



Historically, manifestations of the comic have more often than not been greeted with condemnation, by philosophers, literary theorists, critics and ecclesiastics alike. The comic has been condemned as a form of low art, as a genre inferior to tragedy, as appropriate only to the trials and tribulations of the lower classes, as expressing taste base enough to warrant the recommendation of abstinence. The admittedly infrequent counter to this broad characterisation has championed comedy arguing that it is indeed worthy of serious scholarly attention. This has usually meant either defining the specificity of the operation of the comic by delineating its techniques – whether they be slapstick, degradation, jokes or particular kinds of narrative structure – or focusing upon the thematic content of individual works and uncovering the meaning buried beneath any number of comic façades.¹ Indeed, those advocates who aim to *comprehend* the comic in this manner relinquish addressing what I hesitate to call the “essence of comedy” as much as those who seek to dismiss it. For to comprehend the comic is to risk overlooking the structure of *incomprehensibility* that is crucial to its operation. Whether for or against it, the theoretical and critical reception of comedy has tended to subordinate it to the demands of philosophical reason. In this paper I consider the possibility of avoiding this subordination by pursuing the idea that comedy emerges from a relationship between reason and unreason.

My starting point here is an examination and evaluation of the relevant insights of Georges Bataille, most significantly his philosophy of laughter as a philosophy of *non-savoir* (un-knowing). Indeed, it could be argued that it is because Bataille starts with laughter rather than the comic that he manages to retain the relation between knowledge and un-knowing that is crucial to the

lisa trahair

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operation of the comic. Henri Bergson provides an interesting point of comparison in this regard. While Bergson’s “essay on the meaning of the comic” is entitled *Laughter*, he is never really able to fully reconcile his isolation of the comic as *la mécanisation de la vie* (the mechanisation of life) with laughter itself, concluding at the end that:

From time to time the receding wave leaves behind a remnant of foam on the sandy beach. The child, who plays hard by, picks up a handful, and, the next moment, is astonished to find that nothing remains in his grasp but a few drops of water, water that is far more brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought it. Laughter comes into being in the self-same fashion. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is a froth with a saline base. Like froth,

it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter.²

Bataille's contemplation of laughter is fragmented across the breadth of his work, being found in his anthropological and sociological essays (those published in *The College of Sociology* (1937–39), edited by Denis Hollier), his philosophical essays (those on *non-savoir* and Hegel) and in his works dealing with mystical experience (*Inner Experience* and *Guilty*). Each of these treatments of laughter is specific to its context, although there is also a consistency in the theorisation of it across these works. Thus the sociological essays are concerned with laughter's relation to the sacred and the role it plays in the transformation of repulsive forces into attractive ones, the philosophical essays consider the intersection between laughter and epistemology, and the mystical works deal with laughter and sovereignty and communication. In this essay I am concerned with the comedy that emerges from Bataille's conception of laughter, and the implications that such comedy has for philosophy.

It is Georges Bataille who, more than any other theorist of laughter, provides the possibility of displacing the lowly status of the comic. He does so not by raising the comic to the level of art but by bestowing upon the operation of the comic nothing less than the status of sovereignty. For Bataille, the "beauty" of the poetic is still subordinate to the logic of reason and meaning, whereas laughter exceeds this logic to the extent that it occupies a position outside the system of philosophy, yet nevertheless produces effects within that system.³ Bataille's laughter exposes the relationship between reason and unreason – the un-knowing that constitutes the essence of comedy – by reversing the conventional method of inquiry into comedy. Rather than attempt to philosophise comedy, Bataille treats philosophy as comedy.

Comedy, the comic, the ludic, the joke, play and laughter are terms which pervade the works of Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard and Samuel Weber – they are but the better-known examples of what might be considered a more general phenomenon of incor-

porating the tenets of the comic into contemporary philosophical thinking. At worst, this trend merely "inserts" the comic into philosophy; at best, it attempts to theorise the specificity of the comic's formations. For it could be argued that, in the absence of a theoretical basis for understanding the comic, the effects of the comic's operations both within comedy and on philosophy remain unacknowledged and unknown. This alone warrants and has to some degree effected an expansion of Bataille scholarship. Attention to his affinity with surrealism and his celebration of cultural forms expressing the irrational, the unthinkable and the impossible (death, ecstasy, ritual, sacrifice, the erotic, the comic, the sacred) has been extended to theorisations that interrogate both the philosophical underpinnings of his work and, indeed, its consequences for philosophical thinking.⁴ I refer here to the work of Nick Land, Joseph Libertson, and Arkady Plotnitsky as well as to Jacques Derrida. I will show how this relatively recent scholarship has deemed Bataille's laughter capable of resuscitating the Kantian noumenon, presenting a radical alterity to philosophy and reinscribing the Hegelian dialectic to the point where the quest for meaning is forsaken.

In his essay "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve," Derrida questions the possibility of the comedy of philosophy that Bataille envisages. More specifically, he draws upon the breadth of Bataille's writings to consider their relation to the Hegelian project. The impetus for Derrida's analysis of Bataille's laughter can no doubt be located in what Michel Foucault has called "the epoch" which "struggles to disengage itself from Hegel"⁵ or what Vincent Descombes has identified as a general preoccupation of post-1968 French thinking with the problems arising from the nature of the dialectic in the Hegelian project⁶ – problems such as the reduction of the other to the same, the all-encompassing nature of philosophical reason, and the end of philosophy. Doubtless Derrida also sees in Bataille's thought the *possibility* of undermining the concepts of presence and identity which dominate Western metaphysics and to which his work returns again and again. His essay is of interest to us here

because of its theorisation of Bataille's dispersed comments on comedy, laughter and un-knowing, but also because it evaluates the success and failure of Bataille's endeavour from a poststructuralist perspective. In this respect, Derrida's deconstruction of Bataille is relevant to understanding the operation of the comic in general.

