

The Skull-Bone and the Bloody Head: Lacan's Lamella and Kojève-Hegelian Desire

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Slavoj Žižek has made it his essential project to renew an understanding of G.W.F. Hegel's subjectivity by means of the psychoanalytic theory and practice of Jacques Lacan. One crucial element in such an endeavor is Lacan's notion of the lamella, a particular understanding of excessive desire as indestructible and exterior to the self. I would like to investigate Žižek's characterization of the lamella in Lacan's work and its Hegelian antecedent (particularly evident in the famous reading of Alexandre Kojève), as well as bringing the thought of Georges Bataille, a significant interlocutor for Lacan, to bear on the formation and ramifications of the idea. Most importantly, I would like to investigate the question of sexual difference as it has bearing on the lamella (and on subjectivity) as a result, and to suggest a feminine aspect to its image that has perhaps gone unnoticed.

Kojève's Hegel

Kojève's seminars are the major source for Lacan's appreciation of Hegel. Žižek writes of "the crucial role played by Alexandre Kojève in Lacan's development – to his end, Lacan referred to Kojève as his *maître*" (Žižek 2006: 354). Advancing a radical re-reading of Hegel, Kojève focuses almost entirely on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and contemporary lectures. Hegel had envisioned the *Phenomenology* as the ontogenetic groundwork for the accomplishment of Science. This means that Hegel's real goal is to establish true metaphysics: the laws of dialectics set forth in the *Logic*. The *Phenomenology* is a historical demonstration, a distinction from and incorporation of philosophical predecessors, and an account of how the *Logic* could have come to be discovered by a man named Hegel. Seen on its most ambitious terms, it is meant to account for the totality of historical knowledge in both its abstract form and concrete fulfillment—the explanation of human strivings latent in all historical moments, and the possibilities for their contemporary realization. The *Phenomenology*, then, traces the advent of human self-consciousness in ancient Greece, the discovery of Christianity and the Enlightenment, and history's conclusion with the French Revolution and Napoleon.

Hegel had been virtually unknown in the French context, with a ban on his presence in French universities imposed by Leon Brunschvicg. As a result, he had been widely considered to be a raving metaphysician as a philosopher, and his thought of history and the political to be a mere apology for the absolutist Prussian state. Kojève meditates on the power of the negative, the dialectic of lordship and bondage, and the revolutionary Terror. These passages allow him to reinvent Hegel as a Marxist, an atheist, and an existentialist. Stuart Barnett describes Kojève's Hegel as "anthropo-thanatological" (Barnett 1998: 24). This label indicates that Kojève views consciousness as depending on a consideration of man; further, man's finitude and mortality; and as requiring a genetic account, rather than being accepted as original. In addition, Kojève emphasizes the particularly *discursive* nature of man's freedom and mortality, pointing the way to the emphasis on language in post-Sartrean French thought.

Kojève's appropriation of insights from Marx and Heidegger provides the key to his notion of the human relationship with death.

Heidegger a repris les thèmes hégéliens de la mort; mais il néglige les thèmes complémentaires de la Lutte et du Travail; aussi sa philosophie ne réussit-elle pas à rendre compte de l'Histoire. – Marx maintient les thèmes de la Lutte et du Travail, et sa philosophie est ainsi essentiellement « historiciste »; mais il néglige les thème de la mort (tout en admettant que l'homme est mortel); c'est pourquoi il ne voit pas (et encore moins certains « marxistes ») que la Révolution est non pas seulement en fait, mais encore essentiellement et nécessairement – sanglante (thème hégélien de la Terreur) (Kojève 1947: 575).

These two sentences, published as the final footnote to an appendix, tell us why the revolution announcing the conclusion of history requires blood. For Kojève, the revolution *means* death. We find in this statement the synthesis between the left and the right Kojève argued was already staring at us, out of Hegel. Marx failed to consider the significance of death adequately, Heidegger neglects history, but supplemented with Hegel, all three tell us that revolution is a confrontation with death, a collective commitment to endure mortality.

