

CHAPTER 1

Introductory: A Genealogy of Postmodernism

To trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries, carries us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods; so that, in the face of all the glad, hay-making suns, and soft-cymballing round harvest-moons, we must needs give in to this: that the gods themselves are not for ever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birthmark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*¹

At first one thought that political correctness (PC) was but an absurd, and hopefully ephemeral, travesty: a collection of kitsch euphemisms patched together in order to cover, in the manner of fig leaves, the obscenities of contemporary America: her barbarism and racism. We know the story: Mrs. and Miss turned into Ms., gal became lady, colored people minorities, guy gentleman, blacks African-Americans, fat heavy (or big), Spics Latinos (or Hispanic-Americans), skinny slender, Wops Italian-Americans, Third World countries developing countries, Orientals Asians, short petite, et cetera. This was yet the folk aspect of the change. Initially—in the early eighties—all this sounded ludicrous, but one might have granted the benefit of the doubt to the whole effort and inferred therefrom that PC was but the expression of a movement that sought, in spite of all, to correct the errors and hatreds of the past by starting with the words themselves, with *speech*. Soon it became clear that the shift was never meant to go further. It was rhetoric all right; some kind of manneristic foreplay to the habitual doublespeak of the “Liberal democracies,” which, in their ploys of international conquest and social imbalances, always come to justify imperial intrigue in the name of “freedom” and “human rights” on the one hand, and to blame economic inequality on “culture,” on the other.

So PC turned out to be an argot that the middle class developed to mask its failure. Its failure to democratize the country; to overcome its deep-seated

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loathing of all those ethnic groups that have shown themselves “unfit” in point of technological and business proficiency; to tolerate the sight of misery and distress with a view to allaying them; and to alleviate indigence . . . In short, as they were incapable of “spreading the sunshine,” and as they were despairing because of this failure, the intelligentsia and the people thought it was better to lie to themselves chronically, and so, like hackers, they cheated; they broke into the network of daily parlance and altered the data, they doctored the words. Words whose outspoken brutality was itself the suggestion of where the problems had to be tackled.

But there was no afterthought; in time, things evolved. Not only had ordinary language become falsified, and the intellectual possibility of *dissent* enfeebled as a consequence, but one came to find that this semi-improvised linguistic patchwork had gradually assumed the proportions of a *system*. In schools it became fashionable to hear that “truth” was an elusive concept, and therefore that the notion of “immutable values,” by which one might rank *human* achievements (and crimes), was not only wrong but heinous to boot, given its implicit injunction to discriminate, subjugate, and eventually destroy all that had been classified as “inferior.” According to this sprouting creed, the culprit of all that was abominable was the middle-aged white male of European descent: admittedly the greatest classifier and butcher in the history of mankind. This was hardly a new or controversial conclusion; what was different, however, was the peculiar logic leading to it.

So-called truths, one heard, formed just a tangle of *discourses*—discourses ever changing, the one hardly “truer” than the other, all of them manifestations of evolving *power* relations. This sounded suspiciously similar to a Marxian argument, but it wasn't, for, listening on, one discovered that the human expression of reality as a whole was but a fabric of discourses, some (the dominant ones) more preponderant, others (the marginalized ones) less so. The novelty was that whole new categories of “displaced subjects”—the oppressed ones—were now launched on the field of analysis and endowed with discourses of their own, which, as it was forcefully conveyed, happened to be no less (if not a great deal more) noble, legitimate, and truthful than the discourse of the Eurocentric whites.

At first sight this appeared to be a compassionate move to give a voice to all the formerly silent victims of torture and abuse—the “soft targets” of Western oppression: colonized peoples, the poor, the weak, women, children, and homosexuals. Yet again, looking more closely, it was nothing of the sort. This new philosophical “system” implied no resolution, no synthesis, no expectation of salvation, no promise of a struggle in the name of unity—aspects that, for instance, Christianity and Marxism did share to a certain extent. Because it didn't really promise a way out of the suffering, the new “discourse” seemed to abandon the world to its own confusion and insolvency. The best one could do, so went the advice, was to resist stubbornly the established powers of oppression and attempt to subvert them always by joining nuclei of guerrilla warfare, which maneuvered from the *margins* of society.

