
The Sacrifice of Feminine Eros in *Heavenly Creatures*^{*}

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The sleeves and cuffs of the navy woolen coat siphon mud and water. The first blows drew the hands into the pain, into the skin opened by the brick; now the hands and arms stretch out. The fingers stiffen with each crush of brick against hair and skin, and they relax as the brick in the stocking bounces away. Arabesques of blood darken the ground: ochre on brown. The face moulds features in the mud. Black buttons mould circles. The head weeps.

The murder in the final scenes of the film *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) brings two girls, Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme, to the zenith of their wildly extravagant love.¹ They are sentenced to five years in prison and, as a condition of their release, are prohibited from ever re-establishing contact. The murder of Pauline's mother culminates a vertiginous, ruinous love between the girls. What kind of eros—life principle, or more specifically, sexuality—tends toward violent murder? What kind of eros is figured in *Heavenly Creatures*?

In his works *Theory of Religion* ([1973] 1989) and *Erotism* ([1957] 1986), Georges Bataille develops a theory of eros as an inherently violent life force. I will sketch Bataille's conception of eros and the necessity of violence, and his constructions of human relationship and feminine eros within his representation of eros. Bataille's theory, I argue, complements and illuminates the ontology and politics of *Heavenly Creatures*. I then introduce Jessica Benjamin's feminist theory of eros as presented in *The Bonds of Love* (1988) to resist the seduction of the Bataillan erotic cosmos

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figured in *Heavenly Creatures*. While arguing that violence plays a significant role in erotic fantasy, Benjamin denies the *necessity* of violence in human erotic relationships. She regards violence as the distortion, into domination and submission, of genuine human desires for recognition from an "other." My juxtaposition of Bataille and Benjamin evokes two very different constructions of feminine eros in *Heavenly Creatures*: while a Bataillan reading regards feminine eros as expendable, Benjamin reconfigures feminine eros as a vital subjectivity in search of wholeness within human relationships. Benjamin concedes that historically and culturally feminine eros has been regarded as expendable, but she urges us to challenge the *necessity* of such an account by confronting the horrible configurations such an account may take.

Violence: The Secret Heart of Eros

For Bataille violence lies at the heart of eros. He develops his theory of eroticism as a universalist account of the development of human being and culture. Human existence originates in unconscious being; we exist "*in the world like water in water*" (Bataille [1973] 1989, 19). This "perfect immanence" (19) is disrupted as humans begin to use tools. It is now possible to know something as an object, as "other" than the user of the tool, the subject. From these primordial beginnings, human beings gradually construct an "order of things" (35), of economic exchange and production, within a world of receding immanence. This process of "humanization" entails a denial of the boundless violence of immanent existence. Human beings function in the world as separate entities cut off from this originating immanence thereby rejecting the "intimate life whose measureless violence is a danger to the stability of things" (47). It is on the basis of these origins that Bataille regards human being as radically divided between two opposing natures: a rational, utilitarian nature belonging to the "order of things" and an irrational, violent nature belonging to the order of immanence. Eros threatens human stability by temporarily privileging the violence of immanent being over utility and order.

The yearning for lost immanence characterizes the erotic and religious impulse in human life and culture. Both erotic and religious desire attempt to recover, if only momentarily, a sense of immanence, of immersion in that "full and limitless being" (Bataille [1957] 1986, 21) that defines the origins of humanity. According to Bataille ([1973] 1989, 57), religious and erotic impulses are essentially a "search for lost intimacy." Such striving for fusion with immanent being necessarily involves a violent and transgressive rupture of the rational, utilitarian order of things that sustains human existence.

The transgressive aspect of eroticism in Bataille's view is perhaps most evident in his characterization of eros as negating the possibility of relationship. Love for another person, according to Bataille, evokes the desire for complete union, that is, for immanence. Such a desire, however, is experienced primarily as anguish since fusion (or identity) with an "other" is impossible. The lover's yearning is lacerated with the awareness of the impenetrable barriers that separate the lover from the beloved. The lover, held in solitary confinement within his body and his self-awareness, yearns for the beloved who is necessarily enclosed within her separate barrier. The longing of lovers seeks what human existence is not: complete immanence. For Bataille, eros momentarily ruptures the parsimonious utility of human existence with violent and violating extravagance. The lovers momentarily recover immanence in the convulsive and anguished rupture of barriers.

