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The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research

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# *The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research*

Michael Weingrad

I assume he's read some of those books you lent me – Bataille and other theorists – about transgression and pain and sex; lust, crime, and desire; murder and erotic pleasure. It didn't mean much to me, any of that stuff.

– Saul Bellow (*Mr. Sammler's Planet*)

The fact that Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille knew each other during the 1930s has raised a certain amount of interest and not a few eyebrows.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, a habitu  of the National Library in Paris, made the acquaintance of Bataille, who worked there as a librarian. Even more intriguing is the claim that Benjamin attended meetings of the Coll ge de Sociologie and the Ac phale, the intellectuals' cabals that Bataille formed and directed during the interwar period. (It is even said that sometimes he was accompanied by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, though there is evidence to the contrary.) The most poignant

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1. Allan Stoekl, who with Denis Hollier has done so much to introduce Bataille's writings into American intellectual life, observes in his 1985 selection of Bataille's essays that, "[T]he reader will note many parallels between the projects of Bataille and Benjamin." *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt & Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985) xxv n.18. The Germanist, Gary Smith writes: "The association with Bataille – to whom Benjamin entrusted his papers – deserves greater attention because of the natural affinity between these two early explorers of the then uncharted waters of fascist irrationality" *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. Gary Smith & Andre Lefevere (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) xxxiii-xxxiv.

moment of their friendship pertains to Benjamin's flight from Paris in 1940, when he gave a number of his manuscripts, as well as the Paul Klee painting "Angelus Novus" (a present from Gershom Scholem) to Bataille for safekeeping. The latter hid them in the National Library for the duration of the war.

This encounter is pregnant with possibilities for elaborating an intellectual history that convincingly links Bataille and Benjamin, and it entails significant implications for understanding postwar intellectual developments. And yet, the few attempts to show the interrelatedness of Bataille and Benjamin have not been terribly encouraging. Jochen Hörisch has attempted to show the traces of Bataille's influence on Benjamin's writings of the 1930s, but the textual evidence he adduces is too thin to be at all convincing.<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Mehlman links the two through the seventeenth-century Jewish heresy of Sabbatianism, suggesting that the transgressive and antinomian elements in Bataille's thought derive from Benjamin's friendship with Scholem, the central historian of the Sabbatian movement. Mehlman's fanciful genealogy involves some clever textual interweaving, but as intellectual history, it does not withstand much scrutiny.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, rather than merely assuming an intellectual kinship, this investigation follows the recollections of Pierre Klossowski, Bataille's friend and Benjamin's co-worker during the late 1930s.<sup>4</sup> He writes

2. Jochen Hörisch, "Benjamin entre Bataille et Sohn-Rethel. Théorie de la dépense et dépense de la théorie," in *Walter Benjamin et Paris*, ed. Heinz Wisman (N.L.: Cerf, 1986).

3. Elsewhere I critique Mehlman's attempt to link Bataille with Sabbatian antinomianism, and I offer an alternate genealogy that traces the messianic strains in Bataille's thought to the literature of the French Decadents. See, "Parisian Messianism: Catholicism, Decadence and the Transgressions of George Bataille," *History and Memory* 13.2 (Fall/Winter 2001): 113-33.

4. On several occasions, Klossowski speaks of Benjamin's political disagreements concerning Bataille's circle. In a 1969 statement in *Le Monde*, Klossowski writes: "Walter Benjamin disagreed with us. . . . He wanted to keep us from slipping; despite an appearance of absolute incompatibility, we were taking the risk of playing into the hands of a 'prefascist aestheticism.' . . . There was no possible agreement about this point of his analysis." (Hollier, ed. 389) A decade later, Klossowski repeats his claim that "Acéphale illustrated for [Benjamin] the temptation of a prefascist aestheticism," and even judges that Benjamin "had understood Bataille well . . ." Jean-Maurice Monnoyer, *Le peintre et son démon: entretiens avec Pierre Klossowski* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985) 185-86. In this interview one reads that, while Bataille admired "the great moral conscience of Benjamin," he nevertheless "took a disliking to him in the end," and described him to Klossowski as "a child on whom one had stuck a moustache" (187, 186). Ignoring Klossowski's negative comments, Bataille's biographer Michel Surya cites this interview to indicate the high esteem in which Bataille held Benjamin! See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Séguier, 1987) 325.

about the dynamic between Benjamin and the College members: “Benjamin followed all these goings-on with as much consternation as curiosity. Although Bataille and I were at variance with him then on every position, we listened to him with fascination.”<sup>5</sup> An account of Benjamin and Bataille’s association must take note of the dismay and difference as well as the curiosity and fascination.

In what follows, I provide such an account with a roughly chronological record of Benjamin and Bataille’s interactions, which took place within the larger context of the encounters between the affiliates of the Institute of Social Research and the participants in the College of Sociology. I have constructed this report from the published correspondence of Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno, who, along with Hans Mayer, were most privy to the activities of the College. I have also drawn on the letters sent by Bataille to Roger Caillois, as well as writings from the 1930s and 1940s by both Institute and College members, particularly Bataille, Caillois, and Klossowski, and postwar interviews and reminiscences by Klossowski, Caillois, Mayer, and Scholem, among others. Although it is a preliminary account, the general contours of these interactions – notably, the Institute affiliates’ skepticism towards Bataille’s projects and the politics of the College – as well as a number of important details are laid out.

### *The Task of the Translator*

The first member of the College with whom the Institute had regular dealings was the French author and translator, Pierre Klossowski. Benjamin met Klossowski in 1935. As the latter recalls, it was during a meeting of “Counter-Attack,” the political group founded by Bataille and André Breton. Bataille and Breton detested each other but managed a brief reconciliation in order to mobilize intellectuals in support of Léon Blum’s Popular Front.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of 1936, the Institute engaged Klossowski to translate Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” for publication in the Institute’s journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Like Benjamin, Klossowski

5. Pierre Klossowski, quoted in *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 219.

6. Benjamin may also have met Bataille at this time, though Benjamin’s research in the National Library might have brought the two into contact earlier. On the subject of Breton’s possible relationship to Benjamin see Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illuminations: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993).

trafficked between French and German; he had translated both Hölderlin and Max Scheler, the latter an influence on Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study. Like Benjamin, he had been cordially received by Rilke before the poet's death.<sup>7</sup> Their collaboration seemed fortunate, and Benjamin wrote to Adorno expressing optimism about the French translator's abilities: "[Klossowski] not only possesses all requirements of a linguistic nature, but also important scholarly prerequisites for the work."<sup>8</sup> Klossowski was also engaged to translate a number of Horkheimer's works.

This enthusiasm was soon tempered. Klossowski's translation of Horkheimer was never satisfactorily concluded, apparently because of problems with Klossowski's rate of work, as well as the difficulty of the material involved. Benjamin writes of hounding him about the "Work of Art" translation,<sup>9</sup> which is confirmed by Klossowski's recollection of the experience half a century later:

I would prefer to forget that terrible week he had me spend working day and night to rectify my text with his. He took charge of me, was my governess, which obscured, as I said, his angelic soul – in addition to something effeminate in his hysteria – a massacring humor, horribly maniacal. . . . Translating with him was a sufferance disproportionate to the result obtained." (Monnoyer 187)

One can imagine the difficulties involved in rendering this essay, as well as the demanding expectations of Benjamin, for whom the act of translation was nothing less than a metaphysical undertaking. Moreover, the "Work of Art" essay was of great importance to Benjamin<sup>10</sup> for the theoretical development of his *Arcades Project*, his collaboration with the

7. Alain Arnaud, *Pierre Klossowski* (N.I.: Éditions du Seuil, 1990) 185.

8. Benjamin to Adorno, 7 Feb. 1936. Adorno, *Briefe und Briefwechsel*, vol. 1: *Theodor W. Adorno / Walter Benjamin, Briefwechsel 1928-1940* ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1994) 163. Hereafter abbreviated as Adorno. All quotations from this source are my translations.

9. Benjamin to Adorno, 27 Feb. 1936. Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, eds. Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994) 523.

10. Adorno and Horkheimer even envisaged an anthology of essays on mass culture which would include Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay and Adorno's *Jazzarbeit*, as well as studies of architecture, film, and the detective novel by other Institute members. See the letter from Adorno to Horkheimer, 15 May 1937, in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 16: *Briefwechsel 1937-1940*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995) 151-52. André Malraux referred to the essay in an address to a 1936 writers' conference, and discussed his interest in the essay with Benjamin (Benjamin to Horkheimer, 10 Aug. 1936, in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15: *Briefwechsel 1913-1936* 610).

Institute, and his reputation in French intellectual circles.

Klossowski's working partnership with the Institute survived these disappointments and he continued to translate essays for the *Zeitschrift*. He even attempted to interest both André Gide and Jean Wahl in Horkheimer's work.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin mentions only Klossowski and Adrienne Monnier by name when he speaks of the few dependable people who would be left near him after Adorno's decision to leave Europe for the United States.<sup>12</sup> Most notably, however, it was through Klossowski that the Institute came to know the groups Bataille organized in the late 1930s, first the *Acéphale* and then the *College*.

