, bodily parts; they also include the original material out of which the subject, as foetus, grows. What is excluded, then, is actually already included within the very subject that operates the exclusion. If we peel off the first layer of straightforward formal discontinuity we find a material base of continuity that traces "nail clippings" back to fingers, "cut hair" to heads, "faeces" to bowels, the "foetus" to *ipse*. It is thus no accident that these taboo elements are also the ingredients witches use in their practices, magical practices whose goal is to generate transgressive forms of mimetic participation that break down the boundaries of individuation. As Bataille learned as an "apprentice sorcerer" (I, 523) from Henry Hubert's and Marcel Mauss's theory of magic (as well as from James Frazer and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl), "magic takes place in a sacred world" in which figures loaded with the "force of *mana*" trigger "a spiritual action at a distance that is produced between sympathetic beings" (Mauss and Hubert 1995, 105). Heterogeneous matters, then, introduce not only unclean (physical) continuities, but also sympathetic (spiritual) continuities at the heart of "absolute" discontinuities, generating a sense of what Bataille, following Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, also calls "mystical" participation with the world (I, 347). Similarly, as Bataille will later say in *Erotism*, at sacred or erotic times, taboos are indeed transgressed; and out of this transgression a "discontinuity" of beings turns into what he calls a "miraculous continuity between two beings" (1986: 19)—or, more generally, "continuity of being" (16).

As the language of "being" suggests, and the scope of heterology confirms, this double-movement of attraction and repulsion is not without destabilizing ontological effects: if it explicitly reintroduces mystical transformations that, for better and worse, recharge the sacred, it also implicitly throws mud on an entire

classic tradition that conceives of being in terms of pure, ideal forms. Mimetic studies re-turns to this muddy ontology.

## Muddy Ontology: Un-forming Idealism

At stake in Bataille's quarrel with an idealizing tendency in anthropology that excludes the impure is not only a redefinition of what the sacred is, or should be; it is also, and more fundamentally, a philosophical interrogation of the ontological foundations of being itself. Bataille's general anti-idealism is well-known given his genealogical alignment with figures like Nietzsche, but we still need to further his materialist ontology to further mimetic studies. If we have seen from an anthropological perspective that heterogeneity (the sacred) introduces mimetic continuities between human beings, we now turn to see from a philosophical perspective that it also introduces a mimetic continuity at the very heart of being.

Bataille's paradigmatic examples of mimetic heterology indicate an underlying dialogue with a much more ancient tradition, a classical, metaphysical tradition whose ideal forms Bataille sets out to deform or, better, un-form. In a much-discussed passage on the "formless," in fact, Bataille counters "academic men [*hommes académiques*]" for whom "to be happy, the universe would have to take shape [*prendre forme*]" by stating that the "formless [*informe*]" "universe is something like a spider or spit [*crachat*]" (1929, 382; 1985, 31). Less known is that, as the anti-academic tone of this paragraph suggests, the origins of this philosophical tradition can be traced back to that *homo academicus* par excellence who is, of course, Plato. After a confrontation with the father of anthropology of religion, a brief dialogue with the father of philosophy will allow us to see how deep the anti-idealist foundations of Bataille's mimetic studies go.

The base, materialist spirit of Bataille's definition of heterology is clearly anti-Platonic in conceptual orientation, but when it comes to the movement of his thought, matters are far from being clear-cut: underlying mimetic continuities emerge between Bataille's materialist heterology and Plato's idealist ontology. In *Parmenides* (1961a), for instance, a notoriously difficult yet founding dialogue in western metaphysics, the ancestral father of ontological thought, Parmenides, sets out to interrogate the foundations of Socrates' (Platonic) theory of forms. Let us simply recall that in Plato's transcendental metaphysics, immanent, plural

phenomena (*phainomena*) are modeled on a corresponding, singular form in the transcendental sphere of ideas (*eidōs*), an intelligible sphere in which sensible phenomena are said to “participate” via the medium of imitation (*mimesis*)—that is, by “being made in their image” (1961a, 927).<sup>8</sup> From the outset, however, Parmenides is not at all convinced that “forms themselves” can be neatly peeled away from the material phenomena that mimetically “participate” in them. Thus, he asks Socrates a series of materialist questions that resonate strikingly with Bataille’s heterogeneous concerns with formless matters. Let us partake in a part of this dialogue:

**Parmenides:** “[Is there] a form of man, apart from ourselves and all other men like us—a form of man as something by itself? Or a form of fire or water?”