Whether we call it Bataille's challenge to Hegel or, as Derrida prefers, the "constraint of Hegel,"⁷ my interest in Bataille's writing is with the manner in which he envisages laughter undoing the tenets of metaphysical philosophy, relating concepts to their own baselessness, subjecting them to inner ruination, and inscribing a non-teleological method of "backwardation"⁸ by referring the known to the unknown. While the significance of laughter as an affective response to philosophical reason is not to be underestimated, such laughter implies very specific operations of the comic which Bataille calls operations of sovereignty. By examining the moments when Bataille's laughter is invoked, I propose to demonstrate the comic operations that it engenders. After elaborating the significance of the comedy of philosophy, of Bataille's philosophy of laughter and of his response to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, I will return to Derrida's evaluation of the success of Bataille's endeavour.

II

In his essay "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears," Bataille openly declares that in as much as he is a philosopher, his is a philosophy of laughter.⁹ To make laughter the very basis of philosophy might here be construed as an attempt to further perturb the happy marriage of philosophy and reason that was, until Nietzsche, still in its honeymoon period. In the place of reason, Bataille inserts its very antithesis – neither an enterprise, nor a disposition constitutive of a subject, only barely a mode of behaviour. (In his essays on attraction and repulsion, for example, Bataille considers laughter under the rubric of the principle of contagion which constitutes human society around a sacred nucleus, as a community whose fusion entails a loss of individual self.¹⁰) Bataille's self-characterisation is further radicalised when one takes into account his proposi-

tion that the cause of such laughter is both unknown and unknowable: "That which is laughable may simply be the 'unknowable'."¹¹ For Bataille it is this very unknowability which is essential: "*The unknown makes us laugh.*"¹² In his efforts to produce a philosophy of laughter, a philosophy therefore of the unknowable, Bataille questions the conventional understanding of the philosopher as the lover or friend of wisdom, of knowledge, learning and erudition, and of soundness of judgement.

Bataille's philosophy of laughter, and the importance of his mobilisation of the notion of *non-savoir*, has prompted commentators to relate his work not only to Hegel but also to Kant. Bataille's laughter, and the impact it has on philosophy, has thus been described by Nick Land as a "fanged noumenon" (116) and by Joseph Libertson as an "altering incumbence of exteriority" (2). It is worth attending briefly to both of these characterisations so as to better grasp the performative nature of Bataille's reinvigoration of the Kantian noumenon against Hegel's subsequent dismissal of it.

Un-knowing such as Bataille invokes has a philosophical precedent in the Kantian noumenon and a psychoanalytic one in the Freudian unconscious. In the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena, phenomena are appearances in the world that we can know through sensory experience. Noumena, by contrast, are things-in-themselves: they are unknowable because ungraspable by sensory experience. Diana Coole notes that Kant conceives noumena both positively and negatively. In the negative sense the noumenon is "a thing so far as it is *not an object of our sensible intuition*," while in its positive sense it is "an *object of a non-sensible intuition*."¹³ The noumenon for Kant in this positive sense is the concept that makes sensible intuition possible, the concept of the object in general before its determination as either "something or nothing."¹⁴ Hence it is an empty concept without object (*ens rationis*).¹⁵ Land argues that Bataille's "fanged noumenon" is not the beginning of knowledge but its end; laughter, as the experience of *non-savoir*, has a *destructive* capacity not broached by Kant, constituting a "slide

into oblivion,” a “dissolvent immanence” that can neither be defined nor comprehended.¹⁶

Joseph Libertson has discussed the unknowable similarly in terms of a philosophy of alterity. Libertson locates Bataille’s work at the point of a philosophical impasse where the inadequation between discursive representation and the alterity implicit in communication emerges. The very possibility of communication, Libertson argues, produces an opacity in its economy, which escapes comprehension and manifestation.¹⁷ The “spontaneity of consciousness” which discourse engenders is limited thrice over by “the difference or discontinuity of the exterior thing, of the exterior subject or the intersubjective other, and of the generality of existence in its excess over closure’s comprehension.”¹⁸ The attempt by discourse to register these limits (this alterity) both domesticates them and is necessarily eluded by them. The result, according to Libertson, is that inadequation becomes correlation, “the vicissitude of a larger adequation.”¹⁹

Importantly, however, this is not, for Libertson, the only experience of the relation of alterity to thought. The great “anti-intellectualist” thinkers (Nietzsche, Proust, Freud, but also the subjects of Libertson’s book – Blanchot, Bataille, and Levinas) attest not simply to an inability of formal discourse to represent alterity but also to alterity’s “alteration of thought,” which “weighs upon subjectivity in a communicational moment which is *not yet* or *no longer* comprehension.”²⁰ Libertson calls this experience an “altering incumbence of exteriority” which, nevertheless, remains subordinate in formal discourse.²¹ That is to say, this altering incumbence of exteriority alters the effect of formal discourse, but when represented by discourse is still subordinate to it. According to Libertson, the anti-intellectualists turn the formal (Kantian) and speculative (Hegelian) proposition of the noumenon or the thing-in-itself on its head. They regard alterity neither as a power that nevertheless constitutes the basis of thinking phenomena (the Kantian noumenon), nor as negation working toward the achievement of absolute spirit (the Hegelian in-itself). The anti-intellectualists refuse “to characterize alterity as a power or effectivity” and “thematize subjectivity

itself as a radical passivity or heteronomy: not a dependence upon another power, but a pure passivity in a reality without power.”²² They heed “the approach of a powerless element over which consciousness nevertheless has no power – an element which changes and concerns thought on the basis of its very passivity and inactuality.”²³

The means of this “altering incumbence of exteriority” will become clearer when I consider the effects of Bataille’s laughter as rupturing moments for Hegel’s text. For Bataille’s laughter is just such an “altering incumbence of exteriority.” It is that powerless element over which consciousness has no power, that element which changes thought on the basis of its very passivity and inactuality.