Thus, paradoxically, the negation of relation characterizes eros and intimacy for Bataille (Irwin 1993). This is most evident in Bataille's description of sacrifice as synonymous with love making. Sacrifice restores immanence of being to the victim—animal or human—of sacrifice. The sacrificer-subject, in destroying the victim-object's separate existence, transports the victim beyond all consciousness of dualism and alienation into unknowing immanence. Likewise, the sacrificer-lover "strips the beloved of her identity...she loses the firm barrier that once separated her from others and made her impenetrable...she is laid open to the impersonal violence that overwhelms her from without" (Bataille [1957] 1986, 90). The erotic "sacrificial" rite destroys barriers, drawing the lovers beyond the alienation of mere relation into unconscious, limitless fusion: "each being contributes to the self-negation of the other, yet the negation is not by any means a recognition of the other as a partner" (102). The complementary roles in the erotic rite, of sacrificer-subject and victim-object, ensure self-preservation beyond erotic excess. These roles, it should be observed, are gendered: in the erotic act of dissolution the male retains his barriers while the boundaries of the female are violated, penetrated. The male assumes the *active* role of sacrificer; the woman is assigned the *passive* role of victim. Aggressive male desire preys on the submissive love object. Bataille's equation of ritual sacrifice with eros elaborates his construction of feminine eros as passive, as acted on rather than acting. In short, feminine eros is voided of agency.

Utility and Immanence

Bataille's conception of a rational world of utility dominating and holding at bay an irrational, sacred world, both of which inhere in individuals, illuminates the construction of eros in *Heavenly Creatures*. The economic

circumstances of the two girls, Pauline and Juliet, are suggestive of these two opposing worlds. Pauline's working-class family seems caught in the world of things. Their circumstances do not permit the luxuries that Bataille associates with a sacred wastefulness beyond utility. The family takes in boarders to supplement the father's income as a fish store manager. Pauline's mother wears an apron in almost every scene, her hands reddened from dishwashing and cleaning; indeed, she remains preoccupied with the practical and mundane right up to the moment of her murder when she notices that Juliet's coat is unbuttoned: "Button up your coat, dear. You'll catch a chill." Juliet's family, by contrast, intimates the sacred world of excess and extravagance. They live in a palatial home, their lifestyle immersed in leisure and conspicuous consumption. Their wealth permits a privileged life of introspection: Juliet's father is rector at Christ Church University College and her mother practices "deep therapy." In the games that Pauline and Juliet play together, Juliet dresses as a luxurious princess followed by her dark plebeian suitor, Pauline.

There are several indications on the day Pauline and Juliet meet that their subsequent romance will rupture the utilitarian "order of things." The coexistence of conflicted worlds—one devoted to continuity and stability, the other to extravagant excess and violence—is drawn in highly suggestive ways. Reality and fantasy are juxtaposed in each scene. Juliet is introduced to her new class during a French grammar lesson and thus to rules, conformity, boundaries. The grammar lesson that Juliet's appearance briefly interrupts, however, is on the imperfect subjunctive, a grammatical tense expressive of the hypothetical, of desire, fantasy, wish. Later, in art class, Juliet and Pauline are paired up for an exercise in "life drawing" wherein each girl must draw her partner. Instead of drawing her subject, Pauline, Juliet creates a dramatic tableau of Saint George and the dragon. She has drawn Saint George in the likeness of Mario Lanza, "the world's greatest tenor." Pauline plays her Mario Lanza record as soon as she gets home from school, submerging herself in the romance of the music and its evocation of an insatiable desire: "no one in the world can end this yearning," Lanza croons. Pauline's fascination with Juliet's excessive sense of romance triggers the primordial substrate of immanence lurking in Pauline's careful existence, what Bataille ([1957] 1986, 59) calls the "swelling tumult continuously on the verge of explosion."

Pauline is drawn more and more into Juliet's world of romantic excess and luxury. In an evening ritual before a candlelit brick altar, they celebrate the saints of their imagined heaven—the "fourth world"—a "paradise of music, art, and pure enjoyment," a world in which utility has been sacrificed to unmitigated pleasure. Juliet summons the saints of this world, famous male entertainers, addressed as "He," "Him," "This," and

"That." Pauline proposes her own saint, Orson Welles, as "It." Her saint is rejected by Juliet, "Absolutely not! Orson Welles, the most hideous man alive!" In an essay on the film, Luisa Ribeiro (1995) notes the contrast between Juliet's aesthetic evocation of desire and Pauline's evocation of an unruly It/Id desire as symbolized by Orson Welles, an outlaw cinematic character.² The Id, an irrational pleasure principle resistant to the demands of reality, represents a dangerously self-inflexed desire that refuses the reality of the other. In Bataille's view, however, Juliet's genteel conception of romance cannot break the spell of the mundane world: "violence alone...can burst the barriers of the rational world and lead us into continuity" ([1957] 1986, 140).