**Socrates:** “I have often been puzzled about those things, Parmenides...”

**Parmenides:** “Are you also puzzled, Socrates, about cases that might be thought absurd, *such as hair or mud or dirt or any other trivial and undignified objects*? Are you doubtful whether or not to assert that each of these has a separate form distinct from things like those we handle?”

**Socrates:** “Not at all, said Socrates. In these cases, the things are just the things we see; it would surely be absurd to suppose that they have a form. *All the same, I have sometimes been troubled by a doubt whether what is true in one case may not be true in all.*” (Plato, 1961a, 130c–d; emphasis added)

Parmenides contra Socrates, Plato contra Plato: this is, indeed, an ancient mimetic quarrel. Dramatically put, Parmenides’s materialist questions unbalance Socrates’ idealism and force him into an impossible double bind, throwing a wrench in the very origin of Plato’s metaphysics and, by extension, western philosophy as a whole. Either Socrates admits that not all material phenomena have a corresponding intelligible idea. *Ergo* the world of forms is incomplete, deficient and perhaps even illusory—that is, the ideal world turns out to be a fable! Or he admits that impure, formless elements such as “hair, or mud, or dirt” do have a corresponding form in which they participate. *Ergo* pure forms turn out to be as formless as impure mud—that is, the ideal origin is stained by a muddy reality! There is no easy way out from this mimetic stranglehold, and the dialogue does not offer a dialectical resolution. Instead, old Parmenides benevolently admonishes young Socrates for dismissing these formless, heterogeneous matters. In his view, Socrates has not been fully possessed by philosophy as

yet, and cares too much for the world's opinions (*doxa*), a tendency Parmenides hopes Socrates—and with him perhaps also Plato, and the idealist philosophy he engendered—will perhaps overcome “someday:” “You will not despise any of these objects then,” Parmenides quips, “but at present your youth makes you still pay attention to what the world will think” (1961a, 130e).

To be sure, more than two millennia later, as Bataille explores the muddy waters of heterogeneous matters, he is certainly not concerned with what the world thinks. On the contrary, he turns precisely to such “undignified objects” in order to subvert a longstanding metaphysical tradition that considers base phenomenal matters as a debased imitation of ideal forms. That Bataille, in “Definition,” is implicitly engaging with the same “academic” tradition he denounces in “Dictionary” is confirmed by the shadow of mimetic language that frames his recuperation of impure matters within the sphere of the sacred. For instance, he writes:

[T]he role of heterology consists precisely in taking out from the shadows [*ombre*] what they had made horrible, and to do that it first had to remove as explicitly as possible a confusion that had resulted from protection from all investigation for the very thing [*chose même*] that had for humankind immeasurable importance. (Bataille 2018, 34)

The “origin” of our being, which, for Bataille, is the “very thing” (*chose même*)—he does not say the “thing itself” (*chose en soi*) to avoid the idealizing tendency he seeks to overturn, preferring to speak of the “original cesspool” (*cloaque initial*) (34) instead—has indeed been relegated to the world of mimetic “shadows” by an ontological tradition that privileges dignified, unitary forms over and against undignified, formless phenomena. Bataille, on the other hand, like other figures of Nietzschean inspiration, continues to be haunted by illusory “shadows” or “phantoms,” whose originary nature has progressively been rendered “unintelligible” by a western “need to idealize” (2018, 30). Thus, he specifies:

By moving away from these unpleasant phantoms [*phantasmes*], a new purpose was realized: the unspeakable sense of ecstatic horror, which is at the root of religion as well as erotic activity, was rendered unintelligible, as were polarization phenomena as their heterogeneity increased... (34; trans. modified)

Bataille's concept of "phantom" should not be confused with a psychological phantasm here. As it was already the case with his references to "shadows," it stems from the same philosophical tradition that excludes unformed matters into a cavern of darkness. As is well-known, in Book 10 of the *Republic*, as the question of what mimesis is in general returns to haunt the philosophical scene, Socrates describes the world of phenomena as mere "phantoms" (*phantasma*) and the world of art as "an imitation of a phantasm" (1961b, 598b) three times removed from reality. In sum, Bataille's playful relegation of the *homo academicus*' "need to idealize" to the illusory world of "unintelligible" "shadows," or "phantoms," far removed from the "original sewer" out of which we are born, is wrapped up in deep layers of (Socratic) irony. In a deft metaphysical move, Bataille turns mimetic "shadows" into "original" realities, the "sewer" into something "originary," while at the same time relegating the "need to idealize" to what he significantly calls a place of "darkness."