III

For our purposes, Bataille’s mobilisation of laughter as un-knowing finds its most profound relationship when compared with the apotheosis of metaphysical thinking – Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. That Bataille’s understanding of Hegelian philosophy is derived from Alexandre Kojève’s lectures in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s – attended by so many of the French intellectuals who would subsequently take issue with the Hegelian dialectic – is nothing new.²⁴ I am not so much concerned with the plausibility of Bataille’s interpretation as with the manner in which he construes his relation to Hegel and its implications for understanding comedy.

Bataille’s relation to Hegel is both concrete and elusive. To be sure, Bataille, at the outset, appears to make a significant break with Hegel – un-knowing and knowledge being the respective motifs that inaugurate for each thinker the beginning of philosophy. And many of Bataille’s notions respond specifically to Hegelian concepts. Hegel’s articulation of the relationship between philosophy and knowledge, as well as his concepts of experience (*Erfahrung*) – as the movement which consciousness exercises on itself – and the dialectic – as the logical method of such conscious investigation – are the motifs that will be transformed in Bataille’s philosophy of un-knowing.

Against the relationship between knowledge, truth, and consciousness in Hegel's work, Bataille's statements about his philosophy of un-knowing could easily be misconstrued as glib or perfunctory. But to approach him superficially would be to fail to heed his stance on the anti-intellectualism against which he has been outspoken.²⁵ Bataille's philosophy of un-knowing is in no way a celebration of ignorance. It is, rather, a response, a very precise interjection in relation to Hegel's thought, in full knowledge, as Bataille professes, of its consequences.

Bataille's starting point is un-knowing as it is manifested in the experience of laughter, the sacred, ecstasy, and so forth. What is significant here is that while laughter is, like knowing, subjectively experienced, it is experienced as *un-knowing*. One can be conscious of one's experience of un-knowing, but self-consciousness cannot supersede the experience of un-knowing. (Hence, Libertson's characterisation of the radical passivity of subjectivity.) Bataille's philosophy is concerned with "the effect of any proposition the penetration of whose content we find disturbing."²⁶

The concept of experience provides a point of differentiation between the two philosophers. For Hegel, experience is related to the dialectical movement of self-revelation, the inner movement of the knowing process coincidental with the inner movement and transformation of the object known, which constitutes the "becoming" of absolute Spirit. Unlike Hegel's dialectical experience, Bataille's experience is sustained rather than developmental or progressive. Bataille proposes that a philosophy of laughter should not confine itself to the object of laughter or its cause, but consider it in the context of other experiences of un-knowing which form a continuum rather than a dialectic (tears, anguish, the feeling of the poetic, ecstasy, etc.). He writes: "I do believe in the possibility of beginning with the experience of laughter and not relinquishing it when one passes from this particular experience to its neighbour, the sacred or the poetic."²⁷ Hegel, on the other hand, sees experience as the movement toward the absolute, toward Science and toward Spirit. While in the *Phenomenology* the trajectory of consciousness's knowledge is

from the less well known to the better known in that a presupposition is refined or shown to be *known* in some way, Bataille claims that his is a presuppositionless philosophy, that it begins with the suppression of knowledge, with nothing.²⁸ Bataille also at times considers this experience as a regression from the known to the unknown, a movement of backwardation.

Bataille's interest in Hegelian philosophy is also explicit to the extent that so many of his writings directly address issues that arise from the *Phenomenology*. Bataille engages with the work of the Hegelian dialectic and the logic of its economy, and speculates about the implications of the project's success in giving an account of the attainment of absolute knowledge. In so doing he puts forward un-knowing or unknowability as the inevitable blind spot of the completion of philosophy. On the one hand, he emphasises the un-knowing that the *Phenomenology* must necessarily turn its back on – the poetry, ecstasy, and laughter which provide no satisfaction to self-consciousness – and on the other, he points to the fact that the condition of absolute knowledge, the very completion of the project, coincides with reaching a point where there is *nothing else to know*, reaching, that is, *the unknowable!*²⁹

Bataille thus identifies a conundrum in the work of Hegel. While the aim to think through the "totality of what is" and to account for "everything which appears before our eyes, to give an integrated account of the thought and language which express – and reveal – that appearance,"³⁰ is without doubt the noble aim of philosophical thinking in general, for Bataille it is quite another thing to claim success, as Hegel does, to state that the project is completed, to turn in one's badge and shut up shop indefinitely. For the end of philosophy necessarily entails the redundancy of the philosopher himself.

In "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," Bataille argues for the general comicality of the task Hegel set himself. He sketches a double caricature, claiming that Hegel usurps the sovereignty of the divine and at the same time downgrades God to the status of regent. God as eternal and unchangeable becomes "merely a provisional end, which survives while waiting for something better."³¹ It

is the sage, Hegel, who is rightly enthroned as sovereign, since he is the one to whom “history revealed, then revealed in full, the development of being and the totality of its becoming.”³² Bataille, presuming to identify with Hegel, briefly imagines the despair he must have felt upon realising that the consequence of his insight was that there would be nothing else to know, but cannot help but see the comic side of it: “In order to express appropriately the situation Hegel got himself into, no doubt involuntarily, one would need the tone, or at least, in a restrained form, the horror of the tragedy. But things would quickly take on a comic appearance.”³³

Bataille claims that the issue of death is decisive for Hegel and, in turn, subjects it to various comical interpretations. The fact that Bataille invokes laughter at the moment of death is consistent with his more general conception of community as being bound by the interattractive force of laughter which encloses the sacred nucleus of death.³⁴ Paul Hegarty notes, however, that while Hegel and Heidegger argue that awareness of death is constitutive of humanity as such in that it “drives us to react against this initial negativity, by creating society as protection,” Bataille on the other hand sees this “as a defence mechanism that allows itself to fail at certain points (in festival, eroticism, laughter, drunkenness, sacrifice).”³⁵

