

THE LAURE - GEORGES BATAILLE EXCHANGE
CELEBRATING THE DISSYMMETRY
OF THE COUPLE
IN INTERWAR FRENCH THOUGHT

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Colette Peignot has become known to us principally through the biography of Georges Bataille. Rebaptized as "Laure" by Bataille and Michel Leiris, she was Bataille's companion from 1934 until her death at the age of thirty five in 1938.¹ Undoubtedly, this woman who was intimately linked with Bataille--and moreover at the center of theoretical and experiential exchanges on eroticism, the sacred, and an economy of sacrifice--does not fail to capture our attention. However, our interest in Laure extends beyond a general fascination with the phantasmatic parameters to which her role can certainly be ascribed.²

Importantly, the extent to which Laure herself was involved in the intellectual life of the twenties and thirties deserves attention. Laure was a committed revolutionary, sojourning in the U.S.S.R. in 1930. A participant in *Le Cercle communiste démocratique* alongside her contemporary Simone Weil, Laure also contributed a number of political articles to the review *Le Travailleur communiste, syndical et coopératif*, as well as *La Critique sociale*, all under the ambiguously-gendered pseudonym Claude Araxe.³ Laure was not only a central actor in *Acéphale*, but according to Michel Leiris, it was at her request that Bataille founded this Nietzschean secret society dedicated to the search for modern forms of community and the sacred,⁴ and Bataille later proclaimed that it was Laure's death that put an end to the society in 1938.⁵

Les écrits is a volume of Laure's fragments, poems, autobiography, fiction, journaux intimes, political notes, and correspondence. Confided to Bataille just before her death, these surviving texts - Laure reportedly destroyed much of her work - could be deemed the sole example of a woman's engagement with the issues of this early form of sociology. Importantly, her exploration of this subject came to privilege a subjective preoccupation with the notion of community that resulted in a highly particular conceptualization of the sacred and eroticism. In effect, Laure's writings achieved their acclaim outside of the political arena. They have above all become celebrated for the extent to which her revolutionary convictions become transposed into a burning amorous impulse.

Laure's amorous penchant has been historically valorized in Michel Surya's extensive critical biography of Bataille, in which an allegorical itinerary of Laure's love successively traversing certain important

intellectual figures of the epoch (Jean Bernier, Boris Pilniak, Boris Souvarine) before crystallizing in Georges Bataille, reads like a chronicle of the vicissitudes of 1930's intellectual life (245). While Laure's renown as Bataille's paramour seems to limit her impact to the periphery of Bataillean scholarship, Laure's impetus to amorous exchange represents a dynamic channel of intellectual participation. While these texts were collected, annotated, prefaced, appendixed and re-presented posthumously through the male lens of Bataille, Leiris, and Laure's most impassioned reader, her nephew Jérôme Peignot, it is imperative to legitimize the voice and action which are transmitted through the vehicle of the amorous exchange. Articulating in her *écriture* the desire for the "absence of literature" (125), Laure conceived an act of writing built on the amorous gesture that achieves the "moment où la parole est aussi intense que le sentiment éprouvé" (85); hence it is a love that re-erects a profound ethics within the space of writing. It is thus vital to not underestimate the ethico-political configuration of the couple Laure-Bataille as it is manifest in their mutual works.

The Laure - Bataille relationship constitutes a chapter in Bataillean history because it marks a moment of political inoperativity, where in the midst of the social dis-aggregation of the mid 1930's, the search for community is displaced onto a personal, affective register. The couple, under these conditions, becomes surcharged with the socio-political imperatives put forth by Bataille's and Laure's interrogation of the social foundations, which broached a particularly violent conception of the limits of identity and difference. I would like to highlight the couple as the construct where a negotiation of community--the "contract" (or non-contract) of subject to other--takes place. It is through the shared space of the two partners--the exchange between Laure and Bataille--that a particular metaphysics of continuity and discontinuity, and of fusion, is first established. In turn, I would like to show how a unique discourse on the couple comes to the foreground in the writings of Laure, until the emergence of what we could call a philosophical fiction of the couple is brought to full light in Bataille's work which later becomes his theories of *érotisme* and *expérience intérieure*.