### *Acéphale*

The relationship between *Acéphale* and the *College*, as well as that between *Acéphale* the published journal and the secret society of the same name, remains somewhat murky. The comments of the Institute members support this contention. The publication *Acéphale* consisted of four volumes published during the late 1930s. Its scope and emphasis were mainly determined by Bataille. The Institute's connection to the journal, however, was through its contributor, Klossowski. When Adorno discussed the first issue of *Acéphale* (June 1936) with Horkheimer, he referred to it as "Klossowski's journal."<sup>13</sup>

The two Institute members were highly critical of the journal, which they perceived as a late manifestation of the surrealist tradition: "As to the Surrealists in toto," writes Adorno in connection with *Acéphale*, "I, too, have the feeling that irrationalist confusion begins to overgrow the great achievements of Max Ernst."<sup>14</sup> This view was inaccurate in the sense that Bataille and many of the future *College* members had broken quite rancorously with the official Surrealist movement led by Breton. Nevertheless, the assumption that Bataille was a surrealist illuminates a number of philosophical presuppositions informing the members' perspective on Bataille. They were interested in Surrealism as a highly suggestive critique of Enlightenment rationalism and its intertwining with modern capitalism. While the members of the Institute regarded the

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11. Klossowski to Horkheimer, 16 Jun. 1937. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* 16: 167. Hereafter abbreviated as Horkheimer. (All quotations from this source are my translations).

12. Letter to Horkheimer, 6 Dec. 1937, Horkheimer 314.

13. Letter to Horkheimer, 25 Jan. 1937, Horkheimer 34.

14. Letter to Horkheimer, 25 Jan. 1937, Horkheimer 34.

Surrealist project as similar to their own, they hoped to avoid its flaws.<sup>15</sup> The identification of Bataille's work as a product of Surrealism is consequently an indictment of it as a failed critique of Enlightenment thought that was degenerating into "irrationalist confusion."

We can see this ambivalent proximity in "The Sacred Conspiracy," the call to arms which Bataille published in the first issue of *Acéphale*. Here Bataille exhorts his fellow Acéphalians "to abandon the world of the civilized and its light," and to turn to "ecstasy" and the "dance that forces one to dance with fanaticism."<sup>16</sup> These directives seem to provide evidence of the "irrationalist confusion" that Adorno censures. Yet Bataille's rejection of the civilized is predicated on the same attack on instrumental reason, positivism, and utilitarianism undertaken by the members of the Institute, and similarly acknowledges the limitations of bourgeois rationality. "The advantages of civilization," argues Bataille, "are offset by the way men profit from them. . . . [Civilized] existence is limited to utility."<sup>17</sup> Such sentiments can be found in Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the culmination of the Institute's own critique of Enlightenment during the 1930 and 1940s.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the *Dialectic* does not exhort us to "abandon the world of the civilized," but rather to comprehend the processes by which the civilized world engenders its own barbarity. Bataillean ecstasy rejects such dialectical thinking as a compromise with Enlightenment thought, which is exactly what it is. Bataille sought instead to escape the consequences of the reduction of Enlightenment reason to dehumanizing utilitarianism by cultivating activity that cast away any notion of use-value. "The Sacred Conspiracy" alludes to three such activities: play, eroticism, and sacrifice. Yet all three will be exposed in the *Dialectic* as false escapes from the cruelties of the Enlightenment's excesses. The

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15. Benjamin already hinted at this in his 1929 essay on Surrealism, which argued that while the Surrealists desired to "win the energies of intoxication for the revolution," they often found themselves in "the humid backroom of spiritualism." Benjamin, "Surrealism," *Reflections* ed. and intro. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978) 189, 180.

16. Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," *Visions of Excess* 179.

17. Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," *Visions of Excess* 179.

18. This connection is further reflected in the conclusion of "The Sacred Conspiracy," when Bataille mentions Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, an opera that emblemizes in numerous ways the Enlightenment's darkening. The Frankfurt School's proximity to this is underscored by Adorno's desire at this time to write a work on Mozart "with reference to the problem of Sadism." Adorno to Horkheimer, 29 Nov. 1937, Horkheimer 293.

*Dialectic* shows at length the cynically manipulative and utilitarian nature of sacrifice – a dimension Bataille only gradually confronts in his later writings. Whereas Bataille understands sacrifice as a transcendence of use-value, Adorno finds the absence of use-value in the fetish, “the commodity that survives to no purpose.” He further speculates in a letter to Benjamin that “surrealism may come to an end” as commodity-fetish, the “alienated object in which use value withers.”<sup>19</sup>

The rejection of Bataillean thought in the *Dialectic* is already anticipated in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s deprecations of *Acéphale*. Horkheimer disparages the second issue of *Acéphale* (Jan. 1937). “You are right,” Horkheimer writes to Adorno, “a very great intellect Klossowski is decidedly not. The latest I have seen by him are some comments on Nietzsche in the journal ‘Acéphale’ that he coedits. The journal appears in radical Surrealist getup and contains stale liberal teachings. Rather subaltern and wretched. With these French, too, it seems to go increasingly downhill.”<sup>20</sup>

### *The Search for Colleagues*

In spite of what he expressed to Horkheimer, Adorno was not completely dismissive of the contributors to *Acéphale*. Just a few months later, in July 1937, he recommended both Bataille and Caillois as possible Institute coworkers. Adorno writes Benjamin that, in the effort to secure him a more definitive position in the Institute, he would be given more responsibility for Institute work in France. “I would further recommend that you be on the lookout for highly qualified French coworkers. In this regard one cannot of course ignore [Raymond] Aron who, by the way, is beginning to be a problem; one ought to depend on him but not on him alone. I mentioned Caillois and Bataille(?)”<sup>21</sup>

One notices the question mark; Adorno clearly has reservations. Why he would recommend Bataille at all if he had been so critical of *Acéphale* just a couple of months before?<sup>22</sup> What did Adorno know of Bataille and Caillois at that time that would prompt his suggestion of them as

19. Adorno to Benjamin, 2 Aug. 1935, in Benjamin, *Correspondence 1910-1940* 498. Adorno doubted the ability of Surrealism to sustain a critique of the phantasmagoric world of consumer capitalism with which it seemed to have such an affinity.

20. Horkheimer to Adorno, 6 Apr. 1937, Horkheimer 111. This comment begs further exploration, since Bataille’s articles, “Nietzsche and the Fascists” and “Propositions,” have a certain resonance with Horkheimer’s own writing on Nietzsche. See *Visions* 182-96.

21. Adorno to Benjamin, 2 Jul. 1937, Adorno, *Briefe* 257.

22. Caillois only contributed to issue 3-4 of *Acéphale*, which appeared in July.



coworkers? It is possible that Adorno met them, through Klossowski or Benjamin, during one of his Paris sojourns. (He had already been to Paris twice that year alone, in March and May, prior to this missive.)

Whatever sparked Adorno's recommendation of Bataille and Caillois, one must remember that the need to find potential coworkers for the Institute was evidently more pressing than to be in complete agreement with or admiration of them. During the 1930s, especially after fleeing Hitler's Germany, the Institute sought sympathetic colleagues and allies for its atypical philosophical and political endeavors. In France, there were as many disappointments as there were hopes for the Institute. While the Institute's approaches were Marxist in orientation, they were so heterodox that they were unacceptable to most Marxists, and almost all party-affiliates. French intellectuals belonging to the Communist Party were not open to the Institute's challenging and reworking of basic dogma.<sup>23</sup> Yet Left intellectuals without party affiliations in France were often hard to distinguish in their proclivities from actual fascist sympathizers. Benjamin makes this clear in his frustrated reply to Adorno's letter: "Here we have to deal on the one hand with the immobility of the orthodox intelligentsia, paralyzed because of the events in Russia, on the other with the frequent unconscious fascist sympathy of the independents."<sup>24</sup> This political judgment is often applied to the College members.

Although the Institute was continually seeking contacts and colleagues among French thinkers, it was far from easy. Benjamin was vital in these attempts at establishing intellectual relationships. As the Institute affiliate with the most French contacts, he helped to arrange meetings and to interpret the intellectual landscape for his German colleagues.<sup>25</sup> And there were successes in these attempts at establishing a meeting of the minds in Paris. The Institute's Paris branch was founded in 1933 with support from Célestin Bouglé, Maurice Halbwachs, Georges Scelle, and Henri Bergson. The Institute's journal was published by the French house, Alcan, and French writers often contributed to it. The Institute had cordial

23. Furthermore, the Institute's critical stance toward both liberalism and positivism certainly limited their potentially appreciative philosophical audience, though they did find a pleasant reception in the United States, at Columbia University. See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of The Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996) for the history of the Frankfurt School from its beginnings to 1950.

24. Benjamin to Adorno, 10 Jul. 1937, Adorno, *Briefe* 264.

25. Adorno writes of Benjamin's "truly indispensable" role in developing contacts among French intellectuals, letter of 7 Aug. 1937, Horkheimer 213.

relations with figures such as Alexandre Koyré and René Etiemble. Klossowski and Raymond Aron both furthered the Institute's work in Paris.<sup>26</sup>

Yet the correspondence of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Benjamin bears witness to the many difficulties and dead-ends involved in their efforts to create an intellectual homeland for Critical Theory in France. They all tried unsuccessfully to find a French translator – Emmanuel Levinas and Koyré were also considered – and publisher for a collection of Horkheimer's essays. They repeatedly failed to place the Institute's works in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, and to interest the publisher Gallimard in their writings. The Institute's encounters with Bataille's groups, the *Acéphale* and the College of Sociology, take place within these attempts to find support in France. Their interactions were dictated as much by necessity as by affinity.

