A New Mysticism
Sartre’s Critique of Bataille's Inner Experience

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Abstract
The article, ‘A New Mysticism’ is a critique by Sartre of Bastille’s Inner Experience that focuses on the form and content of the book. This paper will verify aspects of this criticism and tries to show how far Sartre’s argumentation is reliable. I start with a rough distinguish that Sartre has made between literary and philosophical history, to identify Bastille’s style with the surrealist tradition; then I will continue to focus on his argumentation and criticism.

Keywords: mysticism, inner experience, bastille, sartre, criticism, consciousness.
The article, ‘A New Mysticism’ is a critique by Sartre of Bataille's Inner Experience that focuses on the form and content of the book. Sartre’s article distinguishes between literary and philosophical history, and identifying Bataille’s style with the surrealist tradition, reaching back to Pascal and Nietzsche, ‘concerned with self expression that is unrestricted, open to the moment, unconcerned about the practices of argument, writing, motivated by the author’s desire to bare himself, independently of all convention, to do away with any sense of measure or discretion.’

For Sartre, language is an instrument for transmitting messages and information, but Bataille saw it as, in Klossowski’s words, the code of everyday signs that always conditions expression and limits transmission. He used words to break through this code so as to give voice to that which is beyond language, to the sacred, aiming ‘to draw the reader into the “ineffable”, into a place where reason founders. Because Bataille was trying to give voice to the ineffable, Inner Experience needed to be a synthesis of rapture, method and intellectual rigour.’

In Inner Experience, philosophical technique is used for purposes alien to philosophy, giving voice to that which stands beyond to the intellect in a way that frees the idea of the sacred from religious connotations.

The function of irony is to "torture" discourse, to empty it of positive content by pressing it up against a blind spot, a symbolic no-man's-land that simultaneously reveals to the discourse its own finitude and its beyond. The principle of nonknowledge that gives Inner Experience its rhythm is the ephemeral residue of ignorance. Can this be left out?

Inner Experience is a work of negative dialectics in the sense in which the term is employed by Adorno, as dialectics without the negation of the negation, without identity, what Heimonet has described as a conflict of oppositions that takes place not between the subject and the external world but between the ego and the internal world.
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Sartre’s criticisms of Camus's "metaphysical" revolt are much the same as his objections to inner Experience. Unlike the situation of the slave who rises up against his enslavement, the metaphysical rebel is motivated by a rising up of his whole being against the absurdity of his condition; like the subject in Bataille’s book, the rebel’s awakening to consciousness and dignity comes as a result of a "conquest" over "nonmeaning." In the absence of a specific obstacle, which would have material form in the world of facts, revolt, writes Camus, "creates nothing." Existing before "every action, it contradicts purely historical philosophies in which value is conquered [if it is conquered] after action" [28, 32, 38, 365].

Arguing against the interventions of Sartre and Jeanson, who reproached Camus for the Icarian aspect of his position – that of the "beautiful soul" soaring over history – Bataille objected that during the period when Stalin was taking up the relay from Hitler in the race to horror, the only profoundly human attitude consisted in no longer making History but in "revolting against it" [OC 11: 232]. This revolt joined up with Camus's revolt in that it excluded action – or, what amounts to the same thing for the intellectual, taking sides in words. To "revolt against history" in fact means to refuse to play its game, to refuse to supply it with new programs under the pretense of changing it; all this in order to distance oneself from history and to take a good look at it, questioning with an ever-sharper conscience the ways in which it drove "the human species to suicide." In a word, a revolt against history means to oppose and to substitute reflection for action, to question the real instead of plunging into it in the illusion that one is in control of it… [234]. This being said, Bataille does not disguise the fragility of his position, in particular the risk of having it confused with a "foolishly verbal attitude" [232]. Beyond theory, the revolt against history comes out of an ethics, from a general human attitude toward the dangers and trials of existence. And since man is reciprocally, and most indissociably, historical animal/symbolic animal, this ethics remains entwined with and in language.
The unity of the book is to be found in its debunking trajectory, the intellectual torture to which the subject submits in order to rediscover the other. Moved by the desire to be "all," to be "God Himself," the self measures its finitude by going "to the farthest possible reach of the human," inasmuch as this reach corresponds to the extreme end of consciousness/conscience and of language [OC 5: 19]. As long as it remains human, revolt is objectively limited by the necessity of proceeding according to the law of signs and representation. The practice of this law reveals to the practitioner the two cardinal virtues of discourse in the domain of moral meaning and ethics:

1. The insurmountable distance that separates desire, as an aspiration to totality, from its delayed translation into signs and symbols (the gap in which the Ego learns to laugh at what is most important to it is exactly what romanticism means by irony).