Violence emerges as a powerful undercurrent in Juliet's sense of romance: the lover, in a "blazing fury," runs his opponent through with a sword; castle walls are breached and the women inside are ravished. Initially, these fantasies remain distinct from the everyday world: Juliet narrates the lover's duel at the dinner table; the girls tower over the sandcastle where the women are imagined to have been raped. This state of affairs changes, however, when Juliet's parents announce their imminent departure on a four-month trip to England without her. Juliet's rage and anguish at her parents' abandonment of her is assuaged as the "fourth world" intrudes into the established order of things via a "gateway in the clouds." Pauline's observation that this event occurs on the "day of the death of Christ" implies that abandonment and sacrifice usher in this world. The girls walk in groomed gardens among unicorns and mammoth butterflies. The world of excess is momentarily experienced as excess of the beautiful, of "peace and bliss."

Soon, however, the fourth world, "full of peace and bliss," is replaced by the violent romance stories of a kingdom, Borovnia, and its plasticine characters made by Juliet and Pauline. The girls represent their desire for each other in heterosexual terms through a royal couple, Charles and Deborah, the former figuring Pauline and the latter, Juliet. Their construction of desire in socially acceptable terms, which acts to sublimate their socially transgressive lesbian love, also conforms to a romance plot, in which the male aggressor pursues the female beloved. In a school assignment intended to feature the British royal family, Juliet substitutes the Borovnian story of Deborah's vain attempts to fend off Charles's voracious efforts to "have his way with her morning, noon, and night." Pauline and Juliet dramatize Deborah giving birth to a son, Diello. Diello manifests the destructive potential within eros as excessive, limitless violence. As Bataille suggests, eroticism ruptures the barrier separating the world of utility from the world of immanent being: "deep within the significant break there dwells a boundless violence" ([1957] 1986, 107).

The love of Pauline and Juliet, sublimated as the love of Charles for Deborah, has given birth to an extraordinary violence. Diello "slaughters his nannies whenever the fancy takes him" and, by the age of ten, he "has killed fifty-seven people and shows no desire to stop." From a manageable plasticine figure molded by the girls' hands, Diello assumes life-size proportions and a reified autonomy, slaying anyone who threatens the girls' love. The romance world, the world of sacred excess and violence, makes frequent incursions into the girls' mundane existence. Diello crushes the boarder who falls in love with Pauline. On another occasion he impales the psychologist, Dr. Bennett, who attempts to cure Pauline's alleged "mental disorder," that is, her sexual attraction to Juliet. Diello also drags away and decapitates the minister who visits Juliet at the TB sanatorium. Of course while all of this is imagined by the girls as projection/fantasy, Diello's apparent autonomy signals the extent to which immanence has saturated, or subsumed, the mundane order of things.

The fourth world, now indistinguishable from the violent romance world of Borovnia, opens a space for Pauline and Juliet's vicarious experience of ruinous, violent love. Their forays into the fourth world have transformed them into sovereign "heavenly creatures." As Pauline writes in her diary, "the outstanding genius of these two is understood by few... Worship the power of these two... It is indeed a miracle that two such heavenly creatures are real." The heavenly creatures, Pauline and Juliet, negate human relation. Their wisdom, according to Pauline, resides in their hatred and contemptuous scorn of others caught within a world of utility, uninitiated by the ravages of eros.