Bataille argues that the comic significance of death in the Hegelian system directly parodies the equally comic death of Christ. Death and eternal divinity, he points out, are irreconcilably contradictory: “to pass through death is so absent from the divine figure ... The death of Jesus partakes of comedy to the extent that one cannot unarbitrarily introduce the forgetting of his eternal divinity – which is his – into the consciousness of an omnipotent and infinite God.”³⁶ Bataille surmises that in Hegel’s conceptualisation of death, the attempt made by self-consciousness to achieve independence duplicates the implausibility of the merely rhetorical death of Christ. Death is dramatised by Hegel in consciousness’s acquisition of a sense of self, a disposition only fully realised when consciousness obtains the recognition of the other. The demand for recognition of self-consciousness by

another self-consciousness entails the infamous fight to the death, the duel that institutionalises the relationship between self-consciousnesses as that between master and slave. In this duel, Hegel sidesteps the issue of mortality in exactly the same manner as the Christian myth of the death of Christ. That is to say, the outcome of the drama is predetermined: the stakes are bogus; in each case there is no possibility of death. The *necessity* of both risking death and staying alive are irreconcilable.

Derrida argues that in laughing at this point of the Hegelian text Bataille focuses upon the duplicity of Hegel’s concept of death. In the master–slave dialectic self-consciousness realises that it cannot negate everything – that it is theoretically possible to be independent of everything *but* the life that is necessary in order to be. Hegel writes: “self-consciousness becomes aware that *life* is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness.”³⁷ The difference between real death and theoretical death is conceptually represented in the difference between abstract negativity and sublative negation. Hegel argues that the outcome of real death “is an abstract negation, not the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession.”³⁸ The risk of actual death would thus appear to be overcome, being superseded by the anticipation of the idea of death. It is at exactly this moment that Hegel, Bataille implies, overextends himself. He fudges his logic by drawing a distinction between the abstract negativity that lies beyond consciousness and the negation which consciousness utilises as a tool to further its quest for truth.

Just as the eternal divinity of God turns the sacrifice of Jesus into a sham, so too does self-consciousness’s putting at stake of life rely a priori on the condition that it continues to live – hence Bataille’s analogy between the comedy of the death of Christ and the risk of death undertaken by self-consciousness. While the master–slave dialectic would seem to dramatisate a shift from materiality to conceptuality, Hegel purports to have no interest in pure materiality, as the unknowable in-itself. The opening claim of the *Phenomenology* is that the truth of

consciousness's knowledge of an object is not dependent on its relation to a world beyond cognition. How, then, within a single diegesis can Hegel make the distinction between real death and conceptual death, between abstract negativity and sublative negation? This is what Bataille laughs at.

Here we have it: a necessary stage in Hegelian self-consciousness's pursuit of the absolute and Bataille's scorn. What does it tell us of laughter and its epistemological status as un-knowing? Bataille's laughter is not so much based on a material figure exceeding a conceptual figure as on the simultaneous invocation and denial of the in-itself. If we follow Bataille's thought a bit further we find that his laughter at the master-slave dialectic is not simply a response to an isolated moment of the journey toward Spirit. He does not refuse to buy Hegel's argument at this particular point, laughing it off and moving on. For Bataille, the master-slave dialectic is not merely one dialectic among others. He takes it to be the model for the dialectic in general. Whether rightly or wrongly, for Bataille it defines the nature and role of negativity throughout the *Phenomenology*. Hence the seriousness of his laughter; its object is both specific and fundamental. Beyond the relation between domination and servitude, it goes to the very heart of Hegelian negativity, undermining the success of the dialectical method and its ability to institute reason, truth, and meaning.

It is interesting that Derrida's reading of Bataille's relation to Hegel, and particularly with regard to the emphasis placed on the master-slave dialectic, has come under fire by Joseph Flay and Judith Butler in *Hegel and His Critics: Philosophy in the Aftermath of Hegel*, edited by William Desmond. Both authors criticise Derrida for limiting his focus to the master-slave dialectic, and to mastery in particular. Flay argues that this is to the exclusion of other instances of the *Aufhebung* and thus rejects the claim that the master-slave dialectic is the model for the operation of the dialectic in general. Flay's argument assumes that Derrida's essay is a deconstruction of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Yet it is arguable that Derrida's project in "From Restricted to General

Economy" is not so much a deconstruction of Hegel as a deconstruction of Bataille. The title of the paper uses concepts first elaborated by Bataille – restricted and general economy – rather than Hegel, and it is possible to suppose from the subtitle that Derrida's concern is not Bataille's opposition to Hegel but his complicity with him – a complicity "without reserve." Moreover, we will come to see that "without reserve" suggests that the complicity between the two thinkers is in accordance with the operation of general economy.

Bataille's laughter at the master-slave dialectic focuses upon the two kinds of negativity that operate in the Hegelian system. The first is the productive negation of sublation, the interiorisation of material death into conceptual death and its transcendence. The second is abstract negativity, which Hegel, according to Derrida, freely admits is a "mute and non-productive death, this death pure and simple."³⁹ In making this distinction between sublative negation and abstract negativity, Hegel attempts to remove abstract negativity from the endless interpretation of the system, *even while including it as a concept*.⁴⁰

Derrida also shows us that the difference between these two forms of negativity structures Bataille's concepts of restricted and general economy. In restricted economy, to all appearances coincident with Hegel's economy in the *Phenomenology*, the negative works towards the production of meaning. Restricted economy is geared towards production and expenditure for the return of profit. It is an economy of determinate meaning and established values where the dialectic, through sublative negation (*Aufhebung*), provides its rule of exchange. General economy is not an economy of exchange, but of waste, of expenditure without return, of sacrifice, of the destruction, without reserve, of meaning. It almost describes the mode of functioning of abstract negativity. Bataille's laughter therefore repudiates the economy of the *Phenomenology* – that is to say, the structure of evaluation and exchange that occurs in the dialectic; the free expenditure of intellectual currency on defunct concepts provided the returns are worthwhile, on a real death, a mute and non-productive death, for example, returned as a

conceptual death. Just as self-consciousness needs the other, the recognition of the other, to end the cycle of the meaningless negation of nature, Hegel needs discourse to ensure the meaning of life. Bataille therefore contrasts between the restricted economy that characterises the circulation of meaning in the *Phenomenology* and the general economy that exposes meaning to its comic underside, that wastes meaning, destroys it without reserve.

