

**A semantics of love: Brief notes on desire and recognition in Georges
Bataille¹**

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Abstract: *According to the Hegelian scheme proposed by Honneth, the first pattern of intersubjective recognition, still below the juridical mediation, is the sphere of interactions marked by affective bonds, or love. It is considered a first stage mostly because recognition is rooted in the partners' mutual dependency as needy creatures, which demand care and the emotional approval that follows it. In this sense, a constitutive lacking emerges as the fundamental character of the most primitive kinds of interaction embedded in social norms. And that is important inasmuch the other stages of recognitive practices depend on this first one, in which subjects acquire capacities for rational and moral reasoning and action in the public sphere. However, one could question to what extent the same normative structure can be taking as underlying every loving relationship, as oriented by an affirmation of the subject's independence, while presupposing involuntary feelings of liking and attraction. At this point it seems important to recall Georges Bataille's account of sexuality to think not only about the limits of recognition, but also its dialectical structure. The central notion of transgression helps understand why the normative grounds of intersubjective acknowledgment regarding at least some love relationships require a sort of suspension which is not the mere suppression of their validity: the violence that resides at the core of such erotic, transgressive experiences points to a disruptive effect over the features of subjective arrangement, intersubjectively formed. This very paradoxical character that is decisive for Bataille. The following notes propose a reflection on what is at stake in this conceptual operation, and on the significance of the peculiar enjoyment of norms to a rethinking of the particular aspirations of recognition in love relationships.*

Keywords: *Recognition, Eroticism, Transgression, Georges Bataille*

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Resumo: De acordo como o esquema hegeliano proposto por Honneth, o primeiro padrão de reconhecimento intersubjetivo, ainda abaixo da mediação jurídica, é a esfera de interações marcada por laços afetivos, ou amor. Este é considerado o primeiro estágio principalmente porque o reconhecimento está enraizado na mútua dependência dos parceiros enquanto criaturas dotadas de necessidades, que demandam cuidado e a aprovação emocional que advém daí. Nesse sentido, uma falta constitutiva emerge enquanto caráter fundamental das formas mais primitivas de interação imersas em normas sociais. E isto é importante na medida em que os outros estágios de práticas de reconhecimento dependem do primeiro, no qual os sujeitos adquirem capacidades para o pensar e o agir racional e moral na esfera pública. Contudo, poder-se-ia questionar em que medida a mesma estrutura normativa pode estar subjacente toda relação amorosa, enquanto orientada por uma afirmação da independência do sujeito, enquanto ela pressupõe sentimentos involuntários, como o gostar e a atração. Neste ponto parece importante retornar à concepção de Georges Bataille sobre a sexualidade, de modo a se poder pensar não apenas sobre os limites do reconhecimento, mas também sobre sua estrutura dialética. A noção central de transgressão ajuda a entender porque os fundamentos normativos do reconhecimento intersubjetivo relativos a pelo menos algumas relações de amor requerem uma espécie de suspensão, a qual não é a mera supressão de sua validade: a violência que reside no cerne de tais experiências eróticas e transgressivas aponta para um efeito disruptivo sobre os fatores do arranjo subjetivo formados intersubjetivamente. Este caráter altamente paradoxal que é decisivo para Bataille. As notas a seguir propõem uma reflexão sobre o que está em jogo nessa operação conceitual, e sobre o significado desse peculiar gozo das normas para um repensamento das aspirações particulares do reconhecimento em relações amorosas.

Palavras-chave: Reconhecimento, Erotismo, Transgressão, Georges Bataille

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It is as though we had access to the various forms of existence only as deprived of ourselves, and deprived of everything. (Maurice Blanchot)

0. It may seem very odd to propose a talk about semantics in the work of Georges Bataille, considering that he is among the authors contributing to a *Dictionnaire critique*, whose entries were published in the early 1930's in *Documents*, and that he conceived the project of such a dictionary as in this famous quotation: "A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of the words, but their tasks [*besognes*]." Semantics traditionally considered as related to explaining how language can carry meaning, would then be completely out of place. And the fact that the sentence is found opening the entry "formless" is very significant, because an important part of what is at stake is precisely to put under critical assessment the way determinate semantical content is tied to the determinate form of objects, leaving aside words and things that have no such defined shape, and so are "squashed everywhere". The stability of meaning is then confronted with the uncertainty of tasks in the moment of their announcement or in their course of realization. So, the first step is to understand in what specific and unusual way one can talk about semantics in this context, or what this sort of *heterological semantics* is about.

