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# Bataille and the Birth of the Subject

Nidesh Lawtoo [a]

[a] Department of English, University of Lausanne, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

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nidesh lawtoo

# BATAILLE AND THE BIRTH OF THE SUBJECT

## *out of the laughter of the socius*

> [Y]ou ought to learn how to laugh, my young friends . . . Then, perhaps, as laughers, you may some day dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil – metaphysics in front.
>
> *Nietzsche*, The Birth of Tragedy *26*

"Sovereign communication" is perhaps the central concept of Georges Bataille's heterogeneous thought. It is certainly one of the most discussed *topoi* in Bataille studies insofar as it encompasses most of his theoretical obsessions. From sacrifice to inner experience, eroticism to death, dramatization to trance, tears to laughter, the movement of Bataille's thought continuously interrogates contagious experiences that have the power to transgress the limits of individuation. Yet, if critics tend to agree that the concept of "communication" is at the center of Bataille's "single mythic thought" (Baudrillard 191), disagreement reigns with respect to the specific theory of the subject that informs and underlies this thought.[1]

Subjected to a number of influential readings, Bataille is now mostly remembered as a precursor of the poststructuralist "death of the subject," an unrecognized giant who, in an untimely fashion, prepared the ground for the burial of a reassuring notion of "subject" that is always centered on itself, always present to itself, never different from itself. And yet, despite the tremendous importance of such readings, and the productive "occasions for misunderstanding" they have generated,[2] the question remains: is Bataille's thought, despite its emphasis on the impossibility to communicate his interior experiences, really centered on a linguistic de-centering whereby the subject slides (*glisse*) along an endless chain of signifiers?

Recent critical developments have begun to suggest otherwise, stressing the fact that throughout his career Bataille never ceased to meditate on experiences that are firmly rooted in the immediacy of bodily affects, affects that are impossible to convey through language but that can be "communicated" quite directly, through affective contagion.[3] Paul Hegarty, for instance, argues that "contagion is the basis of (or is) the communication Bataille is writing about" (97). Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen posits an affective, mimetic "identification" at the heart of Bataille's understanding of communication (163). And, more recently, Patrick ffrench suggests that Bataille's early thought is characterized by what he calls "affectivity without a

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subject'' – by which he means a communicative, ''emotional force which passes between individuals and across groups, and which does not take the route of rational, conceptual thought'' (7).[4]

Extending this emergent line of inquiry, I propose to reconsider the precise, affective dynamic that informs Bataille's understanding of communication in order to rethink the old, yet always new, question of the formation of ''the subject.'' If we fundamentally agree that communication is, indeed, ''contagious'' and, thus, transgresses the boundaries that divide self from others, interior from exterior, then we must ask: which conception of the subject allows itself to be so easily traversed and overtaken by such an affective, communicative flux? And if this affectivity is, indeed, ''without a subject,'' and based on a ''pre-subjective psychology'' then, we may wonder: which underlying psychological mechanism allows communication to transgress the limits of individuation?

In order to address such questions which, as we shall see, will take us very quickly to the bottom of Bataille's communicative thought, I begin by considering Bataille as a thus far unacknowledged theorist of subjectivity himself, a theorist who offers an alternative perspective to rethink the foundations of subjectivity in relational, affective terms. More precisely, I propose that a focus on the experience of ''mimesis,'' understood as a disconcerting psychic phenomenon which troubles the boundaries of individuation, can be instrumental in reconsidering the theoretical foundations of Bataille's engagement with what he calls ''contagious subjectivity'' (*subjectivité contagieuse*) (VIII: 288).[5] As a counterpoint to still-dominant accounts of subject formation in terms of linguistic mediation and unifying specular identifications, I argue that Bataille explores, in a Nietzschean fashion, the immanent role of bodily, mimetic affects (such as laughter) which, in his view, are responsible for the birth of a ''subject'' which is not one.[6] If recent critics still tend to relegate Bataille's communicative thought to a ''metaphysics of the subject,'' I adopt a genealogical approach to Bataille's work and argue that his thought relies on what he calls, following the long-neglected psychologist Pierre Janet, a ''psychology of the *socius*'' (II: 287). That is, a mimetic, intersubjective psychology which transgresses precisely this metaphysics insofar as it considers the ''other'' with whom I communicate as already interior to myself, already constitutive of what I am, so intertwined with myself that metaphysical distinctions between ''self'' and ''other,'' ''interior'' and ''exterior,'' no longer hold – in short, already a *socius*.

Bataille's career-long meditation on contagious forms of mimetic communication offers us a precious insight into the mysterious, intersubjective process whereby we become ourselves – while being someone other. Seen in this light, Bataille's theory of communication is perhaps less concerned with the *death* of a linguistic subject (the subject of the signifier), and more invested in the *birth* of an affective subject (the subject of mimesis). As we shall now progressively see, Bataille's account of the birth of the subject out of the laughter of the *socius* may even offer us a provisional answer to the much-discussed question ''who comes after the subject?''[7]

## the mimetic reflex of communication

> [I]ncipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere materm.
> (Virgil qtd in Bataille, *Guilty*, *Œuvres complètes* V: 389)

Let us start our genealogy of sovereign forms of communication in the proximity of Bataille's beginning as a theorist in the early 1930s, but also the beginning of the experience of communication in childhood. In one of his ''Essais de sociologie,'' collected in the second volume of the *Œuvres complètes*, Bataille turns to consider the affective dynamic that informs the mother's communication to her baby. Speaking of the maternal attempt to convey a feeling of disgust for the child's own stools – which attract children as much as they repel adults – Bataille writes: ''During the formation of behavioral attitudes in childhood, the act of exclusion is not directly assumed. It is communicated from the mother to the child through the means of funny faces [*grimaces*] and expressive exclamations'' (II: 220). This passage is taken from one of

Bataille's early theoretical sketches, yet the language and examples he relies on are already characteristically Bataillean. The French theorist, in fact, makes clear that, from the very beginning, even what may seem a most "natural" response of disgust is not dependent on the object itself – no matter how "abject" the object is. Nor does it originate within the subject itself – no matter how "interior" that experience is. Rather, affective responses, for Bataille, emerge through a relation of non-discursive, mimetic communication that takes place between the child and a significant other, in this case the mother. The child facing the maternal "funny faces" and "expressive exclamations" will start instinctively imitating them and, through such a facial, automatic mimicry, s/he will eventually experience the same feelings of disgust as the mother. For Bataille, then, an automatic mechanism based on an involuntary, reflex mimesis leads the child to reproduce the exterior visual expression of the other; and this mimetic reproduction of a facial gesture is, in turn, responsible for the emergence of an interior "affect" within the subject.[8] We already begin to see that for the early Bataille, the experience of "communication" in childhood involves the "curious intersection of being" (34) described in Foucault's account of "transgression," and that such an intersection is predicated on a mimetic mechanism which crosses the limits of individuation, opening the subject to its affective outside, as it were.