And yet, Bataille does not paint the world in black and white. Despite the violent, idealist exclusion of the low (formless) sacred from the high (formed) sacred, the movement of Bataille's heterology indicates that there is no simple opposition between light and darkness, pure ideal forms and impure material phenomena, but a mimetic continuity instead. Just as a shadow cannot easily be detached from the form that casts it, so the formless side of the sacred cannot easily be detached from the formal side that rejects it. In fact, it is precisely through this "classic," "purifying" exclusion, Bataille suggests, that the origins of our being are "made horrible." And, conversely, he says that "the role of heterology consists precisely in bringing out from the shadows [*ombre*] what they [the idealists] had managed to make horrible" (34; emphasis added). For Bataille, then, the purifying movement of exclusion of heterogeneous matters into a cavern of "shadows" is far from remaining unstained. On the contrary, this idealist move is directly responsible for generating the muddy "horror" it seeks to keep at bay, unwittingly contributing to the movement of attraction and repulsion it attempts to freeze. Paradoxically, then, Bataille finds in Plato's idealist ontology an inversed, mirroring counterpart of the movement of heterology. That is, a *transformative* movement in which an originary experience turns into a formless shadow, a pure intention into an impure effect, ideal forms into muddy sewers, angelic spirits into abject bodies. Perhaps, then, at stake in Bataille's move is not only a metaphysical inversion that posits formless matters over and against ideal forms; nor solely a psychological diagnostic that shows the impure, material consequences of pure, rational reflections (though it is both). It is also a heterological realization that despite their absolute otherness, formless, abject

matters are nonetheless intimately connected to the origins of our being—if only because, for Bataille, it is from a formless “universe” in general, and from bleeding “wounds” in particular, that human beings both originate and continue to participate.

We are now in a position to confirm the destabilizing effects of Bataille’s mimetic heterology whereby we started and its general importance for a re-turn of homo mimeticus that transgresses idealist forms. If the rigor of orthodox science Bataille inherits from Durkheim’s religious anthropology forces him to set up a radical *conceptual* difference between the sacred and the profane, the ontological undercurrent that animates the *movement* of Bataille’s heterogeneous thought transgresses the neat positivistic distinctions on which he relies. Bataille, in fact, not only cuts through homogenous disciplinary traditions, spilling over to contaminate the ontological foundations of western idealism; it also melts the formal boundaries of heterogeneity itself, generating inclusion and continuity at the heart of exclusion and discontinuity. This also means that, for Bataille, the “study of human polarity as an autonomous science” (2018, 33) is predicated on the realization that oppositions, no matter how “absolute,” are never static and unmovable, but entail a transformative polarization that turns polar opposites into mimetic polarities. And if this was true for anthropological and ontological polarizations, we now turn to see that it is equally true for psychological communications.

## Transgressive Psychology: Communicating with the Socius

Eroticism, phantasms, and the ambivalence generated by sexually oriented bodily matters. Indeed, as Bataille unfolds his definition of heterology, sailing away from the idealism of anthropology, while deftly avoiding the whirlpool of Platonic ontology, he is nearing yet another disciplinary shore that turns sexual taboos into a privileged object of inquiry that is, psychoanalysis. Heterology’s proximity to psychoanalysis was already latent in Bataille’s suggestion that rationalist exclusions are responsible for turning heterogeneous matters into something abject and horrible—what psychoanalytic critics will theorize under the rubric of “the powers of horrors” (Kristeva 1982). But Bataille makes this connection manifest as he says that psychoanalysis “reaches directly to eroticism, genitalia and *excreta*” (2018, 35), which is the sphere of heterology as well. Like

heterology, psychoanalysis focuses on the impure, excluded matters at the “root of religion as well as erotic activity” (34). And, again like heterology, psychoanalysis is concerned with the contradictory double movements generated by irrational, emotional currents. Thus, Bataille acknowledges that in chapter 2 of *Totem and Taboo* (1940), titled “Taboo and the Ambivalence of Emotions,” “Freud speaks of the conjugation of attraction and repulsion,” giving the example of the “neurotic fear of touching and the desire to touch at the same time” as an indication of a type of psychic ambivalence “causing nausea and erection, disgust and love at the same time” (2018, 34–35; see Freud 1940, 48–54).