In brief, what was being offered was a shorthand gospel of intellectual disobedience in the name of a sentimental connivance with the downtrodden of the world. In fact, as we shall see, the true nature of this new intellectual fad was far more complex than what might have been gathered from this collection of impressions, but all in all, a sneering relativism and the profession of parlor radicalism were the immediate traits that transpired from a first casual encounter with it.

American academia in the eighties was at the forefront of this transformation. Notwithstanding its poses and sentimental outbursts, seldom, if ever, is the academic corps a disobedient lot. Among American educators, as the issue was one of “resistance,” what this new trend thus translated into, practically, was a mischievous pantomime of antagonisms. In other words, the “new dissenters”—who, exactly as their predecessors (the Marxists of yesteryear), never acted outside or against the system but always *within* it—resolved to play a game in which each entrenched himself or herself in the nominal dugout of “tolerance.” From that position, they proceeded to analyze all “cultural artifacts” (the “great books,” films, scholarly and media articles, etc.) and tear them apart—“deconstruct” was the proper expression—with a (more or less overt) view to lashing out at a number of choice targets, which were always the same for all (we will come to these shortly). The beauty of it all was that, through this game, one got to disintegrate much and construct nothing; and no systematic alliances across the dugout were possible for these would have meant one step toward *unity*, which, as a “totalizing discourse”—as a “universal”—was, for the “new dissenters,” the ultimate taboo. In truth, the “deconstructivists” came to form an alliance of sorts: a loose but nevertheless strong and resilient alliance against anyone seeking unity across the political spectrum in the name of justice. Phrased differently, the “new culture of resistance” stood for an alliance against alliances.

The new trend took on the name of “postmodernism,” and its prophet was a white, thoroughly European male: Michel Foucault a darling of Western propaganda, whose decisive endorsement by the Parisian intelligentsia in 1966 and by its New York counterpart in 1975 transformed him instantly into an intellectual icon of the West. Foucault agreeably assumed the proffered role of guru, and in time came to be the leader of a veritable French invasion of America’s academia and educational institutions. An invasion which has consolidated itself twenty-five years later—at a time when, in Europe, the Foucauldian influence has been long dead—into a strong bastion of thought, wielding ever more money, converts, governmental leeway, publications, and power, power of the purest sort: intolerant and corrupt.

For lack of a better creed, and presumably disappointed by the utter failure of their country’s short-lived and scattered Socialist and hippie experiments in the recent past, waves of American intellectuals, educators, and publicists presently seem to have found sanctuary in the “rebel” construction of this late French, postmodernist school.

From philosophy to literary criticism, via sociology and governmentality, the contagion has recently reached economics. The picture that emerges from this

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scramble is an odd one: among the lettered multitudes, we no longer see the “Left”: no coherent movement of dissent exists anymore—it is literally finished. Instead, the spectacle is one of affluent middle-class intellectuals, nearly all white males of European descent, that are divided into two factions: the Liberals (modernists) on one side, and the prankishly antagonizing postmodernists on the other. Under the cover of a politically correct truce signed in the name of propriety, the one faction (barely) tolerates the whims of the other, and while the modernists carry on business as usual, telling their pupils that life is a game of chance in which “the market” alone can take them to the top, the postmodernists reach conclusions not altogether dissimilar. Put another way, postmodernist professors invite their classes to apply relativistic exercises and “deconstructivist” techniques, whereby the students are made to take apart a narrative and identify the social prejudices informing the text; but after the deconstruction has crushed all the idols, the class has in fact no option but to fall back upon whatever is the current system of belief, that is, the creed of self-interest and faith in the “free-market” with which every Anglo-Saxon is raised.

Ten times out of ten the pupils are trained to take aim and fire at the privileged pet-peeves of postmodernism. These are: patriarchy, phallocracy, paternalism, racism, sexism, machismo, racist industrial pollution (that is, only that pollution that is putatively caused by the white elites and discharged on “minorities”), Europe, Eurocentrism, the white European male, the male in general, Columbus and the Catholics, religion, God, transcendence, metaphysics, the spirit, colonization and early imperialism, and sometimes, *ever more infrequently*, “capitalism,” preferably singled out as a vague synonym for economic oppression. *Never*, though, are the students made to visit the polemic upon the concrete working of the hierarchies of *real power*: say, to investigate the effective composition, functioning, and history of the political and financial establishments of the West.