The Human Subject

In the lecture “L'idée de la mort dans la philosophie de Hegel,” delivered in 1933 and 1934, Kojève argues that Hegel's first innovation, expressed in paragraph 17 of the Preface, regards the identity of Subject and Substance. This is to consider the Subject, the knowing observer of the world, as equiprimordial with Substance, the world as it presents itself to be known (Kojève 1947: 529). Paradoxically, Kojève argues that Hegel's subject establishes this knowledge of the totality of substance by first recognizing itself as separate from the world in which it lives. So, in contrast to pre-Kantian metaphysics and post-Kantian idealism, it is impossible to formulate a true philosophy without considering the capacities and restrictions of the being doing the philosophizing. Hegel's great philosophical rivals—the ancients and Spinoza—imagine that the knowing subject is not crucially distinct from the world that is observed. Man is different, and made so by negativity. Kojève's Hegel argues that this subject is the only agent capable of producing meaning. The Hegelian system depends on negation in order to maintain distinctions. Failing to consider a knowing subject as separate results in the “night in which all cows are black,” a self-identity that leaves no place for freedom or even intellectual perception (Hegel 1977: 9). In Kojève's reading, the Subject on whom Substance

(the world, matter, nature) and Science (knowledge and consciousness) depends is defined as Man. Man's self-consciousness is not immediate, but emerges through the historical labor of this critical capacity.

Kojève sees Substance, nature apart from man and from history, as self-identical (Kojève 1947: 530). It does not change; it is a sort of pantheistic one-ness of everything. It is the action of the Subject to impose distinctions and understanding. Hence, there must be a moment of distinction of Man and subjectivity from Nature and the self-identical. The creation of Man, by himself, is always an activity of negation; the creation of Man is always a separation of the self from everything else. Man is not immediately aware of his negating activity; his discovery of himself as separate from Nature takes place in history. Kojève sees Greek man as completely natural, without freedom, history or individuality (Kojève 1947: 531).

Kojève argues that Judaism falls short of its true insight by positing man as distinct from, and subject to, God. Christianity makes the advance of identifying the human and the divine, even subjecting God to death in the person of Jesus Christ, but falters in its insight by granting man the possibility of an afterlife. According to Kojève, Hegel's Man does not possess an immortal soul, making Hegel the realization of historical free individuality (Kojève 1947: 538). Freedom requires separation from the all-encompassing rule of nature. To achieve this freedom, Man must also be mortal: not only finite, as an animal would be, but conscious of finitude. Man achieves self-consciousness when he is willing to accept the inevitability of death (Kojève 1947: 539). Further, man demonstrates that he has mastery over this consciousness by refusing to fear death. Rather, human beings are capable of risking death in full knowledge of the danger of their actions. Men can even kill themselves, demonstrating full acceptance of their mortality and ownership of their own death. Consciousness of death is the grounds for Man's self-recognition. Hegel dramatizes the means of the ontogenesis of this mediated self-consciousness in his famous dialectic of lordship and bondage. This how Hegel envisages Man discovering his own finitude, in a kind of primordial past, that will set the basic problems of human development throughout history. Hegel outlines a problem of self-recognition, and posits struggle and death as its key (Hegel 1977: 111-119).

Kojève argues that animal desire is directed at an object necessary for survival. Human desire, in contrast, has the capacity to be aimed at *nothing*. There is no *nothing* in Nature; only Man can posit a lack through his essence as distinct and mortal. Nothing comes into the world, and it comes into the world because Man desires it. Humans certainly have an animal aspect that requires the desire for the necessities of survival; however, the essence of *human* Desire is for an object that surpasses nature and reality, so human desire is itself negativity (Kojève 1947: 12).¹ Human desire is itself nothing, a pure negative force. Kojève submits that if human desire is aimed at nothing, then desire must be aimed at another desire (Kojève 1947: 13). If desire is the negative, then negation is the outcome of desire. The satisfaction of the desire for nothing could be met only in one's own death or the death of another, requiring the risk of the annihilation of one's nihilating consciousness.

