

La Révolte enfantine: on Georges Bataille's "La Morale de Miller" and Jean-Paul Sartre's "Un Nouveau mystique".

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In 1946, Daniel Parker--the self-proclaimed "Président du Cartel d'Actions Sociales et Morales"--threatened to take legal action on the grounds of obscenity against the publication in French of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, and *Black Spring*.¹ The subsequent "Affaire Miller" brought Henry Miller's authorship to the forefront of a literary debate on obscenity and censorship and resulted in the formation of a "Defense Committee for Miller and Free Expression." Among its members were such literary figures as André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, André Breton, Paul Eluard, Robert Queaneau, and a number of other well-known writers. After much public debate in Miller's defense in journals and in the press, Daniel Parker eventually dropped his threat to sue Miller.

One member of the "Defense Committee" was Georges Bataille, who in 1946 published in the first issue of his journal *Critique* an essay on Miller: "La Morale de Miller." The publication of *Critique* was also a continuation of a public debate between Bataille and Sartre, whose existentialist journal *Les Temps Modernes* dealt with many of the same issues and writers.

Within the framework of that debate, Sartre's critique of Bataille in his 1943 essay "Un Nouveau Mystique" paradoxically repeats and redefines itself in Bataille's "La Morale de Miller." Through a comparison with Henry Miller, I will illuminate some of Bataille's ideas on literature and in that process show how Bataille, in writing about writers, tested his own theories on literature as a way to communicate revolt against society.

Two things emerge from Bataille's essay on Miller: a unique representation of how French critical theory dealt with and strove to appropriate writers commonly considered "obscene" and how literary debate made evident the widening schism between groups such as the existentialists and Bataille's more surrealist inspired anarchist visions of politics.

One fundamental question arises concerning Henry Miller: Is it possible to understand Miller through a debate so clearly set up to define and elaborate an ideology of literary criticism? In other words, can an objective analysis of Miller's literary merits, which will do him justice, result from such a debate? In this essay I will contend that there cannot be a single answer to that question; but there can be acknowledgement that Miller's attitude toward sexuality and the role of the narrator can be seen through the responses to his work and that those responses in turn attest to the complexity and depth of his writings.

The attempt to dislodge the traditional boundaries between the critic and his subject allies Bataille with Miller in more ways than one. For Bataille, as for Miller, writing became a way to represent a totality of radical experience from an aesthetic as well as political point of view. But although Miller was

crucially aware of the pitfalls in presenting himself as the chief object of his books as well as the main critic of his own persona, Bataille actively avoided (or tried to) the issue of evaluative discourse within literature.

That in effect, becomes the chief problem for Sartre and the starting point for his critique of Bataille in "Un Nouveau Mystique," which was first published in *Cahiers du Sud* in February 1943. Sartre claims that a writer cannot deal with critical discourse that attempts to place itself outside rational and dialectical definitions of morality. In pointing out and critiquing the mechanisms at work in Bataille's texts, Sartre claims that Bataille's suppositions on literature merely reach a dead end in so far as theory is concerned. For Bataille, literature becomes the only way to project a truly subversive voice; whereas for Sartre, literature is always dependent on the writer's critical and rational ability to analyze his own voice. Thus, although both writers are interested in whether literature can revolt and transgression in terms that differ radically from a literary criticism that strives to do the same, they reach different conclusions as to whether that is possible.

Sartre's major point of contention with Bataille is his tendency to consider literature as a separate realm, a way to portray an ecstatic vision of life that circumvents traditional notions of morality and critical discourse. According to Sartre, Bataille cannot glorify literature's position as sacred and incontestable and at the same time criticize language for being an inadequate way to communicate the ecstatic, the heterogeneous, the malevolence that Bataille portrays as universals. Once Bataille, as Sartre posits, sees language as "construction, enterprise" and words as "les instruments d'actes utiles," how can he then reconcile language caught, as it is within utilitarianism, with the expression of an irrational and ecstatic sphere? Because Bataille considers language, by the nature of its structural arrangement and its cultural significance, to be inherently defective, he is forced, according to Sartre, to defend his literary position from a set of mystical propositions rather than through any rational explanations. Caught in that position, Bataille is like "the sociologist who establishes a law by induction, based on the subject's observations of others, and then uses reasoning to place himself above the law he has just established" (Sartre 154).