The lacerations of forbidden eros become intolerable when the girls are threatened with separation. Juliet's parents announce their intention to divorce. Juliet will be sent to South Africa to live with her aunt. Pauline contemplates death as the only reprieve from the anguish of her love, "not [as] an idle or temporary impulse" but as the "best thing." The exquisitely painful awareness of discontinuity, of the huge gulf separating lover from beloved, can only be mitigated, as Bataille would have it, by transgression. Transgression violates the taboos confining people to alienated existence, temporarily flooding the world of utility with boundless violence. The shape of that transgression begins to form in Pauline's mind. But she, Charles, did not "tell Deborah of [her] plans to remove mother."³ The romance world now rises to a crescendo of "stark raving madness." The girls are permitted to spend two weeks together before Juliet moves to South Africa. Their evening at an Orson Welles's film ends with a fantasy of Welles's pursuit and capture of the girls. Juliet's and Pauline's socially transgressive lesbian love is given, through Welles, a heterosexual transcript sharpened into that of aggressor and passive

object, violator and violated. They speak of how the saints make love and all inhibitions are cast off: the castle in Borovnia is imagined as a blazing orgy of undulating bodies. Together Juliet and Pauline have discovered something "wonderful, heavenly, beautiful and ours. We are satisfied indeed...we have now learned the peace of the thing called bliss, the joy of the thing called sin."

The transgression of cultural taboos against lesbian love opens up immanence and thus an insatiable appetite for ruin. For Bataille sacrificial killing is synonymous with erotic desire, and so the plans for murdering Pauline's mother naturally evolve out of the girls' erotic fusion. Pauline assumes the role of sacrificer and her mother becomes objectified as the intended victim. Pauline's plans for murder have a ceremonial air: it is to be a "surprise party," and so the "pleasure of anticipation is great." In her diary entry for 22 June, 1954, Pauline writes, "Day of the Happy Event," adding that she felt "very excited last night and sort of night-before-Christmas." The anticipated festival of sacrifice lays waste to utility, drawing bounded existence into the "sovereign world of the gods and myths, the world of violent and uncalculated generosity" (Bataille [1973] 1989, 44).

This world of sacred excess upholds the imperative of non-relation, even with regard to one's own mother. Juliet attempts to convey her qualms to Pauline about their plans for murder. "Your mother is a rather miserable woman, isn't she?" "I think she knows what's going to happen. She doesn't appear to bear us a grudge." Pauline fortifies her negation of this relationship, however, through her Borovnian world, blocking all incursions of the real. She responds to Juliet's anxiety with details about her story writing: "I wrote the first ten pages of my opera. It's a three act story with a tragedy in it."

Pauline's fantasy works to separate her mother from the world of mundane rituals of housekeeping, moving her toward the world of sacrifice and violent excess. The girls and Honora, Pauline's mother, take the bus to Victoria Park where the cliffs rise vertiginously above the sea. Honora insists on having tea at a small shop before sightseeing in the woods. When only one dessert remains on the serving tray, Honora protests that she must watch her waist line, but her daughter insists, "Come on mother, treat yourself." The girls are eager to begin walking: Pauline leads the way, followed by Honora, with Juliet behind her. They slip along the muddy path over ragged patches of sunlight. Honora, still in the realm of the mundane, notices that Juliet's coat is unbuttoned; a little later she notes the time and suggests returning so that they can catch the bus. When Honora bends down to examine a pink piece of glass, Pauline, and then Juliet, smash her head repeatedly with a brick in a stocking.

Honora is ushered out of the world of things and into sacred immanence; in Bataille's words ([1973] 1989, 50), the "passion of an absence of individuality, the imperceptible sonority of a river, the empty limpidity of the sky." Through Honora's sacrificial murder, Juliet and Pauline consummate immanent being, an "inner secret animation, a deep-seated frenzy, a violent laying hold of an object and consuming it like fire, leading it headlong into ruin" (Bataille [1957] 1986, 180).

The act of sacrifice fuses the sacrificers into continuous existence, a brief respite from discontinuous being. The isolated self knows intimacy only through the complete destruction of barriers. Pauline and Juliet violate, penetrate, and despoil Pauline's mother. Together they take the role of sacrificer, of masculine eros, while Honora, as feminine eros, is acted on. For Bataille, such horrific actions are the very heart of eroticism. Honora's dying screams are the "wonder-struck cry of life" ([1973] 1989, 46): desire destroys desire.