The encounter of one human with another, in its essence, must be “une lutte à mort en vue de la « reconnaissance »”, a fight for prestige (Kojève 1947: 14). “Prestige” is a form of self-recognition through another, and, from the perspective of the material, nugatory. The one who fails to risk everything, who prefers the continuation of his concrete existence in the world to a willingness to suffer annihilation, will become a slave, He who avoids death, who prefers to live at the price of higher prestige, is reduced to an effectively animal state of desire (preferring material satisfaction to recognition of finitude). The one who refuses to live in an inferior position, who would have preferred conscious acceptance of death, becomes the Master. This struggle is impossible among animals, because their conflicts only take place over concrete objects. The struggle for recognition is the function of the capacity to put prestige above organic concupiscence; so “c'est cet anéantissement de l'animal qui est la création de l'Homme” (Kojève 1947: 565). This makes Man *qua* Man equivalent to the pure capacity for this risk. If it is Man's essence to purchase self-recognition at the risk of death, it follows that “il est la *mort incarnée*” (Kojève 1947: 569).

Desire against the Dialectic

Following Kojève, Lacan declared that the erotic and death drives are not truly opposed, but are instead merely two aspects of human desire. Drive is the correlate to instinct, entirely non-biological and impossible to satisfy; sexual drives are “toujours susceptibles de présentifier la présence de la mort” (Lacan 1973: 286). It follows from this that passion is not composed of pure vitalism, but rather conceals, in its very effervescence, a persistent morbidity. In its essence, love thrives on death; it seeks it and persists within it. Jean Wahl invited Lacan to a conference on dialectics at Roumont, in 1960. It was here that Lacan delivered “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir,” which is in part a commentary on Hegel, or a Freudian revision of Hegel. Lacan argues that Hegel’s dialectic relies on ruling out death as a possible consequence. While it is the life-or-death struggle that is absolutely crucial to the attainment of recognition and subjectivity, “death” is quickly bypassed in the transition from paragraph 188 to paragraph 189 in chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel’s route to freedom is through the work of the slave, which amounts to forfeiting enjoyment because of fear of death (Lacan 1999: 291). So it is work that Hegel will come to affirm, and not desire.

What of desire itself in this schema? That is, what can we say about the struggle for prestige, if we do not choose to casually move on to the framework of alienated labor that sets history in motion? What if the combatant prefers death, upright, to survival, kneeling? It is not a great leap to suggest that this very possibility, the choice of death, is identical to what Freud calls the death drive. Lacan’s assertion will be that the death drive tells us something about all drives (drives are components of the desire that contends for recognition).

Freud himself sometimes speaks of this drive as a desire for rest; a will to no longer feel. He at times sees this in a biological sense, or even expressed as inertial, in terms of physics (Freud 1955: 36). Lacan, in contrast, views this way of seeing the death drive as purely metaphorical. The death drive, for Lacan, has little to do with biology and much to do with language. He implores us to see in the death drive “cette marge au-delà de la vie que le langage assure à l’être du fait qu’il parle” (Lacan 1999: 283). So, for him, it is man as speaking creature that separates him from immediate life. Further, he speaks of language as the unifying force that brings together all the parts of the body. Body parts are mediated by

language, and this integrates them into an entire body, at the price of alienation in the form of linguistic representation. For Lacan this mediation distinguishes the drive, which is human desire, insatiable, from instinct, the animal desire for a concrete object (Lacan 1999: 283). This is why he speaks of “l’affinité essentielle de toute pulsion avec la zone de la mort” (Lacan 1999: 223).