2. The fact that this distance is linked to the presence of a medium the necessary/universal character of which restores the subject to its proper level and place: to the level and place of others, within the limits of the circle constituted by the totality of conscious beings with whom it must communicate each time it is manifested as human.

It is with these two necessary and universal attributes of the medium of language that inner experience leads to the dissemination of the Ego within the enclosure of signs that it has tried to break out of, and to its communication with the rest of the world. Several passages in the book consider the excessive practice of discourse as the strongest and the most tenuous bond that attaches, indeed alienates or even "condemns" the Ego to the other – doing so even in spite of the Ego's desire to dominate the other. "The third element, the companion, the reader that moves me, is discourse. It is he who speaks in me, who maintains in me the discourse which lives for his sake." And further on: "The subject of inner experience, wherever it may reside . . . is the consciousness of others" [75, 76].
It is necessary to differentiate between two types, or rather two regimes or two qualities, of discourse. Because it is not sufficient simply to speak or write, in order for the ethical function of discourse to be revealed, ethics, the sui generis limitation on desire, appears only to the degree that language has stopped being an instrument, when there is no longer any way for language to be used as a means aimed at expressing the interests of a so-called subject that existed before language. In order for the ethical function to intervene, discourse, taken to its extreme by the play of contradictions, has to turn back on itself, has to revert to its own mystery as well as to the mystery of an endless questioning in the course of which the former user of discourse must experiment with the objective synonymy between "nonknowledge" and "nonpower." "Contradiction erupts (writes Sartre) in the condition of the subject thus torn between two opposing demands": the wish to be everything, to be "on top," and the necessity in which the subject is obliged, as a practitioner of excessive discourse, to lose itself in the multitude and dissolve into the totality of signs and conscious beings [see "NM" 203]. It is precisely this state of being torn that constitutes the reason for being, or the "content by default" of inner experience; it is what teaches the subject the human tragedy of the split between desire and duty, between liberty and morality, or, as Bataille writes, between "putting into action and putting into question", 2 as with two poles between which one has to oscillate indefinitely without ever resolving to jump into history. This circular movement of a consciousness that has relinquished the power of shaping the world according to its desire or ideal is a further prolonging of the romantic tradition. Sartre translates this spiritual obligation – that man must go through life meaningfully, that man can exist fully only in representation – as a "vain struggle," a "battle lost before it is waged." Self-probing and communication among consciousnesses are for Sartre only forms of disengagement, an "escape plan" allowing the subject to pull away from History ["NM" 203]. And in fact when one bases existence and freedom, as Sartre does, on the concept
of the project, as the ability to externalize and turn vested interests into concrete reality by means of action, the "principle of experience"—that is, Bataille writes, "escaping the domain of the project through a project"—cannot be anything but unacceptable, indeed aberrant [see 204]. This principle is, however, the ultimate form of the "revolt against history," a principle that sets the practical project of imposing one's will on the world against the completely different project of breaking out and getting beyond this control.

The two visions of time and life, "well laid-out" and "immediate," rightly contrasted by Sartre, correspond to two forms and two ethical systems of discourse. On the one hand, there is linear discourse, didactic and heavy, the vehicle of a project, of a philosophical thesis or of a political choice that can only be realized in the historical process; on the other hand, there is circular discourse, an interrogative dialogue that takes place among conscious beings, in which the expenditure and the exhaustion of meaning act as a limitation on desires that have become powerless to achieve their ends, unable to plant themselves within their own solid representations in the expectation that History will somehow fulfill them.