Eros as Mutual Recognition

As Jessica Benjamin (1988, 191) observes, it is the lack of a "model of the psyche in which the self truly seeks to know the outside world and longs for contact with the other" that leads to the idea, such as we find in Bataille, of "connection as a return to oneness, as dedifferentiation and irrationality—a romantic, and ultimately dangerous reunion with nature." Benjamin's feminist theory of eros in *The Bonds of Love* helps us recast the ontology and politics of *Heavenly Creatures*. Benjamin concedes that violence animates erotic desire as either actual sexual violation and submission or as fantasies of erotic domination. However, she locates the persistence of violence in eros not, like Bataille, in our origins as a species, but rather as a contingent configuration of human sexuality within patriarchal culture. Therefore while Bataille regards erotic violence as a transgressive yet *natural* urge suppressed by a rational order that maintains an artificial separateness, Benjamin identifies erotic violence as the "end-point of a complex process, not [as] the original human condition" (1988, 73).

Unlike Bataille, Benjamin regards the relational self as the starting point for understanding eros. For Bataille immanence is an impossibility for solitary selves imprisoned in their bodies and identities. Immanence is attainable only via the destruction of barriers. But Benjamin (1988) thinks that stable relations can be achieved through a tensive choreography of recognition between two selves. Recognition entails a range of responses to an "other" that registers the other's presence as subject: "to recognize is to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar,

...love" (Benjamin 1988, 15–16). However, the relational space between two subjects creates the conflicting desires of two subjects desiring both self-assertion and recognition each from the other. If this tension breaks down, assertion and recognition become polarized. Benjamin observes that this polarization immediately receives a gendered inflection. The male subject asserts himself through erotic domination while the female object recognizes the other only through submission.

Benjamin locates the breakdown of a tensive relation between dependence and autonomy in the persistence of gender dualism in Western culture. She assesses the subject/object structures of gender dualism as the basic but *reversible* "pattern of all domination" (1988, 218). While she does not wish to assign particular characteristics to either gender, she observes how women have historically served as "other" or object to the male subject. Thus women have been associated with nature, immanence, primordial oneness as a mirror to male reason, transcendence, and individuation (6). This dualism, according to Benjamin, persists not only in interpersonal relationships, but in Western culture as a whole; it "permeates our social relations, our ways of knowing, our efforts to transform and control the world" (220). Psychoanalytic theories, Benjamin notes, have tended to associate maturation with increased autonomy, particularly on behalf of the male. The boy's identity formation is characterized as the assertion of separateness against a mother regarded as a potentially engulfing other. The girl, by contrast, develops her identity through identification with the mother's amorphousness experienced as a lack of subjectivity or agency. Bataille's idealization of a deferred union with nature sustains the gender dualism of male subject and female object that supports patriarchal domination. Since the female half of the gender dualism has been associated with submission and self-negation, Benjamin argues that "the other must make a difference" (221). The other, the woman, needs to assert her agency and desire in order to resist absorption by the man (220). In this way Benjamin constructs feminine eros as an expression of agency, subjectivity and autonomy, against patriarchal culture's construction of feminine eros as passive and derivative. The reintroduction of tension through the assertion of *two* subjects of desire, man and woman, restores the possibility of the recognition of the other as intractably yet gratifyingly real.⁴

Like Bataille, Benjamin attends to the human yearning for immanence as the desire to overcome one's separation from the other through fusion. But Benjamin argues that in the absence of a tensive mutual relation between subjects, this desire for immanence results in male domination. Bataille's notion of recovering immanent being through sacrificial eros positions the man as active agent and the woman as passive conduit.

The male exercises violation, a form of assertion made possible only through the negation of dependence on others. The woman endures violation and, in her submission, seeks vicarious recognition through an "ideal omnipotent other" (Benjamin 1988, 60). The polarizing of male assertion and female recognition serves male domination. The solipsistic male subject denies that his autonomy feeds on female subjugation and objectification. By considering violation the breakdown of potential wholeness, Benjamin resists Bataille's claims for an inherent (non-gendered) urge to domination and omnipotence.

Male Characters and Feminine Eros

What, then, is the effect of "gendering" the heavenly creatures as female? Benjamin's theory of eros suggests that within a patriarchal ethos feminine desire becomes objectified and distorted as passive dependence on an other's desire. This master/slave relationship tends toward the loss of all tension experienced in reciprocal contact with the other. Benjamin's exposure of the politics behind the construction of feminine eros as passive lends a critical perspective to the representation of female desire in *Heavenly Creatures*. Throughout the film female desire is depicted as an amorphous, passive, delirious passion. Furthermore through a complex interplay between the girls' fantasy world and the real world, their desire is represented as unreal, as a figment of their fantasy.