At first sight, the psychoanalytical concept of “ambivalence” seems to offer a privileged door to account for the movements of repulsion and attraction taboo subjects generate. As Freud makes clear such an “ambivalent attitude toward...taboo prohibitions,” characteristic of so called “obsessional neurotics” and “primitive people” (1940, 54) has ultimately its origin in an unresolved Oedipal conflict. Sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex, the story goes, generates a rivalrous hostility toward the parent of the same sex who is perceived as an obstacle, and as this conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle is internalized into a psychic conflict between the “id” and the “superego,” we have what Freud calls “the prototype of the ambivalence of human emotions” (1940, 91–92)—*alias* the Oedipus complex.<sup>9</sup> From this “prototype,” then, Freud extrapolates an anthropological theory that, in *illo tempore*, the same desire led young “savages” to the actual murder of the ancestral father figure in a sacrificial transgression responsible for the emergence of taboo prohibitions and, by extension, religion and culture as a whole. As Bataille faithfully reports, for Freud, what is at stake in this original transgression is a “‘projection of unconscious hostility’ that the children had nourished against the dead parent during his lifetime” (2018, 34; see Freud, 1940, 77). With psychoanalysis, then, heterology seems to have reached the bottom of the affair. Bataille, in fact, touches a discipline that not only makes the sphere of the impure its privileged object of scientific investigation, but also individuates the very origins of the ambivalent oscillation responsible for the polarization of erotic experiences.

And yet, having traveled so far, Bataille is extremely careful not to frame the movement of heterology within neat, prototypical (that is, triangular) forms, lest he reproduce the idealist movement he has been deftly averting all along. Bataille’s suspicion of psychoanalysis—what he also calls in *Sovereignty* “*la pensée abstraite*” (VIII, 18)—is expressed at different points in his work, but “Definition” shows how deep his anti-Oedipal critique of Freud actually goes, clarifying the fundamental *différend* that divides the Oedipal unconscious from

the mimetic unconscious. Bataille, in fact, specifies that psychoanalysis is based on a “defective method (which, besides, did not belong to it, since it was borrowed from general scientific method) (2018, 34),” and compares Freud’s homogeneous approach to the one of “the chemist or the physiologist working in their laboratories” (35). That is, scientific figures that do not follow the flow of blood that animates living organisms, but dissect dead bodies instead. For Bataille, this methodological distance is the reason “Freud did not manage to think of impure objects as a specific reality” (34) and, consequently, missed the very origins of the ambivalence he set out to illuminate. It is thus no accident that Bataille sardonically speaks of “psychoanalysis’s impotence” (*impuissance*) (34), deriding the castrating methodological effect of applying a homogeneous scientific method to heterogeneous sacred matters. Finally, for Bataille, the perverse effect of framing “primitive” people’s sacred emotions in an Oedipal account of “obsessional neurotics” confined to familial, pathological dramas renders Freud seemingly “unaware that [in the 1930s] human life in its totality has become a function of demented reactions” (35). We can now understand why in “Dossier Heterology” Bataille insists that heterological investigations “are to be opposed to the theme of Oedipus” (II, 171). This is a firm and decisive claim. It clarifies, once and for all, that no matter how close to psychoanalysis Bataille might sound at first sight heterology, and the conception of the unconscious it presupposes, is radically “opposed” to the founding Oedipal theme on which psychoanalysis, in its Freudian, Lacanian, or other derivations, ultimately rests—if only because Bataille, like Nietzsche before him, is an advocate of the mimetic unconscious instead.

As we have now come to expect, Bataille’s references to the father of psychoanalysis are not simply antagonistic; they rest on a mimetic agonism that serves a double diagnostic operation: symptomatic of a psychoanalytical impotence to account for the ambivalence of heterogeneous objects, the case of Freud also provides a springboard for immanent and material operations into heterogeneous subjects. Here is a Freudian diagnostic that gestures toward a heterological backdoor Freud himself did not actually open, but gives us access to the unconscious sources of the emotional currents we have been following all along:

“The corpse, the newborn,” he [Freud] said, “women in their state of suffering [*die Frau in ihren Leidenszuständen*], attract *by their inability to defend themselves*, the individual who has reached maturity and sees this as a source of new pleasures. That is why these people and these states are taboo.” (Bataille 2018, 34)

The corpse, the newborn, and the suffering woman: what could these heterogeneous subjects possibly have in common? Freud's explanation is typical: it is their shared vulnerability, their "peculiar helplessness" (1940, 55), their openness to being violated, that generates an ambivalent feeling of attraction and repulsion, opening up transgressive "new pleasures" to be later repressed by social taboos. This is, indeed, a classical psychoanalytical explanation that frames the movement of heterogeneous affects within the Oedipal "prototype" Bataille warns us against. What, then, we may wonder, is the Bataillean alternative to access the labyrinth of the unconscious?