The *social sciences* . . . suffer when fashionable nonsense and word games displace the critical and rigorous analysis of social realities. Postmodernism has three principal negative effects: a waste of time in the human sciences, a cultural confusion that favors obscurantism, and a weakening of the political left . . . No research [. . .] can progress on a basis that is both conceptually confused and radically detached from empirical evidence [. . .]. What is worse [. . .] is the adverse effect that abandoning clear thinking and clear writing has on teaching and culture. Students learn to repeat and to embellish discourses that they only barely understand. They can even, if they are lucky, make an academic career out of it by becoming expert in the manipulation of an erudite jargon.²

In the end, even though in the classroom “God” and patriarchy have come to be arraigned, tried, and sentenced a million times, our system, as a whole, as many critics (including various postmodernists) have understood, is never questioned. Moreover, it is widely remarked that the postmodern attitude, in its craving for differentiation, erasure of boundaries, and permissiveness, is indeed highly compatible with the defining traits of our corporate, market-oriented age.

This basic realization reveals that the apparent antagonism between modernists and postmodernists is somewhat feigned, if not imaginary.

So far, all this sounds like a sorry joke. But the fact remains that, since the advent of postmodernism, whatever was left of a dissenting mood has beaten a hasty retreat. And the impact of political correctness on the middle class' education system might have something to do with this. Twenty-plus years of disintegrative labor in the schools have eventually managed to discipline American pupils, conditioning them to snarl, snap and bite whenever they sniff anything redolent of "sexism," "absolutism," "Eurocentrism," or "white male chauvinism." They have been disciplined by means of a politically correct lack of any spiritual certainty, other than a patriotic feeling of righteousness, a feeling shared and reinforced on the other hand by the pupils' Liberal education—the other pedagogical half of America. Joining the postmodern half to the Liberal half, and taking the limit of our argumentation, thus assuming that in time all empathy will be wrested from the hearts of young Americans, we obtain this hypothetical, neotype "American citizen": a fanaticized hybrid who, as a creature of Liberalism, decomposes life in costs and benefits, considers compassion an (expensive and unnecessary) option, and is convinced of his/her intellectual and cultural superiority vis-à-vis all those peoples incapable of mastering the technological arts or the savvy ways of commerce. As a creature of postmodernism, however, the "new western type" will not always dare to confess openly the conviction of being culturally superior. He or she is ever the hypocrite. But, with regard to postmodernism, the interesting development in this case is that, since strongly religious peoples have been historically deaf to the merits of machine-making and of technology,³ the Liberal scientific pride and the postmodernist aversion to traditional religion will reinforce each other and bring "the citizen's" mind to an impasse. Either rationality prevails and the individual's vision turns into the most intolerant form of hawkish mindset—for example, we may think of today's *Liberal* supporters of the "war on terror" (i.e., the war against the Arab people as a whole—see chapter 9)—or postmodernism's open-ended philosophy of denial predominates and the individual flounders in irresolute apathy, not knowing what to do. To this difficulty the so-called Neoconservative variant presents a fascinating solution: what the new Republican Right has studiously attempted since the mid-nineties is precisely this fusion of civic, devout ardor—Christ wrapped in the flag, or the flag tout court—with the Liberal faith: supply-side economics plus technology. This model, conceived and orchestrated with patience and method by these intriguing "postmodernists of the Right" (e.g., Leo Strauss, Irving Kristol, Francis Fukuyama, and others), though much derided at its inception by rival Democrats, has, instead, displayed tremendous efficacy in the face of the exigencies of the times. This "Neoconservative" palliative presently appears to be working better than anything the Liberals had thought of in our era of post-Cold War, "global," "multipolar" competition.