Mediation by language is what allows for the creation of desire over instinct (Lacan 1999: 294). This mediation of instinct into desire takes place in relation to another (Lacan 1999: 287). The struggle between two self-consciousnesses logically takes place for a third. In order for them to have any grounds for competition, any prize to be won, there must be a third party witnessing their contest from without. According to Lacan, Freud places the struggle for desire in the eyes of the Father; specifically, a dead Father (Lacan 1999: 293). Lacan endorses a certain measure of human freedom when he affirms that the social dialectic is “la raison qui la rend plus autonome que celle de l’animal du champ de forces du désir” (Lacan 1999: 95). He declares that this mediation brought by entry into language provides the birth of a whole body as represented by a name, rather than the myriad sensations he describes as the “corps morcelé,” as well as the transformation of instinct into desire. However, this very entry into language also brings with it a reference to a Law prohibiting satisfaction, governed by the Other (Lacan 1999: 294). Following the Hegelian contest, Lacan will assert that desire, as such, is effectively the desire to control another’s desire. For this reason, the question “que veux-tu?” will inevitably become “Que me veut-il?” (Lacan 1999: 295).

This distinguishes desire from instinct. It is necessary to further differentiate “drive” from “desire”—briefly, desire is unified by the phallus, whereas drive is partial and fragmented. “Demand” is a third term requiring definition. Demand, for Lacan, is the spoken correlate to instinct that produces desire or drive. He states that drive “est ce qui advient de la demande quand le sujet s’y évanouit” (Lacan 1999: 298). This means that a subject, an apparently full consciousness-of-self, issues a demand. Demand is what a human being in full self-control utters in order to make his animal instincts into human desires; it effectively takes place on Hegelian terrain. Drive, in contrast, loses subjectivity; drive is not an animal instinct coercing activity in order to maintain survival. It is instead a specifically human trait that remains

uncontrollable by any seemingly free subject.

The Phallus

In Lacan's work, there are not only distinctions among instinct, demand, and desire, but also a difference between desire and drive. Desire takes place on a symbolic level while drive addresses itself to the real; desire is unified, drive is split and fragmented. Drive has primacy; it comes from fragments of the body, which are only later brought together into a single body. Lacan speaks of the "les intégrations plus ou moins parcellaires qui paraissent en faire l'ordonnance, y fonctionnement avant tout comme les éléments d'une héraldique, d'un blason du corps" (Lacan 1999: 284). This means that the apparently developmental stages discussed by Freud—the oral, anal and genital stages—take place as subsequent integrations of parts of the body. This process of unification is not one that corresponds to biological maturation. Rather, we have here relationships like those in the pseudo-science of heraldry. Each part of the body is mediated by symbolic representations in order to construct a language that will articulate all body parts into a whole. The aristocratic connotations of "heraldry" in this metaphor should not be ignored, as they remind us of Lacan's inheritance from the Hegelian understanding of identity as initially historically constructed by feudal relations.

In order to construct this unified body by means of this heraldry, and in order to transform the myriad drives into unified desire, human consciousness requires a "trait unaire;" a single signifier or mark that stands in supremacy over the others (Lacan 1999: 288). This unary trait is the phallus, which enjoys a "paradoxical" privilege. It is paradoxical because the phallus is most essential as guarantor of the coherence of the ego-ideal, but it is at the same time accompanied by the castration complex. It is the vulnerability of the phallus—the possibility of its destruction (by the Father, in fantasy) or its failure to respond to conscious thought (impotence)—that makes the subject incapable of its projected self-control and autonomy. It is a castration of sorts that happens to the bondsman in Hegel's dialectic. The phallus is "structural du sujet;" it "constitue essentiellement cette marge que toute pensée a évitée" (Lacan 1999: 301). Lacan speaks of this phallus as a "bone," indicating both a "bone

of contention” and a play on slang for an erection (Lacan 1999: 301). In order to understand the relation between the phallus and bone, we ought to understand what Lacan means by his concept of the lamella.