Bataille does not open this door completely, but he offers us a key. To capture the unconscious sources of heterological polarization it is necessary to situate these Freudian examples within the mimetic currents and undercurrents that inform the general economy of Bataille's thought, while at the same time supplementing a definition Bataille left partially incomplete from the angle of mimetic studies. We have seen so far that what is totally other and *discontinuous* at the level of science (work) might intimately be the same and *continuous* at the deeper level of communication (transgression). We have equally seen that the ingredients witches and sorcerers use in their magical rituals (nails, hair, etc.) are not only in a direct *physical* continuity with the body, but also in a *spiritual* participation with the soul, going as far as touching the *ontological* origins of being itself. What we must add now is that this mimetic continuity at the heart of human beings is even more intimately experienced with the three taboo cases mentioned above (corpses, newborns, suffering women). The repulsion and attraction they generate should in fact not simply be defined in terms of a "peculiar helplessness" that opens the door to Oedipal pleasures (Freud 1940, 55). Nor should our emphasis on mimesis lead us to automatically think in terms of a mimetic "identification" with an image (Lacan 1966, 94); or, alternatively, of a "mimetic desire" in which "mimesis" determines the object of desire (Girard 1977, 146). Rather, these examples are defined by an intrinsic feeling of *mimetic participation* generated by the fact that this heterogeneous "other" is not simply "totally other," but is also experienced as being intimately the same—what Bataille, following the French psychologist and philosopher Pierre Janet, also calls a "socius."

The importance of Janet's "psychological analysis" in the discovery of the unconscious has been traced by Henri Ellenberger's monumental study, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, but largely due to the shadow psychoanalysis's romantic agonism cast on competing figures it is still largely unknown in the humanities.<sup>10</sup> This is the moment to retrieve Janet from the shadows. In fact,

he developed an “intersubjective psychology” that gives birth to phantom egos open to mimetic influences that are now under the lens of mimetic studies.<sup>11</sup> Bataille, for one, was well-versed in Janet’s analytical psychology: he even collaborated with Janet by serving as the vice-president of the Society of Collective Psychology, presided by Janet.

In a lecture for this short-lived Society in 1937, for instance, Bataille relies on Janet’s “psychology of the socius” in order to go to the origins of the ambivalent feelings of attraction and repulsion generated by heterogeneous others that trouble the boundaries of individuation. He writes: “Janet insisted on the fact that the individual subject,” as he is caught in the movement of sacred communications, “is not easily distinguished from the fellow creature with whom he is in rapport, from the socius” (Bataille II, 287; Janet 1938, 145). The socius, then, as a distinct figure who is “not easily distinguished” from the “individual subject” opens up a mimetic continuity at the heart of discontinuity. And specifying this opening, Bataille adds a heterogeneous touch to Janet’s definition as he adds: “the dead is a socius, which means that he is very difficult to distinguish from oneself” (II, 287). This is indeed a strange claim to understand, especially in technologized, homogeneous societies where corpses tend to be excluded and confined to profane institutions used to keep the feeling of sacred horror at a distance. Yet, as anyone who has experienced the loss of someone dear intimately knows, the death of the other is very difficult to keep outside—for her pathos is felt inside. Thinking of death, Bataille will also later speak of a “gulf which separates us” (1986, 12), yet he immediately adds, “death is hypnotizing” (13), suggesting the possibility of a mimetic union. The corpse might thus be excluded in its physical manifestation as corpse, but as socius she is immediately included in a “rapport,” a hypnotic rapport generating what Bataille will also call a “passage, communication, but not from one the other insofar as the *one* and the *other* have lost their distinct existence” (1954, 74). This also means that the dead qua socius might indeed be “totally other” from the exterior point of view of homogeneity (science), but from the interior perspective of a transgressive communication (heterology) this other is actually difficult to disentangle from the self.

The socius, then, is a mimetic other who is formative of *ipse*, but not in the homogeneous sense that she reflects a unitary image in a mirror, or directs desire in yet another structure of rivalry. Rather, she is mimetic in the heterogeneous sense that her hypnotizing effect transgresses neat distinctions between self and other, inside and outside, introducing an affective continuity whereby “human unity” is unformed—or as Bataille figuratively says, is “shattering” it “like glass” (2018, 36). In sum, the socius is not the origin of an ideal, representational form,

but of a formless bodily communication; she does not freeze the ego in a unitary *imago* but opens up the boundaries of individuation allowing the communication of mimetic affects to flow.