The tendency to focus on the human condition as governed by largely destructive universal, psychological, and sociological terms strikes Sartre as essentially immoral. By always stressing the Sadean-Nietzschean dualism of Good and Evil, sacred and profane, Bataille is part of a tradition that, for Sartre, eliminates the free choice of man. In spite of Bataille's search for a discourse beyond modernism, "cette forme qui paraît si neuve a déjà une tradition." The tradition implied by Sartre is based on a never-ending search for a mimetic experience of a mystical nature. Thus the urge for constant transcendence that informs all of Bataille's texts is born out of a "besoin religieux chez l'homme moderne, voilà la grande affaire, aujourd'hui comme hier" (134).

Underlying such a critique as Sartre's is, of course, the assumption that Bataille is somehow at odds with his own quest for meaning; that he seeks a

coherent if metaphysical world view. But for Bataille the important issue, and indeed the premise for his literary studies, is the notion of rupture, an acknowledgement that, in creative terms, a violent expulsion of energy may ultimately be fruitful rather than harmful. As one circumvents conventional notions of morality, the opposition between Good and Evil may also represent a force for creation. Bataille's constant dualism of Evil and Good, obscenity and morality invokes the crucial aspect of tension that both propels the writing forward but also places the writer in an impossible position. The impossibility of ever solving that dilemma is what literature is in a unique position to show.

In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille links the search for that state, which he defines as absolute individual sovereignty, with a literature based on transgression and on an acute knowledge of Evil. To do that, Bataille defines modern civilization (which he sees as intrinsically faulty) as based on the will to survive. Society, in its fixation on Good above Evil, utilitarianism as opposed to waste, makes a concerted effort to ignore the fascination with Evil that is equated with death. Following that premise, Bataille calls sovereignty "the power to rise above the laws which ensure maintenance to life" (182). He goes on to say that literature should ideally function as "an infraction of the law, of that which is forbidden--Evil--and which is also the essence of sovereignty" (163).

The will to survive in a utilitarian society, according to Bataille, presents itself in an ideology based on action, accumulation, and constant production. It demands "the primacy of the future over the present moment" (22) and is manifest in philosophy, for example, that works traditionally toward a future goal for the common good.

As a philosopher, Sartre is highly critical of the way in which Bataille not only synthesizes the twin concepts of Evil and Sovereignty but then claims them as operative and viable forces within literature. If language, for Bataille, is seen primarily as an enterprise and a construction of utilitarianism, then, according to Sartre, Bataille must provide an alternative. Instead, he falls back on religious terminology, using the notion of the sacred to mask a methodology that is both value- and theory free and that, therefore, in Sartre's view, holds no proper critical value.

Those premises form the background for Sartre's accusation that Bataille divests the world of intelligible significance losing himself in an intense experience that is religious rather than political. The sacred, in that respect, is yet another way to define an "expérience intérieure" that Bataille, however much he may want to, is unable to formulate. For Sartre, Bataille's uneasy relationship to language stems from the inherent need to use language to describe its malfunction. If sovereignty in literature forms part of a sacred sphere, as Bataille claims, then it cannot, according to Sartre, function as a basis for communication and will never be able truly to formulate revolt. According to Sartre, Bataille is an "essay-martyr," a writer whose style is based on "désordre, un symbolisme passionné, un ton de prédication prophétique" (134), a style ill-suited to a convincing theoretical exposition of writing. One of Sartre's premises is that poetry, and fiction to a certain extent, is immune to

the criticism one can level against theoretical discourse, which must communicate a precise experience rather than a sensual imitation of that experience. Briefly stated, fiction is capable of exposing and dramatizing the various choices that individuals face, whereas philosophy presents the reader with the reasons behind those choices. For Sartre, philosophy, rather than merely being representative of utilitarian society, is still a viable form of communication. For it to be taken seriously, it must communicate a level of moral as well as political engagement in the surrounding world.

Paradoxically, Sartre pre-empts Bataille's critique of Miller's fiction on the same grounds. In "La Morale de Miller," Bataille carries over Sartre's main argument: that Miller, in writing self-consciously about his own identity as a construction, cannot hope to attain complete sovereignty as long as he recoils from the political implications of his fictional representation. In other words, Bataille does not see Miller as engaged in honest communication with his readers.