Bataille claims for the sake of his own revolt and negativity the liberty of living at the margin of History, without letting himself be absorbed by its mechanism. "The open wound that is my life," he wrote in his famous letter to Kojève, "constitutes by itself the refutation of Hegel's closed system." Under these conditions, writing is presented as the ultimate result, the ultimate method of "doing," which allows the clear-minded individual to escape having to decide between the alternatives, largely viewed, of unemployment and crime. This does not mean that the activity of representing is a solution or an end in itself. Bataille specifies that his personal negativity "had given up its usefulness only after the moment in which it no longer had any use: this is the negativity of someone who no longer has anything to do and not that of someone who prefers to speak" [OC 5: 369-71]. This negativity, however, when confronted with itself, and
in the absence of a project or goal that might be worth anything, is far from passive. It continues to act in the form of a critical work that is executed in and for consciousness by interrogating the process that drives it back into idleness. "Negativity emptied of content" (as Bataille calls it), the energy of which is inscribed in discourse and writing, no longer has to justify action but instead functions as a mode of reflecting on the meaning and limits of action. It thus becomes the privileged organ of human responsibility and commitment. This critical function of negativity restored to writing is exactly the goal (the "project") that inner experience takes on in order to produce itself: "Inner experience answers to the necessity that I face—and all of human existence with me—of putting everything in question" [OC 5: 15].

In his critique of Inner Experience, Sartre confuses two textual aspects that are mutually resistant. On the one hand, its style, where the authenticity of the text lies, and the symbolic charm by which its words acquire universal meaning; on the other hand, its didacticism and its engagement on the level of a so-called "content," according to which the text is supposed to provide answers that can be applied in the world of achievable ends. With a belatedness that is surprising in regard to the theory of his time, Sartre does not seem to understand that the "content" of a text is found above all in its "form": the strategic treatment applied to the language within which this text is produced.

On the ideological level, it is significant that this utilitarian conception of writing bears a resemblance to the communicational theories of Jürgen Habermas. Like Sartre, Habermas bases his critique of the romantic and modern tradition—in which he would situate Bataille—on the two criteria of contradiction and circularity. For this he borrows from the linguistic pragmatics of K. O. Apel the concept of "performative contradiction," which serves to designate every speech act in which "the propositional content contradicts the affirmation" [Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action 80, translation modified]. According to this
criterion the "discourse of modernity"--the paradigm of which can be traced from the earliest German romantics to the theoreticians of the 1960s (Bataille, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida . . .)--is defined as a narcissistic or reflexive discourse, which the systematic search for and use of contradictions for their own sake condemns to "go around in circles" without ever producing any positive content. In this type of discourse, Habermas explains, the aesthetic or philosophical value of a work does not come out of the harmony between "form and content," "external and internal," "individual and society," but is due to the maintenance of an infinite, self-sustaining tension in the absence of an answer and to "the necessary failure of an impassioned search for identity" [Philosophical Discourse of Modernity 112, translation modified]. It is no coincidence that this analysis aims equally to denounce the "mysticism" of modern discourse ever since the time of the romanticism of Iena with its dangerous tendency to reject the "conquests of Western rationalism" [Philosophical Discourse 121, translation modified].

By evoking the "rather grotesque" attitude that consists in "playing around with the ecstasy of religious and aesthetic inspiration" [366], Habermas echoes Sartre. For, as Sartre sets out in his article in Situations, it is just as much Bataille's "religiosity," his faith in an unspeakable, unsayable, and unrepresentable real, that is scandalous. Once the end of knowledge has been attained, far from arriving at the conclusion (as Goetz does in Sartre's play The Devil and the Good Lord) that heaven is empty, the practitioner of inner experience persists in his error and raises the stakes. He does not make the "vow that was expected of him," that is, "that there is no transcendence." Instead of "discovering man," he throws himself into "rediscovering God" ["NM" 218]. Again Sartre prefers to ignore the distinction Bataille makes at the beginning of the book between "confessional experience," where the revelation of transcendence constitutes a "haven," a gratifying result which compensates the practitioner for his efforts, and his own critical experience, which,
"reveal[ing] nothing . . . can neither provide the foundations for belief nor leave belief behind" [OC 5: 15, 16]. As we have pointed out, the critical radicalism of this experience, which, being "born of nonknowledge stays there" indefinitely [15], leads to the humiliation of the subject, from whom is wrested all power to materialize his desire in action. Now it is precisely toward the support of such power, charged with carrying out [End Page 69] the positivity in meaning, that the utilitarian pragmatism of Sartre and Habermas leans, toward the possibility for man--using Heidegger's words--to install himself as "lord over 'individual being [étant].""