It is important to stress that this is not an idiosyncratic, marginal model of communication restricted to Bataille's early period. In his later work, Bataille will consistently rely on the same model of mimetic, automatic reflexes in order to account for the general experience of contagious forms of communication. Thus, towards the end of his career, he returns to the topic of the formation of attitudes in childhood as he writes that we "have to teach them [disgust] by pantomime" (*Erotism* 58). In *Guilty*, not limiting this mimetic communication between mother and child to the feeling of disgust, he writes: "the mother provokes laughter in her child via a mimicry which engenders an emotional disequilibrium. She suddenly approaches its face, comes up with playful, surprising expressions, or utters strange little cries" (V: 390). And in *Erotism*, after accounting for the major instances of sovereign communication (such as disgust, eroticism and laughter), he makes clear that the experiences that interest him are firmly rooted in contagious and, thus, mimetic affects:

> The contagion in question is like that of yawning or laughter. A yawn makes one yawn, repeated gusts of laughter make one want to laugh . . . Seeing and hearing a man laugh I participate in his emotion from inside myself. This sensation felt inside me communicates itself to me and that is what makes me laugh: we have an immediate knowledge of the other person's laughter when we laugh ourselves or of excitement when we share it. (152–53)

Clearly, then, for Bataille, the experience of communication is predicated on a mimetic mechanism that transgresses the boundaries of individuation and is at the base of most ordinary phenomena. Such phenomena, like the contagion of a yawn or of laughter are so ordinary that they tend to go unnoticed, and thus unthought, and thus untheorized; yet they become immediately apparent if we rely on a type of experiential knowledge – what Bataille calls "lived *affective* experience" (I: 348) – that is attentive to the contagious dimension of bodily affects.

Such an immediate conception of non-linguistic communication that opens up a provisional affective continuum in the liminal space between self and other may seem theoretically naïve for us today (Derrida says "equivocal") since we are still so accustomed to think of communication in terms of linguistic mediation and deferral. It is thus not surprising that this mimetic principle at the heart of Bataille's theory of communication has largely gone unnoticed. Yet it is important to stress that as Bataille roots communication in an immediate automatic, bodily reflex, he is not saying anything truly original. Even prominent philosophers among postmodern quarters like Friedrich Nietzsche had already made strikingly clear that the origins of communication are based on what he calls a "compulsion to imitate" which leads the subject to automatically reproduce the facial gestures of the other and, by doing so,

to experience the affect of the other. Thus, Nietzsche, in the fragments collected in *The Will to Power* specifies: "[o]ne never communicates thoughts: one communicates movements, mimic signs, which we then trace back to thoughts" (809). And in *Human All Too Human*, preparing the way for Bataille's conception of communication, Nietzsche stresses that the origins of this mimetic principle are rooted in the experience of childhood:

> Older than speech is the mimicking of gestures, which takes place involuntarily and is even now . . . so strong that we cannot look upon facial movement without innervation of our own face . . . The imitated gesture led the person who was imitating back to the sensation that expressed itself in the face or body of the person being imitated. Thus the people learned to understand one another; thus the child still learns to understand its mother. (216)

That Bataille's notion of communication is indebted to Nietzsche's Dionysian, squandering thought is a point that is frequently made in Bataille studies.[9] Equally well known is the fact that Bataille's mimetic relation to Nietzsche is so profound that he goes as far as confusing himself with Nietzsche (he famously says: "I am the only one to present himself not as commentator, but as being the same as him" VIII: 401). Virtually unknown, however, is the fact that Bataille's understanding of the precise psychosomatic mechanism responsible for a communication between self and other that transgresses the boundaries of individuation is predicated on what Nietzsche called "genuine psycho-physiology" (*Beyond* 23) and the automatic "compulsion to imitate" it involves. Bataille's conception of the communicative subject, then, turns out to be Nietzschean in a more fundamental sense than has been previously recognized: Bataillean communication is Nietzschean communication insofar as it is mimetic communication.

And yet we would be misguided in rooting our genealogy of Bataille's theory of communication in a single, Nietzschean origin. Not only because Nietzsche, like other modernists after him, is already indebted to a much wider pre-Freudian psycho-physiological tradition that looms large in the late nineteenth century,[10] but also because Bataille's communicative thought directly aligns itself with specific branches of this theoretical tradition. The idea that the subject responds automatically to gestures, expressions, and mimetic affects was still pervasive in late nineteenth-century French culture, a culture dominated by a pre-psychoanalytical model of the unconscious, which the historian Marcel Gauchet has called "*inconscient cérébral*."[11] That is, a model of the unconscious which is not based on a repressive hypothesis but, rather, on a psycho-physiological model of the psyche which roots the subject in the immediacy of bodily, automatic reflexes – reflexes the subject cannot *consciously* control and are, in this sense, *unconscious*.[12]

Bataille scholars have tended to be skeptical of this pre-Freudian model of the unconscious,[13] yet, as we shall see, this did not prevent Bataille relying heavily on this theoretical model in order to account for the reflex experience of fundamental forms of communication. That recent discoveries in developmental psychology and the neurosciences have confirmed the hypothesis of the primacy of mimetic, automatic reflexes in the formation of the psychic life of the subject testifies to Bataille's theoretical timeliness (I shall return to this). For the moment, suffice it to say that we already seem to have reached the psycho-physiological roots of Bataille's understanding of communicative force, and are now in a position to better understand the general principle on which Bataille's transgressive communication, and what he will later call "*la subjectivité contagieuse*," relies. Communication, for Bataille, as for Nietzsche before him, is contagious and transgresses the limits that divide self from other insofar as it is predicated on an involuntary reflex mechanism which leads the subject to mimetically reproduce the gestures of the other. A non-mediated, psycho-physiological mimesis is thus responsible for the emergence of the affect of the other within the subject, a mimetic and impersonal affect which, from childhood on, crosses and re-crosses the limits of individuation. And it is through such a transgressive communication that the affective life of the subject is stimulated, or,

as Nietzsche says, "innervated." We are thus beginning to realize that Bataille, one of the major "precursors" of the poststructuralist death of the subject and the linguistic mediation it entails, turns out to be fundamentally aligned with a model of communication that accounts for the emergence of subjectivity by privileging the immediacy of bodily reflexes. Perhaps, then, if Bataille retains the notion of "subject," it is not so much in order to advocate the "subject of the *signifier*" but the "subject of *mimesis*" instead.