Perhaps the common concern that impacts the writings of both Laure and Bataille is the problematic of fragmentary existence. This critique of capitalism holds that man's reduction to servility constitutes dually a loss of the plenitude of total existence and a dissolution of community. Although adhering to a rhetoric of nostalgia for the loss of unity, Bataille's awareness of the resulting fragmentation prompts a search for new forms of what he calls "l'existence simple et fort, que la

servilité fonctionnelle n'a pas encore détruite" (*L'Apprenti* 524). The same concern appears elsewhere in his work as the search for a sovereign experience of the subject. Yet few works engage in this problematic of fragmentary existence more directly than Laure's *Écrits*.

In response to these concerns, above all, Laure's texts narrate the search for modern *topoi* of the sacred. Laure describes the sacred as [the] "moment infiniment rare où la part éternelle que chaque être porte en soi entre dans la vie, se trouve emportée dans le mouvement universel, intégrée dans ce mouvement, réalisée" (85). In this enunciation we see that the sacred is constituted through an image of self loss, even of death, in which "la menace de mort projette au dehors le fond de moi-même comme une éruption de volcan" (*idem*). Importantly, in the search for the sacred, integrity of self is paradoxically accomplished through fusion of self and exteriority. This exigence of integration serves to counter the fragmentary existence of the subject. The "rarity" of the sacred explains why the subject only retrieves fragments. This doubled fragmentation opposes discontinuity to continuity, stressing the disconnection between the two. The thematic foregrounding of fragmentation serves to vitalize the significance of the fragmentary mode of writing, which is without doubt the privileged "genre" in Laure's body of work.

In elaborating her conception of a modern experience of the sacred, Laure unveils its condition of alterity: "je rejoins la notion des sociologues, le Sacré mêlé au Social pour que cela soit Sacré. Pour que cela soit, il faut à mon sens que cela soit ressenti par les autres, en communication avec les autres" (88). In fact what is sacred to poetry is its "création d'un événement topique....communication à d'autres de ce qui est raison de vivre, or cette raison de vivre se déplace" (89). Bataille later expresses his indebtedness to Laure's linkage of the sacred to communication. The innovation of Laure's text lies in her contextualization of the sacred in the realm of empirical project. In doing so, Laure removes the sacred from its anthropological bewitchment: dispelling the "prestigieux, insolite, dangereux" and "défendu" (85) qualities ascribed to it, Laure moves the sacred into the quotidian. And importantly, Laure's sacred implicates a vision of a new order of social exchange; it is fundamentally an ethical valuation.

Yet just as Laure lucidly outlines the imperative of the subject to other relation and the schema of transparent alterity, she also removes all idealism from her writing of the sacred or "scripture". Indeed, Laure's fragmentary inscriptions have been deemed parole as "cri d'alarme" (159), which expresses the limit of "la transparence incandescente: la squelette et la forme du coeur" (57). Laure's

utterances aim to expose the transparency of the subject that is "brisé en mille morceaux" (87) because it is refused by the other: they narrate an absolute impasse in the exchange of subject and other. Laure's dilemma echoes Rimbaud's theatrical dislocation of the subject. In Laure's poetic text "8", the signifier 8 illustrates the movement of communication:

Je rampe le long de ses contours
 je vogue dans ses méandres
 je saute hors du cercle
 et retombe dans l'autre
 je reste étranglée au milieu
 mon visage est là...
 Et qui donc, voyant ce signe fatal
 songerait à m'y découvrir
 voudrait m'en délivrer. (92)

It is a writing of "fatal signs" from the fervor to communicate.

This urgency in Laure's *Ecrits* thus culminates in the configuration of the couple Laure - Georges Bataille. Their exchange is constituted under the sign of a transparency that ensues from an intersubjective complicity in the very impossibility of exchange in the quotidian.

... toi et moi ne pouvons vivre vraiment que de ce qui exalte
 et si tout à coup dans la vie quotidienne il semble qu'il y ait
 même pas un heurt mais un manque nous nous en voulons
 trop et cependant ce trop est quand nous nous retrouverons
 nus et vrais. (ER 93)

Anticipating the concept of Lacan, the couple here is formed from the lack [manque] that yields to desire: it is in this excess of desire [*le trop*], which is constituted on the premise of a palpable lack, that the couple, "nous" is founded. In stating that "nous nous trouverons dans l'arc en ciel...c'est pour moi aussi brûlant que le feu" (ER 93), Laure expresses her vision of the unity of the couple, a unity that is utopian; and as it implies an encounter of two subjects outside of themselves, it is also transcendent. However, it is a transcendence that is infernal, because of the subjects' status as "êtres renfermés" (ER 97): the couple here remains together according to a principle of complicity in their separation.