Two points should be stressed here: First, that Bataille's critique can only work from the premise that Miller is in fact trying to attain complete sovereignty; and second, that Bataille needs that premise to evaluate whether Miller succeeds in re-presenting a transgressive voice in his fiction, the necessary premise for attaining sovereignty. Sartre's evaluation of Bataille focuses on the fact that as a theorist Bataille cannot communicate a viable theory of literature that is not nihilistic in its centralization of death.

Bataille fails to take into account that Miller, for reasons that are personal rather than overtly political, may be engaged in a complex game of masking his own fictional voice. Whereas Sartre dismisses Bataille on the grounds that he pretends to be political when in reality his theory is deeply personal, Bataille distrusts the diversity of Miller's voices under the assumption that Miller's symbolic use of obscenity serves a purely transgressive purpose.

Bataille critiques Miller's boisterous sexual persona because his sexuality is based on what Bataille calls a "sordid" obscenity, sordid because it degrades the various objects of his lust--primarily women. What strikes Bataille as particularly obscene is that Miller's sexual partners carry a value only in so far as they are useful repositories for lust. As Bataille puts it, Miller's "sensuality always goes hand in hand with the abasement of his subject" ("La Morale" 50; my translation). By disassociating seduction and respect, Miller "permits the equivalent of a sordid obscenity" (51; my translation).

On the other hand, the philosophizing voice of Miller in such essays as "Obscenity and The Law of Reflection," uses eroticism chiefly as a means toward a literary transcendence aligned to a sacred sphere, that is, to sovereignty. As Miller puts it in "Obscenity and The Law of Reflection," "an understanding of an order and harmony which is beyond man's conception and approachable only through faith" (*Remember to Remember* 274). To Bataille, such a comment seems oddly inconsistent with the man whom he accuses of "despising women" and "even stealing from them" in *The Tropics*.

Miller's shift from one voice to another clearly confuses Bataille, and eventually he opts to criticize Miller as an "essay-martyr" (although he does not

go so far as to use Sartre's expression). Bataille sees Miller as an essay-martyr because he views his self-representation as being born out of an exhibitionist urge, evident, he claims, in Miller's sordid sexuality. For Bataille, the exhibitionist urge is part of the ploy of the essay-martyr, who thinks that redemption is possible through confession when in reality, redemption can only come through absolute sovereignty. That urge is not only narcissistic but also nonpolitical.

Bataille does see Miller as capable of a more politicized view of society but only as long as Miller retains the puerile voice of transgression--also designated as the sphere of childhood. The domain of childhood, partly defined in opposition to the adult world of rationalization and production, is defined by Bataille as sacred, in the present, and divine even as it aspires toward Evil. Revolt is represented by violence and puerility, a combination that for Bataille best exemplifies the individual search for freedom and sovereignty. The child is antisocial precisely because he does not take the collective good into consideration but strives to express himself in the present rather than according to future goals.

Bataille focuses a large part of "La Morale de Miller" on Miller's descriptions of his childhood in Brooklyn around the turn of the century. In those, Bataille sees "a microcosm of a world turned upside down in which laws are governed diametrically opposite to adult society" (42; my translation). In the sphere of childhood, sovereignty has not yet been fully abandoned, as the child primarily thinks of himself and of sensual enjoyment regardless of its social ramifications. Partly because Bataille initially reads Miller's descriptions of his childhood in terms of opposition, he later criticizes Miller for not taking the consequences of his early rebellion.

Because Miller in his fiction presents childhood in such relatively idyllic terms (unlike a possibly angst ridden sphere of repression in a Freudian sense), Bataille assumes that it is in Miller's best interest to return to the sphere of childhood. Because that is never completely possible, the alternative must be a concerted effort by the adult to retain the puerile voice.