Adorno crossed the channel again in August to attend a philosophy conference in Paris; Horkheimer joined his friend there at the end of the month. In detailed letters concerning their contacts with a number of French philosophers and intellectuals, they mention only Klossowski amongst the future College members. In November, Adorno again refers to Klossowski, who was translating an essay by Horkheimer, but not Bataille or Caillois. On the eve of the first session of the College, its founders did not occupy an important place in the consciousness of the Institute members.

### *The Praying Mantis*

The exception to this was Caillois's essay, "La mante religieuse" [The Praying Mantis],<sup>27</sup> which Adorno appraised in a September 1937 letter to Benjamin. This curious essay argues that biology is the sire of myth and even the dynamics of human imagination as a whole. Taking the praying mantis as his subject, Caillois enumerates the roles of the mantis in a myriad of world cultures and mythologies. He first notes its

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26. See Jay 30. Klossowski and Aron were later somewhat critical of their German colleagues. Aron writes in his *Mémoires*: "Neither Kojève, nor Koyré, nor Weil rated Horkheimer or Adorno very highly, philosophically speaking. I defer to the judgment of the friends I have admired. . . . The combination of economic analysis and moral denunciation [in Frankfurt School thought] better suits radical Americans than pure Marxists." Raymond Aron, *Mémoires* (Paris: Julliard, 1983) 86, 87, my translation. Nevertheless, Aron esteemed Benjamin very highly when the two worked together on the "Work of Art" translation in 1936 at the Institute's Paris branch.

27. The essay first appeared in *Mesures* 3.2 (15 Apr. 1937), and was republished in Caillois, *Le mythe et l'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

anthropomorphic appearance, then considers the more striking aspect of the creature's behavior: to wit, that the female eats the male as part of its mating pattern. Caillois surmises that this peculiar behavior evidences biologically the fundamental connection between sex and nourishment. Anticipating Bataille's *Erotism*, he suggests that this blurring of sex and ingestion is seen in protozoic merging. Caillois also notes that many human myths link gustatory and sexual behavior, and cites examples ranging from vampirism to fertility rites.

These diverse phenomena are brought together and explained in the essay's central proposition that the connection between eating and sex is biologically grounded, and is manifest equally in two different types of behavior, specifically: *sexual cannibalism* in the case of the insect, and the making of *myths which link eating and sex* in the case of human beings. The insect represents bodily what human beings represent imaginatively. Myth is not merely symbolic of biological facts, as Freud would maintain. It is a manifestation of them, an instinctual discharge whose semantic nature bears none of the arbitrariness of the sign, and is instead an outward manifestation of the deeper biological relations that engender it. The human animal "does not escape the action of biological laws which determine the behavior of other animal species, though these laws, adapted to his own nature, are less apparent,"<sup>28</sup> operating as they do in the cultural realm, not in the bodily realm.

Caillois's essay plays too fast and loose with the life sciences and their interactions with human behavior to be taken very seriously today. His actual precursor is the symbolist author, Remy de Gourmont, whose dazzling paean to the mating habits of the mantis can be found in his *Physique de l'amour*. Meanwhile, Caillois's work attracted the attention of the Frankfurt School, which, like Caillois, sought to challenge prevailing notions of the interactions between nature and history. In fact, this project grew out of Benjamin's own *Trauerspiel* study which, as Richard Wolin shows, was the central influence upon Adorno's 1932 lecture, "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte," in which he argued the need "to transcend the customary antithesis of nature and history . . . to push these concepts to a point where their pure opposition is transcended."<sup>29</sup> We see therefore why Caillois's work was of interest to the Institute. However, Adorno's response shows that the Frankfurt School opposed

28. Caillois, *Le mythe et l'homme* 82. Translation mine.

29. Wolin, Richard. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 166.

any conception that collapses the differences between the natural and the social and creates a false totality, with all its political consequences.

Adorno praises Caillois's refusal to reduce myth to mere symbolism. Yet he is unconvinced by Caillois's parallelism: "if indeed only a minimal difference exists already between the head-gobbling mantis and man," Adorno writes, then "*Vive la petite différence.*"<sup>30</sup> He argues that Caillois considers only one side of the equation, drawing "the historical dynamic into the biological, but not the latter into the historical dynamic" (277). Most importantly, Adorno attributes a pernicious political dimension to Caillois's biologism. He writes: "It is of course a materialism that it has in common with Jung and certainly with Klages. And unfortunately more than that. Namely the antihistorical, hostile to social analysis, and indeed cryptofascist Nature-worship that leads in the end to a kind of *Volksgemeinschaft* of biology and imagination" (277). He decries the essay as "vulgar materialism veiled by erudition" (278), and tells Benjamin that, in his opinion, "the man belongs to the other side" (278). This was only one of a number of attacks made by the Frankfurt School on the political ramifications of Caillois's writings. Adorno's published review of the essay appeared the following year in the *Zeitschrift*; it is less thoroughly negative than his letter to Benjamin, and raises a point he had made, namely, that to critique the reified division between the biological and the sociohistorical spheres "has its progressive side."<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the review was negative.

Benjamin agreed with Adorno about the political dimension of Caillois's mantis study. But he was unsure if it should be characterized as "vulgar materialism" and wanted to discuss the matter with Adorno in person. Benjamin's hesitation points to his own debate with Adorno concerning the concept of dialectical images in the *Arcades Project*. Adorno also criticized Benjamin's "vulgar materialism," and what he saw as the latter's theoretical proximity to Jung and Klages.<sup>32</sup> He had even advised Benjamin to engage in a study of the two reactionary thinkers<sup>33</sup> in order to disentangle his work from the taint of Jung's notion of the collective unconscious. Adorno's critique of Caillois redounds unexpectedly upon

30. Adorno to Benjamin, 22 Sept. 1937, Adorno, *Briefe* 277.

31. Adorno, (review of) Roger Caillois, *La Mante religieuse*, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* VII (1938): 410-411, here 411.

32. Adorno to Benjamin, 2 Aug. 1935, in Benjamin, *Correspondence 1910-1940* 494-503. For a good treatment of the Benjamin-Adorno debates of the 1930s, see Wolin 163-212.

33. Horkheimer was opposed to the study; see Adorno's letter to Horkheimer, 23 Apr. 1937, Horkheimer 126.

his own disagreements with Benjamin.

Bataille shares Caillois's biologism in their inaugural lectures for the College on November 20, 1937. Here, Bataille discusses human societies in terms of cellular structures, a pretense to scientific objectivity, that he would gradually abandon during the period of the College, finally embracing a dark and ecstatic mysticism which distanced him from Caillois and his quasi-biological theories.<sup>34</sup>

### *The End of History*

On December 4, 1937, Alexandre Kojève was invited to address the College. Kojève was known for the highly influential seminar on Hegel he taught throughout the 1930s whose participants included Bataille, Levinas, Aron, and Jacques Lacan. Kojève had also written a review in the 1931 issue of the *Zeitschrift*.

Kojève's College lecture, which has not been recovered, was entitled "Hegelian Concepts," but apparently it had much more to do with contemporary events in Russia. It made a great impression upon both Benjamin and Bataille, though in very different ways. They were not alone in their strong reactions. Years later, Caillois recalled:

This lecture left us all flabbergasted, both because of Kojève's intellectual power and because of his conclusion. You will remember that Hegel speaks of the man on horseback, who marks the closure of History and of philosophy. For Hegel this man was Napoleon. Well! That was the day Kojève informed us that Hegel had seen right but that he was off by a century: The man of the end of history was not Napoleon but Stalin.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Elsewhere, however, Bataille distinguishes sharply between the natural and historical spheres, as in his 1932 article, "The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic" (coauthored with Raymond Queneau). Here he argues that the orthodox Marxist notion that dialectics can be seen in the workings of nature is patently absurd. If the natural world is to be viewed dialectically, he writes, this can be best affected through the mediation of psychoanalysis. Thus, Bataille's integration of Freudian and Marxist thought occurs at the same time as the Institute's parallel explorations, and for some of the same reasons: the desire for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the human and the natural, a need to challenge the mechanistic rigidity of orthodox Marxism, and a need to account for the irrational elements that contemporary Marxist thought was unable to account for. However, in excusing nature from the analytical powers of philosophy, Bataille is not trying to avoid the nature-worship Adorno decries. Rather, he preserves nature as a sphere of violent heterogeneity, which cannot be domesticated by thought: "nature is the *fall* of the idea," he argues; "it is a negation, at the same time a revolt and an *absurdity*." *Visions* 107.