So far so good. But are psycho-physiological, automatic reflexes all there is to Bataillean forms of communication? Is this communicative experience so blind to the identity of the other? And what are the theoretical implications of a conception of communication which breaks down the distinction between subject and object, exterior and interior, what the other feels and what the subject feels? Nineteenth-century psycho-physiology does not say. Hence, in order to pursue his dissection of the experience of communication, Bataille looks not only backward, towards past psycho-physiological conceptions of the unconscious concerned with the immediacy of contagious reflexes. He is equally looking forward, towards more contemporary psychic research. More precisely, he relies on the research of one of the most influential psychologists of his time, a figure who has been largely neglected in the past Freudian century, but that our own post-Freudian era is now beginning to reevaluate, namely the French philosopher and psychologist Pierre Janet.[14]

## bataille, janet and the psychology of the *socius*

It is well known that Bataille's collaborator and co-founder of the Collège de sociologie, Roger Caillois, relied explicitly on Pierre Janet in order to account for his conception of *mimétisme*.[15] Less known, however, is the fact that Bataille himself was well read in Janet's psychology. Like Caillois, Bataille finds a theoretical source of inspiration in Janet's conception of mimesis but, unlike his collaborator, he is much more interested in exploring the intersubjective, psychological foundations of this Janetian concept. Serving as the vice-president of the short-lived Société de psychologie collective founded by Janet in 1937,[16] during the same period, Bataille finds in Janet a powerful source of theoretical inspiration to account for the non-discursive experience of sovereign communication. This largely neglected point is central in accounting for the theoretical foundations of Bataille's communicative thought, a thought in which, as we have seen, the subject is "always already" inextricably tied – via the contagious experience of mimesis – to someone other.

Bataille finds in Janet's "psychology of the socius" a theoretical supplement that allows him to move beyond nineteenth-century psycho-physiology in order to account for contagious forms of communication in intersubjective, mimetic terms. In a lecture delivered in the context of the Société de psychologie collective Bataille writes: "Professor Janet repeatedly insisted on the fact that the individual subject cannot easily distinguish itself from its fellow [*semblable*] with whom he is in relationship [*rapport*], that is, from the socius" (II: 287). Similarly, in another lecture of the same period given in the context of the Collège de sociologie, Bataille returns to Janet's psychology in a decisive passage devoted to exploring the contagious dimension of laughter. Thus, he links what he calls "the well-known principle of contagion, or if you still want to call it that, fellow feeling, *sympathie*" to what he calls, following Janet, "the feeling of permeability experienced when confronted with an other/socius [*sentiment éprouvé en face d'un autre/socius*]" (Hollier, *College* 109). Given Bataille's emphasis on the concept of *socius* in order to account for the intersubjective dynamic that is at the heart of an exemplary form of communication, let us now ask: who exactly is this *socius* responsible for that disconcerting feeling of permeability that cracks the subject up, in laughter?

In order to answer this question, and take another step in our alternative genealogy of Bataille's conception of communication, a detour via Janet is necessary. In fact, as we shall now see, Janet's "psychology of the *socius*" opens up a new theoretical perspective on the question of the

subject that allows us to rethink the foundations of Bataille's transgressive thought in relational, mimetic terms.

Succeeding Ribot and Charcot as the president of the Congrès International de Psychologie, Janet opens the eleventh meeting held in July 1937 with an introductory speech titled "Les Conduites sociales," which sets out to indicate what he calls his "dreams for future psychological studies" (138).[17] In this lecture, delivered towards the end of his career (and subsequently expanded in an article titled "Les Troubles de la personnalité sociale"), Janet begins with the humble recognition that despite his career-long efforts to go beyond what he calls "a subjective psychology," his research still remained "too much confined within a personal psychology" (141). For Janet, the limits of such a confinement within a psychology of the subject – which he considers symptomatic of the discipline of psychology as a whole – are particularly visible if we realize that the subject is not a monadic, self-contained form which comes into being in isolation but is, from the very beginning, a permeable mimetic entity that is open to the affect of the other. Now, it is precisely in order to move beyond such a subjectivist fallacy and open up a new direction of psychological research that Janet encourages young generations of psychologists to explore the role of the other in the formation of what he calls "social personality" (142). Hence, he urges future psychologists to "move beyond too personal a psychology and to begin the inter-psychology Gabriel Tarde spoke of" (149).[18] The "psychology of the socius" is Janet's major step towards this psychology of the future.

"*Socius*" is the concept Janet uses in order to account for those "others" who are not experienced as truly other insofar as they are constitutive of the formation of the subject (i.e., parents, siblings, teachers, friends) – external models who give life to the child's psychic development and are experienced as being internal to oneself. For Janet, then, communication with the *socii* is responsible for the emergence of a form of subjectivity that must be understood in relational, mimetic terms. "The act of the socius," he writes, "determines the more or less complete and exact imitations that we see very early on in small children" ("Troubles" 167). And he adds: "Already [James] Baldwin signaled that the important consequence of imitation is to introduce into an individual consciousness the thoughts of another" (167). Janet is thus clear on the fact that it is through mimesis that the incorporation of the other/*socius* in the self actually takes place and, as a consequence, the child comes into being as a social, relational subject. Further, Janet also reminds us that imitation is, as he says, "far from being as simple as we think it is" and adds an extra layer of complexity to our understanding of the mimetic communication responsible for the emergence of subjectivity. Thus, he specifies that in mimetic relations

> I must constantly modify my behavior [*conduite*] vis-à-vis a socius, depending on the reaction it provokes, reaction I am incessantly obliged to take into account . . . the subject who imitates modifies its action in relation to the action of the other and . . . the imitated subject equally modifies its own. Thus, one is not imitated uniquely in a passive way; and there is a special attitude of the one who is imitated. ("Sentiments" 34)

The experience of mimesis, for Janet, is a fundamentally relational process that transgresses reassuring distinctions between subject and object, imitator and imitated, in favor of a back-looping effect that short-circuits a linear, causal logic. The subject's imitation of the other generates a retroactive effect whereby the other starts imitating the subject imitating the other, and so on, ad infinitum. This also means that in behavioral mimesis there is no stable referent for the subject to imitate, no clear-cut distinction between the subject and the object of imitation. Rather, mimetic communication with the *socius* initiates a complex intersubjective spiraling process of mutual interaction that challenges binary distinctions between self and other, origin and copy, interior and exterior, the experience of the subject and the experience of the other.