In Laure's text, one can also discern particular movements of the couple. Laure accentuates not the magnetism that unites the couple, but a certain form of retreat, of repulsion that causes one to flee the presence of the other. In the couple, there is an element of confrontation and contestation of the subject with the other, just as the other serves to stabilize the subject. At the same time, it is the other that delivers the subject from the fatal sign of death--the sign under which Laure lived, suffering from tuberculosis during her relationship with Bataille until her death in 1938. Indeed, this imminent death accentuates the impenetrability of the subject. Before her death, Laure writes to Bataille: "tu ne m'atteindras plus jamais: je ne serai jamais là où tu crois me trouver" (261). These words establish an insurmountable gulf of difference between the unfathomable subject and the other.

Furthermore, since the other can never be attained, the object of one another's desire is eradicated: the couple remains tottering on the edge of the "manque béant". Indeed, the topos epitomizing the couple's reunion is centered on the crest of Mt. Etna, reinforcing the allusion to Petrarch. It is here that the narrative of the couple becomes dialogic. Bataille's voice intervenes as he narrates their ascent:

Tout était aussi noir et aussi chargé de terreur sournoise pendant la nuit où Laure et moi nous avons gravi les pentes de l'Etna...l'arrivée à l'aube sur la crête du cratère immense et sans fond--nous étions épuisés et, en quelque sorte, exorbités par une solitude trop étrange, trop désastreuse: c'est le moment de déchirement où nous sommes penchés sur la blessure béante, sur la fêlure de l'astre où nous respirions... alors que nous étions entrés dans une région infernale, nous devinions également au loin le cratère du volcan à l'extrémité d'une longue vallée de lave et il était impossible d'imaginer quelque lieu où l'horrible instabilité des choses fût plus évidente.⁶

The couple Laure - Bataille pushes to the limit the logic of what Laure describes as "la brèche à laquelle deux êtres se reconnaissent l'un l'autre" (290). The experience of the ascension of Etna reveals the unlimited opening of this brèche "immense et sans fond", "la blessure béante" and "la fêlure," the image of castration par excellence; it is a shared experience of a lack of object⁷, which results in a moment of "déchirement," the opening onto the sacred itself. In this realm of a breach in the symbolic order, both partners remain separated, unstable, without any means of exchange. The third term to constitute sexual

union is absent, exemplifying what Lacan would later state is the impossibility of the sexual relation (Lacan 138). Bataille, however, taking as a point of departure the instability of the couple, because of its impossibility, executes a reversal. His metaphysics of fusional love celebrates this chaotic situation: in this site of paradoxical communication, fusion (to be distinguished from union in the Lacanian sense) becomes the instant of dissolution of beings fixed in their separation.

This economy of the couple which exposes the negations inherent in the amorous exchange--the "vide communicant"--constitutes what Maurice Blanchot will later call in *La Communauté inavouable* "la communauté négative des amants" (Blanchot 49). In turn, the narrative of the infernal couple Laure - Georges Bataille is a celebration of drunkenness, madness, sordid places, sexual debauchery, abjection, anguish--and what Duras will later call languishing "maladie de la mort." Duras' notion admirably articulates the feminine episteme present in Laure's writings that betrays an entangled dialectic of will and suffering. While this episteme produces a pathos that proves to be the epicenter of the riveting force of the dissymmetry of the couple, it is mobilized by the ethical "pureté de la lutte contre" (184).

But how shall we consider as a historical moment this dual dissymmetry and utopia of the couple, representing a radical inversion and displacement of a cultural ideal, of a structure of relation that orders the social and the imaginary? Indeed, this form of exchange represents a paroxysm of the limits of identity and difference. An exchange that consecrates instability, it relegates the couple to an economy of sacrifice.