35. Hollier, ed. 86.

In December 1937, Kojève's end of history would have been reflected in the Moscow show trials then being held. His enthusiastic interpretation of events in Soviet Russia shocked Benjamin, who, in a letter to Horkheimer, remarks:

I was recently astonished to hear an apparently non-party-aligned intellectual refer to them [the events in Russia] in a positive sense. This was Kojevnikoff [Kojève's original name], in a lecture on Hegelian thought in relation to sociology. I expect the man is more or less known to you. . . . He lectures at the Sorbonne; his seminar on the "Phenomenology," of which he has prepared a French translation, is the place where some of the Surrealists received their information on dialectics. His manner of lecturing is clear, and his ability with language outstanding. Kojevnikoff is as much of an expert in Hegel as one can be without having much proficiency in materialist dialectics. Regardless, his conceptions of the dialectic seem to me highly contestable. They don't hinder him in any case in his talk – in the "Acéphale" circle! – from developing the thesis that only Man's natural dimension, in its manifestation in his history up until now, which as it is running out shares the fixed quality of his natural being, can be the object of scientific knowledge. Sociology is "done" today in Moscow; it could now be written, if someone there has so decided. It was quite sad, if one happens not to lose sight of it, that a lot might be said out of malice against the sponsor of his talk.<sup>36</sup>

Although he admired Kojève's intellect, Benjamin is scandalized to hear him attempt to justify events in Russia, and to render Stalin – the "sponsor" of Kojève's lecture, as Benjamin sarcastically puts it – as the man at the end of history. The exclamation mark expresses Benjamin's surprise in light of this apotheosis at a lecture series nominally free of orthodox party Communism. The Institute's distance from Party dogma precipitated its relationship with the politically eclectic College. Benjamin could not accept Kojève's deification of Stalin, nor the notion that Soviet Russia had transformed human history into a static, geological record of humankind. While the interpenetration of the natural and historical spheres is a feature of Benjamin's thought, it certainly was not as a positive redemption brought about by Stalin.

Bataille, on the other hand, was thoroughly convinced by Kojève's lecture. However, he still wanted to know what people are to do with themselves now that history has been exhausted. If, according to Kojève's

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36. Benjamin to Horkheimer, 6 Dec. 1937, Horkheimer 315.

Hegel, the essence of the human is its negativity, Bataille challenges Kojève to imagine what the soon-to-arrive state of “unemployed negativity” will look like. In a letter to Kojève (which he would later partially publish as an appendix to his book, *Guilty*), Bataille implies that the end of history will bring about a full liberation of this negativity, which, as Allan Stoekl explains, “would manifest itself in unproductive expenditure, eroticism, sacrifice, and so on.”<sup>37</sup> Hegel culminates in Stalin who, in Bataille’s cunning revision of Kojève, culminates in the potlatch.

### ***Sadism and Shock***

Whatever we may think of Kojève’s conclusions, there was ample evidence for his Hegelian apocalypse in the streets of Paris. In 1937, while civil war raged in Spain (Hitler bombed Guernica in April), and the show trials were staged in Moscow, France hosted the Paris International Exhibition of Art and Technology, the latest incarnation of the first Great Exhibition at London’s Crystal Palace of 1851. The most imposing of the Exhibition’s more than 80 national pavilions were the colossal structures of Nazi Germany and the USSR, facing each other defiantly from across the central avenue leading from the Eiffel Tower to the Tower of Peace. Benjamin, Bataille, and most everyone in Paris at the time walked between these martial, mausoleum-like edifices: Albert Speer’s eagle gripping a swastika on one side, on the other a proletarian couple marching with hammer and sickle into the future. (Or, more apparently, into the eagle). A confrontation written, as it were, in stone. “The individual is supposed to feel his insignificance before these colossal things,” remarked Horkheimer, who visited the Exhibition that summer.<sup>38</sup> Yet this was not the only historically significant exhibition in 1937; Germans flocked to Munich to see the “Degenerate Art” of Jews, Communists, and other primitives.

In 1938, the College continued with its first lecture series. Benjamin was in San Remo from the end of December until January 21 and so he could not have attended Michel Leiris’s talk on “The Sacred in Everyday Life” (January 8, 1938), though he later expressed his interest in

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37. Stoekl, “The Avant-Garde Embraces Science,” *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) 929-35, here 933.

38. Horkheimer notes the female proletarian’s resemblance to Delacroix’s *Liberté*, a comparison that functions as an iconographic version of the Institute’s concern to trace the origins of totalitarianism in bourgeois liberalism, the roots of the irrational in reason’s will to mastery. Horkheimer to Friedrich Pollock, 25 Aug. 1937, Horkheimer 220-21.

Leiris's book, *L'Age d'Homme*, which is not surprising since both he and Leiris were engaged in the exploration of childhood memories. Benjamin was in Paris when Bataille delivered his two crucial lectures on the sacred, "Attraction and Repulsion" (January 22 and February 5), though they are not mentioned in his published letters.

In mid-February 1938, Gershom Scholem arrived in Paris to visit the friend he had not seen in over a decade. Scholem recalls those five days in his book, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, but never refers to Benjamin's relations with Bataille or the College, which is unfortunate since Bataille and Scholem are two of the most perceptive writers on the phenomenon of violent, religious antinomianism.<sup>39</sup> In recounting his visit to Paris, the aspect of the French intellectual scene that most struck Scholem was the appearance of Céline's violently anti-Semitic *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, displayed in the city's bookstores.<sup>40</sup> That same month, on the eve of his departure for the United States, Adorno wrote to Horkheimer expressing his fear that "the Jews still existing in Germany will be exterminated."<sup>41</sup>

On March 5, Bataille delivered a lecture on "The Structure and Function of the Army" – knowledge hardly necessary for an understanding of the German "*Anschluss*" of Austria a week later. Ernst Bloch, trying to leave Europe, writes: "I am not panicking, yet we see the Austrian, *kampflose* example."<sup>42</sup> It is against this appalling background that Horkheimer responds to Benjamin's unpublished letter of March 7:

Concerning the Surrealists, where they should be methodical it appears from your detailed report that they instead embrace silliness. The downfall of this artistic movement, whose effect is based on sadism and shock, is also explicable in that in reality both have become commonplace.<sup>43</sup>

39. In mid-February Bataille delivered the College lecture, "Power," which contains certain similarities to an essay Benjamin had written two decades earlier, "Critique of Violence." Bataille here distinguishes between two types of power, one a religious-tragic power, which turns violence against itself, the other a fascistic-militaristic form of power which turns against the external world. See Hollier, ed. 125-36.

40. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1981) 212. Benjamin and Horkheimer also comment upon the work in their correspondence.

41. Adorno to Horkheimer, 15 Feb. 1938, Horkheimer 392.

42. Adorno to Horkheimer, 21 Mar. 1938, Horkheimer 415.

43. Horkheimer to Benjamin, 28 Mar. 1938, Horkheimer 416-17. Benjamin's unpublished letter of 7 Mar. 1938 is probably one of his "Literaturbriefe" and could possibly refer to the College.



**Tragedy**

The March 19 lecture, on “Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches,” necessarily reflected back on the purpose of the College itself. Bataille emphasized again the choice between “a religious world, a world of tragedy and inner conflicts on the one hand and, on the other, a military world that is radically hostile to the spirit of tragedy and endlessly turning aggressively toward the outside – externalizing its conflicts.” He argued that a third option, represented by “the man of law and discourse,” was as ineffectual in opposing the rise of fascism as the parliaments of Western Europe were in stopping the spread of Nazism: the military “lout has no difficulty putting the man of discourse in his service.” The feeble parliamentarian succumbs to military pressure, while “the man of tragedy cannot be subjugated under any circumstances.”<sup>44</sup> In this, the purpose of groups such as the College was nothing less than the transformation of a society in crisis. They were to develop this “spirit of tragedy,” unable to be absorbed into the ruthless machinery of the military world.

Bataille’s talk shows to what extent he was already at odds with Caillois over the purpose and nature of the College. The “collective ecstasy and paroxysmal death” which Bataille sees as essential to the cultivation of the spirit of tragedy was not interesting to Caillois. Bataille’s more mystical, ecstatic turn of mind as compared with the highly disciplined Caillois is quite evident. Nevertheless, at the next session of the College, on April 2, Bataille and Caillois shared the rostrum and presented a summation of their work so far. Moreover, around the beginning of May 1938 (the exact date is not known), they gave a joint lecture on myth.<sup>45</sup>

On May 19, Klossowski delivered a lecture, entitled “Tragedy;” Bataille, Jean Wahl, and Denis de Rougemont participated in the discussion.<sup>46</sup>

44. Bataille, “Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches,” in Hollier, ed. 146, 147.

45. Their notes have not been recovered. I discuss their views of myth in chapter 4 of my dissertation. See *Benjamin or Bataille: Transgression, Redemption, and the Origins of Postmodern Thought* (Diss. U. of Washington, 1999).

46. For instance, Klossowski differentiates between ancient (Greek) tragedy and modern by arguing that the modern tragic hero suffers from a heightened and guilt-ridden self-consciousness not seen in the more “innocent” Attic protagonist. The modern hero’s grief is a “constant reflection on the fact of suffering” (Hollier, ed. 173). This might describe Benjamin’s distinction between the highly dramatized suffering of the Baroque’s tyrant-martyr and the innocent immediacy of the Greek protagonist. Klossowski also designates silence as a mark of the tragic hero, an observation Benjamin took over from Franz Rosenzweig and used in the *Trauerspiel* study. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London & New York: Verso, 1985) 107-08.