Now, for Janet, it is precisely this spiraling process of mimetic interaction which, from childhood on, characterizes the relationship of

the subject to the *socii* that surround it, that forces a reconsideration of subjectivity in relational rather than monadic terms. Elaborating on the psychological implications of this reciprocal, mimetic relationship, Janet adds that the *socius* occupies such a fundamental place in the interior, psychic development of the subject that it "troubles" the distinction between self and other which is so central to traditional notions of what he calls "personality" or, alternatively, "subject":

> The two personalities, that of the subject and that of the socius, emerge together in a confused matter [*s'édifient ensemble d'une manière confuse*] . . . Here we arrive at what may seem a paradoxical idea. Namely, that the distinction between persons, between myself and the socius is not as fundamental and as primitive as we thought it was, and that there was a period, of which there are still traces, where my person and my acts were confused with the person and the acts of others. ("Conduites" 145)

Here we see how subversive of traditional notions of subjectivity that consider the subject in terms of monadic, self-enclosed, unitary substance Janet's psychology of the *socius* actually is. For Janet, in fact, this originary, foundational confusion of identities that defines such an affective relation in childhood is not the result of two separate subjects who join in a common act of communication – if only because there is no subject that preexists the experience of communication. Rather, for Janet, communication is the necessary condition for the emergence of a subject which is not one, in the sense that it is not a unitary, self-centered substance but a multiplicity in relational flux instead. The "subject," thus understood, is not conceived as a solipsistic, self-contained *subjectum* who subsequently relates to other subjects because, for Janet, it is precisely the communication with the others/*socius* which brings the subject into being as a relational, mimetic being. What Janet's psychology of the future suggests, finally, is that the experience of mimetic communication with the *socius* not only precedes the self/other distinction and is thus "exterior" to the self but is also the necessary condition for the formation of the "interior" life of the subject.

Recent theoretical discoveries in the sphere of developmental psychology have given new impetus to Janet's dream for a psychology of the future attentive to the relational, mimetic dimension of subject formation. For instance, Andrew Meltzoff and Keith Moore (independently from Janet) have adopted a relational perspective in order to address the question of infants' imitation, while at the same time returning to the question of newborns' responsiveness to facial imitation that had already struck Nietzsche, Janet and Bataille as being central to communication between newborn and mother. Grounding their research on an empirical basis, these contemporary psychologists have demonstrated that newborns only a few minutes old are already responsive to facial imitations such as protruding the tongue or opening the mouth (records of mimetic reflexes so far being set around 30-minute-olds!).[19] This is an important discovery; or, better, it is a *re*-discovery of a mimetic principle that was well known among late nineteenth-century psychologists who relied on a pre-Freudian conception of the unconscious in order to give an account of the psyche. What these recent empirical developments prove, then, is that the emphasis given to mimetic, involuntary reflexes can no longer be simply dismissed as the product of an antiquated conception of the unconscious superseded by the so-called Freudian "discovery." Rather, they confirm the value of those physicians of the soul such as Nietzsche, Janet and Bataille who realized, in an untimely fashion, that mimetic reflexes are much more important in the psychic development of the subject than psychologists from Freud onwards will later be willing to acknowledge. If these figures are still important in our post-Freudian era, then, it is also because they offer us a theory of communication which helps us to rethink the foundations of subjectivity, in relational, mimetic terms, terms which empirical researchers are barely beginning to investigate.

We can now better understand why these external *socii* with whom communication takes place are experienced as being constitutive of the subject. A mimetic relation with the *socius*

reopens those affective channels which nourished the subject in the first place and convey what Janet also calls "an immediate certitude and in a way, reflex of the other's feelings" ("Troubles" 161). Characteristic examples of these reflex, immediate affects that trouble the stability of subjectivity concern the mother's relations to the child, or the leader's orders to soldiers. Janet, in other words, extends his considerations on the psychology of the *socius* to those paradigmatic examples Bataille will later rely on in order to account for the process of sovereign communication. The child's automatic reflex to imitate the mother's facial expressions, the soldier's automatic marching in step, as well as yawning and laughing subjects for both Janet and Bataille, are not monadic individuals (from Latin, *individuus*, indivisible) who are self-sufficient, self-contained monads and fundamentally distinct from others. On the contrary, they are engaged in a process of affective (mimetic) relationship, which is predicated on the subject's primary (mimetic) openness to the (mimetic) affect of the *socius*. We begin to realize that the subject, as Bataille understands it, is "always already" open to the experience of transgression, insofar as it is precisely through such an originary transgression of limits that the communicative subject – ticklish as it is – emerges into being.

## the ticklish subject

> [T]he happiest laughter is the one that gives birth to a child. (Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure* 106)

We were wondering which conception of the subject underscores the Bataillean model of sovereign communication. What were the affective foundations of the "*subjectivité contagieuse*" that informs the interior experience of communication, and is responsible for the affective transgression of the limits of individuation? A direct answer, it should be clear by now, can be found in Bataille's reliance on the nineteenth-century Nietzschean model of the reflex unconscious in general, and on Pierre Janet's psychology of the *socius* in particular. In fact, for Bataille, as for Nietzsche and Janet before him, it is because the subject is from the very beginning open, by reflex, to the contagious affects of the *socii* in childhood, that it continues to remain vulnerable to the transgressive power of mimetic communication in adulthood.