It may be said that just as Sartre wants to "make History" by refusing to waste his negativity in a textual game, he also wants power. It is rather ironic, then, that the "mysticism" he denounces in Bataille applies just as well to a certain aspect of his own work. With this difference, however: if Bataille's mysticism is practiced in pure loss, since it results in the desanctifying of the subject, Sartre's mysticism is oriented instead toward tangible assets accumulated with the aim of sanctifying the subject and turning it into a being superior to most men. Take Nausea, for example, that philosophical novel only poorly disengaged from surrealism (from "surrealist sorcery" as Sartre now calls it) ["NM" 211]. When he sententiously criticizes the manner in which Bataille "pushes away the reassuring constructions of reason in the name of 'the Ego's experience'" and reproaches him for his "strangeness" regarding the world [192-93], Sartre seems to forget that several years earlier he himself had made a few twists in the relation between words and things, between rational and real, between lived experience and its representation in the order of discourse, the fundamental theme of Nausea [La nausée].

If in 1943 Sartre had become the herald of the "pro-ject" and of the "well laid-out" life, where the individual acquires an identity by participating in collective history, the situation ten years earlier was different. Roquentin's problem is, in fact, Time. Reluctant to search for the truth of existence in Monsieur de Rollebon's past or in his own travel
memories, he comes to this conclusion: "A man is always a storyteller . . . ; he tries to see his life as if he were telling it. But one has to choose: to live or to tell" [La nausée 62]. Putting things into words, into the chronology of discourse or story, is only a convention, an artificial order meant to disguise the contingency of what is and what happens, and to provide man with the illusion of control. Roquentin's energy will then be devoted to the attempt to escape time, to cross the threshold of linear time where life, like the old woman he sees from his window, limps along in place, in the absence of all novelty, project or story: "This, then, is time, naked time, which comes slowly into being, which makes us wait, and when it comes, you feel sick because you realize that it was there all along. . . . It is a tarnished newness, with the bloom faded, the new that can never surprise" [51]. What is interesting is that this flight of Roquentin from linear time remains very much in the "beautiful soul" style; his escape is procured for him through a means that the author of "A New Mysticism" would deem narcissistically idealistic: through art. First music, then literature. The jazz melody, "rag-time," possesses the magical virtue of substituting a necessary sequential chain of notes for the "flaccid" time of existence. Like the perforated roll in a hurdy-gurdy or a player piano, the melody "crosses our time from one part to the next," "tears it from its dry little points" [39], and "like a scythe, slices the insipid intimacy of the world" [243]. Indeed what is taking place here is an inner experience and not simply a distraction or entertainment. When the singer's voice "rose up in the silence," "crushing our miserable time against the walls," "something happened"; Roquentin takes possession of the world again, and, at the same moment, of his own body: "I felt my body harden and the Nausea disappeared"; "my glass of beer . . . becomes hard, indispensable," the client's head possesses "the obvious, the necessity of a conclusion." Stranger to history and to linear time, "there is another time" [30]. Roquentin doubtless knows that music "does not exist" [243]; it is no less the supra-natural or supra-existential agent of an ek-stase that snatches him away from the Nausea, from the entrapment and partisanship
of things. One could say the same thing of those "perfect moments" that he struggled to concoct during his life with Anny. Bataille himself was not deluded in this, since he notes in his article "The Sacred," about the very notion of "instant" in mystics, that "J.-P. Sartre, in Nausea, had already spoken of "perfect moments" and "privileged situation" in a meaningful way" [OC 1: 560]. And indeed, for [End Page 70] the Sartre of 1935, everything points to believing that there is something "beyond meaning," which is the very definition of the sacred. Each crisis of nausea begins with the gap between words and things, the consciousness of a profound inadequation between concept and lived experience. Reality surpasses lexicon (that is, the norm), either from above or from below. Sometimes things are endowed with "a funny little meaning that surpasses them" [190]; sometimes they remain just the opposite, "above all explanation" [183]. But these two extremes join up again to circumscribe an ineffable space of meaning, resistant to intellection. Thus, at the moment of