The film presents feminine eros as amorphous and derivative in a number of ways. Juliet and Pauline trace their desires through ebullient romantic narratives. They also make plasticine figures of the royal court of Borovnia. The malleability of their media corresponds to the variety of characters that shape their desires. The figures are predominantly male, with the exception of a gypsy character, Gina. Deborah, a central character in the romantic fantasies, never appears as a plasticine figure. Pauline takes the role of Gina, who is desired by Nicolas, a tennis instructor. Later, in an exchange of letters with Juliet in the TB sanatorium, Pauline becomes Charles while Juliet writes as Deborah. Pauline is "Paul" to Juliet early in the film; she becomes Gina and Charles. The polymorphous nature of their desire nonetheless conforms to a heterosexual romantic plot. The romantic plot implies a particular ideological construct of eros or desire.⁵ Within the romantic plot, eros originates in the male; masculine eros is an aggressive, violating force that acts upon a female object. Feminine eros only exists as a receptiveness to male desire; it is evoked by the desire to be desired, to be acted on, at bottom, by fantasies of rape.

The nexus of fantasy and real worlds evokes the delirium and unreality of Juliet's and Pauline's desire. Perhaps the most complex figuration of the girls' desire as unreal (or real only if it originates in a man or in a

desire *for* a man) occurs through the plasticine character Diello. He represents a virulent conjunction of the girls' imaginations, who, as Charles and Deborah, give birth to his violent agency. Diello polices the borders of the girls' fantasy world, maintaining their desire in unreality, by dispatching anyone who might force them to confront "external reality." For example Diello kills a plasticine effigy of John, the boarder who briefly draws Pauline out of her preoccupation with Juliet by pursuing her and declaring his love for her. Diello also impales the psychologist, Dr. Bennett, as he attempts to confront Pauline with the "reality" of heterosexual culture by drawing her away from the "disorder" of her attraction to Juliet.⁶ Diello protects the borders of the girls' inviolable self-sufficiency; when the numbness becomes intolerable, they use his violent means to break out of encasement.

The figure of Orson Welles also acts as an agent for the girls' desire for one another. The girls attend an Orson Welles film, the first time, as Pauline writes, that "I had ever seen 'It'." She describes him as dreadful and hideous, "but I adore him!" They imagine Welles pursuing them down the streets and into the Hulmes's house, and when they believe they have escaped him, as Pauline writes: "we talked for some time about 'It'—getting ourselves more and more excited! We enacted how each saint would make love in bed." As Pauline bends over Juliet to kiss her, she metamorphoses into Welles. Juliet's horror merges with pleasure as he clasps her throat with his gloved hand. A plasticine hand appears on Pauline's throat as she imagines being ravished by Diello. Juliet's and Pauline's timid and tentative kisses are overshadowed by their fantasies of submission to male lovers, and a scene in the Borovnian castle of male plasticine figures engaging in voracious sex. Their lesbian desire, "heterosexually conceived" (de Lauretis 1991, 259), becomes associated with frenzy, excess, and delirium through its juxtaposition with a Borovnian explosion of madness as Diello slashes people into pieces. Juliet's and Pauline's desire—"heavenly, beautiful, and ours"—is elided beneath effusions of male fantasy.

The construction of feminine eros in *Heavenly Creatures*, as unruly, derivative and ultimately unreal, forms one half of the dichotomy of an erotics of domination. In breaking out of their encapsulating fantasy world, Juliet and Pauline complete the other half of the dichotomy. Amorphous feminine eros is subsumed by and shaped as autonomous masculine agency.⁷ Charles/Pauline resolves the problem of an imminent separation from Deborah/Juliet: "None of us knows where we are going. A good deal depends on Charles." Charles/Pauline plans and carries out the removal of an obstacle: Pauline's mother. Pauline asserts absolute subjectivity by overshadowing and then absorbing the one (her mother)

on whom she most depends; in this way a dichotomized masculine eros absorbs an equally dichotomized feminine eros. As Benjamin's feminist theory of eros demonstrates, the fatal dissolution of the paradox of eros into polarity effaces the vibrancy and agency of feminine eros and women's relationships.

Conclusion

A Bataillian reading of *Heavenly Creatures* offers the seductive conception of eros as a fleeting yet vivifying immersion in immanent being. Thus, in the sacrificial murder of the mother, Juliet and Pauline enact their human yearning for immanence by rupturing the barrier of the world of utility. According to Benjamin, however, Bataille's notion of a *universal* human impulse toward transgressive violence actually disassembles a culturally contingent conception of relationship, that is, a specifically patriarchal conception. Far from being germane to human being *per se*, it is a *particular* (patriarchal) inflection of human relationships and eros that serves male domination, since it renders feminine eros superfluous and expendable.

