

Taking Bataille Seriously

The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel

By Christopher M. Gemerchak

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Review by Brent Dean Robbins

There is an irony in the title of this review, which suggests that Gemerchak's *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel* takes Bataille seriously. The irony lies in the juxtaposition of the content of his reading of Bataille with the style in which his reading is written. Gemerchak writes in a way that takes Bataille seriously; he attempts, in other words, to systematize Bataille's body of work as if it consisted of an organized set of neo-Hegelian doctrines or principles. And yet, as Gemerchak will instruct the reader, Bataille is fundamentally a thinker who thinks that which is beyond the systematic. To go beyond the systematic, one must go "beyond the serious"—the "beyond the serious" being, in fact, the title of the first chapter of the book.

The forementioned irony highlights the thorny problem of how one should go about writing a secondary text on a thinker as volatile and slippery as Bataille. In the end, I believe Gemerchak's solution is as good as any other: It necessitates that, in the final chapter, the author must mock his own work through sardonic laughter. And this is precisely what Gemerchak does, at least implicitly, when he remarks on the final page of the text that, even as he mocks himself through laughter, he must press on (p. 222). There is another irony in the fact that the author does not press on, at least not in this text, but brings the text to a close—and necessarily leaves the reader with a desire that is piqued. The reading never expels itself but instead seductively strokes the reader into a mounting desire, so that he or she may be turned on enough to enter the transgressive negative dialectic of Bataille's highly influential and morbidly compelling body of work. And so not in spite of, but because of the irony, Gemerchak's approach works. It does what it must. It gives the reader an overview of the thinker and situates it within the history of ideas that gave it birth—and with the very same stroke, frustrates the reader enough that they must ultimately turn back to the source from which it came. In the final analysis, Gemerchak fails to take Bataille seriously

by taking him seriously, and to that extent, it succeeds.

We must take Bataille seriously, as Bataille would inform us we must take serious anything, or anyone, with whom we would come to know, however ultimately incomplete that knowledge must be. Without taking him seriously, how could he come to mock us in our seriousness and bring us to sympathetic laughter? We must take Bataille seriously because he is, without question, one of a few thinkers who were formative of an entire generation of French neo-Marxist, neo-Hegelian criticism. Without some handle on Bataille, it is difficult to fully appreciate, say, Foucault, Derrida, Sommer, or Barthes, all of whom were published by Bataille and whose work is infused with Bataille's sensibility. It would be difficult to appreciate the unique flavor of Lacan's French psychoanalysis without an appreciation for its debt to Bataille. And so, for those of us enamored with this highly influential period of French philosophy, we must press on and grapple with Bataille, along with all of his obsessions with human sacrifice and his allegorical porn.

By taking Bataille seriously, Gernerchak provides the reader with an orientation that will motivate the reader to put up with the often frustrating elusiveness of Bataille's writings. By situating Bataille's work as a critical response to Kojève's reading of Hegel, Gernerchak helps us to appreciate his post-Marxist criticism as neither a humanism nor a theological reading of Hegel—but a radicalization of the Hegelian project. Bataille takes Hegel seriously by not taking him seriously—and through that transgression pushes the boundaries of Hegelian dialectic to their necessary end, an end that haunted Bataille in a way similar to the way it haunted Heidegger: through a contemplation and celebration of the impossibility of reconciling being with nothingness in thought without, at that very moment, delivering that thought to oblivion.