the main crisis in the public garden, as Roquentin is facing the chestnut tree, each aspect of the root represents an excess, is "too much" with respect to what can be said about it. Like Adolph's suspenders, which "were not purple," the root of the tree "was not black," Roquentin remembers. "Shady" and indeed forcibly "unnameable" things are apprehended according to an approach specific to the mystic: by negation, by depleting or sacrificing language in order to check off everything that things are not. "Black? I felt as if the word were deflating, being emptied of its meaning. . . . Black? The root was not black, black was not what was on this piece of wood--it was . . . something else [183]. This "something else," or, as Bataille would put it, this "inexplicable difference," where "the true secret of existence lies" [190], is in a book--of which the actual book, Nausea, would itself be the sketch--and it is in a book where Roquentin will undertake his quest for that secret. In the same ways that "the Jew and the Negress" have been "saved" (in the very religious and even very Christian sense of the word saved, "washed from the sin of existing") by music [246-47], Roquentin
will be saved by writing. But pay attention: not just any writing. The book will only be redemptive, so that its author can "look back on his life without repugnance" [248], if it remains distinct from every other book written before. To be so, it ought to be "another species of book": a "story," of course, but not "a history book," such as the one in which Roquentin got sidetracked by wanting to "resuscitate M. de Rollebon"; and especially not a "narrative," an artificial (that is, linear) book, constructed with a view to organizing existence. This book about nothing strangely recalls the Capital Book of Flaubert or Mallarmé; like this Book, which, in Its form and in Its content, has not been "soiled" by any worldly, that is, prosaic, element, its value and power of salvation are drawn precisely from the fact that, being beyond the power of the human mind, it cannot be written. In the tradition of idealism, as with the inaccessible Grail, its purpose is to transcend the intolerable, dull opacity of chaos and to exist as pure aspiration, as an indeterminate tendency toward some supreme point where it would be possible to absolve existence. This iconoclastic book should be understood to suggest that there is "behind the printed words, behind the pages, something that would not exist, that would be above existence" [247, my emphasis]. Finally, we have seen Sartre criticizing the spiritual egotism and megalomania that led Bataille to sanctify himself and place himself above his contemporaries. But the quest for the heights seems also to characterize Roquentin himself. The hero of Nausea in fact possesses the essential traits by which Bataille defines the "heterogeneous" being, the individual whose unclassifiable or unusual ontological caliber causes him to stand out among his fellow men [see OC 1: 348]. From this point of view, Roquentin is clearly a special being, defined by a nervous temperament and special powers. Excluded from collective emotions ("I wondered, for a moment, if I were not going to love people. But after all, it was their Sunday, and not mine" [81]), he is presented as a sorcerer or a magician. In the gallery in the Bouville museum, he gives himself over to an exorcism, an "unbewitching" in front of the portrait of Jean Parrotin--an operation that he will repeat
with the statue of Impétraz symbolizing the bourgeois order: "When one looks straight and directly at a radiant face (Roquentin observes), after a while, the radiance disappears." At first the image of Parrotin resists, but, little by little, under the powerful stare of his enemy (an enemy who is not, or not just, a class enemy but an ontological adversary), it liquefies and dissolves. Soon, nothing subsists any longer of the haughty personage but "flesh . . . defenseless, bloated, drooling, vaguely obscene" [128-29]. A shaman, Roquentin is also a prophet. Looking out over Bouville, the modern Babylon infested with philistines, he foresees its apocalypse. This vision is again the prerogative of a being superior to most men: "How far I feel from them, from the height of this hill. It seems to me that I belong to another species" [220]. And indeed, human space is divided into two warring categories; on the one side, there is the One, Roquentin; and on the other, everyone else, middling humanity lumped together and uniformly despised as "they" or "them" [see 221]. On the one side, the supreme wise man, who has succeeded in piercing the "secret of existence"; on the other, those who neither know nor see, the "bastards" [salauds], as the book calls them. "As for them, they are completely wrapped up inside, they breathe this nature and they don't see it, they imagine that it is outside, twenty leagues from town. But as for me, I see it, this nature, I see it . . ." [221].