Bataille puts it quite clearly as he pursues his discussion of what he calls a "fundamental example" of communication – namely laughter – and the affective permeability it generates. Anticipating contemporary developments in child psychology, Bataille focuses on the newborn's immediate response to mimetic reflexes as he writes: "[a] child, who is a few weeks old, responding to an adult's laughter, represents unambiguously the classic example of immediate laughter" (Hollier, *College* 107). And he specifies:

> Now I will go back to the child's laughter as a basic example [*exemple fondamental*] of permeability to a common movement. It happens when faced with adult laughter [*Il a lieu en face du rire de l'adulte*]. It establishes between adult and child a communication that is already so profound that it later will be able to be enriched and amplified by multiplying its possibilities without its intimate nature being changed. (Hollier, *College* 109)

For Bataille, then, in the beginning was laughter. Or, as he will later say, quoting Virgil: "*incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere materm*" (V: 389).[20] Initially triggered by the mimicry of that *socius* par excellence who is the mother through an immediate, affective communication based on an involuntary reflex mechanism, laughter, for Bataille, is the source of a primary, pre-subjective permeability to the affect of the other/*socius*, a contagious, mimetic affect which brings the subject into being as a permeable, relational, being.

At the most general level, Bataille makes clear that communication with the *socius* does not communicate any linguistic message ("there is no pure and simple communication"), insofar as for Bataille the affective medium *is* the message ("what is communicated is joy") (Hollier, *College* 110). And, as he specifies, the joy conveyed by the laughter of the *socius* establishes

a communication "so deep" that it paves the way for future forms of communicative experiences. Moreover, Bataille's implicit reliance on Janet's intersubjective psychology suggests that the "subject," as it operates in his heterogeneous thought, emerges out of an affective relation of mimetic communication with another/*socius* who is experienced as being both interior and exterior to the subject/*ipse*. Prior to the experience of communication there is, strictly speaking, no subject to speak of and thus no limits to transgress. The subject that emerges from the experience of communication is, however, from the very beginning, permeable to the other – if only because it is the laughter of the other that brings it into being. As he will later put it, "the happiest laughter is the one that gives birth to a child" (*Expérience* 106).

An insight into the psychological and psychophysiological foundations of Bataille's immanent conception of communication allows us to answer some of the fundamental questions addressed to Bataille from a purely ontological perspective, and to clarify some fundamental misunderstandings concerning his theory of the subject. Leslie Hill, for instance, in an informed reading of Bataille, wonders "whether, despite its attempt to overcome the subject–object relation, his work does not remain hostage to it and to a metaphysics of the subject" (53). Along similar lines, François Warin, despite his awareness of the presence of mimetic elements in Bataille's thought, claims that Bataille's language

> remains often prisoner of the metaphysics of the subject, a metaphysics which borrows its models and concepts from the constituted natural sciences (fusion, effusion, contagion, dissolution . . .) concepts which always presuppose the existence of a substance, of a *upokeimenon* isolated and closed upon itself. (254)

A genealogical account of Bataille's psychological sources suggests otherwise. Concepts like "fusion," "contagion," "effusion" are not only central notions in the natural sciences (and, closer to home, in human sciences like religious anthropology and crowd psychology) but also stem from a mimetic tradition rooted in a pre-psychoanalytical conception of the reflex unconscious that challenges precisely the ontology of the subject these critics invoke. As we have seen, Bataille's conception of "the subject" is far from reposing on a self-enclosed monadic substance (or *upokeimenon*), but is traversed by a communicative flux of mimetic affects which renders it, from the very beginning, vulnerable to what Bataille calls the "permeability experienced when confronted with another" (or *socius*). In short, the Bataillean conception of communication does not repose on a *metaphysics of the subject* but on a *psychology of the socius* that transgresses precisely such a metaphysics instead.

Am "I" exaggerating Bataille's reliance on a permeable conception of the mimetic subject which slips (*glisse*) through the metaphysics of subjectivity? Are "we" making too much of a theory of mimetic subjectivity on the basis of a punctual moment in Bataille's early period, unduly generalizing his take on laughter to other forms of communication? Perhaps. And yet Bataille is insistent in positing the centrality of laughter as the fundamental relational dynamic which informs communicative experiences yet to come. Thus, he goes as far as calling laughter the "specific form of human interaction" (Hollier, *College* 108); or, alternatively, the "fundamental phenomenon of interattraction" (109). Moreover, in *Guilty*, extending his reflections on the laughter that emerges in the sovereign communication between mother and child, he writes: "the essential thing is the instant of violent contact, where life slips [*glisse*] from one to the other" (V: 390). And he adds in a striking formulation which sums up his conception of mimetic communication: "what fusion introduces in me is *another* existence [*une existence* autre] (it introduces this *other* in me as *mine*, but at the same time as *other*)" (V: 391). Such paradoxical formulations where the experience of fusion dissolves the metaphysical boundaries between self and other do not entail a logical confusion. Rather, these lines indicate that the experience of laughter, for Bataille, is not only at the origin of communication but is also an affective locus of *both* dissolution *and* emergence of the subject, of being *oneself* while becoming someone *other*. Laughter, then, is a primary mimetic experience

that cracks the subject up, in an ecstatic form of communication, which opens its affective system to the affect of the other, and in this opening subjectivity slips (*glisse*) through idealized metaphysical notions of what the subject "is," or is supposed to "be."

A genealogy of the mimetic foundations of Bataille's conception of communication indicates that for the French theorist the child's initial openness to the reflex of communication is responsible for its subsequent permeability to other subjects, and continues to pave the way for future transgressive forms of communication that challenge the limits of individuation. "This immediate joy," as he writes, "will persist through the social alteration of laughter" (110). And he specifies: "Laughter would be only one of the possible currents since unifying movements, transmissible from one person to another, are able to take different forms as soon as permeability frees a passage [*ouvre librement la voie à des parcours*]" (109). In the context of this lecture at the Collège de sociologie, Bataille will continue to delineate other "passages" that allow fluxes of affect that disrupt the distinction between self and other to flow. As he puts it: "Contagious weeping and erotic contagion are the only things that, subsequently will be able to deepen human communication" (109). Sobbing and eroticism, then, will continue to deepen the mimetic channels that tie the subject to the other. But as Bataille will pursue his exploration of what he calls "moments of intense communication" (110), he will continue to explore other, immediate forms of affective communication that transgress the boundaries of individuation. From drunkenness to ecstasy, trance to dramatization, sacrifice to festive celebrations, fluxes of contagious forms of communication will continue to flow through the passages initially freed by the laughter of the *socius*. In sum, if the laughter of the *socius* is a foundational moment in Bataille's theory of subjectivity it is because it opens those mimetic channels that will continue to irrigate both the communicative subject and Bataille's heterogeneous thought on the subject. For Bataille, then, at the origins of subjectivity there is nothing foundational, solid or original – but the fluid, communicative experience of mimesis instead.