Bataille's critique of Miller, based on the premise that the writer desires above all to return to the sphere of childhood, appears inconsistent at times. The challenge that Miller sets himself--to live as an adult on the edge of the infantile revolution--accentuates what Bataille calls Miller's "radically non-submissive" attitude, seen as nonthreatening in a political sense. Miller, says Bataille, in remaining "faithful to his childhood," chooses to continue the fight marginally, albeit on his own terms. But even that is a dubious practice because the stance of the child, in Miller's case, often seems nonserious, almost humorously inefficient. Bataille writes: "the revolt condemns itself to a certain ambiguity, to the point of becoming almost inaccessible to Miller himself" (45; my translation).² Again, Bataille's critique of Miller echoes Sartre's of Bataille. What bothers Sartre is not so much the ambiguity, as Bataille's attempts to turn that ambiguity into a viable methodology.

Although Bataille praises Miller for his rebellion against the mores of adult society, he nevertheless criticizes Miller for maintaining "the shifty

attitude of the child." In focusing solely on Miller's childhood descriptions, as indicative of a social and political consciousness, he fails to consider that Miller may be using his past as a way to redefine himself in the present. Miller's descriptions of his childhood, rather than being attempts to move beyond language by using the puerile voice, are a constructed discourse that provide an idyllic vision of a mythic America, seen in retrospect from an adult perspective. For Bataille, the child's entry into the productive sphere (in practical terms into the work force) produces a form of involuntary exile. What Bataille does not take into account is that Miller wrote about his childhood in America while in voluntary exile in Paris, thereby accentuating the freedom he felt he had attained in Europe, which he could not find in New York.

In spite of the complexity inherent in Miller's use of the notion of exile, Bataille chooses not to deal with Miller's prerogative as a writer, namely, to use his past to redefine his present literary persona as well as to present it in opposition to utilitarian society. Once the past is seen as to present it in opposition to utilitarian society. Once the past is seen as qualitatively defined by whether it can circumvent utilitarian society, Bataille necessarily must judge Miller's work according to his success in that. But Miller, like everyone else, grows up and cannot hope to relive his past in pure terms; he can only try to remember it. Bataille, realizing that, states that "the child's opposition can only fail, it is possible marginally and through trickery" (44; my translation).³

Bataille, unknowingly perhaps, echoes Sartre on the impossibility of retaining the puerile voice and, at the same time, examines it from without. Bataille's dualism of Evil versus Good, of the quest for sovereignty versus the quest for the collective good, is thus acknowledged as a productive force in itself, in spite of the impossibility of ever truly representing Evil. Once again, the tension that propels the text forward is the self-same tension that places the writer in an impossible situation. Miller's problem, for Bataille is that he uses descriptive techniques to denote rebellion; and by doing so, he falls into a pattern of constructed language, seen by Bataille as incompatible with the quest for sovereignty.

Bataille finds that method, in the case of Miller, "dangerously inconvenient," but the question is, whether Bataille is more inconvenienced than Miller. Bataille finds Miller's multiple persona an inconvenience because he cannot see Miller's use of narrative psychology as an exploration of exile and identity, in other than his own terms of Evil and sovereignty.

We see Miller, in broad terms, dealing with the relationship between the remembered self and the remembering self. For him, the past and the present form a reciprocal relationship in which the trauma of growing up is diffused in an alternative world of dream and humor. The humor is important, for more than anything else, it signifies the radically different attitudes of Miller and Bataille. Bataille, caught up in a theory based on the inevitability of death, appears much too anxious to ever laugh at himself. Within that context, Miller's mythic America, refers not so much to a lost reality as to his own state of mind. That state of mind is formed by Miller's desire to write about the "lost" American that he once knew from a present perspective of freedom in Europe.

What Bataille overlooks is that Miller's "myths of resurrection," as Bataille calls them, are not simply based on a desired return to a happier childhood, but are an attempt to get to the heart of what constitutes creativity.

The loss of the state of childhood provides Miller, in this case, with the necessary condition for the rebirth of the artist, as did the move from America to Europe. From Miller's perspective, the real struggle for the artist is how to represent the self through a given language, not how to render language obsolete--which Sartre posits is Bataille's, if not primary, then inevitable goal. Once again, the problem is that Bataille is caught between the binary structures of Good and Evil that he sets up as a methodology and the need to convey that in "ordinary" discursive terms.