Bataille treats the distinction between sublative negation and abstract negativity – and Hegel’s utilisation of the former to institute meaning and relegation of the latter to the beyond of reason and meaning – as simultaneously comic and significant. In the first instance, it is possible to draw from Bataille’s laughter a technique that is well known in the world of comedy – the conceptual bifurcation between the two forms of negation is a *double entendre*. (In another context it would be interesting to pursue the implications of the fact that the *double entendre* exemplifies the operation of condensation in Freud’s theory of the joke.) In the second instance, abstract negativity, “death pure and simple,” is not simply what Hegel discards; it is, Bataille’s writing seems to suggest, the condition of possibility of sublative negation.

IV

In proposing the philosophy of laughter as a philosophy of *non-savoir*, Bataille links an affective response to an epistemological condition. Indeed, he situates laughter at the limit of epistemology. But Bataille’s philosophy of un-knowing is neither systematic nor systematisable. It is not found in a given book that can be picked up, read, and understood. It rather amounts to a process of backwardation, a writing of transgression, and a submission to the ecstasy, death, and sacrifice that can be glimpsed in isolated moments of texts by other thinkers. In this regard, Bataille’s response to the *Phenomenology* is exemplary. While Bataille chastises Hegel for failing to thematise the significance of laughter, for refusing laughter a place in his reputedly all-encompassing tome (laughter should have been considered first⁴¹), he also enjoys its exclusion.

It is important to note that Bataille does not presume a synonymy between the laughable and the comic. Although he speculates that the laughable is the unknowable, he makes the qualification that we can nevertheless know the comic: we can “define the various themes of the laughable,” subject it to both methodological and epistemological investigation, devise ways to provoke laughter and even make objects of laughter.⁴² Indeed, between Bataille’s laughter and the meaning of the *Phenomenology* we have been compelled to seek textual incidents that justify his amusement, incidents that are comic no less. We have witnessed Bataille’s caricature of Hegel the philosopher, his attribution of a parodic dimension to the completion of the philosophical project, and his attempt to turn the Hegelian dialectic into a joke. And while Bataille’s emphasis is on laughter rather than comedic technique, and while comedic technique is simply something that we have retrospectively inferred from his laughter, we can glean a more explicit interpretation of the comic from his linkage of the comic to sovereignty.

In his collection of Bataille’s writings, Michael Richardson argues that sovereignty is an ongoing problem for Bataille inasmuch as he is concerned with how “human beings exist integrally for themselves while living in society with others upon whose existence their own depends.”⁴³ Certainly Bataille’s writings are replete with references to sovereignty. The rulers’ caricature of sovereignty, the rebel’s inevitable loss of sovereignty in the satisfaction of his aims, poetry’s near attainment of sovereignty, and sovereignty’s relation to beauty are all habitually revisited in Bataille’s writings.

But for Bataille the term sovereignty is much more complicated than is conveyed in its everyday usage. It is not just an issue of the individual’s freedom and rights in society. Nor does it simply define the status of the monarch. What we see in Bataille’s conceptualisation of the confrontation between two self-consciousnesses is an emptying out of sovereignty as it is exoterically conceived and the emergence (if only for an instant) of another notion of it.

In *Inner Experience*, Bataille writes: “sovereign operation is the most loathsome of all

names: in a sense, *comic operation* would be less deceptive.”⁴⁴ In his essay on Bataille, Derrida demonstrates how Bataille’s conceptualisation of sovereignty as the operation of the comic both relies upon and undertakes the destruction of two of the central concepts of Western metaphysics – identity and presence. In other words, as the comic operation, sovereignty puts an end to determinate meaning. Bataille’s laughter at self-consciousness’s feigned risk of death is the condition that instantiates the emergence of sovereignty as a simulacral doubling of lordship and mastery. I would suggest that Bataille thus laughs at Hegel’s concept of lordship in the name of an *other* to which it might be compared. In this instance, Bataille thus conceives sovereignty as a non-present other that provides the basis for comic comparison and justifies his laughter at the Hegelian dialectic.

More generally, it is significant that Bataille’s method of backwardation means he reverses the relation between cause and effect. In this case, laughter does not emerge on the basis of comic sovereignty; the comic is rather constituted in the instant when laughter bursts out, and in that instant alone. The comic here is not something that precedes laughter; it is rather an effect of it. Thus in spite of Bataille’s claims that the techniques of the comic can be produced at whim – much as we can define the rules of comedy in its opposition to tragedy or account for the joke in terms of condensation and displacement – the temporal precedence which Bataille gives to laughter emphasises the priority of the *unknowable*, which conventional theories of the comic so often forget about but which Bataille argues is nevertheless the single cause of laughter.

It is fundamental that this laughter has no place in the Hegelian text. Derrida explains:

Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. A negativity that never takes place, that never *presents* itself, because in doing so it would start to work again. A laughter that literally never *appears* because it exceeds phenomenality in general, the absolute possibility of meaning.⁴⁵

This “laughter that literally never *appears*” does so on the basis/baselessness of abstract negativity and in so doing gives rise to the doubling of the Hegelian text. While laughter would be a moment existing outside the Hegelian text, an alterity having no place in dialectics, the manner in which it gives rise to sovereignty allows us to see precisely that “altering incumbence of exteriority” that Libertson describes. This is evident in Derrida’s careful ascription of the burst of laughter as that which “makes the difference between lordship and sovereignty shine, without *showing* it however and, above all, without saying it.”⁴⁶