It might be objected that in the context of his discussion of laughter at the Collège, Bataille relies on Alexandre Kojève's Hegelian language of "recognition" in order to account for the mimetic relation between the subject and the *socius*. Yet, already during this Kojèvian period, he makes clear that the child's visual recognition of its mother is not the condition for an affective communication to take place. On the contrary, recognition is but the effect of [*construit à partir de*] a previous, originary mimetic affectability [*sentiment éprouvé*] that overtakes the subject immediately, as it is exposed to the presence of an "autre/*socius*." As Bataille puts it, "the phenomenon of recognition will appear to be constructed on the basis of the feeling of permeability when confronted with an other/socius" (Hollier, *College* 109). For Bataille, the immediacy of mimetic affects is not only prior to representational distance but is also the necessary condition for a mediated recognition to take place.[21]

The Bataillean subject does not see the other, and then feel her/his affect; it feels the affect of the other first, and it is on the basis of this mimetic experience that recognition is subsequently based. Nor does the subject have its origin in a complacent feeling of narcissistic self-satisfaction at the thought that "this ideal form is my ego." On the contrary, laughter, for Bataille, stems from the subject's affective openness to the contagious communication of the laughter of the *socius* which, like an electric current, transgresses the boundaries of individuation and generates the experience that "this mimetic affect is my ego"! This child does not come into being by pondering his static mirror-like image, an immobile form represented to itself from a distance ("I see myself therefore I am") but, rather, experiences, with joy, the living pathos of the laughter of the *socius* whose "expressive exclamations" tickle the subject into being ("I feel – I am"). In short, the Bataillean subject is not born out of the spirit of idealism, but out of an uncontrolled burst of laughter instead.

That the experience of sovereign communication, as it continues to operate in the general economy of Bataille's thought, remains mimetic in the sense that it is predicated on a contagious, immediate, non-linguistic and

non-representational experience that transgresses the boundaries of individuation is confirmed later in his work. In *La Souveraineté*, for instance, Bataille, speaking of the "subjectivity of laughter," says that "it cannot be expressed discursively, yet those who, themselves, laugh, feel from one to the other an unexpected transparency, overwhelming too, as if the same laughter would engender a unique, interior flux" (VIII: 288). And in the concluding pages of *Guilty* he speaks of ticklish forms of laughter [*rire de chatouillement*] along the following lines: "the tickled subject . . . escapes from himself, and by doing so, opens himself to the other (who tickles him)" (V: 392). Bataille's ticklish subject, then, emerges in the liminal space *between* subjects, at the instant of an opening where the subject's "being" is momentarily suspended in favor of a ticklish form of mimetic communication which introduces the subject to the experience of becoming-other.

In the light of this genealogical account of Bataille's theory of communication, we can see that Foucault was perhaps closest to Bataille's Nietzschean spirit as he spoke of transgression in terms of a "curious intersection of beings that have no other life beyond this moment where they totally exchange their beings" (34), and of communication as an "opening where its [the subject's] being surges forth" (43). What we must add is that the non-dialectical language of transgression is mimetic through and through insofar as it is the experience of mimesis that is the necessary condition for the birth of a bodily, immanent, subject. For Bataille, as we have seen, this birth takes place through the womb of contagious forms of communication which, like the laughter of the *socius*, challenge the boundaries of beings by tickling the subject into a being, which is not one.

Finally, in order to move towards a conclusion, we should notice that a general awareness of Bataille's debt to Janet's pre-subjective account of the psychology of the *socius* helps us illuminate some enigmatic, paradoxical affirmations – that have often baffled critics – concerning the problematic of sovereign communication in his later period. For instance, readers of *L'Expérience intérieure* have often wondered why Bataille calls the experience of communication "inner" despite its explicit ecstatic character. From a mimetic perspective, it is clear that it is only because this *socius* with whom *ipse* communicates is already interior to the subject, constitutive of an "identity" which is *not* identical to itself, that a flow between "interior" and "exterior," "self" and "other," can actually take place. Similarly, we can better understand why Bataille famously writes: "I cannot make the difference between myself and the others with whom I desire to communicate" (*Expérience* 55). Or that "communication is not a fact that is added onto human reality but is constitutive of it" (37). It is because communication with the other/*socius* brings the subject/*ipse* into being as a relational, mimetic subject that dualistic metaphysical categories like "self" and "other," "interior" and "exterior" are no longer tenable to account for the transgressive experience of sovereign communication. As Bataille himself puts it in *La Souveraineté*: "[w]e live in a world of *subjects* whose *exterior*, *objective* aspect is always inseparable from the *interior*" (VIII: 284).

Communication as Bataille understands it, then, does not entail a relation to another subject who is exterior to the self; nor does it involve the assimilation of the other into the subject, and thus an annihilation of the other as other (as commentators have often suggested). Rather, communication involves an affective experience with the other, or, as Bataille also calls it, borrowing an old notion taken from the hypnotic/mimetic tradition, a "*rapport*" with the other which reopens those affective "passages" engendered by different forms of ticklish communication. Sovereign communication, in other words, continues to be possible in adulthood because it is through the other that the subject comes into being in childhood. Put differently, communication is an inner experience which reenacts the affective, mimetic "rapport" which brings the subject into being *with* the other, *as* other.[22]

Towards the end of his career, Bataille, finding as always a theoretical starting point in his lived, affective experience, speaks of himself in terms that gesture towards the beyond of the subject he has been experiencing/theorizing all along. Thus, he says in a characteristically personal

mood: "I am – the being in myself is – as much outside of me as in myself" (VIII: 297). Here, as well as in the other passages quoted above, and many others yet to explore, Bataille is just restating concisely what his theory of communication says consistently. Namely, that the subject of communication is neither interior nor exterior to oneself, neither fully oneself nor fully someone other, but rather it is what he calls an "intermediary between an individual and another" (VIII: 286). This "subject," this intermediary subject position, this *subjectivité contagieuse*, is thus nothing more and nothing less than a passage of contagious experiences, a mimetic current that slides between the metaphysics of the subject and is responsible for the birth of what he calls "this *other* in me as *mine*, but at the same time as *other*" (V: 391).