I would briefly defend the pertinence of such a notion recalling the way contemporary semantics gained new force through an immersion into pragmatics, that is, accounting for meaning in terms of language use in social practices. Now, the point here is that for Bataille the tasks of words are also somehow dependent upon social practices, more precisely, upon a particular

set of social dynamics related to *transgression*. I'll sketch an argument that one promising way of grasping a notion of significance beyond fixed meaning requires taking a better look on what Bataille calls *communication*, and to comprehend why he can say that “the sexual relationship is itself a communication and a movement, it is like a celebration [*fête*] by nature, and because it is essentially a communication it provokes an outward movement at first place” (BATAILLE, 1986: 207). Of course one should not take for granted the relation between semantics and communication, but that is a more general topic, and to develop it we would certainly go astray the main focus of this paper. In this context I'll just notice that semantics here means something pertaining to the conditions that render communicative interactions possible, and that Honneth subscribes to such vocabulary (making reference to Niklas Luhmann's work on love). So in the following I'll try to contrast two semantical conceptions of love (as opposed to love as a mere feeling or sheer psychological phenomenon, whatever sense that may have) emphasizing love's social embeddedness and ontological reliance: Honneth's and Bataille's.

1. The governing role of the “imperative of mutual recognition” in the reproduction of social life is considered by Honneth the point of departure to a reconstruction of a theory of processes of social change with normative content. By doing so, one can view social struggles with moral motivations as demands for expanded intersubjective recognition that, in his words, “become a structuring force in the moral development of society” (HONNETH, 1995:93). That is grounded in the assumption that reflexive behavior – “practical relation-to-self” – is intelligible only within the normative scenario

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in which the individual can consider herself as a social addressee of her partners in interaction. But that requires a sort of developmental account that lead Honneth to emphasize in Hegel and Mead an interesting distinction of patterns of mutual recognition that in a systematic way progressively enlarge the stages of “subjective autonomy”. It is well known that such patterns are: love, rights and solidarity.

Remarkable is Honneth's insistence in justifying such a division by an effort to seek agreement “with the results of empirical sciences” (ibid.), because that helps understand what is the specific role displayed by psychoanalysis in his explanatory enterprise. One first impression is that the reader find no in-depth confrontation of psychoanalytical theory or clinic with different aspects of the three forms of mutual recognition outlined, nor a discussion of the so called Freudian social texts. Psychoanalytical resources come out as “evidence from empirical studies” that would help understand the features (medium of recognition, form of relation-to-self made possible, potential for moral development) of the first stage of reciprocal recognition: love.

Now, the issue here is not to complaint about Honneth's rather poor engagement with psychoanalysis, for this clearly is not the purpose of his book. What seems more interesting to think is Honneth's characterization of the first stage of recognitive practices, the sphere of interactions marked by particular affective bonds, or love. What is called love is surely not restricted to sexual intercourse nor to a vague feeling of physical attraction. As Honneth explains,

Love relationships are to be understood here as referring to primary relationships insofar as they – on the model of friendships, parent-child relationships, as well as erotic relationships between lovers – are constituted by strong emotional attachments among a small number of people. (HONNETH, 1995:95)

So, regarding loving recognition, the situation is that of a subject whose relevant emotional bonds involve some significant others of mainly three different types: important friends, family members and sexual partners.

It is not difficult to understand why for Honneth is actually very important not to restrict this stage of mutual recognition to only one paradigmatic type of relationship; after all, how one could unambiguously separate one from another? Honneth also knows that “sexual” is not a synonym for “genital”, as Freud repeatedly insisted. But curiously enough, Honneth does not emphasize the element of pleasure driving the “strong emotional attachment” so prominent in love interactions. Instead of that, he focuses on mutual dependency and neediness:

Thus, for Hegel, love represents the first stage of reciprocal recognition, because in it subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to the concrete nature of their needs and thereby recognize each other as needy creatures. In the reciprocal experience of loving care, both subjects know themselves to be united in their neediness, in their dependence on each other (HONNETH, 1995: 95).

Love is the first stage, then, mostly because recognition is rooted in the partners' mutual dependency as needy creatures, as individuals that demand care and the emotional approval that follows it. As naturally prematurely born, adventitious humans face a difficult, turbulent path across individuation and

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maturational processes that lead to agency. It is a path that one cannot cross on one's own, precisely because one's own is rather the result, the product of early cognitively interactions, mainly those between mother and child. Then, a constitutional lacking emerges as the fundamental character of the most primitive kinds of interaction embedded in social norms, a lacking that demands for a certain sort of satisfaction, which is followed by important subjective effects:

Since, moreover, needs and emotions can, to a certain extent, only gain 'confirmation' by being directly satisfied or reciprocated, recognition itself must possess the character of affective approval or encouragement. This recognition relationship is thus also necessarily tied to the physical existence of concrete others who show each other feelings of particular esteem. (HONNETH, 1995: 95-96)

Affective approval and encouragement are here names for what Freud insisted in calling pleasure and satisfaction, in order not to lose the fundamental qualitative character of the experience. Of course, Honneth's avoidance is not naïve, since it is a matter of showing how that is a decisive pattern of reciprocal recognition, inasmuch as it provides subjects the acquisition of capacities for moral development required for reasoning and acting in the public sphere. But, as Honneth explicitly declares, the central point is not just that of privileging an intersubjectivist reading of psychoanalytical theory of psychosexual development, but rather the

convincingly portray [of] love as a particular form of recognition only owing to the specific way in which it makes the success of affectional bonds dependent on the capacity, acquired in early

childhood, to strike a balance between symbiosis and self-assertion (HONNETH,1995: 98).

It is worth noting that Honneth takes this normative structure of love recognition not just in its developmental strand, but he also engages (even if briefly) in clinical considerations, relying on Jessica Benjamin's work on "pathological disorders of the love relationship". Leaving aside the problems in reading perversion as a recognition deficit due to one-sidedness rigidity in the balance between symbiosis and self-assertion, the interesting point is how these normative poles are related to issues in pathology, and how they can be reconsidered from another point of view: rather than that of child-parent relationship, the one regarding erotic relationship between lovers. For one problem in Honneth's recourse to object relations theory is that it may even suite well one kind of the relationships composing the love pattern of recognition practices, but that appears as a unjustified privilege if the purpose is to account for the whole set of relationships pertaining to the same normative environment. That's why I would like to confront Honneth's with Bataille's way of articulating symbiosis and self-assertion in love practices, specifically erotic ones.

2. Perhaps the most obvious way to proceed the confrontation is through the concept of eroticism. But immediately a question imposes itself: wouldn't it be misleading to take eroticism for love? Aren't they different things for Bataille? Actually, eroticism is a rather determinate concept in Bataille's thinking, while he uses love more loosely. Nevertheless, some important passages about love just put forward the same erotic disruptive character:

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Love is so excessive a feeling that I prop my head up in my hands. Arising from the passions, this realm of dreams isn't fundamentally a domain of lies. In the end the face is dispersed. In the place where the fabric of things rip open – in the lacerating rip – nothing remains but a person introduced into the fabric's texture. (BOTTING; WILSON, 1997:94)

There's a strong convergence with definitions and descriptions of eroticism, such as:

I regarded eroticism as the disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question. [...] If necessary I can say in eroticism: *I lose myself* [*JE me perds*]. Not a privileged situation, no doubt. But the deliberate loss of self in eroticism is manifest; no one can question it. (BATAILLE, 1986: 31, trans. modified)

Eroticism is not the only experience in which the self faces disintegration; nevertheless it is a paradigmatic one, since it is a voluntary loss, not just accepted but sought up. And it is always a violent experience, of an uncontainable excess menacing all that the subject yet recognizes as human. A violence that brings forth anguish, an affection that lies in the heart of the dialectic between interdiction and its transgression, and emerges with full force “especially at that moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo [*l'interdit*] still holds good and yet we are yielding to the impulsion it forbids.” (BATAILLE, 1986: 38)

Based in part on readings of ethnographic and anthropological studies, Bataille opposes two dimensions of social life: one circumscribed by interdiction, which is the domain of work and rational order, the other opened

up through transgression, being violence precisely what is so violently avoided in taboos. Death is among the most clear and horrifying signs of violence, therefore, the one most likely to be interdicted. But Bataille suggests also that sexuality too is an anguishing yet fascinating sign of violence, and that the universal character of its interdiction (taboo of incest) is compatible with the radical violence of sexual impulses.

These elements lead Bataille to link death and sexuality, as close aspects of a dialectical flow of energy that could be named *life*: both are taken as violent vestiges of archaic nature that lies at the very core of subjectivity, revealing its true ontological character, for they represent that inassimilable remainder of continuity, into which all discontinuity (individuation) collapses in eroticism.