The Lamella and the Skull

Four years after his address at the Roumont conference, Lacan gave his eleventh seminar, known for its formulations on the gaze. The seventh chapter, “L’anamorphose,” discusses Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors* and its relevance to the Lacanian understanding of vision and desire. Lacan speaks of a historical coincidence of Holbein’s time (the 16th century): the development of effects of perspective in painting and the formulation of the modern subject. Holbein’s painting makes use of not only perspective but also anamorphosis—a distorted image that can only be viewed correctly from some skewed vantage point.

Holbein’s oblique anamorphosis depicts an unusual shape in the lower center of his canvas that can only be discerned correctly from the right hand side and very close up. However, even in its distorted form, examination reveals the figure to be a skull. Lacan refers to this as a “fantôme phallique” (Lacan 1973: 101). Lacan declares that “au cœur même de l’époque où se dessine le sujet et où se cherche l’optique géométrale, Holbein nous rend ici visible quelque chose qui n’est rien d’autre que le sujet comme néantisé” (Lacan 1973: 101). This skull –not depicted straight-on, but rather, distorted almost out of recognition by spatial manipulation –is for Lacan “l’incarnation imagée” of castration, which he reminds us is the center of the desires as they frame the drives (Lacan 1973: 101). But he insists that this skull is not merely a phallic symbol (though in its distorted form the skull does appear as elongated or even erect); it is rather the “le regard comme tel” (Lacan 1973: 101). The anamorphosis of this skull means that it presents its image to a viewer, but the viewer must take an unusual position in relation to the image in order to see its true form.

As *Seminar XI* proceeds, Lacan begins to argue that the libido—in this writing, effectively synonymous with drive—is itself an organ. However, it is an “organe insaisissable,” an “objet que nous ne pouvons que contourner,” a “faux organe” (Lacan 1973: 220). It is this false

organ that Lacan gives the name the “lamella.” “Lamella” etymologically signifies a “thin layer.” It is used in biology and geology, to describe a plate-like structure. In zoology it can describe a gill; it can also refer to a layered material such as mica or graphite. Lastly, it can denote a portion of cortical bone, which is the hard, stacked osseous tissue that makes up the surface of the skeleton.

Lacan describes this lamella as immortal, “Puisque ça survit à toute division, puisque ça subsiste à toute intervention scissipare” (Lacan 1973: 221). This pure libido is “de vie immortel, de vie irrépressible, de vie qui n’a besoin, elle, d’aucun organe, de vie simplifiée et indestructible” (Lacan 1973: 221). The lamella is “non pas la polarité sexuée, le rapport du masculin au féminin, mais le rapport du sujet vivant à ce qu’il perd de devoir passer, pour sa reproduction, par le cycle sexuel” (Lacan 1973: 223). So at this point, he wishes to argue that this eroticism is about death rather than sex. The lamella, pure libido, is not so concerned with sexual difference, but with our status as finite beings. Further research, however, might call into question whether this desire towards death is truly indifferent to sex.

Žižek describes the lamella as the image of the discordance between reality (the consensus generally shared of the world in which we all live) and the real (the inherently traumatic experience of the world utterly outside, which cannot be understood or represented). This latter term, the real, is the final object of enjoyment, but is at the same time necessarily obscene, disgusting and repulsive. So for Žižek, the lamella is the “disgusting substance of enjoyment” (Žižek 1995: 206). His cinematic examples of lamella include insects, beetles, “raw flesh,” worms, and the “body stripped of its skin” (Žižek 1995: 206, 209, 208). However, the denotative meaning of the word “lamella” does not indicate the soft or multitudinous abjection implied by Žižek’s examples. We might ask, why does Lacan choose to call the image of desire, the representation of the castrated phallus, the lamella? Cortical bone is hard, compressed, layered tissue. It is solid, opaque, unbending. Lacan could, after all, have called his image of libinal energy “trabecular” or “cancellous” instead, the names for the spongy, inner bone substance. This would be closer to Žižek’s example of raw flesh. The lamella is hard and unyielding, and this is also the image from Holbein’s painting that Lacan chooses to represent the castrated phallus. So, the lamella’s terrifying presence is not necessarily the sticky texture we generally associate with disgust, but rather a hard, solid,

resistant mass like bone lamellae.