Perhaps, then, the experience of mimetic communication is the general hinge which swings the subject from one pole to the other of Bataille's conceptual economy: from work to play, from project to chance, from time to the instant, from slavery to sovereignty, from the seriousness of philosophy to an innocent, Nietzschean laughter. At the summit of such mimetic experiences, sovereign communication leaves the subjects mid-air, in an instant where the boundaries of individuation are provisionally suspended, both dissolved and sustained by the affects that flow through the limits of their ticklish bodies. Quite naturally, in such an intense state of mimetic loss of selfhood, the subject is no longer concerned with the profane sphere of work, the realm of what is useful and can be realized through a dutiful project that unfolds in time. At the instant of sovereign communication, the subject is "sans emploi," to be sure. Yet Bataille thinks that this experience of the summit (*expérience du sommet*) opens the gates for the "sensitive emotional contact" (VIII: 288) to flow, and this affective flux where the subject has the chance to be open to the pathos of the other/*socius*, is for him an experience for which it is worth living.

From laughter to inner experience, via tears, trance, eroticism, death, dramatization and sacred festivities, mimesis seems, indeed, to be at the center of Bataille's persistent preoccupation with sovereign forms of communication. As I have tried to show, it is only because of the subject's prior affectability to the contagious affects of the other/*socius* who is both exterior and interior to *ipse* that the latter remains permeable to subsequent forms of communicative experience. Or, if you prefer, it is because the subject is, from the very beginning, chained to another subject that such a magnetic-electric-hypnotic-mimetic current characteristic of sovereign forms of communication can actually flow. Which also means that communication is not only concerned with the dissolution of the boundaries of the subject, nor with a mystical fusion with what Bataille calls the "continuity of Being" (though it is both these things), but also, and perhaps more importantly, with a reenactment of that very affective process which *brings the subject into being as a mimetic, relational being*.

To be sure, Bataille does not offer a single, homogeneous answer to the open question "who comes after the subject?" Yet his account of the birth of the subject out of the laughter of the *socius* affirms the emergence of a modality of being which is always open to the possibility of *becoming* other. The laughter of the *socius*, in fact, opens up the channels of affective communication that pave the way for the subject's future permeability to other forms of mimetic experiences; these passages also prepare the subject for future encounters with *socii* yet to come, with whom the experience of sovereign communication may, with some chance, eventually be reenacted. That Bataille could not effectively communicate these interior experiences on the page is clear. Yet this impossible, communicative task did not prevent him from affirming that "truth is not where humans consider themselves in isolation: it starts with conversations, shared laughter [*rires partagés*], friendship, eroticism and it only takes place by *passing from one to the other*" (V: 282; my emphasis).

Bataille's transgressive, mimetic thought makes the subject continuously slide on the affective passages that emerge in instants of sovereign communication with the *socii*. That is, those "others" who are interlocked with the "subject" in such a fundamental way that they

cannot be dissociated from what the subject "is." These *socii* do not communicate with me, but through me, because they are already chained into me – part of the experience of what Bataille calls, thinking of Nietzsche, "being multiple singular" [*être à plusieurs un seul*]" (*Sur Nietzsche* VI: 279).

## notes

I would like to thank Salah el Moncef and *Angelaki*'s reviewer for their insightful comments and suggestions. Of all my *socii*, I am especially grateful to Michaela Lawtoo and Kim Lawtoo for providing, on a daily basis, the affective source of inspiration for this piece. This essay is dedicated to them.

1 Such a disagreement can be traced back to the earliest and most influential readers of Bataille. Michel Foucault, for instance, in "A Preface to Transgression," affirms that Bataille's transgressive thought involves a "shattering of the philosophical subject" (43). Jacques Derrida, in "From Restricted to General Economy," while also emphasizing the de-centering movement at work in Bataille's text, argues that "[o]ne could even abstract from Bataille's text an entire zone throughout which sovereignty remains inside a classical philosophy of the *subject*" (267). And Jean-Luc Nancy, in *La Communauté désœuvrée*, writes that "perhaps Bataille did not have a *concept* of subject"; and specifies that "at least up to a point, the communication that is in excess of the subject is related to a subject, or it erects itself as a subject" (63; my trans.).

2 See the special issue of *Diacritics*, "Georges Bataille: An Occasion for Misunderstanding" (26.2 (1996)).

3 Bataille's conception of "communication" should not be confused with a linguistic exchange between subjects – though poetry is a manifestation of sovereign communication. For Bataille, communication is predicated on heterogeneous, affective experiences that are, as he says, "impossible" to convey through language. As he puts it in *La Souveraineté*: "communication is never the object of discursive knowledge, but is communicated from subject to subject through a sensitive emotional contact [*contact sensible de l'émotion*]: it is communicated in laughter, tears and in the tumult of festivities" (VIII: 287–88).



These Dionysian experiences are "sovereign" in the specific Bataillean sense that they are outside the sphere of work (or "slavery"), are rooted in the "instant," are characterized by high levels of emotional "squandering," and "transgress" the distinction between self and other. I have commented on the Nietzschean and Hegelian implications of Bataille's notions of "sovereign communication" elsewhere; see Lawtoo, "Bataille."

4 Patrick ffrench's *After Bataille*, one of the most important recent interventions in Bataille studies, shares my investment in reinscribing Bataille's thought back to the sphere of bodily affects and in uncovering, via a genealogical approach, the theories that already inform his thought. More specifically, ffrench and I share the conviction that Bataille's early thought is characterized by a theoretical emphasis on the power of "immediate emotional contagion" (*After* 4) – a theoretical approach we both partly inherit from Borch-Jacobsen's account of a "'bottomless' 'pre-subjective psychology'" (qtd in *After* 45). One of my claims is that though less visible in his second period, questions of pre-subjective, mimetic affects continue to run, like an undercurrent, through Bataille's corpus as a whole.

5 Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes* (12 vols.). Unless specified otherwise, translations are mine. Volume and page numbers are given in the body of the essay.

6 I take the concept of "subject" from Bataille himself, but we should be careful not to confuse his own idiosyncratic understanding of the concept of "subject" with traditional philosophical definitions. In Bataille's textual economy, "subject" is far from indicating a foundational substance, seat, or *subjectum* that is unitary, centered on itself, and predicated on the distinction between self and other, interior and exterior. As he explains it in *La Souveraineté*: "We live in a world of *subjects* whose *exterior, objective* aspect is always inseparable from the *interior*" (VIII: 284). And after identifying the notion of "subject" with the one of "sovereignty" ("the *subject* is, for me, the *sovereign*"), he adds: "the state of mind of the sovereign, of the *subject*, is *communicated subjectively* to those for whom he is sovereign" (VIII: 287). If I retain the notion of "subject" it is in order to gesture *beyond* the subject, towards an impersonal, intersubjective communicative dynamic of "sensitive emotional contact[s]" that is at the heart of Bataille's conception of sovereign communication.