If the laughter that gives rise to sovereignty and, indeed, if sovereignty itself is an “altering incumbence of exteriority,” laughter and sovereignty would each constitute a “passivity” which nevertheless has effects. With regard to laughter, this passivity is evident in the fact that it never takes place, that it is outside of dialectics, while its effects are evident in sovereignty and the inflection of comicality it imposes on reason. As a non-present simulacrum of lordship, sovereignty puts the concept of identity into question. Sovereignty does not itself have an identity but exists in the relation between laughter and death.⁴⁷ Derrida writes, for instance, that “differing from Hegelian lordship, [sovereignty] ... does not even want to maintain itself, collect itself, or collect the profits from its own risk”⁴⁸ and that “sovereignty has no identity, is not *self*, for *itself*, toward *itself*, near *itself* ... [I]t must expend itself without reserve, lose itself, lose consciousness, lose all memory of itself and all the interiority of itself.”⁴⁹ Lordship and sovereignty can thus be related to Bataille’s concepts of restricted and general economy. In the restricted economy of the Hegelian dialectic, lordship has a meaning, lordship seeks meaning and makes meaning; whereas in the general economy sovereignty sacrifices meaning: “it governs neither others, nor things, nor discourses in order to produce meaning.”⁵⁰

V

As a means of clarifying the subtlety of Derrida’s argument here we can examine the terms in

which Flay and Butler also call Derrida to account for failing to see the comicality that operates in the *Phenomenology*. Flay isolates a couple of moments of comic irony, while Butler goes much further, claiming not only that the structure of the *Phenomenology* mimics the comic style of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* but that it is possible to interpret the speculative concept of the *Aufhebung* as a comic device. Butler's work is indebted to the Hegelian scholar Jacob Loewenberg who has argued that the successive conceptions of self that natural consciousness passes through in its journey toward spirit and the absolute are subsequently revealed to be outrageous caricatures. Flay criticises Derrida for assuming that Hegel remains "with the seriousness of the negative, within the framework of a dialectic chained to the *Aufhebung*, rather than taking up the issue of sovereignty and its laughter with the rejected 'abstract negativity.'"51 Yet the very proposition that Derrida is suggesting, that the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* should have taken up abstract negativity, sovereignty, and laughter lacks feasibility because he goes to such pains to show that these "concepts" can be thematised only in relation to the death and mastery of the *Phenomenology*. Were they interiorised by the discourse of the *Phenomenology*, they would become indistinguishable from their counterparts in restricted economy.

Against the criticisms of Derrida by Flay and Butler that he maintains a narrow conception of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, in "From Restricted to General Economy" Derrida interrogates the possibility of "getting beyond" the powerful mechanism of the dialectic, not by directly deconstructing the logic of the Hegelian enterprise but by examining the success of what he considers to be one of the most strategic and incisive treatments of it. While Derrida begins and ends by demonstrating that Bataille does not so much oppose Hegel as manifest a complicity with him and that, if Bataille's work is to some extent "free" of Hegelianism, it is also paradoxically constrained by it, in the course of his essay he reinscribes their relationship within the thematic of Hegel's two self-consciousnesses. In fact, he sets the scene for the two philosophers to engage in a duel. Yet he envisages not so much a strug-

gle to the death as a metamorphosis – of Bataille into Hegel and vice versa.

The turning point is Derrida's evaluation of the transgressive potential of Bataille's complicity with Hegel where he gestures towards the limits of Bataille's laughter.

For at the far reaches of this night something was contrived, blindly, I mean in discourse, by means of which philosophy, in completing itself, could both include within itself and anticipate all the figures of its beyond, all the forms and resources of its exterior; and could do so in order to keep these forms and resources close to itself by simply taking hold of their enunciation. *Except perhaps for a certain laughter. And yet.*⁵²

In focusing on the issue of transgression, Derrida's argument has relevance beyond evaluating Bataille's relation to Hegel. For it is the transgressive capacity of the comic that has precipitated its denunciation by moralists and its celebration by more anarchistic critics. Derrida's critique of Bataille is instructive in this regard. Through Bataille's work he demonstrates quite precisely the limit condition of transgression: that is, the manner in which it becomes bound to what it negates.

Derrida brings the issue of transgression to the fore when he questions Bataille's claim that sovereign writing is able to neutralise the effects of discourse. Bataille, for instance, claims that such writing neutralises because it is neither this nor that – it destroys discourse, proceeds by means of backwardation, etc. Derrida says both yes and no. Yes, because it is true that sovereignty enunciates nothing;⁵³ no, because *it is discursive knowledge that is neutral*. Discourse, for instance, neutralises the real death that is put at risk in the dialectic. Language neutralises the alterity of the other. Derrida argues that sovereignty's destruction of discourse is not an "erasing neutralization," but a "multiplication of words," a process of "baseless substitution," a "potlatch of signs."⁵⁴ While the words and concepts subjected to the sovereign (comic) operation might well neutralise each other by cancelling each other out, as is the case with lordship and sovereignty, they nevertheless, Derrida argues, affirm the "necessity of transgressing

discourse.”⁵⁵ Transgression thus affirms a kind of negation.

This affirmation of negation leads Derrida to ponder Bataille’s conclusion that transgression has the character of the *Aufhebung*, that it operates like the sublative negation found in the Hegelian dialectic. According to Bataille, the transgression of those laws of discourse that prohibit meaningless play and baseless substitution described above “dispel[s] the prohibition without suppressing it.”⁵⁶ A reader familiar with Derrida’s moves might at this point expect him to perform an about-turn, that is, to affirm Bataille’s position, emphasise once again the immense enveloping capacity of metaphysics and lament Bataille’s inability to elude it. But, surprisingly, Derrida does not make such a move. He heeds Bataille’s acknowledgment that the operation of transgression here has the character of the *Aufhebung*, but rather than interpret this as more evidence of the complicity between Bataille and Hegel, Derrida argues the opposite – that “Bataille is even *less* Hegelian than he thinks.”⁵⁷ Certainly, the character of such transgression is sublative to the extent that it must affirm (that is, preserve and maintain) that which it negates. But Derrida indicates a fundamental difference between dialectical sublation and sovereign transgression:

The Hegelian *Aufhebung* is produced entirely from within discourse, from within the system or the work of signification. A determination is negated and conserved in another determination which reveals the truth of the former. From infinite indetermination one passes to infinite determination, and this transition ... continuously links meaning up to itself. The *Aufhebung* is included *within* the circle of absolute knowledge, never exceeds its closure, never suspends the totality of discourse, work, meaning, law, etc.⁵⁸

On the other hand, transgression does not maintain itself entirely within discourse and the circle of absolute knowledge but, in simulating the figure of the *Aufhebung*, “links the world of meaning to the world of nonmeaning.” The distinction between real death and conceptual death only has meaning by recourse to a diegetic *mise-en-abyme*. Derrida writes:

Bataille, thus, can only use the *empty* form of the *Aufhebung*, in an analogical fashion, in order to designate, *as was never done before*, the transgressive relationship which links the world of meaning to the world of nonmeaning. This displacement is paradigmatic: within the form of writing, an intraphilosophical concept, the speculative concept *par excellence*, is forced to designate a movement which properly constitutes the excess of every possible philosopheme.⁵⁹

Derrida suggests here that while dialectical sublation is composed of determinate meaning and continually links the world of meaning up with itself, sovereign transgression uses the “empty form” (the noumenal form) of the *Aufhebung* in an analogical fashion, thereby linking the world of meaning to the world of non-meaning. Transgression (the non-present doubling of the sublative negation of the *Aufhebung* by laughter, for example) does not proceed from a determinate form to a more determinate form but produces an excess which cannot be incorporated into the restricted economy of determinate negation and which, moreover, renders the concepts of restricted economy indeterminate. This excess would be either the simulacrum or “laughter, which constitutes sovereignty in its relation to death,”⁶⁰ both empty forms, empty concepts without objects. Their indeterminacy, far from restricting the economy of meaning, opens it to its beyond. In other words, the empty form of the *Aufhebung* used by Bataille engenders comedy by transgressing meaning, engenders comedy to transgress meaning.

This difference between dialectical sublation and sovereign transgression is crucial to understanding the operation of the comic – not simply in Bataille’s work, but in general. The operation of comedy simulates dialectical sublation and produces an excess which lies beyond classical logic. In general, this simulation, this unreason buried and exposed in the heart of reason and vice versa, is what constitutes the comic, what makes it funny and what makes us laugh. The comic, in other words, opens restricted economy to the effects of general economy.

But lest one think that Derrida ultimately sides with Bataille, let us examine the closing

remarks of his essay. Having established that Bataille is less Hegelian than he thinks, Derrida nevertheless ends by insisting that the *Phenomenology* is by no means left in tatters by Bataille's laughter. In the duel that Derrida stages for us it becomes less and less clear who has the advantage. If the Bataille in Derrida's scenario seems livelier than Hegel to begin with, in Derrida's mind's eye his laughter reanimates the Hegelian text. The statue comes to life, not to fight with Bataille directly, but rather to deny the stability of representation he had supposed. Derrida argues that given the form – the empty form – of the *Aufhebung* that operates in transgression “[i]t would be absurd for the transgression of the Book by writing to be legible only in a determined sense. It would be absurd ... and too full of meaning.”⁶¹ Derrida thus draws a distinction between the book and writing as though the former were a determined form, the *énoncé*, governed by the conditions of restricted economy, and the latter were something like the writing of *différance*: iterable, overdetermined, and operating under the conditions of general economy:

Thus, there is the *vulgar* tissue of absolute knowledge and the mortal opening of an *eye*. A text and a vision. The servility of meaning and the awakening to death. A minor writing and a major illumination. From one to the other, totally other, a certain text. Which in silence traces the structure of the eye, sketches the opening, ventures to contrive “absolute rending,” absolutely rends its own tissue once more become “solid” and servile in once more having been read.⁶²

Against Flay's and Butler's criticisms of Derrida noted above – that he maintains a narrow conception of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, that he takes its operation in the master–slave dialectic to be paradigmatic and, moreover, paradigmatically appropriative and restricted in its economy – Derrida's comments here indicate that he *is* willing to admit different forms of the *Aufhebung*; in this instance, one that functions through determinate negation and the other through analogy. Furthermore, and I don't think this can be emphasised enough, once Derrida has noted the empty form of the *Aufhebung*, it becomes nearly

impossible to attribute to the *Phenomenology* a fully determined sense. Arkady Plotnitsky argues insightfully that general economy is *in principle* one of unutilisable excesses: “*in principle*, rather than only in practice. Such losses in practice would be recognised within many classical or philosophical frameworks – restricted economies – specifically in Hegel and Marx, to which Bataille juxtaposes *general economy*.”⁶³ Following Plotnitsky, we might say that, practically speaking, the *Phenomenology* produces and indeed might rely on unutilisable excesses but that Bataille's laughter does so as a matter of principle. For Derrida, it is the necessary iterability of the Hegelian text that makes it powerless to prohibit Bataille's laughter and unable to resist the operation of the comic which wends its way through it, changing everything and nothing at the same time.

Derrida thus takes up one aspect of the thematisation of death in Bataille's philosophy of laughter, situates Bataille's reinscription of it in relation to the Hegelian dialectic and the difference between sublative negation and abstract negativity, and shows how restricted economy is doubled by general economy. Derrida's formulation here, it might be argued, suffices for the comic in general, a formulation that heeds the meaningless element that resides in comedy. Does Derrida here define the comic as just another formal mechanism? Yes and no. Yes, because he provides a rule for it; no, because in indicating its meaninglessness he invokes the possibility of contagion that undoes formal constraint.