Hegel's Skull

At this point, we should consider what Hegel himself had to say about the skull and bone in consideration of mind. In section A of chapter V of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel devotes himself to a consideration of the role of the skull in thought. His comments are immediately concerned with a refutation of phrenology, the nineteenth-century pseudo-science that we today only find amusing. However, his comments are significant in delineating his position against the reductive materialism that sees mind as merely an epiphenomenal product of brain tissue.

Hegel describes the skull-bone as the “immediate actuality” of mind, that is, the raw material encasing the mind (Hegel 1977: 200). However, the skull does not act, nor does it speak. “We neither commit theft, murder, etc. with the skull bone, not does it in the least betray such deeds by a change of countenance, so that the skull-bone would become a speaking gesture” (Hegel 1977: 200). The inert matter of bone is not even a sign; it can tell us nothing about the thoughts housed within. We might contemplate a skull, but the skull bone is itself only self-identical—any meaning it possesses we bring to it voluntarily; we cannot read it. The skull (the implicit contrast is to the face) is not mediated, without desire or recognition, and hence utterly inhuman. For this reason, Hegel suggests that it is absurd to maintain, as phrenology does, that the “bump” of a murderer could be discerned in his skull. He might have any number of bumps and contours, and none would have the real determinate force necessary to affect his character (Hegel 1977: 202). A bone merely *is*, lying in wait to be examined, perhaps after death, or by a phrenologist during life, whereas the mind is free (Hegel 1977: 205). Lacan appears to allude to this passage in his Roumont address when he says that cognitive psychology talks as if “s’il fallait que le psychique se fit valoir comme doublant l’organisme” (Lacan 1999: 275). Like phrenology, a certain reductive materialism aims to locate all psychic mechanisms in the anatomical brain, failing to account for the consciousness that is irreducible to neurology.

Hegel makes another, quite different, allusion to the skull in his uncanny and horrific

passage on the night of the world. This is one of Hegel's meditations on the pure negating power of human consciousness. In his view, human beings are capable of positing an empty negativity, merely annihilating the existence around them. As Kojève quotes and translates it, from the *Lectures of 1805-1806*:

Dans des représentations fantasmagoriques, il fait nuit tout autour : ici surgit alors brusquement une tête ensanglantée, là – un autre apparition (Gestalt) blanche ; et elles disparaissent tout aussi brusquement. C'est cette nuit qu'on aperçoit lorsqu'on regarde un homme dans les yeux : [on plonge alors ses regards] en une nuit qui devient *terrible* (furchtbar) ; c'est la nuit du monde qui se présente (hängt entgegen) [alors] à nous (Kojève 1947: 575).

Hegel's skull is the self-identical, immediate aspect of mind. It can be studied or analyzed by a phrenologist, it is present and measurable, but it has no capacity to limit or to determine human freedom. Hegel's second "skull" of sorts, the one appearing in the night of the world, is quite different. This "bloody head" is also immediate; it is pure self, pure negativity. The skull that phrenology possesses is the non-determining shell of human consciousness. The bloody head, on the other hand, is the extreme point of the negating power of mind. Whereas the skull-bone is an empty nothing waiting to be determined by human consciousness, the bloody head is the nothing of human consciousness as such, the negative without limit. This bloody head is what appears when we look another in the eye, when we recognize their absolute freedom and our incapacity to tame or subordinate that freedom.

As we recall, Lacan charges Hegel with eliding the possibility of death in his life-and-death struggle. Rather than exploring his true insight, the identity of desire and death, he proceeds teleologically, to the historical pursuit of human freedom through work. This insight leads Lacan to isolate desire itself, desire in its proper form as carrier of death drive, and to begin to theorize the lamella. This lamella is the figure of the partial drive, the drive that contains death, the drive that is not unified into a whole identity. This is because, as Hegel also shows us, whole identity is also only shaped through the dialectic of lordship and bondage, through an economy of recognition, subsequently to the settling of accounts with desire and death. Desire *qua* desire has not yet allowed for recognition or for identity, in that it is arrested at the moment of suicidal and homicidal negation. This means that desire itself, the lamella, is outside of time and indestructible—it concerns pure negation, not the dialectic

that occurs in history.