I have shown elsewhere that Janet's "psychology of the socius" informs not only the entirety of Bataille's heterogeneous thought but also opens up an alternative, mimetic backdoor to the unconscious.<sup>12</sup> Following up on this dossier, we should notice that Bataille moves from the figure of the "dead" to the one of the "newborn" as paradigmatic case of communication with a socius. Bataille was in fact quick to recognize that from the very first weeks of life, newborns are open to non-linguistic forms mimetic communication that turn exterior affects originating in the other into interior experiences that animate the self. For instance, speaking of that contagious affect par excellence that is laughter, Bataille says: "A child, who is a few weeks old, respond[s] to an adult's laughter" (in Hollier 1995, 107). Along similar lines, but thinking about the origins of feelings of disgust, he writes: "During the formation of behavioral attitudes in childhood, the act of exclusion is not directly assumed. It is communicated from the mother to the child through the medium of funny faces [*grimaces*] and expressive exclamations" (II, 220). And in *Erotism*, still thinking of children, he specifies that we "have to teach them [disgust] by pantomime" (1986, 58), suggesting that even such visceral affects such as disgust do not originate in the subject herself, but emerge from a mimetic reproduction of the facial expressions of the other/socius. An unconscious reflex triggered by an external expression of attraction (laughter) or repulsion (disgust) is thus at the source of a polarized emotional experience within the subject; the affect of the other/*socius* is not only reproduced but also felt, experienced, as the affect of the self/*ipse*.

This heterogeneous view of pre-verbal, unconscious communication flies in the face of the homogeneous doxa that dominated the twentieth century and considered that imitation was a belated, Oedipal phenomenon; yet it anticipates by nearly a century cognitive, mimetic discoveries that are now informing educated readers in the twenty-first century. Experiments in developmental psychology have in fact confirmed the presence of mimetic responses in newborns that allow them to reproduce facial expressions right after being born, records ranging about 42 minutes old (Meltzoff and Moore 1999), leading to the evolutionary hypothesis of the "imitative mind" (Meltzoff and Prinz 2002) in line with mimetic studies. More recently, as we noted in the Prelude, the discovery of "mirror neurons" in the 1990s (initially found in monkeys and later confirmed in humans as well) entailed the discovery of motor neurons that fire not only when we enact a movement but also when we observe someone else's movements

or expressions. Still under discussion, mirror neurons are responsible for unconscious forms of imitation that can communicate basic emotions along embodied, affective and communicative lines postulated by precursors like Bataille. The most philosophically inclined among neuroscientists go as far as claiming that mirror neurons “may provide a key neural mechanism for understanding the mental states of others” (Jacoboni 2008: 33). Above all, contemporary neuroscience confirms a genealogical hypothesis on the birth of homo mimeticus: namely that the presence of an “unconscious intersubjective mimesis” (Gallese and Ammaniti 2014, 13) entails that “we should abandon the Cartesian view of the primacy of the ego and adapt a perspective emphasizing that the other is co-originally given as the self” (24), which is exactly that a genealogy of the phantom ego suggested. Familiar with a long tradition in mimetic theory—from Plato to Nietzsche, Tarde to Janet—and attentive to the formative power of mimesis in the birth of the ego Bataille modestly couched his groundbreaking heterological observations in the language of mimesis by saying: “I have thus only stated in other terms the well-known principle of contagion, or if you still want to call it that, fellow feeling, *sympathie*” (in Hollier 1997, 109).

After this detour via the laws of imitation responsible for affective communications with a *socius*, we should be in a better position to address the third, and last case of heterology: the suffering woman. When Freud speaks of “*die Frau in ihren Leidenszuständen*” (1920, 44) he might actually be alluding to the pain of menstruation, a bodily production that is traditionally included among taboo, heterogenous objects. And yet, since the focus is on the suffering subject herself, we should be careful not to objectify our interlocutor and essentialize our mimetic diagnostic, if only because suffering [*Leiden*] transgresses gender barriers in order to open up the self to a suffering that takes place with the other [*Mitleid*]. That this case can be diagnosed from the perspective of the psychology of the *socius* is clear. In both its physical and psychic manifestation, suffering is a contagious affect that communicates itself mimetically, from self to other, introducing an affective continuity at the heart of discontinuity that is experienced from the inside. Thus, in the experience of *Mitleid* or sympathy (*sym-pathos*, feeling with not feeling for) for a suffering woman or man—why be biased?—the self is caught in a relation of communication so profound that the distinction between self and other, inside and outside, my pathos and sym-pathos, no longer holds. As Bataille will specify later in his career, such an other allows me to “participate in his emotion from inside myself. This sensation felt inside me communicates itself to me” (1986, 153). The subject who speaks from “inside myself” is thus not myself, and yet an experience in which the heterogeneity of what

is supposedly “totally other” turns into an intimately felt homology of what is experienced as radically the same.