Most importantly, recent scholarly analyses of Neoconservatism have revealed the existence of an undeniable philosophical affinity between these postmodernists of the Right and their counterparts on the Left;⁴ this connection will

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be examined in chapter 8. Both parties believe that ours is a world ultimately driven by chance, which only power (i.e., violence) can subdue. Yet the conservative elitists keep this truth occult and recommend, for the sake of social stability, the espousal of “traditional values” and economic oligarchism, whereas the Foucauldian postmodernists of the Left personify, more or less aggressively, the other half of the game, namely, the unstable and chaotic drift of life upon whose taming the conservatives assert their political tenure. By retreating “to the margins of cultural difference” and posing behind a stance of merely verbal harassment aimed at, say, phallocracy or televangelism, the Foucauldians do in fact renounce to antagonize, in a united front, the powers that be. Superficially, what seems most contradictory of these Foucauldians is their use of reason to humiliate reason, and of rational language (what they refer to as “discourse”) to celebrate chaos: more than a contradiction, this is “cheating” (*une tricherie*), as Georges Bataille himself admitted. “The realm of thought,” he said, “is horror. Yes, it is horror itself [. . .]. It is like slipping in the night, on the pitch of a roof, with no parapet and in a wind that nothing appeases. The more thought is rigorous, the more the menace intensifies.”⁵ So, what has been truly at work in this strange debate? What have been the stakes?

Several issues are at stake here: the state of education in America, the paralysis of the critical faculty of students, the death of dissent, and the political orientation of the American intelligentsia. These are all related themes, and one of the linking threads is indeed this exceptional adaptation of French antihumanism within America’s network of knowledge. The focus of this study will be to investigate the origins and nature of this peculiar philosophical import from France. Borrowing Foucault’s phraseology, we propose to conduct an archeology of Foucault himself and map out a genealogy of his spiritual provenance. Who is Foucault and where does he come from?

Foucault owed his American success to having developed a product that happened to satisfy a critical exigency faced by the U.S. elites in managing country and propaganda: namely, that of preventing the formation of a compact movement of political dissent united by a universal belief in justice. Academics, too, had reasons for jumping on the bandwagon and taking up the vogue from France: (1) it offered a way out of the contradictory imperative of Marxian class conscience: with Foucault, the educated bourgeois with romantic aspirations could side with and speak for the poor, the madmen and convicts without having to be one of them—this was liberating; and (2) Foucault wrote at length, often passionately, in defense of the oppressed who suffered disfiguring abuse in asylums, prisons, and hospitals; he spoke in defense of a primordial vitality, systematically crushed by disciplinary powers, whose mystique he most originally depicted; and he pleaded without affecting the sanctimonious style of all those optimistic bores who could never conclude a treatise on human struggle and iniquity without appealing to the powers of divine providence. In a word Foucault was “it”: sophisticated, talented, deep, feisty, creative, politically engaged, seemingly compassionate, but sporting enough iconoclasm and irreverence to keep the whole deal “cool.”

And so he became a new star of the (already bankrupt) American Left. But there appeared to be a serious misunderstanding behind it all.

During the 1980s, a number of Americans working in a university setting enshrined Foucault as a kind of patron saint, a canonic figure whose authority they routinely invoked in order to legitimate, in properly academic terms, their own brand of “progressive” politics. Most of the latter-day Foucauldians are high-minded democrats; they are committed to forging a more diverse society in which whites and people of color, straights and gays, men and women, their various and ethnic and gender “differences” intact, can nevertheless all live in compassionate harmony—an appealing, if difficult goal, with deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. *Unfortunately*, Foucault’s lifework is far more unconventional—and far more discomfiting—than some of his “progressive” admirers are ready to admit. [. . .]. Foucault issued a basic challenge to nearly everything that passes for “right” in Western culture—including everything that passes for “right” among a great many of America’s left-wing academics.⁶

These lines, penned by a Foucauldian academic, go straight to the heart of the matter. “Unfortunately,” he wrote: as if he were regretfully informing his “high-minded, Democrat” colleagues that they have all been the victims of a frightening misjudgment, if not a dupery. Still driven by the precepts of their “Judeo-Christian” formation, but pressured by the mechanical pace, the uncertainty, and the disillusion of the times, the “progressives” appear to have satisfactorily bartered their traditional, leftist slogans for the newer lingo of Foucault. They merely thought that they had “upgraded”: still compassionate after all these years, yet “hip.” However, and here is the trouble, the Foucauldian discourse, as the passage above correctly warned, has nothing to do with compassion. Foucault never cared for the conservation of life, but rather the opposite: if anything, he enjoined to cultivate *suicide* throughout one’s life. His empathy for the troubled lunatics and convicts of the carceral institutes was a form of complicity with all those creatures of uninhibited, violent yearning; a camaraderie felt toward all manifestations of savage insubordination before any form of authority, be it transcendent or mechanically immanent (like the taxonomic frenzy of the modern era). The proximate enemy of postmodernism appears to be technocratic oppression and surveillance—symbolized by the clean-shaven, monitoring engineer in a white robe—but the ultimate target is unmistakably the belief in “the good.” Foucault’s is a testimony to reasoned despair, which strives to oppose compassionate sentiment, and which takes no pains to reform the world’s iniquities for the sake of peace.