Lacan's term, lamella, can refer to layers of flesh and layers of bone, both. We can oppose a type of desire, in complicity with death, that is hard and contoured (like the lamella Lacan uncovers in Holbein's painting), and another desire that is instead wet, fleshy and indeterminate. It is my contention here that this first desire, the resistant and analyzable surface of bone, corresponds to Hegel's consideration of the skull bone. Of course, there is a distinct paradox here—Hegel's skull-bone is only the inert space of the human body without power over mind, whereas Lacan's lamella is desire itself. We might argue, following Lacan and Bataille, that it is Hegel's mistake to allocate to human beings a freedom that they do not have.² For Hegel, the skull-bone is indeterminate. For Freud and Lacan, our desires are constantly refracted and derailed by an interior resistance that cannot be thought. This is not the physiological reductionism Hegel rails against, but it is a consideration of matter as unthought and unthinkable even in the core of our desires—the “bone” of which Lacan spoke (Lacan 1999: 301).

In “Attraction and Repulsion II,” Bataille writes of the duality of the sacred as exemplified by the distinction between the gory objects of taboo that have not been consecrated—“corpses, blood, especially menstrual blood, menstruating women themselves”—and what remains after putrefaction; “bleached bones” are auspicious (Bataille 1988: 121). We might note that the hard and phallic nature of the lamella corresponds to the Hegelian skull from which consciousness emerges. The shattered, bloody and wet skull, on the other hand, corresponds to Hegel's bloody head—the raw force of negating desire. The skull-bone is hard and unyielding, and, for Lacan, the emblem of an exclusively male libido. The specifically bloody head, however, spoken of by Hegel, reminds us of the menstruation of women. Hegel's discussion of the night that becomes awful when we look another human in the eye recalls the implicitly male struggle of two self-consciousnesses for death or for prestige, but it also suggests something not as visible. The well-known historical fear of women cannot be theatrically presented in the way that Hegel dramatizes the struggle for recognition. I might, however, submit that the relationship with a woman is at least as significant for identity, at least as problematic, as the belligerence between warriors to which Hegel allocates such pride of place. Kojève reminds us that, for Hegel, love is only a return to the immediacy of

nature; death and combat are responsible for the birth of humanity (Kojève 1947: 521).

After all, it is impossible to imagine the life-and-death struggle of the *Phenomenology* as anything other than a historically masculine one. It is Bataille's innovation to turn his attention to another possibility for the examination of the bloody head, in contrast to the comparatively ossified study of war and resentment. We can easily imagine the terror of looking another in the eye as taking place between two women, or between a man and a woman. The fear here, after all, is the inscrutability and uncontrollable nature of another human consciousness, the essentially free and negating force of another's desire. This night that becomes awful could be, in fact, the fear of where one's wife has been at night—the terror of cuckoldry, rather than the fear of death in battle. So if the skull-bone belongs to a defeated adversary who no longer has the capacity to mediate or sublimate the limits of the substance of his brain, the bloody head could belong to a woman who we cannot understand or possess. It is this possibility that represents Bataille's most significant and worthwhile departure from the orthodox Hegelian schema; the glimpse at a possibility of alterity not understood as a rival for prestige, as something other than subject to death or conquest.

¹ This concern with the *nothing* and its importance to a conscious subject takes inspiration from Heidegger's formulations of ontological difference (Heidegger 2000: 27).

²Bataille points out Hegel's and Kojève's ignorance of the unconscious and consequent overoptimistic assessment of individual autonomy (Bataille 1988: 115).

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