Bataille's laughter at the *Phenomenology* wreaks havoc with determinate discourse, letting loose in it a certain non-relation to what is variously designated as the sovereign operations or the comic operations. By examining the points at which Bataille's laughter bursts out I have tried to analyse the specificity of some of these operations and to demonstrate that what constitutes the comic is the disruption of discourse or, to put it another way, the subjection of meaning to a certain non-meaning. It is in this sense that the comic is essentially transgressive. The story, however, does not end here. Derrida's scrutiny of the sublative character of this transgression indi-

cates that there is a limit to transgression and that it is possible to think of such transgression neither as a form of absolute negation nor as a form of abstract negativity. Inasmuch as transgression is affirmed, prohibition is sublated; the prohibition that one had sought to negate is maintained in transgression. From a particular perspective, sovereignty likewise interiorises lordship and the comic interiorises meaning. Thus, the transgressive affirmation of the general economic operation of the comic needs a restricted economy of determinate meaning. The comic is not nonsense as such, but the relation of meaning to nonsense. It is because of the inseparability of these two economies, because of the intimacy between sense and nonsense that defines the comic, that the destruction of reason can itself be given a reason. That the comic is so easily reinscribed in the order of meaning explains why theorists of the comic so efficaciously illuminate its meaning for us. But that such theorists so often fail to reflect on the implications of their practice means that in the process of taking the comic seriously they demonstrate less of an understanding of it than those who deem it to be a worthless or dangerous enterprise.



notes

I would like to thank *Angelaki's* reviewers, Bill Freind and Lars Iyers, for their comments on this essay.

1 For a discussion of the relation between play and meaning in the joke see Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud*.

2 *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* 178–79.

3 Whereas poetry for Hegel is the highest form of art, according to Bataille it is rather almost entirely “poetry in decline” or, as Derrida says, “fallen poetry,” reliant as it is on metaphors extracted from the “servile domain” of determinate discourse. See Derrida’s comments on this in “The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s *Semiology*,” in *Margins of Philosophy* 91, n. 19, as well as Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. II, 1036; Bataille, *Inner*

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Experience 147; Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy,” *Writing and Difference* 262.

4 For an extended elaboration of the philosophical, literary, and anthropological influences on Bataille’s thought and in turn the influence of his work on postmodernist thinkers, particularly Jean Baudrillard, see Julian Pefanis’ chapter “The Issue of Bataille” in his *Heterology and the Post-Modern: Bataille, Baudrillard and Lyotard*.

5 *L’ordre du discours* 74, quoted by Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* 12.

6 Descombes 12.

7 Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” 251.

8 The term is Derrida’s. “From Restricted to General Economy” 272.

9 “Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears,” *October* 36: 93. (This article is a transcription of a lecture dated 9 February 1953.)

10 For a discussion of the elaboration of community and contagion throughout Bataille’s work, see Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*.

11 “Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears” 90.

12 Ibid.

13 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 307; Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism* 29.

14 Nick Land quotes the following passage from Kant:

The supreme concept with which it is customary to begin a transcendental philosophy is the division into the possible and the impossible. But since all division presupposes a concept to be divided, a still higher one is required, that is the concept of an object in general, taken problematically, without its having been decided whether it is something or nothing. (*The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* 105)

15 Land 114.

16 Ibid. 116.

17 Libertonson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* 1.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid. 2, emphasis added.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Stanley Rosen comments that Kojève's "interpretation of Hegel is arbitrary and philologically unsound, despite the fact (somehow unexplained by his orthodox academic critics) that it remains the best in the sense of the most philosophical single book ever written about Hegel" ("Kojève's Paris: A Memoir," *Parallax* 4: 9) and Derrida writes in an endnote to "From Restricted to General Economy": "for Bataille there was no fundamental rupture between Kojève's reading of Hegel, to which he openly subscribed almost totally, and the true instruction of Marxism" (334), both illustrating the general perception of the incorrectness of Kojève's and Bataille's interpretations.

25 Bataille's repudiation of anti-intellectualism and the specificity of his approach to it is indicated in his response to Hemingway:

I think this anti-intellectualism accounts for that which is basically very limited and entirely anachronistic in the affirmation of the master's morality pursued throughout his work ... I believe, in any case, that if the seduction of Hemingway, which is linked to ignorance, can be attained, it will be on one condition only: that we go to the extreme limit of knowledge. It is only beyond knowledge, and perhaps in that un-knowing which I have presented, that we can win the right to ignorance. ("Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears" 101–02)

26 "Un-knowing and its Consequences," *October* 36: 81.

27 "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears" 93.

28 Ibid. 97.

29 Bataille, *Inner Experience* 108.

30 "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," *Yale French Studies* 78: 11.

31 Ibid. 12.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid. 13.

34 In "Attraction and Repulsion I: Tropisms, Sexuality, Laughter and Tears," Bataille writes:

If in a communicative reaction of exuberance and general joy a third term interferes, one partaking of the nature of death, it is to the extent that the very dark, repulsive nucleus, around which all turbulence revolves, has created the principle of life out of the category of death, springing out of falling. (111)

35 Hegarty 291.

36 "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" 13.

37 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 115; Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 255.

38 Hegel 114–15.

39 Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 255.

40 Derrida writes, for example, that the *Aufhebung* "signifies the *busying* of a discourse losing its breath as it reappropriates all negativity for itself" ("From Restricted to General Economy" 257).

41 Bataille, "Conférences sur le non-savoir"; Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 256.

42 "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears" 89.

43 Georges Bataille: *Essential Writings*, ed. Michael Richardson, 188.

44 *L'expérience intérieure* 237. Quoted by Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 274.

45 Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 256.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid. 265.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid. 264.

51 Flay, *Hegel and His Critics: Philosophy in the Aftermath of Hegel*, ed. W. Desmond 166.

52 Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 252, my emphasis.

53 Ibid. 273.

54 Ibid. 274.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid. 275.

57 Ibid., my emphasis.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid. 256.

61 Ibid. 276.

62 Ibid. 276–77.

63 *Reconfigurations: Critical Theory and General Economy* 20.

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Lisa Trahair

School of Theatre, Film and Dance
The University of New South Wales
Sydney, NSW 2052
Australia

E-mail: l.trahair@unsw.edu.au