To a certain extent, Sartre may be deliberately misunderstanding Bataille to solidify his own position as an existentialist. Although Sartre acknowledges that Bataille wants to dislodge the traditional boundaries between the critic and his subject--to present a total vision of literature, he does not acknowledge Bataille's methodology for doing so. Rather than see Bataille as proposing the elimination of language, one could see him as a theorist with great faith in the investigative capacities of language. In that case, Sartre's focus on the impossibility of attaining sovereignty fails to give Bataille much credit for trying to transcend traditional notions of poetics in search of something better.

The same could be said of Bataille's somewhat one-sided analysis of Miller. Miller's great investment of energy in his literary production lies perhaps not so much in his creation of an obscene voice as in his attempts to understand the links between creativity and the individual. For Bataille, the issue of creativity struggles with a basic conundrum: If literature is the experience of limits and if the author is responsible for maintaining his text at the edge of meaning, then death--the absolute negation of meaning, reasoning, and utilitarianism--is also the death of literature. As Bataille puts it in "La Morale de Miller," "if one refuses the 'possible, one accepts on the other hand to be torn apart, to remain in the grasp of the 'impossible " (46).⁴ Such a critique is almost identical to Sartre's in "Un Nouveau Mystique." Sartre accuses Bataille of trying to synthesize literary discourse with a vision of an ecstatic and sublime instant; thus he rejects the dramatic aspect of Bataille in favor of a more rational and speculative philosophy. Bataille, in similar ways, dismisses Miller for not being interested in providing a dialectical resolution to the issue of childhood. Just as Sartre feels that he can measure Bataille's level of engagement through an analysis of whether his philosophy stands up to close scrutiny, Bataille feels capable of critiquing Miller on the grounds of a "sordid obscenity." The question is whether Bataille's writing can tolerate such scrutiny any more than Miller's multiple personas and contradicting gestures can be seen to portray a conventional narrator. According to Bataille, Miller "changes the perspectives from which we see things" by subverting our conventional notions of what constitutes morality, but he fails in "substituting them with an ecstatic vision of a reality which eludes us" ("La Morale" 54; my translation). Perhaps

Miller realized, in Sartre's words, that "la découverte d'une réalité qui n'est pas notre réalité ne peut se faire que par le moyen d'une hypothèse" (Sartre 153).

In critiquing Miller, Bataille shows an acute knowledge of the dichotomies as well as the hypotheses that form the backbone of so much of his own work. Rather than dismiss Bataille's analysis of Miller because it contains major contradictions, one should perhaps see Bataille's project on Miller as not so far removed from Miller's own. Just as Miller returned obsessively to the same places, the same memories, the same women, Bataille appears to explore over and over again his own identity as a critic and the validity of his theories in his writings on other writers.

It may seem bizarre that Bataille should criticize Miller for a "sordid obscenity" if one considers Bataille's own virulent erotic writings, but Bataille's mixing of the political, the sacred, and the erotic strove to express itself in a radically different way of writing. Miller, on the other hand, who enjoyed words rather than hated them, found himself banned for nearly 30 years as a dangerously subversive writer. Miller's so-called sordid obscenity, although a failure in Bataille's eyes, may have been the reason why Miller, in striving to represent himself, created a truly radical and rebellious voice, and thus came closer to absolute sovereignty than Bataille would credit him.

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¹ *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), *Black Spring* (1936), and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) were originally published in English by Obelisk Press. *Tropic of Cancer* was not legalized for publication in the United States until 1961.

² As Bataille explains: "Le difficile dans la révolte de l'adulte est qu'elle maintient, faute de sérieux, la nature mineure-- humiliée--de l'enfance, dont elle perd, si elle est sérieuse, la nature divine et capricieuse. Ainsi le révolté se condamne-t-il à l'équivoque, au point de devenir insaisissable pour lui-même" ("La Morale" 45).

³ Bataille goes on to say that Miller: "ne peut, matériellement ni moralement, espérer davantage, à la dérobée, qu'un délai." ("La Morale" 44).

⁴ This basic conundrum is at the heart of Miller's literature, according to Bataille: "si l'on refuse en même temps le possible: on accepte en contrepartie d'être déchiré, de demeurer aux prises avec l'impossible. On ne peut, dans ces conditions, qu'être ce qu'est Miller, le monstre qu'avoue ses livres, insoutenable en tous les sens" ("La Morale" 46).