Klossowski's lecture bears traces of his association with Benjamin, particularly echoing Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. These traces emerge most strongly in Klossowski's digression about the nature of the College itself, when he makes use of Benjamin's concept of the ruin. Benjamin believed that the "truth content" of a work arises in its afterlife, through the process of mortification and decay.<sup>47</sup> Benjamin expresses this as the purified truth of the ruin: the "transformation of material content into truth content" is "a rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is completely stripped off, and the work stands as a ruin."<sup>48</sup> This notion of the ruin underlies Benjamin's interest in fragmentary works and literary styles, and finds expression later in Adorno's famous comment that the task of philosophy is "to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption," showing the world "with its rifts and crevices."<sup>49</sup> Klossowski proposes this model for the work of the College:

Let us then define today our leanings as the attempt of fragmentary aspirations in the art of composing posthumous works. A fully developed work does not permit us any relationship with the personality that produced it; on the other hand, posthumous writings, because of their abrupt, desultory character, awake in us the need to collaborate with the poet's personality. Posthumous works are ruins, and ruins present a residence that is obviously appropriate for those who are dead to the world. We, who are also dead to the world, must practice the art of giving a posthumous character to what we are creating . . .<sup>50</sup>

This passage, clearly influenced by the author of the *Trauerspiel*, is itself a posthumous fragment of Benjamin's collaboration with Klossowski.

### ***Cruel Relations***

In May 1938, Bataille called a planning session for the next term of the College's activities. In a letter to Caillois he writes: "I'm asking Kojève, Wahl, Benjamin, Leiris, Klossowski, Moret [Moré] to come to

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47. Benjamin understood the process of translation in this way, as the afterlife of the original: "a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife." Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 71. We can assume Benjamin and Klossowski discussed the subject of translation at length.

48. Benjamin, *Origin* 182.

49. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1971) 247.

50. Klossowski, "Tragedy" in Hollier, ed. 176-77.

see who is able to continue” the series.<sup>51</sup> The planning session was held on May 25, and apparently Benjamin did attend, for he writes to Horkheimer three days later about the organization Bataille and Caillois have created. He describes Bataille as a librarian at the National Library whom he sees often in connection with his work. As for the College:

Bataille and Caillois have jointly founded a college of sacred sociology, in which they openly recruit young people for their secret society – a society of which the secret is not least what its two founders actually have in common.<sup>52</sup>

Such comments not only assert that the differences between the College’s two directors were evident. They also suggest how hazy the lines were separating Bataille’s secret and public organizations. Only in May 1938, does Benjamin refer to a “college” and not, as in the case of the Kojève lecture, to the “Acéphale circle.” And he describes both Bataille and Caillois openly soliciting members for the “secret” group.

Benjamin’s letter also includes an extremely negative response to Caillois’s essay, “L’Aridité,” which had appeared in the April issue of *Mesures* along with Bataille’s “L’Obélisque.” “L’Aridité” advocates the hard rigor and spartan character emblemized by the cruel and rugged landscapes of desert and wasteland. Against the shallow promotion of freedom for freedom’s sake, Caillois would establish a moral order of harsh discipline, one which would purify the individual as the desert purifies the soul. “In this world accustomed to carelessness and turned toward ostentation, I would outline a dialectic of voluntary servitude.”<sup>53</sup> A vague sort of Nietzscheanism, this voluntary servitude is to forge an elite community of peers who embrace the “cruel relations”<sup>54</sup> of power and violence.

Benjamin called this the language of fascism. “This dialectic of voluntary servitude,” he wrote in a pseudonymous review of “L’Aridité” in the *Zeitschrift*, “uncannily illuminates intricate trains of thought in

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51. Bataille, *Lettres à Roger Caillois, 4 août 1935 - 4 février 1959*, ed. Jean-Pierre Boulter (N.I.: Folle Avoine, 1987) 87. This is the only mention of Benjamin by Bataille that we possess. All quotations from this volume are my translations.

52. Benjamin to Horkheimer, 28 May, 1938, Adorno, *Briefe* 358. In this letter, Benjamin also indicates that Horkheimer’s impression of Bataille was obtained through the journal *Acéphale*, contradicting assertions some have made that Horkheimer met Bataille.

53. Caillois, “L’Aridité.” *Mesures* 2 (15 Apr. 1938): 5-12, here 8.

54. Caillois, “L’Aridité” 10.

which a Rastignac loiters about, reckoning not with the House of Nucingen, but with the clique of authoritarian propaganda-chiefs.”<sup>55</sup> In the letter to Horkheimer which functioned as the first draft of this review, Benjamin was even more explicit, referring not to “the clique of authoritarian propaganda-chiefs,” but to the “Goebbels clique.”<sup>56</sup> “When C[aillois] says, ‘one works for the liberation of beings that one wants to have serve and that one hopes to see obedient only toward oneself’ so he has with great simplicity characterized fascist praxis.”<sup>57</sup> Benjamin published the review under a pseudonym because a friend of Caillois who worked as a secretary in the Bureau of Naturalization had taken up Benjamin’s cause in the attempt to become a French citizen.<sup>58</sup>

Adorno also found “L’Aridité” politically repellent, and agreed with Benjamin that it represented a betrayal of Caillois’s considerable talent. Adorno also referred dismissively to Bataille’s “L’Obélisque” in the same issue: “another one against the beloved God. Hopefully it will turn out all right.”<sup>59</sup> Benjamin described “L’Obélisque” as an assortment of Bataille’s obsessions arranged as a dissonant picture-book, organized around a “secret history of humanity” interpreted from the history of the obelisk. The secret history adduced from architecture, as well as the picture-book arrangement, might suggest an affinity with Benjamin’s Arcades Project, but Benjamin does not say so. Bataille’s essay, which Denis Hollier has examined as an example of his anti-hierarchical (“anti-architectural”) anti-idealist thought, was finally judged by Benjamin as “harmless.”<sup>60</sup> Benjamin asks that Horkheimer not publish his comments about “L’Obélisque” or about the College, since he requires Bataille’s help at the library, and since his naturalization is still in question. Bataille, he explained, “is not one to take [such comments] calmly.”<sup>61</sup>

Benjamin spent the period from June 22 to October 17, 1938 with Brecht in Denmark. During this time Hitler precipitated the Sudetenland Crisis, which was “resolved” by the Munich accords on September 29, continuing western Europe’s policy of appeasement towards the

55. Benjamin, (review of) Roger Caillois, “L’Aridité,” et. al., *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* VII (1938): 463-66, here 463. Quotations from this source are my translations.

56. Benjamin to Horkheimer, 28 May 1938, Adorno, *Briefe* 357.

57. Benjamin, (review of) Roger Caillois, “L’Aridité” 464.

58. Benjamin to Adorno, 9 Dec. 1938, Adorno, *Briefe* 387. See the discussion of the interwar politics of Caillois in Denis Hollier, *Les Dépossédés* (Paris: Minuit, 1993).

59. Adorno to Benjamin, 2 Aug. 1938, Adorno, *Briefe* 346.

60. Benjamin to Horkheimer, 28 May 1938, Adorno, *Briefe* 358.

61. Benjamin to Horkheimer, 3 Aug. 1938, Adorno, *Briefe* 358.

Nazi regime. A week after the accords were signed, Caillois drew up a statement responding to the crisis, which was then signed by him, Bataille, and Leiris and then published in November. At that time Bataille was less preoccupied by world events than by the illness of his lover, Collette Peignot (Laure), who died on November 7.<sup>62</sup> Benjamin was also concerned with personal relationships: on September 28 he and his ex-wife sent their son to London, away from the continent. Benjamin himself was still unenthusiastic about suggestions to leave the continent, despite the mounting catastrophe. October saw the Munich rallies, and on the night of November 9, 1938, the Germans unleashed the night of broken glass against the Jews. The letters of the Institute members are marked by the horrors of the time; Horkheimer was busy securing affidavits for Jews attempting to escape Europe.

### *Democracy and Virility*

The College's second lecture series commenced on December 13, 1938, with a talk by Bataille on "The Structure of Democracies." In the published account of Bertrand d'Astorg, who was in attendance that evening, Bataille does not appear to be opposed to democracies per se, although d'Astorg said of the typically eclectic and hard-to-categorize College participants that "one could not tell whether the speakers were perfidious antidemocrats or if they were defending a personal conception of an ideal democracy."<sup>63</sup> In Bataille's case, the latter seems to be true. Bataille's despair over the future of democracies did not prevent him from arguing that the "tragic sense" could yet save democracy. If democratic states would acknowledge the tragic sovereignty of the individual, he argued, then these individuals might be able to devote their energies to the rescue of these states. Bataille would speak again on January 24, 1939, a lecture entitled "Hitler and the Teutonic Order," for which there are no manuscript or surviving notes.

At the beginning of 1939, Benjamin sent Horkheimer a report on the special issue of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* devoted to the College, which had appeared the previous July. This issue contained the three manifestos: Bataille's "Sorcerer's Apprentice," Caillois's "Winter Wind," and Leiris's "The Sacred in Everyday Life." Benjamin singled

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62. On Bataille's kindred spirit see Collette Peignot, *Laure: The Collected Writings*, trans. Jeanine Herman (San Francisco: City Lights: 1995).