If we view the primary taboos [*les interdits essentiels*] as the refusal laid down by the individual [*l'être*] to co-operate with nature as regarded as a squandering of living energy and an orgy of annihilation we can no longer differentiate between death and sexuality. Sexuality and death are simply the culminating points of the holiday [*fête*] nature celebrates, with the inexhaustible multitude of living beings, both of them signifying the boundless wastage of nature's resources as opposed to the urge to live on [*désir de durer*] characteristic of every living creature. (BATAILLE, 1986: 61)

3. It is easy to read passages like this, and others, especially from his literary writings, seeing in it only a sort of aesthetization of limit-experiences, with no substantial theoretical concepts involved. Well, I think that's a possible reading, except obviously for the term 'only'. A closer reading shows that

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there's more in Bataille than symbolizations of the death of the subject, or its mere dissolution in blind flows. I would like to explore the reading that, for Bataille, rather than a pathological trouble, dispossession of self is a very important subjective experience, that of openness to new forms of existence, or a new integrative movement, individuation.

The insistence on the discontinuous features of individuality lead to an illusion of self-assertion as a fixed set of subjective properties, and that all contact and exposure could just be abstracted. In experiences like that of eroticism, the subject is clearly withdrawn from its supposed isolation, not only by means of imposed violations of his or her integrity (references to Sadean practices of domination or religious immolations are limit-cases indeed), but through encounters ruled by chance. Bataille calls *communication* this radical exposure due to an ontological tearing [*déchirure*] each one carries, and that from the subjective point of view can be referred to as *la nostalgie de la continuité perdue*, our “yearn for the lost continuity” (BATAILLE, 1986: 15, trans. modified). After all, “A being that is not cracked is not possible” (BATAILLE, 1988: 23).

The undressing can be seen as an interesting state of communication in this sense, a sort of bereavement or divesting of these social contours that we, in a sense, think can guarantee our safety somehow, possibly by hiding the obscene. Nakedness, specially that which precedes a sexual encounter, announces this a partial dissolution of discontinuity that is the condition a momentary step into symbiosis. Or, as Bataille puts it,

it is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality.³ (BATAILLE, 1986:18)

Of course one could contrast this with Bataille's praise of the sovereign as the subject that affirms life even in death, and that rejects rationality of work in benefit of sumptuous expenditure. But these are not to be taken at face value, so to say, as Bataille argues that “sovereignty is not an established state of being, nor something arrived at by holding oneself back” (MITCHELL; WINFREE, 2009: 10), that is, not a model of behavior, nor a subjective position acquired once for all. Sovereignty would rather be the transgressive impulse itself, the one leading the subject to face anguish and preventing him or her from recoiling.

So communication for Bataille takes place in this sort of passion for continuity, which he also calls *fusion*, or fusion of beings, granting that it does not mean a full harmonious encounter; on the contrary, it means the dissolution of the self, or of self-assertion, not in the sense of a mere subjective breakdown, but in the sense of a partial undoing of identificatory forms, which means that the subject experiences radical heterogeneous features, not fully integrable in his or her self-image. In this sense, it is possible to see self-identity as a sort defense from such strange, enjoying

3 « C'est un état de communication, qui révèle la quête d'une continuité possible de l'être au-delà du repli sur soi. Les corps s'ouvrent à la continuité par ces conduits secrets qui nous donnent le sentiment de l'obscénité. L'obscénité signifie le trouble qui dérange un état des corps conforme à la possession de soi, à la possession de l'individualité durable et affirmée. » (OC X, 23)

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features, from that which has no definite ordinary name, that which Bataille used to call the heterological, or the accursed share. That's why "What fusion brings into me, Bataille says, is *another* existence" (BATAILLE, 1988:141)

4. Now, we can return to Honneth's normative balance between symbiosis and self-assertion, and say that for him, these are like extreme poles between which the subject transits, never (or almost never) achieving completely one of them. If pathology is a fixed position in one of the poles, normality would be a certain plasticity allowing a dynamic equilibrium across the line.

For Bataille, on the other hand, the situation is quite different, for if we read symbiosis as the name of opening to the continuity of being, that would be specifically what transgression somewhat provides as sexual satisfaction. Of course, self-assertion is not eluded, but it becomes the name of a sort of narcissistic defensive formation, that is important insofar as the subject is engaged in work and instrumental rational action. It is tempting to see it as more fragile in Bataille when compared to Honneth, but that may not be the case when stated like that. Because for the french writer, the fact self-assertion is suspended during the time of celebration [*dans la fête*] does not mean that it is simply negated. Suspension here means *Aufhebung*, suppression that overcomes, *dépassement*.

In this sense, symbiotic relations *per se* do not result in pathological troubles, as somewhat debilitating conditions, as least if conceived as erotic dispossession of the self in transgression. Insistent avoidance of such dispossession is what would be more like a sign of poor balance, a balance in

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which the subject is necessarily confronted with the anguish of not having a fixed, stable position. I think that is this Bataillean conception of balance that is interesting to confront with Honneth's, as a means of a critical assessment of psychoanalysis in the context of the theory of recognition.

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