We should now better understand why in the midst of writing what is arguably his most influential work, *Inner Experience*, Bataille stated: “Then I started reading Janet, imagining it necessary to use his subtlety in order to go further” (V, 430). Indeed, in Janet’s much-neglected (some would say excluded) psychology of a socius who is oneself, while being someone other, he finds a subtle tool to diagnose the laws of imitation that underlie his persistent fascination for sacred forms of sovereign communication. Whether he speaks of the self in terms of a “space of communication, of fusion between subject and object” (1954, 21) in *Inner Experience*, of an “interpenetration (contagion)” that opens up “the passage, the fall of one’s being into another [*la chute d’un être de l’un dans l’autre*]” (V, 392) in *Guilty*, or of “our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is” (1986, 15) in *Erotism*, he is consistently referring to the experience of mimetic homology generated by heterogenous and, thus, sovereign communications with the other/socius. This is why, he, Bataille, in a confessional mode, goes as far as saying: “I cannot distinguish between myself and those others with whom I desire to communicate” (1954, 55).

In sum, the corpse, the newborn, and the suffering (wo)man are paradigmatic examples of heterogeneous subjects and should be considered as “totally other” from the mediated perspective of “discursive knowledge” (Bataille 1954, 11). Yet, as anyone who has lost a loved one, loves a newborn, or has made a lover suffer, intimately knows from the experience of what Bataille calls “emotional knowledge” (11), these others, far from being “totally other,” engender what Bataille calls a “fusion, precarious yet profound” (1986, 20). This precarious fusion, Bataille specifies, provisionally melts the unity of the ego, dragging it back to a type of muddy and originary, yet *ek-static* homology in which the ego can no longer be contained in neat, ideal forms and is rendered formless and precarious instead. Hence, the experience of communication with the socius introduces a polarized attraction, a *passage*, in which self and other are no longer on the boat of individuation but slide (*glisse*) in the currents and undercurrents of the ocean itself, “two waves losing themselves in the neighboring waves” (1954, 64). Be it at political meetings, at a funeral, in childbirth, or in a lover’s bed, the subject is magnetically, or as Bataille likes to say, “hypnotically” attracted toward an experience with the socius that merges the ego in a “primal continuity linking us with everything that is” (1986, 15). Until the very end, Bataille will continue to insist that we are irresistibly attracted by heterogeneous communications because “we yearn for our lost continuity” (15).

And yet, precisely because of the socius's fatal attraction toward the ecstatic sphere of communication, *ipse* also shivers with an originary terror that violently swings her in the opposite direction, lest she loses her identity in a formless experience of self-dissolution. Hence this communicating subject is not only radically pulled *toward* originary experiences with others qua socii who have the power to open up the channels of the ego to its unbounded outside; it is also pulled *away* from it, horrified by the possibility of a permanent loss of identity in a muddy pond without form. We can thus better understand why Bataille, at the beginning of his career, as he is about to open his "Dossier Heterology" jots down a reminder for himself that reads: "say also the heterogeneous is what we *love* and what horrifies us" (II, 171). And, many years later, as the end is nearing, he echoes the following reminder for others: "We ought never to forget that in spite of the bliss love promises its first effect is one of turmoil and distress" (1986, 19). If heterology generates ambivalent feelings of attraction and repulsion, then, the origins of this double movement do not stem from the vulnerability of the object alone; nor from the openness of the subject alone; but from the irresistible currents and undercurrents of sovereign communication that open up the ego to the sacred ecstasy of eroticism, while making her shiver in front of the terror of death. That this deeply subjective experience touches the heart of the matter is confirmed, one last time, as Bataille specifies: "this ambivalence inherent in the sacred things has not only the effect of tearing apart the feeling of which it is the object, *it rips apart as well the sacred itself*" (2018, 35; emphasis added). In this final heterological incision, the sacred is indeed ripped apart—so that its palpitating heart can keep beating.