63. Bataille, "The Structure of Democracies," in Hollier, ed. 194.

out Caillois's piece for criticism, ignoring Bataille's. The opening salvo of his report emphasizes the distance between the work of the Institute and the work of the College, the latter finding a place in the journal which had been unwilling to publish essays by Institute members:

You will not wonder that the *N.R.F.*, which has shown itself impermeable to our work, has put out a special issue on the college of sociology with Bataille, Leiris, and Caillois. Years ago we had planned to have Michel Leiris at Landsberg's. He grouped several childhood memories under the title, *The Sacred in Everyday Life*. Caillois falls further into ambiguity. His contribution, *The Winter Wind*, celebrates the "bitter wind," under whose frosty breath all the weak must die, and in which the fit will recognize each other by their red cheeks (not from shame) in order to unite in a caste of heroes. . . . The *N.R.F.* shows with this special issue which political outlook provided the determination to move against the party of French pacifism during September's European Crisis. It legitimates the doubt as to whether one could stand in solidarity with its decision.<sup>64</sup>

Benjamin's concluding statement resonates with the declaration, mentioned above, that Caillois wrote concerning the Munich accords and that appeared in several French journals a month or so after the accords were signed. Caillois's declaration attacks the hypocrisy that led up to and followed the capitulation in Munich. He took to task a French public that now put forward the false "complicitous memory" that it had reacted to the possibility of war with calm resolution.<sup>65</sup> (There were in fact mass flights from the cities.) And he attacked "the absurdity of the political positions," – both Hitler's and Chamberlain's. The conclusion of his article is replete with the rhetoric of virility that Benjamin had attacked in his review of "L'Aridité." Picking up a thread from his "Winter Wind," Caillois writes in the "Declaration:"

The College of Sociology regards the general absence of intense reaction in the face of war as a sign of man's *devirilization*. It does not hesitate to see the cause of this in the relaxation of society's current ties, which are practically nonexistent as a result of the development of bourgeois individualism.<sup>66</sup>

64. Benjamin, "Ein Literaturbriefe," *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* IV (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995) 26-40, here 30-31. Translation mine.

65. Caillois, "Declaration of the College of Sociology on the International Crisis," in Hollier, ed. 44.

66. Caillois, "Declaration of the College of Sociology on the International Crisis," in Hollier, ed. 45, original emphasis.

Given this lack of social cohesion and strength he calls for people to recognize “the *absolute lie* of current political forms” and to form together “a collective mode of existence that takes no geographical or social limitation into account and that allows one to behave oneself when death threatens” (46, original emphasis). The call indicates the slipperiness of Caillois’s political stance: a Nietzscheanism that appears to sanction an internationalist revolution.

Benjamin’s “doubt whether one could stand in solidarity with” Caillois’s “political outlook” expresses his general pessimism about French politics. On the one hand, Caillois lambastes the capitulation at Munich, yet he does so through an anti-democratic rhetoric of virility, which Benjamin distrusts. On the other hand, the “party of French pacifism” is just as disquieting. D’Astorg, in his account of Bataille’s December 13 talk, writes: “It is significant . . . that the men who adopted a straight-forward attitude of refusal [to fight] in September were precisely the ones not contaminated by democratic beliefs”<sup>67</sup> and names Thierry Maulnier, extreme nationalist and editor of *Combat*, as an example of these anti-democratic “pacifists.”

After reading a few pages of the *N.R.F.* issue, Horkheimer responded: “Of the winter wind that blows there, one can only say that it does not bring with it the pleasant fragrance of the south.” He went on to observe that Caillois’s scientific studies are “attractive for us in their posing of the problem,” but that even in these cases Caillois evinces a “deficiency in theoretical training” and that his work resembles “an index of learned works by an outsider” who is never quite in full command of his material. Horkheimer argues that there is an unfortunate tendency among French intellectuals in general to be seduced by a discursive, scientific style: “They prove to be true fetishists of the systematic representation. I believe, if I may say so, that they adore *Mummenschanz* even more fervently than the Germans have ever done. . . . In this, the French intellectuals of today are too naive.”<sup>68</sup>

### *Sade*

On February 7, 1939, Klossowski gave a lecture on “Sade and the Revolution,” a topic that would be treated in the first edition of his book, *Sade, mon prochain*. It relates to a perennial question for French intellectuals, and certainly one the College struggled with: how can the

67. D’Astorg, “At the College of Sociology,” in Hollier, ed. 195.

68. Horkheimer to Benjamin, 23 Feb. 1939, Horkheimer 564-65, 566.

iconoclast (whether libertine or intellectual) be of service to a political cause? How can Sade benefit the Revolution? Klossowski's answers to this question situate him closer to Horkheimer and Adorno and their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* than to Bataille, who as we know was always very enthusiastic about the possibility of Sadean politics. Bataille understood Sade to represent the liberating force of radical heterogeneity in a society otherwise enslaved to rational utility.<sup>69</sup> In the *Dialectic*, on the other hand, Sade is precisely the opposite. He is an expression of Enlightenment rationalism gone unchecked, of "the bourgeois individual freed from tutelage."<sup>70</sup>

Klossowski argues that Sade has pedagogical value, exploring the moral limits of French republicanism, showing the links between the values of the Revolution and the "criminality" required for them to come into being. He writes: "[W]hile recognizing Sade's nature as a release, we must attribute to him the *function of exposing dark forces that are camouflaged as social values*."<sup>71</sup> The first clause is a nod to Bataille; the statement as a whole is, however, of a piece with Adorno and Horkheimer, who portray Sade and Nietzsche together as moralistic soothsayers showing the terrible end to which the unfettered mastery of reason leads. Sade and Nietzsche, they write,

have not postulated that formalistic reason is more closely allied to morality than to immorality. Whereas the optimistic writers merely denied in order to protect the indissoluble union of reason and crime, civil society and domination, the dark chroniclers mercilessly declared the shocking truth. . . . Not to have glossed over or suppressed but to have trumpeted far and wide the impossibility of deriving from reason any fundamental argument against murder fired the hatred which the progressives (and they precisely) still direct against Sade and Nietzsche.<sup>72</sup>

Klossowski describes this critique of reason as Sade's "moral conspiracy," an "esoteric method that consists in disguising itself as atheism in order to combat atheism, in speaking the language of moral skepticism in order to combat moral skepticism, with the sole aim of giving back to reason everything this method can, in order to show its worthlessness."<sup>73</sup>

69. See "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade" in *Visions* 91-102.

70. Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1996) 86.

71. Klossowski, "Sade and the Revolution," in Hollier, ed. 231. Emphasis in original.

72. Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 117-18.

73. Klossowski, *Sade, mon prochain* (N.l.: Éditions du Seuil, 1947) 230.



It is not surprising that Klossowski and the Institute would show such affinities in contrast to Bataille. Benjamin had already favorably reviewed Klossowski's article, "Evil and the Negation of the Other in the Philosophy of D.A.F. de Sade," in the *Zeitschrift*. And, as we know, Klossowski was privy to the Institute thinkers' thoughts on Sade before the publication of his Sade book. For this reason, Denis Hollier's suggestion that Benjamin's influence is seen in the changes Klossowski made between the first and second editions of his Sade book is chronologically unsound.<sup>74</sup> It is the first edition that shows the influence of Benjamin, not the second (1967) version.

One possible sign of Benjamin's influence is seen in Klossowski's lecture, when he argues that Sade was obsessed with evil because he wanted to expose and uproot it. The manner in which Klossowski describes this paradoxical moralism bears a resemblance less to Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic* than to Scholem's descriptions of radical Sabbatianism and its "redemption through sin:"

This chance of there being evil that never erupts yet any moment can erupt is Sade's constant anxiety. This evil must, therefore, erupt once and for all; the bad seed has to flourish so the mind can tear it out and consume it. In a word, evil must be made to prevail once and for all in the world so that it will destroy itself and so Sade's mind can find peace.<sup>75</sup>

Steven M. Wasserstrom has noted the parallels between the passage cited above and the Sabbatian mystical notion of "defeating evil from within," as well as Scholem's and Klossowski's views of the antinomianisms they each studied as "a spontaneous rebirth of gnosis in eighteenth century Europe."<sup>76</sup> Did Benjamin's discussions with Klossowski touch on the studies of Sabbatian antinomianism then being pioneered by Scholem? Certainly there was fertile ground for a dialogue between Benjamin and Klossowski on the subject. Klossowski even credits Benjamin with introducing him to the study of gnostic heresy through a German volume Benjamin lent him on Valentinus, Basilides, and other heresiarchs.<sup>77</sup>

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74. Hollier, ed. 219.

75. Klossowski, *Sade, mon prochain* 222.

76. Wasserstrom, "Defeating Evil From Within: Comparative Perspectives on 'Redemption Through Sin'," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6.1 (1997): 37-57, here 47.

77. Jean-Maurice Monnoyer, *Le peintre et son démon: entretiens avec Pierre Klossowski* (N.I.: Flammarion, 1985) 184.

### *The Executioners*

By February 1939, Barcelona had fallen to Franco's forces. Caillois delivered a lecture that month on "The Sociology of the Executioner," four months before the last of the carnivalesque public executions allowed by French law.

In March, the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia. Benjamin's financial situation had grown even worse than usual just as the Institute suffered its own financial setbacks and could no longer assure Benjamin of his stipend, let alone offer him a regular position. Benjamin wrote a desperate letter to Scholem asking him to intercede with Salman Schocken for the possibility of support:

There is no time to lose. What kept me plugging along in earlier years was the hope of someday getting a position at the Institute under half-way dignified conditions. What I mean by half-way dignified is my minimal subsistence of 2,400 francs. To sink below this level again would be hard for me to bear *à la longue*. For this, the charms exerted on me by this world are too weak to make it worthwhile, and the rewards of posterity too uncertain.<sup>78</sup>

Scholem was himself panicking over the problems of his family in the aftermath of the German invasion, and was worried about the difficulties involved in trying to find support for Benjamin at a time of such crisis.