As said, the Foucauldians have no political agenda, no program, and no plans for reform. Foucault’s idea of resistance was merely to join the forces of resentment that simmer in the lower depths of society (“at the margins,” as he put it), and engage in an endless tug-of-war with the constituted authorities. The invitation to *transgress* appeared to have been an end in itself: it managed to keep social tension always at boiling temperature. And, needless to add, the party profiting the most from such a state of perennial strife is “disciplinary power” itself—the enemy.

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One could have then inferred from his peculiar brand of “heresy” that Foucault was some sort of modern-day *Gnostic*, that is, a contemporary edition of those teachers of antiquity who couched in rational prose ideas, parables, and myths antithetical to the orthodox dogmas of the Fathers of the Church. Teachers who accordingly preconized behaviors and lifestyles that the Fathers censured as disreputable and immoral. As a neo-Gnostic, Foucault’s induction into American academia might be seen as something of a sensation; one of those bizarre twists in the history of ideas that do not occur infrequently, but that do not generally last more than a few seasons. At this time, however, Foucault is still going strong, and his academic popularity in the United States shows no signs of abatement. And, for a fad, even if French, a quarter of a century is a long time.

In truth, this phenomenon is the conspicuous symptom of a crisis. A crisis so profound that clever minds, such as American academics claim to have in abundance, have mistaken a priest of dissolution (Foucault) for an apostle of compassion and taken in his whole retinue (other French *maîtres à penser* such as Lyotard or Baudrillard, whom we will discuss later), no questions asked. Those questions should have been asked, for the sake of clarity. Because, if they had been, they would have revealed that Foucault is not as original as the voice of U.S. academe purports him to be. By tracing the sources of his discourse, one discovers that Foucault had merely re-elaborated themes that had been developed by another thinker. Not some vague magus of Gnostic memory, but the true inspirer of the postmodern mood: Bataille, the *poète maudit* of contemporary French thought. Foucault borrowed the near entirety of his neologisms, metaphors, allegories, and philosophical constructions from Bataille, *wholesale*. And like all ambitious, and accordingly ungrateful, pupils, Foucault gave only sparse thanks to the master, quoting him duly and admiringly (whenever the master’s shadow could not be avoided altogether), but as seldom as possible. Exponents of the Frankfurt School, who attended a series of seminars chaired by Bataille in Paris the late thirties, were quick to point to the *obvious* legacy connecting Foucault to the semiforgotten Bataille,⁷ but, as it usually happens in the history of modern thought, the mold of a successful creed of subversion is much too revelatory and is thus better left in wraps. And so it went: Bataille, like a Leninist grandee at the time of the Stalinist purges, was effaced from the official photographs; thenceforth his name made only brief appearances in the indices of postmodern texts, and his vast opus (translated into English only in part) has been entrusted to the care of a handful of purist custodians. Custodians, whose chief duty, of course, has been to issue continual disclaimers highlighting how starkly different in point of style and goals the two men—Bataille and Foucault—truly were. Which is false.

Bataille had conceived his opus in the form of “a project” (*le projet*) whose crudity and extremism, however, prevented it from gaining diffuse acceptance in the Liberal mainstream. The Bataillean enterprise was driven by the unhinged ambition to convert others to a placid acceptance of violence and dissipation by employing a mix of persuasive rational arguments on the impossibility of grasping the meaning of the Hereafter, and by teaching the rudiments of a language

of his making, which was built upon imagery inspired by death and bloody sacrifice.