Benjamin's feminist theory of eros enables us to see that the detritus left in the wake of violent eros is feminine eros. Her theory, unlike Bataille's, opens space for critical distance from the film, allowing the viewer to maintain a healthy erotic relationship to the film and the characters, and to resist the ideological message that feminine eros is expendable. Through the critical perspective offered by Benjamin's theory of eros, the characters—lost beneath turgid lyricism and the swelling intrusion of fantasy—come back into view. The tumescence of eros shrinks. Barriers are permeable rather than mutually exclusive. Eros as life principle opens the possibility of reciprocal union between subjects of desire and agency, female or male. Eros opens this recognition as a way to “confront the painful aspect of external reality—uncontrollable, tenacious otherness—as a condition of freedom and not domination” (Benjamin 1988, 48). The girls walking along through the mud, and the mother between them, attest to the fragility of eros as mutual recognition: the girls are denied recognition of their agency and desire, while the mother is denied her distinct subjectivity and desire. Violence erupts out of this fatal breakdown of the tension required for mutual recognition, twisting assertion into battering, submission into death.

Endnotes

1. Peter Jackson, the director of *Heavenly Creatures*, wrote the screen play with Francis Walsh. The film is based on one of the most sensational murders in New Zealand's history, the murder of a mother, Honora Rieper, by her daughter,

Pauline Yvonne Parker, and her daughter's best friend, Juliet Marion Hulme, in June 1954. After Honora's murder it was disclosed that she had never married Pauline's father, Herbert Rieper, and so Pauline was charged under her mother's maiden name of Parker. The court rejected a plea of insanity and Juliet and Pauline were convicted of murder. Upon their release from prison in 1959 they were given new identities. Juliet Hulme was recently revealed to be Anne Perry, the successful murder mystery writer.

2. Luisa F. Ribeiro (1995) also gives a detailed analysis of Peter Jackson's use of music as a "barometer" of Juliet's and Pauline's emotions, as a way to highlight themes in the film and as a means to evoke the viewer's sense of pathos and irony.

3. While there are many conditions impeding Pauline from accompanying Juliet to South Africa, Pauline singles out her mother as the only obstacle threatening to separate her from Juliet.

4. Like much psychoanalytic theory, Benjamin's theory of eros idealizes heterosexuality as normative development while pathologizing homosexuality. In her latest work, Benjamin (1995) addresses this bias in her previous works by revising her gender dualism into a construction of gendered positions as multiple and heteronomous. Diana Fuss (1995) questions the basis of gender dualism in psychoanalytic theory, that is, the dichotomy of desire and identification. Distinguishing identification (the wish to be the other) and desire (the wish to have the other) effectively displaces homosexuality or desire as identification beyond theoretical formulation. Fuss challenges this construction through a subtle analysis of the permeability of desire and identification.

5. Anne Cranny-Francis (1990) argues that the romance genre, considered as social practice with an implicit ideology, is the genre most resistant to feminist revisions. The romance genre, according to Cranny-Francis, encodes the "bourgeois fairy tale," based on idealized inequalities of gender and class.

6. Peter Jackson's sympathies seem allied with Juliet's and Pauline's lesbian desire. For example the camera close-up of Dr. Bennett's mouth as he haltingly pronounces the word "homosexuality" conveys the grotesqueness of the pronouncer rather than the "diagnosis" pronounced (as the psychologist clearly intends it). Nonetheless the romantic heterosexual configuration of Pauline's and Juliet's desire undercuts these sympathies by reinforcing heterosexuality as normative. Homosexuality is thus relegated to fantasy, liminality, excess and often elided altogether by burgeoning heterosexual fantasies.

7. Virginia Woolf gives a classic rendering of dichotomized masculine and feminine eros in her representation of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey. Mrs. Ramsey's eros is an amorphous energy, as indicated by the water and light imagery used to characterize it; but this amorphousness is precisely what makes it susceptible to the imposition of male patterning, that is, to Mr. Ramsey's influence. Note the intrusion of masculine eros in the following description of Mrs. Ramsey: she "seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as

if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating...and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare" ([1927] 1977, 38).

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