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We were wondering: what are the laws that govern the movement of "attraction and repulsion" whose pathos of distance constitutes the palpitating heart of mimetic studies? We are now in a position to see and feel that Bataille's heterology may appear impossible from a purely homogenous, scientific perspective that considers the sacred from without. Yet it is rendered possible by a heterogeneous perspective that adopts *anthropological*, *ontological*, and *psychological* lenses to consider the homology of heterology from within. What appears other and excluded from an exterior, scientific perspective actually turns out to be intimate and included from an interior, affective perspective; what is discontinuous in the path of work is continuous in the path of transgression. This is also what Bataille himself suggested, in a truncated footnote whose formless logic we are now perhaps in a position to recompose:

[I] expressed the impossibility of a science of the excluded or heterogeneous part, but in practice? It is not necessary to take into account the fundamental difference from the point of view of knowledge, between the excluded part and the mode of exclusion; and it is easier to speak of the science of the heterogeneous: this fiction can only cause inconvenience if one has not indicated it from the outset [The sentence stops here]...(Bataille 2018, 38; trans. modified)

Indeed, the “fiction” of a science heterology can only “cause inconvenience” if one does not take into consideration what Bataille indicated at the outset: namely, that heterology “refers” to what he describes as “*lived states* [états vécus],” and its method of investigation rests on “lived, *affective* experience” (I, 339, 348). And as he will continue to emphasize, heterology is not only a science based on discursive “knowledge” of a rational *logos*; it is also, and above all, a science based on the “practice” of a felt *pathos*. From this “practical” angle, the absolute otherness of the heterogeneous might actually be less other than “the point of view of knowledge” (or work) thought it to be; if only because from the point of view of “lived experience” (or transgression) this other qua “socius” is in a homologous continuity with the self qua “ipse.”

“I” have argued that the laws of heterology are tightly intertwined with the laws of imitation, in the sense that *mimesis*—conceived not as homogenous representation, but in its heterogeneous anthropological, ontological and psychological manifestations—reveals the underlying homology of being that, at sovereign instants of communication, opens up *ipse*, for better and worse, to the experience of what is totally other, yet is intimately the same. For Bataille, it is because our muddy origins are in a relation of mimetic continuity with our universal destiny that we remain intimately fearful, yet radically open to the ecstatic and squandering horror these heterogeneous forces generate. This is the beating heart that keeps Bataille’s sacred thought in motion, a communicative, oscillating, and above all palpitating thought that realizes, time and again, that what is most distant and totally other (heterology) may actually be closest and intimately the same (homology). From the systolic and diastolic interplay between sameness and difference, *logos* and *pathos*, work and transgression, the homology of mimetic heterology must thus be constantly renewed. For Bataille, this is, indeed, a life-affirming operation that transformed impure bodies into pure angels, the horror of death into the ecstasy of love—whether we could turn this *ek-stasis* into a labor of love out of which mimetic studies was born, is not up to any ego to say, but for future phantoms to evaluate.

## Notes

- 1 This is a revised version of an article titled “Bataille and the Homology of Heterology” first published in a 2018 special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* devoted to “Bataille & Heterology.”
- 2 For a critical reader of canonical poststructuralist essays on Bataille from Maurice Blanchot to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida to Jean-Baudrillard, Denis Hollier to Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen among others, see Botting and Wilson 1997.
- 3 On Bataille and mimetic studies see Lawtoo 2013, 209–305; on Bataille and community, see Nancy 1991, Lawtoo 2019, 53–128, Nancy and Lawtoo 2022, 35–38.
- 4 As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe was quick to note: “Bataille, though invoked just once, unless I am mistaken, in *Violence and the Sacred*, continuously underlied the Girardian problematic” (1989, 106, n103). This neglect is revelatory of the logic of “romantic agonism” (Lawtoo 2023a, 54–57) that led Girard to consistently erase or downplay influences of theorists of mimesis of the past, which mimetic studies now aims to re-turn to.
- 5 On Bataille and (new) fascism see Lawtoo 2019, 53–128.
- 6 References to Bataille’s *Oeuvres complètes* (1970–1988) are indicated by volume number instead of date.
- 7 See Borch-Jacobsen 1997, French 2007, Lawtoo 2011, 2019.
- 8 For a more detailed discussion on the role mimesis plays in Plato’s metaphysics, see Staten, ch. 2 in this volume, and Lawtoo 2022, ch.2
- 9 For a more detailed genealogy of the Oedipal unconscious and the way it intersects with mimetic theory, see Lawtoo 2023a.
- 10 As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Sonu Shamdasani put it in their informed account of the history of psychoanalysis sensitive to mimetic strategies at play in “Freud’s theory,” which “was one of the many possible philosophies of the unconscious”: “What was good in psychoanalysis was not new, and stemmed from Janet’s work. What was new was not good, and could safely be left to Freud” (2012, 94, 75).
- 11 See Lawtoo 2013, 247–281.
- 12 See Lawtoo 2013, 254–281.

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