Perhaps the fate of the couple lodged in this sacrificial economy becomes clearer in the event of Laure's death in 1938. Did Laure's death coincidentally realize the sacrifice for Acéphale that would bind the "community"? Through the "unleashing of passions" (O.C. 7:37) that reveals not a finite identity, but to the contrary an undefined universality, this symbolic death would be the paradoxical means to reveal being. Michel Surya, in reflecting on the historical impact of Laure's death, emphasizes that far from consolidating Acéphale, Laure's death ravaged the society (296). Surya extends this idea: "le silence d'Acéphale en 1938 a le poids de cette mort surgie comme celle appelée pour suspendre les survivants à l'horreur d'une communion dans une intolérable identité" (idem). Such a complete loss of difference and fusion into one communal identity is contrary to the intention of Acéphale. The horror that this death provoked foreshadowed the cataclysm of the war.

Bataille, in the light of the rise of community based on fixed racial and patriotic identity (Surya 328), to the contrary, held tightly to his conception of an elective amorous community. In his work *La Communauté désœuvrée*, Jean-Luc Nancy notes that this Batailleian moment arises from a "moment paradoxal de désespoir . . . Bataille ne put enfin opposer à 'l'échec immense' de l'histoire politique religieuse, et militaire qu'une souveraineté subjective des amants" (56). As he shows in one of his final papers for *Le Collège de sociologie*, Bataille's lovers do not have the power to reverse the progressive force of social dissolution. The moment of coupling is represented as an act of reconstitution. The couple functions as a "merveille aveuglante" (*L'apprenti* 530) that supplements fragmentary existence in order to "recomposer la vie" (*idem*). In this schema, the couple is a figure of compensation for the dissolution of social experience. Although a supplement, Bataille claims that the couple operates counter to a fiction, which only illusively seals up fragmentary existence. The couple has potential in the real; "le monde vrai des amants" (531) is sovereign as it goes beyond forms of servility to create "la réalité vivante des correspondances encore informes" (533). Above all, let us recognize that Bataille has the intuition that the couple, "l'être double qui se perd dans les interminables étreintes" (535), renders being mutable; it has the power to reverse a fixed, hierarchical order. While Bataille's compulsion to publish Laure's works posthumously, and his attempts to recompose her life, result to a large extent in the fabrication of an icon through the web of his own desire (Ronat 34), the efforts were equally driven by the ethical principles of maintaining the amorous community.

Both idealized and victimized by a culture fascinated with the pathos of a female subject caught in the apocalyptic moment in which the foundation of the social order has been shaken loose, Laure's text has become a critical palimpsest for the second half of the century. Through an appreciation of the profound ethical imperative set forth in Laure's writings, however, we can recover her from such phantasmatic clutches. In effect, Laure broke down the hierarchy of early sociological and anthropological discourses through her conception of the sacred, and her visions of an economy of amorous exchange that negotiates the subject to other relation. While living the radical dissymmetry of the exchange with Bataille, Laure never completely relinquishes her utopia through which we may read the ethical valuation of a new social order. Indeed, Laure had qualified her own "faculté de résistance à ce qui existe, de non-accomodement à la

vie telle qu'elle est voulue: salie et gâchée par des millions d'êtres. . . , ce n'est pas le désespoir mais un immense espoir" (184).

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NOTES

¹ Michel Leiris, in a letter to Jérôme Peignot, speaks of "celle qu'il fallut bien baptiser 'Laure'" (*Ecrits* 27). However, the facts surrounding this name remain ambiguous. Surya (250) remarks that Laure was Peignot's legal middle name (Colette Laure Lucienne Peignot). Bataille himself refers to Peignot as "celle qui s'est désignée elle-même sous le nom de Laure" (*Ecrits* 129). While it may be a fact that Peignot signed her later manuscripts in the name of Laure, the Pauvert edition gives evidence of the self reference only in certain erotic texts. It thus seems most likely that Peignot became canonized as Laure in the course of Bataille's and Leiris' publication of her texts. While a reference to Peignot would presumably recover her identity, the implications of this naming could not be so simplified in the restricted scope of this paper, thus I will refer to "Laure" throughout this discussion. For further insight, see M. Ronat.

² For further discussion of these issues, see Ronat.

³ Nine articles collected in Laure's *Ecrits retrouvés*. All citations to Laure are from her *Ecrits* unless *Ecrits retrouvés* (ER) is specified.

⁴ J. Peignot's note in Laure's *Ecrits* 99.

⁵ Bataille's note in Laure's *Ecrits* 311.

⁶ Bataille "Le coupable: fragments retrouvés sur Laure" in Laure's *Ecrits* 289.

⁷ For further psychoanalytic insights on Bataille's passage, see Assoun.

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