7 *Who Comes After the Subject?* is the title of an influential collection of essays where a panoply of French philosophers commonly associated with poststructuralism and more or less directly indebted to Bataille – from Blanchot to Derrida, Deleuze to Nancy, Borch-Jacobsen to Lacoue-Labarthe – meditate on the future of the category of "subject." In this essay, I extend a mimetic line of inquiry opened up by Borch-Jacobsen's conception of "identification" and Lacoue-Labarthe's conception of "mimesis." Both concepts, as Lacoue-Labarthe aptly puts it, gesture towards "the process whose task – probably untenable – is to account for the birth of the subject" (204). What follows is an attempt to account for this "untenable," mimetic task via the filter of an "untenable," mimetic thinker.

8 That Bataille understands "affect" in mimetic, psychological terms is confirmed in other essays of the same period. In "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," for instance, Bataille accounts for the "force" of fascist sovereigns, and their will to power over the masses of soldiers thus: "'affectively' refers here to simple psychological behaviors, such as *standing at attention* [garde-à-vous] or *marching in step* [pas cadencé]" (I: 359). Affect, for the early Bataille, is thus mimetic in the sense that it is based on reflex, automatic reactions that implicate the subject in the psychic life of the other. Even in his later period "affect," for Bataille, continues to be understood in these immanent, "psycho-mimetic" terms.

9 See, for instance, Hollier, "Beyond"; Lawtoo, "Bataille"; and Warin, who devotes an entire book to the Nietzsche–Bataille connection.

10 See Lawtoo, "Nietzsche" esp. 681–84.

11 See Gauchet.

12 Patrick ffrench is right to stress that Bataille's account of the psyche is "fundamentally non-Freudian," and his emphasis on the importance of immediate affectivity does much to clarify Bataille's thought (14). Yet his claim that "Bataille's emphasis on affect sidesteps the issue of the unconscious and of subjectivity" needs to be qualified (14). The fact that Bataille sidesteps the *Freudian* notion of the unconscious does not mean that the unconscious does not play a part in his conception of subjectivity. Bataille, in fact, continues to operate within a pre-Freudian, psycho-physiological tradition of the "reflex unconscious" which has so far largely gone unnoticed in literary studies, but, as historians of psychology have pointed out, was still prevalent in the decades around the turn of the century. On the question of the unconscious, the most reliable historical reference is Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, esp. chapters 1–5. I discuss at length the links between pre-Freudian psychology and Modernism (including Bataille) in a recently completed study titled *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism, Mimesis and the Pre-Freudian Unconscious.*

13 See Richman 59.

14 Janet is not a well-known figure within literary studies as yet, but in the wake of Ellenberger's historical reevaluation of Freud's fundamental debt to Janet (*Discovery* chapters 6 and 7), theorists are beginning to turn towards this much-neglected figure. As the philosopher Ian Hacking puts it in *Rewriting the Soul*: "Janet was flexible and pragmatic, while it was Freud who was the dedicated and rather rigid theoretician in the spirit of the Enlightenment" (195). Freud's focus was on a "higher Truth about the psyche"; "he aimed at the true Theory to which all else had to be subservient" (196). Anticipating this critique, later in his career, Bataille will also define psychoanalysis as a "pensée abstraite" (VIII: 18).

15 Caillois is particularly interested in Janet's psychological research in "legendary psychasthenia," a mimetic pathology that generates as one of its major symptoms a feeling of dissolution of the boundaries of subjectivity. See esp. 111–13. For a critical evaluation of Caillois' take on mimesis, see Hollier, *Les Dépossédés* 55–71.

16 See Surya 330 n. 3.

17 All translations of Janet's texts are mine.

18 See Tarde.

19 See Meltzoff and Moore 9–12. Neurophysiologic studies have recently located the presence of "mirror neurons" that are automatically triggered by the visual movements of others with whom the subject relates. See Gallese.

20 Bataille specifies in a note that "[i]n a meeting at the *Collège de sociologie*, Roger Caillois . . . expressed a reserve on the meaning of this line. It is possible to translate it: 'start, little child, to recognize your mother through your laughter [*par ton rire*]' but also, 'by her laughter [*à son rire*]'" (V: 389–90).

21 Bataille's account of the birth of the subject may seem, at first sight, reminiscent of his contemporary Jacques Lacan, who in a celebrated essay also emphasized the role of mimetic, identificatory mechanisms in the formation of the ego (see "Le Stade du miroir" 93–100). Critics have emphasized the similarities between these two figures previously (see Dragon and Dean), and quite rightly so given their common theoretical sources (Kojève included). And yet if we focus on Bataille's and Lacan's respective accounts of the role of mimesis in the formation of the subject (or ego) a fundamental *différend* needs to be signaled. Lacan emphasizes the role of specular *mimesis* (or "identification") in the process of subject formation (94), but, contrary to Bataille, he rejects the centrality of an *affective mimesis* (or *Einfühlung*) in the process of formation of the ego. Thus, he states:

> It is this captation of the human form by the *imago*, more than an *Einfühlung* demonstrably absent during early childhood [*une* Einfühlung *dont tout démontre l'absence dans la prime enfance*] which dominates the entire dialectic of the child's behavior in the presence of the other [*semblable*] between six months and two years. ("Agressivité" 113)

Empirical psychologists have recently given support to the Bataillean/Nietzschean observation that the mimetic *Einfühlung* Lacan foreclosed is present in newborns from the very first days of existence. If Bataille's account of the formation of the subject remains timely for us today, it is also because he offers us a theoretical model to rethink the foundations of subjectivity that is in line with recent discoveries in the empirical sciences and had escaped notable twentieth-century psychologists.

22 Even in his later period, Bataille continues to rely on Janet's psychology. For instance, in a note to the introduction of *Inner Experience*, he writes: "Then I started reading Janet, imagining it necessary to use his subtlety in order to go further" (V: 430).

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Nidesh Lawtoo
Department of English
University of Lausanne
1015 Lausanne
Switzerland
E-mail: nidesh.lawtoo@unil.ch