That month at the College, the ethnologist Anatole Lewitzky delivered two lectures on shamanism. Three years later Lewitzky would be shot as a member of the French Resistance. Bataille planned to follow Lewitzky's second lecture, held on March 21, with a response to the Nazi takeover of Prague. He wrote to Caillois that he would include in this response two "political principles of sacred sociology," essentially reiterations of Bataille's stances to date. The first was that the need for the sacred is channeled into political extremes of the left or right only at a cost to itself. The second insisted that a core of resistance ("un noyau irréductible") be formed to withstand the economic institutions which enslave people and debase society.<sup>79</sup>

Following Lewitzky's lectures, Bataille began planning for the third trimester of the College, but this time he does not mention Benjamin in his correspondence with Caillois. This raises doubts that Benjamin was to have delivered a lecture at the College (on Baudelaire) but was "bumped"

78. Benjamin to Scholem, 14 Feb. 1939, *Correspondence 1932-1940* 248-49.

79. Bataille to Caillois, 17 Feb. 1939, *Lettres* 100.

to the next semester by Hans Mayer's lecture. Benjamin may not even have been in consideration as a speaker. Bataille's correspondence strongly indicates his imminent rupture with Caillois. Referring to a long conversation they had the day before, Bataille writes: "What I said to you yesterday about the intellectual probity associated with mystical experience is a concerted position. I don't believe that you are able to avoid a position of this kind."<sup>80</sup> Bataille wants to blur the distinctions between the intellectual and the mystic, while Caillois is increasingly wary of such an enterprise.

### *Hans Mayer*

Hans Mayer, a young, eclectic thinker who had been working with the Institute since 1934, was of all those affiliated with the Institute the most enthusiastic about working with the College.<sup>81</sup> Yet he was also deeply critical of the College, in ways that he ignores in the rather scant recollection of the experience decades later in his memoirs, *Ein Deutscher auf Widerruf*.

In September 1939, after the war's outbreak, Mayer wrote Horkheimer from Geneva, lamenting the impossibility of carrying out the projects he had set up for himself in France, including the continuation of his association with the College.<sup>82</sup> Yet in the same letter Mayer announces that he will write a critique of the "social function of Durkheimian sociology at the present moment" and in a subsequent letter he elaborates on his intentions as follows:

My stays and contacts in Paris, in particular with the young sociologists who participated with me in the direction of the Collège de Sociologie . . . have persuaded me that a dialogue with Durkheimism is far from being something peripheral. . . . I will show how this doctrine, so "scientific" and "positive" in appearance, not only serves clearly political ends, but that it also leads ineluctably to the habitual carrefour of its kin: to relativism and, beyond even that, to a new political and social religiosity with totalitarian tendencies.<sup>83</sup>

80. Bataille to Caillois, 22 Mar. 1939, *Lettres* 103.

81. In October of 1940, Mayer wrote the first published obituary of Benjamin, calling him "one of the most significant critics of his generation." Hans Mayer, "Walter Benjamin: 50. Todestag am 26. September 1990," *Bucklicht Männlein und Engel der Geschichte: Walter Benjamin, Theoretiker der Moderne* (Berlin: Werkbund-Archiv, 1990) 98-100, here 98. Translation mine.

82. Mayer to Horkheimer, 29 Sep. 1939, Horkheimer 637.

83. Mayer to Horkheimer, 24 Oct. 1939, Horkheimer 645. Though Horkheimer was enthusiastic about the idea, the projected study never appeared.

In a piece written for the *Zeitschrift*, Alexandre Koyré had already attributed totalitarian tendencies to Durkheimian sociology.<sup>84</sup> Mayer sees the potential implications discussed by Koyré overtly realized in the program of the College. He refers to “the new irrationalism of a school which is served by the Durkheimian concept of the ‘sacré’ in order to propagate a pure obscurantism.”<sup>85</sup>

This damning critique of the College is very much of a piece with the criticism from the Institute members. In fact, Mayer’s College lecture, which was delivered a few months before the outbreak of the war, reads like a warning directed at the group, concerning the fascist potential in the desire to create a sacred community. Entitled “The Rituals of Political Associations in Germany of the Romantic Period,” the lecture traces Nazi rituals and symbols to the reactionary cadres of early nineteenth century Germany. These ultranationalist cabals bear a striking resemblance to the objects of Bataille’s fascination. Karl Follen, the “Führer of young German nationalism,” professed an ideology in which “everything was a symbol of death and voluptuous pleasure in death, in the double sense of sacrifice and murder.” (Bataille would deliver the lecture “Joy in the Face of Death” two months after Mayer’s lecture.) Mayer explains that there is an “eroticism that binds” Follen’s followers. In Mayer’s view, all these characteristics link them to the Nazis:

The same state of mind reappeared a century later in the assassins of Erzberger, Rathenau, and many others: This mixture of cynicism and spiritual dedication, of lansquenet and masculine order, the same absence of clear and distinct ideas as well, all are to be found among the ranks of Follen’s apostles. The sacred character of the group is obvious.<sup>86</sup>

In contrast to the “liberal, national bourgeois spirit” of the Second Reich, the Nazi regime bears the characteristics of the “the spirit of 1819”: the spirit of “rebels, myth, and direct action.”<sup>87</sup>

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84. Koyré maintained that a truly Durkheimian moral and political system would have social cohesion as its supreme value – a result of Durkheim’s Enlightenment faith in human progress – and therefore necessarily favor a conformist, and even a totalitarian politics. See Koyré, “La sociologie française contemporaine,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* V (1936): 260-64.

85. Mayer to Horkheimer, 24 Oct. 1939, Horkheimer 646.

86. Mayer, “The Rituals of Political Associations in Germany of the Romantic Period,” in Hollier, ed. 275-76.

87. Mayer, “The Rituals of Political Associations in Germany of the Romantic Period,” in Hollier, ed. 278.

Mayer's deeply negative attitude toward the political implications of the College was evident not only in his letter to Horkheimer, but also in his lecture to the group. Nevertheless, he was very interested in continuing his relationship with the group, and in his memoirs, written four decades later, he does not criticize the project of the College at all. In fact, he expresses regret that he was not more open to Bataille's ideas: "Bataille wanted to win me over. . . . I avoided this, almost without understanding. Jewish rationality, secularized yet secularly trained in the mistrust of images and the imagination, effected a secret resistance."<sup>88</sup>

### *The Festival and Mimesis*

Mayer's lecture was followed by Caillois's talk on the festival, later published in the *N.R.F.* This study has had a significant influence on writers such as Octavio Paz and Mircea Eliade, and is also cited in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Caillois interprets the phenomenon of the festival as a necessary and periodic rejuvenation of society, still persisting even in the modern West:

the disguises and few bits of boldness still permitted at Carnival, the drinking and street dances on July 14, even the carousing at the end of the Nuremberg Congress in national-socialist Germany, are evidence of the same social necessity and its continuation.<sup>89</sup>

The festival is a "world without rules," an eruption required for the health of the social order; festival time purifies and rejuvenates, and allows the society to reunite. Caillois argues that, in the industrial West, the festival is being replaced by a pale substitute – the vacation – indicative of the progressive dessication of the social forces keeping the society energized.<sup>90</sup>

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno take up Caillois's notion of the vacation as a substitute for the festival, arguing that, through the process of Enlightenment, "Enjoyment becomes the object of manipulation." Even the festival is "extinguished in fixed entertainments," or artificially intensified in the "phony collective euphoria" of Fascism.<sup>91</sup>

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88. Mayer, *Ein Deutscher auf Widerruf* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1982) 243. My translation.

89. Caillois, "Festival," in Hollier, ed. 281.

90. Ten years later, Caillois would change the conclusion of his study, arguing that the forces released in the festival are not dying out in the phenomenon of the vacation, but are instead being unleashed in the form of war.

91. Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 106.

However, Caillois sees this process as a fall from the health of a perfect, primal society, as expressed in the cyclical rhythm of festival and profane times. Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, historicize Caillois (in their own rather abstract way) in order to deprive his observations of their implicit appeal to the fulness of some mythical, original social order. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the festival is already the manifestation of a problem, the expression of the dialectical tension between civilization and nature inherent in all societies. Like all experiences of enjoyment and pleasure, the festival is a revolt against civilization, yet a revolt which “owes its origin to civilization.” It signifies, not fullness, but the alienation that is intrinsic to social organization itself.

Caillois is cited again in the *Dialectic*. Horkheimer and Adorno use his study of mimetic behavior in animals, “Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire,” as an example of the need human beings have to shed consciousness and to “lose [themselves] in the environment.”<sup>92</sup> Freud called this the death instinct, while Caillois describes it as an “*instinct for abandon*, gravitating being towards a reduced mode of existence which, at its limit, would not possess consciousness or feelings.”<sup>93</sup>

A curious facet of the *Dialectic* is that Horkheimer and Adorno cite Bataille’s co-director and rival, Caillois, rather approvingly – if passively – even though they had roundly criticized what they saw as fascist implications in his work. Yet it is Bataille’s thought that is implicated in the *Dialectic*’s critiques of myth, unreason, and sacrifice, though Bataille is nowhere named. Preserved in the footnotes of the *Dialectic*, Caillois’s essays of the 1930s remain obscure, while half a century later Jürgen Habermas speaks in apocalyptic terms of the conflict between Bataille and the Frankfurt School.<sup>94</sup>

92. Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 227.