Should I speculate gravely about freedom, or about God? We know nothing of it, and if we do speak of it, it is by way of play (*c'est un jeu*). Everything that goes further than common truth is play.⁸

It seemed as though Bataille had wanted to infiltrate conventional language and thought (which he subsumed under the rubric of “discourse”) and, through these, reach the collective mind of bourgeois society with the purpose of bending, confusing, and re-directing it. Thus, he looked forward to dissolving within the thinking individual all expectation of justice after death, of karma. More specifically, the “project” consisted of making “*violence*,” which is *silent* (i.e., whose experience is inexpressible), a spoken word, in the *hope* of subverting all preconceptions traditionally accepted as “sacred,” such as peace, compassion, gifting, and harmony. The final objective being that of disabusing the potential convert by reconciling him or her to the spontaneous brutality of life and nature. Finally, Bataille’s social dream was to see men, after they have undergone this kind of *initiation*, create communities that would celebrate the mystery of collective life much in the fashion of the ancient orgiastic cults, which fascinated him so deeply. The new sacred imperative was to violate every prohibition, to *transgress* every taboo and sacred commandment: especially the belief in the “benevolent, all-seeing God,” which, in revenge, he turned on its head by transforming it into a worship of base matter. His new creed came to be symbolized by a headless monster: the Bataillean icon of a deified Nothingness; he christened it “*l’Acéphale*.”

Bataille’s starting point was the critique of modern bureaucratized society whose subversion he wished to employ for a clearing through customs, as it were, of ancient bloody cults, such as those of Kali or the Aztec divinities. He was the first contemporary thinker who systematically tackled the essentially religious challenge of recycling, within a modern, rationalist framework, old infernal forms of worship with the avowed intent of numbing within the individual the yearning for transcendence—of annihilating in humans the wish that there be retribution after this life. But “the project” never took off. In itself, the legacy of Bataille—an eclectic and unique collection of gritty pornography, surrealist poems, philosophical aestheticism, iconoclastic mysticism, bold theology, genial sociology, and dazzling political economy, all of which were composed in the key of death, tumescence, and bloody effusion—was far too pictorial, uneven, and cruelly sincere to have succeeded in perverting the modern middle class as its author had wished. What with the oneiric prose and, as we shall see, all that evocation of obscene monsters, dreary epiphanies, purulent vaginas, and not-so-ambivalent tracts on the merits of fascism, “the project,” in such a raw state, was not likely to convince the skeptical West, which had long since stopped believing in angels and demons. And this is the reason why Foucault came to acquire enormous relevance in this movement: he purged the Bataillean project of the

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mystical and esoteric fancies and gave it discursive respectability by shaping it into a compact system of thought, a pseudophilosophy that was built upon a simple contraposition. The contraposition of a preexisting core of rebellious, primordial lifeblood (embodied by Foucault's well-known lunatics of the asylum), prowled and hunted by the aseptic, rational rigor of the machine era (the technocratic managers of the clinics, penitentiaries, and madhouses). This imaginative Bataillean metaphor of contemporary life struggle in the modern era Foucault would immortalize in his celebrated "theory" of Power/Knowledge. Finally, the American Foucauldians adopted this myth to articulate the racial/gender divide along which blacks allegedly part from whites, and women from men, until each party rejoins its own isle of indigenous knowledge, pledging to resist "at the margins" and to let the mutual hostility fester with no chance of reconciliation. Thus, with uncommon disingenuousness, feminism, homosexuality, and nonwhite ethnicity have been granted by the white establishment peer status in the grand arena of public discourse—through, for example, proclamations, exclusivist legislation such as Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, and ad hoc academic departments. And from this kind of promotion to describing the post-9/11 rampage in Afghanistan as a "feminist war of liberation" there could only have been a short step. So ours is the story of a system of power, which, finding itself ever more under the grip of war-loving oligarchs that have brought intoxicating propaganda to new heights of virtuosity, resolved thirty years ago to promote openly the postmodern politics of diversity with the manifest intent of blocking any form of dissent and opposition. This politics of diversity is an academic treatment of Foucault's Power/Knowledge, which is itself, a systematic re-elaboration of a creed of sorts invented by Bataille in the prewar era. So we now turn to the antitraditional roots of the Bataillean vision.