It is well known that thirty years later Sartre will publish his self-criticism. "I was seeing things," he writes in The Words [Les mots]. His first novel, in sum, would not have been anything but an error of youth, that of a man in a hurry to exist restlessly and as quickly as possible. "I succeeded at thirty years of age in this one thing: writing in Nausea--very sincerely, you can believe me--about the unjustified and primitive existence of my fellows and putting my own existence beyond question" [Les mots 210]. Still, this confession remains questionable. Like most of his characters, Sartre is himself a "crab"; an author "with two faces." With one, he sets about to dissipate the ether of thought and to recycle metaphysics
into the general current of History; with the other, unknown to himself, indeed, even in spite of himself, his preoccupations lead him into the arcane reaches of the unthinkable. One can find this dichotomy also in The Devil and the Good Lord, the most positive (or antimystical) play of Sartrean theater, since, dealing with the "relations of man with God," or the relations of "man with the absolute," it claims "to replace the absolute with history" [Théâtre de situations 272, 274]. Both agent of and guinea pig for this substitution, the character of Goetz is not unequivocal. He too has two faces. If for Nasty, the political leader of the peasants, Goetz has become "anyone," after his conversion to history, for Hilda, by contrast, who knows him deeply and intimately, he remains fundamentally and irreversibly other, heterogeneous and different from other men: "You will not ever be like them. Neither better nor worse: other" [247]. The entire didactic content of the play rests on Difference, which makes of Goetz a special and distinctive being, without any possible reversal or conversion. The question is one of a primary order, a question to which Sartre obviously does not reply, being himself the cause of this alterity: why can Goetz be nothing but excessive, above or below other men, but never on the same level, never on the same footing?

Like Hegel, who betrays his romantic youth by wrapping Mind in the Prussian state, Sartre quickly forgets the initial title, Melancholia, \(^1\) of his first novel: the sickness of "beautiful souls" smitten with the absolute. In the course of a university and literary career crowned with success, he cauterized his worry by erecting a perfect system of philosophical and political rationalization that would scarcely upset certain writings of his later years. This was also his way of forging a fail-safe moral philosophy. When he reproaches Bataille for his "two hundred pages of trumped-up considerations on human misery" ["NM" 221], Sartre is speaking as the spokesman of History. Sympathetic to Marxism and bard of the class struggle, he fulfills the role of the great figure (very French) of the intellectual of consequence, that is, "of the left," whose engagement, like
that of Goetz, will be felt "among men." But one is forced to acknowledge that recent political developments have not borne him out. With the collapse of the Marxist empire, this last [End Page 72] decade will have proved that History could in no way "replace the absolute," for the obvious reason that History is itself an absolute. And of the worst kind; a sacrifice where it is no longer words but people who are the victims. It is not enough to strip the Absolute of the mantle of Reason in order to stifle its avid demands. Even when one seeks to compel metaphysics to "go down into the cafés," it still remains metaphysics, with its dual effects, often perverse, beneficial, or cathartic in one arena, injurious or ideological in another. If one admits that the quest for the sacred or the absolute represents an anthropological need in man, Bataille and Sartre are the spiritual embodiments of two divergent paths, one centripetal, the other centrifugal. The first revolts against History, the second wishes at all costs to make History. One looks for the absolute in writing, in the mise en abyme and the critical exercise of individual consciousness; the other looks for it in action, or in what takes the place of action for the intellectual, the guiding of collective consciousness. These are in fact the only two forms, diametrically opposed and antagonistical, of engagement by discourse.
Endnotes:

1. This movement described by the term *mise*, where the self-subject puts its sovereignty into play, appears in the last pages of *Guilty*, which Bataille wrote during 1943-44, after the publication of *Inner Experience*. "Mise en action and mise en question are continually opposed, the one as acquisition for the benefit of a closed system, and the other as rupture and imbalance in the system" [OC 5: 385].

2. We should, however, note that this change of title, substituting the profane term *nausea* for the more romantic one of *melancholia*, was not originally Sartre's idea. It was suggested by Gallimard [see Simone de Beauvoir, *La force de l'âge* 292, 308].

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