93. Caillois, *Le Mythe* 121, original emphasis. Interestingly, both Octavio Paz and E.M. Cioran have discussed Caillois in terms of this temptation toward the inorganic. Cioran writes that Caillois is motivated by a mineralogical aesthetic, “the search and the nostalgia for the primordial, in the obsession with beginnings, with the worlds before man.” E. M. Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Quartet, 1992) 207. Paz writes of Caillois in similar terms in his “Piedras Legibles.” In the *Dialectic*, Horkheimer and Adorno treat mimesis as a danger, yet they have also written of its positive aspects, following, not Caillois, but Benjamin in his short meditation, “On the Mimetic Faculty.” Here Benjamin designates language as the ultimate expression of the mimetic faculty, which has the positive function of indicating the delicate interrelatedness of things. *Reflections* 336.

94. “Horkheimer and Adorno battled with Nietzsche; Heidegger and Bataille gather under Nietzsche’s banner for the final confrontation.” Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT, 1992) 131.

*The End of the College*

On June 23, 1939, Caillois left for Argentina to lecture on mythology. He intended to return in a few months, but the war would keep him there for six years. The distance between him and Bataille at this point was, however, more than geographical. Bataille had abandoned the idea of a detached, investigative scientific sociology, and moved openly towards the atheistic mysticism he had never entirely abandoned. On June 6, Bataille had delivered a lecture entitled "Joy in the Face of Death." No manuscript exists for the lecture, but in the final issue of *Acéphale*, which appeared that month, there is an article by Bataille entitled, "The Practice of Joy in the Face of Death," in which he writes:

Only a shameless, indecent saintliness can lead to a sufficiently happy *loss of self*. 'Joy before death' means that life can be glorified from root to summit. It robs of meaning everything that is an intellectual or moral beyond, substance, God, immutable order, or salvation. It is an apotheosis of that which is perishable, apotheosis of flesh and alcohol as well as of the trances of mysticism.<sup>95</sup>

This existential ecstasy was the breaking point for the College. In Bataille's lecture of July 4, 1939, which was the last of the third lecture series, and which turned out to be the last College lecture, he acknowledges the disagreement that has divided the original founders and many of the regular participants: "It will suffice to point out that the role I assign to mysticism, tragedy, madness, and death seems to Caillois hard to reconcile with our original principles."<sup>96</sup> Leiris, who had only been marginally involved anyway, had quit the College the day before, arguing that Bataille had departed from the sociological principles set up by Durkheim, and that, due to this lack of rigor, the College was in danger of becoming "merely a 'clique'."<sup>97</sup> Caillois had written a similar letter to Bataille,<sup>98</sup> affecting a break over the distinction, which they had argued

95. Bataille, *Visions* 237, original emphasis.

96. Bataille, "The College of Sociology," in Hollier, ed. 335.

97. Leiris to Bataille, 3 Jul. 1939, in Hollier, ed. 355.

98. Bataille responds to Caillois as follows: "My greatest reservation has to do with how frantically you insist on describing yourself as an 'intellectual.' . . . I am perfectly willing to acknowledge that I am an intellectual, but I do not want to add phrases that lead one to believe that an intellectual who willingly limits himself can still be called 'honest' and 'honorable.' . . . Perhaps you believe that authority is possible for those who would possess knowledge. . . . I do not completely deny myself that hope. But I do not believe we can avoid here seriously overstepping the points you yourself have defined." Hollier, ed. 358-59.

about previously, between the intellectual and the mystic, a dichotomy Bataille was not at this point prepared to acknowledge.

### *The Nature of Hitlerism*

On August 22, 1939 the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was signed, and on September 1, the Germans invaded Poland. At the outbreak of war, Benjamin was interned as a refugee in a work camp in Nevers, France, where he remained until mid-November. His health deteriorated as a result of the internment. Several weeks after his release, he wrote Horkheimer: "Right now, I feel completely exhausted and I am so tired that I must frequently pause halfway down the street because I am unable to go on. This is certainly due to nervous exhaustion, which will go away provided that the future does not hold anything horrible for us."<sup>99</sup>

In October, Caillois published an article in Spanish, entitled "The Nature of Hitlerism," in the South American journal, *Sur*. Here Caillois puts an end to any political ambiguity. He adamantly opposes Nazism as a fatal menace. Its racism, he says, "encloses every being in the fatality of a past and pretends to find in birth everything which determines its future and worth."<sup>100</sup> Hitlerism "presents the messianism of religions without its universalism," and "by its nature menaces each individual and every community." He concludes that this "gangrenous part" of humanity must be amputated.<sup>101</sup>

Writing in November, Bataille expresses his disappointment with the article.<sup>102</sup> He agrees politically with Caillois, but he sees nothing properly sociological in Caillois's article, which deals with the place of sacred forces in the workings of social structures. Bataille<sup>103</sup> tells Caillois that,

99. Benjamin to Horkheimer, 30 Nov. 1939, Benjamin, *Correspondence 1910-1940* 618-19.

100. Caillois, "Naturaleza del Hitlerismo," *Sur* 61 (Oct. 1939): 93-107, here 99. Quotations from this source are my translations.

101. Caillois, "Naturaleza del Hitlerismo," 99, 107.

102. Bataille to Caillois, 13 Nov, 1939, *Lettres* 120-22.

103. Bataille to Caillois, 13 Nov, 1939, *Lettres* 120. Drieu's article, "L'Actualité du XXe Siècle," first appeared in the November issue of the *N.R.F.*, and made the case for the "terrible pragmatism" of fascism, which understands how to meet force with force. Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Chronique Politiques 1934-1942* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) 201. A year previously, Drieu had written the article "To die as democrats or to survive as fascists," in which he explained: "I call fascist the only method capable of withstanding and deterring the expansion of the fascist countries. And I say: you will sleep and die as democrats, as liberals, or you will revive, resurge, and triumph as fascists" Drieu 193. Translations mine.



while he has “no prejudice in favor of Drieu [La Rochelle],” he finds the position of the College to be closer to the French fascist’s recent article in the *N.R.F.* than to Caillois’s. “These things being inextricable,” he writes, “it’s better to say nothing.”<sup>104</sup> This is another instance of Bataille’s conviction that only those subterranean forces which fascism has harnessed will be of use in the fight against fascism. Faced with a choice between what he sees as the impotence of liberalism and the accurate but politically contemptible position of Drieu, Bataille prefers to remain silent.

### *A Darkness This Total*

In May 1940 the Germans attacked the Low Countries; in mid-June they entered Paris. Benjamin fled the city and took his own life when he was apprehended by the border guard while trying to cross into Spain. During the occupation, Bataille went to the country to recuperate from tuberculosis. He continued work on the book he had begun at the war’s outbreak, *Guilty*. This dark and fragmented work was published in 1944, and would become the first volume of his “Summa Atheologica.” In its opening sections, written in September 1939, Bataille writes:

I won’t speak of war, but of mystical experience. I’m not unaffected by the war. I’d be glad to give my blood, weariness, and what’s more, the brutal moments undergone at death’s approach. . . . But how even for a moment can I dismiss this non-knowledge, a feeling of having lost my way in some underground tunnel? To me this world, the planet, the starry sky, are just a grave (I don’t know if I’m suffocating here, if I’m crying or becoming some kind of incomprehensible sun). Even war can’t light up a darkness this total.<sup>105</sup>

“The war,” Caillois said later, “had shown us the inanity of the attempt of the College of Sociology. These dark forces that we had dreamed of unleashing had been liberated on their own, their consequences were not those we had anticipated. The war had doubtless precipitated Bataille toward an interior world.”<sup>106</sup>

104. Bataille to Caillois, 13 Nov, 1939, *Lettres* 121. At this point, Bataille still writes with the assumption that the activities of the College will resume, and asks what work Caillois has undertaken in Argentina on its behalf. Bataille continued to attend some regular meetings, which included people involved in the journals, *Esprit* and *Volontés*; this seems to have petered out in December.

105. Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone, intro. Denis Hollier (Venice, CA: Lapis, 1988) 12.

106. Caillois, quoted in Daniel Lindenberg, *Les années souterraines (1937-1947)* (Paris: La Découverte, 1990) 77. Translation mine.

### **Conclusion**

The record I have assembled shows anything but a relationship of mutual agreement and influence. Benjamin and his Institute colleagues found their way into Bataille's orbit out of necessity, predicated upon their unorthodox views as compared with other intellectuals of the day. On the positive side, there was a great deal of mutual curiosity: in essence, the two groups were posing many of the same questions, all of which centered around the larger question of how to respond to the apparent failure of Enlightenment rationality. The Frankfurt School thinkers saw many parallels to their own efforts in the work of the Surrealists, and they viewed Bataille's circle as the direct heirs of this school.

Yet from the start, the relations between the Institute and the College were marked by a great deal of skepticism about the different answers they were producing. Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno became increasingly pessimistic about the political ramifications of Bataille and his associates' activities and publications. They directly critiqued the writings of Caillois, pointing out the fascist implications they saw in his articles. Moreover, the Institute associates distanced themselves from the French explorations of the irrational such as were being undertaken by Bataille. Their disapproval is seen in their letters, as well as in the positions taken in the philosophical writings, which emerged at this time, such as Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. When he turned over his manuscripts to Bataille, Benjamin trusted the librarian, not the theorist.